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## An Introduction to Imagining the Law: Lawyers and Legal Issues in the Popular Culture

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## AN INTRODUCTION TO IMAGINING THE LAW: LAWYERS AND LEGAL ISSUES IN THE POPULAR CULTURE

*J. Thomas Sullivan\**

“Imagining the Law: Lawyers and Legal Issues in the Popular Culture,” the theme for this year’s Ben J. Alheimer Symposium presented by the William H. Bowen School of Law at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR), reflects the continuing vitality of the law as a source of subject matter for creative artists working in popular media. The Alheimer Symposium, sponsored annually and presented by the *UALR Law Review*, brings together nationally prominent legal scholars and commentators on important legal topics. This year’s program focused on the role of popular culture in interpreting the impact of lawyers and legal issues on our collective understanding of the ways in which law affects daily life. In examining the relationship of lawyers and legal issues to the themes of popular culture, we may also understand the quite diverse views of lawyers and the legal system maintained by society.

This year the Alheimer Symposium was held in conjunction with a series of presentations at UALR honoring its seventy-fifth year as an educational enterprise. Throughout the fall term, the UALR community and the greater Little Rock community have enjoyed the exhortations of a series of speakers encouraging us to seek justice. The speakers in UALR’s program have included individuals identified with the most pressing issues of domestic racial equality and concern for the achievement of international peace:

- **Danny Glover**, actor and social activist who played characters in the films *Places in the Heart* and *Grand Canyon*, offered compelling insights into historical and contemporary race relations in the United States and urged us to get involved on a personal level in resolving issues of social and economic justice.
- **Edward James Olmos**, an actor, director, producer, and composer, related the ethnic “salad bowl” in which he was raised in East Los Angeles and the way in which true multicultural life experience has shaped his life and work. Olmos’s film portrayals have included important views of the lives of Hispanics in American society, such as *Stand and Deliver*, a story of a teacher uncompromising in his pursuit of educational excellence; *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, a story premised on the unintended consequences of misunderstood translation of language; and *American Me*, the riveting story of the birth of Mexican-American prison gangs in the California prison system.

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- **Spike Lee**, the brilliant African-American filmmaker, challenged the audience in the University Theater to look beyond the stereotype by respecting the individual and diverse cultures in American society.
- **Benazir Bhutto**, former Prime Minister of Pakistan, warned us not to adopt the simplistic view of a homogeneous Islamic world bent on destruction of the West and to adopt instead a national policy fostering the development of democracy, modernization, and economic progress in the Middle Eastern and Islamic states.
- **Ben Stein**, Yale Law School valedictorian, Nixon White House Aide, television celebrity, and film star—"Bueller, Bueller, Bueller"—entertained law students with his stories of how he escaped from the mundane practice of law after driving his antitrust professor into immediate retirement as an unrepentant student who demanded that the professor actually disclose an answer during Socratic dialogue. In a second presentation, Mr. Stein lectured tongue-in-cheek to the University community on his keys to *avoiding* being a responsible adult.
- And finally, the keynote speaker for the law school's symposium, print and television journalist **Juan Williams** presented a stirring view of Justice Thurgood Marshall's growing vision for challenging the doctrine of "separate, but equal" as a young man and young lawyer. Williams, author of the definitive biography *Thurgood Marshall, American Revolutionary* and the highly acclaimed history of the American civil rights movement, *Eyes on the Prize*, poignantly adapted the theme for the Alzheimer Symposium to his remarks by discussing Marshall's legal imagination in seeking to transform the legal landscape of the United States. His comments appear in this issue of the *UALR Law Review*.

The Alzheimer Symposium included the work of Professors Paul Joseph, Shepard Broad Law Center, Nova Southeastern University, and David Papke, Marquette University Law School, who examined the portrayal of women attorneys in the television series *Ally McBeal* and in contemporary Hollywood films, respectively. Professor Christine Corcos, Louisiana State University Law Center, reflected on the role of truth and irony in the legal process as portrayed in film. UALR Professor Richard Peltz drew a fascinating allegory between the concept of the "prime directive" in *Star Trek* and the fundamental goals of international law. Veteran Arkansas legal services lawyer and Little Rock author, Grif Stockley, talked about his character, Gideon Page, in his legal mystery series and about writing as therapy for the practitioner. And finally, Jill Goldsmith, former Chicago public defender and writer/producer for *Law and Order*, talked about her journey from the courtroom to television and the use of legal issues as subject matter in television series for which she has written, including *Ally McBeal* and *The Practice*.

The second day of the symposium was directed toward Arkansas practitioners and students. Portland, Oregon defense attorney Steven Rosen presented his nationally-known continuing legal education program, "Movie Magic: How the Masters Try the Cases," drawing on law-related films to illustrate basic tactics and ethical questions for trial lawyers. Judge Joe Brown, who served as a criminal court judge in Memphis, Tennessee, before turning his sights to television, spoke to students at Hall High School in Little Rock, the location of the University's early admissions-college experience program, and then later spoke to students, faculty, and the public at the William H. Bowen School of Law. Judge Brown encouraged the students of Hall to maximize their potential and also encouraged law students to make informed decisions in practice. The symposium was also complemented by an exhibit of prints from the Arkansas Arts Center reflecting law-related topics in the visual arts.

This year's Alzheimer Symposium examined the diverse ways in which law, lawyers, and legal institutions are portrayed to the public in popular media. In examining how the legal community is *portrayed* in popular culture, we may come to understand much about how we are *perceived*. Hopefully, this understanding can be applied to better equip the legal profession and institutions of the law to better serve our clients and our communities.

