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TOP WHITE COLLAR LAWYERS 2020

Elliot R. Peters

Peters moved from the prosecution to the defense side in 1991, after winning the U.S. Department of Justice's Medal for Superior Performance as an assistant U.S. attorney in the Southern District of New York. The Kecker, Van Nest & Peters name partner has since represented clients in significant cases, including cyclist Lance Armstrong, plaintiffs' attorney Bill Lerach, investment banker Frank Quattrone and—in a pro bono role—numerous California prison inmates.

In the days following the 2020 elections, however, he remained haunted by one aspect of his former career. "A source of tremendous shame for me is that I was hired at the SDNY by Rudy Giuliani," he said, naming the 1980s-era Southern District U.S. attorney who was most recently propounding evidence-free claims of election malfeasance disadvantaging Donald Trump. "He was respected back then, and now he's just a disgrace."

As for the justice department he once served and now often opposes in court, Peters said he longs for the day when President-elect Joe Biden appoints an honorable attorney general. "Biden won't have a corrupt agenda, and neither do most in the department now. It's just been the AG himself." Peters likes the prospect that former Acting U.S. Attorney General Sally Yates could be named to the top Department of Justice post. "We had her to an event at our firm a while back, and she's

a straight-shooter," he said. Yates is currently a partner at King & Spalding LLP.

Peters also knows another figure who could be involved in any post-Trump investigations and prosecutions. "I went to elementary school with Cyrus Vance [Jr.]," he said, naming the current New York County district attorney. "You know, he was a white collar defense lawyer in Seattle for a time. I don't think he'll stop going after Trump."

At present, Peters is preparing for a 2021 trial in Riverside County, where client John Wessman, a prominent Coachella Valley real estate developer, is accused of bribing a former Palm Springs mayor in connection with the redevelopment of a shopping mall. *People v. Bougnet, Meaney & Wessman*, RIF1700618 (Riverside Co. Super. Ct. filed Feb. 14, 2017).

"My client is a prolific developer and a wonderful character who worked on a highly popular project that revitalized downtown Palm Springs," Peters said. "I like my chances. I don't think he's guilty, and in our line of work, that makes the case more stressful."

In a motion to dismiss, Peters contended that prosecutors unfairly swayed grand jurors to return an indictment. "When witnesses tried to explain why City officials legitimately supported Wessman's projects on the merits, the prosecutors quickly cut them off, and inserted their own, prejudicial commentary," Peters wrote.



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"This case is a big deal in Palm Springs," he said. "The responsibility of representing someone who is not guilty is huge. The deck is stacked, you have an uphill battle and you can't rest."

— John Roemer

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