Trump's Vengeance against American Lawyers and Law Firms

by
Janet Munro-Nelson
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Within a month of starting a second term as US president on 20 January 2025, Donald J. Trump began making derogatory remarks about both law firms and higher educational institutions. Providing strong academics and a strong legal system are necessary elements for a pluralistic society to survive successfully. As Trump's targeted attacks on the U.S. legal system intensified and became more specific, it became evident that he was targeting certain law firms which he believed had 'done him wrong' either through an issue or by representing someone he disliked. Trump began signing executive orders and memoranda stating that the named lawyer(s) and/or law firm would be barred from all federal buildings; prevented from ever working for the US government in the future; and any and all current government contracts with the named firm would be cancelled. But, going even further in attempting to destroy or at least limit these law firms, Trump stated that any company using the specified law firm would also be denied any federal contracts.

The First Orders Against Lawyers and Law Firms

One of the first orders targeting a specific American law firm was signed by President Trump on 25 February 2025 against certain members of the Covington and Burling law firm. The Memorandum on Suspension of Security Clearances and Evaluation of Government Contracts suspended all security clearances for Covington and Burling's "partner Peter Koski and all members, partners and employees of Covington and Burling who assisted former Special Council Jack Smith as Special Council." The reason for this presidential memorandum appears staightforward: Covington had provided *pro bono* services to former U.S. Special Counsel Jack Smith, who was building two major cases against Donald Trump. One case covered Trump's denial of the November 2020 presidential results and his consequential actions of the 6 January 2021 when he allegedly encouraged an insurrection against the U.S. Capitol and members of Congress. The second case was about some 34 boxes of U.S. classified documents which Trump took with him after leaving his first term of office. Both cases were discontinued when Donald Trump won the presidential election in November 2024. The Covington firm did not bring an action against the federal government as some law firms subsequently did. However, in March 2025, it affirmed that it had recently agreed to represent Jack Smith in an individual capacity when it became apparent he would become the subject of a government investigation. Covington stated, "We look forward to defending Mr. Smith's interests and appreciate the trust he has placed in us to do so."

The next law firm to be attacked by Trump was Perkins Coie who had represented Hillary Clinton during her 2016 presidential campaign. Executive Order 14230, signed by Donald Trump on 6 March 2025, withdrew the security clearances for all the firm's personnel thus barring them from entering federal government buildings including the premises of regulators and courts. Further, this order required private businesses holding government contracts to not only report this to the U.S. government but also to terminate their instructions to Perkins Coie or lose their contracts with the U.S. government. The executive order was an unprecedented interference in a private business by the federal government – in addition to a law firm-- in the face of numerous Constitutional protections against such retaliatory actions. For a law firm as large and powerful as Perkins Coie, these stipulations would enormously effect its business.

Perkins Coie refused to 'do business' with President Trump and, instead, turned to another large law firm, Williams Connolly, to defend it. Within days the Federal District Court for the District of Columbia moved to block parts of the president's executive order. District Court Judge Beryl Howell stated that barring attorneys from entering federal buildings was against the Constitution's First Amendment. On 2 May 2025, Judge Howell permanently blocked the executive order as "an unprecedented attack" on the legal system and ruled that it "violated the Constitution and is thus null and void." Judge Howell stated, "Eliminating lawyers as the guardians of the rule of law removes a major impediment to the path of more power. In a cringe-worthy twist on the theatrical phrase, 'Let's kill all the lawyers,' Executive Order 14230 takes the approach of 'Let's kill the lawyers I don't like', sending the clear message: lawyers must stick to the party line or else." After the order, many of Perkins Coie's clients left the firm but Perkins Coie demonstrated the power of using the law and the courts while not bowing to the unprecedented and illegal intimidation by a U.S. president. On 30 June 2025, the Department of Justice for the US government appealed the Federal Court's findings for Perkins Coie (see below).

