

The lavender scare review essay sample

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David K. Johnson's *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*, is a comprehensive overview of the more than decade long period of time in which homosexuals had to face repeated attempts at persecution in America. The book addresses major questions about what roles gays and lesbians played in the government during that time and more importantly, how they were viewed in relation to the conflict with Russia. The book uses real examples from actual individuals that were involved during the time, which includes both those who were and were not openly homosexual.

From that, it uses a wealth of information and evidence to make serious claims about how American perception of these people was shaped by the historical circumstances surrounding the Cold War. It argues that these people had to put up with social ostracizing and political pressure both because the American people did not readily accept homosexual lifestyles and because there was much thought that correlated homosexuality to evil during a time when the evil represented by Russia was the ultimate enemy for America.

The opening chapter, titled "Peurifoy's Revelation", Johnson wastes little time in letting the reader know where the book was headed. It is a breakdown of how the Americans in power at the time felt about homosexuals. Specifically, the book cites Senator Joseph McCarthy's well documented assailment of military risks that existed within that state. In McCarthy's breakdown of these risks, he discusses each and every one to the members of congress in an advanced form.

Though not all of the risks that McCarthy mentioned were about homosexuals, there were a few cases that were. In the book, the author writes, “ But two cases stood out from the rest. They were not about individuals, but groups, and they were less about political than sexual deviance. Case no. 14 involved a ‘ flagrantly homosexual’ translator, who had been dismissed as a ‘ bad security risk’” (16). This chapter does much to give the reader a look at the political climate of the time and address how prominent members of the government felt about both communism and homosexuality.

Chapter two takes a different look at the entire situation, this time from a more personal point of view. It is an interesting contrast from the first chapter, as the second one does not look at the homosexuals in the government as simply being case numbers or just being statistics. In order to give a more personal look at what it was like to grow up a homosexual man during that time, the author discusses the plight of a boy that he calls “ Ladd Forrester”. He describes the way that the boy wanted to get away from his small hometown in the Deep South, where his way of life was clearly not accepted.

In order to do that, Forrester had to take on a job within the government. Interestingly, Forrester’s story is not the only focus on the chapter, though. The author ties the story into the rest of the argument, citing the fact that this boy’s tale was highly representative of what other males struggled with during that time. In this chapter, Johnson writes, “ The story of ‘ Ladd Forrester’ and his migration to Washington is representative of the stories of many gays and lesbians who forged Washington’s gay subculture in the
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1930s and 1940s” (42). Clearly, this was done by the author in order to help the reader understand that the strong homosexual undercurrent was being established at the time. It did not just start in Washington. It came as a result of individuals migrating there in order to escape their previous lives.

Chapter three of the book is written to ensure that the reader understands a very important point about the entire ordeal in Washington. Homosexuality was no small problem and this was represented in many ways. It was no small problem because it was permeating the culture for both experienced politicians and the new blood who came to Washington. In addition, it was a large problem because of the fact that it caused political problems for the people that were in power at the time. As in his characteristic style in this book, the author uses a real life story to help explain this to the readers.

He goes into detail about a member of the traveling party of Franklin Roosevelt. Roosevelt, who was campaigning for the presidency at the time, had decided to take his entire cabinet down to Alabama to speak to prospective voters. That was when one of his prominent members got drunk and showed his homosexual tendencies to everyone there, causing a ruckus in the process. The story, as written by Johnson, was, “ After finally retiring to his compartment late that night, Welles rang for assistance.

When an African American railroad porter responded, Welles sexually propositioned him and several other porters who responded to subsequent calls” (66). This was an interesting story both because it described someone who had a prominent role in government and it because it gave clear indication that no part of government was immune to the threat of

homosexuality. In a way, that fact is what helped drive the fear of homosexuality in the government. There was no way of knowing who would come out of the closet, so to speak. Welles was a man that had been an openly straight individual with a wife and a family. As such, no one was immune from the possibility and speculation over their sexual orientation.

The fourth chapter continues on the trend of exposing the homosexual situation in the federal government on a more profound level, but this time, it takes a look at how the national media picked up the story and made it run. Though the media had always played a role in exposing the situation, they were not nearly as much of a factor in the early part of the ordeal as one might have thought they would be. Once it came to light that the government had uncovered almost one hundred homosexuals within the federal government, reporters took the news and did with it what they normally do with big time news. In this chapter, the author addresses this and lets readers know just how comprehensive the media buzz was around this revelation.

