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MEDIA CONTACTS: Laura McGinnis (laura@rennacomunications.com, 202-596-0402), Cathy Renna (cathy@rennacomunications.com, 917-757-6123) or Indra Lusero, (lusero@palmcenter.ucsb.edu, 303-902-9402)

EXPERTS: Obama Administration DEFERS “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” Repeal to 2013

SANTA BARBARA, CA, April 30, 2010 – Today’s plea by Defense Secretary Robert Gates that Congress avoid taking action on “don’t ask, don’t tell” until the Pentagon completes its study of the law likely reflects a White House decision to defer resolution of the issue until 2013, according to experts. “The White House knows that the political environment will become more challenging over time,” says Dr. Aaron Belkin, “If repeal doesn’t happen this calendar year, it is unlikely to pass until after the next presidential election.” Belkin is Director of the Palm Center and Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Christopher Neff, Deputy Executive Director of the Palm Center, believes that Secretary Gates’s letter is a signal from the White House, not just the Pentagon. “Today’s letter represents a public effort by the Obama Administration to put a stop to Congressional repeal of “don’t ask, don’t tell” in 2010. Clearly, the Department of Defense is not its own branch of government. The Secretary of Defense serves the President.”

Palm Center scholars believe that a narrow legislative opportunity may still be available if Congress decides to repeal the “don’t ask, don’t tell” law in 2010 while providing discretion to the Secretary of Defense regarding implementation. According to this scenario, Congress could eliminate the law from the books and then allow the Pentagon to formulate new personnel policy over time. Belkin said that, “this would meet the letter and spirit of the request that Secretary Gates made today.”

While some gay rights groups might oppose a legislative option that does not include a specific, statutory implementation plan, experts said that such opposition is unwarranted. According to Neff, “once the law is off the books, the discharges will stop and it will be exceedingly difficult, from a political and operational standpoint, for future administrations to reinstate discrimination.”

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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.