

## **A Timeline of the Respect for the Legal Profession's Gradual Decline**

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When it comes to the American public's disrespect for various professions, lawyers are now second only to used car salesmen (having just slipped below television evangelists in a recent opinion poll). Many in the legal profession find the lack of respect disturbing. Lawyers consider the importance of their work and the academic rigors associated with entering their profession when wondering why they are not taken more seriously. The timeline below tracks the public's gradually decreasing respect for lawyers, from its post Civil War height to the present.

### **May 4, 1865-Abraham Lincoln Buried in Springfield, IL:**

Hundreds of thousands traveled to view the former president's body as it traveled by train across the grieving nation. Admiring the trial lawyer's leadership, integrity, and lack of corruption charges by an Illinois politician, the nation mourned their assassinated leader. 1865 marks the height of American respect for the legal profession, as well as the last time a lawyer's death was mourned by anyone other than immediate family.

### **April 26, 1929-Albert Fall Sentenced to Prison:**

When filling his Cabinet, President Harding felt the logic of nominating elder statesmen to lead the State Department, former military leaders to head the War Department and proven businessmen to be Secretary of Commerce was outdated. Instead, he preferred lawyers turned politicians over subject matter experts (a tradition which continues to this day). Despite having no experience in conservation or land management, Harding nominated Albert Fall (the corrupt lawyer/senator from New Mexico), to lead the Department of the Interior. Due to a scandalous (but rarely understood) no-bid contract scheme involving oil, the Navy, lengthy investigations, and a giant rock shaped like a kettle, Secretary Fall was convicted of corruption charges and sentenced to prison. The aftermath of *The Teapot Dome Scandal* caused three lasting effects. Americans became suspicious of lawyers turned politicians (yet oddly continued to vote for them). Political scandals now were required to have a headline-friendly nickname. And generations of students would be confused by their American history textbook's three paragraphs dedicated to the ordeal and think, '*I hope none of this is going to be on the final.*'

### **December 25, 1962-To Kill a Mockingbird Wows Audiences:**

Gregory Peck's Academy Award winning portrayal of the stern, but fair Atticus Finch in the film *To Kill a Mockingbird* created a slight increase in the country's respect for lawyers. Finch's unrelenting desire for truth and justice made a lawyer the movie's good guy (rare in American cinema). Peck's outstanding performance associated the actor's face with compassion, wisdom, and righteousness. However, the slight increase in admiration for lawyers dwindled over time when viewers realized that all of the other lawyers in the film had no problem sentencing an innocent man to death out of racism and convenience, and that Finch actually represented the minority of the Maycomb legal community. Any remaining respect for lawyers created by the film was completely erased ten years later when Peck starred as Dr. Josef Mengele in *The Boys*

*From Brazil.* After that, instead of compassion, wisdom, and righteousness, Peck's face became associated with fugitive Nazi war criminals and Hitler cloning enthusiasts.

### **March 1, 1974-Watergate Seven Indicted:**

Seven men (all lawyers) from President Nixon's staff and/or campaign were indicted in federal court on numerous charges. Disturbing to many Americans was the fact that the former cabinet secretary in charge of the Department of Justice was charged with obstruction of justice. Of the scores of government officials convicted of criminal charges, only one, E. Howard Hunt, was not a lawyer. Hunt was however a former spook for the CIA (a profession the public considers just as shady, but slightly more honest). Even the President faced the possibility of criminal charges as a result of the scandal. However, the ex-lawyer Nixon was saved by a pardon from another ex-lawyer (this time a slip-and-fall guy from Michigan). As a professional courtesy, the six minutes it took Ford to prepare and sign the pardon was rounded up to only two billable hours.

### **April 18, 1979-Despite Not Being Married, Lee Marvin Declared Married:**

Much to his surprise, actor Lee Marvin learned he was married. After breaking up with his live-in girlfriend, Marvin was sued for alimony. To fight the consequences of a failed marriage, Marvin relied on the fact he was not married. This strategy was not successful. In its landmark ruling, the California Supreme Court found the existence of a marriage was not necessary to prove the existence of a marriage. During appeal however, the issue became moot when legal bills erased the actor's contested estate.

### **September 7, 1989-John Grisham Publishes His First Novel:**

The same way Tom Clancy made everyone who could buy a book believe they were qualified to be the President's National Security Advisor, John Grisham took a complex profession, simplified it, and made every reader an expert on the topic. *A Time to Kill* was the first of many novels telling the same suspenseful story of a young idealist, fresh out of law school, and in over his head taking on the corrupt establishment. Making matters worse for lawyers was the fact that many of the novels became movies. No longer did one even have to know how to read to become a legal scholar. Grisham films did much to undermine the legal profession. People began to question where lawyers got off charging so much to do something that only took 90 minutes for the guy who was Robin (in the worst of the Batman movies). Actual lawyers reading and watching Grisham stories not only found themselves thinking '*this is not how any of this works,*' but also wondering why a scene depicting a young and athletic Tom Cruise overpowering the obese and elderly Wilford Brimley is considered suspenseful.

### **October 3, 1995-O.J. Simpson Acquitted of Murder Due to Wardrobe Inconsistencies:**

After murdering two people, Hall of Fame running back and Heisman Trophy winner Orenthal James Simpson spent six million dollars on a team of lawyers who successfully argued the murderer's innocence. Simpson's legal team relied on a three-pronged defense. Expert witnesses were provided to explain how DNA contains no scientific properties if one of the investigators used racial slurs in the mid-eighties. Lawyers also demanded the jury interpret Simpson's unwillingness to put on a glove as a requirement to ignore logic. And finally, the defense impeached the credibility of every prosecution witness by accusing them of being racists and/or Detroit fans still upset about the '76 Thanksgiving game between the Lions and Bills.

**December 12, 2000-US Supreme Court Decides Bush vs. Gore:**

Nine minutes after the polls closed on November 7, 2000, lawyers from both presidential campaigns invaded the beaches of Miami in a manner resembling the first twenty minutes of *Saving Private Ryan*. Overnight, every American's vocabulary grew with previously unknown phrases like *butterfly ballot*, *dimpled chad*, *optical marks*, and *Tallahassee*. In toddler-like fashion, cable news legal analysis bitterly debated complex constitutional issues such as election procedures, the appropriateness of a partisan Secretary of State overseeing recount efforts, and why Florida is relevant for the first time since the sinking of the Spanish Armada. The immediate affect of the Bush vs. Gore decision was that recount efforts were stopped with George W. Bush in the lead. The decision's lasting affect however, is that candidates in every future presidential election ensure they have multiple C-130s, preloaded with airborne attorneys waiting to parachute into the next Operation Market Garden.

**September 4, 2005-Nancy Grace Given Show on CNN Headline News:**

In a last ditch effort to retain fleeing viewers, CNN Headline News hired TV personality and former prosecutor Nancy Grace to host a one hour show analyzing legal topics. Grace's signature blend of shouting and basing conclusions on either misunderstood or made up facts caused her to eclipse Judge Judy as the nations preeminent daytime-cable legal scholar. With her experience as a former prosecutor, she was expert at sniffing out criminal involvement in any news story, and turning them into McCarthyesqe accusations of guilt. Although the former Senator's charges where usually raised in a quieter and more professional fashion (and with less of a drunken slur).