

# **THE PROFESSION OF THE LAW**

**Conclusion of a lecture delivered by  
Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.,  
to undergraduates of Harvard University  
on February 17, 1886.**

## **Foreword**

**In an address to a class at Harvard University in February 1886, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., an Associate Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, uttered one of his most famous epigrams about the law:**

**The law is the calling of thinkers.**

**He concluded with comments that seem on the one hand highly personal—because he was something of an intellectual loner—yet on another to encourage his youthful audience to live full, active lives, to think widely and deeply, to take chances and to understand that life is not easy:**

**For I say to you in all sadness of conviction, that to think great thoughts you must be heroes as well as idealists. Only when you have worked alone, — when you have felt around you a black gulf of solitude more isolating than that which surrounds the dying man, and in hope and in despair have trusted to your own unshaken will, — then only will you have achieved. Thus only can you gain the secret isolated joy of the thinker, who knows that, a hundred years after he is dead and forgotten, men who never heard of him will be moving to the measure of his thought.**

**Holmes's brief speech is posted here followed by an album of photographs of him from the Library of Congress.**

## THE PROFESSION OF THE LAW.

CONCLUSION OF A LECTURE DELIVERED TO UNDERGRADUATES OF HARVARD UNIVERSITY,  
ON FEBRUARY 17, 1886.

---

AND now, perhaps, I ought to have done. But I know that some spirit of fire will feel that his main question has not been answered. He will ask, What is all this to my soul? You do not bid me sell my birthright for a mess of pottage; what have you said to show that I can reach my own spiritual possibilities through such a door as this? How can the laborious study of a dry and technical system, the greedy watch for clients and practice of shopkeepers' arts, the mannerless conflicts over often sordid interests, make out a life? Gentlemen, I admit at once that these questions are not futile, that they may prove unanswerable, that they have often seemed to me unanswerable. And yet I believe there is an answer. They are the same questions that meet you in any form of practical life. If a man has the soul of Sancho Panza, the world to him will be Sancho Panza's world; but if he has the soul of an idealist, he will make — I do not say find — his world ideal. Of course, the law is not the place for the artist or the poet. The law is the calling of thinkers. But to those who believe with me that not the least god-like of man's activities is the large survey of causes, that to know is not less than to feel, I say — and I say no

longer with any doubt — that a man may live greatly in the law as well as elsewhere; that there as well as elsewhere his thought may find its unity in an infinite perspective; that there as well as elsewhere he may wreak himself upon life, may drink the bitter cup of heroism, may wear his heart out after the unattainable. All that life offers any man from which to start his thinking or his striving is a fact. And if this universe is one universe, if it is so far thinkable that you can pass in reason from one part of it to another, it does not matter very much what that fact is. For every fact leads to every other by the path of the air. Only men do not yet see how, always. And your business as thinkers is to make plainer the way from some thing to the whole of things; to show the rational connection between your fact and the frame of the universe. If your subject is law, the roads are plain to anthropology, the science of man, to political economy, the theory of legislation, ethics, and thus by several paths to your final view of life. It would be equally true of any subject. The only difference is in the ease of seeing the way. To be master of any branch of knowledge, you must master those which lie next to it; and thus to know anything you must know all.

Perhaps I speak too much the language of intellectual ambition. I cannot but think that the scope for intellectual, as for physical adventure, is narrowing. I look for a future in which the ideal will be content and dignified acceptance of life, rather than aspiration and the passion for achievement. I see already that surveys and railroads have set limits to our intellectual wildernesses, — that the lion and the bison are disappearing from them, — that the lion and the bison are disappearing from them, as from Africa and the no longer boundless West. But

that undelightful day which I anticipate has not yet come. The human race has not changed, I imagine, so much between my generation and yours but that you still have the barbaric thirst for conquest, and there is still something left to conquer. There are fields still open for occupation in the law, and there are roads from them that will lead you where you will.

