

Tennessee appeals court pulls judge from case with lawyer who revealed his secret arrest

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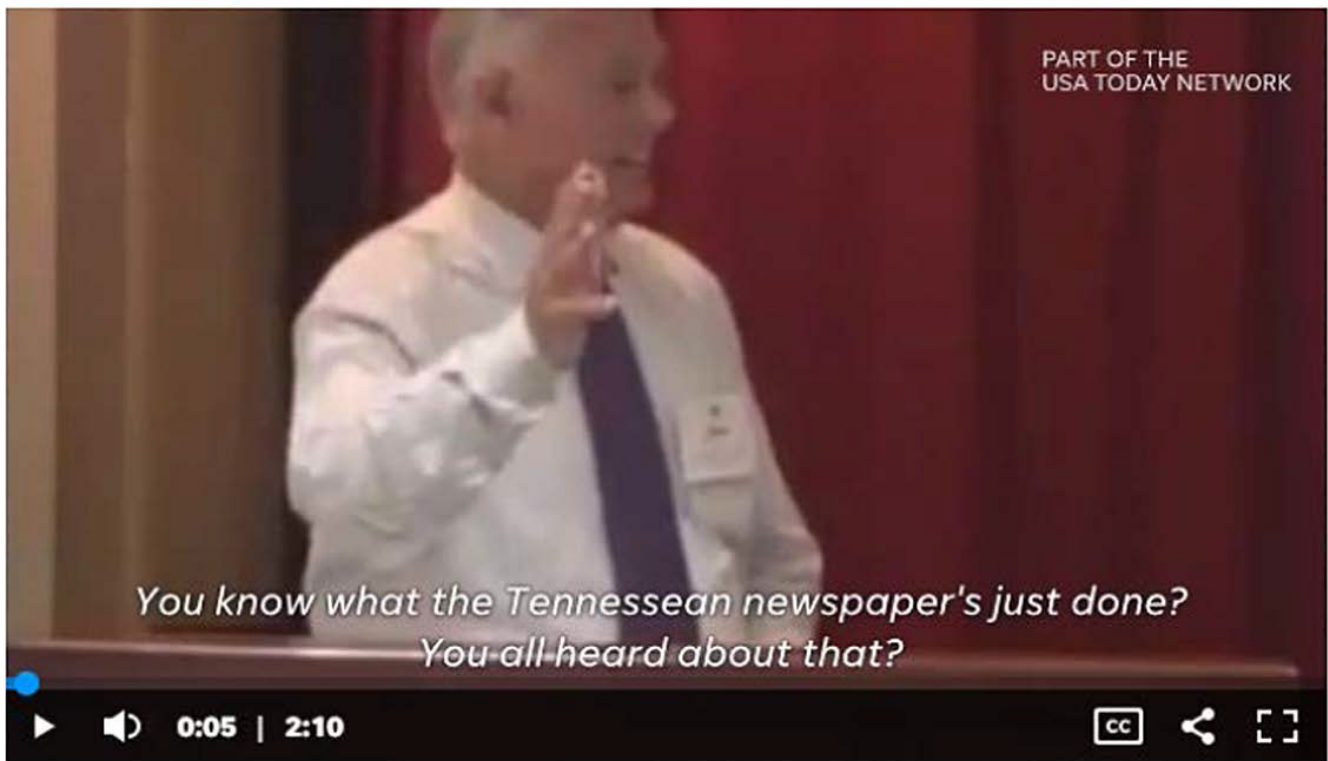
CRIME & COURTS

Appeals court removes Tennessee judge from case with lawyer who revealed his secret arrest

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Williamson County judge Michael Binkley sanctions order struck down

A Tennessee judge vowed revenge just weeks before he slapped a lawyer with \$700,000 in sanctions in 2018. The sanctions order has now been struck down. *Angela M. Gosnell, Wochit*

A Williamson County judge was convinced a Nashville lawyer with a reputation for legal trash-talking had exposed his secret.

Vengeance, Circuit Court Judge Michael Binkley publicly and repeatedly vowed, would be his.

"My day will come," Binkley told a courtroom of attorneys.

Just weeks later, it did, court records show.

Binkley slapped the attorney, Brian Manookian, and his legal partner with more than **\$700,000** in sanctions in a hotly contested battle between warring lawyers in a lawsuit.



Former Nashville judge Casey Moreland

Former Nashville Judge Casey Moreland pleaded guilty in May, admitting he attempted to bribe an ex-paramour and that he conspired to steal from a program for recovering drug addicts.

Now, a state appellate court is booting Binkley off the bench in that case and striking down his sanctions order in an opinion that lays bare the very thing Binkley wanted to hide.

Binkley had been caught in a prostitution sting in **2010**, two years before he was elected to the bench. But one of Tennessee's most powerful judges - former Davidson County General Sessions Court Judge Casey Moreland - erased all record of it.

"Once the court revealed its thoughts about Mr. Manookian in open court, one might reasonably question whether the court had reached a prejudged conclusion as to the contempt order," the Tennessee Court of Appeals opinion stated.

"When the judge mused that 'my day will come,' the judge also said that day is 'just about here' - less than a month before awarding supplemental damages and finalizing the contempt order."

