

## West Point Thesis Challenges Army Gay Policy, Wins Award

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WASHINGTON — Alexander Raggio says he was 16 when he learned one of his relatives was gay — and watching that person's struggle gave him a grim introduction to discrimination against gays.

He carried those feelings into West Point, and in his senior thesis argued that the military's policy banning gays is not only wrong, but harmful to the Army.

The Pentagon may not agree, but the U.S. Military Academy gave him an award for the paper.

"I love the Army and I think that this is hurting the Army," said Raggio, 24, in an interview this week from his new military post at Fort Riley, Kan. "I see it as my obligation to say 'I don't agree with what you're doing.' I'm not being insubordinate — I just think we're making a mistake here."

He said it was the first time he had spoken publicly about the paper or the award, which he received last year when he graduated from West Point in New York.

While the topic was controversial, and the argument contrary to the military's 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy, Raggio was presented the Brig. Gen. Carroll E. Adams Award for the best senior thesis in the art, philosophy and literature major in the academy's English department.

"It won independent of the subject matter and content," said his thesis adviser Richard Schoonhoven, a philosophy professor at West Point. "It was a closely argued piece of philosophical prose. He tackled a substantive issue, took a stand and didn't back down from the controversy. He presented a good case."

Initially Raggio worried about a backlash from his paper, saying people told him, "There's a possibility this will come back to haunt you, that people will use it against you." But in the end, he said he felt obligated to say what he thought.

"The Army often talks of doing the harder right rather than the easier wrong, and now it is time to put the policy where the propaganda is," he wrote in his 24-page thesis. "Allowing the open service of gays in the military is the right thing to do, no matter how difficult a transition it may be."

Under the Pentagon's policy, the military is prohibited from inquiring about the sex lives of service members, but those who openly acknowledge being gay must be discharged. There were 726 military members discharged under the policy during the year that ended last Sept. 30.

"I have a problem where you have a military that says you can't discriminate based on race; in all but very minimal ways you can't discriminate based on gender, and you can't discriminate based on religion or lack of religion. The only people not getting a fair shake were homosexuals," said Raggio, who is from Muncie, Ind., and describes himself as "about the straightest guy you can imagine."

He says he knew by the time he was in seventh grade that he wanted to go to West Point and become a career Army officer. Now a 2nd lieutenant, leading a platoon in the 97th Military Police Battalion, he talks eagerly of going to Iraq, possibly next year.

He plans to spend at least 20 years in the service, and he said he believes the Army he loves is capable of integrating openly gay soldiers, much as it brought in minorities and women.

In his paper Raggio acknowledged that changing the policy may create tension or put openly gay soldiers at risk of violence.

But he argued that soldiers who make life and death decisions in Iraq and handle volatile situations with insurgents and prisoners are capable of dealing with a gay soldier in their battalion.

Advocates of gays in the military said they were encouraged that Raggio's paper was lauded by the school.

"I think that this award symbolizes a shift in military culture," said Aaron Belkin, director of the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military, a think tank at the University of California at Santa Barbara. "Raggio was brave enough to write about it in the first place, but the fact that West Point would give him an award for challenging the gay ban is a powerful indication of how far the military has come culturally."