

Excerpt from the Law School dedication speech of Vice President Walter Mondale

April 4, 1978

“I’m happy to be back, and I accept this award as a symbol of the principles for which this great institution has always stood. As long as I have been associated with this school, it has been and placed no higher objective than teaching students about their special obligation to society as lawyers. It was here that I first learned the difference between rules of law and the rule of law. It was here that I first read Blackstone, who said that law is the living embodiment of the moral sentiments of the people. There’s always been a special focus here upon legal ethics and professional responsibility. It’s fitting that the new law school building should be dedicated to a renewal of that distinguished tradition.

And today that tradition is more essential than ever. For perhaps the most compelling lesson of our recent Constitutional crisis, was how fragile our laws and legal institutions are, when our highest officials decide to ignore them. And what was most frightening was that Watergate was only the crest of a larger wave.”

“What truly makes a difference, what holds the key to our survival as a free nation, is not just the rules of law, which you can find in the U.S. Code. It is above all the rule of law found in the collective consciousness of our people. The rule of law is not the excuse of higher officials that they tiptoed skillfully on the outer edges of legality. It is rather the knowledge of public servants that they acted in the deepest meaning of its spirit. The rule of law is not the false efficiency of a controlled press or of leaders who define dissent as treason. It is the strength of a people who love their country and serve it willingly. The rule of law is not those voices who echo the worst and bloodiest words in this century – that they were only following orders. It is the inner voice of public leaders asking not just how to avoid crime, but how to do justice. That is the voice which is echoed through the corridors and classrooms of this great institution defining its highest purpose.

There is on this campus a sense of professional responsibility transcending the mastery of craft or process. It will not be found in memorizing the Rule Against Perpetuities. If any student can now recite those provisions – and I want you to know I never could – I assure you that they will disappear like magic in three and one half minutes after your final exam. But what does not disappear is the pride in our profession, and the belief in its essential rightness. For each of us as lawyers, that belief can make the difference between a government of laws and a government of men.

We’ve seen clear evidence in our time for the bad and for the good. At every level of government there are now men and women who change the system by their very presence as its leaders. This is the task for us, to match our talents and intellects with an active consciousness and the instinct for truth and fairness.”