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The Long End of the Stick

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"The Long End of the Stick"

Tristan Anne Borer, Associate Professor of Government

Remarks to the Class of 2005 at Baccalaureate, May 21, 2005

Congratulations to all of the graduates here today, and to your families.

You may not remember this, but your first day of classes as Freshmen was Thursday, August 30th, 2001. Twelve days later, on September 11th, the United States was the victim of terrorist attacks not two hours away from here. This makes you the first cohort of graduates to have spent your entire college career in a post 9/11 world. In the time since September 11th and your graduation tomorrow, you not only witnessed the horrendous reality that this country is not safe from terrorism, you also witnessed the country engage in not one, but two wars on continents that many Americans cannot even identify on a map.

You witnessed a presidential election, whose contestation and outcome spotlighted the deep and painful divisions between citizens not only nationwide, but on this campus as well. You were witness to the realization that some American soldiers have committed torture in prisons around the world, photographic evidence of which shocked not only Americans, but the world at large, and which threatens to weaken the moral authority of one of the most important governmental voices for holding states accountable for human rights. You have watched a long-trusted religious institution be forced to come to terms with a sex-abuse scandal. You have also witnessed the only change in leadership of that institution that you have known in your lifetime. The list of world-altering events could go on. Yes, the world into which you are graduating is not the same one which existed when you arrived here.

But, then again, neither are you the same person you were when you entered Connecticut College four years ago, are you? In that time period, as the world around you was changing, so too were you. In the past four years you have engaged in intellectual debates in the classroom, tested yourselves on playing fields, fallen in and out of love, made and lost friendships, and some of you have seen other parts of the world. As a result, I would wager that each of you in some way has grown emotionally, intellectually, physically, spiritually, and morally.

What I hope that you have been aware of these years is how very privileged you have been. To mention but the most obvious point: the major purpose of your four years here was to simply think. Yes, and to write papers about what you were thinking, and to write up lab reports and do homework assignments. Still, the vast majority of people in this country, not to mention the world, are not lucky enough to have time to themselves simply to read, and to figure out what their passions are, and what they think about issues, and what they think about themselves. You may not have appreciated this luxury while you were here, but I bet you'll reflect on it pretty soon after entering the "real" world.

But the privilege extends beyond carving out four years for reflection and growth. About four million other students in this country entered an institution of higher education with you four years ago. This is a pretty small number. Indeed, in 2002 only 27% of Americans over the age of 25 had a college degree. That already puts you in a pretty elite minority. But still, it gets better for you. There are approximately 230 liberal arts colleges in this country, and they confer around 6% of college degrees. However, you are members of an even more select group. Only around 115 colleges in this country are designated as selective residential liberal arts colleges. Connecticut College is one of them. Only 3% of all college graduates (which, don't forget, only represent about 25% of all Americans) graduate from one of these best of the best colleges. You are

among them. This is an impressive feat, indeed, and you should feel proud of yourselves for your accomplishment.

I suspect that many of you sitting here today don't feel particularly lucky. Some of you haven't quite completed that job search yet and answer more than a little defensively to the question, "so what are you doing after graduation?" Many of you are worried about how you will pay off student loans, especially when they are combined with rent checks and car payments. Some of you are facing the prospects of long-distance relationships, wondering how you will negotiate this. I do not mean to belittle these fears--they are very real and I know that.

Still, I'd like to convince you that, in the big picture, you are still pretty well off, all things considered. On the most general level, it's well documented that college graduates, on average, earn more in their lifetimes than high school graduates. College graduates also enjoy benefits beyond increased income, including higher levels of savings, better health, increased personal and professional mobility, improved quality of life for their children, better consumer decision making, and more hobbies and leisure activities. That's just for college graduate as a whole.

What about the 3% of the most elite graduates, in which you are included? Liberal arts college graduates are represented disproportionately among leaders in the arts, education, science and medicine, public service and business. A 1998 study found that even though only 3% of American college graduates were educated at a residential liberal arts college, alumni of these colleges accounted for 8% of Forbes magazine's listing of the nation's wealthiest CEOs; 8% of former Peace Corps Volunteers; 19% of US presidents; 20% of Phi Beta Kappa inductees; 24% of all Mellon fellowships in the humanities; and 23% of Pulitzer Prize winners in drama. All in all, compared to the lives of the majority of people nationally and globally, you are off to a pretty good start.

