

People v Trump

2024 NY Slip Op 31180(U)

March 26, 2024

Supreme Court, New York County

Docket Number: Indictment No. 71543/2023

Judge: Juan M. Merchan

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SUPREME COURT OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK
COUNTY OF NEW YORK: PART 59

THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK

- against -

DONALD J. TRUMP

Defendant

DECISION and ORDER

People's Motion for an
Order Restricting
Extrajudicial Statements

Indictment No. 71543-23

JUAN M. MERCHAN, A.J.S.C.:

BACKGROUND

Defendant is charged with 34 counts of Falsifying Business Records in the First Degree in violation of Penal Law § 175.10. The charges arise from allegations that Defendant attempted to conceal an illegal scheme to influence the 2016 presidential election. Specifically, the People claim that Defendant directed an attorney who worked for his company to pay \$130,000 to an adult film actress shortly before the election to prevent her from publicizing an alleged sexual encounter with Defendant. It is further alleged that Defendant thereafter reimbursed the attorney for the payments through a series of checks and caused business records associated with the repayments to be falsified to conceal his criminal conduct. Trial on this matter is scheduled to commence on April 15, 2024.

On February 22, 2024, the People filed the instant motion for an order restricting extrajudicial statements by Defendant for the duration of the trial. The restrictions sought are consistent, in part, with those upheld in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit in *United States v. Trump*, 88 F4th 990 [2023]. On March 4, 2024, Defendant filed a response in opposition, arguing that his speech may only be restricted by the application of a more strenuous standard than applied by the D.C. Circuit and that the People have failed to meet that standard in this case.

DISCUSSION

The freedom of speech guaranteed by the First Amendment and the State's interest in the fair administration of justice are implicated by the relief sought. The balancing of these interests must come with the highest scrutiny. "Properly applied, the test requires a court to make its own inquiry into the imminence and magnitude of the danger said to flow from the particular utterance

and then to balance the character of the evil, as well as the likelihood, against the need for free and unfettered expression.” *Landmark Communications, Inc. v. Virginia*, 435 US. 829, 842-843 [1978]. The Court has an obligation to prevent outside influences, including extrajudicial speech, from disturbing the integrity of a trial. *Id.* at 350-351; *see also Sheppard v. Maxwell*, 384 US 333 [1966].

With the standard set forth in *Landmark*, this Court has reviewed the record of prior extrajudicial statements attributed to Defendant as documented in Exhibits 1-16 of the People’s Motion for an Order Restricting Extrajudicial Statements. Notably, Defendant does not deny the utterance of any of those extrajudicial statements, or the reported effect those statements had on the targeted parties. Rather, Defendant argues that, as the “presumptive Republican nominee and leading candidate in the 2024 election” he must have unfettered access to the voting public to respond to attacks from political opponents and to “criticize these public figures.” *See* Defendant’s Opposition to Motion at pgs. 8-9. Yet these extrajudicial statements went far beyond defending himself against “attacks” by “public figures”. Indeed, his statements were threatening, inflammatory, denigrating, and the targets of his statements ranged from local and federal officials, court and court staff, prosecutors and staff assigned to the cases, and private individuals including grand jurors performing their civic duty. *See* People’s Exhibits 1-16. The consequences of those statements included not only fear on the part of the individual targeted, but also the assignment of increased security resources to investigate threats and protect the individuals and family members thereof. *See* People’s Exhibits 1-16; *Trump*, at 996-998. Such inflammatory extrajudicial statements undoubtedly risk impeding the orderly administration of this Court.

Defendant contends that continued compliance with the existing orders, referencing both this Court’s admonition at the start of the proceedings (*see* court transcript dated April 4, 2023) and the recent Protective Order issued on March 7, 2024, with respect to juror anonymity, is an effective, less restrictive alternative. He supports this position by noting that he has generally refrained from making extrajudicial statements about individuals associated with the instant case in marked contrast from the significant volume of social media posts and other statements targeting individuals involved in every other court proceeding reflected in the People’s submission.

