Students at Stake in The Sunshine State:

How Florida Politicians Used Gay Students to Fuel Statewide Witch Hunts of the Cold War

A Thesis in History

by

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Abstract:

This thesis explores the story of how the Florida Legislative Investigations Committee— Commonly referred to as the Johns Committee— surveilled, interrogated, and intimidated gay students at the University of Florida (UF) in the late 1950s. The Committee's interest in students exemplifies how a Cold War culture justified infringements on Civil liberties, attacks on state universities, and the harassment of gay Ameicans, in the search for political power. I begin with a short history of the injustices facing gay Americans in the early 1950s during the Lavender Scare. Then I examine how the Lavender Scare filtered down and functioned within the State of Florida, through outlining the Committee's creation and early endeavors. I examine the Committee's investigation into homosexualtiy at the UF. I center the experiences of three individual students who interacted with the Committee during the investigation through drawing on oral history interviews with students directly targeted. Importantly, I spend the final chapter of my thesis exploring the aftermath of the investigation. First, I explore the rise of student activism on the University of Florida's campus following the Committee's arrival. I also expand on the stories of the gay students by focusing on their lives post-graduation. I work to explore the lives of students beyond the context of their interaction with the Committee.

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Acknowledgements:

The most important thing I came to realize over the course of this project is that no endeavor, academic or otherwise, is a solitary pursuit. In fact, setting out to complete this thesis alone would have been utterly impossible. I have an enormous amount of gratitude to express to the people who made this project into what it is today.

Firstly, I want to thank the people who had no obligation to answer my inquiry emails about projects they worked on decades ago. Most of the fruitful leads that propelled this project forward came from strangers turned collaborators. I want to give special thanks to Dr. Allyson Beutke DeVito for a year's worth of zoom calls, emails, and follow up messages. It was Beutke DeVito who connected me with the students the Johns Committee targeted in the 1950s, a development that allowed me to actively center student stories at the heart of this project.

I want to say thank you to those students, Art Copleston and Merril Mushroom, for lending their voices to this project. In several rounds of phone interviews Art and Merril illuminated the lived experience of being gay in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. I am beyond grateful for them sharing a part of the gay past with me and for the massive amount of inspiration for future projects their stories provided me with. Without these amazingly interesting people this project would not be what it is.

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I want to acknowledge how this project—which will display the strength and necessity of community in the Queer past—was fueled by the communities who so kindly gave me the support, encouragement, and enthusiasm I needed.

Introduction

Anti-Communism, mass conformity, and the infringements of civil liberties characterize the socio-political landscape of the Cold War. Hysteria about Soviet spies or homosexual scandals populated newspaper headlines and conversations on the floor of Congress. By the 1950s, the discourse taking place in high politics enveloped Washington and reached into the lives of everyday Americans from coast to coast. The ideological roots of the conflict were just the start. As this project goes on to explore, the high politics of the Red Scare manifested as a political attack on LGBTQ+ Americans, often referred to as the Lavender Scare. Specifically, this project focuses on how the homophobic political culture filtered out of Washington, D.C. and into state and local governmental efforts, ultimately affecting the lives of everyday Americans.

In order to examine the political usefulness of homophobia and the dissemination of this political tactic throughout the U.S. I use a case study focusing on how the Florida Legislative Investigations Committee—which will be further referred to by its colloquial name, the Johns Committee— capitalized on the national culture of homophobia that was prevalent during the Cold War. The Johns Committee, in an attempt to 'clean up' the Sunshine State, championed a revolving door of ambitions— starting with attempts to discredit the NAACP, moving to investigate subversive organizations, before finally settling on ridding the state's public school system of gay educators.[1] The Committee capitalized on anxieties about integration, sexual morality, and threats to national security to construct the argument for their value. In the end, the

[1] Throughout this project the word "gay" will be used in lieu of the word "Queer". The individuals featured in later sections understood the term not as a binary label but instead as the umbrella term, much like how the word "Queer" is used today.

Committee's only true political success came from exploiting widespread homophobic rhetoric of the Lavender Scare.

Specifically, this project focuses on the first purge the Committee successfully orchestrated in 1959. On February 17th, the University of Florida's (UF) student paper *The Florida Alligator*, broke the story of the Johns Committee's investigation on UF's campus. The short front page story discussed the lengthy report compiled by the Committee being handed off to the University President J. Wayne Reitz. On February 20th, *The Alligator* covered the findings of the Committee's report, which claimed 15-16 members of the university faculty and staff were suspected of being homosexuals. On April 7th, *The Alligator* reported that "action for a dismissal has been taken. Fourteen academic and non-academic employees were affected." As a direct result of the Johns Investigation 14 employees at UF lost their jobs.[2] The Committee achieved its first major success in attacking gay teachers. The Committee spent the next five years capitalizing on this success and continuing to use the strategies developed at UF to remove public school teachers across the state.

Historiography of the Johns Committee

Among the scholars who study the Johns Committee, the purging of educators— starting at UF in 1959— is considered one of the most significant tragedies. In 1963, the Committee bragged to reporters about the 110 gay educators and administrators they removed in the four years from 1959 to 1963. The Committee also boasted that cases regarding the removal of 63

[2] "Johns' Group Gives Findings To University," *The Florida Alligator*, February 17, 1959, 1; Bob Gilmour, "15-16 Suspects Named in Report of Johns Group," *The Florida Alligator*, February 20, 1959, 1; Dave Hamilton, "Reitz Tells Action on Johns' Report," *The Florida Alligator*, April 7, 1959, 1.

more educators were pending in April of 1963.[3] Cold War culture made a victim of each educator dismissed. The Committee destroyed careers in public education through forcing administrations to fire gay employees. Beyond school grounds the Committee facilitated blackmail and intimidation. Educators, left unemployed, faced economic instability. Meanwhile, educators who retained their employment faced harsh Cold War standards of conformity in their classrooms.

Scholars interested in a variety of localized effects of the Red and Lavender Scares have used the Johns Committee as a fruitful case study.[4] Scholars interested in how anti-Communist hysteria intersected with other aspects of personal and political lives of Floridians in the 1950s can find vivid portraits of how the Cold War existed not only in Washington's high politics but manifested in the lives of everyday Americans. A study of the Johns Committee puts the infringements of civil liberties— characteristic of the Cold War— on full display. The study of the Johns Committee began in 1985 when Bonnie Stark, a masters student in the Law program at the University of South Florida (USF), published her thesis titled "McCarthyism in Florida: Charley Johns and the Florida legislative investigation committee July 1956 to July 1965." Since the Committee turned its attention to USF in the early 1960s the USF archives maintained (and maintain) various documents regarding the Committee. Because of these preserved documents and interest in the localized history, several influential academic treatments came out of USF. Stark's thesis focused on how the Committee rose to power in the state of Florida and turned to attack USF. Stark focused extensively on how the Committee began by attacking integrationist

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[3] AP, "Homosexual Teachers Ousted, Florida Told," *The Evening State*, April 19, 1963, A5.

[4] In 2014, Judith Poucher, a retired history professor from Florida State College, published the first historiographical essay dedicated to the Johns Committee. The following paragraphs draw important dates and historian's biographical information from Poucher's essay. Judith Poucher, "The John's Committee: A Historiographic Essay," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 93, no. 1 (2014): Article 6.

organizations before moving on to attack homosexuals. Since the Johns Committee's papers were not yet available at the time Stark was writing, her thesis drew heavily on interviews she conducted with state senators, Johns Committee investigators, and faculty members at USF.[5] Stark's work, founded in her expertise of legal practice and process, is used in this project to understand how the Committee came to exist.

While at USF Stark completed her thesis under Dr. Steven Lawson, a renowned Civil Rights historian. Lawson himself published on how the Johns Committee functioned in an attempt to uphold segregation in Florida.[6] Another student of Lawson's, James A. Schnur, is applauded in the field of study for his efforts to persuade the state of Florida to release the Committee's records to researchers in 1993.[7] According to one article in *The New York Times,* the State of Florida intended to keep the records sealed until 2038. However, due to Schnur's effort the Florida State Archives released over 25,000 pages of Committee documents decades early.[8] Schnur's work on the Committee is the first treatment to pull from the documents kept by the Committee.[9] These documents are foundational to the study of the Johns Committee and this project.

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[5] Bonnie Stark, "McCarthyism in Florida: Charley Johns and the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee July, 1956 to July, 1965" (master's thesis, University of South Florida, 1985).

[6] Steven F. Lawson, "The Florida Legislative Investigation Committee and the Constitutional Readjustment of Race Relations, 1956-1963," in *An Uncertain Tradition: Constitutionalism and the History of the South,* ed. Kermit L. Hall and James W. Ely, Jr. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 296-325.

[7] Today it is important to acknowledge, in an ironic twist, that Schnur was charged with the possession of child pornography in 2018. While his work is foundational, his more recent actions cannot be separated from his legacy.

[8] "Florida Examines Era of Suspicion," *New York Times,* July 4, 1993, 14.

[9] James Schnur, "Closet Crusaders: The Johns Committee and Homophobia," in *Carryin' On In The Lesbian and Gay South* ed. John Howard (New York, New York University Press, 1997), 132-163.

Following Schnur, Dr. Stacy Braukman, another Lawson student, published her dissertation on the Johns Committee, focusing on how the case study focused on the intertwining of anti-communism, racism, and homophobia, effectively combining the themes explored by her predecessors and mentor. Her book— *Communists and Perverts Under the Palms: The Johns Committee in Florida, 1956-1965*— is considered the most comprehensive treatment of the Committee.[10] Braukman focuses on the Committee's agenda, the tactics used by investigators, and the response from the public universities the Committee interfered with. While she touches briefly on the student experience in general terms she mostly focuses on a pervasive Cold War culture justified the Committee's activities.

In 2007 Karen Graves published "Doing the Public's Business: Florida's Purge of Gay and Lesbian Teachers 1959-1964," in the journal *Educational Studies*. Graves, a historian of education, dedicated her study to focusing on the Committees effect on educators. In 2009 she published *And They Were Wonderful Teachers: Florida's Purge of Gay and Lesbian Teachers*, an in-depth book-length treatment of the Committee's effects on gay educators during the statewide purges at K-12 schools.[11] Graves's work usefully extended the study of the Committee into a new subfield—of the history of education. Graves and her predecessors display just how indicative the story of the Johns Committee was in a study of the larger Cold War, and how the Committee capitalized on vulnerable groups in search of their own success.

By the 2010s, scholarship turned to focus on the personal stories of individuals affected by the Johns Committee. Starting in 2003, Judith Poucher, a history professor at Florida State

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[10] Stacy Braukman, *Communists and Perverts Under the Palms: The Johns Committee in Florida, 1956-1965* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2012).

[11] Karen Graves, *And They Were Wonderful Teachers: Florida's Purge of Gay and Lesbian Teachers* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

College with a focus on local Florida history, began publishing on Ruth Perry, an NAACP officer caught in the crossfires of the Committee's investigation. Poucher paid specific attention to the personal story of Perry. She expanded her study of Perry and expanded her scope to include several other individual's stories as well. In 2014 she published a full-length treatment— *State of Defiance: Challenging the Johns Committee's Assault on Civil Liberties.*[12] The book explored five personal stories of Florida citizens—two civil rights organizers, a lesbian bartender, a UF professor, and a USF administrator—targeted by the Committee. Poucher's work effectively tied the larger narrative of the Cold War to the stories of individuals— truly displaying how the Cold War made individual Americans in vulnerable positions into victims of the larger socio-political power structure.

I argue that a study of the Cold War greatly benefits from examining the stories of infringements on individuals's civil liberties. A study of the Johns Committee allows a unique opportunity to perform such work. Such a study allows historians to better understand how a Cold War culture affected the lives of everyday Americans. Similarly, such a study allows for close analysis of how groups such as the Johns Committee capitalized on the defenseless targets to successfully pursue their own agendas. Particularly, a focus on the gay university students affected by the Committee provides insight into the nature of the Committee's investigation. Through centering stories of young students we can understand how the Committee built its power on the backs of Americans who lacked the ability to fight back. While every population the Committee targeted was vulnerable in some way, attacking young students in educational

[12] Judith Poucher, "One Woman's Courage: Ruth Perry and the Johns Committee," in *Making Waves: Female Activists in Twentieth Century Florida*, ed. Jack E. Davis and Kari Frederickson (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 229-249; Judith Poucher, "Raising Her Voice: Ruth Perry, Activist and Journalist for the Miami NAACP," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 84, no. 4 (Spring 2006): 517-540; Judith Poucher, *State of Defiance: Challenging the Johns Committee's Assault on Civil Liberties* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014).

spaces proves a particularly problematic strategy to secure the success of the Committee. Gay students were targeted by an investigation which university administrators supported. Instead of focusing on their education in a safe and uninterrupted environment, the gay students faced the challenge of navigating state sponsored harassment and intimidation on campus. Unfortunately, scholars have not yet dedicated significant attention to the individual stories of the students caught in the crossfire of the Committee's agenda or how the investigation affected their trajectories after graduation.

Student Stories Centered

It is worth noting that student stories have not been completely ignored in discussion of the Johns Committee beyond academic articles and book length treatments. Several documentary projects made by students from Florida's public universities have dedicated significant attention to the experience of students who interacted with the Committee in the 1950s and 1960s. The first of these projects is Allyson A. Beutke and Scott Litvack's 1999 film *Behind Closed Doors: The Dark Legacy of the Johns CommitteeThe Dark Legacy of the Johns Committee.*[13] The pair produced the film in lieu of a thesis while pursuing masters degrees at UF. Importantly, their positions as students at UF in the 1990s gave them unique access to material on the Committee held in UF's special collections and the chance to interview UF community members who remembered the Committee's tenure on campus. The documentary featured interviews with students targeted by the Committee in 1959. The footage included in the project allowed these students to speak for themselves and recentered the narratives around the individuals affected by

[13] Allyson A. Beutke DeVito, *Behind Closed Doors: The Dark Legacy of the Johns Committee*, produced by Allyson Beutke DeVito and Scott Litvack, (1999; Gainesville, FL: Documentary Institute in the College of Journalism and Communications at the University of Florida) 2000, video.

the Committee. Importantly, UF students of the 1990s were instrumental in bringing the voices of UF students from the 1950s and 60s to the forefront of the study of the Johns Committee.

In 2011 students at the University of Central Florida, under the direction of professors Lisa Mills and Robert Cassanello, produced *The Committee*.[14] The film makers brought a variety of interdisciplinary backgrounds to the creation of *The Committee.* The documentary combined interviews with affected students from UF and campus police officers who aided in the investigation. Upon its release *The Committee* had a large and influential reach. The film appeared for local showings, international festivals, and eventually made accessible digitally through PBS.[15] *The Committee* sparked widespread conversation about the unjust attacks staged by the Johns Committee and allowed audiences beyond the Sunshine State to learn about a localized set of Cold War atrocities.

In 2020 another digital treatment of the Committee surfaced. A YouTube video produced by Vox titled "How Florida legally terrorized gay students" brought the story of the Johns Committee to another large audience made up of everyday Americans.[16] The video featured an interview with a student who was interrogated by the Committee, the voice of Judith Poucher, and close analysis of the primary documents housed at the Florida State Archives. The Vox video effectively showcases how the story of the Johns Committee escaped the academic treatments and acid-free boxes and found an audience of over one million viewers. In February of 2020 I found this video. The story it featured was my first introduction to the Lavender Scare. I was

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[14] Monica Monticello, Kathryn Pailson, Amy Simpson, *The Committee*, directed by Lisa Mills and Robert Casanello (2011; Orlando, FL: University of Central Florida, 2012), video.

[15] "The Committee: About the Film," University of Central Florida, accessed April 9, 2025, https://cah.ucf.edu/the-committee/#about.

[16] Ranjani Chakraborty, "How Florida legally terrorized gay students," produced by Vox on Nov 4, 2019, YouTube Video, 11:56, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IbTBehjdlc0.

struck with the personal story of a gay student who suffered through torment at the hands of their state. I became interested in the human stories of the people affected by the Johns Committee and the other stories that existed beyond the short 11 minute video. This project is informed by my original exposure to the stories of students affected by the Johns Committee.

Tracking down the stories of gay students attacked by the Committee in the historical record is a difficult and demanding task. Laws such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act keep records of enrollment and expulsion out of the hands of researchers. While over 25,000 pages at the Florida State Archives are available to the public, portions of the records necessary for tracking down individuals affected by the Committee are inaccessible because of Chapter 93-405 of Senate Bill No. 20-B. Effective on June 30, 1993, Chapter 93-405 called for a massive redaction effort in order to maintain the privacy for the people the Committee interrogated, people named in recorded testimonies, and people named in the body of evidence the Committee maintained.[17] Since the State Senate amended previous legislation in order to release the documents over 30 years earlier than originally intended, the State employed temporary workers to help with the redaction effort. In a rush to release documents on time, the State Archives made no copies of the original documents. Frustratingly, the temporary workers took black markers to the original documents—permanently striking the names of the Committee's victims from the historical record. Because of this, student stories have largely been left out of the academic treatment of the Johns Committee, in favor of the more readily available stories present in the documents.

In order to tackle the challenge of massive information gaps, this project draws largely on the stories of three students who have dedicated accounts of their college years to the public

[17] Florida State Senate, *Chapter 93-405 Senate Bill No. 20-B*, June 13, 1993.

record—Art Coplestone, Merril Mushroom, and the late Chuck Woods. Each of these students had run-ins with the Johns Committee during their time at UF. For each of these students, the interactions with the Committee were a direct result of their being gay. Over the past twenty years, these three individuals have agreed to share their stories with filmmakers, historians, journalists, and most recently, me. Some of them have also penned autobiographical pieces detailing their interaction with the Committee. In their own words and of their own volition Art, Merril, and Chuck, have contributed their stories to the historical record in order to expand the study of the Johns Committee.

Through examining the footage embedded in various documentaries, dissecting the entirety of interview transcripts kindly provided to me by filmmakers, reading personal accounts of encounters with the Committee, and conducting oral history interviews with Art Copleston and Merril Mushroom, I have dedicated this project to intentionally centering these three personal stories within the study of the Johns Committee. As this project goes on to show, understanding how the Committee targeted students is vital to understanding how the Committee built its power on the backs of the most vulnerable populations at UF. To successfully execute purges in schools across Florida the Committee relied on the evidence gained through interrogating students, the culture of fear curated through using young informants, and the specific threats held over the heads of students. The existence of Florida's gay subculture, ironically, lent credibility to the Committee's charges. For the Committee this gay subculture made the young gay individuals easily exploitable in the cultural landscape of the Cold War. This is made expressly clear through examining student stories.

In the mid-1960s the Johns Committee undermined its credibility by pushing beyond its original mandate. By the late 1950s and early 1960s Americans grew increasingly tired of

played-out McCarthyist rhetoric. Still, the Committee continued to utilize the outdated rhetoric. Eventually, when up for re-appropriations, the State Senate of Florida chose not to allocate funding for the continuation of Johns' agenda, and in 1965 the Committee ceased to exist. While this paper follows the rise and the fall of the Committee, special attention is also directed to the lives lived by the affected students long after the Committee's downfall. I have worked to examine the lives of these individuals into adulthood and beyond the particular episode of hysteria that most Cold War narratives often focus on. I want to illustrate how the Committee used these students to fuel their investigation, but, more importantly, I want to examine the perseverance each of these individuals exercised in the face of adversity. Each of the students I introduce in this project completed their college education despite the challenges placed before them. These people became educators, activists, and members of their local gay communities. The stories examined in the pages that follow show how gay Americans directly affected by this homophobia survived their moment and were inherently shaped by it.

