

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF
NEW YORK

Charles Oakley v. MSG Networks, Inc., et al.

Oakley · No. 17-cv-6903 (RJS) · Decided November 21, 2025

SUMMARY

The court overruled Charles Oakley’s objection to a magistrate judge’s denial of his motion to stay payment of \$642,337.65 in attorneys’ fees and costs imposed as spoliation sanctions. Applying Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 72(a) and the factors governing stays, the court concluded that Oakley had not shown clear error, likely irreparable harm, or a likelihood of success on the merits.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Southern District of New York
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Richard J. Sullivan
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Southern District of New York
DECIDED	November 21, 2025
DOCKET	17-cv-6903 (RJS)
DISPOSITION	other
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Plaintiff objected under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 72(a) to a magistrate judge's order denying his motion to stay payment of attorneys' fees and costs imposed as spoliation sanctions.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 72(a), a magistrate judge's nondispositive pretrial order may be modified or set aside only if it is clearly erroneous or contrary to law; reversal is appropriate only for an abuse of discretion. A motion to stay is evaluated under the four-factor test stated in <i>Nken v. Holder</i> .
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	unpublished district court order
PARTIES	Charles Oakley v. MSG Networks, Inc., et al.

TOPICS

- civil procedure
- sanctions
- attorney fees
- costs
- injunctions

PRACTICE AREAS

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the magistrate judge's denial of Oakley's motion to stay payment of attorneys' fees and costs was clearly erroneous or contrary to law under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 72(a).
2. Whether Oakley satisfied the four-factor standard for obtaining a stay, including a likelihood of success on the merits, irreparable harm, potential injury to other parties, and the public interest.

HOLDINGS

1. A magistrate judge's nondispositive pretrial order may be modified or set aside only if it is clearly erroneous or contrary to law, and reversal is appropriate only when the magistrate judge abused his or her discretion.
2. Oakley was not entitled to a stay because he failed to establish a strong likelihood of success on the merits or irreparable harm, and he therefore did not satisfy the stay factors.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 72(a), the Court may “modify or set aside” a magistrate judge’s non-dispositive pretrial order only if it is “clearly erroneous or is contrary to law.””

“Courts must weigh four factors when evaluating motions to stay: “(1) whether the stay applicant has made a strong showing that he is likely to succeed on the merits; (2) whether the applicant will be irreparably injured absent a stay; (3) whether issuance of the stay will substantially injure the other parties interested in the proceeding; and (4) where the public interest lies.”” (426)

“because monetary injury can be estimated and compensated, the likelihood of such injury usually does not constitute irreparable harm.” (249)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Oakley was ordered to pay \$642,337.65 in attorneys' fees and costs arising from spoliation sanctions. He argued that a stay was warranted because he was likely to succeed on the merits of his objections concerning the consideration of defense-counsel biographies and the characterization of the litigation as complex commercial litigation, and because payment would cause substantial injury. The court concluded that the merits arguments were unlikely to succeed and that the claimed monetary hardship did not constitute irreparable harm.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The court had previously imposed \$642,337.65 in attorneys' fees and costs as spoliation sanctions. Magistrate Judge Robyn F. Tarnofsky denied Oakley's motion to stay payment, and Oakley objected to that order. The district court, through Circuit Judge Richard J. Sullivan sitting by designation, overruled the objection and directed the Clerk to terminate it.

