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Joe Tacopina is pretty sure he can get Trump out of this

He's a flashy New York lawyer with a track record of getting famous clients out of tough jams. Now he wants to do the same for Donald Trump.

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By [Kara Voght](#)

NEW YORK — Joe Tacopina wasn't seeking anyone's permission to represent Donald Trump. "I was going to do what I felt right doing," Tacopina says. Even so, the defense attorney felt it proper to dial up some of his celebrity clients and allies — A\$AP Rocky, Meek Mill, some others — to deliver the news himself. "Out of respect, as a courtesy," he says. Also: "I just wanted to hear what some of these other people — how they would react."

As Tacopina remembers it, "They all said the same thing: 'Just do what you do. You're a litigator.'" Whatever feelings they had about Trump, he says, they kept to themselves.

The Rev. Al Sharpton, who received one such call, has not been so withholding. "I've said to him, 'I just wish you had not taken this case — what this man has done is destructive,'" says Sharpton. Nevertheless, the civil rights activist — who first met Tacopina years ago, on an MSNBC panel — conceded that everyone needs a legal defense. "We ended it by saying whatever you choose, we'll remain friend-ly," he says, "but you know, I'm gonna be taking shots at your client."

Helping famous (and infamous) people who find themselves in tight spots — that's how Tacopina made his name. His clients have included Alex Rodriguez, the Yankees third baseman who sued Major League Baseball over a doping suspension; Lillo Brancato, the "Sopranos" actor acquitted of murder in the 2005 killing of a New York City police officer; Joran van der Sloot, a suspect in the 2006 disappearance of 18-year-old Natalee Holloway in Aruba; and Kimberly Guilfoyle, fiancée of Donald Trump Jr., when she appeared last year before the House committee investigating the [Jan. 6, 2021](#), attack on the U.S. Capitol. He's also taken on the cases of well-known rappers like Mill, for whom Tacopina overturned a drug and gun charge, Rocky, who is facing felony firearm charges, and YG — who, incidentally, co-wrote the anti-Trump protest song "FDT," which stands for exactly what you think it does.

And now, Tacopina is doing his thing for Trump. He's co-counsel, with Susan Necheles and Todd Blanche, in the Manhattan district attorney's criminal prosecution over hush money Trump paid to adult-film star Stormy Daniels through then-lawyer Michael Cohen. Trump has pleaded not guilty to 34 felony counts of falsifying business records. Tacopina is also defending Trump in a lawsuit brought by E. Jean Carroll, a writer who has accused Trump of sexually assaulting her in a department-store dressing room in the mid-1990s. That case is slated to go to trial later this month.

It's obvious why Trump would hire Tacopina to represent him in a Manhattan courtroom. Tacopina is a flashy, brawny bulldog of an attorney, like a stock photo of a New York City trial lawyer come to life. Like Trump, Tacopina is a tabloid figure, earning superlatives ranging from "New York's most hated attorney" (The Daily Mail) to "New York's hottest attorney" (GQ). He's experienced at trial, and has another important skill: He knows how to be a lawyer on television. Tacopina has been a greenroom regular for decades, and Trump has privately praised his TV appearances.

And why would Tacopina represent Trump? He has two criteria for taking on a case: "If I think someone's been really wronged, and I really fall in love with a person," Tacopina says. To him, the former president meets both.

There have been jabs from late-night comics: Jimmy Kimmel said Tacopina was "born in the ashtray of Rudy Giuliani's Lincoln Continental," while SNL dubbed him "Phony Soprano." Plus, the former president is a notoriously difficult client. Some lawyers reportedly wouldn't work for him because they worry he'd stiff them on a bill. Others have found themselves enmeshed in their own legal troubles after helping Trump with his.

Tacopina, who claims to be missing a "fear gene," says he is not worried about any of it. Trump's been paying him in a "timely manner," he says, and the insults don't bother him. As for finding himself Michael Cohen-ed: "That's not me — it's never gonna be me."

What does make him a bit anxious, however, is this article — even as he welcomed The Washington Post into his Manhattan office and held forth on an array of topics, including his work for Trump, the rumors of tension between him and other Trump attorneys (he complimented his co-counsels, saying "There's a zero-ego zone here"), his workout schedule, his history of purchasing Italian soccer clubs, the dinner he says he had with A\$AP Rocky and Rihanna the night before the Super Bowl, the time he almost punched opposing counsel during the A-Rod case ...

"My biggest fear ever meeting with you or anything like this is I come across a pompous a--," he said. "I'm really not trying to be. I am who I am. I care about what I do. I don't believe in my own bulls---."

Tacopina's likeness is affixed to every surface of the Madison Avenue law offices of Tacopina, Seigel, & DeOreo — in newspaper photographs, magazine profiles and tabloid headlines mounted behind plexiglass. His personal office — a short walk past poster-size courtroom drawings from some of Tacopina's high-profile trials — is a shrine to his assorted clientele. Photographs of him and A-Rod. A signed thank-you note from Meek Mill. A "Humanitarian of the Year" award from Sharpton for his work on the Mill case.

Tacopina's corporeal form heaves through the office entryway, 10 minutes behind schedule. He apologizes for his lateness: He's returning from a meeting at Trump Tower 15 blocks uptown. The former president had been arraigned two days earlier and Tacopina, a cable news fixture in the weeks leading up to it, declares himself "done with that TV s---." The cable-news blitz had been a bid to head off the indictment in the court of public opinion. That hadn't worked, and Trump's court appearance had begotten its own media circus. Now, temporarily free from the obligations of courtrooms and greenrooms, Tacopina has traded his Italian suits for a cashmere turtleneck and jeans so tight they look shrink-wrapped to his thighs.

