

“How that Stevenson Rumor Started”

The 1952 Election and Cold War Gender and Sexuality

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## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction: A New Gender Tension? .....</b>	<b>3</b>
Defining Masculinity and Femininity .....	4
Background .....	6
Historiography .....	7
Structure .....	12
<b>Chapter 1: The Political and Cultural Background.....</b>	<b>13</b>
The Military and Queerness .....	13
The “Crisis of American Masculinity” and Women’s Domesticity .....	16
The Lavender Scare and the New Deal .....	20
The 1952 Election.....	25
<b>Chapter 2: The Stevenson Rumor and Masculinity .....</b>	<b>28</b>
The Feminization of Stevenson in Newspaper Coverage .....	30
Indecisiveness .....	33
Stevenson and the Nuclear Family .....	35
<b>Chapter 3: The Lavender Scare and Stevenson Rumor as a Political Tool .....</b>	<b>38</b>
“Geniuses are Potential Queers” .....	39
Hoover versus Stevenson .....	44
<b>Chapter 4: The 1952 Election and Cold War Femininity .....</b>	<b>49</b>
Election Coverage: Borden Stevenson vs. Eisenhower.....	50
The 1952 Election’s Legacy for Borden Stevenson .....	54
<b>Conclusion: The Presidency, Gender, and Sexuality Today.....</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>66</b>
Primary Sources .....	66
Secondary Sources .....	69

## Table of Figures

Figure 1. Daily News Stevenson Cartoon.....	42
Figure 2. Excerpt of Borden Stevenson's Comment .....	53

## Introduction: A New Gender Tension?

Regardless of the outcome of the now historic Presidential nomination fight, Adlai Stevenson's toughest battle was not fought against Senator Kefauver, or Ike Eisenhower, or the G.O.P. His matchless courage and sportsmanlike heart were pitted against vilifications that have droned in his ears since the day he entered the national political scene.<sup>1</sup>

Any presidential election includes some degree of foul play; however, the 1952 election provided an infamous case as Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson had to battle a harsh rumor—whispers alleged that Stevenson was gay. This “Stevenson rumor” was much more than simply an attack on Stevenson’s masculinity. Accusing the Democratic candidate of being sexually attracted to other men connected to broader tensions surrounding shifting gender and sexuality dynamics. Today, the 1952 election has faded into obscurity for many; however, this election provides an extremely relevant case study to understanding how the presidential elections function to regulate normative ideas of gender and sexuality.

I argue that rumors of Stevenson’s alleged homosexuality<sup>2</sup> reflected anxieties during the Cold War about changing gender and sexual norms. Newspapers questioned Stevenson’s masculinity through using more “feminine” terms to describe him or even referring to him as “Adelaide.” Meanwhile, commentary on Borden Stevenson, his ex-wife, reflected traditionalists’ fears about the growing liberation of women. As an independent woman who initiated the divorce against Stevenson, her close association to a possible future president flouted the domestic expectations expected of women. Gossip magazines coverage of the election worked to invalidate Borden Stevenson by framing her divorce as vain and shameful— sending the

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<sup>1</sup> Mitchell Cavanaugh, “The Whispers Stevenson Couldn’t Stop,” *Uncensored*, December 1956.

<sup>2</sup> In this thesis I use the terms “homosexual” and “homosexuality” as these were the colloquial terms used at the time to refer to the victims of the Lavender Scare and the accusations made against Stevenson. While I recognize that these terms are dated, I utilize this language for continuity purposes.

message that women who did divorce were morally corrupt. While Stevenson attempted to run again for the presidency in 1956 against Eisenhower, this thesis will focus just on the 1952 election which featured heightened paranoia about homosexuals in government. The Lavender Scare, which had just begun in 1952, portrayed homosexuals in the federal government as a threat and gave the Stevenson rumor more strength.

I also suggest that the 1952 election was the first modern case of political opponents using gender anxiety in a presidential election to scapegoat candidates. Scholars explain how the state is constructed as “masculine,” and how our understanding of America having “founding fathers” situates roles in the federal government like the presidency as inherently masculine.<sup>3</sup> Stevenson’s candidacy for the presidency as a “effeminate” divorced man threatened the masculine role of the presidency, while his ex-wife refused to conform to notions of traditional femininity. This dynamic illustrates national politics reflect resentment of women, or of supposedly effeminate men. This tension stretches into the modern day. I suggest that the 1952 election provides both a case study to help us understand anxieties around gender and sexuality in the context of the Cold War and as a model to better understand our political dynamics today.

### **Defining Masculinity and Femininity**

The ostracization of the Stevensons and their failure to conform to traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity exemplify how the power of the presidency also extends shaping ideas of normative masculinity and femininity. However, a solid definition of masculinity and femininity does not exist due to fact that gender is defined at the moment by the dominant class. By 1952, the presidency was only reserved for affluent white Americans; therefore, my

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<sup>3</sup> Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 7; Aidan Smith, *Gender, Heteronormativity, and the American Presidency* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 2.

references to “masculinity” and “femininity” refer to a white middle class understanding of these gender roles.

Sociologist R. W. Connell summarized the definition of masculinity as “what men ought to be” and guarantees “the subordination of women.”<sup>4</sup> This definition, while vague, identifies that masculinity is dependent on its relation to femininity, but also that the concept exists as something inherently understood. During the 1950s, sociologist Helen Mayer Hacker provided a more concrete definition of masculinity as a balancing act for men. Men must express “intuition, charm, and tact” while also being “sturdy oaks.”<sup>5</sup> Mayer Hacker’s discussion of the “study oak” is the element of masculinity I wish to focus on. This image highlighted the physical strength expected of men.

Masculinity also connects to sexuality. In Connell’s discussion of homosexuality, they argue homophobia functions as part of defining heterosexual masculinity and draws a line between “masculine,” or heterosexual men, and “feminine” or homosexual men.<sup>6</sup> I discuss sexuality and gender together because societal understandings of heterosexuality rely on gender norms as well. In the 1952 election, the feminization of Stevenson functioned to question his sexuality.

My definition of femininity derives from historian Elaine Tyler May’s definition of “Domestic Containment.” May argues that suburban housewives in the 1950s were expected to serve as a defense against communism.<sup>7</sup> The Soviet nuclear threat heightened the importance of

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<sup>4</sup> Connell, *Masculinities*, 70, 77.

<sup>5</sup> Helen Mayer Hacker, “The New Burdens of Masculinity,” *Marriage and Family Living* 19, no. 3 (1957): 229, <https://doi.org/10.2307/348873>.

<sup>6</sup> Connell, *Masculinities*, 40.

<sup>7</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 14.

conforming to gender norms, and the Stevensons, by violating these norms, triggered conservatives' anxieties.

## Background

Senator Joseph McCarthy's declaration that 205 card carrying communists secretly worked in the State Department originally functioned to spark fears about communists in the government. Ultimately, the effects of this speech merged with anxieties in American society over shifting understandings of gender and sexuality to create the event known today as the Lavender Scare. During a congressional hearing, Deputy Undersecretary John Peurifoy claimed that the State Department had worked towards dismissing any known security risks, including ninety-one homosexuals.<sup>8</sup>

Peurifoy's claim confirmed underlying concerns in American society about the blurring of gender roles due to the growth in women's employment and the revelation of the prevalence of homosexuality in the *Kinsey Report*. The report provided a rude awakening to conservative Americans; about a third of American males had engaged in at least one sexual experience with another man.<sup>9</sup> Homosexuality, like communism, could not be visibly identified by the average person. These two identities merged into one in the minds of many as both posed a threat to the dominant values of a heterosexual nuclear family. American society was in decline, conservatives believed, and the Deputy Undersecretary's statement proved that this moral crisis had reached the federal government.

Aside from representing the cultural fears around gender and sexuality, the Lavender Scare also functioned as a political tool. With the White House dominated by Democrats for five

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<sup>8</sup> David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Johnson, *The Lavender Scare*, 53.

consecutive terms and the popularity of Roosevelt's New Deal, the Lavender Scare provided conservatives the opportunity to blame the fears of a supposed communist or queer invasion on Democrats and their lack of strength.<sup>10</sup> These types of attacks tie into how gender and politics work with one another. The American political system is inherently gendered with men having traditionally assumed political roles. This meant that attacks on strength had an ulterior motive to also attack the masculinity of the Democratic party.

These developments bled into the upcoming 1952 presidential election with the rumors around Stevenson's sexuality. As a divorced man, Stevenson failed to represent the societal ideal of the nuclear family. Political observers also judged his ex-wife, Ellen Borden Stevenson, for her role in initiating the divorce and allegations that she started the rumor that her ex-husband was gay. Borden Stevenson presented the perfect example for gossip magazines to argue that modern women were morally corrupt.

### **Historiography**

In the existing literature on the Lavender Scare, few scholars address Stevenson as a case study of one of the victims of the scare. The works that do discuss Stevenson only dedicate a few pages to the topic and fail to provide a detailed analysis of the different elements of the rumor. Aside from the Stevenson rumor, historians generally agree the Lavender Scare reflected growing anxiety around threats to traditional gender norms and heterosexuality and how these fears meshed with anti-communism.

Ironically, biographies of Stevenson shy from addressing the scrutiny of Stevenson's sexuality during the 1952 election. Jeff Broadwater only referenced the rumors once in their

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<sup>10</sup> K. A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 40.



chapter on the election, saying that they arose because of his divorce.<sup>11</sup> John Martin dedicated more time to discussing the Stevenson rumor, but also considered it a minor element in Stevenson's campaign. Martin mentions the FBI's role in the Stevenson rumor with claims of a man posing as an FBI agent claiming to investigate the Stevenson rumor.<sup>12</sup> Both Broadwater and Martin limit their discussions of the Stevenson rumor to just a quick reference to one player of this broader scheme. Intriguingly, the biographers both paint Stevenson as ready to defend himself rather than portraying him as a victim of a political smear campaign.

More detailed discussions of the Stevenson rumor can be found in the literature about the Lavender Scare. David Johnson's *Lavender Scare*, the definitive book on the subject, contained a small section on Stevenson in the 1952 election. Johnson's coverage contained the most comprehensive list of the players involved in this rumor, including the FBI, newspapers, political leaders, gossip magazines, and Stevenson's ex-wife. However, Johnson does not analyze any of these elements in detail and instead relied on a few quotes to summarize the entirety of each element's contribution to the spread of the rumor. For example, Johnson limited the role of newspapers by only mentioning articles that referred to Stevenson as "fruity" and an "egghead," and centered his discussion on the attacks Stevenson faced as part of an anti-intellectual movement.<sup>13</sup> Hostility to intellectuals did harm the Stevenson campaign and did contribute to suspicion of his sexuality, but the attacks by newspaper articles encompassed more comments than just these quotes. Johnson's discussion also lacked a thorough discussion of gender in favor of an analysis that focused more on the political elements of the scare.

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<sup>11</sup> Jeff Broadwater, *Adlai Stevenson: The Odyssey of a Cold War Liberal* (New York: Twayne, 1994), 121.

<sup>12</sup> John Bartlow Martin, *Adlai Stevenson of Illinois: The Life of Adlai E. Stevenson*, (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1976), 644, 647.

<sup>13</sup> Johnson, *The Lavender Scare*, 121.

K. A. Cuordileone provides a gendered analysis of the Stevenson rumor but uses a narrower selection of evidence than Johnson. In *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, Cuordileone argues masculinity plays a role in the Lavender Scare as conservatives attempted to paint Democrats as communist sympathizers through accusations of a lack of masculinity among liberals.<sup>14</sup> Cuordileone looks at both the role of sexuality and gender in the attacks on Stevenson through newspaper attacks. However, the evidence from these newspapers only came in the form of references to select terms used to describe Stevenson and his supporters.<sup>15</sup> Cuordileone analyzes these quotes with gender in mind, arguing that to avoid explicitly accusing Stevenson of homosexuality, the media relied on innuendos that feminized him.<sup>16</sup> Cuordileone frames their argument through the broader lens of masculinity that pervades discussions of the red and lavender scare; they argue that a lack of masculinity made Democrats “soft” and therefore feminine. Cuordileone brought in the gendered lens that played a major role in the Stevenson rumor but limits their evidence to just quotes from newspapers and political speeches.

Other historians also emphasize the role of masculinity in paranoia about communists and homosexuals, but these scholars do not mention Stevenson. John D’Emilio’s essay “The Homosexual Menace” deepens the connection between communism, homosexuality, and masculinity. D’Emilio paints the picture of Cold War anxiety as a combination of the fears around communism alongside changing gender roles and homosexuality. He writes: “Lacking toughness, the effete men of the eastern establishment lost China and Eastern Europe to the enemy, while weak-willed, pleasure-obsessed homosexuals- ‘half men’ - feminized everything

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<sup>14</sup> Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, 38.

<sup>15</sup> Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, 88.

<sup>16</sup> Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, 92.

they touched and sapped the masculine vigor that had tamed a continent.”<sup>17</sup> Feminine men and homosexuality combined into one greater threat to create a personification of communism.

D’Emilio only speaks on this amalgamation in a general sense and does not analyze any case studies of victims of this anxiety to demonstrate how these fears manifested from a thought to a political movement.

