

# The Trump-Loving Lawyer Who Won't Stop Suing Fox News

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When a discrimination suit is filed against Fox, chances are Douglas Wigdor's behind it.



Douglas Wigdor.

Photographer: Brad Ogbonna for Bloomberg Businessweek

Felix Gillette

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Douglas Wigdor raced out of his law offices near Union Square in Manhattan, jumped on a bike, and, still wearing his navy suit and purple tie, pedaled furiously toward a BBC TV studio downtown. It was a mild evening in mid-September, and once again the news bookers had beckoned him to weigh in on the ongoing drama surrounding Rupert Murdoch's [21st Century Fox Inc.](#) Wigdor was eager to oblige.

As Wigdor settled in on-set, an anchor in London caught viewers up on the latest development. That morning, 21st Century Fox had been dealt a serious setback in its \$15.5 billion bid to take over Sky, the European pay-TV giant. Karen Bradley, the U.K.'s culture secretary, [had just revealed](#) that she'd be referring the deal to regulators for more scrutiny—in part over concerns raised by Wigdor and others about whether the company would comply with British broadcasting standards.

The BBC anchor turned to Wigdor, who said a new probe would be a step in the right direction. He represented more than 20 current and former 21st Century Fox employees, he explained, in lawsuits involving claims of sexual

harassment, retaliation, and racial discrimination. And there was still more to uncover, he said. Past settlement agreements had prevented many potential witnesses from speaking out. The government ought to [lift the gag orders](#) and hear every voice. “I refer to 21st Century Fox as 19th Century Fox,” Wigdor said.

A few days later, back in his office, he admits he flubbed the punchline—in past interviews, he’d placed Fox in the 18th century. In his defense, it had been a crazy day. The same morning news broke about the Sky deal, Wigdor had [filed a defamation suit](#) in Manhattan federal court on behalf of Charles Oakley, the erstwhile NBA power forward, who’d been forcibly removed from Madison Square Garden during a Knicks game earlier this year. Afterward, James Dolan, the team’s owner, suggested on ESPN Radio that Oakley has a drinking problem. In the suit, Oakley claimed he hadn’t been intoxicated that night and alleged that Dolan had a history of haphazardly accusing his critics of alcoholism. Dolan’s legal team called the lawsuit “frivolous,” but the sports mediascape went nuts, discussing Wigdor and Oakley’s assertions endlessly.

Wigdor, 49, grew up in Port Jefferson, N.Y., on the North Shore of Long Island. He’s a sporty guy—he spent a couple of summer breaks from college in the early 1990s giving tennis lessons in Washington, D.C. Alan Greenspan and Andrea Mitchell were clients: A photograph of the former Fed chairman in snug tennis attire hangs in a revered spot in Wigdor’s office.

The Knicks have always been the lawyer’s favorite basketball team, but he didn’t hold back in crafting Oakley’s complaint. Among other jabs, he called them the laughingstock of the NBA. “I’m a die-hard Knicks fan,” he says. “Hopefully, they won’t ban *me* from Madison Square Garden.” Then he shrugs. The Knicks have been bad for eons.

Wigdor’s fortunes, by contrast, are on the rise. In the summer of 2016, when Roger Ailes, the founder of Fox News, was ousted from his longtime perch atop the network, he left behind what critics characterize as a Superfund site of toxic workplace behavior. Wigdor now spends his days dredging actionable claims from the sedimentary layers of allegation. It’s potentially a lucrative business. In a regulatory filing in August, 21st Century Fox [revealed](#) that in the previous year it had incurred costs of \$50 million settling such claims.

Wigdor isn’t yet as well known as, say, the late Johnnie Cochran or the ubiquitous Gloria Allred, but his multifront legal assault on Fox News has quickly elevated him to the top tier of telegenic anti-discrimination lawyers. He’s something of an anomaly, though, among New York plaintiffs’ attorneys—a white, male, Republican Trump supporter, a species about as common in his habitat as feral elephants in Central Park.

Even so, Wigdor’s practice is thriving. In part, this is because of his [Allredian knack](#) for generating frenzied press coverage on behalf of clients and for striking aggressively at the jowl-sheltered jugular of white corporate America. “When we write our complaints, there’s an effort on our part to make it as colorful as possible,” Wigdor says. “We’re writing in a way that puts the company on its heels. Because we know that these companies have multimillion [dollar] marketing resources. Now we’re suing this company and trying to change the public perception.”

