

Three former Trump aides indicted as Washington political warfare intensifies

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The indictment of two Trump election campaign aides, including former campaign chairman Paul Manafort, and the indictment and guilty plea of a third aide mark a new stage in the political warfare in Washington. Such indictments are typically the first step in a prosecutorial strategy that starts with lower-ranking figures, using charges and plea deals to gain their cooperation as witnesses against the central target, in this case, Trump and his inner circle.

The investigation into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 US election and possible collusion by the Trump campaign, spearheaded by Special Counsel and former FBI Director Robert Mueller, is the mechanism through which powerful sections of the military-intelligence apparatus, in alliance with the Democratic Party, are seeking to destabilize the Trump administration, with the goal of either shifting its foreign policy in a more openly anti-Russian direction or creating the conditions for Trump's removal from office.

None of the charges against Manafort and his top aide Rick Gates made public Monday has anything directly to do with allegations of Russian manipulation of the US election campaign. Manafort and Gates were indicted on 12 counts of money-laundering, conspiracy, filing false reports and failing to register as representatives of a foreign power in connection with their work as lobbyists and political operatives for the former president of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, and his pro-Russian political party.

The indictment, which appears to have an extensive factual basis, claims that the two men concealed some \$75 million in payments from Yanukovich, his government and his Party of Regions over the course of a 10-year period from 2006 to 2015. Much of this money was used to lobby the US Congress and the executive branch for legislation and administrative actions favorable to the Yanukovich regime. The rest went into the pockets of

Manafort and Gates, allegedly without them reporting it as income. The two are accused of using offshore accounts to conceal their wealth from the Internal Revenue Service.

Manafort and Gates surrendered to the FBI Monday morning and were taken before a federal judge, where not-guilty pleas were entered and bail was set at \$10 million for Manafort and \$5 million for Gates. The two were then released into house arrest.

The same day, a guilty plea by former Trump foreign policy adviser George Papadopoulos was made public. In the plea, the former campaign aide admitted lying to the FBI in interviews in January and February of this year about contacts with at least three Russians in the course of 2016.

Papadopoulos was arrested in July and has apparently been cooperating with the Mueller investigation since then. He is described in at least one court document as a "proactive cooperator" whose sentencing recommendation depends on the value of his collaboration. He pled guilty on October 5 but the charges against him and the plea were sealed until Monday.

The 30-year-old former oil and gas industry consultant pleaded guilty to several counts of lying about the timing and importance of his contacts with the three Russians, one of them alleged to be a representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. There was no claim that he lied to the FBI about the content of the discussions, including his claim that the Russians were offering "dirt" about Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. This suggests that Mueller may be seeking to preserve Papadopoulos's credibility as a witness against higher-ranking campaign officials.

The court papers on Papadopoulos cite his discussions with high-level Trump campaign officials concerning his contacts with the three Russians. One of the Trump officials, unnamed in the court documents but identified

by the press as Manafort, is described as encouraging Papadopoulos to seek anti-Clinton information from his Russian contacts.

In a press briefing later Monday, White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders argued that the indictment of Manafort and Gates was for actions they had taken years before they joined the Trump campaign in March 2016. She dismissed the perjury guilty plea by George Papadopoulos, calling him an “unpaid volunteer” who met only once with top campaign officials and had no standing to speak for the campaign.

Both Sanders and Trump continued to push claims of Democratic Party collaboration with Russia before and during the election campaign. This effort received support from the indictment of Manafort and Gates, which repeatedly cites the role of “Company A,” the lobbying partner of the two longtime Republicans, which was revealed Monday to be Podesta Group, a major Washington lobbying firm aligned with the Democratic Party and headed by Anthony Podesta, brother of John Podesta, Hillary Clinton’s campaign chairman.

By the close of business Monday, Podesta Group announced that its founder and namesake had resigned from the company and the firm would be sold to a group of its executives, who would operate the business under a new name. Last week, NBC News reported that Podesta Group was a target of the special counsel’s investigation, which has “morphed into a criminal inquiry into whether the firm violated the Foreign Agents Registration Act.”

The Democratic Party-aligned lobbying firm was thus facing the same charge as Republicans Manafort and Gates: acting as agents of the government of Ukraine and the pro-Russian ruling party without registering as required by federal law.

This casts a spotlight on the cynicism of the anti-Russian campaign being waged by the Democrats, which combines the demonization of Russia with denunciations of Trump for being “soft” on Moscow. Individuals aligned with both capitalist parties are quite willing to pocket millions on offer from foreign regimes seeking to curry favor in Washington. At the same time, both parties are instruments of the US ruling elite, unalterably loyal to Wall Street, the Pentagon and the CIA.

The next steps in the ongoing political warfare remain highly uncertain. On one side, Trump is being pressed by far-right advisers like Stephen Bannon and the editors of the *Wall Street Journal* to break openly with the political norms of Washington, fire Mueller and shut down the investigation outright. This course would involve an open

appeal to ultra-right, extra-parliamentary support against the expected backlash in Congress, even among sections of the Republican Party.

The factions of the ruling class represented by Mueller see the special counsel investigation as a means of ratcheting up their pressure on the Trump administration for specific policy changes, particularly in the area of foreign policy. They want a more hard-line opposition to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and, more generally, against Russian influence in the Middle East and Central Asia, something Trump has begun to deliver.

On both sides, there are demands to criminalize political dissent and censor the Internet in order to crack down on any independent expression of the sentiments of the vast majority of the American people, who are opposed to war and face an ever more desperate struggle to survive economically, even as Trump proclaims the glories of an ever-rising stock market.

Mueller is the representative of the “deep state” of military brass, intelligence officers and their political and media flunkies. There is nothing progressive in either warring faction within the ruling class. Both sides represent sections of the financial oligarchy whose domination has become a nightmarish burden on American society.

A socially progressive outcome depends on the emergence of the working class as an independent political force, putting forward its own class demands in defense of jobs, living standards and democratic rights and against imperialist war.



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