

Paper

These Colors Don't Run: Queer Resistance against the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" Policy

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On December 22nd, 2010, President Barack Obama signed the act that repealed the US military's Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT) policy, which, since its enactment in 1993, had exposed queer servicemembers to discrimination and abuse.¹ In theory, DADT aimed to make a distinction between "homosexuality" as an identity and "homosexual conduct" as an act done while in service, only the latter of which would be grounds for a discharge.² As such, it was originally proposed as a more moderate policy for queer soldiers, as compared to previous policies, which had been far more discriminatory. Previous policy stated that queer servicemembers were fundamentally unacceptable in the military, even if they hid their identity.³ From the start, however, DADT ended up introducing new forms of discrimination for queer servicemembers. National Guardsman Andrew Holmes, for example, was discharged in 1994 for being open about his queer identity, for which he unsuccessfully sued the military. His was one of many such cases that would follow in the wake of DADT's enactment.⁴ Similarly, US Air Force major Margaret Witt was forcibly outed in 2004 and subsequently let go by the Air Force – like Holmes, she sued the Air Force, claiming that her dismissal under DADT had violated her constitutional rights. She won her case and was granted her retirement benefits and reinstatement of rank, with the court agreeing that DADT had violated her rights.⁵

Though DADT had originally been envisaged as a compromise between military leaders, who saw queer soldiers as a threat to the combat readiness of the military, and the queer soldiers themselves, it nevertheless led to numerous discharges of talented personnel for the supposed crime of their sexuality and identity.⁶ After public protests, numerous court cases, and extensive lobbying efforts, Obama would finally proclaim "This is done!", as he signed the act to repeal DADT. His remark was a reference to a story he had told before the signing about a young servicewoman who had asked him to "Get 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'

Notes

¹ This article will use the term 'queer' as an umbrella term to refer to all LGBTQ+ identities. As Faderman notes in *The Gay Revolution*, the usage of queer to denote a variety of LGBTQ+ identities began in the 1990s, when younger LGBTQ+ people reclaimed it. Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle* (Simon & Schuster, 2015), xi-xix.

² "10 USC § 654 – Policy concerning homosexuality in the armed forces" U.S. Code Toolbox, Cornell University Law School, last visited 13 april, 2026, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120213234231/https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/10/654>.

³ Heather Stur, *The U.S. Military and Civil Rights Since World War II* (Praeger, 2019), 123-124, 132-134.

⁴ Stur, *The U.S. Military and Civil Rights*, 132-133.

⁵ Heather M. Stur, "Red, White, Lavender, and Blue," in *Service Denied: Marginalized Veterans in Modern American History*, ed. John M. Kinder and Jason A. Higgins (University of Massachusetts Press, 2022), 113.

⁶ Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle* (Simon & Schuster, 2015), 505-512.

done.”⁷ The repeal of DADT was a major stepping stone in the wider campaign for LGBTQ+ rights in the United States, creating precedent and momentum for later queer rights victories, particularly *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015, which established a constitutional right to same-sex marriage in the United States at the federal level.⁸ This victory was hard-won, as republicans, right wing outlets, and military leadership offered stiff opposition to repeal at every step of the process.

Despite this, many people in the audience privy to the signing had no illusions that this victory was the end of the struggle for queer rights in the military. Among the people in the crowd at DADT’s repeal was Alexander Nicholson, a veteran turned activist who had been one of the people on the forefront of fighting queer discrimination in the military. He shared little of the sense of victory that was felt by others in the room, recounting that “I did not feel the sense of elation or fruition I thought I would feel after all those years of work. (...) deep down I knew that the work was far from done.”⁹ Nicholson would be proven right. Following his reelection in 2024, President Donald Trump vowed to reinstate the transgender ban in the military, which he had introduced in his first term. Accordingly, Pete Hegseth, the Trump administration’s Secretary of Defense, quickly reimplemented the ban on transgender servicemembers.¹⁰ The Supreme Court backed the trans military ban in May 2025, despite the fact that various lower courts had found it violated the constitutional rights of transgender servicemembers.¹¹ At the time of writing, Trump’s and Hegseth’s ban on trans soldiers has harmed the careers of thousands of transgender military personnel, in a widespread campaign of discrimination akin to that practiced under DADT in the 1990s and 2000s.¹² It is against this backdrop of renewed anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination that this article examines the strategies employed by queer servicemembers to fight for DADT’s repeal.

