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THE AM LAW LITIGATION DAILY

Litigation Leaders: Steve Dettelbach of Baker & Hostetler on Trial Lawyers, Thick Skin and 'No Drama'

By Ross Todd

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Welcome to another edition of our Litigation Leaders series, featuring the litigation practice leaders at some of the biggest and most innovative law firms in the country.

*Meet **Steven Dettelbach**, firmwide chair of the litigation practice group at **Baker & Hostetler**, who is based in Cleveland, his hometown. Dettelbach returned to the firm after serving as the director of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives from July 2022 to January 2025 under President Joe Biden. He previously served as the U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Ohio for six years during the Obama administration.*

When we spoke earlier this month, Dettelbach, a self-proclaimed "long-hoping and long-suffering Cleveland sports fan," was eagerly awaiting LeBron James' latest decision about where he's taking his basketball talents. For those not as plugged into the NBA news cycle as Dettelbach, James announced Friday that he will be playing for the Philadelphia 76ers in the upcoming season—a disappointment to both Dettelbach and his Cavaliers and me and my Golden State Warriors.



Courtesy photo

Steven M. Dettelbach of Baker & Hostetler.

As you'll see from the copy below, Dettelbach is a spirited interviewee. We're running this Q&A in two parts, the first focusing on what keeps Dettelbach returning to the firm after his stints of government service. Tomorrow we will spend more time discussing the firm's litigation department and what he thinks sets it apart in the market.

The following has been edited for length and clarity.

Lit Daily: Tell us a bit about yourself—perhaps a thing or two your partners would be surprised to learn about you.

Oh my gosh! So, I don't know how much my partners would be surprised to learn about me. I've been here three times now as a partner. I would tell you, I grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, and I'm Cleveland through and through. I am a long-hoping and long-suffering Cleveland sports fan. So, I don't think this column will beat the decision

that LeBron James is going to make about where he plays next year. But if it does beat it, [if he comes back to Cleveland], I would vote for him if he wants to be governor of Ohio.

He likes to drag things out. This column is slated to run here in a couple of weeks, so it could still be ongoing at that point.

It could be. So, both my folks were lawyers. So, even though I did all my pre-med requirements and thought I was going to be a physician, I really was destined from day one to follow in their footsteps. Some of my earliest memories are of my mom, who went to law school later in life, sitting around the dining room table studying. I feel really guilty about how me and my brother behaved during that time, when she was a single mom raising two kids and going to law school at the same time. She was a teacher before that. My dad was a trial attorney. I remember going to see him do things in court here in Cleveland. I really love being a lawyer. I love Cleveland. I love my family, and I love being a lawyer. And, oh yeah, I love BakerHostetler.

So, you've been a partner at the firm three times now. What is it that keeps you bringing you back after your stints in public service?

So, a few things. I think number one, the reason I first came to the firm as a junior partner was because they just are really good at what I did—a great government-facing internal investigations white-collar group and a firm that actually tries cases. So, that was what brought me here the first time, because I didn't know anything about law firms and Big Law. I interviewed at a bunch of places. I was a summer associate at a bunch of places. But I didn't really know.

The second time I came back was after I was U.S. Attorney. I knew a little bit more. So that time I came back to be the head of the white-collar group, which I had been in the first time. I liked the fact that this is a place where people try the cases; they don't try each other. It's a place where we don't have a lot of drama, except for in the day job where there's a ton of drama. Even though it's clearly a national firm, it still has that part of the firm that is its Ohio roots, kind of the "Midwest nice" part of the firm. I don't want to have false advertising—[that's nice] at least to each other. We're pretty tough on our opponents sometimes—professional but tough. So that culture of the firm, I think, was part of what brought me back.

And then the other thing that brought me back is that this was a very well-run place. As I got to be more senior and more focused on developing my practice, it's the kind of place where people like to try and say "yes" to our partners, if we can. That doesn't mean I always hear "yes." But when I don't hear "yes," I at least get a "no" instead of some sort of a B.S. answer to lead you on, which I think most people appreciate. There's usually a reason for it. And I don't know, maybe this can still go on the record: Sometimes I'm even wrong. Don't tell my wife that. I admit that. So, I like the fact that it's well-run, just from the point that there's not a lot of drama. There's a good decision-making process. And just from an economic standpoint, it's a place that for 33 years in a row, without missing a single year, has improved revenue year-on-year. Think about that. That includes years like 2009 and 1999. That, again, goes back to the fact that it's well-run.

