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MILITARY SURVEILLANCE OF GAY STUDENT GROUPS RECALLS MCCARTHY ERA CRACKDOWNS

Historians React to Secret Pentagon Database

SANTA BARBARA, CA, December 19, 2005 - The recent revelation that the U.S. military is spying on gay rights groups, say historians, evokes the Cold War crackdowns on gays during the McCarthy era. Then, as now, the government compiled lists of American citizens who were suspected of subversive activity by virtue of their association with critics of government policy. Targets included gays and members of gay or gay-friendly groups.

Last week, NBC News reported it had obtained sections of a secret Pentagon database with information about individuals linked to peaceful activist and protest groups that opposed certain U.S. military actions. According to Sirius OutQ Radio, the military has been monitoring meetings and events it deems "suspicious," including gatherings of several student groups at the University of California, New York University and William Patterson College. Students were meeting to discuss and oppose the military's policy excluding openly gay Americans from serving in uniform. At least one protest was classified as "possibly violent."

A spokesman for the Defense Department said the Pentagon has "a legitimate interest" in using personal information about private citizens to "protect its installations and people."

But according to David K. Johnson, a historian at University of South Florida and author of "The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government," the banner of "national security" has long been used as a pretext to crack down on gay rights and even to spark moral crusades against homosexuality under the guise of national defense.

His book explains that "security risk" was used throughout the Cold War to invoke "the specter of homosexuality," which was cast as a threat to national security, and as something that "needed to be systematically removed" from the government and minimized in the culture at large. As far as is known, the current surveillance does not target homosexuality itself, but rather gay groups which have voiced opposition to the "don't ask, don't tell" policy barring openly gay service. But as described in Johnson's book, the historical pattern for thwarting gay freedom has been "guilt by association." Joseph



McCarthy singled out Americans who read Communist literature, and took aim at gays because they "had extremely close connections with other individuals with the same tendencies." The McCarthy era was also known for keeping lists of individuals deemed "security risks" because they had a history of alcoholism, Liberalism, disloyalty and even "loquaciousness."

Dr. Johnson said the Pentagon's spying is the latest in a long history of targeting gays and lesbians as subversives despite lacking any evidence for such a charge. "It's no surprise," he said. "The federal government began spying on those who challenged its discriminatory policies from the very earliest days of such activism." He said the FBI investigated the first organizational meeting in 1961 of what became the Mattachine Society, one of the earliest gay rights groups. Government agents took photographs in 1965 at the first gay and lesbian public demonstration in front of the White House against the military's exclusionary policies. "What is surprising," he said, "is that in nearly a half century of undercover intelligence gathering, they haven't yet figured out that these are always peaceful, lawful protests."

Nathaniel Frank, a historian and Senior Research Fellow at the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military, a research institute at the University of California, Santa Barbara, said there have been important advances made in the rights of gays and lesbians since the McCarthy era. "The witch hunts in the military have diminished," he said, referring to the process of identifying gay and lesbian service members through invasive and degrading methods. "We don't see the 'queer stockades,' the deliberate humiliation and sanctioned physical abuse that used to characterized military life for gays who served their country."

But he expressed concern that what the Pentagon defends as routine security measures has too often been used to vilify, thwart or even harm gay people. "While tolerance and treatment of gay Americans has generally improved since the Cold War," said Dr. Frank, "both our government and the popular imagination have frequently used 'national security' to run roughshod over the rights of gay patriots. The line between legitimate defense needs and abuse or exploitation of minorities in this country is easily blurred. What needs to be vigilantly monitored right now is not peaceful gay groups but our national commitment to keeping this line in sharp focus."

The Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military is an official research unit of the University of California, Santa Barbara. The Center is governed by a distinguished board of advisors including the Honorable Lawrence J. Korb of the Center for American Progress, Honorable Coit Blacker of Stanford University and Professor Janet Halley of Harvard Law School. Its mission is to promote the study of gays, lesbians, and other sexual minorities in the armed forces.