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Trump's Executive Orders Against Law Firms

Written by [John R. Vile](#), published on March 28, 2025 *last updated on March 13, 2026*



The law firms targeted by President Donald Trump are associated with litigation or investigations against him or his allies. For example, one of the orders terminates federal contracts with WilmerHale where Robert Mueller III (pictured here) worked both before and after he was appointed by the Justice Department as special counsel in the Trump-Russia investigation. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh, File)

Although the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution guarantees basic freedoms of religion, speech, press, assembly, petition, and [by implication] association, such provisions are rarely self-enforcing. To a large extent, they rely on the ability of individuals and institutions to challenge threats to these rights in courts. That is one reason that so many entries in this Encyclopedia deal with cases that have arisen in respect to First Amendment rights.

In February and March 2025, President Donald J. Trump began issuing a flurry of actions and executive orders against law firms he deemed as dishonest and engaging in litigation and conduct he declared was detrimental to American interests.

As of March 27, Trump has targeted five large law firms, moving to terminate federal government contracts with them, limiting them from entering federal buildings and even in some cases barring interaction by federal employees with them.

The actions and orders specifically outline the work of attorneys in the law firms, such as Robert Mueller who had been appointed by the Justice Department to investigate connections between Russia and Trump after the 2016 election, and others that have been at odds with Trump or involved in investigations about him. Some of the orders also attack the firms for their diversity, equity and inclusion policies.

Trump moves against firm that provided free counsel to Jack Smith

The first firm targeted by Trump was Covington and Burling when the White House said in a Feb. 25 announcement that it was suspending security clearance of some of the firm's lawyers and initiating a review and termination of the firm's federal contracts. The announcement noted that the firm had provided free legal services to former special counsel Jack Smith, who was appointed by the Justice Department and brought criminal charges against Trump after his first term. The announcement noted an executive order signed by Trump on his first day in office "to end the weaponization of the Federal Government..."after promising to 'end forever the weaponization of government and the abuse of law enforcement against political opponents.'"

On March 6, 2025, Trump issued an executive order against a law firm, specifically directed to what he disparagingly described as “[t]he dishonest and dangerous activity of the law firm Perkins Coie LLP.” Trump’s central complaint was the role of Perkins Coie in hiring Fusion GPS, which, he alleged, had manufactured a “false ‘dossier’ designed to steal” the 2016 election. Trump also expressed dissatisfaction with Coie’s diversity, equity, and inclusion policies, its work with George Soros to “overturn popular, necessary, and democratically enacted election laws,” and the like.

Trump ordered the Attorney General and others to “suspend any active security clearances” of Coie employees and to “terminate any contract, to the maximum extent permitted by applicable law, including the Federal Acquisition Regulation, for which Perkins Coie has been hired to perform any service.” Such agencies were also largely to “refrain from hiring employees of Perkins Coie.”

A Republican staffer of the U.S. Senate subsequently issued a similar order designed to restrict the lobbying efforts of both Perkins Coie and the law firm of Covington & Burling.

On March 14, Trump targeted the Paul Weiss law firm with a similar order for bringing actions against protestors at the U.S. Capitol Building on Jan. 6, 2001, and for investigating Trump during his first presidential term.

On March 25, Trump issued an order against Jenner & Block saying it has undermined justice by engaging in “obvious partisan representations to achieve political ends.” The order specifically details the hiring of Andrew Weissmann after Weissman helped Mueller, the special counsel in the Trump-Russia investigation.

On March 27, Trump issued an order against another law firm, this time WilmerHale, as punishment for its connections with Mueller who worked there both before and after he was special counsel in the Trump-Russia investigation. Like the other orders, Trump moved to terminate all of government contracts with the law firm, suspended any security clearances, barred them from federal buildings and prohibited federal government employees from “engaging with” with them, among other items.

Three law firms sue administration over orders, another settles

Perkins Coie sued to block the portion of the order barring its attorneys from certain federal buildings and requiring government contractors to disclose their business with the firm (Beitsch 2025) and was successful in getting a temporary injunction. On May 2, 2025, a federal district judge issued a permanent injunction against the government, saying the executive order against Perkins Coie violated First Amendment rights of speech and association and was an unlawful retaliation against the firm's protected speech..

Jenner & Block and WilmerHale also sued and, in late May, both won permanent injunctions from separate federal judges which ruled that the executive orders were unconstitutional.

The Weiss firm took a different approach, agreeing to provide substantial pro bono work to defend challenges against the government in exchange for the government ceasing its actions. Some observers liken Weiss's concessions to those of Columbia University, which agreed to change policies related to student protests after the government threatened to cut off \$500 million in federal funding.

A number of judges have issued temporary injunctions against Trump's executive orders targeting law firms. On April 15, Judge AliKhan referred to Trump's targeting of the firm Susman Godfrey, which had secured a \$787.5 million settlement against Fox News in a defamation case, as "a shocking abuse of power"; the judge further indicated that Trump's attempt to "control who law firms are allowed to represent . . . threatens the very foundations of legal representation in our country." (Montague 2025).

