

**Lawyers for Lawyers seminar 21 May 2026**

## **Openingspeech – mr. J.H. (Jasper) Stek, President of the Amsterdam Bar Association**

Also on behalf of Emilie van Rijckevorsel, my co-President of the Amsterdam Bar, welcome to the Lawyers for Lawyers seminar titled: “From Warsaw to Washington – Lessons in Vigilance for the Rule of Law.” It is a pleasure to address you on such an important topic and especially today, the 40<sup>th</sup> birthday of Lawyers for Lawyers.

Warsaw and Washington are alliterative names and therefore make for a catchy seminar title. But these cities are also well chosen for today’s topic because they provide us with cautionary tales. From both cities we will hear from speakers who deserve our admiration for standing up — and continuing to stand up — against authoritarian tendencies in their home countries: Katarzyna Gajowniczek-Pruszyńska, Dean of the Warsaw Bar Association Sylwia Gregorczyk-Abram, Polish human rights lawyer and Rachel Cohen, a seemingly ordinary lawyer in the United States with an extraordinary story to tell. Poland and the United States: who would have thought, when I was studying law some decades ago, that we would one day discuss these countries as cautionary tales? Under the leadership of Lech Wałęsa and his Solidarność movement, Poland had in the late eighties shaken off the shackles of communist rule and was rapidly transforming itself into a democracy governed by the rule of law. Our Polish colleagues will tell us what happened over the last decade.

But I am even more surprised by developments in the United States, having lived in Washington, D.C. for several years as a child and later worked as a lawyer in New York City. From childhood onwards, I viewed the United States as a rule-of-law role model: the “shining city on the hill” and an example for those fighting tyranny around the globe. I am not blind to its faults, but until just a few years ago, the democratic backsliding taking place under President Trump seemed inconceivable — at least to me. And our American colleague-lawyers have played a role in that backsliding, in some cases positively and in others negatively.

We all know, more or less, what happened. In March 2025, President Trump issued an executive order sanctioning the law firm Perkins Coie because it had represented Democratic politicians such as Hillary Clinton and other critics of Mr. Trump. The measures included barring the firm’s lawyers from entering federal buildings. Comparable executive orders soon followed against several other law firms.

In response, hundreds of law firms signed an amicus brief arguing that the orders were unconstitutional. They warned that the measures posed: “a grave threat to our

system of constitutional governance and to the rule of law itself. The judiciary should act with resolve — now — to ensure that this abuse of executive power ceases.”

Yet the most striking aspect of the amicus brief was not who signed it, but who did not. Many of the country’s largest and most influential firms chose silence. Faced with a direct attack on the independence of the legal profession, they left the defence of fundamental principles to smaller firms.

What followed was even more troubling. When the Trump administration threatened another large firm with similar sanctions, the firm — long regarded as one of the leading names in American law — became the first to capitulate. It agreed to provide \$40 million in pro bono legal services to the administration.

Then eight other major law firms, which had not even formally been targeted, pre-emptively looked for a deal with the White House, jointly pledging nearly \$1 billion in pro bono legal services. Among them was the New York firm where I have spent six months as a foreign associate.

The judiciary, however, ultimately came to the rescue. When Perkins Coie challenged the sanctions in court, a federal judge named Beryl Howell struck down the executive order, affirming the importance of an independent legal profession: “No American President has ever before issued executive orders like the one at issue in this lawsuit, targeting a prominent law firm with adverse actions to be executed by all Executive Branch agencies. But, in purpose and effect, this action draws from a playbook as old as Shakespeare, who penned the phrase: *‘The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers.’* When Shakespeare’s character hears this suggestion, he promptly incorporates this tactic as part of his plan to assume power. Eliminating lawyers as the guardians of the rule of law removes a major impediment on the path to greater power. In a cringe-worthy twist on the theatrical phrase *‘Let’s kill all the lawyers,’* the executive order takes the approach of *‘Let’s kill the lawyers I don’t like,’* sending the clear message: lawyers must stick to the party line, or else.”

The administration appealed against this decision, but later withdrew the appeal. So in the end, Perkins Coie won.<sup>1</sup> Even so, that should not obscure that President Trump succeeded in pressuring some of the country’s largest and most powerful law firms into public submission. Many surrendered despite the absence of any legal basis for the administration’s actions, revealing a striking lack of courage.

Speaking to us later today will be Rachel Cohen, a lawyer who did have the courage to speak out against her firm’s submission to Trump. In doing so, she put into practice one of the main lessons from Timothy Snyder’s book *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*: “Defend institutions.”

Snyder’s book serves as a manual for us lawyers, reminding us of our role in society. Law firms are much more than just another type of business enterprise: we first and

---

<sup>1</sup> After the seminar it was pointed out to me that after dropping the appeal it was reinstated and a hearing took place at the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit on May 14, 2026.

foremost have a responsibility to preserve the rule of law and to stand up for institutions. As Snyder writes: *“Institutions do not protect themselves. They fall one after the other unless each is defended from the beginning.”*

Snyder offers several more lessons with particular relevance to the legal profession. One of them is: “Remember professional ethics.” He writes: *“When political leaders set a negative example, professional commitments to just practice become more important. It is hard to subvert a rule-of-law state without lawyers, or to hold show trials without judges.”*

Let us, also here in the Netherlands, therefore remain mindful of our crucial role within the rule-of-law state. Let us be vigilant and raise our voices when, for instance, a member of parliament dismisses a court decision as “just another opinion”.

Finally, Snyder offers one more lesson of particular relevance to today’s seminar. His lesson 16 is the following: *“Learn from peers in other countries. Keep up your friendships abroad, or make new friends in other countries.”*

That is exactly what we are doing today. I congratulate Lawyers for Lawyers on its 40<sup>th</sup> birthday and wish you an inspiring seminar.