

## Biography Resource Center

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### Eric H. Holder, Jr.

**Also known as:** Eric H. Holder

**Birth:** 1951 in Queens, New York, United States

**Nationality:** American

**Ethnicity:** African American

**Occupation:** District attorney

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## BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

In 1993 Eric H. Holder, Jr. joined the ranks of top-level federal prosecutors when he was named U.S. attorney for Washington, DC. Holder, who was appointed by President Clinton, is the first black ever to serve as U.S. attorney for the District of Columbia, a region that is more than 70 percent black. Holder's confirmation by Congress was seen as a positive step toward greater self-determination for the crime-ridden area.

Eleanor Holmes Norton, the district's non-voting Congressional representative, told the *Washington Post* that under Holder, "I think people will see the criminal justice system, far more than in the past, as working directly for them, because a man who comes from them and has been committed to them has been made U.S. Attorney." For his part, Holder merely stated in the *Chicago Tribune*: "This is probably the most interesting legal job in Washington, if not the country."

Holder, who is reluctant to discuss his private life, is married to Sharon Malone, a physician. They have one daughter, Maya, who was born in 1993. Holder's annual salary is many thousands of dollars less than he earned as a Superior Court judge, but most observers agree that his new job has a built-in degree of upward mobility that may some day result in a federal judgeship or a top position at the Justice Department.

Most legal experts agree that Holder has stepped into the most powerful district attorney post in the nation. U.S. attorneys have enormous responsibilities. The office, a division of the Justice Department, prosecutes both local and federal crimes--including high-level Congressional corruption cases and other violations of the law involving federal workers. The U.S. attorney's office in Washington, DC employs more than 500 people, 300 of them lawyers who investigate crimes, bring indictments against individuals or groups, and take cases to trial.

Needless to say, when the investigations involve politicians or their employees, the cases become high-profile, controversial, and emotionally charged. Holder, as the top attorney, must handle the publicity surrounding his office's cases, both notorious and mundane. He must also assure that the cases are handled swiftly and

legally.

Holder's predecessor in the position, J. Ramsey Johnson, told the *Washington Post*: "The U.S. attorney... has enormous opportunity to serve in a role of community leadership... to assist victims of crime in specific cases, but more than that, to work within the community to help it grow and thrive and address the root causes of crime." If this is the case, Holder might well find the job very much to his liking.

Holder was born and raised in a working-class section of Queens, New York. His parents had both emigrated from Barbados. By virtue of his scholarship, he was accepted into the academically elite Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan, and after graduation he enrolled at Columbia University. There he majored in American history, earning top grades, and he spent his spare time absorbing black culture at such notable Harlem landmarks as the Apollo Theater and the Abyssinian Baptist Church. Feeling a responsibility toward fellow black Americans who were less fortunate than himself, Holder began spending his Saturday mornings at a Harlem youth center and taking selected young people on trips around the city. He joined the Concerned Black Men, a national organization dedicated to helping minority youngsters.

Holder received his bachelor's degree in 1973, and immediately was accepted into Columbia's law school. When he graduated from that institution in 1976, he decided to join the Department of Justice. At the time he figured he would work there two or three years and then take a position in a private firm. Holder joined a relatively new division at Justice, the Public Integrity Unit. "It was formed... with [the summer of 1972 incident, which eventually resulted in U.S. president Nixon's resignation, known as] Watergate still ringing in everyone's ears," he told the *Chicago Tribune*.

The Public Integrity attorneys were charged with prosecuting high-level corruption cases, often involving respectable public figures. Among those Holder helped to prosecute were former South Carolina congressman John W. Jenrette--in the notorious "Abscam" case in the late 1970s--and a Philadelphia judge who accepted monetary gifts to "fix" cases. The list of people Holder prosecuted while with Public Integrity included Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents, politicians, organized crime figures, and even a fellow Justice Department lawyer. The job Holder thought he would stay in for two years consumed one dozen years of his life.

In 1988, President Ronald Reagan appointed Holder to the Superior Court of the District of Columbia. The rotating judgeship involved deciding every imaginable kind of case, from murders and armed robberies to nonpayment of child support and school truancy. The job proved particularly difficult for a man committed to helping African Americans in the city.