I argue that queer resistance to DADT succeeded because it attacked DADT from various angles at the same time under a single uniting goal, creating cooperation among various fronts and groups. In particular, this interconnectedness can be seen in the way in which the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network (SLDN) was active simultaneously in court rooms, public pressure campaigns, and political lobbying. The SLDN was founded in 1993 explicitly to combat DADT and bring about its repeal.¹³ The SLDN was therefore behind many public pressure campaigns. It also helped with court cases, such as that of Major Witt, and public outreach campaigns. The SLDN was central to the interconnected nature

⁷ Faderman, *The Gay Revolution*, 532.

⁸ *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. 644 (2015) U.S. Supreme Court, last visited 20 April 2026, <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/576/644/#top>.

⁹ Alexander Nicholson, *Fighting to Serve: Behind the Scenes in the War to Repeal “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”* (Chicago Review Press, 2012), 1.

¹⁰ Maya Yang, “US Military will no longer accept trans troops, Pete Hegseth’s memo says,” *The Guardian*, February 10, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/feb/10/military-trans-troops-hegseth-trump>.

¹¹ “Attorney General James Stands with Service Members in Constitutional Challenge to Transgender Military Ban,” Office of the New York State Attorney General, last visited 20 April 2026, <https://ag.ny.gov/press-release/2025/attorney-general-james-stands-service-members-constitutional-challenge>.

¹² Alex Horton & Casey Parks, “Hegseth initiates ban on transgender troops after the Supreme Court Ruling,” *The Washington Post*, May 8, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/05/08/transgender-troops-hegseth-trump-supreme-court/>.

¹³ “A Look At Our History,” Modern Military Association of America, last visited 20 April 2026, <https://modernmilitary.org/about>.

of the DADT repeal movement – this nature was a key reason, I argue, for its eventual success. Beyond SLDN, this article also analyzes the various other means through which queer servicemembers fought DADT, utilizing oral history collections, most notably the *Ask and Tell* (2007) oral history collection assembled by historian Steve Estes, as well as the autobiographies of those who were involved in the campaign. In particular, this article will examine the autobiographies *Fighting to Serve* (2012) by Alexander Nicholson and *Tell* (2017) by Major Margaret Witt. These have been chosen as providing insights into the activities of two key figures in the repeal movement.

The existing historiography on DADT is limited, generally approaching it either as part of a broader queer history, as in Lillian Faderman's 2015 *The Gay Revolution*, or as one chapter in the larger re-examination of the intersection of civil rights and the military being pioneered by new military historians, as in Heather Stur's book, *The U.S. Military and Civil Rights since World War II* (2019). This article will draw on the existing work in both queer history and new military history in order to approach DADT from an intersectional military history perspective. It will argue that the campaign to repeal DADT is unique in both the larger stories of American queer history and the history of civil rights and the military. In doing so, it will focus specifically on the DADT repeal movement's uniquely united nature and why that was so instrumental for its success. For example, while Faderman's chapters on queer soldiers and DADT are expansive, they do not highlight the uniquely interconnected nature of the resistance against DADT. She does, however, make some note of the various strategies employed, examining the repeal of DADT in relation to the struggles of civilian queer civil rights movements. This forms a crucial foundation for my own research.¹⁴ The full history of DADT can only now be told, as oral and autobiographical sources become increasingly available to historians examining the history of the policy and of the movement arguing for its repeal.

