

The Stormy Daniels scandal: Political warfare in Washington hits a new low

Patrick Martin
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The “60 Minutes” broadcast on Sunday night, devoted to rehashing allegations of sexual impropriety and bullying against Donald Trump, marked a new level of degradation for the US political system. For nearly half an hour, an audience of 23 million people tuned in to a discussion of a brief sexual encounter between Trump and adult film star Stormy Daniels (Stephanie Clifford) in 2006.

Trump was then a near-bankrupt real estate and casino mogul, best known for reinventing himself as a television personality. By her account, the proffer of a possible guest appearance on *Celebrity Apprentice* was the only attraction the 60-year-old Trump had for Daniels, then 27. Trump made promises, but as usual did not deliver.

Earlier in the week, the same interviewer, Anderson Cooper, appearing on CNN instead of CBS, held an hour-long discussion with Karen McDougal, a former *Playboy* magazine centerfold, who described a year-long relationship with Trump, also in 2006, the year after his marriage to Melania Knauss.

White House officials flatly denied both accounts, but Trump himself has been conspicuously and unusually silent, even on Twitter. His lawyers filed papers with a Los Angeles court, in advance of the “60 Minutes” broadcast, claiming that Daniels was in violation of a confidentiality agreement and could be liable for damages of up to \$20 million.

Last Tuesday, a New York state judge turned down a motion by lawyers acting for Trump and refused to dismiss the lawsuit for defamation brought against him by Summer Zervos, a former contestant on another Trump “reality” show, *The Apprentice*. One of nearly a dozen women who made public charges of sexual harassment against Trump during the final weeks of the 2016 campaign, Zervos alone has sued Trump over his

repeated public claims that the women were all liars.

There is little doubt that the accounts by Zervos, McDougal and Daniels are substantially true. Trump has already demonstrated this by attempting to suppress their stories, either through legal action or by purchasing their silence, directly or indirectly. A Trump ally, David Pecker, owner of the *National Enquirer* tabloid, bought the rights to McDougal’s account of her relationship with Trump in 2016 for \$150,000, in order not to publish it. Trump’s personal attorney, Michael Cohen, admitted last month that he had paid \$130,000 to Daniels in October 2016, only weeks before the election, to guarantee her silence.

The bullying tactics of Cohen and other Trump allies add credibility to the claim by Daniels, during her “60 Minutes” interview, that a thug, presumably sent by Cohen, had threatened her with violence in 2011, when she first sought to sell her story about Trump to the media. Daniels offered no evidence to back her claim, but her attorney Michael Avenatti dropped broad hints that Daniels would be able to corroborate much of her account.

Cohen may himself face some legal jeopardy due to his public declaration that he paid Daniels out of his own funds. Given the proximity of the payment to the election, this could well be construed as a cash contribution to the Trump campaign far beyond the \$3,500 legal limit for an individual.

The Zervos suit, however, may present the most immediate legal threat, since the next step, after New York Supreme Court Justice Jennifer G. Schecter rejected Trump’s claim that he has presidential immunity, is to take discovery. In other words, Trump and his closest aides could be required to give sworn depositions about his actions in relation to Zervos and many of the other women.

Justice Schecter cited the precedent of the Paula Jones case against President Bill Clinton, in which the US Supreme Court held that a US president had no immunity from lawsuits over his private actions. While cloaked in democratic rhetoric at the time (“No one is above the law”), that decision actually gave a green light to an anti-democratic conspiracy by ultra-right forces who used the Jones lawsuit to trap Clinton into lying about his relationship with Monica Lewinsky.

Unlike the 1998-1999 conflict over impeachment, there is no issue of democratic rights involved in the sexual allegations against Trump. Some of the same legal tactics (using sworn depositions to set a perjury trap), are being employed as weapons in an increasingly bitter conflict within the US ruling elite, in which both factions are equally reactionary.

Trump is a representative of the underworld of real estate, casino gambling and reality television, elevated to the presidency because he had the good fortune to run against a deeply unpopular and reactionary shill for Wall Street and the military-intelligence agencies, Hillary Clinton. Under conditions of mounting discontent among working people with the Democratic Party, after eight years of the Obama administration, Trump was able to eke out a narrow victory in the Electoral College.

The Democratic “opposition” to Trump is focused not on his vicious attacks on immigrants, his promotion of racist and neo-fascist elements, his deregulation of business and passage of the biggest tax cut for the wealthy in decades, or his increasingly violent and unhinged foreign policy pronouncements. The Democrats have sought to attack Trump from the right, particularly on the question of US-Russian relations, making use of the investigation into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 elections, headed by former FBI Director Robert Mueller.

Trump has sought to mollify his critics within the US national security establishment with measures such as a more aggressive US intervention in Syria, the elevation of Gina Haspel, the CIA’s chief torturer, to head the agency, and, most recently, the expulsion of dozens of Russian diplomats as part a NATO-wide campaign aimed at whipping up a war fever against Moscow.

As Trump has made concessions on foreign policy, his opponents have shifted their ground, attacking his behavior towards women. They have sought to link

these exposures with the broader #MeToo campaign, which is aimed at creating a witch-hunt atmosphere in Hollywood, the US political system, and more generally throughout American society, in which gender issues are brought forward to conceal and suppress more fundamental class questions.

In both the Russia investigation and now the allegations of sexual misconduct, the Democrats have sought to hide their real political agenda, which is just as reactionary and dangerous as that of Trump and the Republicans. While Trump is pushing towards war with North Korea or Iran, and behind them China, the Democrats and their allies in the national security apparatus seek to maintain the focus on Russia that was developed during the second term of the Obama administration, particularly in Syria, Ukraine and Eastern Europe as a whole, posing the danger of a war between the world’s two main nuclear powers.

Beyond the immediate foreign policy issues, the whipping up of sexual scandals is invariably a hallmark of reactionary politics. Such methods appeal to social backwardness, Puritanical prejudices or prurient interest. They contribute nothing to the political education of working people and youth, who must come to understand the fundamental class forces underlying all political phenomena. The political basis for a struggle against Trump is not in designating him as a sexual predator, but in understanding his class role as a front man for the American financial oligarchy, which treats the entire working class, including the female half, as objects of exploitation.



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