But do not think I am pointing you to flowery paths and beds of roses, — to a place where brilliant results attend your work, which shall be at once easy and new. No result is easy which is worth having. Your education begins when what is called your education is over, — when you no longer are stringing together the pregnant thoughts, the “jewels five words long,” which great men have given their lives to cut from the raw material, but have begun yourselves to work upon the raw material for results which you do not see, cannot predict, and which may be long in coming, — when you take the fact which life offers you for your appointed task. No man has earned the right to intellectual ambition until he has learned to lay his course by a star which he has never seen, — to dig by the divining rod for springs which he may never reach. In saying this, I point to that which will make your study heroic. For I say to you in all sadness of conviction, that to think great thoughts you must be heroes as well as idealists. Only when you have worked alone, — when you have felt around you a black gulf of solitude more isolating than that which surrounds the dying man, and in hope and in despair have trusted to your own unshaken will, — then only will you have achieved. Thus only can you gain the secret isolated joy of the thinker, who knows that, a hundred years after he

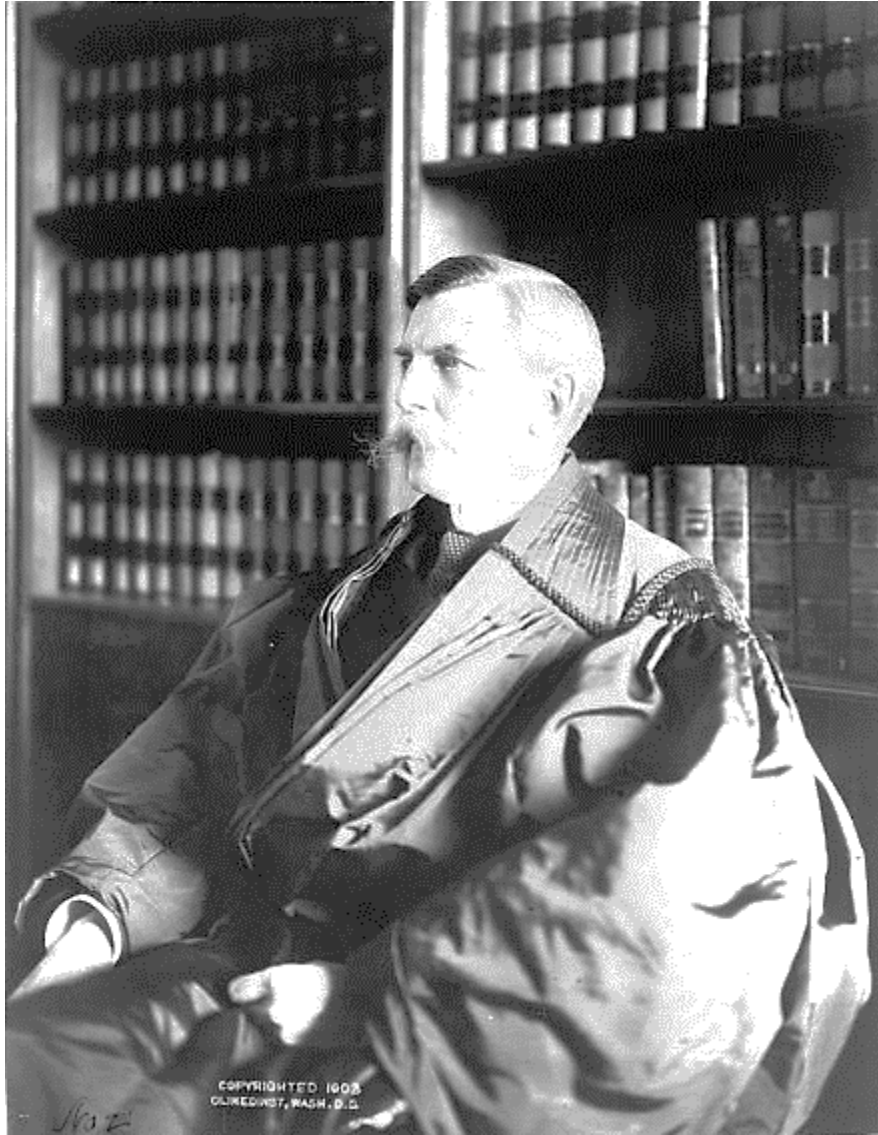
is dead and forgotten, men who never heard of him will be moving to the measure of his thought,—the subtile rapture of a postponed power, which the world knows not because it has no external trappings, but which to his prophetic vision is more real than that which commands an army. And if this joy should not be yours, still it is only thus that you can know that you have done what it lay in you to do,— can say that you have lived, and be ready for the end.



