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## Veterans, the Flag, and Protest: Facilitating Dialogue at Jesuit Institutions

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## Veterans, the Flag, and Protest: Facilitating Dialogue at Jesuit Institutions

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*Sean Hagerty, S.J., is completing his scholastic studies at Saint Louis University (SLU). Before joining the Jesuits in 2012, he served in the U.S. Army, where he was deployed to Diyala Province, Iraq, commanded a forward observer team, and served as second in command of an infantry company. After finishing his military service, Hagerty began work in the beer industry. He was a star manager when he decided to leave the corporate world and enter the Society of Jesus.*

*During the events of Occupy SLU, an American flag was hung upside down and dragged through the mud in the center of the protestors' encampment. In his article, Hagerty reflects on his role as a Jesuit and a veteran who participated with a group of SLU veterans, and on the group's consideration of flag desecration, deliberating with veterans familiar with soldiers who were sent home from far-away lands with the flag draped over their coffin.*

When I arrived at Saint Louis University in the fall of 2014, I had just taken first vows after finishing two years in the Jesuit novitiate. Being missioned to study philosophy was exciting, as it was my first assignment as a vowed man in the society. Philosophy studies were a departure from my life before the Jesuits. I was an Army officer, a veteran of the Iraq war, and then a manager in the corporate world. However, my studies took an unexpected turn soon after I arrived in St. Louis when Michael Brown was killed in nearby Ferguson. When the protestors settled on SLU's campus in October 2014, my fellow Jesuit scholastics and I were put in the role of facilitating campus conversations about the events. For me, that involved participating in discussions with SLU's Student Veterans Association.

The protest was composed of a small group who occupied the clock tower in the center of SLU's campus. It created division among the students. Many supported the protest, feeling that something need to be done about the pervasive and long standing injustices perpetrated against the black community by police. Others felt threatened by the protest and urged the administration to forcibly remove the protestors from the grounds (the administration did not). The protestors were watched by supporters and opponents alike, every action documented and discussed. The university even installed a webcam so that everybody could stream images of the protest from home. At the center of the protester's encampment an American flag hung

upside-down from a short PVC pipe, the lower section of the flag resting in the dirt of a flower bed. Flying the flag, union side down, is a display of extreme distress. At times, the protestors would drag the flag on the ground. It was the treatment of the flag that disturbed the veteran community at SLU.

Veterans have an attachment to the American flag that borders on devotion. Service members wear the flag on their right shoulder when deployed. Before I left for Iraq, my commander issued a set of "combat rules" for the unit. Among them was the following: "only trust those who wear our flag." Fighting a counterinsurgency is tricky; it is very hard to know whom to trust. The only persons in whom one could trust wore the flag. The flag meant safety and loyalty; it meant home. When those who died in combat were sent home, they went with flag over their coffin. That same flag would be given to those they left behind.

Like the rest of SLU student body, some veterans supported the protest while others did not. Many members of the Student Veterans Association wanted a letter, written on behalf of the veteran community, to be sent to the administration denouncing the protestors and demanding the university end the protest. Some even suggested the possibility of releasing the letter to local



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media in the hope that it would force the university to end the protest. A meeting was organized to discuss whether the Student Veterans Association should publicly denounce the protest and the administration's handling of the situation.

The meeting was well attended. While normally 5-10 veterans would show up to any given meeting, more than 25 attended the meeting about protest. The organization's president and vice president opened the floor to discussion about what should be done. For more than two hours student veterans debated the merits of both positions. The conversation was heated. Everybody disliked the treatment of the flag by protesters but there was disagreement as to whether it was appropriate during protest on campus. As a Jesuit and veteran, I supported the protest. The fact that it made students uncomfortable was a *good thing*. If anything, the protest facilitated a much needed conversation about social justice. Sitting in a room dominated by white men (myself included), I found it sad that many of my peers felt anger towards protesters without even attempting to consider the situation that led to the protest.

At the end of the meeting, it was decided that no letter would be sent to the administration. The decision was made for various reasons. First, as students at SLU we appreciated that the university gave voice to those who wished to protest, even for those with whom we disagreed, as it guaranteed that our voice would be heard as well. Second, to release a statement condemning the administration would harm the school for doing what a university ought: challenging the opinions and worldview of its students. Third, and last, although the Student Veteran Association unanimously disagreed with the desecration of the flag, we, as an association, acknowledged the right to do so. All service members swear an oath to uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States; desecrating the flag in protest is protected by the First Amendment. To deny that right would be tantamount to breaking our oaths, a far greater desecration than dragging the flag. HJE