

President's Message



Law Day - - Looking Back to 1958

By Lee H. Rightmyer

The annual "Law Day Column" had me stumped. Nobody sets out to recycle the same platitudes that fill most Law Day columns; it just seems to happen.

I learned from the ABA's website that America first celebrated Law Day in 1958. Then I turned to an even better resource. The St. Petersburg Bar Association holds a hidden treasure – a stack of musty, old scrapbooks dating back to the late 1950s. And so I opened our Bar's scrapbooks and began to learn even more.

Our yellowing newspaper clippings taught me that Law Day is rooted far more in politics – maybe propaganda – than in public service. I learned that our "celebration" needs to be viewed within the context of the Cold War. Supporting freedom's side during the Cold War was a noble purpose, just not the purpose that I expected.

In 1957, the ABA proposed the first Law Day to emphasize the differences between America's rule of law and freedom and the Communist alternative. Ike (President Eisenhower) agreed and issued a proclamation designating May 1, 1958 as Law Day – USA. He proclaimed our government to be "a beacon of light for oppressed peoples of the World seeking freedom, justice and equality." He urged "the legal profession, the press, and the radio, television and motion picture industries to participate in the observance of that date."

By design, we celebrated Law Day on May 1. And why on that day? May 1 was chosen because it coincides with the Communists' international celebration of "May Day." Today it is easy to minimize Cold War tensions and to view Communism as a paper tiger. Such notions would have found less support in St. Pete, circa 1958.

The ABA, President Eisenhower, even the St. Pete business leaders and our local Bar enthusiastically embraced this largely "political" exercise.

You cannot read the contemporaneous news reports without sensing the Cold War struggle. The *St. Petersburg Evening Independent* editorial page opined as to the contrast between the "Red" May Day celebration and "our" new Law Day celebration:

This is a direct counter to the lawlessness and mental and spiritual immorality of communism, will aim to reawaken the national consciousness of the American concept of freedom and individual guarantees under law, and strengthen our resolve to preserve them against all attacks, direct or insidious.

(*St. Petersburg Independent* editorial, 4/30/58).

The *St. Petersburg Times* similarly commented on Florida's first Law Day:

For the chasm between the way of life under totalitarian communism and our own system is far less characterized by the difference between socialism and free enterprise than it is by the contrast between the rights of free men under the law, as we know it, and those of the state-chattels which men are under communism.

(*St. Petersburg Times* editorial, May 1, 1958).

St. Petersburg's first Law Day did not go unnoticed in the business community. Eight local banks placed large newspaper advertisements trumpeting this first Law Day's goals (can't imagine that happening today, can you?).

Stetson Law School hosted a large event attended by 200, including dignitaries and donors. Ike spoke in Washington, contrasting "our" Law Day with the "Red" May Day. The local newspapers provided very favorable coverage.

Not everyone ignored the inconsistency between Law Day's lofty ideals and St.

Petersburg's social realities. The *St. Petersburg Times'* editorial pages applauded Law Day, but then took issue with the Florida Bar's very limited role in advancing matters involving civil rights. The *Times* pointedly questioned, "Does equal justice mean to Florida lawyers 'equal justice for white, Protestant, Right-thinking people only?'" Perhaps this message was not quickly absorbed; on February 5, 1959, the St. Petersburg Bar Association's monthly dinner speaker was a segregationist former governor. His speech roundly criticized the U.S. Supreme Court for unconstitutionally meddling in local matters. The press reported that the event was well-attended; the former governor was warmly introduced by a local judge.

The same yellowing clippings also show the earnest, young faces of our 2007 Bar's most senior members and other departed friends. That rising generation of lawyers witnessed – indeed, many guided the community through – nearly five decades of social change that seem unimaginable from the perspective of our old scrapbooks. And maybe Law Day's lofty ideals helped serve as a catalyst for positive change.

The St. Pete Bar celebrates our forty-ninth Law Day this year. The Cold War ended many years ago. The purpose of our Law Days messages may have changed, but hopefully we stay true to the goals of justice and equality under the law.

P.S. I strongly encourage anyone with a sense of history or who was part of this history to visit our St. Pete Bar Office and spend some time with the scrapbooks. The address is 2600 M.L. King Street North, Suite 602, St. Petersburg, FL 33734-7358. Call ahead at 823-7474 if you would like.