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## **Thinking Inventively in Attacking Homophobia: The Case of ROTC**

Gay people are so often in a victimized position that we do not take advantage of the opportunities we are offered. Sometimes, discrimination can work to our advantage. A case in point is the current controversy about ROTC. Clearly, the U.S. Department of Defense is discriminating against lesbians and gay men when it refuses to let us serve in the armed forces. One never hears homophobes suggesting that gays and lesbians should be exempt from paying taxes to support the military, yet they do mandate that anyone discovered to be homosexual should be thrown out of the service.

Rather than lesbian and gay sailors and soldiers shaking in our boots, in fear that we will be discovered, perhaps it is time for us to take action to turn the tables on this form of institutionalized homophobia. Massive numbers of young gay men and lesbians who want to get a free college education should enter the college of their choice and apply for an ROTC scholarship. This would mean that they would have to be closeted while they are being supported by the Navy, Army, or Air Force. But once they have completed their education and specialized training, they can "come out." By current Defense Department rules, they would be honorably discharged.

At the least, such persons would have had their education paid for by the Armed Services. Considering the number of gay and lesbian veterans who have been unfairly denied their retirement benefits from the armed forces, surely this course of action is morally justified. If such educational benefits must come from the budgets of the U.S. military establishment, so be it. Investment in the education and training of the upcoming generation, after all, is a much better investment in our nation's future than more bombs and jet fighters.

Additionally, the training given by the military could be quite valuable for a civilian career. For example, students trained as ship officers by Naval ROTC would be well qualified to join the merchant marine. Where are the gay investors, officers, and crew who can set up an all-gay shipping company? This would not be the first time in history for such a trend to occur. In the seventeenth century, homosexual sailors left the oppressive British Royal Navy to establish their own independent fringe societies as buccaneers in the

Caribbean. Though stereotyped as "pirates" by the British government, they often were in fact more democratic and humane than the British Navy.

If a large portion of the armed forces officers-in-training turned out to be lesbians and gay men, the Defense Department would eventually realize that the necessary investigations and waste of trained personnel would be too costly. Then, for the survival of their own bureaucracies, they would be forced to drop their discriminatory practices. If they did not, at least lesbians and gay men could continue to get the benefit of a free college education paid for by ROTC scholarships.

The gay community has developed protest to a fine art, but we often ignore how discrimination can offer us special opportunities. Rather than just complain about discrimination, it is time that we start exercising our initiative to make the best of a bad situation, and give "straight" society the message that discrimination is bad for them. It is clear that many prejudiced people will never change their attitudes based on a moral appeal. Only when it is in their financial interests will they change. We must show the Defense Department that homophobia is costing *them*, and promote massive numbers of gay and lesbian youth to apply for ROTC scholarships. It is a case of the old saying, "When the world hands you a lemon, make lemonade."

As a retired officer in the Army Reserve, I know that the worst thing about being gay in the military is the fear of being discovered. If gay and lesbian service personnel would simply stop fearing being thrown out, and would go about our duties with a relaxed manner, then we will not be oppressed by fear. As Franklin Roosevelt said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." For those in college, discretion is advisable in order to keep one's scholarship. But after graduation, if we are discovered to be homosexual, then we simply leave the service and get a civilian job. It is the military's loss, not ours.

The events of Eastern Europe this last year clearly demonstrate that an oppressive situation can continue only so long as the people put up with it. Surely the Defense Department is not so dumb as to think that the several hundred veterans they dismiss from the military each year are the only homosexuals in the armed forces. They take these very public actions in order to intimidate the majority of gays and lesbians in the service. When the gay community will no longer be intimidated, they will realize it is too expensive for their homophobic policy to continue.