
Air Raid Sirens and a Blank
Screen: Forging Connections
through Law in a Fractured
World

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Only fifteen minutes into my first online lecture for a classroom full of Ukrainian law students, an air raid alert sounded throughout their coastal city of Odesa. A Russian attack was feared. The students and their professor were forced to take immediate shelter. Our session was paused, the screen went blank after a hurried goodbye, and I was left in the safety of my Tokyo home wondering whether my new friends in Ukraine might be hurt or even killed.

Thankfully, it turned out to be a false alarm. We were able to resume our exploration of the law together not long thereafter. To my astonishment, the students had returned with the same curiosity and engagement they had exhibited before the interruption. They were undeterred, and their smiles, which matched those they had worn previously, revealed true resilience and perhaps how accustomed they had grown to constant threats in war-torn Ukraine.

That moment from nearly two years ago has stayed with me. It demonstrated, more powerfully than any article, textbook, or set of PowerPoint slides could, that legal education is never separate from

the world around us. It can, and must, respond to pressing realities, even those unfolding thousands of kilometers away.

Law is immeasurably more than a compilation of rules to be dusted off from time to time. It is the pursuit of justice, the protection of dignity, and the forging of bonds. In a world as in flux yet interconnected as ours, that viewpoint resonates more than ever. Whether we are studying constitutional rights, civil procedure, intellectual property, family law, or another specialty, law helps us grasp not only how societies function but also how we can truly make them better and, as with Ukraine, more peaceful.

This heightened awareness of law's power has transformed everything from my teaching to my research to conversations with colleagues over coffee.

Take a recent semester during which a student came to me frustrated while delving into Japan-based corporate sociopolitical activism (or in certain circles, CSA) and its legal and corporate governance repercussions. CSA covers instances when companies take public stances on politically or socially contentious issues such as climate justice or LGBTQ+ rights. We had examined CSA and quasi-CSA examples from the United States – like when Silicon Valley companies filed an amicus brief in 2017 opposing immigration restrictions – and from Europe, including Unilever's embrace of "Creating Shared Value" (CSV) and its broader involvement in shaping public policy around environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standards and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives.

But with respect to Japan? "I keep running into dead ends," she

said before I gently nudged her down an alternative path.

One week later, the student returned with a completely different energy. Her research had led her to assess how Japanese companies with operations or supply chains in Myanmar traversed the 2021 military coup. She was now enthusiastically contemplating the challenges boards confront when making real-time decisions involving stakeholder capitalism, human rights, and geopolitical risk. What began as a straightforward report transformed into a nuanced study of how corporate legal compliance intersects with moral responsibility amid the collapse of an entire legal system.

The un-siloed practice of law today is rife with such intersections, but it was noticeably partitioned back when I began my own legal career in venture capital. Never once did the environmental or social impact of a startup cross my mind. Part of my job was to simply get them “shined up” for an initial public offering (IPO) or acquisition. On the other side of the equation, our sophisticated investor clients from financial centers worldwide focused almost exclusively on getting in on the ground floor of the next Amazon (or, as we joked then, the next Enron – but Enron is a captivating story for another day). I cannot recall a single conversation about board diversity, sustainability, human rights due diligence, or corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Today’s legal landscape bears little resemblance to that bygone era (although admitting that reveals my age). A web of cross-border regulations now shapes corporate and investor behavior in ways unimaginable in decades past: The United Kingdom’s Modern Slavery

Act demands transparency about labor practices; the European Union's AI Act governs algorithmic decision-making while its Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) calls for environmental and human rights oversight; the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) extends digital protections beyond state lines; and Japan has embraced ESG disclosure requirements through its revised Corporate Governance Code. And across industries and national borders, shareholder activism has taken firm hold. In 2024, for example, the Japan market saw the second-highest level of activism globally.

The law will continue to evolve in myriad unpredictable ways as it always has, but change occurs at hyper-speed nowadays. Novel regulations – especially those addressing AI, data privacy, and the climate crisis – are transcending spheres and affecting corporations big and small, old and new. And legal education should continue to evolve in lockstep.

As for my modest contribution, I will keep striving to convey to students near and far what it means to treat law as a *sacred* field with genuine impact and meaning.

This takes me to another story related to Ukraine. I feel a deep sense of pride representing Rikkyo University and, to a limited extent, Japan-based legal professionals and scholars with each virtual course or online lecture I hold for a Ukrainian institution. The students and professors are hungry for knowledge, for international connection, and perhaps (understandably) for distraction from the daily realities of the ongoing war. Admittedly selfishly, I, in turn, draw immeasurable

inspiration from everyone on the other side of the screen.

In April of this year, I had the honor of giving closing remarks at the 7th International Scientific and Practical Conference hosted by Ukraine's Ministry of Finance and the State Tax University. The conference's theme of *Balancing Private Rights and Public Interest Under Martial Law* could not have been more poignant given the current martial law conditions in Ukraine. Participants from Austria, Azerbaijan, Czech Republic, Italy, Lithuania, and the United Kingdom joined Ukrainian colleagues and me in analyzing the impact of legal debates and education during crises and across geographies.

Ours is an undoubtedly volatile world. But, as this conference demonstrated, legal exploration grounded in rigor, stretched beyond borders, and guided by values constitutes a quiet act of resistance. It is a way of saying, even in the midst of air raid sirens and blank screens, that the law still matters, and so does how we teach it.

On occasion, a minor element of "how" I teach garners students' attention. They ask about my habit of wearing a tie and (usually) a sport coat or suit for every class. Well, the answer traces back to Professor Richard Nagareda from my law school days. Professor Nagareda was an expert (read: genius, in his case) in complex litigation, and I had the good fortune of learning mass torts from him. Professor Nagareda treated each class as if it were part of oral arguments in the trial of the century before the Supreme Court, and his admiration for the law permeated every aspect of his own "how": from his preparation to the admirable way he treated us law students to his appearance.



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(April 3, 2025)



A 2025 conference on martial law featuring participants from Ukraine, Austria, Lithuania, Czech Republic, Azerbaijan, the UK, Italy (unlisted), and Japan.

Being an introvert, I felt reluctant during my law school days to tell Professor Nagareda how much his approach and passion influenced me. When he died unexpectedly at a young age, the chance to express my gratitude slipped away. But Professor Nagareda's deeper lesson about treating legal education as *sacred* work lives on each time I

straighten my tie before heading into a lecture, whether with students in Ukraine, Japan, or elsewhere. And I recall that law transcends *time* as well as geography.

Now, I must admit that the tie does come off when circumstances demand. Every autumn around Halloween, I surprise my students – or at least those taking their first course with me – by donning a silly costume. The reason I do such an apparently out-of-character thing is to instill in my students the notion that you can be yourself wherever you are – on the 51st floor of a New York City skyscraper negotiating an M&A transaction, in a courtroom advocating before a panel of stern-faced judges, or at the front of a classroom packed with young minds from all corners of the globe.

Yes, decorum and professionalism call on us to act appropriately (typically without costumes!), but, deep inside, if you remain true to yourself, you will know you are carrying out your life's calling.

And what a noble – even *sacred* – calling it is to practice law, to engage in meaningful work for a corporation, nonprofit, or international body, or, in my case, to teach law.

May we never take that for granted, especially when we recognize that, somewhere in the world, students are returning to their classrooms or screens with smiles and passion intact after the air raid sirens have finally quieted down.