



Supreme Court of Kentucky

Chambers, State Capitol
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Joseph E. Lambert
Chief Justice of Kentucky

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Note: Following a tradition of chief justices and justices who have retired before him, Chief Justice of Kentucky Joseph E. Lambert gave this brief address to the audience immediately after hearing his final oral argument as chief justice on June 13, 2008, in the Supreme Court Courtroom at the Capitol. Chief Justice Lambert is retiring June 27 after 22 years as a Supreme Court justice and 10 years as chief justice.

REMARKS BY JOSEPH E. LAMBERT Chief Justice of Kentucky

June 13, 2008

Counsel, distinguished guests,

It's a long-standing tradition for retiring Justices to say a few words at the conclusion of their last oral argument, and I'll follow that tradition here today. I deeply appreciate all of you for being here. I take your presence as an expression of goodwill and friendship, and for that I'm grateful.

It seems only a short while ago that I was taking this Bench for the first time, but the calendar tells me it that was almost 22 years ago. My first colleagues were Justice Roy Vance, Justice James B. Stephenson, Justice William M. Gant, Justice Charles M. Leibson, Justice Donald C. Wintersheimer, and, of course, Chief Justice Robert F. Stephens. To most of them, since I was the youngest justice ever on the Court, my age made me a bit of a curiosity. (Justice Gant always called me "young man.") From that first group of colleagues I learned a great deal about this institution and its role in Kentucky government.

I learned to deeply appreciate the rich history and traditions of this Court, and to understand that the way things were done was the product of reasoned decisions made over the course of generations. Through the years, I learned to deeply appreciate the judicial process. I've often thought that if only the public we serve could see our decision-making process, its fairness, if not always its wisdom, would be accepted. I have served on this Court with 26 Justices and, while some have been closer friends than others, I deeply appreciate all of those colleagues.

This is not intended as a retrospective of my career, though I firmly believe we have done a lot of good things for the Court of Justice and for the people of Kentucky during my tenure. Neither is it meant as an elegy. Rather, this is to acknowledge that

today is my final appearance on the Supreme Court bench during oral argument. While I won't be here when the Court reconvenes in August, my thoughts will be with my colleagues and Court staff as you do your best to do justice for the litigants who come before you, and as you apply the time-honored principles of Kentucky law.

More than half of my professional career has been spent as a Justice of this Court, and more than a third of my entire life has been spent here. I consider it an unparalleled honor to have been elected three times by the voters of my district as a justice and three times by my colleagues to serve as Chief Justice. Through the years, in conversations with justices from other states, where the selection of the chief justice is done in some other manner, I have taken great pride in disclosing that on three separate occasions I was given the confidence of my colleagues and elected to serve as Chief Justice.

This second floor of the Capitol and these rooms are like my second home. The Supreme Court staff and AOC staff are like my second family. A long time ago, I decided to spend my career in this noble endeavor. If I had it all to do over again, and if my career were just beginning, I would decide, as I did before, to spend it here with you. I like to think I was well-suited for the positions I have been privileged to hold, but I know for sure that there is no career I would trade for this one. And in addition to all that, twice a month, I have been paid a good salary for doing this job I love. What could be better than that? However, I must admit that as a Chief Justice, I've been a mighty poor timekeeper.

For the Judicial Branch of government, nothing is more important than independent, courageous decision-making, unaffected by threat or favor. Litigants who come before the courts of Kentucky have an absolute right to decision-makers whose heads and hearts are not subject to any influence other than the facts and law of the case. While the Judicial Branch of government is a co-equal branch, it is vastly different from the political branches, and we must never lose sight of that.

Several years ago at the time of his retirement, Justice Dan Jack Combs used a line I have always remembered. Prior to announcing his resignation, Justice Combs said, "With humble heart protesting ..." I share that sentiment today. Throughout the process of deciding to leave the Court, my judgment drew me in one direction, but my heart pulled in the other. But I am certain the decision was right, and I am absolutely confident that this institution is in strong, capable hands.

As a final expression of my feelings for all of you and the Kentucky Court of Justice, I close with the words of the 16th President of the United States in a letter to his friend, James C. Conkling. President Lincoln wrote, "Thanks to all. [Thanks] [f]or the great republic – for the principle it lives by, and keeps alive – for man's vast future, – thanks to all." To all of you, I say "thanks." Thanks for your kindness, for your trust, and for your friendship.

Ms. Clary, please adjourn Court.