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**Closet Crusaders: The Johns Committee and Homophobia, 1956-1965**

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Carryin’ On in the Lesbian and Gay South

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Sigismond Diettrich received the telephone call on 19 January 1959. The polite caller convinced Diettrich, an eminent scholar and chair of the University of Florida’s geography department, to meet with agents of a state investigative body that evening. The dubious inquisitors grilled the professor for nearly ninety minutes. They confronted him with allegations of homosexuality from an informant who conceded that he had never actually witnessed Diettrich in a sexual act. While Diettrich staunchly denied these unsubstantiated accounts, under duress he did acknowledge other brief encounters with consenting adult males.

Diettrich knew that his career at the Gainesville campus had ended when President J. Wayne Reitz and the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences called him into an office on 16 March 1959 and dismissed him from the faculty. After leaving this meeting, Diettrich ingested eighty-five aspirin and contemplated suicide by planning to jump from the upper floor of a classroom building. Though he never carried out his plan, Diettrich left the campus a week later, considering himself a traitor to his family, his colleagues, and the university. The Johns Committee had claimed another victim.

From 1956 to 1965, the Johns Committee sought to curtail civil liberties in the Sunshine State. Officially known as the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee (FLIC), this state agency trivialized civil rights, compromised academic freedom, and threatened the constitutional protections supposedly afforded to all Floridians. As U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy’s national influence waned, the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision and the nascent civil rights movement persuaded Southern politicians to investigate any person or organization that violated customs and traditions preserving racial segregation. Hence the FLIC sanctified the dogma of its namesake member, Senator Charley E. Johns of Starke, Florida, and forwarded the interests of “porkchoppers,” the county-seat elites who preserved romantic notions of the past and who blamed a monolithic enemy for any perceived threats to their way of life. When McCarthyite tactics failed to destroy the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and similar groups, the committee launched a relentless crusade against a contrived “homosexual menace”—a crusade that eventually embarrassed legislators and later compelled them to seal the FLIC’s records until 31 December 2028.

Demands to bolster Florida’s otherwise liberal public records act reinvigorated interest in the Johns Committee. Lawmakers opened their closet of secrecy after Floridians resoundingly approved a November 1992 constitutional amendment, thereby guaranteeing access to nearly all public documents as of 1 July 1993. While the unveiling of the FLIC’s records confirmed the agency’s distrust of educational institutions and dislike of integrationists, scrutiny of these manuscripts also revealed a story heretofore untold: The committee’s archives recount both the systematic persecution of actual and suspected homosexuals throughout Florida and the FLIC’s desire to work with similar bodies to establish regional and national bureaus that would remove legal protections from anyone arbitrarily deemed a “sex pervert.” Similar to national studies that have documented the lesbian and gay experience prior to the 1969 Stonewall riots, the historiography of homosexuality in Florida must transcend Anita Bryant’s acerbic 1977 campaign to repeal Dade County’s gay rights ordinance by evaluating the activities of the Johns Committee in the emerging cold war climate.

As noted, the legislature originally authorized the Johns Committee as a means of decimating the civil rights movement. As acting governor of Florida from 1953 to 1955, Charley Johns had promised to dismiss any educator who supported the NAACP. When Johns returned to the state senate in 1955, he modified his earlier proposal for a body to study criminal activities when he included an anti-integration proviso in the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee Act. He envisaged this legislation as a way to circumvent the *Brown* decision, quell the Tallahassee bus boycott, and halt demands for civil rights reform. After lawmakers empowered the FLIC during the 1956 special session, committee members established operating procedures and initiated investigations. The Johns
Committee conducted many meetings in executive session, allowed the chair to issue public statements only with the approval of fellow members, and refused to share any information before completing its inquiry. Although the state attorney general's office found no provision that permitted the FLIC to cite uncooperative witnesses for contempt, the committee stipulated that "refusal to answer a proper question will subject a witness to contempt proceedings." The FLIC hoped to dismantle Florida NAACP chapters when it denied deponents the right either to consult with counsel during testimony or to place prepared statements in the record without the committee's approval. As the FLIC purged integrationists from university campuses and attempted to seize NAACP membership records, however, Johns faced the specter of informing his senate colleagues that his committee had failed to demonstrate communist complicity by either the NAACP or the academic community. He decided to shock lawmakers into extending his interim committee by searching for a more vulnerable enemy: homosexuals in the state of Florida.

Johns quietly dispatched an investigator to search for homosexuals at the University of Florida (UF) during the summer of 1958. Rumors and innuendo offered the FLIC a long-awaited opportunity to create a conspiracy that linked homosexuality, subversion, and integration. Jerome Johns, the senator's son and a UF student, told his father that effeminate instructors had perverted the curriculum. Soon thereafter, FLIC investigator Remus J. Strickland met a black man who claimed that he had engaged in lascivious acts with male faculty members at the all-white university. Johns enjoined Strickland to conduct his inquiry with the utmost secrecy because the 1957 enabling act did not permit the FLIC to search for homosexuals. Strickland also operated covertly for practical reasons: He hoped to maintain an element of surprise and avoid attracting negative publicity that might threaten the FLIC. Thus Johns sent assignments to Strickland through the committee's chief counsel, Mark Hawes.

Ironically, Johns had shunned a similar opportunity to search for homosexuals during his tenure as acting governor (September 1953-January 1955). When administrators at Florida State University (FSU) forced associate professor Robert L. Leathers to resign, Leathers claimed that FSU president Doak S. Campbell condoned homosexual behavior on campus. Although Johns did schedule a public hearing on Leathers's behalf in December 1954, he later promised FSU administrators that he would not "stick his nose" into the inquiry. While Johns refused to intervene in the earlier controversy at FSU, he knew the UF probe satisfied the expedient political motives of the committee.

Earlier homosexual witch-hunts provided a foundation for the tactics used in the University of Florida probe. During the spring of 1957, committee members and officers from the state Sheriff's Bureau interrogated staff at the Southwest Florida Tuberculosis Hospital in Tampa. When Johns and the sheriff's chief investigator issued a directive ordering state employees to offer full cooperation, they also secretly sent information to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) for background checks. The committee warned one staff member that if he refused to implicate the hospital's medical director, the FLIC would have him sentenced to prison for twenty years. After the interviewee informed the director of the state Tuberculosis Board of this harrowing session, the Johns Committee sent for the distraught subject, connected him to the polygraph machine, and forced him to submit to further questioning. Testimony gathered from him and from other hospital employees gave the committee the impression that homosexual teachers in Hillsborough County had obtained their positions with the clandestine assistance of subversive university faculty.

To fortify this perceived conspiracy among gays on college campuses, the Johns Committee contacted two UF students who had conducted their own inquiry. In the fall of 1955—prior to the FLIC's creation—two undergraduates undertook a monthlong investigation for the school's newspaper, The Alligator. They invited "known deviates" to visit their dormitory and secretly recorded conversations from an adjoining room. When The Alligator refused to publish their article, the disgruntled junior detectives gave campus administrators the names of students and faculty mentioned on the tapes. The shallowness of this probe became evident to Hawes and Strickland when they questioned the two students. One of the students acknowledged that he "never knew about these people actively recruiting anyone, except those who wanted to join." When agents pressed the students to divulge names, they claimed they had created the list "without any proof at all." Even though the students admitted that gays posed no menace to the campus community, in his October 1958 progress report, Strickland boasted that he had uncovered "a considerable homosexual operation" that merited further investigation.

