

Former U.S. Attorney General Griffin Bell speaks on DOJ



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Former U.S. Attorney General and 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals Judge Griffin B. Bell served as a Sanders Visiting Scholar this past spring and spoke to members of the Georgia Law community about U.S. Department of Justice activities and its hiring practices.

“As attorney general, you represent the people of the United States,” he said. “You try to carry out [the president’s] policy, but that is different with cases.”

Bell recalled President Jimmy Carter asking him once, “Who is representing me?” When he replied, “I don’t know,” Bell said the president retained his own outside counsel.

He said one of the biggest questions facing the attorney general today is whether or not that person is “an advocate or a counselor.” Bell said he thinks that person should be a counselor and likened the dilemma to the same question facing corporate America’s general counsels. “Is the general counsel an advocate versus a counselor or watchdog or guard?” Bell said if he were president, he would want an attorney general who “could stand on his own,” be “trustworthy” and be “a counselor that would do what is right.”

Bell had a long distinguished career in both the public and private sectors. In 1958, he was named Georgia Gov. S. Ernest Vandiver’s chief of staff. President John F. Kennedy appointed him as a judge for the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in 1961, where he served for nearly 15 years. From 1977 to 1979, he served as the 72nd attorney general of the United States, a post he was nominated for by President Carter. During his tenure as attorney general, it has been said that one of his primary achievements was rebuilding the Justice Department as a “neutral zone” in government.

Over the years, Bell has practiced law with the Atlanta firm King & Spalding, where he has served as partner, managing partner, senior partner and senior counsel, a position he assumed in 2004. While his practice areas are multi-faceted, Bell’s principal focus in recent years has been advice and counsel on matters relating to corporate crime.

Named for Georgia’s 74th Governor and Georgia Law alumnus Carl E. Sanders, Sanders Visiting Scholars are individuals who have distinguished themselves as leaders in public service and the legal profession and are brought to campus to enhance the learning experience of law students.