



Will President Trump Pardon Joe Exotic? Lawyers Weigh In



Netflix, Jamie Squire/Getty Images

BY DESIRÉE O / SEPT. 15, 2020 1:32 PM EDT

Viewers of Netflix's viral docu-series *Tiger King* will know that its controversial central figure, **Joe Exotic**, ended up **behind bars** after trying to have his nemesis, **Carole Baskin**, killed in a murder-for-hire plot as well as for selling cubs and killing five tigers. Although Exotic was given a 22-year sentence, in September 2020, the former animal park owner's legal team attempted to persuade President Donald Trump to grant Exotic a pardon.

In fact, **TMZ** reported that the "Tiger Team leader, Eric Love, flew into D.C. ... with Joe's lawyers, packing a 257-page document." Love told the outlet that the document "fully proves Joe's innocent." While we're sure plenty of people would be interested to find out what that supposed proof might be, they'll also likely want to know if Exotic *really* could receive a pardon from the president.

But ... what exactly is a pardon? Basically, it's "us[ing] the executive power of a governor or president to forgive a person charged with a crime or convicted of a crime, thus preventing any prosecution and removing any remaining penalties or punishments," according to **Cornell Law School**. If you take a peek at the information provided by the **United States Department of Justice**, you'll see that it tends to be a strictly regulated — and complicated — process.

So does Joe Exotic really have a chance when it comes to being pardoned by Trump? Fortunately, two legal experts gave *Nicki Swift* some exclusive insight into the somewhat surreal situation and you'll definitely be interested in what they had to say.



NICKI SWIFT



"The timing of Joe Exotic's pardon request, just before the election, is no accident," according to criminal defense attorney Lara Yeretsian, who is the principal of [Yeretsian Law](#) in Los Angeles. The legal expert, who has represented numerous celebrity defendants including Scott Peterson and Michael Jackson, explained that Exotic is "betting that Trump will see a political benefit to himself in granting a pardon."

Yeretsian also told *Nicki Swift* that it "sounds like [Exotic's] team has really prepared their case to highlight the weaknesses of the government's position." Beyond that, the attorney added: "From a defense perspective, I've always believed there was reasonable doubt and that Joe Exotic may have been set up." However, whether or not Exotic is innocent or guilty, Yeretsian says that his team is "taking a chance" regarding a pardon because "there's a strong likelihood that Trump won't grant it." While "there were almost 2,500 requests for pardons and more than 11,500 requests for commutation" at the beginning of 2020, "[a]s of August [2020], Trump had pardoned, commuted, or rescinded only 39 convictions."

On the flip side, despite the fact that it's "typically a lengthy process to get a pardon," Yeretsian points out that "Trump has been anything but typical when it comes to granting pardons, even giving them to people who haven't asked for them." And considering "Trump's love of reality TV and his unpredictability, there's always a chance that he'll see a political benefit for himself and give Joe Exotic his pardon."

But wait! Does our other legal expert agree?

This is why President Trump may pardon Joe Exotic



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Santa Rose Sherrif's Office, Spencer Platt/Getty Images

Joe Exotic may have his request for a pardon granted if it suits President Donald Trump, however, "his chances of success are slim," former U.S. Assistant Attorney Neema Rahmani, co-founder of [West Coast Trial Lawyers](#), told *Nicki Swift*. Rahmani explained that a "federal appeals court is unlikely to second guess and overturn a unanimous jury verdict based on Joe's argument that he was actually innocent." That's because "[t]here was plenty of evidence, including recordings and witness testimony, to support the murder-for-hire conviction."

On top of that, even if he's able to have his murder conviction "overturned on appeal, Joe publicly admitted to selling cubs and killing tigers, both federal crimes which support a multiyear prison sentence," which is why "Joe's only real chance of success is a presidential pardon."

But then again, Rahmani also took into consideration the fact that it's "no secret that the President loves publicity, and Joe Exotic is one of the most famous inmates in federal prison." That's why, according to Rahmani, "[i]f the President gets involved in Joe's case and either commutes his sentence or pardons him outright, it will be for political reasons shortly before the election, and not because Joe is actually innocent on the merits."

So it seems like our legal experts agree: Exotic probably won't get his pardon, but if he does, it might be an attempt by Trump to boost his profile ahead of the 2020 election. Will that happen and will it work? We'll just have to wait and see!



