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CONTACT: Indra Lusero, Assistant Director, 303-902-9402, indralusero@palmcenter.ucsb.edu

EXPERTS CONCERNED ABOUT PENTAGON DEPICTION OF GAY BAN'S END AS 'DELICATE'
Advice to Military Study Group Emphasizes Decisive Leadership as Key

SANTA BARBARA, CA, Feb. 15, 2010—Scholarly experts on "don't ask, don't tell" are expressing heightened concern about the rationale for a new Pentagon study group on gays in the military. According to Dr. Nathaniel Frank, "Political and military leaders are saying that unless we study the feelings of straight troops, the Pentagon won't know how to manage the sensitive transition to an inclusive policy. But the 1993 RAND report and other studies conclude that the way to implement this kind of change is to do it quickly and simply, and that if it's done this way, and with the full support of senior leadership, it will be a smooth transition." Frank is author of "Unfriendly Fire: How the Gay Ban Undermines the Military and Weakens America," the definitive book on "don't ask, don't tell," and Senior Research Fellow at the Palm Center.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said this month that it would be "stupid" to "impose a policy from the top without any regard for the views of the people who were going to be affected." Frank agreed it is important to consult the troops but distinguished between consulting and asking permission. "The military is a top-down institution for a reason," he said. "The risk here is that political obstructionists will exploit whatever the troops say." While researchers at the Palm Center have committed their support to the study group based on over a decade of research on this issue, they are also pointing out that a prolonged study process is what derailed reform in 1993.

Dr. Aaron Belkin said that "If the study group intends to summarize the more than twenty peer-reviewed, military and official studies which conclude that repeal is not problematic, that would be one thing. But to say that we have no data, and that without data, we just don't know what will happen after repeal, is not consistent with the extensive research on the topic." Belkin is Director of the Palm Center. "Ironically," he added, "the Pentagon is doing the one thing that the research says not to do if you want to minimize problems, which is to drag the process out and act like it is fragile. That's exactly how the 1993 conversation turned toxic."

The Palm Center's new recommendations to the Pentagon study group echo Dr. Frank's concerns, and underscore extensive research which concludes that military repeal of a gay ban is neither complicated nor fragile. Secretary Gates said that, "We need to understand all of the different things that have to be dealt with in terms of housing and benefits, and regulations and fraternization rules, and conduct and training, and so on." But the RAND report as well as the rest of the literature has found that if leaders send clear signals and hold service members to a common standard, these supposed second-order effects are minimal. The Palm Center's recommendations are outlined in a new policy memo, released today.



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The Palm Center is a think tank at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Since 1998, the Center has been a leader in commissioning and disseminating research in the areas of gender, sexuality, and the military. For more information visit www.palmcenter.ucsb.edu.