



NEW YORK CITY LAW DEPARTMENT
OFFICE OF THE CORPORATION COUNSEL

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Speeches

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CORPORATION COUNSEL MICHAEL A. CARDOZO IS AWARDED THE WIEN PRIZE FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY BY COLUMBIA LAW SCHOOL

SPEECH GIVEN BY MICHAEL A. CARDOZO TO GUESTS AT THE RAINBOW ROOM ON NOVEMBER 5, 2007

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Thank you for that generous introduction. My thanks also to the Wien Family and Columbia Law School for this honor. Special thanks also to my family, especially my wife, Nancy, without whose support I would never have been able to reach the goals I have achieved.

To receive this award with G. G. Michelson, one of Columbia Law School's most distinguished graduates, who continues to dedicate so much of her life to making New York City a better place, makes today even more special.

I find it hard to believe that it was more than 40 years ago that David Stern and I used to sit on a bench overlooking Morningside Park eating our lunch and talking about the latest incomprehensible civil procedure problem Hans Smit had given us. As we sat there, and occasionally discussed what we would next do with our lives, I can assure you that David's future, as he saw it then, did not extend to him becoming chair of the Columbia University Board of Trustees. And the idea that David would one day be elected Commissioner of the NBA, let alone be the longest serving commissioner in league history, was as far from his mind as was any thought I had that I would some day be the Corporation Counsel of the City of New York. Yet here we are.

As you know, I came to full-time public service late in my career and I have enjoyed every minute of it. Never in my career, even when, as used to be the case, I represented the NBA, have I realized such professional fulfillment. Yes David, representing Mayor Bloomberg is even more fun than representing you.

I want to take just a moment to urge all the law students who are here today, and all Columbia students, to consider a public service career. The rewards are extraordinary.

The difference a government lawyer can make in people's lives, and the thrill and satisfaction of representing your government, is extraordinary. To stand before the Supreme Court of the United States, and have the honor to say, as I did last year, that you represent the City of New York, makes worthwhile all the time you spent worrying about being called upon in first year torts to explain the Palsgraf case, or for those of you old enough to know what I am talking about, flipping quarters during a DLI exam.

Equally satisfying, to cite additional examples from my office, is to bring litigation, which also reached the Supreme Court last year, to control carbon dioxide emissions, or to draft legislation to improve the New York City public school system or to ban cigarette smoking in most buildings. Or think back to your con law class at Columbia and imagine the excitement my lawyers have – and the incredible importance of

the issues they face in this post 9/11 world – in litigating constitutional issues such as the legality of random backpack searches on the subways.

It is essential that this law school, and every other law school in this country, do everything possible, given the meager salaries available to government lawyers, to encourage law students to engage in government service. Let me offer two quick suggestions on what should be done in this regard.

First, law schools must guard against sending what is sometimes an unintended message that while working for a public interest organization is good, working for the government is somehow bad. I certainly commend those who work for the many outstanding public interest groups in this country. But schools must be careful not to imply there is something wrong in serving as an attorney for the city, the state or the nation. As highlighted by the examples I just gave, working for the government is not only rewarding, but gives you the opportunity to effect fundamental and needed social change. And, as the present crisis in the Justice Department reflects, highly qualified attorneys with a clear moral and ethical compass are needed in government to maintain the rule of law.

Second, law schools must do everything possible to ease the extraordinary financial burden faced by those who choose public service. There must be loan forgiveness programs for graduates who enter public service, such as Columbia's program whose expansion is commendably being championed by Dean Schizer. But even Columbia's program is not sufficient – as highlighted by a discussion on this very subject at the Law School Board of Visitors meeting just last week. In addition to law schools, the government, I submit, must provide loan forgiveness programs to help subsidize lawyers who decide to forego the economic rewards of private practice and who instead work in the public sector.

The Wien Prize is a powerful recognition by a great law school that public service is the most noble of all professions. I accept this prize with enormous gratitude and I do so on behalf of the hundreds of dedicated lawyers in my office, and the thousands of government lawyers across the country, who make a difference in this world.

Thank you.

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