The burgeoning field of new military history offers a particularly relevant lens for examining this history. As Stur contends in her 2019 work on the military and civil rights, the postwar history of integration in the military often clashed with broader American cultural beliefs of what a soldier 'should' look like, with African American and queer soldiers challenging these core beliefs.¹⁵ Her analysis builds upon that of historian Margot Canaday in *The Straight State* (2009), who argued that as the US federal state expanded in the early twentieth century, this expansion was accompanied by attempts to define American citizenship (and thus also military service) as heterosexual in nature. In Canaday's analysis, we see the operating rationale that belied many of the policies the military and federal government enacted to keep out queer servicemembers; heterosexuality was the only way to be a good American, and therefore deviation was not to be accepted in the federal machine.¹⁶ As historians David Kieran and Edwin A. Martini argue, "the history of the U.S. military and its activities must be approached in the context of the other histories with which they

¹⁴ Faderman, *The Gay Revolution*, xvii.

¹⁵ Stur, *The U.S. Military and Civil Rights Since World War II*, xi-xiv.

¹⁶ Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton University Press, 2009), 10-15.

intersect...”¹⁷ This article operates from this intersection, focusing on the strategies employed by queer soldiers and veterans and the interconnectedness of their efforts to pursue their rights to military service and an open queer identity.

The structure of the article is in three parts. I first briefly discuss the relevant broader history for understanding DADT, demonstrating its uniqueness compared to previous military policy regarding queer servicemembers. The second part of the paper will analyze the oral histories and autobiographies of the people who publicly challenged DADT and how they engaged broader public opinion. The third part will discuss the specific public outreach organizations and campaigns that underpinned this outreach. It is these latter two sections that will provide the detailed analysis to support my argument that the DADT repeal movement represented a uniquely interconnected example of civil rights struggle.

To understand the roots of the DADT policy, it is important to first look at how the military banned, criminalized, and discharged queer soldiers from its ranks before the 1990s. As Stur has argued, although the military had excluded queer soldiers before the 1940s, it only began developing a standardized policy regarding homosexuality during the Second World War.¹⁸ This eventually took the form of the “undesirable discharge,” which allowed military leadership to quickly remove servicemembers from duty without the process of a court martial and the associated requirements for evidence a dishonorable discharge would require. This was often used against soldiers suspected of being homosexual, whose discharge would also lead to the loss of the benefits associated with the GI Bill. The “undesirable discharge” laid the groundwork for the queer-exclusionary military policy that would follow after the Second World War.¹⁹

In the 1950s, at the height of McCarthyism and the Red and Lavender Scares, the military set out to find and subsequently dismiss queer soldiers over supposed national security concerns. This paranoia over queer people being a national security threat originated in the State Department, with fears of homosexual staff being either amicable to communism or being easily blackmailed by communist agents. This paranoia quickly spread to all levels of the federal government, including the military.²⁰ The military responded a policy harsher than the “undesirable discharge”; it argued that queer identity was fundamentally incompatible with military service. This remained the military’s policy on queer servicemembers until the enactment of DADT in 1993.²¹

On the presidential campaign trail in 1992, Bill Clinton promised to end the military’s discriminatory policies, likening himself to Truman, who had led the charge on racially integrating the military in the late 1940s.²² Once in office, however, Clinton found himself hamstrung by both Congress and the military leadership. He was unable to end the

¹⁷ David Kieran and Edwin A. Martin, “Introduction,” in *At War: The Military and American Culture in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*, ed. David Kieran and Edwin A. Martin (Rutgers University Press, 2018), 5.

¹⁸ Stur, *The U.S. Military and Civil Rights Since World War II*, 123.

¹⁹ Canaday, *The Straight State*, 145-148; Stur, “Red, White, Lavender, and Blue,” 104-107.

²⁰ Naoko Shibusawa, “The Lavender Scare and Empire: Rethinking Cold War Antigay Politics: The Lavender Scare and Empire,” *Diplomatic History* 36, no. 4 (2012): 728-730.

²¹ Stur, *The U.S. Military and Civil Rights Since World War II*, 123, 130-131.

