

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

A Product of Law Bulletin Media | Volume 164, No. 35

Serving Chicago's legal community for 163 years

40 pages in 2 sections

Former Obama attorney comes back to Chicago

White House assistant counsel will use new skills to assist his clients at Riley Safer Homes & Cancila

BY SARAH MANSUR
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John K. Theis has moved from the White House to Riley Safer Holmes & Cancila LLP as a partner in the firm's Chicago office.

As the associate counsel to former President Barack Obama, Theis was responsible for putting out fires and handling the legal side of crisis management.

For example, Theis was involved in litigating Obama's use of executive privilege in response to requests for records from Operation Fast and Furious, which was a Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives investigation that allowed nearly 2,000 guns to be sold to Mexican drug cartels in order to track the purchasers.

He also was involved in the White House's response to congressional inquiries following the 2012 attacks on the U.S. diplomatic mission in Benghazi, Libya. Four people died as a result of the attack.

Before he joined the White House counsel's office in January 2016, Theis was a trial attorney at the Department of Justice's federal programs branch.

Theis has also worked for the Chicago offices of Eimer Stahl LLP and Perkins Coie LLP. He earned his law degree from Northwestern University Pritzker School of Law in 2005.

The Law Bulletin spoke to Theis about his job as a White House lawyer and how that experience relates to his new role.

Law Bulletin: Why did you decide to join Riley Safer Holmes & Cancila?

Jack Theis: It's really the people. The firm has really exceptional lawyers at the height of their profession in my practice areas, which are litigation, investigations and risk management. The work is cutting-edge and many of the lawyers have government experience.

They understand the importance of public service and how those skills and experiences translate into private practice ... What is unique about the firm is it is really built for clients ... There really is a focus on everything the firm does being aligned with the interests of the client and the interests of the attorney.

And I really thought that was a really refreshing and honest approach to lawyering, which I really appreciated and liked.

The firm has a really strong commitment to diversity that is real. The partnership is 52 percent women and 32 percent minorities and that's just incredible. And one

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thing that really drew me to them was the commitment to pro bono that is unique ... The firm is currently representing the city [of Chicago] in the sanctuary city litigation against the federal government.

[The firm] filed an amicus brief in the case involving the federal travel ban. It's really interesting and high-impact cases that they are doing, which really drew me to it.



John K. Theis

The attorneys are all public service and social justice oriented while at the same time providing exceptional service for the clients. And that really fits me and my personality and what I want to do in my private practice.

LB: Can you describe your private practice and what types of clients you will represent?

JT: I'm going to be focused on litigation, investigations and crisis management. Those are the practice areas of the firm that I will be working on. I have experience handling cybersecurity matters, internal and government investigations, antitrust and competition law and then complex matters with both legal and reputational risk ... As far as the clients, the firm has a really diverse client base. There's multinational corporations and publicly traded companies but it's also smaller companies and private individuals.

LB: Would you be involved at all in the sanctuary city litigation?

JT: That's certainly the kind of the case that I would like to be. I think there's a team that's running

JT: I worked in the White House counsel's office ... My role was to advise White House officials on managing risk and handling a crisis. So what that meant was essentially when something happened — if there was some sort of crisis or some reporter called with questions about something that was happening or Congress is investigating something — my job was to figure out exactly what went wrong and what happened so the White House could fix it and explain it and make sure it didn't happen again.

That meant advising on investigations, litigation, vetting issues, compliance — those kinds of issues. It was super fast pace and exciting and around the clock. At any given day you would have no idea what you were going to handle. Often, you would go in thinking you would do X and you would end up spending the entire day and the entire night doing Y. So, that part was exciting and really great.

LB: How will that experience help you in your new role in private practice?

JT: Many of the skills translate directly to private practice. At the White House, I represented the White House in investigations. I managed attorney fact gathering teams, prepared witnesses, counseled clients in how to respond to requests for information from investigators. I'll be doing those exact same kind of services in private practice. In addition, a large part of the job was thinking strategically about how to solve problems with several dimensions.

At the White House, when a crisis happened, I would advise on the legal risk but I would also think about things like the reputational risk, or the political risk. I would work with the communicators on developing a PR strategy, with legislative affairs or other components to think about that.

That kind of multidimensional thinking about 'How do we address this problem?' I think directly relates to private practice where clients very much appreciate the legal analysis and the managing and the advising on the legal risk but also to have a broader understanding of the optics ... That's a very important skill that applies to a lot of complex legal issues.

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