Today is the 120th day of the Donald J. Trump administration, and we continue to be inundated with news about it. It’s been a strikingly unprecedented 120 days, not least in the plethora of historical references in the daily news cycle – for example, to J. Edgar Hoover, Watergate, the Korean War, 9/11, the invention of nuclear weapons, Roe v. Wade, Medicare and Medicaid, the Chinese Exclusion Act, the immigration exclusion acts of 1924 and 1927, the emoluments clause of the Constitution, the impeachment clause of the Constitution, just to mention a few.

Using historical analogies and other kinds of historical reference to ground policy argument in the present is a familiar rhetorical device in our democracy. It is perhaps especially common at the start of presidential administrations where one party replaces the other and promises a major reversal in current policies. Every new president, understandably, wants to make new history of his own.

Early in 2016 – recognizing that maybe, just maybe, Mr. Trump might shake up the political landscape – Professor Harsch and I decided to create two new history courses to enable students to bring focused historical insight to the 2016 presidential election and its aftermath. One course dealt with the traditions of American political campaigning, starting with Andrew Jackson; the other dealt with the so-called “first 100 days,” starting with George Washington. Around 75 students (including several of our graduates here today) took one or both of these new courses. Though we had to resist some students’ desire to make the courses more about, or even all about, Mr. Trump, we never hesitated to adapt our history curriculum to put history to direct use in illuminating the present moment. This is normal in our department’s own history. From the time I arrived here 29 years ago, we have never hesitated to re-invent what we teach, how we teach it, and how we organize our programs of study for history majors.
Our program is built on two intellectual pillars. The first is that history is a creative discipline – that not only computer scientists and biologists and artists invent new ways of seeing the world, but that historians do so too by constantly re-envisioning how we see the past, and how we interpret links between past and present. For our faculty, the importance of particular historical subject matter is always evolving, depending upon the questions we ask, the data we gather, our methods of analysis, and the interpretive frames we employ to make sense of our data. As scholars, we bring our individual imaginations as fully as our shared skill sets into play, and we naturally bring these creative approaches into the classroom.

The second pillar that guides our teaching involves the people we hire as faculty members. How do we make these choices? As I like to put it, we in the History Department always look for future colleagues who are intellectually “on fire” in both their scholarship and their passion for teaching history as a creative discipline. Despite the many recent advances of “learning science,” I continue to believe that, overall, the best researchers make the best teachers because they authentically bring a creative spark, and one uniquely their own, into all of their interactions with students – both inside the classroom and outside as well. The superb teaching record that our History faculty has accumulated over the years derives from our commitment to hiring the best and most passionate scholar-teachers we can find – those who model “on fire” intellectual engagement and (if you will excuse my mixed metaphors) invite students to come on board to share their intellectual journey. I think that this basic inspirational approach to education at Carnegie Mellon, and at Dietrich College especially, is what is driving its burgeoning reputation, nationally and internationally, as a truly exciting intellectual place -- an “on fire” university.

Let me now take a step down from grand generalization and talk about our 2017 graduating class of History majors.

Two sub-groups of History majors are graduating with us this morning: those in Social & Political History and those in Global Studies. (Students in our interdepartmental third major, Ethics, History & Public Policy, are graduating with the Philosophy Department; we alternate and next year
they’ll graduate with us.) Both Social & Political History and Global Studies offer novel definitions and organization of historical subject matter. In Social & Political History, we provide huge amounts of choice from a wide array of topically and chronologically defined historical subjects, including the aforementioned courses on political campaigning and “the first hundred days.” In Global Studies – the more highly structured and interdisciplinary of the two programs – we require, in addition to history, training in anthropology and a foreign language.

In both programs, we are strongly committed to training students in the basic methods and tools of historical and social science research -- tools that, we believe, provide essential preparation for all high-level professional endeavor. These include basic tools of information gathering, documentary analysis, and field research; they also include development of more general tools of conceptualization, synthesis, interpretation, placing knowledge in context, insistent and imaginative question-posing, and -- perhaps most usefully, as one proceeds up the occupational ladder -- effective and clear communication skills. Mastering these skills, we firmly believe, provides an excellent means to train students to appreciate and manage, not to fear, complexity in human affairs and to break down complex problems into manageable tasks that put to practical use the varied analytic skills we have taught them.

Our commitment to educating students in basic methods and tools translates into a strong belief in the value of original undergraduate research. After preliminary training, all students are required to take a Capstone Research Seminar that culminates in an original research product on a topic of their own choosing. Some students also do independent studies and honors theses in order to pursue additional research opportunities. In the History Department, much as in the hard science disciplines, we believe it is critical to give undergraduates first-hand exposure to the joys of specialization and in-depth learning -- to internalize what it feels like to truly be in command of a subject, and, inevitably, to recognize as well that even for those in command, there remain vast areas of ignorance that only hard work and creative imagination can resolve.
Please do take a moment now to locate in the middle pages of your brochure the remarkable range of original research products that your sons and daughters have produced this past year. It is an absolutely extraordinary list of the sort that can only be found at a handful of top undergraduate History programs in the country.

I turn 70 this summer, and for the past 44 years – in addition to working in think tanks, government, and private consulting -- I have been quite fortunate to serve as a regular or visiting faculty member or fellow at several great universities. My most important career decision was to leave lovely California and re-locate to Pittsburgh in 1988, not only because Pittsburgh is a terrific city to live in but because Carnegie Mellon is wonderfully receptive to scholars of an interdisciplinary bent with quirky research agendas of their own. I was honored earlier this week to receive Dietrich College’s Elliott Dunlap Smith teaching award, but my greatest honor is to be an integral part of this intellectually adventuresome, “on fire” History faculty, and to have the good fortune to teach and collaborate with your sons and daughters. Hearty congratulations to all of our graduates for your exceptional achievements. I wish you all the best.