The committee looked for homosexual activity in a variety of locations. Hawes and Strickland discovered that gays often congregated at the Burger House bar near campus, as well as at the "chicken farm," a private
home in rural Alachua County, five miles outside of Gainesville. They also heard of "purple passion parties," gatherings where young men drank and fraternized in dimly lit rooms. Concerned that faculty members engaged in homosexual acts away from the university, investigators surveyed the Cross Creek residence where Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings—author of *The Yearling* and *South Moon Under*—had once lived. Many prominent faculty, including College of Law professor Phillip Keyes Yonge, went on retreats to the Cross Creek home after Rawlings's death in 1953.10

The men's lavatory at the Alachua County Courthouse served as the focal point for much of the UF investigation. The county sheriff, who had once served as chief of the university's police department, agreed to give the Johns Committee full authority to monitor the building's public restrooms. In this corrupt bargain, the sheriff even supported Strickland's plan to keep the facilities open during the evening to attract traffic. Strickland persuaded UF police chief Audie Shuler to reassign a few campus officers from their regular duties so that they could serve as decoys in and provide surveillance of the courthouse restrooms. After police arrested individuals for committing lewd acts, committee members used coercive interrogation tactics to try to link restroom activities with members of the university community. Mark Hawes referred one man arrested at the courthouse to the campus police department so that officers could arrange for him to observe faculty members covertly in their classrooms. Hawes then expected the subject to name every instructor he had witnessed in or near the courthouse. For his part, Strickland preferred guilt by association. For example, he asked one man caught in the restroom if "some of these people were dressed in such a way and their mannerisms were of such nature that they were or could have been connected to the University of Florida."11

The committee intimidated the faculty members it interrogated. Strickland hired student informants with FLIC funds, used highway patrolmen to remove professors from the classroom, and telephoned some instructors late at night, demanding that they provide testimony in Strickland's motel room at his convenience. He also prohibited the accused from confronting their complainants, seldom informed subjects of their legal or constitutional rights, and rarely offered them sufficient time to secure an attorney or to prepare their defense. Like the authors of the unpublished *Alligator* article, most informants provided hearsay evidence at best. Often the committee settled for less, even securing the deposition of one student who deemed professors "queer" by "observation of them in class ... the way they act ... nothing specific" and another who named an instructor because he wore Bermuda shorts on campus. Although state policy required that teachers charged with moral turpitude receive a formal hearing before the Florida Board of Education, Strickland circumvented the law by acting as both prosecutor and jury. Hawes cautioned one unyielding educator "to testify fully and truthfully before this Committee, or you are going to fail to do so at your own peril." Many interviewees cowered under such pressure and gave the FLIC the names of suspected homosexuals.12

Students, too, faced the committee's wrath. While faculty and staff suffered immediate dismissal if accused of homosexuality, gay students could remain on campus only if they visited the infirmary and submitted to psychiatric treatments throughout their academic career. As committee members scrutinized the patient records of the University of Florida's clinic, the threat of expulsion continued to haunt those students under orders to receive counseling. The FLIC compelled personnel at the UF health center to disclose information found in patient records and demanded that medical professionals identify the basic "disturbance" or "illness" that fostered homosexual desires in each of the students obtaining psychiatric care. The committee also reserved the right to seize clinical records, as it did when investigators confiscated paperwork on thirty-five female students who had given birth out of wedlock at the UF facility.13

UF president Reitz cooperated with the Johns Committee because his superiors failed to intervene on the University of Florida's behalf. Although Governor LeRoy Collins alienated lawmakers with his moderate stand on racial integration and his campaign for equitable legislative reapportionment, he permitted previous FLIC enabling acts to become law without his signature because he realized that any mediation in the UF probe would jeopardize his programs for the 1959 biennial legislative session. The governing body for Florida's universities, the Board of Control, ceded its authority to the committee by sanctioning abuses in the FLIC's investigations. On 27 September 1958, three Board of Control members met with the committee and soon thereafter directed Reitz to cooperate with Strickland. In February 1959, Reitz and the board each received a report of approximately nineteen hundred pages, documenting
the committee's inquiry. A substantial portion of the testimony included the provocative title "Crimes against Nature at the University of Florida."14

Two months later the committee shared its findings from the University of Florida investigation with lawmakers in Tallahassee. On 13 April 1959, the FLIC reassured legislators that "In conducting this investigation, it has been and still is the prime concern of this Committee that nothing be done to injure the good name of the university and the vast majority of its faculty and students." Based on the questionable testimony collected by the committee, Johns surmised that an untold number of homosexual teachers allegedly used coercion and manipulation to recruit youngsters for sexual encounters. To reinforce the pervasive anti-intellectual sentiments found in the legislature, the FLIC report insinuated that homosexual behavior tended to increase with educational attainment. Johns encouraged his colleagues to enact provisions requiring a centralized file of personnel records, the fingerprinting of present and potential government employees, and the forfeiting of state retirement benefits for educators dismissed due to moral misconduct. Hawes and Strickland summarized their investigation at a locked-door senate session on 30 April 1959. Although they spoke in general terms and gave few specific details, they persuaded the legislature to extend the committee's life for two more years so it could "investigate any agitator who may appear in Florida." Even the dismissal of more than fifty students and the termination of more than twenty employees did not satisfy Johns, as the university continued to suffer from probes into the 1960s.15

Similar homophobic witch-hunts besieged Florida State University. When the school's newspaper, The Flambeau, criticized Senator Dewey M. Johnson for attempting to oust an FSU professor, the Sarasota News defended Johnson, a former vice chair of the FLIC. Since the Johns Committee had performed so well in Gainesville, the News argued that it should relocate to FSU. Although the committee had previously monitored civil rights activities on the Tallahassee campus, it did not launch a thorough probe of homosexuals at FSU until the state hired William Tanner, a former FBI officer, to assist its investigations. Charley Johns may have ignored Leathers's pleas to interfere at FSU in the early 1950s, but he had since discovered that hearsay and innuendo could easily destroy others. The committee worked with FSU campus security officers to entrap students, faculty, and staff. In addition to the informants who frequented parks and other public facilities, the state hired an agent who invited male students to congregate at a house in suburban Tallahassee. The agent gained the confidence of the young men by hosting parties and other social events. When the intended victims gained the trust of their host, they went with him into a bedroom and gossiped about others at the party. The agent secretly taped these conversations and sent them to Tanner, who summoned participants to his office, questioned them about their involvement, and had them expelled.16

School officers encouraged the removal of homosexuals from Florida State University. Although Strickland later claimed that FSU's close connections to the committee spared the university from probes similar to those in Gainesville, investigators performed more than a few raids. Indeed, the Tallahassee campaign resembled the earlier purges in both ferocity and disregard for the constitutional protections of the accused. In tactics similar to those used at the Alachua County Courthouse, committee agents and local deputies served as decoys at the Greyhound and Trailways bus station restrooms. Strickland and Burl Peacock from the city's police department planted a tape machine in their vehicle, thereby allowing them secretly to record conversations with suspects before placing them under oath in a formal interrogation session. When university administrators implored the committee to interview their students and faculty on campus, Senator Johns rebuffed this proposal by holding hearings in the capitol and by refusing to allow the chair of FSU's disciplinary committee to attend. (Johns did invite Tanner, however.) The FLIC also hired student informants at FSU, including one woman who first provided Tanner with the names of suspected lesbians and later agreed to hire women into a bugged motel room. Even though this woman fabricated her "evidence," Strickland detained many women on her list and seriously considered her suggestion that the committee hire student informants from each dormitory to "act" gay.17

