

Free-Speech Ruling in Hughes Case

Los Angeles

Because of First Amendment freedom of speech, billionaire Howard Hughes won't have to pay punishment damages for allegedly saying a fired aide was "a no-good dishonest son of a bitch and he stole me blind," a federal judge ruled yesterday.

But the judge said that Hughes, may have to pay actual damages, if any, suffered by the deposed Robert Maheu, who once ran the Hughes' Nevada business empire of hotels and land holdings.

Judge Harry Pregerson of U.S. District Court said that to allow damages a "chilling effect on freedom of speech."

His decision limits a jury due to begin deliberations October 29 to a consideration solely of what actual damages in his career as a result of the Hughes' comment during the course of a 1972 telephone news conference.

Court observers termed the judge's decision a precedent.

Earlier, in a four-month trial, a jury had ruled that Hughes had defamed Maheu. Jurors added that in their view Summa had failed to prove what would have been a successful defense to the Maheu suit: that the Hughes' allegation was true.

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