

# [***How Vince McMahon built an empire on fakery and taught Donald Trump to control a crowd***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BB1-VB41-DY7V-G02T-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

New York (CNN) &#8212; Netflix recently bet $5 billion on the idea that pro wrestling is due for a renaissance.

It's not hard to see why. Wrestling has all the drama of reality TV, but on steroids. It's oozing with Millennial nostalgia. And it's the kind of entertainment in which the central conceit, known as "kayfabe," has never been more relevant.

Put simply: The wrestling you associate with names like Hulk Hogan is scripted. But the people in it are committed to playing it out as real life, inside the ring and out. That's kayfabe, and it's a lens we can apply to a distressingly vast array of experiences in our extremely online lives, when the line between spectacle and substance is increasingly porous. (See also: most social media, AI deepfakes, national ***politics*** generally.)

The potential liability for Netflix, though, lies with World Wrestling Entertainment's longtime puppet master and promoter, Vince McMahon.

McMahon, who is 78, resigned last month as executive chairman of TKO, pro wrestling's parent company, after being [*sued by a former employee*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/25/business/vince-mcmahon-accused-trafficking-lawsuit/index.html) who says she was sexually abused and trafficked by McMahon to other men at WWE, McMahon's family-run empire, where he was the longtime chairman and chief executive. Beyond that lawsuit, according to [*the Wall Street Journal*](https://www.wsj.com/business/federal-prosecutors-investigate-vince-mcmahon-sex-trafficking-allegations-460a6822), McMahon is also under federal investigation for alleged sexual assault and sex trafficking.

McMahon has denied the allegations.

A Netflix spokesperson didn't respond to a request for comment.

While McMahon has officially stepped out of the ring, his name won't be easily excised from the world of wrestling he built over four decades, according to Abraham Josephine Riesman, author of the 2023 [*unauthorized biography*](https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Ringmaster/Abraham-Josephine-Riesman/9781982169442) of McMahon.

In her 2023 book, "Ringmaster: Vince McMahon and the Unmaking of America," Riesman pulls back the curtain on the world of pro wrestling that launched the careers of such figures as Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, "Stone Cold" Steve Austin and, to an extent, former President Donald Trump.

I talked to Riesman late last month, as news of McMahon's resignation was breaking, about McMahon's rise and fall, the evolution of kayfabe and what a post-McMahon future looks like for the wrestling world.

The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**CNN:** Vince McMahon has been a powerful force in American culture over the last 40 years, but I think that's hard to convey to non-wrestling fans. How would you sum up McMahon's legacy?

**Riesman:** For about 40 years, Vince McMahon was the central actor and gravitational point for the American and Canadian professional wrestling industry. Now, professional wrestling seems like a sideshow to the American story, or at least, slightly ridiculous, and therefore not worthy of serious consideration.

But pro wrestling is beloved by the populace. And Vince McMahon managed to build a bridge between professional wrestling and the corporate and political worlds of America - that was the big innovation that he brings to the story of wrestling.

Vince managed to have it both ways - at once being incredibly successful and respected while also making a product that was regarded as so silly that nobody really took much of an interest in the abuses that it was meting out on the people within it.

(Note: McMahon has faced multiple allegations of sexual misconduct over the years. He remains under [*federal investigation*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/03/investing/vince-mcmahon-search-warrant/index.html), and he has not commented publicly on millions of dollars in hush-money payments [*he reportedly made*](https://www.wsj.com/articles/wwes-vince-mcmahon-agreed-to-pay-12-million-in-hush-money-to-four-women-11657289742?mod=article_inline) to several women at WWE. In 2022, McMahon said that he [*promised to cooperate with the investigation*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/08/media/vince-mcmahon-wwe-money/index.html).)

**CNN:** Your book makes the case that the wrestling world built by McMahon kind of planted the seeds for Donald Trump's political rise. Can you explain a bit how those two are connected?

**Riesman:** Donald Trump has been watching McMahon family wrestling since he was a child in the 1950s. Vince's father and grandfather produced the wrestling that little Donny Trump grew up in Queens adoring, it was his favorite thing.

