



Dean Gordon, Commencement Speaker:

Thank you, President Tribble. Class of 2009, Faculty, Members of the Board of Visitors, parents, friends, all members of the CNU community who work so hard to make this day possible, I am deeply honored to speak to you today. Permit me a few important "thankyous" before my formal commencement remarks.

From the very start of my life in this "immortal profession" in 1965, I have been happy to claim the name of teacher. And for the past almost thirty years proud to be a faculty

member at Christopher Newport College and University, both when we

were patronized by SCHEV as that not too bad place down on Shoe Lane and now that we have taken

our well-deserved place among the ranks of the outstanding universities and colleges in the Commonwealth of Virginia and among the best liberal arts and sciences institutions in the region. I salute my colleagues on this university faculty, friend and adversary alike. I thank you with gratitude with respect.

I've worried and thought and read in preparation for several weeks for my fifteen minutes in the sunset here and continued to worry until I received an email from one of my colleagues in the English Department. He wrote: "Congratulations on your being chosen to give the commencement address. I remember when you became dean and spoke to us. I was so inspired by your words. I must say, though, I can't say I remember anything you said. But sometimes I can't even remember how to find my way home." What a relief for me to know most of you may be inspired and may not remember what I said! The comfort of a colleague is a blessing. Special thanks for the love and support of my mother who is here today, for making me do my chores and complete my homework first before I could play. Priorities are important. My sister Melinda is here

today. May you all have such a sibling who loves you and always believes in you more than you do in yourself. And a most special thank you for her support and love goes to my wife Linda Maureen Gordon, a Summa Cum Laud graduate of CNC. She has loved and supported me during my CNU life, including my deanly years. It was she who said eight years ago to go and write a letter of application when the dean's job opened. At least try, she said. I did and I did.

Good morning Class of 2009. You are happy? feeling fine today? Ready to take on the world? My remarks fall under the title "One More Assignment." The assignment I have for you is not like all of those you have already dutifully fulfilled to arrive at this point. It is a perpetual "assignment." Its fulfillment requires "eternal vigilance." Its rewards are inestimable both for yourselves and your family and for the greater good of this exceptional and decent country we know as The United States of America.

A creative and curious imagination is one of the several hallmarks of a liberally educated person. Take a brief journey with me, geographically just down the road from here, about thirty minutes if the traffic permits, to the banks of the York river, to a sacred bit of ground, not just for the

history of this nation but also for the long history of humankind's aspirations for liberty.

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The time is October 1781, a brief historical 228 years ago -- a time when the colonists were weary of war, the economy was in shambles, and the Congress was regarded as inept and incapable --some things never change-- and the future looked bleak. After a long and inconceivably hard march from Rhode Island, gathering rag tag forces along the way and joined by the colorful, stylish and well-equipped French, the Continental Army and its allies began the siege of Yorktown.

Its sweeping meadows and quiet village today belie the gathering storm of that autumn with the huge French fleet blocking a sea escape, leaving Cornwallis trapped. Richard Ketchum has compellingly told the story of that siege in *Victory at Yorktown*. The British artillery began firing on October 1, 352 rounds between sunrise and sunset and into the night, eventually at intervals of one to two minutes. The human and animal carnage was brutal. While the British bombarded, Americans and French continued to dig trenches preparing shovelful by shovelful for the allied firing that began October 9. When the signal went up to fire, the first cannonball could be heard striking from house to house in Yorktown. On the 10th the French Grand Battery opened and that day fired 3,600 shots. By the 11th of October the parallel directed at Cornwallis's works was ready and the next eight days saw repeated skirmishes and cannon fire, death and destruction. On the 17th the allied daybreak cannonade fired from all the redoubts without stopping. Bombs and cannon balls rained on the whole line. Shortly then came Cornwallis's white flag and request proposing a cessation of hostilities. Most of you know the rest of the story. The British surrender. The just adulation of General George Washington. But what, pray tell, does this have to do with us and more particularly CNU graduates this day in the merry and soggy month of May 2009?

We are all here in freedom because, those "...who had served so selflessly, enduring such hardships as few armies had known, had achieved a miracle. They had made the impossible possible as they struggled to bring independence to a new nation. At a time in the history of the world when it was simply inconceivable that such a transformation could occur. Yes, the American Revolution was a war of liberation from foreign rule. Yet its significance was in going much further than a war for freedom. By winning the armed conflict they had begun first step. Beyond that was their determination to achieve independence with constitutional guarantees." (Ketchum) Incontrovertible liberty.

You are about to receive your degree from one of a fairly rare group of institutions in American higher education, a public liberal arts university. Put simply, the purpose of liberal learning is that "aspires to nurture human talent in the service of human freedom." (William Cronon "Only Connect..."). Yes, in all of you, we have aspired to nurture your human talent: now you will be asked to use these talents in the service of human freedom and human liberty, from the Latin *liber*, free, which we contemporarily translate as free women and men.

We are citizens of a constitutional republic, its principles and ideals enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution with its Bill of Rights. "We hold these

truths to be self evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” Liberally educated people know that sound and enduring ideas are fundamental to being able to live a good life, live in freedom. These ideas have and continue to make a difference in individual lives. Advances we have made in human rights and justice, however painfully slow, are possible precisely because we have our constitution and a bill of rights. Through those documents hope for liberty and justice for all is reborn again and again.

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And here’s where you come into the picture. What can be more important now in yet another apparently bleak time, with a struggling economy and all the other important national and global pressures, than the harnessing of public education for the preservation of liberty? We must secure “freedom of ideas, alliance to the values of the nation, a society of laws, not special prerogatives, tolerance for diverse opinion and belief, equality of the sexes, an open economy, government transparency to protect individual and capital investment” (Victor David Hanson. Essay. National Review Online.) Liberty grows human potential. As Jefferson reminded us “A person who wishes to remain ignorant and free in a state of civilization, wishes for what never has been and never will be.” Ignorance is our common enemy. Expanding knowledge of how to understand and preserve human liberty our common enterprise.

We know of the slow fraying of public education, reminded again most recently of it in a recent Daily Press editorial, Pointing out the big price to pay when 1 in 5 young people doesn’t finish High School in our region. Those numbers are much worse in some inner city schools, some as high as 60 to 70 %. Roughly 1.2 million public high school students drop out every year. This mounting failure of our schools endangers freedom. The costs in stunted human potential, in despair, in poverty, in crime, in dollars – estimated at hundreds of millions of dollars a year – are staggering. How can we ignore the matter? What’s a liberal arts graduate to think and to do? And why should you care since you’ve proved yourself at a fine university? In whatever community you settle, make it a point to get connected to what’s going on in public education, apply your liberal learning habits of mind to listen and hear, read about the issues, look at the statistics -- and if you can’t remember what you learned in Mathematics 125 about statistics or in your social sciences statistics class, ring up one of your professors to get it right and challenge the numbers if necessary -- question assumptions, analyze causes, ask for facts, distrust opinions and assertions without proof, email tweet and text your legislators, -- doesn’t the class of 2009 have the strongest thumbs of any CNU graduating class?-- petition the government for redress of these grievances, write to your local paper, volunteer at the literacy council, read to children. Get connected to former Army General and Secretary of State Colin Powell’s Americans Promise Alliance.

Why? Because you know, or should know, that tyranny, however democratically elected, and authoritarian rule grow when ignorance, lack of literacy, and hopelessness spread. Ruthless leaders exploit human ignorance for their personal gain.

And, briefly, what about higher education? When the French officers stopped in Philadelphia on their way to Yorktown in 1781 they marveled that students could receive as good an education as

many students in the elite centers of Europe. Since then we have built in this nation a system of higher education that, for whatever failings as of late, still draws the admiring gaze and the aspirations of our citizens and many around the world who seek learning free from prejudices, favoritism and rigid ideologies, who seek learning set in the healthy environment of human liberty protected by law, who value academic freedom and unfettered intellectual inquiry.

What's a liberally educated person to think and to do when the increasing costs of higher education threaten to deny significant numbers of young people a higher education?

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The Southern Regional Educational Board Fact Book on Higher Education points out that 2004 sixty-three percent of undergraduates at public four-year colleges and universities did not have enough money to cover the annual costs of college. That's bound to be worse now. More disconcerting, in 2006 for students from middle-to-lower income families costs of higher education had increased to 29% of household income, and for students from household in the lowest fifth of incomes the one year costs of higher education were a staggering 125% of income. In 2006 in the southern region in which we reside, tuition and fees for in state undergraduates at public four-year colleges and universities was 75% higher than 10 years earlier when adjusted for inflation.

