

Interview

Life After Government

An Interview with the Honorable William S. Cohen,
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, The Cohen Group, Washington, DC



The Hon. William S. Cohen

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to founding *The Cohen Group* in 2001, William S. Cohen enjoyed a nearly 30-year career in the public sector, serving as a member of the United States House of Representatives (1973-1979), the United States Senate (1979-1997), and as secretary of defense under President Bill Clinton (1997-2001). During his tenure in the Senate, Cohen served as chairman of the Committee on Aging, the Armed Services Committee's Seapower and Force Projection Subcommittee, and the Governmental Affairs Committee's Government Oversight Subcommittee. He also served as a member and vice chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence and the "Iran-Contra Committee." An acknowledged leader in environmental issues and champion of small businesses, Cohen has also demonstrated stature in international circles, encouraging dialogues between governments and launching the William S. Cohen Institute for International Business at the University of Maine.

COMPANY BRIEF Founded in 2001, *The Cohen Group* (www.cohengroup.net) is headed by a roster of prominent leaders from the world stage. With an objective to help multinational clients explore opportunities both domestically and abroad, the firm provides its clients with tools for understanding their businesses,

political, legal, regulatory, and media environments.

After serving as secretary of defense, was it difficult to go into private life?

I'd actually expected to enter private life much sooner. As I was leaving the Senate in 1996, I was planning to start The Cohen Group with a few of my longtime colleagues, but just as soon as we'd printed up business cards for the firm, President Clinton asked me to put those plans on hold and nominated me to be his secretary of defense. As you can imagine, it was a tremendous honor and responsibility for me, and I dedicated all of my efforts to what I think is the best job in government.

To be sure, the transition from the public sector to the private realm was quick. My longtime colleagues, Bob Tyrer, Jim Bodner, H.K. Park, and I left the Pentagon on Saturday, rested Sunday, and founded The Cohen Group on Monday. But I wouldn't say that my transition to private life has been difficult. I was very familiar with challenges faced by the CEOs of large corporations; in some ways, the defense department is similar to a large business, though obviously on an entirely different scale, with some three million employees and a budget of more than \$400 billion. But it's overseen by a board of directors comprising 535 Members of Congress.

The Cohen Group, with about 40 people, is just slightly smaller, but leadership is leadership. The principles I applied to my leadership of the defense department are the same guiding principles I exercise today at The Cohen Group. I was pleased to see that our experience in managing a global operation applies to the business world as well.

What does the firm do?

Given our collective experience in government decision-making at the highest levels, we help some of our corporate clients solve problems that they have with the U.S. government or with foreign governments. The issues vary widely. Such problems could include regulatory issues, market-entry barriers,

or simply red tape, especially in developing markets.

We also help our clients market their products and services in the U.S. and abroad. We understand the process, the politics, policies, and personalities that influence government decision-making, and we help our clients do so as well. We are strategic planners. We are proud of the insight we can offer from decades of service at all levels of government, and it allows us to help businesses think through complex problems and develop and execute a solution.

You've hired some outstanding former generals, admirals, and other members of the government.

Yes, I'm proud to say that we have, but we've been careful to not just hire people with important titles. Instead, we have chosen particular individuals who have experience, and whom we know well and trust deeply, such as General Joseph Ralston – former vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and supreme allied commander in Europe – and Lord George Robertson, who served as the U.K.'s defense minister and as NATO's secretary-general and is now a senior counselor with our firm. Other senior counselors include Admiral Jim Loy, the former deputy secretary of the department of homeland security, General Paul Kern, a retired four-star U.S. Army general, and Ambassador Marc Grossman, formerly the third-highest ranking State Department official. We specifically approached each of these individuals for the professional and personal qualities that we knew they would bring to the firm. To our good fortune, they agreed to join us.

You have some of the world's top companies on your roster of clients. Do you mention anyone?

No, we don't disclose our clients by name. I can say, though, that the scope and size of our client roster has grown considerably over the years. Today we have the good fortune of working with businesses in a wide variety of sectors, including aerospace, information technology, bio-technology, agriculture, telecom,

logistics, and real estate. It's a great testament to our wide-ranging expertise and experience that such a diverse array of companies has sought our input.

Our China practice has taken-off in the past few years. When you think 5, 10, or 15 years into the future, China will define the economic marketplace to a large extent. Today, many U.S. companies still find the terrain unfamiliar, and understandably so, but those in our China practice have found tremendous success bridging the cultural divide. Our efforts have been welcomed by our clients and the Chinese government, with whom we consult regularly.

