Message from the Dean

Dear Alumni and Friends:

By the time this issue of The Record reaches your mailbox, I will have completed my first year as dean. I am delighted to report that it has been a year marked by continued success for students, faculty, and the Law School. Our students have enjoyed unparalleled employment opportunities, as described in detail in this issue. Our faculty continue to produce creative and influential scholarship. Professors Eric Posner and Nicholas Stephanopoulos’s work on quadratic voting is a prime example. It has also been a year of new arrivals. We were delighted to welcome a new Dean of Students, Shannon Bartlett, who you can meet on page 44.

For all the accomplishments of the past year, alumni have most often asked me about is the visit of President Barack Obama in April. The President came for a public conversation with Professor David Strauss about the future of the Supreme Court and a town hall with students. The photographs beginning on page 22 show various aspects of his visit. His visit was the first by a sitting president to the Law School since President Theodore Roosevelt laid the cornerstone of the original Law School building in 1903. President Gerald Ford’s visit occurred after he had left office. President Bill Clinton spoke at the University’s 1999 Convocation but did not visit the Law School. Many of our alumni have asked me: What was it like? How was the visit from a “backstage” perspective? Did you meet Bo?

The Law School is well accustomed to hosting dignitaries and executing elaborate events. The annual Hooding Ceremony, this year with Adam Silver, ’88, as the Distinguished Alumni Honoree, and the symposium on Judge Richard Posner’s book Divergent Paths are two examples. But a Presidential visit has a scale and complexity all its own. Every contingency must be considered for a president, and accordingly the staff is extensive (and, I hasten to add with gratitude, highly professional and efficient). Also, an unfortunate reality is that security is a significant consideration. Security at the Law School on the day of the visit surely was tighter than it has ever been. When I arrived early that morning, even I was initially not permitted entry into the building. (“I’m the dean.” “The what?”) It was my fault for failing to include myself on the list of “invitees.”

Even in the rarified air of presidential visits, President Obama’s visit to the Law School was special, and two reasons made it so. The first was that despite all the pomp of a presidential visit, the center of the event was a substantive discussion about the future of the Supreme Court, a civil and intelligent exchange about issues of importance, which is characteristically University of Chicago. The President might have gone to any law school, but for a thoughtful and unrehearsed conversation with students and a leading constitutional law scholar, he came to our Law School. He might have given a formal address to a large and docile audience. Instead, he had a dialogue with Professor Strauss and a seminar-like town hall with our students.

Our colleagues and students did not disappoint. Professor Strauss’s questions were discerning, astute, and informed by his deep expertise of the Court and constitutional law. We all got to see why our students adore Professor’s Strauss’s teaching. The White House requested that the Law School not vet the students’ questions, and we honored that request. Perhaps this was a foolhardy decision of a new dean, but it was also an act of trust in our students and in the education they receive here. The students’ questions during the town hall vindicated that trust. They were well-informed, insightful, and at least in one instance, challenging in tone and substance. The President’s responses were equally thoughtful and engaging. The event showed why the University of Chicago is known as the university for serious inquiry.

The second remarkable feature of the visit was that it was a homecoming. President Obama taught at the Law School for twelve years, and this was his first visit to the Law School since his election to the presidency. The town hall stage set may have made the Green Lounge unrecognizable to him, but it was a thrill to see him greet his old friends (and his former deans) Professors Geoffrey Stone and Douglas Baird. Clinical Professor Herschella Conyers even gave the President a kiss on the cheek. After the town hall, the President gave an interview to Fox News’ Chris Wallace in the D’Angelo Law Library. In the final portion of the interview, they visited his former office, which Mr. Wallace exclaimed was “spartan.” (I prefer the term “modern minimalist.” It is a Saarinen building.) His visit reminded us how extraordinary it is to have a member of our community serving as the President.

And, no, I did not meet Bo.

Warmly,

Thomas J. Miles