

# Key Trump Lawyer Withdraws as Manhattan Criminal Trial Nears

Joseph Tacopina brought extensive experience with high-profile cases to former president Donald J. Trump's legal team.



By Maggie Haberman

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Joseph Tacopina, the trial lawyer on Donald J. Trump's legal team with the most successes defending high-profile clients, will no longer represent the former president in his criminal trial in Manhattan, according to a notice sent to the court on Monday.

Mr. Tacopina also withdrew on Monday from another case in which he was still legally representing Mr. Trump: an appeal of the verdict in a lawsuit brought by the writer E. Jean Carroll. Mr. Trump was found liable for sexual abuse and defamation last year and was ordered to pay Ms. Carroll \$5 million.

It was not clear why Mr. Tacopina decided to withdraw, and he declined to comment.

His departure from the two cases comes as Mr. Trump enters a year of legal uncertainty. He faces four criminal indictments, and trials with dates that are up in the air. The trial in Manhattan, in which he is accused of falsifying business records to hide hush-money payments to a porn star during the 2016 election, could begin as early as March.

Its timing may depend on whether the federal trial accusing Mr. Trump of illegally trying to subvert the 2020 election is delayed. That trial is also scheduled for March.

Asked for comment, Steven Cheung, a spokesman for Mr. Trump, did not directly address Mr. Tacopina's departure, saying only that Mr. Trump "has the most experienced, qualified, disciplined, and overall strongest legal team ever assembled" as he fights his various cases, which he has slammed as partisan efforts to prevent him from being re-elected president.

Mr. Trump's legal team has shrunk, expanded and turned over many times. But Mr. Tacopina, a pugnacious, New York-based defense lawyer, has a long history of trial court wins.

He has represented high-profile clients ranging from the Fox News host Sean Hannity, who on his show called Mr. Tacopina one of the “greatest defense attorneys of all time,” to the former Yankees star Alex Rodriguez and the rapper A\$AP Rocky.

But the former president was Mr. Tacopina’s biggest client to date. When the Manhattan district attorney, Alvin L. Bragg, charged Mr. Trump last year, Mr. Tacopina accompanied Mr. Trump to his arraignment.

The lawyer Todd Blanche also represents Mr. Trump, and it is unclear who else might sign on to the case.

The withdrawals came a day before jury selection is set to begin in a second trial stemming from the allegations brought by Ms. Carroll, who accused Mr. Trump of raping her in a department store dressing room in the 1990s.

Mr. Trump recently told The New York Times that he wanted to testify in the new trial, and that Mr. Tacopina had advised him against doing so in the first one — a decision the former president said he regretted.

During his closing arguments in the earlier trial, Mr. Tacopina noted that Mr. Trump did not testify and described it as the right decision. There were no questions he could have asked Mr. Trump about the events Ms. Carroll had described, he said, because she could not pinpoint the date of the attack and because Mr. Trump had already denied her claims during a deposition under oath.

Mr. Trump last week delivered part of his own closing remarks in the New York attorney general’s civil case, and was rebuked by the judge for going outside the confines of what he was allowed to talk about.

But state courts tend to be less rigid than federal courts, and it is not clear that the judge in the upcoming defamation trial will tolerate similar behavior if Mr. Trump, who has repeatedly attacked Ms. Carroll on social media, testifies.

During closing arguments in the earlier trial, Mr. Tacopina argued that jurors were entitled to their personal views of Mr. Trump, but he suggested the case was aimed at harming his client politically — a widespread view in Mr. Trump’s world.

“It’s OK however you feel about him,” Mr. Tacopina said. “I said this before. You could hate Donald Trump. It’s OK. But there is a time and a secret place to do that. It’s called a ballot box during an election. It’s not here.”

To other clients, Mr. Tacopina brings a specific level of commitment to cases.

Mr. Rodriguez, in a brief interview, said he could not speak to Mr. Tacopina's involvement with Mr. Trump, but described his own experience being represented by him as he battled a suspension from Major League Baseball related to steroid use.

"He's not a person that just phones it in; he lives it," Mr. Rodriguez said. "When he defends you, he defends you like you're family."

**Maggie Haberman** is a senior political correspondent reporting on the 2024 presidential campaign, down ballot races across the country and the investigations into former President Donald J. Trump. More about Maggie Haberman

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