



Advancing LGBTQI+ Rights, With Julie Dorf

Julie Dorf, co-chair of the Council for Global Equality, sits down with James M. Lindsay to discuss what the United States has done and could do to advance LGBTQI+ rights around the world.

Jim Lindsay:

Welcome to The President's Inbox, a CFR podcast about the foreign policy challenges facing the United States. I'm Jim Lindsay, director of studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. This week's topic is LGBTQI+ rights. With me to discuss US diplomatic efforts to advance LGBTQI+ rights around the world is Julie Dorf. Julie has been a leader in the LGBTQI+ rights movement for nearly three decades.

Jim Lindsay:

She is a co-chair at the Council for Global Equality, a nonprofit organization that works to ensure that the US government and US businesses support inclusion and equal treatment for LGBTI people across the globe. She also founded and directed the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, now OutRight Action International. Thank you for joining me today, Julie.

Julie Dorf:

Thank you for having me.

Jim Lindsay:

If we may, I'd like to begin with your assessment of the global landscape for the fight for LGBTQI+ rights. Are we looking at primarily a positive story, a negative one, something in between?

Julie Dorf:

I guess it's something in between. I mean, I think in the long arc, we're heading in the right direction. I mean, it is so crystal clear that young people everywhere, from Texas to Georgia to Nigeria, want their rights and are not

willing to wait. And we're seeing all kinds of progress here and there. But I would say in the last couple years, particularly in the Trump and post-Trump period, we are seeing some significant backlash or at least a reaction to this positive trajectory.

Julie Dorf:

I really wish there was more of a moveable middle, but I think the polarization across so many issues applies to this one as well. You see, you know, countries that are very clearly LGBT friendly, and you see many who are in the hostile category, and fewer and fewer in that in between stage. So, it's a good question about how fast that trajectory going forward is really going to keep moving.

Jim Lindsay:

Well, let's start with the countries that you would put in the LGBTQ friendly column. Where have been some of the big successes?

Julie Dorf:

Well, I think like last year we won marriage equality in Chile. Taiwan also, another country where we won marriage equality. If you look at any of the most recent in the last three years like mass popular movements, whether it was Sudan or Lebanon or Chile, Thailand, you see LGBTQ issues and people

very visibly part of those mass movements. So, you know, there's governments and then there's what's happening in a real popular level.

Julie Dorf:

Marriage equality is a great example of a legal reform and policy that really does move hearts and minds, but there's a lot of other telltales, I would say, for the LGBT "friendly" environments, whether it's X markers on our passports, one of the Biden deliverables in this last year, really recognizing that there's more human diversity.

Jim Lindsay:

For people who don't follow the issue, Julie, what's the X mark on a passport?

Julie Dorf:

An X marker on... There's about 12 countries in the world, including now the United States, that allow their citizens to identify as something other than male or female. Some people identify as both. Some people identify as neither. There's quite a bit of gender identity diversity in the human population, which is actually a really beautiful thing in countries that

embrace that diversity and see that as good for human evolution, as opposed to threatening to anybody. Those would be the countries I would put in the friendly category.

Julie Dorf:

But that said, there is no perfect place, right? There is discrimination and bias and bigotry that exists everywhere, and there are... I mean, our US military flip flops on whether or not transgender people can serve in the military. But even today to almost two years into the Biden administration, people who have intersex characteristics aren't allowed to serve in our military. There's lots and lots of progress that every country can still make.

Jim Lindsay:

You mentioned, Julie, that we're seeing a movement for LGBTQ rights across countries, driven in good part by young people. What do you think accounts for that? Because I used to be a young person, but again, when I was a young person in the 1970s and 1980s, again, you know, things like homosexuality were stigmatized, if not criminalized. Why do you think it is today that we see this movement for recognizing the diversity of the human experience?

Julie Dorf:

When I started doing this work in the late '80s, early '90s, it was a different time and we didn't even have email. We were just getting the fax machine. Clearly technology and globalization have changed our entire world across so many issues. And what is available just in terms of information, in terms of role models, in terms of norms has changed immensely. People with access to the modern world, I think, are able to find themselves. I think also the actual legal norms have changed.

Julie Dorf:

When I started doing this work officially in 1990, there was... I mean, Amnesty International didn't even work on LGBTQ rights. People who were put in prison because they were gay, and there were many more countries then, there's only 69 countries today that criminalize same sex adult

intimacy... Didn't consider that part of the human rights space. That has changed. The UN has recognized sexual orientation and gender identity as actual legitimate grounds for human rights abuses that deserve to be addressed.