Certain Law Firms Give in to Donald Trump's Demands

Unfortunately, the D.C. District Court's findings against the government did not deter Trump from signing Executive Order 14237 on 14 March 2025 against one of the most prestigious U.S. law firms: Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison ("Paul Weiss"). Using nearly the same wording Trump had used against Perkins Coie, this order suspended the security clearances held by the firm; eliminated any government contracts it held and denied access to federal buildings and resources. By 20 March 2025, Paul Weiss had agreed a deal with President Trump whereby the law firm would contribute $40 million dollars worth of *pro-bono* services to some of the president's favored causes. Some of the causes listed were supporting merit-based employment practices rather than diversity DEI; assisting the nation's veterans; fairness in the justice system and combating anti-Semitism. Brad Karp, the managing parter of Paul Weiss, later explained that the firm had agreed to Trump's demands because clients were getting spooked and other firms — rather than rallying to Paul Weiss's defense — began "aggressively soliciting our clients and recruiting our attorneys." Mr. Karp, himself, resigned from Paul Weiss when evidence indicated that his friendship with Jeffrey Epstein was more extensive and of a longer duration that he had previously stated.

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On 17 March 2025 and at the Trump administration's direction, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) sent letters to the top 20 law firms in the U.S. demanding information on their DEI practices which are comprised of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The EEOC alleged that each firm's DEI practices violated Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (See, Rebecca Beitsch's article, "Law firms divided over response to Trump orders"; *The Hill,* March 25, 2025).

In a New York Times Opinion article on 25 March 2025, Deborah Pearlstein wrote that President Trump was declaring his own war on leading American law firms "in a chaotic attempt to dismantle democratic governance, redefine citizenship and cast aside fundamental rights of speech and due process." Her article, "They are America's most powerful law firms. Their silence is deafening", contended that by either agreeing to Trump's terms or by keeping silent, these powerful law firms made choices that were deeply wrong. The uncontested fact was these law firms knew the law and they had not stood up for it. In the days following Paul Weiss's capitulation to President Trump's demands, other law firms followed suit by 'settling with Trump and his government. These firms defended their decisions as being "driven by strategic considerations". Pearlstein noted that each of these law firms should have been aware that by agreeing to Donald Trump's demands, first, weakens the laws of the United States when they are not followed or enforced – weakening the whole system – and, second, such agreements with the executive branch hastens America's slide from being a constitutional democracy, in which executive power is constricted and restrained by multiple independent institutions, to a regime akin to an authoritative government. Pearlstein also stressed that as a business strategy it would not be successful since lawyers are governed by ethical rules which would expose the lawyers to disciplinary action. As important, an agreement with Trump never seems to indicate the end of the matter. Instead, once a person or firm gives into Trump's demands, Trump appears to think then that he can demand more in the future.

Between 28 March and 11 April 2025, a number of prominent US law firms followed Paul Weiss in agreeing to Trump's terms but with one big difference: none of these other law firms received an executive order from President Trump. Instead, they agreed preemptively to 'donate' their firm's time to prevent any executive orders arriving from the president.
The law firms who struck a deal with Donald Trump were:

Skadden Arps – agreed to provide Donald Trump with $100 million worth of the firm's time (28 March);
Wilkie Farr & Gallagher -- $100 million (2 April);
Milbank -- $100 million (3 April);
Latham & Watkins -- $125 million (11 April);
Simpson Thacher & Bartlett -- $125 million (11 April);
Kirkland & Ellis -- $125 million (11 April);
A&O Shearman -- $125 million (11 April); and
Cadwalader Wickersham & Taft*-- $100 million (11 April).

The total amount of free, billable time pledged to Donald Trump by these leading US law firms--including the initial $40 million from the Paul Weiss firm--totals 940,000,000 US dollars (i.e., almost one billion dollars). Each of these deals commits the firm in question to: 1) not engage in 'illegal DEI' as labelled by the government (i.e.,"diversity, equity and inclusion"), instead, to use merit-based employment practices; 2) provide *pro bono* legal services to causes that the president and the firms both support and agree to work on; and 3) 'not deny representation to clients such as government officials, employees and advisors on the basis of political affiliation'.

