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PALM CENTER ISSUES KEY RECOMMENDATIONS ON GAY BAN TO PENTAGON WORKING GROUP

SANTA BARBARA, CA, February 17, 2010 -- The Palm Center has released eight key recommendations to the Pentagon Working Group on gays in the military. These recommendations are intended as a first step in providing full support to the Working Group and acknowledging the importance of a thorough and timely process.

The Palm Center has more than ten years of experience studying gays in the military at home and abroad as well as the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy specifically. Housed at the University of California, Santa Barbara, the Palm Center has published over thirty books, book chapters, and journal articles on gays in the military. Nine of our studies have been published in peer-reviewed journals including *International Security*, *Armed Forces and Society*, and *Military Psychology*; others appeared in respected publications such as *Parameters*, the official journal of the U.S. Army War College.

While noted in full below, the key recommendations include:

- Consulting existing literature as a roadmap;
- Assessing the Impact on Unit Cohesion Properly;
- Consulting troops for relevant information rather than to ask their permission for reform;
- Sending study teams to Britain, Israel, Australia, and Canada;
- Using an appropriate standard for assessing the likely impact of change;
- Consulting research on the timing of implementation;
- Noting that leadership and consistency are more important than second-order effects; and
- Correcting for biases introduced by “don’t ask, don’t tell”

Although our independent findings—as well as the vast majority of other government, military, and academic research—have concluded that ending the gay ban will not harm military effectiveness, our offer of support and recommendations below do not assume any outcome,” stated Dr. Aaron Belkin, Director of the Palm Center. “We hope to be one of many resources that the working group considers. These recommendations reflect key ‘lessons learned’ from our work within this field.”



Recommendations to Pentagon Working Group on Gays in the Military:

(1) Consult existing literature as a roadmap. Research on openly gay service is extensive, and includes over half a century of evidence gathered by independent researchers and the U.S. military itself, as well as the study of the experience of foreign militaries. The U.S. military's own researchers have consistently found that openly gay service does not undermine cohesion. While some opponents of gays in the military have published material asserting links between gay service members and perceived harm to the military, no research has ever shown that allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly impairs overall readiness. This fact has been acknowledged by the Pentagon, which has said that the rationale for its gay ban is "inherently subjective in nature" and is rooted in "professional Military judgment, not scientific or sociological analysis." Existing literature also provides helpful "lessons learned" about the implementation of a policy to replace the ban on openly gay service. The Appendix lists the major studies on gays in the military over the past fifty years. We recommend that the Pentagon working group consult the existing literature.

(2) Assess the Impact on Unit Cohesion Properly. The unit cohesion rationale, the claim that allowing gay men and lesbians to serve openly would undermine cohesion, must be assessed rather than assumed. Asking service members their opinion about whether openly gay service would harm cohesion is not an empirical assessment. Rather, to test the unit cohesion rationale, the working group should derive a measure of "outness" for a sample of units by asking members of each unit whether they have gay peers. The "outness" of each unit should then be correlated with independent measures of the unit's readiness and cohesion after controlling for other determinants of unit quality. If a unit's "outness" is uncorrelated or negatively correlated with unit quality, then this would cast doubt on the plausibility of the unit cohesion rationale. (This was the approach of Dr. Laura Miller, a RAND scholar, and Dr. Bonnie Moradi, a University of Florida professor, who published their findings in *Armed Forces and Society*.)

(3) Consult troops for relevant information rather than to ask their permission for reform. It is important to be sensitive to the concerns and anxieties of military members as options are weighed about lifting the ban on openly gay service. Yet it is crucial that, when uniformed personnel are consulted on this matter, the purpose of the consultations be made clear: Polls or anecdotes about the personal preferences of enlisted personnel and junior officers should not be used as a basis to determine policy, and they do not constitute evidence about the critical question of what impact lifting the ban will have on cohesion, recruitment, and effectiveness. In Britain and Canada, approximately two-thirds of troops surveyed said that they would not work with gays, yet when inclusive policies were implemented, just a handful of service members actually retired.

