

Thus, for example, you might be connected to President Bush by five degrees if your former boss married a woman whose brother once cut hair in the president's favorite Texas barbershop.

You might be similarly connected to Bush's Democratic rival, U.S. Sen. John Kerry, if your son had a friend whose sister once waited tables at a Boston sandwich shop favored by Kerry.

In this context, it's possible to make sense of U.S. Attorney Alice Martin's arguments for the disqualification of the latest judge to be assigned to hear the fraud and bid-rigging case of former Gov. Don Siegelman and two co-defendants.

Real or perceived conflicts of interest, especially in something as grave and important as a government corruption trial, should never be ignored.

On the other hand, if we trace conflicts of interest to the infinite degrees that Martin has suggested in various court filings, we may have to ask not only whether it's possible to find a federal judge in Alabama qualified to preside over the Siegelman case but whether it is possible to find 12 qualified jurors.

After all, federal jury lists are drawn directly from local voter rolls. Thus, it's conceivable that most potential jurors in the pool have voted either for or against Siegelman in at least one of his seven runs for seven runs for [illegible text].

There are many ways to look at Martin's various motions alleging conflicts of interest among the judges consecutively assigned to the case.

One interesting factor to consider is the political affiliations of the various judges before they were appointed to the federal bench. Judges are obliged to abandon all political activity when they are appointed to the federal bench, but no one gets a federal judgeship without ties to whichever party controls the White House at the time

of appointment. Partisan concerns likewise factor into the appointment of U.S. attorneys.

The first federal judge assigned to the case, Republican Karon Bowdre, stepped down from the case before either side could object to her hearing it. Bowdre's lawyer husband had represented a company that was a losing bidder for the Medicaid contract that is a key issue in the case.

The second judge, Lynwood Smith, is a Democrat. Martin, a Republican, objected to his hearing the Siegelman case because he is related to Gov. Bob Riley, a Republican who defeated Democrat Siegelman in the 2002 governor's race. Based on Smith's relationship to Riley (the judge also had once attended a Riley fund-raiser), it might seem that if either side should have objected to Smith hearing the case it might have been Siegelman's lawyers, but they did not.

Logic suggests that both sides considered political affiliation, or some other factor, more important than Smith's relationship to Riley.

The third judge appointed, L. Scott Coogler, stepped aside after Siegelman's attorneys noted that Siegelman co-defendant Dr. Phillip Bobo—whose interests could conflict with Siegelman's in the case—owned a medical clinic at which Coogler's children had been treated. Despite this remarkably direct connection—only one or two degrees of separation, as it were—Martin did not object to Coogler, a Republican, hearing the case.

Things get more complicated when you come to Martin's objections to U.S. District Judge U.W. Clemon, a Democratic appointee currently assigned to the case. In the case of Clemon, the alleged conflicts cover so much ground that, if found to be legitimate, they could make it difficult for any well-connected lawyer to become an effective federal judge.

For example, Martin has complained that Clemon should not hear the case be-