None of these agreements to settle can be called traditional settlements. They were and are legally and ethically unprecedented. Veteran lawyers have stated that these settlements don't appear to be legally valid. Time has indicated that those law firms that have agreed to Trump's stipulations have lost many of their best lawyers (and clients) who have not agree with the firms' decisions to bow to the overbroad demands of the Executive Branch. There may be other law firms settling according to "All About Lawyer" on 3 March 2026 which stated, "At least seven other firms agreed to provide tens of millions of dollars in *pro bono* work for Trump despite there being no executive orders against these firms; they agreed only because of the threat of a Trump order. Skadden Arps' Executive Partner Jeremy London announced its agreement with President Trump by saying, "Skadden is pleased to have achieved a successful agreement with President Trump and his Administration." On 11 April 2025, the managing heads of Latham & Watkins, Simpson Thacher, Kirkland & Ellis, and A&O Shearman issued a statement, "Today our Firms reached an agreement with President Trump and his Administration. We have resolved this matter while upholding longheld principles important to each of our Firms. . . We look forward to a continued constructive and productive relationship with President Trump and his team." It is doubtful that any of these firms felt pleasure or joy at having to give away their firm's time to the executive branch of government.

Law Firms & Legal Bodies Contesting Trump's Executive Orders and Memoranda

At the same time, in addition to Perkins Coie (discussed above), there were other notable and prominent US law firms deciding to fight against these presidential orders. In response to Executive Order 14246 signed by President Trump on 25 March 2025 against Jenner & Block, the law firm filed its legal papers suing the Trump administration on 28 March. Upon the court's receipt of Jenner & Block's papers, a temporary restraining order was issued by U.S. District Court Judge John D. Bates. On May 23, 2025, Judge Bates ruled the executive order against Jenner & Block was unconstitutional as it "seeks to chill legal representation the administration doesn't like." Jenner & Block also commented, stating, "The court agreed that this is an unconstitutional executive order holding no legal weight"

*Cadwalader Wickersham & Taft merged with Hogan Lovells as of 1 July 2026, becoming Hogan Lovells Cadwalader

On 27 March 2025, Donald Trump signed Executive Order 14250 against the law firm of Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale & Dorr LLP ("WilmerHale" but may appear as "Wilmer Cutler" by some writers). WilmerHale had legal papers filed the next day by Paul Clement (former solicitor-general under President G.W. Bush) requesting a permanent injunction from the court against this executive order. U.S. District Court Judge Richard Leon issued a temporary order on the same day blocking part of the order. Two months later, on 27 May 2025, Judge Leon struck down the entire executive order against WilmerHale on the grounds that it was unconstitutional. Judge Leon's ruling states, "There is no question that this retaliatory action stifles speech and legal advocacy, which constitutes a constitutional injury." Judge Leon did not address the revocation of security clearances, stating that this fell under the purview of the executive branch. The reason for the executive orders against these two law firms, Jenner & Block and WilmerHale, may be due to each firm's ties to the earlier federal probe into alleged collusion between Russia and Donald Trump during Trump's first presidency term.

On 30 March 2025, an essay appeared in the New York Times written by the law firm of Keker, Van Nest & Peters and entitled: "Our Law Firm Won't Cave to Trump. Who Will Join Us?". This essay set out why Keker et al was committed to the legal stance taken by Perkins Coie. A copy of the Keker, Van Nest & Peters' essay to all U.S. law firms and lawyers is set out below (see, Notes 1. below).

The next law firm Trump went after was Susman Godfrey with his Executive Order 14263, signed on 9 April 2025. Susman Godfrey turned around on 11 April to file a motion requesting summary judgment and a permanent injunction against the executive order. Susman Godfrey also published this statement: "Anyone who knows Susman Godfrey knows we believe in the rule of law, and we take seriously our duty to uphold it. This principle guides us now. There is no question we will fight this unconstitutional order." Its motion stated that President Trump's actions were "a grave threat" to a "foundational premise of our Republic. The President is abusing the powers of his office to wield the might of the Executive Branch in retaliation against organizations and people that he dislikes." In respond to the order, rather than pull back on its diversity program cited as evidence of discrimination by the government, Susman Godfrey expanded it. The US District Court judge hearing Susman Godfrey's case was Judge Loren AliKhan who on 27 June 2025 struck down Executive Order 14263 in its entirety as unconstitutional and permanently enjoined its enforcement; he stated that the order was a "shocking abuse of power" driven by the president's "personal vendetta". Susman Godfrey had earlier won a lawsuit against Fox News for repeating President Trump's fraudulent lies about winning the 2020 presidential election. The law suit settled with Fox News paying Susman Godfrey $787 million dollars.

