

Lifting Her Voice: A Conversation with Lani Guinier

In 1998, Lani Guinier became the first black woman to be appointed to a tenured professorship at Harvard Law School, after teaching for ten years at the University of Pennsylvania Law School. During the 1980s she was head of the voting rights project at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and during the Carter Administration served in the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division. In 1993, she was nominated by President Clinton to head the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice. Her writings on minority voting rights drew criticism from conservatives, and her name was withdrawn without a confirmation hearing. Guinier wrote about that experience in her book, Lift Every Voice: Turning a Civil Rights Setback into a New Vision of Social Justice (1998). The author of many articles, her other books include Becoming Gentlemen: Women, Law School and Institutional Change, written with Michelle Fine and Jane Balin (1997); The Tyranny of Majority (1994); Who's Qualified? written with Susan Sturm (2001); and The Miner's Canary, written with Gerald Torres (2002). In 1995, the Commission on Women in the Profession honored Guinier with the Margaret Brent Women Lawyers of Achievement Award. On April 14, 2003, Perspectives editorial board member Sheila Thomas spoke to Guinier, who shared her thoughts on life, law school, and the legal profession. This is an excerpt of that interview.

Perspectives: Most people know you as the law professor who was nominated for Assistant Attorney General during the Clinton administration. But you were a highly regarded civil rights lawyer before you got into academia and were instrumental in the development of the law in voting rights.

Guinier: Well, my first assignment when I came to the Legal Defense Fund in 1981 involved working with a very large coalition of groups. We called ourselves legislative advocates to extend and amend the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and I had the opportunity to litigate some of the first case that interpreted the legislation, including the case that went to the Supreme Court, *Thornburg v Gingles*.

Perspectives: The Voting Rights Act has had a great impact on the numbers of legislators who are people of color. You deserve credit for a lot of that, isn't that true?

Guinier: No, I don't want to take credit for that. I was part of a larger movement of people that were working together. I was doing my job.

Perspectives: You spent much of your early career working on cases involving race discrimination against African Americans. How long have you been interested specifically in the topic about women in law school and what happens to them?

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