

Trump commutes prison term for political crony Roger Stone

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Late Friday afternoon, President Trump commuted the prison term of longtime political crony Roger Stone, who was convicted on seven charges of perjury, obstruction of justice and witness tampering in his responses to congressional inquiries that were part of the Democratic Party's anti-Russia campaign.

The action is the latest blow struck in the ongoing political warfare in Washington, driven by conflicts between the Trump administration and sections of the military-intelligence apparatus allied with the Democratic Party, largely over foreign policy, in particular, in relation to Russia and the Middle East.

Trump issued the commutation, which he had hinted at repeatedly for several months, only one day after the US Supreme Court decision that allowed Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance Jr., a Democrat, to proceed with a subpoena for Trump's business and financial records from his accounting firm Mazar's.

The high court remanded the case to District Court Judge Victor Marrero, who set a July 15 deadline for Trump's attorneys to declare whether they would file a further challenge to the prosecutor's demand for documents. The quick action left open the possibility that Trump's business records, including his tax returns, could be made available to his Democratic opponents before the November 3 election.

Stone is himself a right-wing provocateur who entered politics as a manufacturer of "dirty tricks" for President Richard Nixon. He has operated on the right wing of Republican Party politics ever since, working for the Dole presidential campaign in 1996 and as part of the Trump campaign in 2015, and informally thereafter.

Stone's conviction was the last action of the now-defunct Mueller investigation into allegations that the Russian government interfered in the 2016 presidential election and that the Trump campaign colluded with Moscow in this effort. Stone went to trial in November

2019, seven months after Mueller delivered his report finding no basis for charging any Trump aide or official with criminal collaboration with Russia.

The conviction came mainly on charges that Stone lied to the House Intelligence Committee—then under Republican control in 2017-18—when it was carrying out an investigation into the allegations that formed the basis of the Mueller probe as well. The lies mainly concerned Stone's supposed relationship with WikiLeaks, the anti-secrecy organization whose founder, Julian Assange, is now in a London prison and the target of a US government effort to extradite him and jail him for life.

Stone had boasted of being in close contact with WikiLeaks and attempted to use this alleged connection to revive his influence with Trump, whom he had continued to advise informally after leaving any official position with the campaign in the summer of 2015. When subpoenaed by the House committee in September 2017, Stone repeatedly lied about his role as an intermediary between the Trump campaign and WikiLeaks.

The gist of the case was that Stone's claim to have developed a close relationship with WikiLeaks was false. He had boasted of a connection where none existed in order to curry favor with Trump. The main lie was Stone's claim that a New York City talk show host, Randy Credico, had been his intermediary with WikiLeaks.

The witness tampering and obstruction of justice charges relate to Stone's efforts to induce Credico to back up his story when Credico was himself called as a witness by the same committee. Despite the severity of the witness tampering charge, which carried a maximum 20-year prison sentence, Stone did not threaten Credico with violence or other consequences, only sent him emails pleading for his support.

The press reports on the House committee investigation, the Mueller inquiry and the trial of Stone are generally

silent over the actual content of the material released by Wikileaks, which was unquestionably in the public interest and highly damaging politically to the campaign of Trump's Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton.

WikiLeaks made public emails from the Democratic National Committee documenting official Democratic Party efforts to sabotage the campaign of her main rival for the Democratic presidential nomination, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders. It also released emails from Clinton's campaign chairman, John Podesta, providing the transcripts of Clinton's remarks to closed-door meetings with Wall Street bankers at which she vowed to serve their interests.

No convincing or credible evidence has ever been produced to show that the Russian military intelligence service was responsible for hacking Democratic National Committee servers and Podesta's email account to obtain the damaging documents, or that WikiLeaks obtained the emails it leaked from Russia. The Mueller investigation merely parroted the claims of the intelligence agencies themselves, without providing any evidence of Russian involvement. Nor has there been any claim that the leaked documents were falsified in any way.

In other words, WikiLeaks was engaged in publishing truthful and politically important materials provided to it anonymously, as nearly all such leaks are. Stone, who had no personal contact with WikiLeaks, falsely boasted to Trump that he did. Eventually, piling lie upon lie, he went before the House Intelligence Committee and committed perjury.

That said, the commutation of Stone's sentence is typical of Trump's conduct as the head of a gangster administration that views every issue from the standpoint of its immediate impact on the kingpin in the White House. This is Trump's second crude intervention into the criminal justice system on Stone's behalf, following his pressuring of Attorney General William Barr, who agreed to slash the recommended prison sentence for Stone from seven years to 40 months. Now Trump has slashed it to zero.

The latest intervention takes the form of a commutation rather than an outright pardon apparently at Stone's own request because he cannot continue to appeal his original conviction if he receives a presidential pardon. The appeal is now before the Circuit Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia, which would not be expected to rule before the election, after which the case could be further appealed to the US Supreme Court.

The timing of Trump's intervention was dictated by

District Judge Amy Berman Jackson, who had allowed Stone to delay reporting to prison from April through June but denied any extension beyond July 15. Stone had cited an entirely reasonable fear of reporting to a federal prison in Jesup, Georgia that has 23 documented cases of COVID-19, but neither the judge nor the Department of Justice was willing to make any further concessions on the grounds of his age, 67, and undisclosed health problems.

The commutation is part of a pattern set by Trump in the use of his powers to commute sentences and pardon convictions. By one estimate, 31 of the 36 people to receive such clemency from Trump have been political or personal cronies. This compares to hundreds or even thousands given clemency by previous presidents, Republican and Democratic alike.

For Trump, the power of clemency has nothing to do with mercy, even in the extremely constrained form in which it has been practiced by previous chief executives of American capitalism, if only, as in the case of Barack Obama, to cover for the favors they have done for political cronies like billionaire Mark Rich, pardoned for crimes relating to tax evasion and racketeering.

Trump's pardon power is to be used only when it benefits his narrow political circle and his fellow billionaires. The vast numbers in federal prisons on harsh sentences for nonviolent offenses, let alone the thousands convicted unjustly, do not get a moment's consideration from the White House. According to the Justice Department, there are 13,500 inmates seeking presidential clemency whose pleas have gone unanswered.

For that reason, the list of those receiving clemency from Trump reads like a rogue's gallery of the American political right. It includes former New York Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik; right-wing commentator Dinesh D'Souza; former Maricopa County, Arizona Sheriff Joe Arpaio; former Democratic Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich; former Dick Cheney aide Lewis Libby; billionaire newspaper mogul and swindler Conrad Black; billionaire junk bond king and swindler Michael Milken; and billionaire construction boss and swindler Eddie DeBartolo, Jr.



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