

2004

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By Brian W. Whitson, W&M News

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March 17 ceremony honors distinguished corporate and civil rights attorney and public servant.

William T. Coleman, Jr. an ardent defender of civil rights, was presented the Marshall-Wythe Medallion March 17, 2004, during a special dinner and ceremony at the Sir Christopher Wren Building.

A distinguished corporate and civil rights attorney and public servant, Coleman was one of the authors of the legal briefs presented in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark case that persuaded the Supreme Court in 1954 to outlaw racial segregation in public schools. He also served as the U.S. Secretary of Transportation for former President Gerald Ford.

The Marshall-Wythe Medallion, presented by Law School Dean W. Taylor Reveley, is the highest honor given by faculty each year at the School of Law and recognizes outstanding leaders from the bench, bar and academia.

“The Medallion recipient tonight stands squarely in this august tradition,” Dean Reveley told those at the dinner. “Anyone identifying the leading figures in American law of our time – anyone listing the divinities in today’s legal pantheon – would include William Thaddeus Coleman, Jr. He stands tall among leaders of the legal academy, bench and bar.”

Coleman’s remarkable career includes advisory positions to seven presidential administrations, including currently serving as an advisor to the Secretary of Defense with regard to the use of military commissions. Currently, he is also Senior Director of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund and is a senior partner in the law firm of O’Meleny & Myers.

“I’ve always felt that being a lawyer meant that you got engaged in public service,” Coleman said after receiving the prestigious award. “That’s what makes this country



great. I would urge you to get in the pit, enjoy the process and remember that this country ... is just about the best in the world.”

In addition to Wednesday’s dinner, Coleman spoke Thursday to law students, faculty and members of the community during a public talk, titled “2004-09 Challenges” sponsored by William and Mary’s Institute of Bill of Rights Law.

In his talk, Coleman spoke on the challenges facing the country during the next five years, including improving the public school system, union participation and the outsourcing of American jobs, changes to Social Security system, technological advances, and racial issues that still confront the country today.

“I have taken you through a series of disparate issues today,” Coleman said. “The actual list is much longer, the analysis more complicated. I suggest only that specialization, however, often takes one down the wrong path. Concentration on your specialty might cause you to pay too much attention to the oak trees, for example, at the expense of the broader forest.”

Prior to joining O’Melveny, Coleman was a Distinguished Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. He also served as a law clerk to the late Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter. In addition to serving as Secretary of Transportation, Coleman was a member of the National Commission on Productivity; a member of the Price Commission; consultant to the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency; NASA Advisory Council Task Force on the Effective Utilization of the Shuttle; and Co-Chairman of the Secretary of State’s Advisory Committee on South Africa.

Among the many honors Coleman has received are the Thurgood Marshall Lifetime Achievement Award; the Presidential Medal of Freedom (the nation’s highest civilian award); and in 1979, the President of France nominated Mr. Coleman as an Officer of the National Order of the Legion of Honor.