

A Supreme Conclusion

Veteran New York Times Reporter Linda Greenhouse Closes Supreme Semester with Commencement Keynote

by Michael M. Bowden

The Supreme Semester ended on a high note at Commencement 2008, with a keynote address by Linda Greenhouse, Supreme Court correspondent for *The New York Times* for three decades and one of the best known reporters covering the Court, who spoke on “A Lawyer’s Choice.”

Greenhouse began by quoting Charles Hamilton Houston, the late Justice Thurgood Marshall’s mentor and a “great theoretician of the civil rights movement,” who said that a lawyer can choose to be a “social engineer” and “use the Constitution as an engine of progress,” or a “parasite on society” who manipulates the law for personal gain.



RWU Law Honorary Doctor of Law recipient Linda Greenhouse delivers her keynote at Commencement 2008.

Greenhouse suggested that in today’s world a third choice had emerged for lawyers – to be an “enabler,” one who contorts the spirit of the law for short-term political advantage.

“We’ve seen recently the dismaying spectacle of lawyers who have provided top officials in the Executive Branch with the covers they sought and the answers they wanted,” she said. Their memos “offered interrogators the ability to ignore statutory and constitutional constraints in the name of presidential

authority, [and] accomplished what the White House wanted in the short run.

“But in the longer run, these ambitious young legal enablers did a serious disservice to their masters, let alone to the country, in providing a roadmap for the betrayal of our nation’s commitment to the rule of law,” Greenhouse said.

Urging graduates to aspire toward higher legal goals, she concluded, “You are entering into a high calling on which the future of our society depends. There has never been a more important time to be a lawyer.”

Greenhouse graduated from Radcliffe College at Harvard in 1968, where she served as an editor of the *Harvard Crimson* and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. She began covering the Court in 1978, after earning a Master of Studies in Law at Yale Law School, where she attended on a Ford Foundation fellowship – making her career at the Court longer than that of any current justices except John Paul Stevens, who came on in 1975.

RWU Law’s honorary Doctor of Laws degree recognized Greenhouse’s “extraordinary contributions to public understanding of the law and the American legal system,” which “have enriched and inspired lawyers and non-lawyers alike.”

In addition to her journalism, Greenhouse has also written several law review articles as well as a book, *Becoming Justice Blackmun: Harry Blackmun’s Supreme Court Journey*. In 1998 she won the Pulitzer Prize, journalism’s highest honor, for her coverage of the Court. In January 2009, she will return to Yale as the Knight Distinguished Journalist-in-Residence and Joseph M. Goldstein Senior Fellow.

Greenhouse has a number of academic writing and speaking commitments lined up for the year ahead, and plans to remain “actively engaged in thinking and writing about the Court,” she has said, adding, “I don’t feel like I’m leaving anything undone after 30 years on this beat.”

Vintage Greenhouse

(An excerpt from the conclusion of Greenhouse’s first dispatch on the Supreme Court’s decision in the presidential election of 2000, which she produced on a ten-minute deadline.)

Nothing about this case, *Bush v. Gore*, No. 00-949, was ordinary: not its context, not its acceptance over the weekend, not the enormously accelerated schedule with argument on Monday, and not the way the decision was released to the public tonight.

When the court issues an opinion, the justices ordinarily take the bench and the justice who has written for the majority gives a brief oral description of the case and the holding.

Today, after darkness fell and their work was done, the justices left the Supreme Court building individually from the underground garage, with no word to dozens of journalists from around the world who were waiting in the crowded pressroom for word as to when, or whether, a decision might come. By the time the pressroom staff passed out copies of the decision, the justices were gone.

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