

# [***Manhattan DA Alvin Bragg to face his toughest trial yet as Trump criminal case begins***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BT7-DJG1-DY7V-G01K-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Byline:** By Gregory Krieg and Kara Scannell, CNN

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; A few weeks after being elected Manhattan's top prosecutor, [*Alvin Bragg*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/19/politics/alvin-bragg-manhattan-district-attorney-trump/index.html) sat in a Harlem cafe bullishly explaining how he planned to balance his reformist priorities for the borough with the infamously knotty task of confronting former President Donald Trump in court.

"I've done a lot of cases that are considered no-win," Bragg told CNN at the time, in December 2021. "I think going into most of those cases people were like, 'Ooh, you're gonna get a lot of heat however it comes out.' That's the job."

About 15 months later, on April 4, 2023, Bragg and his team of prosecutors stepped into that white-hot spotlight by [*indicting Trump*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/30/politics/donald-trump-indictment/index.html) on 34 felony charges of falsifying business records to cover up hush money payments delivered to quiet a sex scandal ahead of the 2016 president election. Bragg sat in in the courtroom as Trump was arraigned on the charges. After a little more than a year of legal wrangling, pundits' clashing over the strength of his case and a tabloid backlash to his progressive ***politics***, Trump's criminal trial - the first of its kind for a former American president - is [*set to begin on Monday*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/trump-hush-money-trial-04-15-24/index.html) in New York City.

Bragg is now facing up to what many of his peers and other outside observers would describe as the textbook definition of a "no-win" assignment. His decision to prosecute Trump came under immediate, searing scrutiny from all quarters. Democrats largely viewed him as brave, even if they worried over the political implications of the case, while Republicans immediately cast the 50-year-old Harlem native as a craven opportunist acting on what Ohio Rep. Jim Jordan described as "blatant political animus toward former President Trump."

Going there

Manhattan's first Black district attorney, Bragg carries an estimable legal resume but none of the blue-blood pedigree enjoyed by his two predecessors, Cy Vance Jr. and Robert Morgenthau, whose fathers served in presidential administrations. Morgenthau first won the job in 1974. Vance took over in 2010. Previous occupants Charles Seymour Whitman and Thomas Dewey went on to become governors of New York. Dewey twice won the GOP presidential nomination, though he fell memorably shy of the White House on both occasions.

Bragg, a Harvard-educated attorney, previously served in roles including assistant US attorney in the Southern District of New York; a top lawyer in the New York attorney general's office, as a civil rights lawyer; and as a professor and co-director of the New York Law School Racial Justice Project, where he represented family members of the late Eric Garner in a lawsuit against the city. Garner was killed in 2014 after a plainclothes police officer placed him in an unauthorized chokehold following a dispute over his allegedly hawking loose cigarettes.

Though Bragg's ambitions are widely considered to be less lofty than some of his predecessors, the Trump trial will likely write both his political future and legacy. The landmark case will take on added significance because of its timing - in the midst of a presidential campaign, first among four criminal cases, at the state and federal level, facing Trump, the presumptive Republican nominee.

The indictment stems from a $130,000 payment made by Trump's former personal attorney Michael Cohen - now the prosecution's star witness - to adult film star Stormy Daniels days before the 2016 election. In exchange, she agreed to keep quiet about her alleged affair with Trump.

Prosecutors allege Trump was involved in the coverup, involving falsified invoices, business records and checks to repay Cohen. The theory of the case is that Trump and his allies were motivated to stop Daniel's story from offending female voters and therefore they tried to influence the outcome of the 2016 presidential election.

The former president and his allies blitzed Bragg ahead of the charges, in some cases stoking fear about civil unrest to follow.

One of his lawyers, Alina Habba, warned of "mayhem" across the city following an indictment, telling CNN, "If there are (security) concerns, that's rightfully so." Though her prediction fell flat, Trump himself responded with a similarly dramatic take, warning in a late night social media post of "potential death & destruction" upon his being charged.

"I never thought anything like this could happen in America, never thought it could happen," Trump said in a more restrained statement about the indictment. "The only crime that I have committed is to fearlessly defend our nation from those who seek to destroy it."

