

Cover Story

D.C.'s Crowell & Moring Nabs L.A. White-Collar Boutique

By **Rebecca U. Cho**
 Daily Journal Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES — Lightfoot Vandeveldede Sadowsky Crouchley Rutherford & Levine, one of the city's few remaining premier white-collar defense boutiques, has joined Washington, D.C.-based Crowell & Moring to anchor its Los Angeles office.

The move brings an end to the firm's 35-year rein as a highly sought-after litigation shop known for hiring and producing some of California's top public servants and tackling high-profile cases.

Some of the firm's noted wins have included persuading a federal judge to toss all charges against accused double-agent Katrina Leung, based on prosecutorial misconduct. The firm also was able to get federal charges related to child molestation and pornography dismissed against former Orange County Superior Court Judge Ronald Kline.

Over the years, the firm has attracted stellar alumni, including former federal public defenders Maria Stratton, now a Los Angeles County Superior Court judge, and Stratton's successor as federal public defender, Sean Kennedy.

The seven-lawyer boutique firm follows the example of other small white-collar firms over the years that have closed shop or dispersed for the resources and prestige of big firms.

Lightfoot became Crowell & Moring's Los Angeles office last Wednesday, adding to the 460-attorney firm's presence in California, which includes an Irvine location that opened in 1991. All of the Lightfoot attorneys joined Crowell & Moring, including senior partner Michael J. Lightfoot, partners Janet I. Levine, John D. Vandeveldede and Jeffrey H. Rutherford, senior counsel Stephen B. Sadowsky and John S. Crouchley and associate Marta VanLandingham.

Vandeveldede, a former assistant U.S. attorney, said that business continued to be strong, but demand from clients helped fuel the decision to join Crowell & Moring. He



Courtesy of Mark Savage

John D. Vandeveldede, Marta VanLandingham, Janet I. Levine, Stephen B. Sadowsky, Jeffrey H. Rutherford, Michael J. Lightfoot, and John S. Crouchley are now part of Crowell & Moring's Los Angeles office.

attributed the changing nature of the white-collar law practice, including the increasing number of global clients and more overlaps with other practices, such as antitrust and health care, for the firm's decision. Clients include a Japanese metals company and a French insurance company.

"We haven't always been able to do everything in-house as much as we'd like," Vandeveldede said. "If a case involves health care issues, environmental issues, technical and substantive issues, we have to look outside our firm and collaborate with other people.

"That's been great, but we think this would be even better because everybody is part of the same team on an ongoing basis. It's going to be terrific."

Crowell & Moring offered the firm the opportunity to remain in its same location, while opening a Los Angeles office for Crowell. It also gave Lightfoot attorneys a chance to work with people they liked in a genuine team environment, Vandeveldede said.

"I haven't met a jerk, yet," Vandeveldede joked.

Lightfoot's move follows that of Los Angeles white-collar crime shop Beck, De Corso, Daly, Kreindler & Harris, which closed its doors at the beginning of the year. Mayer Browne Rowe & Maw and Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe both grabbed chunks of that firm.

Richard Kolodny, president of legal recruiting firm The Portfolio Group, said Lightfoot's decision would enable the firm attorneys to maintain some autonomy as Crowell's L.A. office while enjoying the benefits of a firm of Crowell's size, including its marketing, infrastructure and client base.

Kolodny, who brokered the Beck De Corso deal for Orrick, said the Lightfoot firm continues a trend among small litigation firms.

"Although each situation needs to be evaluated on its own, this move continues the consolidation trend of the past several years as it relates to specialized boutique practices, like white-collar or patent litigation, which have difficulty competing with full-service firms in certain areas given the national and international platform, reach

D.C.'s Crowell & Moring Nabs L.A. White-Collar Boutique

and client base of many of their larger competitors," Kolodny said.

Michael Procter, a partner at Los Angeles litigation boutique Caldwell Leslie & Procter, said he believes a strong market for small litigation firms continues to exist, but the timing of Lightfoot's decision made sense for the firm attorneys.

"For people like Janet Levine and John Vandavelde and Mike Lightfoot, they've conquered their world," said Procter, a former deputy federal public defender under Stratton. "This merger gives them the opportunity to expand into more international cases and more international practices. I do think this will give them incredible resources that a small firm maybe didn't have as much of."

Another prominent Los Angeles white-collar boutique that remains standing is Bird Marella Boxer Wolpert Nessim Dooks & Lincenberg. With 26 lawyers, more than three times the size of Lightfoot, name partner Gary Lincenberg said the firm now devotes more than half of its practice to civil litigation.

Lincenberg said his firm has rebuffed

merger offers from larger firms, mainly because of the office camaraderie. Most of the clients come through lawyer referrals, rather than former corporate clients. As a result, the firm's business tends to be more local, and its lawyers stay more plugged in to local bar activities.

"Because we're always dealing with the same faces ... it makes for a more civilized practice," he said.

By joining a larger firm, the lawyers at Lightfoot Vandavelde will be able to draw more of their business from a pre-existing client base, Lincenberg added.

Crowell & Moring, well known as a litigation firm with particular strength in government contract work, was seeking a top group of litigators to represent the firm's presence in Los Angeles, said firm chairman Kent Gardiner.

"It was very important for us to grow into the market in a top-quality way," Gardiner said. "We were looking for a strong move into Los Angeles that would set the tone for the excellence we were aiming for. We were fortunate enough to get in touch with the Lightfoot firm."

Gardiner said Los Angeles is key to

the firm's growth in light of the firm's strength in litigation, which accounts for 80 percent of its work. The firm represents Blackwater USA, the security contractor under investigation for a fatal shootout last September in Baghdad. The expansion was driven strongly by client demand, he said.

"We thought it was particularly important to grow in Los Angeles because, in our view, it is such an important litigation marketplace, not only from the standpoint of client demand, but also talent," Gardiner said. "There is tremendous litigation talent in Los Angeles."

In 2007, Crowell & Moring acquired a 10-lawyer group from Buchanan Ingersoll & Rooney in New York, bolstering its financial services capabilities and expanding the office to 43 attorneys.

Lightfoot, a founding partner, said he felt a host of emotions as he witnessed the firm's transformation into Crowell & Moring last week.

"I looked back and saw the guy peeling the sign off," Lightfoot said. "It's bittersweet. It's the end of one era but the beginning of another great new era."