Importantly, I want to recognize that an unknowable number of gay Americans were not lucky enough to survive the Lavender Scare. Individuals who took their own lives once outed or experienced violence from people in their communities because of their being gay are hard to account for due to the vague nature of journalist coverage of such a taboo topic. The political actors of the moment understood the vulnerability that came with rejecting heterosexuality and internalized the political usefulness of homophobia at a moment of national anxiety. A gay existence in the 1950s was not an easy one—not by a long shot. Still, gay Americans survived an era that attempted to destroy them. The stories of the student profiled in this project speak to these two truths and many others. This is the story of the Johns Committee, but in this rendition special attention has been paid to the rich and complex experiences of the young gay Americans

the Committee got away with terrorizing. Special attention will be dedicated to the ways in which these students persevered regardless.

Chapter 1:

Creating a Culture for The Johns Committee to Thrive

A Short Gay History of WWII

With the onset of World War II came dozens of dramatic changes to American life. One such shift historians have noted is the shift in gender demographics. The war effort demanded the unbridled power of America's male population. Over the duration of the war military services siphoned over 16 million men out of their local communities, and redistributed them around the globe.[18] Over 73% of enlisted men served overseas, sparking a massive shift in gender dynamics both at home and abroad. Men serving in military capacities spent their days surrounded by members of the same sex and grew accustomed to homosocial environments. GIs enveloped in staunch masculine company developed their own niche subcultures. For women on the home front, a similar homosocial environment developed in response to the lack of men. Such a demographic shift spurred changes in the American workforce. In addition to their daily work within the home women took up employment beyond the domestic sphere in unprecedented proportions. According to a report released by the Department of Labor directly following the war, prewar numbers of women in the workforce hovered near 14 million.[19] Women in need of money to support their families while male breadwinners were overseas, turned to employment out of necessity. Similarly, employers, in search of capable people to fill factories floors, turned

[18] Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Public Affairs, "World War II Veterans by the Numbers," 2025, https://dig.abclocal.go.com/ktrk/ktrk_120710_WWIIvetsfactsheet.pdf.

[19] Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, Women Workers in Ten War Production Areas and Their Postwar Employment Plans, Bulletin 209 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1946)

to hiring women to fill the vacuum of ‘man’power. By 1945, over 19 million women were a part of America's workforce.[20]

Private industries were not the only entity to turn to women to fill positions left vacant by men. By 1941 the U.S. Army turned to women to take up service in a sex-segragated auxiliary branch. Comprised entirely of volunteer enlistees, the Women's Army Corps (WAC), followed by the Navy’s Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES) and Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP), relied on women to perform clerical tasks, administrative work, and eventually to act in service capacities. These auxiliaries provided women with social mobility unthinkable in years prior. For the first time in American history, a large number of women had the chance to leave their hometowns and experience a new kind of independence both socially and economically.

Physical geographical separation of American men and women challenged the status quo of the patriarchal power structure that characterized American life prior to the war. However, the changes did not settle in easily. Anxiety regarding the shifting gender dynamics manifested as public outcry about women serving in the WAC. Critics of women taking up roles in the military painted servicewomen as overly sexual, mannish, or ‘queer’. The Army, concerned with ruffeling as few feathers as possible, met the criticism with a call for stricter policing of servicewomen’s appearance, behavior, and sexuality in order to avoid concerns regarding women failing to live up to proper gendered expectations. Colonel Oveta Culp Hobby, the WAC’s first director, worked

[20] Ibid.

tirelessly to maintain the respectability the Army demanded in order to ensure women maintained a *respectable* place in the military.[21]

The military's attempt to maintain respectability amidst the war also meant maintaining a proper image of heterosexual morality in the eyes of the public. Such an attempt resulted in overtly homophobic policies. Gay men and women within the services lived in fear of the investigations into homosexuality and subsequently dishonorable discharges if discovered. Yet, despite such homophobia, gay men and women in homosocial environments found ways to connect. Some people experienced their sexual awakenings while others found a gay community, albeit underground, for the first time in their lives. Away from the eyes of small hometown communities, families, and employers, gay men and lesbians forged relationships and camaraderie around the world as the war waged on.[22]

While the U.S. military never promoted the inclusion of gay Americans, the largest war effort of the nation's history called for a certain level of tolerance. Military health professionals did develop a screening process intended to prohibit the enlistment of gay recruits, yet, it was not wholly effective. The ever-increasing demand for bodies to throw into combat made a large-scale removal of gay service members who slipped past the screening process unfeasible. Instead, small specific investigations into service members caught in homosexual acts, or service

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[21] Leisa Meyer, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps During World War II* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1996). Marilyn E. Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes: The Regulation of Female Sexuality during World War II* (New York: NY, NYU Press, 2010).

[22] Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990); John D'Emilio, "The Homosexual Menace: The Politics of Sexuality in Cold War America," in *Making Trouble : Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University*, (New York: Routledge, 1992).

members running in similar social circles to proven homosexuals, made up a majority of the homophobic investigations intended to maintain a morality in the military.[23]

In 1945, as the war around the globe began to wind down, so did the Military's leniency towards homosexual servicemembers. With the close of the war came blue discharges, classified by a Congressional Committee on Military Affairs, as "'neither honorable nor dishonorable,'" but which essentially enforced "the practical effect of a dishonorable discharge."[24] While the blue discharges disproportionately affected Black service members, the War Department also targeted a large number of homosexual service members. Around the close of the war, 50,000 people received these discharges—9,000 of whom were homosexuals.[25] Each blue discharge for a gay individual came with an adjoined code that labeled the recipient as a homosexual, making seeking civilian work increasingly difficult. The discharge not only removed the individual from their military position, but also robbed the affected person of their ability to economically support themself and prohibited access to the benefits promised by the GI Bill. For homosexuals these discharges came with the compounded threat of enforced psychiatric institutionalization, and potential imprisonment.[26]

According to the War Department Technical Manual of Military Justice Proceedings, the War Department justified purging gay Americans from the armed forces by stating the purpose of

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[23] Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire.*

[24] House of Representatives, Committee on Military Affairs, *Investigations of the National War Effort*, June 1946, 13.

[25] "Blue and Other Than Honorable Discharges," National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, accessed November 15th, 2025, https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/blue-and-other-than-honorable-discharges.htm.

[26] John D'Emilio, "The Homosexual Menace"; Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire.*

such purges aided in "the elimination … of undesirables who have no potential military value."[27] To the War Department, homosexuals—lumped together with drug addicts and perverts—exemplified 'undesirables' who "possess habits and traits of character which actually or potentially affect their efficiency."[28] Such justification aligned with the contemporary conceptions of homosexual behavior as a manifestation of a mental disturbance. Over the following years such rhetoric became a cornerstone for the homophobic purges of public employees. The massive expulsion of 9,000 gay members from the Armed Forces marks an explicit shift in official governmental attitude toward homosexuality.

During WWII the government simply tolerated gay men and women amid a national emergency that required all American hands on deck. Even gay bodies served their country well. However, mounting anxiety about shifting gender roles and sexual morality at the close of the war spurred an episode of extreme homophobia. Nevertheless, gay communities found a way to persevere despite the government's first successful homosexual purge. Following discharges, many service members were unable to return home for fear of outing themselves. Others, exposed to a rich gay subculture within the homosocial environments of the military, were unwilling to continue conforming to the standards held by their local communities. Many gay men and women settled in coastal port cities around the U.S.[29] For many Americans the traditional patriarchal and heteronormative structure promised comfort and familiarity in a world changed by violence. Budding underground gay communities stood in stark contrast to the

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[27] War Department, War Office, *Technical Manual of Military Justice Proceedings*, February 23, 1945, 6.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire.*

post-war turn towards the nuclear family. At the War's close, the “homosexual menace,” now spread from coast to coast, became one of America’s explicit new enemies.[30]

A Cold War Culture Settles in

The violence of WWII was replaced by an ideological conflict between the world powers of the Soviet Union and the United States. Beyond the arms race, another strong weapon against Communism was implemented on the homefront: ‘traditional American values.’ Traditional American values promoted white middle-class family life—and in exchange for unquestioned compliance—promised security in the increasingly turbulent and uncertain world. On a small scale the family unit offered an attempt at containment by way of keeping the youth of America safe from the spread of communist ideals through parental enforcement of proper American morals. Meanwhile, alignment with proper heterosexual behavior promoted conformity in interpersonal relationships, allowing married couples and abstinent young people to define themselves in opposition to sexual deviants. The encouragement of consumerism in the post-war boom helped American families define themselves as capitalist and therefore anti-communist.[31] While conformity provided practical protection against atomic bombs or impending Russian invasions, it offered the illusion of security.

On a national scale, a Cold War culture of conformity and anti-communism also filtered down from the world of high politics. Quickly, starting in 1950, the hysteria commonly associated with the Red Scare spread through the U.S. as a result of media frenzy. In February of

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[30] John D’Emilio, “The Homosexual Menace.”

[31] Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: NY, Basic Books, 1988), 164.

1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy (WI-R) quickly rose to prominence. McCarthy is best described as an opportunistic figure who took advantage of mounting anxieties. On February 9, 1950 McCarthy delivered his infamous speech in Wheeling, West Virginia. In the speech he began by painting a picture of the Cold War struggle as a "final, all out battle" between the "democratic Christian world," that prized "morality" and "justice," and the "communist atheistic world" slowly gaining footholds in Eastern Europe.[32] In his speech, McCarthy went on to claim he possessed a list 205 Communists employed by the U.S. State Department. McCarthy's claims, false for the sake of being flashy, held no water. Still, McCarthy, in search of establishing himself as a legitimate politician with a commitment to maintaining national security, rode the wave of hysteria and fanned the flames for his personal benefit. Quickly, anything that could be considered un-American was labeled communist. Such a construction made simple accusations a powerful political weapon for both Republicans and Democrats looking to discredit opponents. The cultural phenomena referred to as 'McCarthyism' was replicated by opportunistic politicians across the U.S.

In August 1950 Congress passed the Internal Security Act of 1950— commonly referred to as the McCarran Act, named for its notoriously anti-communist author, Senator Pat McCarran (NV-D). The McCarran Act reified McCarthy's claims about communists lurking in federal agencies.[33] According to the language of the document, the act was intended to "protect the United States against certain un-American and subversive activities."[34] In order to protect

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[32] Joseph McCarthy, "Enemies from Within" (Speech, Ohio County Republican Women's Club, Wheeling, WV, February 9, 1950).

[33] Michael J. Ybarra, "The Road to Wheeling," in *Washington Gone Crazy* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Steerforth Press, 2004), 1-8.

[34] Subversive Activities Control Act of 1950, 81st Cong., 2nd Sess, September 23, 1950.

Americans from “infiltration” and “revolution,” the act required communist organizations to register with the Attorney General. Since 1947 the Attorney General kept a list of subversive organizations as a part of Truman’s Loyalty Program. In the early days the names of over 300 organizations were published as a part of the Attorney General's list.[35] The McCarran Act greatly expanded this list and created the Subversive Control Board. The Board indiscriminately added hundreds of additional organizations to the list. The list included organizations such as the Industrial Workers of the World, American Jewish Labor Council, and the Michigan School of Social Science.[36] By the height of the Red Scare hysteria the list was far reaching, consistently growing, and understood to be an effective tool in disbanding the groups it featured. The McCarran Act, compounded with Truman’s Loyalty Program, codified anti-communism in Washington. Cold War rhetoric preoccupied political conversation and anti-Communism quickly became a bi-partisan platform. The McCarran Act set the stage for infringements on America's civil liberties and gave legal justification to McCarthy’s witch hunts. The culture instilled by McCarran and his anti-Communist agenda disrupted and destabilized lives in the capital before disrupting and destabilizing lives across the country.

The hysteria of the Red Scare is a prime example of the ways conversations in high politics trickled down into national culture through the media. McCarthy’s political maneuvers combined with the ramifications of the McCarran Act portrayed just how effective this Cold War rhetoric was in Washington and beyond, as headlines took the stories and disseminated them

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[35] Robert Justin Goldstein, “The Attorney General’s List of Subversive Organizations: A Sad Lesson from American History,” History News Network, last modified January 25, 2009, accessed April 9, 2025. https://www.hnn.us/article/the-attorney-generals-list-of-subversive-organizat

[36] “Government Proscribed 36 More Groups As Subversive, 23 of Them ‘Communist’,” *New York Times,* April 2, 1949, 6.

across America. Though McCarthy's original audience in Wheeling was small, the Associated Press picked up the story and syndication pushed it into national prominence.[37] It took a few days, but soon McCarthy's anti-communist crusade was deeply rooted in the front page of newspapers across the nation. The claims that showed up in morning headlines stoked already existing anxieties and further fueled the hysteria. Coverage of the McCarran Act in the accredited papers such as the *New York Times* spread the act's effectiveness beyond Washington.[38] The press became a tool of disarmament used against organizations added to the Attorney General's List of Subversive Organizations. For the targeted groups being painted as subversive or radical in print often necessitated the decision to disband.[39]

Sensational stories about the reality of a communist conspiracy caught Americans attention. In 1950, the arrest of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg caught national attention and amplified anxieties about the threat of espionage. Their arrest and subsequent trial became a national spectacle that stoked deep-seated fears. Hysteria claimed the Rosenbergs as its victims. The couple was executed by electric chair on June 19, 1953. The story dominated the headlines.[40] The press also turned attention to the dramatic House of Un-American Activities Committee

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[37] Edwin Bayley, *Joe McCarthy and the Press* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981); Cecil Holland, "McCarthy Says He Had Witness to Back His Charges," *The Evening Star,* April 10, 1950, 1; "McCarthy Divides GOP Governors," *The Daily Alaska Empire*, June 19, 1950, 1; "M'Carthy Insists Truman Outs Reds," *New York Times,* February 12, 1950, 5.; "M'Carthy names 4 He Says Are Linked To Reds," *Chicago Tribune*, February 13, 1950, 18; UP "State Dept. Still Full Of Red Risks: M'Carthy," *Daily News,* February 12, 1950, 326; AP, "Senator is Ready To Provide Names," *Reno Gazette Journal*, February 15, 1950.

[38] C.P. Trussell, "Red Bill Veto Beaten, 57-10, By Senators," *New York Times*, September 24, 1950, 10; Lewis Wood "Incrimination Ruling May Have Wide Effect," *New York Times*, December 17, 1950, 10.

[39] Ellen Schrecker, "Blacklists and Other Economic Sanctions" in *The Age Of McCarthyism: A Brief History With Documents* (Boston, MA: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 86-97.

[40] "Execution of the Rosenbergs," *The Guardian*, June 19th, 1953, 1.; "Rosenbergs Executed As Atom Spies After Supreme Court Vacates Stay; Last Minute Plea To President Fails," *New York Times*, June 20, 1953, 1.; A. H. Baskin, "Story Of The Rosenbergs: Two Links In Atomic Conspiracy," *New York Times,* June 21, 1953, 6.

trials. Artists, actors, and activists bore the brunt of the prodding trials while they were broadcast on radio stations and television screens. Cold War political culture stood center stage and Americans looked on. Because of sensational headlines and stories the threat of communism became conflated with any thing that could be construed as a threat to the United States. In many ways it became meaningless in the same way it became powerful.

As the 1950s wore on, the cycle continued and intensified. Absurd waves of hysteria cropped up. Panic about the newest dance crazes, premarital sex, and obscenities in comic strips reflect how Americans reacted to a shifting socio-economic landscape. Citizens who stepped out of line—challenging gender roles, promoting radical ideas, or challenging the government in any way—risked facing interrogations, harassment, and blacklisting. In order to escape the fate of harassment, ostracization, or economic ruin Americans had little choice but to conform. By not challenging the status quo, each American who conformed without question played a role in perpetuating the political and social oppression politicians justified through promoting the goal of maintaining national security. While certain communities were less affected than others, no American truly operated freely outside of a pervasive Cold War Culture.

“Historically known to be security risks”

Despite increasing anti-communist sentiments in post-war society, it was never explicitly illegal to be a registered communist. Still, the U.S. government put several security measures in place at the federal level to both weed out employees with radical backgrounds and keep out hires with communist ties. This system of security is best exemplified in Executive Order 9835, issued by President Truman in March 1947. The order instituted a Loyalty Review Board to tackle any “threat to our democratic processes” through the eliminating “the presence within the

Government service of any disloyal or subversive person."[41] Truman's executive order established the political culture of the 1950s. As the 1940s faded into the 1950s, language like "subversive" became increasingly volatile and abstract. At first used to describe communists, the word soon came to embody anyone who challenged American values. Contemporary logic included homosexuals as a part of this perceived threat. David Johnson, a historian of the Lavender Scare, claims that by 1950 "the issue of homosexuals in government threatened to overtake that of Communism in government within public political discourse."[42] Johnson further suggests "the constant pairing of 'communists and queers' led many to see them as indistinguishable threats."[43] For the reading public—watching witch hunts unfold in the headlines coming out of Washington D.C. day in and day out— gay men and lesbians became increasingly tied to an omnipresent and loosely defined national security threat. Yet, unlike the individuals labeled political opponents by Cold War rhetoric, gay Americans did not possess the power to advocate for themselves and instead faced discrimination at the hands of their own government.

Since the earliest days of colonial settlement, American society considered same sex acts of intimacy both legally and morally forbidden. A legal system, steeped in Christian influence, met both male and female homosexuals with the death penalty if discovered.[44] Laws that defined

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[41] "Executive Order 9835 of March 21, 1947, Prescribing Procedures For The Administration Of An Employees Loyalty Program In The Executive Branch Of Government," *Code of Federal Regulations 13* (1947).

[42] This project hardly scratches the surface of the story that unfolded in Washington D.C. For a complete and detailed treatment of this particular purge along side the other anti-gay policies, investigations, and media treatment in Washington, D.C. during the early Cold War refer to Johnson's foundational work on the topic. David Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Perscution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 30.

[43] Ibid, 31.

[44] Louis Crompton, "Homosexuals and the Death Penalty in Colonial America," (1976). Faculty Publications -- Department of English. 60. https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishfacpubs/60, 278.

sodomy as a capital crime remained on the books in the original 13 states until 46 years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence.[45] Still, homophobia became legally ingrained in American culture. Even after states dropped the death penalty for same-sex relations, a powerful social stigma surrounding homosexuality remained intact. By the Victorian period, public discourse about sexuality constructed intercourse for the sake of reproduction as the only moral expression of sexuality. In turn all other expressions of sexuality— sex for pleasure, sex between two members of the same gender, or masturbation— were linked to mental illness and imbalance.[46] Victorian ideals of sex and sexuality lingered and permeated post-war America. Through the 1950s sodomy, defined in 1949 by Article 125 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice as an "unnatural form of carnal copulation with another individual belonging to the same sex," remained illegal not only within a military context, but also on a larger legal scale across the U.S.[47] This long culture of homophobia set the stage for unquestioned and undisputed attacks on gay Americans during the early Cold War.

