

Help, I'm in Legal Trouble. Get Me John Kecker

Near Chinatown, in San Francisco's busy financial district, stand the law offices of Kecker and Van Nest. Nestled into this chic structure with exposed wooden beams and views of the surrounding bay is the headquarters of the man who attorneys overwhelmingly agree is the person they would want to represent them if trouble ever strikes. In a 2001 issue of *California Lawyer* magazine, John Kecker was picked by his peers more often than anyone else when attorneys were asked whom they would turn to if faced with serious charges. (He is also the top point-getter among this year's Northern California Super Lawyers.)

Kecker, a decorated Marine, civil activist and famed trial lawyer, has made a name for himself in high-profile cases around the country. He was chosen to be the chief prosecutor in *United States v. Oliver North* during the Iran-Contra scandal and is currently representing investment banker Frank Quattrone, convicted last year on obstruction charges.

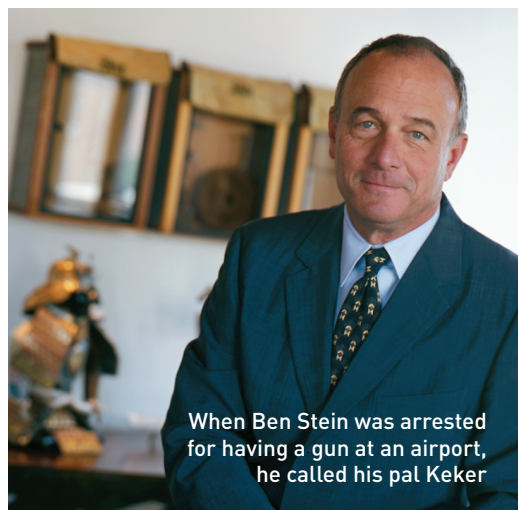
Kecker's office is filled with Napoleon busts and images of the Magnificent Seven, testaments to his aggressive courtroom tactics and his past as a platoon leader in Vietnam. The room also contains a fire helmet and a plaque commemorating his time as the president of the San Francisco Police Commission. But look around his office, and there are no memorabilia of his big cases. No pictures of him shouting to the press while he was representing the famous lawyer Patrick Hallinan. No clippings about his legendary backroom wheeling and dealing during the prosecution of former Enron executive Andrew Fastow and the jury trial of Genentech. No photos with his celebrity clients, such as George Lucas and Eldridge Cleaver. The only case that he displays is *Neary v. Regents of Univ. of California*, in which George Neary, a cattle farmer, was awarded \$7 million after an impassioned Kecker persuaded the jury that university veterinarians had libeled his client by claiming that Neary's cows were killed by neglect, not by the toxins sprayed by the government.

The lawyers interviewed for this article generally agreed that what makes Kecker one of the great lawyers of this era is that he truly cares about his cases. There are plenty of attorneys who are good with a jury, well prepared and hard working, but Kecker is passionate about his clients. When Russian programmer Dmitri Sklyarov was arrested by the FBI, Kecker rushed to work for him pro bono as a matter of principle. "I think he is being unjustly accused, and that's the kind of case I like to do," Kecker told the *Recorder*. Sklyarov

*He's the lawyer
 lawyers want to hire*

was allowed to return home in time for Christmas.

When actor, attorney and columnist Ben Stein was arrested after going through a metal detector at an airport with a gun almost 20 years ago, he called on his old friend and Yale Law School colleague Kecker to defend him. Stein was in the process of moving into a dangerous neighborhood, and thought it was OK to bring the weapon onto the plane as long as it was unloaded, but he was charged and thrown in jail nonetheless. Kecker swiftly moved into action. "He got them to drop the charges," says Stein, a note of gratitude and nostalgia drifting into his famously monotone voice. "And he even got my gun back." Stein adds, "If it came down to it, he is the one person I would want on my side."



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It seems almost every other lawyer would agree. "He knows how to shut all the doors and windows before he pops the big question to a witness," says Hallinan, who was acquitted of racketeering and drug smuggling charges under Kecker's watch. "He's tenacious."

"I consider myself reasonable but very aggressive," Kecker says. "Aggressive means you don't beat around the bush. You don't make it easy for witnesses and judges to thwart you." Or, we might add, for his opposing counsel either. He once referred to Hallinan's prosecuting attorney Tony White as "a chicken-shit who is afraid to try a case against me."

"I was very pleased to see him in my rear-view mirror," Brian Lysaght of Piper Rudnick told *Bloomberg* after Kecker withdrew from a lawsuit against his client.

As Kecker's reputation grows, so does his firm. What started out as a two-attorney office in 1978 is now a tremendously successful practice bustling with 49 lawyers that was recently named "Litigation Boutique of the Year" by *The American Lawyer* magazine. "He's highly paid and should be," says Stein. "He's one of the few people who I feel are more capable than I am." ❖

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