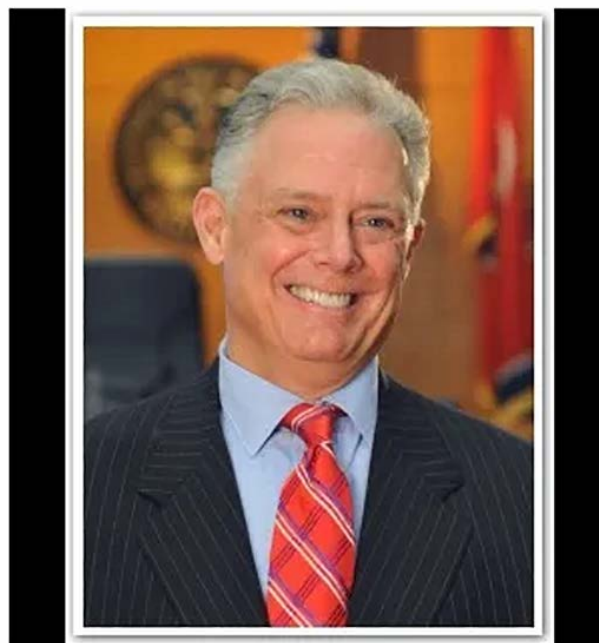
Binkley did not return a phone call seeking comment.

Judicial secrets abound

Moreland was considered one of Nashville's most powerful judges. The **FBI** would later reveal **his dark side**: trading court favors for sex, stealing money from the recovery court he founded and hosting trips with fellow judges and lawyers at which prostitutes were hired and marijuana was smoked.

Moreland's dark side was still under wraps, though, when Binkley - then a lawyer who wanted to be a judge - was nabbed in a prostitution sting on Dickerson Avenue in **2010**, according to records reviewed by Knox News.

Moreland erased all record of the charge against Binkley the very same day. With his secret safe, Binkley ran for election to the Williamson County bench in **2012** and won.



Williamson County Circuit Court Judge Michael Binkley was removed from a case by an appellate court that ruled his impartiality was compromised by threats of retribution he made about one of the lawyers in the case. *Tennessee Supreme Court*

An anonymous complaint to the Tennessee Board of Judicial Conduct about Moreland's behavior and the secret expungement of Binkley's arrest became public when it was leaked to Nashville journalists in February **2017**.

Binkley was convinced Manookian had something to do with that leak, though it's still not clear why the attorney was at the top of his suspect list.

'My day will come'

Binkley - who even now refuses to publicly acknowledge his **2010** arrest and Moreland's secret expungement - suspected Manookian as early as May **2017**, the appellate opinion states.



Nashville lawyer Brian Manookian was hit with \$700,000 in contempt sanctions by Williamson County Circuit Court Judge Michael Binkley before an appellate court pulled Binkley from the case and struck down the sanctions. *Submitted*

Manookian is a wealthy attorney known for his harsh rhetoric in interactions with opposing lawyers and even judges. He's been repeatedly slapped with complaints to the Tennessee Board of Professional Responsibility and has drawn temporary suspensions more than once.

Binkley publicly vowed revenge against Manookian in a speech to attorneys obtained by Knox News and from the bench.

"Now, what do I do when I'm sitting there watching (a media report), and my family is watching it, and all my friends are watching it?" Binkley said from the bench during a case that had nothing to do with Manookian.

"And as a judge it's probably good that I don't say a word," Binkley continued. "It's very difficult. But my day will come. And it's just about here ... I feel like it's necessary for me to be crystal clear, transparent and clear. I did not like what Mr. Manookian did at all, and my day will come."

Just weeks later, in July **2018**, Binkley hit Manookian with more than **\$700,000** in contempt sanctions, labeling the attorney a leak and a liar. Manookian said he was innocent of both claims and wanted a new hearing before a new judge.

Binkley refused.

"What people are doing to judges, making up stuff in the media when it's totally false, it's happening," Binkley told a crowd of lawyers in a speech a few months later. "I've never turned in a lawyer in my entire career. But there's one, Brian Manookian, I'm going to turn in. And I've got **70** different examples, and I'm not stopping."

Court: Vengeance is not yours

Binkley followed through with his threat, filing a series of complaints with the Tennessee Board of Professional Responsibility against Manookian.

Manookian, meanwhile, appealed the sanctions order.

In a ruling issued last month, the appellate court said there was no way the public could have faith in Binkley's fairness to Manookian given the judge's vows of revenge.

"Taken in context, a reasonable person would construe (Binkley's vow of revenge) as indicating that the judge may have sought retribution against Mr. Manookian for a perceived wrongdoing unrelated to the contempt charges," the appellate court ruled.

"Because the trial court's impartiality might reasonably be questioned, the court should have recused itself," the opinion stated.



The U.S. Attorney's Office, Middle District of Tennessee, discusses the charges against Judge Casey Moreland on March 28, 2017. Moreland later resigned; however, city officials continue scrutinizing cases in his court. *Shelley Mays|File|USA Today Network - Tennessee*

The appellate court is striking down Binkley's sanctions order and ordering up a new hearing before a new judge. Manookian, meanwhile, is fighting Binkley's board complaints. In a document obtained by Knox News, Binkley is demanding secrecy if he submits to a deposition about his board complaints.

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