The Committee also visited the nearby Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU). The state's university for African Americans, FAMU had endured a Jim Crow system that offered the school only a paucity of financial appropriations and instructional support. Porkchoppers had refused to elevate the college to university status until late 1953, when a growing body of case law necessitated the illusion of separate yet equal facilities. In late 1956 the FLIC launched a covert investigation of FAMU students and faculty who supported the Tallahassee bus boycott and the integrationist Inter-Civic Council. During the course of his inquiry, Strickland located some FAMU students who, under intense inter-
rogation, claimed that at least one-quarter of the university’s faculty practiced homosexual acts. Agents frequently asked gay African Americans if they had ever engaged in acts with whites of the same sex. Based on the uncorroborated statements of a few questionable witnesses, the committee proclaimed that a subversive network of homosexuals compromised the university’s governance structure. For example, after agents discovered a gay employee in FAMU’s purchasing office, they seized requisition forms and attempted to oversee the daily operations of the department.18

Investigators derived a perverse pleasure from discrediting African Americans. Just as Southern whites had perpetuated the myth that black males possessed an immoderate virility that endangered white womanhood, the committee hoped its probes would debase black homosexuals by portraying them as less than human. For example, the committee ordered one FAMU student to “name me another person. Do you know a ... light skinned nigger that lives down there on Macomb Street?... Where is this boy now?” And while some agents monitored events at the FAMU campus, Strickland visited the Clearwater offices of the Pinellas County school board. He interrogated many educators at this location, including Thomas F. Pinson and William J. Neal, faculty members at Gibbs Junior College, a black educational institution. St. Petersburg police officers had detained Pinson when they saw him driving in a white neighborhood. After holding him on a charge of night prowling, detectives compelled Pinson to confess to sexual liaisons. Strickland grilled Neal, an instructor in music, for nearly eight hours. When Neal refused to submit to Strickland’s tactics, the temperamental investigator warned Neal that he would never teach anywhere in America. Referring to the teacher as an “educated nigra,” Strickland constantly reminded Neal that he had taken an oath, asked if he knew the statutory penalties for perjury, and wondered if he had committed crimes “up North.” Shortly after this session, Strickland had authorities revoke Neal’s certification. Devastated by the FLIC’s witch-hunt, Neal relocated to Maryland and filed a lawsuit to restore his teaching license.19

As inquiries led Strickland and his agents from Pensacola to Miami, they used their resources to embarrass blacks who supported the civil rights movement. In a manner similar to the detailed lists they had maintained on the NAACP and other integrationist organizations, committee operatives painstakingly recorded hearsay to destroy African American educators, as when they created a file on school administrators who allegedly “derive[d] sex satisfaction through the rectum.”20

Regardless of their race, gay and lesbian public schoolteachers had much to fear from the Johns Committee’s inquisition. Homosexual educators whom the FLIC exposed faced immediate personal humiliation and professional alienation, as one teacher quickly learned when Strickland asked, in McCarthyite fashion, “Do you know now, or have you known in the past any teacher in the public school system of this state who is a homosexual?” Investigators generally concentrated their probes on urbanized counties. Concerned that homosexual teachers might depart before he could interrogate them, Strickland told Hawes to urge county superintendents not to accept resignations unless the instructors willingly forfeited their certificates or consented to exit interviews. In early 1961, Strickland joined forces with highway troopers and officers from the Metro Dade Public Safety Department. During the spring, detectives spent their evenings visiting “gay addresses” and arresting uncooperative residents throughout Dade County, most of them teachers or other public servants. The committee welcomed the services of veteran investigator James D. Barker, a man who shared Strickland’s disdain for civil liberties and due process.21

While Barker and Strickland entrapped private citizens, Hawes and other committee members prepared reports and potential legislation for the 1961 biennial session. The committee told lawmakers that despite “its limited staff, funds, and time,” it had located homosexuals “in shocking and appalling numbers” that surpassed estimates given in the 1959 report. Substituting homosexuality for pedophilia, the FLIC argued that the gay teachers who “permeated even the public school system ... invariably turn[ed] to the recruitment of young people as sex partners.” Committee members cited statistics: Since 1959, they had persuaded the state Board of Education to revoke thirty-nine teaching certificates—with fourteen additional cases pending—and had testimony supposedly incriminating seventy-five additional teachers and seven university professors. The committee also hoped to disquiet legislators by reporting that agents had confiscated nearly eight thousand pieces of “pornographic paraphernalia.” This strategy gave the Johns Committee the mandate it desired. The 1961 enabling legislation sanctioned probes documenting the “infiltration of agencies supported by state funds by practicing homosexuals and the policies of state agencies in dealing therewith.”22

The legislative decree strengthened the committee’s resolve. In November 1961, Charley Johns dispatched a generic letter to administrative officers throughout the state bureaucracy, indicating that the FLIC
planned to conduct public hearings and to examine departmental policies concerning the employment of homosexuals. He insisted that “it will not be the purpose of the Committee to receive any evidence in regard to the extent of this problem in our various state institutions. Neither will it be the purpose of this Committee to identify or single out any homosexual.” According to Johns, the FLIC intended only to perform its legislative mandate by examining the personnel policies of various agencies. Although Johns promised to conduct this inquiry with “a very high level of dignity without injuriously affecting any state department or administrative officer,” his belief that lax regulations had permitted homosexuals to endanger the government by moving from one agency to another impelled him to predict a “serious and substantial problem” that would portend numerous terminations.

Authorities tendered prompt responses to Johns’s letter. When the senator read these replies, he wrote comments on the letters such as “no real policy,” “make further inquiry,” or “bull—get facts[,] what about their records?” Johns placed the last annotation on a reply sent by the director of the state Tuberculosis Board. Remembering the FLIC’s 1957 purge of the Tampa hospital, Johns ordered Strickland to have the director provide copies of his agency’s personnel records to the committee. Johns also put university presidents on the defensive: While Reitz pledged the continued support of UF’s police detectives, FSU president Gordon W. Blackwell assured Johns that his school maintained files on dismissed students and staff. John S. Allen, president of the newly opened University of South Florida (USF), believed that his belief that lax regulations had permitted homosexuals to endanger the government by moving from one agency to another impelled him to predict a “serious and substantial problem” that would portend numerous terminations.

The FLIC invited many administrators to testify at its April 1962 hearings. Committee members believed the combination of a centralized employment-records clearinghouse and the fingerprinting of all state workers would “keep homosexuals from infiltrating public jobs.” Most educators agreed with the committee’s program, although a few of them thought the FLIC’s proposal to withhold the retirement benefits of terminated homosexual employees went too far. Some authorities who thought the committee should do even more to punish homosexuals also proffered their suggestions. For example, the personnel director from Polk County’s school district believed any suspected homosexual “should not be in a classroom, regardless of whether or not he has been proved guilty” of any crime. A Broward County colleague confessed that he felt uncertain about hiring bachelors or teachers who had resigned during the middle of the school year. One junior college administrator requested an increase in his travel budget so he could journey to the present residences of prospective employees. These witnesses espoused the sentiments of Thomas D. Bailey, Florida’s superintendent of public instruction. Bailey praised the cooperative relationship existing between his Board of Education and the committee, a political marriage that gave Strickland unrestricted access to the superintendent’s records. FLIC members expressed a sense of pride that their homophobic campaigns had garnered the support of the Florida Education Association (FEA). Bailey’s office and Strickland’s agents often shared personnel information with FEA leaders. The FEA warned teachers appearing before the committee to yield their Fifth Amendment protections and advocated that the state disqualify from classroom teaching anyone who had ever experienced any type or degree of homosexual contact.