Tacopina, 57, speaks in a gravelly baritone that bears the accent of a working-class Italian upbringing in Brooklyn. As a Manhattan attorney, he cultivated a taste for the lavish — nice watches, luxury cars, a 49-foot yacht. He says he's ditched most of those trappings in recent years, though his casual look includes a Patek Philippe wristwatch so rare it last sold for \$3.2 million at auction. He works out five days a week — including the morning before Trump's arraignment. ("I can't *not* do that," he says. "When I don't do that, I get into a low-energy spot.") He has several tattoos, including one of a Roman eagle on his right hip.

His overall aesthetic answers the question: What if Billy Flynn, the tap-dancing attorney from the musical "Chicago," was swallowed whole by Lou Ferrigno? "I have a *look*, obviously — I don't look like every lawyer," Tacopina says. "He's a persona in New York, in a good way," says Lara Treinis Gatz, a former federal prosecutor. "He's a street fighter, but with monogrammed French cuffs."

He got his start as a prosecutor in the early 1990s and became a defense attorney in 1995, earning a reputation as a defender of New York City cops accused of grisly crimes — like an officer involved in the alleged sodomization of a detained suspect with a broomstick. He won an acquittal for two detectives, dubbed by the tabloids as the "rape cops," who were accused in the alleged sexual assault of a drunk woman in her East Village apartment. "Sometimes Joe is almost *too* good," jokes Bill Stanton, a private investigator, of Tacopina's knack for representing clients facing unsavory charges.

Several denizens of New York's legal world criticized Tacopina's style and clientele. None were willing to do so on the record.

"As co-counsel, he's wonderful," says Marilyn Chinitz, a divorce attorney who worked on a case with Tacopina. "As an adversary, be careful."

In the days leading up to Trump's indictment, the former president's Truth Social account posted a photograph of Trump holding a baseball bat juxtaposed with a portrait of District Attorney Alvin Bragg. The post had been broadly interpreted as a threat, and the judge condemned Trump's "irresponsible" social media posts during his arraignment. Instead of defending the behavior, Tacopina went to TV to call it "ill-advised."

"I'm not embracing or defending that, I'm not doing it — I'm doing me," Tacopina says now, in his office. "I'm a hard-charger and all that stuff, but my credibility is what I care about as much as anything. I'm not gonna say something just to say something."

Tacopina, who once filmed a pilot for his own reality show (“sort of a ‘Judge Judy’ meets ‘Perry Mason,’” he told GQ at the time), flinches at comparisons between himself and Trump. He wants people to think of him, and his involvement in the former president’s legal defense, as substantive — a matter of law, not politics or personality. “Joe really, deep down, thinks that there’s bad law here,” Sharpton says of the hush money case. Plus, “he does not bow away from a tough fight,” he adds, “even though he may have a dud as his client.”

Trump first sought out Tacopina’s legal services years ago, he says, but Tacopina turned him down. “I can’t get into, exactly, what,” Tacopina says of Trump’s request from back then. “It wasn’t the right time, it wasn’t the right case.” But last December, Trump reached out again, and Tacopina made his way to Mar-a-Lago in January, lingering just long enough to sort out which cases he’d take on: Carroll’s lawsuit and Bragg’s criminal prosecution.

How are the cases similar, and has he thought about how he’ll approach each one?

“Both cases would not be in a courthouse if it weren’t Donald Trump as a defendant. Both. So it might be sort of the same type of Joe in both,” Tacopina says. Then he starts freewheeling on strategy.

“You know, when I did the ‘rape cops’ case — I got an acquittal in that one — that was a *difficult* case. I mean, these guys were called rape cops for *two years*. Not *alleged* rape cops — they were called ‘rape cops’! Presumption of innocence aside, ‘rape cops’! But that’s the name of the case — that became the ‘rape cop’ drama. So I picked the very smart jury — I picked, like, five Ivy Leaguers on that jury. I connected with them saying, ‘Look, guys, you have to be offended. You just gave nine weeks of your life in this room, listening everyday to every piece of evidence. The people popping in and out of the courtroom on glorious days — like a summation day or when the main witness testified — and write articles that tell you how the case should end up — that should be *offensive* to you guys. Use your intellect and whatnot. And when I cross-examined her — someone who I believe was completely embellishing — there was no, like, ‘rarr.’ It was very sort of soft, surgical, and methodical, obviously. I didn’t want to take the risk of — even though I wasn’t saying she was a victim, she was credible and something did happen to her, unpleasant, that night.”

But when it comes to cross-examining Michael Cohen, the ex-Trump lawyer who is expected to be a key witness against Trump in Bragg’s case, “You’ll probably see fangs coming out of my mouth.”

What would it mean to Tacopina to win?

“First-ballot Hall of Famer as a lawyer,” he says.

He laughs, then slackens his smile into a thin line of concern. “It would really mean that despite all the odds being stacked against us in this county — despite people saying we can’t get a fair trial or a fair judge or fair anything — that the system still does work.”

Tacopina compares the stakes of his work for Trump to the famous quote by the Rev. Martin Niemöller — the one that describes bystander failing to speak up when the Nazis come for different groups, one by one, until *they came for me — and there was no one left to speak for me*. He compares his task to that of John Adams, when America’s second president was the reluctant defense attorney for the British in the Boston Massacre.

“He was the greatest criminal-defense lawyer,” Tacopina says of Adams. “He takes on the most unpopular case in U.S. history and he was able to get them acquitted.”

He takes a breath.

“I don’t want to make myself seem more important than I am.”

CORRECTION

An earlier version of this article described Alex Rodriguez as the Yankees' shortstop. He played third base. This version has been corrected.