

US political warfare intensifies after Cohen plea, Manafort conviction

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The political warfare between the Trump White House and its opponents in the military-intelligence apparatus, the Democratic Party and the corporate media reached a new level of savagery Wednesday in the wake of the legal blows to former Trump aides the previous day.

Former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort was convicted of eight felony counts, including income tax evasion, bank fraud and filing false statements with the government, after a three-week jury trial in Alexandria, Virginia. Former Trump attorney and self-styled “fix-it man” Michael Cohen pleaded guilty to eight felony counts in a federal court in Manhattan, including income tax evasion, bank fraud and two counts of violating federal campaign finance laws.

In the most damaging aspect of the day’s events, Cohen declared in open court, as his guilty pleas were made before federal Judge Kimba Wood, that in orchestrating payoffs in 2016 to former *Playboy* model Karen McDougal and pornographic film actress Stormy Daniels he had acted “in coordination and at the direction of a candidate for federal office,” in other words, Trump. He stipulated as well that the purpose of the payoffs was to suppress their accounts of sexual relationships with Trump in light of the presidential election.

One of Cohen’s attorneys, Lanny Davis, followed up this statement by posing the question: “If those payments were a crime for Michael Cohen, then why wouldn’t they be a crime for Donald Trump?” Davis, a longtime Democratic Party operative who worked as a defense lawyer against impeachment for President Bill Clinton, made the rounds of television interview programs Tuesday night and Wednesday morning, all but demanding congressional action to impeach Trump.

He told CNN that Cohen’s testimony could assist the investigation by Special Counsel Robert Mueller into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election and Trump campaign collusion with Russia. “Michael Cohen has information that would be of interest to Mr. Mueller in his probe of a conspiracy to corrupt American democracy,” he said.

Davis added, referring to the payoffs to suppress accounts by McDougal and Daniels: “There is no doubt that Donald Trump committed a crime and, more than that, a cover-up of the crime.

Because he did not want to write the check to Stormy Daniels.”

He claimed that Cohen was motivated in making his confession to the federal charges by newfound political hostility to the Trump presidency. “Patriotism and love of country caused him to recognize the danger of this particular president, his lack of suitability to be president of the United States,” Davis said.

With the conviction of Manafort and the guilty plea by Cohen, the four aides who stood closest to Trump exactly two years ago are all now convicted criminals. Manafort was campaign chairman, now found guilty of fraud and tax evasion. Rick Gates, his deputy, has pled guilty to multiple felonies and testified as a prosecution witness in the Manafort trial. Gen. Michael Flynn, Trump’s top adviser on national security and a prominent campaign surrogate, has pled guilty to felony charges of lying to the FBI and is cooperating with the Mueller investigation. And Michael Cohen, Trump’s closest personal aide at the time, has pled guilty and his lawyer is shopping his services to Mueller as well.

The media outlets that have been spearheading the anti-Russia campaign, based on unproven allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 election, seized on the Cohen plea and the Manafort conviction as a vindication of the Mueller investigation, although neither case has anything to do with Russia.

The *New York Times*, in an editorial headlined “All the President’s Crooks,” wrote, “Only a complete fantasist—that is, only President Trump and his cult—could continue to claim that this investigation of foreign subversion of an American election, which has already yielded dozens of other indictments and several guilty pleas, is a ‘hoax’ or ‘scam’ or ‘rigged witch hunt.’”

The *Washington Post*, under the headline “Sixteen felonies,” made the same argument, claiming that with the Manafort conviction, “Mr. Mueller continues to demonstrate with quiet professionalism and steady results that his investigation is anything but the ‘witch hunt’ of Mr. Trump’s insult-mongering.”

The newspaper essentially declared the 2016 election fraudulent, because, through the suppression of the Trump sex stories, “American voters...were prevented from learning

potentially relevant information ahead of Election Day 2016.” The editorial went on to demand a congressional investigation into the Cohen charges against Trump, calling him the “alleged co-conspirator in the White House.”

