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John F. Sonnett Memorial Lecture Series

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John F. Sonnett Memorial Lecture Series: John F. Sonnett Memorial Lecture Series: The Constitution is Alive and Well

Sol Wachtler

New York Court of Appeals

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Introduction for:

WACHTLER

The Constitution of the United States of America is on permanent display in the National Archives in Washington D.C. In 1991, over one million people visited the National Archives to view it, the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. To protect and preserve the original copy of the Constitution, the National Archives installed an elaborate security system. The Constitution rests in a vacuum sealed, shatterproof bronze and glass display case. To preserve the document, the air inside the case has been replaced with helium. An armed security guard watches over the case and the visitors. When the Archives close, the whole display case is lowered twenty feet under ground into a fifty ton vault until the next day. These are just some of the steps the government has take to physically protect this valuable document.

The Constitution is more than our most cherished historic document. For over two hundred years the Constitution has helped define what it means to be an American. Its guarantees belong to each and every American; the Constitution is theirs to cherish and protect. Chief Judge Sol Wachtler of the New York Court of Appeals, devoted his Sonnett Lecture to a discussion of ways by which we can protect and preserve the guarantees of liberty found in the Constitution.

Chief Judge Wachtler urged his listeners to use contemporary measures of liberty and justice to define their rights as individuals. In Chief Judge Wachtler's opinion, the founding

fathers used The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights to describe in broad terms the principles we hold ourselves to as a nation, but left it to subsequent generations to flesh out their full meanings. According to the Chief Judge, these principles are served when each generation defines them in terms consistent with its sense of morality and justice. Look at previous generations' interpretations of equality, Chief Judge Wachtler urged, to see that conceptions of our most basic rights change in fundamental ways over time. Chief Judge Wachtler places the responsibility for maintaining goals described over two hundred years ago squarely on the shoulders of today's advocate. In doing so, he urged all attorneys to advocate for America, honoring the tradition to which John Sonnett subscribed and to which this lecture series is dedicated.