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Downtown Den: Robert O'Brien, managing partner at Arent Fox, with photographs and mementos at the law firm's office in downtown Los Angeles.

After Hours

Arent Fox's Robert O'Brien stays busy outside the office assisting Mitt Romney's presidential campaign and working to overhaul Afghanistan's justice system.

By **ALFRED LEE** Staff Reporter

FOUR years ago, Robert O'Brien's boutique law firm, O'Brien Abeles, joined the much larger Washington, D.C.-based Arent Fox LLP, and he became managing partner of Arent's downtown L.A. outpost. Since then, despite the downturn, he's grown the office from 10 to 56 attorneys. But he's also active outside law firm life: he's an adviser to Mitt Romney's presidential campaign; a co-chairman of a State Department effort to reform Afghanistan's justice system; and also a member of the State Department's Cultural Property Advisory Committee, which tracks antiquities trafficking. O'Brien met with the Business Journal at his office to talk about his admiration for Winston Churchill, how he turned into a country music fan and how he wants to end his career.

Question: You serve as an adviser to Mitt Romney's presidential campaign, as you did in 2007. Will he be the next president?

Answer: I certainly hope so. We're certainly leading in all the national polls on the GOP side. Of course, we're 16 months from the next election and that's a lifetime in politics.

Was there a moment when you knew you'd support him?

The first big moment was when my family and I went to the Salt Lake Olympics just after Sept. 11. The Olympics had been in terrible trouble, and there'd been a bribery scandal. Everybody was fired and Mitt Romney

came in and did an unbelievable job. I remember at one point watching local news in the morning, and there was a big traffic jam, and his motorcade came through and Mitt hopped out in a parka and started helping the volunteers direct traffic. This wasn't your typical big shot.

How did you link up with him?

I got to know his son, Tagg Romney, who was a neighbor of mine in the Pasadena area.

What kind of guy is Mitt?

Several years ago we went over to Tagg's to have breakfast (and Mitt was there). I was hanging out with Tagg and his wife, Jen, and I was looking for my son, who at the time must have been 10 years old. And he and Gov. Romney were sitting over on the couch having a conversation about Little League baseball for probably 15 minutes. Mitt was getting the whole download on the positions my son was playing, who was on his team, how good they were that year. I've seen Mitt in a lot of different circumstances, whether meeting with leaders in government or in Afghanistan, and that's one of the things that'll stick out, to see the interest he took in my young boy.

Do you think his Mormonism will be an issue with voters?

I think there was a novelty to it the last time around, but I don't think it's going to be a substantial issue. Now Gov. Jon Huntsman is in the race, and we currently have an African-

Robert O'Brien

TITLE: Managing Partner of downtown L.A. office

COMPANY: Arent Fox LLP

BORN: Los Angeles; 1966.

EDUCATION: B.A., political science, UCLA; J.D., UC Berkeley.

CAREER TURNING POINT: First big case as an associate, Home Box Office vs. Film Finances. "We ... realized, 'I can do this.'"

MOST INFLUENTIAL PEOPLE: Skadden attorney John Donovan, an early mentor; Berkeley law professor David Caron.

PERSONAL: Lives in the Pasadena area with wife and three children.

ACTIVITIES: Golf, tennis, skiing, reading.

American president who attended a church that at least some folks thought was controversial. I don't think Americans are going to vote for someone or against someone based on their religion.

Are you Mormon?

I grew up Catholic but joined the LDS Church in college.

Is that a reason why you support him?

No. Look, Harry Reid, who I think is a good man, is Mormon. And if he were the only

Mormon running for president, I wouldn't support him.

When did you convert?

It's a personal thing, but I had friends who were LDS. I'd gone to Catholic school, but when I was in college at UCLA I joined the LDS Church.

What was it about the religion that appealed to you?

Family is central to the faith, and it's important to me. It's a Christian faith, and we believe in Jesus Christ as our savior. But I think the emphasis on family, service and country are the things that shine through.

How does it emphasize family?

We believe as a church that families are forever, that we're all children of God, and closeness as a family is key to the doctrine and critical to our church.

Does that affect your professional life?

There's a real commitment at this firm to family. I was worried that the closeness, the cooperation and the collegiality might be lost in a bigger firm. We've grown since January 2007 from 10 lawyers to 56 lawyers in this office in the most difficult economic circumstances. I think we've been able to maintain that same level of collegiality.

Why does closeness in a law firm matter at all?

Clearly the economy has changed the law business. I think clients are looking for firms that

can staff their matters leanly and that can come up with creative results to resolve their disputes in a cost-effective manner, and that's where I think we have an advantage because of the collaboration and collegiality we're talking about. That fosters our ability to work together on small teams.

You also mentioned service and country are important to you and your faith.

I just feel it's a real privilege to serve our country. One of the times I'll most remember was after I'd been sworn in (as a legal officer) by Ambassador John Bolton at the United Nations. The next day I was sitting in the U.S. seat on the floor of the General Assembly, and one of our Foreign Service officers came over and said, "We need you to make an objection to a motion that's about to be voted on."

Then what happened?

You know, I'm a lawyer, I'm used to speaking in public, I've spoken in court, I've tried cases my whole life, so it's not a big deal. But when it was our turn and I flipped up our little placard, and when General Assembly President Jan Eliasson said, "I am now calling on the United States of America," for that second I kind of got choked up. It was almost overwhelming.

