

The Lavender Scare: The Cold War persecution of gays and lesbians in the federal government.
By DAVID K. JOHNSON. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. Notes. Oral
History Interviews. Index. Pp. xii, 277.

During genocides and purges, one group will try to eliminate another because of a perceived societal risk or impure trait, which usually leads to the persecution of more than one type of group. For example, despite the universal knowledge that the Holocaust targeted the Jews, much less remember how others, such as Gypsies, the mentally disabled, communists, and homosexuals, were targeted as well. The last two were also subject to discrimination in the United States starting in the 1950s during the Red Scare. However, over time, the public consciousness remembers mainly the communist persecution while nearly forgetting the homosexual persecutions that were just as rampant during the time. David K. Johnson attempts to rectify this overlooked event of the Red Scare in his book *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays*, diving into the history of government-led homophobia during the Cold War, but mainly from the start of the Second Red Scare to Stonewall.

Johnson's monograph meticulously traces the roots of the Lavender Scare, a term used to describe the witch hunt that ensued post-WWII when the U.S. government began purging alleged homosexuals from its ranks. Drawing from extensive research and oral history, Johnson gives readers an in-depth understanding of the political, social, and cultural climate of the Lavender Scare and the factors that fueled this era of repression. Johnson begins his monograph about the initial purge of homosexuals under John Peurifoy, the head of the State Department security program at the time. Despite the chapter's name, the focus is not on Peurifoy but instead how Republicans tried to conflate homosexuals with communists (p. 44). Johnson devotes a whole chapter to the history of the queer community in Washington, D.C., before the Lavender Scare. He mentions that the New Deal projects created during the Great Depression caused a spike in

employment for queers in the capital. The queer community grew significantly because of the manpower demands of WWII and the invention of penicillin, the latter which reduced the consequences of venereal diseases such as gonorrhea and syphilis. Johnson makes the argument that Dr. Alfred Kinsey's publishing of the *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* study in 1948 was the decisive moment when America heeded how homosexuality affected the country (pp. 53–55). Johnson intelligently mentions the subsequent “Postwar Sex Crime Panic” and the “Pervert Elimination Campaign” to demonstrate that governmental backlash against homosexuality did not begin with McCarthy.

Another notable aspect of *The Lavender Scare* is its examination of the nexus between Cold War hysteria, McCarthyism, and the targeting of homosexuals. Johnson reveals how the federal government, driven by the fear of communism and a desire to maintain a morally pure image, exploited public apprehensions about homosexuality to justify its actions targeting homosexuals and lesbians. He exposes the hypocrisy and duplicity of those in power who preached freedom and democracy abroad while crushing civil liberties at home. Johnson offers the scandal of Sumner Welles, with his baggage at hand, demanding sex from a male black porter in a drunken stupor. The Welles' scandalous event felt the homosexual problem in Washington began with him (p. 67). Johnson highlights the beliefs of many who wondered where they thought the problem came from, mainly the fear that communism sought weaknesses in America, and homosexual effeminacy was that weakness, which turned into a “security risk” (p. 70). Johnson's paramount example of the Lavender Scare occurs with the infamous 91 homosexuals under Peurifoy in the State Department. Johnson shows politicians' selfish goals and attempts to show how proactive they were at the problem. Johnson dives into how the Lavender Scare began with the politicians and then went into the public consciousness, and even

talks about how lesbians were affected as well. Strangely enough, Johnson explains how the Lavender Scare was implicitly a backlash against the bureaucracy that appeared during the New Deal era, painting bureaucracy as full of gays, and used this negative image as a means of mobilizing people against bureaucracy (pp. 95–98). The government’s repressive policing action against gays, with police agencies encouraged to investigate gay meeting places and share their arrest records, or civil employees interrogated about their private sex lives, took a heavy toll on the overall queer community. Thousands lost their jobs or resigned under pressure. Others “disappeared,” or return back to their home towns to leave their shame behind. A small number were driven to suicide. However, this level of intimidation within Washington’s gay community also spawned resistance. Johnson examines the formation of the Mattachine Society of Washington (MSW) and national Mattachine Society, the former founded by Frank Kameny.

While *The Lavender Scare* offers a comprehensive and compelling account of a forgotten chapter in American history, it is not without its limitations. At times, Johnson’s writing can be dense and heavily academic, potentially alienating readers less familiar with the historical context. Furthermore, the book could have benefitted from a more diverse analysis, incorporating perspectives from individuals who held more conservative attitudes towards homosexuality. However, *The Lavender Scare* remains a groundbreaking work that leaves an indelible impact on its readers. Johnson’s meticulous research and captivating storytelling bring to light the injustice faced by homosexuals, reminding us of the devastating consequences of government-sanctioned discrimination. By examining this dark period in American history, the author provides a cautionary tale and a plea for vigilance against the erosion of civil rights in the face of fear and prejudice. David K. Johnson’s monograph is an essential addition to the literature on the history of LGBT rights in the United States.