In late February 1950 a large-scale public attack on gay federal employees began when Deputy Under Secretary of State John Peurifoy, testifying before a subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Appropriations, rebuked McCarthy's recent slander against the State Department. Peurifoy, in an attempt to prove the department's efficacy in removing subversives, pointed to the fact that over the past three years the State Department had dismissed 91 employees on charges

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[45] Ibid, 279.

[46] Kevin J. Mumford, "'Lost Manhood' Found: Male Sexual Impotence and Victorian Culture in the United States," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3, no.1 (July, 1992): 33-57.

[47] National Military Establishment, Committee on a Uniform Code of Military Justice, *Uniform Code of Military Justice*, February 8th, 1949, 149.

of homosexuality.[48] Peurifoy's admissions set off a chain reaction of controversy that spiraled into hysteria about other homosexuals hiding in federal departments. In July of 1950, Senator Homer Ferguson (MI-R) reading a memorandum in defense of the State Department, acknowledged "the extensive employment in highly classified positions of admitted homosexuals." Surprisingly, Ferguson openly admitted that homosexual remained employed by the State Department. However, in order to avoid scrutiny, Ferguson leaned into acceptable rhetoric, ensuring that he pointed to the fact that such admitted homosexuals "are historically known to be security risks."[49] Not a single senator disputed such claims.

Within a matter of months issues regarding the employment of homosexuals grabbed the attention of the 81st Congress, and federal legislatures successfully painted homosexuality as a national security threat necessitating quick and direct action under the McCarran Act.[50] Prior to Peurifoy's admission, Senator Clyde Hoey (NC-D), as a part of a Senate subcommittee began working on an investigation. In late 1950 the subcommittee published an interim report titled "Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government." The primary objectives of the report, as described by its authors, was to "determine the extent of the employment of homosexuals and other sex perverts in Government; to consider reasons why their employment by the Government is undesirable; and to examine into the efficacy of the methods used in dealing with the problem."[51] The Hoey Report characterized homosexuals as psychologically

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[48] Congress.gov. "Congressional Record." April 11, 2025. https://www.congress.gov/bound-congressional-record/1950/07/24/senate-section, 10843.

[49] Ibid. 10806.

[50] Ibid.

[51] U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Departments, Subcommittee on Investigations, *Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government*, 81st Cong., 2nd sess., 1950, S. Res. 280. Further referred to as "The Hoey Report."

disturbed, susceptible to black mail, and threatening to the well being of heterosexual employees. The report called for the removal of gay employees and barring the employment of homosexuals in the future. The Hoey report exemplifies the way homophobic policy was supported by federal legislators. Hoey's report undoubtedly laid the foundation for the Lavender Scare in Washington D.C.

"Not Suitable for a Position of Responsibility"

Government agencies justified the systematic firing of gay employees by painting homosexuals as a threat because of the strong association between homosexuality and mental disorders. Through the 1950s the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders listed homosexuality as a type of "sexual deviation" alongside pedophilia, rape, and sexual mutilation.[52] Medical professionals and the public they informed perpetuated the notion that homosexuality was merely a mental illness of a temporary nature and in turn curable through correctional therapy.

On the contrary, studies of human sexuality conducted by Alfred Kinsey suggested that homosexuality was not a mental illness, but instead an aspect of normal human sexuality. Kinsey, a respected academic, founded the Institute for Sex Research (ISR). In 1948, the ISR, with Kinsey as its director, published *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male.* The study included the interviewing of over 5,000 participants regarding sexual practices and attitudes. Kinsey's study estimated that 37% of men in America had some homosexual experience.[53] In 1953, *Sexual*

[52] American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual Mental Disorders* (Washington, D.C.: Mental Hospital Service, 1952), 38-39. Within the pages of the DSM, the APA considered homosexuality a mental disorder until 1973, when it was downgraded to simple maladjustment.

[53] Alfred Kinsey, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia, PA: W.B. Saunders Company, 1949), 623.

Behavior in the Human Female, a survey of over 6,000 participants expanded the scope of the study. The 1953 report found that 13% of women had overt homosexual experience and that just over 700 of the women in the sample had some sort of homosexual experience.[54] Kinsey's reports presented information in a subjective, scientific, and amoral manner. Yet, the findings presented sparked massive controversy and spurred a public discourse about sex and sexuality.[55] Kinsey brought sexual realities to light and began dismantling mainstream understandings of sexual normality. Heterosexual experiences between a married man and woman, Kinsey pointed out, was not the only way Americans were having sexual encounters. In fact, homosexuality was more prevalent in society than most Americans were willing to accept.

Kinsey's widely circulated report did not inform the investigations into the perceived threat of homosexual employees in D.C. Instead, Hoey's 1950 report drew from psychologists, physicians, and other medical experts.[56] Nowhere in the report are the "experts" named or cited. Within the report the contemporary medical understanding of homosexuality as a psychological disorder served to justify the removal of gay employees. As the report states "employees with mental maladjustments, within the senators' understanding, could not be trusted to handle important issues regarding national security."[57] For the senators who lead the extensive efforts to remove gay employees, the medical justification painted the problem of employing a homosexual not just as abstract and immoral but instead as a scientifically founded threat.

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[54] Alfred Kinsey, *Sexual Behavior in The Human Female*, (Philadelphia, PA: W.B. Saunders Company, 1953), 475.

[55] Erdman Palmore, "Published Reactions to the Kinsey Report," *Social Forces* 31, no. 2 (December 1952): 165–172.

[56] "Hoey Report," 2.

[57] Ibid, 4.

In a similar vein, Hoey's report also justified the removal of gay employees because of their vulnerability to blackmail. The report argues that "perverts are frequently victimized by blackmailers who threaten to expose their sexual deviations."[58] Outcries about national security from voices such as McCarthy, bolstered anxieties surrounding such blackmail. Senators feared the ways in which foreign powers could capitalize on harassing gay employees. In reality, America's marginalization of homosexuality made gay citizens more susceptible to harassment on all fronts. The enforcement of heterosexual standards is in turn what made homosexuals so vulnerable to potential blackmail in the first place. Ironically, discriminatory policy regarding homosexuality is responsible for *creating* the threat to national security.

Lastly, the Hoey report also points to the ways in which homosexuals led a coercive effort of their own. The report claimed that "sexual deviants" frequently try to recruit "normal" people into "perverted" practices.[59] In the report this sentiment is simplified into a single sentence which reads, "One homosexual can pollute a government office."[60] Such a sentence embodies the contemporary understanding of homosexuality as a social ailment that could be spread. Contemporary anxieties about homosexuality focused on gay individuals' efforts to recruit and in turn pervert vulnerable heterosexuals. This understanding of homosexuality as a moral pollutant mirrors the contemporary fear of communist being spread like a disease.[61] In actuality, such recruiting efforts were typically misunderstood efforts to build an early gay community. Gay individuals typically found safety to self identify and exist authentically around other gay folks.

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[58] Ibid, 5.

[59] Ibid, 4.

[60] Ibid, 4.

[61] Geoffrey S. Smith, "National Security and Personal Isolation: Sex, Gender, and Disease in the Cold-War United States," *The International History Review* 14, no. 2 (May 1992): 307-337.

Ironically, a growing underground gay community supported the report's claims about recruiting efforts.

The Hoey Report outlines the extensive efforts to justify the removal of gay employees from federal positions. The report posed such homosexual employees as threats to national security. In many ways the report is a response to the accusations posed by McCarthy (who sat as a member of the subcommittee that published it). The Senators involved presented genuine concern in the report's prose as well as in conversation captured in the congressional record. It is important to acknowledge the fear many Americans felt in regards to homosexuality during the Cold War. Gay employees were understood to be genuine threats to national security, and through the proper selection of evidence, such a stance went largely unchallenged.

Purges in the Pursuit of Power:

Over and over politicians attempted to respond to the growing hysteria triggered by McCarthy's various claims. Pueorfoy's admission about the 91 homosexuals ousted from the State Department was one such attempt. In order to maintain political reputations, legislatures and politicians needed to prove themselves staunch Cold Warriors. Much like anti-communism, homophobia became a vital stance to take within the political culture of the early Cold War. A constant investigation into homosexuality made maintaining the effort to 'clean up' up the government sustainable. A homosexual witch hunt proved even more fruitful than a failing search for communist sympathizers. In response—politicians in Washington shifted gears, and as it happened homosexuals, both politically and socially vulnerable, made the perfect target.

As it turned out, gay Americans proved to be better scapegoats than communists. One reason stands out—in 1950, gay men and lesbians in the U.S. could not politically organize.

Medical professionals of the mid-century considered homosexuality a mental illness and law enforcement agencies considered homosexual acts criminal. Organizing effectively required gay men and women to self-identify as mentally-ill criminals, in turn putting their livelihoods at stake. The threat of forced institutionalization in asylums combined with carefully recorded arrest kept gay men and lesbians virtually powerless. In the early 1950s the first gay activist groups, then called 'homophile organizations,'were still fledgling operations. In 1951 The Mattachine Society, a group for white-collar middle class gay men, began holding meetings in California. In 1955 the Daughters of Bilitis, a group made up of a similar demographic of gay women, followed suit.[62] These homophile organizations held virtually no political power in their early years and lacked national influence. By the late 1950s both organizations reached Washington, D.C. In the capitol these organizations became visible and were even described as the most militant branches.[63] However, such organizations arrived too late to protect gay employees against the massive purges that defined the first half of the 1950s. The gay men and women working for the federal government in the late 1940s and very early 1950s lacked representation and risked their reputations by speaking out against homophobic policies. As the purges of gay employees tore through Washington uninhibited and unquestioned, no one risked standing up for the gay Americans affected.

Democrats and Republicans alike used the sensational events of 1950 to bolster their parties' credibility in opposition to one another. Homophobia and accusations of homosexuality

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[62] John D'Emilio, "Radical Beginnings of the Mattachine Society," in *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 57-74.

[63] Martin Duberman, "The Father of the Homophile Movement," in *Left Out: The Politics of Exclusion/ Essays/ 1964-1999* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1999), 59-94.

became a bipartisan platform.[64] While Republicans argued the Democratic leadership of FDR and Truman allowed the federal government to harbor homosexuals, Democratic leaders pointed out their party had effectively removed homosexuals.[65] Homosexuals in federal positions quickly became the pawns in a political game as the Republicans fought to regain control of the White House and the Senate. The political strategy of the era became increasingly dependent on 'uncovering subversives' to bolster credibility by guaranteeing American security. Opportunistic politicians continued constructing gay men and women to be a security risk that demanded immediate attention.

American eyes on Washington through the Cold War witnessed the purges. It was a gripping story that championed American exceptionalism in the midst of an anxious era. Political hopefuls around the U.S. joined their constituents in looking on to the dramatic series of events unfolding in Washington. With eyes on senate seats or governorships, the lessons learned from the initiation of the Lavender Scare permeated the political landscape of the 1950s and the use of a helpless gay scapegoat promised a chance at political success.[66] A culmination of reactionary behavior to McCarthyism, the disenfranchisement of gay Americans, and the political opportunism characterized homophobia as an effective political tool.

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[64] Andrea Friedman, writing on McCarthy's role in popularizing the use of homophobia on the national stage of politics, interestingly points out that McCarthy himself could not escape "sexual smearing." While he was not frequently accused of being a homosexual, political adversaries on both sides of the political spectrum accused members of McCarthy's circle of being Queer. Not even the man who started the hysteria was safe from the wide reach it boasted. Andrea Friedman, "The Smearing of Joe McCarthy: The Lavender Scare, Gossip, and Cold War Politics," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (December 2005), 1105-1129.

[65] Johnson, *The Lavender Scare,* 6.

[66] For more on this reference: Friedman, "The Smearing of Joe McCarthy"; Johnson, *The Lavender Scare*; D'Emilio, "The Homosexual Menace."

Florida State Senator: Charley Johns

Florida, much like the rest of the country, was wrapped up in the Cold War rhetoric that enveloped D.C. Syndicated stories from the capitol filtered into major Florida newspapers. Starting in the Summer of 1954 a committee loosely dedicated to maintaining the moral fabric of the state of Florida laid roots in the political landscape of the Sunshine State. The Committee, officially referred to as The Florida Legislative Investigations Committee, is commonly referred to as the Johns Committee or the Johns Group. The group took its name from the opportunistic State Senator who spearheaded the effort to create it. The Johns Committee continuously shifted gears to attack various groups and individuals deemed subversive by Cold War standards. The most successful and sustained attack the committee orchestrated targeted gay students and educators and lasted from 1959 to 1964. Charley Johns and the Committee he created exemplify how the Cold War rhetoric successfully weaponized in Washington during the early 1950s filtered down into state level politics.

Johns' career is defined by his intense pursuit of political power. Johns' tenure in the Florida legislature began in 1936 when he was elected to the Florida Senate to represent Starke County. In running for reelection in 1940, he lost to Lex Green. Seeking a return to the State Senate, Johns ran again in 1944, this time winning. In 1953, Johns graduated to Senate President.[67] As Senate President, he made his first attempt at creating an investigations committee. Concerned with tackling the issue of crime, Johns proposed a committee to clean up the state of Florida. However, Johns' peers in the state legislature, worried dedicating specific attention to the issue of crime—by way of creating a committee—threatened to negatively affect

[67] "Charley Eugene Johns," Florida Department of State, State of Florida, accessed April 11, 2025, https://dos.fl.gov/florida-facts/florida-history/florida-governors/charley-eugene-johns/.

the state's prosperous tourist industry. His colleagues also worried that an investigation into Florida's crime problem closely replicated the McCarthyesque witch hunts that gripped national attention in 1950.[68] By 1954, McCarthy's political tactics grew out of hand as he accused the Army of being communist. He quickly lost reputability in the world of politics, and his contemporaries worked to distance themselves from aligning too closely with overt political opportunism.[69] Johns' peers worried investigations committees in the wake of McCarthy's downfall threatened to produce similar poor public opinions of the state legislature.[70]

One of Johns' most vocal opponents was Florida's Democratic Governor Dan McCarty. Due to McCarty's disapproval of Johns' pursuits, the Senate voted against Johns' measure to create a crime busting committee in 1953. McCarty died in the fall of the same year and Johns rose to fill the position of acting governor. He held the position from September 1953 to January 1955. During his time as acting governor Johns maintained an interest in tackling the issue of crime in Florida. When up for election in May of 1954, Johns lost to Leroy Collins and faced a return to the Senate.[71] According to interpretations from scholars who have closely examined Johns' political trajectory, the defeat Johns faced in the gubernatorial race further stoked his political ambition. Johns, back in the senate, continued his search for political relevance.

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[68] Bonnie Stark, "McCarthyism in Florida: Charley Johns and the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee July, 1956 to July, 1965" (master's thesis, University of South Florida, 1985), 2.

[69] Robert Griffith, "Censure," in *The Politics of Fear: Joseph R. McCarthy and the Senate*, (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 270-317.

[70] Stark, "McCarthyism in Florida," 7.

[71] Stark, "McCarthyism in Florida," Introduction, passim.

***Brown's* Effect on Florida**

In 1954 the United States Supreme Court produced the landmark decision, *Brown V. The Board of Education*, declaring segregation within public schools unconstitutional. Across the South, where segregation was deeply ingrained, states scrambled to come up with loopholes and write up constitutional clauses to defend the sanctity of their segregated educational institutions.[72] This was especially true in Florida. The *Brown* decision sparked anxiety in white Floridians. Increasingly prevalent boycotts against segregated transit systems in Tallahassee and Miami added to the unease. Many white Floridians, upset over attacks on segregation, turned to their representatives for a solution.

While unrest and debate about the *Brown* decision ripped through the South, Johns maintained his commitment to being tough on crime, going so far as to call for the creation of a State FBI. Once again, his dreams of creating any sort of committee died on the senate floor. Floridians, and the legislators who represented them, cared more about high profile issues surrounding segregation than they did about Johns' attempts to clean up criminality. So, in 1956, Johns shifted gears to focus on the issue of segregation. On July 25th, 1956, after three years of trial and error, Johns' third attempt at creating an investigations committee met success. In a vote of twenty eight to seven the State Senate passed the bill that created the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee (FLIC). The bill, sponsored by Johns and his collaborators senators Dewey Johnson and John Rawls, guaranteed the Committee would serve as a measure to uphold the Fabianski Plan— a legal plan designed to uphold the infrastructure of segregation through

[72] Stark, "McCarthyism in Florida," 11.

Florida's education system, despite the *Brown* decision.[73] In the beginning it was this commitment to upholding segregation that gave Johns' Committee the credibility it needed in order to be conceived. Such a commitment truly exemplifies the first instance in which Johns leaned into focusing on the anxieties of his consistency in search of political success.

According to Bonnie Stark's thesis on the legal history of the Johns Committee, "the language of the Bill authorized the FLIC to investigate organizations or individuals threatening the safety of Florida's residents by violating state laws."[74] Stark's observation in regards to the bill's language is important in understanding the flexibility the vocabulary and phrasing gave the investigators. Initially, Florida's chapter of the NAACP was the prime target of harassment for the Committee. The legislature conflated calls for integration and equality with radical communist agendas in an attempt to discredit organizations working to dismantle segregation in Florida. Such a strategy was effective, but not effective enough. By summer 1958, a convoluted legal battle between the NAACP and the Committee had been raging on for nearly four years. During these four years the Supreme Court of Florida consciously made ruling against the interests of the NAACP.[75] Yet, for Johns, the Committee's failure to discredit the NAACP in a swift and simple fashion sparked concern about maintaining the Committee's reputation in the eyes of the public. The slow progress against the NAACP sparked Johns to broaden the scope of the investigation in an attempt to maintain relevance and seek success on other fronts.[76]

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[73] Ibid, 12.

[74] Stark, "McCarthyism in Florida," 14. Here Stark's interpretation is valuable for two reasons. First, Stark maintains training and expertise in legal language and intention. Secondly, the bill is not readily accessible online, making research conducted from out of state difficult.

[75] Judith Poucher, "Virgil Hawkins: Pursuit of the Dream Continues," in *State of Defiance*: Challenging the Johns Committee's Assault on Civil Liberties, (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2014), 24-40.

[76] Stark, "McCarthyism in Florida."

Johns encouraged a shift in direction, again tuning into the anxieties of his constituents. In summer 1958 the Committee's Chief Investigator R.J. Strickland received orders to redirect his attention from discrediting the NAACP to launching an investigation at the University of Florida (UF) in Gainesville. From August to December 1958 the Committee conducted an investigation into communists, integrationists, and subversives at UF. Over this four month period not a single public hearing or trial was held. The Committee had learned a thing about the notoriety that came with staging a public crusade and instead insulated their investigation at UF with some secrecy to avoid public scrutiny if failure were to arise.[77]

From summer 1958 forward the investigation into the NAACP in an attempt to maintain segregation in the Sunshine State was no longer the Committee's primary objective. The Committee instead transitioned to maintaining morality within Florida's public educational system. Throughout its existence the Committee's objectives continuously adapted and shifted to fit the perceived needs of Florida in order to continue receiving state funding. The investigations took a new shape and closely linked themselves first to universities and then to grade schools. It was within the walls of the state funded institutions that the Committee conducted their most compelling investigations, uncovering and ousting homosexual educators.[78]

The University Stage

The Committee's special attention on UF is no surprise within the context of the Cold War. In the years following WWII American colleges and universities saw a massive expansion

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[77] Ibid.

