

Paul Weiss Loses Another Prominent Lawyer in Wake of Trump Deal

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Paul Weiss, the elite law firm that was the first to strike a deal with the Trump administration to deflect a punishing executive order, is losing one of its most prominent new hires — the former U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York.

Damian Williams, who joined Paul Weiss Rifkind Wharton & Garrison in January, shortly after stepping down as one of the nation's top federal prosecutors, is taking a job with Jenner & Block. The move, the latest in a string of high-profile departures, was announced on Friday by Jenner & Block, where Mr. Williams will serve as a co-head of the law firm's litigation and white-collar practices.

Unlike Paul Weiss, Jenner & Block chose to challenge an executive order aimed at punishing the firm for employing an attorney who had investigated Mr. Trump. Last month, a federal judge struck down that order, calling it “doubly violative of the Constitution.”

As U.S. attorney in Manhattan, Mr. Williams, 44, and his team secured a number of high-profile convictions, including in the fraud case against Sam Bankman-Fried, the former FTX cryptocurrency exchange founder. His office also was successful in convicting former Senator Robert Menendez of New Jersey on public corruption charges.

Before President Joseph R. Biden tapped Mr. Williams to serve as U.S. attorney in 2021, he had led the office's securities and commodities task force. He also had served as a law clerk to the former U.S. Supreme Court justice John Paul Stevens, a jurist with a liberal reputation.

"Jenner & Block fearlessly advocates for its clients and provides outstanding strategic counsel through their most difficult challenges," Mr. Williams said in a statement. "I've seen firsthand how this firm expertly tackles the toughest cases and lives its values."

The legal community has been split on how to respond to Mr. Trump's executive orders, as he has sought to punish his perceived enemies by keeping them from conducting business before the federal government. Jenner had once employed Andrew Weissmann, a longtime deputy to Robert S. Mueller III, who investigated Mr. Trump in his first term over possible links to Russia.

Jenner and three other firms chose to fight the president, as opposed to reaching a deal, and all four firms have prevailed with federal judges, who struck down the president's orders.

Paul Weiss was the first of nine big law firms to make a deal with Mr. Trump, and it has been widely criticized for rushing to do so. The firm agreed to provide \$40 million in free legal work to causes supported by Mr. Trump, in what became a template for the other settlements.

Brad Karp, the chair of Paul Weiss, who negotiated the deal with the White House, said the firm had no choice but to settle or risk losing clients and attorneys.

But critics in the legal profession, on Capitol Hill and at law schools have accused Paul Weiss and the other firms of capitulating and selling out their principles to Mr. Trump. A little over a month ago, lawyers in New York rallied outside the federal courthouse in Lower Manhattan to support the firms that stood up to the Trump administration. Many people carried signs attacking Paul Weiss and the other firms that settled.

In the aftermath of its settlement, a number of attorneys have defected from Paul Weiss. Not long after the firm reached its deal in mid-March, Jeh Johnson, a former secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, and Steven Banks, the leader of the firm's pro bono practice, departed the firm. And just two weeks ago, four top litigators, including Karen Dunn, a prominent Democratic lawyer, left to open their own firm.

Ms. Dunn's exit raised eyebrows because she was a member of a small group of top lawyers at the firm who helped gather support for the decision, people briefed on the matter said at the time.

Both Ms. Dunn and Mr. Williams are seen as important figures in Democratic national politics. Ms. Dunn oversaw debate preparation for former Vice President Kamala Harris and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during their presidential campaigns. Mr. Williams is seen as a potential attorney general in a future Democratic administration, given his success as a top federal prosecutor.

Paul Weiss, under Mr. Karp's leadership, has been active in Democratic politics and is often a top fund-raiser for national Democratic candidates.

In joining Paul Weiss this year, Mr. Williams was returning to the law firm he had worked for as young lawyer.

He has degrees from Harvard, Cambridge University and Yale Law School, and he was the first Black person to lead the federal prosecutor's office in Manhattan, a position that is considered one of the premier posts in the Justice Department. Mr. Williams clerked for Judge Merrick B. Garland, who later became attorney general under Mr. Biden, and for Justice Stevens.

“Damian is an outstanding lawyer with a depth of experience that will help our clients navigate their most pressing and complex challenges,” said Thomas J. Perrelli, Jenner & Block’s chairman.

A Paul Weiss spokeswoman said the firm wished him well.

One of Mr. Williams’s last big cases as U.S. attorney was a public corruption indictment he brought against Mayor Eric Adams of New York. But the Trump administration dismissed the lawsuit, claiming the indictment was driven by political considerations.

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