

# Disease Dialogues: How Medical Language Impacted the Lavender Scare

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Disease is a fickle thing, often it silently slips from person to person, casually stalking just below the radar and calculating the next victim. Before long an epidemic is on hand and containment becomes the primary focus. A silent, paralyzing fear of illness is an arguable hallmark of the Cold War period. In this era, dialogues on disease and infection permeate every facet, from social developments, to cultural artifacts, to medical research, and most notably to politics. In this era, the prevalence of medical vernacular and disease dialogues became ever present in political discourse, as leaders from Roosevelt to Eisenhower discussed the threat of “ailments” that could cripple the United States. But in the 1950s, a new threat so great, yet so undetectable, threatened to infect the healthy body politic. Political discourse filled with dread over the development of Communist States and the threat to the United States’ vitality. As the dialogue developed, an association between communism and disease formed in the early stages in of the Cold War. This view held that the American capitalist system was a healthy body being threatened by the “communist disease.” The United States was understood to be under attack by the nefarious disease of communism. Keeping within a medical framework, the immune system of the United States needed to be secured, through identification of threats, shoring up protection, and keeping vital functions safe. Therefore, the alignment of medical and political dialogue in the early part of the century arguably laid the framework for the Lavender Scare, which acted as a treatment to protect the United States against the new threat of communism.

The spike in medical dialogue surrounding the Cold War permeated into almost every facet of American life. Buzzwords such as condition, quarantine, disease, contagious, cure, strength, suffering, and epidemic appeared in dialogues from the Senate Floor to the White House, and into New York Time’s columns of the day. Prior to the period leading into the Cold War this type of language tended to remain within the field of medicine, but

something in this era precipitated a change in attitudes and dialogue. The first extensive reference to medical vernacular that appears in the national dialogue comes from Franklin Roosevelt, in his 1937 Quarantine Speech. Roosevelt gets to the vital heart of the matter in his speech by noting, “unjustified interference in the internal affairs of other nations or the invasion of alien territory in violation of treaties” (Roosevelt) and within this claim, two very important words stand out. The first is invasion and the second is alien. Invasion obviously connotes an attack and alien connotes an unfamiliarity, thus the attack of an “unknown” was at the forefront of the European conflict. While this is not directly related to medicine, this assessment of the situation sets the stage for Roosevelt’s further comment on the European situation.

As he progressed, Roosevelt noted, “it seems to be unfortunately true that the epidemic of world lawlessness is spreading” (Roosevelt) as he described the situation in Europe. In essence, he stated, the epidemic is spreading, and this is a phrase that is meant to incite fear. It acknowledged a quickly spreading threat and warned of the future consequences. Knowing the danger in the spread of an epidemic, Roosevelt noted, “When an epidemic of physical disease starts to spread, the community approves and joins in the quarantine of the patients in order to protect the health of the community against the spread of disease.” (Roosevelt) Roosevelt then makes a comparison between physical disease and the spread of another disease, and this hints at fascism as the epidemic that is spreading over Europe. Craftily, Roosevelt ties medical language to the political dialogue, as he warned, “War is a contagion, whether it be declared or undeclared” (Roosevelt) and he underscored the risk of entering the war. But he proposed a solution, laced in a warning that the United States may not be able to hide forever from the spread of the latest conflict. Roosevelt warned, “We are determined to keep out of war, yet we cannot insure ourselves against the disastrous effects of war and the dangers of involvement. We are adopting such measures as will minimize our risk of involvement” (Roosevelt) and with this Roosevelt again ties medical language to political language. What Franklin Roosevelt also does in this speech is bring medical vernacular into the political spectrum, with his use of language such as contagion, minimization of risk, alien, invasion, epidemic, and most importantly quarantine.

Effectively, Roosevelt makes what was once medical, political and brings the language of medicine into politics.

