



Former Public Defender and Civil Rights Attorney Poised to Replace Judge Emmet Sullivan on D.C. District Court

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Congresswoman **Eleanor Holmes Norton** (D-D.C.), Washington D.C.'s lone member of Congress, announced on Thursday that she was backing former public defender **Jia Cobb** to replace Judge **Emmet Sullivan** on the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia.

"Jia Cobb possesses all the necessary qualities to be an exceptional federal judge," Norton said in a [statement](#). "She has the intelligence, temperament, and integrity for this position. She also brings much-needed racial and professional diversity to the federal bench."

Norton's recommendation will carry significant weight in President **Joe Biden's** process for nominating a replacement for Sullivan, who announced he would take [senior status](#) soon after Biden's inauguration. The White House in January [granted](#) Norton "senatorial courtesy" for U.S. District Court judges, the U.S. Attorney, and the two U.S. Marshals for the District of Columbia. Under the long-standing though non-binding custom, presidents will defer to the senior senator sitting in the state with appointment vacancy, generally not moving forward on a candidate without that lawmaker's approval. Due to D.C.'s unique non-state status and non-representation in the Senate, Norton has been afforded the courtesy by former Presidents **Bill Clinton**, **George W. Bush**, and **Barack Obama**, though former President **Donald Trump** [did not do so](#).

Cobb, who is Black, is currently a partner at D.C.-based law firm Relman Colfax PLLC, which represents plaintiffs in civil rights cases. Cobb, an 11-year veteran of the firm, specializes in housing discrimination and criminal justice litigation.

Prior to entering private practice, Cobb spent six years at the D.C. Public Defender Service. According to her [attorney bio](#), while with the office, Cobb "represented indigent clients charged with serious criminal offenses, supervised and trained new lawyers, and was a member of a specialized practice group that focused on handling complex cases involving forensic science and other expert witness testimony."

In addition to improving racial and gender diversity on the federal bench, Cobb's potential nomination would also aid in ameliorating the significant imbalance in judicial philosophy caused by the vast overrepresentation of former government advocates that makeup the judiciary. According to a [2019 study](#) from libertarian thinktank The Cato Institute, the ratio of "judges who previously served as courtroom advocates for government" compared to "judges who served as advocates for individuals against government in civil or criminal cases" is seven to one.

“When criminal and civil rights cases pitting individuals against government are filed in federal court, the chances are nearly **50 percent** that they will be heard by a judge who served as a courtroom advocate *for* the government (but never for individuals against government),” the study said, “whereas there is only a **6 percent** chance that the case will be heard by a judge who represented individuals in cases *against* the government (and never served as an advocate for government).”

The 73-year-old Sullivan served full-time for roughly 27 years on the D.C. District Court and presided over some explosive cases, most recently the extraordinary criminal prosecution of former National Security Advisor **Michael Flynn**. Sullivan refused to dismiss the criminal case against the Trump ally, resulting in a wild series of events as the case ping-ponged from the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit to the *en banc* D.C. Circuit and back down to the district court again for more fireworks. The case eventually became moot when former President Trump pardoned Flynn, but Sullivan got his parting shots in.