

# Canning gay linguists. Stonewalled

BY NATHANIEL FRANK

**W**HEN IAN FINKENBINDER served an eight-month combat tour with the Army's 3rd Infantry Division in Iraq in 2003, he was tasked with human intelligence-gathering, one of the most critical ingredients in the Army's effort to battle the deadly Iraqi insurgency. It is also essential to the U.S. goal of winning support from the Iraqi street. Finkenbinder's job as a cryptologic linguist was to translate radio transmissions, to interview Iraqi citizens who had information to volunteer, and to screen native speakers for possible employment in translation units.

Finkenbinder was a rare and coveted commodity. Having attended the Army's elite Defense Language Institute (DLI) at the Presidio of Monterey, he graduated in the fall of 2002 with proficiency in Arabic at a time when the United States was scrambling to remedy a dire shortage of linguists specializing in Arabic, Farsi, and other tongues critical to the war on terrorism.

So it's not surprising that, according to Finkenbinder, his company commander was "distracted" last month at the prospect of having to start discharge proceedings against him just before the 3rd Infantry, which spearheaded the Iraqi invasion with its "thunder run" to Baghdad, was scheduled to redeploy for a second tour. But he had no choice. The Pentagon's "don't ask, don't tell" policy on gay troops makes no exceptions for linguists, and Finkenbinder had revealed he is gay.

In November 2002, I reported in *THE NEW REPUBLIC* that—despite the importance of trained Arabic speakers to waging the war against terrorism and the critical shortage of these skilled translators in the U.S. military and intelligence agencies—the military fired seven Arabic language specialists from DLI earlier that fall for being gay or lesbian ("Perverse," November 18, 2002). It also booted speakers of Farsi, Korean, and other languages critical to combating the emerging global threats facing the United States.

As Finkenbinder's story illustrates, the Pentagon continues to dismiss trained linguists—people whose skills are desperately needed in Iraq and elsewhere around the world—for being gay. In fact, newly obtained data from the Department of Defense reveals that these firings were far more widespread than previously known. Between 1998 and 2004, the military discharged 20 Arabic and six Farsi language speakers under the "don't ask, don't tell" policy. The new data are not broken down by year, but additional figures from other reports suggest that about half the Arabic discharges came after September 11. The data were obtained from the Pentagon following a Freedom of Information Act request by the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military, a think tank at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where I work, and the office of Massachusetts Democratic Representative Marty Meehan, a vocal critic of the ban on gays in the military, who sits on the House Armed Services Committee.

**N**ATIONAL SECURITY EXPERTS have identified the shortage of Arabic linguists as contributing to the government's failure to predict the September 11 attacks. *The 9/11 Commission Report's* assessment of the nation's preparedness for those and future strikes indicated that the government "lacked sufficient translators proficient in Arabic and other key languages, resulting in a significant backlog of untranslated intercepts." A 2002 General Accounting Office study concluded that staff shortages in Arabic and Farsi "adversely affected agency operations and compromised U.S. military, law enforcement, intelligence, counterterrorism and diplomatic efforts." And an October 2001 House Intelligence Committee report found that "thousands of pieces of data are never analyzed, or are analyzed 'after the fact' because there are too few analysts, even fewer with the necessary language skills."

Nevertheless, the available data now confirm that, in addition to those fired before September 11, the military has continued to discharge gay language specialists despite the ongoing shortage. In total, according to Pentagon data, there were at least 73 people discharged from DLI for homosexuality between 1998 and 2003. At least 37 of these discharges took place after the September 11 attacks. "It's incredibly self-defeating to discharge badly needed, capable service members for something that has nothing to do with their ability to fight in the war on terrorism," Meehan says. "While intercepts collected dust on the shelves waiting for Arabic translators, the military devoted its resources to rooting out patriotic gay Americans whose skills were essential to our safety."

The purging of gay language specialists persists in the face of ongoing pleas by military and political leaders to increase the numbers of Arabic translators. A Pentagon advisory panel recently reported that the United States "is without a working channel of communications to the world of Muslims and Islam." A Justice Department inspector general's report released in September 2004 said the government "cannot translate all the foreign language counterterrorism and counterintelligence material it collects," due largely to inadequate translation capabilities in "languages primarily related to counterterrorism activities," such as Arabic and Farsi. Last summer, Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge insisted that "we need more Arabic-speaking analysts."

Pentagon spokeswoman Lieutenant Colonel Ellen Krenke said the discharge policy conformed to the federal law passed in 1993. "Any change in the law, and thus the Department's resulting policy," Krenke wrote in an e-mail in response to my questions about the military's firing of gay linguists, "would have to be debated again and reflect the will of the elected Congress."

Maybe that time has come. This week, the 3rd Infantry became the first Army unit to cycle back into Iraq since the war began. Finkenbinder, of course, stayed behind. "There was definitely a feeling of, 'We could really use you,'" he says of the moment when his commander learned he was gay. "I was an Arabic linguist, and those are pretty valuable over there."

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*Nathaniel Frank is a senior research fellow at the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military at the University of California, Santa Barbara.*