

## **Commencement Address - Joseph Russoniello '63**

### **Fairfield University**

**May 20, 2012**

Father President, Members of the Board of Trustees, Honored Guests, Members of the Faculty and Administration, Family, Friends and Members of the Fairfield University Class of 2012. Thank you so much for the award you have bestowed on me. It means so much more than words can express.

I can't begin to tell you what a distinct pleasure and honor it is for me to stand here before you today. It's hard to believe it was 49 years ago this June that I sat out there where you're sitting today. In all candor, I must confess, if I had it to do all over again, I wouldn't change a thing, not that much of what has happened to me over the past 49 years was entirely within my control in the first place.

But what a half century this has been and what extraordinary similarity the year 2012 bears to 1963, the year of my graduation from Fairfield.

We came to Fairfield University at what was for us a time of great hope and change. With the election of John F. Kennedy, the first Roman Catholic President of the United States, we were optimistic that this youthful leader, who looked and acted a lot like us, would better understand us, address our special needs, and help us realize our goals.

In 1963, President Kennedy had stared down the Soviets over their plan to deploy missiles in Cuba, averting a possible nuclear confrontation, and, in doing so, halted the potential spread of communism throughout the Western Hemisphere. On the domestic front, the United States seemed to be coming out of another cyclical economic recession and job prospects for our class were good.

But then, as now, it was the events that happened that we didn't foresee that were to shape our lives and alter the course of the predictable.

It was also in 1963 that John Kennedy was assassinated, that the war in Vietnam would begin to escalate, the course and conduct of which would rend the nation in two, spawn protests that would drive President Johnson from office and cause wounds to our confidence in government and prestige throughout the world that were to endure for years to come.

In 1963, drinking on the Fairfield University campus was forbidden, trips to New York State where the drinking age was 18 were the norm, marijuana was a "weed," and cocaine part of a Cole Porter lyric. Crack was about as attainable as an A+ in biochemistry.

Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan were foreign exotic lands of Aladdin, Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves and the long since gone historic Persian Empire. In fact, James A. Michener's book "Caravans," published in 1962, attempted to merge the romance of primitive Afghanistan with the real dangers of living in an often-lawless tribal culture. In it, he predicted that, despite its backwardness, it would not be long before Afghanistan would experience democratization and capitalism and be joining the league of civilized nations.

Not even the Soviets who later invaded Afghanistan, much less James Michener, could have predicted that the invasion would lead to a Mujahideen uprising that, with our support, would force the Soviets to abandon their Afghanistan misadventure, causing irreparable damage to their hold on power in the Soviet Union, and lead to a government takeover in Afghanistan by the Taliban which, in turn, would provide Al Qaeda with a safe haven for launching attacks against the United States and its allies. And, as we know, 9/11 changed the world forever.

Well, that was then and this is now. Today we face threats and challenges in a world we know better than the world we knew in 1963. It's still dangerous out there, but, in so many ways, we and you will be better able to predict danger and prepare for it.

The Soviet Union is gone; the greatest threat to our safety and security will likely come not from state-sponsored terrorism, though Iran and North Korea bear watching, but from adherents of fanatical radicalism, both foreign and domestic, who pose an everyday threat.

The world economy is in the midst of the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression and the European Union, despite its posturing and bravado, teeters on the brink of fiscal collapse. Given our own precarious deficit, we can offer little but advice and encouragement.

If these problems seem daunting to you as you prepare to move from the relative security of academia to the uncertainty of a challenging future, don't despair. By your decision to attend Fairfield University and your perseverance in obtaining a degree, you've reached an important early milestone in life's journey. As you reach for the stars, your time spent here will serve you well.

I like to think we live our lives in trimesters. In the first, from birth to about age 30, and you are well on your way to completing this phase, we lay the foundation for career, home and family. It's a learning time. For me, it was when I met Moira, my wife of 42 years, moved to California, started on a career in law, law enforcement in particular. It was when we bought our first house in San Francisco – at the top of the market – and obtained a loan to finance the purchase – at the then unthinkable rate of 8.5 percent.

The second trimester, from roughly age 30 to age 60, perhaps in your case, age 75, will be your most productive and active period, your chance to spread your wings, show the world what you've got, so to speak.

In the third, and for however long that may be, and in your case that could be many healthy and peaceful years, you get the chance to relax, do more of the things you always wanted to do, to enjoy the fruits of your labor.

At Fairfield, we learned that despite the extraordinary education we received, family, friends, and caring institutions would be invaluable to us in all our future endeavors. A case in point; one of my closest friends at Fairfield was Richard Romanski. While I was manager-trainer for the school's basketball team, the Stags, Dick was the statistician. After college, Dick went to UVA Law School and I went to NYU. We both joined the FBI as Special Agents in 1966. In fact, in one of those inexplicable lifetime coincidences, because our photos in the yearbook were placed alphabetically, Romanski, Joe Rucci and I shared the same top row on page 128 and all three of us, unbeknownst to the fact, joined the FBI in 1966. Dick was a few training classes ahead of me and had left Washington, D.C., before I arrived, but prepared the way for me. He was assigned to the Memphis Division of the FBI for his first office as I was, but had been detailed to a resident agency at Fort Campbell before I arrived. Again, he warned them I was coming.

