



## **THE MICHAEL D. PALM CENTER**

BLUEPRINTS FOR SOUND PUBLIC POLICY

### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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### **POLITICAL OBSERVERS DEBATE MOMENTUM OF GAY BAN Introduction of Repeal Legislation Prompts Reconsideration**

**SANTA BARBARA, CA, February 26, 2006** -- In the wake of announcements that Congressman Marty Meehan will re-introduce legislation to repeal "don't ask, don't tell" this week, observers are debating the future of the gays-in-the-military issue in Congress. Last year, Representative Meehan, a Democrat from Massachusetts, garnered the support of 122 representatives for the Military Readiness Enhancement Act, but Republican leaders failed to move it to a vote.

Representative Meehan, who serves on the House Armed Services Committee, has led the fight for repeal in Congress. In addition to re-introducing repeal legislation, he has announced plans to hold hearings this year in the HASC Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee, which he chairs. "The 'don't ask, don't tell' policy is at the top of my priority list, and I'm going to work with the House Armed Services Committee to ensure that it gets a fair hearing," Meehan told researchers at the Michael D. Palm Center today. "It's time to end this outdated and discriminatory policy." The Palm Center is a research institute at the University of California, Santa Barbara, which studies military personnel policies including "don't ask, don't tell."

Several strategists, however, told Palm Center researchers that the new Congress may not make repeal an early priority. Bob Witeck, a former aide for a Republican Senator and political strategist in Washington, views the changed Congressional landscape in the context of the race for the White House. "The overriding consequence of elections 2006 is to prepare for election day 2008," he said. In an effort to overcome perceived weaknesses on national security, he said, Democrats' focus will be Iraq. "That means it is not likely that 'don't ask, don't tell' will get a frontal assault before the 2008 elections -- unless we can tie loyal, openly gay service members to meeting American national security priorities." According to a spokesman for Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker "is committed to reintroducing the legislation [for repeal] and supports it," but he added that, right now, "it's hard to say where things are going."

Ike Skelton, the new Democratic HASC Chairman, supports the current gay ban, but has signaled that he could be open to re-visiting the matter in the new Congress, according to HASC spokeswoman, Loren Dealy. Some of the new Democratic point players on defense and national security are seen to be among the Party's most conservative, including Skelton, John Murtha, Jim Webb and others with close ties to the military.

Other Democratic candidates who won House seats in November, however, also have experience in the military, and some have taken positions against the current gay policy. The Human Rights Campaign, the nation's largest gay rights lobbying organization, touted the support for repeal of Joe Sestak, a former Vice Admiral who served on President Clinton's National Security Council, and who won his bid for a seat

in the house in Pennsylvania.

Patrick Murphy, an Iraq War veteran who taught constitutional law at West Point, and won a seat in a neighboring district, has expressed concerns about the effects of "don't ask, don't tell" on national security and military values.

Aaron Belkin, Director of the Palm Center, said that on the one hand, significant barriers in Congress remain. On the other hand, Belkin noted that repealing the gay ban is not just the priority of a liberal or Democratic agenda, but is now supported by majorities of Republicans, conservatives and regular church-goers. "More and more people have seen the evidence about 'don't ask, don't tell,' and believe that the policy is not helping the military."

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The Michael D. Palm Center, formerly the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military, 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.org](http://www.palmcenter.org)