

THE GENTLEMAN LAWYER: DAVID ISBELL

By Interviewer William N. Sinclair

Anyone who worked with, or against, David Isbell would likely say the same thing: a fine lawyer and, above all else, a gentleman. Isbell was a long-time partner with the law firm of Covington & Burling in Washington D.C. In a career that spanned half a century, he did it all. A staff member of the Civil Rights Commission in the 1950s, president of the D.C. Bar Association in the 1980s, and a long-time delegate to the American Bar Association, he argued federal appeals on behalf of convicted mafiosos at one end of the spectrum while counseling accountants regarding industry standards on the other.

While proud of his accomplishments for his private clients, he was equally proud of his *pro bono* efforts. Isbell authored Covington's *pro bono* policy shortly after becoming a partner in the mid-1960s and was the first chair of the firm's *pro bono* committee. A long-time advocate on behalf of the ACLU (and long-time member of its national board, for which he was a significant voice on major policy issues), he offered the following amusing story. The first time he met then Chief Judge David Bazelon of the D.C. Circuit, the Chief couldn't understand how Isbell authored so many ACLU briefs while having a full-time practice with Covington. In Isbell's words, he had "to deflate [the Chief's] assessment" by explaining that he coordinated the efforts, and as a result, had his name on the briefs, but often was not the lead author.

But while his legal career was interesting, his life was just as interesting if not more interesting. As a boy coming to age in the Great Depression, he shipped off for France with his family in the 1930s for several years while his parents taught at a school there. Sensing the war clouds accumulating over Europe, the family came back to the States in the late 1930s, giving Isbell a rather idyllic existence as a teen on Long Island. A graduate of Yale College and Yale Law School, his time in New Haven provided him with quite a number of stories: from having federal appeals judge (and longtime Yale Law professor) Jerome Frank preside over his first wedding to being a fellow student of former Senator Arlen Specter to editing a piece by John F. Kennedy that, in Mr. Isbell's mind, was just not up to snuff.

But the near-misses are just as interesting as the accomplishments. Isbell turned down clerkships with Justices Black and Warren because both conditioned their offers on his promise that he would not return to Covington after the clerkships, being concerned because the Firm (at that time) had the most cases before the Court. Then there was the drowning baby he saved in India while lecturing for the United States Information Agency, a now-defunct federal agency devoted to public diplomacy. And of course, the nuclear missile test he observed while serving as a US Army officer during the Korean War.

Through it all, Isbell not only maintained cherished relationships with family and friends, but became one of the finest practitioners of the art while distinguishing himself above all as civil, courteous and professional – a true gentleman. A long-time adjunct professor at Georgetown University and the University of Virginia, where he taught professional responsibility, Isbell at the end of his career made a name for himself as a go-to lawyer for professional responsibility matters. And if you read his story, you'll understand why.