

# Rep. Jim Slattery

*Taste of international law in school leads to lifelong career.*

*By Brad Porter*

**Rep. Jim Slattery, BS '70, JD '74**, is well known as one of the most prominent Kansas politicians of his generation. He ran his first campaign while a first-year law student at Washburn University School of Law. He served in the Kansas House of Representatives from 1973-79. He later served in the U.S. Congress from 1983-95 and ran for Kansas governor and the U.S. Senate.

Outside of elected office, Slattery has also built an impressive resume as a practicing attorney with a particular focus on international affairs. For more than 20 years he was a partner at Wiley Rein LLP, a large Washington, D.C., law firm where he headed the firm's public policy practice. In 2019, he left to form Slattery Strategy, LLC to advise clients who have matters pending before the federal government and international agencies.

So how did a farm boy from the Good Intent Community in Atchison County, Kansas become a globe-trotting attorney involved in high profile international cases, and what has he learned along the way?

**When did you first get a taste for politics and international affairs?** When I arrived at Washburn in the fall of 1966, I already had an interest in politics, but had not traveled outside the Midwest except for one ROTC flight to Texas. One day though, Dean of Students Lee Dodson pulled me aside in Morgan Hall and told me about an opportunity to study abroad for a year at the Netherlands School of International Economics and Business. I jumped at this chance.

It was a life changing experience! I studied international economics and European history with a focus on post World War II East-West relations. I traveled all over Europe – visited NATO headquarters, the European Parliament and looked over the Berlin Wall at Checkpoint Charlie in West Berlin. I also traveled extensively in Eastern Europe and saw firsthand the impact of communism. I will never forget being in Prague, Czechoslovakia, in January 1969 shortly after several students burned themselves to death to protest the Soviet invasion of their country. It was a transformative time for me as I watched young people my age risk their lives to gain their freedom. This experience along with the Vietnam War spurred a lifelong passion for international affairs and the law.

Studying abroad was not common in the 60s. But it was something Washburn prioritized. I will always be grateful to Dean Dodson for encouraging me to go to Europe to study.

**From there, you went to law school and entered politics, before eventually landing at a prominent D.C. law firm, Wiley Rein. How did your work there in international law and trade come about?** My first client at Wiley Rein was from Atchison, my hometown. Midwest Grain Products was the largest producer of wheat gluten in the country. MGP told me how a recent trade agreement, the Uruguay Round, was causing serious injury to the U.S. industry. I had never done a trade case in my life, but I consulted with our trade experts in the firm and two other Washington law firms and studied the Trade Act of 1974 in search of a remedy for MGP. We ultimately concluded that a safeguard action under Section 201 of the Trade Act was the only viable remedy, so we filed suit against the European Union on behalf of the U.S. wheat gluten industry.

Most trade experts in Washington thought this was a fool's errand because this section of the Trade Act had not been used for years. But I put together a team, and a coalition within the wheat industry, to fight for the U.S. industry. We had to pursue this case through the International Trade Commission and educate members of congress and officials in the Clinton Administration about the serious injury our clients were suffering. But we succeeded in winning a judgment that MGP and others were being seriously injured and were entitled to relief. I then met with President Clinton to discuss a remedy. In a matter of about 5 minutes, he understood exactly what was going on and agreed to impose a quota on imports.

This was a groundbreaking case that I especially enjoyed because it saved a lot of jobs in my hometown and it paved the way for other industries like the steel industry to fight unfair and illegal foreign competition that destroyed U.S. jobs. Several years later this led to an excellent monetary settlement for the clients.

**In addition to trade cases, you also wound up getting involved in very high-profile cases where you worked as a political intermediary.** Yes. For example, I was retained to represent Julia Timoshenko, the former prime minister of Ukraine, who led the 2004 Orange



Jim Slattery, BS '10, JD '74, Photo by Jeremy Wangler

Revolution, when she was thrown in jail by her political rival. In this case there was an international legal component, but it was also a political matter. I spent hours negotiating man-on-man with Viktor Yanukovych, the president of Ukraine, to persuade him to release my client. I worked closely with Congress to pass resolutions demanding her release, which put international political pressure on Yanukovych. I pursued a legal and political remedy at the same time.

**So what would you say to a law student or young attorney interested in international law – what lessons have you learned?** To be successful in the international arena it is important to do your homework. Know the law and the facts. Find and rely on experts. And then it is important to determine whether a political remedy is available, or a legal remedy, or both. Sometimes there is a political solution to what appears to be a legal problem. I enjoy the complexity, and I enjoy unraveling all the layers to find

a remedy for my client. It sure helps to understand the other side's perspective.

Find opportunities to study abroad, earn an advanced degree, work with the International and Comparative Law Center, do all you can to broaden your perspective and build friendships. Washburn does a great job of providing these opportunities. This has to be something you're passionate about.

And as you do, build friendships. Your success or failure will often depend on the friendships you have made in life.

This is a condensed version of our conversation with Jim Slattery. For the longer version, with more stories, examples and insights, please visit: [wualumni.org/Slattery](http://wualumni.org/Slattery)