
Thurgood Marshall was an extraordinary man. He served for 24 years as a Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States. Yet before he ever took his seat on that Court, he had designed and carried out a legal strategy which resulted in the overturning of laws which discriminated by race in schools, transportation, housing, and the voting booth.

Under his leadership, the American constitutional landscape in the area of equal protection of the laws was literally rewritten. The list of cases he argued and won before the Supreme Court of the United States is a long one. The names and holdings of the leading cases are known to every practitioner and student of constitutional law. Smith against Alright (sp), Shelley against Kraemer, Sweat (sp) against Painter (sp), and finally, his greatest victory, the landmark case of Brown versus the Board of Education.

His remarkable accomplishments as a private lawyer were followed by appointment to the court of appeals for the Second Circuit, appointment as Solicitor General, and finally, as Associate Justice of the Supreme Court. In these quite different roles, his contributions to public law were necessarily of a different kind. On the Supreme Court, he continued to be a vigorous champion of civil rights for minorities and civil liberty for all -- sometimes in the majority, just as often in dissent. But he authored important opinions in areas of the law quite apart from those with which he is usually associated. His opinions for the Court, for example, in Loretto (sp) against Teleprompter and FCC versus Florida Power Company, remain important landmarks in the interpretation of the takings clause of the Fifth Amendment. During his 24 years as a member of the Supreme Court, he wrote more than 300 majority opinions.

We who sat with him during this time learned to value his wise counsel and conference. We also looked forward to those occasions on which he would recount some of his experiences as a civil rights lawyer in often bitterly hostile towns and distinctly unfriendly courtrooms. Many of these stories had a humorous twist to them, but they also gave us a sense of what he had been up against in many of these cases. His forays to represent his clients required not only diligence and legal skill, but physical courage of a high order.

When I read today of highly paid young lawyers in large firms complaining about how dull the life of a corporate lawyer is, I cannot help contrast them with the career of Thurgood Marshall as a practicing lawyer -- Thurgood's being far less rewarding financially, to be sure, but so much more rewarding professionally and personally.

As a result of his career as a lawyer and as a judge, Thurgood Marshall left an indelible mark, not just upon the law, but upon his country. Inscribed above the front entrance to the Supreme Court building are the words "Equal justice under law." Surely no one individual did more to make these words a reality than Thurgood Marshall.

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