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POSSIBLE DEFENSE SECRETARY SEEN AS OPPONENT OF GAY RIGHTS

Former Senator Daniel Coats led Republican effort to expel gay soldiers

18 December 2000- SANTA BARBARA, CA. In remarks delivered to the nation last week, President-elect George Bush spoke of "respect for our differences" and said that he would be "president of every single American, of every race and every background." By considering a conservative Republican Senator from Indiana for the top post at the Pentagon, however, Bush may choose an outspoken opponent of gay rights.

While serving in the Senate, Dan Coats voted against a bill to prohibit job discrimination against gays and lesbians, refused to sign a non-discrimination policy for his own office, and opposed the Hate Crimes Statistics Act, a bill that sought to track, not punish, bias-motivated violence. He said that gay marriage was a sign of "deep moral confusion" and he strongly opposed the 1993 nomination of lesbian civil rights lawyer Roberta Achtenberg as Assistant Secretary for Fair Housing, citing "some disturbing things about her background, character, and temperament" and claiming that her opposition to the Boy Scouts' ban against gays was "an example of a radical agenda that is outside the mainstream of civil rights."

As a former member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Coats spearheaded the opposition to gays in the military, resisted gender integration in basic training units, and fought to prohibit abortions at overseas military hospitals. He equated President Clinton's proposal to allow gays to serve in the military with condoning sexual harassment, claiming that Clinton's proposal "would allow the kind of conduct that took place at the Tailhook convention to be exempted from any military regulation."

Evan Wolfson, a senior attorney at the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, notes that Coats's position on gays in the military is more extreme than that of Vice-President elect Dick Cheney, who said that the gay ban was "a bit of an old chestnut" when he served as Defense Secretary. In 1991, Cheney distanced himself from "a policy I inherited" which said a "gay lifestyle is incompatible with military service." Given Cheney's previous criticism of the gay ban, Wolfson says that he hopes for a new era of inquiry into the empirical evidence on gay troops, which suggests that known homosexuals can serve alongside straight troops without undermining the military.



The Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military is a research unit of the University of California, Santa Barbara. Its board includes Lawrence J. Korb of the Council on Foreign Relations, Coit Blacker of Stanford University and Professor Janet Halley of Harvard Law School, and its mission is to promote the study of sexual minorities in the armed forces.