*Gender, Heteronormativity, and the American Presidency* by Aidan Smith provides the most comprehensive analysis of the Stevenson rumor that connects both gender and politics. Smith analyzes both the 1952 and 1956 election as a reflection of Cold War demands for conformity through the television campaigns created by the Eisenhower and Stevenson campaign.<sup>18</sup> While the coverage on Stevenson provides the most detail in how the Stevenson rumor manifested, Smith’s analysis covers only television and argues the development of television drove this rise in increased scrutiny over a candidate’s masculinity. Smith is correct that television coverage was important, but I am interested in how other sources, like newspapers, influenced the public perception of Stevenson’s gender identity.

This thesis responds to and contributes to this literature by combining the analysis of the tensions around queerness and gender norms with a detailed look into the different parties that spread or implied the rumors around Stevenson’s sexuality. While discussions of his sexuality only focus on a certain term used against him or simply reference the involvement of an individual in the rumor, closer analysis provides an important insight into one victim of the Lavender Scare and how the working parts of this scare manifested into a political attack.

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<sup>17</sup> John D’Emilio, *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 64.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, *Gender, Heteronormativity, and the American Presidency*, 32.

Regardless of whether Stevenson truly identified as a gay man, the rumors exemplified how presidential politics functioned to scapegoat violators of gender and sexual norms to blame for fears around the spread of communism. Scapegoating homosexual federal workers as the embodiment of America's communist anxieties revealed the expendability of this population in the eyes of politicians. The defamation of Stevenson as an alleged effeminate gay man provides an underexplored representation of how American politics clung to traditional expressions of gender and sexuality and shunned any possible deviations from this image.

The literature on Stevenson's ex-wife, Ellen Borden Stevenson, remains sparse. Borden Stevenson was the main subject of the gossip magazine coverage on the Stevenson rumor; however, the literature that covers these gossip magazines do not mention how these articles defamed her. Christopher M. Elias' monograph *Gossip Men*, which mainly focuses on how Joseph McCarthy, Roy Cohn, and J. Edgar Hoover used rumors to their advantage in politics, includes a small section on Stevenson and his gossip magazine coverage. Elias does not focus on the magazine's discussion of Borden Stevenson and instead discusses how gossip magazines tried to appear "in the know" about political rumors.<sup>19</sup> Johnson briefly mentions Borden Stevenson as a player in the Stevenson rumor, claiming that she supposedly told dinner guests that Stevenson was a homosexual.<sup>20</sup> But he otherwise does not examine the coverage of her by the mainstream media or by gossip magazines.

In short, Borden Stevenson's historical legacy mainly centered around her status as the ex-wife of Stevenson. A more thorough analysis on the content of the gossip magazine coverage of the Stevenson rumor aims to expand past existing commentary on Borden Stevenson and

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<sup>19</sup> Christopher M. Elias, *Gossip Men: J. Edgar Hoover, Joe McCarthy, Roy Cohn, and the Politics of Insinuation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021), 141.

<sup>20</sup> Johnson, *The Lavender Scare*, 121.

analyze how presidential politics also utilized Borden Stevenson to enforce traditional notions of femininity.

## **Structure**

This thesis consists of four chapters. Chapter one sets the background for the historical context of how public perceptions of gender and sexuality evolved during the early 20th century, and how this caused American society to feel a sense of crisis surrounding American morality. Chapter two and chapter three center on press coverage of the Stevenson rumor. Chapter two addresses how the New York *Daily News* attacked Stevenson for being overly feminine. Chapter three illustrates how the Stevenson rumor worked as an extension of the dissatisfaction some Americans had with the Democratic party. Chapter four centers on Cold War femininity and how Ellen Borden Stevenson was used in gossip magazines as a target to project the insecurities men felt about their masculinity during the 1950s.

## Chapter 1: The Political and Cultural Background

Is America in danger of creeping homosexuality? While homosexuals gain strength through numbers and money and cast off the heavy cloak of shame and fear, responsible persons are quietly concerning themselves with the inherent danger of having homosexuality regarded as something normal, as something to be accepted as different religions are accepted.<sup>21</sup>

The rumors surrounding Stevenson's sexuality reflected a broader movement in American society rather than an isolated incident. During and before the 1950s, a variety of major events altered normative gender and/or made homosexuality more visible. Additionally, the Great Depression and World War II provided many women the opportunity to begin working outside the home. While these changes were seen as temporary, their impact created a sense of uncertainty around the definitions of masculinity. These threats to traditional notions of gender and sexuality manifested into the Lavender Scare which targeted homosexuality, and its impact on gender expression, as a threat to American democracy. The obsession with the Stevensons' degree of conformity to gender norms during the 1952 campaign represented one piece in a greater response to changes to American gender and sexuality norms.

### **The Military and Queerness**

During the twentieth century, the military played a significant role in the growing visibility of queer America. The relationship between the army and the visibility of homosexuality occurred thanks to the growth of psychiatric evaluations in soldiers. These evaluations included investigations in sexuality due to the consideration of homosexuality as a mental disorder. While not truly effective in determining the sexuality of an individual, these

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<sup>21</sup> "Exposed: The Homosexual Menace!" *Exclusive*, May 1956, 7.

newly implemented psychiatric evaluations increased the prominence of homosexuality as a concern for the state.

The military, like other state agencies, was preoccupied with sexuality in the early twentieth century. During World War I, Secretary of War Newton Baker formed the “Commission on Training Camp Activities” (CTCA) which enforced a ban on alcohol and prostitutions on “moral zones” in which investigators discovered the existence of male prostitutes soliciting sex from soldiers.<sup>22</sup> In addition to regulating the “morality” of active soldiers, the state also concerned itself with barring individuals with “mental disorders,” according to psychiatry at the time, from the military. At this period, homosexuality was categorized as a type of “sex perversion,” but army recruits were screened for “defects... on intelligence and the nervous system rather than on personality disorders.”<sup>23</sup>

In the aftermath of World War I, the importance of psychiatric evaluations in the military increased as psychiatrists began to recognize homosexuality as a “personality disorder.” Led by Harry Stack Sullivan and Winfred Overholser, psychiatrists advocated for increased psychiatric evaluations in the military during the interwar period.<sup>24</sup> World War I resulted in many veterans with psychological problems— a consequence that psychiatrists argued the military could avoid by screening soldiers for any mental ailments beforehand.<sup>25</sup> Due to the consideration of homosexuality as a mental disorder, this meant the military considered queerness as a possible “condition” that could disqualify someone from military service.

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<sup>22</sup> Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), 60-61.

<sup>23</sup> Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 12-13.

<sup>24</sup> Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire*, 9.

<sup>25</sup> Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire*, 10.

By 1941, psychiatrists succeeded in obtaining the support of the surgeon generals of the Army and Navy in establishing a protocol to screen and exclude homosexuals in the military.<sup>26</sup> In the time between World War I and II, Freud's contributions to understanding psychology changed how psychiatrists evaluated mental disorders including homosexuality. Biological and physical characteristics now "indicated" mental issues so, army inspectors "detected" homosexuality based on the physical "abnormalities" of soldiers such as stereotypically "feminine" features like wide hips and narrow shoulders.<sup>27</sup> While these features do not actually indicate homosexuality, the state's investigations did consequently make queerness more visible.

Despite these investigations, many homosexuals evaded detection and their participation in a gender-segregated organization allowed them the opportunity to grow a community among other queer soldiers. Psychiatric evaluations of Army culture mentioned the prominence of using homosexual behavior as a joke among soldiers such as one individual acting overtly feminine to the teasing of the rest of the soldiers.<sup>28</sup> While these jokes did not imply the participant's sexuality, it did normalize sexual behavior between men to a degree. Additionally, men commonly found themselves paired in secluded situations, sharing a bed or hotel, which provided opportunities for some soldiers to experiment with their sexuality.<sup>29</sup> Queer soldiers also transformed service club spaces into makeshift gay bars to socialize with their fellow queer soldiers.<sup>30</sup> The military originally attempted to eliminate homosexuality from its organization, but instead World War II had the opposing effect of allowing a small queer community to flourish.

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<sup>26</sup> Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire*, 12.

<sup>27</sup> Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire*, 14.

<sup>28</sup> Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire*, 37.

<sup>29</sup> Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire*, 39.

<sup>30</sup> Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire*, 101.



## The “Crisis of American Masculinity” and Women’s Domesticity

Alongside the changing dynamics of sexuality during the interwar period and World War II, gender dynamics also began to shift. The Great Depression alongside the lack of male workers during World War II pushed many women to exit the home and enter the workforce. These changes were originally seen as temporary; most Americans assumed that after the war ended, women would resume their domestic roles. However, many women rejected this assumption and continued to pursue careers outside of the home. The growing independence of women created a sense of insecurity among many men. With women beginning to take up roles originally designated for only men, the idea of what constituted hegemonic masculinity began to be questioned.

The Great Depression disrupted the traditional family ideal of the breadwinner husband and the homemaker wife. The economic crisis resulted in the relative normalization of a new family structure with both the husband and wife working outside the home.<sup>31</sup> The unsustainability of a single-income household forced Americans to shift their initial perception of how the family divided work. The depression also harmed marriage as fewer Americans married, had children, and the divorce rate increased.<sup>32</sup> Despite these changes to the family structure, the depression still did not result in a radical change in the role of women. Women remained in “pink collar jobs” and faced job discrimination meaning that these employed women still could not pursue an independent lifestyle with their jobs.<sup>33</sup>

Like the depression, World War II once again forced women to exit the home. With fewer men available to work combined with higher demand for war industry goods, women took

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<sup>31</sup> Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 38.

<sup>32</sup> Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 40

<sup>33</sup> Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 56.

jobs in new sectors like factories.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, these changes were perceived as only temporary due to the fears of the changes that independent women would create.<sup>35</sup> During the depression, women faced structural barriers like gender discrimination ensuring their employment rates did not permanently change. However, war propaganda centering around being a “patriotic American” attempted to manipulate how women interpreted their new opportunities. The “most important patriotic job” a woman could fulfill remained motherhood, and parent magazines warned mothers not to expel all their energy at work and neglect their other role of being a mother.<sup>36</sup> While they enjoyed growing independence, women also faced a constant reminder that their societal role centered around domesticity and motherhood.

The trend in encouraging women to take up employment during an economic depression and a major war established women’s activity as associated with times of instability. During the Cold War, Americans blamed “sexual perversion” which ranged from homosexuality to sexually promiscuous women to blame for the political threats of the Cold War.<sup>37</sup> Thus, enforcing these domestic values would defend against the political instability of the Cold War. In addition to policing female sexuality, how women raised their children was also blamed for the growing presence of queer Americans.<sup>38</sup> A family that conformed to the traditional expectations of a dominant husband and submissive housewife was believed to be the key to maintaining cultural peace in America. American traditionalists saw sexuality at the root of the source for maintaining or destroying the country.

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<sup>34</sup> Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 68.

<sup>35</sup> Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 71.

<sup>36</sup> Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 74.

<sup>37</sup> Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 93.

<sup>38</sup> Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 96.

One *Chicago Daily News* article exemplified the two contrasting images women took up during the Cold War. “Why are Girls Marrying Earlier?” addressed a statistic that found 1952 had the lowest median age for women getting married, yet the year also had a peak in the number of married women working.<sup>39</sup> These statistics reflected that both the pressure to conform to domestic expectation and the normalization of women having careers outside the home impacted women. Interestingly, authors Samuel G. and Esther Kling placed a domestic reasoning onto the rise of women. They argued marriages happened later due to men saving to support their wives, but women began working to relieve this burden onto their young husbands and justify an earlier marriage.<sup>40</sup> According to this narrative, women worked due to their eagerness to marry. The article also treated women working as a temporary choice while their husbands improved their education or their jobs and earned an income able to support the entire family.<sup>41</sup> This attempt to understand the contrasting activities of women invalidated the idea that women might want a career or sense of independence. Instead, the only motivations existing for women all centered around marriage and domesticity.

The policing of the role of women reflected a growing fear of the disruption to traditional gender roles because of the growing employment of women. The idea of the breadwinner husband began to crumble, which threatened the original idea of what made an individual a “man.” World War II also provided a dangerous realization that women could survive without a man’s presence. *Esquire* writer Arthur Schlesinger summarized the feelings of anxiety men felt in his article “The Crisis of American Masculinity” writing, “what has unmanned the American man is the American woman.”<sup>42</sup> In the minds of American men during the 1950s, women aimed

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<sup>39</sup> Esther B. Kling and Samuel G., “Why are Girls Marrying Earlier?” *Chicago Daily News*, August 15, 1952.

<sup>40</sup> Kling and G., “Why are Girls Marrying Earlier?”

<sup>41</sup> Kling and G., “Why are Girls Marrying Earlier?”

<sup>42</sup> Arthur Schlesinger Jr., “The Crisis of American Masculinity,” *Esquire* (November 1958), 64.

to expand their roles while also utilizing their already designated positions to flip the hierarchy of power. Schlesinger alarmingly wrote, “As mothers, they undermine masculinity through the use of love as a technique of reward and punishment. As teachers, they prepare male children for the role of submission in an increasingly feminine world.”<sup>43</sup> This portrayal of women argued that women knowingly worked to undermine masculinity. While Schlesinger later rejected that women are to blame for the fears of declining masculinity, his discussion of the resentment towards women summarized the feelings other works during the fifties also communicated.

