



Encore Performance

Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas impresses students with open discussion

Supreme Court Justice, Clarence Thomas, made his second visit to the JMU campus on March 14 to participate in the university-wide celebrations surrounding the 251st birthday of James Madison. The previous year, Thomas delivered the Madison Day address in Wilson Hall. While on campus, Thomas expressed a desire to return to meet personally with undergraduates in a smaller, more intimate setting. The newly opened James Madison Center proved the ideal site for such a forum, which involved some 25 specially invited students selected mostly from the university's Honors Program.

Justice Thomas requested that his formal remarks be kept off-the-record in order to facilitate a lively and open discussion. As a result, no member of the press was in attendance and no questions were considered "off limits." For more than two hours, Thomas eloquently discussed a wide array of issues including the Bush v. Gore decision, his views on affirmative action and the role of the Supreme Court in contemporary American society. Interestingly, he also revealed that he attended Yale Law School at the same time that Bill Clinton and Hillary Rodham were enrolled there.

After graduation from Yale, Thomas practiced law in the Office of the Missouri Attorney General, before being appointed by President Ronald Reagan to the position of assistant secretary for civil rights with the U.S. Department of Education. He later served as the head of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and as a justice on the U.S. Court of Appeals before being named to the high court by President George Bush in 1991, replacing the retiring Thurgood Marshall on the bench.

The James Madison Center plans each year to host other such symposia with scholars, dignitaries, and public officials in an effort to encourage educated and informed debate on the JMU campus. Indeed, during the early years of the American republic, the nation's public dialogue was frequently intense and passionate, but was tempered by a respect for divergent beliefs and moderated by a sense of personal integrity. With only a few notable exceptions, ideological disagreements were separate and distinct from personal attacks. As historian Lance Banning writes in his book, *Jefferson and Madison*, "[Madison] believed that a republic ultimately rests on mutual respect among its citizen and on a recognition on the part of all that they are members of a free community of mutually-regarding equals."

Justice Clarence Thomas' visit to the James Madison Center helped students evaluate the judge in relation to his beliefs and convictions without the filter of the news media or some other secondary commentary. Regardless of their own political perspectives, all were universally impressed with the sincerity of Thomas' convictions and his steadfast commitment to the principles of the United States Constitution.

Whitney Pack, a junior political science major, astutely observed, "Clarence Thomas allowed himself to be thrown in a room with a group of JMU students who may or may not have shared his particular political views. That in itself is commendable. I was particularly impressed with his forthright answers to students' questions. He never once averted a question or threw back a 'no comment.' Thomas is a conservative voice on the Supreme Court - and his remarks aligned with that position. He made no apologies for his

libertarian leanings. While some in the room may have disagreed with his Supreme Court decisions, I believe all recognized the reverence and allegiance Clarence Thomas feels toward the position to which he was appointed."

Justice Clarence Thomas' graciousness and his willingness to engage in an intellectually stimulating dialogue did much to advanced James Madison's legacy on the JMU campus as well as to promote the university's unwavering commitment to his philosophical principles.

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