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August 15, 2010

Washington, DC Defense Lawyer and Judge Dies

On July 8, Harry T. Alexander, a Superior Court judge and **DC federal criminal lawyer**, died of cardiopulmonary arrest at the age of 85. Judge Alexander was known as a judicial and civil rights activist during his legal career, and his outspoken, charismatic approach polarized the community.

In 1966, Alexander was appointed to the DC Court of General Sessions, which later became known as the DC Superior Court. During his career as a judge, Alexander's proponents praised his support of civil rights and his "conscientious and effective judicial service." His critics decried his methods, which included making "intemperate and injudicious remarks tending to downgrade" those appearing before him. In 1972, a judicial commission publicly censured Judge Alexander, noting at least one case where it appeared that Alexander's personal bias interfered with his judicial obligation. In that case, Alexander chastised a white officer, who did not use the prefix "Mrs." when referring to a black witness, and he refused to let the officer complete his testimony. When the prosecution asked for a continuance because the officer was not allowed to finish testifying, Judge Alexander dismissed the case.

In 1976, Judge Alexander decided not to seek reappointment, and he began practicing as a **DC federal criminal lawyer**. As a defense attorney, Alexander's most notorious client was Hamaas Abdul Khaalis, leader of the Hanafi Muslim sect which seized three downtown Washington buildings in a 39-hour standoff with dozens of hostages. One person was killed during the siege. The Hanafis were found guilty of kidnapping and murder, and Alexander was criticized for his courtroom behavior. According to a DC Court of Appeals, which upheld the convictions, Alexander "made improper opening remarks to the jury, argued with witnesses, interrupted the court, commented on the testimony and the court's rulings, asked improper questions, and 'baited' the court." His unorthodox behavior continued, and in 1985, Alexander was suspended from practicing law for two years as a result of disciplinary violations. He never practiced law again; however, he continued to insist upon being called "Judge," saying, "A judge keeps his title until someone takes it away or until he dies."

This article is presented by The Law Offices of David Benowitz, a criminal

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