[78] Karen Graves, *And They Were Wonderful Teachers:Florida's Purge of Gay and Lesbian Teachers,* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

to accommodate a new generation with greater access to college granted by the G.I. Bill. The trend continued and over the course of the 1950s college enrollment increased by 45%. By 1960 over 3.63 million students were enrolled in colleges across the U.S.[79] Land grant schools popped up in cornfields and millions of young adults formed localized collegiate subcultures on massive campuses. Such subcultures sparked a new anxiety for parents, legislatures, and administrators as students gained a new shared consciousness and began questioning Cold War conformity.[80] Once again, these newly budding anxieties quickly became conflated with the threat of communists, subversives, and homosexuals.

This anxiety intensified due to the growing relationship between universities and public defense spending. Following WWII, STEM programs at universities across the U.S. became an important arm of national security. By the mid 1950s the Pentagon contributed over $300 million to universities conducting research related to defense.[81] In 1958, following the Soviet's successful launch of Sputnik the year prior, the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) passed in Congress and worked to make college education more accessible through federal loans. The NDEA dramatically increased college enrollment. A young educated population could be a leg up on the Soviets if properly trained in the fields of math, science, and foreign languages.[82] Political science programs promised to produce diplomats and help the U.S. navigate a particularly turbulent geopolitical landscape. Meanwhile, expanded programs in science and

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[79] John R. Thelin, *Going to College in the Sixties*, (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2018), 12.

[80] Ibid, 14.

[81] Kenneth J. Heineman, *Campus Wars: The Peace Movement at American State Universities in the Vietnam Era*, (New York: NY, New York University Press, 1994), 13.

[82] *National Defense Education Act of 1958*, 85th Cong., 2nd Sess, September 2, 1958.

math trained the next generation of engineers and chemists to facilitate development of nuclear weaponry as the arm race intensified. Programs that bolstered the military industrial complex and strengthened American power on the global stage were maintained as a particularly powerful weapon of the Cold War.

Because educational institutions became indelibly linked to maintaining national security, both politicians and their constituents kept a close eye on educators and administrators. Anti-intellectual movements, attempting to censor ideas considered radical by Cold Warriors, used the power of accusations to force academics out of influential positions.[83] Educators, looking to keep their jobs, faced the challenge of carefully navigating an increasingly politicized educational landscape. The expectations of upholding moralistic standards enveloped educators working in kindergarten classrooms to college campuses. According to contemporary logic, if the Cold War ideology was not perpetuated the fight against global communism would lose its scaffolding and deteriorate. In order for schools to secure and maintain federal funding, educators needed to promote anti-communism in their classrooms through their behavior and their pedagogy. In turn educators became a pillar of maintaining national security through the dissemination of proper American values to their students.[84]

As the 1950s carried on, parents and administrators grew more concerned with the potential for corrupting influence in their student's classrooms. Looking back on the moment it

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[83] R.C. Lewontin, "The Cold War and the Transformation of the Academy," in *The Cold War and the University: Toward an Intellectual History of the Postwar Years*, ed. Noam Chomsky et al. (New York: The New Press, 1997),1-34. Howard Zinn, "The Politics of History in the Era of the Cold War: Repression and Resistance," in *The Cold War and the University: Toward an Intellectual History of the Postwar Years*, Noam Chomsky et al. (New York: The New Press, 1997), 35-72.

[84] JoAnne Brown, "'A is for Atom, B is for Bomb': Civil Defense in American Public Education, 1948-1963," *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 1, (June 1988), 68-90.

becomes clear that a multitude of factors *outside* of the classroom truly drove students to question the status quo. Students imbued with a new collective consciousness, were fueled by their experience in socio-economically diverse communities, armed with new language to express radical ideas, and frustrated when the promises of post-war peace and prosperity failed to materialize.[85] These factors lead to an explosion of student activism that surfaced in the late 1950s and is remembered as a mainstay of the 1960s. New anxieties came with the expansion of these educational institutions, as young Americans flooded into new environments and were exposed to new ways of thinking. Contemporary rhetoric made the University into a battleground on which the socio-political battles and moralist skirmishes of the Cold War were fought.

Johns' Takes on Homosexuals in Higher Education

Starting in 1954 Charley Johns capitalized on the anxiety, unease, and hysteria of the Cold War in a desperate attempt to justify the necessity for his committee. However, by 1958 attention specifically pinned on Florida's universities gave the Committee a narrowed and specific scope that bolstered their legitimacy. For Johns, the university was the perfect stage for fighting for the sanctity of American morals and the upholding of traditional power structures. Historians who have studied the Johns Committee, such as Karen Graves, have examined why the Committee trained some much of their attention on potential homosexuals within Florida's public education system. Graves contends that legislatures within the state of Florida who were "looking to schools as central posts in the battle for domestic containment, took no chance on

[85] Clark Kerr, "Student Dissent and Confrontation Politics," in *PROTEST! Student Activism in America,* ed. Julian Forster and Durward Long, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1970), 3-10.

teachers who might be social deviants," and instead argued it was "better to purge them all."[86] A national discourse concerned with maintaining morality in the classroom allowed for wide sweeping investigations and attacks on radicals and subversives to go unquestioned. Meanwhile, a national culture of homophobia justified attacks on gay Americans.

Homophobic purges within public universities were in no way unique to Florida. In fact, Johns' attack on homosexuals on a college campus was not unique by any means. Historians Margaret A. Nash and Jennifer A. R. Silverman conducted a case study of three American universities that executed homophobic purges in the 1940s. According to Nash and Silverman the University of Texas, the University of Wisconsin, and the University of Missouri all purged perceived and proven homosexual faculty and/or students. A cultural exchange existed as stories of successful gay purges reached national relevance and spread through headlines from Toledo to Nevada.[87] Nash and Silverman argue the college campuses examined in the article point to a larger power structure in which homophobic purges act as an established means of exercising political power on a local level.[88]

For Johns and his peers functioning with an understanding of the successful purges in Texas, Missouri, and Wisconsin—conducting their own investigation and purge provided a foolproof strategy for protecting their reputation. For Johns, UF, a state-funded public school, provided a place for a concentrated investigation into unfit educators to begin in the name of

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[86] Graves, *And They Were Wonderful Teachers*, 49.

[87] "Charges Texas Prexy Hid 'Nest of Perversion,'" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 18, 1944, 16; "Morals Offenses Bring Probation," *Wisconsin State Journal*, June 21, 1948, 9; "4 Named in Missouri University Sex Orgy Probe Plead Guilty," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 7, 1949, 10; "Accused In Sex Cases, Professor Posts Bond," *The Sun*, May 29,1948, 4; "Accused Journalism Teacher at Missouri Fired By Curators," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 5, 1948, 13.

[88] Margaret A. Nash and Jennifer A.R. Silverman, "'An Indelible Mark': Gay Purges in Higher Education in the 1940s," *History of Education Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (2015): 441–459. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26356322.

defending Floridians. By February of 1959 Johns' purge removed 14 educators from UF. This tragedy was just the start of the Committee's growth to consume the entire state in the throes of its investigation. Attacks on gay individuals in combination with attacks on a large state university once again proved an effective strategy to gain political power on a localized scale.

Capitalizing on the Cold War Culture:

The Johns Committee's shift from searching for radicals and integrationists to investigating homosexuality on the campus of a major state university exemplifies the ways in which various aspects of a Cold War culture converged and filtered down into localized state politics. Though McCarthyism was quickly falling out of fashion by the mid-1950s, the anxieties that stoked the flames of McCarthy's strategies still existed in communities around the U.S. A swath of newly surfacing and rapidly growing anxieties about sexuality, race, and an educated youth, reinvigorated calls for controlling subversives and radicals on local levels. Johns and his Committee are the product of this reinvigoration. Johns capitalized on the homophobia deeply embedded in American society, the same homophobia actors in Washington capitalized on the early 1950s, the same homophobia that administrators at universities from Texas to Wisconsin used to drive out students and staff in search of executing their own agendas. For political actors in search of reassuring their constituency they were worthy of reelection and capable of the fight for American morality, attacks on gay Americans served as a proven strategy for success.

Following a failure to uncover a communist plot hiding within the ranks of the state's NAACP, the turn to uncovering homosexuals at UF offered a way for the Committee to reestablish its reputability as a state institution worthy of continued effort and funding. The Committee went on to use American's anxieties surrounding subversive infiltration into

educational institutions to justify their investigation. However, in order to create tangible results that demonstrated a homosexual problem existed, the Committee first needed to compile a substantial body of evidence. To do so the committee launched a quiet investigation into the homosexual underground subculture that existed in Gainesville and focused their harassment on a uniquely vulnerable group —gay students.

Chapter 2

Interrogations and Informants

Despite the attacks on gay employees unfolding on the federal level and disseminating to state governments, gay communities found ways to flourish in postwar America. Narratives too tightly focused on the era's heterosexual conformity deny the existence and validity of the rich underground gay subcultures that existed across the country. In looking back on the memories from their childhoods, older members of Florida's gay community expressed finding comradery, albeit underground, in ways similar to today. This is not to say gay communities existed uninhibited and free from fear; rather, that examining how gay cultures function allows for a more complete understanding of how a rich subculture existed in spite of legal frameworks that marginalized gay men and lesbians. Unfortunately for the gay communities across the Sunshine State, to legislators and law enforcement officers, with internalized imperatives of the Cold War, this underground subculture exemplified the subversive political culture constructed as the enemy to American stability. In exposing and cracking down on the participants in this subculture, politicians demonstrated their commitment to maintaining both the morality and the security of the nation.

1950s Florida Had Gay Culture Too

For gay men and lesbians of drinking age, the gay bars that dotted coastal cities provided escapes from the strict set of behavioral expectations that existed within heterosexual mainstream society. In Miami Beach and Tampa these bars existed on the margins of society. Mafia families typically ran the gay bars. In exchange for the illusion of safety the working class gay

community tolerated seedy joints that charged exorbitant prices for watered down drinks.[89] The bar scene, however corrupt and unkempt, provided a place for gay people to dance, wear pants, and meet partners. Despite the Mafia paying off law enforcement, total safety was never a guarantee. Much like the bars further north in cities like New York City and Washington D.C., police forces frequently raided the bars. The raids came with the threat of arrest on charges of vagrancy, not wearing the required three pieces of sex-appropriate clothing, and worst of all "crimes against nature."[90] Still, despite the well-understood danger, gay men and lesbians of the working class, unable to finance get-togethers in private homes, carried on patronizing the bars.[91]

The threat of incarceration and harassment for homosexuals hung in the air in the midst of nationwide sexual psychopathy scares. A series of "sex crimes" in Miami, beginning in 1954, amplified the fear of 'sexual criminals' in Florida.[92] These crimes typically involved the gruesome molestation and murder of young victims and made for sensational news stories. Quickly, law enforcement conflated homosexuals— already tainted with a contemporary reputation of criminality and immortality— with 'perverted' criminals. Again, the media, particularly the *Miami Herald* sensationalized the stories and portrayed a narrative of law and order or cops against queers.[93] A limited understanding of the structure of the gay subculture provided law enforcement with something to crack down on.

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[89] Judith Poucher, *State of Defiance: Challenging the Johns Committee's Assault on Civil Liberties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014),94. Interview with Merril Mushroom, September 13, 2024.

[90] Author's interview with Merril Mushroom, September 13, 2024.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Fred Fejes, "Murder, Perversion, and Moral Panic: The 1954 Media Campaign against Miami's Homosexuals and the Discourse of Civic Betterment," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 9, no. 3, July 2000, 305-347.

[93] Ibid.

Law enforcement cracked down on the visible gay subculture in wake of the series of crimes presented in headlines. Local police officers in Tampa and Miami employed harassment and arrests to crack down on ‘perverts’ and ‘clean up the streets’. Working-class gay men and lesbians more frequently experienced arrests at gay beaches and bars— the public spaces that comprised the visible sect of the subculture. If arrested, the local papers often outed gay men and women by publishing their names, addresses, and places of work.[94] Such a strategy put gay members of the working class at further risk of losing their livelihoods. Meanwhile, gay folks who held white-collar positions as teachers, nurses, or office clerks avoided meeting publicly for fear arrest meant losing jobs and incomes that could not be as easily replaced. These class lines illuminate the demographic make up of various strands of Florida’s underground gay network but cannot be taken as concrete boundaries. Instead, this analysis helps illustrate the idea of what was at stake for gay men and women of different classes.

Younger Floridians sought out the gay community as well. In the high schools in Florida’s coastal cities gay students formed cliques and developed small scale gay subcultures. Teenagers experimented with personal style, took up dating relationships, and had candid discussions about who else might be gay.[95] Outside of the school setting young people snuck into gay bars with phony IDs or spent weekends at the gay beaches. Teenagers existed beyond the economic stakes of the older gay men and women who had livelihoods on the line. For the

[94]John D’Emilio, "The Homosexual Menace: The Politics of Seuxuality in Cold War America," in *Making Trouble : Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University,* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 62.

[95] Interview with Merril Mushroom, September 13, 2024.

younger high school crowd, arrest, still a possibility, felt out of sight and out of mind, because as one older lesbian from Miami Beach put it, "we were teenagers, we were immortal."[96]

This is all to say Florida's gay culture existed just below the surface of mainstream society for gay people of all ages. Much like gay adults, gay teenagers cultivated their own gay subculture. In the post-war years large numbers of young adults planned to continue their education at universities across the state. Schools like the University of Florida (UF) offered affordability and an array of educational programs from which to choose. These schools also offered students privacy, away from family members. Gay students, accustomed to the gay community they cultivated in high school, sought out similar community on college campuses. Slowly, gay students found their networks, cliques, and companions. The gay community found ways to function across the state, not only in large urban areas but also among young people on college campuses in rural counties. Despite mainstream 1950s culture, a significant gay subculture existed underground. Such secrecy allowed maintained safety for gay men and lesbians in the Sunshine State.

The Committee Arrives in Gainesville

In summer 1958, a shadow settled onto Gainesville: the Florida Legislative Investigations Committee. The Committee arrived in search of communist and pro-integrationist faculty at UF.[97] Meticulous internal documents kept by the Committee detail the early days of the investigation, which consisted of compiling preliminary evidence. One such document explicitly

[96]Interview with Merril Mushroom, September 13, 2024.

[97] Stacy Braukman, *Communists and Perverts Under the Palms*: *The Johns Committee in Florida, 1956-1965* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2012).

states in June of 1958 the Committee began tracking license plate numbers outside of known meeting locations for integrationist organizations, specifically focusing on a meeting of the Council of Human Relations in Gainesville.[98] According to one internal Committee document which features a list of names and organizational affiliations, such integration focused groups presented "a threat to the principals of the founding fathers of our republic" and if they were to be left "unchecked" they would most certainly "mean the end of constitutional government in America."[99] Hyperbole was not in short supply.

The Committee's attention soon extended beyond a sole focus on integration efforts in Gainesville. An August 8, 1958 subpoena summoned President Julius Wayne Reitz—who served as President of UF for the duration of the Committee's investigation— and demanded "all records of personal misconduct on all faculty personnel, past and present. All records of Communists or Communist Front Affiliations of all personnel or faculty. All records of integration activities of all personnel and/or faculty members."[100] The Committee expanded the focus of the investigation at UF to include not only integrationists but also other faculty the Committee considered to be subversive. No major removal of university staff or faculty occurred directly following the subpoena. Once again, the Committee hit a dead end.[101]

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[98] "License Nos-," June 8, 1958. Box 1, Folder 7, Johns Committee Collection, University of Florida Special Collections.

[99] "Carefully Compiled List From Public Record," n.d. Box 1, Folder 7, Johns Committee Collection, University of Florida Special Collections.

[100] Florida Legislative Investigation Committee, "Subpoena," August 8, 1958, Archives Box 1, Folder 7, Johns Committee Collection, University of Florida Special Collections. Here it's important to note that the subpoena did not directly request any records pertaining to homosexuality.

[101] In examining student papers, local papers, and documents relevant to the Johns Committee held at the UF archive, no evidence of the removal of professors with integrationist or communist affiliations surfaced.

After failing to find and fire communists and integrationists from UF, the Committee had an alternative route prepared and already stocked with preliminary evidence. The Committee easily connected homosexuals to UF through evidence collected by Chief Counsel Mark Hawes the previous year in Tampa. During bar raids in 1957, Hawes and local police officers worked together and specifically sought out gay educators caught in the busts. The search was a success. In collaboration with local police forces Hawes turned up several teachers who frequented gay bars. Interestingly, a handful of these gay teachers had been educated at UF and a few of them had even received letters of recommendation from gay professors.[102] To the Committee, this exemplified the process of indoctrination and dissemination of homosexuals into Florida's public schools. The connection gave the Committee something to use in order to continue the investigation into UF by focusing on the threat posed by homosexuality. Having already begun a search into subversives on UFs faculty, the Committee easily shifted to focus more specifically on seeking out homosexuals. This shift both narrowed the Committee's search and helped solidify a moral purpose justifying further investigation.

By late fall 1958, the Committee explicitly turned part of its attention to homosexuality on and around campus. Chief investigator R.J. Strickland gave a statement of facts to the Committee, detailing the November 20th, 1958 "observations and surveillance made upon the Alachua County Courthouse."[103]According to the statement, the courthouse bathroom served as a

[102] *State of Defiance*, 96. It is worth noting the debate which exists within the literature surrounding why the Committee's attention turned to Gainesville in particular. Anecdotes about Johns' son complaining to his father about a homosexual teacher and allusions to Johns' friendship with Reitz are mentioned by various historians without proper citations and evidence to back such claims. Poucher's claim is supported by her examination of Committee documents in the State Archives in Tallahassee.

[103] R.J. Strickland, "Statement of Facts: 'observations and surveillance," n.d., Box 1, Folder 7, Johns Committee Collection, University of Florida Special Collections. Further referred to as "Statement of Facts."

primary hub of the county's homosexual cruising culture and was understood by the Committee as "one of the most publicly known meeting places of homosexuals in [the] territory."[104] The men's bathroom in particular served as a spot for men looking to exchange sexual dalliances.[105] The Committee amped up surveillance and stationed an informant in the bathroom at the Courthouse. Strickland used one witness' account to connect the Courthouse cruising location to UF. That account referred to a man claiming to be a professor at UF who approached the witness and solicitied "homosexual activity."[106] A university sticker on the car of this suspected homosexual reinforced the link between the cruising spot and UF.[107] In a December 5, 1958 statement of facts, Strickland laid out how a UF police officer was used in a sting operation to catch an English professor in the Courthouse restroom. This professor was promptly taken to the County Jail where he provided investigators with the names of six professors and one student whom he knew to be homosexual. Strickland quickly laid plans to further question the professor about other homosexual staff and students.[108]

In a May 1, 1959 article published in *The Florida Alligator*, the logic the legislatures used to justify their investigation is clearly laid out in quotes pulled from a Committee Report. One such quote reads, "some of the state's instructional personnel at the higher educational levels

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[104] Ibid.

[105] Gay communities spanning from urban NYC to rural Gainesville informally created cruising spots where men looking to engage sexually with other men could find one another. These spaces came into existence at bars, in bathrooms, and on beaches. A strict set of sexual and moral standards which condemned homosexuality made it so the exchanges remained anonymous. Police often cracked down on these locales and arrested the gay men present for various degrees of vagrancy.

[106] "Statement of Facts."

[107] Ibid.

