

Tanya Domi: Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project, recorded at The Graduate Center of The City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing forming New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi: Brynn Tannehill is a Naval Academy graduate and aviator who earned her master's degree in operations research from the Air Force Institute of Technology in 2008. She has since worked in the defense industry as a senior analyst and research scientist. After transitioning in 2012, she has been an activist and researcher on transgender issues writing for the New York Times, Slate, Salon, and other media outlets while acting as a board member of SPART*A and the Trans United Fund. She is author of the book Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Trans But Were Afraid to Ask. She currently works for a nonprofit think tank in the Washington DC area, where she lives with Janice, her wife of 19 years, and their three children. It is fortuitous she joins us today, less than 24 hours after the Pentagon announced it is banning transgender service members in active duty. Welcome to The Thought Project, Brynn.

Brynn Tannehill: Thank you.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for being here today. Well, first off the bat, we have news. You happen to be a board member and a founder of the trans service members advocacy group SPART*A. I actually was a founder too, so it is fortuitous that you're here today, one day following the announcement by the Pentagon yesterday that a directive implementing the Trump Administration's ban of transgender service members would go into effect in 30 days. What do you have to say about this? Where are we at this moment? It looks like a huge setback, and what can we expect next?

Brynn Tannehill: Well, this is hugely disappointing that this was allowed to go into effect. There was no reason for it to be devised in the first place. The entire policy was based off of a series of tweets inspired by Mike Pence's office and the Family Research Council, anti-LGBT hate groups. So the whole thing started off with animus, and then it looked for a method to get to that point of animus, which you're not supposed to be able to do legally, but here we are. The policy itself is, in effect, a new "don't ask, don't tell." In effect, you can be transgender, you just can't do any transgender things, like transitioning or changing your gender markers, or getting medical care. And it's essentially like "don't ask, don't tell," where you could be gay. You just can't do any of the gay things.

Tanya Domi: Exactly.

Brynn Tannehill: And I can't believe that we've gone backwards this far so quickly.

Tanya Domi: Yeah. I think it's an ominous moment, and it should be a wake up call, not only to the LGBT community, but it needs to be more broadly understood of how this is a threat to any minority in this country.

Brynn Tannehill: This is firmly directed at transgender people, and setting a precedent that you can take a population of people and systematically discriminate against them, not because of any actual impact on their ability to do the mission. We just had one of our transgender members get through Air Assault School and he managed to power through it on a torn ACL.

Tanya Domi: That's pretty impressive.

Brynn Tannehill: So to give you an example, if you have a woman who takes estrogen supplements, it's a little blue pill you take once a day. She can take it. If a transgender woman takes that same pill, she's excluded from military service, right? So it's not the medication. It's not the condition. It's not the effects of the medication. It is, in fact, about the person being transgender.

Tanya Domi: Exactly. Well, it's a really sobering moment, and not unsurprising to me, but nonetheless shocking. Despite that, and it's very true, it's a very sobering moment, there has been a seismic shift in visibility of trans people in American society during the past decade. The emergence of Caitlyn Jenner, despite whatever controversies associated with Caitlyn coming out, the actress Laverne Cox, the activist Janet Mock, the celebrity Chaz Bono, and former Navy Seal and war veteran Kristin Beck. To what extent has these coming out trans people, what extent has it helped transgender, the advancement of transgender rights, or has it hurt? I'd like to hear your thoughts on this.

Brynn Tannehill: This is kind of the mother of all mixed blessings, and it's kind of a complicated question. When I first started writing about trans issues, the polling data said maybe 8% of Americans knew somebody who was transgender. The most recent data puts it somewhere just north of 20%. That's a huge jump. That level of increase wasn't seen with gay people except during the plague years, as that started bringing things to the forefront. So like the plague years, there's also some terrible, terrible consequences to that visibility, among them being in 2015, the religious right and anti-LGBT hate groups realized that [inaudible 00:06:13] was lost. They were going to lose marriage equality, and that they were going to shift all their efforts to transgender people.

Brynn Tannehill: At the same time, we had the disastrous election of 2016, and the packing of the courts with extreme nominees that were sponsored by The Heritage Foundation and The Federalist Society, many of whom have ties to anti-LGBT hate groups that have legal arms, such as the Alliance Defending Freedom. And we're seeing an all out assault on the civil rights of transgender people as a result of us becoming the focal point for their animus, and we're losing a lot. So we have arrived at this weird point in history where more people know us, more people accept us, that some of the polling data shows that we're up to 70%

approval for transgender people in the military, but because our judiciary and our government no longer represents the people or care what the people think, they represent the narrow interests of the religious right, we're actually going backwards in a direction that the American people don't want. But unfortunately, most Americans don't vote based off of LGBT issues. They vote on other things. They look at this as, "Too bad, so sad, but I'm going to vote on my wallet or something else."

