

Rising Star: Mayer Brown's Timothy Keeler

By Lance Duroni

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Between counseling top companies on crucial trade negotiations, Mayer Brown LLP partner Timothy Keeler helped lobbyists rein in an Obama administration policy that barred them from serving on trade advisory committees, earning him a place among Law360's top international trade attorneys under 40.



Timothy Keeler

A policy wonk with more than a decade of experience on Capitol Hill and in the executive branch, the 39-year-old, one of four IT attorneys on the Rising Star list, has built a thriving practice centered on World Trade Organization law, trade negotiations and policy development in just six years since leaving the government.

In a departure from his typical engagements, Keeler recently joined the firm's appellate team in a D.C. Circuit case that saw international trade intersect with the First Amendment. Representing six registered lobbyists, the Mayer Brown team won a ruling last year that prompted the administration to back off its blanket ban on lobbyists serving on advisory committees, including those that counsel the U.S. trade representative and the Commerce Department in trade negotiations.

"Essentially, the court held that while there isn't an inherent right to be on a trade advisory committee, the government can't prohibit you from serving because you've exercised a First Amendment right — and the right to petition is a First Amendment right," Keeler told Law360.

The ban stated that it was designed to curb the "culture of special interest access," but the plaintiffs argued that it denied the committees technical expertise and actually drove many lobbyists to de-register. In response to the D.C. Circuit decision, the administration issued guidance removing the ban as long as a lobbyist was advocating for a company or other nongovernment entity.

Keeler's schooling in policy began right out of college, when he took a job answering phones for the Senate Finance Committee, and he fell into international trade "by happenstance" because he joined the committee's professional staff when it was swamped with such work in the late 1990s.

After weighing a law degree against an MBA and other graduate studies, he decided on the George

Mason University School of Law because of the versatility it would provide inside the Beltway.

“At its root, in Washington, D.C., a law degree is really the currency of the town, for better or for worse,” he said.

Keeler joined the Treasury Department’s Office of Legislative Affairs in 2001, advising Congress and others on Bush administration positions including foreign exchange rate policy. He rounded out his tenure for that administration as chief of staff for the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative.

“There is no better vantage point in terms of U.S. trade policy and the substance of international trade than being the chief of staff at USTR,” said Susan Schwab, who hired Keeler at the agency and followed him to Mayer Brown as a nonlawyer consultant and adviser.

Keeler said his time at Treasury has paid dividends in his highly sensitive work representing clients before the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States, a Treasury panel that vets proposed deals for national security complications. All of his CFIUS work from 2014 remains confidential, he said.

ACE Insurance Group has benefited from Keeler’s political acumen in its fight against various bills that have bounced around Congress in recent years to tax the use of foreign affiliate reinsurance. Keeler said he challenged the legislation on the basis that it breached a WTO agreement, arguing directly to Senate and House committee staffs, submitting testimony and even convincing the European Union to join the opposition.

“The way the bills are designed, they’re not being done to neutrally protect the tax base, they’re being designed essentially to protect domestic insurance companies,” he said. “It’s sort of taking legal arguments and using them in a multifaceted way to stop a problem from actually becoming a reality.”

Keeler is the head of a Mayer Brown team serving as global trade counsel to Visa Inc., providing advice on the Trans-Pacific Partnership and other negotiations. He also counts Intel Corp., Chevron Corp. and Volvo Group among his international trade clients.

The man who helped recruit Keeler to the firm, Mayer Brown partner and former Secretary of Commerce Mickey Kantor, said his protege can handle trade issues spanning the globe from Europe to China.

“He’s a very well-organized, thoughtful lawyer and one who gets things done,” he said. “It’s a terrific package and one which everyone at the law firm is thrilled with.”

--Editing by Brian Baresch.