

## I N P R I N T

# Straight shooting

By Michael S. Sherry

The current debate over gays in the military seemed to come suddenly out of an historical nowhere. Not because of its novelty, Randy Shilts' *Conduct Unbecoming* suggests, but because our refusal to recognize the injustice to gay personnel has blinded us to its earlier visibility. It's scarcely remembered that in the '70s gay Air Force Sgt. Leonard Matlovich graced *Time* magazine's cover, that NBC made a docudrama of his crusade against the ban, that presidential aspirant Jimmy Carter announced, "I oppose all forms of discrimination against individuals, including discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation." By the late '70s, gay personnel were informally organizing, open defiance was rising and court cases threatened military policy. What seems a new issue is an old one, even in the public arena.

By 1980, as the Cold War heated up once again, the counterattack was in full force: discharges and punitive punishments escalated, rising numbers of women provided new fuel for homophobia, and the Carter administration scurried away from whatever commitment to gay rights it had made. It went backward from there—however faint-hearted liberals and Democrats have been on this issue, it's worth remembering now that conservative Republicans have been worse. Anti-homosexual policies, which once rested on a consensus among liberals and conservatives so automatic that it needed no articulation, were now the latter's favorite cause, at least among New Right moralists. (The Old Right's Barry Goldwater, by contrast, has now issued a thundering call to lift the ban.)

Implemented during the Carter-Reagan transition, new Pentagon regulations proscribed not only those with homosexual behavior or "associations" but the mere "desire" for such behavior. "The military," notes Shilts with pardonable

exaggeration, "had, in effect, banned homosexual thoughts," and what had once been a "preoccupation" became "an obsession." AIDS intensified that obsession, less because the disease worried officials than because screening for it gave them a new device to identify and purge gay men. Perhaps most decisively, Reagan's judicial appointees gave the obsession new legal protection.

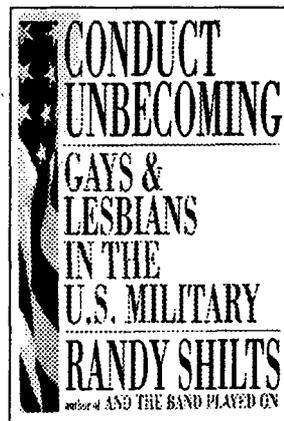
Despite—or because of—those developments, the gay subculture, tolerated by many commanders, rose ever nearer the surface of military life as gay discos flourished on aircraft carriers and the camp dance hit "It's Raining Men" rang out even on remote bases. Both more intense and more openly defied, military homophobia was on a collision course with internal and external pressures that ended in the current maelstrom.

I began Shilts' massive book preparing for a scholar's typical demolition job on journalistic history. The flaws are evident: Shilts has a woefully ahistorical concept of homosexuality (as if being gay were the same in 1993 as in 1793); he poorly grasps the American history that surrounds his subject; he wrings certainty from the most ambiguous evidence.