DISPOSITION

CASES CITED

- Thai Lao Lignite (Thailand) Co. v. Gov't of Lao People's Democratic Republic, 924 F. Supp. 2d 508, 511 (S.D.N.Y. 2013)
- Nken v. Holder, 556 U.S. 418, 426 (2009)
- Nat. Res. Def. Council, Inc. v. U.S. Food & Drug Admin., 884 F. Supp. 2d 108, 122 (S.D.N.Y. 2012)
- Haua v. Prodigy Network, LLC, 2022 WL 20056294, at *3 (S.D.N.Y. Aug. 5, 2022)
- Brenntag Int'l Chem., Inc. v. Bank of India, 175 F.3d 245, 249 (2d Cir. 1999)

OPINION

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF NEW YORK CHARLES OAKLEY, Plaintiff, No. 17-cv-6903 (RJS) -v- ORDER MSG NETWORKS, INC., et al., Defendants. RICHARD J. SULLIVAN, Circuit Judge: Plaintiff Charles Oakley objects to the November 20, 2025 order of Magistrate Judge Robyn F. Tarnofsky denying his motion to stay the payment of \$642,337.65 in attorneys' fees and costs in connection with spoliation sanctions that the Court imposed on July 23, 2025.

For the reasons set forth below, the objection is overruled. Under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 72(a), the Court may “modify or set aside” a magistrate judge’s non-dispositive pretrial order only if it is “clearly erroneous or is contrary to law.” Fed. R. Civ. P. 72(a); see also 28 U.S.C. § 636(b) (1).

Under the Rule 72 standard, “magistrate judges are afforded broad discretion in resolving nondispositive disputes and reversal is appropriate only if their discretion is abused.” Thai Lao Lignite (Thailand) Co. v. Gov't of Lao People's Democratic Republic, 924 F. Supp. 2d 508, 511 (S.D.N.Y. 2013) (internal quotation marks omitted). Courts must weigh four factors when evaluating motions to stay: “(1) whether the stay applicant has made a strong showing that he is likely to succeed on the merits; (2) whether the applicant will be irreparably injured absent a stay; (3) whether issuance of the stay will substantially injure the other parties interested in the proceeding; and (4) where the public interest lies.” Nken v. Holder, 556 U.S. 418, 426 (2009) (internal quotation marks omitted). “The party seeking the stay bears a heavy burden to establish a favorable balance of these factors.” Nat.

Res. Def. Council, Inc., v. U.S. Food & Drug Admin., 884 F. Supp. 2d 108, 122 (S.D.N.Y. 2012) (internal quotation marks omitted and alteration accepted). Oakley has not carried that burden here – let alone demonstrated that Judge Tarnofsky clearly erred.

In his objection, Oakley primarily argues (1) that he is likely to succeed on the merits, and (2) that he faces a risk of substantial injury if he must comply with the Fees Order. (Doc. No. 469 at 1–2).

But Oakley’s arguments on the merits – chiefly that Judge Tarnofsky erred by considering biographies of Defendants’ attorneys that were publicly posted on their firm’s website and by improperly treating this case as a complex commercial litigation – will likely fail because courts routinely consider such biographies, see, e.g., *Haua v. Prodigy Network, LLC*, 2022 WL 20056294, at *3 (S.D.N.Y.

Aug. 5, 2022), Defendants submitted a declaration attesting to the accuracy of the biographies (Doc. No. 454 at ¶ 3), and this case originally involved a complex set of ten claims against multiple corporate defendants (Doc. No. 1). Oakley’s contention that he will be substantially injured by having to pay fees and costs also falls short of the mark: “because monetary injury can be estimated and compensated, the likelihood of such injury usually does not constitute irreparable harm.” *Brenntag Int’l Chem., Inc. v. Bank of India*, 175 F.3d 245, 249 (2d Cir.

1999). And Oakley cites no caselaw supporting his novel argument that the length and nature of this particular litigation themselves constitute “considerable hardship” that rises to the level of irreparable harm justifying a stay. (Doc. No. 469 at 2.)

Accordingly, IT IS HEREBY ORDERED THAT Oakley’s objection to the denial of his motion for a stay is OVERRULED. The Clerk of Court is respectfully directed to terminate the objection pending at Doc. No. 469. SO ORDERED. Dated: November 21, 2025 (New York, New York
RICHARD J. SULLIVAN UNITED STATES CIRCUIT JUDGE Sitting by Designation