Following these unprecedented attacks on the legal community by President Trump—barely two months after being sworn in again as president of the United States—there was an outpouring of objection and dissent from other lawyers, law firms and legal students. A multitude of legal briefs were filed in court objecting to Trump's attacks. These amicus curiae briefs (as "friends of the court") were filed by many, many organizations including but not limited to: Eimer Stahl LLP and Munger, Tolks & Olson ("Eimer&Munger") filed an amicus brief for more than 500 law firms across the US on behalf of Perkins Coie; a week later, Eimer&Munger filled an amicus brief on behalf of more than 800 law partners across the U.S. for Jenner & Block and WilmerHale; Eimer&Munger also filed an amicus brief for more than 880 law firms nationwide on behalf of Susman Godfrey; a brief was filed on behalf of some 10,000 law students for Susman Godfrey; Law Forward joined 507 law firms supporting Perkins Coie; Law Firm Partners United--first a LinkedIn group before becoming a non-profit to "bring together partners at AmLaw 200 law firms to find ways to express our point of view on the rule of law when our firms choose to lie silent." – filed a brief for more than 750 partners all acting in a personal capacity; a group of 67 in-house lawyers of major US corporations filed a brief; Reporters Sans Frontiers (RSF) (protecting journalists) joined 60 other press freedom and media organizations in filing three amicus briefs. The American Bar Association, the U.S. professional body of lawyers, reported on 8 April 2025 that briefs had been filed by more than 500 law firms; more than 360 law professors; nearly 350 former judges; and "cross ideological groups" such as the American Civil Liberties Union, the Instititue for Justice; Bloomberg Law; Reuters; Law 360 as well as from top US law firms. This is not a definitive list as many more briefs to the court were filed after 8 April 2025.

On 16 June 2025, the American Bar Association (ABA) sued the US government requesting the federal courts to find that the Trump administration's policy of intimidation against lawyers and law firms was unconstitutional and requesting the executive branch be immediately enjoined from enforcing its policies. The ABA's suit named more than twenty-four federal departments and agencies, along with the heads of those departments and agencies. The ABA alleges that President Trump's executive orders, letters, memos and public statements were designed to damage certain law firms and intimidate others, thus producing a chilling effect. Further, the that the actions taken by President Trump are overbroad and extend beyond his legitimate executive powers in an attempt to coerce lawyers and firms to abandon any clients, causes and/or policy positions with which he disagrees.

The ABA case rests on 3 Constitutional pillars: free speech; due process; and separation of powers. The advantage of the ABA lawsuit is that it is broader than what any single firm could specify. It challenges the authority to issue any such orders at all, regardless on whom is named. The ABA's argument is if these orders were allowed, there would be a severe chilling effect where law firms and lawyers would turn down future business if the case appeared to be against President Trump's interests. Besides being the whim of one person, ie., the president, it would grievously effect lawyers working in human rights, civil rights, and immigration as well as public defenders. The orders would also also effect any lawyer with a security clearance. The actual risk went beyond the loss of business by these law firms to the question of whether the president of the United States is permitted/allowed to use economic punishment to shape who lawyers can and will represent.

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On 11 August 2025, the ABA adopted a resolution opposing government efforts to punish “lawyers, law firms, or other organizations for representing or having represented any particular client or cause disfavored by the government”. It stated that the rule of law “will not long survive if lawyers and law firms are threatened and punished for doing their jobs and if judges are threatened for doing their jobs”. The Department of Justice filed an action in federal court on Wednesday, 4 March 2026 requesting the court to dismiss the ABA’s lawsuit against the government but the court’s reply on 31 March 2026 denied the U.S. government’s motion. Federal Court Judge Amir Ali stated there was “a realistic threat of sanctions” against the ABA to establish its standing in the action, thus having the right of the ABA to bring its law suit.

