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CONSERVATIVES WAGE PR BATTLE AGAINST GAY SERVICE

Leaked Email Reveals Effort to Dig Up Gay “Horror Stories”

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SANTA BARBARA, CA, October 1, 2008 – Social conservatives, sensing they are on the losing side of a public relations war, are plotting ways to turn military leaders against the service of gays and lesbians, according to emails obtained this week by the Palm Center, a think tank at the University of California, Santa Barbara. In an exchange between Colleen Holmes, director of the Eagle Forum, and Jack Jett, a talk show host, the Eagle Forum leader inadvertently forwarded a message laying out a strategy to use “horror stories” about gays in the military to show that gay troops “threaten our national security” and the “personal safety” of other soldiers.

The email from Holmes suggests using the “horror stories” tactic as part of what she calls a “PR battle that it seems needs to be waged” to “recruit members of the military” to enlist in a culture war against gays and lesbians. It acknowledges that such “horror stories are very difficult to find,” but could be wielded as an effective tool to combat the “‘Will and Grace’ effect” in which the cultural trend toward tolerance of homosexuality works to “manipulate and flat-out bully many Americans away from taking any position indicating that homosexuality is wrong.”

Nathaniel Frank, senior research fellow at the Palm Center, said the email reveals the bankruptcy of conservative arguments against openly gay service. Frank’s forthcoming book, “Unfriendly Fire: How the Gay Ban Undermines the Military and Weakens America,” argues that no evidence ever showed that gay service undermines unit cohesion, and that the current policy was never about military readiness but was a sop to the political demands of the religious right.

“This correspondence lays bare the real motivations behind opposition to gay service,” said Frank. “As Holmes states, her objective is to tar homosexuality as ‘wrong,’ whereas the impact of gay service on national security is a secondary concern. In fact, it’s only referenced as a PR scheme to lend legitimacy to her moral crusade.” Fishing for “horror stories” while acknowledging they are few and far between, said Frank, is the “very essence of prejudice. If evidence of gays damaging the military is so hard to find, honest observers would conclude that gays do not damage the military instead of concocting tales



to bolster a predetermined conclusion.”

It is not clear who the recipient was of the email, which Holmes conceded was mistakenly sent to Jett. But Frank said there was evidence suggesting it was directed to Elaine Donnelly, who heads the Center for Military Readiness, a group dedicated to opposing women and gays in combat. According to Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, Donnelly has organized a Washington, D.C. briefing with veterans’ organizations this week to discuss ways to implement Holmes’ strategy and to rout momentum toward ending “don’t ask, don’t tell.”

Holmes, who previously worked with the Christian Broadcast Network and the Christian Legal Society, ended her email by calling the crusade against gay service a “spiritual battle.” “Gays are literally dying for their country,” said Frank, “and the religious right is scheming about ways to vilify them and remove them from service.”

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The Palm Center is a research institute at the University of California, Santa Barbara. The Center uses rigorous social science to inform public discussions of controversial social issues, enabling policy outcomes to be informed more by evidence than by emotion. Its data-driven approach is premised on the notion that the public makes wise choices on social issues when high-quality information is available. For more information, visit www.palmcenter.ucsb.edu.