Not my problem you say? Then how will you send your own daughters and sons to your alma mater in a few short years? What social strife based on income disparity and the lack of access to higher education will fray and undermine social order?

And, finally, on one other matter, what will happen when our need for a common national identity is diminished by lack of knowledge of the country's history and common ideals and aspirations. I recommend for your study while you're searching for a job or reading on the beach this summer not only the great documents of the American Revolution but also the June 2008 report of the Bradley Project on America's National Identity, E Pluribus Unum. The writers, scholars and thinkers of all political persuasions and stripes, note that the fragile nature of liberty requires we be reminded that "America is unique among nations in being founded not on a common ethnicity, but on a set of ideas...." What American stands for at its best must be learned over and over again.

Consider, for example, recent reports, even taking into account some possible exaggeration and the limits of surveys, the show higher education has its work cut out for it. The Intercollegiate Studies Institute in Delaware has reported the dismal knowledge of college students of a basic Test on American History and Institutions. To take one egregious example, what are we to think when only 27% knew that the Bill of Rights expressly prohibits establishing an official religion for the United States? What consequences might await for us all with such ignorance and more about fundamental ideas that protect liberty?

What can you think and do? For starters, stay active in your university, join the Alumni Society, know who your Board of Visitors are and write them and help them with good

ideas to hold down the costs of higher education. Stay connected so you can rest assured that this public institution's curriculum has an expressly transparent way to make sure that graduates know not only the content of their major, but the habits of mind of the liberally educated that assure that university students become uncompromising stewards of liberty.

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If you have special courage, ask some difficult questions, such as why is it that so many of those who have betrayed the public trust and ruined the lives of so many by corrupt and greedy financial schemes came from prestigious institutions of higher education? What has gone wrong? Who is to be held accountable? How will all of us help to restore trust to important public and private institutions on which we depend? How can we develop a moral economy without stifling individual initiative? Step into the void created by shouting factionalists and hysterics of right and left and work to restore trust in good government. The future of liberty depends on getting to the heart of these and other matters and making sure that your university and others are serving this nation's common good. The blessings of liberty must, in part, be secured through higher education. We have set out to educate ethical citizens for a constitutional republic, served by democratic processes. We are counting on you.

I leave you with a final gift, a sonnet from Shakespeare. While I have the greatest respect for the precision of the algorithm, the elegance of the piano sonata, the value of an economic analysis, the hermenutics of a religious text, the insights of public policy, the history of a remarkable time, the fine design of a laboratory experiment, I have carried this Sonnet in my memory since that terrible time of the hateful attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, during my first year in the dean's office. The murderous attack, make no mistake about it, originated in an extremist ideology that reviles human independence, liberty, and human rights, particularly for women and children. I have recited it often to myself and several times recently in public gatherings where I was asked to speak. It was written at a time in the sixteenth century that has famously been described as "nasty, brutish, and short." The all too familiar pattern of the poem's speaker is to look at the world and lament the loss of beauty to "the wrackful siege of battering days." If the beloved is mortal, how will love and beauty endure? His hopeful, though somewhat tentative conclusion, is that yes life is short but art is long.

Will his sonnet survive and enshrine his beloved? So it has for more than four hundred years, not too shoddy a record!

Sonnet 65

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,
But sad mortality o'ersways their power,
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?
O how shall summer's honey breath hold out
Against the wrackful siege of battering days,

When rocks impregnable are not so stout,
Nor gates of steel so strong, but time decays?
O fearful meditation! Where alack,
Shall Time's best jewel from times chest lie hid?
Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
Or, who his spoil of beauty can forbid?
Oh none, unless this miracle have might,
That in black ink my love may still shine bright.

Women and men of the Class of 2009, welcome to the world of liberally educated citizens. Let your love shine bright for humanity's noblest aspirations enshrined in the "black ink" of this nation's Declaration of Independence and The Constitution.

Cherish liberty.

Wherever you go in this world be unstinting in your life ahead to work "to secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity."

Thank you. Godspeed, you all. Godspeed.