²² Faderman, *The Gay Revolution*, 505-507.

military's discrimination or to get the congressional support needed to enact comprehensive reform. It was in these circumstances that the idea of DADT was born. DADT had been imagined by Clinton, his cabinet, and several members of Congress, as a compromise between military leaders who saw queer soldiers as a threat to the combat readiness of the military, and the queer soldiers themselves, who desired some measure of freedom. Although the policy theoretically made a distinction between queer identity and queer conduct, it led to witch hunts and discharges, returning the situation to one similar to that of the undesirable discharges of the 1940s and 1950s. Around fourteen thousand queer personnel were discharged in the seventeen years that the DADT policy was active.²³ These DADT discharges were not uncontroversial, however, and many of the soldiers let go under DADT frequently sought out various options to challenge the policy.²⁴ It is these acts of resistance that I turn to in the second part of this article.

Resistance to DADT took various forms, including public pressure actions, legal actions, public outreach, and lobbying. Although these public pressure actions have received relatively little attention in the existing scholarship, they were a significant part of the resistance to DADT, most notably the public coming outs of queer high-ranking officers in the 2000s. In 2003, ten years after DADT was enacted by Clinton, three senior officers, Brigadier General Virgil Richard, Admiral Alan Steinman, and Brigadier General Keith Kerr, publicly came out as gay to challenge DADT in an interview in the *New York Times*, alongside similar interviews at other outlets. This was part of a larger public outreach campaign organized by the SLDN.²⁵ As Steve Estes notes, there was no precedent in the long history of the US military's discriminatory policies toward minorities for high-ranking officers doing something so publicly to challenge the military's policy.²⁶ As Steinman argued in the three senior officers' joint *New York Times* interview, "because gays and lesbians are required to serve in silence and in celibacy," DADT operated as "effectively a ban." Richard contended that DADT actively harmed military readiness, as it forced queer servicemembers to choose between service and who they are; "There are gays and lesbians who want to serve honorably and with integrity but have been forced to compromise [...] It is a matter of honor and integrity." Kerr notes that the Clinton and Bush administrations did not tackle homophobic harassment enough: "It needs to be tackled more forcefully. And the president could set the tone."²⁷ Kerr also noted in subsequent years that "I wanted to come out to make a statement that 'Don't Ask Don't Tell' after ten years is not working."²⁸ Their argument was clear: queer servicemembers had been part of the military for a long time and had never negatively impacted military readiness. Steinman, Kerr, and Richard also all noted in their interview that the sacrifices they had made – not being able to be with the people they loved

²³ Faderman, 505-512.

²⁴ Faderman, 505-512.

²⁵ John Files, "Gay Ex-Officers Say 'Don't Ask' Doesn't Work," *The New York Times*, December 10, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/10/us/gay-ex-officers-say-don-t-ask-doesn-t-work.html>.

²⁶ Steve Estes, *Ask & Tell: Gay and Lesbian Veterans Speak Out* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 210-211.

²⁷ Files, "Gay Ex-Officers Say 'Don't Ask' Doesn't Work."

²⁸ Estes, *Ask & Tell*, 210.

and living with a constant sense of paranoia – had pushed them to come out publicly as a protest against DADT.²⁹ All of these reasons, ranging from the harassment and firings faced by queer soldiers to their own experiences with paranoia or sacrifice over the military's discrimination, influenced them to speak out. Their protest interviews and associated public 'coming out' received widespread attention in national news outlets.³⁰ Their protest would therefore go on to influence other queer servicemembers.

One servicemember who felt compelled to come out following the example of Richard, Steinman and Kerr was Army Ranger Brian Hughes. He had dropped out of Yale in the late 1990s to join the Army despite being gay. The Military, however, did not know about his sexuality, and he remained in the closet for the duration of his service. After returning from a tour in Afghanistan and receiving an honorable discharge, he decided to publicly come out to put pressure on the military to end DADT, like the three senior officers had done before him.³¹ The unprecedented public coming out of these three senior officers also pushed other senior and decorated queer officers to publicly come out in protest against DADT, who hoped to make a similar impression. These pressure actions showing queer soldiers who had served professionally for years became a common tactic for the repeal campaign. They showed that queer people had not degraded military readiness, countering the military leadership's argument for keeping DADT. The 2003 interview was also significant because of its publication as part of the SLDN's campaign to mark the ten-year anniversary of DADT's enactment. This points towards how interconnected the repeal campaign was, as SLDN found and provided the senior officers for the public coming out. These coming out actions were important to the DADT repeal movement and were recorded as significant events by national media outlets, becoming a crucial front of the interconnected fight against DADT.

