

# Caught up in Avenatti scandal, Mark Geragos finds himself on the other side of the law

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Mark Geragos, left, Michael Jackson and his sister Janet Jackson arrive for the King of Pop's arraignment on child molestation charges at the courthouse in Santa Maria, Calif., in January 2004. (Hector Mata / AFP/Getty Images)

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Even by the standards of a man who has been at the center of media firestorms involving Michael Jackson and Colin Kaepernick, it had been a whirlwind 24 hours.

On Monday afternoon, Mark Geragos' name surfaced in connection with a sprawling federal criminal complaint that accused another camera-friendly litigator, Michael Avenatti, of trying to extort millions from athletic-wear giant Nike. As media report after media report described Geragos as an “un-indicted co-conspirator,” CNN quickly moved to fire him as a legal pundit. Meanwhile, the typically loquacious lawyer remained silent.

By Tuesday, Geragos was in the headlines again, this time celebrating a surprise legal victory when prosecutors in Chicago decided to drop charges against one of his suddenly infamous clients — actor Jussie Smollett, who had been accused of manufacturing a hate crime that has captured national attention.

“The nature of what I do,” Geragos, 61, said plainly Tuesday, as if being implicated in an extortion scheme and finding himself at the heart of a roiling debate on race-based violence was a normal start to a week.

For decades, Geragos has seemingly courted controversy, earning a reputation as a respected and talented courtroom figure while defending or advocating for one divisive figure after another, from the King of Pop to the NFL quarterback who turned the national anthem into a political battleground.

Although Geragos has never been one to pull punches when challenging law enforcement in court, he now finds himself in their crosshairs for the first time.

“He is both sides of the spectrum,” said Laurie Levenson, a former prosecutor and Loyola Law School professor who has watched Geragos in the courtroom. “A hero and a goat.”

[For Michael Avenatti, a luxury lifestyle built on a purported house of cards »](#)

In brief conversations with The Times on Tuesday, Geragos would not address the Avenatti case. His attorney, Benjamin Brafman, said Geragos is not expected to be charged in New York but declined to comment further.

According to a criminal complaint filed in New York, Avenatti was “attempting to extract more than \$20 million” from Nike by threatening to hold a news conference accusing the company of paying the families of high-profile high school and college basketball figures, unless Nike agreed to hire him to conduct an internal investigation.

During a series of meetings between Avenatti, lawyers for Nike and a person described in court documents only as “CC-1,” Avenatti threatened to take \$10 billion off the company’s market value if he went public with the allegations.

Avenatti, who was also accused of wire and bank fraud in Santa Ana on Monday in a separate case, has denied all wrongdoing. He has not commented on what, if any, role Geragos played in the Nike case.

Although Avenatti was in near fiscal peril — allegedly embezzling money from one client in Orange County to cover the expenses of a flailing coffee business and to finance a lavish lifestyle that included driving race cars — friends of Geragos said the veteran attorney would have no reason to take part in the cash grab described in court documents.

“Our firm has the unfortunate problem of turning people away, daily, because of all the cases that come through. He certainly isn't hurting financially whatsoever,” said Tina Glandian, a partner at Geragos’ firm. “Aside from his law practice, he has numerous real estate holdings in hotels, restaurants. He is not going to risk his law license, his career, his reputation to make a quick hit. He just doesn’t need to. He is settling large cases weekly.”

Avenatti and Geragos did not have any working relationship until late 2018, when Avenatti sought Geragos’ advice after he was arrested on suspicion of domestic violence by Los Angeles police, according to two people familiar with the situation. Both requested anonymity in order to discuss the case candidly. Prosecutors declined to bring charges against Avenatti.

Michael Avenatti arrested and charged with embezzlement and attempt to extort Nike

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It was most likely Geragos' recent championing of former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Kaepernick that drew him into the situation involving Nike and Avenatti. The attorney helped Kaepernick — who has said he was blacklisted by the NFL because he knelt during the national anthem to protest police brutality — broker a multimillion-dollar deal with Nike that spawned the popular “Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything” advertising campaign.

“When most people run away and the mob piles on against someone in these cases, Mark leans in and gives the advice that saves lives,” said Ben Meiselas, an attorney who has worked with Geragos and brought several suits against police in Bakersfield and Kern County over alleged brutality and misconduct.

Attorney Mark Geragos, seen during an October 2015 news conference, has been implicated in the federal prosecution of another celebrity litigator, Michael Avenatti. (Mark Boster / Los Angeles Times)

That kind of dog piling happened more than once in the Smollett case. When allegations first surfaced that he had been the victim of a hate crime, many rallied around the actor best known for his role on “Empire.” But as Chicago police began to lob accusations that the attack was a hoax, public opinion quickly turned on Smollett.

All the while, Geragos said, he knew his client was innocent.

The charges against Smollett “never should have been filed in the first place, and it became painfully obvious after reviewing the discovery,” he said Tuesday.

Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel and Police Supt. Eddie T. Johnson blasted prosecutors' decision to drop charges against Smollett during a news conference that Geragos dismissed as having "no basis in fact whatsoever."

Colleagues say Geragos often sees himself as a champion for long-shot defendants, in some cases considering himself their last hope. Others have described him as a charming adversary, a consummate "schmoozer" who understands the benefits of knowing as many judges and bailiffs by name as possible.

Geragos' star first began to shine on a national level in the 1990s, when he represented Susan McDougal, who spent 18 months in jail for civil contempt before being convicted of fraud in connection with the Whitewater real estate scandal that rocked the early part of Bill Clinton's presidency.

During McDougal's contempt trial, Geragos repeatedly chastised special prosecutor Kenneth Starr, earning a reputation for offering a vociferous defense even while giving the laid-back appearance of a man who often left his sunglasses seated atop his head in court.

It was his defense of Jackson against molestation charges, as well as his role in the 2004 Scott Peterson murder trial, that would make Geragos a household name. Even though Peterson was convicted, Geragos' repeated sparring with legal analyst Nancy Grace made him a fixture on millions of Americans' television screens.

Many of those who worked with Geragos' during his decades-long career said they were stunned by the allegations in the Nike case.

"I am in complete shock right now with everything I have been reading," said Lara Yeretsian, a defense attorney and former colleague of Geragos. "He is too good an attorney. He knows too much to be in this mess. I was flabbergasted to see his name next to Avenatti's."

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