

Will Ex-Defense Secretary Push for Gay Boy Scout Leaders?

Former U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates said Friday he would not press during his term as **Boy Scouts of America** president for an end to the group's ban on gay adult leaders for fear of causing permanent damage to the century-old organization.

Gates, who helped end the "don't ask, don't tell" policy that barred gays from serving openly in the U.S. military while he was defense secretary, said he strongly supported the Boy Scouts vote last year to lift its ban on gay youth members.

He also said he personally supported going further, but would oppose efforts to reopen the issue in his two years as president. His selection had fueled speculation that Gates would seek to end the ban on gay adult scout leaders.

"Given the strong feelings—the passion—involved on both sides of this matter, I believe strongly that to reopen the membership issue or try to take last year's decision to the next step would irreparably fracture and perhaps even provoke a formal, permanent split in this movement," Gates said in the text of a speech to the annual meeting in Nashville, Tennessee.

Gates, a former CIA director, was defense secretary when the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy was repealed in 2010.

"This is where we are at as a movement" Gates said in an interview. "Unlike the Pentagon or the CIA, I can't just give an order and everyone salutes and does what I say."

Gates, who took over as president this week, said he wants the **Boy Scouts** to focus on recruiting and fundraising at a local level. The Boy Scouts have acknowledged membership declines, but have about 2.6 million youth members and 1 million adult leaders.

The vote last May to allow openly gay scouts starting on Jan. 1 drew criticism from conservatives who opposed the change and from **gay rights** groups who said it did not go far enough.

Some parents pulled their boys from the Boy Scouts after the vote and a group of conservatives formed a break-away start-up, Trail Life USA, which condemns sexual activity outside marriage between a man and woman as “sinful before God.”

Some major sponsors have pulled funding from the scouts to protest policies seen as discriminatory, including Lockheed Martin Corp and Intel Corp.

Reporting by Marice Richter in Dallas; Editing by David Bailey, Kim Coghill and Ron Popeski

© 2014 Thomson Reuters. All rights reserved.