Tanya Domi: Right. This is sort of parallel to the time period when I was in the movement where the millennials had really moved into the voting electorate, and so the same thing was going on, that the American people were more openly embracing LGB people, but the politicians weren't moving with the people at that time, and there was a great deal of resistance, and that's how we ended up with "don't ask, don't tell." It was like three quarters of the Democratic caucus voted for, "don't ask, don't tell." And Congressman Barney Frank cut a deal with President Bill Clinton on security clearances and that's how he was able to support "don't ask, don't tell."

Tanya Domi: Yeah. It's a really difficult period, and yeah, I think there will continue to be losses, unfortunately, and my greater fear is not only are the courts packed, and this is going to be very problematic for trans people, but for I think all people that are minorities, LGB, women, people who are Muslim, I mean, the list goes on and on. These courts are going to be a really hostile area on civil rights, I believe, for the next generation.

Brynn Tannehill: The three groups that are being most by the administration, I mean, everybody's being targeted, but the people that they can go after the most directly and most obviously are immigrants, Muslims, and trans people.

Tanya Domi: Yes.

Brynn Tannehill: Immigrants, we can ... Screaming children in cages. I don't know that I can say a lot more about that. Muslims are protected by the first amendment, but that's still not enough to hold up in Hawaii v Trump, but transgender people have the weakest level of protections of anybody in this group that are citizens of the United States.

Tanya Domi: Right, because they don't have any status.

Brynn Tannehill: The one federal act that protected transgender people specifically, the Violence Against Women Act, was allowed to lapse.

Tanya Domi: Right. Was not ... Yeah. it sunsetted.

Brynn Tannehill: So where we're at now is that we have the right wing arguing that transgender people shouldn't be allowed to use bathrooms at all, based off of the idea that it violates a person's privacy to even have the possibility of sharing a bathroom

with transgender people. They're trying to get rulings that transgender people aren't protected by Title VII or Title IX. They're trying to get rulings that uphold the ban on trans people in the military. They're trying to strike down laws against reparative therapy, which are mostly targeting transgender youth now.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Brynn Tannehill: We are going backwards so quickly.

Tanya Domi: And I'm sure that it's becoming apparently clear to lots of people that there's so much at stake in next year's presidential election.

Brynn Tannehill: That's the thing, is I'm not quite sure the American public understands just how far the religious right would go when it comes to transgender people. If you look at their playbook from Project Blitz, they hold that it is in the public interest of government to promote policies that minimize the number of transgender people in America.

Tanya Domi: Well, yeah. I was going to talk about this later, but since you're bringing it up, I think one of the most startling moments about this administration and how they were targeting transgender people was when there were reports by the New York Times in October reporting that they had obtained a draft of an HHS redefinition of transgender, and that would like violate not only the tenants of everything that the American Psychiatric Association has done and the American Psychological Association, but the fact the HHS thought they had the authority and the skill and understanding and competence to draft such a definition, I thought it was absolutely shocking.

Brynn Tannehill: What you have to understand about that HHS memo is it conforms with the policy goals of the Family Research Council and The Heritage Foundation who want to make sure that transgender people cannot be affirmed in their gender in any legal way. And I have it on good authority that a major federal agency is going to be changing their policy for transgender employees soon to implement the HHS guidelines. And without revealing sources or the agency, I can tell you that the end state goal of these policy is to force transgender people working in the federal service to face the choice of detransition or be fired, and the way you accomplish that is say, "Well, your original birth certificate said male. We are going to treat you as male, therefore we need you to cut your hair and come in wearing a suit and tie tomorrow. And if you don't, we'll write you up. You do it again, we write you up.

Tanya Domi: The third time, probably you're fired.

Brynn Tannehill: And not even your union can protect you.

Tanya Domi: Just so our listeners know, the Family Research Council is listed on the Southern Poverty Law Center's list of groups that are considered hate groups that are

anti-LGBT. These people are now inside the administration making law and policy.

Brynn Tannehill: And the New York Times wrote an article about this. The president of the Family Research Council, Tony Perkins, bragged that he has never had access to a White House like this before, and he was around during the second Bush Administration as well, and even W didn't want this guy too close to him.