Another front in the repeal movement was legal battles. While many court cases happened as part of the fight against DADT, the case of Major Margaret Witt can be considered one of the most impactful, paralleling the impact of the public coming out of high-ranking officers in 2003. In 2004, Air Force Major Witt became one of the thousands of queer servicemembers discharged under DADT. Like countless of her peers, she had sacrificed in order to not 'tell' about her queerness. She had broken up with a previous partner when she wanted to adopt a child and had lived far away from her base in order to avoid any suspicion over her sexuality. In 2006, she was discharged because it was discovered she was lesbian. This motivated her to ensure it would not happen to any other queer servicemember.³² Jan Gemberling, one of Witt's friends and a lawyer, pushed her to do so. Gemberling had worked on previous cases that challenged DADT's discrimination and thus

²⁹ Estes, 219-225.

³⁰ Bill Hemmer, "Gay ex-military officers speak out," *CNN*, December 11, 2003, <https://edition.cnn.com/2003/US/Northeast/12/11/cnn.gays.military/index.html>.

³¹ Estes, *Ask & Tell*, 241-247.

³² Faderman, *The Gay Revolution*, 508-509; Margaret Witt and Tim Connor, *Tell: Love, Defiance, and the Military Trial at the Tipping Point for Gay Rights* (ForeEdge, 2017), 89-94.

knew the significance of someone like Witt, a career officer who had received accolades for her service, and was therefore the “ideal plaintiff,” suing the military over DADT.³³

As soon as the discharge letter came in, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) began to set the stage for the case that would become *Witt v. Department of the Air Force*.³⁴ The ACLU had become involved with Witt’s case, as they had also been attached to previous court cases over DADT.³⁵ The ACLU argued that DADT had violated Witt’s constitutional rights, specifically the right to due process, by not granting Witt a timely hearing on the accusations before moving to a discharge. Furthermore, the ACLU built upon the 2003 *Lawrence v. Texas* case, in which same-sex sexual activity was made legal throughout the United States, including the military.³⁶ When Witt’s case went to retrial in 2010, it rested on how DADT had violated Witt’s constitutional rights. Witt’s case was strengthened by the testimony of those who served alongside her, such as Captain Ed Hrivnak, who said that “I have served (...) in two wars, and I’m coming in to tell you that you’re wrong. You made a mistake by letting this officer go.”³⁷ This use of senior military officers to publicly disagree with the DADT policy strengthened Witt’s case. The SLDN also supported Witt’s legal team, linking the case to other aspects of the repeal movement. They led Witt’s legal team to other senior officers willing to take the stand on behalf of queer servicemembers, for example Major General Dennis Laich.³⁸

In late 2010, Judge Ronald Leighton issued his ruling, arguing that the Air Force’s application of DADT policy to Witt had violated her constitutional rights, and that she had to be reinstated immediately. The fact that Witt won by proving DADT’s unconstitutionality was important, representing a major PR victory for the repeal movement. Furthermore, Leighton stated that Witt had proved the government wrong about queer servicemembers negatively impacting military readiness.³⁹ The very public victory of Witt and the ACLU in this court case was of immense importance; not only did they successfully manage to challenge DADT’s constitutionality in the courts, but several high-profile military officers had also served as witnesses in support of Witt. As with the public coming outs of Kerr, Richard, and Steinman, this confrontation helped to highlight the failure of DADT to the American public. Once again, it also reflected the interconnected and well-coordinated nature of the resistance against DADT, as SLDN provided several senior officers willing to testify for queer servicemembers. Furthermore, when the military was publicly and legally forced to provide an adequate reason for discharging queer soldiers, it failed to do so.