Sociologist Helen Mayer Hacker also noted the widespread feelings of resentment among men towards women and their growing independence. Mayer Hacker noted in their data collection of a trend of men “defensively” blaming women for their feelings of inadequacy.<sup>44</sup> This resentment also bled into popular culture depictions of women during the 1950s as “castrating Delilahs busily levelling men’s individuality and invading the strongholds of masculinity in work, play, sex, and the home,” while, “husbands and fathers are the guileless tools of their wives and daughters.”<sup>45</sup> This portrayal, like Schlesinger's article, pictured women as wishing to dominate men. The presence of women in men’s spaces threatened the ideal of masculinity due to the reliance on performance and physical presentation as a defining characteristic of gender.<sup>46</sup> Since “men’s spaces” no longer truly belonged to men this damaged the traditional notion of what masculinity meant.

In reaction to the unstable definition of masculinity, politicians worked to overcompensate and many on the conservative side attempted to hold up their interpretation of

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<sup>43</sup> Schlesinger Jr., “The Crisis of American Masculinity,” 64.

<sup>44</sup> Hacker, “The New Burdens of Masculinity,” 228.

<sup>45</sup> Mayer Hacker, “The New Burdens of Masculinity,” 228.

<sup>46</sup> Connell, *Masculinities*, 52.

masculinity as the embodiment of a patriotic American. Aside from blaming the lack of masculinity on women, the convenience of modern society also deteriorated masculinity.<sup>47</sup> For many conservatives, the driving force behind “modern society” manifested in the New Deal. These politicians worked to differentiate themselves from Democrats and protect their idea of the pre-New Deal masculine society by painting the opposing party as effeminate. According to this party binary, liberals were portrayed as “born of a weak, timorous psychological disposition.”<sup>48</sup> Conservatives stood at the opposite end of the spectrum by portraying the anti-communist crusade as a masculine effort. Like the pressures to push women into domestic roles to protect the country from communism, men also had to embody a certain type of masculinity to also defend their country.

### **The Lavender Scare and the New Deal**

The New Deal famously led to the expansion of the federal government. However, one unintended consequence was the bolstering of a queer community in Washington D.C. Alongside developments during the interwar period and World War II which made queerness more visible to the state, the New Deal’s job growth in Washington D.C. made the city more attractive to homosexual Americans.

Cities historically provided gay and lesbian Americans a center to form communities; however, the situation in Washington D.C. provided an environment more enticing to queer Americans. The Pendleton Act in 1883 formed a merit-based hiring system for civil service jobs; however, this system was still full of racial discrimination due to the requirement of a photo of

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<sup>47</sup> Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, 13.

<sup>48</sup> Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, 47.

each applicant.<sup>49</sup> Despite the racial discrimination, this system benefitted white homosexuals. Merit-based jobs provided them the opportunity to obtain employment without possible discrimination for their sexuality.

Aside from the merit-based hiring process, the gendered association behind clerical work also attracted gay men. According to a University of Chicago sociology study in 1930, interviews with gay men found that half the participants worked in some sort of clerical job.<sup>50</sup> This correlation between clerical work and queerness created fears around a lack of masculinity as the number of white-collar jobs grew. The transition away from blue collar jobs due to urbanization and a growth of bureaucracy would weaken masculinity, critics feared.<sup>51</sup> While office jobs do not actually feminize an individual, the studies which did find a popularity among queer Americans towards clerical work provided a justified source for Americans to fear the growing bureaucracy the New Deal bolstered.

Additionally, for unmarried queer women, working in the federal government also provided them security outside the traditional expectations of relying financially on a husband. By 1944, about 60 percent of the federal workforce in the capitol were women.<sup>52</sup> While clerical work was already associated with women, employment provided them the opportunity to lead independent lives. Additionally, while not enforced harshly, the Classification Act of 1923 also required equal pay for civil service jobs.<sup>53</sup> In combination with the merit-based hiring system, the promise of equal pay provided white women an alternative to a domestic lifestyle. These

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<sup>49</sup> Johnson, *The Lavender Scare*, 43

<sup>50</sup> Johnson, *The Lavender Scare*, 45.

<sup>51</sup> K. A. Cuordileone, "'Politics in an Age of Anxiety': Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949–1960," *The Journal of American History* (Bloomington, Ind.) 87, no. 2 (2000): 525, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2568762>.

<sup>52</sup> Johnson, *The Lavender Scare*, 44.

<sup>53</sup> Johnson, *The Lavender Scare*, 44.

opportunities were especially important to queer women as they did not need to turn to heterosexual marriage and could freely engage in forming queer communities.

In 1948, Americans became aware of the prevalence of homosexuality due to the Kinsey Report. The study attempted to survey the sexual activity of Americans with shocking results. According to the report, 37% of men surveyed had at least one homosexual experience in their adolescence.<sup>54</sup> In a culture where heterosexuality was the expectation, the reality that over 1 in 3 men had engaged in homosexuality subverted societal norms. The Kinsey Report rejected the idea that homosexuality was abnormal as a significant portion of the population has violated the expectation of heterosexuality.

This rise in homophobia created a moral panic. Gossip magazines show how these fears manifested due to their role in discussing the less “honorable” topics like homosexuality.<sup>55</sup> Gossip magazines thus provide clear examples to analyze how the Kinsey Report heightened homophobic sentiment. One article, for example, titled “The Homosexual Menace!,” preyed on the report’s anxieties. The author wrote: “Since there are more than 50,000,000 males in the U.S., about 16,000,000 have been involved in an act of perversion! What is the future of your little boy?”<sup>56</sup> Centering the secrecy of homosexuality as a threat to American youth framed the impact of the *Kinsey Report* as evidence of moral decay. Another article headlined “America, on Guard: Homosexuals, Inc.,” illustrated the political fears of the *Kinsey Report*. Author Kenneth Frank wrote about the rise of the Mattachine Society (an early gay rights organization) and its plans for political involvement. Frank claimed that the society “could swing not only local

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<sup>54</sup> Johnson, *The Lavender Scare*, 53-54.

<sup>55</sup> Barbara Epstein, “Anti-Communism, Homophobia, and the Construction of Masculinity in the Postwar U.S.,” *Critical Sociology* 20, no. 3 (1994): 22.

<sup>56</sup> “The Homosexual Menace!” 7.

elections but state and federal election as well.”<sup>57</sup> Frank represented homosexuals as a secret force with the force and intention to alter national politics.

These developments ultimately merged with Senator McCarthy’s infamous claims of the “205 card carrying Communists” working in the federal government. On February 20, 1950, Senator McCarthy delved further into his claims in a meeting before the Senate where he mentioned two cases of homosexual State Department employees with ties to communist organizations.<sup>58</sup> McCarthy argued that homosexuality predisposed an individual psychologically into believing in communist ideology or towards becoming a victim of blackmail from communist agents.<sup>59</sup> This alleged association established the justification for the Lavender Scare. Like communists, the invisibility of sexuality created the fear of the ease with which homosexuals could infiltrate the government.<sup>60</sup> Homosexual government employees could not be “trusted” with sensitive information if communist agents could easily blackmail them.

The fear of homosexuals in the government did not begin with Senator McCarthy. In 1947, the Senate Appropriations Committee expressed concerns around communists and homosexuals “infiltrating” the government in a letter to Secretary of State George Marshall.<sup>61</sup> The private way the committee discussed their concerns over “security threats” heavily contrasted the extremely public manner in which Senator McCarthy handled his concerns over security. In response, Secretary of State Marshall created a Personnel Security Board which fired 90 homosexual government employees between 1947 and 1950.<sup>62</sup> The mechanisms already in place to guard against these “threats” debunked the fear that the Truman administration could not

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<sup>57</sup> Kenneth Frank, “America, on Guard: Homosexuals, Inc,” *Confidential*, May 1954, 19.

<sup>58</sup> Johnson, *The Lavender Scare*, 16.

<sup>59</sup> Johnson, *The Lavender Scare*, 16.

<sup>60</sup> D’Emilio, *Making Trouble*, 64.

<sup>61</sup> Johnson, *The Lavender Scare*, 21

<sup>62</sup> Johnson, *The Lavender Scare*, 21.



handle the homosexual “issue.” However, the success of the loyalty program simply brought more fears of an “infiltration” by providing proof that a homosexual could successfully gain employment in the federal government.

In the same month as Senator McCarthy’s accusations, the Senate created the Tydings Committee to investigate the allegations. The three-month long investigation led by Democrat Millard Tydings attempted to investigate whether vulnerabilities existed in the State Department, but the inquiry became a partisan battle. The committee began with Senator Tydings urging Senator McCarthy to provide specific proof of his allegations of homosexuals in the government.<sup>63</sup> Republicans responded with accusations that Democrats were trying to cover-up the security risks.<sup>64</sup> Republicans, charged that the Tydings committee functioned not as an attempt to fix the government’s security but instead a game to defame the opposing party. Senator Tydings grew so angry that he yelled, “Won’t you stop this continued heckling about homosexuals and let us get on with the main work of finding Communists?”<sup>65</sup> Tydings argued that the Republicans’ plot to hurt the Democrats’ image came into the way of actual investigations meant to determine the integrity of the federal government’s security.

The consequences of making sensitive government information public shifted the perception around Democrats and the New Deal. One poll found that 49% of participants said they supported McCarthy and only 21% were anti-McCarthy three months after he started making his allegations. Americans had not forgotten McCarthy’s platform and almost half still supported him months after the campaign’s beginnings. The fear of homosexuals in the government “has revolted people more than anything else— more even than if McCarthy had

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<sup>63</sup> Johnson, *The Lavender Scare*, 26.

<sup>64</sup> William S. White, "M'Carthy Asserts Budenz Named Red in Acheson Office," *New York Times*, Apr 26, 1950.

<sup>65</sup> White, "M'Carthy Asserts Budenz Named Red in Acheson Office."

proven his charges,” according to one reporter.<sup>66</sup> The original claim made by Senator McCarthy focused on communists in the government, but his secondary accusation surrounding homosexual federal workers secured the loyalty of Americans fearful of a “government takeover” by alleged sexual subversives.

In response to these fears of security risks, the federal government attempted to adapt and appease the concerns of conservatives. To provide the federal government and the nation with more protections against the threat of communism and homosexuality, Congress passed the McCarran Internal Security Act of 1950. The act established the Subversive Activities Control Board (SACB) which created a registry of communists that the government, and businesses associated with defense facilities, could use to deny employment to individuals in this database.<sup>67</sup> While the act explicitly mentioned communism, the association between communists and homosexuality implied that homosexuality came into the jurisdiction of this act.

The exposure of “security risks” in the federal government helped reverse the New Deal momentum as the power of President Truman, or any Democratic administration, to evade these alleged communist and homosexual “spies” came under fire. Many conservatives took advantage of this shift to find support from Americans fearful of a “government invasion” by communists and homosexual federal workers.

### **The 1952 Election**

These social and political developments culminated in the 1952 election. Communism and the tensions surrounding heteronormativity and gender took center stage during the election as Republican Dwight Eisenhower and Democrat Adlai Stevenson fought for the presidency.

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<sup>66</sup>“In Spite of McCarthy People are Worried,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 23, 1950.

<sup>67</sup> Benjamin G Bishin, Thomas J Hayes, Matthew B Incantalupo, and Charles Anthony Smith, *Elite-Led Mobilization and Gay Rights: Dispelling the Myth of Mass Opinion Backlash* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2021), 123.

The Korean War, one major election issue, also functioned as an opportunity between the candidates to exemplify masculinity. Eisenhower supported the “Koreanization” of the war which meant gradually withdrawing American troops and turning more of the fighting over to South Korea.<sup>68</sup> Eisenhower argued that President Truman’s weakness had encouraged the North Korean invasion and he promised to personally travel to Korea to investigate the war himself.<sup>69</sup> On the other hand, Stevenson had to defend Truman’s actions in the face of Eisenhower’s judgement.<sup>70</sup> The war exemplified the battle to exude masculinity between Eisenhower and Stevenson. While Eisenhower had his military background to defend his bold claim, Stevenson’s defensive position portrayed another way in which the 1952 election served as a constant battle for Stevenson to prove his masculinity.

Both Eisenhower and Stevenson had to navigate tensions with important influential party members as well. Senator McCarthy’s fear mongering about possible communist spies in government made him an important figure that both Stevenson and Eisenhower had to confront in their campaign. While Stevenson took a more aggressive approach in denouncing the Senator, Eisenhower had to balance his disagreements with McCarthy while also not ostracizing an influential member of his party.<sup>71</sup> Senator Robert Taft, a leader of the conservative wing of the Republican party, ran against Eisenhower during Republican primaries, making him another important Republican to manage during the campaign. Eisenhower achieved this with meetings with Taft and negotiations over certain principles Eisenhower would need to adhere to as future president, including opposition to the New Deal, to win Senator Taft’s support.<sup>72</sup> Stevenson

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<sup>68</sup> John Robert Greene, *I like Ike: The Presidential Election of 1952*, (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2017), 164.

<sup>69</sup> Greene, *I like Ike*, 163, 165.

<sup>70</sup> Greene, *I like Ike*, 164-165.

<sup>71</sup> Greene, *I like Ike*, 160-161.

