

Trump's ex-lawyer testifies before Congress

Michael Cohen hearing: A criminal administration, a reactionary opposition

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Wednesday's seven-hour nationally televised hearing, in which former Trump lawyer and "fixer" Michael Cohen appeared before the House Oversight Committee, was a degrading demonstration of the reactionary character of both the pro-Trump and anti-Trump factions within the ruling class and the state.

While the members of the Republican minority in the House abased themselves as stooges for Trump, the majority Democrats wallowed in scandal-mongering, primarily over sex, in order to evade any struggle against Trump's authoritarian and militarist policies.

The hearing clearly showed through the testimony of Cohen, who worked for 10 years as Trump's legal enforcer, that Donald Trump conducts his business enterprise, the Trump Organization, like a Mafia gangster, a revelation that should surprise no one.

Cohen himself acknowledged that he had threatened people "hundreds" of times on Trump's behalf. His targets included newspaper reporters, rival business figures, people to whom Trump owed money, politicians and many others. One of his principal activities was hushing up scandals involving Trump's business and private life, in many cases by buying off those who might publicly complain or threatening to bankrupt them with punitive lawsuits.

Cohen played a key role as the bag man in Trump's efforts to block attempts by his political opponents to use sex scandals to demolish his election campaign. He brokered the efforts of the *National Enquirer* tabloid, owned by Trump crony David Pecker, to purchase for \$120,000, and then suppress, the tell-all account of one Trump paramour, former Playboy playmate Karen McDougal, a common practice among the super-rich known as "catch and kill."

In the final weeks of the 2016 campaign, Cohen paid \$130,000 to porn actress Stormy Daniels to keep quiet about her past relationship with Trump. Daniels' account would have added to the uproar already created over the "Access Hollywood" tape, which recorded Trump boasting of his

ability to assault women with impunity because of his celebrity status and wealth.

The payoff to Daniels was a violation of federal campaign finance laws, according to the plea bargain Cohen entered into last year. He pled guilty to a half dozen other tax and bank fraud charges as well, most involving his non-Trump business activities as the owner of a failed Manhattan taxicab business. He also pled guilty to lying to Congress. He is to begin serving a three-year prison term in May.

Cohen agreed to become a cooperating prosecution witness for the Trump-Russia investigation headed by Special Counsel Robert Mueller and for the US attorney for the Southern District of New York, whose office is investigating myriad financial and tax charges against the Trump Organization.

The campaign finance charge was the most important, since Cohen alleged he was carrying out the instructions of Trump personally to buy Daniels' silence. Much of his testimony Wednesday concerned his role in the hush-money scheme, and Cohen presented copies of personal checks from Trump, written after he had taken office as president, as well as checks from the Trump Organization, which claimed the hush money as a business expense, calling it a retainer for Cohen's legal services.

Even more ominous, from the standpoint of Trump's legal position, was Cohen's declaration that he remains in "constant contact" with the Southern District of New York, which is investigating other, undisclosed criminal allegations against the Trump Organization, i.e., against the president, still the principal owner, and his two sons, Donald Jr. and Eric, who manage the business.

Unlike the Russia investigation, which is based on completely bogus allegations that Trump is a "Siberian candidate" controlled and manipulated by Russian President Putin, the investigation into Trump's business affairs has evidence galore. As the *World Socialist Web Site* observed last year, after the extraordinary FBI raid on Cohen's

Manhattan home and office:

Mueller and the anti-Trump camp within the ruling elite know very well that the billionaire New York real estate and gambling speculator-turned president is mired in criminal activity, which is certain to be reflected in the material seized from Cohen. They have Trump by the throat, and Trump knows it.

House Oversight Committee Chairman Elijah Cummings laid out ground rules for the interrogation of Cohen at the beginning of the hearing, discouraging any questions that would impinge on the Russia investigation being conducted by Mueller. As a result, there was little probing of Trump's business ties to Moscow, where Cohen reportedly played a significant role in efforts, ultimately unsuccessful, to build a Trump Tower in the Russian capital.

The hearing played out by rote, with Democratic questioners focusing entirely on eliciting disparaging remarks from Cohen about Trump—the “racist, con man and philanderer” of the media headlines—while Republican questioners defended Trump (whom they barely mentioned by name) by denouncing Cohen as a convicted liar. This line of argument made little political or legal sense, since Cohen admitted to lying to Congress in order to shield Trump's business activities in Russia from investigation.

In the course of his testimony Wednesday, Cohen explained that Trump had not directly instructed him to lie, but had conveyed his intentions nonetheless, indirectly. Trump's lawyers handling the Mueller probe reviewed his (false) testimony before he delivered it, and even made changes in its content. So in lying to Congress, he was acting as the agent of the liar-in-chief in the White House.

The Democrats made every effort to limit their attacks on Trump to scandal-mongering, avoiding any discussion of the broader implications of Trump's systematic attacks on democratic rights, including his persecution of immigrants, his praise of neo-Nazis and violent police, his ban on Muslim visitors, and, most recently, his declaration of a national emergency to obtain funds to build his wall on the US-Mexico border, an action that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi called “shredding the Constitution.”

After the hearing, Chairman Cummings boasted that “not one person on our side mentioned impeachment,” as though that was an achievement to be proud of. Instead, there were questions on some of the more lurid allegations that have been making the rounds on the internet and at Washington cocktail parties, including claims of a tape of Trump beating his wife Melania, all of which Cohen flatly denied.

It is notable that among those who adhered to the Democratic Party line of “scandals only, no politics” were Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib, both members of the Democratic Socialists of America, as well as Ayanna Pressley, the African-American congresswoman from Boston who has been aligned with Ocasio-Cortez, Tlaib and Ilhan Omar as the face of the identity politics “left” in the Democratic House majority.

Ocasio-Cortez narrowly focused her questioning on Trump's building a golf course in the Bronx subsidized by taxpayer funds, from which he reaps considerable profit, as well as on a recent exposé by the *New York Times* about the tax scams in which Trump and his father engaged to avoid inheritance taxes.

The only point at which the political substance of the crisis in the US ruling elite was touched on came at the very end, when Cohen gave a closing statement. He cited Trump's olive branch to the neo-Nazi right after the Charlottesville, Virginia, riot in August 2017, when an anti-fascist demonstrator was killed. He then said he was worried that if Trump loses the 2020 election, “there will never be a peaceful transition of power.”

This remarkable statement went almost unnoticed in the blanket media coverage of the hearing and was ignored by the Democrats on the panel.

What both the Democrats and Republicans sought to conceal throughout the hearing were the actual political issues being fought out behind the scenes in Washington. These relate largely to foreign policy, with the Democrats demanding a more aggressive posture toward Russia and opposing Trump's inclination to move away from confrontation with Moscow in Syria and Ukraine, as well as his maneuvers in the Far East with North Korea's Kim Jong-un.

It is noteworthy that the hearing went ahead as scheduled on February 27, the same day that Trump held his summit with the North Korean leader in Vietnam, even though it could easily have been postponed. Cohen does not report to prison until May and is completely at the disposal of Congress until then.



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