

“Wreckers, Destroyers, Security Risks:” Early Gay Activism and the Cold War

What people are taught about McCarthyism is almost always focused on Senator Joseph P. McCarthy’s claims that there were communist operatives in the United States government and entertainment industries. What they often don’t learn is that McCarthy and his allies concern was extended beyond alleged communists to those they deemed to be immoral, dishonest, or otherwise subject to coercion. That definition covered not only drunks and criminals, but queer people too.¹ “We share the American dream; that is, we share it until it is discovered that we are homosexual,” wrote one anonymous man in a letter to Senator Everett M. Dirksen in 1955. The anonymous author may not have considered himself an activist, but by reaching out to Senator Dirksen, the author fought for queer acknowledgment, acceptance, and rights under a government that was firmly against them. “An Open Letter to Senator Dirksen” is a key example of Cold War-era gay rights activism and is a look into how the early queer activists utilized rhetoric of citizenship, loyalty and democracy to challenge both government and public perception of homosexuality as a threat to the American way of life. By situating “An Open Letter to Senator Dirksen” in a context provided by American exportation of ideology as described in historian David K. Johnson’s “America’s Cold War Empire,” this essay will argue that American queer rights activists utilized Cold War patriotic rhetoric to combat state-sponsored ideals of moral superiority over the U.S.S.R..

From March until May 1950, U.S. Army Lieutenant Roy Blick claimed that 5,000 homosexuals took residence in Washington D.C., and that 3,500 of them were government

¹ David K. Johnson, “America’s Cold War Empire: Exporting the Lavender Scare,” in *Global Homophobia: States, Movements, and the Politics of Oppression*, ed. Meredith L. Weiss and Michael J. Bosia (University of Illinois Press, 2013).

employees. These numbers were likely made up but were widely reported. The numbers created a frenzy that sparked the creation of a longer-term committee. The Hoey Committee, named as such for chairman senator Clyde Hoey, was created to investigate homosexuals within the government. Widespread reporting on its findings and ongoing investigations served to worsen growing moral panic within the government relating homosexuality as a “security risk.”² It was in this context that queer people were first conflated with communists, framed as weak mentally and morally, and considered prone to blackmailing.³

In 1953, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed Executive Order 10450, setting new security standards for government employees. Included in this order was a list of behaviors and mannerisms that could disqualify prospective employees from public service; Section 8a, Clause 1.3, mentions “sexual perversion” as a possible disqualification.⁴ At the time, government defined “sexual perversion” as any practice or identity that deviated from the heterosexual, procreative normality. The use of that term places those queer people directly in opposition to the interests of national security. Pressure was placed on government agencies to oust any employee with connections to the queer community, but most especially employees who appeared to be queer themselves.

During the Cold War, domestic security concerns ceased to be exclusively domestic. It brought unprecedented levels of tension between other countries, and tested nations’ loyalties to one another. One example of this is in the United Nations, where, under pressure from the United

² Judith Adkins, “‘These People Are Frightened to Death’: Congressional Investigations and the Lavender Scare,” *Prologue Magazine*, 2016, National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2016/summer/lavender.html>.

³ Judith Adkins, “‘These People are Frightened to Death’”.

⁴ Exec. Order No. 10450, 3 C.F.R. 936 (1953).

States, the UN agreed to remove employees deemed disloyal to member nations.⁵ The U.N. did not initially make these determinations based on morality, but the Eisenhower's State Department shared perceived moral transgressions regardless. The U.S. State Department exerted immense pressure for the U.N. to act on its recommendations regarding perceived moral transgressions. It quickly became common practice for US allies and other international bodies to enact those same "security procedures" to remove queer employees, thereby exporting the moral-security paradigm.⁶ As in domestic government agencies before them, international organizations, including NATO, faced pressures to oust employees based on these same moral-security paradigms.

During a campaign speech on September 22, 1954, Senator Everett M. Dirksen made a number of inflammatory remarks about queer people. "An Open Letter to Senator Dirksen" was written in response to those remarks and published in early 1955 in the *Mattachine Review*. The author remains anonymous, admitting to having "homosexual tendencies," yet addresses Senator Dirksen on behalf of the hundreds of queer people who had lost their jobs due to perceived security risks when their homosexuality was discovered.⁷ The address comes not as an adversary, but as a friend and fellow American, invested in civil service, loyalty, and morality. Throughout the letter, the author strategically adopts the very same Cold War security rhetoric used to justify ousting queer people from the government under the Hoey Commission or Executive Order 10450. The author insists that homosexual individuals are not only trustworthy, but loyal and

⁵ David K. Johnson, "America's Cold War Empire: Exporting the Lavender Scare," in *Global Homophobia: States, Movements, and the Politics of Oppression*, ed. Meredith L. Weiss and Michael J. Bosia (University of Illinois Press, 2013).

⁶ Johnson, "America's Cold War Empire".

⁷ *January/February 1955: An Open Letter to Senator Dirksen*, in *Speaking for Our Lives: Historic Speeches and Rhetoric for Gay and Lesbian Rights (1892–2000)*, ed. Robert B. Ridinger (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2004), 3, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315801704-8>

extensively patriotic. It is with this language as well that the author confronts the idea of the homosexual as a “security risk,” turning that language of national security and patriotism into a defense. The letter highlights morality through the thousands of men and women who fought and died for America during war, and continue to do so, asserting that those people’s identities as Americans always came first before their identities as homosexuals. Yet when they are suspected or revealed as homosexuals, they are classified as “wreckers, destroyers, security risks, blabbermouths, drunks, traitors and saboteurs.”⁸

In a poignant appeal, the author states: “Our tears do not flow less freely... in warfare with communism.... Our hearts are not less full of pride and honor at the sight of massed American flags because we are homosexual.”⁹ It is here that the author most explicitly places himself in opposition to the communists they are conflated with – and looks to the American people and to the American government for homosexuals to be recognized as a valid, moral people. As Johnson argues in “America’s Cold War Empire,” the Lavender Scare was an ideological project that conflated heteronormativity and national security. “An Open Letter to Senator Dirksen” takes a stance within that ideological background. Early activists like the author of this letter laid the groundwork for reframing the national view of queer existence. This letter represents an early example of one of queer activism’s tenets, transforming the language of oppression and power into a tool for inclusion and equality.

⁸ *January/February 1955: An Open Letter to Senator Dirksen*

⁹ *January/February 1955: An Open Letter to Senator Dirksen*

I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work. – Abigail Firestone

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