Not long ago, in the early 2000s, Wigdor was toiling away in the obscurity of Big Law, handling labor and employment cases for Morgan, Lewis & Bockius LLP on behalf of large corporations. He had two young children at home but found himself growing restless as he approached middle age. To the initial dismay of his parents, he decided to strike out on his own. In 2003, along with like-minded colleagues Kenneth Thompson and Scott Gilly, he formed the firm that’s now known as [Wigdor Law](#).

The partners picked up one of their first clients on their way out the door at Morgan, Lewis, & Bockius, when Wigdor ran into a secretary named Sharon Simmons-Thomas on the elevator. She was visibly upset. On a recent Christmas shopping trip to [Macy’s](#) flagship store in Manhattan, plainclothes security guards had accused her of shoplifting. She’d produced receipts for her items, but the guards nevertheless marched her to a holding facility and handcuffed her to a bench. Like her, everyone in the makeshift jail was black, she said.

That May, Wigdor and his partners filed a race-discrimination suit against Macy’s Inc. in federal court in Manhattan,

alleging that the retailer was unfairly targeting minority shoppers. The company released a statement saying it “doesn’t profile or discriminate against any minority group or individual.” But the “shop and frisk” suit generated a wave of bad publicity for the chain. Macy’s eventually settled the case.



Wigdor (left) with Sharon Simmons-Thomas and lawyer Kenneth Thompson (right) at a news conference outside Macy’s Herald Square in New York City.

Photographer: Pat Carroll/NY Daily News Archive/Getty Images

Other headline-generating suits followed. That first year, Wigdor also represented Patrick Brady, a young man with cerebral palsy who alleged that he’d been demoted from his job at a Walmart pharmacy in Centereach, N.Y., because of his disability and assigned instead to menial tasks such as retrieving shopping carts from the parking lot. The case went to trial, and in February 2005 a federal jury sided with Brady, ordering Wal-Mart Stores Inc. to pay \$7.5 million in damages. Following the verdict, prospective clients poured into Wigdor’s office, alleging workplace malfeasance in a cross section of New York industries: banking, advertising, design, retail, and, notably, media.

In 2009, Wigdor ran up against a Murdoch-owned news operation for the first time. His client was Sandra Guzman, a former *New York Post* editor who is of black and Puerto Rican descent. Guzman filed a discrimination suit against the tabloid, alleging she’d been terminated after complaining about an editorial cartoon depicting police officers shooting to death a chimpanzee and uttering a wisecrack that some believed alluded to President Obama. The complaint was jam-packed with unflattering anecdotes, portraying the *Post*’s offices as a kind of racist, drunken zoo. A lawyer for the newspaper at the time called the suit without merit; it was later settled under confidential terms.

“He might be a Cowboys fan. All right. It’s not necessarily relevant to my case”

In July 2011, Wigdor and his partners filed another lawsuit against the *Post*. Their client, Nafissatou Diallo, a maid at the Sofitel hotel in Manhattan, had recently [alleged](#) that she’d been sexually assaulted on the job by Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the former head of the International Monetary Fund. Not long after her claims went public, the *Post*

published a series of articles describing Diallo as a prostitute who “routinely traded sex for money with male guests.” She sued for libel, saying the paper had concocted false accusations against her “in an apparent desperate attempt to bolster its rapidly plunging sales.” A spokesperson said the *Post* stood by its reporting, but eventually the paper settled that case, too, for an undisclosed amount.

At the time, Kenneth Thompson was the frontman for many of the firm’s highest-profile cases. (Gilly, who departed the firm in 2011, didn’t respond to a request for an interview.) A liberal Democrat, Thompson had long harbored political ambitions, and in 2013, with Wigdor’s support, he ran for Brooklyn District Attorney. He defeated his incumbent opponent, becoming the borough’s first black DA. He held the job for nearly three years until he died, at age 50, from cancer.

When his friend won the race, Wigdor was overjoyed, but suddenly he was left to command the spotlight for his clients—alone, without the advantage of a black partner who’d become one of the city’s most recognizable civil rights advocates. He went on to prove more than willing to draw attention to himself, sometimes by larding his complaints with racially inflammatory rhetoric. In the past year, his filings and public statements have accused companies of “conduct reminiscent of the Jim Crow era,” practicing “plantation-style management,” and perpetuating “a segregationist culture.”

“My clients like that,” Wigdor says. “They’ve used those words and phrases in interviews. They think it’s appropriate.”



Wigdor and Thompson in court during the *Strauss-Kahn v. Diallo* trial in 2012.

Photographer: Stan Honda-Pool/Getty Images

In July 2016, Gretchen Carlson, a longtime Fox News personality, filed a [sexual harassment suit](#) against Ailes. At the time, his lawyers denied the allegations. But then more female employees came forward with stories of harassment. 21st Century Fox parted ways with the embattled news executive, who walked away with a \$40 million

severance package. (Ailes died earlier this year.)

