

A Call for Congress to Reform Federal Criminal Discovery

March 15, 2012

We, the undersigned, are current and former judges, prosecutors, law enforcement officers, defense lawyers, conservative leaders and others, all with substantial professional experience within or personal dedication to the efficient operation of the criminal justice system. We call upon Congress to address the persistent problems with discovery in the federal criminal justice system by immediately enacting legislation that clarifies federal prosecutors' obligations to disclose information to the defense and that provides appropriate remedies when prosecutors fail to do so.

Over the past few years, we have seen a troubling number of cases involving failures to disclose evidence to the defense pursuant to *Brady v. Maryland* and its progeny. Most notable was the prosecution of the late Senator Ted Stevens. The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) moved in April 2009 to set aside the jury verdict in Senator Stevens's case and dismiss the indictment after discovering that prosecutors had withheld evidence they were required to disclose—evidence that would have impeached the trial testimony of a key government witness and bolstered the Senator's defense. A subsequent, court-ordered investigation concluded that the prosecution had been "permeated by the systematic concealment of significant exculpatory evidence which would have independently corroborated Senator Stevens's defense and his testimony, and seriously damaged the testimony and credibility of the government's key witness."¹

In addition to the Stevens case, a string of recent cases has emerged in which the defense eventually discovered undisclosed evidence that was constitutionally required to have been disclosed. For example, in December 2011, a judge in the Central District of California vacated the government's conviction of the Lindsey Manufacturing Company and two of its executives for violations of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act. The judge found that the government had "recklessly failed to comply with its discovery obligations" pursuant to *Brady*, among other forms of misconduct throughout the prosecution.² A month later, federal prosecutors in Massachusetts moved to dismiss charges against defendant Andrew Berke related to an illegal Internet pharmacy. The prosecutors' dismissal immediately followed a statement from the trial judge that he was going to have to dismiss the charges himself based on the fact that a law enforcement officer had destroyed "apparently exculpatory" evidence in the case and prosecutors had not notified the defense when they learned of this fact.³ In 2009, federal prosecutors in the District of Montana failed to disclose compelling information impeaching a key witness's credibility in the criminal case against W.R. Grace Corporation and three of its former executives.⁴ All defendants in the case were ultimately found not guilty. Around the same time, in the District of Massachusetts, a federal prosecutor failed to produce prior inconsistent statements of a police officer witness in the prosecution of Darwin Jones, charged with possessing a

¹ Report to Hon. Emmet G. Sullivan of Investigation Conducted Pursuant to the Court's Order dated April 7, 2009, at 1, *In re Special Proceedings*, Misc. No. 09-0198 (D.D.C. Mar. 15, 2012).

² *United States v. Aguilar*, 2011 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 138439 at *3 (C.D. Cal. Dec. 1, 2011).

³ Milton J. Valencia, *U.S. Drops Charges in Internet Drug Case*, Boston Globe, Jan. 18, 2012.

⁴ Order, *United States v. W.R. Grace et al.*, No. CR-05-07-M (D. Mont. Apr. 28, 2009).

firearm as a felon. When the violation was discovered, the court reprimanded the prosecution for its “dismal history of intentional and inadvertent violations of the government’s duties to disclose in cases assigned to this court,”⁵ though ultimately decided sanctions were not warranted in this particular case as the violation had been “unintentional rather than deliberate.”⁶

Failure to disclose *Brady* evidence is a constitutional violation that by its very nature often goes undiscovered—anything that the government chooses not to disclose to the defense generally remains unknown. So, it is impossible to know how often these violations occur. Still, a 2010 USA Today investigation documented 86 cases since 1997 in which judges found that federal prosecutors had failed to turn over evidence that they were legally required to disclose.⁷ Reports by a host of organizations have reached similar conclusions about the frequency of these violations. Suffice it to say that *Brady* violations—which include both intentional misconduct and inadvertent errors—occur with sufficient frequency that Congress must act.

