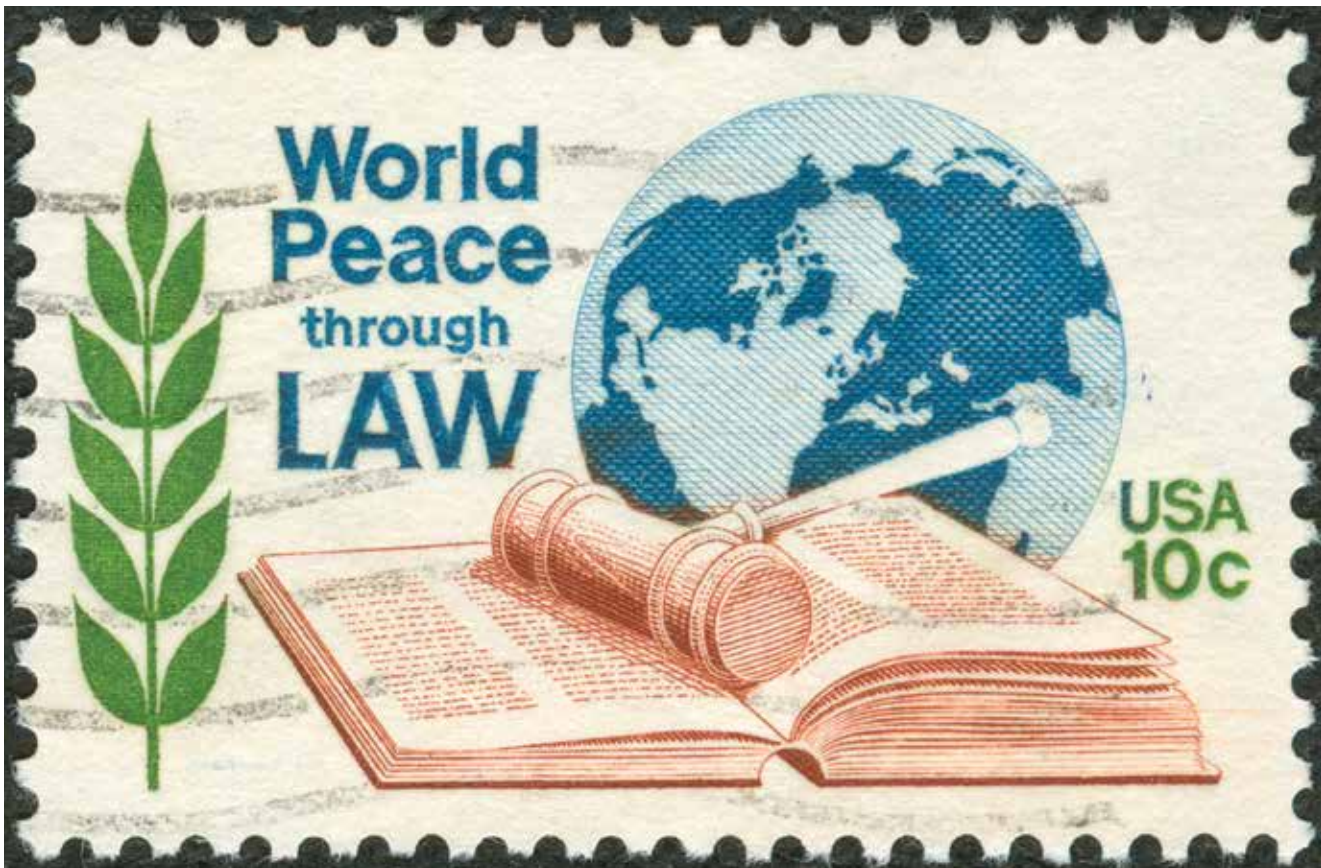


“You Will Make a Difference”

George T. Roumell Jr.'s
Fall 2015 Commencement
Address to the
MSU College of Law



Congratulations to the December 2015 graduating class of the Michigan State University School of Theology.

Hey, wait a minute—the university doesn’t have a theology school, and we’re graduates of the law school! It’s true that you are not becoming a priest, minister, rabbi, or imam in the spiritual sense, but you are becoming one in the secular sense because society looks on lawyers and the legal profession as the thread that brings peace and dignity to all persons on this globe. Regardless of your position, at some point in your professional life as a lawyer, you will have an opportunity to make a difference in somebody’s life, in your community, in your country, or in the world depending on where you are and who you are.

