

Central Park 5 Say Trump Defamed Them During Debate

By **Nadia Dreid**

Law360 (October 21, 2024, 6:15 PM EDT) -- The Central Park Five — New Yorkers who were wrongfully convicted as young teens of assaulting and raping a woman in Central Park — have hit former President Donald Trump with a defamation suit, saying he falsely claimed at a recent debate that they pled guilty, decades after calling for the boys to be executed.

Yusef Salaam, Raymond Santana, Kevin Richardson, Antron Brown and Korey Wise, all of whom are Black or Hispanic, were between the ages of 14 and 16 when they were charged with the attempted murder and rape of a woman who nearly died after being attacked while jogging in Central Park in 1989.

They were convicted of various charges related to the assault and spent between 6 and 13 years in prison before serial rapist Matias Reyes confessed to the crime. DNA evidence later exonerated them. But during the presidential debate in September, the lawsuit filed Monday in Pennsylvania federal court said that Trump defamed the men by saying they had killed someone and pled guilty to a crime.

"Plaintiffs never pled guilty to the Central Park assaults," the men said in their suit. "Plaintiffs all pled not guilty and maintained their innocence throughout their trial and incarceration, as well as after they were released from prison."

Collectively, all five men maintained they were innocent of the attack "even when this later hindered them from obtaining parole and extended their incarcerations," they told the court.

The woman who was attacked also did not die, as Trump claimed she did, according to the lawsuit.

Salaam, now a New York City Council member, was at the debate when Trump claimed before the 67 million people watching that night that he and the others had pled guilty to an assault in which someone had died, the suit claimed. Later, the lawsuit said Salaam tried to approach Trump to speak with him about what he'd said, but once Trump realized who Salaam was, waved him away.

"Sir, what do you say to a member of the Central Park Five, sir?" the suit said Salaam asked, but received no response. So he tried again, saying, "President Trump, I'm Yusef Salaam, one of the Exonerated Five. How are you doing?"

"Ah, you're on my side then," Trump responded, according to the suit.

"Plaintiff Salaam then said, 'No, no, no, I'm not on your side,'" the suit claimed, after which Trump smiled, waved and walked away.

But according to the lawsuit, this is just the latest in a pattern of "wrongful conduct" toward the falsely convicted men that stretches back to when they were boys awaiting trial.

Trump knew the statements he made during the debate were false, because he has watched a documentary about the Central Park Five case made by Ken Burns which faithfully details their conviction and exoneration, the suit claimed.

And the reason this is public knowledge is because Trump complained about the documentary on Twitter in 2013, calling it a "one sided piece of garbage that didn't explain the horrific [sic] crimes of these young men while in park [sic]."

That statement, the suit said, was "itself false, defamatory and part of a continuing pattern of extreme and outrageous conduct."

During the racially charged lead-up to the trial in 1989, Trump took out a full-page advertisement in four different New York newspapers calling for the death penalty for minors who commit certain crimes — never mentioning the Central Park Five specifically, but according to the lawsuit, clearly alluding to them.

Rejecting a statement by then-NYC Mayor Ed Koch that "hate and rancor should be removed from our hearts," the Trump ad said, "I do not think so." It added a line later that "muggers and murderers" should be "forced to suffer."

Trump has also repeatedly alluded since then to the men being guilty, saying that they "admitted their guilt," according to the lawsuit. The boys did issue false confessions, which they recanted almost immediately, and have argued consistently since then that they were solicited under duress after hours without food, water or rest and without parents present.

All this means that the former president's comments during the September debate were made "with ill will and spite, and with wanton, reckless or willful disregard for his conduct's injurious effects on plaintiffs," the suit claimed.

The Central Park Five seek a yet-to-be-determined amount of compensatory and punitive damages, as well as costs.

All five men are represented by Shanin Specter and Alex Van Dyke of Kline & Specter PC. Wise is additionally represented by Jane Fisher-Byrialsen and David Fisher of Fisher & Byrialsen PLLC and Hollis Whitson of Samler & Whitson PC. Salaam, Richardson, Santana and Brown are additionally represented by Jonathan C. Moore and Marc Cannan of Beldock Levine & Hoffman LLP.

Counsel information for Trump was not immediately available.

The case is Yusef Salaam et al. v. Donald J. Trump, case number 2:24-cv-05560, in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania.

--Editing by Michael Watanabe.

