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"PROMOTING TRUTH IN THE COURTROOM"

THE CECIL SIMS LECTURE

BY

THE HONORABLE EDWIN MEESE III  
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

AT

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY LAW SCHOOL

103215

NCJRS

NOV 10 1986 MONDAY, OCTOBER 6, 1986  
UNDERWOOD AUDITORIUM  
VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY  
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

NOTE: Because Mr. Meese often speaks from notes, the speech as delivered may vary from this text. However, he stands behind this text as printed.

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It is a distinct privilege to be with you, and to join my predecessors as Attorney General -- Elliot Richardson, Judge Griffin Bell, and William French Smith -- in becoming a Cecil Sims Lecturer. But best of all, as a former law professor, it is good to be back "in front of a class." By the way, I haven't decided yet whether a pop-quiz will follow this lecture, but you may want to be prepared.

One of the best features about university life is the freedom it affords to pursue the search for knowledge. In virtually all disciplines, an understanding of certain truths, of the way various historical or scientific facts fit together, is an important starting point for further learning and deliberation. The search for truth is also a tremendously important undertaking beyond the campus walls, and especially in the realm of criminal justice. That endeavor, the effort to arrive at an accurate assessment of the truth or falsity of charges of criminal misconduct, is the subject of my remarks today.

The Gospel of John, chapter 8 verse 32, tells us that "The truth shall make you free." In the broadest human and spiritual senses this is surely so. In the criminal law, however, I'm afraid that too often the opposite is the case. Today, criminals -- people who have committed violent and serious crimes and whose guilt is clear beyond any doubt -- often go free because in important ways our criminal justice system obstructs the search for truth.

To most of us, I think, the point of a criminal trial is to determine whether the defendant did what he is accused of, and to impose a just sentence on the basis of that determination. Getting the right answer in this context is of the utmost importance. Mistakes in one direction will falsely brand innocent people as criminals and punish them unjustly. Mistakes in the other direction, freeing guilty defendants, also have dire consequences. Dangerous individuals may be set loose upon society, public respect for the legal system may be diminished, and justice will not be done. The objectives of protecting the public from the offender and deterring others from committing crimes cannot be achieved if guilt is not accurately established. These objectives are not casual concerns, but the basic reasons that a criminal justice system exists. If the truth cannot be discovered and acted on, the criminal justice process fails in its basic mission. Indeed, the state itself fails in its most fundamental responsibility.

Accordingly, in this week of the Commodores' battle against Auburn, I'm reminded of the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., the Justice's father, who said:

Truth is tough. It will not break, like a bubble, at a touch; nay, you may kick it about all day like a football, and it will be round and full in the evening.

If you'll pardon the expression, there are too many ways truth is kept out of play today in the arenas of our courts. We need to look seriously at the various ways in which truthfinding has been frustrated.

My purpose today is to consider whether the vital objective of truth has been subordinated to other interests, and whether the hurdles placed between the facts and the judge or jury can be justified. There are, of course, many such hurdles.

I won't talk about all of them. But let me focus my attention on several of the most significant.

First, this year marked two significant legal anniversaries: the 25th anniversary of Mapp v. Ohio, which applied the Fourth Amendment exclusionary rule to the states, and the 20th anniversary of Miranda v. Arizona, the case establishing the rules that now govern custodial interrogations. Both cases, and their progeny, have had a profound impact on the search for truth.

Next, there are the rules limiting adverse inferences from silence. They also involve significant restrictions on getting reliable evidence before a factfinder.

Finally, there is a topic of special relevance for future members of the bar. I am referring to abuse of the system by practitioners.

The problems I will be addressing are not inherent in our legal traditions or the nature of an adversary system. Most of them are quite accurately "problem children" of the law, born in the radical innovations of the 1960s. Too many were willing to

compromise the search for truth in favor of extrinsic policy objectives, as they grew fascinated with complex, formalistic courtroom rules and procedures. In the process we subordinated the objective of reaching a true and just result in any particular case. When viewed against the broad sweep of American legal history, and our even older common-law traditions, it is clearly wrong to see these truth-defeating changes as constituting a deeply-rooted part of our legal heritage. Correcting them involves a restoration of enduring principles, not their abolition.

The question is, have these truth-defeating doctrines made any practical difference? The answer is clearly yes.

