

POLITICAL MEMO

Trump Had Good Fortune So Far With His Four Cases. Then Came a Verdict.

Until the jury's decision on Thursday, the four criminal cases that threatened Donald Trump's freedom were stumbling along, pleasing his advisers.



By Maggie Haberman and Jonathan Swan

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Donald J. Trump's run of luck in his criminal cases has expired.

Before the conviction on Thursday in Manhattan, the former president had drawn what some of his closest advisers regarded as a defense lawyer's equivalent of an inside straight: something close to perfection. Mr. Trump had lost civil cases with costly damages, but the four criminal cases that threatened his freedom were stumbling along so badly that his advisers were often incredulous at his good fortune.

In the Florida case in which he was charged with obstruction of justice and unlawfully holding onto classified documents, a Trump-nominated judge had spent so much time puzzling over minor issues that the trial would almost certainly be delayed beyond the presidential election in November.

In the Georgia case, the prosecutor who had charged Mr. Trump as part of a conspiracy to overturn the 2020 election was caught in a romantic affair with the man she had hired to help her prosecute Mr. Trump.

And with the federal charges over his efforts to disrupt the peaceful transfer of power, the Supreme Court has significantly narrowed the chances of a trial before the election, having taken up the presidential immunity arguments put forth by Mr. Trump's lawyers.

His streak ended minutes after 5 p.m. on Thursday, as 12 jurors found Mr. Trump guilty on all 34 counts of falsifying business records to cover up a sex scandal that could have imperiled his 2016 presidential campaign.

As the verdict was announced by the jury foreman, there was almost no reaction from Mr. Trump's two rows of friends, family and aides. Mr. Trump sat slack and glum at the defense table. On the bench behind him, his son Eric shook his head from side to side. The courtroom was silent as the foreman repeatedly announced, "Guilty. Guilty."

When Mr. Trump got up to leave court, his face looked as if he'd been punched in the solar plexus. As he entered the aisle of the courtroom, he reached for Eric Trump's hand and they clasped their hands together. The former president left with an entourage that included his longtime friend, the real-estate investor Steve Witkoff. "He is my dear friend," Mr. Witkoff said later. "I stand with him."

Mr. Trump exited the courthouse in his motorcade, smiling out the window at his fans as he typically does. But days of predictions from his allies that the case would end in a hung jury or even in an acquittal did not come to pass.



Mr. Trump left the courthouse on Thursday in a motorcade. He will be sentenced on July 11, a few days before the start of the Republican National Convention. Adam Gray for The New York Times

Such an outcome seemed almost unthinkable to the Trump team as recently as last summer, according to several people with knowledge of the discussions.

Back then, the conventional wisdom among Mr. Trump's lawyers was that the Manhattan case would never see daylight. Mr. Trump's lawyers spent relatively little time thinking about it. Instead they focused on the cases they viewed as far more serious and perilous: in particular, the two federal cases brought by the special counsel Jack Smith.

The Trump team liked its chances in the Florida documents case, with a perceived friendly judge and a friendly jury pool, the people with knowledge of the discussions said. But the team was pessimistic about the Washington trial, in which Mr. Trump would face

charges of scheming to hold onto power through lies and intimidation. There, they met a judge, Tanya Chutkan, who seemed to them as hostile as the city's residents, who overwhelmingly vote Democratic and had a close-up perspective on the violence that was committed on the former president's behalf at the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. Mr. Trump's lawyers thought that the Washington trial would surely be held before the election, and they didn't like their chances.

Then, their delay tactics — and moves made by Mr. Smith's team — meant that the two federal cases were stalled. And the Manhattan trial was suddenly the first one on deck.

Some close to Mr. Trump noted an irony: Inside the Manhattan district attorney's office, the hush money case was nicknamed the "zombie case." It kept being killed off and then resurrected, according to Mark Pomerantz, who had worked in the office but resigned in early 2022 after the new district attorney, Alvin L. Bragg, declined to immediately proceed with prosecuting Mr. Trump. Mr. Bragg was skeptical of relying on the testimony of Michael D. Cohen, who had pleaded guilty to lying to Congress, and people close to Mr. Trump assumed that Mr. Bragg was being pressured into a prosecution that he never truly believed in.