And I guess the last reason that I keep coming back here is they continue to have the incredibly poor judgment to keep giving me really good jobs. So, I started the first time as a partner. I came next time to co-head the white-collar group, which is a great group. And then this time, when I was coming back from the administration, my chairman called me—my boss, **Paul Schmidt**—and he said, "Look, for 20 years we've had the same person heading litigation. He's decided he's had enough of it. If you come here, you can head our litigation group." For me, I couldn't believe my

good fortune to get to do what I want to do in the place I wanted to do it and actually give something back. I'm 60 now. When you start getting a little bit further on in your career, you think, "Okay, what can I do to make things a little bit better for the people who keep doing this?" And that was an incredibly attractive thing for me.

Well, as you alluded to, you took the leadership reins from Ray Whitman, who had been leading this practice for more than two decades. So, what, if any, advice did he have for you as you took on this role?

Well, I had a great, great situation. So, when I came on, first of all, I was tired. So, I needed a little rest from my job at ATF, because that was a very, very intense job. I knew that was going to be the case. So, I just needed a little break. I started in April, and one of the things that Paul did was he gave me eight months to sit with Ray and do everything with Ray. One of my conditions, which Ray was fantastic about, was I said, "I want to do everything with you. Every meeting. Every decision."

I can't even count the number of things that Ray passed on to me about the job during that period. And it's such a luxury to be able to have a handoff like that. It's very, very, very uncommon. When I came into ATF, they hadn't had a director in eight years that was presidentially appointed. So, it was the polar opposite. This was: "Let me show you every single thing."

I think you know Ray. It's so interesting. Look at our resumes as litigators. We couldn't be more different, right? I'm a government-facing D.C./Great Lakes white-collar guy. Ray is a pure Texas through-and-through energy lawyer. I knew Ray as my boss, but I didn't know him as a person. But I found us to be tremendously similar on the things that matter in running a litigation department. We both value and require hard work. I think that's part of who I am, and it's part of who he is too. We both believe that you have to be good trial lawyers. There's no way to be an effective litigation department if you don't have the ability, from the moment the phone rings, to be thinking about what this case would look like in trial and how do I build it to get there. We both believe that there's both a human side to things and a numbers side of things and you have to balance those things. That's hard. If you want to be a numbers person and only think about the numbers, that's easy. If you want to be a human story and drama person and only think about the human side of things, that's kind of easy too. The hard part, to me, is having to deal with both of those things together and to be fair. That is sort of the north star: to be fair. So, we're pretty eye-to-eye on that.

To answer your question, it's really interesting. Because we were so different, I wasn't expecting to see that we would see the world the same way. But those sorts of basic values were pretty deeply ingrained.

You served as the director of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives under President Biden, and U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Ohio for six years under President Obama. What do you draw on from those leadership experiences in your work leading the litigation practice back at the firm?

So, I never would have hoped to be able to have the career that I have had as a lawyer. I have had the chance in my career to have a series of jobs with gradually increasing responsibility. What I learned over that time is that while every job requires an expertise, there are still some things that are common in terms of trying to lead organizations and manage organizations. By the way, those are two related but different concepts, right? You have to both lead and manage.

One thing that I've learned over the years is that—despite the fact that most people have very strong opinions about their analysis of things—I'm not always right. Despite the fact that I'm

giving you this long interview, if you want to do your job well, you have to be a good listener. You can't just wait for your turn to talk. You have to really listen to people because, number one, that's how you make them understand that their view counts, and, number two, they're right sometimes. You're not always right about things.

Number two, I learned you can't do everything yourself. So much depends upon getting the people that surround you to help you. So, you pick the places that have those people, which I've done in my career. I mean, my U.S. Attorney's Office: incredible place to work. BakerHostetler: incredible place to work. [The DOJ] Civil Rights Division, where I started my career, was an incredible place to work. Just time after time, I've been working around these incredibly talented people, and then when I've gotten the chance to lead, the most important decisions we make are the decisions to hire without any even close second place. Those are decisions that define you as a leader, as a manager. I've been very fortunate that I've had the chance to select some great people and work with some great people over the years.

I think some people don't quite get it, and they wonder why I am having to spend so much time in the hiring process or in the talent evaluation process or in the talent development process. It's time away from work. But that is the most important thing, I think, that you do as the head of a group, as a leader in general. And then, just harkening back to something I said earlier, which is no drama. There's so much drama. I definitely learned I have a very thick skin now compared to when I started out, especially when I started getting in positions that had more public scrutiny like the U.S. Attorney's position. Oh my gosh! Every newspaper article, even the good ones, it wasn't good enough. "Why didn't they say this?" And: "I told them that." The guy who handled my media … poor guy! You say, "Well, they should have said this." He said, "This is like the best article you could ever hope for, and you're complaining?!" So much less if you get criticized, right? I remember feeling very, very, upset. Same for internal things. Ah, this person's challenging you, and "I'm right, and they're wrong." I just learned over the years that you have tosort of put those feelings aside. They're natural feelings, but the most important thing is: What is the goal I'm trying to accomplish here? Is somebody getting in the way, or is something getting in the way of me accomplishing the goal? Or is it just getting in the way of the way I want to do it, or getting in the way of my ego?