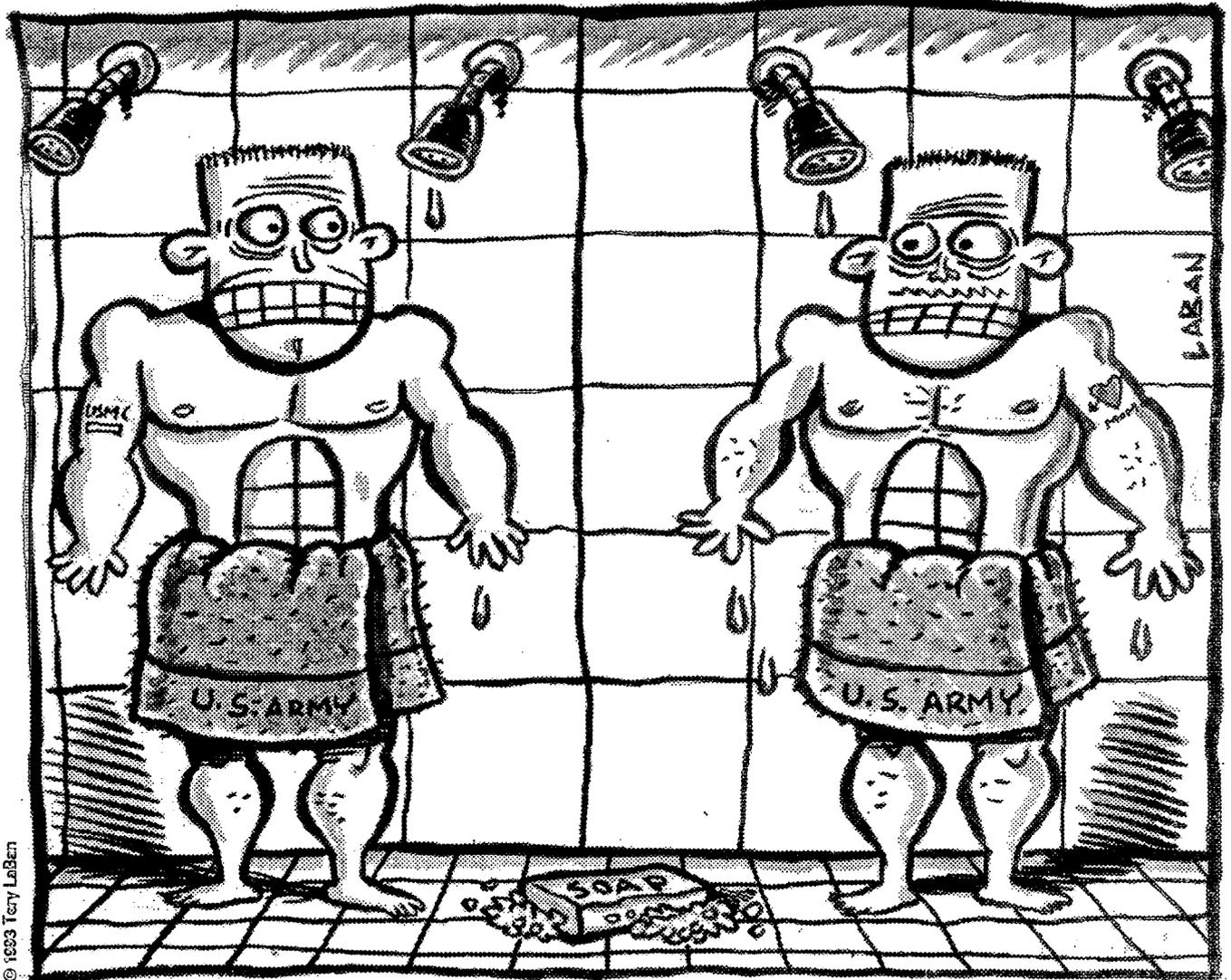
But if no Michel Foucault, Randy Shilts has written a powerful book with a grasp of detail no scholar is likely to match. Even the most informed scholars (and veterans) know this story only in vague outline. Despite the ban, as Shilts documents, many gay people have served in the armed forces and been viciously investigated, abused and humiliated—damaging job prospects and family ties, as well as military efficiency.

Shilts' success lies less in drawing the broad outlines of this familiar story than in giving it life, scale, specificity and moral drama. At the center of that drama is hypocrisy—both of the armed forces, which have enforced the ban when it was convenient and ignored it when not; and to a lesser extent of the gay rights movement, which often seems less interested in overturning the ban than in using its victims as poster children for different causes.

Shilts is at his best laying out the "totalitarian tactics" of military investigative agencies. Since a soldier's own words, service record and the testimony of "aggrieved 'victims'" rarely produce evidence of homosexuality, "illegal coercive interrogations are not an unfortunate side effect of anti-gay regulations; they are virtually the only way to execute the work that the regulations demand." This has led to gross violations of due process, physi-



**Conduct Unbecoming:  
Gays & Lesbians in the  
U.S. Military**  
By Randy Shilts  
St. Martin's Press  
784 pp., \$27.95



cal and emotional brutalization of those suspected (whether gay or not) and crude doctoring of military records. Making the process more capricious has been the willingness of officials to bend the rules when it serves their needs—because someone is highly valued or has access to powerful supporters, because of wartime demands for personnel, because some victims threaten embarrassing publicity that might expose the military's illegal ways or its tacit acceptance of many queers. To make exceptions possible, enforcement had to be even more uneven and hypocritical, viciously advanced in some cases and laughably waived in others.

Shilts, in the grand and often useful tradition of muck-raking journalism, tends to condemn rather than to explain; he's never wholly able to account for why the military's ban came into place and why support for it persists. To find an explanation in the various rationales offered for official policy is a feckless endeavor, for the rationales have changed greatly since their initial formulation during World War II—only the policy itself has remained fairly consistent. But

parts of an explanation can be found here, if untidily scattered about in this huge book.