But here the case was — back on the calendar, set for an April trial, just three months before the Republican National Convention. And the former president and New York native was forced to face a jury in a city that widely despises him. He will now be sentenced on July 11, just a few days before the start of the convention where he is set to be nominated for a third time.

In private conversations with his advisers in recent days and weeks, Mr. Trump, who was found liable by two civil juries in the last year and a half in Manhattan, had often seemed resigned to the notion that he would be convicted in this case. He has insisted privately that the verdict can play to his political advantage, just as the indictments energized and consolidated his support in the Republican primaries.

He has telegraphed for almost a year now his playbook for managing the fallout.

Mr. Trump and his allies on Capitol Hill and in conservative media assiduously prepared their audiences to be outraged, whatever the outcome. There was no need for talking points to be distributed. Everyone knew what to think and what to say. Minutes after the verdict, Mr. Trump's allies said roughly the same thing in simultaneous posts on social media: This was a threat to the U.S. system of justice.

His allies whom he endorsed were asked by his team to post on social media in support of him. And one of his top advisers warned on the X platform that a Republican candidate for Senate had "ended" his campaign after having urged people to respect the verdict.

Mr. Trump has asserted, relentlessly and without evidence, that the Manhattan charges are part of a sweeping conspiracy against him, orchestrated by President Biden and unnamed henchmen around him. His allies, chief among them his former strategist Stephen K. Bannon, have already called for congressional Republicans to issue subpoenas to anybody involved in any of the prosecutions of Mr. Trump.



Alvin Bragg, the Manhattan district attorney, had declined to immediately proceed with prosecuting Mr. Trump. Emil Salman for The New York Times

For over a year, Mr. Trump's political campaign and legal woes have been completely entwined.

Yet while his indictments empirically helped him in Republican primaries — boosting his standing in the polls and turbocharging his online fund-raising — it's less clear what effect a conviction might have for the broader electorate to whom Mr. Trump must appeal to win in November.

The public's views of Mr. Trump have long been remarkably stable. Mr. Trump currently holds a lead over Mr. Biden in five of the six closest swing states, according to the latest New York Times/Siena College polls of the states likely to decide the presidential election. Most swing-state voters said that they were not paying much attention to the trial, but Mr. Trump has an opening among undecided voters, who were about evenly divided on whether he could get a fair and impartial trial.

Working in Mr. Trump's favor is the fact that, of the four criminal cases Mr. Trump is facing, voters across the country consider the hush money charges to be the least serious. In a national poll taken a month into the trial, Quinnipiac University asked voters if Mr. Trump's conviction in the Manhattan hush money case would influence their vote. Just 6 percent of his supporters said that a conviction would make them less likely to vote for him. While the share is small nationally, such voters could be decisive in closely fought states.

"Voters have short memories and even shorter attention spans," Neil Newhouse, a Republican pollster, said. Just as the former president's two impeachments have faded from memory, he said, "a guilty verdict in the hush money trial may be overshadowed by the first presidential debate."

"There's nothing that has come out in this trial that has been a shocker or a surprise to throw this back into the court of public opinion," Mr. Newhouse added.

It's almost a certainty that the conviction will intensify what is already a burning Republican anger across the country. In a Fox News poll taken during the trial, the vast majority of Mr. Trump's supporters said that he was not being treated fairly by the legal system, and half said he had done nothing wrong regarding the payments.

"So many Republican voters — even those who were maybe lukewarm on Trump — have been angry in a way I've never seen our base — more angry than after the 2020 election, more angry than after any impeachment trial," Senator J.D. Vance, Republican of Ohio, said.

"There's a sense of personal resentment," added the senator, who is on a shortlist to be Mr. Trump's running mate. "Here is this symbol of American law and order — the courtroom — weaponized against the only candidate who ever gave a damn about them."

Nobody is working harder to stoke that MAGA fury than Mr. Trump.

On Wednesday, the day after the actor Robert De Niro joined Biden campaign staff for a news conference outside the Lower Manhattan courthouse, Mr. Trump regaled reporters about how Trump supporters had shouted down Mr. De Niro.

"He got MAGA'd. He got MAGA'd yesterday," Mr. Trump said in the hallway outside the courtroom. "He got a big dose of it."

Ruth Igielnik contributed reporting.

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