This Court is unpersuaded. Although this Court did not issue an order restricting Defendant’s speech at the inception of this case, choosing instead to issue an admonition, given the nature and impact of the statements made against this Court and a family member thereof, the District Attorney and an Assistant District Attorney, the witnesses in this case, as well as the nature and impact of the extrajudicial statements made by Defendant in the D.C. Circuit case (which

resulted in the D.C. Circuit issuing an order restricting his speech), and given that the eve of trial is upon us, it is without question that the imminency of the risk of harm is now paramount. The Supreme Court in both *Nebraska Press Ass'n v. Stuart*, 427 US 539 [1976] and *Sheppard v. Maxwell*, 384 US 333, 363 [1966] holds that the court has the obligation to prevent actual harm to the integrity of the proceedings. When the fairness of the trial is threatened, "reversals are but palliatives; the cure lies in those remedial measures that will prevent the prejudice as its inception." *Sheppard*, at 363. On the record submitted, and in keeping with its mandate, this Court need not wait for the realization of further proscribed speech targeted at the participants of this trial.¹

The People propose an additional restriction on speech with respect to prospective and sworn jurors. The restrictions sought are an extension of the previously issued protective order regarding juror anonymity. While the D.C. Circuit decision addressed only the risks of influencing witnesses and intimidating or harassing other trial participants in accordance with the lower court's ruling, it nevertheless opined that "one of the most powerful interests supporting broad prohibitions on trial participants' speech is to avoid contamination of the jury pool, to protect the impartiality of the jury once selected, to confine the evidentiary record before the jury to the courtroom, and to prevent intrusion on the jury's deliberations." *Trump*, 88 F4th at 1020, citing *In Re Russell*, 726 F2d 1007, 1009, 1010 [4th Cir 1984]. While the protective order related to juror anonymity prevents the dissemination of certain personal information, it is not sufficient to prevent extrajudicial speech targeting jurors and exposing them to an atmosphere of intimidation. The proposed restrictions relating to jurors are narrowly tailored to obtain that result.

The uncontested record reflecting the Defendant's prior extrajudicial statements establishes a sufficient risk to the administration of justice consistent with the standard set forth in *Landmark*, and there exists no less restrictive means to prevent such risk.

¹ Defendant argues that references to speech targeted at individual prosecutors in the instant case do not substantiate their claims, adding that the People only cite posts which occurred in March and June 2023. See Defendant's Motion pg. 14. Notably, within hours of the court appearance on March 25, 2024, setting the trial date for April 15, 2024, the Defendant targeted an individual prosecutor assigned to this case, referring to him as a "radical left from DOJ put into [...] the District Attorney's Office to run the trial against Trump and that was done by Biden and his thugs" in a press conference. *C-SPAN, press conference video dated March 25, 2024, at minute 2:34.*

THEREFORE, it is hereby

ORDERED, that the People's motion for a restriction on extrajudicial statements by the Defendant is **GRANTED** to the extent that Defendant is directed to refrain from the following:

- a. Making or directing others to make public statements about known or reasonably foreseeable witnesses concerning their potential participation in the investigation or in this criminal proceeding;
- b. Making or directing others to make public statements about (1) counsel in the case other than the District Attorney, (2) members of the court's staff and the District Attorney's staff, or (3) the family members of any counsel or staff member, if those statements are made with the intent to materially interfere with, or to cause others to materially interfere with, counsel's or staff's work in this criminal case, or with the knowledge that such interference is likely to result; and
- c. Making or directing others to make public statements about any prospective juror or any juror in this criminal proceeding.

The foregoing constitutes the Decision and Order of the Court.

Dated: March 26, 2024
New York, New York

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Juan M. Merchan
Judge of the Court Claims
Acting Justice of the Supreme Court

HON. J. MERCHAN