Military policies spring from more than obvious homophobia. Few deny—and long-suppressed Defense Department studies have admitted—that gay men and women have served ably and honorably. The debate now focuses less on the alleged misdeeds of gay people than on the fear and mistrust straight soldiers have of gays. If “unit cohesion” suffers, it will not be because of the inherent disruptiveness of a gay presence but because the armed forces have so long cultivated homophobia.

To be sure, malign notions of homosexuality still lurk in this debate: the notorious shower argument, usually accompanied in television coverage by teasing footage of naked men in the contested site, conjures up images of predatory homosexual rapists. But even that argument presumes an aggressive sexuality that further buries old stereotypes of limp-wristed gay men and asexual lesbians, and it focuses on straight men fearful less of attack than of the mere thought of being gazed upon as sexual objects. Such fears

are not new; they long existed alongside a host of other fears and stereotypes, like the claims that homosexuals were security risks, faint-hearted soldiers or moral perverts. But now they've displaced the older claims. Whatever the outcome of the current debate, that shift in focus—from the failings of gay personnel to the anxieties of straight ones—guarantees that any compromise will be unstable, that the fight will continue. (The current compromises being floated promise much litigation and little justice, a sort of New Deal jobs program for lawyers.)

The fact that the military long tolerated many homosexuals and now draws the line between "open" and secret homosexuality further suggests that the issue is less homosexuality per se than power: the military's power to govern itself, in one of the few arenas remaining for it to exercise such power. Racial, religious and ethnic discrimination long ago became taboo—if hardly extinct—and gender discrimination, while far more persistent, by and large lacks the sanction of law and official policy. Only with respect to sexual orientation do military officials retain the legal right to define their institution in social terms, and to wield the power that right presupposes.

The preservation of the ban has as much to do with sexism as sexuality. It strengthens the military's hand in dealing with its most striking change—the growing numbers and expanding roles of women. As Shilts suggests, the military has enforced its ban more brutally against women because their presence is more novel and threatening to notions of military manhood than the familiar, if scarcely acknowledged, presence of gay men. The debate's extraordinary inattention to military women—hardly anyone has raised the dread specter of lesbians gazing at the naked bodies of other women—also suggests how much men and their anxieties drive the debate. With the ban intact, or just a watered-down version that keeps the Uniform Code of Military Justice, the armed forces will retain a powerful weapon for controlling women in the ranks: men can refute accusations of sexual harassment and worse by accusing the accuser of lesbianism.

The functional result of all these forces is certainly homophobia, often of the most repugnant sort. But that's just the point. An intricate social construction, homophobia has sprung not only from the direct hatred of homosexuals but out of complex impulses to exercise power over gender and social relations. Homophobia and sexism are so intricately linked in the military that one will not be dislodged without tackling the other, and without seeing both as something more than simply irrational intolerance. The right to stigmatize and eject confers power, and power in this arena has been consciously, cynically and "rationally" pursued.

Beyond the conscious exercise of power lies another level of military homophobia whose logic, if any, is only perverse. Military authorities have routinely blackmailed gay personnel in the name of guarding against their vulnerability to blackmail—forcing lesbians and gay men into accepting dis-

honorable discharges, ratting on friends and cowering in submission. Homosexuals have indeed been vulnerable to blackmail, but it came from their fellow Americans, not Soviet agents. As was often the case in the Cold War, much of the evil projected onto the blank screen of "communism" was a projection of the cruelties that powerful Americans visited upon the less powerful.

But if the injustice and stupidity Shilts documents have been around for so long, why has this issue come now so prominently to the fore? It's certainly not because gay and lesbian activists made it their top priority—they made it a priority only in reaction to the furor set loose by Clinton's initial move in January. Why should dismantling the ban seem more urgent—or, to its opponents, dangerous—than securing a federal gay civil rights bill or getting gays into high offices?

Implicit in the debate is the assumption that the military retains pride of place among American institutions and that citizenship is secured above all by service in it. The assumption is understandable; after all, black Americans achieved integration in the armed forces before they did in most American institutions, and this initial achievement was the springboard for later ones. But this step came when the military was an ascendant institution, critical to Cold War politics. That this arena is now so privileged by both the ban's defenders and its opponents seems more curious.

