

JUSTICE JIMMY

*Meredith Gowan Le Goff**

Time has passed since we bade farewell to Justice James L. Robertson, but his memory and legacy continues. It is an honor to be included in this tribute to a man who lived his life committed to public service, the defense of due process, free speech and other cherished values of our Constitution, and the respect of human dignity for all. Justice Robertson, or Justice Jimmy as he was later called, was my professor, my judge and my friend. As he did with others, he challenged me to think, and to question my own beliefs.

Before I was his law clerk, I was his student. In the autumn of 1986, I signed up for Justice Robertson's course on Jurisprudence as my fall semester elective. From the first day, we all noticed that Justice Robertson carried a coffee cup around with him in class. He would lecture for 3 hours straight with no notes, periodically peering into the coffee cup as if his notes were at the bottom of the cup. I was the only first year in the class, and Justice Robertson would occasionally ask if I was OK.

In everything Justice Robertson did, he brought a sense of compassion, consideration and curiosity. If I did well in his class, it was due to his ability to lay out and explain complex concepts in an accessible manner—and to inspire.

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* Clerk, Mississippi State Supreme Court Justice James L. Robertson 1989- 1990. JD 1989 University of Mississippi, University of Amsterdam Law and Economics of EU integration 1990-1991. A resident of Paris, France since 1991, Ms. Gowan Le Goff has taught American Constitutional Law at the University of Paris, Assas and L'Institut d'études politiques (Sciences Po), and has served as International Legal Counsel and Regional Vice Chair (EMEA) for Democrats Abroad, as well as Chair of Democrats Abroad France. She worked for Moquet Borde (Paul Hastings, Paris), Anderson Legal and Ernst & Young Legal, and continues to volunteer with the Center for Constitutional Rights.

After a year in New York as an Ella Baker Fellow at the Center for Constitutional Rights and law student at New York University, I came back to Mississippi to clerk for Justice Roberston at the Mississippi Supreme Court, along with my fellow Ole Miss graduate and classmate, Terry Williamson.

When I say it was the best job I ever had, it was what I felt then and know with certainty now. It probably was not without some grief for him though. No doubt, seeing my vintage clothes and ripped jeans on the weekend, some must have asked him if he had been assigned “the one from the Salvation Army”.

There are many stories to tell: the long opinions on fishing holes and annexations, the impassioned arguments over footnote and the breadth of the free exercise clause, and the enlightening discussions on the death penalty, abortion, Faulkner, and, lest we forget, baseball, while accompanying him on long drives to speeches. Justice Robertson took Terry and me into his multi-faceted, colorful world, often over lunches at the Palette, introduced us to Gore Vidal, shared his favorite operas, and to his other passions (but thankfully sparing me his passion for running).

Through it all, Justice Robertson gave his all to protect and to defend the integrity of the legal process. Although few will risk taking unpopular stands even if those positions are rooted in law and logic, Justice Robertson never failed to make the hard decision, knowing full well the consequences which might follow. Whether faced with lovers whose quarrels led to the theft of checks and a stereo, or an accused child molester, or a kid selling drugs on the street of Hattiesburg, he ensured that all had a fair trial, fighting for this basic principle every day, both as a judge and as a lawyer.

We can say Justice Robertson was a Renaissance man, because he was, but more than that he loved the law and the State of Mississippi with all its characters, big and small. I am sure I will not be the only one to mention the needle point reminder in his chambers: *Illegitimi non carborundum*.

Godspeed, Justice Jimmy. Your memory is a blessing to us, we lucky ones who shared different parts of your incredibly well lived life. Your legacy will surely brighten the paths of future generations of lawyers.

Indeed, it is up to us, the beneficiaries of the wisdom and courage of those who walked before us, like Justice Robertson, to defend our profession, the rule of law and democracy. We understand that the rule of law stands as one of the foundational pillars of any democratic society. It ensures that all individuals, institutions, and governments are held accountable under a common set of laws that are publicly promulgated, equally enforced, and independently adjudicated. This principle not only safeguards individual rights and liberties, but also upholds the legitimacy and functionality of our democratic system. Within this framework, we play a critical role as defenders of the rule of law and democracy.

The rule of law guarantees that no one is above the law—not even those in positions of power. In a democracy, the rule of law functions as a shield against tyranny and corruption. It promotes transparency and provides mechanisms for resolving disputes in a peaceful and structured manner.

Without the rule of law, democracy cannot function effectively. Laws give structure to democratic processes, including elections, legislative debate, and judicial review. We must ensure that these processes remain fair and accessible to all. By establishing the legal framework within which political, economic, and social rights are exercised, the rule of law forms the backbone of a just and equitable society.

We, as lawyers, serve as stewards of the rule of law. Our responsibilities extend beyond representing individual clients; we are also advocates for justice and defenders of the constitutional order. By interpreting, applying, and challenging laws, we help shape the legal landscape in ways that uphold democratic values.

Justice Robertson taught jurisprudence and legal process to instill in students respect for and a deeper understanding of our legal system, as well as a sense of healthy skepticism. As a judge he stood firm on due process and constitutional rights despite the consequences. As a man, he inspired courage, curiosity and commitment to the rule of law. May we all follow his example.