Presentation of the 2020 Father Robert Drinan Award to Robert N. Weiner
Remarks by Wendy Mariner, Chair, ABA Section of Civil Rights and Social Justice
Chicago, Illinois
February 14, 2020

On behalf of the Section of Civil Rights and Social Justice, it is my honor and privilege to present the 2020 Father Drinan Award to Robert N. Weiner.

Rob Weiner has devoted his career to advancing civil rights and social justice through the rule of law. When he joined the ABA Section of Civil Rights and Social Justice in 1980, Rob was already an astute advocate for the rule of law to protect constitutional rights and human rights. After all, he came out of Texas. Born in San Antonio to a World War II veteran father and a war bride mother from Manchester, England, Rob had a British accent when he started school. That did not last long in San Antonio. An obvious intellect, Rob went to Princeton. But Rob lost his heart in San Antonio, where he met Cheryl. They married on Memorial Day weekend right after Rob’s graduation from Yale Law School and moved to New York City on Memorial Day Monday. A day or two later, Rob started a clerkship at the federal Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit with Judge Henry Friendly, who became his legal north star. You can see Judge Friendly’s insistence on fairness in everything Rob does. Next, Rob clerked for Justice Thurgood Marshall. This was extraordinary training for civil rights and the rule of law. Cheryl says that Rob would happily stay at the courthouse well into the evening listening to the Justice’s stories – while she was home and pregnant, by the way.

Rob listened not only because Justice Marshall’s experience was that of a true civil rights champion, but also because he loves the law. Rob loves finding creative solutions to problems. He believes in principle. He believes everyone deserves a lawyer, even if the lawyer disagrees with the client’s position. These are increasingly rare qualities today, and they deserve praise and emulation.

Rob joined the leadership of the ABA Civil Rights and Social Justice Section and became Chair in the 2017-2018 bar year. He initiated the Section’s wildly popular and informative Rapid Response Project. This is an ongoing series of webinars – in addition to our regular substantive in person and online programs. Most bring experts together within days to explain fast-breaking legal issues of national significance. Others offer updates of ongoing issues. Since 2017, we have had 54 webinars with over 10,000 viewers. They offer clear and insightful analysis of the legal issues, with different perspectives on how they might or should play out. Lawyers working in many legal domains can learn about issues outside their professional specialty to feel empowered as a knowledgeable citizen. This has been especially valuable in this era of confusing social media and misinformation.

Rob’s leadership has been indispensable in gaining adoption by the House of Delegates of many resolutions CRSJ sponsored, such as, in his year as Chair alone, resolutions concerning the
Militarization of Law Enforcement; Protection of Anti-Discrimination Protection of LGBTQ Populations in Health Care Settings; Sexual Harassment and Assault in the Workplace; and Paid Family and Medical Leave. He was instrumental in ensuring our extremely successful Thurgood Marshall Award Dinner here in Chicago in 2018.

Yet Rob is the last one to take credit. Instead, he just gets it done. Moreover, he is a great mentor for anyone interested in getting things done. He takes the time to bring young lawyers along. I have said it before and I’ll say it again, Rob always says yes, no matter how menial or difficult the task. I don’t know where he finds the time or energy. And he does it all with modesty and a wry sense of humor.

Rob has kept CRSJ focused on preserving the rule of law. His Chair columns on the rule of law and the perils democracy faces are required reading – and they are on the CRSJ website for your convenience. While Rob was Chair, he successfully encouraged the Section to support the Court Watching Project, co-led by Steve Hanlon, which observes and reports on violations of due process in misdemeanor courts, such as failures to tell defendants of their right to counsel and failures to determine whether defendants could afford to pay fines and fees. Lawyers have observed and reported on court proceedings in New Mexico, Missouri, and Florida. These are issues of basic fairness for defendants, who are often poor or immigrants or of color in city and state courts that rarely receive public scrutiny.

He remains committed to these issues of justice and fairness. Since 2017, he has chaired the ABA Presidential Task Force on Building Public Trust in the American Justice System (now known as the ABA Working Group on Building Public Trust in the American Justice System) and spearheaded the development of the ABA’s Ten Guidelines on Court Fines and Fees, published in August 2018. The work continues with a new report on Privatization in the Criminal Justice System.