Assistance also came from the executive branch of the state government. In January 1962, Governor C. Farris Bryant welcomed more than sixty patrolmen to an academy he had established in conjunction with the Sheriff’s Bureau. Bryant assembled a circuit judge, a prison official, a parole commissioner, and numerous attorneys, all of whom served as the “faculty” that would teach law enforcement officers a variety of ways to expose homosexuals. Worried that the press might reveal their strategy, officials banned journalists from attending these workshops. Meanwhile, Bryant also asked the Florida Children’s Commission to forge a cooperative relationship with the FLIC and police departments. While the governor privately envisioned this alliance as a means of expurgating gay employees from the state payroll, he publicly stated that “this problem is serious, but not sensational. . . . We are seeking to approach it with maturity and with understanding.” Johns and Strickland, now serving as de facto members of the Children’s Commission, exploited this additional mandate to their committee’s advantage. Strickland boasted that he had collected the names of several thousand homosexuals. Yet, when pressed to provide a more specific estimate, he conceded that “I don’t have any idea. . . . There’s a lot of them. . . . We have a lot of education work [sic] to do.” Although the chief investigator continued to cultivate a closeted
conspiracy, the acting director of the Children’s Commission praised him for his efforts to curb “this social and moral problem.”

While legislators on the Johns Committee concluded their hearings in Tallahassee, Hawes and Strickland accepted a new assignment in Tampa. Porkchoppers viewed the University of South Florida as anathema. When he had assembled faculty for the state’s first metropolitan university, President John Allen had angered reactionaries by proclaiming that “there are no fences, no boundaries holding us and limiting our search for knowledge or our methods of teaching knowledge.” A sense of idealism and missionary zeal thrived on campus after classes began in the fall of 1960. However, by early 1962 a group of concerned Floridians secretly contacted the committee and implored Johns to cleanse USF of supposedly “unpatriotic” individuals. In April 1962, Mark Hawes and Remus Strickland began a stealth probe of homosexual activities, subversive influences, and teaching methods at USF, from a Tampa motel room that was often frequented by prostitutes. Thomas Wenner, a USF instructor sympathetic to the committee’s goals, invited approximately forty students to his home for a social gathering and dinner. Although the FLIC later disavowed any connection with Wenner, both Hawes and Strickland attended this function. The chaperons questioned their student guests about conditions at the university, following Johns’s edict to quietly collect evidence and to select student informants with the utmost care. After a brief investigation at the Florida School for Boys in Marianna, Hawes and Strickland returned to Tampa and devoted their energies to the USF investigation.

Committee members hoped to cloak their activities in secrecy. As in the UF investigation, police officers removed students from their classes for interrogation. Agents obtained information from vindictive and unreliable sources. One interviewee regarded USF’s head librarian as “effeminate... possibly a homosexual [and] possibly the weakest link among the faculty.” Other professors aroused suspicion because they ate lunch together or had a “butch” haircut. A student accused a dean of homosexual tendencies after he “stirred up a big stink last year with the idea of not wearing shorts on campus.” This student later implicated an instructor in English, basing his information entirely on “things kids have said about him in class. I have never had a class with him, but I have seen him. He’s very bashful, shy person [sic].” In similar fashion, a few other students made contradictory remarks about a graphics coordinator. Committee members sought to discredit USF president Allen by branding him as a subversive with the “characteristics of a homo.”

By May 1962, Wenner viewed himself as USF’s expert on political and moral depravity and criticized Hawes for moving too slowly in the investigation. He decided to expedite matters by informing the press of the committee’s presence. His plan backfired. After reading Wenner’s disclosure in the 18 May 1962 St. Petersburg Times, Strickland called the instructor and said he worried “about the possibility of it coming out.” While Allen promptly suspended Wenner and Governor Bryant independently sought the insubordinate lecturer’s dismissal, the FLIC attempted to distance itself from Wenner by claiming it had come to Tampa to defend the infant university from outside attacks. Allen warned Hawes and Strickland that if they planned to take further testimony, they should do so on campus, in the presence of university authorities. Between 23 May 1962 and 7 June 1962, the FLIC questioned those who chose to appear and gathered nearly twenty-five hundred pages of sworn testimony. Hawes and Strickland concluded their official investigation after only two weeks on campus. Not surprisingly, they continued to conduct interviews in their Tampa motel room. On 6 June 1962, Johns asserted that the FLIC did not find “too much wrong with this beautiful university” yet hinted that he would probably recommend disciplinary action. Although Johns originally promised to transmit the committee’s report to board members and campus authorities before releasing information to the public, he allowed a Tampa newspaper to publish a selectively edited, fifty-three page summary on 25 August 1962, at a time when most university officials—including President Allen—spent their vacations outside of Florida.

Johns wanted this report to discredit administrators and faculty at USF. Committee members lambasted Allen for promoting a climate that supposedly allowed “subversive” professors to persuade “naive” students, through salacious reading materials and indoctrination, to question orthodox religious, moral, and sexual practices. However, excerpts released by the newspaper refuted the committee’s outrageous suppositions. Admitting in their report that they had devoted scant time or effort to searching for homosexuals, FLIC investigators “believe[d] this problem not to be of great magnitude at the University of South Florida at this time.” The testimony also failed to reveal any Communists or fellow travelers at USF. Realizing that gay students and faculty had never posed
any threat to the university, the FLIC tried to craft this report to emphasize teaching methods and classroom assignments rather than private behaviors. Thus the FLIC scorned Professor Henry Winthrop for discussing sexuality in his course on human behavior and criticized numerous other faculty members for introducing their students to the “intellectual garbage” written by Margaret Mead, Aldous Huxley, and J. D. Salinger, among others.30

Three signal events placed the committee on the defensive before it met with legislators at the 1963 biennial session. During the fall of 1962, Sheldon Grebstein—a recently hired English instructor at USF—assigned a Norman Podhoretz essay critical of beatnik authors to his advanced writing class. The Board of Control and the Johns Committee immediately summoned President Allen to a secret Gainesville meeting and demanded Grebstein’s dismissal for exposing students to this Partisan Review article. In light of the board’s refusal to disclose any of the accusers, clarify the charges, or allow the professor to defend himself, Florida’s scholarly community protested this blatant violation of academic freedom. Although Grebstein soon left USF and moved to New York to assume a position in an area with “more freedom in the intellectual atmosphere [and] a more enlightened citizenry,” his ordeal prompted public outrage and galvanized the mass media’s opposition to the committee.31

The second event developed because Strickland so detested members of the press. Robert Delaney—a reporter stationed at the Orlando Sentinel’s Tallahassee bureau and frequent critic of the committee—met a woman at a bowling alley who called herself Janet Lee. Two nights later, on 10 February 1963, Delaney met Lee at a motel in Tallahassee. While Strickland peered through a window, Burl Peacock and other police officers watched from an adjoining room. After hearing a signal, agents rushed into the room, took compromising pictures of Delaney, and arrested the reporter for committing an unnatural sex act. But after Delaney’s subsequent removal from the Sentinel and the capitol press corps, the committee suffered further embarrassment when the public learned that not only had Strickland booked the room, he had also permitted Lee to register with an alias and allowed her to disappear before the trial. Soon thereafter the Tallahassee police chief acknowledged that his officers regularly cooperated with Strickland by establishing traps in motel rooms.32

