

Manafort guilty plea, cooperation deal rock Trump White House

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17 September 2018

Former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort pled guilty to two federal conspiracy charges Friday, agreeing to substantial asset forfeiture, estimated at \$46 million, and to become a cooperating witness for the Justice Department special counsel, Robert Mueller, who is investigating charges of collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia during the 2016 election.

Manafort spoke the words, “I plead guilty,” in a Washington, DC courtroom, and accepted a requirement that he answer “fully, truthfully, completely and forthrightly” questions about “any and all matters” that Mueller wants to ask about.

In return for the guilty plea, prosecutors agreed to limit the total prison sentence for the 69-year-old Manafort to 10 years for all the charges against him. This includes the eight federal charges of which he was convicted last month in a jury trial in Alexandria, Virginia, the 10 additional charges on which the jury voted 11-1, failing to convict because of a lone holdout, and the two counts of conspiracy.

The deal came after three days of negotiations between Manafort’s attorneys and the special prosecutor’s office, with the deal Friday coming on the eve of Manafort’s trial in Washington, which was to open Monday morning.

Manafort worked for the Trump campaign from March through August, first enlisted to assist in insuring that Trump’s delegates to the Republican National Convention were not poached by any of his rivals for the nomination, and then chairing the campaign overall for nearly three months. He left the campaign after press reports emerged detailing his financial relations with ousted Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, in large part because these ties were viewed as an obstacle to US efforts to consolidate a right-wing pro-US regime in Kyiv.

Despite breathless round-the-clock attention by those sections of the corporate media that have been promoting the bogus claims of Russian interference in the 2016

elections, it is not clear that Manafort has anything to add in the way of evidence. He was present at the Trump Tower meeting in June 2016 in which Trump aides met with a Russian delegation allegedly peddling dirt on Hillary Clinton, but others who attended the meeting have already given testimony to Mueller, without anything explosive emerging.

Any plea agreement must have followed a “proffer,” a formal declaration by Manafort or his attorneys about the scope of the information he would be able to provide the prosecutors. No details of this proffer have yet leaked out, including whether it touches in any way on the charges of collusion between the Trump campaign and the Russian government.

Whatever the impact of Manafort’s testimony on possible future charges against Trump or his immediate family—the other two top aides at the Trump Tower meeting were Donald Trump, Jr. and son-in-law Jared Kushner—the documents filed with the federal court paint a picture of the utterly corrupt milieu in which both capitalist parties operate, the Democrats as much as the Republicans.

Manafort admitted to engineering a scheme in which a front company was set up in Brussels to conceal Ukrainian government payments to his own lobbying firm and several others, including the Mercury Group, a bipartisan operation, the Podesta Group, run by Tony Podesta, brother of Clinton’s campaign chairman, and the Skadden Arps law firm, in the person of Gregory Craig, a White House counsel under Obama and a defense lawyer during the impeachment of Bill Clinton.

The Podesta firm has been liquidated as a result of the Ukrainian exposures, and Craig departed from Skadden Arps. Manafort could potentially become a witness against an array of Washington power-brokers who took his money and did his bidding, knowing he was working as a front man for the Ukrainian government under

Yanukovych.

The scale of corruption is demonstrated by the size of Manafort's asset forfeiture, which includes five homes in the New York City area worth a combined \$22 million: two Manhattan apartments in Soho, worth \$3.2 million and \$4.1 million; an apartment in Trump Tower, worth \$3 million; a brownstone in Brooklyn, worth \$4.1 million; and a two-story, 5,600-square foot home in the Hamptons, the center of great wealth on Long Island, with 10 bedrooms, a swimming pool, and a tennis court, and an estimated value of \$7.3 million.

Manafort is the fifth individual associated with the Trump campaign or his personal business operations to plead guilty to felony charges, ranging from bank and tax fraud to lying to federal agents. Besides Manafort, these include retired General Michael Flynn, Trump's first national security adviser, who is still cooperating with Mueller and has not yet been sentenced; Manafort's top aide, in both his business operations and the Trump campaign, Rick Gates, who testified against him in the Alexandria trial; George Papadopoulos, a former campaign adviser on national security issues; and Michael Cohen, Trump's long-time personal lawyer and "fixer."

The trajectory of the Mueller investigation strongly suggests that an imminent target is Roger Stone, a longtime Trump crony and informal adviser to the campaign, who has been depicted in press accounts as the contact person between the Trump campaign and WikiLeaks, during the period when WikiLeaks was publishing emails taken from the Democratic National Committee and John Podesta, Clinton's chairman, revealing Democratic Party skullduggery directed against the campaign of Bernie Sanders, as well as the transcripts of Clinton's groveling speeches to Wall Street audiences.

It is entirely possible that Mueller could press for an indictment of the WikiLeaks organization, or of the group's founder Julian Assange, in an effort to align his investigation still further with the requirements of the US military-intelligence apparatus.



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