

By Ray McGovern

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Exclusive: *In this season of graduations – and the rush to bestow honorary degrees on the “great and powerful” – one ironic moment will play out at Fordham University, where Jesuits are giving top billing among its honorees to White House counterterrorism chief John Brennan, notes Fordham grad (and ex-CIA analyst) Ray McGovern.*

Since even readers of the *New York Times* are aware of deputy national security adviser John Brennan’s [open identification](#) with torture, secret prisons and other abuses of national and international law, Fordham University’s invitation to him to give the commencement address on May 19 brought, well, [shock and awe](#) to many Fordham students, faculty and alumni.

It now turns out we didn’t know the half of it. Piling outrage upon indignity, Fordham announced this week that Brennan will enjoy pride of place among the “eight notables” on whom it will confer honorary degrees at commencement. The others receiving a Doctorate in Humane Letters, *honoris causa*, include Timothy Cardinal Dolan (Archbishop of New York), and Brooklyn congressman Edolphus Towns.



White House counterterrorism adviser John Brennan

Unlike his co-recipients, Brennan is widely known for his advocacy of kidnapping-for-torture (aka “extraordinary rendition”) and killing “militants” (including U.S. citizens) with “Hellfire” missiles fired by “Predator” and “Reaper” drone aircraft.

These practices and “Special Forces” operations guarantee an indefinite supply of anti-U.S. militants for what is now known as the “new normal” in the kind of wars that former Gen. and now CIA Director David Petraeus has said our grandchildren will still be fighting.

The endless supply of “insurgents” engendered by the violent tactics so beloved of Brennan makes Americans [less secure](#). But there is no sign that Brennan recognizes that — or cares. Not that some of Brennan’s co-honorees are all that great, either.

Cardinal Dolan, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, is best known for his outspokenness on pelvic issues, his stalwart defense of the first nine months of life, and his deafening silence on the taking of life in war. Since by all evidence he is far more interested in birth control than death control, it is impossible to know where Dolan or his fellow bishops stand on the wars on Iraq and Afghanistan. He abjures any attempt to offer moral guidance on issues like war, preferring to defer — as the Fordham Jesuits do — to a good Jesuit-trained Catholic like Brennan to make decisions on such issues.

Edolphus Towns’s claim to distinction, in Fordham’s pre-commencement publicity, relates to his bringing “millions of dollars” to his district. Unmentioned is Towns’s membership in the Congressional Unmanned Systems (Drone) Caucus, which serves as a lobbying arm for drones — a new cash cow for the defense-industrial-congressional complex.

O Tempora, O Mores!

Since John Brennan has been accorded the dual honor of commencement speaker cum Doctorate of Humane Letters *honoris causa*, let’s try to piece together why Fordham’s Trustees decided to single him out for such glory. What, in other words, is the

causa

behind the

honores

? Why does George Orwell have a smirk on his face; and why are many past and present Jesuits holding their noses — Justice Jesuits like Rupert Mayer, Pedro Arupe, Dean Brackley and Dan Berrigan?

Could it be that Brennan is being honored for his role in serving up fraudulent intelligence to “justify” attacking Iraq in 2003? Or is it perhaps his open advocacy of kidnapping Muslim clerics off the streets of Milan (he calls it “extraordinary rendition”) and rendering them to “friendly” intelligence services more practiced at torture techniques than the CIA?

Is it the secret prisons he favored for “enhanced” interrogation techniques; or maybe his role in promoting illegal eavesdropping on Americans? Or could it be his stalwart defense of the intentional drone killing of American citizens without charge or judicial process? Or is it the aggregate set of abuses. And could intelligent Jesuits actually believe these approaches are okay because they are “keeping us safe?”

This would mean the teaching of moral theology at Fordham has changed markedly. Five decades ago, torture was very clearly put in the same category as slavery and rape — always “intrinsically evil” — no gray areas. I wonder where Fordham’s moral theologians now put remote-control drone killings of people on the hunch they are “militants.”

The *causa* of the *honores* could have a simpler explanation, one that risks damage to the mystique of Jesuit sophistication — no, not sophistry. Maybe the Fordham Jesuits and Trustees get their news from Fox. Perhaps their thought process was simply this: Brennan is a Fordham alumnus; he works in the White House; isn’t that enough?

Earlier Indignities

This is hardly the first time a Jesuit university has succumbed to the “prestige virus” and given a proven scoundrel high honors at a commencement. There are, sad to say, numerous examples, but one comes immediately to mind.

It is George W. Bush's national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, who, according to ABC News, chaired White House deliberations in 2002 and 2003 at which CIA torture techniques were "almost choreographed" by the most senior national security officials. The objective was to determine which particular technique, or combination, might be most effectively applied to which "high-value detainee."

Rice gave the commencement address at Boston College on May 22, 2006, and was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws (yes, George Orwell, that is ironic.).

An onlooker would be permitted the reasonable inference that one *causa* of the *honores* must be the promoting of torture that Rice and Brennan held in common. Maybe an objective history of the Inquisition, and the Jesuit role in it, was not included in the books available at Jesuit seminaries.

Or, worse still, maybe it is the case that ingrained habits — like jesuitically justifying torture — can apply for renewal after several centuries. Habits die slowly. Has torture and killing of innocents now entered some sort of gray area in moral theology because a Jesuit-trained, White House functionary now says these things are necessary to "keep us safe?"