(4) Send study teams to Britain, Israel, Australia, and Canada. Twenty-five nations allow gays and lesbians to serve openly. None has reported any overall detriment to cohesion, morale, recruiting or retention. Internal reviews by the British and Canadian militaries found no negative impact on readiness, despite expectations that the policy transitions would cause substantial disruptions (see Appendix). American military culture is distinct from that of its allies, but the lessons from other countries are nevertheless instructive. We recommend that the



Pentagon working group send research teams to other nations that allow gay men and lesbians to serve openly to determine what worked and what did not.

(5) Use an appropriate standard for assessing the likely impact of change. Some participants in the conversation over gays in the military have sought certainty about what will happen when “don’t ask, don’t tell” is repealed. Yet this is not consistent with how public policy assessments are made. By the standard of absolute certainty, we cannot know for sure whether the continuation of “don’t ask, don’t tell” could jeopardize readiness, just as we cannot know the future impact of any policy change before it happens. The appropriate criterion for any policy decision is not certainty, but a preponderance-of-evidence standard. A similar point must be made about measurability. Some insist that “don’t ask, don’t tell” has no measurable, negative impact on the armed forces, and that repeal poses an unacceptable risk to the military, without specifying how or how much repeal would harm the military. The working group should of course assess the impact of policy continuity and change with as much precision as possible; however, the question of measurability must be asked in an even-handed way when attempting to compare the impact of retaining “don’t ask, don’t tell” to the impact of repeal.

(6) Consult research on the timing of implementation. Secretary Gates has announced that, even after Congress repeals “don’t ask, don’t tell,” the military could require a year to implement an inclusive policy. Extensive research on the topic, however, including the 1993 RAND study, concludes that, once a decision is made to allow gay men and lesbians to serve openly, the policy transition should be implemented quickly. As RAND found, “The policy selected should be implemented immediately. Any sense of experimentation or uncertainty invites those opposed to change to continue to resist it,” which adds to uncertainty and anxiety about the change. This is also the lesson of foreign militaries. The working group should assess the wisdom of Secretary Gates’s proposed one-year implementation timeline.

(7) Leadership and consistency are more important than second-order effects. A closely-related issue is the question of imagined second-order effects. Research has found that there are only two major factors that determine the success of a transition to an inclusive policy. First, senior leaders must send clear signals of support for the new policy, and ensure that commanders discipline those who disobey it. Second, the military must have a single code of conduct that applies irrespective of sexual orientation, and that holds every service member to the same behavioral standards. (The U.S. military already has such a code.) Other factors have negligible or minimal impact. For example, much has been made of whether lifting the ban will require base housing and spousal rights for same-sex partners. Yet as a government entity, the military is governed by the Defense of Marriage Act; hence, partners of gay troops will not be accorded benefits. Substantial research has found that transitioning to an inclusive policy is less difficult in fact than is currently portrayed. Pretending that it is difficult, however, could invite the very divisiveness that participants of good faith on all sides of the conversation seek to avoid.

(8) Correct for biases introduced by “don’t ask, don’t tell.” “Don’t ask, don’t tell” shields itself from analysis in at least three ways. First, because gay troops cannot acknowledge their sexual orientation to researchers, it is



difficult to assess the policy's effect on them. Second, evidence suggests that many commanders are ignoring the presence of gay service members in their units in an effort to retain personnel, a fact which reflects belief among field officers that "don't ask, don't tell" actually hinders their jobs rather than helping cohesion. That said, they are unlikely to acknowledge this information given their side-stepping of the law. Finally, by sending a signal that gay troops are not equal, "don't ask, don't tell" sustains the appearance that military culture is less hospitable to gay troops, and less amenable to change, than is actually the case. A student study at the Naval Postgraduate School found that the majority of service members polled believe that they are more tolerant of homosexuality than their peers (a statistically impossible situation). Research shows that service members are, in general, tolerant of gay and lesbian peers but often feel they must pretend to be intolerant in front of others. When scholars fail to correct for this bias, they may mischaracterize the degree of tolerance among service members.

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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.