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

EXPERTS DEBATE LIKELY EFFECTS OF LIFTING GAY BAN New Data Raise Question of Whether Repeal Would Impact Recruitment

SANTA BARBARA, CA, October 10, 2005 - Data from a new poll of potential U.S. military recruits has set off debate among scholars and other military experts about whether allowing gay troops to serve openly would undermine recruiting efforts. According to the results of the survey, seventy-six percent of potential military recruits said that lifting the ban on openly gay service members would have "no effect" on their decision to enlist. Twenty-one percent of respondents said that lifting the ban would decrease their chance of enlisting, while only two percent said it would increase their likelihood of joining the military.

The study was commissioned by the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military, a research institute at the University of California, Santa Barbara, to test how the gay ban is perceived among individuals whom the military seeks to recruit. To perform this test, the pool of respondents was designed to match the characteristics of a cohort of new military recruits in terms of political affiliation, gender and age. Among respondents, 53.1 percent were Republicans, 29.8 percent were independent / other, and 17 percent were Democrats; 81.6 percent were male and 18.4 percent were female; and all were between the ages of 18 and 24.

The results of the poll, according to Dr. Aaron Belkin, Director of CSSMM, suggest pockets of resistance to lifting the ban on openly gay service members. "These numbers may cast some doubt on the arguments many of us have been making," said Belkin, "that ending the gay ban would not hurt recruiting." Nearly 180,000 Americans join the military each year as enlisted personnel, Belkin said. "If twenty-one percent of these individuals are less likely to enlist following repeal of the ban, this means that perhaps 38,000 potential recruits would be less likely to serve in the military if they knew they might be serving beside open gays."

Opponents of lifting the ban have long argued that doing so could harm recruiting. Belkin said that the figures from the latest poll are consistent with what these experts have been claiming since debate over gays in the military began.

But other experts cautioned that this poll does not indicate that Americans would be less likely to enlist.



Before Canada lifted its gay ban in 1992, a survey of 6,500 male soldiers found that 62% said they would refuse to share showers or living quarters with a gay soldier. But when the ban was actually lifted, follow-up studies found no increased difficulty with recruiting, discipline or performance, and few if any resignations were attributed to the change in policy. A similar scenario unfolded in Britain, where two-thirds of service members indicated that they would not serve with gays if the British ban were eliminated. Following the lifting of the ban, studies found no increased difficulty with recruitment.

"The real question," said Belkin, "is whether people are actually going to do what they say they'll do and avoid the military because gays are allowed to serve openly. It's one thing to register your disapproval in a survey. It's quite another to say, 'now that gays are allowed to admit who they are, I'm going to let that drive me away from the military career I wanted.'"

Melissa Embser-Herbert, formerly a Captain in the Army Reserve and currently a sociologist who studies gender and sexuality in the military, suggested the new data show growing tolerance of sexual minorities. She pointed out that polls conducted when the current policy was first implemented showed large majorities opposing letting gays serve. In one survey, for example, three quarters of male respondents said they "would feel uncomfortable if there were some homosexuals in my unit" and believed that "allowing openly gay and lesbian soldiers in the Army would be very disruptive of discipline."

"The current figures," she said, "indicate that three out of four potential recruits don't care if they are serving with gays and only one in five believes it would decrease their likelihood of serving. What we're seeing, quite simply, is the effect of broader societal change. Today, the vast majority of those polled appear to recognize that it matters little whether their fellow soldiers are gay or lesbian."

Embser-Herbert suggested that the shrinking minority who view the presence of openly gay troops as a disincentive to join might self-select out of the military, a development that could benefit those who remain. "Given the connection between homophobia and sexual harassment," she explained, "the military would be a stronger organization if it were able to attract those with a greater understanding of the diversity of humanity and a willingness to work alongside those who may be different from themselves."

Some advocates of ending the ban have further argued that doing so would enhance recruiting both by broadening the pool of permissible enlistees and by removing the stigma of intolerance that may turn off younger or more progressive Americans. For instance, a recent data analysis of 2000 census figures



from the Williams Project, UCLA School of Law, suggests that lifting the gay ban could increase the number of active duty personnel by more than 41,000 troops.

David R. Segal, Professor of Sociology and Director of the Center for Research on Military Organization at the University of Maryland, said it was significant that three quarters of a conservative sample said openly gay service would make no difference. "Since public opinion, and especially conservatives, tend to favor the status quo," he said, "what stands out is that only one in five respondents said a change in policy would decrease their likelihood of enlisting." Throughout history, he explained, the public has opposed change in military policy, including racial integration, gender integration and even ending the draft. But threatened resignations and fears of recruitment woes came to naught. Segal further questioned the significance of the 21% figure meant. People who say they would stay away if the ban were lifted, he said, predominantly white conservative middle class males, are already staying away with the ban in place. "I don't think there would be a large drop in recruiting," he said, "and it would probably be more than offset by people who would be more comfortable if the ban were lifted-and who weren't polled in the survey."

Elizabeth Kier, Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Washington and a specialist on national security issues, said it was difficult to draw conclusions from questions that highlight gay service unless the survey also measured the importance of sexual orientation relative to other factors, such as employment considerations, educational benefits or patriotism. "Even after potential enlistees have been asked to imagine serving alongside openly gay troops," she said, "over three quarters said it would have no effect. If respondents were asked to rate the relative importance of this consideration in shaping their decision to enlist, the potential negative influence might be even less."

Belkin said, "We now have data on both sides of this question," referring to the ongoing debate about whether to let gays serve openly. "Clearly, we need more research, particularly on the relationship between the attitudes and behavior of military personnel."

The CSSMM survey was administered from August 5 to August 25, 2005, to a sample of 424 young adults by Knowledge Networks, a public opinion firm. Of those surveyed, 282 responses were extracted to create a pool that matched the profile of a cohort of new military recruits. The survey had a margin of error of plus or minus 5.8 percent.

The Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military is an official research unit of the University of California, Santa Barbara. The Center is governed by a distinguished board of advisors,



including the Honorable Lawrence J. Korb of the Center for American Progress, Honorable Coit Blacker of Stanford University and Professor Janet Halley of Harvard Law School. Its mission is to promote the study of gays, lesbians, and other sexual minorities in the armed forces.