<sup>72</sup> Greene, *I like Ike*, 131.

engaged in a strategy called “De-Trumanization” by isolating himself from Truman and ignoring advice from Truman advisors.<sup>73</sup>

Television also grew in influence during the election. Eisenhower established the first developed television campaign in presidential politics with a series of thirty-one ads titled “Eisenhower Answers America.”<sup>74</sup> The ads worked to create a sense of intimacy and closeness between Eisenhower and American voters. Stevenson failed to take full advantage of television advertising, only creating eleven ads.<sup>75</sup> Despite the stark contrast in the usage of television ads between the two candidates, scholars have also found television as an important battleground between Stevenson and Eisenhower to establish their masculinity.<sup>76</sup>

The anxiety surrounding American sexuality and gender that culminated in the Lavender Scare played a major role in the 1952 election. With fear that deviant gender presentations and sexual orientations would cause the demise of America, candidates Eisenhower and Stevenson had to present themselves as a masculine figure willing to defend American democracy.<sup>77</sup> While the later chapters will reveal that Stevenson failed to execute this image, the scrutiny placed onto Stevenson and his ex-wife demonstrated the how the political and societal tensions towards deviations in gender and sexuality manifested in presidential politics.

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<sup>73</sup> Greene, *I like Ike*, 133.

<sup>74</sup> Greene, *I like Ike*, 146.

<sup>75</sup> Smith, *Gender, Heteronormativity, and the American Presidency*, 37.

<sup>76</sup> Smith, *Gender, Heteronormativity, and the American Presidency*, 34.

<sup>77</sup> Smith, *Gender, Heteronormativity, and the American Presidency*, 31.

## Chapter 2: The Stevenson Rumor and Masculinity

All presidents have a mandate: Don't be a wimp.<sup>78</sup>

“Wimp-baiting” refers to the implied expectations placed onto presidential candidates to uphold a manly image.<sup>79</sup> While the term developed after Stevenson's time, its message holds relevance to how newspapers portrayed Stevenson. The negativity surrounding Stevenson's relationship to masculinity highlighted a gender tension encapsulated in “wimp-baiting” that punished presidential candidates for evidence of femininity. Since journalists could not overtly claim Stevenson was gay, they worked around this through emphasizing the features that distanced Stevenson from traditional conceptions of masculinity.

Prior to Stevenson's bid in the 1952 election, his past political behavior and his background contained seeds of suspicion that made him victim to later questions about his sexuality. Stevenson planted one of these seeds during the infamous Alger Hiss case in 1948. In this case, ex-Communist party member Whittaker Chambers accused Hiss, a former State Department official, of being a communist spy.<sup>80</sup> During congressional hearings on the case, Stevenson came to the defense of Hiss, who had been his friend and colleague.<sup>81</sup> After Hiss's conviction, Stevenson's defense of Hiss contributed to the stereotype of Democrats lacking the “strength” to stand up against communism. Chambers also admitted to being a homosexual during the trial, providing concrete evidence to a link homosexuality and communism.<sup>82</sup> Stevenson's involvement in a controversial espionage case ultimately came back to haunt him as

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<sup>78</sup> “Professor Says All Presidents have a Mandate: Don't be a Wimp,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 2, 1989.

<sup>79</sup> “Professor Says All Presidents have a Mandate: Don't be a Wimp.”

<sup>80</sup> Johnson, *The Lavender Scare*, 32.

<sup>81</sup> Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, 88.

<sup>82</sup> Johnson, *The Lavender Scare*, 32.

his political opponents weaponized his past support of Hiss to portray Stevenson as weak on communism.

Stevenson further contributed to his “weak” image through his lack of confidence about his presidential bid. Throughout the nomination process, Stevenson reportedly rejected calls to step up as the Democratic nominee. During the closed Illinois state primary, a primary only open to members of the Democratic party, Stevenson allegedly pleaded with delegates to not write his name on the ballot.<sup>83</sup> Stevenson’s reluctance towards the presidential bid implied he had a timid character and lacked confidence. His acceptance speech for the presidential nomination further exposed his self-deprecating attitude: he said he wished his speech came from “a stronger, a wiser, a better man than myself.”<sup>84</sup> Hegemonic masculinity demands a strong-minded individual, and Stevenson failed to satisfy these expectations in his behavior during the election. Opponents also weaponized Stevenson’s history of indecisiveness towards the presidential election to portray him as incapable of being president.

A major factor in building suspicion around Stevenson’s sexuality came through his divorce with Ellen Borden Stevenson. Borden Stevenson initiated the divorce in 1949 on grounds of “mental cruelty.”<sup>85</sup> Stevenson’s divorce, and specifically Borden Stevenson’s initiation of it, presented Stevenson as out of control of his own household. This detail played a crucial role in the perception of his weakness. Those that feared the decline of American masculinity believed one cause came from women becoming more powerful in their homes.<sup>86</sup> To some, Stevenson appeared under the control of his ex-wife in addition to failing to satisfy the expectations of

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<sup>83</sup> Jean H. Barker, *The Stevensons: A Biography of an American Family* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996), 312.

<sup>84</sup> Martin, *Adlai Stevenson of Illinois*, 601.

<sup>85</sup> Martin, *Adlai Stevenson of Illinois*, 429.

<sup>86</sup> Cuordileone, “Politics in an Age of Anxiety,” 523.

maintaining the nuclear family. Stevenson's single status also threatened the domesticity of the White House. A Stevenson victory would cause a vacant First Lady position and imply the capability to succeed without conformity.

### **The Feminization of Stevenson in Newspaper Coverage**

At the time of the Lavender Scare, mainstream media rarely discussed homosexuality in contexts outside medical disorders due to the "distastefulness" of the subject.<sup>87</sup> Newspaper coverage of the Stevenson rumor did not explicitly make accusations about Stevenson's sexuality due to this unspoken rule. Instead, newspapers implicitly made comments about Stevenson's masculinity. While they did not purposefully accuse him of being a homosexual, these articles helped contribute to an overall suspicion about his sexuality.

The New York *Daily News* played a major role in the feminization of Stevenson. One way in which this feminization manifested came in the focus on his word choice and voice. One *Daily News* article highlighted a small portion of an Eisenhower speech which attacked Stevenson's flowery language. The snippet of Eisenhower's speech contrasted Eisenhower's preference for plain language versus Stevenson's preference for "witty and pretty talk." The *Daily News* further strengthened Eisenhower's attack by calling Stevenson's speeches "tea-cup words."<sup>88</sup> The choice by the *Daily News* to center an entire article around the few words of Eisenhower's speech gave the attack by the Republican nominee much more weight. The *Daily News*' commentary took Eisenhower's attacks a step further as their criticisms of Stevenson centered around emphasizing Stevenson's "femininity."

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<sup>87</sup> Epstein, "Anti-Communism, Homophobia, and the Construction of Masculinity in the Postwar U.S.," 22.

<sup>88</sup> "Ike Talks- Adlai Orates," *Daily News* (New York), October 23, 1952.

Richard Nixon, the Republican vice-presidential candidate, also contributed to Stevenson's feminization and benefitted from the aid of newspapers in highlighting these comments. In one speech, Nixon warned listeners that a Stevenson victory would bring a "weasel administration" to the White House and called the current Truman administration a "mink administration."<sup>89</sup> These attacks exemplified how conservatives relied on an argument of weakness in the Democratic party by comparing Stevenson and Truman to small fluffy animals, and suggesting that Democrats, by taking bribes in the form of mink coats, were corrupt. Later in the same month, Nixon also compared Stevenson to a small animal, asking listeners if they would prefer a "man or mouse" for president.<sup>90</sup> Nixon portrayed Stevenson as prey while affirming Eisenhower's masculinity by associating him with men, a hunter. Newspapers' decision to highlight this small section of Nixon's speeches also illustrated the contribution of newspapers in feminizing Stevenson. Of the entire content of Nixon's speech, the *Daily News* believed feminization of Stevenson was the highlight.

Comparisons of the two presidential candidates relied on a gendered connotation to feminize Stevenson and masculinize Eisenhower. One issue of the *Daily News* made a comparison between the separate speeches Eisenhower and Stevenson had recently made. Eisenhower, who had spoken in Philadelphia, was described as giving a "deadly earnest, fiercely indignant, and saltily humorous" speech of an "honest American" full of "fighting words" and "meat."<sup>91</sup> This description helped build the image of Eisenhower as a fighter with "deadly" and "fierce" both having connotations of physical strength. Calling Eisenhower an "honest American" and describing his speech as having "fighting words" also boosted Eisenhower's

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<sup>89</sup> Frank Holeman, "Nixon says Adlai Backs HST 'Smear,'" *Daily News* (New York), October 3, 1952.

<sup>90</sup> Frank Holeman, "Nixon Blasts at Stevenson On the Adlai Home Grounds," *Daily News* (New York), October 21, 1952.

<sup>91</sup> "Ike at Philadelphia," *Daily News* (New York), September 6, 1952.



masculinity by both establishing that Eisenhower exemplified the American man, but that he also possessed the physical strength to combat pressing issues like the ongoing Cold War.

In contrast, Stevenson, who spoke in Denver, presented his “usual cute, fruity-voiced self” to voters in his “purdy” speech.<sup>92</sup> For a job as serious as the presidency, this description disconnected Stevenson from the image of a presidential candidate. While Eisenhower was a fighter, Stevenson was unserious. Additionally, starting this descriptor off with “usual” implied Stevenson embodied “cute” and gave “purdy” speeches. Eisenhower’s speech was described as having “meat,” food with substance that satiates, meanwhile Stevenson’s work was “fruity,” sweet and light. The focus on masculinizing Eisenhower instinctually placed Stevenson outside of those classifications on top of the literal word choice that feminized him.

The use of the word “fruity” to describe Stevenson also appeared outside this specific *Daily News* article. One Pennsylvania editorial introduced Stevenson as a “fruity-voiced phrase maker” in the article’s first sentence.<sup>93</sup> Starting the article with feminizing Stevenson worked alongside the *Daily News* article to help shape the association between Stevenson and femininity. The article continued to argue that Stevenson lacked any capability to address any issues of corruption in the federal government.<sup>94</sup> Not only is Stevenson effeminate due to his “fruitiness,” but his own actions as a politician made him too weak to address pressing issues. These articles utilized multiple angles to portray Stevenson as a wimp. Not only does his voice contrast the deep tone expected of men, but as a politician Stevenson also lacked the muscle to create change.

The interpretation of Stevenson as “fruity voiced” played a role in shaping Stevenson’s image among some queer communities in America. One queer essayist, Charles Boultenhouse,

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<sup>92</sup> “Stevenson at Denver,” *Daily News* (New York), September 6, 1952.

<sup>93</sup> “Old, Familiar Tune,” *The Oil City Derrick*, September 8, 1952.

<sup>94</sup> “Old, Familiar Tune.”

embraced Stevenson as the possible first gay president. In his essay “The Fifties,” Boultenhouse wrote of a dinner party he hosted where he and his guests celebrated what they believed would be the election of the first gay president.<sup>95</sup> The hope Boultenhouse and his friends felt towards the 1952 election illustrated the positive side to the changing dynamics of gender and sexuality occurring in the midst of the Lavender Scare, writing, “Adlai was our hero. Hadn’t the New York *Daily News* called him fruity?”<sup>96</sup> The essay illustrated the impact of the feminization of Stevenson. While the *Daily News* worked to insult Stevenson, Boultenhouse turned this attack around by embracing the feminization of Stevenson as evidence of his belonging in queer America. This essay also highlighted the impact of the feminization of Stevenson. While newspapers did not explicitly call Stevenson gay, Boultenhouse’s celebration proved the newspapers did create an association between Stevenson and queerness.

### **Indecisiveness**

Outside pressures put Stevenson on the path to the Democratic nomination, rather than Stevenson willingly pursuing the nomination himself. Stevenson began to obtain national attention after a private meeting with President Truman alongside a *Time Magazine* feature on Stevenson that spoke positively about his record as Illinois governor and speculated his chances for running for President.<sup>97</sup> At the same time, Stevenson expressed his disinterest in the presidency and his preference to remain the governor of Illinois in his private correspondences.<sup>98</sup> Stevenson’s rejection of the presidential nomination was not perceived as an act of free will, rather this aversion was seen as a product of a lack of masculinity. According to 1950s

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<sup>95</sup> Charles Boultenhouse, “The Fifties,” In *The Christopher Street Reader*, edited by Michael Denny et al, (New York: Putnam, 1983), 291.

<sup>96</sup> Boultenhouse, “The Fifties,” 291.

<sup>97</sup> Martin, *Adlai Stevenson of Illinois*, 521, 527.

<sup>98</sup> Martin, *Adlai Stevenson of Illinois*, 524.

sociologist Helen May Hacker, no man could express, "... any confessions of doubts, uncertainties, or insecurities... any sign of weakness might be taken for effeminacy."<sup>99</sup>

Hegemonic masculinity expected Stevenson to hide his hesitation towards a major responsibility thrust onto him. Consequently, Stevenson's deviation from the expected behavior of a man contributed to his feminization.

*Daily News* editorials scrutinized Stevenson's indecisiveness as evidence for his incompetence for the presidency. One editorial finished their criticism of Stevenson's inadequacy to combat communism with a series of eleven quotes where Stevenson publicly addressed his hesitancy towards the Democratic nomination spanning from March to July.<sup>100</sup> This editorial served as a double feminization as Stevenson failed to fit both the expectations of the ambitious man and the anti-communist. Other editorials added quick jabs at Stevenson's indecisiveness, one writing, "We don't see how Adlai could do the job, even if he wanted to. We're still waiting to be convinced that he wants to."<sup>101</sup> These comments argued Stevenson's indecisiveness made him a poor presidential candidate. With the implied masculinity tied to the presidency, if Stevenson shied from the role he was clearly not "manly" enough to deserve it.