During discovery for this case, the ABA reported on 21 July 2026 that the Trump Administration was sending subpoenas to some 14 major law firms asking for documents, communications and testimony from each one. Subpoenas were sent to law firms that had made agreements with Trump’s government and also to those law firms which had brought law suits against the government. When news of these subpoenas was published regarding the ABA lawsuit, it was noted that some law firms would comply while others would challenge parts as being overly broad or privileged information.

As of 29 October 2026, the ABA lawsuit is still at an early stage. No trial date has been set and the court has not yet ruled on the substance of the constitutional claims. As discussed below, the government’s appeal of the individual firm rulings remain pending before the D.C. Circuit Court leaving open the possibility that those orders could be revived. The ABA’s position is that whatever happens with any single order, the pattern requires a comprehensive judicial remedy addressing the policy as a whole.

As of 29 October 2026, no further news on this lawsuit has been received.

Results from the Four Law Firms Suing Donald Trump

On 30 June 2025, the Department of Justice for the US government appealed the court’s findings for Perkins Coie. With the U.S. government losing each of its cases against the other three law firms (Jenner & Block, WilmerHale, and Susman Godfrey), the Department of Justice also appealed each case on 21 July 2025, 25 July 2025, and 28 August 2025, respectfully. At this point, the four cases brought by Perkins Coie, Jenner & Block, WilmerHale, and Susman Godfrey were consolidated into one case.** The case was to be heard by a three-judge panel for the U.S. Appeals Court for the District of Columbia. The Justice Department was ordered to file its appeal brief by Friday, 27 February 2026. On the evening of 2 March 2026, the Justice Department moved to voluntarily dismiss its consolidated appeal, with all parties agreeing.

On the very next day (3 March), the Justice Department formally asked the US Court of Appeals to withdraw its motion made the day before. To clarify such action, the Department of Justice wanted to continue to appeal the earlier court rulings made in favor of the four law firms. The Department of Justice emailed the four firms, apologizing for the short notice, and saying it would file a motion to withdraw its voluntary dismissal. All four firms opposed this latest motion by the Department of Justice but it proceeded to file its appeal brief on 6 March 2026. The law firms followed suit and filed their briefs on 27 March. Several weeks later (19 April 2026), the U.S. Court of Appeals stated that it would allow the Department of Justice’s motion to continue defending Donald Trump’s orders. Oral arguments in this case of these law firms** against the executive orders of Donald Trump were heard by the Court of Appeals three-judge panel on 14 May 2026. The law firms were represented by Paul Clement. The injunctions against the government remain in effect while the appeal is pending.

As of 29 October 2026, the Appeals Court has not yet issued a judgement.

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Notes

1.) New York Times Essay: “Our Law Firm Won’t Cave to Trump. Who Will Join Us?” New York Times, 30 March 2025.
By John W. Keker, Robert A. Van Nest and Elliot R. Peters of Keker, Van Nest & Peters LLP

“President Trump this month issued an executive order clearly intended to destroy the venerable law firm Perkins Coie, a firm that has zealously represented clients large and small for more than a century.
The order left no doubt that Perkins Coie’s primary offense was representing Hillary Clinton in 2016 and standing up for other causes Mr. Trump views unfavorably. It could not have been more blatantly unconstitutional than if a legal scholar had been asked to draft a template for an unlawful executive order: It violates the First Amendment, contravenes fundamental due process rights and imperils the Sixth Amendment right to counsel.

On March 11, the courageous and skillful law firm Williams & Connolly filed a lawsuit on Perkins Coie’s behalf, seeking to enjoin the president’s order on constitutional grounds. At a hearing the next day, Judge Beryl A. Howell of Federal District Court in Washington, D.C. issued an order temporarily barring enforcement of most of the order. The Justice Department responded by moving to disqualify Judge Howell, a motion she rejected in a withering opinion on Wednesday.

**”Zaid v Executive Office of the President”, a related security clearance case was also added to this lawsuit.

Our firm stands with Perkins Coie and all firms and lawyers who fight against this president's lawless executive actions. That's why we've called on other firms to join us in submitting a friend of the court brief in support of Perkins Coie. If lawyers and law firms won't stand up for the rule of law, who will?

