



It's a Wonderful Profession—Let's Defend It!

Said the angel to a disbelieving George Bailey in the movie "It's a Wonderful Life":

You've been given a great gift, George—the chance to see what the world would be like without you. It's strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many other lives. When he isn't around he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?

Thus, the angel in the classic holiday film showed Jimmy Stewart's character how different his town would be had he not been born.

We lawyers have a similar opportunity. We can tell the critics of our great profession how different the United States would be without lawyers—how the quality of everyone's life would be lessened without the positive contributions of lawyers. It is a message we need to communicate more often, more widely, and more loudly.

Too many people lack an adequate appreciation of the historical and ongoing role of lawyers in our society, and the lawyer jokes they tell suggest that they wouldn't stop us from jumping off the bridge in Bedford Falls. It seems they are unaware of the roles lawyers have played in forming and guiding this country, and the significance of lawyers to the rights and privileges that people routinely enjoy and take for granted.

It was a lawyer, Thomas Jefferson, who so eloquently authored our Declaration of Independence from Great Britain. Joining him in signing at the risk of their "Lives, ... Fortunes and ... Sacred Honor" were 24 other lawyers.

A lawyer also drafted the United States Constitution. James Madison did that with the aid of 55 other delegates to the Constitutional Convention, 30 of whom were lawyers. More than one-half of the 39 delegates who signed were lawyers.

Lawyers were not only instrumental in conceiving our great system of government. As judges, they have made crucial decisions to preserve that system, including the intended balance among the branches. Perhaps foremost among them is United States Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall, whose opinion in *Marbury v. Madison* cemented the concept of judicial review of the constitutionality of legislative acts.


Lawyers also have led our country in times of war and peace. Twenty-five of our 43 presidents were first lawyers. One of them, a trial lawyer named Abraham Lincoln, gave us not only his courageous leadership in such forms as the Emancipation Proclamation, but also his life, during the most divisive period in our country's history.

For some, these historical examples of lawyers' positive contributions are too remote or intangible. If so, we can



herald other illustrations of what lawyers have done for them lately. Because of lawyers, we all enjoy safer workplaces, products and transportation. We have equal rights to vote and to a basic education. And we are freer of discrimination based upon our differences. I could continue this list, but space is limited, and it suffices to say that many of the benefits of life in America were advocated for and won by lawyers.

You may be tired, as I am, of lawyer jokes and other less insidious attacks on our profession. If so, then choose to respond to such a joker or attacker next time. Ask to whom they will turn for help if they are wrongfully discharged by their employer, or accused of a crime, or their spouse or child is killed or crippled by another's negligence. Will they call a comedian or some lawyer-bashing radio talk-show host? Of course not. Remind them that their rights and remedies in such situations, and scores of others, were largely forged by lawyers in legislatures and court-houses.

Though our judicial system isn't perfect and is subject to some abuse by lawyers and non-lawyers alike, we have earned the right to be proud of what we do. It's a wonderful profession. Stand up for it whenever you can. 

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Chas Wirken