

Book Review

A. Belkin. *How We Won: Progressive Lessons from the Repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.”* New York, NY: Huffington Post Media Group, 2011. 108 pages. \$4.99 Kindle (ASIN: B005NDLMVK)

I cannot imagine a more exciting and fun adventure through the 10 years leading up to the repeal of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell (DADT) than Aaron Belkin’s first-person escapade, *How We Won: Progressive Lessons from the Repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.”* If you are under the same assumption as was a producer of an HBO documentary film on gays in the military, “that as far as DADT goes, nothing important happened between 2002, when the Arabic linguist story first broke, and 2009, when Barack Obama became President” (chap. 3),¹ then this ebook should be required reading. This is not the Log Cabin Republican’s story, nor the Obama Administration’s story, nor the military’s story, but Belkin’s story alone. He expresses this story throughout the rather short read, as he fills each page with his insider anecdotes. More importantly, though, the factual progression is accurate enough for this work to be used as a history text. In this way, Belkin ensures the people who sought to deny the LGB² community their right to serve can neither forget the past nor misremember their active discrimination.

Belkin discusses not only the facts of what occurred, but also how intricately he conspired to create the change that needed to happen. While his chapters in Part 2 consist of his five strategies (target conservative lies, iterate high quality research, recruit validators, build from within, and expose hypocrisy), there is a more common set of three ideals in each chapter: discover truth via high quality unbiased research, frame the results, and disseminate as broadly as possible through reputable media sources.

Despite Belkin’s uncloseted progressive enthusiasm, the clear mantra for his book is, “what mattered was telling the truth” (chap. 2). He humorously (and accurately) points out that, “progressives’ problem isn’t bad framing. It’s

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Steven M. Samuels was one of the faculty members Belkin writes about in Chapter 5 and was quoted in Chapter 6 of this book. The author also wrote an original review blurb for the ebook.

that we're bad at telling the truth" (chap. 2). His dedication to truth is the foundation of his writing, and saving himself from his bald-faced partisanship. That said, he does reserve his unrestricted bile for those conservatives who constantly lie and misrepresent their beliefs as military necessity instead of as moral and religious homophobia. As he repeatedly demonstrates, "If DADT had been based on an honest concern for unit cohesion and an honest reading of the evidence, the Pentagon would not have become repeatedly entangled in its own web of distortion" (chap. 6). He holds himself and his research to these same high standards, demanding that the research speak for itself, even when it paints a mixed picture. Belkin even takes a bizarre pride when Elaine Donnelly, arch supporter of banning gays from the military, used Palm Center research on Fox News. Paraphrasing Paul Krugman, Belkin insists, "the difference between a legitimate research institute and a spin shop is that the former releases all data that it uncovers, while the latter only releases evidence that is conducive to one point of view" (chap. 10).

While truth serves as Belkin's foundation, much of his writing emphasizes the Thomas Theorem: Perception is reality. It is critical to have the facts on your side, but what is as important is how decision-makers view the facts (chap. 1). From the onset, he insists that it is vital to frame the debate as one of military effectiveness, not of human rights:

We should get away from rhetoric about fairness, freedom, and the suffering of gay troops. It's not that these weren't crucial topics. But in order to win repeal, I believed we had to prevail on the national security argument. And instead of coming up with a new frame, we should use the one that conservatives had invented. But, we should flip it on its head. My message was this: It wasn't gay soldiers that harmed the military. It was discrimination. (chap. 2)

Again and again, Belkin targets his research and his message on military effectiveness. In fact, if it weren't for the personal asides (liberally sprinkled throughout the book), you would think he was an advocate for the military and not an activist for the LGBT community.

The last of these three themes is his wolverine-esque focus on getting the message out. It is clearly not enough to have the facts on your side; the facts were on the side of allowing LGB members to serve in 1993 with a \$1.3 million RAND study, which was overridden by five flag officers signing a 15-page document (chap. 1). It is not enough to frame the material. The public and policymakers must be made aware of the truth. In many ways, Belkin's quest for publicity is the comedic adventure of the book. Every framed fact needs less time to explain how it came to light, and much more time to depict how it came to press. His most agonizing moments are when he is unable to get his word out. Belkin bewails the contradiction that the

more success he has broadcasting his message, the harder it becomes to come up with a new angle on the message:

The New York Times reporter who was assigned to the DADT beat for a number of years in the mid-2000s told me at one point that he just wasn't interested in yet another research study showing that the repeal of DADT would not undermine unit cohesion, even if the study was fully accurate. (chap. 3)

Belkin's constant struggle to find a fresh way of presenting the same information (i.e., every study continually pointing out that LGB troops could serve openly with no negative effects) is perhaps the most heroic part of this story—and makes for the best reading.

These joyful internal insights, however, also have their downside. At times, the detail of recollection bogs down the overall story. Another negative issue with such a personalized account is an itinerant wandering into his much beloved partisan politics. Most of these meanderings are purposeful, but they lack the depth and factual background that make the rest of the book so powerful. Sidetracks on taxes, militarism, etc. come off as personal opinions and deviate from the main message. In his defense, Belkin clearly believes the main message is that these strategies can be used to further progressive politics. However, unlike his work on the repeal of DADT, he leaves this thesis incomplete and undeveloped. Even he admits to this in Chapter 10, "Limitations of the Strategy."

Belkin's tone can also be superior at times, especially with some of the nastiest people he encounters. While people, such as Elaine Donnelly, may be deserving of contempt, perhaps he should rise above such belittling comments like: "If [research correctly characterized how the military had no problem with homosexuality] upsets Elaine Donnelly, she should move to an alternate universe" (chap. 10). Still, it is possibly too much to expect him to turn the other cheek after sentiments expressed by former Reagan Pentagon official Ronald Ray:

Good and decent people must see that the opening up of the military to homosexuals right on the heels of allowing women to serve in combat is simply the latest step in an agenda that has as its end the complete transformation of the nations' moral and spiritual being. (chap. 6)

It is clearly not enough for Belkin to know that he has won the day, and that people like Donnelly and Ray are now merely humorous caricatures of discrimination, fit only to be *Daily Show* targets and YouTube amusements. Then again, given their vitriol, hatefulness, and people they've actively harmed, perhaps readers should ease up on a gay scholar who has worked ceaselessly for justice.

When thinking about American history, it is usually only a minority of people who are actively in favor of civil rights before they are granted. Once established, most people claim they were always on board. Ultimately, *How We Won* is a testament to truth and an unwillingness to let bigots off the hook. It reminds us how the repeal of a discriminatory law came about, and how each step was crucial in making the repeal happen. In many ways, I suspect *How We Won* could easily be made into a film as the last minute heroics make the outcome of this fight more improbable than we all remember. Belkin reminds us how much hard work by so many people went into this victory for all America. This is a tale that truly makes us understand that *fortes fortuna adiuvat* (fortune favors the bold)!

In closing, it is important to reiterate Belkin's focus on integrity. He remains true to himself and to his morals when he states that:

One of the things I learned during this process was the difficulty in sticking to your convictions even when all or most of your allies disagree with you, and the importance of continuing to communicate and work together despite disagreements about key strategic decisions. (chap. 8)

In doing so, Aaron Belkin pays tribute to the efforts of all the people who worked hard to give those serving silently their voice and the respect due them.

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NOTES

1. Since *How We Won* is only available as an ebook with no page numbers, all quotations will be referenced by chapter only.

2. While there are certainly transgender individuals who did serve (and are currently serving) honorably, the repeal of DADT only affects lesbians, gay males, and bisexuals. Those who identify as transgender are still legally prohibited from serving in the military if they are open about their sexuality.