A *Los Angeles Mirror* news story went deeper into the "problematic" elements of Stevenson's indecisiveness by also revealing how his lack of masculinity translated into a lack of respect. The front-page article mainly centered the conversation around Stevenson's disinclination towards the presidency as a rejection of President Truman's request. Journalist Jack Clark judged Stevenson for not immediately jumping to Truman's calls to run for president, writing, "To most politicians that would not be a request; it would be more in the nature of a

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<sup>99</sup> Mayer Hacker, "The New Burdens of Masculinity," 228.

<sup>100</sup> "Stevenson to the Legion," *Daily News*, August 28, 1952.

<sup>101</sup> "Stevenson at Denver."

royal command and also the ultimate political accolade.”<sup>102</sup> In this analysis, Stevenson not only rejected the principle of masculinity based on his indecisiveness, but also due to his lack of obedience to his superiors. Clark further emphasized this element of disobedience arguing, “to Adlai Stevenson it was just a request. And requests can be refused. Gov. Stevenson refused this one.”<sup>103</sup> The repetition of “request” and “refused” showed how Stevenson subverted the behavior expected of him. The passage implied that President Truman’s recruitment was anything but a request and through the repetition ostracized Stevenson for his reaction to his possible nomination.

Outside of newspapers, political magazines also weaponized Stevenson’s indecisiveness in their cases for why he was unfit for the candidacy. The *American Mercury* article “The Case Against Adlai Stevenson” by James Burnham portrayed Stevenson’s nomination as a ploy established by the Democratic bosses but dedicated a section of the article’s grievances against Stevenson to his indecisiveness. According to Burnham, Stevenson’s hesitancy was “of public concern” and “excruciating.”<sup>104</sup> Burnham’s exaggerated language to comment on a personality trait stressed how much Americans valued strong-mindedness. The critiques of Stevenson’s indecisiveness implied the importance of masculinity as a qualification for the presidency.

### **Stevenson and the Nuclear Family**

Stevenson’s divorce also played a major role in shaping his image in the media. Cold war anxieties transformed the nuclear family and suburban home as a bastion for safety against the threats of communism and nuclear war.<sup>105</sup> Rather than exemplifying the progress of American

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<sup>102</sup> Jack Clark, “Just Who is Adlai Stevenson?” *Los Angeles Mirror*, March 28, 1952.

<sup>103</sup> “Just Who is Adlai Stevenson?”

<sup>104</sup> James Burnham, “The Case against Adlai Stevenson,” *The American Mercury*, 1952, 8.

<sup>105</sup> Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 16.

society, Stevenson's divorce isolated himself from this expectation and transformed him into something unfamiliar. The married man stood for a defense against the threat of communism through his embodiment of the masculine ideal capable of protecting his country through maintaining the American nuclear family.<sup>106</sup> The generalized suspicion against divorce set up Stevenson for extra scrutiny as he failed to uphold one of the basic requirements expected of an adult man.

Stevenson's failure to remain married to his wife raised the suspicion of many reporters. Helen Scott Reed, the clerk for Nevada's Clark County where the Stevenson divorce was finalized, reported an influx of calls and letters asking for more details on the divorce amid the upcoming election.<sup>107</sup> The sudden interest in the private life of Stevenson demonstrated how integral the role of marriage played in American politics. This interest was amplified as Stevenson's ex-wife, Ellen Borden Stevenson, also allegedly claimed that Stevenson was homosexual.<sup>108</sup> These accusations only increased the interest in finding out the "truth" of the divorce. *Chicago Tribune* journalist Will Leonard pointed out the ulterior motives for investigating Stevenson's divorce, noting, "Political opponents have thought they might find something of more than passing interest in the evidence..."<sup>109</sup> The belief that defamatory information could be found in the divorce details implied one way in which national politics rooted out deviant sexuality practices. According to these investigators, the Stevenson divorce could not have happened simply because the couple were incompatible, there had to exist a more incriminating reason, like homosexuality.

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<sup>106</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 97.

<sup>107</sup> Will Leonard, "Tower Ticker: Las Vegas Letter," *Chicago Tribune*, October 6, 1952.

<sup>108</sup> Johnson, *The Lavender Scare* 121.

<sup>109</sup> Leonard, "Tower Ticker: Las Vegas Letter."

The emphasis on Stevenson's divorce as a representation of changing moral standards highlighted how media perceived Stevenson as a threat for his lack of conformity. A *Columbia Daily Tribune* editorial argued, "the human drama of the Stevenson family may be a significant commentary on the times and the tremendous demands which high public office places upon an individual."<sup>110</sup> While the editorial attempted to blame the divorce on the stress of government positions, the deterioration of the nuclear family at powerful levels such as the presidency endangered hegemonic gender norms for the rest of American society. In the *Los Angeles Mirror*, reporter Clark identified Stevenson as "the only man in the history of the world who was divorced for having been elected Governor of a State."<sup>111</sup> The obsession surrounding Stevenson's marital status mattered because politicians also established a model for the rest of the nation. A Stevenson victory would have subverted the expectations of masculinity by providing a new framework for what a successful man could embody.

Many of the media attacks faced by Stevenson worked to undermine his masculinity through comments on his voice, indecisiveness, and marital status. These features all highlighted how Stevenson failed to uphold masculinity and the emphasis on these details proved the role masculinity played in making a presidential candidate "qualified" for the job. The concern around masculinity worked alongside the rumor of Stevenson's homosexuality due to the ways in which heterosexuality was part of the definition of masculinity. Societal norms at the time barred media outlets from explicitly mentioning the Stevenson rumor explicitly, so scrutiny towards Stevenson's masculinity functioned as a method to covertly influence readers into accepting the rumor.

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<sup>110</sup> "She Spurned Role as Governor's Wife," *Columbia Daily Tribune*, March 28, 1952.

<sup>111</sup> "Just Who is Adlai Stevenson?"

### Chapter 3: The Lavender Scare and Stevenson Rumor as a Political Tool

‘If you want to be against McCarthy, boys, you’ve got to be a Communist or a cocksucker’ – Joseph McCarthy.<sup>112</sup>

The Lavender Scare not only represented emerging anxieties towards an increasingly visible queer population, but the scare also functioned as a political tool. The scare occurred during an over decade long domination by the Democratic Party in the White House and targeted the expansion of the government under the New Deal.<sup>113</sup> These elements resulted in the scare disproportionately affecting the Democratic party. The political language at the time evolved to acknowledge this reality with conservatives developing the term “pink” as a label for liberals with communist sympathies.<sup>114</sup> This term also emasculated its victims with pink having an association with femininity. Conservatives also took this term further with warnings of an alliance made up of pinks, communists, and lavenders, a color associated with homosexuals.<sup>115</sup> Claims of this secret alliance only made the ulterior motive of regulating gender and sexuality more explicit.

Alongside the growing association between liberalism, communism, and queerness, the Truman presidency had numerous scandals which only increased public distrust towards the Democratic party. The most relevant scandal to this growing association was the Lavender Scare, which some conservative politicians attempted to weaponize as proof of the Truman administration’s dishonesty. During a Senate investigation of communists in the federal government, which also included a brief discussion of homosexuals resigning from their

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<sup>112</sup> Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, 47.

<sup>113</sup> Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, 39.

<sup>114</sup> Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, 37.

<sup>115</sup> Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, 37.

positions in the State Department, some Republican Senators such as William E. Jenner of Indiana accused the Democratic party of “whitewashing,” or covering up the scandal.<sup>116</sup> Other scandals that occurred included the “Five Percenters” scandal where Truman appointees obtained government contracts for friends, and another scandal where a close confidant of Truman, General Harry H. Vaughan, was arrested for bribery.<sup>117</sup> These scandals, despite not directly involving Truman, created the assumption that the Truman administration, and by association the Democratic Party, were corrupt. In February 1952, a poll found that 52% of participants believed there was a lot of corruption occurring in the federal government.<sup>118</sup> While these other scandals do not have a relation to homosexuality, the belief in queerness as a manifestation of immorality alongside the Truman administration’s abuses of power allowed for the association between two “immoral acts.” These damages to the image of the Democratic party were also reflected in the spread of the Stevenson rumor. Allegations of Stevenson’s homosexuality not only reflected the regulation of hegemonic masculinity but also served as an outlet to express grievances towards the Democratic party.

### **“Geniuses are Potential Queers”**

Magazine articles, newspaper editorials and letters to the editor, and political cartoons reflected conservatives’ distrust of intellectuals, liberals, and homosexuals. “The Triumph of the Egghead” by Louis Bromfield strongly reflected this resentment many Americans felt towards the Democratic party and how this resentment manifested into critiques on gender expression and sexuality. The magazine article, published a month after Stevenson’s defeat in the election, wrote of the “decline” of liberals. In Bromfield’s words, the New Deal transformed liberals into

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<sup>116</sup> William S. White, “M’Carthy Asserts Budenz Named Red in Acheson Office,” *New York Times*, Apr 26, 1950.

<sup>117</sup> Greene, *I like Ike*, 7.

<sup>118</sup> Greene, *I like Ike*, 7.



“watered-down Marxists” obsessed with materialism.<sup>119</sup> The mention of materialism and Bromfield’s dissatisfaction with the growth of the welfare state implicitly related to fears of declining masculinity as the consequences of the New Deal—bureaucratization and the growth of consumerism that this state nourished along with social reform were forces believed to weaken masculinity.<sup>120</sup>

Bromfield also hinted at the association of his grievances with the decline of masculinity in his discussion of the term “egghead.” He defined eggheads as “over-emotional and feminine in reaction to any problem” and unaware of the “experience of more sound and able men.”<sup>121</sup> Bromfield’s dialogue situated eggheads as closer to femininity with their emotions and disconnected from “sound and able men,” which implied eggheads existed outside the definition of the traditional man. Bromfield also insinuated Stevenson fit the definition of an egghead, ending his article writing that the recent election demonstrated the “extreme remoteness of the ‘egghead’ from the thought and feeling of the whole of the people.”<sup>122</sup> As Stevenson could not conform to the behaviors expected of real men, this made him incapable of truly connecting with voters.

While Bromfield did not directly call Stevenson a homosexual, historian Aaron Lecklider suggested uses of the term “egghead” had the intention of implying queerness. Lecklider argued the discussions of the egghead during 1950s America wanted to isolate the egghead from the American values, making the egghead homosexual and communist.<sup>123</sup> Thus, Bromfield’s final statement of Stevenson’s “remoteness” from the American public also referred to an isolation

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<sup>119</sup> Louis Bromfield, “The Triumph of the Egghead,” *The Freeman*, December 1, 1952, 155.

<sup>120</sup> Cuordileone, “Politics in an Age of Anxiety.” 525.

<sup>121</sup> Bromfield, “The Triumph of the Egghead,” 158.

<sup>122</sup> Bromfield, “The Triumph of the Egghead,” 158.

<sup>123</sup> Aaron Lecklider, *Inventing the Egghead: The Battle over Brainpower in American Culture*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 190.

stemming from Stevenson's "queerness." During the 1952 election, Stevenson was commonly referred to as an "egghead" due to his Ivy-league education and tendency to use flowery language. Bromfield's work to associate the egghead with feminine traits and societal isolation did set the stage for the audience to see egghead as synonymous with homosexuality.

"Geniuses are Potential Queers" by Fred Bennett is another example of how journalists made the explicit association between intellectuals and queerness. Bennett traced a pattern between many well-known and well-educated historical figures, such as Oscar Wilde, that were queer or rumored to be gay. Bennett concluded that homosexuality and intelligence were linked, hypothesizing, "Is it because the genius is not one of us, not one of the crowd?"<sup>124</sup> While Bromfield did not explicitly reference homosexuality in his discussion of the egghead, Bennett's work had similar themes of the isolation of the genius allowing for certain deviances like homosexuality.

The Lavender Scare was both a defense against the growing visibility of queer Americans as well as a political tactic to defame the Democratic party. According to conservatives, the "softness," or lack of masculinity, of liberals allowed for moral degradation and the Lavender Scare's exposure of security risks.<sup>125</sup> Many conservatives harbored resentment towards liberals who they perceived as "disconnected" from the real America due to their wealth and prestigious education.<sup>126</sup> The conservatives weaponized Stevenson's alleged lack of masculinity as a tool to attack the Democratic Party.

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<sup>124</sup> Fred Bennett, "Geniuses are Potential Queers," *Exposed*, 64.

<sup>125</sup> Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, 40.

<sup>126</sup> Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, 39.

One *Daily News* political cartoon highlighted how the dissatisfaction with the Democratic party combined with the questioning of Stevenson's masculinity. The cartoon attempts to portray Stevenson and the New Deal, referred to as the "fear deal," as David and Goliath (see fig.1).

Unlike David who fearlessly defeats Goliath, Stevenson stood unarmed and warned he might possibly call the Goliath "a bad name or two."<sup>127</sup> The cartoon undermined Stevenson's strength.



Figure 1. *Daily News* Stevenson Cartoon. Source: Newspapers.com

Unlike David who fought against the Goliath, Stevenson only had his words for a weapon which he hesitated to use. The cartoon implied that intellectuals lost their physical strength because they dedicated their lives to education and had no defense aside from their words. The dangerous Goliath was portrayed as much larger and stronger than Stevenson, which also implied the artist's own commentary on the political strength of the Democrats. The liberals who shaped the New Deal lack any masculinity to tackle the issues caused by their creation.