Later in the Twentieth century, after the United States became “infected” and entered World War II, other politicians and leaders were still utilizing medical vernacular when discussing politics. The successor of Roosevelt, Harry Truman, continued this trend in his inaugural address. While discussing the next threat to the world, Truman claimed, “Communism is based on the belief that man is so weak...that he is unable to govern himself” (Truman 518) and this creates a distinct image. Truman’s understanding of Communism thought that a lack of strength presented a perfect victim for opportunistic Communism. Further, while discussing the Third World, Truman noted, “their poverty is a handicap and a threat to both them and to more prosperous areas” (Truman 520) and again there is a use of medical language. Truman’s claim notes that a handicap of poverty afflicts the up and coming nations and that this poverty is a threat to areas of prosperity. Implied is the spread of poverty, which could move from already impoverished areas and debilitate prosperous ones with their handicap. But, most interestingly, Truman noted that, “for the first time in history, humanity possesses the knowledge and skill to relieve the suffering of these people” (Truman 520) and this suggests that a “cure” is available to immediately remove the affliction of the Third World. Thus, in the early stages of the Cold War, there is a permeation of medical language and ideology in the United States’ global interactions.

But moving into the decade of the 1950s, the dialogue began to shift slightly as the focus of the United States turned inward. This was problematic, however, according to Senator Margaret Chase Smith (R-ME) who attempted to bring national attention to a national ailment. Speaking in 1950, Smith stated, “I would like to speak briefly and simply about a serious national condition” (Smith 522) and her use of condition is suggestive of a prolonged, if not chronic, ailment. Speaking further, Smith noted that the condition developed due to the “shield of congressional immunity” (Smith 523) and this had the effect of sapping, “the strength and unity it [the nation] once had when we fought the enemy instead of ourselves” (Smith 527). Smith’s use of medical language suggests that due to

congressional immunity the national condition had festered, and therefore, it was attacking the internal vitality of the United States. The condition which Smith sought to identify was the fight against communism, which in the period of 1947-1955 became a national “epidemic” per se. In various places, the national dialogue became filled with articles, such as a 1952 New York Times article titled, The One Cure for Communism, or a 1953 editorial which suggested, “the real antidote for communism is this nation” (Harlow) and both of these news articles, plus Smith’s speech make a point evident. The use of medical terminology and ideology that started with Roosevelt and by the 1950s, had been applied to the fight against communism.

In this fight against communism, the state of national health became a primary concern and all precautionary measures were taken. One such measure carried on the use of medical terminology as it identified a great threat to the international operation of the United States. Speaking before Congress in 1950, Representative Arthur L. Miller (R-NE) suggested the following about employees of the State Department, “Some of them are more to be pitied than condemned, because in many it is a pathological condition” (Miller) and Miller persisted in identifying “them” in the name of national vitality. Continuing to make his point, Miller stated, “I realize there is some physical danger to anyone exposing all of the details and nastiness of homosexuality” (Miller) and so the homosexual became a matter of national concern. In the 1950s, the homosexual presented the utmost threat to the health and vitality of the United States in the face of the threat of the spread of Communism. In his article National Security and Personal Isolation: Sex, Gender, and Disease in the Cold War United States, Geoffrey Smith identified a, “nexus between the Communist menace, disease, and illicit sexuality” (Smith 313) and so at the intersection of these three themes stood the homosexual government employee, whose “pathological condition” created great danger.

The identification of this triumvirate of worry led to a period of Cold War history known as the Lavender Scare, which took Washington, D.C. by storm between the years of 1950-1960. Led by figures such as Arthur Miller (R-NE), Joseph McCarthy (R-WI), and others, such as Roy Cohn, this was the systematic removal of homosexual

government employees in what appeared as an attempt to shore up the national immunity to communism. Early in the decade, in a 1950 speech given at Wheeling, West Virginia, Joseph McCarthy identified 205 “known communists” (McCarthy) that worked in government. More details regarding this claim came to light when Arthur Miller took up the gauntlet laid down by McCarthy in a late 1950 speech. Miller noted, “the Russians are strong believers in homosexuality, and that those same people are able to get into the State Department and get somebody into their embrace, fearing blackmail, will make them go to any extent” (Miller) and this suggested that homosexuals were susceptible to blackmail. This lends itself to Geoffrey Smith’s assertion that, “individual behavior in sensitive places might have extreme international consequences” (Smith 315). Essentially, the perceived threat of Soviet spies blackmailing homosexual government employees created a terror that played into the earlier dialogues of disease that had permeated into the tissue of American life.