A decision by Florida’s supreme court constrained the FLIC’s investigative powers and represented the third event that placed the committee on the defensive. On 27 February 1963, justices refused to rehear an October 1962 pronouncement in William Neal v. Farris Bryant, et al. In this case, the court restored the teaching certificates of three Pinellas County educators, including former Gibbs Junior College instructor William Neal, by asserting that the 1959 FLIC enabling act prohibited the Johns Committee from probing allegations of moral turpitude. When rendering its verdict, the state’s supreme court built on its earlier stipulation that the committee could not exceed its duly constituted authority under the guise of uncovering so-called subversive activities in civil rights organizations. According to the justices, the state Board of Education failed to follow departmental policy when it revoked the petitioners’ certificates in 1961. The board erred when it permitted R. J. Strickland to conduct hearings on its behalf—knowing that he lacked the statutory mandate to determine probable cause—and used the contents of his dubious testimony as the sole reason for nullifying the teachers’ licenses. The court further proclaimed that the committee’s enabling legislation during the 1959 biennium never gave Strickland the authority to search for homosexuals, invoke subpoena power against gays, or threaten to call public hearings, regardless of any tacit agreement he had fashioned with Superintendent Thomas Bailey.33

The 1963 legislative session marked a turning point for the Johns Committee. Reeling from recent events, the committee tried to justify Delaney’s arrest and the USF investigations. Counsel Mark Hawes denied that the FLIC had entrapped Delaney, instead arguing that Strickland had hired the mysterious Janet Lee and other secret informants to capture lesbians. Disavowing any plan to ensnare the committee’s critics, Hawes added that agents would never interfere in “any man-woman relationship, regardless of how unnatural it is or how strange.” He failed to tell lawmakers, however, that Lee had received generous informant fees to engage in carnal acts at the very time the criminal court in Pensacola had placed her under its supervision because she had killed a former husband. (The Escambia County Court and Strickland had negotiated a secret agreement that made Lee, de facto, an employee of the state who earned her salary by seeking sexual favors and thereby violating her probation.) Still, because some legislators had begun to fear the committee’s prowess at uncovering liaisons, they offered their support with the hope that agents would refrain from opening any closets in the capitol. On 18 April 1963, Hawes delivered a verbal assault against the University of South Florida, contending that the school’s faculty and curriculum brazenly...
defied taxpayers by endangering the state's welfare. Although USF president Allen received moral support for his subsequent defense of the university and academic freedom, the FLIC persuaded legislators to extend the committee's mandate until 1965 and more than doubled its fiscal appropriation.34

The committee sought to distance itself from past blunders. Hawes and Strickland left the FLIC in August 1963, after Representative Richard O. Mitchell assumed the chair from Senator Johns. Although Johns remained a member of the committee, he mourned the changes wrought by this reorganization, exclaiming that even "if Sergeant Strickland never does another thing ... he's earned every dime this Committee has paid him." In actuality, Strickland continued to conduct secret inquiries, never hesitating to misrepresent himself as a member of the committee or as an operative for a fictitious Governor's Committee on Pornography. While Strickland egregiously violated the law by acting as an unlicensed detective, the committee hired C. Lawrence Rice as chief investigator and John E. Evans as staff director. Evans, former chair of Governor Bryant's Center for Cold War Education, wanted to distance the Johns Committee from its earlier incarnations by avoiding the meddlesome violations of due process practiced by predecessor committees. But the crusade against homosexuals continued. In September 1963, FLIC members met with leaders of private organizations, federal officials, and congressional committees in Chicago and Washington, D.C., who reinforced the committee's suspicion that Communists planned to subvert the American way of life by controlling academic institutions and by corrupting the nation's moral fiber. Believing that constituents demanded action rather than apathy, Mitchell cloaked investigations in the guise of a research project, with the hope that lawmakers might enact comprehensive legislation to control sexual behaviors. By the end of 1963, the committee was seeking to shock Floridians into accepting its program by distributing a summary of its findings on gays and lesbians.35

In January 1964, the committee released a booklet titled Homosexuality and Citizenship in Florida. Dubbed the Purple Pamphlet because of its conspicuous cover, this work purported to "be of value to all citizens" by revealing homosexuality as "a skeleton in the closet of society." While the Johns Committee admitted that it possessed "no corner on understanding the history or prognosis of homosexuality"—and even selected the biblical description of "abomination" as a suitable definition—it nevertheless concluded that acts between members of the same sex promoted "neurosis and mental imbalance, a predilection opening pathways to crime and conduct far beyond the veil of rationality." Fearing the proliferation of muscle magazines and Polaroid camera shots, the committee decried the "torrent" of homophile "propaganda" that portrayed gays as "a maladjusted, misunderstood, and mistreated minority, composed of productive people seeking their proper place in the sun." The report instead viewed homosexuals as the carriers of a degenerative disease that posed a greater menace to society than child molesters. The authors of the booklet argued that the heterosexual pedophile "seldom kills or physically cripples his victim. The outlook for the victim of molestation is generally good for recovery from the mental and physical shocks involved and for the enjoyment of a normal life." Homosexual acts represented a far greater threat, according to committee members, because younger "victims" engaging in such acts, would inevitably become first accomplices and later perpetrators as they succumbed to erotic desires. (Despite the committee's prodigality to extract names from witnesses, most of the "expert" authorities quoted in this booklet remained anonymous.) The report contained suggestive photographs, a glossary, and a bibliography. The committee sold copies of the Purple Pamphlet for a quarter and offered a special discount for bulk purchases of over one hundred copies.36

The pamphlet's release sparked a maelstrom of controversy. A resounding chorus of constituents voiced their anger at state officials. Weary from fielding a deluge of complaints, Governor Farris Bryant had distanced himself from the Johns Committee by March 1964. Although Bryant admitted to reporters that he had never read the booklet—and said that he doubted if he ever would examine it—he nevertheless seemed reluctant to criticize the committee. Rather than expressing an interest in the civil rights of gay Floridians, Bryant used the uproar as an excuse to chastise the media, saying that "if the press had not been given a copy of the booklet they would have demanded it .... They got a copy and they complain." While Bryant merely remarked that the FLIC should consider limiting the circulation of the pamphlet, a Dade County judicial officer threatened to file legal action against the committee. State Attorney Richard E. Gerstein warned the FLIC to cease distribution of this "obscene and pornographic material" to anyone willing to give them a quarter. Ironically, even though the Florida Civil Liberties Union blasted Gerstein for censoring Homosexuality and Citizenship, the committee refused to give this organization an extra copy of its booklet, claiming it intended to allocate the remaining issues to "responsible agencies ... whose conclusions on
the report and this Committee are more open-minded." Evans and Mitchell, who had once thought their pamphlet would become a best-seller, found themselves responding to countless letters, some addressed simply to “Sex, Tallahassee.”

Committee members defended this publication as part of a broader program to prohibit homosexual behavior. The Purple Pamphlet marked only the first salvo in the committee’s newest offensive against Florida’s gay population. To preserve heterosexuals’ “private liberties . . . at all costs,” FLIC counsel Leo Foster promised to confine homosexuals and subject them to secret hearings whenever their activities threatened “national security.” C. W. “Bill” Young, state senator and Committee member, warned that Floridians could not “stick [their] heads in the sand. The legislature has responsibilities to the public to expose these people who have been preying on young people.” According to Young, the glossary allowed police officers “to recognize a homosexual from some words he used.” Evans echoed these sentiments when he explained that in “exposing the rapid spread and insidious aspects of homosexuality the Committee is neither crying wolf nor palming off a pipe dream.” He offered to marshal the agency’s resources to cleanse Dade County—which he considered “a major playground for deviates”—and the rest of the state. Warning that “all the fruit the Sunshine State raises is not confined to the grove,” one supporter praised the FLIC for exposing the state’s schools as “homo factories with desks.” (Although the Johns Committee refused to sell Homosexuality and Citizenship to numerous Floridians, it freely disseminated complimentary copies to sympathetic parties throughout the United States. Away from the limelight, Evans quietly sent fifty copies of the pamphlet to the Orlando Police Department and received in return photographs from a lesbian “wedding.”)

