



Former U.S. President Donald Trump is shown on screen during a debate watch party at the Cameo Art House Theatre in Fayetteville, North Carolina, on Sept. 10, 2024. Photo: Allison Joyce/Bloomberg

NEWS

## 'Central Park Five' Accuse Trump of Defamation Over Presidential Debate Remarks

"The lawsuit alleges that Donald Trump defamed the plaintiffs, cast them in a harmful false light and intentionally inflicted emotional distress on them. The plaintiffs seek to correct the record and clear their names once again," the plaintiffs' attorney, Shanin Specter of Kline & Specter, said in a statement.

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Litigation

A defamation suit filed Monday on behalf of the "Central Park Five" accuses former President Donald J. Trump of falsely stating during the presidential debate last month that the plaintiffs pleaded guilty to the assault of a jogger in Central Park.

The suit, *Salaam v. Trump*, was filed in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania on behalf of the plaintiffs, Yusef Salaam, Raymond Santana, Kevin Richardson, Antron Brown and Korey Wise, who are also known as the "Exonerated Five," after they were wrongfully convicted in a series of assaults nearly 35 years ago. The complaint alleges that Trump made false statements about the five men during the Sept. 10 presidential debate, which was hosted in Philadelphia.

The plaintiffs were exonerated after being wrongfully convicted of assaulting a jogger in Central Park as teenagers in 1989, after they provided statements "that were the product of coercion and duress," and were recanted shortly after the interrogations, the complaint said. However, Trump is accused of falsely stating that the plaintiffs killed an individual and pleaded guilty to the crime.

"The lawsuit alleges that Donald Trump defamed the plaintiffs, cast them in a harmful false light and intentionally inflicted emotional distress on them. The plaintiffs seek to correct the record and clear their names once again," the plaintiffs' attorney, Shanin Specter of Kline & Specter, said in a statement.

The complaint maintains that the topic of the Central Park Five was raised at the debate after Vice President Kamala Harris said that Trump "took out a full-page ad in The New York Times calling for the execution of five young Black and Latino boys who were innocent, the Central Park Five."

Trump responded with, "They come up with things like what she just said going back many, many years when a lot of people including Mayor Bloomberg agreed with me on the Central Park Five. They admitted—they said, they pled guilty. And I said, well, if they pled guilty they badly hurt a person, killed a person ultimately. And if they pled guilty—then they pled we're not guilty."

"These statements are demonstrably false. Plaintiffs never pled guilty to any crime and were subsequently cleared of all wrongdoing. Further, the victims of the Central Park assaults were not killed," the complaint said,

claiming Trump has previously made false public statements about the Central Park assaults, and the recent incident is "part of a continuing pattern of extreme and outrageous conduct directed at plaintiffs." The plaintiffs pleaded not guilty on all counts that were brought against them, and maintained their innocence throughout their trials and prison sentences, the complaint said.

Additionally, the complaint contends that Trump's reference to Michael Bloomberg was false, as he did not become the mayor of New York until 2002, and the mayor at the time of the assaults was Ed Koch, who allegedly did not agree with Trump's statements about the assaults.

"In fact, in the 1989 advertisement, defendant Trump acknowledged: 'Mayor Koch has stated that hate and rancor should be removed from our hearts. I do not think so.' In response to Mr. Trump's advertisement, Mayor Koch was quoted as saying: 'Nobody I know of in Western society believes that under any circumstances would you ever impose the death penalty on juveniles,'" the complaint said.

"Defendant Trump also omitted key facts, further rendering his statements false, misleading and defamatory. These include, among other things, the fact that the Manhattan District Attorney's Office later acknowledged that the teens' confessions were unreliable and conflicted with the objective evidence; that four of the five were acquitted of attempted murder; that all five men's convictions were later vacated; that the true perpetrator, Matias Reyes, confessed; that DNA evidence confirmed that Reyes was the true perpetrator; and that the City of New York ultimately agreed to pay \$41 million for its conduct toward Plaintiffs," the complaint said.

The plaintiffs claim Trump's Sept. 10 statements were made negligently, with reckless disregard with their falsity, and constitute defamation per se, as "they ascribe to plaintiffs the commission of criminal offenses, including offenses for which plaintiffs have never been charged or accused, offenses for which they were acquitted at trial and offenses for which they were conclusively exonerated and their convictions vacated." The complaint also alleges that the statements qualify as defamation per se because the assaults involved rape, and therefore Trump ascribed "serious sexual misconduct" to the plaintiffs.

The complaint brings claims for defamation, false light, and intentional infliction of emotional distress. The plaintiffs request that the court award plaintiff compensatory and punitive damages, as well as pre- and post-judgment interest and costs.

"This is just another frivolous, Election Interference lawsuit, filed by desperate left-wing activists, in an attempt to distract the American people from Kamala Harris's dangerously liberal agenda and failing campaign. The frantic lawfare efforts by Lyin' Kamala's allies to interfere in the election are going nowhere and President Trump is dominating as he marches to a historic win for the American people on November 5th," Trump Campaign Spokesman Steven Cheung said in an emailed comment.

Counsel has yet to enter an appearance for Trump. His office did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

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