McCarthyism

by Luca Prono

Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy. Image courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

McCarthyism is the term applied to the attempts in the late 1940s and early 1950s to expunge Communists and fellow travelers (often identified as homosexual) from American public life. Named for Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin, the term has come to signify Red-baiting, political extremism, and civic hysteria.

For gay men and lesbians, the period was one of police harassment, witch hunts, suspicions of disloyalty, and dismissals from jobs, especially in the public sector.

Indeed, McCarthyism may be seen as the time when homosexuals became the chief scapegoats of the Cold War. In the United States and Great Britain, throughout the 1950s, thousands of individuals were arrested and imprisoned on homosexual charges. The popular consensus that homosexuals were immoral, emotionally unstable, and untrustworthy justified their punishment and stigmatization.

The Climate of Paranoia

Senator McCarthy was active in hunting down Communists for a relatively short period of time. Only four years passed between the Senator's 1950 speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, where he claimed to have a list of 205 people in the State Department known to be members of the American Communist Party, and his spectacular downfall in the Army-McCarthy hearings, which culminated in his censure by the United States Senate, passed on a vote of 67 to 22. Yet the climate of paranoia that he and his tactics helped establish was one of the enduring traits of the Cold War.

Communists and homosexuals were the major targets of the witch hunts promoted by McCarthy and his fellow conservatives. During the era, the two groups became closely associated. As John Loughery puts it, "few events indicate how psychologically wracked America was becoming in the 1950s . . . than the presumed overlap of the Communist and the homosexual menace."

Events Contributing to the Association of Homosexuals and Communism

Specific events contributed to the association of homosexuals with Communism. For example, in 1948, Whittaker Chambers, an editor and writer at *Time* magazine and a former Communist Party member and courier in a Soviet spy ring infiltrating the American government, accused Alger Hiss, head of the Carnegie Endowment, of perjury and, implicitly, of Soviet espionage. The vast media coverage of the scandal hinted that Chambers had a crush on Hiss, establishing a link between Communism and homosexuality.

Chambers was only too eager to strengthen this link, declaring to the FBI that his homosexual activities had stopped once he had left the Communist Party.

In addition, the 1951 flight to the Soviet Union of gay British spies Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean also helped fuel the association of homosexuality and treason in the public imagination.

Not surprisingly, "Pinko fag" became the worst insult of the era.

The Psychological Atmosphere

Equally important in establishing the link between Communism and homosexuality was the psychological atmosphere of paranoia that fostered fears of foreign infiltrators preparing attacks against America, abetted by home-grown traitors. These fears prompted Americans to look for evidence of foreign infiltration and to search for the enemy within.

In this climate, conformity became the most prized characteristic of the era. Clearly, both homosexuals and Communists violated this ideal. Moreover, in the popular imagination, they shared some crucial ideological positions: both groups allegedly abhorred religion; rejected middle-class morality; were manipulative and cynical; and, finally, were eager to put their own cause above the national one.

Republican Senator Kenneth Wherry of Nebraska summarized these popular perceptions in an interview with the *New York Post* in December 1950: "You can't hardly separate homosexuals from subversives. . . . Mind you, I don't say that every homosexual is a subversive, and I don't say every subversive is a homosexual. But [people] of low morality are a menace in the government, whatever [they are], and they are all tied up together."

As John D'Emilio has concluded, such "congruence between the stereotype of Communists and homosexuals made the scapegoating of gay men and women a simple matter."

Purges of "Sexual Deviants" from Public Employment

The link between Communism and homosexuality was used in particular against public employees. In February 1950, John Peurifoy, Undersecretary of State, reported to the Senate Appropriations Committee that most of the ninety-one men who had recently been dismissed from the State Department as security risks were sexual deviants.

By May of 1950, Senator Wherry quoted reliable police sources that 3,750 homosexuals held federal jobs. A month later, the Senate authorized an official investigation, the first of its type in the history of the United States. The results of the "pervert inquiry," as it was popularly named, came out in December at a time of profound concern over national security.

The Senate Report accused the Truman administration of indifference toward the danger represented by homosexuals in governmental positions. The Report explicitly mentioned "lack of emotional stability" and "weakness of . . . moral fiber" as defining characteristics of homosexuals that made them likely targets of Soviet propaganda and recruitment.

 As John Loughery reports, the systematic expulsion of homosexuals from public service becomes clear if one compares the number of dismissals between 1947 and 1950 with the figures for 1951 alone. In the three years before the "pervert inquiry," an average of sixty federal administrative employees and one thousand military personnel were dismissed each year as a result of investigations into their sexual histories. By 1951, these numbers had dramatically increased: federal workers were then dismissed at a rate of sixty per month and homosexual discharges from the military amounted to two thousand a year.

