

Trump's pardons wipe out payments to defrauded victims

In addition to clearing prison sentences, the president's clemency actions have erased millions in restitution payments.

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By [Beth Reinhard](#) and [Aaron Schaffer](#)

By the time a federal judge in 2023 sentenced convicted fraudster Trevor Milton to four years in prison, Salt Lake City businessman Liejo Supoto had long given up hope of recovering the more than \$100,000 he had invested in Milton's hydrogen-powered truck company.

Supoto didn't know that a federal law requires certain criminal offenders to pay what's called restitution to compensate their victims for losses. In Milton's case, prosecutors argued that the former CEO of Nikola should pay investors \$660 million.

But before a judge had the chance to calculate and order restitution, President Donald Trump pardoned Milton — which in addition to sparing him any time behind bars also wiped away any financial penalties.

“I want him to understand that there were people he hurt, that there were real victims,” said Supoto, 64. “There’s that old saying that crime doesn’t pay, but it sure paid off for him.”

At least 20 people who have received clemency from Trump so far this year — cutting their sentence short, restoring their civil rights after imprisonment or allowing them to avoid prison altogether — were also forgiven of financial penalties totaling tens of millions of dollars. Some of these offenders owed money to real-life victims of fraud. Marian Morgan, for example, was sentenced in 2013 to nearly 34 years in prison for running a Ponzi scheme and was ordered to pay \$17.5 million to dozens of investors, most of which remains unpaid. In 2021, she filed a statement in court saying, “I want to pay restitution to my victims so they know I am truly sorry for the damage I caused.” But in May, Trump commuted her sentence “to time served with no further fines, restitution, probation or other conditions.”

In other cases where Trump granted clemency, the federal government was the main victim. Paul Walczak, a health care executive and convicted tax cheat, was sentenced in April to 18 months in prison and ordered to pay over \$4 million to the Internal Revenue Service. Walczak had pleaded guilty to tax crimes and agreed to pay restitution to the IRS, according to court filings. His pardon came through just 12 days after his sentencing, relieving him of his financial obligations and sparing him from going to prison.

“I don’t think that people are fully appreciating the way these pardons are working or whether they are paying attention to the financial interests of crime victims,” said Elizabeth Oyer, who served as U.S. pardon attorney for three years until she was fired two months into Trump’s second term. “It’s having a detrimental effect on victims and taxpayers, and it’s a windfall to the people who committed crimes.”

The White House did not respond to questions from The Washington Post about whether Trump considers victims and their ability to receive restitution when making clemency decisions. “President Trump has exercised his constitutional authority to issue pardons and commutations for a variety of individuals,” said White House spokeswoman Abigail Jackson, adding that former president Joe Biden’s clemency record warrants tough scrutiny.

Biden drew widespread criticism for breaking a long-standing promise not to pardon his son shortly before leaving office. But unlike any other modern president, Trump has wielded his executive power to reward dozens of allies while condemning their prosecutions as politically motivated. He has routinely ignored Justice Department guidelines that state pardons should be given only to offenders who are five years past their conviction or imprisonment. The guidelines also say that accepting responsibility for their crimes and paying restitution to their victims should be “important considerations.” Presidents are not bound by the criteria because the Constitution gives them the near-absolute power to grant pardons for federal crimes.

Milton did not appear to meet those Justice Department standards. Found guilty of securities and wire fraud in 2022, he remained out on bond as he appealed his conviction. Last year, he and his wife donated more than \$2.5 million to boosting Trump's campaign. Milton has repeatedly insisted he did nothing wrong and has been promoting a documentary proclaiming his innocence.

In a statement to The Post, Milton lashed out at an investment firm that issued a report calling Nikola "an intricate fraud" in 2020, sending its stock price spiraling downward. Less than a year later, the Justice Department and the Securities and Exchange Commission filed charges. The SEC dropped its case against Milton after Trump's pardon, court filings show.

"The investor losses rest squarely on the predatory practices of the activist short sellers, and if they were held to the same standard as all other law-abiding citizens, they would be in prison for decades," Milton said. "The presidential pardon and dismissal of the SEC case demonstrate no laws were broken or violated. We feel awful for anyone and everyone who had to feel the pain from the short sellers' fraudulent activity."

Before filing for bankruptcy protection, Nikola agreed to pay a \$125 million fine in 2021 to settle SEC charges that it defrauded investors. The SEC said it has collected \$48.8 million from Nikola and will eventually distribute that money to investors. Some investors also have filed civil claims, but Supoto isn't holding his breath.

“I wrote that money off a long time ago,” he said.

Back in 2020, Supoto was day-trading and constantly tuned in to CNBC, CNN or YouTube. Milton, who had founded Phoenix-based Nikola in 2014, was all over the media landscape, touting his start-up’s zero-emissions trucks powered by hydrogen fuel and electricity instead of diesel or gas. Nikola looked as if it would revolutionize the trucking industry. Supoto was enthralled.

“It was the promise of the future,” Supoto said. “The promise of something new and technological and advanced. Something that would compete with Tesla.”

One widely circulated promotional video showed a Nikola semitruck cruising down a highway. “Behold, the 1,000 HP, zero emission Nikola semi-truck in motion,” read the Facebook post.

“It was very convincing,” Supoto said. He bought \$100,000 worth of Nikola stock after the company went public in June 2020. On Sept. 8, 2020, General Motors announced it was taking a \$2 billion equity stake in Nikola and would engineer and manufacture a Nikola pickup truck. Nikola’s share price soared, briefly surpassing Ford’s and making Milton a billionaire.

