

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

## Graduation Ceremony of November 29, 2014

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

Proud parents and happy family and friends of the graduates,  
My fellow members of the John-F.-Kennedy Institute community,  
Loyal alumni of the Institute,  
Dear Graduates of North American Studies of Freie Universität Berlin,

I welcome you to our annual ceremony to honor those who have successfully completed their respective degree requirements in North American Studies over the past year.

Let me first convey my personal heartfelt congratulations to you our most recent crop of graduates. In addition on behalf of the entire community of scholars sharing 7-9 Lansstr. in Berlin-Dahlem, let me thank you for your participation in the intellectual life that we have shared together these past years. Your progress and your success in our academic programs have delighted us all.

For some of you the academic journey will continue either into MA or doctoral programs here and elsewhere in Freie Universität or in other institutions near and far. For others the next stop will be the so-called real world, paid or otherwise. We wish you all continued success.

To anticipate a theme that will be repeated throughout this ceremony: keep in touch with your alma mater. Stay linked, networked and Facebook-friended with each other and be certain to join the alumni of JFK-I. Most of you will leave a proverbial Koffer in Berlin. The least you can do is to leave us your forwarding address too. You will miss us, if not later this evening, then probably sooner than you might have thought coming into today's ceremony.

Part of any successful academic ritual is the **pomp** that includes faculty and graduates dressed in academic regalia. Another part is captured in the **circumstance** of musical accompaniment of the ceremony. And of course no pomp and circumstance is ever complete without having an elder member of the community exploit the possibility of having a captive audience, and pack some valuable life-tested advice into your backpacks before you take off. Because you are graduates of a distinguished Institute of North American Studies, that advice needs to be gift-wrapped in a certain New-Worldliness.

## Veritas, Justitia, Libertas Truth, Justice and Freedom

Up to now I have addressed you as graduates of the John-F.-Kennedy Institute for North American Studies which is only one part of your identity: **what** did you study. As sterling as the reputation of our fair Institute is among those in the know about matters North American, few outside that circle—except of course those we have drawn in to be our academic guests—could locate us on a map. So the answer to the question of **where** did you study is answered “Freie Universität Berlin”, that also happens to be the name of your Alma Mater proper. These two bits of information establish the academic clan and tribe you belong to.

Delving deeper one might ask **why** you chose to go to the university or for the repeat offenders among you receiving MA’s and doctorates, why you chose to continue your university studies. Your actual answers to the **why** question would range widely and decades of experience with the inflow and outflow of students have taught me that students who have preceded you often discovered that they made the right choice for the wrong reason.

Let me seize this last chance to share with you the “multiple-answers” to that “single-choice” question. The correct answer to why study is dual to the correct answer to a **so-what** or **why-bother** question regarding the ultimate purpose of university education.



The correct answer is completely familiar to you all. It is to be found in the seal of Freie Universität. Both above and below the traditional symbol of Berlin, our beloved bear bearing a torch of freedom (hint: think of the Statue of Liberty), are the Latin words Veritas, Iustitia, Libertas which even those of us without the good fortune to have had a proper classical training in the humanities are able to translate as meaning “Truth, Justice and Freedom” (Wahrheit/Gerechtigkeit/Freiheit). Footnote: these same words in Latin in reverse order happen to be the motto of Korea University.

Our emblem and its motto were conceived by Edwin Redslob, one of the three founders of the Berlin newspaper Tagesspiegel in 1945. Redslob was among the founders of Freie Universität in December 1948. He served as its second Rector 1949/50 following Friedrich Meinecke.

## Veritas.

The pursuit of truth, the preservation of human knowledge, its transmission across generations and frontiers are all included under this first reason of why you should have chosen to go to university.

**Truth** is never understood in these halls as the interpretation and application of divine principles as either revealed to us or to our prophets.

Truth is discovered, sometimes we stumble upon it looking for something else as did the *Three Princes of Serendip* from which the term “serendipity” was coined by Horace Walpole in 1754. More often the discovery of new truth involves a costly voyage across uncharted realms as most recently demonstrated by the European Space Agency’s Philae lander from the Rosetta spacecraft that we now know detected organic molecules before falling into hibernation in the shade on Comet 67P/Chryumov-Gerasimenko.