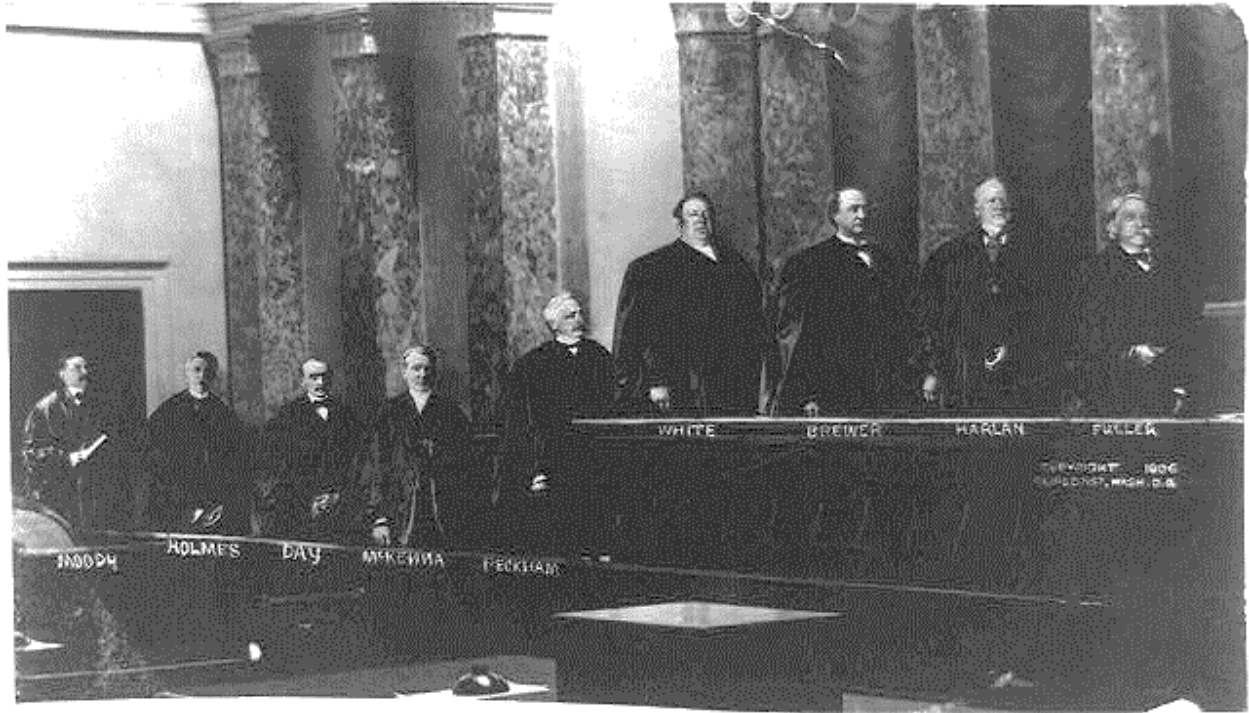
**An album of photographs of Holmes  
from The Library of Congress  
follows**



**Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.**  
**ca. 1873**  
**C. M. Bell photograph collection,,**  
**Library of Congress**



**Three-quarter length portrait of Justice Holmes,  
seated in library, facing left, wearing judicial robe.  
Date of photograph: ca. 1903  
Library of Congress**