This permeation of fear and the continuation of disease dialogues can be seen in David Johnson’s book, *The Lavender Scare*, especially as Johnson reports, “The Republican Party campaign [in the 1952 election] slogan ‘Let’s Clean House’ promised to rid the bureaucracy of a host of problems” (Johnson 121) and this promise to clean house suggests a need to disinfect Washington, as if it had been unsanitary. Further, Johnson indicated that the release of Alfred Kinsey’s report on human sexuality in 1948 had created a national stir. Johnson wrote, “psychiatrist Edmund Bergler warned, ‘if these figures are only approximately correct then ‘the homosexual outlet; is the predominant national disease’” (Johnson 54) and so a national epidemic was hand. Thus, as the Lavender Scare developed, there was discussion of a need to disinfect, or clean Washington, D.C. as a way to counteract the national epidemic being endured. Geoffrey Smith identified that this problem was so pressing because it had always been easier to identify the contaminants, or subversives of society. In his article, Smith noted and wondered, “It had been easy to identify and single out for discriminatory treatment Blacks and ethnic minorities; how though, might one identify ‘Communists’ within- men and women who might undermine national security” (Smith 311) and this underlying fear amped up concerns. With a political

dialogue laden with medical terminology, the threat of an undetectable epidemic that could cripple the fortitude of the government prompted swift action.

As demonstrated by earlier politicians and those contemporary to the time, the use of medical vernacular included words commonly used to describe illness and epidemics. Translated into the period of the Lavender Scare, the use of these words can be used to explain why the Lavender Scare occurred. The announcement of McCarthy’s list of Communists in government could be considered the “patient zero” in this crusade to shore up the immune system of the government. Arguably, the homosexual working in government acted like an open sore, prime for communist infection. Geoffrey Smith pins this idea down as he noted the presence of what was identified as the, “all powerful, super secret inner circle of highly educated, socially highly placed sexual misfits in the State Department” (Smith 318) who according to claims, were, “easy to blackmail, all susceptible to blandishments from homosexuals from foreign nations” (Smith 318) and so this opened the State Department up to threats. In addition, Andrea Friedman, in her article *The Smearing of Joe McCarthy* notes that masculinity had much to do with this assessment of the State Department and its protection against the infection of communism. She described that many players in government held the notion that, “what made a real man overlapped with McCarthy’s in certain ways; all valorized physical strength and toughness, ‘warrior heroism’ and virility” (Friedman 1109) and so masculinity was key. Unlike the effeminate men of the State Department, a real man was thought to possess the strength that was needed to fight the infection of Communism. Essentially the masculinity and strength of a man were the necessary ideological immunizations against the threat of the communist disease. Conversely, the “sexual misfits” of the State Department, and by default, any other homosexual employees of the government did not have these necessary immunizations and thus were perceived as a risk of infection. Lacking these immunizations, “an emergency condition” threatened the nation’s capital” (Johnson) as an alarming event occurred. According to reports, the Russians had acquired a list of homosexuals throughout the world that had been compiled by Hitler as an espionage tool. Using this list, Russians were prying secrets out of government employee’s.”

(Johnson 80) and so the perceived threat became a perceived reality.

