

8-17-1987

The Moral Obligation in the Study of The Call to Professionalism

J. Clay Smith Jr.

Follow this and additional works at: http://dh.howard.edu/jcs_speeches



Part of the [Legal Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Smith, J. Clay Jr., "The Moral Obligation in the Study of The Call to Professionalism" (1987). *Selected Speeches*. Paper 110.
http://dh.howard.edu/jcs_speeches/110

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the J. Clay Smith, Jr. Collection at Digital Howard @ Howard University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Selected Speeches by an authorized administrator of Digital Howard @ Howard University. For more information, please contact lopez.matthews@howard.edu.

THE MORAL OBLIGATION IN THE STUDY OF LAW: THE CALL TO PROFESSIONALISM

By

J. Clay Smith, Jr.

Dean

Howard University School of Law *

Students entering American law schools today are doing so at a critical period as the legal profession is tightening the standards in legal education and demanding that law schools focus more on professionalism.

I have just returned from the American Bar Association's annual meeting in San Francisco, California. There I took part in extensive discussions and debates on many important issues. However, the dominant issue among the deans of American law schools, legal educators and members of the bench and bar was a concern that law schools and the students may not be living up to the highest expectations required by the profession. Since the students at Howard University School of Law are expected to compete with the general population of lawyers upon being graduated, it is none too soon for you to begin to understand and to commit yourselves to this national call to professionalism, which begins while you are enrolled in law school.

The study of law is a privilege as is bar admission after graduation. Law school is a professional school. It is a place unlike your undergraduate education. It is a place where students prepare to serve people

*Remarks made in the James A. Cobb Moot Court Room before the First Year Class on August 17, 1987.

A lawyer has the capacity to be a leader in a community. The title, "lawyer," connotes the possibility that you can seek to resolve conflict and to mend broken promises, lives, and hearts. The public believes that you are preparing yourselves for economic security at their expense; and you are, but you cannot hope to claim such security without the corresponding moral obligation to provide the public with the highest skills to protect their interests. Thus, a law student stands in readiness to define justice, to resolve conflict and to relieve human pain and suffering by devotion to study and scholarly contemplation. Only such dedication to study qualifies you to offer your services to the public and the economic security that you will ultimately demand from it.

Your duty, your moral obligation to the public begins as students. Law school is approximately twenty six months, if you complete the course of study in three years. This course of study requires that you complete fewer than ninety hours of course work and other required academic requirements established by the faculty. Each day that you are at the Howard University School of Law must be a day in which you pursue the study of Law with a self-imposed rigor, and a recognition that if you do not, you are failing to live up to the moral obligation imposed upon you by the profession.

Do the students at Howard University School of Law want to make a difference in the definition of law or do you seek the average, the easiest and the least challenging methods in the study of law? In the weeks ahead, as the demands of law school extends the nights, requires

faced with conflicts, either to their person or to their property. Faced with the prospect that one of you may betray your trust to a client or the trust imposed by the public while in public life, the Law School has a moral obligation not only to teach you skills to make each of you the best and brightest lawyers, but also to demand that each of you undertake the study of law as a moral obligation to assure that you learn these skills.

In San Francisco, deans, law teachers, judges and other members of the bar were saying that the current generation of law graduates cannot write, are engaged in too many hours of part-time employment, believe that enrollment in law school guarantees them the right to be graduated and to enter the profession. Some argued that students are failing to use library facilities for research and are not briefing their cases, or preparing course outlines and spending way too much time in politics as opposed to the rigorous study and debate on substantive course materials. These, of course, are not novel concerns. They have been raised before, even by members of the Howard Law faculty. However, the question is how will this class, the first graduating class of the 1990's be viewed? This is a question that not only cries out for an answer but compels the contemporary law student to think about the seriousness and the moral obligations associated with the study of law.

Take a minute and think about who you are. You are college graduates, who by special training, are seeking to join a discrete, if not elite group of men and woman who have the power and the capacity to define the meaning of justice. A lawyer is not just a citizen in a community.

more diligence, you may and should begin to question whether the study of law is your life's goal. If you cannot keep up with your assignments, fail to participate in your classes, fail to brief each case, become reluctant to ask questions in and out of class of your instructors and do not seek out the answers in the library, this is a sign that you have made a mistake in choosing law as a career.

Today, the faculty is of the mind that each of the students enrolled in the first year class is unique and special. We hope that your selection to occupy a seat in this class and to attend a law school whose heritage began on January 6, 1869 will motivate you not to betray the rock upon which Howard University School of Law stands: hard work, hard work and more hard work. Hard work is the tradition at Howard University School of Law. The general obligation of the Law Faculty is to provide you with no less than the minimum knowledge to enter the profession of law. Our moral obligation is to expose you to the maximum information of which we are humanly capable.

The faculty is here to shape your mind, to challenge your values and to strengthen both. Law teachers owe as much of an obligation to be teachers to you as you owe to them to be students. Together -- teacher and student -- must never allow the call to professionalism to become a whisper.

I call you to professionalism.

JCSjr:me