Like all big-time trial lawyers—I'd like to think I'm one—I plead guilty to having too big of an ego. I just think you learn to turn the other cheek.

In ATF, oh my gosh, you definitely learned that. At ATF, the goal of that job is very simple. The goal of that job is to decrease violent crime. Three words: Decrease violent crime. All the rest of it is atmospherics. So, to me, you have to learn just because somebody's yelling at you—whether it's a person you work with, whether it's a person on the other side of a case, whether it's a senator or a congressman, whoever it is— [to ask if] what they're doing is going to interfere with the idea of decreasing violent crime? If it's not, whatever.

I'm really lucky. I love my wife. I have great kids. Those are the people that I should be concerned about when they are upset with me. All the rest of it: Some of it's for theatrics. I'm not perfect. I've done that. I'm sure I've mistreated other people, too. But I try to do it less.

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Baker & Hostetler's Litigation Chair on Scale, Scrappiness and Being 'Trial-Hungry'

By Ross Todd

July 28, 2026

*Welcome back to the second part of our Litigation Leaders conversation with **Steven Dettelbach**, firm-wide chair of the litigation practice group at **Baker & Hostetler**. As we detailed yesterday, Dettelbach, who is based in his hometown of Cleveland, returned to the firm last year after serving as the director of Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives from under President Joe Biden. Yesterday, we discussed how that experience and his six years as the U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Ohio shaped his approach to leadership and the reasons he's now come to the firm as a partner three separate times after government service.*

Today we'll go a step deeper on his current role at the firm and where he thinks the firm's litigation department fits in the market.

The following has been edited for length and clarity.

Litigation Daily: So, in your current roles, heading the practice at the firm, what is the divide between your client-facing work and the internal practice leadership and management?

Steve Dettelbach: So, I was going to say 50/50, but really, it's 100/100. I would not have done this job and would not do this job if I did not have the chance to continue to be a practicing attorney. All our practice leaders are like that. I don't get to practice as much as I used to, that's for sure. But I try to pick my shots carefully. I try to help lawyers who I work with to develop their relationships with clients. I'm going to try a case in the Southern District of New York in October, which I'm excited to do. The head of our securities practice asked me to do it. He does a fantastic job, so I wanted to do that. Sometimes there are sensitive matters where maybe I could have some insight based upon my government service. I try to help on those. The days are pretty full, that's for sure.



Baker Hostetler Atlanta Office.

How big is the firm's litigation department, and where are most of your litigators concentrated, geographically speaking?

Our litigation department is the largest department at our firm. Depending on the exact time, it's probably between 420 and 430 lawyers. We're

in every office in the firm except maybe one right now, a small office where we don't have a litigator, but we're working on that. We also have a global outlook, a holistic outlook.

One thing I'm really proud of in this firm is we have dedicated ourselves to being a full-service law firm. Those 420 or -30 all sit in the litigation department. We, of course, have litigators at our firm who don't sit in litigation. So, for instance, I mentioned we're full-service. We still have a great labor and employment practice. There are labor and employment litigators that sit in the labor and employment part of our firm. Part of my job is to work with my fellow group chairs to make sure that we are not losing those synergies between our different departments. We have a great data group in our firm that is really best-in-class. So, we have class action and privacy litigators there. We work together with them all the time on those matters.

So, what do you see as the hallmarks of BakerHostetler litigators? What differentiates you in the market?

To put it bluntly, we don't mind scrapping. This is a place where people like to fight and to get into it, and I like that about this place. Like I say, we try to keep it focused on our client work, not on each other. But this is a place where you know we are … I was going to say trial-ready, but it's really sort of trial-hungry. When somebody has the chance to do a trial, they'll jump in immediately. My problem is that everybody wants to do it, not finding people to do it.

The other thing that I really love about this place is it's an incredible team culture. And I know that as I say it, it sounds so cliché. But I'll give you some examples of that. When I was at the firm—not this time but last time—we were just starting to do what became one of our largest engagements during this period of time, which was we represented people in California wildfire and in West Coast wildfire cases. We started out by pitching and getting the work for the creditors committee of tort claimants in some of those Northern California fires. That means our clients were a committee made up of tort claimants: So, some of the best plaintiffs lawyers in the country were our clients. They are very selective and very demanding about who's going to represent them. So, I remember I wasn't going to be the relationship lawyer in this case. It was a guy named **Bob Julian**, fantastic lawyer who still works for us in California. He was coming from another firm to our firm, and I think he would still tell you to this day, he's never seen anything like that. This is a new guy, doesn't know anybody. These cases are kind of different. But all you have to do at our firm is pick up the phone and say, "I need you on a plane here tomorrow to talk to these plaintiffs lawyers and explain why we're the best firm."

