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Wayne LaPierre announces resignation as leader of the NRA days ahead of civil trial

By Emma Tucker, CNN

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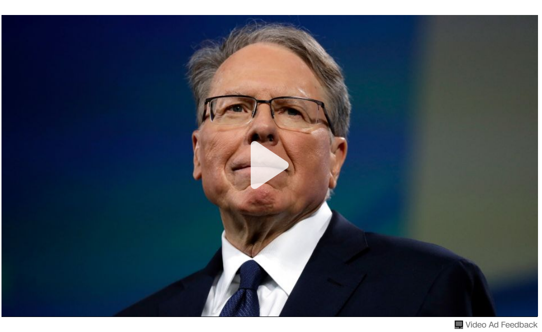

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(CNN) — Wayne LaPierre, the leader of the National Rifle Association of America who served for decades as a fierce protector of the Second Amendment, advocating for firearms owners and manufacturers, announced his resignation on Friday – days before his civil trial is set to begin.

LaPierre is stepping down as executive vice president and chief executive officer, effective January 31, the NRA said in a statement.

Andrew Arulanandam, an NRA executive and head of general operations, will become the interim CEO and executive vice president of the organization, the NRA said on its website.

"With pride in all that we have accomplished, I am announcing my resignation from the NRA," LaPierre said in a statement released by the group. "I've been a card-carrying member of this organization for most of my adult life, and I will never stop supporting the NRA and its fight to defend Second Amendment freedom. My passion for our cause burns as deeply as ever."

LaPierre cited health reasons, according to the NRA. Its president, Charles Cotton, accepted LaPierre's resignation on Friday, the group said.

"Wayne is a towering figure in the fight for constitutional freedom, but one of his other talents is equally important: he built an organization that is bigger than him," read a statement from Cotton.

Daniel Acker/Bloomberg/Getty Images

Wayne LaPierre's image hangs above a registration desk ahead of the NRA annual meeting at the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis in 2019. LaPierre says he "will never stop supporting the NRA and its fight to defend Second Amendment freedom."

New York Attorney General Letitia James in 2020 filed a lawsuit to dissolve the NRA, claiming the organization violated laws for non-profit groups, committed tax fraud and took millions for personal use.

A spokesperson for the attorney general's office confirmed to CNN the case will still go to trial in the New York Supreme Court on Monday, LaPierre attended jury selection this week for the trial, which is expected to last between six and eight weeks.

It will take place after several efforts by the NRA to dismantle the Manhattan court case by moving it out of state or filing appeals alleging the case is politically motivated by James' office. Judge Joel Cohen, who is presiding over the case, blocked James' attempt to dissolve the NRA in March 2022 but allowed the lawsuit to proceed.

The suit names LaPierre, General Counsel and Secretary John Frazer, former Chief Financial Officer Wilson "Woody" Phillips and former Chief of Staff and Executive Director of General Operations Josh Powell.

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"For nearly three decades, Wayne LaPierre has served as the chief executive officer of the NRA and has exploited the organization for his financial benefit, and the benefit of a close circle of NRA staff, board members, and vendors," the complaint said.

LaPierre 'unlawfully profited,' suit says

The lawsuit accuses the NRA of violating multiple laws including false reporting of annual filings with the IRS and New York's charities bureau, improperly documenting expenses, improper wage and income tax reporting and excessively paying people for work for which they were not qualified.

Many of the charges stem from the NRA's status as a charitable organization, which has strict state and federal rules governing spending.

The suit also asks the court to order LaPierre and other executives named in the suit to make full restitution for funds from which they "unlawfully profited" and salaries they earned while employees; to remove LaPierre and Frazer from the NRA's leadership; and ensure none of the executives can ever serve on the board of any charity in New York.

James' office confirmed it was investigating the NRA in 2019, after reporting by The Trace alleged that a small group of executives, contractors and vendors affiliated with the group extracted hundreds of millions from the non-profit's budget.

Michael M. Santiago/Getty Images

New York State Attorney General Letitia James says LaPierre's resignation "validates our claims against him, but it will not insulate him from accountability."

