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MILITARY TIMES POLL FLAWED

Palm Center Research Attacked by Pundit, Defended by Fox News

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Donnelly on Fox

SANTA BARBARA, CA, January 13, 2009 – The Palm Center today issued a policy memo in response to assertions this month by Elaine Donnelly in the National Review Online and on Fox News that lifting the ban on openly gay troops would “destroy” the U.S. military. Donnelly, president of the Center for Military Readiness, made her case in a January 2nd blog post and again on the Fox News Channel on January 11th. She based her argument on a survey conducted by the Military Times which found that 58% of respondents oppose openly gay service and 10% claim they would not re-enlist if the ban were lifted.

In the policy memo issued today by the Palm Center, researchers at the University of California-based think tank correct misinterpretations of the Military Times data. First, they show that the poll is not based on a random sampling pool but on the self-selected pool of readers of that publication who tend to be older and more conservative than the military population at-large, a fact which skews the results against gay service. Second, opinions about the policy are wholly distinct from actual behavior, and bigoted attitudes do not predict discriminatory behavior. When Britain and Canada polled their troops before ending their gay bans, two thirds said they would oppose the change and, in one survey, nearly half said they’d refuse to serve with gays; but when the changes were actually made, almost no one resigned. The same scenario played out at West Point when women were admitted.

Finally, the Palm Center research memo shows that opinion in the military is actually far more favorable toward gay service than the Military Times poll suggests. In the 1990s, the percentage of men in the Army who “strongly oppose” gays serving in uniform dropped nearly in half, from 67% to 37%. In 2004, an Annenberg poll found that among junior enlisted personnel, a slight majority favored openly gay service. In 2006, a Zogby poll of Iraq and Afghanistan vets found that 72% were “personally comfortable” around gays.

“The real news here is the opposite of what Donnelly claims,” said Dr. Nathaniel Frank, senior research



fellow at the Palm Center and author of *Unfriendly Fire: How the Gay Ban Undermines the Military and Weakens America*. “While the media has reported it as news that the military opposes gay service, the trend is toward much greater tolerance: the 58% figure, which would actually be closer to 50% in a randomized poll, is a big drop from the 74% who opposed gay service in 1993, when the current policy was created.” Frank pointed out that one poll that year found that fully 97% of generals and admirals opposed lifting the ban. Today, over one hundred retired flag officers have signed a statement calling for repeal.

Frank also pointed to data showing that the military is far more open to gay service than it was before. Among the 20% of Zogby respondents who said they were not comfortable around gays, only 5% said they were “very uncomfortable.” The vast majority simply don’t care. In addition, a majority said they knew or suspected someone in their unit was gay. “That means gays already serve openly throughout the U.S. military,” said Frank, “and we have no problems attributed to this; the force has hardly been destroyed.” He added that it was “hopelessly naïve” to conflate an opinion poll with an indication of what will actually happen when the ban is lifted.

Donnelly said on Fox News that the Palm Center, which is based at the University of California, was a “gay activist group” and that “research put out by gay activists really don’t understand [sic] what the military is all about.” The Fox News anchor repeatedly defended the research as a “university poll.” Donnelly has never served in the military and has no research credentials.

Dr. Aaron Belkin, Palm’s director, said the Center is a non-partisan research institute and its work is fully transparent. “Our research, which is regularly published in peer-reviewed journals including *Parameters*, the official publication of the Army War College, reports all the data we find, whether it supports or opposes current policy,” Belkin said. “Impugning the messenger as ‘gay activists’ is the tool of someone who doesn’t have an actual argument to make.”

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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.