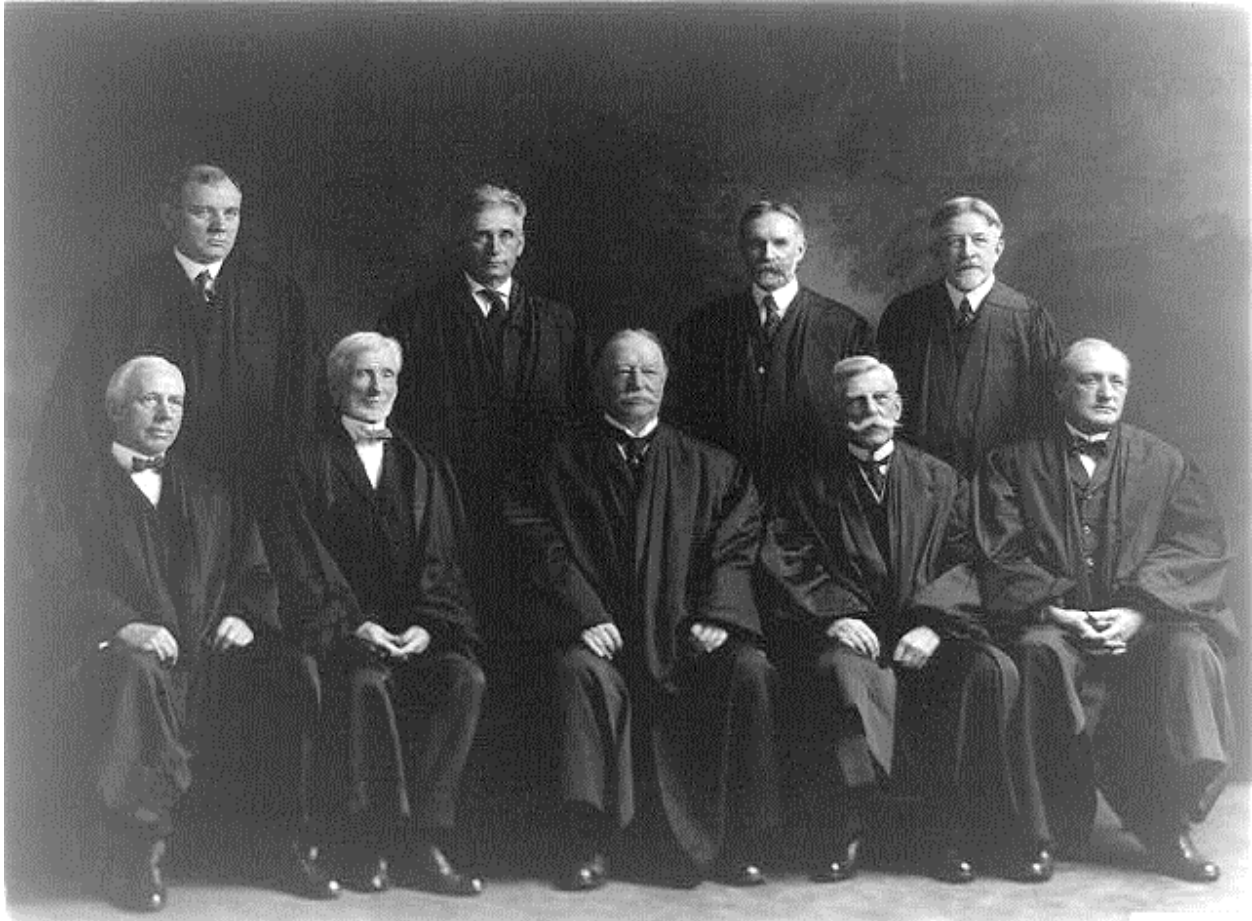


**United States Supreme Court**  
**left to right: Moody, Holmes, Day, McKenna, Peckham, White,**  
**Brewer, Harlan, and Chief Justice Melville Weston Fuller.**  
**Date of photograph: 1906**  
**Library of Congress**





**United States Supreme Court  
Day, Brandeis, McKenna, Pitney, Taft, McReynolds, Holmes,  
Clarke and Van Devanter  
Date of photograph: ca. 1921  
Harris & Ewing Collection.,  
Library of Congress**

