

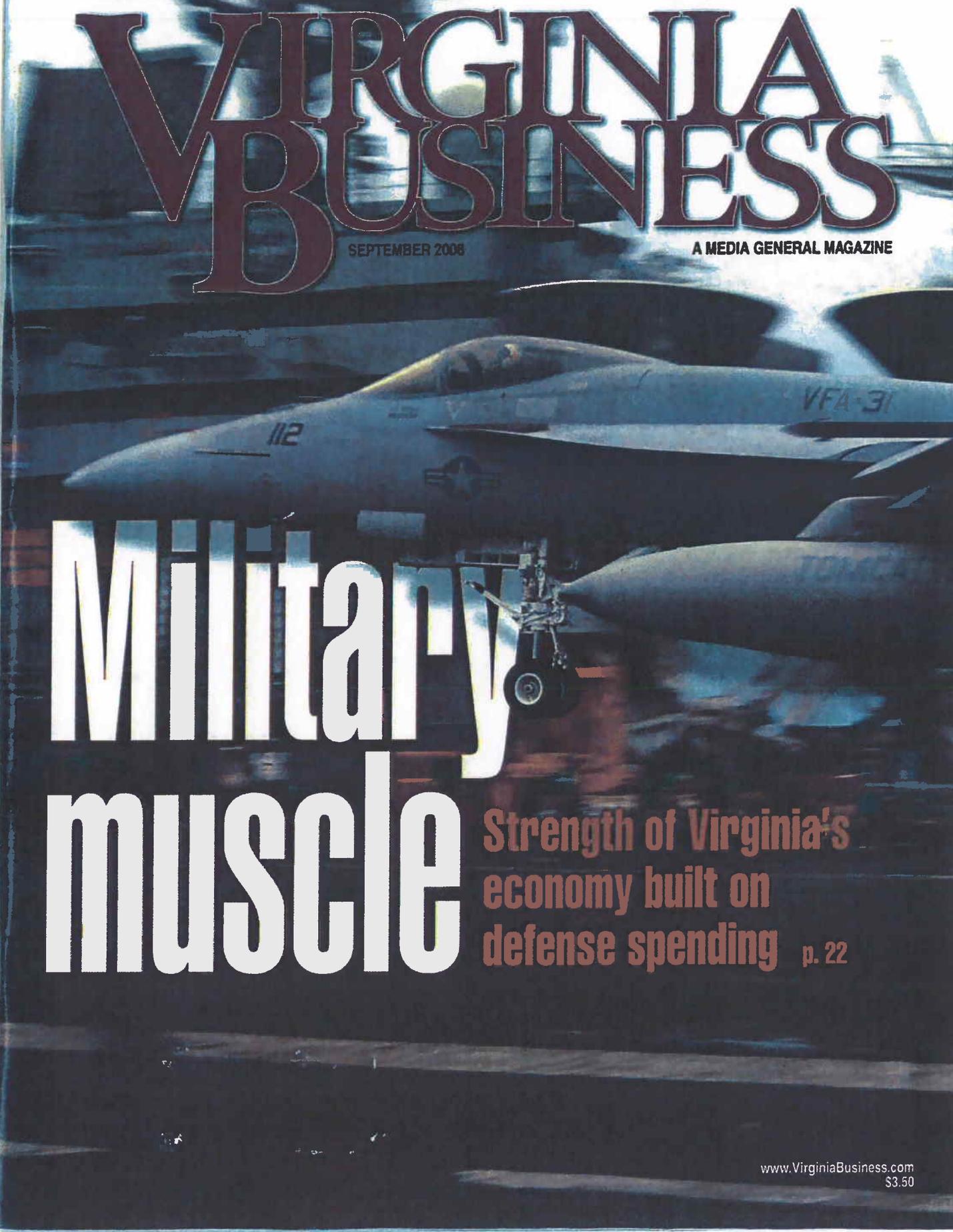
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A fighter jet, likely an F/A-18 Hornet, is shown on a runway at night. The aircraft is illuminated by ground lights, creating a dramatic scene with long shadows and highlights. The tail fin of the jet is visible, featuring the markings 'VFA-31' and '112'. The runway surface is dark, with some lights visible in the distance.