The same is true of our work in India, another rising giant. I recently traveled to India to lead a delegation of top U.S. business executives, coinciding with Treasury Secretary Snow's visit. India is, of course, best known for its technology sector, but our itinerary allowed for a broad overview of India's booming marketplace. We also had an opportunity to meet with the Indian president and prime minister, in addition to a number of other senior officials.

Where will the firm be 5, 10, or 15 years down the line?

We've obviously grown tremendously in the past five years, with about 40 employees where there were once only four. In recent months, we've been especially fortunate to welcome some very prominent team members.

The firm won't ever grow to the point that we aren't able to remain very close to our clients. In fact, I think we've roughly reached our optimal size, or close to it, at least. With 40 people, we're large enough to have a very broad and deep expertise, but we're also small enough to maintain that sense of camaraderie and collegiality that's crucial to our success. Everybody in this firm, without exception, gets along extremely well. We understand each other's strengths and weaknesses and our personalities and idiosyncrasies. The bigger you get, the more you tend to lose that.

So we all gather each morning at 8:30 for a staff meeting to run down, for a half hour's time, the client issues of consequence for that day, week, or month, and to get feedback and guidance from others. It's a rather telling example, I think, of the level of cooperation that goes on within the firm.

People often ask me, "What distinguishes The Cohen Group from other firms?" I think that collegial, team-oriented attitude is a large part of the answer to that question. Our clients aren't dealing solely with me; our business model allows them to take advantage of the full range of The Cohen Group's offerings.

It sounds like you're loving life in the private sector, but what do you miss most about government service? Don't you miss the motorcades and your meetings with foreign leaders?

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years of public service, from my earliest days as a representative from Maine to my time as secretary of defense. But I've been happy to discover, in the past five years, that there is life after government.

I've found that there has been a good deal of continuity between my past life as a public official and my role as a private citizen. I've been fortunate to continue my discussions with foreign leaders. Visiting delegations often stop by to talk,



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and I think they appreciate the opportunity to speak with someone who is outside of government but who also understands the processes and the people. I obviously don't speak for anyone but myself. So they know that I'm able to offer a candid, frank assessment of the facts as I see them.

I've also kept up my foreign travel in the past few years. During my years as secretary of defense, I traveled to over 90 countries and built strong working relationships and good friendships as well. Today, I continue to travel and maintain good ties to many foreign leaders. It's a good way for me to stay current with international developments and to main-

tain the friendships with foreign officials that I've developed over the years.

I've also done my best to continue contributing to the public-policy dialogue. Just as I did during my tenure in government, I occasionally write op-eds on issues that I feel strongly about. A couple months ago, for example, I published a piece – together with Bill Perry, my predecessor as secretary of defense – in the *Wall Street Journal* encouraging Congress to approve CAFTA [The Central American Free Trade Agreement]. Our article was unique, because we encouraged its ratification on national security grounds, while others had only focused on the economic side of the equation.

In the same vein, I also do a weekly segment with Wolf Blitzer on CNN's *The Situation Room*, during which I analyze the important international issues of the day. I do the same through other media interviews and speeches. It's an exciting way for me to remain involved in the national dialogue, even as a private citizen.

What is your Leaders' Project?

Again, this goes back to my desire to continue contributing to public policy. Twice a year, I host a private symposium in Florida. Each gathering has a different focus, but we always choose a topic that's an important issue of international debate and one that's highly relevant. Once we narrow the theme, we then select 40 or 50 individuals who have made the most significant contributions to the field. Our hope – and we've seen it come to fruition – is that once the conference has concluded, these leaders will build upon the relationships they've formed to make even greater contributions to the field in question.

We had a gathering in February of last year, where we discussed U.S. relations with the Muslim world, a particularly poignant subject given international developments at the time. Fifty-five leaders from 15 countries attended. We were fortunate to have a wide range of participants, including Senator George Allen, CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer, former Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, and former Thai Prime Minister Surin Pitsuwan. All of these individuals have made valuable contributions to furthering the understanding between the United States and the Muslim world, and they were excellent additions to the conference.

At our most recent session in November, we looked at the issue of energy security, another timely topic given the recent natural disasters and resulting oil price spikes. As in the past, we assembled a very impressive roster of attendees, and sparked a discussion on the nexus between natural resources, energy security, and national security. These are obviously very relevant issues, and I hope that this conference and the resulting dialogue will further the public dialogue and, hopefully, national understanding. ●