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CJP Removes Couwenberg From Superior Court for Lying

By a METNEWS Staff Writer

Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Patrick Couwenberg was removed from the bench yesterday by the state Commission on Judicial Performance for lying about his education, his professional background and his military record.

The panel found Couwenberg guilty of willful misconduct in office, conduct prejudicial to the administration of justice and improper action under the state constitution.

"He lied to become a judge, elaborated on his misrepresentations for his enrobing ceremony and subsequently lied to the commission in an apparent attempt to frustrate its investigation," the commission said in a 16-page order signed by Chairman Michael A. Kahn.

"The commission is convinced that protection of the public and the judiciary's reputation requires Judge Couwenberg's removal from the bench," the panel said.

Couwenberg's attorney admitted

his client is a compulsive liar. But Edward P. George Jr. of Long Beach said Couwenberg suffers from a curable mental condition and should be allowed to return to the bench. George said the ex-judge has not yet decided whether to petition the state Supreme Court for review.

George noted that the panel took 30 days to reach its decision.

"That's the longest period I can remember the commission deliberating," the attorney said. "I commend the commission, because they did do a lot of thinking about this. This was not a slam-dunk case."

George also noted that the removal had nothing to do with Couwenberg's on-bench conduct.

He said his client has been in therapy four or five months, and that he has made progress in treating the condition that some doctors have called "pseudological fantastica" and consists of mingling truth and lies, and being unable to distinguish between the two.

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PATRICK COUWENBERG
Former Los Angeles Superior Court Judge

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The ex-judge's doctors said it was a result of his difficult upbringing in war-torn Indonesia.

Superior Court officials said Couwenberg officially is off the court as of yesterday. The Supreme Court does not have to take review, even if the former judge seeks it. The action becomes final after 30 days if the high court does not act.

Couwenberg, 56, was appointed in 1997 by then-Gov. Pete Wilson and served at the Norwalk courthouse. He becomes the seventh Los Angeles Superior Court judge—and the 16th statewide—to be removed in the commission's 40-year history, commission director Victoria B. Henley said.

Most recently, Judge Patrick Murphy left the bench following commission action. Murphy claimed that he resigned before the commission's removal order was filed. When applying to Wilson for a judgeship, Couwenberg claimed, falsely, that he went to Loyola Law School. He did not mention that he went to the unaccredited La Verne College of Law.

At his enrobing ceremony he falsely claimed to have been a corporal in the Army and to have received a Purple Heart. Later, he falsely told a group of attorneys that he went to college on the G.I. Bill, had a master's degree in psychology and was late because of a medical appointment for strapping in his groin.

He falsely claimed to have served in the CIA—or some other covert government agency—in Laos.

George, the ex-judge's lawyer, said he hoped the experience would send a message to the Legislature that some type of discipline involving probation is warranted.

The commission action also serves to keep Couwenberg from returning to the practice of law, unless he reappears and is readmitted by the State Bar.

"That," George said, "would mean we could end up retrying this whole case."

Court spokeswoman Jerrienne Hayslett said the removal means the court is down 21 judges.

COUWENBERG