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The Freedom to Say No

New city Labor Relations Commissioner Randy Levine missed the point when he stated to New York Newsday columnist Jim Dwyer: "It's quite different when you're a few years out of law school and a junior associate. They tell you do this job, and you say no I'm not going to do this job, what's your alternative? Quit your job." ["A Little Tale of Gambinos," Jan. 12]

The allure and practicality in choosing law as a profession remains the opportunity to say no. Once admitted into practice, a new lawyer remains free to hang her/his own shingle rather than compromise one's own morality and/or ethics. The only constraint on one's ability to say no should be the need to reasonably provide for one's family. A new lawyer has the opportunity, however, to develop a professional reputation, relationships, knowledge and skills that could still permit one to leave rather than lawyer for some person, concern or issue that conflicts with one's personal morality and/or ethics.

As I was about to enter the same law school where Levine was already enrolled, a learned former Court of Appeals clerk who was then my employer and remains my friend offered me the following advice, which I share freely with prospective and new attorneys: No matter what else you do as an attorney, make sure you are always in the position to say no.

It was good advice in August, 1978. It is good advice in January, 1994.

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Editor's note: The writer, an attorney, serves as counsel/chief of staff for City Councilman Sheldon S. Leffler.