

ACTING SECRETARY OF THE AIR FORCE ERIC FANNING: Thank you very much. I'm very honored to be here today and humbled to be following the previous two speakers.

Just two years ago, you couldn't openly serve in the military, and today we have had the secretary of defense kick off our pride celebration. Thank you very much for being here, sir. (Applause.)

I think your -- your presence here today means more than you could possibly understand. Secretary McHugh, thank you very much for being here, as well. And, Valerie Jarrett, thank you for those moving words. You've been with us from the start. We're so happy to have you here with us today, and we appreciate your support over these many years.

A special thank you, too, to the DOD Pride group that put all this together, that pushed to make sure this event took place, and to all the individuals and organizations that helped make them -- make this a reality.

And a shout-out to all the other DOD Pride events. This is not the DOD pride event. They're all over the world, including in Kandahar and Bagram this week in Afghanistan.

I'll keep my remarks brief, which is actually easy to do when you're third. You're mentally striking paragraphs as you're listening to your two -- the two previous speakers talk. It's hard to follow what they have to say, as well, and I'm not sure what I could add, and it's never a good idea to keep your boss sitting in his seat for any longer than necessary. (Laughter.)

I first started working in this building 20 years ago, just as we were implementing "don't ask/don't tell." It was a difficult time, and it was a painful experience for me personally. There were no other open LGBT appointees, and anyone serving openly in uniform was surely in the process of being discharged.

I know there were others in the building at the time who felt like I did, that we were all alone in the Pentagon. We didn't have a group like DOD Pride to pull us all together and give us support. It was a deeply conflicting time for me. I was launching a career with strong support from amazing bosses, who knew about my personal life, Les Aspin, John Deutsch, John White, and Rudy DeLeon. I was being given opportunities that were being denied to people just like me. I was working for an institution that discriminated people -- against people just like me.

It was hard 20 years ago to hear how people talked about gays and lesbians in such blistering and emotional ways, about individuals who wanted nothing more than the right to serve their country while also being honest about who they were. And it was hard to imagine we'd ever be where we are today, but during these 20 years, the military's gone through the difficult process of opening itself up by providing opportunities to those for whom it was previously denied or constrained, to women, to immigrants looking to prove their loyalty to this country and earn their citizenship, to gays and lesbians.

It hasn't been easy. It's often been painful, many times messy. At times, it seemed agonizingly slow or even that we were losing ground. But never once did we doubt we were on the right path. We faced enormous challenges, even in the easy years, whenever those were, and we are stronger as an institution when we can pull on the diverse talents of a broader pool of people who are willing and able to serve, coming together with different backgrounds, different experiences, different points of view. We are stronger for looking more like the society we are charged with protecting, and we are today, as Valerie said and the secretary said, the finest military the world has ever known.

The tone of the debate two years ago when we repealed "don't ask/don't tell" was remarkably different than 18 years ago when it was implemented. It started, of course, at the top, with the clear support

from President Obama, our commander-in-chief. Valerie already said the great words. We are not a country of "don't ask/don't tell." We are the country of out of many, we are one. They bear repeating, I think.

And that testimony -- that moving testimony from Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, "I cannot escape being troubled by the fact that we have in place a policy which forces young men and women to lie about who they are in order to defend their fellow citizens. It comes down to integrity, theirs as individuals and ours as an institution."

Almost two decades later -- earlier, sitting in the back of the secretary of defense's conference room, as a junior and very young aide, listening to how those chiefs spoke about gays in the military, I could never imagine having a chairman say things like Admiral Mullen did.

I knew we had come a long way when we certified repeal, when it seemed that most people's reaction in the building was, "Haven't we done this already?" I was fortunate enough, with many of you here today, to be present when the president signed that repeal. That night, there were many celebrations, people from inside the building, part of the Department of Defense, friends of ours from outside, and I kept getting asked, "What was it like when you went back to the building after the repeal was signed? Was that what everyone was talking about? Was there a buzz in the building?"

And I answered honestly, and I think disappointingly, that, no, went back to the building, and in my view, the building had already moved on past the decision and we talked about what we talk about every single day, the budget. (Laughter.)

There is more to do, as Valerie said and the secretary mentioned, including honoring the families of all our service members. And I know we'll get this right, because our leaders tell us

we will and because the military places paramount value on the family. We couldn't do what we do without the support of families.

We went through a debate about repealing "don't ask/don't tell," but when the decision was made and gays and lesbians were allowed to serve openly, they became valued members of the team. The chiefs -- and I hear them talk about this all the time -- value all who serve under them, and they value their families. They will find a way to recognize this.

I've received a bit of attention since being nominated for the position of undersecretary of the Air Force, even more in the last few days since becoming active secretary, not all of it welcome, some of it quite negative, though some of it also rather imaginative. Many have speculated as to my agenda, what color I'll paint the planes, what designs I have on the uniforms. (Laughter.) (Applause.)

But the truth, of course, is that I'm focused on doing my job, which means taking care of airmen, finding a way to shift resources from the Army and the Navy to the Air Force... (Laughter.)

One team, one fight. Just kidding. (Laughter.)

And making sure I don't do anything to give the boss reason to doubt his decision to give me this job in the first place. In other words, just like everyone else in this room, I'm focused on doing my job.

But these comments, especially over the last weekend, are dwarfed by the outpouring of support I've received in and out of this building, and it reminds me that, as important as events like this are for our community, they're also important opportunities for our allies to identify themselves and to let us know they're right alongside us. Events like this give voice not just to us, but to those who support us. To all our allies here today, thank you.

We call these pride events as a way of demonstrating that we are proud of the progress we've made as a community, but I know for all of us here in the Pentagon and across the department, there is a different meaning, a larger meaning. We are proud that we are able to serve as part of the military, in or out of uniform, proud that we are able to contribute to this great mission of protecting our nation.

Thank you for inviting me to be a part of this. Thank you for coming today. And I look forward to seeing you next year. (Applause.)