What are the methods used to distinguish between **Truth** and (thank-you Stephen Colbert) “Truthiness”? Mere **Truthiness** is all knowledge based upon intuition in the absence of evidence or logic or perhaps solely based upon Divine Revelation.

Clearly the methods of scholars and scientists rely upon combinations of evidence with logical argument. In some fields we can gather **evidence** through formal experimentation and seeing what happens when we hold one group of factors believed to be important in determining outcomes constant and letting some other group of factors vary. In other fields, we observe “natural or historical experiments” that can be argued to be a reasonable analogy to a properly designed experiment. Depending on the field, evidence can be almost anything from shards of pottery, to a first folio of Shakespeare, to a television series, or formal statistical surveys.

And then there is **logical argument**. It is less that words matter, rather it is the way we combine the words that makes the difference: my favorite illustration is the story of an instructor of language telling the class that for many languages a double negation is equivalent to an affirmation, but that in no language does a double affirmation ever yield a negation. To which, a student from the back of the room responds, “Yeah, right.”

**Theories** can be roughly defined as common understandings, a framework that permits us to explore the consistency of our thoughts and communicate them to others. A chemical metaphor might be of help here: the “subatomic” words come together as “atoms” of definition that themselves get combined into “molecules” of concepts that when properly mixed result in new “materials” called narratives, explanations, or interpretations.



The iconic Sgt. Joe Friday of the L.A. Police in the (for modern generations, ancient) long-running television series *Dragnet* never tired of interrupting the reports of eye-witnesses with words like, "Just the facts, Ma'am". But the good Sgt. Friday knew that evidence and theory are ultimately necessary for each other. We need an evidential anchor to tether our theories to the real world to avoid floating off into that wild-blue yonder of unfounded speculation. When we say North American Studies, the emphasis is understood to be on the first two words. However the "facts" about the United States and Canada more than fill the library of the John-F.-Kennedy Institute or the Library of Congress for that matter or even the servers of Google, oh my.

Because evidence is incomplete or uncertain reliability, part of the utility of having theoretical frameworks is that they enable us to piece together evidence (much as a paleontologist creates an entire dinosaur skeleton from an incomplete set of fossil bones), in more general parlance, allows us "to connect the dots", i.e. to "see" links between individual episodes or facts that to the untrained eye appear unrelated or merely coincidental. A theoretical framework is also a box of tools that can be employed across a large variety of similar though not identical tasks, vastly increasing our productivity in research (e.g. in the initial formation of questions and in our search for evidence).

But how can we be sure that our theoretical frameworks are more than just word games, a sophisticated version of Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky*?

Twas bryllyg, and ye slythy toves  
Did gyre and gymble in ye wabe:  
All mimsy were ye borogoves;  
And ye mome raths outgrabe....

which is complete and utter nonsense. Carroll's *Jabberwocky* has the virtue of being a delightful and self-conscious form of nonsense, it satisfies the reader's yearning to be amused and it doesn't even take a college degree to appreciate it, ask a kid.

Without particularly wanting to either self-flagellate as an economist before you or more importantly not wanting to step on anyone else's theoretical toes here, let me just

mention in passing that scholarly inquiry as a form of social action is liable to waves of fashion. Sometimes such fashions, especially clear with the advantage of hindsight, turn out to lead to theoretical and empirical dead-ends or even what can be described as “**fashionable nonsense**”.

Herding behavior has been repeatedly observed in financial markets, so it should surprise no one when we observe such herding behavior in learned societies where talk is cheap.

Dear Graduates, be aware, while it is bad to be caught in the cross-fire of scientific revolution, it is certainly more honorable than ending up on the “winning” side of scholarly fashion that turns out to lead to a historical amnesia, a sort of dark-ages when previous intellectual achievements have been forgotten. This has been the case for macroeconomics in my lifetime and I have encountered neither proof nor evidence that other academic disciplines have discovered a successful therapy to suppress their own herding instincts. En garde!

Unfortunately deciding between theoretical frameworks seldom rests on evidence that constitute a “slam-dunk” case. How do we know the evidence presented to us is honest/accurate/illustrative vs. interest-driven/biased/unrepresented. It is not adequate to strike rhetorical poses, e.g. Winston Churchill’s remark, “I only believe the statistics that I have doctored myself” or Mark Twain’s popularization of the progression “Lies, damned lies and statistics”. Serious scholars and scientists have developed tools of textual criticism and analysis, fact-checking etc. —analogies to “crash-testing” of new machinery. How robust are results, given the potential weakness of any evidence brought in support of a particular interpretation?

