

Jim Ho plays well on both sides of the aisle

by BECKY BULL

portrait by LARRY MARCUS

Sen. Cornyn's Adviser

When John Cornyn was elected to the Senate in 2002, he called a friend in Washington, D.C., and asked for the names of a few good lawyers to be considered for his chief counsel. He received one name: James C. Ho.

Ho was not your typical pick. He was not a political operative, had never worked on Capitol Hill. And he had never worked with Cornyn. None of this mattered to the senator.

"I was looking for the smartest lawyer I could find," Cornyn says. "People who are more political or ideological tend to be lazy with their legal skills. Jim is the most diligent person I've ever worked with. It's not an 8-to-5 proposition. He was willing to do what needed to be done."

Ho, who is 35 and has worked in all three branches of the federal government, is neither ideological nor political. He harbors no desire to run for office. He just loves the law and everything about it.

"I knew in high school I was interested in the law," says Ho, who grew up in Los Angeles. "I phrase that very specifically. Because I'm interested in law from all its aspects, politics included."

After graduating from the University of Chicago Law School, he landed in Houston, where he completed a clerkship on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 5th Circuit.

Then he moved to Washington, D.C., where he worked for Gibson Dunn & Crutcher in the firm's appellate and constitutional law practice. Though he enjoyed it, he wanted to hone his legal skills further, so in 2001 he joined the U.S. Department of Justice, working there until Cornyn hired him in 2003 to be his chief counsel on the Judiciary Committee.

There, he advised Cornyn and other senators on the committee on a variety of issues, including freedom of information, immigration, civil rights and constitutional law. He helped plan hearings and draft legislation. He became one of Cornyn's trusted advisers and

earned respect from both sides of the aisle, being named one of the "Best 35 Aides Under Age 35" by *The Hill* magazine.

"In Washington it's easy to be branded by who you work for," says Tara Magner, a former counsel to Sen. Patrick Leahy who worked with Ho on several issues. "Looking at Jim's résumé, you would think he was a conservative Republican. Anyone who spends five minutes talking to him, you realize there's more than that. He is not ideological in his dealings with people," Magner says. "I do believe he is quite open-minded."

Leahy and Cornyn don't agree on a lot. But they found common ground on the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), which both men wanted to have more bite. Ho and Magner helped draft legislation to overhaul FOIA for the senators. After extensive negotiations between the House, Senate and Department of Justice, President Bush signed the bill on Dec. 31, 2007.

Judge Reed O'Connor, who replaced Ho as Cornyn's chief counsel and was recently appointed to serve as a U.S. district judge for the Northern District of Texas, says Ho dives into topics and when he develops an opinion, you may not agree with it, but you know his reasoning is sound. "He's very tough to keep up with," O'Connor says. "He has a brilliant mind. I don't think he thinks of himself in that way. So there's a humility there that is unique and endearing to people around him. There are not a lot of people who are on that level of both energy and intellect."

After two and a half years in Cornyn's office, Ho secured a clerkship with Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. "Anyone who hears Justice Thomas' laugh ... he's just a very warm person," Ho says. "Other clerks of other justices will come back and visit him. It was an incredible year to get to know Justice Thomas."

After his clerkship, Ho and his wife, Allyson, moved to Dallas. He returned to Gibson & Dunn's appellate and constitutional law practice, working on cases across the country.



Ho was named one of the best aides under 35 by the respected publication *The Hill*.

Ho's interest in law is partially driven by the experience of his family emigrating from Taiwan when he was a year old. In his spare time, he writes articles on various legal topics, including birth-right citizenship, the law that grants automatic citizenship to anyone born in the United States. He recently testified on immigration law before the Texas Legislature and serves on the board of the Human Rights Initiative of North Texas. He's made time to work on a pro bono immigration case.

"[Emigrating] certainly explains my motivation, why I like spending so much time in certain areas," Ho says. "I'm an immigrant. I was born in Taiwan and came here at a very young age. I love this country." ◀



Left: Ho with Justice Thomas; right: with Sen. Cornyn.



THE DAY I SWAM TO THE WHITE HOUSE VISITING HARRIET MIERS, ON (AND UNDER) CLOUD NINE

After Shonn Brown was made a partner at Locke Liddell & Sapp, she had a chance to visit her mentor, Harriet Miers, at the White House. As she writes about the meeting, below, Harriet's welcome was warm, but the trip there was cold and wet.

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After returning from maternity leave, I had the opportunity to attend a seminar in D.C., with my other colleagues who had also just matriculated to partnership. I was extremely excited that this new partner seminar would be held in D.C., because it would give me the opportunity to visit with my mentor, Harriet Miers, who was then serving as White House counsel.

I immediately arranged a visit with Harriet at the White House and was very excited to see her office and the inner workings of the White House counsel's office.

After checking into the hotel on a beautiful and sunny day in D.C., I quickly dropped my bags and hailed a cab: "To 1600 Pennsylvania, the White House, Northwest Gate entrance, please." I had on a great suit that—amazingly—fit after having a baby just three months before, my new return-to-work-from-maternity-leave black peep-toe heeled shoes and I was a partner ... I was feeling good. When the cab got me to the vicinity of the White House, there was a bit of trouble because we were not able to get to the street facing the Northwest Gate entrance. It had been blocked off by Secret Service, so I would have to walk. I was not terribly excited about this, especially in my new shoes, but nothing would deter me or prevent me from seeing Harriet and the White House! So I instructed the cab driver to let me out so I could walk the remainder of the way.

Because I was let out on the southeast side of the White House, I still had quite a walk. About 30 seconds after the cab let me out, the weather got a little less bright and sunny and turned gray. Then, it started to sprinkle just a bit. I had no umbrella, but that was no big deal because I would just move a bit quicker and get to the gate. It then started pouring rain. My hair was drenched, my cuffed pants were collecting water and my new shoes were squishy. It was awful.

Finally, I reached the gate (or so I thought). I rushed up to a covered area and to the Secret Service. "I'm here to see Harriet Miers, White House counsel." I was instructed to go to the Northwest Gate. The Secret Service guy looked at me without sympathy and without returning my Southern-girl smile. "It's down there," he said, pointing to the opposite end of the street. Mind you, there are two



other gates before getting to what was the correct one. I slogged along and continued on my trek, getting more and more soaked by the second. I got to the gate next to the one I was to enter and asked if I could please just go in through this gate. "No ma'am, you'll need to go down there." I took off my shoes and ran for my life to the final "Northwest Gate entrance." I get to the gate and enter into the Secret Service booth.

I am finally there. I get my A pass. This guy at least acts as if he is expecting me, but basically ignores my puppy dog eyes and face and my dripping attire and has me sign in as usual. I can see the White House very nearby. I'm at least there. So, I go through the Secret Service booth, he checks my purse, which is also filled with water, and instructs me to head to the door, where the White House receptionist will greet me. On the other side of the booth before the door is a long uncovered walkway. When I finally reached the inside of the White House, the receptionist looked sad for me and asked if I wanted to try to dry off before meeting Harriet.

I went to the bathroom and used the people's towels to dry myself. The receptionist gave me a rubber band for my hair. This is not the meeting that I had expected. I finally saw Harriet and we had a good laugh about my experience. Her office was great. She showed me some of the pictures on her walls, including one of the president looking quite pensive on September 11. She proudly had her United States and Texas flags in her office. And she did not seem to mind that I left a wet ring on the people's couch in her office.

—Shonn Brown