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EXCLUSIVE LAW

# Meta to Pay \$25 Million to Settle 2021 Trump Lawsuit

President had sued social-media company after his accounts were suspended following Jan. 6 riot

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Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg, in red tie, attended the presidential inauguration in the Capitol Rotunda this month. PHOTO: JULIA DEMAREE NIKHINSON/BLOOMBERG

[Meta Platforms](#) has agreed to pay roughly \$25 million to settle a 2021 lawsuit that President Trump brought against the company and its CEO after the social-media platform suspended his accounts following the attack on the U.S. Capitol that year, according to people familiar with the agreement.

Of that, \$22 million will go toward a fund for Trump's presidential library, with the rest going to legal fees and the other plaintiffs who signed on to the case. Meta won't admit wrongdoing, the people said. Trump signed the settlement agreement Wednesday in the Oval Office.

A Meta spokesman confirmed the settlement.

“It looks like a bribe and a signal to every company that corruption is the name of the game,” Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D., Mass.) said in a statement. “After Meta pays to play, what does [Mark Zuckerberg](#) expect as a return on this investment?”

Serious talks about the suit, which had seen little activity since fall 2023, began after Zuckerberg, Meta’s chief executive, flew to Trump’s Mar-a-Lago club in Florida to dine with him in November, according to the people familiar with the discussions. The dinner was one of several efforts by Zuckerberg and Meta to soften the relationship with Trump and the incoming administration. Meta also donated \$1 million to Trump’s inaugural fund. Last year, Trump warned that Zuckerberg could go to prison if he tried to rig the election against him.

Toward the end of the November dinner, Trump raised the matter of the lawsuit, the people said. The president signaled that the litigation had to be resolved before Zuckerberg could be “brought into the tent,” one of the people said.

Weeks later, in early January, Zuckerberg returned to Mar-a-Lago for a [full day of mediation](#). Trump was present for part of the session, though he stepped out at [one point to be sentenced](#)—appearing virtually—for covering up hush money paid to a porn star, one of the people said. He also golfed, reappearing in golf clothes and talking about the round he had just played, the person said.

Trump has long been a prolific filer of lawsuits, with mixed results. In recent weeks, that has changed, as U.S. corporations have rushed to make inroads with the new administration. ABC News in December [settled a defamation lawsuit](#) Trump had filed against the network and the anchor George Stephanopoulos, agreeing to pay \$15 million to Trump’s library. Paramount Global executives have discussed settling a lawsuit Trump filed over a CBS News interview with then-Vice President [Kamala Harris](#).

Trump’s lawyers are working to capitalize on that momentum. In December, a lawyer for Trump filed a letter in an unrelated case—in which the president had sued the publisher Simon & Schuster and the author Bob Woodward over [publishing recordings of their interviews](#) without permission—urging the defendants to follow ABC’s lead. Attaching a copy of the ABC settlement, the lawyer wrote, “President Trump is hopeful that the Defendants in this case follow Mr. Stephanopoulos’ expression of contrition.”



A place setting for Meta's Mark Zuckerberg at a luncheon that followed the inauguration at the Capitol.  
PHOTO: BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

The Meta lawsuit was one of a [series of legal actions](#) that Trump, freshly voted out of office, brought in July 2021 against social-media companies that had suspended his accounts. He also sued Twitter, now renamed X, and YouTube, along with their corporate leaders. A federal judge dismissed the Twitter suit, and the Google suit was administratively closed in 2023 but could be reopened.

John P. Coale, a Trump backer who represented Trump on the Meta suit, first discussed the idea of suing the big tech companies at a 2021 meeting with Trump. It was a period in which Trump was politically at his lowest—out of power, having been impeached for the second time and facing prosecutions that he and his allies viewed as lawfare. “He has incoming, nothing but incoming,” said Coale. “I said to him, ‘We’ve got to have some outgoing. We’ve got to attack.’ ”

Coale said Trump remained highly engaged with the lawsuits over the years, asking for updates and providing input at crucial moments. He, along with the attorney John Q. Kelly, embarked on years of litigation. At first, it didn’t seem as if the lawsuits would yield much.

“Censorship runs rampant,” the 2021 complaint against Meta read, “and the result is a chilling effect cast over our nation’s pressing political, medical, social, and cultural discussions.” Trump and other plaintiffs who signed on sought an injunction ordering Facebook to reinstate their accounts and to remove all warning labels from their content.

Trump’s Facebook and Instagram accounts were suspended in 2021 because of posts he made around Jan. 6, 2021, when a mob stormed the Capitol building. In the days

leading up to the attack and on Jan. 6, he repeatedly used the platforms to make false claims that he won the 2020 election and alleged widespread election fraud that was denied by the administration's top election-security experts and attorneys.

Zuckerberg, at the time, said the risks of the president's using the social-media platforms during that period "are simply too great" and then paused the president's accounts for two weeks. The pause was subsequently lengthened.

YouTube, owned by Google, and Twitter also removed Trump from their platforms in response to posts he made around the time of the attack at the Capitol. Twitter said that its decision was permanent, though [Trump was allowed back](#) on the platform in November 2022, shortly after [Elon Musk](#) purchased the company. YouTube [lifted its suspension](#) on Trump's account in March 2023.

How a lawsuit Trump filed nearly four years ago that faced slim chances of success turned into a \$25 million settlement in the president's favor is partly thanks to efforts by Trump's lawyers to draw out the matter, even after a similar case was dismissed.

In May 2022, a federal judge dismissed the lawsuit Trump had brought against Twitter and its CEO at the time the suit was filed, Jack Dorsey, rejecting Trump's argument that the platform had violated his right to free speech on the grounds that the clause applies only to the government, not private companies. Trump appealed the case, but the appeals court hasn't yet issued a ruling.

Three months later, a federal judge stayed the Facebook case, pending the disposition of Trump's appeal of the Twitter case. It looked as if the lawsuit could peter out.

But about a year later, Trump's lawyers revived the suit, requesting that the judge lift the stay and allow them to file a second amended complaint. In a conference with Meta lawyers in November 2023, Trump's lawyers argued that new information had come to light and said they wanted to pursue filing another amended complaint.

Kelly, the lawyer for Trump, said in that conference that while Trump's Facebook account had been restored, a chilling effect remained. "Once you're censored, you're censored, and that's it. But when you're restored, you have to watch your step," he said. "You're sort of whistling in the dark every time you use Facebook and even approach matters that Facebook is not endeared to, such as our ex-president."

U.S. District Judge William Alsup indicated that he was dubious about the argument. "Is it really plausible that President Trump, who is as vigorous a person as could

possibly exist, is afraid of his shadow and will be chilled in his—what he says on the platform?” he said. “I rather doubt it.”

In March of last year, Trump’s lawyers said they were waiting for a decision in another related case before filing their amended complaint. They hadn’t yet done so by November when Zuckerberg arrived in Palm Beach, Fla., to meet with the president-elect.

*—Katherine Long contributed to this article.*

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