Erasing Excellence: The State Department’s Abandonment of LGBTQ Diplomats

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It’s been over 70 years since the US State Department expelled over 1000 LGBTQ diplomats during the Lavender Scare (a period of time during McCarthyism in which LGBTQ individuals were removed from government jobs for fear of being subversives and linked to communism). During the Lavender Scare, the State Department identified employees that it believed belonged to the homosexual community and proceeded to fire those employees or pressure them to resign. While the State Department has formally apologized, it has yet to review the policies and practices that led to the expulsion of these diplomats. As legislation introduced by US Reps. David Cicilline (D-RI) and Joaquin Castro (D-TX) remains stalled, the State Department’s unwillingness to address the issue without congressional intervention highlights many of the concerns that LGBTQ officers in today’s diplomat corps face.

Chief among those concerns is the erasure of LGBTQ individuals’ presence and contributions at the State Department. Outlined in the 2020 report, “Additional Steps Are Needed to Identify Potential Barriers to Diversity,” the Government Accountability Office (GAO) was unable to conduct any analysis on LGBTQ populations at the State Department because sexual orientation is not included in federal personnel records. This presents a significant problem: the State Department does not have an official count of the LGBTQ officers in the corp. This both prevents the State Department from engaging in a rigorous analysis of LGBTQ recruitment and allows the Department to indefinitely defer investments in LGBTQ inclusion and retention.
The State Department often argues that it does not ask for people to self-identify their sexual orientation because it is not a federal requirement for individuals to do so. However, this is a weak argument that allows the State Department to absolve itself of active responsibility to foster an inclusive environment for LGBTQ officers. Additionally, it suggests that the State Department is only seeking to meet the minimum requirements for fostering an inclusive environment. If the State Department was truly committed to LGBTQ-friendly workspaces, it would have already initiated a policy change to welcome LGBTQ officers. However, the State Department has shown that it will follow, rather than lead, when it comes to championing inclusion. The lack of a federal requirement is an excuse to prevent any formal investigations into the State Department’s policies and, therefore, leads to inaction. Real change to federal practice comes from agencies choosing to adopt a practice and then showcasing its benefits to other agencies until it is adopted as a standard practice. For example, the Environmental Protective Agency established the Successful Leaders Program, which trains all new supervisors and teaches them management skills. Following high success, the Office of Personnel Management featured it in its toolkit for adoption at other government agencies. However, the State Department is again waiting for a mandate rather than being a leader—just as it refused to investigate the policies that led to the Lavender Scare. Additionally, the State Department’s inaction causes harm not only to the individual officers but to the collective diplomatic corp.

For example, consider medical care. Officers at the State Department move every two to three years, which means frequently switching medical teams. For LGBTQ officers, the exclusion of their orientation from their personnel files has tangible impacts on their medical care. Officers essentially have to come out every time they begin a new post and switch medical providers as the file provided to their doctors does not contain this information—a burden with huge psychological implications. Asking LGBTQ officers to make this disclosure over and over can be traumatizing, especially given the uncertainty over how the medical team will react. This is also a problem when bidding on posts. LGBTQ officers must weigh their desire for LGBTQ-friendly contexts against the possibility for promotion. In extreme cases, officers are forced to travel to their posts without their LGBTQ partners or are forced to hide their partners once on location. Without an understanding of how frequently officers are placed in this position, the State Department will be unable to assist these individuals and their families and adjust promotion requirements accordingly.

Of course, having the option to self-disclose and maintaining records of LGBTQ employees does not ensure that all LGBTQ employees will self-disclose, nor will it address the countless structural impediments to the full inclusion of LGBTQ officers—and these structural impediments also prevent LGBTQ officers from not only remaining in their positions but receiving opportunities for promotions. The State Department needs to recruit more LGBTQ officers and allow them to rise to the rank of Ambassador and Deputy Chief of Mission and other senior-level positions, as well as create an environment in which LGBTQ officers can
legitimately express their concerns without the fear of judgment or exclusion. While collecting data on LGBTQ officers will not guarantee a change of Department policy or see more LGBTQ officers in positions of power, it is an essential first step toward taking meaningful action.

Another criticism is that officers can simply affiliate themselves with organizations like Gays and Lesbians in Foreign Affairs Agencies (GLIFAA), which represents LGBTQ employees across the State Department, the US Agency for International Development, and other foreign service positions across other government agencies to meet their needs. However, while GLIFAA advocates for LGBTQ officers, it is not a policy-making body and can only provide recommendations to the government agencies. GLIFAA cannot enact policy at the State Department. Additionally, GLIFAA only carries data for officers who willingly seek and actively participate in GLIFAA as an organization. There are likely many other LGBTQ officers that are not a part of the organization but would choose to self-identify in their personnel file.

Finally, there are LGBTQ officers who are actively advocating for LGBTQ-friendly policies within the Department. This argument is not to diminish the labor of individual officers who are trying to make a difference but instead to draw the attention to the larger institutional problem that the State Department has. The fact that there are officers who actively create spaces for LGBTQ officers (as evidenced through the GLIFAA organization) is something that should be celebrated, but this should not detract from the broader argument that the overall environment of the State Department will not change until there is an institutional policy that encouraged self-disclosure from LGBTQ employees.

Self-identification, however, can augment challenges for the LGBTQ community if the entire Department does not actively work to create an inclusive and welcoming environment. Having LGBTQ employees self-identify will not eliminate discrimination. In fact, by self-identifying, LGBTQ employees can place themselves in increased danger if the State Department personnel are not equipped with an understanding of how to support its LGBTQ employees. To mitigate this, the State Department will need to create more streamlined avenues for employees to swiftly report any discrimination that arises out of their identity as an LGBTQ employee with the understanding that it is likely that more discussion about LGBTQ identities will occur as a result of the self-reporting.

The US Foreign Service employs some 13,000 employees. The State Department has a responsibility to protect those employees and to create an environment in which they can thrive. It is not currently meeting this responsibility, and it has no manner in which to even consider addressing the structural inequality LGBTQ officers face if it does not collect data on how many LGBTQ officers it is hiring or has. As a note of caution, we would also like to make it clear that data collection on its own is not sufficient to fully include and support all LGBTQ employees. However, having access to data will allow the Department to begin to make targeted efforts to
bolster its LGBTQ employees’ recruitment and retention rates. For those reasons, we strongly urge the State Department to begin to allow a self-identification option for LGBTQ officers within their personnel files.

4 “State Department,” 2020.
7 “State Department,” 2020.