

The New York Times



June 8, 2007

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

## Don't Ask, Don't Translate

By STEPHEN BENJAMIN

Atlanta

IMAGINE for a moment an American soldier deep in the Iraqi desert. His unit is about to head out when he receives a cable detailing an insurgent ambush right in his convoy's path. With this information, he and his soldiers are now prepared for the danger that lies ahead.

Reports like these are regularly sent from military translators' desks, providing critical, often life-saving intelligence to troops fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. But the military has a desperate shortage of linguists trained to translate such invaluable information and convey it to the war zone.

The lack of qualified translators has been a pressing issue for some time — the Army had filled only half its authorized positions for Arabic translators in 2001. Cables went untranslated on Sept. 10 that might have prevented the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11. Today, the American Embassy in Baghdad has nearly 1,000 personnel, but only a handful of fluent Arabic speakers.

I was an Arabic translator. After joining the Navy in 2003, I attended the Defense Language Institute, graduated in the top 10 percent of my class and then spent two years giving our troops the critical translation services they desperately needed. I was ready to serve in Iraq.

But I never got to. In March, I was ousted from the Navy under the "don't ask, don't tell" policy, which mandates dismissal if a service member is found to be gay.

My story begins almost a year ago when my roommate, who is also gay, was deployed to Falluja. We communicated the only way we could: using the military's instant-messaging system on monitored government computers. These electronic conversations are lifelines, keeping soldiers sane while mortars land meters away.

Then, last October the annual inspection of my base, Fort Gordon, Ga., included a perusal of the government computer chat system; inspectors identified 70 service members whose use violated policy. The range of violations was broad: people were flagged for everything from

profanity to outright discussions of explicit sexual activity. Among those charged were my former roommate and me. Our messages had included references to our social lives — comments that were otherwise unremarkable, except that they indicated we were both gay.

I could have written a statement denying that I was homosexual, but lying did not seem like the right thing to do. My roommate made the same decision, though he was allowed to remain in Iraq until the scheduled end of his tour.

The result was the termination of our careers, and the loss to the military of two more Arabic translators. The 68 other — heterosexual — service members remained on active duty, despite many having committed violations far more egregious than ours; the Pentagon apparently doesn't consider hate speech, derogatory comments about women or sexual misconduct grounds for dismissal.

My supervisors did not want to lose me. Most of my peers knew I was gay, and that didn't bother them. I was always accepted as a member of the team. And my experience was not anomalous: polls of veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan show an overwhelming majority are comfortable with gays. Many were aware of at least one gay person in their unit and had no problem with it.

“Don't ask, don't tell” does nothing but deprive the military of talent it needs and invade the privacy of gay service members just trying to do their jobs and live their lives. Political and military leaders who support the current law may believe that homosexual soldiers threaten unit cohesion and military readiness, but the real damage is caused by denying enlistment to patriotic Americans and wrenching qualified individuals out of effective military units. This does not serve the military or the nation well.

Consider: more than 58 Arabic linguists have been kicked out since “don't ask, don't tell” was instituted. How much valuable intelligence could those men and women be providing today to troops in harm's way?

In addition to those translators, 11,000 other service members have been ousted since the “don't ask, don't tell” policy was passed by Congress in 1993. Many held critical jobs in intelligence, medicine and counterterrorism. An untold number of closeted gay military members don't re-enlist because of the pressure the law puts on them. This is the real cost of the ban — and, with our military so overcommitted and undermanned, it's too high to pay.

In response to difficult recruiting prospects, the Army has already taken a number of steps, lengthening soldiers' deployments to 15 months from 12, enlisting felons and extending the age limit to 42. Why then won't Congress pass a bill like the Military Readiness

Enhancement Act, which would repeal "don't ask, don't tell"? The bipartisan bill, by some analysts' estimates, could add more than 41,000 soldiers — all gay, of course.

As the friends I once served with head off to 15-month deployments, I regret I'm not there to lessen their burden and to serve my country. I'm trained to fight, I speak Arabic and I'm willing to serve. No recruiter needs to make a persuasive argument to sign me up. I'm ready, and I'm waiting.

*Stephen Benjamin is a former petty officer second class in the Navy.*

Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) [Search](#) [Corrections](#) [RSS](#) [First Look](#) [Help](#) [Contact Us](#) [Work for Us](#) [Site Map](#)

Democrats.com <[activist@democrats.com](mailto:activist@democrats.com)>  
To: [bix.mitchell@gmail.com](mailto:bix.mitchell@gmail.com)

Fri, Jun 22, 2007 at 3:33 AM

### **Lift the Ban on Gays in the Military**

Since "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" became law, over 11,000 servicemembers have been discharged because of their sexuality. The number of servicemembers who have left on their own volition, or have decided not to re-enlist is not documented. The government has spent over \$363 million dollars in taxpayer money to implement this unfair legislation.