

Court Information Release



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Contact: Thomas G. Bruton, Clerk of Court
United States District Court for
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219 S. Dearborn St.
Chicago, IL 60604
312-316-6888

Court Mourns the Death of Judge James B. Zagel

Chicago, Ill. – James B. Zagel, a United States District Judge for the Northern District of Illinois, passed away last night at the age of 82 after a long illness. Judge Zagel was appointed to the court in 1987 and assumed senior status in 2016. During his nearly thirty years on the bench, he presided over thousands of cases with his trademark brilliance and unflappable demeanor.

“Judge James Zagel was not only a much-admired federal judge; he played one in the movies. Anyone who knew him could see why: he looked the part, and he truly inhabited the role, reflecting the best of the third branch in his wisdom, common sense, and dry wit. Jim Zagel was a Renaissance man—a lover of the arts, music, and literature; a published author himself; and a man of elegance and charm. And he was a treasured friend to the attorneys and law enforcement officers he worked with for many years, his law clerks, and especially his fellow judges, who miss him dearly,” said Chief Judge Rebecca R. Pallmeyer.

James Block Zagel was born and raised in Chicago. As a child, he walked to Chicago Bears games at Wrigley Field from his family’s apartment in Lakeview. When not playing tennis for the University of Chicago, he studied philosophy and received a master’s degree in 1962. In 2011, the university awarded him its Professional Achievement Award.

After graduating from Harvard Law School in 1965, Zagel became a Cook County Assistant State’s Attorney. He quickly became the go-to legal analyst and strategist for the office. In June 1966, Zagel trained police officers and prosecutors on the requirements of a new Supreme Court decision, *Miranda v. Arizona*, and the next month, he was on the prosecution team for *People v. Richard Speck*. The Speck case put Zagel at the forefront of forensic science and psychology and the expanding role of constitutional doctrine in criminal procedure—areas of law that he continued to specialize in throughout his career. He was a co-author, with Fred Inbau and others, of *Criminal Law and Its Administration* (and later, with James Haddad and others, of *Criminal Procedure: Cases and Comments*). He argued *Witherspoon v. Illinois* (1968) before the United States Supreme Court.

With the Illinois Attorney General's Office from 1969 to 1977, Zagel tried homicide cases throughout Illinois, supervised the Attorney General's criminal division, served as chief prosecuting attorney for the Judicial Inquiry Board, and briefed and argued cases in the Illinois and U.S. Supreme Courts (including, *Spomer v. Littleton*; *Kirby v. Illinois*; and *Lego v. Twomey*). He took a leave of absence from the Attorney General's office to help his friend, then newly elected Attorney General of Arizona Bruce Babbitt, organize that office.

Governor James R. Thompson appointed Zagel to several Illinois statewide responsibilities, including Director of the Illinois Department of Revenue in 1979. From 1980 until his appointment to the federal bench in 1987, he served as Director of the Illinois State Police—a job he would often describe as his favorite.

As a judge, Zagel presided over every case, whether routine or high-profile, with the same calm, piercing intellect. During his federal judicial service, he served on the Codes of Conduct Committee for the Judicial Conference, among other committees, and was a frequent speaker at training courses for both lawyers and judges. In 2008, Chief Justice Roberts appointed Zagel to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court for a seven-year term. He also sat by designation on the United States Courts of Appeals for the Seventh, Fifth, and Federal Circuits.

Judge Zagel dedicated his entire fifty-year legal career to public service. He was an avid patron of the arts, with an encyclopedic knowledge of music, stage, and film. He was a performer too. Under the stage name J.S. Block, he appeared as a judge in *Music Box* (1989). "Block" returned to the screen in David Mamet's 1991 film, *Homicide*. Alongside his academic writing and judicial opinions, he could spin a yarn. In his novel, *Money to Burn* (2002), Zagel imagined a federal judge who plans a robbery of the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago.

He is survived by his wife of 44 years, Margaret Maxwell Zagel, and many beloved cousins and dear friends.

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