



HOMEPAGE

Who are Alex Murdaugh's attorneys? What to know about longtime SC legal bulldog duo

BY JOHN MONK

OCTOBER 03, 2021 5:00 AM



Hampton County (SC) Law Enforcement Center

S.C. Senator Dick Harpootlian and Jim Griffin, attorneys for Alexander Murdaugh and their handling of the media at his bond hearing on Sept. 16, 2021 at the Hampton County, S.C. Law Enforcement Center.

BY [JAKE SHORE](#) | [DREW MARTIN](#)

The focus of the small, [packed courtroom on Sept. 16](#) was to be Alex Murdaugh, part of a powerful legal dynasty in Hampton County who — between the deaths of his wife and son, alleged embezzlement, drug addiction and botched murder plot — has become an almost daily headline as that legacy unravels before a national audience.

That afternoon after the hearing, reporters' microphones and cameras — and much later, social media — were fixated on Dick Harpootlian, one of Murdaugh's two attorneys.

🔒 This story is a subscriber exclusive

Harpootlian was ready, firing off a stream of information, explanations and “no comments.” He offered quips as he fielded more than two dozen questions, dismissing the last from an Island Packet reporter with a brash, but polite, “None of your business. Ever been there?”

It drew laughs, and Harpootlian exited.

Meanwhile, Murdaugh's other lawyer, Jim Griffin, quietly slipped out of the courtroom. He was accompanied by one reporter who asked only three questions as Griffin, never breaking stride, kept on walking.

The moment lasted a few minutes, but was a classic illustration of the different personas of the two heavyweight South Carolina lawyers representing Murdaugh.

Griffin, 59, is reserved, cerebral, a workhorse.

Harpootlian, 72, the former chairman of the South Carolina Democratic Party who [flipped a Republican Senate seat in a 2018](#) special election, is a showhorse, a firebrand, a living quote machine and one of the state's best-known public figures.

“A perfect combination of down-home grit and steely sophistication” with a way of being both “provocative and witty,” Harpootlian was described in the 2010 political bestseller, “Game Change.”

The pair have known and worked with each other for years, their resumes stuffed with high-profile civil and criminal cases.

Now they're on [their biggest case ever](#).

Since June, Griffin and Harpootlian and their client, Murdaugh, have been at the epicenter of an ever-expanding true crime saga, with turns that have captivated readers far beyond the state's geographical lines. The grisly June 7 slayings of Murdaugh's wife, Maggie, and son, Paul, on top of other deaths, drugs and the embezzlement of millions of dollars, are only a few of the unraveling strands.

"Harpootlian and Griffin are legal bulldogs," said former Columbia Mayor Bob Coble, an attorney who has known the pair for decades. "They're not going to give up, and they don't care about criticisms."

WHO IS JIM GRIFFIN?

An Anderson County native raised in Pendleton public schools, Griffin graduated from Wake Forest University.

He credits the North Carolina university's emphasis on tests requiring essay answers — rather than multiple choice — to his academic success at the University of South Carolina Law School, where he graduated in 1987 near the top of his class and was on the Law Review.

Though he promptly landed a job with Nelson Mullins, one of the state's best law firms, Griffin sought more than corporate law.

He clerked with federal U.S Judge Dennis Shedd for more than a year, then went into private practice, opening an office in downtown Columbia across from the county courthouse.

A former federal prosecutor in the South Carolina U.S. Attorney's office, Griffin is known for representing clients in high-profile white collar criminal and complex civil cases, working to get them the best deals when evidence is stacked against them.

His criminal and civil clients have graced headlines, from former [SCANA executive Stephen Byrne](#), and South Carolina State University Chairman Jonathan Pinson to internet giant Google. Eight years ago, Griffin played a role in a case that resulted in former Lexington County Sheriff [Jimmy Metts going to prison](#), representing an informant whose information helped secure a guilty plea.

His hourly rate is said to be up to \$750 an hour.

“Jim is a thoughtful, analytical and detail-oriented lawyer, but he’s also street smart. That’s a strong combination,” said John Simmons, the U.S. Attorney in charge of federal prosecutors in the 1990s when Griffin worked there.

Griffin’s best strength, Simmons said, is “the ability to see around corners with legal strategies.”

When special prosecutor David Pascoe investigated corruption inside the General Assembly, he chose Griffin to help.

In 2018, Griffin’s assistance helped Pascoe win convictions in the jury trial of former Rep. Jim Harrison, R-Richland — so far the only former lawmaker sent to prison. A handful of others have pleaded guilty or are awaiting trial.

And, earlier this year, Griffin sued Attorney General Alan Wilson in an attempt to set aside Wilson’s awarding a \$75 million legal fee to his former firm for what Griffin contends was a minuscule amount of work.