Consider one example: In 1984 a 23-year-old woman by the name of Denise Hubbard Sanders was murdered after testifying in a drug trafficking case against members of the "Bandidos" motorcycle gang. Police arrested a Bandido named Ronnie Gaspard for the crime. He was informed of his Miranda rights, and waived them. He then made a full confession of murdering Denise Sanders. Nevertheless, Gaspard walked away a free man. The reason? A court ruled that his confession was inadmissible on the ground that he had been routinely assigned counsel on his entry into jail but had not initiated later conversations with the police.

According to newspaper accounts, a parent of the woman whom he had shot in the head said "what hurt most" was watching the confessed killer walk out of the Fort Worth courtroom with a "big smirky grin" on his face.

Sadly, as your casebooks remind you, this is not an isolated affront to justice. In 1966 Justice Byron White warned in his Miranda dissent that "in some unknown number of cases the Court's rule will return a killer, a rapist, or other criminal to the environment that produced him, to repeat his crime whenever it pleases him. As a consequence, there will not be a gain, but a loss of human dignity." That prophecy has proved tragically correct.

In the Gaspard case, like many others, there was no question about the confession being voluntary. There was no question about its reliability. There was only a question of tripping on judicially-invented rules.

Those who favor the status quo will argue predictably that rules such as these are necessary to protect basic individual rights, that without them, our Bill of Rights would be undercut. But properly understood, the Constitution itself rebuts these claims.

The provisions of the Bill of Rights have a dual purpose. They provide firm checks against excesses of governmental power, but they also make secure rights and practices -- such as the jury trial, the confrontation right, and the right to the assistance of counsel. These provisions ensure that a criminal proceeding will be neither arbitrary nor unfair, but a search for truth. I support strong enforcement of the Bill of Rights, but want to see that this is done without unduly obstructing the truth.

The rules of the two anniversary cases, Mapp and Miranda, impede the search for truth. Mapp excludes evidence that has been seized illegally -- a consideration that has nothing to do with the evidence's probative value or reliability. Similarly, the Miranda rules exclude statements obtained from the defendant when certain procedural rules have been violated, no matter how reliable and material such statements may be. The rules arising from these cases not only reflect bad policy, they are in no sense required by the Constitution.

Let me begin with the exclusionary rule. In a number of decisions -- such as United States v. Calandra and United States v. Leon -- the Supreme Court has made clear that the exclusionary rule is not required by the Fourth Amendment or any other provision of the Constitution. It survives today only as a judicially created prophylactic rule, designed to deter police misconduct.

Benjamin Cardozo stated the basic problem clearly. Why is it, he asked, that the criminal should go free because the constable blunders? There isn't any adequate answer. Of all possible penalties for government misconduct, throwing away reliable evidence carries the highest cost to the search for truth. It is also a wholly inapt means of protecting individual rights. The windfall chance at acquittal it offers to the guilty defendant may be completely disproportionate to any wrong done to him. Conversely, it provides no remedy for the innocent suspect who would be acquitted anyway. When the exclusionary rule frees a criminal to claim other victims, it is the innocent public --



not the responsible officer -- that is effectively punished. Our continued tolerance of these costs rests on the slender reed that the rule may deter police misconduct.

There is heated debate over whether the rule actually does this. But the real point is that there are ways to secure compliance with the Fourth Amendment that do not turn criminals loose on society.

Officers and investigators should be trained to understand and follow the rules governing searches and seizures. When those rules are violated, appropriate sanctions should be imposed. But we should discipline and deter misconduct outside the forum of the criminal prosecution itself. Make the offending constable, not the public, pay the price.

The Miranda custodial interrogation rules raise similar issues. The Supreme Court has made it clear, in such cases as Michigan v. Tucker, New York v. Quarles, and Oregon v. Elstad that the Miranda rules are not constitutional requirements. They are only suggested safeguards meant to reduce the likelihood of Fifth Amendment violations. The Fifth Amendment itself only provides that a person cannot be compelled to be a witness against himself. It is not violated unless incriminating statements are extracted from a defendant through actual coercion.

The Miranda Court sought to justify its creation of a non-constitutional, prophylactic right to have counsel present at police interrogations as a means of guarding against coercion and of preventing later misrepresentations of a suspect's statements

to the police. But these very interests were well served before Miranda, by a line of decisions protecting criminal suspects against coercive interrogations and the use of unreliable statements. Moreover, such decisions did not come at the great price in lost prosecutions and convictions imposed by Miranda.

Miranda's right to counsel does not guard against interrogation abuses so much as it forecloses any interrogation at all. As Justice Jackson observed, "any lawyer worth his salt will tell the suspect in no uncertain terms to make no statements to [the] police under any circumstances." Miranda thus transforms the constitutional right not to be subjected to compelled self-incrimination into a right not to be subjected to any questioning.

