

BACK STORY

CLOSING THOUGHTS: QUOTATIONS FROM THE CLOSING ARGUMENTS OF FAMOUS CASES

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Many will tell you that cases are often won or lost during the opening statement. That may be true. But, the closing argument has provided some of the most famous scenes in legal history (as well as in legal fiction). It has also generated many remarkable quotations and moments for reflection. Here are but a few:

“An advocate can be confronted with few more formidable tasks than to select his closing arguments where there is great disparity between his appropriate time and his available material.”

- Justice Robert H. Jackson in the Nuremberg Trials

“I want you to remember these words. Like the defining moment in this trial, the day Mr. Darden asked Mr. Simpson to try on those gloves and the gloves didn’t fit; remember these words: if it doesn’t fit, you must acquit.”

- Johnnie Cochran from *People v. Simpson*

“Now, Your Honor, I make it a rule to try not to argue anything that I do not believe in, unless I am caught in a pretty close corner...”

- Clarence Darrow in *State v. Scopes* (the “Monkey Trial”)

“Margaret Schwartz died, Margaret died at the Washington Place door on the ninth floor because that door was locked and that bolt held that door. Safety and all was on the other side for her and the others, and this safety was kept from her. Why? To prevent these defendants, who had five hundred people under their keeping – their lives – from the paltry expense of a watchman.”

- Charles Bostwick in *People v. Harris, et al.* (the prosecution of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire)

“This case is no longer local: the defendant ceases to play an important part. The case has assumed the proportions of a battle royal between unbelief that attempts to speak through so-called science and the defenders of the Christian faith, speaking through the legislators of Tennessee.”

- William Jennings Bryan in *State v. Scopes* (the “Monkey Trial”)



“Experience has taught that nothing is so prolix as ignorance.”

- Representative Thaddeus Stevens in the impeachment trial of President Andrew Johnson

“Mobs mean nothing to me. Let them hang me: I don’t care. Life is only an incident in the Creator’s scheme of things, but if I can contribute my little bit to see that justice is served, then my mission is fulfilled.”

- Samuel Leibowitz in *State v. Patterson* (one of the Scottsboro Boys trials) ■

“Hold to your own convictions. You air line the evidence and if that evidence or the lack of that evidence doesn’t give rise to that still, small voice, that there is a reasonable doubt, you just keep it that way and beware, and justice may be done ... It’s so much better, and I think the law provides, that a thousand guilty ones go free than one innocent defendant here be convicted. I place the welfare of my clients in your hands.”

- H. C. Watkins in *United States v. Price, et al.* (the “Mississippi Burning” trial)

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