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McCain Fights White House on 'Don't Ask'

By Ed O'Keefe

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The Obama administration reiterated its support Monday for repealing the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy as Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) worked to strip language repealing the ban from the annual defense authorization bill.

"The White House opposes any effort to strip 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' from the National Defense Authorization Act," said White House communications director Dan Pfeiffer.

The written statement came as gay rights groups working to end the ban and liberal bloggers raised concerns that McCain would succeed in stripping repeal language from the massive defense policy bill. McCain, the ranking Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, originally supported repeal but switched course this year and is exploring ways to introduce a revised version of the defense bill, a spokeswoman said.

Aubrey Sarvis, executive director of the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, said any talk of removing repeal language from the defense bill "is unacceptable and offensive to the gay and lesbian service members who risk their lives every day."

The authorization measure failed a test vote in September that would have allowed the Senate to proceed to debate. Republicans unanimously voted against moving forward after Senate Majority Leader Harry M. Reid (D-Nev.) included an immigration reform amendment to the bill and prohibited Republicans from adding other amendments.

Reid strongly supports repealing the measure, but "he, of course, can't do it alone," spokesman Jim Manley said in a statement. "The Senator needs Republicans to at least agree to have a debate on this issue - a debate he firmly believes the Senate should have."

But Elaine Donnelly, president of the Center for Military Readiness, a group opposed to lifting the ban, said Obama should focus on more important economic matters and "do the nation a favor and let the losing gays-in-the-military cause go."

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates said over the weekend that he wants Congress to repeal the gay ban by the end of the year, but suggested it might not happen.

The Marine commandant, Gen. James Amos, who opposes repealing the ban, told reporters over the weekend that ending the policy could cause unique consequences and risks for the Marine Corps.