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A LIFETIME IN SERVICE OF THE RULE OF LAW

The Bolch Judicial Institute honored David F. Levi with the 2026 Bolch Prize for the Rule of Law, in recognition of a career devoted to judicial integrity, institutional leadership, and public service.

Photos by Les Todd

On April 15, 2026, the Bolch Judicial Institute at Duke Law School honored David F. Levi as the 2026 recipient of the Susan and Carl Bolch Jr. Prize for the Rule of Law, recognizing a career devoted to strengthening the rule of law and bringing together judges, lawyers, scholars, and policymakers to improve the administration of justice and support democratic institutions.

The evening celebrated not only Levi's accomplishments but also the ideals that have shaped his career: judicial integrity, collegiality, and a deep commitment to democratic institutions. Colleagues and friends reflected on his leadership and example, and a roundtable discussion on judicial collegiality underscored the themes of public service and institutional trust that ran throughout the program.

Levi is the immediate past president of the American Law Institute, the founding director of the Bolch Judicial Institute, and a former dean of Duke Law School. Over the course of his career, he served as the U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of California and as a judge of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of California for 17 years, including four years as chief judge.

The Bolch Prize recognizes individuals and organizations whose work promotes, strengthens, and protects the rule of law in the United States and around the world.

Kimberly J. Mueller, the David F. Levi Professor of the Practice of Law and Judicial Studies and director of the Bolch Judicial Institute, presented Levi with the award *(pictured at right)*. In accepting the 2026 Bolch Prize, Levi evoked the words of one of the country's most influential jurists.

"Ultimately, as Judge Learned Hand said of the spirit of liberty: For the rule of law to survive and thrive, it must reside in the hearts and minds of our fellow citizens in deeply embedded beliefs, emotions, and aspirations," Levi said. "And that's because there's a limit to what courts and judges and even the Constitution can do on their own to preserve the rule of law without public understanding and commitment."

He added, "Our shared dedication to a more perfect union that embodies the rule of law is noble and never-ending work. And it is more than humbling tonight to join with you who are so fully engaged in that effort."

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>
> *– David F. Levi*

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE 2026 BOLCH PRIZE CEREMONY

Opening the ceremony, Kerry Abrams, the James B. Duke and Benjamin N. Duke Dean of Duke Law School and Distinguished Professor of Law, noted that the evening was both a tribute to Levi's influence and an occasion to reflect on the principles that have guided his work.

"Tonight we will do two things at once," Abrams said. "We will celebrate David Levi's extraordinary impact on the legal profession, the judiciary, and the academy, and we will reflect on the ideals and issues he cares about so that we might continue the work he has set in motion." She added, "Your presence here

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Kim Mueller presents David Levi with the 2026 Bolch Prize.

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this evening, as distinguished speakers, guests, friends, and colleagues, is a testament to David's impact and legacy and to our shared belief in and commitment to the rule of law."

Throughout the evening, speakers returned to a common theme: Levi's career has been marked not only by public service and leadership but also by his ability to bring people together across institutions and professional roles in support of the justice system.

Richard H. Brodhead, president emeritus of Duke University, reflected on the search that brought Levi to Duke as dean of the law school and on the qualities that have defined his leadership across the bench, the academy, and the legal profession. He emphasized that Levi's work across many settings has reflected a conviction that law is foundational to human flourishing.

"You believe that the law is the greatest of human accomplishments," he said, speaking to Levi, "and that the law, the rule of law, is the precondition for every good thing that happens in human societies."

James C. Duff, interim dean of the University of Kentucky J. David Rosenberg College of Law and executive director of the Supreme Court Historical Society, emphasized Levi's sustained service to the judiciary and his long-standing work to protect judicial independence.

"When David left the bench, he did not abandon his devotion to the judicial branch," Duff said. "Instead, he used every opportunity he's been given to give voice to and advocate for protections to the judiciary's independence, and, thereby, the rule of law."

Mueller, who became the Bolch Judicial Institute's third director earlier this year, spoke of Levi's critical role in shaping the Institute's purpose and culture.

> "At a moment when confidence in institutions is being tested, David reminds us what principled leadership looks like in practice: steady, thoughtful, and grounded in a deep respect for the role the law plays in people's lives."
>
> *– Kimberly J. Mueller*

"All that we do stems from the vision shaped from the very beginning by David Levi, who as founding director of the Bolch Judicial Institute, worked closely with Carl and Susan to define its purpose and tone and to forge its enduring commitment to collaboration and the rule of law," Mueller said.

She also connected Levi's leadership to current times.

"At a moment when confidence in institutions is being tested, David reminds us what principled leadership looks like in practice: steady, thoughtful, and grounded in a deep respect for the role the law plays in people's lives," Mueller said. "His example reflects the values we celebrate tonight, and it reinforces why they matter and why they must endure."

Susan Bass Bolch, co-founder of the Bolch Judicial Institute, offered closing remarks, reflecting on the origins of the Institute and Levi's role in shaping it from the beginning.

"When Carl and I came to David with this vision, he immediately embraced it," Bolch said. "I don't think everyone understands fully how much of a partner he was with Carl and me as a founder."

In celebrating Levi, the evening also highlighted the larger mission that has defined his career: bringing people together across the legal profession to strengthen the institutions that sustain the rule of law.

– BY MICHELLE KAMINSKY, managing editor of *Judicature*

From left: Richard H. Brodhead, Kimberly J. Mueller, Kerry Abrams, and James C. Duff