You've also led some U.S. efforts to reform the justice system in Afghanistan. Tell us about that.

War and tyranny – Churchill called them the two giant marauders that kept people from having the rule of law and liberty. When you look at countries that are able to get a hold of the rule of law, of having the president of the country as well as a peasant be treated equally before the law, freedom tends to follow and the human condition tends to be better. So for example in Afghanistan, to see women who couldn't leave their basements when the Taliban was in power 10 years ago but are now sitting as judges or prosecutors and working in government and being able to send their girls to school, those are great things to see.

Is Churchill a big hero of yours?

There are tipping points in human history when it comes to freedom and rule of law and liberty and certainly one of the biggest tipping points was Winston Churchill and the British people standing alone against Nazism. He was also quite a soldier in his younger years fighting in Afghanistan. I'm reading "The Story of the Malakand Field Force," his book about the wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan when it was part of British India, and he's talking about the Pashtuns and some of the same tribes in the same areas we're dealing with right now. It's a little bit eerie, some of the parallels between the British experience and what we're experiencing now.

How bad was it when you first started your work in Afghanistan?

You drive past the soccer stadium in Kabul, and that's the soccer stadium in which the Taliban would routinely execute women by chopping their heads off or stoning them. They'd dig a pit and they'd bury a woman accused of adultery up to her head and have a bunch of guys take stones the size of softballs and throw them at her head until she was dead. Or they'd take a kid who may have stolen a crust of bread because he was starving and cut off his arm or his hand. Or they'd behead someone they didn't think was suitably Islamic or had shaved his beard.

Has there been progress?

I think there's been a lot of progress but these are people whose whole culture has been destroyed over the past 40 years. It's going to be a hard row for them to hoe.



Kabul, Afghanistan: With U.S. District Judge David O. Carter.



South Africa: On safari at Addo Elephant National Park.



Dili, East Timor: With, center, East Timor President Jose Ramos-Horta and Arent Fox Partner Pierre-Richard Prosper.

You also track and attempt to block antiquities trafficking for the State Department.

What kinds of items do you track?

We heard about the looting recently of mummies in one country. People were looting them and literally attempting to mail them across the border to another country where a collector wanted to buy these mummified remains.

What's the most interesting thing you've learned about the illegal trade in antiquities?

It used to be people who were just tomb rob-

bers, but now there's this overlap between international organized crime, especially the drug cartels, and the trafficking of antiquities. You might have a truck where they're moving people for human trafficking, for the sex trade. And they've also got a load of drugs and they've got some ancient pottery, and it's all coming up through Central America or, say, from the Far East. It's a little scary to see the power and the reach of some of these criminal enterprises.

How do you juggle it all?

Some late nights. And I am fortunate to have

supportive law partners and clients, and a very understanding family.

What happens if, say, there's some kind of crisis in your firm's L.A. office while you're in D.C.?

I have a team of truly excellent partners in L.A. who can and have stepped up to handle any contingency we have faced.

Between your interests in politics, government and law, what are you at your highest aspiration?

I actually really love being a lawyer. I've been fortunate enough to be able to go into government and come back out but I've wanted to be a lawyer since I was kid. I'll die as a lawyer, hopefully, at my desk practicing law.

Just to get it straight, I asked you what your highest aspiration was and you said to die at your desk practicing law.

(Laughs). I'd like to practice law until a relatively ripe old age.

You have no interest in being a politician?

I'm certainly not going to run for office. I have been fortunate enough to be asked to serve in various capacities in government over the past few years and would never say no. If the call came, I'd certainly respond to it.

Well, you speak well, and has anyone ever said you kind of look like a politician?

I don't know if that's good or bad, but I'll take it as a compliment.

I can't help but notice that your teeth are really straight. What's the secret there?

(Laughs). Good genes and braces.

You've never been encouraged to go into politics before?

There are a lot of people that'll say nice things to you after a speech and that sort of thing. My real focus now is on building the best litigation and best law firm in Los Angeles. There are some great firms in Los Angeles – Munger Tolles, Quinn Emanuel, Skadden's Los Angeles office – and we'd certainly like to be considered in that same short list of go-to firms.

What do you do in your free time?

Try to spend as much time as I can with my family. We play tennis together, we ski together. I'm not on the golf course very often, but I like to play some golf if I have time. On Friday nights we try to have a date night as long as I'm in town, try to go to dinner and a movie. Going to violin recitals and school plays, all those sorts of things, they kind of fill up the rest of your day.

What radio station is your car on right now?

I spend most of my time on 105.1, which is the country station, for music.

Did you grow up liking country?

I grew up listening to rock, to Journey and Loverboy, the Rolling Stones and the Beatles. I like to listen to some classical music as well. I started listening to country while I was in Geneva working for the United Nations Security Council from 1996 to 1998. My sister sent me a Garth Brooks CD. I had a CD player in my car and I was listening to it, and I kind of got hooked on country.

It's a funny image, of you in Geneva listening to Garth Brooks in your car.

I remember a Canadian colleague of mine, a very sophisticated guy who spoke great French. He hopped into my car and I had a Lee Greenwood tape in, "God Bless the U.S.A." We were driving through the old U.N. headquarters in Geneva, through this historic, very European palace area. I'm in this beat-up old car with Lee Greenwood blasting out. He just shook his head.