

OBITUARIES

John H. Pratt Dies at 84; U.S. District Judge in D.C.

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John Helm Pratt, 84, who had served on the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia since 1968, taking senior status in 1989, died of lung cancer Aug. 11 at his home in Chevy Chase.

Before being named to the bench, Judge Pratt had practiced law in Washington for 34 years and had become a senior partner in the firm of Morris, Pearce, Gardner and Pratt. He also had served as president of the D.C. Bar Association.

During his years on the bench, he gained a reputation as a judge who handed down tough but fair sentences. Since 1989, he had presided solely in civil cases.

His appointment to the bench coincided with a time of national turmoil. Some saw a wavering of confidence in government institutions, including the military and courts. During his decades on the bench, he presided over cases that addressed the rights of individuals and the proper role of the government.

One of Judge Pratt's earliest and most controversial cases was the trial of the so-called D.C. Nine in 1970. The defendants—four priests, a nun, a former nun, two Jesuit seminarians and a draft resister—were charged with ransacking the Washington office of Dow Chemical Co. in a protest of the Vietnam War.

The D.C. Nine were convicted and received sentences ranging up to six years.

Judge Pratt also presided over the 4½-month D.C. police corruption trial in 1973. It was his decision in 1972 that required the Department of Health, Education and Welfare to withhold federal funds from 213 school districts in 17 states until they could prove that their schools

were not racially disproportionate. During the Carter administration, he helped double the number of federal employees who enforce civil rights laws in a settlement of three long-standing lawsuits.

He also presided at the trial of Watergate burglar G. Gordon Liddy and denied an appeal by Teamsters President James R. Hoffa, who sought to overturn terms of the presidential pardon that barred him from seeking union office again.

Judge Pratt came under criticism for his handling of the political corruption trial of Gov. Marvin Mandel of Maryland in 1976. In the Mandel case, Judge Pratt struggled to maintain the integrity of the three-month trial amid charges of jury tampering. Mandel was charged with accepting bribes in exchange for using his office to help business ventures. Judge

Pratt declared a mistrial, and Mandel and three co-defendants were retried in 1977.

The judge handed down decisions that broadened civil rights. In 1971, he ordered the Defense Department to restore the security clearances of two homosexuals who lost jobs with civilian defense contractors when their clearances were revoked. They had refused to answer detailed questions about their homosexual acts.

In a sexual harassment case in 1988, Judge Pratt ruled in favor of Securities and Exchange Commission employee Catherine Broderick. He ruled that Broderick was unfairly passed over for promotions when she complained that her office had become a "sexual playground" of affairs between male supervisors and female employees.

It was his disagreement with the harshness of federal mandatory sentencing requirements in drug cases involving first-time offenders that led him to select only civil cases in his later years.

One of his last rulings dealt with Forest Haven, an institution for the mentally retarded that was closed in 1991. In May, he said he would appoint a special master to ensure that the District upholds its promise to treat Forest Haven's former patients. The ruling stems from a complaint filed in 1976, one of the oldest pending against the city.

Judge Pratt was a native of Portsmouth, N.H., who moved to the Washington area with his family when he was 9 years old. A graduate of Gonzaga High School, he attended Georgetown University and graduated from Harvard University and its law school. He served with the Marine Corps in the Pacific during World War II and was awarded the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart. He lost part of an arm in the Philippines.

Survivors include his wife of 56 years, Bernice Safford Pratt of Chevy Chase; five children, Sister Clare Pratt, R.S.C.J., of Rome, Lucinda Pratt Pearlman of Berkeley, Calif., John Jr., of Red Bank, N.J., Patricia Pratt Moriarty of Wellesley Hills, Mass., and Mary Pratt Brandenburg of Columbia; two brothers, retired Navy Capt. William V. Pratt of Bethesda and retired Navy Rear Adm. Richard R. Pratt of Jacksonville, Fla.; two sisters, Marguerite Pratt Foley of Chevy Chase and Lucinda Pratt Ferrill of Las Cruces, N.M.; and eight grandchildren.