# Scott Pelley's Wake Forest speech sparks conservative uproar amid CBS legal and leadership turmoil



Scott Pelley's recent commencement address at Wake Forest University has ignited a significant backlash among conservative circles, particularly within the context of CBS News's ongoing troubles. The veteran anchor's impassioned remarks, which targeted former President Donald Trump and the climate of fear he perceives in the nation, were marked by rhetorical flourishes that did not sit well with many viewers. Critics, especially from the MAGA base, characterised Pelley's delivery as overly dramatic and hypocritical, given ongoing allegations of media manipulation.

The furor surrounding Pelley's speech comes at a time when CBS is entangled in a considerable legal battle. Trump has filed a staggering $20 billion lawsuit against CBS's parent company, Paramount Global, accusing them of deceptively editing a ‘60 Minutes’ interview with Vice President Kamala Harris during the run-up to the 2024 election. The criticism hinges on an edition in which Harris's response to the Israel-Hamas conflict was partially omitted from the television broadcast but appeared in a YouTube clip. Trump asserts this manipulation was intended to mislead the public by aiding his electoral opponent, an accusation CBS has strongly rebutted, defending the integrity of its editing practices.

The ramifications of this lawsuit extend beyond the courtroom. Paramount is currently negotiating a merger with Skydance Media, a deal estimated at $8 billion, which has been placed under scrutiny by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The investigation has raised eyebrows not just for its implications regarding media freedom but also because the FCC is headed by Chairman Brendan Carr, a Trump appointee. The merger's approval is now intertwined with these legal complications, creating a precarious situation for Paramount, especially as it grapples with internal dissent over editorial accountability.

This backdrop is further complicated by the high-profile exit of CBS News CEO Wendy McMahon, who resigned amid tensions surrounding the proposed settlement of Trump’s lawsuit. Her departure, alongside that of '60 Minutes' executive producer Bill Owens, signals a broader discontent within CBS regarding perceived external pressures on journalistic integrity. In fact, reports suggest that McMahon and Owens were opposed to settling the lawsuit, fearing it could undermine CBS's editorial independence and credibility.

In his commencement address, Pelley condemned what he described as an assault on foundational democratic principles, warning of a pervasive ‘insidious fear’ taking hold across various facets of American life. He articulated concerns that journalism, academic institutions, and free speech are being corroded, lamenting the redefinition of critical concepts like diversity and inclusion into derogatory terms. Unfortunately for Pelley, his dramatic exposition only served to fuel criticism, with many accusing him of partisanship and hypocrisy, particularly given CBS's handling of the Harris interview.

Social media backlash was swift, with a flood of derogatory comments directed at Pelley, labelling him as a "self-important propagandist." Some commentators pointed to the apparent contradiction between Pelley's advocacy for journalistic integrity and CBS's controversial editorial choices during the election period. This sentiment reflects a growing frustration among conservative commentators, who are eager to highlight perceived liberal biases within mainstream media.

The broader implications of Pelley's speech and CBS's legal challenges cannot be overstated. As Paramount seeks to navigate fiscal challenges and mergers, it increasingly faces accusations of political bias that could jeopardise its credibility. The ongoing scrutiny from both public figures and federal regulators might compel CBS to critically reassess its editorial direction and independence moving forward, especially under the looming threat of Trump's legal claims and the potential ramifications for its corporate future.