Rob has worked to ensure consideration of civil and human rights in multiple capacities. He continues to bring to the Section valuable knowledge and experience from his many leadership positions within the ABA, including serving as a member of the ABA Board of Governors and its Executive Committee. He also served on the ABA’s Standing Committee on the Federal Judiciary and its Commission on Women in the Profession. Rob has been the State Delegate from the District of Columbia to the ABA House of Delegates since 2014, and is also Vice Chair of its Standing Committee on Credentials and Admission and a member of its Nominating Committee and continues to pursue criminal justice issues of particular concern to the Section. In all these positions, Rob has been a voice for the Section’s mission.

Rob’s multidimensional perspectives on policies, programs, and collaboration with other entities have benefited the Section enormously. He offers views from many different vantage points, including private law practice at Arnold and Porter, professional bar work, having served as President of the District of Columbia Bar, and government. He served as Associate Deputy Attorney General in the United States Department of Justice, where he was charged with
defending the Affordable Care Act. As Senior Counsel in the Office of White House Counsel during President Clinton’s second term, he was in charge of “everything else,” meaning everything except impeachment. That was a wide-ranging portfolio.

Especially important to the Section are his many pro bono activities. Rob chaired the D.C. Circuit Judicial Conference Committee on Pro Bono and served on advisory committees of the D.C. Circuit Court. He chaired the ABA Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service and currently serves as a member of the ABA Standing Committee on Legal Aid and Indigent Defendants. In return, he has instilled the Section’s principles and values in all these endeavors. He is truly an ambassador for the Section’s mission.

Rob’s office at Arnold & Porter is festooned with awards for his pro bono work – around 30 pro bono matters since 2012. He was the architect of a suit challenging the practice of St. Louis suburbs to imprison people of color who could not afford to pay fines and fees stemming from traffic and other minor civil infractions. Since 2017, he has been involved in the firm’s efforts to oppose the Travel Ban and the rescission of DACA, defeating the Pence-Kobach Commission on Election Integrity, and eliminating a proposed citizenship question on the 2020 Census. With all his pro bono work, one might wonder why Arnold and Porter pays him anything. It is because he is worth it. He is creative. He can find ways to right wrongs that no one else thinks of.

In her book of essays, No Time to Spare, Ursula Le Guin, describes three types of reactions to poverty. I think her categories apply to people’s reactions to wrongs done to others. Some people deny that any wrong exists. Others recognize the wrong, but throw up their hands, saying “but what can we do?”, and do nothing. But some people help. Rob helps. He helps right wrongs.

There are other sides to Rob. Many of you know that Rob is a foodie. If you want restaurant recommendations for any city – in any country – just ask Rob. He may have got his start when his daughter Courtney was 7 years old and became a vegetarian. To entice Courtney to eat something besides macaroni and cheese, Rob learned to cook Indian cuisine. Rob is now an aficionado of reality TV food competitions, like Top Chef and Master Chef. After all, he is a litigator, so he has to like competitions. Still, Rob is funny and warmhearted. Except when Cheryl was staying home with the children and he would call and describe the fabulous meals he had at Le Cirque.

We are especially pleased that Rob’s wife Cheryl is here, together with her father Jim Toubin and his friend Kay Lenox, Cheryl’s brother Mark Toubin and sister-in-law Elizabeth Cohen. Rob’s mother would be here but is no longer able to travel. Rob and Cheryl’s children, Courtney and Lindsey, are sorry not to be here, but they are taking care of Rob and Cheryl’s very young grandchildren, Jack and Dahvi.

And now, the Award. Rob, would you please join me at the podium.
First, given your food fetish and loyalty to Texas, I want to present you with a local delicacy—chocolate pralines and longhorns.

Second, on behalf of the entire Section Council, we are so proud to call you our own. You bring intellectual curiosity, rigor, and fairness to the dogged pursuit of justice and the rule of law. In all your endeavors, you emulate Father Drinan’s dedicated and principled advocacy for human rights with wisdom, open mindedness, and generosity of spirit, all in service to the Section, its goals, and its ideals.

Therefore, In recognition of distinguished service to the Section and the profession in advancing civil and human rights for all, it is with great respect and affection that the Section of Civil Rights and Social Justice presents the Robert F. Drinan Distinguished Service Award to Robert N. Weiner this 14th day of February, 2020.