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BY DESIRÉE O / UPDATED: APRIL 2, 2020 8:52 AM EDT

There was quite a lot to absorb while watching Netflix's *Tiger King*. The docu-series gave us a [polygamous marriage](#), a [missing husband](#), a [fake music career](#), a [strangely shirtless interview](#), and a [celebrity-connected, big cat-peddling peer](#), just to name a few of the jaw-dropping aspects of what viewers witnessed onscreen. Needless to say, it was a roller coaster of a real-life story.

However, surely the most outrageous part of the docu-series was the murder-for-hire plot. In January 2020, Joe Exotic (whose legal name is Joe Maldonado-Passage), the star of the docu-series and former owner of the G.W. Exotic Animal Park, was sentenced to 22 years in prison for selling cubs and killing five tigers, according to the [New York Post](#). He's also spending time behind bars for attempting to have his nemesis and the woman behind a famous big cat sanctuary, [Carole Baskin](#), killed.

"Prosecutors said he offered \$10,000 to an undercover FBI agent during a December 2017 meeting" during which he apparently was recorded saying, "Just like follow her into a mall parking lot and just cap her and drive off," per the [New York Post](#). Although Joe claims that he never really wanted any harm to come to Baskin, the jury deciding his fate obviously didn't believe him, which is why he's now behind bars ... and it doesn't sound like he's enjoying his stay.

Joe Exotic says jail is 'worse than you can ever treat an animal'



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"At the end of the docuseries, Joe Exotic was still being held in a county jail," according to *Marie Claire*, though he has since been **transferred** to a federal prison in Texas. Regardless of his whereabouts, Joe has made it clear is that he's not happy with his circumstances.

"They strip you butt naked, put you in a six-by-eight-foot concrete room with no windows, no blankets, no nothing," Joe Exotic said in a clip from the docu-series (via *Newsweek*). "I've been stripped of my clothes, my rights, my identity, [and] my dignity."

In another clip, Joe can be heard crying while saying that he needs to get out of the slammer. "It's worse than you can ever treat an animal," he says. "...I can't do much more of this." That's surely why he's now appealing his lengthy sentence.

Joe Exotic filed a \$94 million lawsuit and wants a presidential pardon



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Joe Exotic still claims that he's innocent and has every intention of being released. "At some point the U.S. Attorneys office and Agents involved will have to answer to the fact that they participated in Perjury to obtain this conviction," he said in a [statement shared on Facebook](#) on Jan. 22, 2020. "I was punished for taking advantage of my Constitutional Rights to not plead guilty to their very well-orchestrated frame job of murder for hire."

According to [The Blast](#), Joe has filed an appeal in federal court. He's also filed a [\\$94 million lawsuit](#) against the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and against Jeff Lowe, his former business partner, and other colleagues. Oh, and one more thing: Joe wants a presidential pardon.

"The Trump Administration must be made aware of the Overreach, perjury, abuse of power and the failure to uphold the Oath of their position which is truth and Justice for all," he wrote in [another Facebook statement](#) on March 19, 2020. "I have been illegally charged with these crimes and the Trump Administration, the United States Department of Interior along [with] the Federal Wildlife service must be held accountable for what they have done to me, my parents, and my family, along with my animals."

Though Joe is clearly upset about his circumstances, he's supposedly enjoying the attention and support he's attracted from [celebrities like Cardi B](#).

Joe Exotic is 'over the moon' about his newfound fame



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Following the viral popularity of *Tiger King*, the docu-series' co-directors and writers, Eric Goode and Rebecca Chaiklin, spoke to the *Los Angeles Times* about Joe Exotic's reaction to his newfound fame. Apparently, the *Tiger King* star "is absolutely ecstatic about the series and the idea of being famous," Goode said while noting that the Netflix star had been calling him regularly. "He's absolutely thrilled."

Chaiklin backed that up, saying, "You can hardly talk to him without him mentioning the amount of press he's getting. He says people are asking to see his Prince Albert [piercing] and girls are sending him sexy bikini pictures even though he's gay."

"He's over the moon. Having kept in pretty close touch with him while he's been in a horrible county prison, this has raised his spirits," Chaiklin continued.

Chaiklin went on to say: "Joe definitely did some horrible things to his animals. He was very abusive to them and he shot five tigers, no question about it. But what has happened to him has also been hard."