

# THE AMERICAN LAWYER

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## LIFETIME ACHIEVERS

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*Our sixth annual awards honor distinctive careers and public service.*

IN A YEAR WHEN WALL STREET WAS REVEILED and government was considered part of the problem—and part of the solution—we were reminded of the need for lawyers with both brilliant legal skills and a higher calling. Our seven Lifetime Achievers fit that ideal. These six men and one woman combined careers in the private sector with longtime commitments to public service.

Our 2009 Lifetime Achievers have won landmark courtroom victories and advised on high-profile corporate spin-offs, among other notable accomplishments. For their pro bono clients, they've fought for ideals—protecting affirmative action policies in law school admissions, advancing the cause of women lawyers, and expanding the rights of the incarcerated. For the government, they've helped preserve critical programs and restored the reputations of troubled but critical agencies.

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PHOTOGRAPHY PORTFOLIO BY MICHAEL J.N. BOWLES

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HARRY REASONER, *Vinson & Elkins*





## Harry Reasoner

*Vinson & Elkins*

THE WALLS OF HARRY REASONER'S OFFICE in downtown Houston are covered with certificates, awards, and photos, all accumulated over his 45-year career as a litigator at Vinson & Elkins. It's the only job he's ever had, part-time college jobs aside. Reasoner joined the firm in 1964, when it had one office and a little more than 100 lawyers, and as its managing partner in the nineties, he helped build it into a national presence with 13 offices and more than 700 attorneys. But what he enjoys about the job has never changed: the thrill of the courtroom, and the friends he's made along the way.

"I love the game of it, the skill, the strategy," says Reasoner, 70, of the courtroom, where he's scored landmark wins for such clients as The Dallas Morning News, Inc., Pennzoil Corporation, and Energy Transportation Systems Inc., and coordinated his firm's defense of the troubled Enron Corporation. "Waiting for a jury to come in after the trial is completed gives me a real thrill." In big cases, he adds, "you work with the top people, and many of my good friends were the people I met then."

What Reasoner is most passionate about, though, is his pro bono work. Starting in 1994, he led the University of Texas School of Law's fight to preserve its affirmative action admissions policy after the state's then attorney general appeared reluctant to do so. "He spent hundreds of hours defending the UT Law School, and earned the gratitude of the faculty and students," says Mark Yudof, then the school's dean and now president

of the University of California. Reasoner won in district court but lost on appeal to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit. He calls the defeat one of his bitterest disappointments. "People who don't have access to higher education don't get to participate in the great opportunities that America provides," he says. "That's a terrible long-term social prospect."

In the 1970s, Reasoner represented state prisoners battling to stop the prison system from censoring their letters. The Texas Department of Corrections had barred inmates from writing to the media and censored all their letters, even ones written to lawyers. The inmates filed a class action, and Reasoner won injunctive relief on free speech grounds. Reasoner says the case became an education in the "miserable" prison conditions of the time, and he says that rape, violence, and drugs in prisons are still some of today's most overlooked problems.

Today, Reasoner chairs the Texas Access to Justice Commission, which works to provide legal assistance to low-income Texans. "There's no decent way to justify discrimination," he says, whether it is based on class or race.

Even after 45 years, Reasoner isn't done yet. "He truly loves the practice, but he also loves the relationships he's developed not only with clients and colleagues but also opposing counsel and others he's come in contact with," says Joseph Dilg, Reasoner's successor as managing partner. "You'll hear much more about Harry in the future. He hasn't slowed down at all." —VIVIAN YEE

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