

# The Appellate Strategist

INSIGHTS ON APPELLATE ISSUES, TRIAL CONSULTATIONS, AND EVALUATING APPEALS

## [Chief Justice Ronald M. George's Supreme Court Tenure \(Part Three of Four\)](#)

December 29, 2010 by [Kirk Jenkins](#)

In the first two posts of this series, we've reviewed [Chief Justice George's career prior to his judicial service](#), and [his early years as a Judge of the Los Angeles Superior Court and a Justice of the Court of Appeals](#). Today, we turn to a review of the Chief's more than eighteen years on the California Supreme Court.

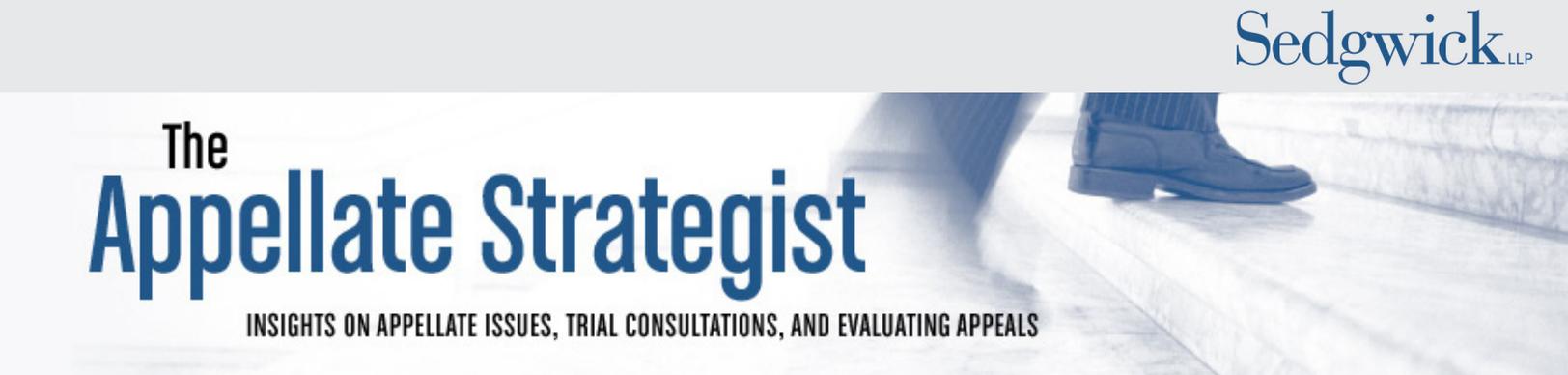
Chief Justice George was appointed to the Supreme Court by Governor Pete Wilson on July 29, 1991, replacing the retiring Justice Allen Broussard. "At the risk of being immodest," Governor Wilson said as he announced the nomination, "I don't see how I could have done better." The Judicial Nominees Evaluation Commission agreed with Governor Wilson's assessment, rating George "exceptionally well qualified." During his five years as a moderate member of the Lucas Court, the Chief Justice wrote a variety of important opinions for the Court on subjects such as civil rights, domestic relations and the California initiative system.

In late 1995, Chief Justice Lucas announced his retirement. Governor Wilson nominated George on March 28, 1996, as the twenty-seventh Chief Justice of California. Once again he received a rating of "exceptionally well qualified" from the JNE Commission, and the Chief Justice was resoundingly confirmed by the voters in 1998, winning retention by a three-to-one margin.

Chief Justice George's tenure has been a time of fundamental reform for California's court system. As the Chief Justice recalled earlier this year in a speech to the State Bar, he assumed office as Chief Justice in the midst of yet another state financial crisis. "I was determined to improve the fiscal security of the trial courts," he said. Many counties were facing "substantial closures and cutbacks in courtroom and clerk's office services as well as widespread employee layoffs." The Chief Justice's first major goal was achieved the following year when, in the waning hours of its legislative session, the Legislature enacted a bill creating a statewide system of funding for California's courts.

The second major reform of the Chief Justice's tenure came only one year later. When the Chief Justice took office, California's judiciary was a maze of over two hundred different superior and municipal courts. The result -- as the new Chief Justice observed in the course of visiting all fifty-eight of California's counties in those early years of his term -- was overlapping of services and inefficiency. As the Chief Justice recalled earlier this year: "Too often, courts were struggling in solitude to meet their obligations, without anywhere to turn. I found the equivalent of the wheel being reinvented in country after county."

All that changed in 1998 when the electorate approved a constitutional amendment permitting the counties' superior and municipal courts to unify into a single trial court for each county. Within three years, judges in every county had voted to unify.



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In 2002, Chief Justice George achieved another major goal with passage of the Trial Court Facilities Act, which transferred responsibility, and in many cases ownership, of the 532 court facilities scattered around the state from the individual counties to the judicial branch. Six years later, a \$5 billion revenue bond measure was approved, providing financing for forty long-overdue court construction and modernization programs.

The Chief Justice has received dozens of honors for his service throughout his judicial career. In recent years, these have included the James Madison Freedom of Information Award from the Society of Professional Journalists (2003), the Matthew O. Tobriner Public Service Award from the Legal Aid Society of San Francisco (2006), the American Judicature Society's Opperman Award for Judicial Excellence (2006) and the Champion of Justice Award from the Bar Association of San Francisco. In 2009, the Chief Justice was inducted as a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Join us tomorrow as we conclude our profile with our nominations for the Chief Justice's most notable opinions.