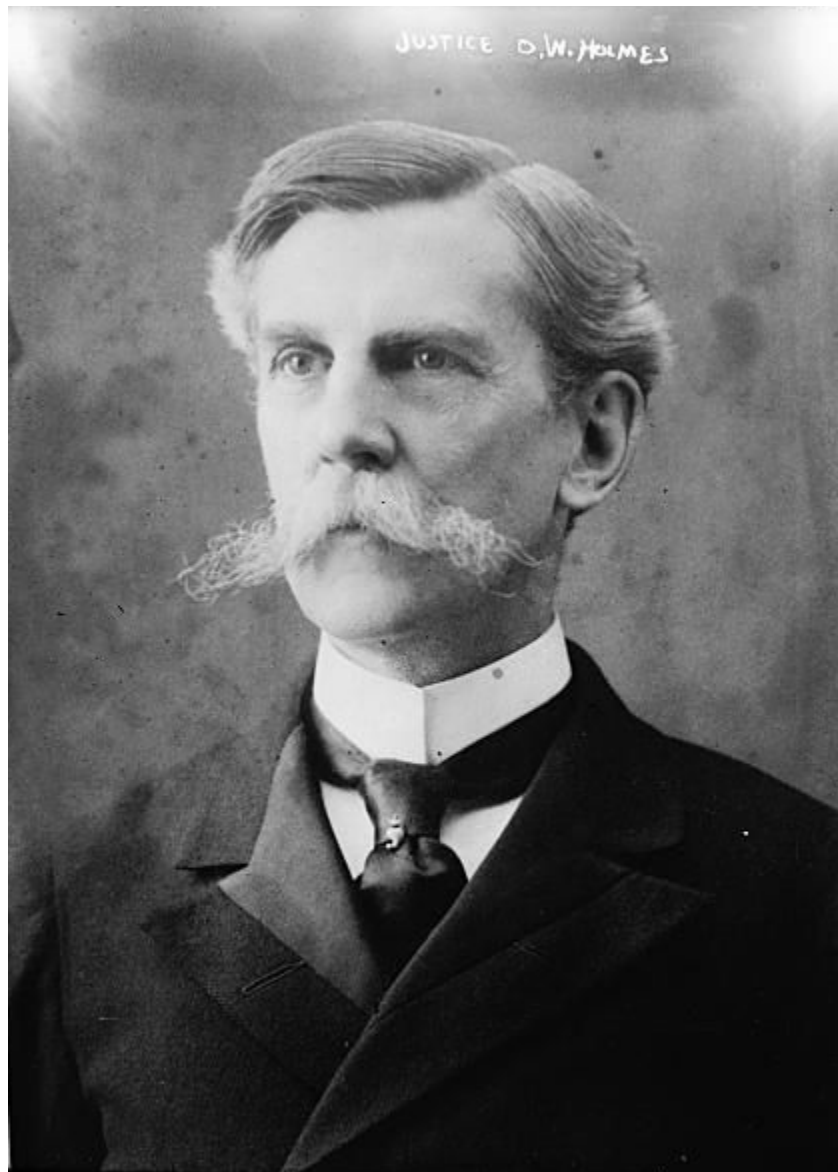


**United States Supreme Court  
Van Devanter, Butler, McKenna, Brandeis, Taft, Sutherland,  
Holmes, Sanford, and McReynolds.  
Date of photograph: ca. 1924  
Harris & Ewing Collection.,  
Library of Congress**