There are clearly other ways to safeguard the genuine rights at issue here. These might include, for example, setting reasonable time limits on interrogations, and requiring confessions to be tape- or video-recorded whenever practical. These other means would enable courts to satisfy themselves that statements were freely made, and might better protect the rights of suspects, with far less cost to the truthfinding interest of the law, than the existing, waivable right to counsel. Since the Miranda procedures are not themselves constitutional rights, there is no reason that such alternative rules could not be fashioned and implemented.

A cousin from the Miranda family tree, Massiah v. United States, provides another example of the law gone astray. Massiah, you may recall, is a right to counsel case dating from 1964.

Massiah, the defendant in the case, was indicted for cocaine smuggling and released on bail. He then made incriminating statements to an informant whose car had been wired for sound. These statements were used at trial and he was convicted. Here there was no issue of coercion, no issue of reliability. Yet the Supreme Court reversed the conviction on the ground that eliciting statements from a defendant after indictment without counsel present violates the Sixth Amendment.

The Sixth Amendment, however, isn't this elastic. It safeguards only the accused's right "to have the Assistance of Counsel for his defense." This provision embodies the historical right to counsel's assistance in preparing and presenting a defense at trial. As a matter of policy, a right to counsel is also properly recognized in other courtroom proceedings involving a need for legal advocacy and expertise to ensure fair treatment of the defendant in court.

The Massiah rule, however, is unrelated to any conventional function of counsel. The techniques employed by the police in Massiah did not interfere with the preparation of a defense or eavesdrop on any privileged communication with counsel. Undercover measures of this sort have been approved repeatedly for pre-indictment investigations. It is hard to understand why a different standard should apply after formal accusation.

The Massiah doctrine has been applied in later cases with shocking consequences. In United States v. Henry, a bank robbery conviction was overturned simply because an informant testified that the defendant had confessed during the course of some prison conversations with him.

In the recent case of Maine v. Moulton, the Court described Massiah as meaning that counsel must be present to serve as a "medium" between the accused and the state. But as one Justice aptly pointed out, there is no support in the Constitution itself for the notion that counsel is "a sort of guru who must be present whenever an accused has an inclination to reveal incriminating information" to a government agent. The Sixth Amendment, of course, does not say that a defendant has any right for counsel to serve as an impenetrable wall between government and the accused after formal charges, that the state's attempts to investigate the truth are foreclosed. It provides only for counsel's assistance in preparing and presenting an at trial defense.

These cases, and others like them, reflect a dangerous turn of thinking in the criminal law. Instead of addressing authentic constitutional rights, these decisions attempt to remake the law into something resembling a sporting event. Unfortunately, what seems to matter isn't whether someone is genuinely guilty, or even if he or she is actually the victim of a constitutional violation. The law represented in these cases appears instead to be most concerned with giving criminal defendants a chance to

"beat the odds" and going free for reasons unrelated to guilt or innocence. The most effective investigatory techniques are increasingly met with new obstacles to their use.

The courts do have a vital role to perform. Violations of the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth amendments need to be identified and dealt with appropriately. But it does not follow that concealing important evidence from the factfinder is the proper remedy for such violations.

Instead, to the extent that wise policy can be rendered in rules, it is for our legislators and administrators to craft regulations and policies that will both prevent violations of suspects' rights and respect the important public interest in effective law enforcement.

As I mentioned earlier, the exclusionary rule and misapplications of the right to counsel are not the only obstacles on the road to truth. There are also the rules barring rational inferences from a defendant's failure to respond to pre-trial questioning, or to take the stand at trial.

The current rules are contrary to common sense. A credible exculpatory story from arrest through trial is, naturally, helpful to the credibility of a defense. On the other hand, for a defendant who refuses to explain away an accusation early on, but suddenly offers a new story at trial, his delay in providing an account may naturally raise doubts concerning his credibility in the mind of the reasonable trier of fact.

However, despite the fact that the Constitution does not mandate them, judicially-invented rules now generally require that pre-trial silence be concealed from the jury. The question is why? Merely permitting rational inferences from a defendant's failure to respond to accusations or to adverse evidence does not "compel" him to be a witness against himself in the sense of the Fifth Amendment. In fact, at the time of the adoption of the Bill of Rights, any refusal by a defendant to answer questions in pre-trial interrogations conducted by justices of the peace could be disclosed at trial, and could provide the basis for adverse inferences by the jury. The Supreme Court also has affirmed in recent decisions that there is no general constitutional bar to admitting pre-trial silence to impeach a defendant's trial testimony.