The problems of fashionable nonsensical theories and bum evidence will not go away in any of our lifetimes.

Let me end this discussion of **Veritas** with a quote from Hemingway on writing fiction that is applicable to the pursuit of truth as a scholar: “To invent out of knowledge means to produce inventions that are true. Every man should have a built-in automatic crap detector operating inside him. It also should have a manual drill and a crank handle in case the machine breaks down.”

It is our hope that we, your instructors, have succeeded in building the “automatic crap detector” in you so that you can go forth and select wisely between useful frameworks and “fashionable nonsense” and a critical sense to determine the plausibility of the evidence you discover yourselves or that is presented to you by others.

Especially for the doctoral recipients, I remind you of your further obligation to share your refinements to our theoretical tools and your personal additions to the data base of knowledge of North America with the larger academic community. We wish too to reap where you have sown.

## Iustitia

At first glance, including “Justice” in the Freie Universität motto seems something of a stretch. Maybe a lawyer was on the committee that designed the seal?

Could going back to Isaiah 59:14 for an early pairing of “Justice” with “Truth” (from the King James Bible) provide a clue?

And judgment is turned away backward, and justice standeth  
afar off: for truth is fallen in the street, and equity cannot enter.

Since the “truth” referred to in Isaiah is of the Divinely Revealed nature, I’ll feel much more secure on the ground of truthiness, or to make it sound more legitimate, on the ground provided by a working hypothesis of my own invention.

In my opinion, Edwin Redslob’s intention was to construct an entry point for education and research with respect to **normative** judgment. “Getting it right” is more than cleanly connecting dots or getting accurate predictions.

Sgt. Joe Friday might have been satisfied with “Just the facts, Ma’am.” But the arts of forensic science can only bring us so far in understanding events, for example, in Ferguson, Missouri. The immediate event of the shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, by the white police officer Darren Wilson, the legal proceedings that led to a decision by a Grand Jury not to indict that officer, the public reactions to the Grand Jury Decision and police reactions to protests on the streets—every step in this sequence demands a larger interpretive format both for understanding as well as prescription.

Justice is a concept that goes far beyond establishing whether a crime was committed, who committed the crime and the weight of mitigating circumstances in determining the appropriate fit between crime and punishment. The just application and interpretation of law also involves the peaceful resolution of conflict of legitimate interests in well-ordered modern societies. “Justice as fairness” was the great contribution of the American philosopher John Rawls towards understanding great issues in the distribution of the benefits of liberal society. Rawls sought the philosophical basis for the coexistence of a commitment to a uniform distribution of basic political rights (one citizen, one vote) with a *conditional* acceptance of inequalities of income and wealth—but only to the extent that a clear and present link between those inequalities and improvement in conditions of the poorest might be established.

Countries over time and different countries at the same point in time possess quite distinct normative orders that matter for meanings, for actions taken and for ultimate judgments. An Institute like ours exists to improve the cross-cultural understanding in our world where fundamental differences in normative moral frameworks are as marked as differences in languages. Even for the England-US special relationship one cannot help to think of George Bernard Shaw remark that “England and America are two countries separated by a common language” and then some.

My final remark concerning Iustitia leads us to Libertas and its context of postwar Germany. The establishment of a freie universität in Berlin was seen part of the effort to build a **democratic government of laws** following the horrors of concentrated power that had been seized by the Nazis and the unfolding of Stalin-styled “democracy”. I remind you of the words of Wolfgang Leonhard who died this past August reporting Walter Ulbricht’s intentions in 1945: “Es muß demokratisch aussehen, aber wir [the German Communists] müssen alles in der Hand haben.”

Incidentally, the tablet held by the Statue Liberty in New York harbor, represents a book of laws.

### Libertas

The word “Liberty”, especially within the context of the circumstances of the founding of our university in 1948, could be argued to be a better fit to the meaning of the original Latin than the word “Freedom.” But if we add a qualifier and say “Political Freedom”, we eliminate any possible misunderstanding.

As some of you know, I began my scholarly career in the field of comparative economic systems and wrote my dissertation on the economy of the German Democratic Republic. Following a seven-month research stay at the Central Institute of Economics at the GDR Academy of Sciences during which time I was able to consult with economists at the Hochschule für Ökonomie Bruno Leuschner in Berlin-Karlhorst and the TU-Dresden. Through 1990 I had regular contact with East German economists from SED central institutes, research institutes with the ministries and think tanks as well as other universities such as Leipzig and our sister university in Berlin the Humboldt Universität.

This experience was important for me in understanding the intimate link between the functioning of institutions of higher learning and the socio-political context within which they act. This link is why Libertas is not merely filling the “Holy Ghost” position in our “Trinity”.

My East/West/United German experience are reason for my profound respect for the courageous efforts of the founding students and professors as well as for the wise support given their efforts by the U.S. occupational authorities especially during the Winter of the Berlin Blockade in 1948 as well as the quasi-private support later given both to Freie Universität and later to our Institute by the Ford Foundation.

As we all know postwar history took a very kind turn with respect to Germany in 1989/90. Merely a quarter century after these events, and most of you being awarded degrees here today were born after them, the political freedom within which you have earned those degrees is taken as much for granted as the level of economic prosperity and security achieved. My simple message is “Please don’t.”

The Humboldtian ideals of “freedom of scientific research, teaching and study”, especially in the fields of the humanities and social sciences, are only well-defended when democratic political institutions maintain the firewalls that separate political authority from higher education and scholarly inquiry.

While this would be a logical point for me to begin my hysterical rant on the sheer baloney content in the Bologna process of Euro-Reform of higher education and for me to read *Jabberwocky*-like selections from our Bologna-conformed rules and regulations behind your degrees, I won't—and you're welcome. This is supposed to be a happy occasion for you.

Instead I'll return from my remarks on Truth, Justice and Liberty— to bring us home to the immediate purpose of this ceremony today — While not Prüfungsrelevant, I still honestly hope you remember these three correct reasons for you to have undertaken the courses of study that we are celebrating your completion of.

Dear Graduates. While you are bathing in the glow of your adoring parents, relatives and friends, don't forget to think back on all the lectures, recitations, seminars and study groups of the courses you took with us; reflect on your experience attained in internships or while studying abroad; recall those unique events like baking in the midday sun at Pariserplatz and seeing the trio of President Barack Obama, Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel and His Honor, the former Mayor of Berlin, Klaus Wowereit. Save a moment to savor the memory of Christmas Karaoke and Glühwein, summer burgers and beer together. Congratulations and best of luck!

### Postscript

As I was writing the above lines and the sequence “Truth, Justice, Freedom” was cycling through my mind, like a CNN ticker at the bottom of a television screen, I could not avoid making the association with the [opening sequence](#) of *The Adventures of Superman* that I and my kid-brother religiously watched, like the overwhelming majority of American baby-boomers.

Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive!  
Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound!  
("Look! Up in the sky!" "It's a bird!" "It's a plane!" "It's Superman!")  
... Yes, it's Superman ... strange visitor from another planet, who came to Earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men! Superman ... who can change the course of mighty rivers, bend steel in his bare hands, and who, disguised as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper, fights a never-ending battle for **truth, justice, and the American way!**

By “the American way” the Kellogg’s people (the breakfast food sponsors of *The Adventures of Superman*) were using a shorts hand expression that certainly contained equal portions of “Freedom” and sugar in its meaning. In the tradition of many a speaker with an impending deadline, I turned to a Google search, hoping to find a classic



Superman comic book cover with the superhero together with his threefold mission-statement.

I found something even better to share at the graduation ceremony: a picture of pre-President, Barack Obama, posing before the Superman statue located in the self-proclaimed “Birthplace of Superman”, Metropolis, Illinois. At the base of the statue can be seen the words “Truth, Justice, and the American Way.” Perhaps the birthers have been right about Barack Obama not being born in the United States—he just might have come to Earth from the planet Krypton.



But wait, it gets better...as we see from the Superman cartoon panel below, where we learn that the Man of Steel had in fact come out of his mild-mannered-reporter-for-a-great-metropolitan-newspaper closet in order to serve the 35<sup>th</sup> president of the United States...



Freie Universität Berlin—Truth—Justice—Freedom—American Way—Superman —  
Barack Obama—John F. Kennedy...it all fits together, somehow.