*THE U.S. SUPREME COURT IN 1925*

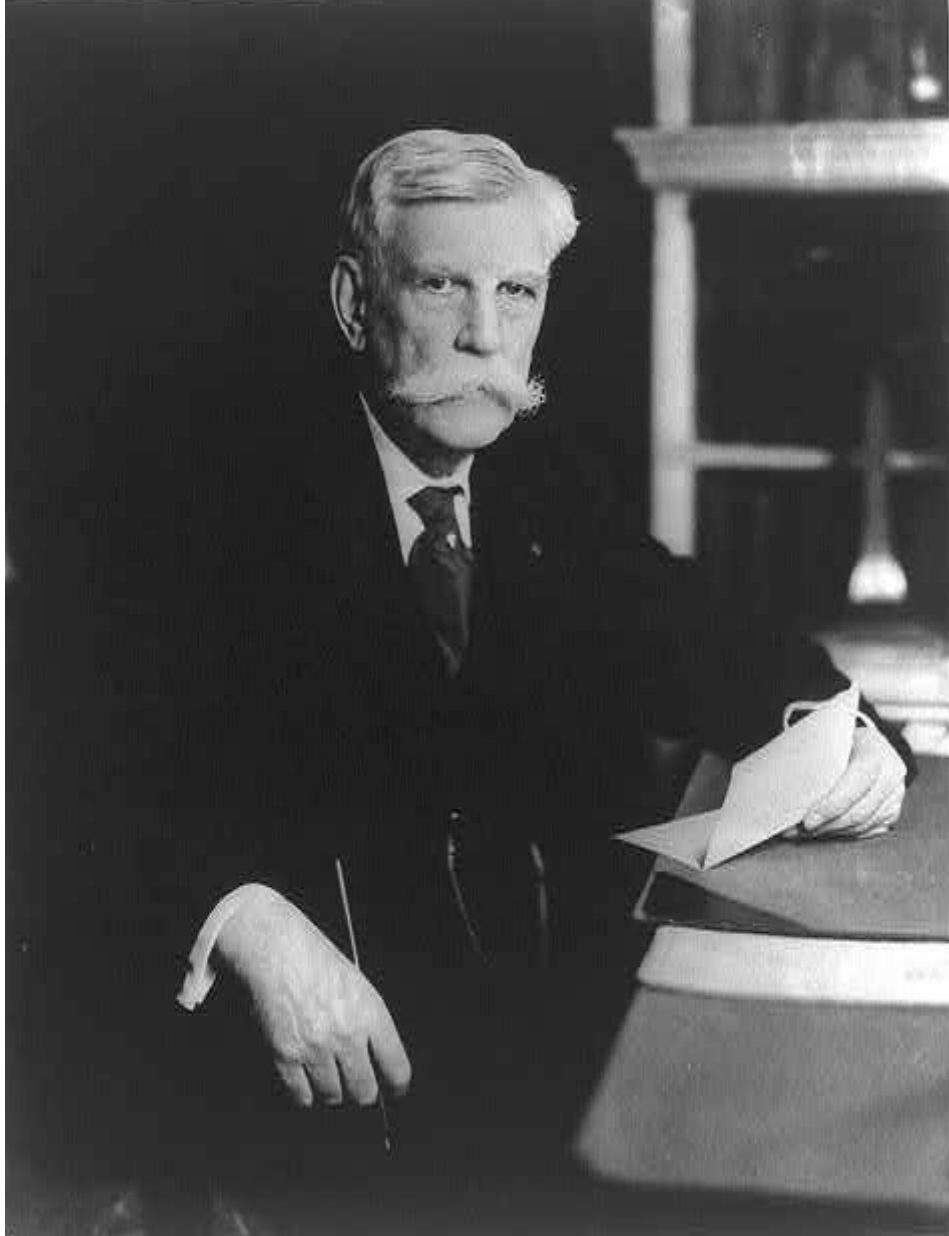
**McReynolds, Sanford, Holmes, Sutherland, Taft, Butler,  
Van Devanter, Stone, Brandeis  
Harris & Ewing Collection.,  
Library of Congress**



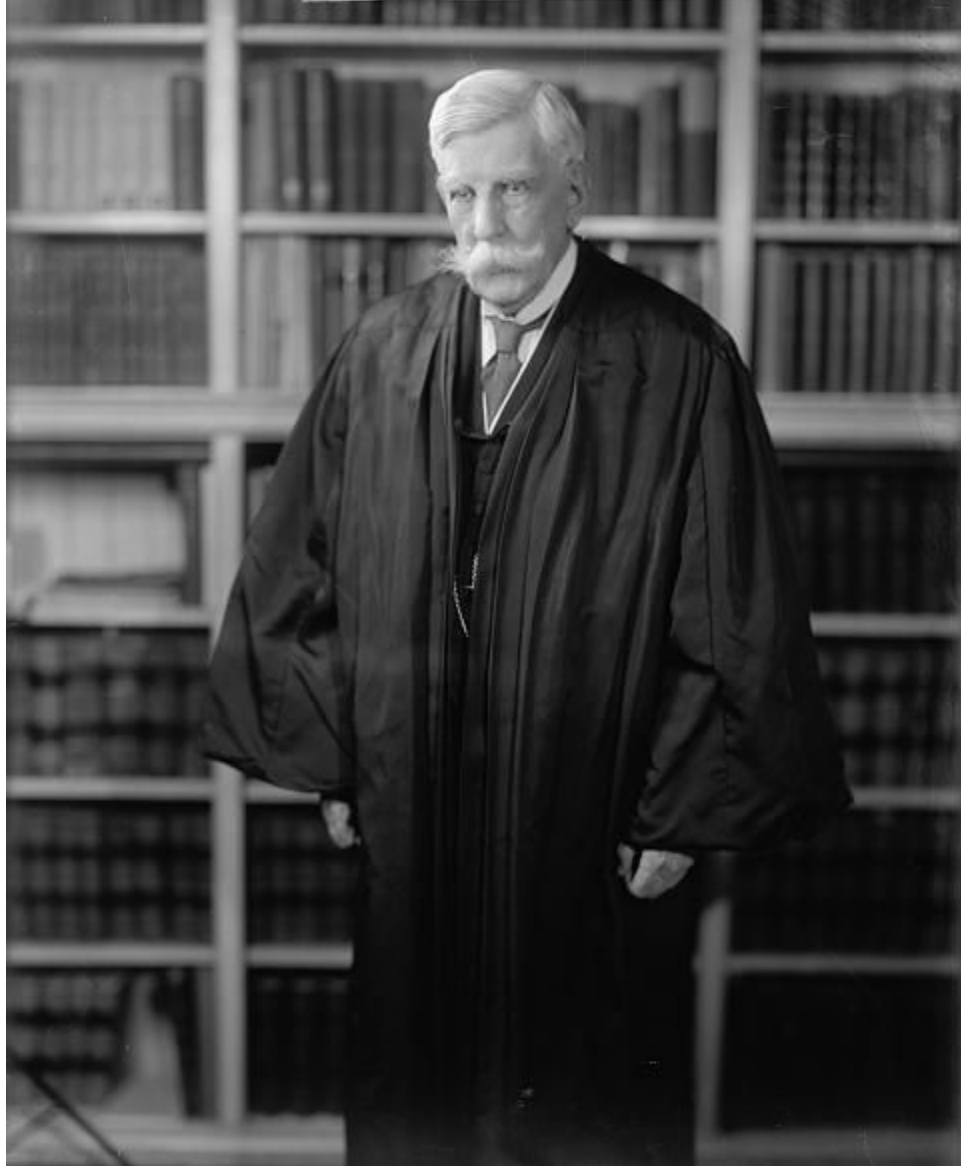
**Undated  
Bain News Service Collection,  
Library of Congress**



