

Two in Trump circle guilty on same day

Cohen pleads to felonies for pay to porn star; Manafort convicted for financial crimes

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WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump confronted one of the most perilous moments of his presidency Tuesday after two one-time members of his inner circle simultaneously were labeled “guilty” of criminal charges. Although Trump largely ignored the jarring back-to-back blows at a campaign rally in West Virginia, questions mounted about his possible legal exposure and political future.

In a split screen for the history books, Trump’s former campaign chairman Paul Manafort was convicted of financial crimes at nearly the same moment Trump’s former personal attorney Michael Cohen pleaded guilty to a series of felonies, including campaign finance violations that the lawyer said he carried out in coordination with Trump.

With two men who played prominent roles on the president’s campaign convicted of multiple criminal charges, the investigations circled ever closer to Trump. But for all that, Trump spent an hour-plus rally in Charleston on Tuesday night painting a rosy view of his accomplishments in office, ticking off developments on trade, taxes, North Korea and even his plans for a Space Force.

“What we’re doing is winning,” Trump told cheering supporters.

“Where is the collusion?” he demanded, underscoring that Manafort’s crimes had occurred before he became involved with the Trump campaign. “You know they’re still looking for collusion.”

The president did say he felt “badly for both” men, but he largely ignored Cohen’s guilty pleas to eight felonies.

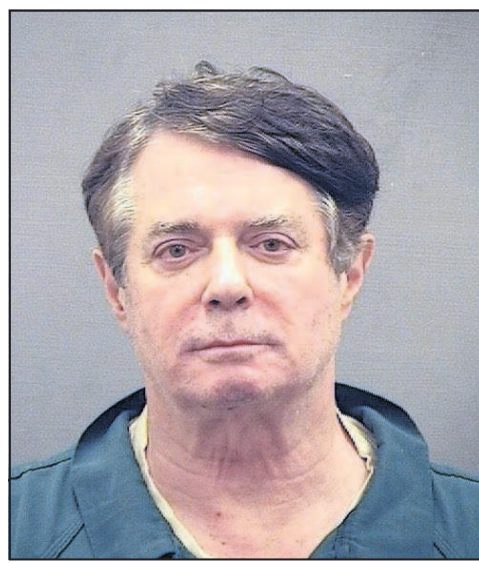
Manafort was convicted Tuesday in Virginia on charges brought by special counsel Robert Mueller, who is investigating Russian interference in the 2016 election and potential obstruction of justice. Cohen pleaded guilty in New York, saying he and Trump had arranged the payment of hush money to porn star Stormy Daniels and a for-



President Donald Trump speaks to the media as he steps off Air Force One, Tuesday in Charleston, W. Va.



LEFT: Michael Cohen, former personal lawyer to President Donald Trump, leaves federal court after reaching a plea agreement in New York on Tuesday. Right: Paul Manafort was booked into the William G. Truesdale Adult Detention Center on July 12.



mer Playboy model to influence the election.

It is the Cohen case that places Trump in the most jeopardy, legal experts said, as the longtime personal “fixer” acknowledged his role in a scheme to pay off women who accused the future president of sexual misconduct.

“It’s going to be hard for the president to try to discredit all this. It’s circling him,” said David Weinstein, a former federal prosecutor who is not involved in the case.

Trump has shown an uncanny ability to shake off a relentless stream of accusations and jolting statements that provoked outrage. His loyal base of supporters has stayed with him despite his effort to blame “both sides” for the deadly violence between white nationalists and anti-racist protesters in Charlottesville, Virginia, for one, and his refusal to side with the U.S. intelligence services over Russia’s

Vladimir Putin in Helsinki last month, among other controversies.

Case in point, the crowd in West Virginia loudly chanted Trump’s campaign staples “Drain the swamp!” and “Lock her up!” despite the fresh corruption convictions and looming prison sentences for his former advisers.

Manafort’s conviction served as a vindication of Mueller’s work as investigators continue to probe potential misdeeds by the president and those in his orbit. Mueller’s team also had referred evidence in the Cohen case to federal prosecutors in New York.

