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Attorney discusses life after eight years in AG office

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After spending eight years working for the Illinois attorney general, Vaishali S. Rao now finds herself on the other side of the table. Which is where she wants to be.

As the head of Hinshaw & Culbertson's regulatory and compliance practice, Rao is drawing on her experiencing handling multistate litigation on consumer protection issues in Lisa M. Madigan's office.

Prior to that, Rao was the assistant counsel of the Illinois House of Representatives. In that role, she took part in the impeachment trial of Gov. Rod R. Blagojevich.

In a written Q&A with the Daily Law Bulletin, Rao discussed what about the Blagojevich impeachment trial stands out to her 10 years later,

CDLB: *Why did you opt to leave public service in favor of a role at a private law firm? Couldn't you continue your work under the new attorney general?*

Rao: I actually left the AG's office prior to Attorney General Madigan announcing she was not seeking re-election. It was a difficult decision to leave public service. I worked on extremely interesting issues of national significance, with very bright people. But, I wanted to spread my wings, find new challenges and expand my network.

I wanted to understand what factors motivate businesses, and their lawyers, in decision-making. I wanted to find out if you can influence more change with a carrot or a stick (still working on the answer). I now have an opportunity to work with businesses to help them develop best practices to avoid major issues down the line.

CDLB: *As the head of the regulatory and compliance practice, you're going to be defending companies who are being scrutinized by government entities. How does it feel to be on the opposite side of the table?*

Rao: Although I had a lot of anxiety about this concept when I started, it feels surprisingly natural.

I've found my strengths as a prosecutor are the same strengths I utilize as a defense attorney: I can appreciate the other side of an argument even through the noise of personality clashes and political subtexts. Because I understand my adversaries and their goals, I can identify the real issues at stake more efficiently.

It feels good to be able to provide value to my clients. Probably for that same reason, I can't tell you how many times I've heard my former colleagues tell me that they are glad it's me on the other side! There is civility in the law after all, I guess. We're all just people doing the best we can.

CDLB: *It's been 10 years since Rod Blagojevich was initially charged, and then later impeached and removed from office. Looking back on all of those events, what do you remember most vividly? What comes to mind?*

Rao: I remember sitting in the Senate chambers late one night providing feedback to chief prosecutor, Dave Ellis (now Justice David W. Ellis), who was preparing for closing arguments. I knew in that moment how lucky I was to have such an incredible experience so early in my legal career.

CDLB: *Similarly, what about the Blagojevich saga do you think people would be surprised to hear about or learn about today?*

Rao: I think people would be surprised to know how much we prepared for the possibility that Blagojevich would show up every day of the impeachment proceedings. We prepared so many witnesses in the most meticulous fashion. We worked tireless hours every day and conducted endless research on past impeachments and issues specific to the charges against the former governor. The hours ended up being worth it — I met my husband working on the impeachment.

CDLB: *What are your long-term goals for your legal career?*

Rao: I want to make a difference. The further I get in my career, the more I realize that this is a journey with detours. I know I enjoy: Ideas, leading people, identifying solutions, having some part in high stakes situations, achieving outcomes and building relationships.

I am open to how I make a difference using these passions. Making the transition to the private sector has opened my mind to the ways I can make a difference in other peoples' lives.

CDLB: *What is the first app you use on your smartphone when you wake up in the morning?*

Rao: Depending on the day, my work e-mail app and my kids' daycare app. The former to read alerts on the happenings of relevant industries I'm servicing as well as the legal profession in general. The latter because it is likely that I have forgotten something

I'm supposed to bring/do/share/schedule for my kids and I need to pop out of bed and deal with it.

CDLB: *What TV show did you just finish binge-watching?*

Rao: "Ozark." It's wrong and right all at the same time.

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