

CBS chief executive Les Moonves is departing amid probe into allegations of sexual misconduct

By Steven Zeitchik, Alex Horton and Sarah Ellison

Leslie Moonves, the powerful longtime chairman and chief executive of CBS, will resign his position in the wake of sexual-assault allegations, concluding a whirlwind six weeks that saw him fall from a perch as one of the country's most respected media titans.

The company announced the news in a statement late Sunday, saying that CBS chief operating officer Joseph Ianniello will take over as interim CEO and president — both Moonves' titles — as the company looks for a permanent replacement for its longtime chief.

Moonves had seemed bullet-proof as of just six weeks ago, regarded as one of the entertainment world's most sterling executives. But sexual-misconduct allegations by six women — in an article by Ronan Farrow in *The New Yorker* in July — led to the board hiring outside lawyers to conduct an investigation



CBS announced on Sept. 9 that CEO Leslie Moonves will step down after accusations of sexual misconduct.

into Moonves and activists to call for his removal. On the magazine's website Sunday, an additional six women alleged behavior that includes sexual misconduct, harassment and retaliation.

“For the past 24 years it has been an incredible privilege to lead CBS's renaissance and transformation into a leading global media company,” Moonves said in a statement late Sunday. “Untrue allegations from

decades ago are now being made against me that are not consistent with who I am. I am deeply saddened to be leaving the company.”

Moonves is still expected to collect millions as part of a settlement with the board, though the company said it will withhold any decision on payment until after the investigation is complete. The executive is one of the best-compensated in media, making \$69 million last

year, according to regulatory filings.

According to a statement from the company, Moonves and CBS will also “donate \$20 million to one or more organizations that support the #MeToo movement and equality for women in the workplace. The donation, which will be made immediately, has been deducted from any severance benefits that may be due Moonves following the Board’s ongoing independent investigation.”

As part of the agreement, CBS and Shari Redstone's controlling shareholder National Amusements will end their lawsuit as Redstone agrees not to merge the broadcaster with Viacom for at least two years. That move gives Moonves a victory in that arena; he sought to keep CBS operating as a separate concern.

“CBS is an organization of talented and dedicated people who have created one of the most successful media companies in the world,” Redstone said. “Today’s resolution will benefit all shareholders, allowing us to focus on the business of running CBS — and transforming it for the future.” Moonves did not comment in the statement.

The company also will replace about half the board, naming three women, Candace Beinecke, Barbara Byrne and Susan Schuman, in addition to

well-known media figures such as Richard Parsons and Strauss Zelnick to director positions.

The allegations posted by *The New Yorker* Sunday include forced oral sex, Moonves exposing himself without consent and the use of physical violence and intimidation to silence the women. The women in Sunday's report echoed descriptions of a culture of downplaying accusations and promoting men even after the company settled allegations against them.

A CBS spokesman on Sunday sent *The Post* a statement in response to the *New Yorker* story. “CBS takes these allegations very seriously. Our Board of Directors is conducting a thorough investigation of these matters, which is ongoing.”

In a statement to the *New Yorker* for their story in July, Moonves said that CBS “promoted a culture of respect and opportunity for all employees” during his tenure.

Entertainment president Kelly Kahl told reporters last month that the environment was a safe one for women. “We’re not saying we’re perfect. No large company is,” he said. But I’m confident the culture of the entertainment division is very safe, very collaborative and very welcoming.”

Though expected in recent weeks, Moonves' exit marks a remarkable turn in the professional fortunes of one of Ameri-

ca's most powerful executives. Moonves has been with CBS since 1995 and has held the title of chief executive for the past 15 years. In early 2006, CBS became a separate entity as it split from Viacom, and has since been one of the most profitable in entertainment.

Moonves’ branch of the Redstone empire, with CBS as its bedrock and Showtime as its prestige jewel, was often seen as more stable compared to Viacom, which relied on fickle basic-cable fees and advertising dollars along with the vagaries of the theatrical box office.

Whether that success would continue under Ianniello, a low-profile figure, remains to be seen. Moonves was widely known in both Wall Street and creative circles, particularly in the latter because of his involvement in casting.

He also had a knack for charming advertisers on which CBS relies for its main revenue stream. At the network’s upfront in May to media buyers at Carnegie Hall, he won over the room when, just days after filing the suit against National Amusement, he took the stage and wryly said, “So, how's your week been?” before extolling the advertising reach of CBS.

In recent years, he has made a push for digital, particularly via All-Access, the network’s streaming service that with shows like “*The Twilight Zone*”

and “Star Trek” has been one of broadcast television’s most ambitious.

Some Wall Street insiders were skeptical CBS would be able to continue as an independent company even with the two-year promise.

“CBS’s days as an independent public company are numbered,” said Lloyd Greif, a Los Angeles-based investment banker who closely follows the company.

“Without its long-standing leader, CBS is doomed,” he said, noting that “Who else is strong enough, either in management or on the board, or has sufficient institutional backing to stand up to Shari? It is only a matter of time before CBS is reunited with Viacom, particularly since National Amusements is in a position to block any other acquirer.”

A settlement does avoid a further public-relations nightmare for CBS as outside lawyers investigate Moonves, eliminating the possibility he is serving as CEO when findings are returned.

But the prospect that Moonves’ exit package would be dependent on the investigation has led to fears among some CBS employees that the inquiry will not be rigorous.

A message to CBS employees in August signed by the lead investigators, Nancy Kestenbaum and Mary Jo White, of-

fered what a former CBS staffer said seemed like a halfhearted attempt at gathering information.

“We welcome speaking to anyone who has any information, including documents, to share about their experience working at CBS,” read the message, which the Post obtained. The statement also said “We will also take steps to protect your identity to the full extent provided by law, if you ask that we do so.”

Rachel Bloom, the star of “Crazy Ex-Girlfriend” on the CBS co-owned CW, on Sunday tweeted strong words about a potential settlement.

“As an employee of CBS, I would just like to say that Les Moonves should be fired without getting a dollar. The actions described in this article are those of sexual assault and shame on anyone else in the corporation who knew about his crimes.”

Activists have been equally vocal about the move. Shaunna Thomas, co-founder of the women's rights group Ultraviolet, also decried any possible payment.

“CBS’ decision to fire Moonves for cause is clearly the right decision. If they reward Moonves’ decades of sexual harassment with a massive golden parachute, it will be shameful and compounds the damage of his decades of unchecked abuse,” she wrote in a message to The

Post. “As the first Fortune 500 company executive to be held accountable, CBS is setting the new standard that should become the norm across corporate America: ‘if you abuse women, you lose your job and your golden parachute.’”

Alleged victims were outspoken in delineating the accusations against Moonves. One of the women who spoke to Farrow in his Sunday report, longtime television executive Phyllis Golden-Gottlieb, said she filed a criminal complaint with police to report incidents that occurred as early as 1986, but the statute of limitations had expired. She and Moonves worked together at Lorimar-Telepictures.

Farrow reported that tension has permeated the company, with law firm investigators seeking interviews with staffers as other men in senior positions are accused of similar assaults. Jeff Fager, executive producer of “60 Minutes,” has been accused by several women who said he inappropriately touched them.

“I really felt like this was one of the most sexist places I’ve ever worked,” Sarah Johansen, who previously worked as an intern at CBS for Fager, told Farrow.