Tuesday also brought the indictment of Republican Congressman Duncan Hunter Jr. of California on multiple counts of campaign finance violations and fraud. Hunter allegedly used at least \$250,000 in campaign funds for personal expenses, including trips to Hawaii and Italy. The indictment of Hunter follows the indictment earlier this month of Republican Congressman Chris Collins of New York on charges of securities fraud and insider trading.

There is no doubt that similar charges could be brought against dozens of members of Congress, both in the House and the Senate, Democratic and Republican. What separates Collins and Hunter from other equally corrupt capitalist politicians is that they were the first two congressmen to endorse Trump for the Republican presidential nomination in 2016. Their selective prosecution is political payback within the ruling elite, another blow against the Trump camp.

The timing of the indictments is obviously political, coming barely two months before the midterm election, on charges that have been known to federal prosecutors for several years. Both representatives were referred to the House Ethics Committee in 2016 for the conduct that has now produced a criminal indictment well after the deadline for replacing the candidates on the ballot. In a particularly brutal display of political hardball, the families of the two representatives were indicted, not just the congressmen themselves: Hunter’s wife and Collins’s son were also charged and could face prison terms and heavy fines.

In the face of this onslaught from the Department of Justice headed by Trump’s nominee, Attorney General Jeff Sessions, the response from his camp has been weak and defensive. His top personal lawyer, Rudolph Giuliani, issued a statement on the Cohen plea declaring, “There is no allegation of any wrongdoing against the president in the government’s charges against Mr. Cohen.”

White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders used a similarly legalistic formula at a Wednesday press briefing, declaring of Trump, “he did nothing wrong. There are no charges against him,” and repeating that language several times in response to press queries.

Trump himself made no mention of Cohen or Manafort during an hour-long speech at a campaign rally in West Virginia Tuesday night. In a series of tweets Wednesday morning, he praised Manafort as “brave” because he refused to plead guilty, while sneering at Cohen.

In an interview with Fox News Channel on Wednesday, he claimed that the payments to Karen McDougal and Stormy Daniels were not illegal because they “came from me” and not from the funds of the presidential campaign, and therefore were not covered by campaign finance laws.

“In fact, my first question when I heard about it was did they come out of the campaign because that could be a little dicey,” he continued. “And they didn’t come out of the campaign and that’s big. But they weren’t... it’s not even a campaign violation.”

He added that he did not know of the payments until some time after Cohen made them, an assertion contradicted not only by Cohen’s testimony, but also by audio tapes secretly made by Cohen in which the two men discuss the scheme to suppress McDougal’s story by having the *National Enquirer* buy the rights to it and then not publish.

The developments with Cohen and Manafort sparked a flurry of comments about impeachment from media pundits and sections of the Democratic Party, although the top Democrat in the House of Representatives, Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, said it was “not a priority,” adding that it was premature to discuss impeachment before the issuing of a report by the Mueller investigation.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer made much the same point in a speech on the Senate floor, in which he called for delaying action on the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court because the president would in effect be choosing “one of the jury” in a future court ruling arising from the corruption probes and the Mueller investigation.

The senior Democrat on the Senate Judiciary Committee, Dianne Feinstein, issued a statement Wednesday saying, “The possibility of criminal wrongdoing by the president, combined with existing doubts that Brett Kavanaugh believes a president can even be investigated, demand further review of this situation. Brett Kavanaugh’s hearing should be delayed.”

Congressional Republicans poured cold water over the discussion of impeachment or any delay in the Kavanaugh nomination, but otherwise sought to avoid a public defense of Trump. Neither House Speaker Paul Ryan nor Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell made any statement.

The number two Senate Republican, John Cornyn of Texas, avoided questions about Cohen’s implication of Trump in a felony. “I have no idea about what the facts are surrounding his guilty plea other than the fact that none of it has anything to do with the Russia investigation,” Cornyn said. “I would make the same observation with regard to Mr. Manafort.”



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