Julie Dorf:

Even if there is dissent by the Russia's and the Egypt's of the world, there is an evolving norm that recognizes the inherent dignity of everybody, including those who identify as lesbian or gay or bisexual or transgender or intersex.

Jim Lindsay:

Julie, let's talk about the evolution of US diplomacy on LGBTQI+ issues. Again, it's a relatively new addition to the US foreign policy agenda. As you mentioned, when you started out in the business back in the late '80s, early '90s, again, if you were homosexual, you weren't allowed to serve in the military. Then we had the whole, "don't ask, don't tell." I mean, I remember back in 1999 when James Hormel became the first openly gay US ambassador, what a big deal it was. But we're in a different place right now. How do we get from where we were then to where we are today?

Julie Dorf:

Well, it's funny, because I started working on making sure that LGBTQ people were included in some way in US foreign policy well before Jim Hormel became the first of gay politically appointed ambassador. And the reason was that folks were fleeing very, very desperate situations because they were being persecuted. For those who were able to access other countries, including the United States and Canada at the time, we needed to help them document those cases and actually make sure that our asylum systems were open to LGBTQ people and that the basis for their persecution was recognized.

Julie Dorf:

A big part of my very first work, which was absolutely lifesaving, was making sure that those abuses made their way into what was then called the

Bluebook, the annual Human Rights Report of the United States, and they did, even in the Bush administration, Bush, Sr. And starting then, here and there, if we got enough documentation to the state department, they would make their way into those reports, which were essential for the immigration system to recognize folks as having been persecuted.

Julie Dorf:

Fast forward today, we have an actual section in every Human Rights Report that the political officer in the embassy is required to complete that looks at the status of violence and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. And recently, the President in honor of pride came out with an executive order, and one of the points of that most recent executive order is to really look at the practice of conversion therapy, a very widespread

so-called conversion therapy, a widespread phenomenon in the United States and elsewhere to try to change someone's sexual orientation or gender identity.

Julie Dorf:

And that's now going to also be required to be documented in the annual human rights report. Now, that's just one little bit of what is part of our very big diplomatic engagement around the world. Interestingly, many advocates around the world and diplomats do care a lot about what the United States says is their human rights record. We have a lot of other tools besides what comes out in the Human Rights Reports. I think much of what is most effective is when these issues end up in the bilateral dialogues that happen in private.

Julie Dorf:

I've been thinking a lot about the 2011... Hillary Clinton's speech during annual Human Rights Day in Geneva. That was one of the most brilliant and humble speeches that I think has been delivered by a senior diplomat in the United States on LGBT rights, if not the most important and humble.

Jim Lindsay:

What stands out to you about Secretary Clinton's speech?

Julie Dorf:

Well, she talked about the evolution of the issue and how we still don't have it right, and that we've made lots of mistakes, and that we're all somewhere on a learning curve around understanding LGBTQI+ issues. But that, you know, instead of doing the naming and shaming game, which sometimes is part of what has to happen, she really invited partnerships to look at where we could all be doing a better job. I think that is actually the right approach.

Julie Dorf:

I mean, there's countries that are far beyond what the United States has been doing on banning conversion therapy, for example, or we weren't the first with the X marker. We are the 12th with the X marker. We were not the first with marriage equality. We just changed our position on supporting advocates around the world who are pushing for full recognition of their families. It's definitely a long journey. And then there's other ways that we work in the multilateral spaces on LGBTQ rights.

Jim Lindsay:

The 2011 Hillary Clinton speech is one, I believe, where she said that gay rights are human rights, doing a riff on her 1995 Beijing speech where she argued that women's rights are human rights.

Julie Dorf:

Exactly. For those of us who were in the room, it was an amazing experience to have her say gay rights are human rights and human rights are gay rights once and for all with the same cadence as she did in Beijing. I happened to be at the Beijing speech as well. One of the differences was that the Beijing conference was on women. In Geneva, everyone was invited without knowing what the speech topic was. Because they knew if they had pre-

Jim Lindsay:

Oh really?

Julie Dorf:

Yeah. If they knew, if they had pre-announced that it was an LGBT rights speech, more than half the world wouldn't have showed up. You had invitations that went out to all the diplomats in Geneva for Hillary Clinton's December 10th human rights speech, and then a few who really wanted to walk out once they realized what it was. It was an extraordinary experience to be in that auditorium. Many of us were really crying at the historic moment and others were having to politely sit through something that was very, very uncomfortable for them.

Jim Lindsay:

Well, let's talk if we can, Julie, about how the United States can translate the idea that gay rights are human rights into actionable policy. When we talk about US diplomacy trying to address LGBTQI+ issues, what exactly are you talking about? What are the tools? What are the levers? What are the initiatives that the US government has and can undertake to make change on these issues?

Julie Dorf:

Well, I think our issues intersect with every other key issue. Like these aren't special or separate rights. They're just part and parcel of everything else. But LGBT people have particular needs just like any vulnerable community that need to be addressed in particular ways.

Julie Dorf:

So, for example, if we're talking about just basic democratic norms like voting, if you're a trans person in a South American country where voting is done segregated by gender, women vote here and men vote here, and you're let's just say a male to female transgender person, but your documents say that you're male but you present as female, you are going to be afraid to stand in the right line and vote in the right place. You will probably stay home even

if you're fined for not voting because it's too dangerous. So, things like legal gender recognition are key to a successful democracy.

Julie Dorf:

If you look at what's going on in Ukraine right now and humanitarian assistance for all Ukrainians that our government is trying to provide, you know, similarly you've got very, very specific needs in this community that may not be as obvious to a generic humanitarian assistance provider, such as ensuring that there's hormone therapy available for trans folks, or that a family with kids of two people who aren't technically married because there is no capacity to be technically married should actually be housed together or should be able to leave the country together.

Julie Dorf:

We have any host of ways that we both benefit and are excluded from basic rule of law or development practices that require a particular type of attention and inclusion. And that's basically the type of work that we do here in Washington is to make those things known to our foreign policy makers, but also to the practitioners.

Jim Lindsay:

Understood that these issues intersect with other issues, do you have a sense of whether there are some strategies that are more likely to be effective than others? Are there strategies that have been tried and found to be counterproductive?

Julie Dorf:

Well, I think one foreign policy strategy I think that is not productive across any issue is the "go at it alone" is the kind of America trying to create its own spaces for everything, as opposed to really working with other like-minded governments or in preexisting multilateral spaces. I think sometimes the United States is willing to do things that other countries won't do and that's much appreciated and it's important to lead. Sometimes leading from behind

is a much better strategy and sometimes doing things very quietly and privately is a better strategy.

Julie Dorf:

I don't think there's a one size fits all, but we have a lot of tools at our disposal. We have a lot of points of leverage. Human rights issues generally are in the mix among many other equities like military and economic and other types of things that factor into our bilateral relationships. But we believe that this should be in there as well in most cases. Take Uzbekistan right now. We have a growing close relationship with the country militarily and they would like economically, especially since the pull out of Afghanistan.

Julie Dorf:

It's a country in the midst of a penal code reform process with a very bad anti-gay law that is used on a regular basis. The government itself says they have 149 gay men in prison today, and they use forced anal exams as a way of "proving" that someone has engaged in gay male sex, which we think is a form of torture. And yet they don't want to change that law as part of their penal code reform.

Julie Dorf:

We think that the United States should put pretty serious pressure and even sometimes consider conditioning things based on a host of reforms that should also include at a minimum not criminalizing LGBT life.

Jim Lindsay:

Now, you mentioned that the United States should sometimes let other countries lead. What countries out there would you say are leaders on these issues?

Julie Dorf:

I think that there's been historically a core group of European countries, particularly the Scandinavian countries, who have led both with their money and their mouths on these issues well before the United States came onto the right side of history with this. But the other countries that actually are in sometimes way more effective leaders, depending on the issue and the location, include Argentina, Mexico, Uruguay, Chile, sometimes South Africa, Capo Verde.

Julie Dorf:

Increasingly, you know, I think we're going to see some Asian countries take some important steps. I would say that's the place we will see more leaders emerge. Australia has an open lesbian foreign minister right now after their elections. There's 42 countries in the world that are part of the Equal Rights

Coalition, which is a multilateral entity of countries who have agreed that LGBTQI+ issues are not only human rights issues, but belong in foreign policy and foreign assistance. That's probably the core group.