Wigdor wasn't representing Carlson, but amid the ensuing litigation, Fox employees started finding their way to him. In December he filed a discrimination suit in federal court in Manhattan on behalf of Lidia Curanaj, a former reporter for WNYW, a local station owned by 21st Century Fox. In the complaint, Curanaj accused 21st Century Fox of fostering a "misogynistic culture" and alleged that Fox News had passed her over for a job because she'd rejected Ailes's sexual overtures during a one-on-one job interview and again afterward. A spokesperson for Fox said at the time the claims were without merit. The suit is ongoing.

On March 28, Wigdor filed another suit against 21st Century Fox, this time on behalf of Tichaona Brown and Tabrese Wright, two black women who'd worked in the payroll department at Fox News. The complaint alleged that they'd been racially harassed and discriminated against by their white supervisor, comptroller Judith Slater, and that Fox had done nothing about it for years. A third black employee from the department, Monica Douglas, soon joined the suit.

The complaint alleged that Slater, a 17-year veteran of the network, had called day laborers "cheap Mexicans," argued that the Black Lives Matter movement was racist, mocked African American employees by using stereotypical slang, and suggested that all black men physically abused women. Douglas claimed that on at least two occasions Slater had kicked her in the buttocks as she walked down the hall.

According to the lawsuit, Douglas complained to management in November 2014 after enduring the offensive behavior for years, but the network didn't intervene until the allegations were about to become public. At that point, just before the lawsuit was filed, Fox News fired Slater and issued a statement saying that "abhorrent behavior" had no place at the network. Slater's attorneys have filed a motion to dismiss the case, which is still active. "The cases that include our client are frivolous and without merit," Brian Jacobs and Catherine Foti, her lawyers, said in a statement. "The complaints Wigdor filed rely on false allegations and mischaracterizations and are nothing more than a reprehensible money grab."

On April 1, the *New York Times* published a [front-page story](#) reporting that the network and its top star, Bill O'Reilly, had paid a total of roughly \$13 million to secure agreements from five different women—one of whom, former Fox News host Juliet Huddy, had been represented by Wigdor—to not speak publicly or sue over the sexual harassment and lewd behavior they'd alleged against O'Reilly. Through a spokesperson, O'Reilly denied the claims. But soon protesters were gathering outside Fox's Manhattan headquarters, and dozens of advertisers were pulling spots from his show.

On the night of April 18, Marc Kasowitz, a lawyer for O'Reilly (and also Donald Trump), released a statement suggesting the uproar against his client was a sham, orchestrated by unnamed individuals with ulterior motives. "Bill O'Reilly has been subjected to a brutal campaign of character assassination that is unprecedented in post-McCarthyist America," Kasowitz wrote. "This law firm has uncovered evidence that the smear campaign is being orchestrated by far-left organizations bent on destroying O'Reilly for political and financial reasons."

Wigdor read the statement with irritation. A lifelong Republican, he was annoyed by the suggestion he was carrying water for some vast left-wing conspiracy. He quickly devised a memorable retort. The previous year, during the presidential primaries, Wigdor had attended a fundraiser for Trump on Kiawah Island, S.C. Before leaving, he'd had his picture taken standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Trump, who grinned and flashed a thumbs-up at the camera. The day after Kasowitz's haymaker, Wigdor [released a statement](#) accompanied by the photo. "As someone who supported and contributed to the Trump campaign and who routinely watches Fox News, I can categorically deny, and find it offensive, that my Firm is being accused of being controlled by far-left organizations," he wrote.

Shortly thereafter, Fox announced it was letting O'Reilly go. Kasowitz didn't respond to a request to be interviewed for this article.

On April 25, Wigdor filed a second racial discrimination suit against 21st Century Fox, this time on behalf of Adasa Blanco, a Hispanic woman who formerly worked in accounts payable under Slater. The [complaint](#) included many of the same allegations of insensitive behavior. The next day, Wigdor hosted a press conference at his offices to announce that Kelly Wright, a black anchor at Fox News, was joining the other racial discrimination lawsuit involving Slater, which was now seeking class-action status. Its list of plaintiffs had grown to double digits. “We have spreadsheets to keep track,” Wigdor says.

In front of a gaggle of reporters, Wright accused Fox News of “systemic and institutional racial bias.” Shedding tears, he [quoted](#) Frederick Douglass: “Power concedes nothing without a demand.” (The network soon responded with a statement “vehemently” denying the claims made in both “copycat complaints.” The suits are ongoing.) Surrounded by his clients, Wigdor was easy to pick out—a white guy in a sea of black and brown faces. People often assume he’s Irish Catholic because of his orange-ish hair and pale, freckled complexion. Sometimes he corrects them, letting them know he’s Jewish; other times he lets it go.