Our experience leads us to believe that the vast majority of prosecutors act in good faith to fulfill their constitutional and legal obligations. However, federal courts, the DOJ and other entities have for years articulated inconsistent, shifting, and sometimes contradictory standards for criminal discovery, leaving it up to individual prosecutors to navigate this legal maze and determine the scope of their obligations to disclose information.

The constitutional obligation to disclose such evidence arises from the 1963 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brady*, which held that prosecutors have a constitutional obligation to provide the defense with “evidence favorable to an accused . . . where the evidence is material either to guilt or to punishment.”⁸ That obligation alone can cause confusion. As a group of former DOJ officials wrote in an *amicus* brief filed in *Connick v. Thompson* in 2010, “complying with *Brady* and its progeny is not always simple or self-evident.”⁹ The difficulty primarily arises because prosecutors must make a judgment call about whether evidence is sufficiently “material” that *Brady* and subsequent cases would require disclosure of the evidence to the defense. The Supreme Court has held that evidence is material “when there is a reasonable probability that, had the evidence been disclosed, the result of the proceeding would have been different.”¹⁰ Materiality does not require a showing that the defendant “would more likely than not have received a different verdict with the evidence, only that the likelihood of a different result is great enough to undermine confidence in the outcome of the trial.”¹¹ When a prosecutor tries to determine whether particular evidence meets this test for

⁵ *United States v. Jones*, 686 F. Supp. 2d 147, 148 (D. Mass. 2010) (citing *United States v. Jones*, 620 F. Supp. 2d 163, 165 (D. Mass. 2009)).

⁶ *Id.* at 149.

⁷ Brad Heath and Kevin McCoy, *Prosecutors’ Conduct Can Tip Justice Scales*, USA Today, Sep. 23, 2010.

⁸ 373 U.S. 83, 87 (1963).

⁹ Brief for *Amici Curiae* Former Federal Civil Rights Officials and Prosecutors Wan J. Kim *et al.* in Support of Respondent at 2, *Connick v. Thompson*, 131 S.Ct. 1350 (2011) (No. 09-571).

¹⁰ *Smith v. Cain*, No. 10-8145, slip op. at 2-3, 132 S. Ct. 627 (Jan. 10, 2012) (citing *Cone v. Bell*, 556 U.S. 449, 469-70 (2009)).

¹¹ *Id.* at 3 (citing *Kyles v. Whitley*, 514 U.S. 419, 434 (1995)) (internal quotation marks omitted).

materiality before trial begins, the prosecutor necessarily engages in speculation and even guesswork about the hypothetical impact that the evidence will have in the future trial. Oftentimes, the prosecutor simply cannot know for certain what the impact of the evidence will be.

Compounding the confusion surrounding *Brady* obligations are the separate, competing obligations established by local court rules, state ethics rules and other sources. For example, 49 states have adopted some version of Model Rule of Professional Conduct (MRPC) 3.8(d), which requires a prosecutor to “make timely disclosure to the defense of all evidence or information known to the prosecutor that tends to negate the guilt of the accused or mitigates the offense[.]”¹² MRPC 3.8(d) is not limited to information that would be deemed “material” pursuant to *Brady* but is meant to demand more extensive disclosure than the constitutional baseline of *Brady*.¹³

Further confusion exists beyond the scope of what must be disclosed to related matters, such as the timing of disclosures and prosecutors’ obligations to seek out exculpatory evidence unknown to them. For example, the Jencks Act provides that federal prosecutors do not have to turn over prior witness statements to the defense until after the witness has testified.¹⁴ Thus, prosecutors oftentimes withhold such statements—which are otherwise subject to *Brady* disclosure—until after the witness has testified, leaving the defense very limited time to understand and make use of the information during the trial.