Additional developments in the medical realm impacted the development of the Lavender Scare in this time period. The men and women reviled by McCarthy, Smith noted, were suggested “[to operate] outside the law, proselytizing effectively among the disgruntled, the downtrodden, the emotionally unstable, and the young” (Smith 314) and therefore, threatened the nation’s most vital weapon, says Smith, which was the family. The consequences of having homosexuals in places of power, where they could influence the nation’s children, appears to have aligned with another development of the time, the final resurgence of the poliovirus. As Geoffrey Smith wrote, the last infection of the poliomyelitis virus emerged in 1952. Additionally, Smith noted that there was a reemergence of venereal disease around the same time. Thus, “anguish at the concealed, infectious, and obviously capricious poliovirus with its clear presentation of physical decay, was in the national scope” (Smith 323) and the combination of venereal diseases constituted “a significant public health problem” (Smith 323). As the threat of polio aimed to wreak physical decay on children, the homosexual threatened the family structure, and both threatened the vitality of the nation. Thus, the United States, politicians and citizens alike, operating within a medically charged framework needed a cure for this ill.

The ideology of Truman’s inaugural speech reappeared, strengthening the ties between communism, homosexuality, and disease, and the connection between political language and medical language. In an age where medically charged language surrounded political conversation and the development of modern health sciences was gaining speed, the emergence of panaceas for ailments came into focus. For the two health concerns of 1952 there were cures and immunizations. As Smith noted, the Salk and Sabine vaccines were widely available after 1952 to quell the poliovirus. Additionally, to handle the nasty venereal diseases, there was penicillin, which as Smith noted, “[had] been hailed as a ‘magic bullet’” (Smith 323) and these cures effectively treated these illnesses. This then left the threat of the communists and homosexuals, and as Johnson noted, “The constant pairing of ‘communists and queers’ led many to see them as indistinguishable threats” (Johnson 31) and

this presented a serious national health concern to the nation. Still working with the framework of medical terminology, the usual tactics of curing medical ills of the 1950s were not applicable to this “condition” that was presenting itself to the nation. Therefore, a wide range of “treatment” was employed to accomplish a few different things. The first was to shore up the American immune system, the second was to quarantine and remove those who promulgated the ills plaguing America. Encapsulated as a treatment, the Lavender Scare promised to cure the ills America was experiencing and it sought to do so quickly.

In meeting the first end, the Lavender Scare shored up the American immune system through two means. First, it led to the production of Executive Order 10450, which updated the requirements of Civil Service which had last been updated by Truman. In the new order, Dwight Eisenhower established a groundwork for employment with the Federal Government, stating, “Any criminal, infamous, dishonest, immoral, or notoriously disgraceful conduct, habitual use of intoxicants to excess, drug addiction, sexual perversion.” (Executive Order 10450) would be terms that would prevent employment in government. Further, “Any illness, including any mental condition, of a nature which in the opinion of competent medical authority may cause significant defect in the judgment or reliability of the employee, with due regard to the transient or continuing effect of the illness and the medical findings in such case” (Executive Order 10450) were also reasons for blocking employment. But finally the order also noted, “Any facts which furnish reason to believe that the individual may be subjected to coercion, influence, or pressure which may cause him to act contrary to the best interests of the national security” (Executive Order 10450) would be another reason for denial of employment. Thus with Executive Order 10450, the employment of homosexuals was expressly forbidden and tied into this prohibition of homosexuals were provisions to prevent the hiring of communists, as well as anyone deemed “unwell” by the government. Thus, Executive Order 10450 appeared to act as an immune boost to the government’s white blood cells as it neutralized the chance of introducing additional threats caused by homosexuals.