Once there was a country lawyer in Illinois by the name of Abraham Lincoln who was called on to serve as president during the great divide in our nation. That

lawyer at Gettysburg gave a very simple speech that ended with the ringing words: “[G]overnment of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth.” He made a difference.

In the 1940s, when Costa Rica decided it wanted no more wars and no more army, its leaders turned to the country’s lawyers. Today, Costa Rica thrives. If you go to the capital city of San Jose, the most impressive building is the Supreme Court of Costa Rica. In the country’s small towns, the major buildings are the courthouses—symbols of dignity, peace, and the rule of law.

Lawyers lead revolutions—not with guns, but with words and acts. Both in America and in South Africa, there were great peaceful revolutions. It is true that in both cases, a few suffered injury and death. For the most part, however, the end of racial segregation in the United States came about peacefully, led by persons like Martin Luther King Jr. But there were judges—from Supreme Court justices down to federal district court judges—who accelerated the end of segregation, realizing this was a nation of the rule of law, not of men.

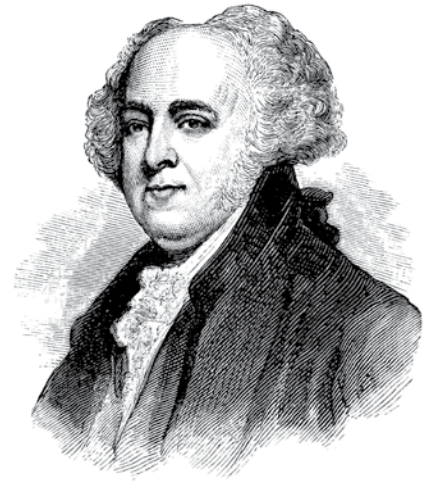
And there were courageous judges. In the South, Frank M. Johnson, a federal district court judge, withstood social pressure from his peers and country-club friends, enforcing the Civil Rights Act and the Constitution at personal cost. Richard Joseph Goldstone, a white judge, helped lead the way to the elimination of apartheid in South Africa. They were lawyers who made a difference as judges. Even today, this work continues.

An alumnus of the MSU College of Law is a U.S. district court judge who concluded, regardless of his personal feelings, that a ban on same-sex marriages was unconstitutional. He was vindicated by the United States Supreme Court. Today, there are individuals in our society who now have the dignity they long sought.

Sometimes as a lawyer, you will stand up to be counted. We have examples of that. There is the story many of you may not know. When Germany invaded Norway in 1940, Hitler installed a Norwegian Nazi, Vidkun Quisling, as premier. A citizen of Oslo brought a writ of mandamus before the country’s Supreme Court seeking to have the action declared unconstitutional. The Court did so unanimously. The ruling flustered Hitler and his gang for several months. Yet, with Oslo crawling with German troops, those judges, at the risk of their own lives, stood up to be counted. The rule of law prevails over gangs.

Sometimes lawyers fail. Lawyers in Germany between 1930 and the end of World War II failed society. They did not stand up to be counted. If they had, perhaps six million people would have lived and enjoyed dignity and peace.

Even today, we celebrate lawyers who make a difference. The movie *Bridge of Spies* tells the story of American lawyer James Donovan, who was appointed by the federal court to



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defend criminal charges against the top Russian spy in the United States during the Cold War. His job was not very popular—in fact, Donovan was ridiculed. And yet, he did a marvelous job defending Colonel Rudolph Abel; he took the case all the way up to the United States Supreme Court and almost won, losing by a 5–4 decision. Donovan proved that a fair judiciary and the rule of law means dignity for all.

Donovan is not the only lawyer in American history who made a difference by taking an unpopular case. While practicing law in Massachusetts, John Adams, our second president, was called on to defend British soldiers who had participated in the Boston Massacre. He did so at great political cost to himself, but he stood up to be counted. Future president John F. Kennedy was so impressed with Adams that he included a chapter about Adams’s courage as a lawyer in his book, *Profiles in Courage*.

Whether you’re James Donovan, John Adams, or a small-town lawyer working out of a modest office down on the corner, you may be asked to defend someone in an unpopular cause. The thing that binds a democracy together, that gives dignity to people, is the right to have their day in court and be judged by the rule of law rather than the rule of man.