In addition, the rare actions of some federal prosecutors who knowingly and intentionally violate their obligations are cause for even more concern. Currently, such misconduct often goes unpunished, as federal prosecutors are immune from civil liability, and criminal liability is extraordinarily rare. Further, state bar associations do not robustly enforce the rules against prosecutors who intentionally do not disclose information to the defense.¹⁵

Amid previous calls for reform, the DOJ has claimed that it could handle the problem of nondisclosure internally and added language to the U.S. Attorneys Manual instructing federal prosecutors to comply with constitutional requirements to disclose material evidence pursuant to *Brady*. Violations continued to occur despite this new guidance. Later, in the wake of the Stevens case, the U.S. Attorney General spoke out publicly and created a working group that reviewed discovery practices. The DOJ then issued additional guidelines and required additional training for line prosecutors as to their constitutional obligations. However, while commendable, these actions have not solved the problem, and violations have continued to occur.

¹² See David Keenan *et al.*, *The Myth of Prosecutorial Accountability After Connick v. Thompson*, 121 Yale L.J. Online 203, 221-33 (2011) (describing the versions of MRPC 3.8 adopted in the states). The McDade Amendment made state ethics rules applicable to federal prosecutors practicing in a state. 28 U.S.C. § 530B.

¹³ ABA Comm. on Ethics and Prof’l Responsibility, Formal Op. 09-454 (2009).

¹⁴ 18 U.S.C. § 3500.

¹⁵ See Keenan *et al.*, *supra* note 12, at 213-220 (discussing prosecutorial immunity from liability and several studies documenting the infrequency of state bar disciplinary actions).

We have concluded that *Brady* violations, whether intentional or inadvertent, have occurred for too long and with sufficient frequency that Congress must act. Self-regulation by the DOJ has been tried and has failed. It is ultimately not a solution to the injustices that continue to occur. Nor is an amendment to the Federal Rules of Criminal Procedure a solution. Such a proposal has been considered at least twice by the Advisory Committee on the Rules of Criminal Procedure, only to be rejected by either the Advisory Committee or the full Standing Committee on Rules of Practice and Procedure, at least partly in deference to the DOJ's attempts to address the issue internally. But, again, DOJ's own internal efforts have not remedied the problem.

Only federal legislation can adequately address these continued violations by federal prosecutors, creating a uniform standard for what must be disclosed and what remedies will exist for non-disclosure, and sending a strong message to the DOJ that there will be consequences when federal prosecutors violate their discovery obligations.

The legislation that we envision would do the following:

1. Provide that the scope of the prosecution's discovery obligation extends to all information—regardless of admissibility at trial—that could reasonably be considered favorable to the defendant, with respect to pretrial motions, guilt, impeachment of witnesses, or sentencing. Requiring disclosure of all “favorable” information requires less room for interpretation on the part of the prosecutors than a materiality standard.
2. Clarify that prosecutors have an obligation to exercise due diligence in obtaining any favorable evidence, beyond what is in their possession, from other parties involved in the investigation and/or prosecution, including federal, state and local law enforcement or other agencies.
3. Require that prosecutors disclose favorable information without delay, as soon as they become aware of it, thus clarifying that the Jencks Act does not trump this disclosure requirement. If the government has legitimate objections to disclosure due to concerns about a witness' safety, a desire to protect classified information, or other reasons, prosecutors may raise those concerns with the court, which can issue a protective order if appropriate.
4. Impose an appropriate remedy in the case of non-compliance, including exclusion of evidence or witness testimony, a new trial, dismissal of the charges, or other remedies to be determined by the court. Courts generally have the power to fashion appropriate remedies under their general supervisory powers, but this law would clarify that the court shall use that power to fashion an appropriate remedy each time a violation of the disclosure requirement has occurred.

The time has come for Congress to act. Clarifying *Brady* obligations will ultimately strengthen effective law enforcement. All previous attempts to cure this problem—a problem that goes to the heart of the fairness and accuracy of the criminal justice system—have failed. Nothing short of the legislation described above is adequate, and we urge Congress to take immediate action to enact it.