When I realized a Bureau career was not for me and resigned to pursue the practice of law in New Jersey, a buddy of mine talked me into driving from New Jersey to California to check it out. It was, after all, 1967, and the "Summer of Love" was in full swing. Once I saw San Francisco, I was smitten and decided to give it a try. As it turned out, Dick was then studying Arabic at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey but was assigned to the San Francisco Field Office. He introduced me to some of his friends in the Bureau who put me in touch with their former agent friends who were working in the private sector which led to my introduction to Harry Clifford, then a supervisor in the San Francisco District Attorney's Office, who had had a storied career in the FBI before joining his childhood friend, the District Attorney John Jay Ferdon, who was himself the product of a Jesuit education and who, as luck would have it, was interested in hiring someone with experience investigating complex fraud cases. I was hired, sat for and passed the California Bar examination and was appointed a deputy district attorney in San Francisco. The rest, as the saying goes, is history, except that Dick and I, and fellow Fairfield classmate Dr. Tom Leonard make up what you might call the Fairfield University Class of '63 San Francisco Bay Area Club. We're still very close friends.

Time and again throughout my life, the grounding in the basics that I learned at Fairfield was invaluable in making decisions, weighing risks against benefits, and recognizing that service to my fellow man was not just a job but a civic obligation. When it was first publicized after Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 that I'd been asked if I'd be interested in appointment as United States Attorney for the Northern District of California, my partners at the firm tried to talk me out of it. "Why give up a lucrative career at the firm, a secure future, and take a substantial cut in salary for what was, by definition, a limited political appointment to an office of, at best, modest prominence?" Moira and I discussed the matter at length and decided, modesty aside, that given my background in the FBI and experience as a local prosecutor coupled with my extensive civil trial practice experience with a prestigious law firm, I was a good fit for the job and should take it. Who could

have known then that, with Rudy Giuliani as associate attorney general, there would be such a dramatic increase in the role of federal law enforcement in fighting organized crime, drug trafficking, national security matters, and white-collar crime? In just one year, 1985, dubbed “The Year of the Spy,” my office prosecuted two major espionage cases. One, known as the “Walker Family Spy Case,” gained national prominence both for the potential damage to our submarine surveillance system the spying could have caused if it had gone on undetected and for the skill shown by the trial team in handling an especially sensitive case.

Serving as U.S. Attorney was hardly *pro bono publico*, but as I became better able to free up time for it, giving back to the community – whether mentoring young law students as San Francisco Law School dean or young lawyers as a senior member of the American Inns of Court, or serving on committees of the American College of Trial Lawyers, the American Board of Trial Advocates or the American Law Institute, or assisting the Church through the co-founding of Catholics for Truth & Justice, a San Francisco Bay Area anti-Church bashing organization, or helping the bishops implement their program to combat child sexual abuse by serving on the National Review Board of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, or in service to the Italian-American community through the Italian Services Agency or the National Italian American Foundation – all of this was in the best tradition of service to the community which, at Fairfield, we were always encouraged to undertake.

We came to believe that life would be a continuous struggle of good against evil, but except for the historical report of atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis and Joseph Stalin’s gulags, this was more theoretical than real. I think, during my career as a prosecutor I have come to see evil close up. When I prosecuted Jim Jones’ underling Larry Layton for the murder of Congressman Leo Ryan at Jonestown in Guyana in the late ’70s, I knew as much about Jones as anyone could and he was evil. His ordering the killing Ryan was trivial in comparison to the murder of 900 of his followers who were, at his direction, first forced at gunpoint to give poison to the infants and children, then take it themselves.

We were educated to believe that this struggle wouldn’t be limited to our battle against others, but we would have to fight off temptation internally and for that fight and for our success we’d need an inner strength. We prayed for the wisdom to know right from wrong, the strength to do the right thing and the courage to persevere even in the face of strong forces in opposition. Key to victory was accepting our mortality, realizing that our time on earth was limited and that we would one day be judged not just on our deeds alone, but on our thoughts and words, as well. I have for almost 40 years been on the front lines of the war on drugs and the senseless violence the fight for territory and dominance has spawned. In my experience, it is the “drug thugs”’ lack of self-esteem, a total and absolute lack of any spirituality, that is the dominant force that governs their actions and makes them so lethal and such a danger to the community. If they have no respect for their own lives, why should we expect they will have any respect for anyone else’s life, much less another’s property. I am proud of the work law enforcement agencies throughout the nation are doing, working with faith-based community groups, the schools and hundreds of volunteers from all walks of life to intervene early in an

effort to restore this sense of purpose and save lives. I'm sure many of you in this graduating class have already been involved in this work. If not yet, you may soon become involved in your own communities.

Through it all I know you will find, as I have, that the experiences you had at Fairfield, in and out of the classroom, gave you the confidence, the self-assurance, courage, and resolve to meet whatever challenges you had to confront and to overcome any obstacles that got in your way.

And don't be afraid to take some risks, especially early in planning for your future. It's cliché' to say that, "When God closes a door, He opens a window." At Fairfield I studied Russian with the hope I would one day join the Foreign Service. It didn't happen, but those language skills were no doubt attractive to the FBI that was then engaged, as part of its mission, in counter-intelligence directed against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. In San Francisco, the large Russian émigré community there adopted me as one of their own and their support became a valuable asset. If I hadn't run for public office in 1979 – I lost the race, thank goodness – I would never have had the public profile and tested credentials that made me a prime candidate for United States attorney after Ronald Reagan's upset victory over incumbent President Jimmy Carter. So, in a word, be bold!

Congratulations! And to your parents and family a special "shout out" for helping see you through this marvelous adventure. Thank you for inviting me to share in your noble achievement.