As the media landscape continues to evolve, the incident underscores the pressing need for journalistic institutions to balance internal and external pressures in pursuit of objectivity and integrity. The situation serves as a cautionary tale for news organisations attempting to navigate politically charged environments while upholding their trustworthiness in the eyes of the public.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14754167/Scott-Pelley-CBS-commencement-speech-Trump-Paramount-Skydance-merger.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.apnews.com/article/1af2ae7fabcb259e3e6dc1c20cabe00b)
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* Paragraph 7 – [[6]](https://www.ft.com/content/2dd9e700-b240-41dc-812d-e975abd8ec66), [[7]](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-sues-cbs-news-60-minutes-interview/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14754167/Scott-Pelley-CBS-commencement-speech-Trump-Paramount-Skydance-merger.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.apnews.com/article/1af2ae7fabcb259e3e6dc1c20cabe00b> - CBS News CEO Wendy McMahon resigned amid controversy over a potential settlement between CBS's parent company, Paramount Global, and former President Donald Trump. Trump sued CBS, alleging biased editing of a '60 Minutes' interview with Kamala Harris. McMahon and '60 Minutes' executive producer Bill Owens opposed the settlement. Additionally, Paramount's controlling shareholder, Shari Redstone, criticized some network coverage, prompting increased oversight of '60 Minutes' and contributing to internal dissatisfaction. Paramount Global is also in merger talks with Skydance Media. Following McMahon's departure, CBS News president Tom Cibrowski and CBS Stations president Jennifer Mitchell will report directly to Paramount co-CEO George Cheeks. McMahon cited disagreements with the company's direction and recent challenges. Meanwhile, CBS faces ratings struggles and internal frustrations with new editorial supervision. The Trump administration has engaged in broader conflicts with the media, including lawsuits and attempts to defund public broadcasting. A similar Trump lawsuit against ABC News was previously settled by Disney for $15 million.
3. <https://www.tvtechnology.com/news/former-fcc-chairs-accuse-fcc-of-acting-as-the-white-houses-personal-censor> - Former FCC chairs and commissioners, representing both Republican and Democratic backgrounds, have strongly criticized the FCC's investigation into CBS News for alleged 'news distortion' in a '60 Minutes' interview with then-Vice President Kamala Harris. In a filing by Protect Democracy, they accuse the FCC of acting as a censorship tool for the White House under President Donald Trump, threatening broadcasters over content unfavorable to the administration. They argue that the FCC is abandoning its role as an independent agency dedicated to protecting free speech and the First Amendment. This follows complaints by the conservative group Center for American Rights (CAR) and Trump's lawsuit against CBS' parent company, Paramount Global. The former FCC officials urge the commission to cease its investigation and reaffirm its commitment to independence, warning that its current actions could stifle free press and speech.
4. <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/senators-question-paramounts-redstone-over-60-minutes-settlement-attempts-with-2025-05-20/> - On May 20, 2025, a group of U.S. senators, including Elizabeth Warren, Bernie Sanders, and Ron Wyden, sent a letter to Shari Redstone, chair of Paramount Global, questioning the company's efforts to settle a $20 billion lawsuit filed by President Donald Trump. The lawsuit targets CBS News over its editing of an October 2024 '60 Minutes' interview with Kamala Harris, then a Democratic presidential candidate. The senators are concerned the settlement attempts could violate federal anti-bribery laws. The case poses a significant hurdle to the proposed $8.4 billion merger between Paramount and Skydance Media, which awaits approval from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Paramount, which began mediation in April, maintains that the lawsuit is unrelated to the merger or the FCC’s approval process. Meanwhile, top CBS News executives, including President Wendy McMahon and '60 Minutes' producer Bill Owens, have stepped down amid concerns about editorial independence. The senators allege Paramount may be influencing CBS content to avoid conflict with the Trump administration. Both Paramount and Redstone have declined to comment on the letter.
5. <https://www.apnews.com/article/4c7729507684fa516391a7022d27586b> - Bill Owens, the executive producer of CBS’s '60 Minutes' since 2019, has resigned amid escalating tensions with President Donald Trump and CBS leadership. In a note to staff, Owens stated he could no longer operate the program independently and make editorial decisions based solely on journalistic principles. The resignation follows a $20 billion lawsuit filed by Trump last fall, accusing '60 Minutes' of deceptive editing in its interview with Kamala Harris. CBS denied the allegations and released the full transcript. Since taking office for a second term, Trump’s administration has targeted various media outlets, with the FCC investigating CBS and other networks. The situation is complicated by CBS parent Paramount Global’s ongoing merger talks with Skydance Media and efforts to settle the lawsuit with Trump, which Owens and others opposed. Throughout the turmoil, '60 Minutes' has aired critical reports about the administration, triggering public backlash from Trump. Owens, a 37-year CBS veteran, emphasized his commitment to journalistic integrity in his farewell memo, and his successor is expected to be chosen from within the '60 Minutes' team. CBS News executive Wendy McMahon praised Owens for his dedication to truth and impactful journalism.
