

Trump continues post-impeachment power grab with Roger Stone intervention

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13 February 2020

In the aftermath of the Democrats' failed impeachment drive, President Donald Trump is moving to consolidate his personal control over the government and surround himself with officials directly dependent on his approval.

This process—which has seen exemplary firings of White House officials who testified in the House of Representatives impeachment inquiry—reached a new level this week with Trump's intervention into the impending sentencing of his long-time political confidant Roger Stone.

The right-wing Republican operative was convicted last November in a Washington DC federal court for lying to the FBI and Congress, obstruction of justice and witness tampering. He was indicted in January of 2019 by then-Special Counsel Robert Mueller in connection with the investigation into alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 US election and possible collusion by the Trump election campaign.

Stone, who falsely claimed to have been in contact with WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, was central to the efforts of the Democratic Party and then-CIA Director Mike Pompeo to frame up Assange as a Russian agent. The Democrats, in particular, concocted the narrative of a conspiracy between Assange and Putin to publish damaging Clinton emails stolen by the Russians in order to swing the election to Trump.

When Mueller's 22-month probe ended with no evidence linking the Trump campaign to Vladimir Putin's supposed massive interference in the election, the Democrats and their allies in the CIA and the military decided to continue their anti-Russia agitation and opposition to Trump's policy toward Moscow in the form of impeachment. Last week's Senate vote to acquit Trump of the impeachment articles passed by the Democratic-controlled House has strengthened the

crisis-ridden Trump administration, but did not end the conflict within the ruling class and state that produced the impeachment drive.

Stone's impending sentencing, set for February 20 by US District Judge Amy Berman Jackson, an Obama appointee, has once again brought the internal conflict into the open. On Monday, the Washington DC US Attorney's Office, which presided over the prosecution of Stone and other Trump associates such as Paul Manafort and Michael Flynn, recommended that Stone be sentenced to seven to nine years in prison.

Trump tweeted a denunciation of the proposed sentence in the early morning hours of Tuesday, calling it a "horrible and very unfair situation." He continued, "The real crimes were on the other side, as nothing happens to them. Cannot allow this miscarriage of justice!"

Just hours later, under orders from Attorney General William Barr, the Justice Department submitted a new filing with the court overturning the sentencing recommendation of the professional prosecutors and calling for a sharply reduced sentence for Stone, without making a specific proposal.

This was followed soon after by the resignation from the case of all four prosecutors, in a clear rebuke to Trump and Barr. Two of the four, Aaron Zelinsky and Adam Jed, had worked on Mueller's team. Jonathan Kravis and Zelinsky resigned their posts at the DC US Attorney's office, and Kravis resigned from the Justice Department altogether.

The political fireworks surrounding the Stone sentencing sparked a flurry of denunciations of Trump in most media outlets, which have been supportive of the Democrats. Both House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer denounced the intervention by Trump and Barr and called for an

investigation.

Trump has responded by escalating his attacks on his political opponents. He issued a series of angry tweets Tuesday night, including one that spoke of “an investigation that was illegal, the Mueller Scam, and shouldn’t even have started.”

On Wednesday morning, he tweeted: “Congratulations to Attorney General Bill Barr for taking charge of a case that was totally out of control and perhaps should not have even been brought. Evidence now clearly shows that the Mueller Scam was improperly brought & tainted. Even Bob Mueller lied to Congress!”

Many of Trump’s tweets and statements include threats to prosecute opponents, including Mueller, former FBI Director James Comey, Hillary Clinton and her former campaign chairman, John Podesta. He has also attacked Judge Amy Berman Jackson.

The intervention in behalf of Stone is part of a broader attack by Trump on those deemed to be opponents, including many who served in the White House or other parts of his administration.

Since his acquittal by the Senate, Trump has removed Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman and his brother, Yevgeny Vindman, from the White House National Security Council (NSC).

Alexander Vindman gave testimony critical of Trump before the House impeachment inquiry on Trump’s withholding of military aid from Ukraine and his July 25 phone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, during which Trump pressured Zelensky to launch a corruption investigation into former Vice President Joe Biden and his son, Hunter Biden. A right-wing Ukrainian nationalist and anti-communist, Vindman headed the Ukraine desk at the NSC. He was lauded by the Democrats as a hero and model of patriotism. Last week he was marched out of the White House by security guards.

Speaking from the White House on Tuesday, Trump called on the Department of Defense to investigate Vindman, saying, “I mean they’re going to, certainly, I would imagine, take a look at that.”

Trump has also fired Gordon Sondland, a campaign donor whom he appointed US ambassador to the European Union, and who played a major role, alongside Trump’s personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, in the effort to get Kiev to announce an investigation into

the Bidens. Sondland also testified before the House impeachment inquiry.

On Tuesday, the White House abruptly withdrew its nomination of Jessie Liu to a senior post in the Treasury Department. Liu resigned her post in December as US attorney for the Washington DC district after Trump nominated her to the Treasury position. As US attorney for the DC district, Liu had overseen the prosecution of former Trump campaign chairman Manafort and former Trump national security adviser Flynn, as well as Stone.

According to press reports, Trump will shortly withdraw his nomination of Elaine McCusker as comptroller of the Defense Department. As a Defense official, McCusker had repeatedly questioned the freeze on military aid to Ukraine.

In addition, Trump’s national security adviser, Robert O’Brien, has made clear that dozens of officials will soon be removed from the NSC staff.

Meanwhile, the investigation into the origins of the Russia probe under Obama is continuing, headed up by federal prosecutor John Durham, who was hand-picked by Barr. The investigation, which could target figures such as Comey, Mueller and members of Mueller’s team—possibly even Clinton—has been upgraded to a criminal inquiry, giving Durham the power to impanel a grand jury and hand down indictments.

Recently, Barr suggested that the Durham investigation would reach “an important watershed” in the late spring or early summer of 2020—that is, at a high point of the presidential election campaign.



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