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The Lavender Scare Lingers To This Day

In the 1950's, history witnessed McCarthyism, a campaign initiated by Senator Joseph McCarthy that targeted suspected communists working in the U.S. government. Known as the "Red Scare," the campaign sought to accuse federal employees of communism and purge them out of employment. The initiative was known to use aggressive scare tactics and condemnation without clear evidence. Many federal employees ended up wrongfully discharged from their jobs.

I chose to investigate, research, and write on the topic of the Lavender Scare. I have never heard of this before, and I will speak later on why this was not taught in schools. The Lavender Scare is a variation of, and perhaps its moniker is inspired from the Red Scare. The key difference is that the U.S. government targeted suspected homosexuals (in addition to communists) working in the federal government and sought to extinguish them from employment.

A huge source that I used in my research came from a CBS News article dated June 9th, 2019. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-lavender-scare-how-the-federal-government-purged-gay-employees/>

There is a nine-minute video covering this topic on the CBS News link. In this video I learned that McCarthy had another agenda, saying, "Homosexuals must not be handling top-secret material. The pervert is easy prey to the blackmailer." This relates to our class's earlier discussion about why some teachers might hide their orientation. They do not want to risk getting fired for something innocuous as their identity. According to the video, newly-elected President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed an executive order to make this official policy.

The American government truly believed that a homosexual person would be a danger to the country because they believed their "perversion" was a slippery slope to becoming a communist. This means that a federal employee could have zero protections against getting fired even if he or she doesn't identify as a communist or a homosexual. In relation to what teachers have to go through, there are school administrators who could make that very same slippery slope argument: a homosexual teacher could be a danger to children because a "perversion" would lead to other "perversions." This is a reason some teachers remain private.

Blackmail, sabotage, and paranoia were tactics that resulted in more suspected homosexuals getting discharged. A suspected employee was interrogated and asked to implicate others. "We want five names of other people you know." Intimidation usually forced employees to cooperate to save themselves, but ended up getting discharged anyway. Or they quietly resigned. But not before giving up names of other people. Once someone was suspected of being a homosexual, "Your life is essentially over. You are shunned by society. You are shunned in the work place." This happens in many workplaces to this day. It's hard to trust people you work with, because anything you say or don't say can be used against you. Someone could have an agenda to get a promotion or simply to get someone fired. Some could be called by an employer to confess what they know and sell you out, due to self-preservation or advancement.

A documentary on the Lavender Scare was another source I found, and information can be found from the documentary's official website: <https://www.thelavenderscare.com/>

According to the documentary and website, “tens of thousands of government workers would lose their jobs for no reason other than their sexual orientation.” After watching the trailer to the documentary and reading further coverage, I now believe that the lingering effects of the Lavender Scare still linger today. There is still a discomfort in the LGBT community in revealing their orientation in the workplace, due to fear of their own safety and livelihood.

I remember learning in history class about McCarthyism in the 1950’s. We were taught about the Eisenhower administration’s backing of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s hunt for communists domestically. However, we were never taught about how he also mandated a “clean house” of any LGBT workers in the federal government. None of that was taught in school. I suspect that even in the 1990’s and 2000’s, the subject wasn’t covered because a) standardized tests wouldn’t ask about it, b) it’s not important enough to be in the curriculum, c) authors of text books forgot about it or didn’t know.

A positive effect of the Lavender Scare is that it sparked movements from LGBT supporters to rally against this injustice. In the 1950’s there weren’t that many organizations formed that openly sought to protect their rights as LGBT people. Forty-two years later, President Clinton overturned Eisenhower’s executive order. Years later, President Obama extended rights to gay federal employees. These events are historical and should be taught in history courses.

Knowing about the struggles during the Lavender scare would help me teach culturally diverse groups of people by honoring their privacy. I would be mindful of every student, faculty, and administrator’s choice to be open about their orientation. I wrongly thought that being open would be a stronger choice than choosing to hide. Even though we live in a more tolerant society, there are still millions of people in this country who do not share progressive views. People in positions of power can still stop someone from advancing in their career or worse: terminate employment.

When asked about what he thinks of the current generation of LGBT people, a former government worker from the McCarthy era said he was “envious of young people who grow up in a more tolerant society.” That they should recognize that people suffered and fought for those rights and accomplishments. I, too, will honor what people fought and suffered for.