

John-F.-Kennedy Institute for North American Studies Freie Universität Berlin

Graduation Ceremony of November 30, 2013

Speech given by the Chair of the Institute Council, Prof. Irwin Collier, Ph.D.

Dear Parents, Friends and Family of the graduates,
Loyal Members of the John-F.-Kennedy Institute Community,
Proud Alumni,
Friends of the John-F.-Kennedy Institute from near and far,
Dear, dear Graduates of North American Studies:

Thanks to the initiative and continued generosity of earlier graduates of the John-F.-Kennedy Institute, we again assemble for our annual celebration of those who have successfully completed the requirements for BA, MA, Magister or doctoral degrees at our Institute.

This is a most happy occasion. You, the graduates, can be proud of your academic achievement. You, the parents and families, can delight in having your graduate one step closer to becoming an independent node in your family network (sorry, I scared myself, that sounded like sociology). We, the elders of this academic village, are extremely happy too. While bibliometricians look at our so-called research impact factors and bean-counters of Freie Universität (who sit in the same building that once housed the Allied Kommandatura of Berlin) look at the euro bottom-lines of our sponsored research accounts, ultimately what really matters can be read today in the smiling faces under the mortar-boards worn by our graduates.

It would be presumptuous to claim that the active and distinguished researchers of our faculty have succeeded in making the torch of civilization perceivably brighter in the visible portion of the spectrum, but if truth be told, few of us would stay in this business without some immodest belief that our research at least wins us lottery tickets to a place in the Pantheon of scholarship and science. But enough about us. Graduation ceremonies remind me of John F. Kennedy's words in his inaugural address as President: "the torch has been passed" — Quite so, we witness today 33 BAs' worth of torch, 13 MA and Magister degrees' worth of torch and 7 torches' worth of doctoral degrees being passed. You have to admit, the John-F.-Kennedy Institute does pretty good torch-passing.

To you, freshly minted graduates of Freie Universität, now the youngest cohort of our alumni, let me as the duly elected chairperson of our institute council extend heartfelt congratulations on behalf of every single colleague, every member of the instructional staff, all of our administrative assistants, and our entire library team. You have earned your degrees (and be honest, with some help from family and friends). Your degrees are

worth far more than the paper they are printed on, because they are asset backed. That asset is your human capital.

You were expected to master vast quantities of material, and you did. You prepared for discussions, and you spoke. You often independently maneuvered your ways through a thicket of evolving Studien- und Prüfungsordnungen, you coordinated your official studies with internships and with time abroad, you worked to connect the disciplinary and interdisciplinary dots your instructors tried so valiantly and sometimes vainly to tattoo into your minds. Yes, we have witnessed your growth in emotional and intellectual maturity too. Of course, wisdom requires much of a lifetime to attain, but without a capacity to learn from both, your personal experience and ability to learn from the experience of others, you could be healthy and wealthy in your later life, but I wouldn't count on becoming wise. It is less the exact content of what you have actually studied here that matters, than having trained your capacity to continue learning after graduation. I hope you feel doubly blessed: while training that capacity to continue learning, your time was well-spent reading and thinking about diverse aspects of North America.

Remain loyal to your alma mater and, when you can, help her nourish the cohorts of students to follow you.

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Events in North America continue to unfold faster than our capacity for "Understanding North America", as we call our first year introductory course. We consider it a good day when we are able to tie the morning headlines and nightly news to deeper trends and patterns.

Judging at least by the intensity of the public outrage in Germany and Europe, the biggest story of the year for America-watchers, or should I say for the "America-watched", is found in the digital trail preserved and revealed by Edward Snowden that documents many activities of the National Security Agency of the United States. Normally historians are first served the entrails of intelligence agencies long after their shelf-life has expired. On such occasions as the Snowden affair, the pantry is broken into and journalists are able to serve us a feast from fresh archival material.