Public dissatisfaction jeopardized the work of the committee’s Homosexual Practices Control Advisory Panel. In early 1964, Chairman Mitchell recruited twelve Floridians from a variety of professions to suggest legislation for the 1965 biennial session. Unlike the witnesses previously subpoenaed by the committee, panelists received per diems, first-class travel arrangements, and comfortable accommodations. A few spouses also attended at the state’s expense. Panel members divided into two distinct camps as they debated drafts for a proposed Sexual Behavior Act. Judges and law enforcement officers on the panel sought to take the FLIC’s plan for a centralized records repository a step further and maintain files on all suspected homosexuals in Florida, not just state employees. These officials also wanted to retain the state’s 1868 sodomy statute, which ambiguously proclaimed, “Whoever commits the abominable and detestable crime against nature, either with mankind or with beast, shall be punished by imprisonment in the state prison not exceeding twenty years.” Psychologists and psychiatrists emphasized a therapeutic approach. They called for legislation to define sodomy with precision, to differentiate between homosexuality and pedophilia, and to sanction Britain’s 1957 Wolfenden Report, which permitted private homosexual acts between consenting adults. Although panelists ultimately fashioned a compromise draft, their efforts vanished in the smoke of the heated controversy ignited by the committee’s booklet.

The Purple Pamphlet alienated porkchoppers and destroyed the committee. Floridians who had ardently supported the committee’s prior assaults on civil liberties withheld their adoration after encountering the booklet. Homophile organizations also exacted damage. In June 1964 a gay book club began to sell reprints of the pamphlet for two dollars apiece from its Washington, D.C., office. While Senator Bill Young criticized this activity as “an obvious attempt to belittle the work of the Committee,” the president of the homophile Mattachine Society scorned the committee for publishing the report in the first place. Harold “Hal” Call and other members of the Mattachine Society had observed the FLIC’s probes from afar for many years. In an open letter to the Johns Committee, Call condemned the agency’s pathetic research and repugnant sensationalism. The committee expected readers to select a theory conforming to its own views, and the pamphlet portrayed gays as sex fiends who spent every free moment searching for anonymous partners, recruiting youth, or transmitting venereal diseases. The appendices thoroughly misrepresented homosexuality. The section describing statutory sex offenses listed bestiality as well as heterosexual acts such as adultery and “carnal intercourse with an unmarried female idiot.” The glossary gave homosexual connotations to a variety of terms, including cute, married, dream boat, gerontophilia, kleptomania, and masturbation. With less than one-sixth of its citations serving as valuable sources for the study of homosexuality, the supposedly “complete and responsible” bibliography lacked as many important works as it contained superfluous ones. In response to the committee’s continued harassment of gays and lesbians throughout the state, the Mattachine Society started its first Florida chapter in Miami.

On the verge of losing its mandate from the legislature, the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee destroyed some of its records and
locked the rest of them away in a closet. Even by 1964, agents had burned photographs and other materials that might ultimately discredit members of the committee. In October of that year Senators Charley Johns and Robert Williams joined Investigator Rice and Staff Director Evans in resigning from the committee. Although a handful of supporters demanded that the 1965 legislature reinvoke the FLIC as a permanent—rather than an interim—investigative body, Johns saw the futility in such an endeavor. He asked fellow lawmakers to “close the office, lock up the records and save the taxpayers of Florida the remainder of the $155,000 appropriation.” Lawmakers disbanded the committee when its enabling legislation expired on 1 July 1965. Claiming that the FLIC operated exclusively under the “executive session” provision of the 1885 constitution, the legislature sealed all public records of this agency from inspection until 31 December 2028.41

Although the Johns Committee officially dissolved in 1965, most of its activities remained a mystery until lawmakers opened the records twenty-eight years later. A few themes have emerged from the FLIC’s gay and lesbian investigations, including the various definitions of “homosexuality” employed by the committee, its investigative tactics, and its perceived role of maintaining social institutions in the climate of the cold war.

The committee arbitrarily modified its definitions of homosexuality to suit its immediate investigative needs. Agents often equated homosexuality with the “crimes against nature” statute. State employees who admitted to heterosexual oral-genital contact faced possible dismissal for committing sodomy, because the committee defined homosexuality as “the sexual relation between two people of the same sex usually, although it can be practiced by two people of the opposite sex.” Strickland would often take this terminology to the absurd extreme, as when he asked one gay man, “Have you ever thought of having homosexual relations with a woman just to find out what it’s all about?” While such a broad classification would encompass many Floridians, it would also exempt certain acts between members of the same sex. Hence, Strickland told a different subject that “a homosexual act is a sexual act between two people of the same sex . . . regardless of what the degree of the act itself might be[,] whether it’s a petting act or a fondling act or goes beyond that degree.” The committee frequently confused homosexuality and pedophilia. After one school system cleared a teacher of fabricated fondling charges, the committee ordered the state Board of Education to reopen the case without offering any evidence. When the educator protested this blatant double jeopardy, an investigator retorted that “when this Committee tried to protect the children of this county . . . then you have the audacity to say this is a witch hunt.” Similar perversions of due process appeared in the hundreds of cases and thousands of pages maintained by the committee.42

Agents coupled inconsistent terminology with subjective and unreliable testimony. Whereas Janet Lee and others offered their bodies or spread rumors in exchange for lucrative informant fees, many of the committee’s accomplices who provided gossip or served as decoys did so in order to stay out of jail or avoid public exposure by the committee. Investigators coached their “expert” witnesses and often visited them in their homes. Comments such as “You told me earlier off the record that . . .” and “If you are following my hand, I’m trying to give you one” pepper the transcripts. One deponent, who volunteered to incriminate a fellow teacher, provided scant evidence and forgot critical events yet received the following praise from an investigator: “You’ve done wonderful. You’ve got a phenomenal memory.” Agents referred to friendly witnesses as “Mr. X” (or a similar pseudonym) as long as they offered damning innuendo about the committee’s adversaries. After gathering information from sympathetic sources, Strickland and his associates kept a file of statements. The following caveat accompanied each of these “investigative leads”: This confidential material “does not purport to be either an evaluation or a complete record, but is a listing of information available. It is furnished on a confidential basis and is not to be disseminated or published.” Many of these sources provided the foundations for the committee’s unscrupulous investigations.43

Confidential informants did, however, face the prospect of public humiliation and even threats of incarceration if the committee found their testimony to be deficient. Committee members expected witnesses to disclose names. But they enforced this edict in an arbitrary manner: While the FLIC permitted leaders of the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens Council to withhold their membership lists, it threatened homosexuals and civil rights advocates with long prison sentences if they failed to identify their associates. After warning one witness that the committee had no desire to engage in a “fishing expedition,” agents told a pastor that “it’s rather odd that you can’t remember any names [sic], You are the first person that we have had here out of some 400 that just sit there and don’t intend to give any names [sic].” As the inquisitors read the riot act in the form of Florida’s perjury statute, many subjects capitulated under pressure, revealed the names of innocent people, and examined mug-shot
books to appease the committee. The FLIC also garnered names from the personal possessions of witnesses. For example, after detaining a Pensacola man, Strickland copied the contents of his address book and planned to contact the people listed therein for interrogation sessions. Guilt by association—the hallmark of McCarthyism—found a new home in the Sunshine State. 44

