July 19, 1993

**Memorandum for the President**

From: The Attorney General [signed Janet Reno]
Re: Defensibility of the new policy on homosexual conduct in the armed forces

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The Supreme Court has repeatedly stated that the courts must review decisions by the President and by military commanders deferentially, taking into account the separate nature and special needs of military society. As a consequence, it is possible to justify in the military setting constraints on individual liberty and choice that might be invalid in civilian society. Because of the extraordinary deference paid by the courts to military service, we are confident that the new policy proposed by the Secretary of Defense will be upheld against constitutional challenge. Moreover, the proposed policy (hereafter, "the policy") that the Secretary of Defense has submitted changes earlier policy in three respects that should improve the ability of the Department of Justice to defend the policy in court.

First, the policy changes the premises on the basis of which questions involving the service of homosexuals in the military are to be resolved. The policy reiterates the prior Defense Department view that "homosexuality is incompatible with military service because it interferes with the factors critical to combat effectiveness." However, the policy adopts a new position that sexual orientation is a private matter and is not a bar to service "unless manifested by homosexual conduct." under the policy, therefore, the military would be directed to judge an individual's suitability for service on the basis of conduct, and homosexual conduct (but not an unmanifested orientation) would be grounds for separation from service. We can be confident that the prohibition on acts that everyone would regard as explicitly sexual would be sustained under existing case law.

Second, the policy implements the distinction between "status" and "conduct" that you drew in your January 29 directive. Most important in this regard is the treatment of statements of homosexuality or bisexuality as creating "a rebuttable presumption that the service member is engaging in homosexual acts or has a propensity or intent to do so." First Amendment problems would arise if the policy proscribed certain speech, in and of itself, because of disapproval of the content or the viewpoint expressed. This approach provides much clearer authority than did the pre-January policy for the argument that the Department of Justice has been making persuasively to the courts up to this point that a member who credibly disproved any intent or propensity to commit physical acts would not be subject to separation. The new policy suggests a meaningful opportunity to rebut the presumption flowing from statements of homosexuality. As a consequence, the Department of Justice will be better able to argue that the policy is not directed at speech or expression itself, and that any burdens in those respects are incidental to the achievement of an important governmental interest.

Third, the policy would subsequently change pre-January investigative policies. Applicants for military service would not be questioned about their sexual orientation or behavior. Investigations would no longer be conducted for the sole purpose of determining an individual's sexual orientation. Commanders will initiate investigations only where there is credible evidence of "homosexual conduct." This change will make decisions made under the policy appear fairer, more even-handed, and conduct-based, and therefore easier to defend.