

Bloomberg opens door to 2020 Democratic run for president

By JULIE PACE
AP Washington Bureau Chief

WASHINGTON — Michael Bloomberg, the billionaire former mayor of New York City, is opening the door to a 2020 Democratic presidential campaign, warning that the current field of candidates is ill equipped to defeat President Donald Trump.

Bloomberg, who initially ruled out a 2020 run, has not made a final decision on whether to jump into the race. If he were to launch a campaign, it could dramatically reshape the Democratic contest less than three months before primary voting begins.

The 77-year-old has spent the past few weeks talking with prominent Democrats about the state of the 2020 field, expressing concerns about the steadiness of former Vice President Joe Biden's campaign and the rise of liberal Sen. Massachusetts

Elizabeth Warren, according to people with knowledge of those discussions. In recent days, he took steps to keep his options open, including moving to get on the primary ballot in Alabama ahead of the state's Friday filing deadline.

In a statement on Thursday, Bloomberg adviser Howard Wolfson said the former mayor believes Trump "represents an unprecedented threat to our nation" and must be defeated.

"But Mike is increasingly concerned that the current field of candidates is not well positioned to do that," Wolfson said.

Bloomberg's moves come as the Democratic race enters a crucial phase. Biden's front-runner status has been vigorously challenged by Warren and Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, who are flush with cash from small-dollar donors. But both are viewed by some Democrats as too



AP Photo/John Locher, File

In this Feb. 26, 2019, file photo, former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg speaks at a news conference at a gun control advocacy event in Las Vegas. Bloomberg has opened the door to a potential presidential run, saying the Democratic field is "not well positioned" to defeat Trump.

liberal to win in a general election faceoff with Trump.

Bloomberg, a Republican-turned-independent who registered as a Democrat last year, has flirted with a presidential run before but ultimately backed down, including in 2016. He endorsed

Hillary Clinton in that race and, in a speech at the Democratic Party convention, pummeled Trump as a con who has oversold his business successes.

Bloomberg plunged his efforts — and his money — into gun control advocacy

and climate change initiatives. He again looked seriously at a presidential bid earlier this year, traveling to early voting states and conducting extensive polling, but decided not to run in part because of Biden's perceived strength.

With immense personal wealth, Bloomberg could quickly build out a robust campaign operation across the country. Still, his advisers acknowledge that his late entry to the race could make competing in states like Iowa and New Hampshire, which have been blanketed by candidates for nearly a year, difficult. Instead, they previewed a strategy that would focus more heavily on the March 3 "Super Tuesday" contests, including in delegate-rich California.

Some Democrats were skeptical there would be a groundswell of interest in the former New York mayor.

"There are smart and influential people in the Democratic Party who think a candidate like Bloomberg is needed," said Jennifer Palmieri, who advised Clinton's 2016 campaign. "But there is zero evidence that rank-and-file voters in the early states of Iowa and New Hampshire feel the same."

Still, others credited Bloomberg with taking on "some of America's biggest challenges" and finding success.

"While this is not an endorsement, Michael Bloomberg is a friend and I admire his track record as a successful business leader and mayor who finds practical solutions to some of America's biggest challenges, from creating good jobs to addressing the opioid crisis and fighting for common-sense gun safety," said Rhode Island Gov. Gina Raimondo, a Democrat.

Judge fines Trump \$2 million for misusing charity foundation

By MICHAEL R. SISAK
Associated Press

NEW YORK — A judge Thursday ordered President Donald Trump to pay \$2 million to an array of charities as a fine for misusing his own charitable foundation to further his political and business interests.

New York state Judge Salann Scarpulla imposed the penalty after the president admitted to a series of abuses outlined in a lawsuit brought against him last year by the New York attorney general's office.

Among other things, Trump acknowledged in a legal filing that he allowed his presidential campaign staff to coordinate with the Trump Foundation in holding a fundraiser for veterans during the run-up to the 2016 Iowa caucuses. The event was designed "to further Mr. Trump's political campaign," Scarpulla said.

In a defiant statement issued Thursday evening, though, Trump suggested he was neither sorry nor in the wrong.

"I am the only person I know, perhaps the only person in history, who can give major money to charity (19M), charge no expense, and be attacked by the political hacks in New York State," he wrote.

He assailed a series of Democratic attorneys general of New York who were involved with the suit, saying they should have spent their time investigating the Clinton Foundation.

"It has been 4 years of politically motivated harassment," Trump said.

Trump's foundation will be dissolved and its \$1.7 million in remaining funds will be given to other nonprofits, under agreements reached by Trump's lawyers and the attorney general's office.

As part of those agreements, made public Thursday, the two sides left it up to the judge to decide what penalty Trump should pay.

The settlement was an about-face for Trump. He had tweeted, "I won't settle this case!" when it was filed in June 2018.

Trump's fine and the charity's funds will be split evenly among eight organizations, including Citymeals on Wheels, the United Negro College Fund and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Attorney General Letitia James welcomed the resolution of the case as a "major victory in our efforts to protect charitable assets and hold accountable those who would abuse charities for personal gain."

"No one is above the law — not a businessman, not a candidate for office, and not even the President of the United States," said James, a Democrat.

The president admitted, among other things, to arranging for the charity to pay

\$10,000 for a 6-foot portrait of him. He also agreed to pay back \$11,525 in foundation funds that he spent on sports memorabilia and champagne at a charity gala.

Trump also accepted restrictions on his involvement in other charitable organizations. His three eldest children, who were members of the foundation's board, must undergo mandatory training on the duties of those who run charities.

Charities are barred from getting involved in political campaigns, but in weighing the Iowa fundraiser, Scarpulla gave Trump credit for making good on his pledge to give \$2.8 million that his charity raised to veterans' organizations.

Instead of fining him that amount, as the attorney general's office wanted, the judge trimmed it to \$2 million and rejected a demand for punitive damages and interest.

The Trump Foundation said it was pleased by those decisions, claiming that the judge "recognized that every penny ever raised by the Trump Foundation has gone to help those most in need."

Trump Foundation lawyer Alan Futefas said the nonprofit has distributed approximately \$19 million over the past decade, including \$8.25 million of the president's own money, to hundreds of charitable organizations.

At the time of the Iowa fundraiser, Trump was feuding with then-Fox News anchor Megyn Kelly and refusing to participate in the network's final Republican presidential primary debate before the Iowa caucuses.

Instead, he held a rally at the same time as the debate at which he called on people to donate to veterans' charities. The foundation acted as a pass-through for those contributions.

James said the evidence of banned coordination between campaign officials and the foundation included emails exchanged with then-Trump campaign manager Corey Lewandowski.

In one email, a Trump company vice president asked Lewandowski for guidance on precisely how to distribute the money raised.

Trump also admitted in the agreements to directing that \$100,000 in foundation money be used to settle legal claims over an 80-foot flagpole he had built at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Palm Beach, Florida, instead of paying the expense out of his own pocket.

In addition, the foundation paid \$158,000 to resolve a lawsuit over a prize for a hole-in-one contest at a Trump-owned golf course, and \$5,000 for ads promoting Trump's hotels in the programs for charitable events. Trump admitted these transactions were also improper.

As part of the settlement, Donald Trump Jr. reimbursed the Trump Foundation for the cost of the portrait.

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