Tanya Domi: Yeah. I'm very familiar with Mr. Perkins. Very familiar. Let me also talk about your book. Your book is Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Trans But Were Afraid to Ask. In your chapter titled Medicine and Mental Health, you lay out the DSM-V definition of gender dysphoria as being a significant departure from previous versions, in that gender dysphoria is not a mental disorder. Rather, it is concerning the distress caused by being transgender. So also unlike LGB people, there is often a medical component to being transgender, including nonsurgical interventions, but also you lay out several myths about gender confirmation surgery, and I thought that your myth listings were really helpful to somebody, especially somebody who doesn't know anything about transgender life. Do you want to talk about those? You list like 15 in this chapter, so I'm not sure we can go through all of them, but in your view, just tell me what you think are some of the most significant myths.

Brynn Tannehill: Some of the most significant myths about mental health and medical care for transgender people, one is that all transgender people are mentally disordered. You already mentioned that distress is the critical component. If somebody's happy in their gender and functional, the DSM-V specifically states there's nothing to diagnose. You're not dysphoric if you're absolutely okay with where you're at, so a transgender person who has transitioned, it's been resolved.

Tanya Domi: And they're happy. And they're happy.

Brynn Tannehill: It's like any other acute condition.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Brynn Tannehill: If you're depressed because your spouse died, and you grieved, and you got over it and moved on with your life, well, you're not still depressed. It was an acute condition and treatable. When it comes to medical care, not all transgender people want everything. Not all transgender people want a specific procedure. Something else that's a big myth is that these procedures are cosmetic or they aren't a medical necessity, whereas the American Medical Association over a decade ago recognized the medical necessity of transgender healthcare and so have the US courts.

Tanya Domi: Yeah. I was just going to ask you about that. There are a number of court decisions, and actually that led to Chelsea Manning, who was able to get treatment because of those court decisions.

Brynn Tannehill: And these court decisions date back to the 70s, Pinnicke vs Presser, basically holding that transgender transition related care is the medically accepted way to treat what was then known as transsexualism, when now more commonly known as gender dysphoria, and that it is a treatable condition, that it is a significant condition, and that withholding treatment from prisoners violates the eighth amendment. The courts have already held that deliberately withholding necessary medical care from prisoners is a form of cruel and unusual punishment, so there are very very few cases left where it has been held that transgender prisoners don't have a right to-

Tanya Domi: To treatment.

Brynn Tannehill: ... transgender medical care.

Tanya Domi: Transgender. Okay. So that's a big myth, because as you say in the first chapter, you talk about, "It's not a choice. Being transgender is not a choice." Tell our listeners why.

Brynn Tannehill: First of all, there is an extensive and growing body of evidence that being transgender is related to factors such as external chemicals, endocrine disrupting chemicals, oligo genetics, epigenetics. There's no one out there that's serious researcher that's saying, "Oh, your parents made you do it because you had a domineering mother or a weak father," the kinds of stuff that they used to say make people gay in the 60s.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Brynn Tannehill: Which is what they thought made people trans in the 60s as well. It's just taken longer to go away. One, there is a nature component to it. The other one is, why would anyone choose this? Most transgender people have fought like hell for years to try and fit in until they reach a point where it's, "Either I transition or I'm coming apart." And I would also point out that people don't choose to be gay. They don't choose to be autistic. They don't choose any of these things that make you somewhat aneurotypical in some way, but we don't ask, particularly with regard to autism. There may, may, evidence is mixed, between autism and being trans. We don't look at autistic people and tell them, "Well, you chose to be this," because there's some moral judgment over it.

Tanya Domi: Thank you very much. So with regard to some of the other myths, we've talked about cosmetic. We talked about why it's important in terms of mental health to be able to transition. Myth is, "I don't want to pay for that." What is that about?

Brynn Tannehill: Well, there is this concept that people don't want to pay for something they think is cosmetic or unnecessary, or there's a religious component to it. The same way they don't want to contribute to a health care plan that includes birth control for women, because it will make them promiscuous or something. But

here's the thing, that's insurance. That's the way insurance works, is that it is supposed to cover everyone's medically necessary conditions.

Tanya Domi: Needs. Yeah. Conditions.

Brynn Tannehill: Based off of every major medical organization out there, they have declared formally that health care and mental health care for transgender people is a medical necessity.

Tanya Domi: Very good. I think that myth number 12, "I don't like the term gender confirmation surgery." Tell us why it's shifted from the previous term of sex reassignment surgery to this phrase now, this phrasing.

