

'Put Myself Back Together Again': A 'Brilliant' Broward Lawyer's Time in an Iraqi War Zone

After watching the 9/11 attacks and a subsequent anthrax attack in Washington, South Florida attorney Corey Gray went directly to al-Qaida strongholds with the U.S. Army.

By Raychel Lean

Boies Schiller Flexner litigator **Corey Gray** was a college senior when al-Qaida militants hijacked four commercial airplanes to kill 2,977 and injured thousands more on Sept. 11, 2001.

"I can remember walking through my college campus and seeing folks just sort of glued to the television screen in the student union and wondering if maybe I had missed some big sport event, because why would these people be gathered around a television?" Gray said. "And I was even more curious when I realized they were watching what looked to be a morning news show."

There was a fiery hole in the World Trade Center's north tower. And, along with everyone else looking on in horror, Gray realized it wasn't an accident when he saw the second plane hit the south tower.

Later, another incident: When Gray was interning for U.S. Sen.

Bill Nelson in Washington, D.C., the Senate building was evacuated over anthrax-laced letters. Five people died in that attack, which some feared was connected to al-Qaida.

"I was sitting there on the sidewalk in Washington, D.C., outside of the Senate building in the heat of summer, and that's when it occurred to me that I need to do something more," Gray said.

Gray remembers thinking, "Maybe I can be a part of the solution," as he responded to a graduate school offer with a request to join its Reserve Officer Training Corps program. So, while studying U.S. military history and the American Civil War, he became a military officer.

The decision felt like a "primal response" for Gray, who thought of the time his first-grade teacher explained the significance of the American flag to the class. "It's a symbol of who we are as people," the teacher had said.



Corey Gray of Boies Schiller Flexner's Fort Lauderdale office. Courtesy photo

"That symbol included this charge to fulfill your potential, according to your freedom, life, liberty and the pursuit of your own happiness," Gray said. "The idea that that was under attack and the idea that there was a potential that that way of life could come to an end overrode my self concern, and made me say, 'I don't want to live in a world without that, and if sacrificing is what it takes to preserve that then I'm willing to do it.'"

'In it for real'

Gray went to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, for his officer basic course, which

primed him to be responsible for the lives of fellow officers, and for deadly weapons and materials.

Gray was assigned to the 10th Mountain Division in Fort Drum, New York, but not for long. His unit had deployed to Baghdad, Iraq, soon after he arrived, and he joined them after a crash course in basic preparation.

It was 2005, and Iraq felt like “a totally different world” to Gray — especially since he’d gone from training to a combat zone within hours.

“It is a surreal experience because now you’re in it for real,” Gray said. “There’s a lot of what you believe you’re capable of doing, but that all gets tested when you are in a combat environment.”

But it also felt like fulfilling a promise to his country, since Gray was making good on the pledge he’d made outside the Senate building.

That first deployment lasted 11 months. First, Gray handled security and conducted threat assessments and patrols at the Victory Base Complex surrounding Baghdad International Airport. Then he went to the Abu Ghraib region and its prison to serve as an artilleryman during Iraq’s political elections.

After a year’s break, Gray returned. This time for a 15-month stint in a small town called Hawija — an al-Qaida stronghold.

There, Gray employed the “Surge Strategy.” The goal was to strengthen Iraq by empowering its local and regional leaders, and it meant putting down the cannons to forge relationships. Gray helped draft and enforce contracts

to build schools, roads, generators, provide clean water and other critical infrastructure.

It wasn’t easy.

“Sitting in someone’s home, respecting the culture in a war environment, is an extreme display of trust to remove your battle armor, remove your shoes, disarm yourself and have a meal with people that you don’t know what their intentions are, but you’re willing to take that risk because the connection is the most important thing,” Gray said.

Through it, Gray discovered what he calls a simple truth.

“What I found is that people want to live good lives,” he said. “They want their children to be able to grow up in a safe environment. They want to be able to be self sufficient, and they want to have dignity and respect.”

Watching the violence decrease, Gray entertained his first thoughts about becoming a lawyer, reasoning, “If I can make a difference here in another country, in a culture that’s not my own, in a different language through an interpreter, imagine what I could do if I used this skill back in my home country.”

Soldier to citizen

After Iraq, Gray said it took a long time to decompress and “put myself back together again.”