When Dwight Eisenhower assumed the presidency in 1953, he soon issued Executive Order 10450, which codified homosexuality as sufficient and necessary grounds for denying or dismissing persons from federal employment. Homosexuals were to be eradicated from government positions, and they could be fired simply on the basis of anonymous accusation.

Representations of Homosexuals in the Media

Established by security and governmental authorities, the link between homosexuals and political subversives was effectively publicized by the media, especially by the popular press. Gay men and lesbians were increasingly depicted as adepts of a sect devising both sexual and political plots.

As Lillian Faderman has documented, lesbians were portrayed in these popular magazines as preying on innocent victims. She quotes, for example, the description of the lesbian given by *Jet*, a Black magazine, in 1954: "If she so much as gets one foot into a good woman's home with the intention of seducing her, she will leave no stone unturned . . . and eventually destroy her life for good."

Publications aimed at higher social classes spouted the same warnings. *Human Events*, a Washington newsletter for business and professional leaders, urged readers to hunt down homosexuals because "by the very nature of their vice they belong to a sinister, mysterious, and efficient International, [and] members of one conspiracy are prone to join another conspiracy."

Response and Resistance

But the 1950s should not be remembered only as years of oppression and persecution. It was also a time of resistance. Gay men and lesbians began to form organizations and to create their own subcultures, though these mainly had to stay underground.

As Faderman contends, homosexuality in the 1950s became "not only a choice of sexual orientation, but of social orientation as well, though usually lived covertly." World War II and the process of urbanization that followed in its aftermath increased the numbers of gay men and lesbians who could take part in homosexual subcultures. Yet, with the advent of McCarthyism, "suddenly there were more reasons than ever for the subculture to stay underground."

But the harassment of homosexuals throughout the 1950s also led them to believe in the necessity of mutual support. Although fighting back was not always possible and many gay men and lesbians were affected by guilt and internalized the stereotypes of the era, the 1950s was also the beginning of activism in the lesbian and gay communities.

The Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, which together inaugurated the American homophile movement, were in many ways shaped by McCarthyism.

The Mattachine Society had from its very beginnings in the late 1940s a Marxist agenda. Harry Hay and most of the co-founders of Mattachine were current or former Communist Party members. Their background in the Communist party made them aware of the necessity of organizing and protest, as they argued that homosexuals were a distinct cultural minority deserving of respect and protection at a time, as Lillian Faderman notes, "when the idea of rights for sexual minorities was inconceivable."

Yet the leaders' association with Communism also imperiled the organization and tended to give credence to the alleged link between Communism and homosexuality.

The fear of being discovered and identified as homosexual was both real and justified in the era, and seriously impeded the efforts of the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis to create a mass movement for gay and lesbian rights. Understandably, both organizations devoted great energy to protecting the secrecy of their membership rolls and reassuring prospective members that they would not be exposed.

As John Loughery has concluded, the founders of these first organizations had the great merit to attempt, in an extremely hostile society, "to articulate an idea of gay people as something more than the sum of

their sexual appetites."

Still, given the climate created by McCarthyism, it is not surprising that these organizations were unable to create a mass movement for change. At the same time, however, they deserve credit for setting the stage for the modern gay and lesbian rights movement that would emerge in the 1960s.

Historical Ironies

Among the historical ironies of McCarthyism is that several of the figures associated with the senator and his movement have subsequently been revealed to have been homosexual, including--in addition to Whittaker Chambers, such individuals as Roy Cohn, the Senator's valued assistant, and J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The sexual orientation of Senator McCarthy himself has been questioned.

Notwithstanding the fact that it is unlikely that any of these figures accepted a homosexual identity for themselves, the irony of individuals engaged in same-sex sexual relationships persecuting gay men and lesbians on the basis of their sexuality cannot be ignored. In an era when accusations of homosexuality were a potent political ploy, however, it is not surprising that politicians of all political ideologies (and sexual orientations) resorted to homophobia.

The Legacy of McCarthyism

The legacy of the McCarthy era for the gay and lesbian movement is complex and varied. On the one hand, the persecutions spawned by the McCarthy era helped propel a movement of resistance. On the other hand, years of harassment created an atmosphere of suspicion that has been hard to overcome for many gay men and lesbians who came of age in the 1950s.

In her history of American lesbian life in the twentieth century, Lillian Faderman quotes the moving words of a retired teacher who explains the reluctance of lesbians of her age to come out because of what happened during McCarthyism: "there is no guarantee that there won't again be a rush to the documents, and a resurrection of our names from somewhere, with who-knows-what-kind of repercussions. . . . we didn't believe the stuff McCarthy got away with."

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