A reader comment in the *Daily News* also encapsulated how dissatisfaction with the Democratic party manifested in anti-intellectualism towards Stevenson and in homophobia. In response to the results of the election, C.H. Bartholomae wrote to the "eggheads who voted the

<sup>127</sup> "The Giant is a Real Goliath, but Adlai Doesn't Look Like a David to Us," *Daily News*, September 6, 1952.

other way” that they should avoid their criticism of Eisenhower as president due to the corruption of their party.<sup>128</sup> Bartholomae continued by blaming the party of these eggheads for the “all-time low in immorality amongst government employees.”<sup>129</sup> This complaint referenced the Lavender Scare, and implied that Stevenson and his supporters purposefully worked against “American morals,” or heterosexuality. These comments illustrated the connections made between the growing prominence of homosexuality with the Democratic party and specifically Stevenson.

Another newspaper article in the *Chicago Daily News* also reflected these frustrations. The comment addressed directly to Stevenson wrote, “Noting your pinkish advisers, we remind you that Illinois law requires an arm signal if you intend to turn left.”<sup>130</sup> “Pinkish” implied a lack of masculinity as the color had a connotation of femininity and communicated the belief that a liberal incapable of standing up to communism was inherently feminine. The conclusion of the article, which accused Stevenson of also having communist sympathies, tied Stevenson into this feminizing term. The concerns around a communist infiltration instigated by liberals in America communicated anxieties about the “softness” of the Democratic party. According to the author, the influence of these feminized “pink advisers” had transformed Stevenson into a communist as he lacked the strength to stand up against the communist threat.

Not only did Stevenson lack the strength to stop his “pink advisors,” he also could not stand up to the Truman administration’s corruption. A *Daily News* article imagined a conversation between Truman, the current vice president Alben Barkley, Stevenson, and Democratic vice-presidential nominee John Sparkman. In this conversation, Barkley repeatedly

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<sup>128</sup> C.H. Bartholomae, “Voice of the People: Voters Still Vocal,” *Daily News*, November 11, 1952.

<sup>129</sup> Bartholomae, “Voice of the People.”

<sup>130</sup> “Special Delivery,” *Chicago Daily News*, August 5, 1952.

called Stevenson “Adelaide” rather than his real name, Adlai.<sup>131</sup> The replacement of Stevenson’s name with a more feminine version raised suspicion at a time of growing anxiety towards deviating gender expression. This feminization came in combination with the characters of Sparkman and Barkley judging Stevenson’s flowery language. The conversation concluded with an assurance that Stevenson would promise to continue Truman’s corruption as president.<sup>132</sup> The use of feminization alongside other criticism of Stevenson and of the Democratic Party meshed the real grievances Americans had with the Democratic party with the questions around Stevenson’s masculinity.

### **Hoover versus Stevenson**

The FBI had investigated homosexuality even before the beginning of the Lavender Scare. The origins of the FBI’s investigations into homosexuals occurred in conjunction with regular investigations into sex offender crimes due to the association of homosexuality with “sexual perversion.” In 1937, the FBI began an investigation on the death and kidnapping of 10-year-old Charles Mattson; this case resulted in the creation of a research file on “sex offenders” which included information on homosexuals.<sup>133</sup> Later during World War II, as fears around homosexuals as a “security risk” increased, the FBI then created a “sex perverts in government” file in 1942.<sup>134</sup> The Lavender Scare only further publicized this already existing suspicion of homosexuality as a political threat that the FBI worked against decades before the scare began. During the election, the FBI began investigating Stevenson’s possible homosexuality. These investigations reflected how the presentation of gender and sexuality of politicians played a role

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<sup>131</sup> “Over the Hash with Harry,” *Daily News* (New York), August 11, 1952.

<sup>132</sup> “Over the Hash with Harry.”

<sup>133</sup> Douglas M. Charles, “Communist and Homosexual: The FBI, Harry Hay, and the Secret Side of the Lavender Scare, 1943-1961,” *American Communist History* 11, no. 1 (2012): 102-3.

<sup>134</sup> Charles, “Communist and Homosexual,” 103.

in determining their political fitness and how outside sources perceived femininity as a danger to the presidency.

J. Edgar Hoover, the head of the FBI, repeatedly expanded the power of the organization to combat concerns around communism. In 1939 in response to the Nazi-Soviet pact during World War II, Hoover formed the “Custodial Detention Index” to identify possible threats to the American government, including communists, for possible detention if the country went to war.<sup>135</sup> Hoover’s involvement in combating communism continued into the 1950s and only grew more invasive. In 1951, the “Responsibilities Program” recorded “derogatory personal or political information concerning all ‘Communist or subversive elements.’<sup>136</sup>” The vague criteria allowed the FBI to investigate a broad group of individuals as the search for “derogatory” information placed sexuality within this jurisdiction. Hoover also weaponized the information the FBI collected for political purposes as he would covertly aid Senator McCarthy and other conservative allies in discovering evidence of possible communist sympathizers.<sup>137</sup> The expansion of the FBI during the Cold War under the pretext of defending against communism and “sexual perversion” was not an unbiased pursuit. Hoover’s anti-communism had a political motive as demonstrated with his selective assistance of certain conservative politicians.

Hoover’s political bias shone through his investigation of the Stevenson rumor. These investigations began in April of 1952 when an agent reported that Bradley University basketball players claimed that Stevenson was one of the “best known homosexuals” in Illinois and was known as “Adeline.”<sup>138</sup> This memo began the investigations into Stevenson’s sexuality and

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<sup>135</sup> Charles, “Communist and Homosexual,” 109.

<sup>136</sup> Kenneth O’Reilly, “Adlai E. Stevenson, McCarthyism, and the FBI,” *Illinois Historical Journal* 81, no. 1 (1988): 45.

<sup>137</sup> Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, 73.

<sup>138</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Informal Memo,” by Edward Scheidt, April 17, 1952, In *From the Secret Files of J. Edgar Hoover*, edited by Athan Theoharis, (Chicago: I.R. Dee, 1991), 284.

implied the origins of the rumors of Stevenson's sexuality likely originated from the general public. In response to this memo, Hoover added Stevenson as an entry to his "Sex Deviate" file, a database of index cards to record alleged homosexuals dating back to 1937.<sup>139</sup> These files also revealed that the investigations into Stevenson's sexuality began only after he became a possible contender for the Democratic nominee. The FBI's sudden interest in Steven's sexuality demonstrates Hoover's concern that presidential nominees would adhere to societal norms.

In addition to documenting the suspicion surrounding Stevenson's sexuality, the FBI also monitored the spread of the rumor. In a memo to Hoover, FBI Assistant Director D. Milton Ladd reported a rumor of "some high official" claiming that the FBI had a file on Stevenson's homosexual behavior and that Ladd made arrangements to tell the official to "'put up' or 'shut up.'"<sup>140</sup> While the FBI did keep tabs on the sexuality of Stevenson, they wanted to keep their surveillance hidden. Another important file by FBI Assistant Director Louis Nichols reported a meeting between Milt Hill, writer of the "official Republican biography of Governor Stevenson," and Orval Yarger, a former FBI Special Agent. Yarger, who asked for Hill to omit his association to the FBI in the biography, allegedly claimed to have learned Stevenson was arrested in New York on a "morals charge," a charge for homosexual behavior, and spoke of his suspicion towards Stevenson's divorce due to Borden Stevenson's refusal to state the reason for their separation.<sup>141</sup>

Yarger's behavior exemplified how past employees weaponized the FBI's work in documenting the sexualities of political figures. First, Yarger's request for Hill to avoid

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<sup>139</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Sex Deviate Index Card File," by J. Edgar Hoover, April 17, 1952, In *From the Secret Files of J. Edgar Hoover*, edited by Athan Theoharis, (Chicago: I.R. Dee, 1991), 284.

<sup>140</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Memo" by D. Milton Ladd, August 15, 1952, In *From the Secret Files of J. Edgar Hoover*, edited by Athan Theoharis, (Chicago: I.R. Dee, 1991), 286.

<sup>141</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Informal Memo," 287-288.

mentioning his association to the FBI implied an understanding of the FBI's goal to avoid revealing their investigations into Stevenson. Additionally, Yarger seeking out the writer of a Republican supported biography of Stevenson highlighted a clear political bias within employees of the FBI. Secondary sources mention Hoover assisted McCarthy; however, these files demonstrated that other agents of the FBI also contributed to the bias against Stevenson and the Democratic party. The file on Yarger also implied a possible interest by the FBI to influence the 1952 election. Ladd's memo wanted to stop the official who explicitly associated the FBI with the spread of the rumor; however, Nichols does not mention silencing Yarger who asked for the FBI's association to be omitted. Nichols's inaction implied the FBI had no interest in stopping the rumors about Stevenson's sexuality as long as the Bureau's involvement remained unknown. While Yarger was no longer associated with the FBI, his meeting exemplified how a government employee saw sexuality as a weapon.

While the Stevenson rumor reflected the paranoia in American society surrounding gender and sexuality, conservatives also weaponized the rumor to express their grievances towards the New Deal and Democrats. The association of Stevenson as an "egghead" and the implied feminization attached to the term illustrated another way in which allegations towards Stevenson's sexuality occurred. Calling Stevenson an egghead fit into a larger discourse of conservatives who believed the program, supported by many wealthy and well-educated Democrats, had weakened American society and posed a threat to masculinity. The FBI also involved itself in the Stevenson rumor with existing files revealing agents kept track and documented the spread of the rumor. The prevalence of anti-intellectualism attacks alongside the FBI files on Stevenson both communicate that there were political motivations behind the



Stevenson rumor and the importance of compliance with societal expectations of sexuality and gender in qualifying an individual for the presidency.

## Chapter 4: The 1952 Election and Cold War Femininity

For at 43, the divorced wife of Adlai Stevenson, 1952's Democratic candidate for President of the United States, still is youthfully pretty as a post-debutante — and hardly more mature... Someone hands her a cocktail. With the second and third she becomes highly animated. Then the careful composure falls away; sourness at her surroundings sets in. Like a sudden aging, small acid lines of bitterness and deep resentment spoil the piquant face; the unbearable memory returns to haunt her. And the gentle air of martyr is replaced by quiet fury. Her chant begins: "I'm just the forgotten woman."<sup>142</sup>

Ellen Borden Stevenson, the ex-wife of Stevenson, came from a wealthy Chicago family.

Her father, John Borden, invested in the stock market and owned several companies. Her mother, Ellen Waller, came from a property-owning family in North Chicago. Crucial to her upbringing was her parents' marriage which failed to uphold the expectations of a nuclear family. Waller had an affair during her marriage with Borden Stevenson's father which ended in divorce and remarriage for both of Borden Stevenson's parents. In the words of Stevenson biographer John Barker, Waller, "provided her daughter with the image of an independent woman."<sup>143</sup> Through Borden Stevenson's wealthy background, her mother's unconventional actions, and her career as a poet, Borden Stevenson defied the expected role of a woman. Her ex-husband's presidential candidacy highlighted how far she deviated from the domestic image expected of a president's partner.

Ellen Borden Stevenson, like her ex-husband, faced scrutiny during the 1952 election due to her failure to adhere to traditional gender roles. She also became a target for blame for the spread of rumors of Stevenson's alleged homosexuality. In comparison, Eisenhower's wife, Mamie Eisenhower, portrayed the image of the supportive housewife, satisfying those who insisted on traditional gender norms and saving herself from attacks on her femininity.

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<sup>142</sup> Joseph M. Porter, "How that Stevenson Rumor Started," *Confidential*, August 1953, 42.

<sup>143</sup> Barker, *The Stevensons*, 264.

## Election Coverage: Borden Stevenson vs. Eisenhower

Newspapers interpreted Borden Stevenson's initiation of her divorce with the Democratic nominee as highly unprecedented. Many editorials and news articles were dedicated to discussing this "peculiarity." The *Columbia Daily Tribune*, for example, in an article titled "She Spurned Role as Governor's Wife," introduced readers first to Borden Stevenson's "failure" as a woman before introducing her name. The lack of an introduction to the Missouri paper's article also implied that audiences could identify Borden Stevenson through just her actions alone. The article, which appeared on the "Society" page, which generally covered celebrity gossip, began with the question: "how many women deliberately would turn their backs on becoming a possible First Lady and mistress of the White House, let alone being the wife of the chief executive of a great state?"<sup>144</sup> The article's understanding of femininity centered solely around domesticity, making Borden Stevenson's rejection of positions that symbolized domesticity "absurd." The article also depicted the divorce as Borden Stevenson's failure to embody the image of a supportive wife at the time of Stevenson's gubernatorial victory. The article continued: "At a time when most wives would have been exultant, the bottom seemed to fall out of Ellen Borden Stevenson's world."<sup>145</sup> The contrast between "most wives" and Borden Stevenson created a barrier between what she evoked versus what was stereotypically expected of the 1950s housewife.

The *Chicago Tribune* followed the *Columbia Daily Tribune* in creating an image of Borden Stevenson as disloyal to her ex-husband. In June, the newspaper published the article "Ex-wife Won't Back Stevenson for President," presenting readers first with Borden Stevenson's

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<sup>144</sup> "She Spurned Role as Governor's Wife."

