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Commentary: I Like My Professional Uniform

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I'll stipulate for the record that I'm no clotheshorse. To the contrary, on many mornings I'm sent back to the closet by my wife -- and, now, even by my daughters -- with instructions to get a tie that, "for crying out loud," goes with the rest of what I'm wearing. Sometimes I'm sent back twice.

For all that, though, I still have some pretty strong views on what constitutes appropriate professional attire for a lawyer. I've watched the evolution of what lawyers wear for the past 25 years with some interest and have to say [I'm not a big fan of the trajectory](#).

On Wall Street, where I started out in the mid-1980s, things sartorial were pretty hidebound. Colors ran the gamut from gray to blue, and it was always suits. The occasional [Beau Brummell](#) back then would wear a blue shirt with a white collar or a double-breasted suit, but that was about as far-out as it got. The one bit of flash for many of us was semi-loud suspenders, which the more knowledgeable always insisted on calling "braces." One older lawyer at our firm -- he'd been a prosecutor at Nuremberg -- laid down the law: Tan and khaki suits could be worn only between Memorial Day and Labor Day.

As a young lawyer, I experienced one particularly humiliating visit to an old-line New York City men's clothier where the young salesman serving me got in a fight with an older tailor who was balking at the butchering alterations that would have to be done to the trousers of a 44-long suit to make it fit my (then) narrow waist.

"Kid, just get yourself some nice gray slacks and a blue blazer," the tailor advised.

Sadly, in 1985, I could no more show up wearing that at my law firm than I could wear shorts and sandals.

A few years spent sitting at desks and at counsel tables in various courtrooms solved my "problem" with fitting into off-the-rack suits. The legal wardrobe may have been a bit stultifying in those early years, but no time was wasted on any morning agonizing over what to wear. Even after leaving Wall Street for North Carolina, little changed regarding my limited palette of lawyer fashion.

As is well-known, all that changed around the time of the "Internet Bubble." The Young Turks of information technology didn't wear ties, and so we, their new lawyers, shouldn't either.

"They're just not comfortable around lawyers wearing suits and ties," we were told by our younger colleagues, concerning this new entrepreneurial set.

I well remember lawyers being addressed at one world-famous software company by a lawyer wearing what looked to be a bowling shirt. And so we went down the slippery slope from Casual Fridays to Casual Every Day.

As a litigator, I could, usually, hold out on the excuse that I had to go to court (or might be called in on some emergency). As a young intern in a district attorney's office, I had seen how judges reacted to defendants who -- in an early 1980s urban fashion statement -- wore surgical scrubs to bail-revocation hearings. I wasn't about to let that happen to me by showing up in court in anything less than the lawyer's full old-fashioned regalia of suit and tie.

When the Internet Bubble finally burst, the profession -- surprisingly, in my view -- did not revert back to our pre-1995 attire. Instead, we moved into a new phase of constant fashion confusion. Few law firms had the stomach to tell young associates -- many making six-figure salaries right out of law school -- that they had to dress like the lawyers of old. In a recent *Wall Street Journal* piece, a young lawyer complained about how hard it was to get up every morning and put on a business suit as if he were being asked to put on a suit of armor (and chain mail, to boot).

LOOKING THE PART

For me, though, the calculus has been simple. I just couldn't imagine too many clients willing to pay more than \$500 an hour for legal advice to a guy wearing a knit shirt who looked as if he were going to hit the links as soon as this damn meeting was over. And \$300 an hour seemed a bit extreme for a young associate who looked as though he ought to be washing your car. We're

all familiar with the phenomenon of the "empty suit" who looks the part, but can't pull it off. But the opposite package -- the brilliant lawyer in wrinkled knit shirt -- is even more rare.

Now, I often find myself the only one in the room -- and, sometimes, it's a big room -- who's dressed the way lawyers used to dress. But I've decided I don't care anymore. When I go to the doctor or dentist, he or she better be wearing a white lab coat. The meal tastes better somehow when the chef wears a white coat, apron and toque. I feel good when my auto mechanic is wearing a jumpsuit with his name stitched on the pocket.

My suit is my uniform. Like the robe and wig of the English barrister, it marks me off from the rest. I'm comfortable with that. And every morning I'll wake up and put on my uniform, just like that barrister's wig, with no complaints.

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