That night, he got the first in a series of death threats. A caller said he was a “n----- lover” and threatened to kill his family and bomb his firm. Wigdor contacted the police, which led, about two weeks later, to the arrest of Joseph Amico, a computer repairman, in Las Vegas. He was extradited to Manhattan and charged with multiple counts of making a terroristic threat and aggravated harassment. (He pleaded not guilty.)

Wigdor kept pushing ahead with the Fox suits, seemingly unrattled. “He just will not be intimidated,” says Jeffrey Speed, a board member at [World Wrestling Entertainment Inc.](#) Years ago, Wigdor represented Speed in a contract dispute with his former employer, [Six Flags Entertainment Corp.](#), winning a roughly [\\$24 million ruling](#) in arbitration. “He went up against one of the top New York law firms. We’d show up for hearings, and there’d be 10 lawyers across the table. He thrives on that.”

This May, Wigdor filed three more suits in Manhattan federal court against 21st Century Fox, bringing the total to six. In one, Jessica Golloher, a correspondent for Fox News Radio, alleged she was being marginalized because of her gender and that the company had retaliated against her after she [spoke up](#). In another, Naima Farrow, a former Fox News employee who is black, alleged she’d been terminated from the accounts payable department because of her pregnancy. And Kathleen Lee, an employee at Fox News Radio, held that she’d been subjected to a “sexually hostile work environment,” and that for months the company had done nothing to address her concerns. In the complaint, she claimed that a male colleague frequently referred to Hillary Clinton as Hillary “Clit-on,” would time how long it took Lee to use the ladies’ room, and engaged in raunchy commentary about the physiques of female TV anchors. Fox News called Golloher’s claims “without merit” and said that the [other suits](#) were “without legal basis,” and that the company had “acted appropriately, and lawfully, in connection with these matters.” Lee’s suit has since been settled for undisclosed terms. Golloher’s and Farrow’s are ongoing.

In July, according to a report in the *New York Times*, Wigdor proposed in a mediation proceeding to settle all of the outstanding suits against 21st Century Fox for more than \$60 million—a proposal Fox rejected. (Wigdor and Fox declined to comment on the negotiations.) Shortly thereafter, on Aug. 1, Wigdor filed a seventh suit against Fox News. This time his client was [Rod Wheeler](#), a black contributor who said he’d been discriminated against by the network and that his reputation had been marred by his association with the manufacturing of a fake news story about Seth Rich, a young Democratic National Committee staffer who’d been murdered.

The complaint read like a D.C. spy noir, rife with double-dealing and subplots. Among other things, it alleged that Fox News had colluded with members of the White House to gin up a bogus news narrative about Rich’s murder, aiming to deflect scrutiny from the Trump campaign’s contacts with Russian political operatives during the 2016 election. Wheeler, an ex-homicide detective, claimed that quotes had been fabricated under his name in a FoxNews.com story that sought to bolster the ungrounded theory that it might have been Rich, not the Russians, who provided WikiLeaks with a cache of stolen emails from the DNC. The story has since been retracted.

The White House denied the allegations in the complaint, as did Fox News President Jay Wallace, who called them

“completely erroneous.” In a motion to dismiss, lawyers for the network have argued that Wheeler was “neither misquoted nor defamed” and that, in any case, he was contractually bound to pursue such claims in arbitration, not court. Even so, the wild, confusing allegations spawned countless news stories on both sides of the Atlantic—and, in the end, helped to persuade British authorities to nudge 21st Century Fox’s pending acquisition of Sky deeper into the regulatory thicket.

“It’s much better to have him on our side than risk sitting across from him”

Behind every successful plaintiffs’ attorney is an effective press strategy. Wigdor takes a varied approach. Sometimes he goes on the TV news circuit. Sometimes he stages press conferences. Often he grants in-depth access to a single reporter from a prominent news outlet, on the condition that the story be embargoed until the day a suit is filed, when it can be set off like a firecracker.

But Wigdor says pressuring companies via the press isn’t enough. You also have to know how to win should the company choose not to settle. Wigdor says he has yet to lose a trial verdict in a case on which he’s been the lead attorney. (He has, mind you, had plenty of cases tossed out before they reached that stage.) “Doug will attack from the press,” says Derek Sells, an attorney and managing partner of the Cochran Firm, which was founded by the late Johnnie Cochran. “But you get him in the courtroom, and he’ll attack you there as well.”



