



Key Witness Lays Out Saga of Deals Comprising Alleged Conspiracy in 'Breathtaking' Trump Trial Testimony

Description

US : April 25 was a big day for former President Donald Trump as the Supreme Court heard arguments over his presidential immunity defense while a second criminal trial made significant headway in testimonies in New York.

Still, President Trump took the opportunity to make a campaign stop before either of those events, shaking hands with construction workers in New York as a crowd chanted "USA, USA" on 48th Street and Park Avenue at 6:30 a.m.

"I'm going to make a play for New Yorkers," President Trump told reporters at the event. "They said, I just heard, there was a very good poll that came out. Normally, a Democrat will win New York.

Biden is the worst president in history, we have some very bad people here, but we have the greatest people and they're right behind me. They all want us to run, and we're going to run very hard in New York."

'Checkbook Journalism'

Over the course of three days, former National Enquirer publisher David Pecker laid out the details and sequence of events of three deals made to "hush" three individuals from leaking negative stories in the leadup to the 2016 presidential election about then-presidential candidate Trump, under direct examination by prosecutors.

From 1999 to 2020, Mr. Pecker was the head of American Media Inc. (AMI), which owned several publications, mostly in the celebrity tabloid genre.

"We used checkbook journalism and we paid for stories," he said.

Not all stories they bought were published; sometimes a purchase was made in order to have leverage against a celebrity or prevent a negative story from getting out.

One such politician was Arnold Schwarzenegger, whom Mr. Pecker had another agreement with when he was running for governor of California. The agreement was made public and led to an investigation, and Mr. Pecker said it was “very embarrassing” for him.

Wary of potentially violating campaign finance laws, he initiated an internal investigation to create new policies and procedures about buying up stories.

These payments were handled by a single accountant, not because Mr. Pecker had believed it illegal at the time, but because he was wary of leaks if too many were involved, he said.

Prosecutors ended questioning by having Mr. Pecker read from a 2018 agreement he made with federal prosecutors, wherein he admitted to paying \$150,000 “in concert with a candidate’s campaign, and in order to ensure that the woman did not publicize damaging allegations about the candidate before the 2016 presidential election.”

He also entered into an agreement to cooperate and testify in exchange for immunity with the Manhattan district attorney.

Attorney Emil Bove, representing President Trump, argued that Mr. Pecker’s agreement with President Trump was not illegal, pointing to other deals he made with Tiger Woods, Mark Wahlberg, and politician Rahm Emanuel after he left the Obama administration to run for mayor of Chicago.

Mr. Bove also had Mr. Pecker affirm that he did not remember that the 2015 meeting at Trump Tower happened mid-August until prosecutors told him so and questioned Mr. Pecker on several more dates and specifics that the witness could not remember, in an attempt to show that testimony of events so long ago could not be reliable.

Mr. Pecker’s relationship with President Trump predated his acquisition of the National Enquirer, beginning in the 1980s. When the real estate mogul launched “The Celebrity Apprentice,” he would give Mr. Pecker scoops about the show.

As a publisher, Mr. Pecker said he knew keenly that covers sold magazines, and Trump covers always sold well. He ran a poll in 2015 asking National Enquirer readers whether they would like to see Mr. Trump run for president, and some 80 percent said yes.

Mr. Pecker testified that during a 2015 Trump Tower meeting, he was asked what he could do for the Trump campaign, and he volunteered to be its “eyes and ears” because he knew The Trump Organization to have a small staff.

He said he could apply that checkbook journalism practice to run positive stories about Mr. Trump, run negative stories about his rivals, and buy up negative stories about Mr. Trump. Lawyer Michael Cohen was Mr. Pecker’s point of contact for all things Trump.

This led to three major deals, one of which the charges against President Trump are tied to and two that the judge has allowed testimony of for context.

Mr. Pecker had paid \$30,000 to former Trump building doorman Dino Sajudin for a story about an illegitimate child that turned out to be false and \$150,000 to former Playboy model Karen McDougal for

a story that he had believed was true.

When news that Stephanie Clifford, better known by her adult film stage name Stormy Daniels, had a story to sell, Mr. Pecker wanted nothing to do with it.

He told his chief content officer Dylan Howard, who negotiated the two other deals, to stay out of it because he didn't want the National Enquirer "associated with a porn star."

He later learned that Mr. Cohen had pressed Mr. Howard to buy the story anyway and was "not pleased." The three men argued when Mr. Cohen made a deal himself but then would not pay Mr. Howard's source the agreed-upon \$120,000.

Leaving the courtroom, President Trump told the press that the day was "breathtaking."

"Breathtaking and amazing testimony," he said. "This is a trial that never should have happened, this is a case that never should have been filed, and was really an incredible, an incredible day. Open your eyes. We can't let this continue to happen to our country."

He did not take a question about his thoughts on the Supreme Court justices' responses to his presidential immunity arguments, only reiterating that "the president has to have immunity, or you don't have a president, or at most you could say it would be a ceremonial president."

By Catherine Yang and Michael Washburn

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