Signatories as of March 29, 2012:

Elizabeth K. Ainslie, Former Assistant United States Attorney, Eastern District of Pennsylvania (1979-84); Chief, Frauds Section (1983-84)

Lee Altschuler, Former Assistant United States Attorney, Northern District of California (1983-93); Chief, Silicon Valley Division, U.S. Attorney's Office, Northern District of California (1993-98)

Jonathan Bach, Cooley LLP; Former Federal Public Defender; Southern District of New York (1997-2001)

Bob Barr, Member of U.S. Congress (R-GA) (1995-2003); CEO, Liberty Strategies, LLC; Former United States Attorney, Northern District of Georgia (1986-90)

Donald L. Beckner, Former United States Attorney, Middle District of Louisiana (1977-81)

Elliot S. Berke, Co-Chair of the Political Law Group at McGuireWoods; Former Counsel to the Speaker of the House and Senior Associate Independent Counsel

Rick Berne, Former Assistant United States Attorney, Northern District of California (1978-80) and Eastern District of New York (1976-78)

Rebecca A. Betts, Former United States Attorney; Southern District of West Virginia (1994-2001)

Martha Boersch, Former Assistant United States Attorney, Northern District of California (1992-2004) (Chief of the Securities Fraud Section (2001-02), Chief of the Organized Crime Strike Force (2002-04)); Attorney General's Distinguished Service Award (2009)

Jeffrey L. Bornstein, K&L Gates; Former Assistant United States Attorney, Northern District of California, Civil Division (1984-87); Senior Litigation Counsel and Chief Major Crimes Criminal Division, Northern District of California (1989-2005)

Krystal N. Bowen, Bingham McCutchen; Former Assistant United States Attorney, Northern District of California (2001-04) and Central District of California (1998-2001)

Lisa S. Blatt, Arnold & Porter LLP; Former Assistant to the Solicitor General (1996-2009)

James S. Brady, Former United States Attorney, Western District of Michigan (1977-81)

Avis E. Buchanan, Director, Public Defender Service for the District of Columbia

A. Bates Butler, III, Former United States Attorney, District of Arizona (1980-81); First Assistant United States Attorney, District of Arizona (1977-80)

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J. A. Canales, Former United States Attorney, Southern District of Texas (1977-80)

Al R. Cardenas, Chair, American Conservative Union

Zachary W. Carter, Partner, Dorsey & Whitney LLP; Former United States Attorney, Eastern District of New York (1993-99)

Robert M. Cary, Williams & Connolly LLP; Counsel to Senator Ted Stevens; Co-author of *Federal Criminal Discovery*

Robert J. Cleary, Former United States Attorney, District of New Jersey (1999-2002) and Southern District of Illinois (2002)

Paul Coggins, Former United States Attorney, Northern District of Texas (1993-2001)

Vincent J. Connelly, Mayer Brown LLP; Former Assistant United States Attorney, Northern District of Illinois (1975-87) (Chief of Special Prosecutions Division)

Thomas G. Connolly, Wiltshire & Grannis, LLP; Former Assistant United States Attorney, Eastern District of Virginia (1995-2000) and District of Columbia (1990-95)

Gregory B. Craig, Skadden Arps; Former White House Counsel (2009-10); Assistant to the President and Special Counsel, The White House (1998-99); Director of Policy Planning, United States State Department (1997-98)

William H. Devaney, Venable LLP; Former Assistant United States Attorney, District of New Jersey (2000-04)

Joseph E. diGenova, diGenova & Toensing LLP; Former Independent Counsel (1992-95); United States Attorney, District of Columbia (1983-88); Assistant United States Attorney (1972-75)

W. Thomas Dillard, Former United States Attorney, Northern District of Florida (1983-87); United States Attorney, Eastern District of Tennessee (1981); Assistant United States Attorney, Eastern District of Tennessee (1967-76, 1978-82)

Ed Dowd, Dowd Bennett LLP; Former Deputy Special Counsel to Senator John C. Danforth on the Waco Investigation (1999-2000); United States Attorney, Eastern District of Missouri (1993-99); Assistant United States Attorney (1979-84)

John Dowd, Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP; Former Chief, Organized Crime Strike Force, U.S. Department of Justice (1974-78)

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Larry D. Eastepp, Former Assistant United States Attorney, Southern District of Texas (1991-2011) (Supervisory Assistant U.S. Attorney) and Eastern District of Texas (1989-91); At-large Member of the Board of Directors, National Association of Assistant U.S. Attorneys (2009-2011)

Miles Ehrlich, Ramsey & Ehrlich LLP; Former Assistant United States Attorney, Northern District of California (2000-05) (Chief, White Collar Crimes Section (2004-05)); Trial Attorney, Public Integrity Section, U.S. Department of Justice (1994-2000)

Tyrone C. Fahner, Mayer Brown; Former Attorney General of Illinois (1980-83); Former Assistant United States Attorney, Northern District of Illinois (1971-75)

Larry Finegold, Garvey Schubert Barer; Former Executive Assistant to the United States Attorney, Western District of Washington (1971-75)

John P. Flannery, Former Assistant United States Attorney, Southern District of New York (1974-79)

Kobie Flowers, Flowers Law Firm, PLLC; Former Trial Attorney, Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Criminal Section (2000-04)

Stuart Gerson, Epstein Becker Green; Former Assistant Attorney General and Acting Attorney General, U.S. Department of Justice; Former Assistant United States Attorney, District of Columbia (1972-75)

Nancy Gertner, Professor of Practice, Harvard Law School; Former Judge, United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts (1994-2011)

John J. Gibbons, Former Judge, United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit (1970-90) (Chief Judge (1987-90))

Donald J. Goldberg, Special Counsel, Ballard Spahr LLP; Former Member, Federal Judicial Conference Advisory Committee on the Federal Rules of Criminal Procedure (1999-2006)

Steven Gordon, Holland & Knight LLP; Former Assistant United States Attorney, District of Columbia (1975-86) (Chief of Felony Trial Division)

Gabriel E. Gore, Dowd Bennett; Former Assistant United States Attorney, Eastern District of Missouri (1995-99); Assistant Special Counsel, John C. Danforth Office of Special Counsel, Waco Investigation (1999-2000)

Robert J. Gorence, Former Assistant United States Attorney (1986-2000); First Assistant United States Attorney (1994-2000)

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Bruce Green, Louis Stein Professor of Law, Fordham University School of Law; Former Assistant United States Attorney, Southern District of New York (1983-87) (Deputy Chief Appellate Attorney (1986-87); Chief Appellate Attorney (1987))

Michael Greenberger, Professor of Law, University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law; Former Principal Deputy Associate Attorney General (1999-2001)

Brent J. Gurney, WilmerHale; Former Assistant United States Attorney, District of Maryland (1991-99)

Henry O. Handy, Retired Special Agent, Federal Bureau of Investigation (1971-92)

Tom Hagemann, Former Assistant United States Attorney, Central District of California (1985-1991)

Peter Hardy, Post & Schell; Assistant United States Attorney, Eastern District of Pennsylvania (2002-08); Trial Attorney, Department of Justice (1997-2002)

Rodger A. Heaton, Hinshaw & Culbertson LLP; Former United States Attorney, Central District of Illinois (2005-09); Assistant United States Attorney, Central District of Illinois (2003-05) and Southern District of Indiana (1989-2000)

Jonathan Howden, Former Assistant United States Attorney, Northern District of California (1980-2005) (Antitrust Division (1980-1986); Criminal Division (1986-2005))

Asa Hutchinson, Former Undersecretary, Department of Homeland Security (2003-05); Administrator, Drug Enforcement Administration (2001-03); Member of Congress (R-AR) (1997-2001); United States Attorney, Western District of Arkansas (1982-85)

John S. Irving, IV, Holland & Knight LLP; Former Assistant United States Attorney, District of Columbia and Department of Justice (1998-2007)

Matthew J. Jacobs, Vinson & Elkins LLP; Former Assistant United States Attorney, Northern District of California (1998-2004)

Erlinda O. Johnson, Former Assistant United States Attorney, District of New Mexico (2000-06)