Wigdor on CNN.

Sells met Wigdor about 15 years ago, at a children’s birthday party in Queens, N.Y. Before long, he recalls, Wigdor challenged him to a game of H-O-R-S-E on a pee-wee basketball hoop. “What struck me about Doug back then, and it’s true now, is how competitive he is,” Sells says. “He wanted to win that game bad.”

The outcome of the shootout is still in dispute, with both lawyers claiming victory, but they became close friends. “We both were committed to civil rights and to doing justice,” Sells says. “I saw in Doug someone who wanted to try and change society, as best he could, through the cases that he handles. That’s something that has lasted the test of

time.” In the years since, Sells and Wigdor have occasionally teamed up for lawsuits and family vacations, during which they bicker frequently about politics. “Sometimes the discussions get a little heated,” Sells says.

“Oh yeah, especially after a couple glasses of wine,” Wigdor says. “He’s a big Obama supporter.”

“He did support Trump,” Sells says. “I don’t know if he still does. You should ask him about that one.”

Wigdor says his ardor for the president has slackened somewhat in recent months, for reasons that include Trump’s failure to strongly condemn the violent gathering of white supremacists in Charlottesville, Va. “He’s done some good things, but I was a pretty vocal supporter among my friends and colleagues during the campaign,” Wigdor says. “I’ve since tapered that down.”

Wigdor is unsure if his political beliefs—which butt against those of most New Yorkers—have ever cost him a client. “If I were someone who had been discriminated against or harassed or insulted, and I were looking for a lawyer, I wouldn’t be looking for an ideologue or someone who is tweeting about liberal causes that they are supporting in their free time,” he says. “I would find someone who is a trial lawyer and knows their way around the courtroom.”

A few years ago, Wigdor and Thompson represented the actor Rob Brown, whose credits include *Finding Forrester* and *Treme*, in [another shop-and-frisk case](#) against Macy’s. The retailer eventually settled the suit. Brown says he was referred to Thompson and Wigdor by a close lawyer friend. At the time, he admired Thompson’s politics but knew nothing about Wigdor’s. He was surprised to learn, from this reporter, that Wigdor is a Trump fan. “We never talked about him being a Republican, and it wouldn’t have mattered,” Brown says. “He might be a Cowboys fan. All right. It’s not necessarily relevant to my case.”

Wigdor declines to share any figures about his firm’s profitability, other than to say that dysfunctional workplaces are his business and business is good. With virtually all of its clients, Wigdor Law works on contingency, taking a 38 percent to 40 percent cut of whatever a case wins in settlement or at trial. “As I would say to a prospective client, this way our interests would be completely aligned,” he says.

These days, the firm’s clientele is expanding to the behavioral hazmat zones of Silicon Valley. Although the bulk of the firm’s business remains in New York, tech-bro litigation is simply too potentially lucrative to ignore. Over the past several years, Wigdor has represented a number of clients against tech companies, including a 2015 suit in federal court by a woman who had been raped by an Uber driver in New Delhi, and who argued that the company had been negligent in vetting him. [Uber Technologies Inc.](#) contested her claims but eventually settled the case.

Although he prefers to work for plaintiffs, Wigdor has occasionally advised companies on workplace management. For years, he’s offered guidance to the clients of [Park Strategies LLC](#), a consulting firm started by Alfonse D’Amato, the former U.S. senator for New York. D’Amato first met Wigdor in the late ’80s, when he interned in the Republican’s Washington office and starred on its softball team, the “D’Amato Hot Tomatoes.” D’Amato says keeping Wigdor on call is a good deal for his clients. “It’s much better to have him on our side than risk sitting across from him.”

It’s a strategy not available to companies like 21st Century Fox, already fending off a Wigdorian barrage. Recently, Fox News has made numerous efforts to clean up its workplace, shedding troublesome employees, hiring a new human resources chief, and implementing mandatory sensitivity training. Yet the lawsuits keep coming. On Sept. 18, Wigdor uncorked his eighth: Scottie Nell Hughes, a former political panelist for the network, [alleged that she’d been raped](#) by Charles Payne, a Fox Business Network host, and that when she’d reported the abuse the company had retaliated against her. A lawyer for Payne said in a statement that his client “vehemently denies any wrongdoing” and described the claims as “baseless,” while Fox and Wigdor, once again, served and volleyed in the press. “The latest publicity stunt of a lawsuit filed by Doug Wigdor has absolutely no merit and is downright shameful,” Fox News said.

But Wigdor has played this game before. “Fox cannot,” he says, “spin its way out of this crisis.”