Brynn Tannehill: So it started out as sex reassignment or sexual reassignment surgery, and then a more common term became gender reassignment surgery, and then shifted to gender confirmation surgery. I use gender confirmation surgery. Why? Because it's confirming the gender with the individual. Reassignment suggests that you are changing the person's gender identity or how they see their own sex rather than affirming how they see themselves internally.

Tanya Domi: Yeah. That seems right. Well, we were talking earlier about the right wing politics, what's driving a lot of these decisions that are adversely impacting trans people right now. It's very obvious that the right wing has seized upon the issue of transgender civil rights, and they use it as dog whistle politics for what they believe is probably the worst impulses of progressive politics and the Democratic Party. I mentioned the HHS definition. Is this the tip of the proverbial iceberg? Where are we? You've called trans related issues the perfect political storm. Why do the Republicans hate trans people?

Brynn Tannehill: I've looked at kind of the composition of the Republican Party, and you've got about 10% that are just pure white nationalists, what you would consider the alt right, and then about 50% is what you would consider the religious right, and then about 40% is what you would consider what I call your Chamber of Commerce Republicans. They don't really care about social issues, they're just going to vote on whoever's giving tax breaks, and zoning things in favor of local business or big business. The problem is, is that the elements that really, really don't like transgender people control the entire direction of the party, and that the Chamber of Commerce Republicans really aren't free to vote the way they prefer to, and the way the Chamber of Commerce would prefer them to vote, because they will probably get primaried. And we've seen that in Texas.

Brynn Tannehill: The reason they hate it, though, is transgender people touch on human sexuality and control of human sexuality. And how do you define if a transgender person is gay or straight? If you see two women holding hands and walking down the street, is that a lesbian couple? Well, what if you don't know if one of them is trans or not? Are they still lesbian? If you control the concepts of toxic masculinity, and masculinity, and gender roles in society, is something that

a patriarchal church desperately needs to control. It also touches on bodily autonomy. If transgender people get to decide what to do with their bits and their reproductive systems, that starts touching on abortion, and a lot of conservative Catholic issues. So there's all these reasons, and one of the other reasons, I hate to say, is that transgender people look different, and because we violate gender stereotypes and paradigms, some people get an immediate "ick" reaction. And all of this drives us to make us both an easy target, one that their base wants to target, and one that's easy to get people riled up about.

Tanya Domi: Yeah. Some of the people that have been getting riled up about it is that, you know the saying, "Sisterhood is powerful." In this case it's been revealed that a number of women feminists, principally second wave feminism, have not been all that accepting of transgender women. Most recently, an example is Martina Navratilova, the former professional tennis star who actually played when Renee Richards was on the tour.

Brynn Tannehill: Beat her all three times they played, by the way.

Tanya Domi: Oh really?

Brynn Tannehill: Yeah. Navratilova beat her every time.

Tanya Domi: She has really sort of put out a fatwa, in a way. Like, "Transgender athletes should not be ... Transgender women athletes should not be able to compete in women's professional sports." There's an offshoot of this, that for example, the Michigan Women's Music Festival chose to shut down rather than to allow boy children and trans women to come to the festival and participate, and they're referring to themselves, it's this term which is trans-exclusionary radical feminists, or TERF. What is going on here?

Brynn Tannehill: I'm going to have to give a history lesson here a little bit.

Tanya Domi: Well, please do, for our listeners.

Brynn Tannehill: Back in the 70s, there were some radical feminists, feminist separatists that did oppose transgender people. They kicked a sound engineer who was transgender by the name of Sandy Stone out of her music collective, forced her out, and that led eventually to Janice Raymond, a radical feminist theorist, very Catholic, who basically wrote a book called *The Transsexual Empire*, and her feminism revolved around, "Either you can give in to the patriarchy or form completely separate women's societies," and have what she referred to as political lesbianism. And this was kind of the basis for ... And she in her book wrote that, on the issue of transsexualism, "I believe it should be morally mandated out of existence," which that's pretty scary words.

Tanya Domi: Wow.

Brynn Tannehill: But the thing was, is that that was never a big group of people, this radical second wave feminists going after third wave feminism going into the 2000s was a relatively small group of people, still fairly vocal. But when I got into the movement, the advice given to me was, "Ignore them. They don't have any power. They're a distraction to the bigger movement." Well, that sort of changed around 2015 when the religious right realized they'd lost on marriage, and organizations like The Heritage Foundation and The Family Research Council and the Alliance Defending Freedom all realized that TERFs, as we call them, they prefer to call themselves gender critical feminist, but the ironic part is the term TERF was originated by someone who was part of the radical feminist community and was cisgender. Not important, not that important. Just a distinction that probably needs to be made.