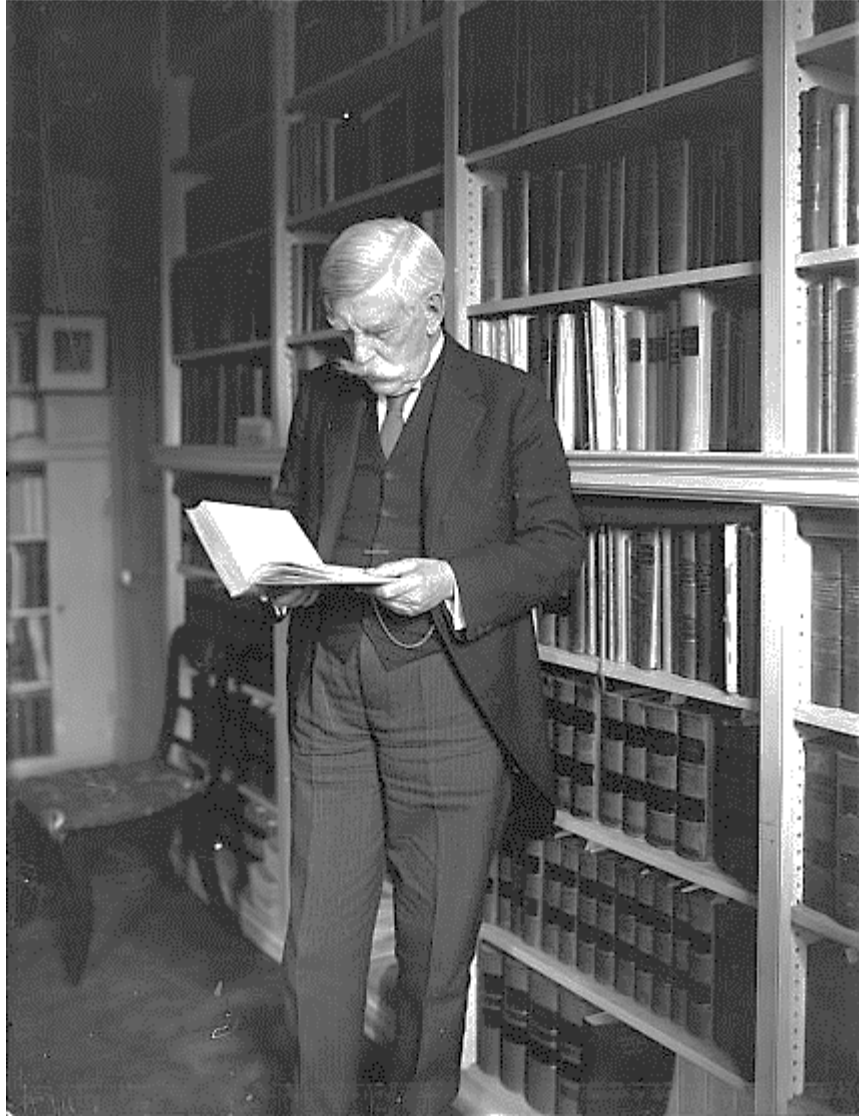
**Undated - probably 1920s  
Harris & Ewing Collection,  
Library of Congress**