# Military muscle

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# Explaining the rule of law

## Lawyers to lead program educating middle-school students

by Donna C. Gregory

**W**e are a nation of laws, and no one is above them.

That simple statement is so much a part of the American fabric that sometimes its fundamental truth is forgotten — or worse still, it's maligned when the justice system appears to fail.

Mike Pace, managing partner for the Roanoke law firm Gentry Locke Rakes & Moore, hopes his newest brainchild, the Rule of Law Project, will change those perceptions. A partnership between the Virginia Bar Association (VBA) and the Virginia Law Foundation, the project will recruit attorney volunteers to teach the basics of the rule of law to seventh- and eighth-graders as part of civics classes in Southwest Virginia, starting this school year.

Pace came up with the idea after his daughter, Cate, studied the Constitution and other foundations of U.S. government as a seventh-grader at Andrew Lewis Middle School in Salem. "The rule of law means that everyone in America has agreed that we are all in this together, governed by law, and that nobody is above the law, not the president, not the Army, the Navy or Marines, and that's what makes America work," says Pace, who is president of the VBA. "I'm not sure that in middle school that message is getting communicated in a way



Tim Isaacs and Rita Bishop of Roanoke City Public Schools believe the program will impress students with the importance of civics and history.

that's understood by the students. I realized lawyers really needed to take the lead on teaching the rule of law at the middle-school level."

Pace approached the VBA board of governors about starting a lawyer-led program. Ultimately, the Virginia Law Foundation awarded the VBA a \$50,000 grant to develop and implement the

curriculum.

This school year, the Rule of Law Project will be offered in Roanoke City, Salem and Roanoke County school systems. Lawyers are expected to visit their first classrooms in February. Eventually, the VBA plans to expand the project statewide.

"This program makes very real to students why it's important to study civics,

The Virginia Law Foundation

The Virginia Bar Association established the Virginia Law Foundation in 1974 to:

- provide grants for programs that educate the public about law and the legal profession.
- provide legal services to the poor.
- offer continuing education for Virginia attorneys and
- support internships for Virginia law students.



Mike Pace created the Rule of Law Project after his daughter studied the fundamentals of U.S. government.

history and government," says Tim Isaacs, director of curriculum development at Roanoke City Public Schools. "It's about being a good citizen. We depend on the law to survive, and that means every citizen has to appreciate the history of those laws — why they exist — and understand that the law is changing. We are one of the few countries where laws and leaders are changed without force, and I think kids take that for granted."

Rita Bishop, the superintendent of Roanoke City Public Schools, says the program offers students the opportunity to understand one of the basic concepts of the American system. "It enables our students to have an exposure that they couldn't have by any other means. If you say 'rule of law' to kids, they will say, 'huh?' But this gets to the fundamentals of what our country is based on."

The project also will give students exposure to lawyers and their craft. In more urban areas where crime and poverty are issues, this may provide some students with a more favorable impression of the legal system. "Lawyers have just as much of a protective responsibility for citizens as the police department or the courts. It's an opportunity for children to see a different face ...[and] to change perception," says Isaacs.

Guy Tower, the VBA's executive director, says the project will foster two-way communication. "I think [the students and attorneys] have a lot to learn from each other ... we all benefit when young people come to adulthood understanding the rights and responsibilities of being a good citizen."

Another benefit may be stimulating interest in civic affairs among students long before they are old enough to vote. Mary Ann Delano, president of the Virginia Law Foundation, says, "We think it has an impact beyond this initial year because kids do go home and talk to their parents and they talk to others."

A committee plans to finish the program's curriculum by early fall. A DVD featuring prominent judges and attorneys will be produced by the end of the year. The school presentation will include showing the DVD and a lecture by a VBA attorney.

"It has the possibility of causing middle-school students to be more aware of the reasons for the freedoms we enjoy and to become more active and engaged citizens as they grow older," says Pace. "Maybe we can change the world one student at a time." Vb