Beside the challenges to DADT policy through these public coming outs and legal actions, the repeal movement also featured a significant public outreach and lobbying campaign. For

³³ Witt and Connor, *Tell*, 93-95.

³⁴ *Witt v. Department of the Air Force*, 527 F.3d 806 (9th Cir. 2008), Justia U.S. Law, last visited 21 April 2026, <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/ca9/06-35644/0635644o-2011-02-25.html>.

³⁵ Witt and Connor, *Tell*, 115-116; *Lawrence v. Texas*, 539 U.S. 558 (2003), Justia U.S. Supreme Court, last visited 21 April 2026, <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/539/558/>.

³⁶ Witt and Connor, *Tell*, 120-121, 123-124.

³⁷ Witt and Connor, 190-191.

³⁸ Witt and Connor, 204.

³⁹ Witt and Connor, 214-215.

this, we can turn to the experience of Alexander Nicholson and Servicemembers United (SU). Like the SLDN, SU was an organization dedicated to the repeal of DADT. What distinguishes SU from the SLDN is that the former was predominantly made up of younger veterans. In 2002, like many other queer servicemembers, Nicholson was discharged under DADT, despite not undertaking any homosexual conduct on base. Nicholson had written a letter to a former romantic partner, which one of his fellow soldiers happened to see him writing. The soldier then reported Nicholson over the letter, and within weeks he was discharged for “homosexual conduct.”⁴⁰ A year after his discharge, the *Lawrence v. Texas* case was decided. This inspired Nicholson to reach out to Marty Meehan, a congressman attempting to repeal DADT and who had highlighted stories of other soldiers discharged. He shared his story, as he was tired of suppressing his experience of being let go despite having done nothing wrong, even under the restrictive terms of DADT itself.⁴¹

Nicholson would end up spearheading the campaign to end DADT as the executive director of Servicemembers United. After setting up SU with other discharged queer service members, with funding from various donors, one of the first major events it would undertake with help from existing organizations like SLDN was the “Call to Duty Tour,” which started in 2006. This was a tour of speaking events at various venues such as universities in which veterans would call for the repeal of DADT.⁴² In the years that followed, Nicholson, the SU, and the SLDN launched other similar publicity events to raise awareness for DADT repeal, such as 2007’s “Legacy of Service” and 2009’s “Voices of Honor” tours. They also sought out senior officers willing to follow the example of Richard, Steinman, and Kerr, and go on the record opposing DADT.⁴³ These PR actions and speaking tours demonstrate once again the collaboration among the various organizations and individuals campaigning against DADT, with SU, SLDN, and other organizations, such as the Human Rights Campaign, proving vital for public pressure events and outreach campaigns. This coordination was vital, as it meant the groups could share resources and experiences, gain access to politicians, and build a significant and united anti-DADT movement. SU’s and SLDN’s public outreach campaigns succeeded in raising awareness of the injustice of DADT, and Nicholson was often interviewed by news outlets or documentaries for his perspective on DADT, such as in the 2009 documentary *Ask Not*.⁴⁴

Nicholson and the SU were frequently cited and asked for comments by mainstream outlets when covering protests against or news about DADT.⁴⁵ In their campaigns they also

⁴⁰ Nicholson, *Fighting to Serve*, 11-12.

⁴¹ Nicholson, 19-20.

⁴² Nicholson, *Fighting to Serve*, 21-25, 30-35, 38-4; “History,” Servicemembers United, archived November 29, 2010, https://web.archive.org/web/20101129050552/http://servicemembersunited.org/?page_id=32.

⁴³ Nicholson, *Fighting to Serve*, 48-49, 53; “Human Rights Campaign, Servicemembers United Bring National Tour to Repeal Don’t Ask Don’t Tell,” Human Rights Campaign, accessed 30 January 2026, <https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/human-rights-campaign-servicemembers-united-bring-national-tour-to-repeal>.