The committee humbled adversarial witnesses. One case exemplifies the experiences of many Floridians brought before the FLIC. Officers removed a public schoolteacher from his vehicle, placed him in handcuffs, and sent him to the Naples Police Department. While in a locked room awaiting interrogation, the teacher discovered a concealed tape recorder. R. J. Strickland entered the room, falsely identified himself as a lawyer employed by the state Board of Education, and refused to state any charges or reasons for conducting this hearing. When the subject asked to contact his attorney, Strickland denied his request and instead began a three-and-a-half-hour interrogation session, stopping at various times to warn the teacher of the penalties for committing perjury. Strickland produced a stack of papers and claimed he could prove the teacher had associated with others guilty of moral turpitude, yet the teacher could not even tell if the papers Strickland possessed were bona fide affidavits. In other instances, committee members took testimony “off the record,” either during the changing of the tapes or at other pivotal moments. Agent James Barker informed one witness that “we’re going to cut the machine off from time to time so we can talk for a minute,” while Strickland occasionally sent witnesses to a nearby lie detector between audiotape reels and began new tapes by asking, “Is there anything about that record you’ve made previously that you’d like to change?” Investigators even added comments to the end of testimony given by uncooperative witnesses: For example, when a music teacher denied the committee’s allegations of homosexuality, an agent mentioned after the instructor’s departure that “the field that he’s chosen... and a white male... waiting for him in [a] Cadillac” proved the teacher’s malfeasance. 45

Prurient questions punctuated interview sessions. Rather than engaging in a pursuit of evidence, agents chose to intimidate their subjects by forcing them to reveal private matters of no investigative value. While interviewing one man, Charley Johns flippantly asked, “Now, when you suck another man’s penis, do you get the same sensation out of it as when you have yours sucked?” This question seems tame when compared with the verbal groping commonly practiced by the committee. While interviewing one lesbian, an investigator said, “I want you to tell me exactly what happened, go into details, everything that you did, stripped your clothes, you were in the nude, lay down in bed, what position you got into and what she did.” A few children faced inquisitions that no parent would knowingly tolerate without their presence. When agents discovered a teenager who had innocently kissed and held hands with another girl, they wanted her to give them the details. They also lectured her: “Have you ever seen what [homosexuality] can really do to a person? ... It can completely destroy you... You haven’t turned against the male sex then have you?” Even when the committee served the public good by discovering child molesters, “call boy” rings, and the like, it often botched investigations by obstructing duly constituted law enforcement agencies. Evans once boasted that the FLIC probed homosexuals because local police “exhibited little understanding of the problems involved or the techniques desirable in such investigations.” Such a statement, coupled with the FLIC’s willingness to allow known pedophiles to disappear after giving testimony, demonstrates the contempt the Johns Committee had for the separation of powers expressed in Florida’s constitution, which clearly stated that the executive branch “shall take care that the laws be faithfully executed.” 46

Educators and other state employees offered an obvious target. While the committee probed Floridians from all walks of life, it quickly learned the McCarthyite ruse of purging from within. Investigators scrutinized the private lives of public servants to satisfy taxpayers such as prominent Tampa reactionary Sumter Lowry, who once asked, “Why shouldn’t the people who are paying the bills have control over their state institutions?” Although Superintendent Thomas Bailey promised to conduct hearings giving testimony, demonstrates the contempt the Johns Committee had for the separation of powers expressed in Florida’s constitution, which clearly stated that the executive branch “shall take care that the laws be faithfully executed.” 46

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delinquents or adolescent agitators. Indeed, the cult of consensus that pervaded American culture limited political, social, and intellectual debates in both the private and public spheres.47

Florida’s homophobic witch-hunts served as a microcosm for cold war crackdowns throughout the nation. Politicians across America sought to bolster the family at a time when promiscuity, adult literature, changing gender roles, and birth control became more prominent in heterosexual circles. In addition to these redefinitions of heterosexuality, Floridians faced racial crises, animosity between urban and rural regions, and unparalleled demographic growth. As participants in the earlier congressional investigations of the comic book industry had attempted to do with alleged Communist sympathizers, FLIC investigators hoped to uncover “deviate” and “psychopathic” influences among homosexuals that might explain America’s failure to contain external enemies or to preserve tranquility on the home front. “Cold Warriors” thus fashioned gays and lesbians into traitorous beasts that placed sexual desires above national interests. Reinforced by a mass media and a popular culture that defined homosexuals as “perverts” and “sissies,” authorities throughout America conducted comparable probes.48

Ironically, the excesses of the Johns Committee and similar bodies fostered a collective consciousness among lesbians and gays. Prior to World War II, most homosexuals viewed themselves as isolated, individuals guilty of “moral depravity” and worthy of societal and biblical condemnation. When Cold Warriors linked sexual practices with civic loyalty, they brought homosexuality into the public spotlight as never before. Like the African Americans who were questioned about their involvement in civil rights activities, gays and lesbians slowly began to see themselves as a distinct—and unjustly persecuted—minority. And while the culture of the cold war emphasized the trappings of consumerism as a means of sustaining the family, a homosexual identity and gay urban subcultures also grew out of the rise of consumption-oriented capitalism. Although Governor Reubin Askew proudly endorsed Anita Bryant in 1977 by approaching a constitutional right,” neither he nor Anita Bryant could deny the growing economic clout of gay, lesbian, and bisexual Floridians. Besides, barriers have fallen: The state supreme court overturned the vague “crimes against nature” statute in 1971, gay and lesbian student organizations appeared on college campuses, and calls for tolerance and diversity have permeated all levels of the government. Yet challenges still remain.

Groups such as the American Family Association and Take Back Tampa have continued to wage Bryant’s homophobic crusade.49

Even as Floridians began to peer into the Johns Committee’s closet of shame, former FLIC members refused to acknowledge the monstrosity they created. In a 1977 retrospective interview, Charley Johns, who died in 1990, told a reporter, “I’d wish I’d been naive and never known [sic] all that about homosexuals. I didn’t know nothing [sic] about lesbianism before that.” But Johns relished the notoriety his investigations received. Congressman Sam M. Gibbons, a supporter of the University of South Florida and Johns’s contemporary in the state legislature, keenly assessed his rival’s ability to blackmail others when he called Johns “the Christopher Columbus of homosexuality.” Fellow Congressman C. W. “Bill” Young, a former member of the committee, has since attempted to distance himself from the agency’s blatant homophobia by asserting that if the FLIC entrapped homosexuals, “it was done before my time.” Two other members saw little purpose in opening the committee’s records. While W. Cliff Herrell, a former vice chair on the committee, said, “I don’t think there’s anything sinister in those records,” one-time chair William G. O’Neill considered the entire episode “ancient history” and added that condemning the agency is “like saying Columbus mistreated the natives when he came over.” Former representative W. Randolph Hodges remarked, “I’m kind of from the old school. . . . I’m certainly not an admirer of sex perverts.”50

Others remained silent. Farris Bryant, who placed many of his gubernatorial papers in the University of Florida’s archives, continues to deny access to these public records until his passing. Before his death, Remus Stickland told one journalist, “I’m bound by secrecy to the Committee by sworn affidavit.” The man who violated committee rules of confidentiality so blatantly during his life thus became something of an enigma after his death. In contrast, although the committee did force Sigismond Diettrich from his job, it failed to destroy his integrity. In the same letter that recounts his feelings of anger and uncertainty, he also expresses a ray of hope: “I have lost all I had, all I lived for in my proud vanity; but I gained infinitely more in the love and proved devotion of my family, my co-workers, my friends, and my students.” The Purple Pamphlet once warned Floridians that “it behooves us all to come to know the nature of the homosexual, for he is with us in every area of the state.” For Diettrich and the countless other victims of the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee, it behooves us to maintain eternal vigilance, to assure that
such violations of our cherished freedoms never threaten any of us—gay, straight, or bisexual—again.51

NOTES

1. Chapter 93-405, Laws of Florida, restricts disclosure of the “identity of any witness, any person who was a subject of the inquiry, or any person referred to in testimony, documents, or evidence retained in the committee’s records; however, this exemption does not apply to members of the committee, its staff, or any public official who was not a subject of the inquiry.” To protect the many victims of the Johns Committee’s investigations, this chapter includes only names already mentioned in newspapers and other sources. For a comprehensive history of the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee, see James A. Schnur, “Cold Warriors in the Hot Sunshine: The Johns Committee’s Assault on Civil Liberties in Florida, 1956–1965” (M.A. thesis, University of South Florida, 1995).

