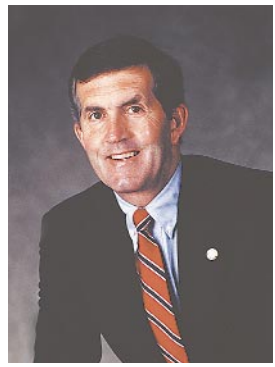
A Message to Alumni from Dean David E. Shipley



Two recent issues have illustrated that the First Amendment and academic freedom are alive and well at the School of Law. Last fall, elected officers of the second- and third-year classes told me they wanted to invite the Honorable Clarence Thomas, Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court and a native of Pin Point, GA, to be the 2003 commencement speaker. I replied enthusiastically, "Let's give it a try," okayed their invitation letter, and followed up with my own invitation. In late November, Justice Thomas accepted the invitation and I announced to the third-year class and the faculty that he would be our speaker.

This announcement generated a great deal of discussion, debate and controversy over the next six months. A number of faculty and students objected to the process as well as the selection of Justice Thomas. There were newspaper articles, interviews, heated e-mail exchanges, letters to the editor, television and radio interviews, and a petition. In the end, the Class of 2003 enjoyed a memorable graduation. A record number of people (over 725) attended our pre-graduation reception. Over 100 students, faculty and local judges were able to meet the Justice at a breakfast prior to the ceremony. In addition, graduation exercises were held before a large and appreciative audience in Stegeman Coliseum (due to rain). Despite small demonstrations outside the arena, Justice Thomas' speech was warmly received with standing ovations before and after his address. I believe the Justice returned to Washington, D.C., with a positive impression of the University of Georgia School of Law.

Our law students showed a great deal of maturity and professionalism throughout the graduation controversy and also in discussions with me and many of my colleagues about faculty hiring. Two candidates, recommended unanimously by the Faculty Recruitment Committee, just missed receiving the necessary 2/3 approval from the entire faculty as required by law school rules before employment offers can be made. Although faculty deliberations regarding personnel are confidential, and votes on hiring are cast by secret ballot, many students desired an explanation for the decision. A few meetings were held and, as expected in the end, student leaders requested that the School of Law hire the very best and brightest faculty candidates whenever possible. Again, our students showed great maturity and professionalism throughout this dialog.

Sometimes it is difficult to avoid contentious and divisive matters like those the law school community faced this past year, but at least two things are now very clear: free speech is thriving at the School of Law and our very active and engaged students will become excellent lawyers and outstanding professionals.

Sincerely,

David Shipley

David E. Shipley
Dean and Professor