The lawsuit is pending in the Supreme Court. Wilson contends the award was appropriate.

“Jim has a tremendous legal mind,” Pascoe said. “He knows the law better than anyone else, and he’s going to outwork everyone else.”

WHO IS DICK HARPOOTLIAN?

The Richland County Democrat will tell you he has four mentors.

They start with the late former solicitor Jim Anders, who taught Harpootlian how to prosecute a criminal case. Then there’s criminal defense lawyer Jack Swerling, who taught him how to defend a criminal case, and, third, the late Columbia Cam Lewis, who taught Harpootlian how how to try a civil case.

The fourth is the late Sen. Fritz Hollings, who taught Harpootlian that if someone attacks him, to “give it back better than he got (and) never let a punch go unreturned.”

Raised in Charlotte and a Clemson University graduate, Harpootlian’s life of scrutinizing public issues started at the student newspaper.

After graduation, he and other aspiring journalists founded a now-defunct alternative Columbia newspaper, Osceola, known for skewering politicians and shining light on their dirty laundry.

“Harpootlian’s first article was a story on how a foundation for the University of South Carolina was buying up land on nearby Wheeler Hill and forcing poor people off the land,” recalled Jim Walser, an Osceola colleague.

Wanting a career that paid more than journalism, Harpootlian enrolled in the University of South Carolina Law School. He quickly landed an assistant prosecutor’s job at the 5th Circuit Solicitor’s office.

It’s there Harpootlian handled the first of what would be more than 100 murder cases, including 15 death penalty cases.

The most sensational was the death penalty trial of serial killer, [Donald “Pee Wee” Gaskins](#), who Harpootlian proved used smuggled plastic explosives to blow up and kill a death row inmate. Gaskins was executed in 1991.

Harpootlian left the solicitor’s office in 1983, heading into private practice. He began his broader political career soon after, when in 1987 he won a seat on Richland County Council. In 1992, he was elected 5th Circuit solicitor, becoming one of 16 elected prosecutors in the state. He prosecuted and won public corruption cases that included a guilty plea from the once-powerful University of South Carolina president, Jim Holderman and a prison sentence for the ABC commissioner on corruption charges.

Harpootlian — who reads spy novels and police mysteries for relaxation — also ran an unsuccessful bid for attorney general, served stints as chairman of the state Democratic Party and became an early supporter and financial contributor to Democratic presidential candidates Barack Obama and Joe Biden.

His wife, Jamie, was recently [nominated by President Biden](#) to be ambassador to Slovenia.

Harpootlian “is a big picture, three-or-four-moves down thinker,” said Scarlett Wilson, who got her first job through Harpootlian and is now 9th Circuit solicitor, covering Berkeley and Charleston counties. “He’s not just thinking about the situation at hand, but more broadly and from a greater perspective.”

“He abhors laziness and is unflappable,” added Wilson, one of seven current or former solicitors who worked for Harpootlian early in their careers.

In civil lawsuits, Harpootlian estimates he has won or settled, alone or with other lawyers, a total of at least a half-a-billion dollars in verdicts and settlements in product liability, whistleblower and personal injury cases.

Harpootlian’s ease in a courtroom, added to a quick tongue and comfort with the press, has landed him in trouble.

During his 1986 run for county council, Harpootlian was quoted in a 2003 Associated Press as saying, “I don’t want to buy the Black vote. I just want to rent it for a day.” And, last month in court, Harpootlian, apparently unaware a camera was rolling, called out FITSNews’ news director Mandy Matney.

“Does she really exist? Will Folks’ alter sexual ego?” Harpootlian said, referring to Matney’s employer.

Harpootlian declined to comment on the remark.

Harpootlian is “the shrewdest attorney I know,” with “political instincts second to none,” former state Rep. Bakari Sellers, now a CNN commentator, wrote in his book, “My Vanishing Country.”

Though, Sellers added, Harpootlian has a little problem with sometimes blurting out things he shouldn’t.

Some consider Harpootlian’s commentary and his obsession with public transparency and spending — controversial or not — refreshing.

Often a critic of the Legislature, Harpootlian won a 2018 special election to the Senate to fill the seat held by former Sen. John Courson, who resigned as part of a State House corruption probe.

Since then, at times he’s attracted Republican fans for his proposals to end wasteful spending and government secrecy.

In his first years in the Senate, Harpootlian leaked reporters documents highlighting lawmakers’ spending on pet projects. He sued the state Department of Commerce, getting a judge to rule that the department broke the law by hiding details of financial incentives offered to companies.

Last summer, he represented a professor who sued Wilson and won a victory in the state Supreme Court that allowed the University of South Carolina to require masks for students and faculty. And, in 2018, Harpootlian created a foundation, filing a flurry of public information requests to get expense records of then 5th Circuit Solicitor Dan Johnson's office.

