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West Pointer Wins First-Ever Military Award for Challenging Gay Ban

SANTA BARBARA, CA, August 8, 2006 - A West Point graduate has earned an academic award and Congressional recognition for a senior thesis arguing that the military's gay ban should be scrapped because it violates military values. A dozen scholars who study the military said this was the first they had heard of a military service academy giving an award for research on gays in the military.

Congressman Marty Meehan of Massachusetts, a senior member of the House Armed Service Committee, issued a letter of commendation this week to honor Lt. Alexander Raggio, the paper's author, for taking a morally courageous position on the controversial topic. Although the West Point award was given last year, it took several months before Lt. Raggio was able to get permission to publicize it. Lt. Raggio, who is heterosexual, graduated from West Point in 2005 and is now an Army Lieutenant who leads a platoon of 35-40 soldiers.

Lt. Raggio's study, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Be: A Philosophical Analysis of the Gay Ban in the U.S. Military," was written as a senior thesis for West Point's English Department, which gave it the BG Carroll E. Adams Award for best thesis. The award is presented each May to the West Point Cadet who writes the best dissertation in Art, Philosophy or Literature. The study also earned special recognition from the Vice Dean for education.

The thesis contends that "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" is out of step with the values of both the military and the nation, and that widening the gap between civilian and military culture works to the detriment of both.

"The Army must reflect the fundamental principles of the nation it serves," the paper argues, "except when doing so would place the Army or nation at risk." By forcing gays and lesbians to hide their true identity, the policy labels them as "second-class individuals," and "may actually undermine the legitimacy of the armed forces" in an age of growing acceptance of the rights of sexual minorities.

Lt. Raggio acknowledges in his paper that it is impossible to know if disruptions would occur if the ban on openly gay troops were lifted. "But the fact remains," he argues, "that the Army has undertaken such risks before, and in far more dire social circumstances." He points out that the public is far more



supportive of gays and lesbians today than it was of African-Americans when they were integrated into the armed forces after World War II. To make changes that incorporate racial minorities and women while drawing the line at gays "is discrimination of the most blatant sort." The paper concludes that the "personal prejudices" and "faulty logic" that undergird the policy "not only fail to meet standards for reasonable policy but undermine the very legitimacy of the institution Army policy should serve."

Many of the dozen scholars interviewed who teach or taught at service academies or who study gays in the military found it noteworthy that a paper opposing the current policy was recognized, and some suggested the development reflects growing tolerance of homosexuality and a greater willingness to look critically at the ban on open gays.

Dr. Kathleen M. Campbell, Associate Professor of Leadership & Management Studies at West Point, said the award "appears to me to be a sign that attitudes are changing about gays in the military even in the service academies." She remarked that, "in my opinion, while the military was ahead of (or equal to) the curve when it came to integrating the services with respect to race and gender, we are really behind the curve when it comes to gays." She added that "gays are hired by the police forces around the country, by the FBI, CIA, etc. yet the military still has a ban on gays serving openly."

Bruce Fleming, Professor of English at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, praised the open exchange of ideas: "The goal of the service academies is to produce thinking officers who can react to the world around them, suggesting ways to improve it and increase military effectiveness. Senior theses, whatever their topics or conclusions, are part of that process. Second Lieutenant Raggio is to be commended for his achievements."

A professor at a military service academy who requested anonymity echoed Professor Fleming's praise of Lt. Raggio: "My hat's off to him for his courage, superb scholarship, and internal fortitude to stand up for his convictions, despite the possible risk. This is the stuff of a true leader with integrity."

Lt. Raggio said that while some at West Point disagreed with his conclusions, openly gay service members did not constitute an issue for the majority of his peers, and he received praise and encouragement from professors. "The most impressive and frankly most surprising responses I've gotten on this topic were discussing these ideas on down time with soldiers," he said. "I think a lot of them had just never really thought of it before. If it's DoD policy, you don't particularly question it and you kind of believe whatever you're told about it." When discussing his ideas with other students and with several members of his 35-40-person platoon, he said that many of those who had opposed openly gay service had moderated their position once they heard the facts.



