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Republican judge takes aim at Bush terror policies.

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NEW YORK, Dec 29 (Reuters) - Far from the typical corporate Christmas card, a former U.S. federal judge's law firm is embracing controversy with holiday cards showing the historic Supreme Court session where he successfully challenged the Bush administration's treatment of Guantanamo Bay detainees.

Even more unusually, the attorney who argued the case before the nation's highest court is a Republican and former federal appeals judge appointed by President Richard Nixon.

"Human rights issues are not Republican or Democratic issues," said John Gibbons, whose arguments led to the Supreme Court's landmark June ruling that foreign terror suspects held at the U.S. naval base in Cuba can have access to U.S. courts.

Gibbons, a former chief judge of the U.S. Third Circuit Court of Appeals in Philadelphia, told Reuters that he has never heard criticism of his fight for detainee rights from other lawyers, regardless of their party affiliation.

"I don't know any organized bar group that has taken the position that the government is right. I think most lawyers probably think the government has gone crazy," he said.

Certainly this soft-spoken former jurist, who takes long thoughtful pauses before answering questions, is no rabble-rouser. Gibbons is a devoutly religious man of conviction, his colleagues say, who time and again has put himself on the line when he thinks a wrong needs righting.

The strong human interest views held by Gibbons and his Newark, N.J.-based corporate law firm Gibbons, Del Deo, Dolan, Griffinger & Vecchione have led the former judge and his colleagues, who usually handle business matters, to become involved in a range of controversial cases.

These have led the lawyers to take on such causes as fighting for the rights of sex offenders and challenging death penalty sentences.

ROLE OFF BROADWAY

In December, Gibbons - at age 80 - even went beyond the actual courtroom to take on a brief stint in the well-received off-Broadway play "Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom." The drama, which caused a sensation when it premiered in London this spring, is a stinging indictment of the Bush administration's handling of detainees.

While the play has helped to publicize the plight of prisoners, it is Gibbons' recent Supreme Court appearance and support of other lawyers that has struck the greatest blow to date at the Bush administration's policies in Guantanamo Bay.

Arguing on behalf of foreign nationals from more than 40 nations held there as part of anti-terror sweeps, Gibbons urged the justices to reject the government's view that federal courts have no jurisdiction to rule on whether the prisoners are being held illegally. He said the situation in Guantanamo amounts to "a lawless enclave."

Although this may seem a strange stance for a Republican appointee to the bench, Gibbons said neither he nor his firm hesitated to take on Guantanamo Bay cases at the very early stages of litigation.

"The decision for us was easy," he said, explaining that the firm established a fellowship program 15 years ago that pays lawyers to do public interest work.

While the Gibbons firm was one of the first to get involved, there are now some 15 corporate law firms providing free representation to about 70 Guantanamo detainees, according to the Center for Constitutional Rights which is coordinating the effort.

Asked why not all of the some 550 detainees have lawyers, Gibbons responded, "It isn't an absence of lawyers at this point."

Instead, the lack of representation is due to problems lawyers and civil rights groups are having in getting the U.S. government to provide names and other identifying information about the detainees. In addition, detainees are hindered in attempts to contact the outside world because their letters are often significantly delayed and heavily censored by the government, Gibbons said.

"The families of detainees don't know where they are, haven't heard from them and don't realize they can hire a lawyer," he said.

Gibbons predicted one of the next areas of litigation will be aimed at forcing the government to facilitate detainees' access to lawyers. "But I anticipate the government will strenuously resist that," he added.

Indeed, litigation aimed at preserving civil rights in the face of Bush administration anti-terrorism policies appears to be expanding Gibbons' resume at an age when many lawyers would be retiring. He has already left two jobs he could have held for life - his position on the federal bench and that as a tenured law professor at Seton Hall University.

Asked if he plans to make any more job changes, he responded, "I'm right where I want to be."

But what about his fledgling stage career?

"I don't think I'll quit my day job," he said.