

Actor Morgan Freeman's attorney demands retraction of CNN's sexual harassment allegations

Niles Niemuth
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An attorney representing 80-year-old actor Morgan Freeman sent a letter to CNN president Jeff Zucker Tuesday demanding the news network apologize for and retract a lurid and sensationalist article published last week, based primarily on anonymous sources, alleging Freeman was guilty of being a serial sexual harasser.

“It has been said that ‘A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth can get its boots on.’ In just the few days since CNN published the article on Mr. Freeman, it has traveled all the way around the world and back, millions of times,” the letter observes. “If CNN has any decency, or any allegiance to journalistic integrity, it will immediately [sic] retract the article and issue a public apology to Mr. Freeman.”

Written by attorney Robert M. Schwartz, the letter describes the lengthy CNN report as “the product of malicious intent, falsehoods, slight-of-hand [sic], an absence of editorial control, and journalistic malpractice.”

Freeman personally responded to CNN's report by denying the allegations and apologizing to anyone who may have misinterpreted his actions. “Anyone who knows me or has worked with me knows I am not someone who would intentionally offend or knowingly make anyone feel uneasy. I apologize to anyone who felt uncomfortable or disrespected—that was never my intent.”

“I am devastated that 80 years of my life is at risk of being undermined, in the blink of an eye, by Thursday's media reports,” Freeman noted in a subsequent statement. “All victims of assault and harassment deserve to be heard. And we need to listen to them. But it is not right to equate horrific incidents

of sexual assault with misplaced compliments or humor.”

However, in light of the ongoing #MeToo sexual witch-hunt, which has sought to amalgamate a whole range of behavior ranging from rape to inappropriate remarks, the publication of CNN's report had immediate ramifications for Freeman. Within hours of the article's appearance, the Screen Actors Guild announced it was reviewing a lifetime achievement award it had given to Freeman in January and financial services firm Visa suspended all advertisements featuring the actor.

Schwartz notes that the CNN article's co-author, entertainment reporter Chloe Melas, is also one of Freeman's accusers and the only named source in the article making allegations. There have been no serious questions raised from within the mainstream media about the report's origins or concerns about a severe lowering of journalistic standards.

The CNN report claims that eight women were subjected to harassment by Freeman and eight others were witnesses to such behavior. None of the accusers except for Melas have been named. The report cites Freeman's business partner Lori McCreary and WGN entertainment producer Tyra Martin but neither have made any accusations against him.

“Hey, still getting a lot of nasty messages from people who think I AM one of the accusers. I'm not, never was. CNN totally misrepresented the video and took my remarks out of context,” Martin noted in a message to entertainment news outlet TMZ.

Schwartz asserts in his letter that “Ms. Melas baited and prodded supposed ‘witnesses’ to say bad things about Mr. Freeman and tried to get them to confirm her

bias against him. Thus, no reader of the article can have any confidence that any of the anonymous sources, which make up the balance of CNN's article, can be relied upon at all."

The lawyer speculates it was necessary for Melas to create a list of the thousands of people who have worked on projects with Freeman over the years and call hundreds of them trolling for negative remarks to find the few cited anonymously in the report.

He also questions Melas' intentions in interpreting a remark Freeman made during a press junket, a remark that apparently inspired her yearlong investigation into the actor's behavior. Melas was pregnant at the time and one of Freeman's co-stars, Michael Caine, told a story about the time he had congratulated "a woman on becoming pregnant, only to learn to Mr. Caine's (and the woman's) embarrassment that she was not pregnant. When Mr. Freeman said 'I wish I was there,' [the remark Melas interpreted as being directed at her] any reasonable viewer would have known that the 'there' to which he was referring was the conversation in which Mr. Freeman's friend, Mr. Caine, had embarrassed himself. That is exactly what Mr. Freeman intended.

"Despite what should have been clear to Ms. Melas, she chose to interpret Michael Caine's anecdote, and Mr. Freeman's remark about it, as having something to do with her and as harassment," Schwartz notes. "One cannot know if that was the product of something as innocuous as Ms. Melas' having misheard what Mr. Freeman said, her runaway self-centeredness, or her search for a sexual harassment perpetrator to 'expose' so that she could grab attention and advance her career." A combination of the last two possibilities would seem a reasonable guess.

Schwartz writes, "Based on those facts, and the additional information presented below, it is clear that CNN has defamed Mr. Freeman. CNN has inflicted serious injury on his reputation and career. At a minimum, CNN immediately needs to issue a retraction and apologize to Mr. Freeman through the same channels, and with the same level of attention, that it used to unjustly attack him on May 24. CNN also needs to retract the portions of the story that concern Lori McCreary and apologize to her for defaming and injuring her."

CNN responded by releasing a statement that rejected

the attorney's demands for an apology and a retraction, standing by its report. "The unfounded accusations made by Mr. Freeman's lawyer are disappointing and are difficult to reconcile with Mr. Freeman's own public statements in the aftermath of the story. CNN stands by its reporting and will respond forcefully to any attempt by Mr. Freeman or his representatives to intimidate us from covering this important public issue."

"We presented CNN with objective evidence, including videotapes and on-the-record denials by the claimed 'victims,' that the alleged incident that gave rise to the story never happened. We proved to CNN, beyond any doubt, that the whole story was built on fakery," Schwartz said in a statement to *Vanity Fair* reacting to the network's rejection of his demand for a retraction. "The credibility of the entire CNN attack on Mr. Freeman has now been undermined. And in choosing to ignore all of the evidence that we presented, CNN has confirmed our concerns about its reporters, its lack of oversight, and its gross misconduct in unjustifiably attacking Mr. Freeman."



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