

1989

A Tribute to Douglas K. Amdahl

James C. Otis

Follow this and additional works at: <http://open.mitchellhamline.edu/wmlr>

Recommended Citation

Otis, James C. (1989) "A Tribute to Douglas K. Amdahl," *William Mitchell Law Review*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 7.
Available at: <http://open.mitchellhamline.edu/wmlr/vol15/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Reviews and Journals at Mitchell Hamline Open Access. It has been accepted for inclusion in William Mitchell Law Review by an authorized administrator of Mitchell Hamline Open Access. For more information, please contact sean.felhofer@mitchellhamline.edu.

© Mitchell Hamline School of Law

A TRIBUTE TO DOUGLAS K. AMDAHL

HON. JAMES C. OTIS†

It is undoubtedly accurate to say that the conventional image of a chief justice is someone who is not only elderly and dignified, but someone who simply presides over hearings, speaks for the court on state occasions, has the bearing and appearance of Charles Evans Hughes, and is otherwise insulated from the real world. Regrettably, members of the legal and judicial professions have for some reason failed to enlighten their constituents adequately regarding the proliferation of responsibility thrust on our chief justice in recent years. Without intending any disrespect for his performance as a tank commander at the Battle of the Bulge, that experience may well have played a part in preparing Chief Justice Amdahl for handling with equal courage and distinction colleagues on the supreme court and trial court, as well as disgruntled litigants, the legislature, and the general public.

While presiding in the courtroom Judge Amdahl was invariably patient and respectful to lawyers who appeared before him, most of whom were highly competent and only occasionally inept. He rarely interrupted their arguments with questions from the bench. Nor did he ever embarrass a lawyer by deprecating an argument with which he disagreed. At the conference with other members of the court which followed oral arguments the Chief's restraint was exemplary, notwithstanding differences of opinion which infrequently became somewhat heated.

When Judge Amdahl was promoted from associate justice to Chief Justice in 1981, he was urged to reduce his caseload in order to devote more time to his administrative duties. This he declined to do. Nevertheless the quality of his opinions remained scholarly, succinct, and thorough. His reasoning was uniformly persuasive, to a degree that rarely made it necessary for him or his associates to dissent. This is an unusual tribute to a judge on whose court there was little inclination to show

† Former Associate Justice of the Minnesota Supreme Court.

deference by acquiescing for the sake of harmonious unanimity.

The administrative duties of the chief justice include the oversight of the conduct of some 14,000 lawyers, 1,500 judicial staff persons, and 230 judges, a challenging responsibility to say the least. He presides over a task force studying the control and financing of all the district courts in the state. He has played a major role in unifying the county, municipal, probate, and district courts in the state. In addition he is obliged to monitor the case flow of litigation, to avoid delays, and to find alternative methods of expediting or avoiding litigation.

Not every lawyer or judge, and few lay people are aware of the numbers and purposes of the boards governing their professions, the management of which is largely the responsibility of the Supreme Court, and more particularly the chief justice. These include the Board of Law Examiners, the Board of Professional Responsibility, and the Client Security Board. Their purpose is to protect the public in three areas: to make certain that only qualified persons are admitted to practice; to discipline or remove lawyers guilty of incompetence or misconduct; and to compensate clients whose lawyers have misappropriated their trust funds.

Perhaps the most enduring of Judge Amdahl's contributions to the legal and judicial systems of Minnesota was his dogged determination to create a new Judicial Center. That facility is now well on the way to completion. It will eventually house the Supreme Court, the Court of Appeals, the law library, the Board of Professional Responsibility, and the law office of the Court Administrator. It will be the fulfillment of a dream Judge Amdahl has long entertained.

The Chief Justice has been conscientious beyond the call of duty in performing other judicial services such as numerous appearances before local and outstate bar groups; attending and representing Minnesota at meetings of the Conference of Chief Justices; promoting programs to educate the general public in the functions of the court system in Minnesota; and perhaps most important, lobbying the legislature to keep them abreast of the personnel and financial needs of the courts.

Judge Amdahl has paid dearly for a career faithful to his commitment to public service. No one has enjoyed and respected the wonder and beauty of the wilderness more than

Douglas Amdahl, both for conservation and for hunting and fishing, and to share the peace and solitude of rivers and forests in the north country. His cottage on the St. Croix River was to be his retreat, insulated from the demands of his office. But it was not to be. He had little time to spare vacationing on the river and eventually gave it up.

Judge Amdahl's leadership has established for all of us a high standard of industry and integrity, a determination to excel as a group, and sense of collegial unity and pride in our performance as judges. His retirement is well earned and well deserved. He will be missed as chief justice but will always remain a devoted friend. In leaving office he has only one concern. It is his hope that in assessing his tenure on the bench we will conclude he was "worthy to be called judge." Our answer is simply, "Douglas Amdahl was not only worthy to be called judge, but he has brought enduring honor and respect to an institution he has served long and well." We wish him Godspeed.