I felt bad for the other firm because every time they were asking, "Well, what do you know about large actions?" we had like a room full of people just waiting to get in there and tell them. "Oh yeah, well, this is this guy was a professor at Stanford who taught energy law." "This guy was on the commission." Whatever it was.

Unless you have a trial, unless you're in the hospital, unless you've lost a loved one, you get on that plane. At BakerHostetler, if your partner asks you, you get on the plane. One of the worst things that anybody could say about you—at evaluation time, at compensation time, at promotion time—is: "He's just looking out for himself" or "She's just looking out for herself." At our firm, that is one of the worst things somebody could say about you. And one of the best things is: "He's a team person" or "They're team players." So, that's the other thing I really think differentiates us.

Not to be boastful, but I think you're probably not going to be surprised that I had a bunch of options every time I flipped for a job. So, I think I have some credibility in saying that, really, I've found that to be true here. I've been a public servant for large hunks of my career, and that's something that this place has in common with public service.

In what three areas of litigation do you have the deepest expertise? I know it's going to be hard to limit yourself.

Oh my God, that's like asking somebody to choose between their friends, right? So, I'll name some areas where I think we have very, very strong expertise. So, first of all, look, I came here myself because of our government-facing, white-collar,

securities practice and internal investigations. Those three things … we just do that extremely, extremely well. The way I would say it to government lawyers is that we don't have an AUSA who is a really good marketer, but if you look back, just did bank robbery cases—which are really important, but maybe not as complicated.

The people who I work with here: **Lauren Resnick**, who tried the Crown Heights case in New York; **George Stamboulidis** did the Wen Ho Lee case when he was in the government, a national security case of great importance; **Carole Rendon** was a former U.S. Attorney; **Becky Lutzko**, former U.S. Attorney; **Jacqueline Romero**, former U.S. Attorney; **Brian McEvoy** in Atlanta, who, for everything that has anything to do with healthcare, he was the go-to guy at the Department. So, I just think we have people who, for people who know the difference, are really good folks here.

So, that would be one. This isn't so much a practice, but there's a thing we do really well: We scale very, very well. So, cases that are like the Madoff case, which is a signature engagement, like the California wildfire case, like the opioid engagement. Cases that aren't one really important case. They are 500 cases. So, you need to understand how to manage the discovery, how to administer the case and what the big strategic points in the case will be that are going to matter for years to come. All of those kinds of big scaling things, we can do that all across the United States with boots on the ground. We do that extremely well.

You asked for three, so one more. I'll give you two more. Our bread and butter in this economy and in this practice is we just do really good at representing large B2B commercial disputes. That's something we really, really pride ourselves in. And if I had to pick one more that's a little different, I would say what I would call our Washington practice. It's a really fascinating, interesting practice. There are a few different parts of it. We have a great appeals group, and we have a great political law group, which does election-related cases all over the country.

Both of those groups, as you can imagine, handle matters that are very, very closely scrutinized and watched, and can be controversial. I think we have an ethos in our litigation group that we don't shy away from things that are unpopular. We represent our clients and give them the best legal representation that they deserve and can get. We're in it on all sides, right? We're, right now, plaintiffs in a case involving suing some tech folks, right, who were alleged in our complaint to have supplied advanced computer chips to the Russians that were used in drone strikes against Ukrainians. We represent Ukrainian families in that case. And I'm sure there's a large group of people who disagree with that, right? We also represent states in redistricting fights. I'm sure there's a large group of people who disagree with that. I mean, we are truly lawyers. We represent clients with legal problems. We're there to give them the legal help that they need, and so that's been something that I'm really proud of this group for.

What does the firm's coming trial docket look like?

So, we are getting ready to retry *United States v. Chuck Jones*, a case where our team—incredible team—tried the case to a hung jury. This was the largest public corruption scandal in the history of Ohio. We represent Mr. Jones, who was the CEO of First Energy Corporation. That's coming up. We have my case, which is coming up in New York in the early fall. We represent a company that produced COVID tests and they were sued on a securities fraud theory based upon allegations that they made statements violated the securities laws. We have that Ukrainian case, although I don't know what the trial date is for that. That's in federal court in Texas.

Gosh, I know I'm going to forget so many. I don't want to. When people read this, they're gonna say, "I can't believe you didn't talk about my case when they asked you about the upcoming trial docket." Those are just three that are out there, but there's a lot. There's obviously a lot more. We try a lot of cases.

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