Supplement to the Los Angeles and San Francisco
Daily Journal
SEPTEMBER 30, 2026

Top 100 Lawyers AND DISTINGUISHED COUNSEL



JOHN KEKER

KEKER, VAN NEST & PETERS LLP
LITIGATION
SAN FRANCISCO

For anyone who came of age in the 1980s, the Iran-Contra affair offered political and courtroom drama on a scale that seemed almost cinematic — a real-life precursor to "A Few Good Men" and its famous confrontation over truth, power and obedience.

At the center of the prosecution of Lt. Col. Oliver North was John Keker, then a young lawyer making an argument that went well beyond the charges against one White House aide. Years before Tom Cruise's Lt. Daniel Kaffee confronted Jack Nicholson's Col. Nathan R. Jessup on the witness stand, Keker — himself a former U.S. Marine who was wounded in Vietnam — stood before North's jury and made his own argument about duty and truth.

"Telling the truth is something you learned at your mother's knee," Keker told the jury. "Government by deception is not a free government. Government by deception is not a democratic government. Government by deception is not a government under the rule of law."

Nearly four decades later, those themes — government power, individual rights and accountability — still animate Keker's work.

Asked what kinds of cases interest him now, the founder of Keker, Van Nest & Peters did not hesitate.

"Cases where grotesque injustice is happening," he said.

Much of that has meant pro bono litigation involving immigration and the Trump administration. Keker pointed with particular pride to litigation involving an immigration detention facility in California City, where his firm and other lawyers succeeded in obtaining appointment of a monitor.

Keker said the monitor subsequently issued a report sharply criticizing conditions at the facility.

"We're very proud of that," he said.

He is also working on a case with roots considerably further in the past — a murder prosecution involving a client Keker represented in 1982.

The client was accused then of murdering his wife, but the case was dismissed before a preliminary hearing. More than four decades later, prosecutors have again charged him.

Keker is serving not as trial counsel but as a witness supporting a due process challenge based on the prejudice caused by the passage of time. He said at least 20 witnesses have died, others have lost their competency or memories, and another man the defense believes may have committed the killing died in 2008.

"This case has nothing new," Keker said, calling the renewed prosecution "an outrage."

What concerns him now is how difficult it has become for younger lawyers to acquire the courtroom experience his generation took for granted.

When Keker began practicing, he said, lawyers could try antitrust, criminal, trade secret, patent and securities cases without being confined to narrow specialties.

"I think it's gotten much harder now to do that," he said, largely because so few cases reach trial.

Alternative dispute resolution may be effective at settling disputes, Keker acknowledged, but he is no fan of what it has done to trial practice.

"I personally hate ADR," he said. "I think it's taken all the fun out of practicing law."

The firm Keker started with Bill Brockett in 1978 has changed just as dramatically. What began as two lawyers and two secretaries has grown into Keker, Van Nest & Peters, with roughly 140 to 150 lawyers and alumni scattered across the judiciary, government and corporate legal departments.

Keker marvels at what grew from fairly modest ambitions.

"My dream was to make a living for my wife and two kids," he said.

Today, he takes particular satisfaction in the lawyers who passed through the firm, including judges, in-house counsel and California Attorney General Rob Bonta.

"I'm stunned at how well it's happened," Keker said.

As for Keker himself, he insists the trial-lawyer chapter is finally coming to an end.

"I'm not going to try any more cases," he said. "I'm done."

Then, after the interviewer expressed a little skepticism, Keker left himself just enough room.

"Remains to be seen," he said.

Reprinted with permission from the *Daily Journal*. ©2026 Daily Journal Corporation. All rights reserved. Reprinted by ReprintPros 949-702-5390.

Reprinted with permission from the *Daily Journal*. ©2026 Daily Journal Corporation. All rights reserved. Reprinted by ReprintPros 949-702-5390.