

Law Day: Fifty Years of Celebrating the Rule of Law

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In 1776, Thomas Jefferson penned the now famous words that became the philosophical foundation of our nation: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” The Founders fostered this idea by forging our system of governance around the concept of the Rule of Law. The Rule of Law is the principle that the government must exercise power only in accordance with lawfully enacted and fully disclosed laws that apply equally to all citizens, regardless of rank, prestige or power. The Rule of Law defends against the arbitrary enforcement of laws characteristic of totalitarian governments like that from which the Founders declared our nation’s independence.

The Rule of Law makes our way of life possible. Our form of government and our system of laws are all predicated on the belief that the Rule of Law supersedes all personal ambition or power. The Rule of Law requires that even the government itself is subservient to its own laws. Our nation’s adherence to the Rule of Law has created an atmosphere of security, equality and opportunity that has allowed freedom, both personal and economic, to blossom and thrive. The Rule of Law has gone far to conquer injustice and level playing fields in all aspects of life, making this concept truly fundamental.

Unfortunately, the Rule of Law is often taken for granted. Seldom do we stop to recognize that the Rule of Law provides the foundation for our free and democratic society. In 1958, President Dwight D. Eisenhower offered Americans and the world a reminder. In the aftermath of the horrors of World War II, the United States faced the growing shadow of Communist totalitarianism. The Cold War was particularly frightening in 1958 as Cuba, one of America’s closest neighbors, fell to Communism and Americans faced the growing fear of nuclear war. On May 1, a traditional Communist holiday, totalitarian leaders prepared to celebrate their recent victories. In the face of this, the President

wanted to rally Americans to celebrate the Rule of Law.

President Eisenhower proclaimed May 1, 1958, as Law Day. As stated in his proclamation, President Eisenhower believed “a day of national dedication to the principle of government under law would afford us an opportunity better to understand and appreciate the manifold virtues of such a government and to focus the attention of the World upon them.” President Eisenhower challenged the people of the United States, particularly those in the legal profession, to promote and participate in the observance of Law Day. Congress made Law Day an annual holiday in 1961 with the passage of 36 U.S.C § 113.

The Arkansas Bar Association and other local bar associations around the state have actively observed Law Day for many years. The Young Lawyers Division of the Arkansas Bar Association sponsors the Law Day Planning Committee. The Law Day Planning Committee takes the lead in organizing and conducting the Arkansas Bar Association’s various Law Day activities. Central among these activities has traditionally been a program where teams of volunteers visit high schools throughout the state to teach the next generation about the Rule of Law.

In recent years, the Law Day Planning Committee has expanded its focus in an attempt to reach not only high school students, but children and adults of all ages, including members of the legal profession. In 2007, with special support from the Arkansas Association of Women Lawyers, the Committee’s Law Day activities included a blood drive organized in partnership with the Pulaski County Bar Association, a statewide poster contest for fifth graders co-sponsored by the Arkansas Association of Legal Assistants and participation in a live call-in show on KATV. The Law Day Planning Committee also organized an event where lawyers gave up a Saturday morning to volunteer with the North Little Rock Mayor’s Youth Council to help Arkansas Rice Depot, a hunger-relief charity, provide backpacks full of food to hungry school children. Additionally,



the Committee helped distribute dozens of Senior Citizen Legal Rights Handbooks to disadvantaged senior citizens and their caregivers. Another highlight was a “Java with the Judges” breakfast reception that provided young lawyers an opportunity to meet and visit with many of the state’s most prominent judges.

For this 50th anniversary of Law Day, the American Bar Association has designated a national theme of The Rule of Law: Foundation for Communities of Opportunity and Equity. The Law Day Planning Committee is working on plans to honor this milestone anniversary and planning new ways to celebrate and educate our fellow citizens about the importance of the Rule of Law in keeping with this year’s national theme. The Committee encourages all members of the legal profession to join in this year’s celebrations and to contribute to the annual observance of the Rule of Law. Members of the legal profession have a special obligation to recognize, promote and spread the Rule of Law. There is no better way to do so than to become involved in the celebration of Law Day, both in this special anniversary year and in the years to come. Anyone interested in more information about getting involved with Law Day may contact the Arkansas Bar Association. ■

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