But on Sept. 10, 2020, an investment firm called Hindenburg Research published a devastating report on Nikola. Among its claims was that the video of the “Nikola One” truck that hooked Supoto was a fake. The truck had been towed to the top of a hill and was filmed rolling downward, the report said.

Supoto was stunned.

“After watching Trevor Milton so many times on television and on YouTube and then you hear this rumor — I didn’t want to believe it,” he said. “I thought there was no way someone would come out and lie like that.”

Milton accused Hindenburg of trying to profit off a downturn in the stock price, though he stepped down as the head of Nikola.

“We merely reported on Milton’s track record of numerous, obvious lies, many of which were later admitted by the company and which have repeatedly been confirmed in the courts,” said Hindenburg founder Nate Anderson. “He wasn’t indicted on criminal charges and found guilty at trial for telling the truth.”

Federal prosecutors charged Milton in 2021 with defrauding investors, including some who lost their retirement savings and others who had never invested in the stock market before, but who had begun trading to earn more money during the coronavirus pandemic. According to the indictment, the “fully functioning” Nikola One truck was missing key parts and was never operational. Nikola’s Badger pickup truck, supposedly built from the “ground up,” actually used the base of a Ford truck with Nikola branding. And prosecutors said Milton’s claims that Nikola was producing low-cost hydrogen and had billions of dollars in orders were all lies aimed at inflating the stock price.

Milton pleaded not guilty. During the trial, his lawyers argued that he never intended to deceive investors and he was only guilty of being an enthusiastic promoter of his company. A jury found him guilty in 2022 of securities and wire fraud, which gave Supoto a little satisfaction.

“He was a snake oil salesman,” Supoto said. “When someone stands in front of the public and lies like he did, I don’t know how he could sleep at night.”

U.S. District Judge Edgardo Ramos sentenced Milton in 2023 to four years in prison and ordered him to forfeit a 4,700-acre ranch in Utah he had bought with cash and Nikola stock. Prosecutors urged the judge to also order \$660 million in restitution to Nikola investors. Milton's legal team argued that he didn't owe anything, that stock prices fluctuate for myriad reasons and that it would be unfair to pin investors' losses on Milton.

Ramos seemed skeptical of the defense team's argument at a December 2023 court hearing. "The concept that there was no loss here is difficult to reconcile with the evidence that I saw at trial and the evidence that I have received since, including some of the victim impact statements," he said. "There was real loss to real people who listened to Mr. Milton and invested in Nikola because of what they heard from him based on their due diligence, such as it was."

Supoto was among the 10 people who filed victim impact statements with the court. They described financial hardship and personal anguish, urging the court to hold Milton accountable. "The betrayal I experienced is not just financial or professional; it is deeply personal," Supoto wrote. "There's an emotional and psychological toll."

By the fall of 2024, Ramos had not yet ordered restitution and Milton was still out on bond while appealing his conviction. He and his wife, Chelsey, gave \$1.8 million to a joint fundraising committee supporting Trump's campaign and \$750,000 to another pro-Trump super PAC. They previously had not been big donors; Milton gave \$1,500 to Trump's 2016 campaign and \$1,000 to his 2020 campaign. "No promises were given or discussed, ever, with anyone," Milton said when asked about the donations.

Trump issued the pardon to Milton in March of this year. “He called me personally to tell me,” Milton said on X in a selfie video viewed nearly 6 million times, in which he appears to be driving a car. “I am incredibly grateful to President Trump for his courage in standing up for what is right and for granting me this sacred pardon of innocence.”

Asked about the pardon that day by a reporter during a public appearance, Trump said Milton was recommended to him — and noted that he was a supporter. “And they say the thing that he did wrong was he was one of the first people that supported a gentleman named Donald Trump for president,” he said. “He supported Trump. He liked Trump.”

Supoto, the owner of a used-car dealership and two car washes, said he has recovered financially from losing the \$100,000 he invested in Nikola. But other investors said they were cheated of precious savings. “It was devastating,” said Preet Singh, 36, who works at a hospital in Pennsylvania and said he lost \$10,000. “What about the middle-class citizens who work hard for their money?”

Singh said he voted for Trump. “I think he made a mistake,” he said. “There needs to be more transparency on why Milton was pardoned.”

Asked about the pardon, Nikola investor Steve Bush pointed out that Milton was represented during the trial by Brad Bondi, the brother of Attorney General Pam Bondi. “I mean, come on,” said Bush, 51, who lives in New Jersey and works at a rock quarry. He said he lost more than \$50,000.

Milton said Brad Bondi did not work on his pardon. Brad Bondi did not respond to requests for comment from The Post about the criminal case and the pardon. Gates McGavick, a Justice Department spokesman, said the pardon “was made through proper channels and the Attorney General had no role in it.”

Supoto said he now stays away from the stock market. Milton recently began working as CEO of an Arizona-based aircraft manufacturer.

“He got to keep all his money and he got his pardon,” Supoto said. “I don’t think there was justice in that.”

Milton didn’t just avoid restitution. He gets to keep the 4,700-acre property in Utah that Supoto said is less than an hour from his home. Milton also got a refund: After Trump’s pardon, he successfully persuaded the court that he should be paid back a special assessment that the judge had ordered at his sentencing. Two weeks after the pardon, Milton got his \$300 back.

Clara Ence Morse contributed to this report.

What readers are saying

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