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Feb. 2013 E-newsletter Faculty Spotlight: Harlan Cohen

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Faculty Spotlight: Harlan Cohen

News @ Georgia Law Feb. 2013 Faculty Profile



Name: Harlan G. Cohen

Title: Associate Professor of Law

Hometown: New York, N.Y.

Law school / graduation year: New York University / 2003

Other degree(s) / institution(s): B.A. History & International Studies / Yale University; M.A. History / Yale University

1. What influenced your decision to go to law school?

It might have been preordained when my parents (both lawyers) decided to name me "Harlan." In reality, despite being around lawyers my whole life, I didn't really know I wanted to go to law school until I took a class on "Computers and the Law" in college. Thinking about the legal and regulatory puzzles supplied by new technologies and new media and seeing the ways existing law and precedent provided a structure for working out the answers was really exciting.

2. What did you do before entering the legal teaching academy?

Prior to law school, I worked in foreign policy at a variety of think tanks and at the journal Foreign Affairs. After law school, I clerked for a federal judge and then worked in the litigation group of Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton.

3. What made you decide to become a professor?

As much as I enjoyed practice (and I did enjoy practice), I simply needed to understand more about how our modern globalized world works – how it's organized (or disorganized) and who's making the key decisions that affect how we all live. I couldn't quench my curiosity.

4. What do you enjoy most about your job? What is the most rewarding aspect of being a professor?

Unquestionably, the students. Every day, I get to talk to amazingly bright, eager and thoughtful people about the hardest issues of the day – war and peace, global governance, balancing justice and pragmatism, ensuring accountability in our government and governing structures. When everything's working, we all learn from each other, and it's amazing.

5. What type of influence do you hope to have on your students?

I want them to understand the power and responsibility of being a lawyer. Lawyers aren't just passive receivers of the law or mouthpieces for those who pay us. Law is an extraordinarily powerful tool of persuasion, of cooperation, of control and of rebellion. The choices we make about how to use it matter.

6. What made you decide to specialize in international law?

When I studied history, my focus was on the culture of diplomacy. The culture diplomats have been trained in historically has framed how they see international problems and opportunities, who they can work with and who they need to oppose. As that culture changes, so too does their assessment of the threats and opportunities around them. International law has been, and continues to be, a part of that story, framing the possible, the desirable, the unacceptable. Understanding how international law can be harnessed to achieve our collective goals in the world is key.

7. What do you enjoy most about this area of the law?

We're constantly playing a game of catch-up. The world is increasingly connected and complex. New governance challenges are constantly appearing. But by the time we've identified a problem, some group of innovators on the ground has already worked out some ad hoc solution. It's our job to make sense of what they're doing, figure out whether it works or not and think about whether and how it should be replicated and governed.

8. What is one of the greatest challenges facing international law today?

The virtual irrelevance of borders. Information, revolution, financial crises, epidemics and climate change all defy state boundaries. So too do multinational corporations, NGOs, philanthropists and terrorists. Going it alone is no longer a viable strategy. Figuring out new ways to cooperate is the challenge of the 21st century.

9. What advice would you give to current law students wanting to practice in this field?

Be open to different opportunities. International law is touching an increasing range of issues and practices. While traditional international law careers may be extraordinarily competitive, opportunities are there for those who can be creative and open-minded.

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10. Are you currently conducting any research? If so, what is its focus?

Partly due to climate change, commodity prices – wheat, cooking oil, iron, rare earths – have been rising. One strategy that states like Saudi Arabia and China have adopted is to secure access to the commodities directly, buying agricultural fields and mines in foreign countries. Whether and how international law should deal with this trend is a difficult and open question. I'm also currently studying the influence of international courts. When will the decisions of particular courts exert force in international relations and why?

11. What do you consider your greatest academic contribution?

Last year, I had the honor of co-chairing the annual meeting of the American Society of International Law. Putting our stamp on more than 35 panels over three days, we were able to help shape the debate in international law for the year.

12. What is your favorite thing about living in Athens?

Its casual sophistication.

13. What do you enjoy doing in your free time? What are your hobbies?

Before having kids, food, wine and travel. Now, with a three-year-old and 8-month old ... free time? I do look forward to inculcating the kids into baseball fandom and the finer points of ERA, OPS, WAR, BABIP and FIP.

14. What do you consider your greatest accomplishment in life?

Convincing my wife to marry me.

15. How do you stay up to date on legal issues and trends?

It's nearly impossible. There's literally a world of stuff going on in the field. Thankfully, I'm part of a real community in international law. Whether in conversations here at Georgia, through friends' blogs or at conferences and workshops, we're all able to educate one another.

16. What book/resource do you find yourself referencing the most?

Thucydides' The History of the Peloponnesian War. Everything you could ever want to know about war and peace was already in there in 400 BC.

17. If you could share an afternoon with anyone, with whom would you choose to spend it?

Lydia Bastianich (American chef, TV host, author and restaurateur), hopefully with a cooking lesson included.



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