Tim Johnson, Former United States Attorney, Southern District of Texas (2008-10); First Assistant United States Attorney (2006-08); Assistant United States Attorney (1985-89)

G. Douglas Jones, Haskell Slaughter Young & Rediker; Former United States Attorney, Northern District of Alabama (1997-2001)

Malachi B. Jones, Jr., Williams & Connolly, LLP; Former Trial Attorney, Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Criminal Section (2000-05)

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202.580.6922

Nathaniel R. Jones, Blank Rome LLP; Former Judge, United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit (1979-2002); Assistant United States Attorney, Northern District of Ohio (1962-68)

David A. Keene, Former Chair, American Conservative Union

A.J. Kramer, Federal Public Defender for the District of Columbia

Glenn B. Kritzer, Former Assistant United States Attorney, Eastern District of New York (1977-79); Southern District of Florida (1980-82)

Simon Latcovich, Williams & Connolly LLP; Counsel to Senator Ted Stevens; Co-author of *Federal Criminal Discovery*

Fern Laethem, Former Assistant United States Attorney, Eastern District of California (1979-80)

Ronald H. Levine, Post & Schell; Former Assistant United States Attorney, Eastern District of Pennsylvania (1985-2002) (Criminal Division Chief (1998-2002))

Nancy Luque, Former Assistant United States Attorney for the District of Columbia (1982-89) (Deputy Chief, Grand Jury Division (1987-89)); Former Chair, ABA White Collar Crime Committee (1994-96)

Michael W. McConnell, Richard & Frances Mallery Professor of Law, Stanford Law School; Former Circuit Judge, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit (2002-09)

A. Melvin McDonald, Jones, Skelton and Hochuli; Former United States Attorney, District of Arizona (1981-85); Maricopa County (Arizona) Superior Court Judge (1974-81)

John McKay, Former United States Attorney, Western District of Washington (2001-07)

Michael D. McKay, Former United States Attorney, Western District of Washington (1989-93)

David Oscar Markus, Markus & Markus PLLC; Counsel for Dr. Ali Shaygan

Richard Marmaro, Skadden Arps; Former Assistant United States Attorney, Central District of California (1980-84)

John G. Martin, Former Assistant United States Attorney, Eastern District of New York (2003-08)

Kenneth J. Mighell, Of Counsel, Cowles & Thompson; Former United States Attorney, Northern District of Texas (1977-81); Assistant United States Attorney, Northern District of Texas (1961-77)

Jane W. Moscovitz, Moscovitz & Moscovitz, P.A., Former Assistant United States Attorney, Southern District of Florida (Senior Litigation Counsel) (1982-87) and District of Maryland (1978-82)

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Norman A. Moscowitz, Moscowitz & Moscowitz, P.A., Former Assistant United States Attorney, Southern District of Florida (Senior Litigation Counsel) (1982-93)

Jeffrey A. Neiman, Former Assistant United States Attorney, Southern District of Florida (2008-2011); Trial Attorney, Department of Justice (2002-08)

Grover Norquist, President, Americans for Tax Reform

Michael D. Ostrolenk, National Director, Liberty Coalition

H. James Pickerstein, Former United States Attorney, District of Connecticut (1974); Chief Assistant United States Attorney, District of Connecticut (1974-86)

Redding Pitt, Former United States Attorney, Middle District of Alabama (1994-2001)

Richard J. Pocker, Former United States Attorney, District of Nevada (1989-90)

Ellen S. Podgor, Gary R. Trombley Family White-Collar Research Professor & Professor of Law, Stetson University College of Law; Former Deputy Prosecutor, Lake County, Indiana (1976-78)

Ismail Ramsey, Ramsey & Ehrlich LLP; Former Assistant United States Attorney, Northern District of California (1999-2003)

Seth Rosenthal, Partner, Venable LLP; Former Trial Attorney, Criminal Section, Civil Rights Division, Department of Justice (1995-2005)

H. Lee Sarokin, Former Judge, United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit (1994-1996); Judge, United States District Court for the District of New Jersey (1979-1994)

