Deval L. Patrick has traversed the ghetto and the ivory tower. He lived on welfare for a time during his South Side Chicago childhood and in the lap of the luxury afforded by his partnership in a prestigious Boston law firm. He is the son of an avant garde jazz musician but took a strikingly different course than his father. Instead of music, there is the law and, if he is confirmed, high government service.

Patrick, 37, is a newcomer to the Washington political scene and now is President Clinton's nominee to be assistant attorney general for civil rights in the Justice Department. The position traditionally has been the focal point for America's ongoing discourse about race, civil rights and how the two are to mix.

Such legal terrain is familiar to Patrick, who as a corporate lawyer with Hill & Barlow and, before that, with the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, argued cases involving voting rights, the habeas corpus rights of condemned prisoners and discrimination cases involving banks and landlords.

With the exception of Drew S. Days III, the solicitor general who was assistant attorney general for civil rights in the Carter administration, "Deval Patrick has more civil rights experience than probably anyone else who's come into this job," said Ted Shaw, associate director-counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, where Patrick remains a board member.

If confirmed, Patrick will oversee about 250 attorneys charged with enforcing federal civil rights laws. Although some observers have questions about his low profile in civil rights circles, supporters describe him as hard working and well prepared, a lawyer who has demonstrated a keen ability to argue persuasively and thoughtfully. He also is described as a strong consensus builder.
But in the heat of legal battle, he is "definitely a formidable opponent," said William D. Gardiner, a Boston lawyer who was opposing counsel in a breach of contract case in which Patrick's client prevailed. "You know he's gonna be prepared. He knows he's a very bright individual. You gotta be on your toes."

Last week, Patrick paid courtesy visits to members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, which will hold hearings on his nomination early next month. Key Republicans on the committee say they are reserving judgment on Patrick until they learn more about him. Patrick also met with the Congressional Black Caucus, which on Thursday threw its "absolute and total support" behind him. The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights endorsed him the day before.

So far, Clint Bolick, a conservative activist, has been the primary voice of skepticism about the nomination. Bolick has expressed concern about Patrick's affiliation with the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund and his friendship with Lani Guinier, Clinton's first choice for the civil rights post, against whom Bolick led the opposition. But Bolick said Thursday that he is holding off on attacking Patrick until the nominee's positions on key civil rights issues are known.

Patrick worked with Guinier on voting rights cases at the legal defense fund. Her nomination sank after Clinton decided -- amid intense political pressure -- that he did not agree with her legal writings on voting rights. Clinton's second choice for the post, John Payton, the D.C. corporation counsel, withdrew from contention after his failure to vote became known and after members of the Congressional Black Caucus expressed reservations about him.

Observers expect no such storms to break over the Patrick nomination. Administration officials are on the offensive, managing his nomination earlier and with far more care than they managed Guinier's. Reporters and members of the black caucus met with Patrick the day his nomination was announced Feb. 1. The next day, the White House held a reception for him. This early attempt to sell the nomination is "a decidedly different approach" than the one taken in the Guinier nomination, an administration official said.

Patrick was born in Chicago, the son of the late jazz saxophonist Pat Patrick, who played with Sun Ra in the 1960s and also with Thelonious Monk. When Deval Patrick was 4, his father left and the family was forced onto welfare benefits for several months. They were so poor that Deval Patrick, his sister and his mother had to rotate sleeping on the family's two beds, friends say.

Patrick attended Mary C. Terrell elementary school, where his sixth-grade teacher, Eddie Quaintance, remembers young Deval standing out because of his seriousness and leadership. Patrick was a patrol boy and a member of the library club. He entered a school essay contest entitled "Why my father should be
father of the year." But because his father was not around, Patrick wrote, "Why my grandmother should be father of the year." His essay won the competition, Quaintance said.

Patrick's potential brought him to the attention of an educational program called "A Better Chance," which awarded him a scholarship to Milton Academy, a Massachusetts preparatory school.

From there, Patrick went on to Harvard, where, again, his "very natural leadership qualities" emerged, said James Vorenberg, a former dean of the law school who was master of Dunster House, the residence where Patrick lived.

The 300 other students at Dunster elected Patrick chairman of their house committee. And when he went on to the Harvard Law School after taking a year off to travel on a fellowship in Africa, he was selected president of the law school's Legal Aid Bureau. He also won the school's Ames Moot Court Competition in which students argue real-life cases in a show of their legal skills.

In 1983, he joined the legal defense fund, where he worked for three years. Initially, Patrick focused on death row appeals. He helped prepare the defense fund's challenge to Georgia's death penalty in 1987 before the U.S. Supreme Court in McCleskey v. Kemp. The defense fund analyzed statistics that revealed patterns showing that the death penalty was applied in a racially discriminatory way in Georgia. The high court, in a 5 to 4 split, acknowledged what it called a "discrepancy that appears to correlate with race" but said that discrimination could not be proved by statistics alone.

Patrick, with Guinier, also argued two voting rights cases while at the defense fund. One, in Alabama, resulted in the acquittals of three black voting rights activists who were prosecuted by the Reagan administration's Justice Department. Later, the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said those defendants had been selectively prosecuted.

In 1986, Patrick joined Hill & Barlow, where 25 percent of his caseload has been pro bono work for disadvantaged clients. He has handled a range of cases, including the pending civil suit that Desiree Washington, the beauty contestant and rape victim, filed against her attacker, boxer Mike Tyson.

Among his most "gratifying" cases, Patrick wrote to the Judiciary Committee, was a lending discrimination case in which Baybanks, a Massachusetts lending institution, admitted it had made home improvement loans in a discriminatory fashion by luring low-income customers, many of them elderly black women, into high-interest, high-penalty deals. The bank, in its settlement, agreed to offer refinancing to 11,000 customers.
Reginald Lindsay, a former colleague of Patrick’s at Hill & Barlow who now is a federal judge in Massachusetts, described the Baybanks negotiations as a demonstration of Patrick’s strengths. It was "a classic case of building consensus," he said.

"I'm also talking about working a difficult compromise where people have very strongly held views and interests and you are able to take the best from both sides and meld them into a workable solution," said Lindsay. "That's not only building consensus on legal issues, that's trying to bring disparate economic and political interests together."

DEVAL L. PATRICK, nominee to be assistant attorney general, Civil Rights Division, Justice Department

EDUCATION


PERSONAL

Married, two children

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 1983-86; general counsel and partner, Hill & Barlow, 1986-present