The records showed Johnson was using public money for personal expenses, sparking an FBI investigation which landed Johnson in prison.

In 2019, so impressed by Harpootlian's crusades he arranged a 90-minute meeting, conservative Wall Street Journal columnist Barton Swaim wrote that although he once regarded Harpootlian as "a flashy defense attorney with a talent for winning massive sums in civil litigation cases, and a boldly foul-mouthed liberal provocateur," he had changed his mind.

"I am (now) a reluctant fan of the man I abominated for years," Swaim wrote.

Chris Kenney, a lawyer in Harpootlian's office, said the man who started as a young journalist to now remains unchanged.

"He wants things to be open, honest — and competent," Kenney said.

For years, Griffin and Harpootlian have found themselves meeting in courtrooms, law offices over stacks of case documents.

"Since 1995, there has probably never been a time when we weren't working on cases together. But we've never been in the same firm — which may be the secret to our success," Griffin, whose understated humor contrasts with Harpootlian's.

Their first lawsuit was together in 1995, a joint victory in the state Supreme Court.

The high court agreed with them that video poker, electronic gambling with cash payouts, could be played statewide. Video poker quickly spread to a \$3-billion-a-year industry before being outlawed in 2000.

Twenty years later, in 2015, they represented a suspected drug dealer who shot and wounded a Drug Enforcement Administration agent during a surprise pre-dawn raid. In a plea deal, their client, Joel Robinson, was sentenced to eight years.

He could have gotten 30.

The duo's court success has had its share of embarrassing moments.

In 2019, they convinced one of the state's toughest federal judges, Terry Wooten, to let their client, John Hardee, stay out of prison in a case over destroying evidence. They promised Hardee would behave. But on his first day of freedom, Hardee was arrested in a prostitution sting. [Wooten, not amused, sentenced Hardee](#) to seven months in prison.

"Harpootlian's genius is, a, his ability to think on his feet and, b, to cut to the point," Griffin said. "I wouldn't give him high grades on preparation. He does prepare, but it's not like someone who spends weekends reading everything and digesting it. That's what I do."

Another difference, Griffin said, "I'm more the hand-holder with clients."

Harpootlian, Griffin continued, "is careful not to become too emotionally involved about his clients because he says it distracts his ability to be surgical about his thinking. I have enjoyed my client relationships. Many of them have turned into lifelong friendships."

The two are opposites, "but that's what makes it work so well," Harpootlian said.

"Fire and ice," Griffin said.

"We're like two musicians," Harpootlian added. "We riff off each other."

GRIFFIN, HARPOOTLIAN TAKE ON MURDAUGH

In South Carolina's political and legal worlds, relationships matter.

Griffin's mother's family had lived in Hampton County for years, and she grew up there.

And in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, when Harpootlian worked in the Richland County solicitor's office, he got to know Murdaugh's [father and grandfather, both of whom were elected solicitors](#), wielding considerable influence over five Lowcountry counties.

Murdaugh, 53, is a fourth generation attorney in a legal dynasty known for being a powerhouse in criminal and civil law.

His great-grandfather, Randolph Murdaugh, was solicitor from 1920-1940, and his grandfather, Randolph Murdaugh II, was solicitor from 1940-1987. Murdaugh's father, Randolph Murdaugh III, was solicitor from 1987-2006.

In 2019, Murdaugh asked Harpootlian to represent his son, Paul, then facing possible criminal charges in the 2019 night boat crash that killed Mallory Beach, 19. Paul was alleged to have been drunk and driving the boat when it crashed.

Sensing that the case was too much for one lawyer, especially with his Senate duties — which Harpootlian said can often be a “huge time suck” — Harpootlian looped Griffin into the defense.

Since then, Harpootlian and Griffin's representation has morphed into representing Murdaugh in all the criminal matters.

In addition to state insurance fraud charges, Murdaugh is being investigated for allegations that he stole millions of dollars from his former Hampton law firm and misappropriated \$2.6 million in insurance proceeds due to the two sons of a longtime Murdaugh housekeeper, Gloria Satterfield, who died in a 2018 fall at his family's house.

The State Law Enforcement Division also is investigating Satterfield's death and the 2015 death of Stephen Smith, whose body was found on a rural Hampton County road.

The pair also is representing their client in a botched murder plot for life insurance money — an event Murdaugh has since confirmed with investigators after his attorney originally told reporters that someone tried to kill Murdaugh while he was changing his tire.

“None of your business,” Harpootlian said when asked about the duo's fee, though lawyers who know them say they were hired on an initial payment of \$500,000.

“Jim and Dick,” veteran Columbia attorney Swerling said, “they're up to the task.”