The word 'privilege,' often has a negative connotation. You may be sitting there thinking that I am implying that it is somehow a bad thing that you are privileged and that you should somehow feel guilty about it. Please believe me when I tell you that this is decidedly *not* what I had in mind when choosing privilege as the theme of my talk. Every single one of you deserves to be here on the merits of the work you did to get into here, and the work that you did to get out of here. Rather, I am much more interested in challenging you to think about what you are going to do with the privilege that you have. Many of you probably think that the most important thing you can get from your Connecticut College degree is a better job. Actually, it isn't. If I and my fellow teachers have done our job correctly the most important outcome of your education is that we have prepared you to be fairly sophisticated citizen-analysts of, as well as participants in, the world around you. Our job has been to help you hone the critical thinking skills so crucial for effective democratic citizenship today.

More importantly, I want to make an argument to you that the flip side of privilege is responsibility. And even though a Google search revealed that it is one of the most often-used phrases, to make all sorts of arguments, the biblical maxim "to those to whom much is given, much is required," applies especially to you, I would argue.

I challenge you to honor the mission statement of Connecticut College whose goal is to educate students to put the liberal arts into action as citizens in a global society. You will likely be in positions to be decision and policy-makers in the world in the not too distant future, both through your vocational and advocational activities.

And lest you think I am implying that privilege always conveys benefits, let me state that I think that yours will not be an easy task. Your generation will have to grapple with some of the toughest questions our country has had to face in a long, long time. You will have to make decisions for future generations about how best to forge a sense of unity in an increasingly multi-cultural

society. You will be forced to confront the growing question of the proper balance between civil and national security. You will be forced to think about, and often take positions on, very difficult questions surrounding war, military intervention, and human rights. You will have to grapple with the implications of being engaged in a war on a common noun-the war on terror-whose conclusion is unlikely to be seen in any of our lifetimes, if the other wars on common nouns, such as the war on poverty, are any guideline. You will be crafting economic policies which will have impact, for better or worse, the growing inequalities between the haves and the have nots in the world. You will have to decide whether genocide on the other side of the world is your moral responsibility. Let's face it, in many ways we have made a mess of the world. You will have the unenviable task of cleaning it up.

Many of you have spent some portion of your time here outside of this country. I urge every single one of you to do this as soon and as often as you are able to, not just because it will make you more cultured, but because it will help you make the best-informed decisions on the issues I just noted. Increased global connectedness means that you cannot simply be citizens of your own country; you have no choice to be global citizens as well. I think it is important to hear the words of a Central American ambassador to the United Nations who said that he wished he could vote in this country because U.S. elections have a greater impact on his country than its own national elections do. It is undeniable that our country's policies impact the lives of people around the world.

What I am trying to argue is that the choices you make potentially have a huge impact on the lives of others, more than you will probably be aware of. You possess an awesome power by virtue of the education you have received and the socio-economic place you occupy in the global arena. This is true not only for those of you who will enter the field of politics or law. As tourists, employers, community members, and purchasers of goods, you will personally influence the global power structure. Will you use your privilege of being highly educated citizens of a democratic country to help give voice to those billions of people around the world, who cannot participate in decisions that significantly influence their lives? To be able to do so, I am convinced that viewing this country from abroad will become increasingly crucial in the future--that with the growing sense of American power and the reality of American hegemony, it will become increasingly necessary to go away and see how the rest of the world views us. Some of you already know, because of international internships, study abroads, and conversations with foreign students, that much of the rest of humanity has a different view of the world than we do. And this knowledge puts you ahead of the curve.

Not long after you graduate from here, you will become immersed in the mundane tasks of everyday life. I'd like to give you a challenge: in the midst of your busy lives, filled with concerns about mortgage payments, marriages, the birth of children, changing jobs, growing up, try to carve out for yourself the kind of time for reflection you had the luxury of here at Connecticut College, but which you probably didn't fully appreciate at the time. Try to find the time to just think; try to remember what it was that made you so passionate in college; in what ways you thought you would change the world as a young twenty year old. Keep engaging in analysis; keep questioning assumptions, and proposing alternative hypothesis and explanations. Most importantly, keep asking questions.

As Cynthia Enloe, a Connecticut College graduate and one of the world's top scholars of international relations has said: "the questions you don't ask say as much about you as the questions you do ask." And in the midst of the inevitable rough spots you will hit along the way, try to remember your privilege.

My graduation wish for you is this: that you will embrace your privilege with humility, and dispense your responsibilities with grace and wisdom.

I want to close with a final thought. Privilege is a two way street. It has been a tremendous privilege for me to have taught many of you in class, and to have gotten to know you outside of the classroom. Thank you for that. Good luck after tomorrow, and stay in touch.