Jim Lindsay:

I would imagine the pushback comes from countries like Russia, which argue that they are defending civilizational values, whatever that term precisely means.

Julie Dorf:

Well, they like to use family. The right wings all over the world like to think that they are protecting family values. We think we are too. But yeah, no, I think Russia has really politicized homophobia in a very deliberate and political way. Putin is the master. He is the original creative thinker around how to weaponize homophobia for political gain starting way back, but in particular 2013 with the first original propaganda bill that makes it illegal to talk about LGBT rights issues in front of minors.

Julie Dorf:

Now, that basically got copied and replicated in many, many, many parts of the world. And just recently, the Don't Say Gay bill in Florida, DeSantis' own communications director very clearly and publicly said that the idea came from Viktor Orban.

Jim Lindsay:

The prime minister of Hungary.

Julie Dorf:

Yes, the prime minister of Hungary, who just re-won his election, despite the fact that he too tried to instrumentalize anti-LGBT sentiment in the same election. And while he won the election in a landslide, actually the LGBT groups, which worked really hard to invalidate the popular referendum one with Orban supporters to X out both the yeses and the nos on that

referendum, which surprised everybody honestly. That's my favorite recent example going back to your original question of where are we headed with this.

Julie Dorf:

Even the cynical attempts to politicize homophobia for political gain don't always work. If we continue to have successful grassroots activism and organizing in the way that the Hungarians did in their just recent April election, I think we will see that actually most people are good and most people don't want to be manipulated for political gain. Most people... There are the true believers who think that homosexuality is a sin and they need to save us, which by the way, we don't need saving.

Julie Dorf:

But I do think that the vast majority of people and certainly young people think that we are as normal as anybody else and deserve equal rights. I actually think the Hungarian situation is a really excellent example of what is possible in our near future.

Jim Lindsay:

Where is China on these issues, Julie? Is it sitting on the sidelines? Is it picking up and amplifying the sort of family values, civilizational values, the weaponization of homophobia like Putin, somewhere else?

Julie Dorf:

China is super interesting and worth watching. I mean, in the last year, actually starting last summer, there has been a new crackdown on Chinese LGBT organizing, but there are actually scores and scores of LGBT community centers across China. There has been a very smart and careful movement that has been built there by openly LGBT people who are visible, who are known, and who are very careful to not necessarily human rights their issues so that they can stay doing what they're doing.

Julie Dorf:

But there has been a recent crackdown. Many of the groups are underground at this point. It's not an easy place. But as far as the government goes, they did stop institutionalizing. It was more considered of mental illness than a criminal sanction in the past that they're no longer doing I think because of economic policy and because of their understanding that... I think the government there understands that discrimination is not actually good for the economy. I think the business argument is, it isn't actually a real argument.

Julie Dorf:

It's not usually what we lead with in terms of what is right and wrong in our societies. But the more inclusive a workplace, the more productive your workers. If you're recognizing the reality, especially in a country as big as China, that there are lots and lots of LGBT people, there are LGBT couples who are having children, who are living in LGBT family situations, it's not good for the bottom line to discriminate against them.

Jim Lindsay:

Julie, you mentioned that Don't Say Gay bill in Florida. It's part of a broader backlash against LGBTQ rights here in the United States. How is that affecting the ability of the United States to press countries abroad to provide, ensure, and protect LGBTQ rights?

Julie Dorf:

Back to what are our foreign policy tools, our best tool is the power of our example. We lost a lot of credibility in general as a leader on human rights when we let our country get ruled by extremists in the last election, including out of the state department.

Jim Lindsay:

You mean the election of 2016, not the election of '20.

Julie Dorf:

Yes. Sorry. The election of 2016. The Trump-Pompeo era was problematic in and of itself, but much more problematic in terms of what the United States stood for. Seeing what's happening right now with the over 300 anti-LGBT aggressive bills across the United States, it's a huge problem for our credibility. I mean, we maybe never completely deserved the role that we played as a beacon of freedom, but we nonetheless played it. I think we still do.

Julie Dorf:

Let's hope that we can make sure that our country stays open to immigrants, stays able to allow its LGBT citizens all the same rights and freedoms as the non-LGBTI citizens. But it's a scary moment and I do think it hurts us tremendously when we are so full of contradictions in the eyes of the world.

