



John T. Berry

# Lawyers Are Special

*Lessons learned from Nigeria*

I have often said that the law is a special calling, and the practice of law an incredible privilege. My career has been focused on helping maintain and elevate the standards of our profession and on defending the profession against those who would demean it by failing to uphold those standards or unjustly attacking the profession itself. I had thought that my appreciation of the profession was as mature and developed as it could possibly be. But I was wrong.

I have just returned from an unforgettable trip representing the United States as part of a two-person Department of Justice project aimed at helping to develop a democracy in a very poor and corrupt society. My co-counsel was U.S. District Judge William Wagner (a Michigander who is now a magistrate judge in Florida). Our assignment was to instruct members of Nigeria's Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) and government leaders on governmental ethics, issues of individual and public morality, and ways to effectively establish an anti-corruption effort.

I learned as much as I taught.

Nigeria is a nation in western Africa with a population of 120 million people. It is a country rife with corruption, violence, and poverty. It has been ruled by an oppressive dictatorship for 25 of the last 30 years. Religious and tribal differences combine with poverty and rampant corruption to give even



John Berry discusses anti-corruption efforts in Nigeria with a staff member of Nigeria's Independent Corrupt Practices Commission.

the strongest optimist concern for the nation's democratic future—yet the lawyers of Nigeria are at the center of a monumental effort to build a society based on the rule of law. In a building surrounded by armed security guards and barbed wire, the ICPC works to fight corruption at the highest levels of government. Its arsenal is not guns and bullets, but law and lawyers.

Sound familiar? David McCollough's recent best-selling biography of John Adams reminds us of the powerful and courageous role lawyers played in the founding of this nation. Wisely recognizing mankind's potential for both good and evil, the founders embedded the concept of separation of powers into the fabric of our government, creating a strong,

independent judiciary with a crucial role for lawyers to play as officers of the court.

My respect for democracy has always been strong, but my trip to Nigeria will forever stamp upon my heart the greatest gratitude for our founders who established a government based upon law, not individual power. In Nigeria I saw some of the worst of human conditions, and some of the very best. The best was exemplified by lawyers, who under the toughest of circumstances are fighting to create a system of justice that decides disputes not by guns or planes crashed into buildings, but by the rule of law. These honest, bright, and courageous men and women are engaged in a daily and dangerous struggle to create what many of us too often take for

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granted. As bright and well-educated people, they could go to other countries and make far more money, under much safer conditions, but they believe that fighting for the rule of law in their homeland is more important.

Will they succeed? I do not know, but I do know that they are willing to put their lives and their family's future in jeopardy to

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make the effort. As much as my heart ached over the desperate poverty I witnessed in this resource-rich African nation, I was humbled and inspired by the courage and dedication of the lawyers I worked with.

It is an honor and a privilege—and a deep responsibility—to be a lawyer. Sometimes it takes traveling far from home to bring the most basic truths home to your heart. ◆

### Congratulations to Bruce Neckers

Bruce Neckers was awarded the Hope College Distinguished Alumni Award, along with three other notable alumni. The award, presented during the college's Alumni Banquet in Holland, Michigan on May 4, is the highest honor an alumnus can receive from the college's alumni association.