

Judicial Profile

HON. ALAN S. GOLD AND VANESSA SISTI SNYDER

Hon. William M. Hoeveler Senior U.S. District Judge, Southern District of Florida

AFTER 35 YEARS ON the federal bench, Judge William M. Hoeveler is a true legal legend. Known as the “Judge’s Judge,” he is beloved by all. Even the *Almanac of the Federal Judiciary* describes him as “Lincolnesque.” He gained his stellar reputation not only for his tireless work on the thousands of cases over which he has presided—including numerous high-profile cases such as the trial of Manuel Noriega, the Elian Gonzalez case, the trial of the Zion Coptics, and disputes surrounding the Florida Everglades—but also because of the

grace, brilliance, and humility he has displayed throughout his entire life. “The very name William M. Hoeveler generates in us strong, warm feelings and emotions. Bill Hoeveler brings out the best in us by simply being who he is. We want to do better and to be better when we are in his presence.” These were the words of Senior District Judge Alan S. Gold in presenting Judge Hoeveler with the South Florida Chapter’s 2011 Edward B. Davis Award for Service to the Federal Bench & Bar. Judge Hoeveler, indeed, is the type of judge that all other judges aspire to be. He is an inspiration to us all.

Born in Paris on Aug. 23, 1922, Judge Hoeveler was the second of three children. His father was a Marine who served in World War I with the American Expeditionary Force in Paris and his mother was a French Opera singer. He was raised outside of Philadelphia, where he was a high school basketball star and was offered an athletic scholarship to Temple University, where he spent two years before joining the Marines during World War II. He served in the Pacific as a lieutenant from 1942 to 1946. When he completed his tour of duty, he finished college at Bucknell University and continued on to Harvard Law School, where he was co-president of the Class of 1950. It was during his time at Harvard that Judge Hoeveler married Mary Griffin Smith. Upon his graduation, they moved to Miami, where they raised their four children: Hank, Betsy, Margaret, and Mary.

For 25 years, Judge Hoeveler practiced law with



the Miami law firm of Knight, Peters, Hoeveler, Pickle, Niemoeller & Flynn. Considered among the top trial lawyers in the country in his area of expertise, Judge Hoeveler’s success did not derive solely from his knowledge of the law. One colleague said of Judge Hoeveler that “As a trial lawyer, [he] was a natural—dashing, deliberate, charming, polite—and he won over witnesses and juries alike. Other lawyers settled out of court rather than face him. One of the top trial attorneys in the South, J.B. Spence, admitted to being afraid of him. “Women nearly fell out of the damn jury box when they saw him,” Spence said. “I was afraid to be in the courtroom with Bill Hoeveler. I mean, he walks in there, tall, good-looking, like Jimmy Stewart in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*.” In fact, Judge Hoeveler’s dear friend, Eleventh Circuit Judge Peter T. Fay, who was his adversary in court at the time they met, says that Judge Hoeveler was among the “cream of the crop” as a defense lawyer. “Smart, witty, and extremely handsome, he was impossible to deal with in front of a jury. Always the courtly and courteous lawyer, he was adored by

judges and jurors alike. Try making a living trying cases against a guy like that!" said Judge Fay.

Yet, despite his remarkable success in private practice, Judge Hoeveler yearned to make a more meaningful contribution to society. He applied for an open federal district judgeship, and President Jimmy Carter made Judge Hoeveler one of his first two appointments to the federal bench in 1977. Of the honor, Judge Hoeveler was later quoted as saying, "Being a judge is the ultimate in legal practice. It is something a lawyer should aspire to. I don't want to sound syrupy, but as I get older I increasingly feel a need to give something back, don't you know, in terms of service."