[108] R.J. Strickland, "Statement of Facts: 'observations and surveillance," December 5, 1958, Box 1, Folder 7, Johns Committee Collection, University of Florida Special Collections.

have been and are recruiting young people into homosexual practices." The quote goes on to state that "these young people have been and are becoming teachers in the public school system of Florida."[109] It is helpful to use this language to understand why the Committee was interested in investigating gay educators. Such language suggests that in the minds of the Committee, professors with suspect predilections threatened to corrupt students and indoctrinate them into a lifestyle of homosexuality. If left unchecked the contact between gay teachers and their students threatened to disrupt a young person's proper heterosexual trajectory. On a broader cultural scale the Committee aimed to 'clean up society' and help maintain the hetero-normative standards in the name of preserving morality and in a larger sense, national security. Such a goal was undoubtedly informed by the Cold War rhetoric that prized heterosexuality as a way to maintain morality. The claim homosexual educators posed a threat to Florida's vulnerable young people acted as the Committee's driving force for continued investigation. The Committee understood how powerful rhetoric focused on protecting young Americans was.

Within a very short time, the Committee expanded the scope of the UF investigation to include a specific focus on gay students. In their search, the group of investigators quickly became aware of the gay subculture on campus among UF students. Strickland's November report offered up a description of a "purple passion party" held by a student who lived in Fletcher Hall on UF's campus. The parties were hosted by a student described by Strickland as "beyond any doubt, a homosexual."[110] According to Strickland such events were "a meeting or getting together of homosexuals in one of the boy's houses or apartments" where the attendees would

[109] Report quoted in "Johns 'Appalled' By Homosexuality In States' Schools," *The Florida Alligator*, May 1, 1959, 1.

[110] "Statement of Facts: 'observations and surveillance.'"

drink a concoction of alcohol and juices by the soft purple glow of a single lamp.[111] This small piece of evidence, gained through Strickland's surveillance of students, revealed an underground subculture maintained by gay students. To the Committee, the sliver of evidence pointed to a pervasive problem which required further investigation. Strickland closed his statement by describing "arrangements" to "pick up and talk to" two students observed in attendance at the party.[112] To Strickland obtaining the student perspective clearly mattered to the investigation. The Committee's logic honed in on the student subculture to further support claims that homosexuality was rampant not only among faculty but had spread to the student population.

It is important to understand that the story of student surveillance starts here, before the purging of suspected homosexual staff members and before the massive mobilization of a very public investigation in the spring semester of 1959. Strickland used his reports to paint a picture of Gainsville as a hotbed of homosexual activity. In many ways, he was not wrong. An entire network of gay connections facilitated an extensive underground community that extended to Gainesville, much in the same way it extended through the rest of society. It just so happened the inescapably subversive nature of the gay community was manipulated by the Committee into the evidence needed to justify its continued presence in Gainesville.

Art

Art Copleston's family did not have the money to send him to college. Instead, at 18, Copleston enlisted in the Air Force to secure the benefits of the GI Bill. During his military

[111] Ibid.

[112] Ibid.

service Copleston, armed with organizational skills, performed clerical work for the Office of Special Investigations (OSI).[113] As a part of the OSI, Copleston aided in tasks supporting military investigation intended to remove gay men and women in the service. Looking back on his time in the military in a recent conversation he recounted, "I saw every case, every gay entrapment case that came across the deck."[114] For Copleston, the circumstance dictated keeping a hard fast boundary between his duties with the OSI and his personal life. He had his eyes on the benefits promised by the GI bill since it offered his only shot at college. So he kept his head low as he harbored a secret of his own—he too was gay.

Copleston arrived in Gainesville in 1957 on the G.I. Bill. Classes at UF began on his 25th birthday, and after such a long wait he was "looking forward to a real happy time on campus."[115] Being a fair bit older than his fellow first-years, Copleston made connections with people closer to his age, finding community among faculty members. Specifically, in a recent interview Copleston recalled his first connection at UF—Tim Reed, an associate professor of Chemical Engineering. The two men crossed paths at the university weight room and hit it off. Over the course of the semester, Copleston and Reed became increasingly close and their relationship grew increasingly intimate. The two men took weekend getaways to go sailing in Cedar Keys where they could engage in their relationship out on the water and away from any prying eyes.

Copleston also recalled developing other relationships with gay men around campus, for instance, English professor Stephen Fogle, who frequently sported a black velvet cape complete with a lavender silk lining on the walk between his classes. For Copelson it was Fogle's eccentric

[113] Author's Interview with Art Copleston October 1st, 2024.

[114] Ibid.

[115] Ibid.

attire that tipped him off. Copleston's and Fogle's connection was strictly platonic—a fast friendship that budded out of shared interests. The two men bonded over a love of opera and frequently met up to listen in to the local broadcasts of the New York Metropolitan Opera on Saturdays. Copleston forged connections with other homosexuals on campus and functioned as a part of a subculture alongside the faculty.

In late summer 1958, while out at the Burger House, a regular social spot just across the street from Thomas Hall where he lived during his second year, Copleston, along with some friends, stood around chatting. He recalled the night vividly—

> I knew that some were gay, they knew that I was gay… So we were having sort of a gay conversation when one of my friends tapped me on the shoulder and said 'don't turn around right now, but there's a guy sitting at the bar that's been staring at our group, and staring, primarily Art, at you.'[116]

The onlooker was John Tileston, a UF campus police officer hired by the Committee to act as an undercover investigator and gather information about the homosexual scene on campus. Being watched was enough to key Copleston in—something big was unfolding.

Things only got worse. Two days later Tileston showed up in the doorway of Copleston's accounting classroom and demanded that he accompany him to the campus police station. Copleston recounted Tileston walking him to a squad car outside of the building. Copleston claims "they were showing off," using the squad car to drive him a mere three blocks to the university police station.[117] The use of the car was one of several intimidation tactics used to incite fear before a full-scale interrogation commenced.

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[116] Ibid.

[117] Ibid.

Once at the University Police Station, Tileston marched Copleston to the station's basement. An interrogation room had been set up. Copleston recalled the basement's blacked out windows and concrete walls, complete with a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling. A table with a tape recorder sat at the center of the room. In the basement, investigator Strickland questioned him. Copleston recalled the questions—"What's your name?", "How old are you?", "Are you gay?"—Copleston recalled how he carefully "stonewalled him all the way through the investigation" and denied any allegations of homosexuality.[118] Copleston understood that admitting to being a homosexual would have been disastrous for a student at UF. According to his recollection the questioning lasted an hour. When he was finally released, Strickland informed Copleston the Committee possessed the power to call him back for questioning at any time, and they did.

The investigation called Copleston in for questioning three more times. After the initial interrogation, the Committee moved the questioning off-campus to the Manor Motel. Once such interaction unfolded on January 20, 1959; this time Hawes, the Committee's chief counsel, led the questioning. This interaction is recorded in one of the many transcripts the Committee collected; such transcripts provide the details of conversations taking place in make-shift interrogation rooms.[119] Although Copleston claimed the Committee used him as a "gay Rolodex" during the early investigation at UF, examiners in the early interrogation transcripts frequently refuse accepting a blatant list of names. Instead, investigators asked for an estimation regarding

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[118] Ibid.

[119] Art Copleston, Interrogated by Mark Hawes, Gainesville, Florida, January 20th, 1958. In reviewing the documents maintained by the Committee in all probability the year attached to this document is wrong. The Committee arrived in Gainesville in fall 1958, therefore this January interaction likely occurred in 1959, not 1958. Typos are common across the Committee's material. Henceforth the integration will be referred to as, "Interrogation January 20, 1959."

"the number of students that… may be homosexual."[120] The Committee was not looking for a concrete list of names, but instead attempting to collect evidence a gay subculture in fact existed. Student testimonies, like the ones collected in the interrogations, served as the evidence the Committee needed to remove gay educators in the coming months.

Outside of the interrogation room, the Committee continued to use various other tactics of intimidation. Tileston continued watching Copleston—following him from class to class and lingering in the hallways of his residence hall. Copleston also noted other strange occurrences such as someone using steam to open his mail to examine the contents before he got his hands on it. Copleston recalled a specific story regarding Jim, his randomly assigned roommate in Junior year. He was wary of Jim from their first meeting, as the onslaught of fear corresponding with the Committee hung in the air. Jim behaved suspiciously: repeatedly messing with Copleston's correspondence and belongings, initiating conversations of a sexual nature, walking around their shared dorm room in the nude, and even begging Copleston for sexual favors. Copleston tried to maintain his composure to avoid incriminating himself. As it turned out, his suspicion was justified. Upon returning from a party one weekend, Jim, pretending to be drunk, tried to convince Copleston to engage with him sexually. Later that week Copleston confronted Jim about the previous weekend's episode. According to Copleston's recollection, Jim casually admitted to being hired by the Committee to see if Copleston was a homosexual.[121]

Despite the fact that during January's motel room questioning, Hawes told Copleston he was "not… being accused in any way by anybody of being a homosexual," it is clear that the

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[120] Interrogation January 20, 1959.

[121] Ibid.

Committee did not believe Copleston's story.[122] The Committee understood gay students, like Copleston, proved vital resources in the quest to compile evidence and construct their case. Unfortunately, Copleston felt he had no choice other than complying with the questioning.[123]

Merril

Merril Mushroom was 16 years old when she arrived in Gainesville, over 300 miles from her hometown of Miami Beach. Mushroom unpacked her bags in September of 1958. She sought a degree in education, mostly because few other viable options for young women existed and all in all she preferred the idea of being a teacher over the idea of being a nurse. "It was very restricted back in those days," she remembered when looking back on 1958 in a recent conversation.[124] Mushroom's arrival on campus in the late summer of 1958 coincided with the Committee's investigation ramping up at UF. Unbeknownst to Mushroom, President Reitz received the Committee's subpoena a month prior to her arrival and investigator Strickland spent the fall observing homosexual hot-spots around Gainesville. For Mushroom the investigation posed a problem, as she happened to be one of the homosexuals the Committee had its eyes out for.

Back home in Miami Beach Mushroom grew up enveloped in the gay subculture that flourished underground between the gay bars and beaches. She recalled hanging out with the biker boys, the memory of her small close-knit friend group slowly coming out senior year, and

[122] Interrogation January 20, 1959.

[123] Interview with Art Copleston October 1st, 2024

[124] Interview with Merril Mushroom, September 13, 2024.

sneaking into gay bars on the weekend to perform as male impersonators with her buddies.[125] While she was never truly out in Miami Beach—because living as openly gay was a dangerous implausibility—she recalled the comradery the gay subculture provided her and her peers.

Mushroom remembered how she interacted with the gay subculture following her arrival on campus. Aware of the gay landscape beyond UF, upon arriving in Gainesville Mushroom and her high school friends sought out students from areas with reputations of large gay networks. Mushroom pointed out gay kids on campus "pretty much kept to [themselves] unless [they] managed to come out to each other safely."[126] Mushroom and her friends formed new gay networks in Gainesville and remembered that "even with all of the horribleness and the terror of the Johns investigations, it didn't stop a whole lot."[127] Mushroom recalled how she found ways to continue engaging with the subculture while in school. Weekend trips, more than a hundred miles off campus, landed Mushroom and her peers at the gay bars in Tampa, where other gay students from UF showed up from time to time. On campus Mushroom scoped out her classmates in an attempt to find other gay women. Linking up with her gay buddies, Mushroom and her friends huddled up to quietly and carefully discuss other students who might be lesbians.

Soon, the quiet conversations about who might be gay turned into conversations about who might be an undercover informant working for the Committee.[128] Although the Committee attempted to conduct its investigation "as quietly" and "with as little notoriety" as possible, gay

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[125] Interview with Merril Mushroom, September 13, 2024; James T. Sears, "Purging Perverts in Paradise," in *Lonely Hunters: An Oral History of Lesbian and Gay Southern Life, 1948-1968* (Boulder, CO: WestviewPress, 1997), 12-47.

[126] Interview with Merril Mushroom, September 13, 2024

[127] Ibid.

[128] Interview with Merril Mushroom, September 13, 2024.

students quickly became aware of the Committee's presence on campus.[129] It was well understood by the gay students at UF that physical surveillance conducted by plainclothes officers and student informants served as a vital way for the Committee to collect evidence.[130]

Mushroom admitted that she is still unsure about whether or not she had any actual encounters with the Committee, because in the encounter she recalled the officer never explicitly stated his affiliations. During spring semester 1959 Mushroom was approached by a single campus police officer and taken to the basement of her residence hall.[131] This distinction in location is important to note as the conversation did not take place in the standard integration room the Committee set up in the campus police station, nor in a motel off campus. The officer did not use a tape recorder nor did he take notes. Mushroom's interrogation happened completely off the record.

The officer questioned Mushroom's spending habits—inquiring specifically about the money she spent on motels in Tampa. Mushroom, in looking back on where the officer might have caught wind of her frequent trips to Tampa, recalled signing in and signing out of her residence hall. Such a practice was required for all female students at UF. Mushroom suspects that following a string of burglaries in her building, when officers were checking the sign out sheets, the extensive record of trips to Tampa motels caught the eyes of someone connected to the investigation.[132] Still, Mushroom, unwilling to tell the officer the truth about her weekend

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[129] Interrogation January 20, 1959.

[130] Interview with Art Copleston; Interview with Merril Mushroom; *Lonely Hunters,* "Purging Perverts in Paradise"; Jim McQuick, "UF Sanctioned Agents Uncover Homosexuals,"*The Alligator*, Feb 19, 1960, 1,2.

[131] Interview with Merril Mushroom, September 13, 2024.

[132] Transcript, Merril Mushroom, Oral History Interview with Paul Oritz, March 24, 2020, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program*. March 24, 2020, P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida.

visits to Tampa's gay bars, made up a tearful story about a secret older boyfriend. Not yet 18 at the time of the basement encounter, Mushroom leaned into the story of a taboo heterosexual relationship. The relationship Mushroom chose to describe was one that would have had to remain secret for legal reasons due to Mushroom's age. She told the officer a lie, saying, "because the people who let me and my boyfriend stay in their house were gay, and they would get in trouble if anyone knew they were gay," she couldn't name them.[133] Even within the fabricated story, the officer found something useful—Mushroom's connection to a gay couple. She recalled him getting quiet before saying, "well if you're so comfortable with the homos, do you know any on campus?"[134] Mushroom did not give him an answer, leaning back into the boyfriend story. She claimed, once again, that she desperately wanted to keep both her fabricated boyfriend and gay couple in Tampa out of trouble.[135] According to Mushroom the officer tried another angle. Unaware that the two gay men from the story were completely made up, the officer tried to get her to consider helping with the investigation, telling her "if they trusted you that much maybe you could find out who they [are] on campus."[136] He was hoping to make an informant out of her

Mushroom recalled the spiel the officer gave her about how she could help the homosexual students on campus. He claimed she "would be doing [her] gay friends a favor" if she "named the names of gay people so that they could get the help that they needed."[137]

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[133] Interview with Merril Mushroom, September 13, 2024.

[134] Ibid.

[135] Ibid.

[136] Ibid.

[137] Ibid.

Mushroom told the officer she "would think about it" and she would get back to him by the end of the semester. Another lie, a chance to stall. The stalling worked, the semester ended, and Mushroom transferred to the University of Miami to continue her education. Mushroom recounted the fear she felt alongside her fellow gay students across campus. In looking back on the events of early 1959 Mushroom remembered the"big group of terrified teenagers," the Committee created on campus. Mushroom was unwilling to stay at UF and risk further run-ins with the Committee. Luckily, the Committee did not follow her south.[138]

Much like with Copleston, Mushroom adamantly dodged all allegations of being a homosexual herself. However, it is unclear whether or not the Committee bought the denial. Both Copleston and Mushroom received questions pertaining to their relationships with homosexuals on campus. Despite their denial of homosexual allegations, it is likely the Committee was aware of their sexual orientations. However, in not immediately expelling them the Committee had the chance to use the students as sources of information. This tactic was made all the more powerful as the looming threat of public outing, expulsion, and institutionalization hung over the heads of Copleston and Mushroom. The Committee's goal was not to remove students, but instead to scare them into providing the Committee with the information it needed to justify its agenda.

Chuck

Chuck Woods arrived at the University of Florida in September 1959—nearly eight months after the Committee's investigation publicly blew open. In early February 1959, the

[138] Merril Mushroom, "The Gay Kids and the Johns Committee," in *Crooked Letter I: Coming Out in the South,* ed. Connie Griffin (Athens, GA: NewSouth Books, 2016), 123-134.

Committee delivered an official report that "listed 105 faculty members, students, and employees who were under suspicion for engaging in homosexual activities" to University President Reitz.[139] The 1,900-page report contained sworn testimonies and statements of facts collected through interrogations and stake outs held in Gainesville the months prior. According to one article in *The Alligator* the lengthy document "reported that 'several hundred' male students had engaged in homosexual practices," and supposedly included the names of professors, health center employees, and students.[140] Much like McCarthy's ever-developing 'list of communists' the report's claims were difficult to prove, especially since no student journalists ever got their hands on the actual document. Instead, the content of the report is understood through brief quotes from President Reizt published in *The Alligator.* Upon receiving the report, Reizt, quoted in *The Alligator*, rejected the Committee's numbers stating they were merely a "statistical estimate," which he claimed had " no relation to a specific institution."[141] Still, the report forced Reizt to act quickly to dispel the homosexual menace uncovered by the Committee's investigations. Reitz functioned within a Cold War that called for action against subversive threats. The failure to act on a threat of the magnitude presented in the Committee's report risked ruining reputations—both for Reitz and UF. So, in the following months, the administration took action. Reitz assured the UF community "where adequate evidence was available," the UF admin

[139] Sally Stewart, letter to the editor, *The Florida Alligator*, April 24, 1959.

[140] Ibid; Dave Hamilton, "Reitz Tells Action on Johns' Report," *The Florida Alligator*, April 7, 1959, 1.

[141] Bob Gilmour, "15-16 Suspects Names in Report of Johns Group," *The Florida Alligator*, February 20, 1959, 1.

took "action for a dismissal."[142] In total, the university dismissed 14 University faculty and staff and took "action… with respect to a few students involved."[143]

Rural Gainesville was a change of pace for Chuck Woods, who, being the son of an Army Colonel, grew up in various corners of the globe. Woods came to understand his sexuality while abroad. He recalled his high school years in Japan, where, on nights out he ended up in Japanese gay bars alongside his closest friend. "It was something that we didn't even discuss," he remembered looking back on it.[144] For him being gay was "just a completely natural thing," and it had "always been that way."[145] Compared to Japan, Gainesville, a small southern town, was a new challenge. Woods described it as a "closeted experience," where the gay subculture amounted to groups of young gay men meeting up for beers at the Burger House. According to Woods it was an impossibility to be "openly gay."[146] Woods arrived in September and had a front-row seat to the aftermath of the April purge. Woods navigated the new set of challenges. As a member of the UF's swim team and a newly enrolled student in the advertising program, Woods had a busy semester ahead of him. In the first few weeks, he recalled he focused most of

[142] Dave Hamilton, "Reitz Tells Action on Johns' Report," *The Alligator*, April 7, 1959, 1.

[143] Ibid. I found no further mentions of the "few students involved."

[144] Interview with Chuck Woods, October 7, 2011, Interviewer Unknown. Lisa Mills, one of the directors of the 2011 documentary film *The Committee*, provided me with the transcripts of the recorded interview with Chuck Woods. Woods was one of two students featured in the film. The film centers around the story of his experience with the Committee. However, the entire interview is not included in the piece, and I have included subsequent details from the interview conducted here.