O Tempora, O Morons!

It remains to be seen whether what happened when the hapless Jesuits of Boston College invited Rice turns out to be a harbinger of what is in store at Fordham next Saturday. Ten days before the commencement at BC, Steve Almond, adjunct professor of English, resigned in protest. Here are excerpts from his letter to BC's president, Rev. William P. Leahy, S.J.:

"I am writing to resign ... as a direct result of your decision to invite Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to be the commencement speaker at this year's graduation.

"Many members of the faculty and student body already have voiced their objection to the

invitation, arguing that Rice's actions as secretary of state are inconsistent with the broader humanistic values of the university and the Catholic and Jesuit traditions from which those values derive.

"But I am not writing this letter simply because of an objection to the war against Iraq. My concern is more fundamental. Simply put, Rice is a liar. She has lied to the American people knowingly, repeatedly, often extravagantly over the past five years, in an effort to justify a pathologically misguided foreign policy. ...

"This is the woman to whom you will be bestowing an honorary degree, along with the privilege of addressing the graduating class of 2006. ... Honestly, Father Leahy, what lessons do you expect her to impart to impressionable seniors? ... that it is acceptable to lie to the American people for political gain? ...

"I cannot, in good conscience, exhort my students to pursue truth and knowledge, then collect a paycheck from an institution that displays such flagrant disregard for both. I would like to apologize to my students and prospective students. I would also urge them to investigate the words and actions of Rice, and to exercise their own First Amendment rights at her speech."

Professor Almond was hardly alone. About a third of Boston College's faculty members signed a letter objecting to Rice's appearance. And here is how the *New York Times* [reported](#) the commencement event:

"Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice delivered the commencement address on Monday at Boston College to an audience that included dozens of students and professors who stood, turned their backs and held up signs to protest the war in Iraq.

"A small plane flew overhead twice, pulling a sign that said, in red letters, 'Your War Brings Dishonor.' Outside Alumni Stadium, where 3,234 students received diplomas, protesters marched up Beacon Street holding signs reading 'No Blood For Oil' and 'We're Patriotic Too.'"

"Inside, however, Ms. Rice received a standing ovation when she was introduced, and she drew

applause throughout her address.”

Daniel Berrigan, S.J.’s Sad Prophecy

In his autobiography, *To Dwell in Peace*, Daniel Berrigan wrote of “the fall of a great enterprise” — the Jesuit university. He recorded his “hunch” that the university would end up “among those structures whose moral decline and political servitude signalize a larger falling away of the culture itself.”

Berrigan lamented “highly placed” churchmen and their approval of war, “uttered ... with sublime confidence, from on high, from highly placed friendships, and White House connections.”

“Thus compromised,” warned Berrigan, “the Christian tradition of nonviolence, as well as the secular boast of disinterested pursuit of truth — these are reduced to bombast, hauled out for formal occasions, believed by no one, practiced by no one.”

The good news is that, despite an out-of-touch president, Rev. Joseph M. McShane, S.J., and his trustees, there remain people of strong conscience at Fordham — people immunized against the “prestige virus” infecting what some have come to call the Vichy Jesuits. There are students and alumni with a good sense of history; people aware not only of the Inquisition, but also of more recent history in Nazi Germany during the 1930s, when the Catholic and Lutheran churches could not find their voice.

Many Fordham people know they cannot in good conscience remain silent on such matters; they know that what is at stake is the very soul of our country. Justice-oriented students are now finalizing plans for specific actions at commencement. A new Facebook page briefly outlining the planning to date has already drawn intense interest — negative as well as positive. It appears that many students abhor the unpleasantness inevitably attached to witnessing to the abuses in which the main commencement speaker has had such a key role.

One post read: “I just wanted to say that as a recent Fordham graduate studying Islam and American foreign policy concerning Islam in graduate school, I am so proud of the people ... who will stage this protest at commencement. I cannot overstate how much of an uphill battle it

is to have kind, sensible and ethical voices like yours heard in this world, where monied and political interests stifle this kind of informed and humane dissent, in the public realm and in academia as well.” Another read: “For the people complaining about their graduation being ‘ruined,’ it is as much your right to have a graduation free from protest as it is our right to have a graduation free of one of the most despicable propagators of violence in our era. I do not condone torture, I do not condone the indiscriminate use of drones, why should MY graduation be tainted with political ideology I do not support.”

In addition, many of the faculty are signing on to a letter to President McShane requesting a sit-down with Brennan before commencement. They want to ask him how he justifies his support for the kind of cruel, inhuman and degrading interrogation techniques (aka, torture) that are banned by domestic and international law.

Meanwhile, many supporters of justice-oriented students are also planning appropriate protest actions. One activity is “ [Stop the Drone Week at Fordham](#) .”

It may not be an exaggeration to suggest that, as Saturday goes, so goes Fordham.

Ray McGovern received a B.A. *summa cum laude* (Phi Beta Kappa) and M.A. in Russian from Fordham University. He was also, briefly, an adjunct instructor there, but was deprived of the opportunity to resign in protest since it was not the practice, in those years, to honor scoundrels at commencement. McGovern was a CIA and Army Intelligence analyst for 30 years and now works with *Tell the Word*, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington.