

Can Les Moonves Keep His Job at CBS? 'He's No Longer Untouchable'

Moonves is accused of sexual harassment by six women

Trey Williams and Itay Hod | July 29, 2018

Les Moonves is trying to do what few men accused of sexual misconduct in the #MeToo era have managed to do: Hold onto his job.

Men from Harvey Weinstein to Kevin Spacey to Matt Lauer to Louis CK have lost high-profile roles and largely left public life since they were accused of wrongdoing. But the CBS CEO will have to fight to hang on to the company he successfully shepherded for 15 years, earning more than \$320 million in the last five years alone, experts tell TheWrap.

"This definitely creates a troubling situation for Les, especially considering the precedent that's been set and how these accusations can often lead to a snowball effect," said Tuna Amobi, a media analyst at CFRA Research. "Even if he does survive it — and right now I would not bet that he will — his reputation will be significantly tarnished."

In a New Yorker story Friday, Ronan Farrow detailed accusations from four women who said Moonves forcibly touched or kissed them during business meetings, and two women who said he physically intimidated them or threatened to derail their careers. All six women, including actress and writer Ileana Douglas and writer Janet Jones, said



CBS CEO Les Moonves speaks onstage during the Vanity Fair New Establishment Summit at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts on October 19, 2016

they feared retaliation if they spoke out.

Moonves, who has been an advocate for the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements, said in a statement, "I recognize that there were times decades ago when I may have made some women uncomfortable by making advances. Those were mistakes, and I regret them immensely." He stressed that he understood and respected that "no means no."

A CBS insider told TheWrap Friday that Moonves plans to stay on the job while CBS investigates the accusations in the story.

The accusations come as Moonves is locked in a power struggle with Shari Redstone, who is trying to reunite CBS and Viacom. Redstone controls roughly 80 percent of both companies through her family's holding company, National Amusements.

"There are people in high places who have taken a mighty fall," said Lloyd Greif, founder and CEO of Greif & Co., an investment banking firm specializing in media and entertainment mergers. **"It doesn't look good for Les and, yes, this could very well take him down."**

“If that’s the case, you can assume he’ll get a helping hand from Viacom. They won’t be sad to see him go,” Greif told TheWrap. “He’s the traffic cop holding his hand up to stop the merger between the two companies, and the problem with traffic cops is that sometimes they get hit by a truck.”

Amobi said that if someone as powerful as Weinstein could be forced out of his own company, Moonves should be worried, too.

Farrow said 30 current and former CBS employees told him “that such behavior extended from Moonves to important parts of the corporation, including CBS News and ‘60 Minutes.’” Farrow reports that 19 current and former employees said Jeff Fager, the former chairman of CBS News and the current executive producer of “60 Minutes,” allowed harassment within the network’s news arm.

That creates another layer of trouble for CBS, which has vowed to investigate all of the accusations seriously.

“CBS has to do a thorough investigation not just of Les Moonves, but of the entire company,” said Richard Levick, chairman of crisis management firm Levick. “There is no question that he’s weakened. He’s no longer untouchable.”

“Some of the allegations are incredibly graphic, including some very graphic allegations of career ruination. That’s frightening,” Levick said. “I think that makes it go beyond just a misunderstanding or single occurrence; it appears like perpetual activity.”

One top talent agent, who also works with brands on shaping image, was confident Moonves will endure, and marveled at the nuance

of his response. The agent said Moonves might benefit from the fact that the accusations are a decade old or more.

“The claims are from way long ago, he owned up to making advances but said he abided by ‘no means no,’ and there’s no accused sexual battery or rape,” said the agent, speaking on the condition of anonymity.

Douglas said that her career suffered after she rejected Moonves. But the agent noted that Douglas appeared on CBS and Showtime (which is owned by CBS) after 1997, when she says Moonves held her down and kissed her. That could help Moonves make the case that he didn’t retaliate against her.

“She said her pilot was rejected after she refused him, but she was later cast on a show on the network, which would legally appear as being treated normally or fairly under those provisions,” the agent said.

The Independent Directors of CBS said in a statement Friday that the “current CBS management team” had its full support during the CBS and Viacom litigation:

All allegations of personal misconduct are to be taken seriously. The Independent Directors of CBS have committed to investigating claims that violate the Company’s clear policies in that regard. Upon the conclusion of that investigation, which involves recently reported allegations that go back several decades, the Board will promptly review the findings and take appropriate action.

The timing of this report comes in the midst of the Company’s very public legal

dispute. While that litigation process continues, the CBS management team has the full support of the independent board members. Along with that team, we will continue to focus on creating value for our shareowners.

Redstone, through NAI, denied what she said was the “malicious insinuation” that she was somehow behind accusations against Moonves. In his story, Farrow says he had been speaking to the accusers since before the CBS and Viacom dispute began.

Here is Moonves’ complete statement:

Throughout my time at CBS, we have promoted a culture of respect and opportunity for all employees, and have consistently found success elevating women to top executive positions across our company. I recognize that there were times decades ago when I may have made some women uncomfortable by making advances. Those were mistakes, and I regret them immensely. But I always understood and respected-and abided by the principle-that ‘no’ means ‘no,’ and I have never misused my position to harm or hinder anyone’s career. This is a time when we all are appropriately focused on how we help improve our society, and we at CBS are committed to being part of the solution.