Bragg's office faced a surge in threats after the indictment, forcing his security detail to bring in additional assistance from the New York police department. Twice last year, the district attorney's office received letters with white powder containing messages. One said, "Alvin: I'm going to kill you." The other letter included imagines of Bragg and Trump and the words "you will be sorry."

The former president, who has a habit of showing up to court even when his presence is not required, will be mandated to attend the trial and is expected to regularly address its developments. Despite multiple warnings from the presiding judge, Bragg, whom Trump has previously called a "degenerate psychopath" and "thug," is likely to be at the center of his animus.

For his part, Bragg, who is not speaking to reporters ahead of the trial, has projected confidence that the facts of the case, and not the characters involved, will vindicate his decision to bring it. He has attended every pre-trial hearing in the case in support of his team**.**

"At its core, this case today is one with allegations like so many of our white-collar cases," Bragg said last year when announcing the charges. "Someone lied again and again to protect their interests and evade the laws to which we are all held accountable."

A legacy in the balance

Bragg took office on the same day New York City Mayor Eric Adams was sworn-in, on January 1, 2022. He immediately set out to deliver on a pair of campaign promises: to aggressively pursue Trump's alleged misdeeds and put in place a new, more progressive model of law enforcement in the district attorney's office.

Neither went as planned.

Less than a week after coming on the job, Bragg released a memo outlining new charging, bail, plea and sentencing policies. His policies, he said, were rooted in his own experience - being held at gunpoint six times in his life, three of them by overzealous police officers. But his plan faced immediate blowback from police union leaders and right-wing media. After an election that Adams, a former NYPD officer, won largely on the strength of a tough-on-crime message, Bragg's list of crimes he would not prosecute - misdemeanors related to marijuana and resisting arrest, among them - landed with a thud.

"Safety is paramount. New Yorkers deserve to be safe from crime and safe from the dangers posed by mass incarceration," Bragg tweeted during the ensuing maelstrom. "We will be tough when we need to be, but we will not be seeking to destroy lives through unnecessary incarceration."

Though the furor surrounding the memo eventually died down - in part because Bragg walked back parts of it - the new DA's pledge to come down hard on Trump, who was being investigated on multiple fronts by his predecessor, was ramping up.

But that pledge faced an unexpected adversary. Two months into office, Bragg was confronted by two senior attorneys leading the Trump investigation. They wanted to move forward and seek charges from a grand jury investigating the accuracy of the Trump Organization's financial statements that were used to obtain loans. When Bragg refused to authorize them to seek an indictment they abruptly and noisily resigned, putting additional pressure on the new district attorney.

That April, Bragg told CNN, "Investigations are not linear, so we are following the leads in front of us. That's what we're doing."

Months later, after his lawyers won a conviction of two Trump Organization entities on a decade long tax fraud scheme, his prosecutors quietly honed their focus, moving away from the financial statements and to the hush money payments.

During his campaign for district attorney, Bragg repeatedly boasted, particularly during the Democratic primary, that he helped sue the Trump administration "more than a hundred times" in his previous capacity as the state's chief deputy attorney general.

Bragg also touted his leadership role in one of that office's highest-profile lawsuits, targeting the Donald J. Trump Foundation, which then-attorney general Barbara Underwood said had been "functioning as little more than a checkbook to serve Mr. Trump's business and political interests," with a "shocking pattern of illegality" that included illegal intermingling with Trump's 2016 presidential campaign.

Trump eventually paid $2 million of his own money to a group of charities, and the foundation was dissolved. The memories of that encounter, and Bragg's campaign rhetoric, though, has endured, with Trump's legal and public relations teams repeatedly arguing Bragg cannot be considered an impartial party.

In February, concerns about Trump's behavior before and during the trial, along with hundreds of threats to Bragg's office, led prosecutors to seek a gag order against the former president, whose words they argued would "pose a significant and imminent threat to the orderly administration of this criminal proceeding." Bragg is not covered by the order, but his staff of prosecutors are.

Judge Juan Merchan largely accepted the request, hoping to put the brakes on Trump's "inflammatory" language. But only days after an expanded order was issued, Trump lashed out again - this time aiming his ire at Cohen and Daniels, who is also expected to testify.

The pair, he said on his Truth Social site, are "sleaze bags who have, with their lies and misrepresentations, cost our Country dearly!"

By Gregory Krieg and Kara Scannell, CNN

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