I'll sidestep the substantive debate this affair has raised about the needed limits on and control of our capacities to tap human communication on a scale unimaginable except within the realm of social science fiction. Here it is worth noting that Orwell's sinister date "1984" is already nearly three decades behind us! Even more remarkable is the growth in a technical capacity to filter out so much of the chatter, they call it "noise", that all of us make in the course of our daily business of life. The goal of these agencies is to extract from our personal noise the sought for signals of foe and friend, ex-super powers, super-power-wannabes, all the way down to your garden-variety bands of pirates and networked terrorist groups. This digital technology is analogous to the organized scientific search for extraterrestrial intelligence and I sometimes wonder if NSA were tasked to that search, what we might then discover. I conjecture that E.T., like Chancellor Merkel, used an antique Nokia to text home.

One of the many tasks facing Germany and the United States (Canada plays the supporting role of an accessory after the fact, being a member of the Five Eyes Alliance for signals intelligence) is to repair the damaged bilateral relationship, to rebuild trust among partners and together improving the balance between the pursuit of security and preservation of liberty. Allow me to also sidestep the substantive discussion of fixing what has been broken.

Instead let me risk a foray into cultural studies. We tread freely across the disciplinary boundaries at the John-F.-Kennedy Institute and I dare say I have never detected the slightest inhibition of any colleagues to ponder financial crises and the roots of economic inequality. So I might be forgiven this transgression.

Detective stories have long been a staple of popular literature, radio, stage and screen. Of more recent vintage is the spy story and it is striking how this genre has evolved over the years. The special relationship between the Brits and the Amis is reflected in the abiding American affection for the work of Ian Fleming (the James Bond franchise that started in 1952 with *Casino Royale* is actually three years older than the McDonald's chain) and of course for the work of John le Carrée that followed Fleming not quite a decade later.

Ian Fleming himself created the name of one of the lead characters in a successful TV spy drama *The Man from UNCLE*, (United Network Command for Law and Enforcement). The series paired an American (Napoleon Solo) with a Russian (Illya Kuryakin) of course working under the command of the British head of UNCLE. This popular series premiered almost simultaneously with the box office hit *Goldfinger* (1964) and ran 105 episodes over four years.

In the following season, capitalizing on the success of *Goldfinger*, came the TV spy parody, *Get Smart* (a brainchild of Buck Henry and Mel Brooks, the latter writer brought us *The Producers* and that unforgettable production number "Springtime for Hitler"). *Get Smart* was to espionage what *Hogan's Heroes* was to POW camps in Germany. An example of the "cutting edge" technology in the parody was a full rotary dial phone hidden in the shoe sole of agent, Maxwell Smart.

A regular feature of the humor magazine, avidly read by many a teenage lad, *MAD* magazine was the cartoon Spy-vs-Spy that I well recall having read. I must admit Spy-vs-Spy has not left a single punch line in my memory, perhaps crowded out by much later lines from Gary Trudeau's *Doonesbury* that has itself featured a few characters having CIA ties. Two of the most salient animated cartoon spy characters in the *Rockie and Bullwinkle Show* of the 1960s were Boris Badenov with his sidekick Natasha Fatale with their heavy Russian accents who worked for Fearless Leader from the country of Pottsylvania.

Finally there was *I Spy*, another 'sixties TV spy drama. In this series two agents for the Pentagon travelled the world under the cover of being tennis bums. Interestingly the show was an early media reflection of the Civil Rights movement as the black comedian, turned actor, Bill Cosby, was one of its two stars. The 1960s constituted a high water mark of spy-themed entertainment in the United States.

James Bond can still fill movie theatres and films like *Argo* continue to provide us the kind of entertainment comfort food that sold well in the 1960s. Turning to Germany, *The Life of Others* personalized the relationship of man-to-mike-to-headphones-to-spook, which is a compelling, dramatic story that nevertheless offers us little insight the organized aspects of the “banality of evil.”

