

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6225

June 28, 2021

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

In recognition of Pride Month, I write to request that the State Department establish a permanent exhibit on the “Lavender Scare” in the National Museum of American Diplomacy to recognize the wrongful dismissal of State Department personnel in the 1950s and 1960s due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. In 2019, I introduced the Lavender Offense Victim Exoneration Act, which I intend to re-introduce this year as a part of my State Department Diversity and Inclusion bill, which calls for such an exhibit to ensure that this history is not forgotten.

During the “Lavender Scare” in the 1950s and 1960s, at least 1,000 people were wrongfully dismissed from the Department under the pretense that their sexual orientation or gender identity made them vulnerable to blackmail and rendered them security risks. Many other patriotic Americans were barred from serving in the Department due to a screening process that explicitly sought to prevent the hiring of individuals because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Even following the “Lavender Scare” itself, the Department continued with patterns of behavior and practices that made careers for LGBTQIA+ personnel challenging. As an example, well into the 1990s, the Department’s Bureau of Diplomatic Security continued to investigate the employment of State personnel who were deemed “security risks” on the basis of their sexual orientation.

The “Lavender Scare” is a stain upon the reputation of the U.S. Government and it runs counter to our nation’s most fundamental beliefs regarding individuality and equality of opportunity. But just as importantly, by limiting who could serve at the Department of State, this terrible part of our history prevented the Department from developing a workforce that drew on the expertise and excellence of all of the American people, and from truly representing America in its work.

Throughout my 28 years in Congress, I have seen firsthand the role that diversity plays in strengthening our military, diplomatic, and foreign assistance efforts by expanding the pool of experiences, options, and ideas that we as a nation can draw on. In the 21st century, diversity must be a strategic imperative for the State Department. I am pleased that you have taken on a commitment to improve diversity as one of your top priorities as Secretary, and I look forward to working with you to strengthen the diversity of Department personnel. To properly pursue our diplomatic objectives in the future, we must address and reflect upon our history.

A permanent exhibit on the “Lavender Scare” at the National Museum of American Diplomacy will not only represent a long-awaited acknowledgment of the sufferings of LGBTQIA+ federal employees, but also provide an in-depth understanding of this history for all Americans who visit the museum, an essential element of preventing such a history from repeating itself. Most importantly, to members of the LGBTQIA+ community, especially those aspiring to join the U.S. diplomatic corps, such an exhibit will show that the Department is committed, in both words and deeds, to incorporating the views and ideas of all Americans in the crafting of our foreign policy. I look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Robert Menendez". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "R" and a long, sweeping underline.

Robert Menendez
Chairman