[145] Ibid.

[146] Ibid.

his attention "on being a student and trying to get through the challenges of being at a large university."[147]

Woods quickly befriended one of his favorite professors in the English department. The two men got along well—convening to grab coffee and talk over the state of the ever-turbulent era. As it happened Woods and his professor had something in common, they were both gay. Woods' connection with the faculty allowed him a unique perspective. "People were really terrified," he recalled thinking back to an evening in which he sat among a handful of humanities professors in a car when the conversation turned to the investigation. Thinking back he reiterated, "faculty members were really scared to death about where this witch hunt was going to go."[148] Faculty members within the English department remained especially fearful since "the English department in particular was hit real hard" by the purges that transpired the semester prior.[149] While Woods enrolled at UF following the purges, the professors he associated during his first year filled him in on the stories about the interrogations they experienced in motel rooms. Woods knew to be terrified.[150]

Woods vividly recalled the day he was interrogated. It was a Tuesday afternoon and Woods was in his dorm room. Around 2 pm there was a knock on the door. It was Officer Tileston. The only thing he said to Woods was, "come with me."[151] Woods followed Tileston to

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[147] *The Committee*, directed by Lisa Mills (2011; Orlando, FL: University of Central Florida, Video release year, 2012), Online video.

[148] Interview with Chuck Woods, October 7, 2011.

[149] Ibid.

[150] Ibid.

[151] Ibid.

the university police station. Once there, the investigators confronted Woods, bluntly telling him, "we have information that you're a homosexual."[152] Unlike Copleston and Mushroom, Woods was directly accused of homosexuality. In looking back on the event, Woods believed "somebody had been pulled in by the same investigator and tipped them with a lot of different names."[153] The culture on campus created through intimidation cultivated a student body unwilling to face the consequence of not complying. Students acted in self preservation, and even sold out their gay peers to secure safety.[154]

The interaction Woods recalled differs in a major way from earlier interrogations. Importantly, Woods describes a letter from Reitz presented by the investigators. In the letter Reitz offered Woods a "solution" to his homosexual "problem" in the form of psychological treatments intended to 'right' his homosexual tendencies. This difference exemplifies the Committee's new goal. The Committee was no longer looking for evidence to justify a large purge of gay individuals at UF. Instead, with the weeding out complete, the Committee turned its attention to ensuring gay students did not gain positions in which they could further 'spread' homosexuality through Florida's public school system.[155] From the Committee's standpoint, the continued interrogations of students allowed for homosexual students to be discovered and offered the proper treatment.

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[152] Ibid.

[153] Ibid.

[154] It's difficult to know how many people sold out their peers since there have been no admissions to doing so in any oral history interviews.

[155] Report quoted in "Johns 'Appalled' By Homosexuality In States' Schools," *The Florida Alligator*, May 1, 1959, 1.

Throughout the interrogation Woods denied the homosexual allegations put forth by the investigators. If he had openly admitted to being a homosexual he felt he "would have been kicked out of the University of Florida."[156] The pressure mounted, and in fear of expulsion, Woods leaned into the denial that he was a homosexual. He went so far as to claim his father would sue the University of Florida if the harassment continued. Woods's empty threat worked: the Committee did not confront him again.[157]

Officer Tileston

In looking back on the event and how students were used to continuing harassing the members of the campus community, it is helpful to examine the perspectives of key players tasked with investigating students at UF. In 2018 filmmakers from the University of South Florida interviewed Officer John Tileston. The interview, featured in *The Committee* gives insight into Tileston's perspective on the investigation. Decades later, Tileston recalled the most effective tactics for extracting information from students. Tileston recounted the logic of interfering with students' academic schedules, saying "if you took them out of the classroom there was the benefit of the shock."[158] In the context of the investigation Tileston understood the usefulness of intimidation over students who he recalled being "rather young" and "quite frightened."[159] Tactics such as consistent surveillance, using squad cars to transport students to the Campus Police Station, and the threat of indefinite questioning all served the same purpose—intimidating

[156] Interview with Chuck Woods, October 7, 2011.

[157] Ibid.

[158] Interview with John Tileston in *The Committee.*

[159] Ibid.

students into complying with the Committee's demands. These tactics made gathering evidence regarding the homosexuals at UF easier for the Committee.

Tileston also recalled the investigators giving students "misinformation about how they're going to be kicked out of the university."[160] For investigators, leaning into misinformation was a powerful scare tactic. For students of lower socioeconomic backgrounds, expulsion meant potentially losing the funding supporting their education. Gay students also faced the threat of being outed to family members in the wake of an expulsion. Students, terrified of derailing their education and subsequent plans for a successful future, were more likely to give the Committee what it wanted. The Committee understood the power of their lie. The lack of expulsions also point to how valuable gay students were to the Committee perpetuating the investigation. Gay students served as accessible sources of information. The empty *threat* of expulsion maintained a culture of fear and made continued compliance more likely. Keeping the students around ensured the investigation's longevity.

Tileston's recollection provides insight into how the Committee orchestrated the investigation from 1958 to 1959. At first the Committee leaned heavily on tactics of intimidation to extract information to compile the lengthy report and justify the legitimacy of the investigation at UF. In 1959, the Committee used such evidence to remove 14 faculty and staff. In search of a new purpose, namely, identifying homosexual students in order to mitigate the further 'spread' of homosexuality into Florida's educational system, by 1960 the Committee used integrations as a way to identify homosexuals and offer them correctional treatments. Officers at UF, like Tileston,

[160] My research has unearthed no record of expulsions. Records from UF, recorded instances in *The Florida Alligator*, and records from the Committee displaying statistics regarding the removal of homosexuals from various positions, do not indicate expulsion was ever actually utilized against students.

played a significant role in the counting to orchestrate Committee investigations even beyond the initial purge.

So, Why Students?

Gay students were especially good targets for the Committee because of their vulnerability. Like gay men and women across the country gay students had next to no ability to politically organize. Across the U.S. homosexuality remained a crime and a mental disorder. A culmination of factors allowed the Committee to purge educators from UF, and it is vital to understand the Committee's use of intimidation and harassment of students that made such a purge successful. Johns and his peers, working within a Cold War culture, understood the need to capitalize on the vulnerable gay students at UF. Investigators stoked a unique fear in the young individuals who were attempting to finish their education while navigating the messy realities of being targeted by their state legislature.

Surveilling and interrogating students also allowed the Committee to tap into UFs gay subculture. In the eyes of Johns and his Committee, the rich gay subculture of Florida exemplified the subversive threat to American mortality and security. The connection that existed between both faculty and students UF's campus served as explicit evidence for the Committee's claims about indoctrination and coercion. However, it is important to note the Committee misread gay community building as homosexual recruitment. In finding a way to exist, away from the heterosexual mainstream, underground gay communities were labeled subversive, and in turn, dangerous. The subculture that persisted served as a virtually limitless supply of scapegoats to continue to fuel an investigation into homosexuality in order to uncover gay educators and set gay students straight. As will be covered in the next chapter, the Committee

also used a continued investigation to justify a continued presence on campus, eventually becoming akin to an overbearing police force.[161] With a continuous flow of such evidence from the gay subculture, the Committee had the grounds to justify, or at least attempt to justify, its long term presence on campus.

[161] "johns committee", *The Florida Alligator,* April 2, 1963.

Chapter 3:

Students Carry On In Spite of the Johns Committee

At the end of the Spring Semester of 1959, when students at the University of Florida opened their newly published yearbooks, they flipped through photos of their picturesque southern campus before flipping open a lengthy bit of prose. Instead of a cheerful message of encouragement, or a bittersweet bidding of farewell the book was "dedicated to… those many students who for some reason leave the University of Florida never to return."[162] The dedication goes on to read, "the many tragedies at the University this year will never be forgotten or fully understood, yet they served as a bond, drawing those left behind closer to reality, and making all appreciate their many blessings."[163] In following sections allusions are made to the "tragedies that marred the happiness and serenity of many lives," particularly in the Fall Semester.[164] Yet, nowhere in the 1959 Seminole are such "tragedies" defined as specific instances. In reading this dedication, it is evident that the events that transpired in Gainesville from fall 1958 and into the early months of 1959 carried a great weight for UF students.

In a single academic year, spanning from Fall 1958 to Spring 1959, the UF community faced dramatic challenges, most of which received some level of attention in *The Florida Alligator.* In October a UF student died in a motorcycle accident. At the end of Christmas vacation 70 Cuban students found themselves stranded in their home country following Castro's rise to power. In February three students were electrocuted following their attempt to install a TV antenna. Less than a month later a 28 year old student attempted to murder another male student

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[162] The University of Florida, *The Seminole* (Gainesville FL: 1959), 4, UF Digital Collections.

[163] Ibid.

[164] *The Seminole*, 1959, 46.

and his wife, before attempting to take his own life.[165] In April, UF swiftly dismissed 14 university personnel on charges of homosexuality.[166] Needless to say, a whirlwind of uncertainty swept through the campus during the single academic year presented in the pages of the yearbook. *The Seminole* editors summed up the shocking semesters succinctly, writing, "students had no time for reflections, for the tedious term paper and projects monopolizes the minds and hands of those who suddenly realized that this could perhaps be their last semester."[167] The events of the year placed the privilege of a safe and uninterrupted education on a precarious pedestal for every student on campus. Mortality, security, and stability floated to the forefront of campus consciousness. Students and staff alike faced a common instability—an instability which served as the backdrop for the Johns Committee's tenure on campus.

The gay students the Johns Committee preyed upon suffered through a uniquely challenging set of tragedies on their own. Students experienced harassment, stalking, and interrogations. The Committee's interference instilled a culture of fear among UF's gay subculture and as a result gay students mostly suffered through the Committee's persistent attacks alone. Yet, despite such tragedies, challenges, and strife spurred by the Committee, Art Copleston, Merril Mushroom, and Chuck Woods each successfully completed their undergraduate careers in Florida.

However, within the study of the Johns Committee, the student experience post-investigation is largely unexamined. This is not at all surprising— the stories of Americans

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[165] Dave Hamilton, "UF Student Killed Here In Collision," *The Florida Alligator,* October 7, 1958, 1. Jim McGuirk, "Cuban Students Return From Revolt-torn Nation," *The Flordia Alligator,* January 13, 1959, 1. "Power Line Kills Three UF Students," *The Florida Alligator,* February 13, 1959, 1. Arlene Alligood, "UF Student Charged In Assault," *The Florida Alligator*, February 24, 1959, 1.

[166] Dave Hamilton, "Reitz Tells Action on Johns' Report," The Alligator, April 7, 1959, 1.

[167] *The Seminole*, 1959, 46.

affected by the Cold War and Red Scare typically focus on instances of infringements on personal liberties. Understanding the way in which times of heightened anxiety affect the quality of Americans' lives is extremely important to understanding the true socio political effects of the Cold War.

As I go on to argue in this third and final chapter, to truly understand the stories of the gay Americans during the Cold War it is necessary to closely examine the way each person's story extends beyond the moments of interrogation and harassment. For this project, this means examining the personal stories of students affected by the Committee beyond the moment of the Committee's most intense interference. In order to fully understand the effects of the Committee, the resilience of students in the 1960s, and the perseverance of the three gay students previously profiled, this chapter looks beyond the 1950s, beyond the state of Florida, and beyond each individual's interaction with the Committee.

"McCarthyism died with its founder"

Following the initial purging of 14 university employees in April 1959, a discourse about the Johns Committee quickly took shape among students at UF. However, in examining the discourse it becomes clear students did not take issue with the attacks on gay individuals within their community but instead took issue with the McCarthyesque ideology displayed in the Committee's actions and rhetorical justifications. Student conversations and convictions—preserved in the pages of *The Alligator*—allow for a closer look at the newly budding consciousness that gave students the language to condemn the Committee. A close look at student writing also provides insight into how students at UF internalized the end of McCarthyism. The conversations began when *Alligator* staff writers broke the story on February

17, 1959. Over the next five years a discourse about the Committee remained a steady stream constantly fed by the ever changing objectives of Senator Charley Johns and his fellow legislators. Through the act of writing and reading students developed shared language to discuss their disillusionment with the Cold War rhetoric.

Directly following the purge of professors one letter to the editor published in *The Alligator* opens with the two authors stating, "we are writing this letter in protest against the recent firings of fourteen (14) professors and University staff members for alleged homosexuality."[168] While the authors open with a focus on the firings of homosexuals, in reading on, it becomes clear they are more concerned with the unjust firings of faculty and staff than with the homophobia at the heart of the attack on gay educators. In fact the authors express skepticism homosexuality mattered to the investigation at all, speculating the Committee focused its attention on these professors for other "underlying reasons."[169] Most likely, the authors point to the tactic of 'smearing' weaponized by McCarthy and his contemporaries during the height of the hysteria. Historians understand smearing—a political tactic that allowed for the silencing of opponents through accusations of communism, homosexuality, or another subversive behavior without a substantial body of evidence—to have been amazingly powerful for McCarthy.[170] The authors of the letter are unconvinced the educators were fired because of their homosexuality, because of the power a mere accusation held. To the authors the firings exemplified how the Committee potentially used smearing in a similar fashion to McCarthy. Such irresponsible

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[168] Charles Edelstein, Ross Beckerman, "Readers Want More Information About Investigation Firings," *The Florida Alligator,* April 17, 1959.

[169] Ibid.

[170] Andrea Friedman, "The Smearing of Joe McCarthy: The Lavender Scare, Gossip, and Cold War Politics," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (December 2005).

political power play is one of the many McCarthyesque tactics with whichUF students took issue.

Instead of the homophobic nature of the attack, the authors of the previously mentioned letter to the editor expressed their outrage was a response to UF's administration allowing "a politician to procure political ammunition at the expense of [their] school system."[171] Such a comment alludes to the budding consciousness about the dangers of political opportunism. Students were concerned with being used as political pawns by their state legislatures and further disruptions to their educational environments being justified by washed up Cold War rhetoric. By 1959, these authors felt free to express their frustration with the lack of response from UF's administration. As made evident by the students' letter to the editor, shrinking in the face of injustice was no longer excusable. Such a position shows how students at UF, even if only marginally, began deconstructing the power of McCarthyesque political tactics of intimidation by calling for action instead of apathy. The authors went so far as to claim the issue of the Committee's investigation "concerns all students and for that matter all citizens of Florida," since the Committee's ambitious pursuit of power had real world ramifications.[172]

The suspicions about the Committee's political ambition proved to be due. Over the next few months the Committee damningly broadened the scope of their agenda. In May, shortly after the professor purge, the Committee turned their attention to ridding the library of "obscene materials," including books "written by Communists or persons on subversive lists."[173] The

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[171] Charles Edelstein, Ross Beckerman, "Readers Want More Information About Investigation Firings," *The Florida Alligator,* April 17, 1959.

[172] Ibid.

[173] Jim McGuirk, "Legislators Studying Laws Banning Books Thought 'Subversive,'" *The Florida Alligator,* May 5, 1959, 1.

Committee continued expanding their efforts beyond UF as well. By 1962 the Committee was meddling in the establishment of the newly opened University of South Florida (USF), cracking down on 'radical' professors who advocated for integration, utilized teaching material containing profanity, openly discussed the origins of the Cold War, or promoted the theory of evolution. Clearly, the Johns Committee was aiming at any target that could have any liberal influence.[174] Meanwhile, various arms of the investigation into homosexual educators seeped into the K-12 school system, and successfully began removing educators from public school classrooms.[175]

By April 1963, a discourse about abolishing the Committee as Florida State Legislatures raised concern. Students, of course, weighed in. On April 2, 1963 in an editorial in *The Alligator* the student authors summed up the mounting critique of such expansion, writing, "the Committee has overstepped its authority [by] assuming too much responsibility not pertaining to its original purpose."[176] According to the student authors of the article, the Committee has become more akin to a "police force" than a "legislative arm to investigate racial strife and subversion."[177] The students criticized the "1957 act which extended the life of the committee," and "broadened its authority," and justified a "McCarthy-like probe" at UF.[178] The explicit use of witch hunts, invasive investigations, and allegations were tainted by the mid-1950s and most definitely outdated by 1963. So, when the Committee continued to use such tactics to justify their investigation into the 1960s UF students rose in opposition.

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[174] James A. Schnur, "Cold Warriors in the Hot Sunshine: USF and the Johns Committee," *Sunland Tribune*: 1992, Vol. 18 , Article 3.

[175] Graves, *And They Were Wonderful Teachers.*

[176] "johns committee", *The Florida Alligator,* April 2, 1963.

[177] Ibid.

[178] Ibid.

Speaking out in student publications became a powerful new tool for rejecting McCarthyism and Johns' agenda. Such visible criticism in UF's student paper points to two important developments. First, students rejected the conformity that characterized the 1950s. As clearly demonstrated by the student discourse on UFs campus, the Committee was losing credibility and students were not afraid to discuss it candidly. In previous years and under different circumstances such criticism could have proven useful ammunition in political attacks. However, UF students had very little to lose in the political landscape and freely used the student press to criticize the Committee. Second, the newly budding consciousness among students of the 1960s allowed for the exchange of ideas and the development of shared language. It was this newly emerging shared consciousness seen in the pages of student publications that laid the foundation for the physical manifestations of dissent that followed on UF's campus.

Anxieties about attacks on free speech, continued interruption of educational environments, and a continued slide towards dictatorial corruption within the state legislature populated the pages of student publications. Students used their right to freedom of press to have candid conversations about the political landscape and their increasing disillusionment with what they understood to be an obvious parallel to McCarthy's reign of political terror. An era of blindly subscribing to harmful and heavy handed Cold War rhetoric was over—especially among the students at UF. In 1963, the editors of *The Alligator* summed up their feelings towards the washed up rhetoric in a lead editorial, writing, "McCarthyism died with its founder."[179] Soon, students rose en masse to ensure such a statement would ring true.

[179] Ibid.

“If You Allow Yourself to be Intimidated”

The Committee’s move into the public sphere fueled a vivid public response the Committee had previously plotted to avoid. Students were outraged and willing to act— even if it meant straying from the conformity that characterized the 1950s. At UF students rose in organized resistance to the Committee, gathering to physically protest, engaging in political activism that called on state legislatures to take a stand, and distributing information about the Committee’s tactics to dispel misinformation previously used to intimidate students. By the late 1950s and early 1960s the Committee was no longer facing a passive student body, but instead an energized resistance that took a physical and overly political form.

Students fed up with Johns’ overly McCarthyesque agenda being perpetrated on UF’s campus took actions both big and small. On May 5, 1959 the front page of the student paper included a report of students hanging Johns in effigy on the quad. In the featured photo a dummy made to look like Johns held a sign which read, “Charlie Johns has condemned FREEDOM here!!! Shall we allow it to die? NO! WE WANT FREEDOM.”[180] The dramatic stunt reveals the frustration of the student body bubbling to the surface. The small but visible act of resistance points to how student anger aimed at Johns escaped the confines of editorial pages and ended up hanging from a tree on the quad.