Trump has done a lot of shows with Vince, and he learned a great deal from that. If you go watch his early pro wrestling appearances, he takes to it like a natural. Trump really absorbed not only the delivery, but a lot of the reality-bending as well.

And Vince, since the mid 1980s, has been an active player, and eventually an enormously significant player, in Republican ***politics*** in the United States. He and his wife, Linda, pursued deregulation in wrestling, and that pursuit put them in contact with politicians in a big way.

Eventually, in the new millennium, once they really have some money after taking the company public, Vince and Linda become major political donors.

By the time the 2010s rolled around, and then the Trump campaign rolls around, you had this candidate who gets a lot of money from [WWE] fans. By then, Vince and Linda were already very close with Trump.

**CNN:** I'm hardly the first person to make this connection, but would you consider Trump's style a kind of political kayfabe?

**Riesman:** It's not just political kayfabe. There's kayfabe, and then there's what Vince really pioneered, which is neokayfabe, a term I made up.

After Vince made it a part of public record that wrestling was fake, that led to sort of the end of the illusion that wrestling was a legitimate, unplanned competition in the sporting realm.

Neokayfabe is when you operate not on the assumption of telling the audience, "Hey, everything you're about to see is real." You start by giving them the assumption, "Hey, everything you're about to see is fake - except the parts that you think are real."

It's Trumpism. You're left to kind of choose your own reality. So whether you are just taking it in and not trying to sort out what's real, or whether you're obsessively trying to sort it into true and false, you're paying attention, and that's all that matters.

**CNN:** I confess that I was never much of a wrestling fan, partly because the overt performance of masculinity didn't really appeal to me. With the allegations against McMahon, it feels like we're seeing how that kind of violent energy played out within the WWE itself, beyond the ring?

**Riesman:** Oh, of course. Vince would be the first to tell you that he ruled his company like a dictator. Maybe a Roman consul along with Linda at times, but Linda was never the dictator in creative, which is the product itself. Vince always had the last word there, often to the detriment of everyone beneath him.

Wrestling has really been an extension of Vince McMahon's psyche. There are plenty of elements that predate him, but the emphasis on blatant misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, racism, all of that stuff, reads like this is one person working out his issues. That became especially true when Vince made himself the central character in WWF/WWE when he became "Mr. McMahon" and had, at various times, every storyline orbiting around him. Now, was the character entirely reflective of who he was? That's a separate question. But he was still the one performing that character and driving that character. And it was massively consequential.

**CNN:** One of the things I don't fully understand about all this is how McMahon stepped down once, and TKO even acknowledged that his alleged behavior was [*a financial liability*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/29/media/vince-mcmahon-wwe-risk/index.html), but they let him come back anyway.

**Riesman:** I don't think they really knew what they were getting into. The corporate suits at Endeavor (which merged with WWE to form TKO) have not dealt with the depths of depravity that exist in wrestling.

My guess is they went into this thinking they had a standard-issue alleged predator problem. And then they found out they had a wrestling-level alleged predator problem. Wrestling is a very weird, idiosyncratic space that Vince has done his best to dress up as just another corporate media or athletics entity.

**CNN:** It feels almost like an anachronism in 2024. But Netflix is betting on a renaissance for the art form. Are you optimistic about that?

**Riesman:** There's a real chance at some kind of renaissance. But the industry is about to face some serious scrutiny in lawsuits and from the federal government. The Vince McMahon story is not over. There are going to be a lot of challenges to come. And I genuinely don't know what the future of TKO/WWE looks like.

**CNN:** A lot has happened in the relatively short time since your book came out last year. Are you updating it?

**Riesman:** An expanded paperback with an afterword coming out on April 16. It will still be a little out of date because this is just such a rolling train wreck - but trust me there's an update.

**CNN:** Final question: Who is your favorite wrestler?

**Riesman:** The Hebrew Champion, Sammy Stein - he wrestled in the '30s.

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