

# Michigan Law Review

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Volume 104 | Issue 2

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2005

## Tribute to John Pickering

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*Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr*

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### Recommended Citation

William J. Perlstein, *Tribute to John Pickering*, 104 MICH. L. REV. 197 (2005).

Available at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/mlr/vol104/iss2/10>

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# TRIBUTE TO JOHN PICKERING

*William J. Perlstein\**

One of my colleagues asked me soon after John died, "How could someone live to be eighty-nine years old and yet there is no one who had a bad word to say about him?"

This is an intriguing question. It is not because John Pickering did not have strongly held views about things. Anyone who ever tangled with John in crafting a brief knew how tenacious he was. John was direct and candid and you knew where he stood on any matter.

It is not because John was easygoing. When he saw something that he wanted changed, he did not take no for an answer. He was relentless and tireless.

It is not because he was not demanding. Working for John was hard work. He set high standards for himself and he expected you to work at the same level.

No, as I have thought about it, it seems to me that what attracted all of us to John was that he was so genuine. John did not need management consultants to tell him how to act. The directness that he had and demands that he made were because he believed genuinely in what he was doing. He was genuine in promoting women in the profession. He was genuine in his belief in the responsibility of those in the law to represent those in need. He was genuine in his fair treatment of all.

He brought that same quality to his leadership of our law firm. He was genuine in his belief in law as an honorable profession; the importance that he attached to the concept of partnership; his leadership in the pro bono efforts of his law firm and of the profession as a whole; his wonderful treatment of associates and staff; and his constant support to those of us who succeeded him in the leadership of his firm. John led by example. We followed his leadership because his example was so real and so genuine.

As I thought about the many important contributions that John made to the legal profession, I was reminded of an article that appeared last year in the *American Lawyer*, asking why the perennial leaders in pro bono services are our firm, Covington & Burling, and Arnold & Porter. The article talked about the long traditions that our three firms have had in promoting pro bono work as part of the culture of our firms. I am confident that my colleagues at those other two great firms would agree that no one had more influence on the importance that we all put on pro bono services than John Pickering.

As the managing partner of a firm with two living founders, no one could have asked for more support than I received from John and from

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\* Co-managing partner of Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr.

Lloyd Cutler. Their care and guidance and genuine joy in seeing their successors manage the firm that they founded was a constant source of reassurance to me during the last seven years, as those of us who had learned from John and Lloyd guided their firm in new directions. Even when they were well into their eighties, neither ever stopped thinking about the future. They both have the eternal gratitude of the more than 2,500 people who are now part of Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr, as well as the thousands of alumni, such as the members of this Court today, who are proud to have had both of them as founding partners and as an eternal source of inspiration.

With the indulgence of the Court, I would like to take one more minute to record my last conversation with John. We were having a management committee meeting. The management committee suggested that I go in and talk to John about an idea we had, so I went and saw John, who was sitting at his desk, and told him what we were thinking about. He said it was a good idea. He then, as he had done so repeatedly in the past year, thanked Bill Lee, my co-managing partner, and me for the leadership we were showing in the law firm. I reassured him that we always wanted him to be proud of us. And then he asked, "Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?"

I said, "No, John. Why?"

He said, "Well, when I saw you were on my calendar, I was afraid that you were coming in to tell me that you were going to cut my pay for the year."

Now, I knew he did not mean it. He knew I knew he did not mean it. There was a sparkle in his eye. That was my last conversation with John. It was five days before he had his stroke. It will forever be with me. I wanted to share it with all of you. It epitomized John Pickering. Right to the end, he never lost a step.