Of course, not all of you will become president of the United States or the political leader of your country. Not all of you will become judges. But even as individual lawyers, some place, some time, you will make a difference. You’ll have that opportunity. You may be called on to settle a zoning dispute in your community that has separated neighbors, and you’ll do so brilliantly, making a difference and bringing peace to the place where you live. You may handle a family law matter in which families are split and children are put at a disadvantage, and you’ll find a way to soothe relationships and make a difference. You may have a Steve Jobs or a Bill Gates

Whatever it is, you are going to make a difference. You may do it many times. You may do it only once. You will do it because that is your mission as a lawyer. That is what being a lawyer is all about.

come into your office one day and ask you to incorporate a company that may lead to a communication revolution or develop a pharmaceutical drug that will eliminate cancer. And you will do so with great skill in such a way that you help make a difference.

I know of a lawyer who graduated from this law school who was working on the busing case in Detroit and was concerned about the disadvantage that African-American students faced. She realized that for many years, federal funds coming into the state of Michigan for vocational education never went to the city of Detroit. She prevailed in the U.S. district court in the Detroit busing case to issue an injunction providing that for the next few years, all federal funds coming into Michigan for vocational education would go to Detroit to build four outstanding vocational high schools. Those schools are still standing, and they are a beacon of educational hope in Detroit.

I think back to one of my law school classmates who was not long out of school when the oil embargo gripped the United States. In the eastern part of the country, power companies relied on oil to fuel their plants, and they were running short because of the embargo. This young lawyer reviewed the Federal Power Commission Act and found an obscure provision stipulating that in a national crisis, companies in other parts of the country were obliged to furnish power. As a result, homes in the East that winter were heated in large part by power generated by Midwest utility companies. That lawyer made a difference.

I have been practicing law for a long time. If asked whether I had made a difference somewhere, I would think back to one case I arbitrated in which a young community college professor in Michigan was terminated for leading a protest many years ago. I put him back to work. Seven years ago, he became president of that community college of 25,000 students. He is an outstanding president. His college, in my opinion, is probably the finest community college in Michigan. I made a difference in his life and in the life of the community and county that his college serves.

I didn't get elected judge. I didn't get elected governor. I didn't get elected president. But as an individual lawyer having an office in downtown Detroit, I was able to make a difference somewhere, at some time, somehow, just like you will make a difference because you are lawyers.

The importance of making a difference goes back to an old Chinese proverb attributed to Confucius: "When there is peace in the home, there is peace in the village. And when there is peace in the village, there is peace in the state. And when there is peace in the state, there is peace among states. And when there is peace among states, there is peace in the world." Now, the way you get peace is by bringing dignity to all persons regardless of sex, race, creed, color, sexual orientation, or other differences. And the way you get dignity and respect for individual human beings is by bringing freedom.

Some of you may be leaving the United States. I can visualize one of you from Turkey some time in your life, perhaps defending a journalist insisting on freedom of the press. Or one of you may return to a country where women have little or no legal rights, and in your lifetime, you may legally change such attitudes and bring true dignity to the women of your nation. Whatever it is, you are going to make a difference. You may do it many times. You may do it only once. You will do it because that is your mission as a lawyer. That is what being a lawyer is all about. Without the lawyers and judges of our world, there would be no freedom. And without freedom, there is no liberty. And without liberty, there is no dignity. Without dignity, there will be no peace.

My class of 1954 had a lot of aspirations. We fought in the Korean War. Some even got around to Vietnam. As we look back, we've written books, we've become president of a university, and some have become judges. But there is still no lasting peace in the world. I am hoping that you, the class of December 2015, will do a better job than we did; that you will really make the difference and bring dignity, liberty, and peace to all mankind. That is your challenge.

Go to it in the tradition of Michigan State, one of the great universities of the world, and with its law school, a symbol of hope, dignity, freedom, liberty, and peace.

Each of you will make a difference!

Congratulations! ■



George T. Roumell Jr. was president of the State Bar of Michigan in 1985–1986. He has been a member of the adjunct faculty at the Michigan State University College of Law and its predecessor, the Detroit College of Law, since 1959. Currently, he is an arbitrator and mediator. He is a past recipient of the Roberts P. Hudson Award and current recipient of the John Reed Legacy Award for Law School Teaching.