Trump attorney Rudy Giuliani sought to cast the blame solely on Cohen in a Tuesday statement, saying: “There is no allegation of any wrongdoing against the President in the government’s charges against Mr. Cohen.”

Trump’s legal team has also been engaged in

a monthlong negotiation with Mueller’s team about a potential sit-down with the president, but has objected to the scope of the questions.

In a separate courtroom Tuesday, prosecutors and defense attorneys for former Trump national security adviser Michael Flynn agreed to postpone his sentencing after he pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI about his contacts with a Russian official, in a sign his cooperation was still needed in the Mueller probe.

The afternoon of explosive legal developments comes as the White House is refocusing itself around the upcoming midterms and as Trump allies like Steve Bannon seek to frame the election as a referendum on the potential impeachment of the president. Trump confidants have long argued that the president’s fate in such a scenario would ultimately be more a matter of politics than law.

Of Cohen’s plea, Ban-

non argued Tuesday that it “takes away the argument from those who are telling the president it’s not that bad if he loses the House. This now becomes more than ever a national election on the issue of impeachment.”

The president seemed to convey the stakes in Charleston, warning the crowd that “You aren’t just voting for a candidate. You’re voting for which party controls the House and which party controls the Senate.”

Trump confidants reasserted late Tuesday that it is the White House position that a president cannot be indicted, referring to a 2000 opinion of the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel, which provides legal advice and guidance to executive branch agencies. Trump’s lawyers have said Mueller plans to adhere to that guidance, though Mueller’s office has never independently confirmed that. There would presumably be no bar

against charging a president after he or she departs the White House.

Michael Avenatti, a lawyer pressing a civil case against Trump for Daniels, who has said she had sex with the president, tweeted Tuesday that the resolution of the criminal case against Cohen “should also permit us to proceed with an expedited deposition of Trump under oath about what he knew, when he knew it, and what he did about it.”

The Supreme Court in 1997, ruling in a sexual harassment lawsuit brought by Paula Jones, held that a sitting president could be made to answer questions as part of a lawsuit. That ruling did not directly address whether a president could be subpoenaed to testify in a criminal investigation.

Despite blustery public denials, the fate of Manafort and Cohen has worried the president’s inner circle.

For many around Trump, Cohen has represented a greater threat than even the Russia investigation, drawing from his decade of working as the then-celebrity real estate developer’s fixer. An FBI raid on Cohen’s New York office and hotel room in April rattled the president, who has complained publicly about what he felt was government overreach while privately worrying about what material Cohen may have had after working for the Trump Organization for a decade.

Those in Trump’s orbit, including Giuliani, have steadily ratcheted up attacks on Cohen, suggesting he was untrustworthy and lying about what he knew about Trump’s business dealings. When Cohen’s team produced a recording that the former fixer had made of Trump discussing a payment to silence a woman about an alleged affair, Giuliani sought to impugn Cohen’s credibility and question his loyalty.

Trump stewed for weeks over the media coverage of the Manafort trial. Though the proceedings were not connected to Russian election interference, Trump has seethed to confidants that he views the Manafort charges as “a warning shot” from Mueller.

As he watched the courtroom proceedings, he told confidants that he feared his eldest son, Donald Trump Jr., could at some point be the one on trial, according to two people familiar with his thinking but not authorized to discuss private conversations.

“What matters is that a jury found that the facts presented to them by the special prosecutor warranted a conviction of someone who surrounds the president,” Weinstein said.

How the case of former Trump fixer Michael Cohen went down

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump’s longtime fixer, Michael Cohen, once said he’d take a bullet for his boss, but on Tuesday he pleaded guilty to eight felonies and described pay-offs to women at Trump’s direction before the 2016 election.

The development marked the pivot point in which Cohen went from ally for years to a potential threat to Trump. Under the agreement, Cohen, 51, could get four to five years in prison at sentencing Dec. 12. His account appears to implicate Trump in a crime, though whether — or when — a president can be prosecuted is in dispute.

Key moments in how it all went down:

2016: Trump is a Republican presidential candidate and eventually the party’s nominee. At Trump’s direction, Cohen says, he and Trump arrange to pay adult film actress Stormy Daniels \$130,000 and former Playboy model Karen McDougal \$150,000 to influence the election — presumably to keep their allegations of sexual encounters private. In entering the plea Tuesday, Cohen did not specifically name the two women or even Trump, recounting instead that he worked with

an “unnamed candidate.” But the amounts and the dates all line up with the payments made to Daniels and McDougal.

Nov. 4, 2016: *The Wall Street Journal* reports that the company that owns the *National Enquirer* agreed to pay \$150,000 to McDougal for her story of an affair with Trump in 2006, the year after Trump married Melania Trump. In a statement, American Media Inc., which is supportive of Trump’s campaign, says it didn’t buy McDougal’s story but two years’ worth of columns. White House spokeswoman Hope Hicks denies there had been an affair.

Nov. 8, 2016: Trump defeats Democrat Hillary Clinton in an upset.

Jan. 12, 2018: *The Wall Street Journal* reports that Cohen arranged a \$130,000 payment to Daniels a month before the election as part of an agreement that barred her from publicly discussing their alleged 2006 affair. Trump married Melania Trump in 2005. Cohen says Trump “vehemently denies any such occurrence.”

Feb. 13, 2018: Cohen says he personally paid Daniels and that he received no reimbursement from the Trump Organization or the campaign. Neither

was “party to the transaction,” he says. Cohen says later the money came from a home equity line to an account for a personal corporation.

March 2018: McDougal files a lawsuit against American Media Inc., seeking to end a contract with the company. She tells CNN that the company bought her rights to tell her story under false circumstances and then killed the story to protect Trump. She also claims she had a lengthy affair with him in 2006. American Media says she’s been free to tell her story since 2016. Through representatives, Trump denies the affair.

April 5, 2018: Speaking to reporters aboard Air Force One, Trump denies knowing about the payment to Daniels. Asked why Cohen made the payment, Trump says, “You’ll have to ask Michael Cohen.”

April 9, 2018: The FBI raids Cohen’s office, seizing records on topics including a \$130,000 payment to Daniels. Furious, Trump calls the raid a “disgrace” and that the FBI “broke into” his lawyer’s office. He also tweets that “Attorney-client privilege is dead!” The raid is overseen by the U.S. attorney’s office in Manhattan and is based in part on a referral from

special counsel Robert Mueller, says Cohen’s lawyer, Stephen Ryan. Cohen had said he took out a personal line of credit on his home to pay Daniels days before the 2016 election without Trump’s knowledge.

April 26, 2018: Trump acknowledges that Cohen represented him in the “crazy Stormy Daniels deal.” He tells “Fox & Friends” that “there were no campaign funds going into this which would have been a problem.”

May 2, 2018: Trump attorney Rudy Giuliani tells “Hannity” that the payment to Daniels had been “funneled through a law firm, and the president repaid it.” He later says that proves the payments didn’t violate campaign finance laws. White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders says Trump “eventually learned” about the payments.

May 4, 2018: Reporters remind Trump of his previous denial of the payments to Daniels. The president blasts the media for focusing on “crap” stories like the Daniels matter and claims that “virtually everything” reported about the payments had been wrong. Daniels’ attorney, Michael Avenatti, tweets, “How stupid do they think all of us are?”

July 20, 2018: People familiar with the investigation say Cohen secretly recorded Trump discussing a potential payment for McDougal two months before the election. Giuliani says the payment was never made and that the brief recording shows Trump did nothing wrong. In it, Cohen is heard saying that he needed to start a company “for the transfer of all of that info regarding our friend David,” a possible reference to David Pecker, Trump’s friend and president of American Media Inc.

When Cohen begins to discuss financing, Trump interrupts him and asks, “What financing?”

“We’ll have to pay,” Cohen responds.

The audio is muffled, but Trump can be heard saying “pay with cash,” though it isn’t clear if he is suggesting to pay with cash or not to pay with cash. Cohen immediately says, “No, no, no” and Trump can then be heard saying, “check.”

Aug. 21, 2018: Cohen pleads guilty to campaign-finance violations and other charges, saying he and Trump arranged the payment of hush money to Daniels and McDougal to influence the election.