For the first time, national attention was being thrown onto this, and the federal government wanted it that way. They had a fundamental shift in their thinking that quit trying to hide the incidents and instead, use the media and other avenues to instill a bit of fear into homosexuals that might be thinking of working in the federal government. In this chapter, the author writes, “The testimony became an Associated Press story within days. It set off a new round of press stories, columns, and editorials on the homosexual menace, dwarfing the publicity that followed Peurifoy’s revelation” (79). This clearly showed that, now, the homosexual presence in the federal government was <https://assignbuster.com/the-lavender-scare-review-essay-sample/>

not only an issue, but it was being considered a “menace” by everyone from politicians to the mainstream media.

Chapter five is there to show the reader what the government’s next step would be in all of this. After all, they had made it very clear that they would not sit by idly as their federal government system was overrun by the evil of homosexuality. With that in mind, the author sets the scene for this chapter very early on by showing that the government was not just looking into things, but they were launching a full scale investigation. Interestingly, the federal government did not give the task of investigating the homosexuality to a congressman that would turn the incident into a national, public search.

They sought out a North Carolina senator by the name of Clyde Hoey, who had been in congress for more than fifty years at the time he was appointed. This was an important decision for everyone involved, according to the author. While some senators might have turned the incident into a television show type of ordeal, Hoey went about things in a different way. The book reads, “Hoey was determined to carry it out in a quiet and dignified manner. He called his chief counsel in and said, ‘I don’t want any public hearings at all on this matter, I want it as low key as possible’” (102).

The author is sure to include this because he feels like it is a very important piece in the development of the federal government’s outlook on homosexuality. They want it exposed, to a point, because they want to instill fear into anyone that might think of joining the party. Still, it is not the federal government’s intent to turn the ordeal into a circus of any kind. They want to keep the view that they are doing things professionally and not

hunting down homosexuals, which they clearly were from all of the evidence that had been presented.

Chapter six gives the reader a view of what action had been taken in light of the investigations. With congress serious about getting rid of the problem, it was clear to everyone that they would take some action on Hoey's investigation. In this chapter, that action is taken in a swift and confident manner. It is at this point in the book that the author gets personal again. For much of the middle part of the work, he had gotten away from telling the individual stories of those people that were being persecuted. He had focused more on the government and had turned the book into a story on numbers.

In this chapter, he goes back to his focus on particular cases, in order to add a human element to the work. One particular story is the most telling and gives the reader a clear idea of what is going on in this chapter. He writes of a long time government employee named " Miss Blevins". Blevins is fairly insignificant on the big scale of things, but she plays a huge role in outing other individuals for their homosexuality. The book reads, " Blevins unburdened herself of all the suspicions she had accumulated.

She told officials she had a ' funny feeling' about one man she described as having ' a feminine complexion, a peculiar girlish walk'" (120). That was not the only person who Blevins exposed, as she went on to name many more. In fact, her reports were taken very seriously by the government, as they once again tagged people in the government as being " security risks". This term is important because it shows the federal government's view on those folks.

They were not people, but they were being taken very seriously. They posed a real, tangible threat to national security, according to many within the government.

In chapter seven, things get taken even further in trying to out the homosexuals. In a purely Cold War fashion, people were being interrogated. All of a sudden, as the author explains, no one is safe from suspicion. The important thing about this chapter is the fact that it shows how quickly thought of this nature can spread. It started out slowly, but after a short while, people began to suspect that just about everyone around them was a homosexual. People within the government were being forced to make decisions that might cost them their jobs, their marriages, and their lives. Strangely, even the people that were not gay were being accused of being gay during this chapter.

Chapter eight is a very important one to the development of the story because it ties the entire homosexual scare into what was going on in the world. In a way, people were becoming so caught up in what was going on the gay front that they forgot that there was a conflict going on with Russia, of all places. In this chapter, that harsh reality is brought back to roost. It explains that some of the individuals that were in danger of being ousted for their sexual orientation were actually quite important to the American Cold War effort.

That created new problems and new questions for the Americans in control. Should they out these people and risk what might happen as a result of that? Should they just stand by and be quiet for the sake of national security. More

choices had to be made by the members of the government and sacrifices had to be considered. In the end, people would have to decide whether or not they would stand by their sexual orientation and face the risks or whether they would change their ways for the sake of personal protection.

The book takes an interesting look at a lot of the issues that faced both American and the homosexual world during that time. It is an interesting work because it considers both sides of the conflict and weights them equally. Without this equal knowledge, people would be left in the dark in regards to figuring out the entire thing.

With the creative use of personal stories and by representing people in both a statistical and human way, the author allows readers to clearly understand what gays and lesbians during the time were facing. It was a struggle, to be sure. The book succeeds in doing everything that it intends to do. Not only is a successful story about an important time in America, but it is a further commentary on how the people that made up this time felt about the incidents that faced them