Stephen A. Saltzburg, Wallace and Beverley Woodbury University Professor of Law, George Washington University Law School; Attorney General's ex-officio Representative, U.S. Sentencing Commission (1989-90); Deputy Assistant Attorney General, Criminal Division, U.S. Department of Justice (1988-89)

Irwin H. Schwartz, Former Federal Public Defender, Western District of Washington (1975-81); Assistant United States Attorney and Executive Assistant to the United States Attorney, Western District of Washington (1972-75)

William J. Schwartz, Cooley LLP; Former Assistant United States Attorney, Southern District of New York (1983-87, Deputy Chief of the Criminal Division)

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William S. Sessions, Former Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation (1987-93); Judge, United States District Court for the Western District of Texas (1974-87), Chief Judge (1980-87); United States Attorney, Western District of Texas (1971-74)

Alexandra A.E. Shapiro, Former Assistant United States Attorney, Southern District of New York, (1994-99); Deputy Chief Appellate Attorney (1998-99), Southern District of New York; Attorney-Adviser, Office of Legal Counsel (1992-93)

David W. Shapiro, Former United States Attorney, Northern District of California (2001-02); Chief, Criminal Division, U. S. Attorney's Office, Northern District of California (1998-2001); Chief, Appellate Section, U. S. Attorney's Office, Northern District of California (1998); Assistant United States Attorney, Northern District of California (1995-98); Assistant United States Attorney, District of Arizona (1992-95); Assistant United States Attorney, Eastern District of New York (1986-92) (Chief, OCDETF/Narcotics Section (1989-91))

Michael Shepard, Hogan Lovells; Former Chief, Public Integrity Section, Criminal Division, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC (1992-93); Interim United States Attorney, Northern District of Illinois (1993); Assistant United States Attorney, Northern District of Illinois (1984-92) (Chief of Special Prosecutions Division)

William I. Shockley, Former Assistant United States Attorney, District of Connecticut (1981-85); Southern District of Florida (1986-91); Northern District of California (1991-2006); Assistant Director, Attorney General's Advocacy Institute (1985-86); Past President, National Association of Assistant United States Attorneys

Earl J. Silbert, DLA Piper; Former United States Attorney, District of Columbia (1974-79); Former Watergate Prosecutor

Craig Singer, Williams & Connolly LLP; Counsel to Senator Ted Stevens; Co-author of *Federal Criminal Discovery*

Amy Sirignano, Former Trial Attorney, Criminal Division, Department of Justice, Washington, DC (2006-2008); Assistant United States Attorney, District of New Mexico (2002-2006); FBI, Special Agent, NY and Los Angeles Divisions (1994-2000), Laboratory Technician (1991-1994)

Lawrence B. Smith, Retired Special Agent, Federal Bureau of Investigation (1983-2006)

Wick Sollers, King & Spalding; Former Assistant United States Attorney, District of Maryland (1985-88)

Neal R. Sonnett, Former Assistant United States Attorney and Chief of Criminal Division, Southern District of Florida; Former Chair, ABA Criminal Justice Section

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Nicole H. Sprinzen, Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP; Former Prosecutor, U.S. Department of Justice Fraud Section (2008-12)

David J. Stetler, Former Assistant United States Attorney, Northern District of Illinois (1979-88)

B. Frank Stokes, Jr., Retired Special Agent, Federal Bureau of Investigation (1971-2001)

Audrey Strauss, Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver & Jacobson LLP; Former Assistant United States Attorney, Southern District of New York (1975-82) (Chief Appellate Attorney; Chief of the Fraud Unit)

Brendan V. Sullivan, Jr., Williams & Connolly LLP; Counsel to Senator Ted Stevens

Thomas P. Sullivan, Former United States Attorney, Northern District of Illinois (1977-81); Former Chair, Illinois General Assembly's Illinois Capital Punishment Reform Study Committee (2003-09); Former Co-Chair, Illinois Governor's Commission on Capital Punishment (2000-02)

