

strengthen his hand on Social Security. At one point in 1994, Clinton believed a swift victory on what seemed like an easy-to-pass crime bill could serve as a springboard to revive healthcare. Rather than hold their fire for the health bill, Newt Gingrich and his troops launched an all-out attack on the crime bill that caught the White House completely off guard. Similarly, today some Democrats believe that a fight over a highly polarizing Supreme Court nominee could be the magic bullet that saps the energy from Social Security.

Being in the opposition means opposing. If there is one lesson that leaps off the page when re-reading the history of Hillarycare, it is that Clinton's foes were ruthless and systematic in their opposition to the president's plan. When Hillary Clinton tried to reach out to Senate Republicans in the spring of 1993, she found she could never schedule any meetings. It turned out that aides to Bob Dole had prohibited any Republican senator from meeting with the first lady. A year later, when Democrats were trying to save the plan, Representative John Dingell reached out to a House Republican but was reportedly told, "John, there's no way you're going to get a single vote on this side of the aisle. You will not only not get a vote here, but we've been instructed that if we participate in that undertaking at all, those of us who do will lose our seniority and will not be ranking minority members within the Republican Party."

Many Democrats today argue that their route back to power depends on transforming themselves into a party of reform. Some of these Democrats are scared that mere opposition—and denying Bush's claim that Social Security faces a "crisis"—hampers their efforts. But Republicans faced the same challenge in the early 90s and found that the two goals were not mutually exclusive. They didn't just kill healthcare reform, they used its corpse as a platform to re-define themselves as a reform movement that swept away the Democratic majority.

It's not just about Social Security. The Republicans knew in 1993 that they were not just engaged in a fight over healthcare but over the future of their own party. In a memo, titleTKhere, Bill Kristol warned Republicans that they had to "kill" rather than amend Clinton's proposal. Its success "will re-legitimize middle-class dependence for 'security' on government spending and regulation," he wrote. "It will revive the reputation of the party that spends and regulates, the Democrats, as the generous protector of middle class interests. And it will at the same time strike a punishing blow against Republican claims to defend the middle class by restraining government." An almost perfect mirror image of those sentiments applies to Bush's plan today. TitleTK James Carville succinctly echoed this point recently. Speaking privately to one of the Senate leaders charged with formulating a strategy to defeat Bush's plan, he warned, "You're the only thing standing in between Democrats and the abyss." No wonder Democrats are so united. ■

Canning gay linguists. Stonewalled

BY NATHANIEL FRANK

WHEN 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 "distraught" 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

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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.

NATIONAL 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.” ■

Banda Aceh Dispatch Ashes to Ashes

BY RACHEL LOUISE SNYDER

MORE THAN TWO weeks after the most devastating tsunami in modern history pummeled much of Southeast Asia, the city of Banda Aceh, Indonesia, lies in ruin. Playgrounds remain immersed in a foot of mud, refrigerators sit astride overturned cars, and chunks of concrete walls, corrugated roofing, and broken glass drape the city’s streets. Great glaciers of rubble make driving almost impossible, and those shops and businesses lucky enough to escape the carnage have yet to reopen. Stray cats skitter over the debris, nibbling inside shadowy crevices at what turns out to be human flesh; of the more than 90,000 estimated dead in this province on the northern tip of Sumatra, only about 30,000 bodies have been found thus far.

Even amid this rubble, hints of Aceh Province’s history of tension are obvious. Despite a temporary cease-fire declared in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami by the Acehese insurgency, Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM), and, despite a promise from the Indonesian army that it would not target suspected rebels during the emergency, reports of sporadic violence are growing more frequent across the province. The Acehese fear a resumption of the all-out war between GAM and the army that has raged, on and off, for decades.

Yet strangely, the devastation of the tsunami’s waves could have offered a chance for peace. Rodd McGibbon, a United States Agency for International Development (us-

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