2. Sigismond Diettrich to Raymond Crist, 24 March 1959, Sigismond de Rudeheim Diettrich Papers, 1933–1960, University of Florida Special Collections, Gainesville; Florida Legislative Investigation Committee Papers (hereafter cited as FLIC Papers). Doc. 4-43 (5 January 1959) and Doc. 2-76 (19 January 1959), Senate Office Building, Tallahassee. The document numbers mentioned above refer to the arrangement of the Johns Committee records in the Senate Office Building. Thus Document 4-43 appears as the forty-third document in the fourth box of the collection. Copies of the committee’s records also reside in the State Archives (Record Group 940, Series 1486) with identical document and box headings. However, the archives rearranged the collection to impose provenance.


sion of the Legislature, FLIC Papers, Doc. 10–19 (13 April 1959); Stark, “McCarthyism in Florida,” pp. 109–11; Chapter 59–207, Laws of Florida. In a personal letter to UF president Reitz, Johns said, “I want you to know that you have my deepest sympathy in having to do all the dirty work that is done at the University of Florida. . . . It was your painful duty to call in those Professors, whom we exposed, whom you had known for years and have to fire them. . . . You did not shrink your responsibilities” (Charley Johns to J. Wayne Reitz, 12 December 1959, Box 35, Reitz Papers).


17. FLIC Papers, Doc. 11–713 (23 January 1961); Doc. 11–1682 (22 March 1963); Doc. 2–204 (9 May 1960); Doc. 2–106 (19 May 1960); Stark, “McCarthyism in Florida,” p. 93. See also McGarrahan, “Peeping Johns.”

18. FLIC Papers, Doc. 3–65 (5 September 1961); Doc. 1–112 (9 May 1963); Doc. 1–113 (27 May 1963).

19. FLIC Papers, Doc. 1–95 (13 October 1960); Doc. 1–78 (13 October 1960); Doc. 1–79 (13 October 1960); St. Petersburg Times, 2 July 1953, 6A.


23. FLIC Papers, Doc. 11–404 (9 November 1961); Doc. 10–37 (undated).

24. FLIC Papers, Doc. 11–1609 (13 November 1961); Doc. 11–1608 (9 February 1962); Doc. 11–1550 (22 November 1961); Doc. 11–1569 (12 December 1961); Doc. 11–823 (undated, 1962); Doc. 11–1153 (20 February 1962); J. Wayne Reitz to Charley Johns, 18 November 1961, Box 72L, Reitz Papers.

25. FLIC Papers, Doc. 11–122 (16 April 1962); Doc. 4–42 (16/17 April 1962); St. Petersburg Times, 17 April 1962, 7A.

26. St. Petersburg Times, 4 March 1962, “Sunday” magazine, p. 3; 12 March 1962, 1A, 8A; St. Petersburg Independent, 18 January 1962, 8B. FLIC Papers, Doc. 12–281 (7 March 1962); Memo from Board of Health to Florida Children’s Commission’s Advisory Committee on Homosexuality, 4 June 1962, with assorted clippings; Governor Farris Bryant Papers, Record Group 102, Series 736, Box 57, State Archives.


32. Peter, “Florida’s Sinner Safari,” p. 15; “Still Another List,” The Nation, 22 June 1964, p. 615; St. Petersburg Times, 29 January 1964, Johns Committee Scrapbooks, University of South Florida Special Collections. See also McGarrahan, “Peeping Johns.”


34. Chapter 63–545, Laws of Florida; Tampa Tribune, 25 January 1964, Johns
Committee Scrapbooks, University of South Florida Special Collections; St. Petersburg Times 23 January 1964, 1A. See also McGarrah., “Peeping Johns.”

35. FLIC Papers, Doc. 10-31 (undated); Doc. 4-77 (4 June 1954); Doc. 11-1699 (26 November 1963); Doc. 10-44 (undated); “Interim Report,” Doc. 10-53 (March 1964); St. Petersburg Times, 23 November 1963. Johns Committee Scrapbooks, University of South Florida Special Collections.


37. Telegram from Richard Gerstein to the FLIC, 18 March 1964, Staff Report no. 15. 3 April 1964, Box 1, FLIC Papers, State Archives; John E. Evans to Stephen H. Jones (executive secretary, Florida Civil Liberties Union), 15 May 1964), Box 2, FLIC Papers, State Archives; St. Petersburg Times, 19 March 1964, 1A, 1A6; Tampa Tribune, 20 March 1964, and St. Petersburg Times, 20 March 1964 and 31 March 1964, Johns Committee Scrapbooks, University of South Florida Special Collections.

38. Tampa Tribune, 30 January 1964, 4B; St. Petersburg Times, 19 March 1964, 1A, 1A6; St. Petersburg Independent, 21 March 1964, Johns Committee Clippings, University of South Florida Special Collections; FLIC Papers, Doc. 4-73 (18 April 1964); “Homosex Report,” 30 May 1964, Box 1, FLIC Papers, State Archives; Professor Anonymous [pseud.], “Perverts under the Palms,” Confidential Magazine (February 1964): 48, found in Box 1, John Egerton File on the Johns Committee, University of South Florida Special Collections.

39. Tampa Tribune, 20 April 1964, 2B; FLIC Papers, Doc. 11-14 (6 April 1964); Doc. 11-16 (28 April 1964); Doc. 11-6 (23 April 1964); Doc. 11-17 (30 April 1964); Doc. 11-66 (13 July 1964); Doc. 11-68 (7 July 1964); Chapter 80001, Florida Statutes; “Minutes of Advisory Committee,” 15 May 1964, 28-30 June 1964, Box 1, FLIC Papers, State Archives.


41. Associated Press news release, 30 September 1964, Box 82, Bryant Papers, State Archives; “Resolution by St. Petersburg Post #14 of the American Legion,” 12 October 1964, Governor Hayden Burns Papers, Record Group 102, Series 131, Box 38, State Archives; D. Stephen Kahn, letter to author, 17 June 1991.

42. FLIC Papers, Doc. 3-12 (undated); Doc. 3-60 (13 October 1958); Doc. 2-175 (24 May 1961); Doc. 4-36 (undated); Doc. 1-5 (undated). See also Dennis Altman, The Homosexualization of America, the Americanization of the Homosexual (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1982), p. 70.

43. FLIC Papers, Doc. 3-80 (24 June 1962); Doc. 1-49 (17 February 1961). See also Box 13 of FLIC Papers at the State Archives, for examples of the committee’s “investigative leads.”