⁴⁴ “Alex Nicholson: Talking about Don’t Ask Don’t Tell,” *NPR’s Fresh Air*, June 16, 2009, <https://www.npr.org/2009/06/16/105443003/alex-nicholson-talking-about-dont-ask-dont-tell>.

⁴⁵ Ed Hornick, “Activists praise Obama’s ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ repeal pledge,” *CNN*, January 29, 2010, <https://edition.cnn.com/2010/POLITICS/01/28/obama.dadt.react/index.html>; “‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ Protesters Chain Themselves to White House Fence,” *ABC News*, March 18, 2010, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/protestors-charged-chaining-front-white-house/story?id=10138564>.

employed a strategy of intentionally featuring the voices of younger veterans or anonymous active-duty soldiers who had openly served as queer soldiers in their campaigns. Nicholson also spent time directly speaking to Obama's staff and various politicians to push for DADT repeal.⁴⁶ The use of younger queer soldiers in these events strengthened the argument the SU, SLDN, Witt, and the three senior officers were making, namely that queer soldiers were actively serving and posed no actual danger for military readiness. Furthermore, as with every American civil rights movement, reaching out to and organizing with political leadership was also a crucial part of the push for civil rights advancements. The efforts of Nicholson and the SU were recognized by the Obama administration; they were seated directly in front of the president when DADT was finally repealed by President Obama on December 22nd, 2010.⁴⁷

Though DADT had only been active for a relatively short period of seventeen years, it ruined the careers of countless queer servicemembers. Some of these service members, such as Nicholson and Witt, would dedicate their energy to the DADT repeal movement as a result. The fight to end DADT was fought on a variety of battlefields, ranging from courthouses to major news outlets, from public speaking tours to political lobbying in Washington. While Witt's court case has received attention in the existing historiography, what made her case so significant in its broader context is largely overlooked – besides successfully challenging DADT on constitutional grounds, Witt, the ACLU, and the SLDN also helped to construct an interlinked network and campaign that allowed notable and senior military personnel to testify on behalf of Major Witt and join the broader struggle against DADT. Therefore, the case not only disproved the military leadership's insistence that DADT improved military readiness, it *publicly* showed the emptiness of the military's arguments. Their legal victory created significant pressure upon the military leadership and Obama administration to repeal DADT. Relatedly, senior officers coming out as queer showed that DADT was actually harming military readiness rather than solidifying it, as soldiers had to hide a pivotal part of themselves. At the same time, the public outreach campaign of Nicholson, the SU, and the SLDN raised awareness, combined with lobbying that took place behind the scenes, placed further pressure on the president and military leadership to finally repeal DADT. Without any one of these angles of attack, the fight to repeal DADT may have lasted longer or never resulted in a full repeal. Yet, only the court battles have been given extensive scholarly attention in the historiography. The focus that these legal cases have been given by scholars has overshadowed other important aspects of the repeal movement, both in the historiography and in the popular consciousness. By comparison, the public outreach, pressure, and lobbying campaigns led by the SLDN and SU have little-to-no presence in the historiography. But, as this article has demonstrated, they too were a vital front for the repeal movement and reported on as such by mainstream media outlets. Furthermore, the SLDN and SU were actively involved with the court cases in addition to their other activities. The interconnected nature of these various efforts is important for understanding the scale and the success of the DADT repeal movement, and yet it is largely absent in the current

⁴⁶ Nicholson, *Fighting to Serve*, 90-93, 97-98, 103-104, 108-114.

⁴⁷ Nicholson, 247-248.

historiography. Thus, these aspects need to be included in our analysis of why DADT repeal succeeded. By focusing solely on the dramatic court cases, we risk overlooking the other vital aspects which helped the repeal movement achieve its victory. As the second Trump administration seems poised to attack various queer rights victories, we should look at *all* the tools of the queer resistance against DADT as inspiration, not just those that took place in the legal arena.