

## **Benjamin Civiletti: An Attorney General's Life**

By Patricia Connell Shakow

*Based on Benjamin Civiletti's Oral History for the D.C. Circuit Historical Society*

Many Washington lawyers will know former Attorney General Benjamin Civiletti personally because he has lived and worked in this area for his entire career. Born in Peekskill, New York and raised in the Midwest, he came to Baltimore to attend Johns Hopkins University as an undergraduate in 1954. And though he initially enrolled in law school at Columbia, he transferred after his first year to return to Baltimore and finish his education at the University of Maryland Law School. After clerking for U.S. District Court Judge Calvin Chestnut, he began the kind of career familiar to attorneys here, shifting from private practice to government service, and he excelled in both areas.

Rejecting the advice of an uncle who told him to specialize in trusts and estates because there was less pressure and the hours were better – the same advice given to female law students in my day – he was determined to be a litigator in the area of criminal law, a combination that ensured both stress and long hours. In the United States Attorney's Office in Baltimore, he was in his element handling a variety of cases. Later, he joined the Venable firm in Baltimore, where he practiced before and after his service in the Justice Department, primarily representing large corporations in criminal matters.

If you'd like to learn how one is chosen for a high post in the Carter Administration without having any political connections, read on, for that is Mr. Civiletti's story. Serving first as Assistant Attorney General in the Criminal Division, then Deputy AG under Griffin Bell, he rose to the top job when Mr. Bell resigned half way through his term. And if you remember, or simply want to learn about any of the following matters in which the young Attorney General was involved, read on: ABSCAM, COINTELPRO, Koreagate, Billy Carter and Bert Lance, Hamilton Jordan and the first independent counsel investigation, the Greylord scandal involving corrupt Chicago judges, the Mariel boat lift from Cuba, the Patty Hearst and Puerto Rican terrorist commutations, and the American hostages in Iran. In the last case, Mr. Civiletti became the first, and to my knowledge the only, Attorney General to argue before the International Court of Justice on behalf of the hostages. Finally, don't miss the case of the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration and the shooting shoe.