**Undated – probably 1920s  
Underwood & Underwood Collection  
Library of Congress**

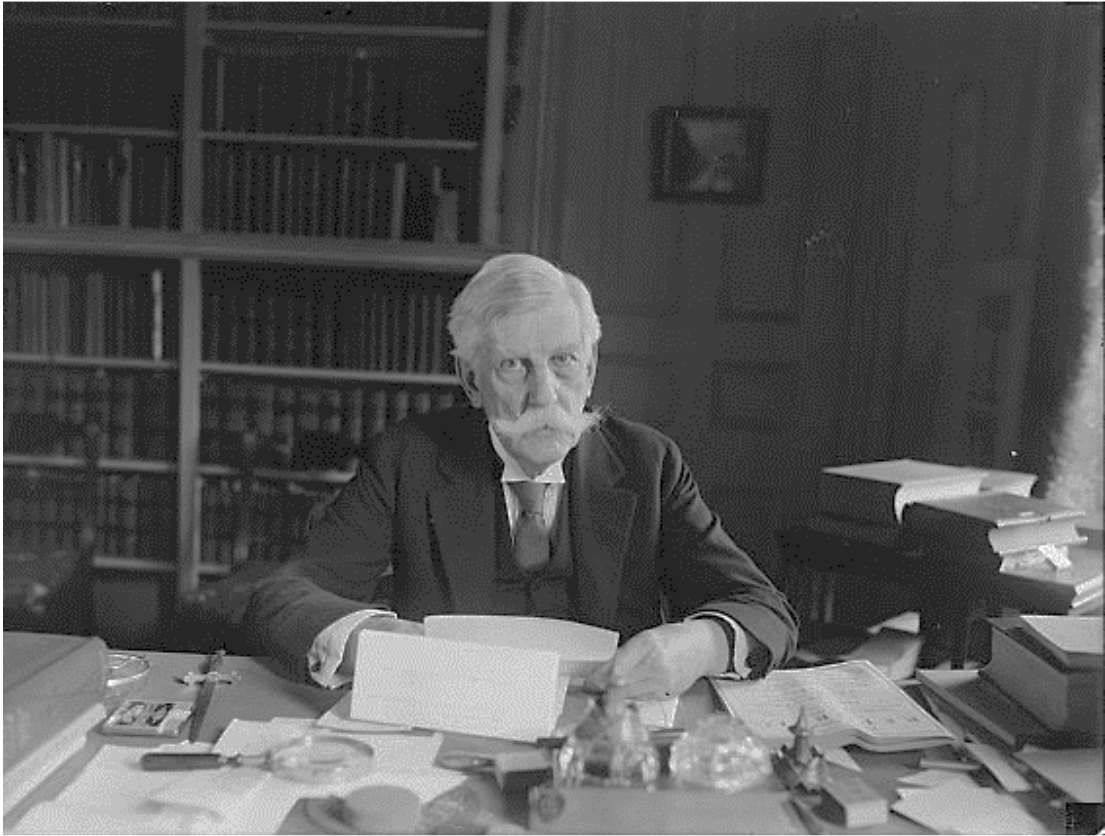


**Undated – probably 1920s  
Harris & Ewing Collection,  
Library of Congress**



**ca. 1924**  
**National Photo Company Collection,**  
**Library of Congress**





ca. 1924  
National Photo Company Collection,  
Library of Congress



**Undated – probably 1920s  
Harris & Ewing Collection,  
Library of Congress**



**The Justice on his 85th birthday,  
March 8, 1926  
National Photo Company Collection,  
Library of Congress**



**The Justice on his 85th birthday,  
March 8, 1926  
National Photo Company Collection,  
Library of Congress**



Posted MLHP: May 29, 2019