My unsettling suspicion is that such debates serve ultimately to legitimate the military at a time when its mission is seriously in question. When it is too blatantly unrepresentative of the American people, the military becomes an alien institution unfit to enforce the nation's will. As "our" institution, it is empowered to act. It's doubtful, for example, that American armed forces could have intervened forcefully in Korea in 1950 if Truman in 1948 had not started the process of integrating them; both stateside politics and battlefield demands for troops made an integrated force necessary.

Too much has changed since 1948 to draw a close analogy between the debate over race and the current one over gender and homosexuality. But it may be that if this obstacle is overcome, our armed forces' charter will be renewed. While excluded from or oppressed within the armed forces, many gay men and women formed major phalanxes in the anti-war and anti-nuclear movements of the '60s, '70s and early '80s. Included, they will gain a sort of citizenship, but at a price for them and the nation—precisely why many gay activists, steeped in an earlier tradition of anti-war activism, have hesitated to make this their cause.

Yet, as Shilts shows, legions of gay military men and women already pay that price while running the constant risk of being denied the benefits of service. The debate is hardly about whether they will serve, but the conditions under which they do. Formal inclusion may empower the military; official exclusion can't be the way to contain it. ◀

**Michael S. Sherry** teaches U.S. history at Northwestern University. He is the author of *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon*, which won the 1987 Bancroft Prize.

# CLASSIFIEDS

## ▶ HELP WANTED

**FIELD CANVASS DIRECTOR:** Full-time, year-round administrative position responsible for fund raising and outreach. Requires previous experience demonstrating leadership and supervisory skills. Salary negotiable. Send résumé to: Denise Conklin, Citizens for a Better Environment, 3255 Hennepin Ave. S., Suite 150, Minneapolis, MN 55408 (612) 824-8637. Closing July 2, 1993, EOE.

INFACT seeks full-time staff for new international campaign to stop the abuses of the tobacco industry! INFACT's first two campaigns--the Nestle Boycott and the GE Boycott--met with great success toward stopping corporate abuses. Now hiring for three positions based in Boston: national organizer, national fundraiser and office manager/development assistant. Send résumé and letter to: Elaine Lamy, INFACT, 256 Hanover St., Boston, MA 02113 (617) 742-4583.

**COMMUNITY ORGANIZER.** The Campaign for Better Health Care will be hiring an aggressive community organizer to fight health care discrimination and other local health access issues on Chicago's southeast side. Applicant should have organizing experience, be creative, motivated and demonstrate initiative. \$17-19,000 plus benefits. Send résumé, cover letter, writing samples and references through July 23rd to Jim Duffett, 44 Main, #208, Champaign, IL 61820 (217) 352-6533.

**ORGANIZING PROGRAM DIRECTOR**—Supervision, program management and low-income organizing experience a must, also excellent

written/verbal communication skills. Grant writing, DTP, and fundraising experience helpful. Bilingual (English/Spanish) preferred. Cover letter and résumé to Executive Director, HCAC, 56 Vernon St., Northampton, MA 01060 by 4:30 p.m. Fri., June 18. HCAC is an AA/EOE actively seeking applications under its affirmative action program.

**COMMUNITY JOBS:** The Employment Newspaper for the Non-Profit Sector. Join over 50,000 job-seekers in reading a unique monthly publication containing more than 200 new job listings (in Environment, Arts, International, Health, Youth, Civil Rights, Housing, Human Services, etc.). Featuring informative articles, book reviews, resource lists, profiles of non-profit organizations and the people who found them. Contact: ACCESS, 50 Beacon St., Boston, MA 02108, (617) 720-5627.

**CIRCULATION/PRODUCTION MANAGER:** Immediate opening at radical economics magazine. Desktop publishing, maintaining subscriber data base. Excellent organizational skills, computer experience required. Three days/week, full-time equivalent salary \$23,300, health coverage, four weeks vacation. Send résumé and cover letter ASAP to Staff Search, Dollars & Sense, One Summer St., Somerville, MA 02143.

## AUTHORS WANTED

Leading subsidy book publisher seeks manuscripts of all types: fiction, non-fiction, poetry, scholarly and religious works, etc. Send for booklet Z-89. New authors welcomed. Vantage Press, 516 W 34 St., New York, NY 10001.

## JEWISH CURRENTS

July-August, 1993 issue

"The Living Mideast Peace Process," Editorial; "The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising 50 Years Later: A Report," Isak Arbus; "A Lullaby," Leib Kvitko; "Sports and American Jews," Lester Rodney.