Brynn Tannehill: When the religious right realized that they had some potential allies, they started feeding them money, and they started sending their own people over there, and they started trying to co-opt the movement. At this point, I can't tell what the radical religious right feminists are, and who the old school TERFs are very much anymore, because they've sort of melded, and you could see that on display when the religious right, and as part of the debate over reauthorizing the Violence Against Women Act brought in a TERF who claimed to be a radical feminist who opposed reauthorizing the Violence Against Women Act because it included transgender women. This was a lesbian woman who would rather not have the Violence Against Women Act at all if it included transgender people, and I can't tell if she's a conservative or just somebody that hates transgender people so much that she's willing to take that hit in order to stick it to the trans community.

Tanya Domi: It just defies logic. I mean, there's some kind of impetus here that has been so perverted. It's disturbing to see it and hear about it. I'm familiar with the lesbian separatist community, because the Michigan Women's Music Festivals, that, and I went to university in that town, and we all went to the Women's Music Festival. That was the thing to do back in the 70s because it was an all women's cultural event that was pretty significant. You know, this has not been great. You've actually referred to, you wrote a piece for Slate last year on Roseanne Barr and her attitudes towards trans people, and about her sort of grandson in her show, right?

Brynn Tannehill: Right.

Tanya Domi: That the character who was non gender conforming.

Brynn Tannehill: And here's the thing, is that there's nothing wrong intrinsically with the character of Mark. There are gender nonconforming people, and I want them to be celebrated. I want them to be supported. I've known kids like that who, they're boys, but they just like sparkly things, and that's awesome. The problem is, is that Roseanne Barr and her TERF background, and even the religious right background is, "Well, yes, you can like sparkly things, but we don't want you to

ever transition. We just want you to be a guy that likes sparkly things," right? But that doesn't address the issue of bodily dysphoria, which wearing sparkly things and makeup doesn't deal with the fact of who you're looking at the mirror. It doesn't deal with being completely uncomfortable with your body, and the character of Mark, the grandson doesn't have that. So there's nothing wrong with the character, but the fact that the character represents an idealized version of where they want to put transgender people eventually made me deeply, deeply uncomfortable, especially given Roseanne's past comments.

Brynn Tannehill: And I'd also like to bring up another point, that everybody acted surprised when Roseanne went off and said all these other horrible things after she said horrible things about trans people. And I compare saying horrible things about trans people to kind of kicking the dog. It's something people do when they think no one's looking or no one cares, but it reveals a lot about their character. And so I find the trans community, when a celebrity or somebody famous comes out and does something absolutely horrible about Muslims or blacks or women, or some other group that people actually care a little bit more about, and they act surprised, I'm like, "I could have told you this was coming based off of the horrible things they were saying about trans people three, four, five years ago. It's just that you're looking now. They were kicking the dog back then."

Tanya Domi: Right. Right. Even members of the gay community were distancing themselves from trans people during the marriage campaign, because they feared that there would be negative consequences in the marriage debate if somehow trans people were part of that discourse. Right? Right. Am I right about that?

Brynn Tannehill: Yes. You're absolutely right, and there's this absolute great quote by Natalie Reed who I adore, and I actually mention her in my book. She was a trans writer that helped get me into writing, because she did the similar kinds of myth busting analysis. But she once made the comment that the vast majority of people only have enough empathy to accept themselves, and I think with a lot of lesbian, gay and bisexual people who are kind of standoffish about trans people, that that's maybe where their empathy stopped, because they couldn't bridge that next step to somebody else who's a little bit different, but still, those other people may also identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

Tanya Domi: Right. I just want to say that for the listening audience, I've known Brynn for like six, seven years. Seven years. Seven years.

Brynn Tannehill: I think we got introduced in 2012.

Tanya Domi: That's right. Seven years this year. I met her when we all came together to form a SPART*A. I'm proud of my role and being a founder. I also worked with you at the New Civil Rights Movement blog, and we did a series of articles together, and I remember I encouraged you. Now you've written this great book, Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Trans But Were Afraid to Ask. 2019. It's a great book. I want to say to those who are in the academy, in academe,

this has the most comprehensive set of citations. It is so impressive that I would recommend it to any graduate student, especially those who might be in PhD education. You are to be congratulated. Despite the terrible moment we are in, it's people like you that give me hope, and I'm delighted we could have you here today.

Brynn Tannehill: Thank you very much. It's been an absolute pleasure.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning in to The Thought Project, and thanks to today's guest, trans activist and author Brynn Tannehill.

Tanya Domi: The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering, and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.