President's Page

William B. Spong Jr.
William Belser Spong, Jr. attended Hampden-Sydney College and was graduated from the University of Virginia Law School in 1947. He also studied at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland.

Mr. Spong is presently a partner in the firm of Cooper, Spong, Davis, Kilgore, Parker, Leon and Fennell, of Portsmouth. On July 1, he will become Dean of the Marshall-Wythe School of Law at the College of William and Mary. He has taught in the law schools at the University of Richmond, University of Virginia and William and Mary.

Mr. Spong has served in the Virginia House of Delegates, the Senate of Virginia and from 1966 to 1973 represented Virginia in the United States Senate. He was Chairman of the Virginia Commission on Public Education from 1958 to 1962.

Mr. Spong is also a long-time member of The Virginia Bar Association. He was President-Elect in 1966, resigning after being nominated for the United States Senate. In 1975 he again became President-Elect. He is a Trustee of the Institute for Congress; a member of the American Bar Association’s select committee on Executive-Legislative Relations; was a participant at the ABA’s Stanford Conference on Law and a Changing Society; and served as Co-chairman of the ABA’s Coalition for Adequate Judicial Compensation.

I AM honored to be President of our Association during 1976. In this Bicentennial year there will be an understandable tendency for Virginia lawyers to recall the magnificent contributions of 18th century Virginians to the legal foundation of our nation. We should be proud of the collective genius of Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence; Mason, advocate of the Bill of Rights; Madison, father of our Constitution; Wythe, the first law professor; and his pupil, John Marshall, architect of judicial review.

Concurrent with our tributes to the past, Virginia lawyers must examine the present and future. We might review the lofty language of the purpose of our Virginia Bar Association: “for the purpose of cultivating and advancing the science of jurisprudence, promoting reform in the law and in judicial procedure, facilitating the administration of justice in this state, and upholding and elevating the standard of honor, integrity and courtesy in the legal profession.” How do we fulfill this purpose in an age of consumerism, an atmosphere of mistrust of government and at a time when many of the basic tenets of our profession are being attacked? We must have a rational, probing and systematic consideration of how our legal institutions will function in tomorrow's world. A recent study entitled: “Law and the American Future” was introduced with the following observations: Futurism is fun and games for some; for others it is a parade of inevitable horrors. But we need not accept all of the predictions of things to come . . . to conclude that the world of tomorrow is likely to be very different from that of today."

Twentieth Century Virginians are more cautious than their 18th Century forebears. Nevertheless, it is to the credit of this Association that groundwork to serve a more useful role for Virginia lawyers and for all Virginians was begun a few years back. An able and perceptive study by former President Waller Dudley, subsequently implemented by John Davenport, Vernon Geddy, Gibson Harris and Tom Monahan, has formed a basis for making this voluntary Association more responsive to the problems of the legal profession.

Our pledge to contribute one hundred thousand dollars toward construction of the National Center for
State Courts at Williamsburg is an investment for the future. Expectations for the Center to improve the administration of justice throughout our Nation were eloquently underscored by the two principal speakers at our annual meeting: Chief Justice Warren Burger and Justice Howell Heflin of Alabama.

Our Committee system has been revised and will be revised further to enable the Association to express its views on pending legislation in Richmond and Washington, or on proposals under consideration by the American Bar Association. The ready acceptance by lawyers throughout Virginia of committee responsibilities for this year is evidence of the viability of the Virginia Bar Association.

If we are to determine how to fulfill our purpose better, we must see ourselves as others see us. To that end this Association, as you know, commissioned an in-depth survey reflecting the opinions of the people of Virginia about the legal profession in Virginia. The contents of this survey were made public in December by Tom Monahan. The Committee of our Association that worked on the survey presented a program at our Williamsburg meeting to enlighten Virginia lawyers about public perceptions. It will be my purpose during 1976 to see that the conclusions of that survey are shared and discussed with the members of this Association and with all lawyers in Virginia.

In addition to the program concerning the survey, we had programs at the successful winter meeting on mandatory continuing legal education and malpractice. We should encourage the presentation of programs of this type on controversial subjects facing our profession for our meetings in Hot Springs and Williamsburg.

The bar must provide leadership in taking considered positions on such matters of current controversy as advertising, mandatory continuing legal education, the adequacy of our disciplinary procedures, malpractice and legal specialization—problems that directly concern us as lawyers.

But there is also a broad and general obligation today upon the legal profession. We should be in the forefront of a recovery of civility, which has, in my judgment, suffered greatly in the wake of the assault upon American institutions in this time of iconoclasm. Daniel Patrick Moynihan recently said: "When procedure is destroyed, liberty is destroyed. It is not an aspect of governance. It is the essence of government."

For the better part of the two centuries of our country's being, lawyers have been balance wheels for stability in government and society. We must espouse courtesy and consideration toward both individuals and groups, opponents as well as allies, and obedience to established rules of procedure and conduct. We must, by example, encourage others to settle disputes with civility and decency.

This Association has flourished since its organization in 1888. It will continue to do so. I pledge my efforts to see that, as an organization, we continue to make a positive contribution to our profession and to Virginia. Our membership has selected an able President-elect in Hugo Blankingship. With his help, and that of our Executive Committee under the Chairmanship of Ned Slaughter, we will work toward fulfilling the high purpose of our founders.