



## Lawyer Jokes

From time to time we all have heard lawyer jokes, a good many of them premised on the notion that lawyers are dishonest cheats and scoundrels. Here are a few examples of clever repartee in that vein, some of which may be familiar:

How does an attorney sleep? First he lies on one side, then the other.

A mother and son were walking through a cemetery when they passed by a headstone inscribed, "Here lies a good lawyer and an honest man." The little boy read the headstone, looked up at his mother, and asked, "Mommy, why did they bury two people there?"

"Lawyer: One skilled in circumvention of the law. Liar: A lawyer with a roving commission."<sup>1</sup>

"Make crime pay. Become a lawyer."<sup>2</sup>

When a person assists a criminal in breaking the law before the criminal gets arrested, we call him an accomplice. When a person assists a criminal in breaking the law after the criminal gets arrested, we call him a defense lawyer.

A man is innocent until proven broke.

Question: The tooth fairy, an honest lawyer, and an expensive, dishonest lawyer are in the same room. There is a \$500 bill on a table in the room.

When they leave, the money is gone. Who took it?

Answer: Since there is no such thing as the tooth fairy or an honest lawyer, the answer is obvious.

How can a pregnant woman tell that she's carrying a future lawyer? She has an uncontrollable craving for baloney.

Some have concluded, "Lawyer name-calling is dangerous because it poisons the atmosphere in the public square and ultimately unravels the legal system."<sup>3</sup> This conclusion takes lawyer jokes as caricature, exaggeration or hyperbole. It assumes that the joke-teller and the listener subscribe to the notion that lawyers *do* lie and that calling all lawyers liars is merely expanding upon reality. Lawyers who subscribe to this analysis typically find lawyer jokes to be offensive.

Yet there is another, more optimistic conclusion, namely, that the expectation for lawyers to be honest is so great that the slightest deviation from this expectation results in surprise and dismay. In other words, the jokes are friendly quips in the form of irony and satire. Lawyers who subscribe to this analysis tend to enjoy these jokes made at their own expense. Knowing the premise to be false, they find nothing to take personally and no


reason to feel defensive.

Both assessments are supported by the title of a popular book about lawyer jokes, *Lowering the Bar: Lawyer Jokes and Legal Culture*.<sup>4</sup> The ironic double entendre in the name of this publication reflects two competing notions:

That lawyer jokes attempt to reduce respect for the bar—by putting down members of the profession; or, that lawyer jokes attempt to reduce the level of expectation for the profession. This latter notion implies that the level is high, at least high enough that it could be reduced. In other words, while there may be rare examples in popular experience that give the jokes traction, these are few and far between.

As you may have inferred from the aforementioned jokes, I have adopted the latter, positive view. Indeed, I have concluded that the level of expectation for lawyers with respect to honesty and integrity is so great that a failure to achieve that elevated level is a surprise sufficiently noteworthy for comment. It is this perspective that heartens me so that I smile whenever I am regaled with a lawyer joke. Rather than taking affront at a perceived insult, I find enjoyment in friendly banter embedded with an implicit compliment toward our profession. If you are a member of this camp, I hope you have enjoyed the jokes presented here.

If not, perhaps this one will grab you:

What's the problem with lawyer jokes? Lawyers don't think they're funny, and nobody else thinks they're jokes. 

The expectation for lawyers to be honest is so great that the slightest deviation from this expectation results in surprise and dismay.



### endnotes

1. AMBROSE BIERCE, THE DEVIL'S DICTIONARY (1906), available at [www.thedevilsdictionary.com/?L](http://www.thedevilsdictionary.com/?L).
2. Will Rogers, quotation at [www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/w/willrogers128273.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/w/willrogers128273.html).
3. Wendy Bay Lewis, *Lawyer Jokes, Lies, and Name Calling*, VOIR DIRE (2004).
4. MARC GALANTER, LOWERING THE BAR: LAWYER JOKES AND LEGAL CULTURE (2006).