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POLITICS | ELECTION 2016

National Enquirer Shielded Donald Trump From Playboy Model's Affair Allegation

Tabloid owner American Media agreed to pay \$150,000 for story from 1998 Playmate of the Year, but hasn't published her account

By [Joe Palazzolo](#) [Follow](#), [Michael Rothfeld](#) [Follow](#) and [Lukas I. Alpert](#) [Follow](#)

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Donald Trump and former Playboy model Karen McDougal PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS; GETTY IMAGES

The company that owns the National Enquirer, a backer of Donald Trump, agreed to pay \$150,000 to a former Playboy centerfold model for her story of an affair a decade ago with the Republican presidential nominee, but then didn't publish it, according to documents reviewed by The Wall Street Journal and people familiar with the matter.

The tabloid-newspaper publisher reached an agreement in early August with Karen McDougal, the 1998 Playmate of the Year. American Media Inc., which owns the Enquirer, hasn't published anything about what she has told friends

was a consensual romantic relationship she had with Mr. Trump in 2006. At the time, Mr. Trump was married to his current wife, Melania.

Quashing stories that way is known in the tabloid world as “catch and kill.”

In a written statement, the company said it wasn’t buying Ms. McDougal’s story for \$150,000, but rather two years’ worth of her fitness columns and magazine covers as well as exclusive life rights to any relationship she has had with a then-married man. “AMI has not paid people to kill damaging stories about Mr. Trump,” the statement said.

Hope Hicks, a Trump campaign spokeswoman, said of the agreement with Ms. McDougal: “We have no knowledge of any of this.” She said that Ms. McDougal’s claim of an affair with Mr. Trump was “totally untrue.”

Ms. McDougal expected her story about Mr. Trump to be published, people familiar with the matter said. American Media didn’t intend to run it, said another person familiar with the matter. Ms. McDougal didn’t return calls for comment.



Mr. Trump and American Media Chairman and Chief Executive Officer David J. Pecker are longtime friends. Since last year, the Enquirer has supported Mr. Trump’s presidential bid, endorsing him and publishing negative articles about some of his opponents.

In a written statement, Mr. Pecker said that it is no secret that he and Mr. Trump are friends and that he greatly admires him. However, he said, the Enquirer under his management “set the agenda” on Mr. Trump’s affair with Marla Maples when he was married to his first wife. “That in itself speaks volumes about

AMI covered some of Mr. Trump’s relationship with Ms. Maples after Mr. Pecker arrived there in 1998. However, Mr. Pecker had not joined the company when their extramarital affair was first exposed in the early 90s.

A contract reviewed by the Journal gave American Media exclusive rights to Ms. McDougal’s story forever, but didn’t obligate the company to publish it and allowed the company to transfer those rights. It barred her from telling her story elsewhere. The company said it also would give her monthly columns to write and would put her on magazine covers.

AMI said in a written statement the company was pleased to hire Ms. McDougal as a columnist.

The tabloid publisher didn’t publish Ms. McDougal’s story of the alleged extramarital affair even after Mr. Trump’s alleged relationships with and comments about women became a campaign issue. In October, the Washington Post published a videotape made by “Access Hollywood” of Mr. Trump, in which he spoke of groping women. Several women subsequently said publicly that he had made unwanted sexual advances.

Mr. Trump has denied their accounts and apologized for his remarks on the tape, calling them locker-room banter.

Ms. McDougal, who continued modeling after appearing in Playboy, told several of her friends she had a relationship for about 10 months with Mr. Trump, beginning in 2006 and lasting into 2007, according to people familiar with her account. Another friend told the Journal that Ms. McDougal’s relationship with Mr. Trump lasted about a year.

A friend of Ms. McDougal’s recalled attending the Miss Universe pageant at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles as a guest of Mr. Trump in 2006. Mr. Trump’s limousine picked up Ms. McDougal and her at Ms. McDougal’s Beverly Hills home, and the two women sat in the front row with Mr. Trump and music producers Quincy Jones and David Foster. Mr. Trump escorted them home, the friend said.

Messages left with representatives for Messrs. Jones and Foster weren't immediately returned.

In July, Ms. McDougal was in talks with producers at ABC News to tell her story, but she ultimately agreed to the deal with AMI, guided by her lawyer Keith Davidson, according to two people familiar with the discussions.

"I did indeed represent Ms. McDougal and currently represent Ms. McDougal in her negotiations with American Media Inc. to provide services to them," Mr. Davidson said.

Mr. Davidson also represented Stephanie Clifford, a former adult-film star whose professional name is Stormy Daniels and who was in discussions with ABC's "Good Morning America" in recent months to publicly disclose what she said was a past relationship with Mr. Trump, according to people familiar with the talks. Ms. Clifford cut off contact with the network without telling her story. She didn't respond to requests for comment.

An ABC spokesperson declined to comment on Ms. McDougal or Ms. Clifford.

The Trump spokeswoman, Ms. Hicks, said it was "absolutely, unequivocally" untrue that Ms. Clifford had a relationship with Mr. Trump.

Mr. Davidson's work for Ms. McDougal was in connection with "claims against Donald Trump and or assisting client in negotiating a confidentiality agreement and/or life rights related to interactions with Donald Trump and/or negotiating assignment of exclusive press opportunities regarding same," according to a copy of Mr. Davidson's agreement to represent her, which was reviewed by the Journal.

The agreement between Ms. McDougal and AMI doesn't mention Mr. Trump by name, but gives the publisher the rights to "any romantic, personal and/or physical relationship McDougal has ever had with any then-married man." The document says AMI is entitled to damages of at least \$150,000 if she discloses her story elsewhere on social media or gives interviews about it.

Ms. McDougal hasn't appeared in or written for any AMI publications since signing the agreement, according to a person familiar with the matter.

Mr. Trump's relationship with Mr. Pecker, the chairman of American Media, is well-documented. In the 1990s, when Mr. Pecker was president and chief executive of Hachette Filipacchi Magazines, the publisher put out "Trump Style," a custom quarterly magazine distributed to guests at Trump properties.

As the presidential race ramped up last year, the Enquirer published a series of columns by Mr. Trump. One began, "I am the only one who can make America great again!" Another was headlined, "Donald Trump: The Man Behind the Legend!"

Correction: Amplifications:

David Pecker cited the Enquirer's coverage of Donald Trump's extramarital affair with Marla Maples as evidence of his commitment to investigative journalism. This story has been updated to make clear that the affair occurred and was first revealed in the early 1990s, predating Mr. Pecker's arrival at the company. The Enquirer did publish articles about Mr. Trump and Ms. Maples before his arrival in 1998 and continued to do so afterward. (Nov. 6, 2016)

Write to Joe Palazzolo at joe.palazzolo@wsj.com, Michael Rothfeld at michael.rothfeld@wsj.com and Lukas I. Alpert at lukas.alpert@wsj.com

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