Just four days prior, on May 1, 1959 the headline “Pork Chop Gang Proposes Bill for Thought Control” appeared on the front page of *The Alligator.* The following article explained the Johns Committee’s newest pursuit—“a bill apparently designed to prevent public schools and

[180] *The Florida Alligator*, May 5, 1959, 1. Note, formatting is recreated as closely as possible to replicate the sign in the image featured in the paper.

college teachers from advocating for integration."[181] Later that week, on May 5th, another headline read "Legislators Studying Laws Banning Books Thought 'Subversive.'" This time, the state senate education committee was behind the proposed legislation to ban books that might "brainwash" Florida's students with subversive marxists ideologies.[182] For students at UF, already fed up with the State Legislature's interference with their education, the news of the two new bills drove them to take action on campus. The same May 5th front page spread featured an advert for a protest against a "'book-burning' bill introduced in the State Senate."[183] Students, frustrated not only with Johns but with his fellow legislators, organized quickly in the face of further injustice.

Students, who had just a month earlier witnessed mass firings, now had a new injustice to stand up to. According to reports from *The Alligator* over 900 students met on the Plaza of the Americans to protest the book-burning bills.[184] In a rapidly planned protest just under 10% of the entire university's student body came together to stand up to the legislature's agenda. Such a protest points to the pervasiveness of the anger felt towards Johns and his peers. As reported in the paper the gathered crowd was not disruptive or disorderly, but instead sat quietly to listen to their fellow students speak about the bill and proposed action against it. "We want to pass on information about these bills," said one speaker, "so that you can write to your representatives

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[181] "Pork Chop Gang Proposed Bill For Thought Control," *The Florida Alligator*, May 1, 1959, 1.

[182] "Legislators Studying Laws Banning Books Thought 'Subversive,'" *The Florida Alligator*, May 5, 1959, 1.

[183] *The Florida Alligator*, May 5, 1959. As made clear through the extensive citations, this entire edition of *The Florida Alligator* points to the tension growing in response to the Johns Committee's presence on campus and the actions of state legislatures. Through examining this single front page spread it becomes obvious that the students of UF were adverse to the Johns' attacks on their education.

[184] Don Richie, "More Than 900 Attend Rally In Plaza Protesting Book Ban Bill," *The Florida Alligator*, May 8th, 1959, 1.

and senators and let them know what you think."[185] Importantly, this is the shift where student energy is transferred from visible physical dissent to organized political action.

Student speakers at the protest urged the gathered crowd to write to their representatives. Student organizers also drew up a petition to take to the State Legislature. In just three days over 2000 students at UF attached their names to the document. The petition was then taken to the capital, Tallahassee, where student representatives presented the grievances to the joint legislature.[186] It is important to note here that in 1959 Florida's voting age was still 21 years old. So, for more than half of UF's population political action such as writing to representatives and signing on to petitions was one of the few ways to make their voices heard while they were still 18, 19, and 20 years old. Students who disapproved of the state's attempts at controlling their educational experience took direct political action against censorship and anti-intellectualism beyond the ballot box.

In the pages of the 1960 UF yearbook, *The Seminole*, students are pictured attending anti-book burning protests and signing on to the petition.[187] Such a portrayal shows that the student resistance to the state's increasingly oppressive agenda was so widely accepted on campus that *The Seminole* editors' chose to include visible evidence of dissent in the 1960 yearbook. The protest, the petition, and the photos immortalized in the pages of *The Seminole* further point to the rejection of the1950s conformist culture. Students took collective action in

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[185] Ibid.

[186] "2000 Here Sign Book Ban Protest," *The Florida Alligator*, May 8th, 1959, 1.

[187] The University of Florida, *The Seminole* (Gainesville FL: 1960), 50, UF Digital Collections.

spite of the threat of being painted as subversives and radicals. In fact, the wide sweeping condemnation of the Cold War was the very thing the students took up.

Students also used the dissemination of knowledge to disarm the Committee's power. A new understanding of the Committee, and the confines of its power, circulated due to the fruitful efforts of student journalists writing in *The Alligator*. In a February 1960 article, the paper's managing editor produced an exposé, populated with information about how the Johns Committee's investigations functioned at UF in the years prior. The editor collected information from various interviews with UF administrators and the Campus Police Chief. The article outlined the nature of the investigation and how the operation functioned. The article—using language collected in interviews with investigators and administrators—gave insight into how the Committee used "young" plainclothes investigators, staged stakeouts of places "known to be frequented by homosexuals", and collected sworn statements from those interrogated.[188] By shedding light on the tactics used by the Committee and the campus police officers involved in the investigation, the journalist allows for readers to be informed about the Committee's commonly employed tactics in order to prepare to face them.

Importantly, the exposé also illustrated the Committee's lack of power in regards to actually firing staff and expelling students. The author outlines the procedure for the removal of a member of the UF community as presented to him by the vice president of UF. The vice president explained that investigators turned in evidence to administrators. Then, cases involving students went to the dean of academic affairs. Some special cases were referred to the vice president to handle personally. Importantly, the vice president points out that following an

[188] Jim McGuirk, "UF Sanctioned Agents Uncover Homosexuals," *The Florida Alligator*, February 19, 1960, 1,3.

accusation "the accused person was then called in for a conference, in which he was given an opportunity to read the statement, confront the witnesses, and have full legal counsel."[189] In conducting these interviews and exposing the bureaucratic process of dismissing students and staff, the student journalist disarmed the Committee's tactics of intimidation through misinformation. During the initial investigation of 1958 and 1959 the Committee's power relied on gay students and staff's ignorance to the lack of jurisdiction the Committee possessed over student standing. In the interrogation room in particular the Committee's power rested on intimidation tactics to extract useful and incriminating information or coerce students into acting as informants, naming other students, or admitting to being homosexuals. Students who refused to comply were then met with the threat of expulsion—a threat the Committee lacked the power to actually follow through on.[190] Misinformation was a powerful tool for the Committee. The information put forth in the editor's article strips the Committee of the power of ambiguity and gives reassurance to the students who faced similar intimidation in the 1960s.

Students also came up with strategies to deal with confrontations with the Committee. In 1963 a group of young civil rights activists, the Student Group for Equal Rights (SGER), stood up to the Johns Committee following an instance of attempted intimidation. By 1963 the Committee had directed attention back towards the target they set their sights on nearly a decade prior—pro-integrationists. SGER, detailed the Committee's attempt to stifle the protest actions of the fledgling Civil Rights group. On July 24, 1963 the group's weekly newsletter entitled "Common Sense"—a publication that served as the main line of communication with

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[189] Ibid.

[190] An interview with Officer John Tileston featured in *The Committee. The Committee*, directed by Lisa Mills (2011; Orlando, FL: University of Central Florida, Video release year, 2012), Online video.

members—reported on an incident where Chief Investigator R.J. Strickland approached two group members while they picketed a racially segregated restaurant.[191]

The ensuing article illuminated the way in which Strickland approached the picketers and threatened arrest. According to the protesters' recollection of the event Strickland claimed the student's organization was "...'an illegal organization" and therefore "any of [their] activities were illegal.'"[192] The students, prepared to deal with such intimidation tactics, reassured Strickland their picketing was "legal, known to the mayor, members of the Bi-Racial Committee, and under the surveillance of the police."[193] By the 1960s the Committee's presence on campus was public knowledge and so were the common tactics employed by its investigators. At the bottom of the same SGER newsletter a note from the editor claimed "the presence of Johns Committee investigators on campus and the sampling we have had of their operation suggests the need for a statement on how to deal with them."[194] The editors followed with such a statement. Set apart in all capitals the message from the editors read—

> INVESTIGATORS DO NOT HAVE THE POWER OF ARREST OR SUSPENSION. NOR CAN THEY COERCE YOU TO ANSWER ANY QUESTIONS OR TO ENGAGE IN CONVERSATION. THEY MUST HAVE A SUBPOENA IF YOU ARE TO BE BROUGHT BEFORE THE COMMITTEE. AT THAT POINT YOU MAY REQUEST LEGAL COUNSEL. INTIMIDATION ONLY WORKS IF YOU ALLOW YOURSELF TO BE INTIMIDATED.[195]

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[191] Student Group for Equal Rights, "Student Pickets Tell of Threats by Johns Committee Investigator," *Common Sense* no. 8, July 24, 1963, Box 1, Folder 6, Johns Committee Collection, University of Florida Special Collections.

[192] Ibid.

[193]Ibid.

[194]Ibid.

[195] Ibid.

Through these student-led publications, student groups facilitated the dismantling of the Committee's intimidation tactics. Student power manifested through sharing knowledge.

No such knowledge existed among the gay students the Committee intimidated in integration rooms five years prior. Copleston was unaware the Committee needed to present a subpoena when Campus Officer Tileston pulled him out of his accounting class. Chuck Woods was unaware the Committee did not possess the power to expel him when he was interrogated by Strickland. Merril Mushroom did not even have conclusive evidence that her questioning was linked directly to Charley Johns and his cronies. Gay students were victimized by the way the Committee weaponized ambiguity and misinformation. By 1963, students, especially those with activist training from the early Civil Rights movements understood their rights and had candid conversations about them. No such candid conversations existed among UF's gay student population, mostly because there was no way to effectively organize nor disseminate information among gay students. A widespread culture of homophobia and the separate branches of the subculture made it difficult for gay students to form a collective consciousness, thus making them more vulnerable to the Committee's unjust attacks.

By the 1960s such a consciousness existed among students at UF, as is evident by their sophisticated and organized response to the Committee. When the Committee overstepped the confines which maintained its legitimacy and spilled over into affecting the lives of the entire student body, a collective movement emerged. Students, armed with the ability to protest, freely confronted the Committee in a vibrant and visible manner. Students, unconcerned with the threat of expulsion, freely attached their names to petitions and called on their representatives to stop the Committee's attempt at banning books. Students, sure of their civil liberties, shut down the Committee's misinformation in verbal confrontations. Gay individuals did not possess the

knowledge nor the social safety net necessary to fight back. The gay community members allowed themselves 'to be intimidated' mostly because they had no other choice. An unquestioned culture of homophobia permeated society even as McCarthyism rhetoric no longer proved effective. Therefore, students focused not on issues of protecting their gay peers, but instead on protecting their community from further infringements of civil liberties, headed the ousting of the Johns Committee by overthrowing the power of intimidation.

"What a report, what a reaction"

Even beyond UF's campus the Committee was digging its own grave. By 1964, nearly a decade after its initial creation, the Committee published "Homosexuality and Citizenship in Florida," in order to present the justification for their homophobic crusades. Scholars often cite the pamphlet, colloquially referred to as the 'Purple Pamphlet' in reference to the publication's distinctive purple cover, as the mistake which ultimately led to the Committee's downfall.[196] In the pages of the publication the Committee, in an attempt to hit home the homophobic rhetoric that helped justify the investigation in Gainesville, took an unmistakable public misstep.

In its contemporary moment, the pamphlet was most definitely absurd. The pages of the publication feature various lewd anecdotes and pornographic material. As the pamphlet progresses the prose and the photos which accompany it grow increasingly explicit. Beginning with photos of nude men kissing on the title page, progressing to a bondage scene featuring a young man, presenting an array of pornographic images featuring a very young male model, and

[196] Poucher interview in Vox's treatment of the Johns Committee Story. Ranjani Chakraborty, "How Florida legally terrorized gay students," produced by Vox on Nov 4, 2019, YouTube Video, 11:56, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IbTBehjdlc0.

culminating in a photo of a two men in a public bathroom exchanging oral sex—the photos present the contemporary reader with obscene sexual content. Besides the set of photos featuring the young subject in which the source of the photos is cited as "a supplier of homosexual erotica," each photo's caption is devoid of context for the image [197]

Instead, anecdotes and claims present in the written portions of the pamphlet give the photos an alternate context. Under a section titled "Why Be Concerned" the Committee describes scenarios of shocking sexual scandals involving sexually deviant men in the state of Florida. The section describes a Central Florida teacher receiving anonymous oral sex in a public bathroom and little league coach who "systematically seduced" the boys on his team into homosexual acts. These stories serve as the emotionally volatile fuel for upsetting a reader. The Committee even goes on to claim that "these are no isolated instances" and even argues such occurrences do not "touch the extremes of deviant behavior which enforcement officers have become accustomed to encountering in the world of homosexuality."[198] In using these unattributed anecdotes the Committee asserts homosexuals are pervasive predators with insatiable sexual appetites for young victims. Such a claim, supported by the decontextualized photos, can be understood as a desperate attempt by the Committee to convince the reader to be concerned about homosexual indoctrination.

A critical reading of the pamphlet does not only exist from the point of view of contemporary historians. The pamphlet received widespread criticism in papers across the state

[197] *Homosexuality and Citizenship in Florida: a Report of the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee* (Tallahassee: Florida Legislative Investigation Committee, 1964).

[198] Ibid. 11,12.

of Florida.[199] The story escaped the confines of the Sunshine State too—spreading as far as Washington D.C. By June, the Guild Book Services (GBS) in D.C., a mail order book distribution chain run by Dr. Henry Lynn Womac, was selling excess printings of the pamphlet for $2.[200] GBS pushed the boundaries of obscenity laws by publishing racy gay content—ranging from erotic books to pornographic material.[201] In 1964, shortly after its establishment, the GBS produced an advertisement for the Purple Pamphlet, writing "what a report and what a reaction!!!"[202] The advertisement offers a few paragraphs GBS's own reaction to the pamphlet. The paragraphs poked fun at the "not even alphabetized" glossary of homosexual terms and discussed the washed up rhetoric recycled in the pages of the pamphlet with tongue in cheek.[203]

The advert also included the reactions it alluded to in the form of quotes from a Floridan newspaper and political figures, illustrating the response to the pamphlet that existed in mainstream media. One such quote included on the GBS ad read "'this illustrated monograph on perversion is a new low… we feel that the immediate resignation of every state official who had a hand in it.'"[204] The GBS attributes this quote to a March 19 article in *The Miami Herald*, a

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[199] UP, "Homosexuality Report Stirs 'Obscenity' Furor," *Fort Lauderdale News*, March 19, 1964, 4B; "Purple Is the Right Color," *The Tampa Tribune*, March 19, 1964 32; Karl Wickstrom, "Why Did Committee Seek Publication of Perversion Booklet?," *The Miami Herald*, March 19, 1964, 14; "Waste Of Taxpayers' Money," *The News Tribune*, March 22, 1964, 4; Karl Wickstrom and Robert Sherrill, "Purple Pamphlet Curtailed," *The Miami News*, March 19, 1964, 1.

[200] "Florida Shame: $2 a Copy," *The Tampa Tribune*, June 29, 1964.

[201] "Dr. Herman Lynn Womack," The Rainbow History Project, accessed February 18, 2025, https://web.archive.org/web/20120312230204/http://www.rainbowhistory.org/womack.htm.

[202] Guild Book Service. Advertisement for the Report 'Homosexuality and Citizenship in Florida,' ca. 1964. 1964 (circa). State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory. https://www.floridamemory.com/items/show/326759, accessed February 18, 2025.

[203] Ibid.
[204] Ibid.

newspaper that covered the story of the Johns Committee and the purge of professors in the years prior.[205]

The story of distaste for the Purple Pamphlet in Florida is abundant in a survey of newspapers published around March 19, 1964. According to one report in the March 19 edition of *The Miami News*, Florida State Legislatures received a copy of the pamphlet mid-March via mail.[206] On the same day the *Fort Lauderdale News* reported the Committee also distributed the pamphlet to the press. The *Fort Lauderdale News* article goes on to cite the Committee's chair Richard Mitchell as saying the pamphlet "should never be placed in the hands of the general public."[207] While the pamphlet was never distributed widely to the public, the controversy surrounding the publication was no secret. The Committee, already outgrowing its mandate, took a large public misstep in 1964 and sparked a public discourse it could not quiet down.

State Legislators, appalled at the distribution of the pornographic, called for an end of the Committee. For example, State Attorney Richard Gerstein, according to the *Fort Lauderdale News*, "ordered the booklet kept out of general circulation" on the "grounds of possible violation of state laws against distributing obscene literature."[208] On the same day, *The Miami Herald* reported following a phone call between Gerstein and Mitchell further distribution of the pamphlet was stopped. In an ironic twist Gerstein cited such an immediate halt on distribution

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[205] The March 19th, 1964 entire issue of *The Miami Herald* is filled with responses to the Purple Pamphlet. The specific article referenced in the GBS advert is,"'Official' Obscenity," *The Miami Herald*, March 19, 1964, 6-A.

[206] "'Obscene Booklet' Mailing Is The Last Straw," *The Miami News*, March 19, 1964, 6A.

[207] UP, "Homosexuality Report Stirs 'Obscenity' Furor," *Fort Lauderdale News*, March 19, 1964, 4B.

[208] UP, "Homosexuality Report Stirs 'Obscenity' Furor," *Fort Lauderdale News*, March 19, 1964, 4B.

because his "main concern was keeping the booklet away from young persons," the very demographic the Committee claimed to protect.[209]

The Committee met its ultimate downfall when the State of Florida failed to renew its funding for the fiscal year of 1965. Yet, the Committee did not fail because of the pamphlet alone. Instead, as evident in news coverage of the Committee in the mid-1960s, a public, increasingly disillusioned with washed up rhetoric from McCarthy days and removed from the initial hysteria, no longer supported the Committee's attacks on ever-changing targets.[210] This is not to say that Floridians rejected homophobic rhetoric, in fact one article published in the *St. Petersburg Times* in July 1964, suggested that with the Johns Committee out of the way "Florida can seriously consider the problem of homosexuality." The article goes on to posit that "it has just begun to be realized in serious scientific circles that in homosexuality the nation has a problem of major magnitude."[211] As exemplified by the article in the *St. Petersburg Times*, by the 1960s the Lavender Scare was not justified by morality, but instead by a scientific understanding of homosexuality as a mental illness. Hysteria over the immorality of homosexuality paled in comparison to a modern, logical, and scientific approach. The Johns Committee championed a moral crusade that fell out of fashion as homophobia became further initialized in psychology.

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[209] Karl Wickstrom and Robert Sherrill, "Purple Pamphlet Curtailed," *The Miami News*, March 19, 1964, 1

[210] "Exit the Johns Committee," *The Miami Herald*, September 11, 1964, editorials, 6-A; "Johns Committee, Shut Up," *The Miami Herald,* April 18, 1964, 6A; "Legislature To Eye Johns Committee," *St. Petersburg Times*, March 25, 1963, 8-A; "Florida Doesn't Need The Johns Committee," *The Miami News*, March 28, 1963, 12A; "Johns Committee Belongs Back In The Salem Of 1692," *The Orlando Sentinel*, April 29, 1963, 11A.

[211] "Meat-Ax Brain Surgery," *The St. Petersburg Times*, July 4, 1964, editorial, 8A.

Art

In the early Summer of 1961, graduation finally came for Art Copleston. He was awarded honors for his academic achievements. But for Copleston graduation was not about celebrating his accomplishments, instead it was an exciting day because it meant he could finally escape. After several bouts of interrogations with the Committee, both in dark police station basements and in off campus motels, Copleston left Gainesville and did not look back. There was nothing to compel him to stay in Florida. Copleston's father had passed away during his time in undergrad and his mother continued to struggle with substance abuse. So when Copleston's uncle, far away in a small Californian town, offered up a place for his mother to live, the last of Copleston's ties to Florida were severed. Copleston packed up the car with his worldly possessions and drove with his mother (and his mother's dog) to the Golden State. After dropping his mother off with her brother Copleston drove on to San Francisco to see what he could find.[212]

In San Francisco he found some semblance of gay community. He joined a gay social organization that owned a campsite in the mountains somewhere north of Sacramento. Over Memorial Day weekend in 1972, Copleston attended what he called a "gay campout." This campout is where Copleston met his life partner, Dennis. In a recent interview, Copleston recalled seeing Dennis for the very first time, standing atop a rock in the middle of the Yuba river, and thinking "ok, maybe he's the one." The men spent the next 30 years together.[213]

Luckily, the pair shared an introverted nature. They enjoyed traveling the world side by side and visited over 30 countries. Satisfied with each other's company and perfectly content to

[212] Interview with Art Copleston, October 1, 2024.

[213] Ibid.

not spend their time socializing with large groups, they made a perfect couple. The men worked together in the real estate business and lived in San Francisco for almost their entire relationship. In 2001 the pair moved to Palm Springs where they lived together until Dennis passed away in 2002.[214]

After Dennis died Copleston's life grew increasingly lonely. He had no interest in seeking out a wide network of friendships. In a recent conversation he spoke about his small social circle of two people, one of whom is the caretaker he hired to assist him with everyday tasks in his old age. Yet, a limited social life doesn't bother Copleston. "I don't want to be around people," he said in the same conversation, "I want to be alone."[215] Copleston attributes his introverted nature to the financial situation of his youth and his inability to afford the activities that filled his peer's time. Yet, Copleston also understands his desire for solitude is a direct result of the Committee's harassment. In his college years he "shied away from friendships," worried about the threat posed by student informants hired to keep tabs on their gay peers. For Copleston, maintaining any sort of relationships on campus was "dangerous" because of the Committee's efforts.[216] So, through college he kept a small group of friends, recalling two students he spent time with. In a recent interview he revealed that more than half a decade later he's carried such a habit with him, saying, "I have no friends, and that's the way I want it."[217]

Copleston may keep his circles small, but he hasn't kept his story to himself. Following the death of his partner and the remaining members of his immediate family he decided to write

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[214] Art Copleston, *Demons and Deliverance: Black and White Edition* (Venture, CA: Purple Distinctions Self Publishing, 2016), About the Author.

[215] Interview with Art Copleston, October 1, 2024.

[216] Ibid.

[217] Interview with Art Copleston, October 1, 2024.

a book about his life. In 2014 Copleston published *Demons and Deliverance*, a memoir detailing his life. The book is not dedicated solely to the story of Copleston's interaction with the Johns Committee, but instead focuses on his life in entirety. For Copleston the Committee's investigation, though a traumatic experience, was only an episode of his life. Still, years after the episode ended Copleston will share his experience with the Johns Committee with journalists, historians, and documentary makers. "I want people to know what happened," he told a journalist with the *South Florida Gay News* in 2016.[218] Because of his willingness to share his story, the study of the Johns Committee included the individual stories of students such as himself.

Copleston, in his retirement, took up a new effort— political advocacy. Since 2003 Copleston has worked with the Democratic party in Palm Springs on both a local and national scale. Today, such work is the only commitment that regularly populate Copleston's calendar.

Merril

Merril Mushroom understood the homophobia of the 1950s and 1960s well. In fact, it was the Johns Committee's homophobic investigation and subsequent purge that spurred Mushroom to transfer. In 1959, shortly after the interaction she had with a college police officer in the basement of her dormitory, Mushroom made plans to leave. In a recent conversation she remembered feeling she "could not stay there, not one minute longer, or [she] would be so in trouble."[219] The interaction was enough to scare Mushroom. She had heard the whispers about the Committee poking into the private lives of other gay students and for her the interaction

[218] Christiana Lilly, "The Johns Committee: State Sanctioned Homophobia," *South Florida Gay News*, March 6, 2019.

[219] Interview with Merril Mushroom, February 14, 2025.

solidified that for her own safety she needed to get out of Gainesville. Mushroom left UF following the close of 1959's spring classes, and began her coursework at the University of Miami the following fall. She graduated with a degree in education in 1962.[220]

While at the University of Miami Mushroom found yet another network of gay peers. Prior to graduation the group, made up of gay men and lesbians, discussed the ideas of pairing up and marrying members of the opposite sex. For these young adults such marriages helped avoid scrutiny from nosey employers, improved safety, and opened up the possibility to legally adopt children in the future. The group paired off in sets of two, made up of people who got along well enough to spend substantial time together following graduation. Mushroom married her first 'husband' Jack and following graduation the pair quickly left Florida.[221]

Jack's job brought the pair to Gadsden, Alabama, mere miles from Anniston, Alabama where only a year earlier the Freedom Riders experienced a violent attack on their Greyhound Bus. During the single year she lived in Gadsden, Mushroom quickly fell in line with Civil Rights activists, specifically joining Black women in their fight to desegregate the town's public library.[222] After her year in Gadsden, Mushroom and Jack moved north to New York City. Mushroom recalled the move to New York as an exciting episode in her life. In the 1960s the city housed a flourishing gay subculture and a hot bed of activism. Mushroom was quickly swept up in the excitement herself.

In New York she recalled taking up roles in various kinds of activism. As the U.S. plunged into visible conflict in Vietnam she participated in the peace movement. Jack and

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[220] Ibid.

[221] Interview with Merril Mushroom, February 14, 2025.

[222] Transcript, Merril Mushroom, Oral History Interview with Paul Oritz, March 24, 2020, *Samuel Proctor Oral History Program*. March 24, 2020, P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida.

Mushroom worked with other gay individuals to help train young men to dodge the draft through putting on convincing performances of pretend homosexuality. Mushroom also participated in the Women's Liberation Movement, took up roles in providing mutual aid for kids who had run away from home and took refuge in New York's East Village, and worked alongside anti-racist educators in schools in New York City.[223] Mushroom became imbibed with the various calls for change that shape popular memories of the 1960s. In looking at the inspirations for her activism Merril, credited the Johns Committee, at least in part, for the awareness it spurred in her. In a 2020 interview with the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program Merril recalled that when the "Johns Committee stuff started coming down" it triggered "awareness of the fact that maybe not everyone was always okay in this world just because they were white."[224] As a young gay Jewish woman from the racially segregated American South, Mushroom understood that systems of oppression existed around her. She grew up hearing her mother's disdain for racially segregated public facilities. She grew into young adulthood fearing gay bar raids, arrest, and sexual assaults at the hands of police officers.[225] She had a plethora of reasons to take up the call for change.

Alongside her activities in various activist circles Mushroom began working as a teacher in Harlem in the late 1960s. Her co-teachers and administrators embodied early anti-racist pedagogy. Mushroom went on to complete a masters in education before starting as a teacher in an early special education program for students with autism. She worked with the program for a little over a year before her interests took her elsewhere. During the early 1970s, Mushroom found her way into the psychedelic movement and eventually filtered into the back-to-the-land

[223] Interview with Merril Mushroom, February 14, 2025.

[224] Transcript, Merril Mushroom, Oral History Interview with Paul Oritz.

[225] Interview with Merril Mushroom.

movement. Satisfied with her time in New York, Mushroom divorced Jack and remarried to a new man. After having adopted their first child, Merril, and her new 'husband' John, left the city in pursuit of land. The family drove over 14,000 miles in search of a spot to settle down.

Eventually, the journey across the U.S. and into parts of Canada produced a suitable option in Tennessee. Mushroom never anticipated a return to the South East, and worried her child, who was Black, would face the same prejudices that existed in the region when she left in the early 1960s. Yet, lesbians in her life long gay network spoke to the progress they witnessed. So, Mushroom and her family made their way to Tennessee, where they joined other 'hippies' interested in the back-to-the-land movement. Mushroom and the people around her started what she called an "intentional community" on a swath of cheap land in Southern Tennessee. The community, or "gay-borhood" as she referred to it in a recent conversation, slowly attracted other gay individuals. Mushroom has since spent the rest of her time in Southern Tennessee with her ever growing gay community. She kept up her activism, working for the Southern Lesbian Feminist Activist Herstory Project to preserve stories of the lesbian past.[226] Mushroom transcended the culture of fear curated by the Committee in Florida and continues to live a life centered around gay community— the one thing the Committee truly took from her in the 1950s. Today she is still living in the gay-borhood alongside her family and friends.

Chuck

Despite the threat of expulsion that plagued Chuck Woods following his run in with the Committee, he went on to graduate with his bachelors in advertising from UF in 1963. Yet, unlike Mushroom and Copleston, Woods did not pack his bags and leave Florida following

[226] Southern Lesbian Feminist Activist Herstory Project, accessed April 15, 2025, https://slfaherstoryproject.org/.

graduation. In fact, Woods did the exact opposite and remained in Gainesville. He pursued graduate school at UF and completed a Masters in journalism in 1965. Following the completion of his Master degree, Woods once again chose to stay in Gainesville. In 1966 UF hired Woods to work with the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences' (IFAS) communications department. Woods eventually received tenure at UF as an associate with IFAS and remained at UF until he retired in 2006.[227] Following his retirement Woods continued to play an active role in both the community on campus and the community beyond it: writing for the *Gainesville Sun*, serving on the town's beautification Committee, and avidly supporting the local arts. He remained in Gainesville until his death in 2017.

Woods, in an October 2011 interview with the team that made *The Committee*—the documentary detailing the rise and fall of the Johns Committee and the body's attacks on students—Woods gives insight into his early days of working at UF. "Had it been known that I was gay I probably would have not gotten tenure," he told the interviewer, "I'm sure it would have been absolutely impossible." Woods recalled that "there was a lot of homophobia on campus," through the 1990s.[228] Woods recalled the homophobia that existed on campus when he began teaching. Such homophobia was pervasive across academia across the U.S. Gay individuals faced the lingering effects of the Lavender Scare and a widely accepted atmosphere

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[227] Interview with Chuck Woods, October 7, 2011. Interviewer unknown. For further detail on Woods' life see Woods's Obituary. Andrew Caplan, "Chuck Woods, opinionated lover of beauty, culture, dies at 76," *The Gainesville Sun*, May 15, 2017, accessed April 15, 2025, https://www.gainesville.com/story/news/local/2017/05/15/chuck-woods-opinionated-lover-of-beauty-culture-dies-at-76/21037006007/.

[228] Since *The Committee* focused mainly on the experience of students during their interaction with the Johns Committee, Wood's later career as an educator is not explored in depth. Thanks in great part to the entire interview transcript taken while preparing for the documentary, and kindly provided to me by the filmmaker Lisa Mills, I am able to share Chuck's views on how he navigated being a gay educator at UF. Interview with Chuck Woods, October 7, 2011.

of homophobia.[229] Woods recalled one instance in which a department chair attempted to remove him from his position on account of him being gay. The situation got so bad that Woods had to file a grievance against the Chair, and ended up getting him to step down from his position.[230]

Slowly, Woods observed the situation on campus improve. He recalled new incoming administrators being increasingly friendly to LGBTQ+ issues and supporting diversity among staff and students. Later in life Woods came out in his professional circles and became a voice for gay faculty on campus. Woods took up LGBTQ+ advocacy in various capacities on UFs campus and beyond. Woods was an early supporter of the The Pride Community Center of North Central Florida, advocated for removing President Reitz's name from the Student Center at UF, and, according to a statement from UF, was overall "instrumental in establishing LGBTQ+ faculty and staff visibility, community, and support at UF."[231] Upon his passing Woods left $700,000 to establish the Charles T. Woods Endowment Grant at UF. According to UF's Department of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's studies the grant is intended to annually "support research and service that benefits the LGBTQ+ community."[232] Grants in Woods's name exist to facilitate faculty and student research and service annually. Despite the Committee's efforts Woods not only lived authentically as an openly gay educator but an advocate for Gainesvilles LGBTQ+ community, even after he passed away.

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[229] John D'Emilio, "The Campus Environment for Gay and Lesbian Life," *Academe*, Vol. 76, No. 1 (Jan. - Feb., 1990), pp. 16-19.

[230] Interview with Chuck Woods, October 7, 2011.

[231] "Center Awards Inaugural Charles T. Woods Grants," Department of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies, University of Florida, accessed February 16, 2025, https://wst.ufl.edu/cgsws-newsletter/2020/center-awards-inaugural-charles-t-woods-grants/; "My Friend Survived a Gay Witch Hunt in Florida: More than 200 others in Florida's state Universities did not," Prism & Pen, Medium, accessed February 15, 2025, https://medium.com/prismnpen/my-friend-survived-a-gay-witch-hunt-in-florida-ad04c661ac04.

[232] "Center Awards Inaugural Charles T. Woods Grants."

Woods not only survived the Committee's attempt to scare him into submission but thrived despite it. In the end, he graduated and went on to work for UF despite the Committee's direct attempt to remove gay educators. Woods watched UF survive the Committee flex its power over gay students and educators, attempt to censor materials in libraries and classrooms, and eventually set the stage for its own downfall. Woods's story points to the power of perseverance and everyday resistance. Despite the homophobia prevalent in Gainesville in the 1950s and 1960s, Woods decided to stay. In planting roots in Gainesville Woods eventually became a voice for the LGBTQ+ community. He stood in direct opposition to the culture of fear instilled on UF's campus in the 1950s and worked actively to undo the legacy of the Johns Committee.

Student Stories At The Center

Examining the ways in which students existed beyond their interactions with the Committee returns agency to young people affected by Johns' agenda. For the students who took a stand against the Committee on campus and in the pages of *The Alligator*, this agency manifested as protests and petitions. For the gay students who the Committee harassed, interrogated, and threatened, this agency took the shape of completing their education and continuing to live lives as their authentic selves. The people profiled above were a part of the budding activist movements beyond their college years once they had the ability to navigate the world without the threat of expulsion hung over their heads. These people took up samesex partnerships and rebuilt gay networks. These people lived as out gay individuals who took up the roles as educators. Their very existence, in spite of and beyond the purview of the Committee, was an act of resistance. Yet, these individuals' triumph over terror of the Johns Investigation is lost when scholarship narrowly focuses on how the Committee targeted students in the late

1950s. These people exist beyond the context of the Committee, and their life stories, successes, and fears deserve a place in the historical record.

Conclusion:

Art, Merril, and Chuck existed in a context far beyond Capitol Hill and the Oval Office. However, in examining their experiences, it is readily apparent the homophobic rhetoric used in Washington D.C. in the early 1950s echoed throughout the nation. A Cold War power struggle on a cultural stage justified pervasive homophobia in an effort to uphold American morality. Such rhetoric justified the actions of Johns and his Committee as they waged attacks on state universities and the students who attended them. It is important to examine the stories of the Americans who were caught in the crossfire of the Cold War. Simply put, Art, Merril, Chuck and their gay peers at UF were made victims of the Johns Committee and the Cold War more generally.

The purging of gay students and gay educators did not begin or end with the Johns Committee's crusades for morality. As discussed in the first chapter, the practice of uncovering homosexual subcultures and pushing out campus community members who ran in gay circles was common practice prior to Johns's power play. Historians have dedicated specific attention to the small but noteworthy purge of gay students at Harvard in 1920, during which the administration expelled eight students on charges of homosexuality. At least one student took their own life as a result of being outed and threatened with disciplinary action.[233] Scholars have also dedicated attention to the small wave of purges that swept through Texas, Missouri, and Wisconsin.[234] During the 1950s homophobia ran rampant on college campuses across the country

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[233] William Wright, *Harvard's Secret Court: The Savage 1920 Purge of Campus Homosexuals* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005)

[234] Margaret A. Nash and Jennifer A.R. Silverman, "'An Indelible Mark': Gay Purges in Higher Education in the 1940s," *History of Education Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (2015): 441–459. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26356322.

and forced students and educators into the closet. Into the 1960s attacks on homosexuals continued. In 1962 the University of Wisconsin initiated a second homosexual purge less than 20 years after the initial investigation into homosexuality that occurred in 1948. By the 1960s the University of Wisconsin had developed a systematic way to execute their hunt for homosexuals as laid out in a recent article published on the investigations.[235]

What makes the 1959 purge at UF unique is the clear cut *state sponsored* nature of the investigation. While other educational institutions unjustly expelled students and fired faculty on the ground of their sexuality, such actions were not driven by State Legislatures. The specific attention the Johns Committee, made up of state senators and state investigators, paid to the students at UF is striking. Much like the Lavender Scare on the federal level, Florida's investigation into homosexual students was a government pushed initiative and not simply an isolated instance of homophobia at a university.

The fact the body initiating the investigation was an arm of Florida's legislatures means a tangible paper trail was left—save for the document reportedly burned by investigators worried about preserving their reputations. Since this paper trail exists there is indisputable evidence pointing to the insidious nature of the investigation. Not every instance of Cold War era harassment and purging of gay students is recorded meticulously or preserved in public archives. Stories of more isolated instances of interrogation, harassment and expulsion are documented while others are preserved through stories passed along from one gay generation to the next.[236] It will be important going forward to dig up these stories to further understand how the Lavender

[235] Ezra Gerard, "Gay Purge: The Persecution of Homosexual Students at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1962–1963," *Siftings*, March 22, 2021. https://campushistory.wisc.edu/gay-purge-persecution/.

[236] John D'Emilio, "The Campus Environment for Gay and Lesbian Life," *Academe*, Vol. 76, No. 1 (Jan. - Feb., 1990), pp. 16-19.

Scare affected the lives of individuals in unique ways. Further work focusing on homophobic university policies, the expulsion of gay students at other universities, and the individualized investigation systems created by other nations, has been started, and must be continued.

Such work is increasingly important with each passing day. In closely examining the stories of gay Americans who persevered through their education despite the challenges placed in front of them historians can understand everyday acts of gay resistance. A commitment to continuing their education, partaking in the gay subculture, and living authentically shows how gay Americans found ways to navigate the culture of fear imposed by the state sponsored committees or university administrations. In expanding the scope to examine the entirety of the lives of Americans affected by the Lavender Scare historians see how the period truly affected individuals and in turn their communities. The Cold War did not come and go for the people it affected— instead its effects linger even into today.

The story of institutionalized homophobia in American universities is not unique to the State of Florida nor to the Lavender Scare. Through the twentieth century, gay students engaging with a gay subculture, engaging in same sex relations, or bravely making the choice to live beyond the closet door, risked arrest, expulsion, and ostracization. In addition to managing course work, gay students face discriminatory practices at the hands of the peers who turned their names over to deans and investigators, the medical professionals who declared them mentally ill, and the administrations who served expulsions. Some universities maintained zero-tolerance policies of homosexual behavior and local laws forbade homosexual relationships. While the legal system has granted gay Americans a broader scope of civil liberties in the past five decades, homophobia is still common. Gay Americans, especially students, remain vulnerable.

Today, the Johns Committee remains an obscure story, but homophobic tactics and investigations into universities weaponized by opportunistic politicians are all too familiar. Attacks on colleges and universities from federal and state governments populate our contemporary headlines. Some university administrations have taken a stand while others have complied with a new set of federal standards intended to enforce conformity and compliance. A new cultural battle on college campuses is playing out across the country today. LGBTQ+ students and scholars are feeling the unique effects. The student stories in the history of the Johns Committee clearly demonstrate two things—student vulnerability and student strength. Art, Merril, and Chuck have shared their stories so we can understand how state sponsored homophobia affected young Americans. As discussed in the final chapter of this piece, the dissemination of information disarms the power of ambiguity wielded by politicians. It is important to learn from the Queer past, and allow the stories of gay resistance to inform how we respond to forces of oppression.

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