

LIFETIME ACHIEVERS  2013

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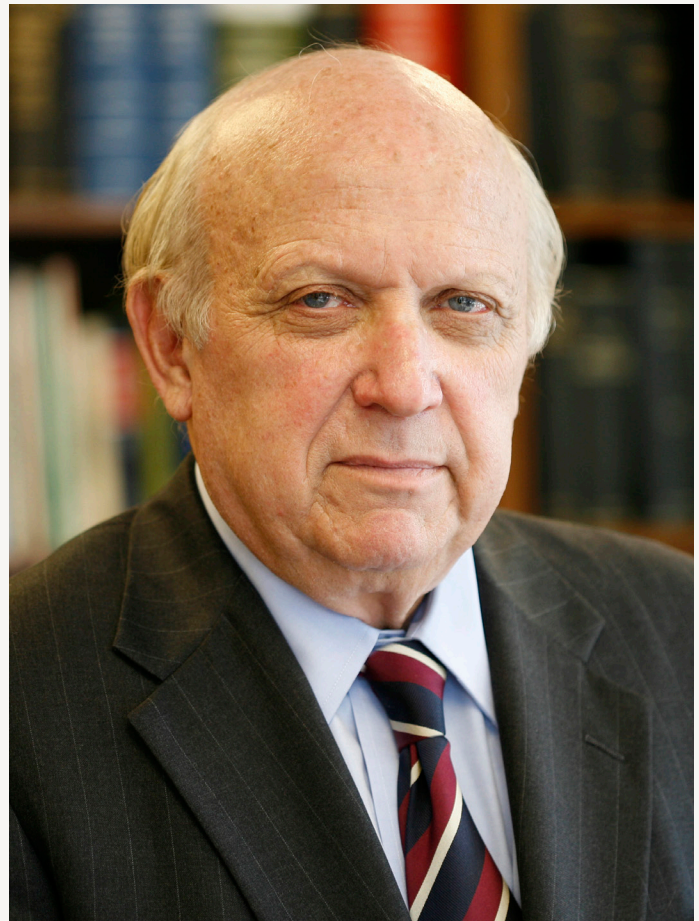
Our 10th annual awards honor distinctive careers and public service.

FLOYD ABRAMS

CAHILL GORDON & REINDEL

IN 2004 MY PREDECESSOR, ARIC PRESS, created The American Lawyer Lifetime Achievement Awards to honor men and women who had distinguished careers at the country's preeminent law firms and legal departments. Press had very specific criteria in selecting the first class: The lawyers must have achieved notable professional and pro bono/government or civic success. He wasn't knocking the workaholic lawyers who single-mindedly devote themselves to their paying clients. Instead, Press was trying to recognize attorneys who might serve as a role model for law firm lawyers: accomplished practitioners who found the time to help the indigent or take a few years (and a pay cut) to do government service. Press also wanted to draw honorees from the ranks of lawyers who were late in their careers or who had retired. He envisioned the awards like the Baseball Hall of Fame, where an inductee's work would be judged by the rearview mirror of history.

—ROBIN SPARKMAN



AS A YOUNG LAWYER, FLOYD Abrams didn't seek to specialize in media law, much less become the nation's preeminent First Amendment lawyer. The practice area didn't even exist when he joined Cahill Gordon & Reindel as an associate in 1963. But Abrams learned on the job, as media giants like NBC and The New York Times Company turned to his firm to defend their coverage of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. In 1971, shortly after making partner at Cahill, Abrams received a call from former Yale Law professor Alexander Bickel, asking him to help *The New York Times* fight an injunction against publishing the Pentagon Papers, a secret history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The resulting litigation lasted only 15 days—"but it changed my life," Abrams says.

The case also changed First Amendment law. Before the 1960s, federal courts rarely heard media law cases. But following the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in favor of the *Times* in the Pentagon Papers case, there was an explosion of First Amendment litigation—and Abrams was at the forefront. Although he has spent his career litigating cases in several practice areas, including insurance, copyright, trademark, and antitrust law, Abrams is best known for his free-speech court cases. Past clients include ABC, CBS, CNN, *Time*, *The Nation*, *Reader's Digest*, and NPR. In 2003 he represented Senator Mitch McConnell in a challenge to federal election financing; in 2004 and 2005, Abrams defended *Times* reporters Judith Miller and Matthew Cooper in their efforts to protect their confidential sources after the identity of CIA agent Valerie Plame was leaked.

Because of Abrams, far more lawyers are interested in media law, says Cahill partner and First Amendment lawyer Susan Buckley. She estimates that the media law bar, which was nonexistent when Abrams began arguing First Amendment cases in the sixties, has hundreds of members, many of whom Abrams mentored, often as associates at Cahill.

"The reason I went to Cahill Gordon was to work with Floyd," says McGraw-Hill Financial Inc. general counsel Kenneth Vittor, who was a Cahill associate from 1974 to 1980. "The first week I nervously went to his office and said I'd like to work with him and went out with a pile of papers. I've been working with him ever since."

In fact, Abrams, now 77, is currently defending McGraw-Hill's Standard & Poor's unit against a federal fraud suit over its securities ratings. Once again, clients want him on their side.

—GRACE TATTER

IN HIS OWN WORDS

What book has influenced you the most?

No one book, but John Tunis's sports books in elementary school, Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* and George Orwell's *1984* in high school, J.D. Salinger's writings in college, and scores of biographies and unquantifiable amounts of superb legal writing thereafter.

What is your greatest personal accomplishment?

The pleasure of working on great cases at a great law firm for 50 years while having a great and loving family, now including four delicious grandchildren.

What is your biggest professional accomplishment?

Persuading the public, legal and otherwise, that the First Amendment is not just a pretty-sounding aspiration, but binding law, and not just law, but the acceptance [by] us all that our nation must remain the most speech-protective one in the history of the world.

What would you have done differently or what is your biggest regret?

I can't think of anything.