



Insights: News

In Memoriam | Elliott Levitas: 1930-2022

December 20, 2022

The firm has lost an authentic history maker, Elliott Levitas, who passed away December 16. A key leader and strategist in the landmark *Cobell* class action case on behalf of Native American property and trust rights, Elliott's dramatic cross examination of then Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt was a turning point that led ultimately to the largest settlement ever agreed to by the United States government. The \$3.4 billion sum reflected more than a century of governmental mismanagement of trust lands and withholding of monies rightly due to tribes and individual tribe members.

Elliott's passionate representation of the *Cobell* plaintiffs was just one highlight of a distinguished career that meshed public service and private practice for more than half a century. Elliott served in the Georgia House of Representatives 1965-1974, followed by five terms in the U.S. Congress representing Georgia's 4th District. A Democrat, Elliott was known for effective bi-partisan collaboration including legislation authorizing and funding Metro Atlanta's rapid transit system. At the state and national levels, he prioritized environmental matters including strengthening the Environmental Protection Agency and preserving and enhancing the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area.

He joined Kilpatrick & Cody in 1985, and over the next three decades he was recognized repeatedly among *Best Lawyers in America* for the practice of Government Relations law. In 2011, at Emory University's 175th anniversary, Elliott was honored as one of "175 Emory Historymakers" for his impact as a public servant and specifically for his role in *Cobell*. The following year he received the Emory Medal, the highest honor given to alumni by the Emory Alumni Association. Annually, the outstanding graduate of Emory's Political Science Department is designated as recipient of the Elliott Levitas Award.

When he came into the Kilpatrick firm, Elliott reunited with his lifelong friend Miles Alexander. They had first become acquainted as Emory undergraduates and members of the debate team. Elliott went on to earn his J.D. from Emory, then was named a Rhodes Scholar and earned a Masters of Law degree from Oxford University. He served in the U.S. Air Force on the Judge Advocate General staff, then began practicing with the Atlanta firm of Arnall, Golden & Gregory, led by former Georgia Governor Ellis Arnall. Miles points out that "Elliott was one of a kind. A brilliant renaissance lawyer who lived life on his terms. My closest friend for over 70 years, he left a legacy of making the world a better place through his public service, unexcelled talents as a lawyer, and Barbara and his adored children and grandchildren."

It was Elliott's Rhodes Scholarship connections that led to our firm's involvement in *Cobell*. As the scope of the case expanded in the late 1990s, fellow Rhodes Scholar Thaddeus Holt recruited Elliott for his legislative insight, since any settlement would require Congressional authorization. Elliott's role expanded significantly over time as he brought vital Kilpatrick resources to bear on the complex, labor-intensive representation, while also figuring prominently in strategic direction and courtroom proceedings. "Elliott's contributions to the *Cobell* victory were immense and continued all the way to the case's conclusion when he guided the passage of the legislation approving the settlement through Congress," said Bill Dorris, a fellow member of the *Cobell* team.

He is survived by Barbara, his wife of 67 years and high school sweetheart, daughters Karin and Susan, son Kevin, and six grandchildren. Elliott's 92nd birthday would have been December 26, 2022. A native Atlantan, he was a member of the Ahavath Achim synagogue and active in the city's Jewish community. The funeral is scheduled for 12 o'clock noon on Monday, December 19, at the synagogue, 600 Peachtree Battle Avenue, Atlanta Ga 30307.

For more information about the amazing life of our friend and colleague, please take a moment to read Elliott's [obituary](#). We will miss him dearly.