Judge Hoeveler's service has long been recognized as exceptional, both within the Eleventh Circuit and beyond. Only six years after his appointment to the bench, Judge Hoeveler was named the best federal district judge in Alabama, Florida or Georgia by *American Lawyer* magazine. The *Miami News* in 1984 wrote an article calling him "The Best Judge In Town." In 1991, the *Miami Herald* called Judge Hoeveler, "The Court's Mister Clean." The article stated, "William M. Hoeveler wins unabashed praise from everyone—including the most famous defendant in his federal courtroom: Gen. Manuel Noriega. Noriega said: 'The one shining light through this legal nightmare has been your honor. You have acted as honest and fair as anyone can hope for.'" He is regarded as so upright that one federal magistrate was quoted as calling him, "ivory, like the soap, because he is 99.44 percent pure." His colleague, the late Judge Eugene Spellman, said "I call him the biblical judge. He has the wisdom of Solomon and the patience of Job."

In 1992, *Harvard* magazine said, "In his years on the federal bench, Judge Hoeveler has become known for his wide-ranging intellect, his command of the law and his uncompromising sense of fairness. In his courtroom he is attentive and unfailingly polite, and he has an almost limitless capacity to be amused, to find fun where others find frustration. Lawyers who appear regularly before him say that the more intricate the point of law, the more Judge Hoeveler enjoys exploring it." The article went on to say, "His willingness to listen to every side of an argument sometimes slows his proceedings to a crawl, and he admits to agonizing over rulings, but he is a deeply religious man with an earnest desire to do right, and that effort takes time. One lawyer says, 'He reflects on it again and again and then reflects on it once more.' It comes from a deep sense of compassion. Judge H. reads the Bible so much that the copy on his desk is dog-eared."

In turn, Judge Hoeveler has been quoted as saying, "I know it sounds saccharin, but I subscribe to the teaching that to love people is where it is. Even in bad people you can see the hope of change and redemption." And Judge Hoeveler practices what he preaches. Before one of the many drug importation

trials he presided over, a defense attorney told the judge that the defendant was still in a jail uniform and needed a few minutes to change. The judge stood up, took off his sweater and handed it to the attorney, saying "Make sure he's seated when the jury comes in, and he'll look fine in this. I hope he likes blue."

Both the lawyers appearing before him and the community in which he has lived and served have long admired these same qualities. Judge Hoeveler is routinely voted the top federal judge on just about every bar poll. He has been recognized with numerous awards, including the Dade County Bar Association's David W. Dyer Professionalism Award, the Lifetime Achievement Award by the Greater Miami Jewish Federation, the Humanitarian of the Year Award by the YMCA of Greater Miami, the Silver Medallion Award for Brotherhood from the National Conference of Christians and Jews, and the Judicial Distinction Award from the Miami Beach Bar Association and the Criminal Defense Attorneys' Association. Most recently, he was the first recipient of the Florida Bar's "The Honorable William M. Hoeveler Judicial Professionalism Award." These are just a few of many such well-earned recognitions, all of which support the sentiments of his judicial secretary of over 39 years, Janice Tinsman, who says that Judge Hoeveler "is well known for his professionalism. He is often considered by people to be the epitome of what a judge should be."

Both professionally and personally, Judge Hoeveler has inspired numerous other judges, attorneys, and citizens throughout his illustrious career. He continues to do so every day as a Senior Judge in the Southern District of Florida. His example has and will continue to encourage us all. He has challenged us to be professional and courteous, to serve our community, and to strive for excellence. Having obtained such heights himself, he has demonstrated the heights of excellence that may be possible. Judge Hoeveler's life and achievements serve as testament to just how much positive change one person can effectuate. Or, in his words, "the fact that you can't do a great deal yourself is no reason to do nothing. It's frustrating, but if everybody decided that they wanted to give some, it would make a lot of difference in the long haul. It doesn't bother me that when I expire, we will not have solved three-quarters of the problems that we have. At least we can make an effort." His own efforts and accomplishments will continue to be appreciated and will never be forgotten. **TFL**

This profile is based upon remarks by Senior U.S. District Judge Alan S. Gold in presenting Judge Hoeveler with the South Florida Chapter's 2011 Edward B. Davis Award for Service to the Federal Bench & Bar and edited by Vanessa Sisti Snyder.