The Steady Hand of Justice Blackmun

William Jefferson Clinton
It is my duty and my honor on behalf of the people of the United States to thank Justice Blackmun for his lifetime of service to our nation. Justice Blackmun, in stepping down from the Supreme Court, steps up into our history. During his twenty-four years on our highest court, he has become part of the rich and evolving story of American justice and constitutional law—with majesty and reason, with scholarship and grace. He is a good man who has earned the respect and the gratitude of every American.

When President Nixon nominated Harry Blackmun for service on the Court, his candidacy naturally occasioned much speculation about what kind of Justice he would be. Some labeled him a strict constructionist. But he rejected such attempts to tag him with a label, saying, “I’ve been called liberal and conservative. Labels are deceiving. I call them as I see them.” Twenty-four years later, we can say that he did exactly what he said he would.

It was President Woodrow Wilson who called our judiciary “the balance-wheel of our entire system; it is meant to maintain [the] nice adjustment between individual rights and governmental powers which constitutes political liberty.” Harry Blackmun has been a steady and strong hand on that balance wheel.

In cases argued before him, he found the human dimension and struck the right balance—in the struggle over how we might overcome our legacy of
been part of a very lively, long, and vital period in American history. And he has served us well.

I can only say that every one of us who serves in any capacity in public life would do very well by the people of the United States if we could bring to our work half the integrity, the passion, and the love for this country that Justice Blackmun has given us on the United States Supreme Court for twenty-four years.

Thank you, Justice Blackmun.