<sup>145</sup> "She Spurned Role as Governor's Wife."

marital status and her refusal to publicly support Stevenson. The article continued with coverage of a statement made by Borden Stevenson declaring that she planned to vote for the Republican presidential candidate due to the Democratic party's lengthy control of the White House.<sup>146</sup> One month later, the *Chicago Tribune* once again centered Borden Stevenson's marital status in her identity with the title "Divorced Wife Sends Congratulations to Nominee Stevenson." The way the *Chicago Tribune* introduced Borden Stevenson suggested that even in divorce women still could not separate themselves from marriage. While this article portrayed a moment of support from Borden Stevenson, the article repeated its earlier claim that she planned to vote for the Republican candidate.<sup>147</sup>

The persistent image of Borden Stevenson as an unhelpful ex-wife showed the *Chicago Tribune's* disdain for her unwillingness to follow the expected destiny of a woman. This portrayal of Borden Stevenson served to uphold the stereotypical images placed onto the White House. A Stevenson victory would elect the first divorced president at a time where American culture celebrated the nuclear family as the key defense against communism. Newspapers responded by creating a harmful presentation of Borden Stevenson for her violation of normative gender roles.

Unlike Borden Stevenson, Mamie Eisenhower's marriage to the Republican nominee resulted in newspaper coverage that amplified her role as a mother and wife. The *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph* teased an upcoming *American Weekly* feature of Mamie Eisenhower and her favorite photos from their family album.<sup>148</sup> Contrasted with Borden Stevenson, whom newspapers reduced to just an ex-wife, Mrs. Eisenhower broadcasted her domestic role to the public during

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<sup>146</sup> "Ex-Wife Won't Back Stevenson for President," *Chicago Tribune*, June 24, 1952.

<sup>147</sup> "Divorced Wife Sends Congratulations to Nominee Stevenson," *Chicago Tribune*, July 26, 1952.

<sup>148</sup> "Life with Ike! A peek into the Eisenhower Family Albums," *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph*, January 6, 1952.

her husband's pursuit of the presidential nomination. The advertisement emphasized this goal with a quote by Mrs. Eisenhower saying, "'We are a corny family, if being corny means liking the simple things.'" <sup>149</sup> This quote framed the Eisenhowers as the average sentimental American family and, unlike the Stevensons, one that honored the demands of the nuclear family. While Borden Stevenson faced judgement as an anomaly, Mamie Eisenhower presented herself as the average mother.

In the lead up to the Republican National Convention, one *Chicago Tribune* news story acknowledged the changing roles of women by describing the increasing number of women participating as delegates for the convention versus the wives of the possible Republican nominee. The writer Ruth Moss contrasted the "political deliberations" of the female delegates while Mamie Eisenhower and Martha Taft, the wife of Ohio Senator Robert Taft, had a "family day while they waited for these women [delegates] to help decide their respective husbands' political destiny." <sup>150</sup> While Moss acknowledged that women could participate in the public sphere, they excluded Taft and Eisenhower from this expectation due to their possible futures as the First Lady. This article exemplified how the tensions between masculine and feminine roles began to develop. While the female delegates could both exist in the professional and domestic spheres, Mrs. Eisenhower and Mrs. Taft had to dedicate themselves entirely to the role of a housewife to strengthen their husbands' campaign. Their behavior exemplified how the presidency also functioned to reinforce traditional gender roles. This expectation also indirectly criticized Borden Stevenson. Unlike Mrs. Eisenhower or Taft, Borden Stevenson left her husband to rather than remaining entirely in the domestic sphere.

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<sup>149</sup> "Life with Ike! A peek into the Eisenhower Family Albums."

<sup>150</sup> Ruth Moss, "2 Women Wait as 381 Others Play Politics: Wives of Taft and Ike Remain in Suites," *Chicago Tribune*, July 11, 1952.

The October 31<sup>st</sup> issue of the *Chicago Tribune* provided an interesting case study in the difference in treatment of Borden Stevenson versus Mrs. Eisenhower as their contrasting portrayals come within a few pages of each other. The front page featured an article covering a new statement made by Borden Stevenson in response to letters she had received from “worried Americans” (see fig. 2). In her response, Borden Stevenson spoke vaguely about Stevenson, writing, “The record is confused enough. It would be sinful for me to add to that confusion.”<sup>151</sup> The publication of this statement aligned with the previously built image of Borden Stevenson as unsupportive of Stevenson and with the article title naming Borden Stevenson again as “Former Wife of Stevenson.” This letter also played a crucial role in the accusations of Stevenson’s homosexuality as Borden

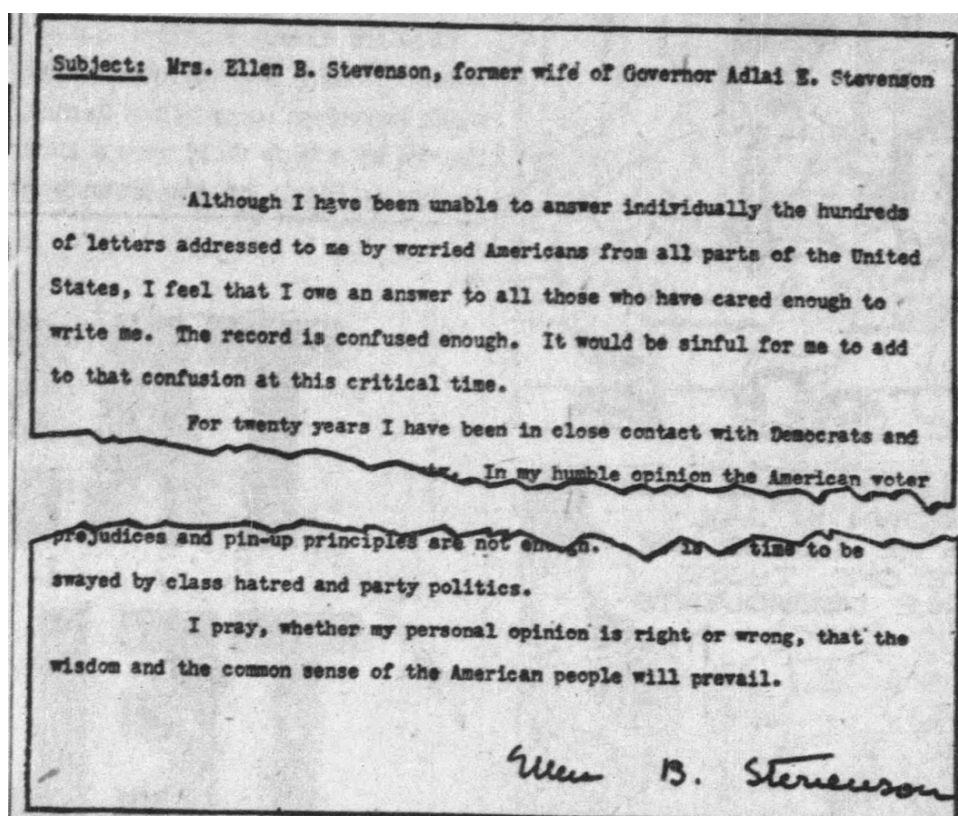


Figure 2. Excerpt of Borden Stevenson's comment on the election published in the *Chicago Tribune*. Source: Newspapers.com

<sup>151</sup> “Former Wife of Stevenson Urges Change,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 31, 1952.

Stevenson's vague discussion of the "confusion" around Stevenson was interpreted as a response to the rumor.<sup>152</sup>

On the next page of the *Chicago Tribune*, journalist William Fulton covered Mamie Eisenhower's recent contributions to her husband's campaign. The news story described a recent campaign rally by Eisenhower and included information about Mamie Eisenhower's involvement. The subsection "Mamie Moves In" included a photo of Mrs. Eisenhower speaking into a microphone to the audience where she "was introduced before her husband."<sup>153</sup> The article highlighted the degree of Mrs. Eisenhower's support for her husband's campaign through her entrance into the public sphere on his behalf. Within one page of the *Chicago Tribune*, Borden Stevenson portrayed a split family spreading rumors about her ex-husband's sexuality, while Mamie Eisenhower presented herself as an encouraging wife and part of a unified family. This issue of the *Chicago Tribune* worked as an important example of the importance of femininity in also securing the image of a presidential candidate, regardless of the candidate's marital status.

### **The 1952 Election's Legacy for Borden Stevenson**

The scrutiny Borden Stevenson faced due to her lack of compliance with traditional expressions of femininity transcended the 1952 election. Future coverage of the rumors of Stevenson's sexuality and even biographies containing interviews by those close to the Stevenson family labeled Borden Stevenson as the villain in Stevenson's story due to her independent lifestyle.

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<sup>152</sup> Porter, "How that Stevenson Rumor Started," 42.

<sup>153</sup> William Fulton, "Ike Rakes Foes' Shocking and 'Dirty' Campaign: Mamie Moves In," *Chicago Tribune*, October 31, 1952.

After the end of the 1952 election, gossip magazines began to tell the story of the Stevenson rumor. As previously discussed, gossip magazines had greater freedom to discuss topics that involved homosexuality, but articles still avoided explicitly naming the rumor. *Confidential*, in their editor's note for "How that Stevenson's Rumor Started," referred to the accusations of homosexuality as, "a foul rumor, uglier than any which has ever marked a national election, became circulated about one of the presidential candidates."<sup>154</sup> The vague language also provided an idea of how widespread the rumor grew for the magazine to only contain fuzzy references.

After the editor's note, *Confidential* published a four-page argument written by Joseph M. Porter which accused Borden Stevenson of sabotaging her ex-husband's presidential campaign by spreading rumors of his alleged homosexuality. The exposé began with painting a scene of Borden Stevenson at a dinner party growing bitter over a "hasty, spiteful and ill-advised decision— one that has ruined her life."<sup>155</sup> The article portrayed Borden Stevenson as malicious and reduced the rumor to a ploy by a resentful ex-wife rather than a plot aided by large newspapers like the New York *Daily News*. Porter continued the victimization of Stevenson by framing the rumor's source as "not a woman scorned, but a ruthlessly ambitious woman who divorced her husband after deciding he had made a fatal political decision."<sup>156</sup> This quote identified Borden Stevenson as an active agent wishing to benefit from Stevenson's political life rather than taking the role represented by Mamie Eisenhower as the supportive bystander.

The magazine article further projected the image of Borden Stevenson as a violator of feminine roles by portraying her as scheming behind the scenes of her ex-husband's political

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<sup>154</sup> Porter, "How that Stevenson Rumor Started," 41.

<sup>155</sup> Porter, "How that Stevenson Rumor Started," 42.

<sup>156</sup> Porter, "How that Stevenson Rumor Started," 42.



career. According to Porter, Borden Stevenson filed for divorce due to her dissatisfaction with his position as Illinois Governor and that she desired for Stevenson to occupy a more prestigious position in Washington D.C., which would have given her access to the city's social scene.<sup>157</sup> This version of the Stevenson divorce, told by a third party, portrayed Borden Stevenson as attempting to control her husband's political career to provide herself the glamorous life she desired. Porter further homed in on implying a power imbalance in the marriage, noting in the divorce settlement Borden Stevenson "neither asked for nor received a financial settlement from Stevenson (her wealth always exceeded his)."<sup>158</sup> This claim subverted the traditional expectations of the breadwinner husband and the financially reliant wife with Borden Stevenson not needing any funds from her now ex-husband to survive with three children. The article summarized the Stevenson rumor as Borden Stevenson's dissatisfaction with the loss of an opportunity to uphold the highest political position available to a woman and the loss of attention she could have received as the wife of a presidential nominee.

After Stevenson's second loss in the 1956 presidential election, the gossip magazine *Uncensored* reported on the Stevenson rumor's spread in 1952. Like *Confidential*, *Uncensored* acknowledged Stevenson as the victim; however, author Mitchell Cavanaugh attempted to give Stevenson an air of disinterest. In the face of defaming rumors Stevenson had "matchless courage and sportsmanlike heart," and that "Stevenson was silent— because he knew the strange reason behind them."<sup>159</sup> The article implied that Stevenson knew Borden Stevenson's scornful attitude and that her attempt at sabotaging his political career was part of a larger trend.

Cavanaugh continued his portrayal of the Stevenson rumor as a game between Stevenson and

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<sup>157</sup> Porter, "How that Stevenson Rumor Started," 59.

<sup>158</sup> Porter, "How that Stevenson Rumor Started," 60.

<sup>159</sup> Cavanaugh, "Whispers Adlai Stevenson Couldn't Stop," 17.

Borden Stevenson, writing that Stevenson's ascension to the presidential nomination was proof Stevenson "unwittingly had outsmarted her."<sup>160</sup> Again, writers portrayed Borden Stevenson as exploiting Stevenson's political career to involve herself in the political sphere, a plot that failed as her divorce separated her from an opportunity to achieve access to the most prestigious position for women.

Cavanaugh followed a similar narrative to the *Confidential* article in pushing the image of Borden Stevenson as an unsupportive wife bitter that her divorce with Stevenson lost her the opportunity to ascend to the elite social circles of Washington. Cavanaugh emphasized Borden Stevenson's unsupportive attitude in his coverage of her statement declaring she would vote for the Republican nominee. He asked his reader, "Are you looking over the words of an ever-loving wife?"<sup>161</sup> Equating of Borden Stevenson's voting preferences to her worth as a wife implied that her lack of public support for Stevenson made her the antagonist. Cavanaugh also contrasted Borden Stevenson with the image of the submissive wife, writing that due to her "ruthless ambition" she "ostensibly tried to control her husband's thinking."<sup>162</sup> These comments took Borden Stevenson's malicious image further by framing the Stevenson rumor as a tool of control. Additionally, the specific terms that Cavanaugh used of "ambition" and "control" suggested that Borden Stevenson desired to obtain power over Stevenson— a direct rejection of the proper role of a woman.

