

# The Lawyer as... *U.S. Customs and Trade Attorney*

## Featuring Peter Quinter

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**Karin Paparelli**

*The Lawyer As...* is an editorial series created to illuminate, explore, and applaud the diverse roles lawyers hold from litigator to legislator, from advocate to agent. It is our goal here at the *International Law News* to introduce to you, our readers, legal professionals from varying backgrounds, educations, and career paths from all around the world in an effort to better understand and appreciate the vibrant mosaic of opportunities a career in law has to offer.

The Spring 2024 edition of ILN is proud to shine the spotlight on Peter Quinter, our ***Lawyer as a U.S. Customs and International Trade Attorney***.

We asked Mr. Quinter to kindly provide our readership with answers to the following questions with the hope that his responses will illuminate the life of a United States Customs and International Trade Attorney. Newly minted attorneys are encouraged to explore the possibility of a career in U.S. Customs and International Trade. The editorial team here at the International Law News join with our esteemed colleagues around the globe in applauding you, Peter, as you exemplify the definition of excellence in the practice of law serving the United States and the global business community.

**Q: Mr. Quinter, would you please provide a definition/explanation of your role as a U.S. Customs and International Trade Attorney:**

As the Chair of the U.S. Customs and International Trade Law practice at Gunster, one of Florida's oldest and largest law firms, I principally represent U.S. importers, U.S. exporters, customs brokers, freight forwarders, and air and ocean carriers to resolve situations with various Federal law enforcement agencies. Sometimes, the matter is urgent such as Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) Special Agents appearing at the corporate office to demand to speak to the President or Import Manager of the company, or \$1 million of perishable food products have been selected for examination by U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), or the Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) of the U.S. Department of Commerce detains an export shipment because it suspects that aircraft parts being exported from the United States may violate an export

license. Mostly, I interact with my former employer, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) which is the lead border enforcement agency of the U.S. Government.

**Q: Would you please provide your personal history achieving this role? Peter, what is your story?**

My career began in August 1989 as an attorney in the Office of Chief Counsel, U.S. Customs Service (now known as U.S. Customs and Border Protection), in Miami, Florida. For five years, I worked closely to provide legal advice to Auditors, Special Agents, Inspectors, Entry Specialists, and Fines, Penalties and Forfeitures Officers, and Seized Property Specialists, Air and Marine Officers, and other employees. It was exciting to work on matters regarding narco-smuggling, commercial fraud, human cocaine 'swallowers', counterfeiting, money laundering, sanctions violations, trade embargoes, evasion of antidumping duties, false country of origin declarations, and failure to declare imported merchandise. I worked closely with the U.S. Department of Justice, DEA, Secret Service, FBI, OFAC, FDA, CPSC, USDA, FMC, and other Federal law enforcement agencies to enforce their respective laws and regulations. It was superb training for my private law career.

**Q: Where are you based, what is your geographic location?**

Florida, U.S.A.

**Q: How difficult was it to transition into private practice?**

In 1994, I left U.S. Customs to enter the private practice of law. It was shocking. I did not know anything about billing, and was clueless about client development, and of course, as a government employee, I was prohibited from asking anyone for money to provide legal advice and representation. The transition was difficult. Fortunately, representing one successful client after another in private practice eventually created a reputation locally, then nationally, and now, internationally. In 1999, I became one of the first

attorneys Board Certified in International Law by the Florida Bar.

**Q: You are a highly sought after speaker and have graced many organizations with your leadership. I'm sure I don't know the half of it, would you kindly elaborate?**

I have been a leader of many legal organizations and lectured often to business or industry organizations and conferences. I have been Chair of the International Law Section of the Florida Bar, Co-Chair of the Customs and International Transportation Committees, and Co-Chair of various Annual Conferences of the American Bar Association's International Law Section, am Co-Chair of the International Trade and Transportation Committee of the Transportation Lawyers Association, and am on the Board of Directors of the Florida Customs Brokers and Forwarders Association. I first went to China in 2002 for a client matter, was honored to be selected by the U.S. Government to travel to Karachi, Pakistan in 2012 for a U.S. Embassy-organized conference on exporting to the United States, and led the first delegation of lawyers to Havana, Cuba, in 2016 to discuss the "Rule of Law." For the last several years have been recognized as one of the best U.S. Customs and International Trade lawyers in the world according to [Global Chambers](#) and [Chambers USA](#) legal directories, and listed in Florida 500: Florida's Most Influential Business Leaders for the past four years, as published in the [Florida Trend](#) magazine. I have many 'reported' Federal court decisions.

**Q: How long have you served as a US international trade attorney?**

35 years.

**Q: You and I had the privilege of visiting Cuba together with the Florida bar in 2015 and that was certainly a memorable trip. Would you please share with our readers some of your experiences and adventures as a U.S. international trade attorney?**

I have travelled to 54 countries as varied as Cuba, China, Germany, UAE, and Argentina, heard many languages, eaten what most Americans would consider to be very strange food, got sick a few times in Asia, and been in some tense security situation overseas. Some memories include lecturing annually in Boston, Massachusetts for two hours at the Seafood Expo North America and then eating delicious lobster, scallops, New

England clam chowder, and other seafood for 2 days at the show; lecturing at the International Precious Metals Institute in Orlando about importing gold into the United States; and participating at the annual Premium Cigar Association Conference in Las Vegas where I can enjoy the fine cigars and drinks. I have developed a fundamental philosophy of "Have Fun Making Money" and "TEAMWORK".

**Q: What would you say is the difficulty of the workload?**

I consider myself extremely fortunate. I work in a law firm that emphasizes camaraderie, cross-selling, and community service. The daily grind is stressful because of the complex nature of the practice having to know so many laws and regulations of various Federal agencies, deadlines, and clients demanding positive results as soon as possible.

**Q: How would you describe your overall career satisfaction in this role and your work / life balance?**

I work 40+ hours a week, typically am in the office on weekends, and am available to clients 24/7 on my mobile phone, vacations included. Just ask my wife and kids. To me, there really is no such thing as a "vacation" once smartphones were created.

**Q: Any final thoughts?**

I know there are many lawyers who don't like being lawyers, but that's never been me. I enjoy the intellectual challenge, the interaction with clients, and advocating on behalf of my clients to persuade Federal Government officials to pursue or not initiate specific actions. Each day is different. The laws, regulations, policies, and procedures keep changing, so I am always learning. I do wish I had learned Spanish, lived overseas for 2 years, and worked as an Assistant General Counsel for a Fortune 500 company, or even a non-governmental organization based in Europe. Nevertheless, I am thankful for all the unique experiences I've had, the superb mentors who've paved the way, and all the close relationships I've developed around the world.

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Karin Paparelli is an active member of the New York, Florida and Tennessee Bars, admitted to the U.S. Court of International Trade in New York, and the Federal Court Middle District of Tennessee. She is active in leadership in the ABA and serves as an arbitrator for the Financial Regulatory Authority (FINRA) for greater Nashville, TN.