Remarks

delivered after receiving the degree of Doctor of Human Letters, *honoris causa,*
at the Final Commencement Exercises of

Fontbonne University

August 15, 2025

At the previous commencements and convocations I have attended over my ten years on the board of the trustees, I have worn what is called, the "Princeton Full Regalia," a piece of academic attire of which I do not entirely approve. My objections to the bright orange chevrons and panels are not primarily esthetic or political. Not that I couldn't carp on those grounds. I have been quoted in the press as saying "good-naturedly" that the get-up makes me look like the Great Pumpkin, and I have reflected that it is just as well that my Irish Catholic father, who kept up the ancestral grudge against the House of Orange, never saw me wearing King Billy's livery colors. I object to it because it departs from the noble simplicity of the American System of Academic Costume and was an early entry in a sort of arms-race for status among colleges that was fought with gowns and hoods.

In the American System in its pure form, there are only three styles of gown: one for bachelors, one for masters, one for doctors. All are entirely black. Color appears only in the hoods, which differ in only three ways: First, by length (shorter for bachelors, longer for doctors). Second, by the color of the velvet of the cowl, which varies with the field of the degree. Third, in the lining of the hood, which will show by color and arrangement of chevrons the institution that granted the degree. For the most part, scholars are differentiated only by the discipline they have chosen and the degree to which they have mastered it. Some universities never fully adopted the American system, and early in the 20th century Harvard and Yale marked their eminence by adopting largely red and blue gowns. Gradually other universities made their own bids for status with their own "full regalia." Then individual scholars whose universities had not adopted colorful gowns were tempted to sport a gown with velvet in the color of their fields. All these changes provided a great deal of business for the regalia makers, who then went on to

create stoles and cords for innumerable honor societies and then stoles with no academic meaning that proclaimed a graduate's ethnic, racial, or sexual affiliation. The system became so chaotic that the American Council on Education, which had created and regulated the system, disclaimed responsibility for it. The regalia makers are now free to sell whatever they please. As in any arms race, the arms manufacturers are the real winners.

I regret these developments for several reasons. We have lost a legible symbolic system. We have abandoned the important message that system embodies: that as scholars, all are equal except insofar as some have acquired more learning and presented more cogent arguments. And we have imposed on young faculty members the needless expense of buying the new products of the gown-makers, because the ever-more personalized gown cannot be lent across institutions or passed down among generations of scholars.

This gown I proudly wear today with a new Fontbonne hood is from the old tradition. It was worn at the commencements of San Diego State University by my aunt, Katherine Ragen, with the hood of a doctor of philosophy of the University of Wisconsin, as she rose to the rank of full Professor of history and during her service as a dean. Wearing this gown, I cannot help thinking of my aunt's academic career, which began 100 years ago, when she entered the local Quaker college in Oskaloosa, Iowa. (She began college at 16 and so was thought too young to go away to a Catholic institution.) There she won a fellowship for graduate study at Bryn Mawr, where she met her mentor, the historian Helen Taft Manning, and—unaided by hip-hop—developed a scholarly interest in Alexander Hamilton. A dissertation on Hamilton's economic policy, based on research at the Library of Congress earned her Ph.D. She held academic positions in Minnesota and Nebraska until Pearl Harbor, when she gave up teaching for war work in San Diego. When the war ended, she took up her profession again, took this gown out of its wrappings, wore it at every commencement for the decades, and led many young people, including even the nephew who became her ward after his parents' deaths and who stands here today in her gown, to believe that there was something noble about the life of a teacher and scholar.

But my aunt was not the first to wear this doctoral gown. It was given her for safekeeping by her friend Jimmy Gleason, who also left the university to do his war work. His was in the Army. It took him overseas, and he was one of the many who never returned to take up their studies and wear a scholar's robes once more when the victory had been won.

In harkening back to the scholars of the Middle Ages, and then to the generations of academics who have succeeded them, every academic gown reminds us that the work of every scholar, every college, every university, is part of a larger enterprise. And that enterprise—the pursuit of truth, the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge—is greater than any one scholar or institution. This gown with its particular history also reminds me that even in victory there is loss, and in loss there is triumph: the very lesson of the cross that stands at the center of this chapel and atop this building.

At this last of Fontbonne University's commencements, we cannot help thinking of loss, as well as of the achievements of the graduates who are receiving their degrees today. This college deserves to be mourned and there is no reason for those of us that love it to hide our grief. But let us remember that loss has always been a part of the scholarly enterprise. If you build an ivory tower, someone will make it his business to knock it down. The university grew out of the monasteries of the early Middle Ages. Monasteries have faced wave after wave of destruction: We can see the devastation moving across the map as the centuries go by: The dissolution by Henry VIII in England, the similar rapacity of Protestant rulers in Germany and Scandinavia, the depredations of the Catholic Hapsburgs in central Europe, the murderous destruction of the revolutionary era that began in France and spread across the West, the equally intense persecution later in countries that fell to Communism, and then the collapse of the religious life once those assaults had been weathered. And the university itself has suffered similar crises and has often weathered them only in name. And I fear we are about to see them assaulted more directly. Recent attacks on universities sound to me very like the rhetoric that accompanied the dissolution of the monasteries. These places are corrupt, they despise our values, they are out of touch with the real business of life, they are full of sexual perversion and

financial corruption. And with those voices filling the airwaves and echoing in the corridors of power, we shouldn't be surprised to read of the closure of another college almost every week, or to see our Congress taking the first steps toward seizing the endowments of universities just as Henry VIII and his craven parliament seized the endowments of monasteries, and calling it an "excise tax."

But loss is not the whole story, for even in the wake of the destruction of the institutions we have built, the enterprise they were built to further goes on. Think back on what may have been the worst day in the history of Christian civilization, May 29, 1453. On that day Constantinople, the New Rome, the center of Eastern Christianity and of Greek civilization, fell to the Turks. The place that, for all its corruption, had seemed to many like heaven on Earth was gone. Haiga Sophia, the Church of Holy Wisdom, whose dome marked the greatest Church in Christendom, was a church no more. Its altar was destroyed, and to prepare it for use by the conquerors as a mosque, the glorious mosaics on its ceiling were whitewashed and hidden for centuries.

But that was not the end of the story, for knowledge, culture, and faith outlive the monasteries, universities, and empires that preserve them. Even before that awful day, what Byzantium had preserved and built had been sent out into the world, carried in the memories of refugees and in the manuscripts they carried into exile. There would be no Greek polity for 500 years and contemporary Greek culture would continue only at the sufferance of the Turks. But what Byzantium had preserved of ancient Greek culture, together with its own contributions to Christian culture, would take on new life in the West. We call what happened next the "Renaissance." While Hagia Sophia's dome was overshadowed by minarets and its mosaics were obscured or destroyed, another dome rose in Rome over the new St. Peter's and the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel burst forth is all the colors of creation. And that was not the end. New domes rose not just on the banks of the Tiber, but on the banks of the Thames at St. Paul's and the banks of the Mississippi in our own Cathedral Basilica of St. Louis. Constantinople the city is gone; Its influence pervades our world.

In the same way, what was created at Fontbonne College and University by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet and generations of faculty and students will not be lost as the college closes and as the university as an institution in America endures this current crisis. It will bear rich fruit wherever its graduates let the knowledge and wisdom they have gained influence their work and, more importantly, their lives. And as their lives touch the lives of others, the influence of Fontbonne will ramify through generations to come. I congratulate today's graduates. And I am very proud that I can wear this old gown with a hood that marks me as one who will, like them, carry on the mission of Fontbonne in the days and years to come.

—Brian Abel Ragen