

Introduction of  
Alvin J. Bronstein  
Fifth Annual Coffin Lecturer  
by  
U.S. Senior Circuit Judge  
Frank M. Coffin

Luther Bonney Hall  
University of Southern Maine  
October 8, 1996

We have finally done it. Your committee charged with choosing this year's Coffin Lecturer has managed to find a perfect exemplar of what not to do in choosing a career in the law. Oh, Alvin Bronstein started out all right. He put in a little over a decade in a perfectly rational and useful private practice with his uncle in Brooklyn.

Then this otherwise bright and attractive man chose a path earmarked for frustration and failure. These were his criteria. For clients he would have a pretty unsavory bunch -- not only the most feared and despised, but the most impecunious. He would practice before trial judges who were among the most biased and vindictive in the country. The issues he would face revolved around prisons, where conditions either were cunningly devised to enhance degradation or achieved the same result through malign neglect. And his activity would commence in an area then a hotbed of prejudice where the playing field was about as level as a Himalayan slope.

It was in 1964 when Alvin Bronstein launched his quixotic venture in Jackson, Mississippi, as Chief Counsel for the Lawyers Constitutional Defense Committee. In those days Jackson was something like a gold rush town for newly motivated civil rights lawyers and activists. NAACP, with Mel Zarr of our own faculty, was nearby. Al Bronstein, with the same dominating physical stature that I possess, a soft spoken northerner, found that his brand of civility and his weird insistence that there was such a thing as the Constitution, was not at first appreciated.

On one occasion, when trying to stop an overbearing interrogation of his youthful black clients, he had the honor of being beaten up vigorously but not lethally. He tells me that, for proof, the FBI has photos of the bruises on unmentionable parts of his body. But his persistence paid off. The unreconstructed federal district judge, Harold Cox, came to respect him, even ordering the recalcitrant Mississippi bar officials to honor reciprocity and admit him to Mississippi practice. The splendid quartette of federal circuit judges -- Chief Judge Tuttle, Wisdom, Reeves, and Brown -- provided safe haven at the end of rocky trial roads. And, most amazing of all, he took nine cases to the Mississippi Supreme Court and won them all.

These trials by fire inevitably led to service as a strategist and/or trial counsel for a dozen or more organizations representing minorities, consumers, and the indigent, as well as teaching and administration at the Kennedy School of Government and American University, and books and articles galore.

But the jewel in what, after all, turned out to be a sparkling crown was Alvin Bronstein's role as Executive Director for nearly a quarter of a century of The National Prison Project of the American Civil Liberties Union Foundation. The project was one of a number of projects build around different subjects - reproduction rights, children, capital punishment; they were self-contained units within a larger public interest family. The Prison Project was one of the first and

clearly one of the best. It achieved through litigation or consent decrees in fifteen states implementing prison reforms. Bronstein's beginning staff of five expanded to 30; his starting budget of \$100,000 stretched to \$2,000,000; his client list rose from 200,000 to 1,500,000.

Just two weeks ago my wife Ruth and I were in San Francisco. We took the ferry to the famous Rock, Alcatraz, which, in 1934, became the state of the art maximum security prison for people like Al Capone and "Machine Gun" Kelly, with its tiny cells, isolation freeze lockers, and gun gallery. On learning that it had been permanently closed in 1963, the thought occurred to me that they saw Bronstein coming.

I wanted to get some personal insight into the man behind these achievements. So I called an old friend who I knew could enlighten me, Professor Norman Dorsen of NYU Law School and former national president of the ACLU. These were his comments: "In over thirty years that I've worked with him, I have never heard anyone put him down either personally or professionally. He occupies a very, very exalted position."

Most recently he has involved himself in international penal reform and human rights in, at last count, a dozen foreign countries. In 1989 he was named a MacArthur Fellow for his contributions to prisoners' rights and institutional reform. In the past decade he was named no fewer than four times by the National Law Journal as one of the one hundred most influential lawyers in the nation.

So you see that Al Bronstein's career choice, off the wall though it was, did not turn out too badly. I cannot think of a better fit than that between the "Law and Public Service" theme of this lecture series and the man we honor tonight. With deep pride I present Alvin Bronstein.