6. <https://www.ft.com/content/2dd9e700-b240-41dc-812d-e975abd8ec66> - Paramount is contemplating a settlement in Donald Trump's $20 billion defamation lawsuit against CBS News. The suit alleges that CBS's 60 Minutes program deceptively edited an interview with Trump's political opponent, Kamala Harris. Although CBS denies the allegations, Paramount's board discussed a possible multimillion-dollar settlement in an April 18 meeting, and mediation is underway. Shari Redstone, Paramount's owner, has expressed concern over CBS's editorial balance, particularly concerning coverage of the Israel-Hamas conflict, and has shown support for a settlement. Redstone and her family stand to gain financially if the Trump administration approves a pending merger between Paramount and Skydance. CBS journalists and media analysts have criticized the potential settlement as a threat to journalistic independence, citing Redstone's perceived interference. The controversy led 60 Minutes producer Bill Owens to resign, and anchor Scott Pelley publicly rebuked the growing influence over editorial content. Critics argue that yielding to Trump's lawsuit could undermine CBS's trusted news brand. Trump's criticism of CBS continues, while media commentators warn that the case may signal increased presidential influence over press freedom in major newsrooms.
7. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-sues-cbs-news-60-minutes-interview/> - Former President Donald Trump has sued CBS News, alleging the network's 'deceitful' editing of a recent 60 Minutes interview with Vice President Kamala Harris misled the public and unfairly disadvantaged him. In a statement released Thursday, CBS News called the former president's claims 'completely without merit' and said the network intended to vigorously defend against the lawsuit. The lawsuit, which comes just days before the two candidates face off in the 2024 presidential election, centers on two clips of an October interview 60 Minutes conducted with Harris. One of the clips was edited to include a longer section of her response to a question about the conflict in the Middle East. Trump's lawsuit contends this editing decision was meant to intentionally assist his opponent and mislead the public, something CBS News has disputed. 'To paper over Kamala's 'word salad' weakness, CBS used its national platform on 60 Minutes to cross the line from the exercise of judgment in reporting to deceitful, deceptive manipulation of news,' the lawsuit claims. The suit says the former president seeks a jury trial and at least $10 billion in damages. 'Former President Trump's repeated claims against 60 Minutes are false,' the network statement says. 'The Interview was not doctored.' Trump's legal complaint was filed Thursday in federal court in the Northern District of Texas Amarillo division, a remote venue where the lone judge is a 2019 Trump appointee. Republican-led states and special interest groups have directed at least 14 politically sensitive cases to that court since January 2021, according to progressive watchdog group Accountable.US. The lawsuit does not claim Trump was defamed by the network, said Geoffrey R. Stone, a First Amendment scholar and law professor at the University of Chicago, who reviewed the complaint. Instead, the suit attempts a novel use of a Texas statute that is meant to prevent advertisers from misleading the public about a product being sold — the Texas Deceptive Trade Practices Consumer Protection Act. Stone called it a 'misapplication' of the law. 'That statute is about sales — a salesperson can be held liable for stating that a product has certain positive effects when he knows it doesn't,' Stone said. 'But CBS is not engaged in advertising here.' Harvard Law Professor Noah Feldman, a constitutional law expert, said he was mystified by the Trump claims and called the case an 'outrageous violation of First Amendment principles.' 'This is a complaint so ill grounded that it comes close to being sanctionable as frivolous,' Feldman said. The former president has for weeks been voicing his displeasure about the interview on the campaign trail. 'Millions of Americans, including residents of Texas and this District, were confused and misled by the two doctored Interview versions,' the suit alleges. In an earlier statement released by 60 Minutes, the network explained the two clips were edited differently because one segment, which appeared on 'Face the Nation,' afforded more time to accommodate a longer section of Harris's answer. 'Same question. Same answer. But a different portion of the response,' the Oct. 20 statement from 60 Minutes said. 'When we edit any interview, whether a politician, an athlete, or movie star, we strive to be clear, accurate and on point. The portion of her answer on 60 Minutes was more succinct, which allows time for other subjects in a wide ranging 21-minute-long segment.' Trump had been invited to sit for his own interview on 60 Minutes but declined. The former president has previously filed several lawsuits against media organizations, including a March defamation case against ABC News over a question asked by anchor George Stephanopoulos during an interview. He has lost prior defamation lawsuits against CNN, The Washington Post and The New York Times.