Holder told the *Washington Post* that he became painfully aware that most of the defendants in his courtroom were "young black guys, 18 to 25." He said: "Conceptually, yeah, I knew that's what it was going to be because it's a city that's 70 per cent black, and black males are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system. I guess the reality of it struck me after a while. I mean, it's not an easy thing to deal with, if you are a person who's concerned about the black community, to see what ought to be the future standing before you charged with some sort of criminal offense."

In a *Washington Post* profile of Holder that followed him through several weeks on the Superior Court bench, the beleaguered justice pondered the African American plight. "I'm black, and I suppose that helps, but I led quite a different life from a lot of the people who come before me as defendants," he said. "Yet there's always a certain something that transcends economic barriers. There's almost a sense that being black and middle class means you've got your feet in both worlds.... Racism is alive and well in this country, but that doesn't excuse or justify the acts of the people who come before you. Every person who comes before you as an adult and talks about the deprived life he's had, there are 10, 15, 20 people from that same neighborhood who are just trying to make it, and those are the people who are the victims."

Holder's sentiments as a judge--both sympathetic and pragmatic--helped endear him to the District of Columbia's political leaders. Many of these politicians felt that the district should have a black U.S. attorney, preferably a local citizen who had demonstrated an allegiance to the area. Holder was just that citizen, and he had even worked at the Department of Justice. After the presidential swearing-in of Bill Clinton in 1993, congressional delegate Norton commissioned a panel of Washington, DC lawyers and civic activists to make recommendations for the District's U.S. attorney slot. The panel chose Holder, and Norton passed his name along to the president. Holder was one of three candidates interviewed for the position, and the only qualm

expressed about him was his lack of leadership experience.

Late in 1993, Clinton announced that he had chosen Holder to be Washington, DC's first black U.S. attorney. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Holder responded to the leadership issue that had concerned some of his supporters. "In some ways, I came in as prepared as I could have been because of my 12 years in Public Integrity," he said. "I think potentially I'm a better U.S. attorney now than I was then, from being on the bench for five years." Asked to assess the impact of a highly visible position on his career, he added: "I guess the reality is [that] there is something personally at stake for me. You have to do the investigating and just call it."

Publicity was waiting for Holder almost the very day he began his new job. Even though he was appointed by a Democratic president, he was expected to preside over a complicated Justice Department investigation of fraud involving the post office in the House of Representatives. An influential congressman, Illinois Democrat Dan Rostenkowski, was the subject of the investigation and has since been indicted on charges that he misused official House accounts.

Rostenkowski, as chairman of the congressional Ways and Means Committee, was in a position to help the Clinton administration to implement its agenda for health care reform. Nonetheless, Holder persisted with the investigation and even widened its scope. He told the *Washington Post* that matters of criminal prosecution must be handled without regard to partisan politics. "The idea that a Democratic U.S. attorney is going to do something different than a Republican U.S. attorney is pretty close to ridiculous," he observed.

Holder has had to provide direction for the prosecution of numerous local criminal suspects, including everyone from the local drug dealers to those who might wish to harm the president. It is in the local arena that Holder is expected to make the greatest impact. His great hope is to set a positive example for students of all ages, serving as either a role model or at least a serious lawman to be feared.

In an address at a Martin Luther King, Jr. memorial service in 1994, Holder articulated his wishes. "There has been for too long a conspiracy of silence in the black community--a reluctance to discuss our manifest problems, a desire to avoid painful truths," he said, as quoted in the *Washington Post*. "The defenders of the silence say we are not the ones who import or manufacture guns. This logic has been used to shield us from the ugly truth that we are the ones who pull the triggers, and we are the ones who sell and use drugs. We must talk about these things and confront these truths." He concluded soberly: "We are in many ways our own worst enemy."

## PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born c. 1951, in Queens, NY; parents emigrated from Barbados; married, wife's name Sharon Malone (an obstetrician); children: Maya. **Education:** Columbia University, B.A., 1973; Columbia School of Law, J.D., 1976. **Addresses:** Office--Department of Justice, 10th Street and Constitution Ave. N.W., Washington, DC 20530.

## CAREER

Department of Justice, Public Integrity Section, Washington, DC, trial attorney, 1977-88; Superior Court of the District of Columbia, associate justice, 1988-93; Department of Justice, Washington, DC, U.S. attorney, 1993--.

## FURTHER READINGS

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