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NIXON SIGNING THE MERCHANT MARINE ACT 1970. MANNY ROUVELAS, STAFFER OF BILL, BEHIND HELEN DELICH BENTLEY.

LEGAL LEGEND:

Manny Rouvelas

BY MARK RUGE



Emanuel “Manny” Rouvelas has been on the front lines of the maritime industry in Washington, D.C. for almost 50 years. He started as the U.S. Senate’s primary maritime staffer in 1969, where he helped write major pieces of legislation still in force today. He began his own maritime law firm in 1973, and this summer his K&L Gates Public Policy Group will celebrate its 45th anniversary, making it one of the largest and longest-lasting law firm policy groups in Washington.

“Well, we enacted a lot more legislation in those days. I served as maritime counsel for four years, and during that time I was the principal Senate staffer for more than 30 pieces of meaningful shipping legislation.”

OVER FIVE DECADES, he has received the American maritime industry’s highest honors, including the *Admiral of the Ocean Sea Award* in 2013, the only practicing attorney ever to receive it. But his influence has gone far beyond the maritime industry. Legal Times recognized him as “one of the greatest Washington Lawyers of the past 30 years,” a “legal visionary,” who “helped turn the nation’s capital’s legal and lobbying community into an international powerhouse.” He has received many other awards within and outside the industry.

We sat down with Manny in his corner office at K&L Gates overlooking the White House to talk about changes in the maritime industry and Washington.

How did you start?

I got my first job in Washington in 1969 as maritime counsel to the Senate Commerce Committee’s Maritime Subcommittee. I knew very little about the maritime industry then, but I learned fast. I owe my start to two former congressional staffers – Stan Barer, now the Chairman Emeritus of Saltchuk Resources, and Jerry Grinstein, who was later CEO of Burlington Northern Railroad and then Delta Airlines.

My boss was Senator Russell Long of Louisiana. He was Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee and also served as Chairman of the Commerce Committee’s Merchant Marine Subcommittee, which is where we worked together. Senator Long served in the Senate for nearly 40 years, and Ronald Reagan called him “a legend ... one of the most skillful legislators, compromisers, and strategists in history.” His father, Huey Long, was a senator from Louisiana before him. Russell Long was elected just before he reached his 30th birthday in the class with Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey.

My main boss was the Committee Chairman, Warren Magnuson of Washington, who was also a giant for the maritime industry and beyond. I grew up in Washington state, so working for him was very special. He served in the Senate for 36 years. In one of those classic Washington, D.C. ironies, “Maggie” was eventually defeated in 1980 by Slade Gorton, who is now my colleague at K&L Gates.

Those are big names!

Add two more: Daniel Inouye and Fritz Hollings. Senator Inouye was a member of the Commerce Committee and, of course, always very interested in the maritime world because he represented Hawaii. He was extraordinary. He served in the Senate longer than nearly anyone and rose to be Senate

President Pro Tempore, third in line to the presidency. Over the years he chaired both the Senate Commerce Committee and the Senate Appropriations Committee. He won both the Congressional Medal of Honor and the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Senator Ernest (Fritz) Hollings, who later became Chairman of the Commerce Committee, was the quickest wit in the Senate and is still alive and well.

So I learned the maritime business from Senate giants and legends.

How did Congress treat the maritime industry back then?

Well, we enacted a lot more legislation in those days. I served as maritime counsel for four years, and during that time I was the principal Senate staffer for more than 30 pieces of meaningful shipping legislation. That would include laws like the Merchant Marine Act of 1970. It’s one of the pieces of legislation that still hangs on my office wall because I cut my maritime teeth on it.

So does the Ports and Waterways Safety Act of 1972. You could write a book about that act, and in fact someone did – *When the Senate Worked for Us* by Michael Pertschuk, Chief Counsel and Staff Director of the Commerce Committee. And I have a personal fondness for the Boating Safety Act of 1971 because we were seeing terrible numbers of boating accidents in those days and it put in place a framework that saved lives. I could go on and on about the other 28 pieces of legislation.