There has been an interesting shift in emphasis to be seen in the current popular TV series *Homeland* and in recent films like the docu-drama *Zero Dark Thirty*. In both these examples, center stage has moved from the playground of action-toy operatives to background “analysis” where one presumes the intelligent life in intelligence is to be found—in connecting the dots, filtering the traffic, and extracting networks from metadata — intellectual efforts comparable to the well-known code-breaking successes in World War II. However the emphasis in our current popular narratives still fails to uncover the reality buried under mathematical algorithms and the nitty-gritty of collating and cross-checking in the exhaustive manner of a gumshoe detective in his office on the phone, that under the best of circumstances is tedious, repetitive, mostly a narrative of dead-ends. Best for the bottom-line of an entertainment industry are a manic-depressive heroine, a traumatized ex POW and their intricate psychological codependencies. Who has ever heard of a heroine with a spreadsheet?

Now enter Edward Snowden who has thrown us all into our brave new NSA world. Public debate in the United States I believe still takes place before a backdrop of images and within narratives shared from the 1960s. I spy, you spy, we all spy. Fun for the family, PG-13. I ask you, is it a wonder that a country like Germany, where Google street view images often look like a foggy day in San Francisco, cannot see eye to eye with the United States with respect to the Snowden revelations?

Next let us recall an unrelated major news story of the past year. Last December a deeply disturbed twenty year old Adam Lanza shot and killed his mother then twenty children and six adults at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Ct. One does not have to be a Michael Moore to see a political-social structure or have to be a psychiatrist at the National Institute of Mental Health to see the pathological human psychology that lie behind this human tragedy. We observe here the repetition of a pattern of disturbed young men, and I emphasize *men*, enabled by the easy acquisition of weapons in the United States who slaughter innocents in schools, universities, movie theaters and yet such repeated slaughter results in no serious legislative action required for society to protect itself.

Finally we recall the act of a 24 year old man with his mail-order rifle who himself was gunned down by a pistol packing night-club owner in Dallas fifty years ago to this week. Many or even a majority of Americans believe that these lone losers with guns must necessarily have been marionettes in an invisible greater game. I personally find the evidence reasonably consistent with a much simpler and familiar alchemy that results from a mixture of a fanatic interpretation of the 2nd amendment’s prescription of a “right to bear arms” with a loser’s (in this case two loser’s) fantasies of righting wrongs.

Speaking of the Kennedy assassination, I highly recommend the recently published book by Philip Shenon *A Cruel and Shocking Act: The Secret History of The Kennedy Assassination* that is a sober investigation by a fine investigative journalist who has talked with apparently almost all of the living staff of the Warren Commission and who

has undertaken great efforts to track down some unresolved mysteries of Lee Harvey Oswald's movements during nearly five days he was in Mexico during the last week of September 1963 during which he contacted both the Soviet and Cuban embassies. Oswald wanted but did not receive a visa to go to Cuba.

One of the strong conclusions of the book, based on interviews with Warren Commission staffers tasked with precisely such questions, was that the CIA was clearly not sharing everything it knew in the matter. While Shenon does not say it, it strikes me that much of the conviction at the time that Moscow and Castro were *not* behind Kennedy's assassination had very much to do with intercepted communications to and from and perhaps bugs in the two embassies at a time when Mexico City was the Berlin of Latin American games of spy vs spy. I fear historians will still have to wait a very long time for an unambiguous accounting of the signals intercepts and the human intelligence relevant to Oswald and his Mexico City trip. Until then, or a Daniel Ellsworth/Edward Snowden successor comes along, evidence-free speculation will continue in the matter of what Oswald was "really doing" in Mexico City and if the loner was really alone.

I have rambled back and forth across five decades of US cultural and political history to give a taste of the challenge of linking the headlines of today with patterns and trends of the American Experience. Both the Kennedy assassination and the romance of espionage as seen in the television of the time have cast shadows to the present. To be glib: Spooks, Guns and Nuts have played prominent roles throughout American History in the post-World-War-II era.

While it would be equally fitting to go out with Mackie Messer's line "Die im Dunkel sieht man nicht," I choose instead verse from 1963. It comes from the record album "The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan." You may sing along, though I shall refrain and simply read his words that fit so well those times as well as our own:

Yes, how many times must a man look up
Before he can see the sky ?
Yes, how many ears must one man have
Before he can hear people cry ?
Yes, how many deaths will it take till he knows
That too many people have died ?
The answer my friend is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind.