

Celebration of the Graduates of the John-F.-Kennedy Institute for North American Studies of Freie Universität Berlin

November 26, 2016

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

Dear Graduates, Parents and Friends, Colleagues, Staff, Students and Alumni of the JFK-Institute and Freie Universität, Ladies and Gentlemen:

For reasons that still remain a mystery to me, we come together to celebrate our annual graduates in late November. Berlin in late November? What could possibly go wrong with that...such a lovely time of year in Berlin? There is no compelling reason for this date beyond the argument that we find ourselves more or less one year from the last time we celebrated our annual graduates. While arbitrary, there is something bucolic and even romantic about choosing the traditional time for harvest celebration. Dear graduates we are all thankful that your semesters of work indeed have yielded harvest fruit, a veritable fruit salad of BA, MA, Magister and Doctoral degrees. For some of you this marks the first or second rung of a climb up the academic ladder, for others the beginning of careers to put what you have learned to good use for yourselves and our society. You all deserve more than a like and an emoji on this day. Can I get a round of applause for our graduates?

Before slipping into my Polonius-giving-advice-to-Laertes avatar, I have two pieces of news to share that make this celebration different from the other graduation celebrations.

The first is that our B.A. and M.A. programs have just received the official blessing of accreditation. The signed documents to that effect were delivered to my office on Thursday. Honestly folks, and some kidding aside, the educational car our graduates have been riding in all these years only now has a TÜV seal. That doesn't change the ride they have experienced, that doesn't add to our insiders' knowledge of the academic integrity of our programs. But this accreditation does provide a signal to the outside world that is readily understood and appreciated. Our thanks goes to the joint efforts of Ms. Verena Schulze, the responsible staff person for quality assurance in our educational programs, and our own Professor Harald Wenzel, who when he isn't leading our Sociology department or photographing the assembled smiles of graduates and their families here this afternoon, guides the Institute paragraph by paragraph through the regulatory reforms that govern matters of curricula and examinations. To both of them, we owe a hearty round of applause.

My second piece of news, very new indeed, is that one of our graduates here today, indeed the young man to follow me with the Absolventenrede, Mr. Timur Ohloff, has just been awarded one of the only two German Rhodes scholarships for study at Oxford University. This constitutes a major first for the JFK-Institute and I ask you to join me in congratulating Timur for this well-earned achievement.

Now let me segue to address all the graduates in whose honor we are gathered here today.

When you enrolled at JFK-I, I was the guy to give you the first academic pep-talk. "Welcome to our Community of Scholars, blah, blah, blah...and all that jazz."

Well time passes, and so did you as we can all see for ourselves. Congratulations, not for just passing your exams and satisfying the degree requirements, but especially for learning much about yourself and also about the object of our common interest, North America. We can add congratulations for all that you have learned about the ways and means of scholarship and scientific inquiry. Reflect for just a moment, in your time at the JFK-Institute you witnessed the face of Canadian politics to the world morph from the crack-smoking former Toronto mayor Rob Ford to the hot, I mean like seriously hot, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. And just a few weeks ago farther South you watched as Orange became the Future Black of the White House.

Seriously folks, this has been a hard month for all of us. As one of the voting U.S. citizens in da House I have only begun to cope with a depression induced by the electoral success of a Presidential campaign that was built upon deception and delusion, one that was able to press all the racist, xenophobic, misogynistic and homophobic buttons (without missing that all-important anti-Muslim button). That successful dark campaign and the policy prospects under a Trump Administration could likely mark a far more fundamental shift in American politics than a mere pendulum swing in the march of progress. I fear now the rise of DINO's, namely, "Democracies in Name Only" and not only south of the Canadian border.

Should we all have been so surprised by the string of Donald J. Trump's electoral successes? I mean all of us here who work and have studied in an Institute that was founded by the lawyer turned political scientist Ernst Fraenkel, a man who fled the ruins of one German democracy and later returned to promote the spread of democratic ideals and the rule of law in the Federal Republic of Germany. You the graduates, like all members of our Institute, have been more than obsessed with the twists and turns of the Presidential campaigns from that moment when Donald J. Trump glided down the escalator to announce his candidacy to a crowd and his clique, that's right, actors who were paid \$50 to project populist power. The great Circus Man, P. T. Barnum, someone who could even make money off the display of a forgery of the original forged "Cardiff Man", could not have staged Trump's arc to the White House any better. We have read, listened, binge-watched, and discussed these events with what seems a 24/7 intensity in retrospect. Did we miss something? How could we have possibly missed anything?

OK, I'll admit I did and with the virtue of hindsight I'll claim now that we really shouldn't be all that surprised. For in fact, just like Wall Street before the financial crisis of 2007-08, American democracy has been living in a House of Cards of its own construction. I only want to tantalize you with that proposition that there are eerie parallels to the developments that nearly drove the world economy into Great Depression 2.0 and the political events that just might have put American democracy into a death spiral. But this is neither the time nor place to conduct a complete physical of American Democracy. After all post-traumatic stress should not be triggered at what is supposed to be a Happy Event...like Thanksgiving dinner with relatives after a controversial election.

Instead, I'd like to share a few random thoughts inspired by this historical U.S. Presidential election.

In his “Notes on Journalism” written for the *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, published September 19, 1926, H. L. Mencken wrote the much quoted lines:

“No one in this world, so far as I know — and I have searched the records for years, and employed agents to help me — has ever lost money by underestimating the intelligence of the great masses of the plain people. Nor has anyone ever lost public office thereby.”

Before you react shocked and clutch your pearls at what would appear to be an antidemocratic or at least elitist subtext, let me provide some necessary context, even if I hear the gentle chiding of a colleague or two that “Intentionality is irrelevant” echoing in the recesses of my memory. The Mencken quote is taken from near the end of a short column he wrote about some implications of the young tabloid format for newspapers, barely seven years old at the time. Tabloids were bought by people who hitherto were not big newspaper readers. Mencken saw this as an opportunity for expanding the market for news, meaning legitimate news and not the fare offered by the yellow press of his time. His main point was that it would be good business for journalists to essentially dumb-down their tabloid news in the wholesome professional interest of delivering content that would be understood, much as a book written for elementary school pupils needs simplification. Mencken’s message to his colleagues was if you build it, they will come...you just have to keep it simple, or in other words “Mind the bandwidth” of your readers. Applied to politics, we can say that Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren got the memo, Trump might have tweeted in its spirit in the wee hours of the morning, while Hillary Clinton probably deleted the file as personal.

Not so very far away from the roots of populism lies anti-intellectualism that has a long tradition in the United States. I immediately think of the Democratic Presidential candidate in 1952 and 1956, Adlai Stevenson, who when told by a voter that all thinking voters were for him, responded that it wasn’t enough...he needed a majority. Stevenson was smeared as an “egghead” by Dwight Eisenhower’s running mate, Richard Nixon, and he lost both elections.

This streak of anti-intellectualism means that to be successful in American politics it is not enough to speak to “the great masses of the plain people” in a way that they will understand because they actually resent the “intellectual” or “expert” chatter of elites overheard in the “lamestream” media, from inside the beltway, or throughout the punditocracy. You might have thought that rendering to Duck Dynasty what is Duck Dynasty’s and rendering to Minerva what’s Minerva’s would work as a political survival strategy but it isn’t that simple.

We have all heard Michael Kinsley definition: “A gaffe is when a politician tells the truth—some obvious truth he isn’t supposed to say.” Related to this is when a candidate attempts to dumb-down the message but is perceived, rightly or wrongly, as talking-down to voters. Showing two-faces is an election deal-breaker, it is much worse than mere flip-flopping. Think of Judas Iscariot who was two-faced versus Saulus, a.k.a. Paulus, a successful flip-flopper. Donald J. Trump had a clear advantage here over his Democratic opponent, there was no clear or present danger of him ever dumbing-down a word and for this he scored relatively highly on the perceived authenticity scale relative to Hillary Clinton. Trump tweets and speaks with one voice and can flip positions during the course of an afternoon. This is why the Trump voter “took him

seriously but not literally” while Adlai Stevenson’s (I mean Hillary Clinton’s) “thinking voters” took Trump literally but not seriously.”

Trump’s declaration “I love the poorly educated” was richly requited at the polls or at least enough to win the key battleground states that had been incorrectly forecast as Hillary Clinton’s Great Blue Wall. We have seen such affected affection before. The conservative intellectual, founding editor of the *National Review*, William F. Buckley, in 1963 took a jab at the large number of Harvard professors in the Kennedy Administration: “I am obliged to confess I should sooner live in a society governed by the first two thousand names in the Boston telephone directory than in a society governed by the two thousand faculty members of Harvard University.” But to be fair to Buckley his denunciation of Harvard intellectuals was a precision strike as opposed to the carpet bombing of scientists and experts favored by climate-change deniers and opponents of evolution which brings us to the general problem of the wing-nuts who inhabit the fringe of the conventional political spectrum of left to right.

Back when I entered academic life decades ago, the only way for a crank to get his or her message out was to have a fat roll of postage stamps, access to a photocopying machine, and the hope of attracting paid subscribers to a snail-mail newsletter. Now it has become child’s play to spam an entire nation across a variety of social-networks. Understandably fact-based policy debate gets degraded by the noise made by the delusional, who are quite often of the conspiracy-theoretic persuasion. For example, there is the 9/11-truther (spoiler alert: the U.S. government did it), radio host Alex Jones of Infowars, someone important enough for Donald Trump to have called on the Monday after the election!

Say what you will, to their credit genuine cranks believe their own nonsense. There is probably (hopefully?) a natural limit to how many of our species can actually function in our reality while believing in their alt-realities. But we must add another layer of noise to fact-based debate, the noise coming from a growing industry of fake-news producers. Inside and outside America, modern web-savvy P.T. Barnums have discovered the recipe for creating click-bait that makes them money by supplying your crazy aunt or uncle with all those links they forward in their email or Facebook postings. (e.g. “FBI Agent Suspect in Hillary Email Leaks Found Dead” got 560,000 Shares on Facebook...a fake) But wait, there is more. It’s not just a few of our crazy relations that we need to worry about.

In a recent study conducted by Stanford’s History Education Group that surveyed more than 7,800 students from middle school through college, it was found that a majority of the students surveyed (note “majority”, not just “many”) have difficulty in distinguishing fake from real news. Should this finding prove to be robust to further investigation, it is a wake-up call for us educators up and down the line.

You might remember, my God I hope you remember, our efforts to teach you the art of finding holes in a theoretical argument and how to check whether evidence presented actually supports an inference. Particular knowledge of Canada and the United States is our specific contribution to your training, but your acquisition of the general tools of close reading, analysis and inference is the hallmark of a university education. Our seminar rooms are intended to have the sense of a court of scholarship held before a jury of peers where strict scientific standards are adhered to in an adversarial

proceeding. Logical contradiction and tainted or false evidence lose cases in the search for truth, at least that is the lesson we hope you take from your academic work with us.

But then what? You go open up your laptop, check your social networks of choice and boom, there you are, strangers, friends and comrades exchanging what gets found as one damn link leads to another. This might be an appropriate time to thunder some sound advice that you need to reduce your dependency on those infernal information appliances and you should stop and smell the roses or sit down and read some good hard copy...but I can't without being guilty of preaching water while drinking Apple i-wine myself. In the hands of the self-educating, which is what your paper diplomas attest you have achieved, that little smart phone, tablet or laptop is your ticket to the most magnificent collection of information the world has ever known, who could ever want to leave the world-wide-reading room? While I personally would love to discover that we have succeeded in instilling in you a love of knowledge, intellectual curiosity and even our peculiar notions of work-life balance, my colleagues and I know that is not where most of you linger before your glowing displays...instead you are probably romping between the social world of information-sharing and its nether-counterpart where useful idiots relay misinformation and disinformation and trolls, bots and information warriors practice their dark arts.

Where am I going with this? We, your instructors, have taught you as though research and reporting is all just a matter of making deposits into a bank of human knowledge and understanding so we the people may make judicious withdrawals as needed. This might make sense as long as the assets in that bank of human knowledge remain non-toxic, i.e., somewhere quality-auditing or filtering is actually taking place and journalism and research are governed by strict professional ethics. But let's face it, due diligence can be pretty boring and a reputation for honesty can take years to build while celebrity seems but a viral tweet or video away. Facebook algorithms for news allocation appear to have become the information analogue to the securitization of liars' loans of the NINJA-mortgage variety (NINJA = no income, no job, and no assets). Can you, will you transfer the habits of sound scholarship and critical reading into your everyday web use? One of the greatest hits of the National Park Service was the image of Smokey the Bear and his iconic "Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires!" Think of old Smokey before you forward or retweet a news item.

From the purveyors of delusion and deception we are a mere stone's throw from providers of propaganda. A popular tweet of the past weeks came from Mr. Jelani Cobb who writes for the *New Yorker*: "Fake news is Angelina Jolie to Leave Brad Pitt for Space Alien. What we're talking about now is propaganda". Actually the kind of domestic American propaganda Cobb is referring to really took off in 1987 when the "Fairness Doctrine" was thrown upon the junk pile of radio spectrum regulation and the vitriol of angry conservative white male voices spread across Talk Radio America. Anyone here who has ever rented a car at a U.S. airport and begun a road-trip has experienced those angry voices while cycling through the car radio stations from Shock Jocks through Preachers, past Trucker Melodies and into Conservative Talk Radio.

The explosion of television channels made possible by home cable and satellite service opened up further possibilities for targeted populist news reporting and commentary. The model of a major television news executive with a definite political anti-Obama and Clinton agenda was Roger Ailes, a long-time friend (recently demoted to ex-friend) of

Donald Trump, was the founding CEO at Fox News in 1996. As Mencken would have expected, Rupert Murdoch, a co-founder of Fox News with Roger Ailes, has not lost money in this venture which of course turned out to be a huge commercial success.

At the next propaganda milestone on the road to Trump's victory we find specialized internet news platforms. Complementing the velvet glove of Fox News in the propaganda war on the Obama legacy and Clinton candidacy, the website Breitbart.com has provided the iron fist. In a July interview then executive chairman of Breitbart News, Stephen Bannon, proudly boasted that Breitbart.com was "the platform for the alt-right." The very next month Bannon left Breitbart News to become the chief executive officer of Donald Trump's campaign and just two weeks ago he was appointed chief strategist and senior counselor for President-elect Trump. It would not appear that Breitbart News has lost money in its venture either, nor has Donald Trump lost public office by including an alt-right propagandist among his closest advisors. Roll over H. L. Mencken!

Random thoughts inspired by the rise and rise of Donald J. Trump have no obvious stopping point but a half of a German academic hour does suggest it is almost time for me to segue us back towards to the ultimate purpose of the celebration to honor your graduation.

But let us take one quick (last) glance at the past together, to a quote from a letter written by Thomas Jefferson to John Tyler Washington (28 June 1804)

"No experiment can be more interesting than that we are now trying, and which we trust will end in establishing the fact, that man may be governed by reason and truth. Our first object should therefore be, to leave open to him all the avenues to truth. The most effectual hitherto found, is the freedom of the press. It is therefore, the first shut up by those who fear the investigation of their actions."

Where I think Thomas Jefferson truly speaks to our times is that he sees the defense of the freedom of the press as an absolutely necessary bulwark against those would use the powers of government to attack the potential source of criticism found in an independent press. There will be constant and severe criticism of the next Administration and a President Trump can be expected to act like a Citizen Trump on steroids with far greater means to strike back when challenged. The critical vital sign for the health of American democracy under the future President Trump will be found in the Fourth Estate's reaction to attempts to restrict its criticism of the people and policies of the future Trump Administration.

However what is needed to update Jefferson's position is the recognition of the vast heterogeneity of media publics and "presses" in our information age that has made media empires possible along with tightly interlinked media platforms. Lags between events, reporting and interpretation have been reduced to instants and incentives for generating and checking content are now biased towards getting the story out first rather than getting the story right the first time. The civic responsibility of those like you who have been blessed with the opportunity of receiving a higher education is to block the road to the Post-truth society and build trustworthy information roads to your fellow citizens who have not had the same opportunity as you.