And then you started your own firm, which remains in existence today, 45 years later.

Yes, our Public Policy Group at K&L Gates, started at Preston Gates in 1973, will be 45 years old on June 1. We’ve been around longer than other policy groups, and maritime remains a core practice. We started small – just me – in 1973, but we are now large, enduring and global.

“For the maritime industry, one thing that gives me optimism is having Elaine Chao as our Secretary of Transportation. She entered the job more knowledgeable about the industry than any Secretary in the department’s 50-plus year history.”

My first client was James (“Jim”) R. Barker, one of the iconic figures in the maritime industry. In 1973 he was Chairman of Moore McCormack Lines, the youngest leader of a New York Stock Exchange company in America. I’m thrilled that he is still a close friend and client. His sons are running his shipping companies today and are still clients.

We represented Malcolm McLean, the inventor of containerization. And early on I became counsel to the Box Club, the council of chief executive officers of the largest international shipping lines, which I represented for 42 years and the firm still represents. Those are only a few of the literally hundreds of amazing maritime companies and organizations I have had the good fortune to work with.

What has made the maritime industry interesting to you over the years?

Well, it was among the first industries to be global. My maritime practice has brought me to 45 countries over the years because of its international nature. Concepts like going overseas for cheap labor or to avoid regulations and laws were occurring in the maritime industry long before they gained favor in other industries, which came to globalization later. You can’t help but have a world view if you work in the maritime industry.

Also it’s such an old industry. Our country is a couple hundred years old, but the maritime industry is a couple thousand years old. Virtually every idea, promotional program or incentive concept related to the maritime industry has been tried and tested somewhere in the world.

Your practice has always been focused on issues where government and the maritime industry intersect. What’s your take on working for five decades in Washington?

For lobbying and government relations, whether in the maritime industry or not, Washington is in a league all its own. Nothing in the world matches it. The size and importance of the U.S. Government, its trillion-dollar budgets, complexity of institutions and separation of powers, the active engagement and competition of thousands of companies, industries, nonprofits, foreign governments and embassies, and tens of thousands of lobbyists all make Washington the 24/7/365 Super Bowl of lobbying and government relations. So being a lawyer/lobbyist in Washington is definitely playing in the “Big Leagues” of your sport.

You have focused on the maritime industry, but over the years your practice also has gone far beyond maritime. What’s your view about the current state of government?

So far the 21st century hasn’t been kind to America or our system of government. Since 2000 we have had eight “change elections” where the White House, House or Senate has changed parties. That’s maybe an unprecedented level of public dissatisfaction and meshes with polls that show extreme anger and division in our country. Whether measured in public opinion polls, attitudes toward government, legislative accomplishments, budget deficits or anything else, our political institutions are struggling and failing.

Anything give you optimism?

Oh sure. There are always lots of good reasons to be optimistic when it comes to business, science, technology, economic progress and more.

For the maritime industry, one thing that gives me optimism is having Elaine Chao as our Secretary of Transportation. She entered the job more knowledgeable about the industry than any Secretary in the department’s 50-plus year history. I have known and respected her since she was a White House Fellow, and we worked together at the Maritime Administration, the Federal Maritime Commission, the Departments of Labor and Transportation and in other capacities. She was a wonderful choice for the job.

Any favorite memories?

Too many to count or relate, but here’s one: Long ago my client, George P. Livanos, an American citizen who became the world’s largest tanker owner, took me to Posidonia for the big maritime industry show in Greece. George had started a new business related to oily water separators, and he was trying to draw attention to it. Somehow he convinced John Wayne – yup, that John Wayne! – to invest in the company, and then George brought John Wayne to Posidonia to draw attention to the product. We all hung around together for two days. As you can imagine, you get a lot more attention at your booth if you have John Wayne standing out front.

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