Remarks on the Occasion of the Retirement of Gray Thoron

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In July 1956 Gray Thoron became Dean of the Cornell Law School at the age of thirty-nine. He had had a varied and successful career before, but it is the following thirty-one years we celebrate tonight. Gray came to Cornell an honorary Texan (so-proclaimed by the governor of the state). In 1952 he had been an active participant in the Taft-Eisenhower contest. After two bitter hearings before the Republican National Committee in Chicago, he and the other contested Eisenhower delegates won recognition. In 1954, he took a leave of absence from the University of Texas to join Solicitor General Sobeloff as an assistant. While in that office, he handled especially difficult matters so that his oral argument box score of two won/four lost is one of which he could legitimately be quite proud.

In addition to a ten-gallon hat and what passed in Ithaca as a Texas drawl, Gray brought to Cornell a keen interest in the field of professional responsibility. He introduced an upper class course entitled Professional Practice, designed to “place a special emphasis on the problems of conscience and professional responsibility which young lawyers are likely to face in the course of daily business with clients, opposing parties, witnesses, governmental agencies, and the public generally.” To this course Gray brought his public service experience and several years both before and after military duty with the New York City firm of Sullivan and Cromwell.

Thoron’s welcome to his first Cornell entering class, the class of 1959 (121 matriculants, 115 men, six women, drawn from 391 applicants—a high point for the period) expressed succinctly his view toward law and life:

We shall do our best to make your work interesting and exciting, and to develop in you a tremendous devotion to the legal profession.

The law offers unlimited opportunities for a lifetime of satisfying service to society, to men and women of character and ability. I can only wish that each of you will find in this profession a

most satisfying and successful career, and will succeed in getting 
from it as much fun and pleasure as I have. 

Among his many contributions as dean must be numbered: 
—creation of the institution of a separate Law School convoca-
tion, apart from and in advance of university commencement; 
—the establishment of the Advisory Council (The first council 
of fifteen, appointed in 1958, included the Attorney General of the 
United States, the Governor of Maine, and the Chief Justices of Mas-
sachusetts and New Jersey, plus senior partners of major firms in 
New York, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Buffalo.); 
—recruitment of strong faculty at both the entry level and from 
other faculties; 
—which required also that he improve faculty salary levels; 
—raising support for and planning Hughes Hall, a critical piece 
of the law school complex; 
—revitalizing and reorganizing the Cornell Legal Aid Clinic; and 
—expanding the International Legal Studies Program. 

When he announced in January 1962 his decision to step down 
from the deanship, Dean Thoron said:

I want all of you to know what a rare privilege it has been to 
hold the Deanship of the Cornell Law School. The School is very 
close to me. It is my kind of a law school. Its potential as a teach-
ing law school and as an institution of quality and distinction is 
indeed unlimited. 

I see for our Law School in the years ahead a great future, 
and one to which I hope that I can continue to contribute in many 
ways.

The editorial tribute in the student-managed Cornell Law Forum 
marked one measure of his success: “He was,” it said, “in the final 
analysis, a student’s dean.”

In the twenty-four years since then Gray has continued to be a 
student’s professor and to contribute to the school in the many ways 
he promised. Through his professionally focused courses, and 
steady experimentation, Gray has given us a unique bridge between 
the law school and the law. Law Practice Dynamics, successor to 
Professional Practice, was a consistent vehicle, but there were 
others. One student, recalling that course, expressed views I have 
heard from countless others when he wrote to Gray:

Certainly I look back on the paper I wrote in your class as 
being a turning point in my career. It forced me to examine and 
articulate my values in a way that has lasted and in turn been a 
positive influence on my family and clients and which in turn will 
be passed on and on. Of course the influences on a single life are
innumerable and the reverberations of that life immense. But you create a crucible through hard work, skill and influence that is worthwhile in the deepest sense. Further, to pick up on a familiar theme, you obviously enjoy it.

Always ready to explore new directions, Gray directed an experimental legal assistance project for the Auburn Correctional Facility from 1970-74. Outside the formal curriculum he has been consistently available with advice, support, and active placement assistance on behalf of those many students who sought him out.

Professional responsibility has not merely been a teaching interest with Gray. In 1964, he was one of three members of a special committee created by the New York State Legislature “to study and evaluate existing ethical standards and practices and the provisions of law relating thereto, applicable to members and employees of the Legislature.” And since 1965 he has served on the New York State Bar Association Committee on Professional Ethics, serving as its vice chairman for a decade. His students in the profession, like those in Myron Taylor, frequently sought his counsel on questions of legal ethics.

As dean, Gray was quite conscious of his responsibility as promoter of the institution. Although he left the deanship in 1963, he has continued to be an ambassador, booster, exemplar for us all. For over thirty years he has demonstrated unflagging enthusiasm for and commitment to the Cornell Law School—his kind of law school. It is our great good fortune that retirement and emeritus status will not take Gray and Pattie (Gray’s wife) from our institution or community. As ambassadors of good will, they have no match—as ambassadors between the school and the profession it serves they are unique.

Gray, Pattie—we salute you both tonight.