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**Outing The Out Of Touch**

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WASHINGTON -- Be honest. Who would you rather share a foxhole with: a gay soldier or Mitt Romney?

A gay soldier, of course. In a dicey situation like that, you need someone steadfast who knows who he is and what he believes, even if he's not allowed to say it out loud.

Hypocrisy is the homage vice pays to virtue, as the gloriously gay Oscar Wilde said. And gays are the sacrifice that hypocritical Republican candidates offer to placate "values" voters -- even though some candidates are not so finicky about morals regarding their own affairs and divorces.

They may coo over the photo of Dick Cheney, whose re-election campaign demonized gays, proudly smiling with his new grandson, the first baby of his lesbian daughter, Mary.

But they'll hold the line, by jiminy, against gay Americans who are willing to die or be horribly disfigured in the cursed Bush/Cheney war in Iraq.

Peter Pace, whose job as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff became a casualty of Iraq on Friday, asserted in March that homosexual acts "are immoral." Yet in May, he wrote a letter to the judge in the Scooter Libby case, pleading for leniency for the Cheney aide. Scooter always looked for "the right way to proceed -- both legally and morally," General Pace wrote of the man who lied to a grand jury about the outing of a spy, after he pumped up the fake case for the war that has claimed the lives of 3,500 young men and women serving under the general.

At the G.O.P. debate in New Hampshire last week, the contenders were more homophobic than the mobsters on "The Sopranos," unanimously supporting the inane "don't ask, don't tell" policy. Even Rudy Giuliani, who loves to cross-dress and who stayed with old friends, a gay couple, to avoid Gracie Mansion when his second marriage was disintegrating, had an antediluvian answer.

Wolf Blitzer asked him about the Arabic linguists trained by the government who have been ousted from the military after being outed.

Mr. Giuliani, who procured three deferments to avoid Vietnam, replied that, with the war in Iraq raging, "This is not the time to deal with disruptive issues like this."

If he's so concerned with disruptive issues, maybe he should start worrying about this one: Two straight guys who slithered out of going to Vietnam are devising a losing strategy in Iraq year after year. W. and Dick Cheney have fouled things up so badly that Robert Gates and Tony Snow are now pointing to South Korea -- where American troops have stayed for over half a century -- as a model.

Mitt Romney agreed with Rudy on the issue. Instead of going to Vietnam, Mr. Romney spent two and a half years doing Mormon missionary work in France. Isn't that like doing Peace Corps work in Monte Carlo?

At the memorial for Mark Bingham, the gay 6-foot-5 rugby player who was on Flight 93 on 9/11, John McCain said he might owe his life to the young man who helped fight the hijackers, bringing down the plane aiming to crash into the Capitol.

But Senator McCain wants gay troops to stay closeted. The policy, he said, is "working." But it's not. The Army in Iraq is like that exhausted nag Scarlett O'Hara whipped on to Tara. Yet Republicans surge on, even as they expel gays.

In a Times Op-Ed piece Friday, Stephen Benjamin, a gay Arabic translator eager to go to Iraq, told how he was dismissed when the Navy learned his status. "Consider," he wrote. "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?"

He noted that 11,000 other service members have been shoved out since 1993 and speculated that if the Army had not been so short of Arabic translators, the cables that went untranslated on Sept. 10, 2001, might have been translated, preventing 9/11.

In 2000, the British military began letting anyone who served say if they were "a poof," as one squadron leader put it. Sarah Lyall wrote in *The Times* that the military reports that none of its fears "about harassment, discord, blackmail, bullying or an erosion of unit cohesion or military effectiveness have come to pass."

America has been Will-and-Graced since Bill Clinton had his kerfuffle on the issue in 1993. Tolerance has blossomed, especially among younger Americans. According to a Pew poll, 4-in-10 Americans say they have close friends or relatives who are gay.

The Republican field seems stale and out of sync. They should have listened to the inimitable Barry Goldwater, who told it true: You don't have to be straight to shoot straight.

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