

William Ray Forrester

January 14, 1911 — February 16, 2001

William Ray Forrester, Dean of the Cornell Law School from 1963-73, died at the age of 90, two months after finishing his last semester of twenty-five years teaching at Hastings College of Law in San Francisco. This fact reveals the love for teaching, particularly constitutional law that proved to be his fountain of youth. As chance would have it, he was the last active member of the Hastings “Over 65” club whereby that school had, during the years of mandatory retirement elsewhere, recruited nationwide an elite of law teachers who, their minds sharp as ever, were not ready to quit the forum.

A graduate of the University of Arkansas, Ray earned his law degree from the University of Chicago Law School in 1935. After working for a Chicago law firm, he was invited to join the Tulane law faculty in 1941. He became Dean of Vanderbilt’s Law School in 1949, returning to Tulane as Dean of that school in 1952. He then came to Cornell and presided as Dean of the Law School for a decade, and then as the Robert S. Stevens Professor until his “retirement” to Hastings in 1978. The author of casebooks in constitutional law and federal jurisdiction, as well as numerous law review and legal periodical articles, he compiled a remarkable resume of participation in arbitration. A charter member of the National Academy of Arbitrators, he exercised his skills at various times on boards seeking to maintain the peace between United States Steel and the United Steel Workers or the International Harvester Company and the United Automobile Workers. His diplomatic skills served him well when leading Tulane’s Law School through the heady and oft-times acrimonious days of the civil rights movement in Louisiana.

Facts reveal Ray to have been a persuasive peacemaker, a superb classroom teacher, a considerable scholar and a successful law school dean. Facts portray him quantitatively as a noteworthy figure in American legal education: they do not reveal the unique inner quality of the man. Soft spoken and wont to speak directly to the matter at hand, there was never any doubt but that he dealt with all and sundry with whom he came in contact, honestly and forthrightly. He might shake his head sometimes when colleagues took positions that seemed to him extreme or impractical, but he never held it against them. Rather, he had a way of laughing it off and proceeding calmly to reason the matter at hand to a sensible result. The laughter, moreover, was not of the mordant variety, but rather had an infectious quality that helped maintain a tranquil atmosphere in which reason could prevail. If one had to sum up the man in a single word, there would be no doubt that those who knew him would invoke: integrity.

Ray's family was always an important part of his life. He is survived by his wife, Celine, now living in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; three sons, William and Stephen, both of New Orleans, and David, of Baton Rouge; a daughter, Catherine Cleland, of Kensington, Maryland; and four grandchildren.

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