

Brian Williams Taps Media Elite Go-To Partner at Williams & Connolly

By Nell Gluckman

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Correction, 2/20/15, 1:54 PM EST: An earlier version of this story misstate the number of partners at Williams & Connolly. There are 121. The story has been revised accordingly.

Brian Williams, the embattled anchor of NBC's "Nightly News," has retained Williams & Connolly's Robert Barnett to help negotiate his future at the network, according to a source close to Williams.

Barnett represented Williams in talks with NBC executives that resulted in a six-month suspension without pay for the beleaguered broadcaster, who was forced to apologize last week for falsely claiming that he was on board a Chinook helicopter that was fired upon and forced down in Iraq in 2003.

NBC officials considered, but stopped short of, firing Williams, according to a story in The Washington Post about the negotiations. But the deal wasn't an outright win for Williams, who sought but did not receive a promise



Photo by Monica Schipper/Getty

Brian Williams

that he could return to his position, the story reports.

Assisting Williams through the negotiations was Barnett, who has carved out a unique reputation in Washington, D.C., as a cross between corporate lawyer, book agent and contract negotiator for his high-profile clients in politics and the media. Barnett declined to comment for this story, but according to his profile on Williams & Connolly's website, he "represents major corporations in litigation matters, corporate

work, contract, crisis management, transactions, government relations and media relations.”

But he is perhaps better known for his work counseling high-profile politicians and media personalities as they seek book deals or to extract themselves from their very public jobs. A 2004 New York Times profile describes Barnett as a “consummate insider” with close personal and professional relationships on both sides of the aisle.

Indeed, The Washington Post points out that Barnett previously represented NBC News President Deborah Turness, who made the announcement about Williams’ suspension. The source close to Williams says the negotiations over the anchor’s contract were not with Turness.

Barnett’s client list is riddled with recognizable names. For book deals, he’s represented President Barack Obama, former Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Washington Post editor Bob Woodard, former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, among others.

In addition to Williams, the television personalities Barnett’s worked for include CBS’ “60 Minutes” reporter Lesley Stahl and CNN’s

Sanjay Gupta and Christiane Amanpour. Among his corporate clients are McDonalds, General Electric, Comcast, Toyota and Deutsche Bank. (Comcast owns NBC’s parent company NBCUniversal, whose general counsel Kimberley Harris is also involved in the network’s ongoing internal investigation of Williams.)

Although the small but storied Williams & Connolly has garnered a reputation for counseling celebrities, the Washington, D.C.-based firm has also been at the center of some of the highest-profile scandals of the 20th century.

Williams & Connolly attorneys represented Oliver North, former deputy-director of the National Security Council during the Iran-contra scandal in the late 1980s and Bill Clinton during his impeachment trial in 1999. The 275-attorney firm, which has only one office, boasts on its website that all but one of its partners were trained at the firm and promoted from within during the past 25 years.

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