Beyond the Perkins Coie executive order, Mr. Trump has issued similar, and equally unlawful, executive orders directed at other law firms that have represented causes or people he doesn't like, including because they have sued him, investigated him or contributed in some way to civil and criminal legal matters brought against him. That includes executive orders in recent days targeting the firms WilmerHale and Jenner & Block. He also issued a memorandum directed across the board at lawyers and law firms that have taken on causes he disfavors, including the pro bono representation of political asylum seekers.

We applaud Jenner & Block's and WilmerHale's lawsuits, filed Friday, challenging the administration's executive orders. To the shock and dismay of many in our profession, the law firm Paul, Weiss, with a tradition of fighting for justice — and also the subject of one of Mr. Trump's executive orders — chose not to fight for itself or for our legal system. Instead, the firm capitulated, agreeing to direct $40 million worth of free legal work to causes Mr. Trump supports. (Mr. Trump said on Friday that another major firm, Skadden, Arps, had agreed to a similar arrangement to avoid an executive order punishing it.) Paul, Weiss's choice was particularly disappointing because it further empowered Mr. Trump's attack on our profession and because Perkins Coie had already charted an alternative path, with a high likelihood of success. We understand that while many firms have agreed to sign on to the Perkins Coie friend of the court brief, some large firms have hesitated or only conditionally agreed if enough of their peers do so first. No doubt they fear losing clients and incurring the president's ire.

We sympathize. We take seriously our obligations to our clients, our associates, our staff and their families. But at this crucial moment, clients need to find their courage, too. And partners at big firms — who often earn millions a year — must be willing to take financial risks when the fate of our nation, the future of our profession and the rule of law itself are at stake.

You can support a lawyer's right to represent unpopular clients and causes against powerful forces — essentially the oath we all took when becoming members of the bar. Or you can sit back, check your bank balance and watch your freedoms, along with the legal system and the tripartite system of government we should not take for granted, swirl down the drain.

This is not hyperbole. The common denominator among the president's recent spate of actions is that he appears to believe he has absolute authority to govern by fiat. What we've seen in the last few months tells us that we are moving ever closer to becoming an autocracy — and the current Congress is a lap dog that essentially offers no resistance. Along with the body politic as a whole, it seems the courts, and the lawyers who advocate in them, are all that stand in the way. A few brave judges will decide whether Mr. Trump is a president or a king. Knowing this, Mr. Trump attacks those judges, calls for their impeachment and sends out messages on social media trying to intimidate them.

Our decision to speak out on this issue was an easy one. We believe that one of the noblest things a lawyer can do is to stand up against the government on behalf of a client whom the government seeks to destroy. When Mr. Trump was indicted and sued, he hired lawyers to defend him. They did a good job, keeping him out of jail and preserving his fortune. For his administration to attack lawyers and firms whose members have opposed or annoyed him is a threat to our democracy.

Lawyers and big firms: For God's sake, stand up for the legal profession, and for the Constitution. Defend the oath you took when you became officers of the court. If we stand together and fight, we will win."

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2.) A multitude of amicus curiae briefs were filed mostly in April 2025 with only a sampling given above. In April 2026, amicus briefs were once again filed by lawyers and law firms following the federal government dropping and, a day later, reinstating its appeal against the lower court rulings found for Perkins Coie, Jenner & Block, WilmerHale and Susman Godfrey that Trump's executive orders were unconstitutional. A small number of briefs filed in April 2026 are listed here: Lawyers for Lawyers, an independent and non-political foundation operating in The Netherlands and beyond-- partnering with fellow lawyers' and human rights organisations across the globe; American Civic Liberties Union along with a cross-partisan coalition of public interest groups (ACLU says: "These executive orders are indefensible."); Society for the Rule of Law; Center for Individual Rights; Legal Defense Fund; Attorney General Davenport (New Jersey) co-led the amicus brief signed by 21 state attorney generals; Stanford Law Professors; Berger Montague (a leading plaintiff law firm); ABA; Lawyers for Good Standing; Yale & 35 other colleges and universities; Rep Jamie Raskin, ranking member of the U.S. House Judiciary Committee; 250 former judges; TaxProf Blog; Electronic Frontier Foundation. This is not a definitive list.