Lt. Raggio's willingness to question the gay ban openly, as well as his West Point department's decision to give him the award for best senior thesis, are consistent with evidence of a shift in military opinion towards gays. In a forthcoming study in the journal, *Armed Forces and Society*, Professor Aaron Belkin, director of the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military (CSSMM), a think tank at University of California, Santa Barbara, shows that military attitudes have changed dramatically in recent years. Two different surveys found that in 1993, only 16 percent of male service members believed that gays and lesbians should be allowed to serve.[i] Since that time, however, shifts have occurred in service members' attitudes about three issues: whether service members are personally comfortable around gays and lesbians; whether they are more comfortable with closeted or openly gay peers; and whether they believe that gays and lesbians should be allowed to serve openly. On all three counts, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" now appears to be inconsistent with the attitudes of key segments of the military.

A March 2000 study by Major John W. Bicknell of the Naval Postgraduate School found that between 1994 and 1999, the percentage of U.S. Navy officers who "feel uncomfortable in the presence of homosexuals" decreased from 57.8 percent to 36.4 percent.[ii] General Wesley Clark confirmed in 2003 that the "temperature of the issue has changed over the decade," saying that "people were much more irate about this issue in the early '90s than I found in the late '90s, for whatever reason, younger people coming in [to the military]. It just didn't seem to be the same emotional hot button issue by '98, '99, that it had been in '92, '93." [iii] The data suggest that the majority of service members feel comfortable around gays and lesbians, and that for most of those who do not feel comfortable, the issue has become less emotionally intense in recent years, conclusions seconded by Lt. Raggio in both his research and first-hand experience.

The data also suggest that Americans are now more uncomfortable with the closet than with openly gay peers. For example, an April 2005 *Sports Illustrated* poll revealed that 78 percent of respondents agree that "It is OK for gay athletes to participate in sports, even if they are open about their sexuality." Only 40 percent agree that "It is OK for homosexuals to participate in sports provided they are not open about their sexuality." The same patterns emerge from military data. Sergeant Robert Stout was an openly gay combat engineer who served for five years in the U.S. Army, including ten months in Iraq. In a June 2005 Congressional briefing, Stout reported that he as well as several other gay soldiers in his unit had revealed their sexual orientation to the members of the unit, and that they had not encountered problems. The only gay soldiers who had been subject to harassment, Stout, said, were those who had not acknowledged their homosexuality candidly.[iv]



The trend toward acceptance is also visible in the policy preferences of enlisted personnel. An October 2004 poll by the Annenberg National Election Survey found that a slim majority of 50 percent of junior enlisted service members (versus 43 percent opposed) believes that gays and lesbians should serve openly in the military. Officers and NCO's, by contrast, remain opposed.

Importantly, while a majority of service members feel comfortable in the presence of gays and lesbians, most have the impression that others are not comfortable, according to the Naval Postgraduate School poll by Major John Bicknell. "This means the majority identify themselves as comfortable around gays and lesbians, but believe that their peers do not feel the same way," explained Dr. Belkin of CSSMM. Such a perception is necessarily wrong, because a majority of service members cannot be both comfortable and more comfortable than their peers, he said. "The finding seems to indicate that there is a cultural-organizational pressure within the armed forces to appear as if one is either uncomfortable or intolerant of homosexuality, but that underneath this performance, service members are in fact comfortable with their gay peers."

The Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military is an official research unit of the University of California, Santa Barbara. The Center is governed by a distinguished board of advisors including the Honorable Lawrence J. Korb of the Center for American Progress, Honorable Coit Blacker of Stanford University and Professor Janet Halley of Harvard Law School. Its mission is to promote the study of gays, lesbians, and other sexual minorities in the armed forces. More information is available at www.gaymilitary.ucsb.edu.

[i] Melissa Healy, "The Times Poll: 74% of Military Enlistees Oppose Lifting Gay Ban," *Los Angeles Times*, February 28, 1993, A1; Laura L. Miller, "Fighting for a Just Cause: Soldiers' Views on Gays in the Military," in *Gays and Lesbians in the Military: Issues, Concerns and Contrasts*, eds. Wilbur J. Scott and Sandra Carson Stanley (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1994), 70.

[ii] John W. Bicknell, Jr., "Study of Naval Officers' Attitudes Toward Homosexuals in the Military" (submitted for the degree of Master of Science in Management, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, March 2000).

[iii] NBC Meet the Press transcript, June 15, 2003.

[iv] "Homosexuality and Sports," *Sports Illustrated*, April 12, 2005. (The *Sports Illustrated* poll was conducted by Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates, Inc., which interviewed 979 adults selected from the general population between March 18-21, 2005. The margin of error for the poll was +/- 3.1 percent.)