

Obama picks openly gay lawyer for ambassadorship

By PHILIP ELLIOTT, Associated Press Writer Philip Elliott, Associated Press Writer — WED OCT 7, 9:46 PM ET

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama said Wednesday he planned to nominate an openly gay lawyer as the U.S. ambassador to New Zealand and Samoa. If confirmed by the Senate, David Huebner would become the third openly gay ambassador in U.S. history and the first pick by this administration. In a statement released from the White House, Obama said he looked forward to working with Huebner and is confident he will represent the United States well in the Pacific region.

Huebner is based in Shanghai, where he handles international arbitration and mediation cases for a U.S. firm. A graduate of Princeton University and Yale Law School, he is also the [Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation's](#) general counsel and previously served on the group's board.

He also has chaired the California Law Revision Commission, served as president of the Los Angeles Quality and Productivity Commission and taught at the University of Southern California's Gould School of Law.

Obama's announcement is a gesture just days before he speaks to a gay rights fundraising dinner on Saturday and gay activists march on Washington on Sunday.

Obama's relationship with gay activists has been rocky since his election. Gays and lesbians objected to the invitation of evangelist Rev. Rick Warren to participate in Obama's inauguration because of Warren's support for repealing [gay marriage in California](#). Obama responded by having Episcopalian Bishop V. Gene Robinson, the denomination's first openly gay bishop, participate at another event.

As president, Obama hasn't taken any concrete steps urging Congress to rescind the Clinton-era "don't ask, don't tell" policy that allows gays and lesbians to serve in the military as long as they don't disclose their sexual orientation or act on it. Some former chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff have acknowledged the policy is flawed.

The office of the current chairman, Adm. Mike Mullen, signed off on a journal article that called for lifting the ban, arguing that the military is forcing thousands of military members to live dishonest lives.

Obama also pledged during the campaign to work for repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act, which limits how state, local and federal bodies can recognize partnerships and determine benefits. But lawyers in his administration defended the law in a court brief. White House aides said they were only doing their jobs to back a law that was already on the books.

Officials said Obama's slow and incremental approach to the politically charged issues has produced some gains.

"The president made commitments on those issues — not just, quite frankly, in a presidential race but ran on some of those commitments in a Senate race," White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said. "They are commitments that are important to him and he is intent on making progress on those issues and is working with the Pentagon to ensure, at least in 'don't ask, don't tell,' that we make progress on it."

Obama has expanded some federal benefits to same-sex partners, but not health benefits or pension guarantees. He has allowed State Department employees to include their same-sex partners in certain embassy programs available to opposite-sex spouses.

On Wednesday, Gibbs said the administration was working with the Office of Personnel Management to expand those benefits.

But that remains far short of his campaign rhetoric.

"At its core, this issue is about who we are as Americans," Obama said in a 2007 statement on gay issues. "It's about whether this nation is going to live up to its founding promise of equality by treating all its citizens with dignity and respect."