Both Cavanaugh and Porter based their articles on a four-part interview Borden Stevenson did with *Chicago Daily News* reporter Jay McMullen. The interview meant to clear up misconceptions around the divorce and portrayed a completely view sentiment of Borden

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<sup>160</sup> Cavanaugh, "Whispers Adlai Stevenson Couldn't Stop," 18.

<sup>161</sup> Cavanaugh, "Whispers Adlai Stevenson Couldn't Stop," 18.

<sup>162</sup> Cavanaugh, "Whispers Adlai Stevenson Couldn't Stop," 61.

Stevenson's thoughts towards the divorce. McMullen summarized, "She is too absorbed in her own problems as mother of three sons, in her literary work and in her friendships to be concerned over what might have been."<sup>163</sup> Unlike gossip magazines which argued Borden Stevenson deeply regretted her divorce, McMullen portrayed her as unbothered. Porter also rumored Borden Stevenson told McMullen a "deeper, sinister, never-revealed reason for her divorce."<sup>164</sup> However, McMullen quoted Borden Stevenson saying she hoped the divorce does not influence anyone's vote.<sup>165</sup> Borden Stevenson's interview publicly cleared the possibility of foul play at the source of the divorce; however, gossip magazines created a complete opposite image. While the McMullen article appeared to aid Stevenson's campaign with Borden Stevenson asking voters to not let the divorce hinder their support for the Democratic candidate, Porter and Cavanaugh believed Borden Stevenson wished to see Stevenson fail.

The villainization of Borden Stevenson in gossip magazines reveals an extra layer of commentary in the crisis of masculinity of the 1950s when considering the intended audience of these magazines. Despite the association of women with tabloids, middle-aged working-class men were the intended audience for many gossip magazines.<sup>166</sup> To retain readership, writers prioritized sensationalism and popular interests over telling a factual story.<sup>167</sup> These magazines wanted to transform the Stevenson rumor into a narrative that satisfied the beliefs of men during the 1950s.

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<sup>163</sup> Jay McMullen, "Stevenson's Ex-Wife Building Full Life Around Her 3 Sons," *Chicago Daily News*, August 18, 1952.

<sup>164</sup> Porter, "How that Stevenson Rumor Started," 60.

<sup>165</sup> Jay McMullen, "Wife Held Off on Divorce Until Stevenson Took Office," *Chicago Daily News*, August 21, 1952.

<sup>166</sup> Epstein, "Anti-Communism, Homophobia, and the Construction of Masculinity in the Postwar U.S.," 23.

<sup>167</sup> Epstein, "Anti-Communism, Homophobia, and the Construction of Masculinity in the Postwar U.S.," 23.

During the 1950s, men's concerns around masculinity centered around women's increasing power in American society. *The New Burdens of Masculinity*, a 1957 journal article by sociologist Helen Mayer Hacker addressed the social impacts of industrialization on men's roles and their ability to fulfill traditional expectations. Hacker identified the shifting roles of women as a main factor in shaping uncertainty among men to satisfy masculinity.<sup>168</sup> The growing participation of women in the workforce threatened the traditional image of the male breadwinner. Worsening these feelings of invasion by women into "male spaces," women also began to take space away from men in research on the changing gender roles of the 1950s. Hacker noted the "voluminous concentration on the more spectacular developments and contradictions in feminine roles" had decreased interest in examining masculinity or to simplify masculinity as a "reaction and adjustment to the new status of women."<sup>169</sup> These developments threatened the dominance of men in the gender hierarchy. Men used to dominate the public world; however, the growth of women pursuing independent careers and the researchers who studied this growth created the illusion of men being "forgotten."

Gossip writers who needed to appeal to men saw Borden Stevenson's story as an opportunity to ease male anxieties. Due to the power and publicity associated with the presidency, both the President and the First Lady had to adhere to stereotypical expectations of gender to serve as an example for the rest of the population. Borden Stevenson's divorce did not save her from these expectations and her distance from domesticity only set herself up to become a scapegoat for demonstrating the dangers of the independent woman.

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<sup>168</sup> Hacker, "The New Burdens of Masculinity," 228.

<sup>169</sup> Hacker, "The New Burdens of Masculinity," 227.

The portrayal of Borden Stevenson in these gossip magazines reflected the resentment many men harbored towards women failed to adhere to traditional feminine roles. Media critiquing the modern woman portrayed them as invading masculine spaces and attempting to destroy men's individuality in the home and in public spaces.<sup>170</sup> Gossip magazines followed this trend by creating a connection between Borden Stevenson's choice to divorce and selfishness. In their portrayal of Borden Stevenson's reaction to Stevenson's nomination, she only felt scorn due to the lack of attention she received. Porter explained that when Stevenson was nominated, "Ellen sent him a polite little note of good wishes. And sat back and waited for someone to pay some attention to her."<sup>171</sup> Porter attempted to shape Borden Stevenson as a representation of modern women who pursued independence for the attention rather than the freedom.

The negative portrayal of Borden Stevenson had broader ramifications for the growing movement of independence women sought during this period. Men were becoming decentered in the lives of women which posed a threat to their control over them. Belittling Borden Stevenson by portraying her as a woman bitter over her ex-husband's success reflected anger over the growing normalization of divorce. Borden Stevenson became a representation for what independent women stood for: they were inherently bitter people wanting to tear down their successful husbands rather than women seeking lives outside being housewives. The trivialization of Borden Stevenson as an individual by Porter and Cauvanaugh "justified" why women must remain in the home. According to their interpretations, women who sought independence pursued it for vain reasons.

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<sup>170</sup> Hacker, "The New Burdens of Masculinity," 228.

<sup>171</sup> Porter, "How that Stevenson Rumor Started," 60.

Individuals close to the Stevenson family also focused on the couple's divorce in their discussions of Borden Stevenson. While the magazines argued Borden Stevenson hated that Stevenson's role as Illinois governor did not provide her access to a Washington D.C.'s high society, Frayn Utley, a friend of the Stevensons, interpreted her as envious of the attention Stevenson received: "She simply could not tolerate Adlai's achieving anything on his own. She had to feel that everything was her doing. She couldn't take it. So the only thing to do was flee from it."<sup>172</sup> Like the gossip magazines, Utley implied Borden Stevenson divorced her husband because of envy, not because of incompatible lifestyles. While an invalid reason for divorce does not exist, critiques such as these at a time where the act of divorce was slowly gaining value hurt the efforts made by women to expand their power. The selfishness Utley and the gossip magazine writers placed onto Borden Stevenson's desire for divorce suggested that the women who opted for divorce were always out for themselves.

Borden Stevenson's separation from Stevenson did not save her from public scrutiny and only aggravated the public judgement she faced due to her deviations from stereotypical femininity. Her initiation of the marital separation alongside her contributions to Chicago's literary community all contrasted with the stereotypical expectations of a housewife. In newspaper coverage of Borden Stevenson during the election, writers commonly framed her as simply the "ex-wife" and an unhelpful figure in Stevenson's life. In contrast, Mamie Eisenhower received the positive portrayal of a motherly figure and supportive wife.

After the election gossip magazines continued the negative portrayal of Borden Stevenson by blaming her as the source for sparking rumors of Stevenson's alleged homosexuality. These writers alongside the accounts by close friends of the Stevensons

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<sup>172</sup> Martin, *Adlai Stevenson of Illinois*, 331.

published in his biographies implied a broader commentary on divorce and the exit of women from the domestic sphere due to the publicity and prestige Stevenson's presidential nomination placed onto himself and his private life. Additionally, these articles had an intended male audience which transformed these works into an example of the resentment men had towards women's changing roles at the time. Porter and Cavanaugh framed Borden Stevenson's independence as sought out for attention rather than for her own benefit. This narrative illustrated the efforts to invalidate the movement to improve the societal role of women. Borden Stevenson's relation to a presidential nominee made her the ideal target.

Borden Stevenson represented the opposite end of the gender tension growing out of the 1952 election. The changing roles of women threatened the conventional definitions of masculinity as well. Borden Stevenson became a public example of an attempt to "regulate" these changes. The idea that women could desire a divorce and independent life worked to undermine traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity. With the First Lady representing traditional femininity, a presidential candidate like Stevenson — one that had his ex-wife divorce him and publicly declare her plans to vote for the opposite candidate — sharply contrasted the expected image of a presidential candidate's partner.

## Conclusion: The Presidency, Gender, and Sexuality Today

“It's just a basic fact — you look at Kamala Harris, Pete Buttigieg, AOC — the entire future of the Democrats is controlled by people without children, and how does it make any sense that we've turned our country over to people who don't really have a direct stake in it?” – JD Vance, 2021.<sup>173</sup>

The Stevenson rumor represented a case of how presidential politics function to enforce gender and sexuality norms by using presidential candidates, and their spouses, as examples of how an individual should satisfy these norms. The 1952 election was the first presidential election after the Lavender Scare began, making this election a crucial case study in understanding how normative ideas of gender and sexuality grew into ways to regulate positions of power. Thus, the Stevenson rumor and the attacks on Borden Stevenson exemplified the new tensions surrounding gender in politics.

The creation of a rumor around Stevenson's sexuality implied that homosexuality and a lack of masculinity could determine the fitness of a presidential candidate. The newspaper coverage of the Stevenson rumor demonstrated how the media feminized Stevenson in their coverage of the election. Rather than overtly accuse Stevenson of being attracted to other men, writers suggested that he failed to live up to traditional expectations of masculinity. These examples implied that the absence of conventional presentations of masculinity meant that a man was homosexual. Additionally, the FBI's interest in the Stevenson rumor and efforts to hide evidence of its investigations from the public demonstrated how one agency of the federal government saw homosexuality as worthy of investigation. The focus on secrecy also implied that this regulation of a presidential candidate's sexuality had a political bias.

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<sup>173</sup> Rachel Treisman, “JD Vance Went Viral For ‘Cat Lady’ Comments. The Centuries-old Trope Has a Long Tail,” *NPR*, July 29, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/07/29/nx-s1-5055616/jd-vance-childless-cat-lady-history>.



On the other hand, newspaper and gossip magazine coverage of Borden Stevenson's involvement during the election proved that presidential politics also regulated femininity. During the election, newspaper headlines shamed Borden Stevenson through introducing her as an ex-wife or divorced woman, implying that her marital status was her identity. Gossip magazine coverage after the election took these efforts further by framing Borden Stevenson's reasoning for divorce as a rushed, vain decision she regretted. They also accused her of starting the Stevenson rumor to sabotage his run for the presidency. The villainization of Borden Stevenson worked in tandem with the feminization of her ex-husband to suggest that a Stevenson victory would endanger the domestic life of the White House.

The commentary on Stevenson and his ex-wife demonstrated the policing of traditional gender norms in politics. A divorced and "unmanly" President with no First Lady would disrupt Americans' understanding of the presidency. Thus, the portrayal of the Stevensons functioned to create an example of what the model man and woman did not look like. During the Lavender Scare, politicians weaponized the association between queerness and how it impacted gender. In the Cold War era where conformity worked as a defense mechanism against the Soviet Union, "deviant" gender and sexuality could destroy American society.

Recent political developments have reinforced that the dynamics reflected in the 1952 election. Conservative politicians still refer to "traditional American values," thus mirroring the Lavender Scare's fears of an increasingly visible queer community. Americans may no longer fear homosexuals working in the State Department, but the weaponization of gender and sexuality in American politics continues today. For example, a recent executive order banned

transwomen from participating in women's sports.<sup>174</sup> The fear of female transgender athletes "invading" the spaces of athletes assigned female at birth demonstrate that the target of right-wing attacks has simply shifted from homosexuality to the transgender community.

The fears of masculinity in crisis during Stevenson's time still exist today alongside the demonization of female politicians. Research into "fragile masculinity" has also found a correlation between feeling insecure about masculinity and support of Donald Trump.<sup>175</sup> Additionally, current Vice President JD Vance called Kamala Harris and Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, prominent female Democratic politicians, "child-less cat ladies."<sup>176</sup> The tensions surrounding maintaining gender and sexuality norms still shapes today's political systems with the figures in these powers affecting our understandings of what "normative" looks like. The attacks faced by the Stevensons in 1952 not only served as an analysis of the impact of gender and sexuality in Cold War politics, but also as an origin point to understanding how these same dynamics shape today's presidential politics.

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<sup>174</sup> Will Graves, "Trump Signs Executive Order Intended to Bar Transgender Athletes from Girls' and Women's Sports," *AP News*, February 5, 2025. <https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-transgender-athletes-3606411fc12effec95a893351624e1b>

<sup>175</sup> Eric Knowles and Sarah DiMuccio, "How Donald Trump Appeals to Men Secretly Insecure About Their Manhood," *The Washington Post*, November 29, 2018. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/11/29/how-donald-trump-appeals-to-men-secretly-insecure-about-their-manhood/>

<sup>176</sup> Treisman, "JD Vance Went Viral For 'Cat Lady' Comments."

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