“As interesting as it was to be going from a training environment one day to a wartime environment within a matter of hours, it was, I would say, doubly so to go from living a life in an intense combat situation for years on end and then, within a matter of hours, get off an airplane and

expected to just carry on with your life,” Gray said.

It took love and support from friends, family and colleagues to get through that process, as active duty was Gray’s “first career love.”

“I was heartbroken in a way because I came to understand firsthand how much work there is to be done and how few hands there are to do the work,” Gray said. “So, to be an able-bodied person to walk away at that time was a challenge for me, and I vowed that if I could help in any way and if all it cost me was personal discomfort, I would do whatever I could, so long as the army considered me worthy of remaining in service.”

Gray transitioned to the U.S. Army Reserves, where leaders encouraged him to pursue law. And at the University of Miami, he sought out “anything that did not involve conflict in any way.”

“I felt that I had had my fill with friction, so I wanted to draft contracts or something along those lines,” Gray said.

But that changed at the health law clinic. Gray represented a woman paralyzed by a stroke, who’d been denied disability benefits. When she suffered a second stroke, Gray left for the hospital, where nurses had told her to leave because she couldn’t afford the room.

Gray introduced himself as a law student, but the client’s daughter replied, “No. You’re her lawyer.”

“She looked around the room and told all her family members that, ‘The lawyer is here and everything is going to be OK,’ and they would not hear anything

otherwise,” Gray said. “A switch turned on and I said, ‘Yes. This is not right.’ ”

The client received her benefits and remained in the hospital room, and Gray hasn’t thought about doing contracts since.

U.S. District judge Federico Moreno in the Southern District of Florida said he’s had many brilliant law clerks, but none like Gray.

“Corey, of all of them, is the most adaptable,” Moreno said. “He can be anywhere and do great. And obviously, anyone who has been in the military and fought in a war is not fazed by anything that happens.”

With his “booming voice” and perpetual smile, Moreno said whatever the task — complex or menial — Gray replies, “Roger that.”

At Boies Schiller, Gray handles complex high-stakes trials and appeals in state and federal court, and has defended Florida Power & Light Co. from a lawsuit over hurricane outages and shielded Carnival Corp. from a first impression Helms-Burton lawsuit.

Lieutenant Colonel

This September, Gray was promoted to lieutenant colonel — the same rank his heroes were when he first joined.

U.S. Army Reserve Public Affairs Officer Major Ebony Gay met Gray at a holiday social, where he won an ugly sweater contest. But the other thing that’s made him stand out, Gay noted, is his genuine passion for the military.

“He doesn’t think about how to fulfill his military obligations.



Corey Gray of Boies Schiller Flexner at his U.S. Army promotion ceremony..

Instead, it is the why that drives him, which is the soldiers,” Gay said. “Others could learn from Lt. Col. Gray that devotion, passion, care and respect for your profession and those around you will generate enhanced growth, a sense of belonging and work performance. A more profound camaraderie is formulated when a person is interested in more than financial gains and accolades of an occupation.”

From what Gay has seen, Gray is a calm, steadfast officer with a “can-do mindset” who’s always ready to help other soldiers, whatever their rank.

“I can never tell when he’s under pressure or stressed out by the revolving door of tasks from his military position and civilian career,” Gay said.

And yet, his distinguished career and service appears to have defied the expectations he had for himself.

Gray grew up in West Palm Beach, farming beans, egg plants, squash and other produce that his

grandfather would sell seasonally to supermarkets. But life became about “just trying to make it” when his parents got divorced and suddenly it was just Gray and his mom, who moved them to Coral Springs in search of better schools.

Despite getting into Florida State University after high school, Gray said he didn’t feel confident enough to go without attending community college first “because I’d never been told that I was smart enough to do something like that.”

Now, Gray serves on the board of the Miami-Dade Urban Debate League, which works to get students in underprivileged communities involved in high school debate. He has three children with his wife.

Corey Gray

Born: February 1979, Boynton Beach, Florida

Education: University of Miami, J.D.; Florida State University, M.A. U.S. military history, B.S., military history and political science.

Experience: Boies Schiller Flexner, 2016-present; Co-president, Miami-Dade Urban Debate League 2019-Present; Law Clerk to U.S. District Judge Federico A. Moreno, 2015-2016.

Military honors: Bronze Star Medal, Defense Meritorious Service Medal and Iraq Campaign Medal

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