Jim Lindsay:

Speaking of presidential elections, Joe Biden ran for office in 2020 with what he portrayed as a pro-LGBTQI+ agenda. You've already mentioned one success, the X marker on passports. How would you evaluate the Biden administration's efforts on LGBTQ issues in its first 18 months in office?

Julie Dorf:

I think that President Biden has done an excellent job in a lot of ways, and this administration has delivered on many of its promises. In addition to the X marker passports, we have a fantastic special envoy for the advancement of the human rights of LGBTQI persons, Jessica Stern at the state department, who's doing a fantastic job. We have an LGBT coordinator at USAID, who is working on ensuring our foreign assistance is inclusive across the board.

Julie Dorf:

We have a national security council that runs an interagency process that delivers on the promises in the presidential memorandum that the president issued in the second weekend in office that looks at a number of key LGBTQI issues in foreign policy and foreign assistance and things take a while in government and there's a number of-

Jim Lindsay:

Never have truer words been spoken.

Julie Dorf:

There's rule making that needs to happen around non-discrimination provisions and foreign assistance. We still don't have an assistant secretary for human rights because we can't get someone through the Senate. I think the administration has tried really hard and delivered on their promise to have our government look like America, but we could do a little bit better job on the foreign policy side of the house being a little less male and a little less straight white male.

Julie Dorf:

Our country has had, you mentioned, Jim Hormel as the first openly gay political appointment and gay ambassador. We've had 24 openly gay male ambassadors and one lesbian. Just recently, Chantale Wong became the first open lesbian to the Asian Development Bank. We could do a little better job

in terms of the gender ratio. But that said, I think the key thing is making sure that these issues rise to the level of importance in our actual bilateral negotiations and conversations and putting our money where our mouths are.

Julie Dorf:

We have excellent foreign assistance programs, both at state and USAID, that focus on LGBTQI populations, but they're teeny. It's like \$10 million out of our entire foreign assistance.

Jim Lindsay:

For the world.

Julie Dorf:

It is such a drop in the bucket, particularly relative to the need. I mean, if you look through the annual Human Rights Reports and see the seriousness of the abuses, the imprisonment, the murders, the impunity that governments are left with, our programming does not come anywhere close to matching the seriousness of the issues and the need. We talked about kind of the Don't Say Gay bills and the instrumentalization of homophobia for political gain.

Julie Dorf:

But I think what's been happening in the United States and abroad is that extremists of all stripes have actually united in a very, very significant way. And so the white nationalists and the anti-Semites and the homophobes while perhaps in the past been different types of organizations are actually very much united in their strategies, in their rhetoric, in their scare tactics and their ways of organizing and dividing people. Now that said, I don't think ultimately hate wins. I think love wins, and I think we're on the right side of this.

Julie Dorf:

But I think we need to look at... Our foreign policy and our foreign assistance needs to look at LGBTQ people not as this kind of small minority, but actually as the canary in the coal mine for all kinds of democratic norms and progress. If you are addressing the needs of the most marginal, you will have a much better chance of winning this bigger war against authoritarianism and anti-democratic forces.

Jim Lindsay:

At the end of the day, Julie, are you optimistic or pessimistic about the direction we're headed in?

Julie Dorf:

Oh, it's hard. I am not optimistic in the short run, but I am optimistic in the longer run. I do think that some of what we're seeing is a reaction to progress and a very harsh and intense reaction to progress and to diversity of all types and to the concepts of pluralism. I think that that is inevitable, but we live in a country that's heavily armed. In the short run, I think I'm actually quite scared about our next election.

Julie Dorf:

I'm quite scared about the state of the environment, how we're going to reprioritize our lives and our policies around what's really going to make for a sustainable, better, freer world. I do think human beings ultimately will do the right thing, but I think it might take a long time and there's going to be a lot more pain before we get there.

Jim Lindsay:

On that sobering, yet optimistic note, I'm going to close up The President's Inbox for this week. My guest has been Julie Dorf, co-chair at the Council for Global Equality. Julie, thank you very much for joining me.

Julie Dorf:

Thank you.

Jim Lindsay:

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Jim Lindsay:

Today's episode was produced by Rafaela Seiwert, with senior podcast producer, Gabrielle Sierra. Rafaela did double duty as a recording engineer. Thank you very much, Rafaela. Really appreciate it. Special thanks about to Dominic Bocci, Margaret Gach, and Markus Zakaria for their assistance. This is Jim Lindsay. Thanks for listening.