Single issue: \$2.

Subscription: \$20 yearly (USA).

**JEWISH CURRENTS**  
Dept. T, Suite 601  
22 E. 17 St.  
New York, NY 10003

**POSITION AVAILABLE: POLICY ANALYST.** Requirements: College graduate, preferable math, computer or economics background. Desire to work for progressive tax policy. \$22,000 annual salary to start, excellent benefits. Contact: Doug Kelly, Citizens for Tax Justice, 1311 L St., NW, Washington, DC 20005.

## ▶ PUBLICATIONS

**LOVE TRAVELING?** Become an independent Travel Consultant. Excellent profits from home. Insider's guide reveals how. Rush \$16.00 to: Zen Tours, Dept-T4, Box 38805, Colorado Springs, CO 80937.

**THE OLD FART:** A magazine for and by curmudgeons. Send \$10 cheque for a one-year subscription to this quarterly publication to Box 83509, 199 Avenue Rd., Toronto, Canada M5R 2M6 (Tel/Fax 416-975-2614) or send \$20, one for yourself and one for your favorite curmudgeon.

## ▶ BOOKS

**COSMIC CONSCIOUSNESS.** Teleportation, Superbrain function. Incredible

Stand up for your right to travel to **CUBA!**

Join members of  
Global Exchange, Pastors for  
Peace, National Network on  
Cuba and others on the historic

**FREEDOM TO TRAVEL  
CHALLENGE**

October 10 - 17, 1993

Contact: AD HOC COMMITTEE  
FOR FREEDOM TO TRAVEL  
PO BOX 401116  
SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94140-1116  
(415-558-9490)

Inquiry Catalog. (Stamps) P.O. Box 2207, Garden Valley, ID 83622.

**BOOKS FOR SALE** Lincoln researcher, complete life of tyrannic president, contemporaries' views. Box 458, Roscoe, NY 12776.

**CAXTON BOOKSEARCH.** Box 220, Ellison Bay, WI 54210. We'll order or search any book. (800) 288-7724.

**FREE METAPHYSICAL** booklist. Sunbooks, Box 5588 (ITT), Santa Fe, NM 87502-5588.

**THE CATALOG OF ALTERNATIVES.** More than just a catalog. Videos, books, and words to live by. Wishful Thinking? Video, P.O. Box 296, Florham Park, NJ 07932.

## ▶ EDUCATION

**BECOME A DIFFERENT KIND OF LAWYER!** 20 years of experience. We prepare you to work in environmental law, civil rights, immigration law, labor law and police misconduct. **PEOPLES COLLEGE OF LAW** now accepting applications (800) 747-6245, extension 40057.

## iviva la tortuga!

Visit sustainable development projects working with sea turtles in Latin America.

Earth Island 1.800.859.SAVE

## NOAM CHOMSKY ON VIDEO

2 hours each, lectures, Q&A.  
Titles include: Year 501; Creeping Fascism; New World Order; Human Nature; East Timor; Interviews Europe '92; Power and Democracy; many more.  
Audio Only: Creativity and Culture; Naturalist Linguistics.

Each 2 hr video \$20.00. Transcripts \$6.00.  
2 sixty minute audiotapes \$20.00. Check or money order to: **TURNING THE TIDE**, 35 Prospect St., Bloomfield, CT 06002, PH: 203-242-5302. *Free catalog available includes Zinn, Marable, Eagleton, many others...*

## PeaceNet Connects

Peace, Human Rights & Environmental Activists

Access vital information, alerts and alternative news from the activist community worldwide!

- Electronic Mail and Faxes
- Computer Conferencing
- Dial Locally, Act Globally
- No Special Computer Required

IGC Networks, 18 De Boom Street  
San Francisco, CA 94107  
(415) 442 - 0220

A Division of the Tides Foundation

## What Is a Liberal?

By E. Haldeman-Julius

Insightful dissertation on the meaning and understanding of political, social, marital, and religious liberalism by the late publisher of the famous Little Blue Books. Though composed over fifty years ago, the timeless relevance of this definitive masterpiece to contemporary issues remains undiminished.

A classic. Edited and read by Carl Shapiro.

Audiocassette, Approx. 45 mins. \$8.50 ppd. (USA)

Independent Publications • Box 102 • Ridgely, NJ 07657