As the government shored up its immune system, it also systematically removed any and all homosexual employees that could be found, as a method of restoring healthy leaders to the ledgers of the Federal Government. An example of such an employee is Madeleine Tress, who was employed by the Department of Commerce. Co-workers in the Department of Commerce had noted that Tress was “‘unstable’ in dress and thinking, ‘bohemian’ in lifestyle, and received calls from many single women” (Johnson 148). Perhaps more damaging though, Tress was categorized as “‘mannish,’ ‘a tom boy,’ or had personality problems.” (Johnson 149) and most searingly, “a Georgetown professor charged that ‘she is a homosexual admittedly and known’” (Johnson 149) and this effectively sealed the fate of Madeleine Tress. Due to her homosexuality, she was investigated and forced to resign. Effectively, under the framework of the time, this would have removed a serious security concern from the Department of Commerce and prevented further spread of the insidious, silent threat of communism, vis a vis, homosexuality.

Given the efforts to shore up the United State’s immune system and cure it of its homosexual and communist condition, the Lavender Scare could be argued to be a product of these actions. Surrounded by concerns of the spread of the Communist menace and the presence of homosexuals who lacked the vitality to fend off such afflictions, there needed to be a treatment to neutralize that threat. Thus, the Lavender Scare presented itself almost as a “lavender pill” which, in the age of an advancement of medical dialogue and research, could effectively protect the nation from succumbing to the direst of epidemics. The metaphor of a “lavender pill” derives from the medical advances which were seen in the decade of the 1950s. These advances had tremendous effects which, when combined with fierce advertising, created a medical mentality in the American mind.

The metaphor of a miracle cure, for homosexuality in government and other diseases, developed early in the decade of the 1950s. In fact, there was a tremendous acceleration in the development of screening and treatment of many pesky, persistent, and resilient diseases that plagued the nation. As Geoffrey Smith noted, the poliovirus was easily quelled by the Salk and Sabine vaccinations. Not long before the development of these vaccinations, the causes and treatments of the

poliovirus were unclear, as a 1950 New York Times article reported. The article noted, “While this Morris County area has its worst polio outbreak in years, publicity concerning open sewage is bringing more attention to the situation than is warranted by the facts” (“Sewage Absolved,” 1950) and thus, this article sets an interesting premise. Reporting on the conditions of Morris County, New Jersey, the article notes that. “most cases [of polio] have come from the recently developed Beechcrest section of Florham Park” (“Sewage Absolved,” 1950) thus the article provides an environment for an outbreak of polio. The disease broke out in a newly developed area of suburban New Jersey, thus showcasing that the disease did not discriminate in terms of socioeconomic status or settlement density. Rather, the article proved that the disease developed in an up-and-coming suburban locale and the article further noted that in at least two cases, the disease was fatal. Moving back to Geoffrey Smith’s point, however, the Salk and Sabine vaccinations proved capable of eliminating a virus which seemed to strike indiscriminately. Thus, in the early portion of the decade of the 1950s, the prevalence of crippling disease was still incredibly high, even in newly developed suburban neighborhoods, which would cast shadows on the “advanced status” of United States medical prominence.

Yet, given this grim prognosis, another report emerged from the New York Times in 1950 which provided a glimmer of hope. In a report, dated November 22, 1950, one month after the Florham Park polio outbreak, it was found that, “Antibiotics have shortened the length of time that patients spend in hospitals” (“Hospital Care,” 1950) and this reduction in time spent in hospitals had substantial benefits. The benefit of the reduction in time needed for hospital care, the article reported, was that more patients could be treated, despite the fact that, “hospital bed space had only increased 18 percent.” (“Hospital Care,” 1950) Therefore, the use of antibiotics had the effect of quickly and effectively treating the needs of patients and maximizing the effectiveness of medicine. But even further, there was a marked increase in the production and advertisement of prescription or pharmaceutical drugs in this same timeframe. For example, in December 1950, the drug company Pfizer announced that it would be increasing its citric acid output and freezing the price of said item. (“To Lift Citric Acid Output,” 1950) In addition to

that advancement, Pfizer also announced that its findings on terramycin, which was added into the category of “wonder drugs” according to the New York Times. With the release of terramycin, the British Medical Journal noted, “to those manufacturers whose efforts have been fortunate must now be added the name of Pfizer and Co..for terramycin is their product.” (British Medical Journal 1209) The overall idea is that Pfizer had much success in the development of terramycin, which the British Medical Journal noted, was effective in treating a wide variety of ailments. Therefore, the decade held a great deal of medical advancement, providing faster and more effective treatment for the diseases which had haunted the United States for decades or more.