Yet in Doyle v. Ohio, the Supreme Court held that a defendant's silence following the receipt of Miranda warnings cannot be disclosed. The Court reasoned that suspects might misunderstand the warnings -- "you have the right to remain silent, and so on" -- as an assurance by the government that silence will not work against them in any way. Since suspects normally get Miranda warnings at or near the time of arrest, the Doyle rule, in practical effect, generally requires the concealment of pre-trial silence from the jury.

Happily, there seems a simple means of correcting the problem. Miranda warnings could be modified or supplemented so that they could not be misunderstood in the way that the Doyle court feared. For example, a suspect could be advised explicitly

that his failure to make a statement or answer questions may be disclosed in court and may reduce the likelihood that any story or explanation he offers later will be believed. With "fair notice" along these lines, there is no reason to deny the jury the whole truth about the defendant's pre-trial behavior.

A defendant's failure to take the stand at trial can be just as telling as his silence before trial. Until 1965, the Supreme Court held that adverse comment by a judge or prosecutor on a defendant's failure to testify in a state trial was constitutional -- a practice widely endorsed on policy grounds by leading writers and model rules of evidence.

Unfortunately, in Griffin v. California, reversing a conviction for a brutal rape and murder, the Court departed from precedent, and adopted a contrary rule. Once again, common sense and the ability of the factfinder to draw reasonable inferences suffered a defeat. I believe the Supreme Court stated the better rule in its 1947 decision in Adamson v. California, wherein it said "we see no reason why comment should not be made upon [the defendant's] silence" as a means of bolstering the prosecution's case in light of the defense's "failure to explain or deny" it. The Adamson approach allowed juries to give greater weight to the government's evidence in the absence of a rebuttal or explanation from the defendant.

In a real sense, much of what I am saying today about the search for truth comes down to trusting juries. Trusting them to weigh the reliability of evidence, trusting them to assess the veracity of confessions, and trusting them to make reasonable inferences.

Almost 70 years ago, in Rosen v. United States, the Supreme Court succinctly stated much of what I have said at length today: "The truth is more likely arrived at by hearing the testimony of all persons . . . hav[ing] knowledge of the facts involved in a case, leaving the credit and weight of such testimony to be determined by the jury . . ."

If our citizens are to retain their trust in our system of justice, we must make sure that when we ask them to find the truth, we give them, consistent with our Constitution, to see the whole truth.

In closing, I'll contrast this reasonable basis for trusting in juries with the reasonable fear that the practices of some lawyers are twisting the criminal justice system in a perverse manner. The search for truth should constrain our profession at least as well as it does the system in which they work.

We do have an adversary system. And we proceed from the belief that in allowing both the prosecution and the defense to advocate their cases fully we will uncover the truth. But zealous advocacy should not mean unbounded advocacy. Counsel's role must to some extent be defined to reflect the basic purpose of the adversary system as a means of promoting the discovery of truth.



For example, a prosecutor is not only an advocate. He has obligations to justice. He must, for instance, disclose exculpatory evidence to the defense. My Department's guidelines go further, and limit the initiation of prosecution to cases in which the prosecutor believes that the defendant is in fact guilty and that prosecution can probably establish that fact to the satisfaction of a fair-minded trier.

On the other side, there are certain constraints on defense counsel as well. As the Supreme Court said in Nix v. Whiteside, "counsel's duty of loyalty and his 'overarching duty to advocate the defendant's cause' . . . is limited to legitimate, lawful conduct compatible with the very nature of a trial as a search for truth." Such common practices as moving for repeated continuances in the hope that witnesses will be worn down, forget or disappear; baiting the judge or prosecutor in the hope of provoking reversible error, and similar tactics are not consistent with this ideal. These practices directly impede the search for truth without furthering any legitimate function of adversarial testing. Courts, of course, have an obligation to act against these abuses, but the women and men who comprise the bar must remember their obligations as officers of the court.

Finally, let me say that I do not expect all the problems I've mentioned to vanish tomorrow. But I do hope that I have encouraged you to think seriously about the premises of our criminal justice system, and how it may be improved.

As aspiring members of the profession, you will someday have obligations to real clients. But both now and in the future you and I have a common commitment to preserving and enhancing our system of justice. In a 1935 decision, the Supreme Court concisely identified the goals of criminal justice: "that guilt shall not escape nor innocence suffer." By pursuing the search for truth we will be faithful to these twin ideals, and live out the proposition, as Joubert once put it, that "justice is truth in action."

Thank you.