Robert W. Tarun, Former Executive Assistant United States Attorney, Northern District of Illinois (1982-1985); Draftsman of American College of Trial Lawyers' Proposed Codification of Disclosure of Favorable Information under Federal Rules of Criminal Procedure 11 and 16 (2004)

David F. Taylor, Perkins Coie LLP, Former Assistant United States Attorney, Central District of California and Western District of Washington (1991-96)

Larry D. Thompson, John A. Sibley Chair in Corporate and Business Law, University of Georgia; Former Deputy Attorney General of the United States (2001-03); Former United States Attorney, Northern District of Georgia (1982-86)

Paul R. Thomson, Jr., Former United States Attorney, Western District of Virginia (1975-79); Assistant United States Attorney (1971-75); Deputy Assistant Administrator for Criminal Enforcement, EPA (1987-90)

Victoria Toensing, diGenova & Toensing LLP; Former Deputy Assistant Attorney General, Criminal Division (1984-88); Chief Counsel, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (1981-84); Assistant United States Attorney (1975-80)

James Trainum, Retired Detective, Metropolitan Police Department of the District of Columbia

Gary R. Trombley, Trombley & Hanes; Former Assistant United States Attorney, Middle District of Florida (1973-77)

Scott Turow, Author and Partner, SNR Denton; Former Assistant United States Attorney, Northern District of Illinois (1978-86)

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Stanley A. Twardy, Jr., Day Pitney LLP; Former United States Attorney for the District of Connecticut (1985-91)

Keith E. Uhl, Former First Assistant United States Attorney, Southern District of Iowa (1972-75); United States Special Prosecutor, Wounded Knee Non-Leadership cases (1975-76)

Jim Walden, Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher LLP; Former Assistant United States Attorney, Eastern District of New York (1993-2002) (Chief, Computer Crimes & Intellectual Property Section; Deputy Chief, Organized Crime & Racketeering Section)

Atlee W. Wampler III, Wampler, Buchanan, Walker, Chabrow, Benciella & Stanley PA; Former United States Attorney, Southern District of Florida (1980-82); Miami Strike Force, Attorney-In-Charge, Organized Crime & Racketeering Section, U.S. Department of Justice (1975-80)

Dan K. Webb, Former United States Attorney, Northern District of Illinois (1981-85)

James J. West, Former United States Attorney, Middle District of Pennsylvania (1985-93)

Kira Anne West, Former Assistant United States Attorney, Criminal Division, Southern District of Texas, Houston Division (1990-99)

Peter H. White, Schulte Roth & Zabel LLP; Former Assistant United States Attorney, District of Columbia (1992-97) and Eastern District of Virginia (1997-99)

Kent Wicker, Reed Wicker PLLC; Former First Assistant United States Attorney and Criminal Division Chief, Western District of Kentucky (1999-2002); Assistant United States Attorney (1995-99)

Solomon L. Wisenberg, Barnes & Thornburg LLP; Former Deputy Independent Counsel, Whitewater Investigation; Former Assistant United States Attorney, Western District of Texas (1989-97) and Eastern District of North Carolina (1987-89)

Morris "Sandy" Weinberg, Jr., Zuckerman Spaeder LLP; Former Assistant United States Attorney, Southern District of New York (1979-85); Member, Council for the ABA Criminal Justice Section

Michael Li-Ming Wong, Former Assistant United States Attorney, Northern District of California (2000-08) (Chief, Major Crimes Section (2004-2005); Chief, White Collar Crimes Section (2005-2008))

Ronald G. Woods, Former United States Attorney, Southern District of Texas (1990-93); Assistant U.S. Attorney (1976-85)

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William Yeomans, Fellow in Law and Government, Washington College of Law; Former Attorney, U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division (1978-2005) (Acting Assistant Attorney General; Chief of Staff and Counselor to the Assistant Attorney General; Deputy Chief, Criminal Section)

David M. Zlotnick, Former Assistant United States Attorney, District of Columbia (1989-93)

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