The most important factor in this increased in development of pharmaceutical drugs and the cures to ailments that plagued society was the technology and resources afforded by the decade. An important note in the British Medical Journal’s 1950 review of terramycin stated, “has been said that several hundred thousand cultures may be examined in order to find one or two worthy of going forward to the pilot-plant stage, that is, production on a scale adequate for thorough experimental and possibly clinical trial. Such work involves a large and continuous outlay, which may or may not reap a gigantic reward”

In effect, the British Medical Journal is claiming that in order to produce a drug of value from soil samples, Pfizer or any company would have needed a tremendous workforce, ample scientific resources, and a market for such a product. In terms of technological development, Kristie Macrakis, author of *Technophilic Hubris and Espionage Styles During the Cold War*, noted, “The rise of large-scale technical intelligence in the United States was part and parcel of Cold War science and technology” (Macrakis 378) yet, it is questionable how a rise in intelligence technology could equate to medical advances. Macrakis also noted, “Intelligence needs stimulated and accelerated the development of Cold War technology like spy satellites, high-altitude planes, and nuclear powered submarines” (Macrakis 378) and thus intelligence needs stimulated technological development. In a similar sense, medical needs, such as the late outbreaks of polio demanded the attention of the advancing field of scientific research. In examining Pfizer’s development of

terramycin, it was found that the field of pharmaceuticals had the resources to develop a labor intensive drug that proved to be highly effective.

When examined from afar, the decade of the 1950s could be described as decade of unprecedented medical advancement. Within ten years there was an outbreak of polio in an up-and-coming suburb in New Jersey and what would become a pharmaceutical giant, produced a “wonder drug” that was highly effective. Further, as Geoffrey Smith noted, the development of the Salk and Sabine vaccines effectively eliminated the poliovirus. When collectively viewed, these advancements all combine to create a mental set in the American mind which could rationalize that any and all viruses, diseases, and illnesses could easily be cured. This mindset of easy cures, when coupled with a medically twinged political dialogue, could be argued to rationalize the use of the Lavender Scare as a cure for the nation’s vulnerability to invasion by the “communist disease.” The association of communism and homosexuality to disease, epidemic, and contagion were deeply entrenched in the socio-political dialogue of the time. Therefore, because political dialogue included medical terminology and ideology, and modern medicine had seen explosive development, it seems natural that a national threat would be defined within a familiar framework.

Thus, when the use of medical language was brought into the political spectrum by Franklin Roosevelt, a trend began. This re-appeared in 1948 as Harry Truman took office and discussed the suffering of the world and the ability to relieve (or treat) the suffering given the great advances of modern science. In a similar sense, Margaret Chase Smith warned of a national condition that had emerged under a cloak of immunity, and various news sources of the 1940s and 1950s applied medical vernacular and disease dialogue to their articles. But most prominent to the development of the Lavender Scare is the pairing of homosexuals and communists that David Johnson identified in *The Lavender Scare* and the identification of the triumvirate of peril that Geoffrey Smith introduced in *National Security and Personal Isolation* which effectively cemented the idea of the risks associated between homosexuality, communism, and disease. It is to this effect that medical vernacular and disease dialogue had a hand in the dialogue of the

Lavender Scare. As the risks of communist infection mounted, leaders feared an epidemic that attack the vital body of the United States due to its lack of strong leaders who could fend off disease, real or otherwise. Therefore, the dialogues of disease and the rise of modern medicine permeated American society. Thus the cause of the Lavender Scare may be argued to rest in the need to shore up the American immune system and cure the ills that threatened the United States during the Cold War, therefore, assuring the United States' global health and security.

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