The NRA filed a countersuit in federal court alleging that the attorney general is hampering the organization's right to free speech in a manner that "threatens to destabilize the NRA and chill the speech of the NRA, its members, and other constituents."

In a statement to CNN, NRA President Carolyn Meadows called the New York suit a "baseless premeditated attack on our organization and the Second Amendment freedoms it fights to defend. It's a transparent attempt to score political points and attack the leading voice in opposition to the leftist agenda."

In the lawsuit, James alleged the current and former NRA leadership, "instituted a culture of self-dealing mismanagement" benefiting themselves, family, friends and favored vendors, leading the organization to lose more than $63 million in three years, according to previous CNN reporting.

James previously told CNN claims that the lawsuit against the NRA is political are false.

When asked why she is seeking to dissolve the organization instead of focusing on leadership, the attorney general said the misuse of funds wasn't just an issue of top leaders, but instead a failure throughout the organization to stop the "looting of the charitable assets."

Following the announcement of LaPierre's departure, James said Friday in a statement on X: "The end of the Wayne LaPierre era at the NRA is an important victory in our case. LaPierre's resignation validates our claims against him, but it will not insulate him from accountability. We look forward to presenting our case in court."

The NRA's troubles

The NRA filed for bankruptcy in 2021 after a long leadership fight that saw the departure of its longtime chief lobbyist, Christopher Cox, in June 2019. The organization's troubles have coincided with a decline in its political spending in the past two years.

For its first 100 years, the NRA was largely non-partisan and supportive of some gun control measures. In the 1970s, however, the group began to lobby against federal firearm restrictions, making strong allies among political conservatives, particularly within the Republican Party.

Though institutionally hindered, the NRA's strength endures within the GOP, whose leaders remain almost wholly aligned with the group's positions.

Sarah Silbiger/Reuters

Wayne LaPierre addresses Conservative Political Action Conference in March in Maryland.

In a statement to CNN on Friday, Brady, a leading national gun violence prevention organization, said the NRA is "on the ropes now more than ever" after LaPierre announced his resignation.

"They are losing their leader, they're under investigation and headed to trial," said Brady President Kris Brown. "Brady and Team ENOUGH youth advocates, survivors, and leaders are to be thanked for building the pressure that created the cracks in the NRA's foundation."

The president of Everytown for Gun Safety, another national gun violence prevention non-profit group, said the NRA "has been in a doom spiral for years" and LaPierre's resignation "is yet another massive setback for an organization that's already at rock bottom."

"LaPierre's legacy will be one of corruption, mismanagement, and the untold destruction gun violence has brought to every American community," said John Feinblatt. "The NRA's declining membership, finances, and political power spell disaster for the organization heading into the 2024 elections."

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March for Our Lives, a student-led organization, said in a statement Friday that the NRA "was an untouchable and seemingly all-powerful political juggernaut" when the gun control advocacy group was founded after the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida, in 2018.

"However, all it took was some meddling kids and a whole lot of determination to take down one of the largest and most powerful lobbying machines in American history," March for Our Lives said in a statement.

"From demanding legal action, to campaigns that highlighted their illegal and immoral activities, March For Our Lives took on the NRA time and again, and since we marched in 2018, they've lost over a million members and nearly half their annual revenue. Now, the NRA is a shell of what it once was," the statement continued.

March for Our Lives reviewed LaPierre's finances and wrote a letter in November 2018 to the New York attorney general, reporting "potentially illegal" activity before the office launched its investigation the following year. The letter included information the group said "suggests a long-standing pattern of significant governance lapses at the NRA."

Stephen Gutowski, a firearms reporter at TheReload.com and CNN contributor, said Friday of LaPierre's resignation: "This is huge."

"I mean, Wayne LaPierre was a staple of the NRA and the gun debate for the last several decades. He is the leader of the gun rights movement in this country forever," Gutowski said. "The guy who was the guy is gone now."

This story has been updated with additional information.

CNN's Ray Sanchez, Omar Jimenez, Justin Lear and Sabrina Souza contributed to this report.

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