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Richard Cooper

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"The Easter Bunny chief counsel sent by Idi Amin" — that's what staff at the Food and Drug Administration affectionately dubbed Williams & Connolly partner Richard Cooper during his stint in the late 1970s as the agency's top legal officer.

"Easter Bunny" was a reference to Cooper's only prior food-and-drug case, in which he represented a company that made holiday-themed chocolates. As for the infamous Idi Amin, Cooper spent a year with the International Legal Center in Uganda in the early 1970s.

These days, Cooper, 62, is known as a top-notch food-and-drug litigator, the man who persuaded the U.S. Supreme Court that the FDA had no authority to regulate tobacco.

"He's such a strong litigator," says Tom Haughey, general counsel of the Par Pharmaceutical Cos. Cooper is representing the generic-drug maker in massive litigation pending in Boston federal court over the average wholesale price of prescription drugs. In a series of cases, dozens of pharmaceutical companies are alleged to have illegally manipulated prices for medicines.

Haughey praises Cooper for his intelligence, responsiveness, and efficiency. "He doesn't make a mountain out of a molehill," says Haughey. "He's particularly good at bringing a reasonable amount of assets to any litigation. He makes sure costs and benefits have a good relation."

Another current client is Barr Laboratories Inc. Among other issues, Cooper is advising the company on the controversial emergency contraceptive Plan B. In 2004, the FDA rejected Barr's application to make the pills available without a prescription. An amended application is pending.

Fred Killion, Barr's general counsel, calls Cooper "a brilliant lawyer. He brings great judgment and intellect to problem solving." Killion also highlights Cooper's integrity and credibility: "When Richard Cooper is speaking on your behalf, people know he's making a fair and honest presentation. He's a very aggressive advocate, but he plays by the book."

Steve Gersten, the head of Abbott Laboratories Inc.'s legal regulatory practice, sings Cooper's praises as well: "Rich is bright and creative, he has a broad base of knowledge, and his advice is balanced and credible. This combination of qualities makes him one of the most effective attorneys I've ever worked with."

Perhaps the biggest victory of Cooper's career was also one of the biggest of all food-and-drug cases: the FDA tobacco litigation. Under Commissioner David Kessler, the agency moved to assert jurisdiction over tobacco products. Six leading tobacco companies filed suit in North Carolina federal court in 1996, calling the move by the FDA an unlawful effort to extend its regulatory reach and usurp the legislative authority of Congress.

In 1999, Cooper, who represented the RJ Reynolds Tobacco Co., argued the case before the Supreme Court. In March 2000, the Court by a 5-4 vote affirmed the decision of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 4th Circuit that the FDA lacked jurisdiction under the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act to regulate tobacco products.

"The position Reynolds took was consistent with the position the agency had historically taken," says Cooper, who calls the high court's opinion "a correct decision."

A Rhodes Scholar, Cooper earned his J.D. from Harvard Law School in 1969. He clerked for Supreme Court Justice William Brennan Jr. Then, because the Peace Corps didn't take lawyers ("quite sensibly," says Cooper), he signed up for a two-year stint in Uganda with the International Legal Center in late 1970.

But in 1971 Idi Amin seized power in Uganda, and Cooper found himself unexpectedly back in the United States that September. He turned to private practice, joining D.C.'s Williams & Connolly, where he made partner in 1976.

In 1977, Cooper took a job in the Carter administration, working under James Schlesinger in the White House Office of Energy Policy and Planning. Within the year, he had moved on to the FDA, where he served as chief counsel until 1979.

It was, he recalls, "a very rapid education in food-and-drug law." On his watch, Cooper says, the FDA essentially "created the modern market for generic drugs" with the development of the Orange Book, which lists brand-name and generic versions of drugs.

Cooper rejoined Williams & Connolly in 1980.