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Lifetime Achievers: A.B. Culvahouse Jr., O'Melveny & Myers

Throughout his career, A.B. Culvahouse has been the man to turn to for presidents in peril.



A.B. Culvahouse, Jr., chair emeritus and of counsel with O'Melveny & Myers. Photo: Diego M. Radzinski/ALM.

BY RYAN LOVELACE

IN RESPONSE TO THE CALLS OF HIS COUNTRY and his clients, A.B. Culvahouse often appears in the wrong place at exactly the right time.

Culvahouse, 70, crafted a career spanning more than 40 years in Washington, D.C., as an

East Tennessee emigrant dedicated to public service who rose to lead one of the country's top law firms. His work has revolved around presidents in peril, from Watergate to Iran-Contra, and his business card is within reach whenever Republicans need to vet candidates for the nation's highest offices.



“I got the bug early on,” Culvahouse says. “I came to Washington fully expecting to stay 18 months, and I’ve been here since ’73.”

“If you’re in trouble with the government, then A.B. Culvahouse is your best lawyer available,” says Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tennessee, reiterating advice he has proffered for many years. The pair first met when Culvahouse was an undergraduate at the University of Tennessee in the late 1960s. Alexander connected him with then-Sen. Howard Baker, R-Tennessee, helping Culvahouse land a job after graduating New York University School of Law.

The timing couldn’t have been better. Two weeks after starting to work with Baker, he says, “I was sitting behind him at the Watergate hearings when he asked John Dean the famous question, ‘What did the president know, and when did he know it?’”

As the senator’s chief legislative assistant and counsel, Culvahouse also worked with Baker on an investigation of the U.S. intelligence services. He says Warren Christopher, the late secretary of State and O’Melveny partner, recruited him to the Los Angeles-founded firm just as it was opening its Washington office.

When Baker served as White House chief of staff during the final years of President Ronald Reagan’s administration, Culvahouse joined as White House counsel for two years.

Culvahouse’s proudest contribution in that time was defending President Reagan during the Iran-Contra investigation. His “great regret” was failing to confirm Judge Robert Bork to the U.S. Supreme Court—though he adds the na-

tion was “lucky” to wind up with Justice Anthony Kennedy.

Sidley Austin partner Peter Keisler, who worked under Culvahouse in the Reagan White House, says Culvahouse is a selfless leader and skillful lawyer.

“A.B. was kind of the classic lawyer who is really thinking very single-mindedly about his clients, and his client wasn’t just Ronald Reagan, but the office of the presidency,” Keisler says.

Back in private practice, Culvahouse rose to become chairman of O’Melveny from 2000 to 2012. He guided the firm through the great recession and worked easily alongside partners with opposing political pedigrees. During his 12 years at the helm, O’Melveny added five new offices and grew revenue per lawyer by 80 percent.

O’Melveny’s Tom Donilon, who was Culvahouse’s adversary in the Bork confirmation fight before they became colleagues, says Culvahouse’s warm personality and formal demeanor built confidence in clients and colleagues.

“He has a way of coming in and really filling up a room,” Donilon says, noting his deep voice and Southern accent. “But the main thing that he brings is judgment and attention to detail—and they don’t always go together.”

During the 2016 election, Culvahouse helped vet vice presidential candidates for Donald Trump, as he previously did for John McCain. More recently, Culvahouse reportedly declined an overture to help Trump fend off special counsel Robert Mueller. He declined to comment on the accuracy of such reports and matters involving the special counsel. ■