

President's Message

JAMES S. RICHARDSON SR.

Striking the Right Balance

AS MANY OF you may know, shortly after being installed as president of the Federal Bar Association, I learned that I had to undergo open-heart surgery to relieve four blockages in my heart. Frankly, aside from some genetic factors, I had no idea that I had any

problems. However, the period of enforced idleness that followed the surgery has caused me to think about our profession and the accompanying lifestyle.

To the outside world, the legal profession is perceived as a high-stress workplace where the billable hour is king and there is little time to be spent with family or otherwise outside the workplace. Several factors that make the legal workplace such a stressful environment also affect professionals in other business settings. The conflict between personal commitments and professional duties is greater now than ever as a result of evolving social and family roles and expectations. Single parents are common in today's workplace, and as the proportion of elderly Americans rises, workers will be faced with a greater need to care for their older relatives.

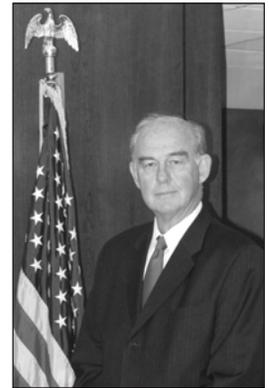
Some stress factors, however, are unique to attorneys. The demands of billable hours and client expectations are issues that apply pressures to attorneys because of the perceived necessity to produce—either for the client or for the employer. Generally speaking, lawyers who work long hours at their firms and agencies are seen as leaders and producers; these hard-working professionals are rewarded with more work and more responsibility, and therefore are pressured to perform better and to continue to work long hours to receive the same praise.

Despite the perceived respect and rewards that come from working long hours, the era of the 80-plus-hour workweek is slowly declining as professionals across the country look for a better balance between work and life—the proportion of the time they spend between home and office that allows them to feel as though they are working to live instead of living to work. Law students are searching for firms and agencies that will allow them to perform more fulfilling duties and have more “normal” work hours in exchange for a less-than-traditional “pay plus bonus” package found in many large firms. Fortunately, many firms and agencies are paying attention to this search for the perfect balance. Employers are looking to change policies to allow for more flexible hours and are implementing a “use it or lose it” policy regarding time off as a way

to encourage employees to take an appropriate amount of vacation each year. The national awareness of this issue has led to rankings of the top firms to work for, with policies that balance work and life an asset that is heavily weighted. Those companies and agencies with programs in place to enhance the nonworking life of their employees are finding that their turnover of employees has decreased and they have happier and more productive practitioners in their ranks.

Included within this balance is the importance of giving back to one's community. Volunteer service is an important component to the American way of life. Attorneys are able to give back by engaging in pro bono work; and firms and agencies are encouraging that work and allowing time to complete it. Taking an active role in a professional association, such as a bar association, also adds to the balance of one's professional and personal life. It is encouraging that our FBA chapters are embracing this idea as well; their programs not only include opportunities for continuing legal education but also offer practitioners a chance to give back through book drives, pro bono court programs, and educational programs about the U.S. Constitution in local schools. We will be spotlighting our chapters' pro bono efforts and community programs in an upcoming issue of *The Federal Lawyer*, and we encourage more chapters to develop these programs and provide them to their courts and communities.

The nature of law itself can be stressful. Attorneys often represent parties involved in controversial issues and their time is often spent in “gray areas,” in which there is not always one “right” answer. As the upcoming holiday season approaches, it is my hope that we all will be able to find what is right for each of us by striking the right balance between personal life and professional responsibilities. **TFL**



A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "James S. Richardson Sr." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal line extending to the right.