

# Donald Trump's lawyers and right-wing supporters seek to prevent US distribution of the docudrama *The Apprentice*

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Former President Donald Trump and his supporters and legal team have made concerted efforts to block *The Apprentice*, an unflattering docudrama about the young Trump, from being distributed in the US. As of June 25, Briarcliff Entertainment was reportedly “getting close to acquiring the film for fall release,” according to *Deadline*.

Among other things, the film, directed by Ali Abbasi, documents Trump's relationship with ferocious anti-communist witch-hunter and all-round scoundrel lawyer Roy Cohn.

The movie, received warmly when it premiered at the Cannes film festival in May, features Sebastian Stan as Trump and Jeremy Strong as Cohn. It depicts Trump's rise in the New York real estate business in the 1970s and '80s with the gangster Cohn as his mentor.

Among the controversial elements of the film is a scene depicting Trump raping his first wife Ivana (Maria Bakalova). The former Mrs. Trump had publicly discussed a sexual assault by her husband in the years after they were divorced. Prior to her death in 2022, she recanted the claim.

Other reported features of the film include the narcissistic Trump getting hair transplants, liposuction to combat weight gain and amphetamine use. None of these claims are new.

One of the primary obstacles to the distribution of the film comes from billionaire Daniel Snyder, an investor in the film's production company Kinematics. Snyder, the former owner of the Washington Commanders NFL team and a significant Trump financial backer, was said to be “furious” about the film after seeing a version of it in February.

*Variety* reported May 20 that sources indicate Snyder, “a friend of Trump's who donated \$1.1 million to his inaugural committee and Trump Victory in 2016 and

\$100,000 to his 2020 presidential campaign, put money into the film via Kinematics because he was under the impression that it was a flattering portrayal of the 45th president.”

The *Variety* report said Kinematics' lawyers were mobilized to fight the US release of *The Apprentice*, and “cease-and-desist letters began flying.” However, the official position of the production company's president Emanuel Nuñez is that Snyder was not involved in the impasse. “All creative and business decisions involving ‘The Apprentice’ have always been and continue to be solely made by Kinematics. Mark [Rapaport] and I run our company without the involvement of any other third parties,” Nuñez told *Variety*.

So far, distributors have purchased the rights to the film in Canada, Britain, France, Germany, Japan and other countries. However, no deal has been made yet for a release of the film in the US in theaters or on streaming services, although, as noted, the Briarcliff deal has been rumored.

According to Michelle Goldberg of the *New York Times*, “Negotiations are ongoing, and domestic distribution could still come together. Yet the possibility that American audiences won't be able to see ‘The Apprentice’ isn't just frustrating. It's frightening, because it suggests that Trump and his supporters have already intimidated some media companies, which seem to be pre-emptively capitulating to him.”

*Deadline* reported May 20 that the Trump campaign's Steven Cheung threatened immediate legal action against the filmmakers, saying, “We will be filing a lawsuit to address the blatantly false assertions from these pretend filmmakers.” Calling *The Apprentice* a “malicious defamation,” Cheung went on, linking the docudrama to directly to the Democrats and the Biden campaign:

This garbage is pure fiction which sensationalizes lies that have been long debunked. As with the illegal Biden Trials, this is election interference by Hollywood elites, who know that President Trump will retake the White House and beat their candidate of choice because nothing they have done has worked.

One distribution executive told *Variety*, any company looking to be sold or to merge with or buy another company would be hesitant to touch *The Apprentice* because of the threat that a Trump White House, if he is re-elected, would come after the firm and his “regulators will be punitive.”

When Trump was president, his Department of Justice blocked AT&T’s acquisition of Time Warner, the company that owned CNN. As was widely reported at the time, the government’s opposition to the deal was seen as retaliation for CNN coverage that displeased Trump.

In another example of the type of tactics that Trump is deploying, a cease-and-desist letter was sent to the filmmakers that said the movie is “direct foreign interference in America’s elections,” citing the fact that its director, Abbasi, is Iranian Danish and that the movie received funding from Denmark, Ireland and Canada.

The letter goes on, “If you do not immediately cease all publication and marketing of the movie, President Trump will pursue every appropriate legal means to hold you accountable for this gross violation of President Trump and the American people’s rights.”

Now, with the recent Supreme Court decision sanctioning criminal actions by the president under cover of “official business,” the gangsterism of the Trump camp will be let loose if he wins reelection and few people in the Hollywood want to take on the risk involved in investing in the distribution of *The Apprentice*.

According to the *Washington Post*, “Kinematics has been accused of stalling on all fronts. Efforts by the other producers to buy Kinematics out of its position have so far been unsuccessful, and people close to the production believe that Snyder has final say and is holding up the deal, ‘which has all the makings of a catch and kill,’ one of the people close to the production said, likening it to the tabloid practice of buying a story to prevent its release.”

After the premiere at Cannes, which concluded with an enthusiastic 11-minute standing ovation by the audience, many investors came forward to support the film.

Director Abassi, who was condemned by the Iranian government for his last film *Holy Spider* for making “an insulting and politically motivated” movie, has made few remarks about the present effort to shut the film down in the US.

Speaking with the *Post* in June, Abassi commented, “Usually when you get the kind of reception we’ve gotten, ... there would be a bidding war.” He continued, “It seems like either [the distributors] are worried about Trump sending the Justice Department or Commerce Department after them and weaponizing the government against them or they’re worried about MAGA nation and what if 80 million people who voted for him get angry at their streaming service.”

The logline for the movie provided to the press asserts rather vaguely that the film is “a story about the origins of a system ... featuring larger-than-life characters and set in a world of power and ambition. The film delves into a profound exploration of the ascent of an American dynasty. It meticulously charts the genesis of a ‘zero-sum’ culture, one that accentuates the dichotomy between winners and losers, the dynamics between the mighty and the vulnerable, and the intricate psychology of persona.”

It is not possible to assess the film based on this information and other descriptions given by those who have seen it. At the same time, judging from the response of Trump and his supporters, it is likely that the movie paints a relatively truthful and devastating portrait of the con artist and would-be American dictator in the making.



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