Orders can have chilling effect on others

Quite apart from such the actions of such firms and institutions is the potential chilling effect this might have on others. Because the orders target past actions, they threaten due process and resemble ex post facto laws that criminalize and penalize actions that were not illegal at the time they were made. They also threaten the Sixth Amendment right to counsel.

A writer for the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression described the administration's actions as "a direct assault" on "the ability of private attorneys to bring lawsuits against the government." (Ortner 2025) The writer asks, "If the Trump administration can target specific firms on this basis, what prevents future administrations from blacklisting firms that represent, say, gun-rights groups?" FIRE

describes Trump's actions as direct violations of the First Amendment, explaining that the order "is unconstitutional viewpoint-based retaliation and violates the right of freedom of association."

It is likely that some of Trump's orders also violate the Unconstitutional Conditions Doctrine, which prevents the government from conditioning a benefit (or in this case withholding privileges) on an agreement to forego the exercise of constitutional rights.

Attempts by government to stop disfavored litigation not new

Although some aspects of Trump's actions are unprecedented, others are similar to earlier cases of blacklisting and to a law that the U.S. Supreme Court rejected in the cases of NAACP v. Button (1963). In that case, the state of Virginia had attempted to prevent the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People from litigating in the public interest.

However disparaged lawyers sometimes are — Jack Cade, who seeks to overthrow Henry VI, in the eponymous play by William Shakespeare noted that the first thing to do "is kill all the lawyers" (Lubet 2025) — law has long been considered to be a high calling (Vile 2001). It may well be that lawyers and judges will have to defend their own rights in order to be able to protect the rights of others.

Harvard Law reminds law students of professional conduct

In a recent column, a lawyer once employed by a large law firm suggested that it was no surprise that such firms, who are largely devoted to making a profit, might fold in the face of Trump's order. He also suggested that it is possible that what Trump has done could be considered to be extortion, although he observed that, as with bribery, "the line is often hard to parse in particular fact patterns" (Khardori 2025).

On March 29, a large majority of law professors at Harvard Law School sent a letter to students noting that the Model Rules of Professional Conduct provide: 'A lawyer is . . . an officer of the legal system and a public citizen having special responsibility for the quality of justice.'" The professors further observed that "The rule of law is imperiled when governmental leaders:

- single out lawyers and law firms for retribution based on their lawful and ethical representation of clients disfavored by the government, undermining the Sixth Amendment;
- threaten law firms and legal clinics for their lawyers' pro bono work or prior governmental service;
- relent on those arbitrary threats based on public acts of submission and outlaws of fund for favored causes; and
- punish people for lawfully speaking out on matters of public concern."

Specifically singling out the Trump Administration's actions against activism on the part of international students, the letter went on to say that "Whatever we might each think about particular conduct under particular facts, we share a conviction that our Constitution, including the First Amendment, was designed to make dissent and debate possible without fear of government punishment. Neither a law school nor a society can properly function amidst such fear."

Recent Events

After judges unanimously ruled that Trump's executive orders against law firms were unconstitutional, the Justice Department filed a motion to dismiss its appeal of the ruling on March 2, 2026. The next day, however, the Justice Department filed a motion to withdraw its motion to dismiss the appeals, without providing an explanation of its action.

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FURTHER READING

- [“In quick reverse, DOJ seeks to continue Trump’s battle with law firms”](#) by **Ryan J. Reilly and Gary Grumbach**, NBC News, **March 3, 2026**.
- [“Trump’s campaign against law firms dealt another setback as judge blocks executive order”](#) by **The Associated Press**, **May 27, 2025**.
- [“There’s a Darker Reason Trump Is Going After Those Law Firms”](#) by **Scott Cummings**, **The New York Times**, **May 15, 2025**.
- [“Judge Blocks Trump From Retaliating Against Another Top Law Firm”](#) by **Zach Montague**, **The New York Times**, **April 15, 2025**.

- **“I Worked at a Big Law Firm. Here’s What to Know About the Surrender to Trump” by Ankush Khardori, Politico. April 1, 2025.**
- **“A Letter to Harvard Law Students.” March 29, 2025.**
- **“Trump’s Not-So-Subtle Purpose in Fighting Big Law Firms” by David Enrich, The New York Times, March 29, 2025.**
- **“Trump’s attack on law firms targets democracy’s front lines of defense” by Steven Lubet, The Hill. March 24, 2025.**
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- **“Law firms divided over response to Trump orders” by Rebecca Beitsch, The Hill. March 25, 2025.**
- **“Trump’s crackdown on top law firms spreads to Congress” by Dasha Burns, Caitlin Oprysko, and Sanieel Lippman, Politico. March 24, 2025.**
- **“Trump’s attack on law firms threatens the foundations of our justice system” By Daniel Ortner, FIRE. March 18, 2025.**
- **“‘We’re in the Midst of an Authoritarian Takeover’: Lee Bollinger on Trump, Columbia, and why capitulation won’t work” by Evan Goldstein and Len Gutkin, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 11, 2025, pp. 12-16.**
- **“Great American Lawyers: An Encyclopedia” by John R. Vile, 2 vols. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2001.**
- **“Addressing Risks from Perkins Cole LLP” by Donald J. Trump, Presidential Actions, March 6, 2025.**

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