

Catastrophic day for Trump: Former campaign boss Paul Manafort and former lawyer Michael Cohen are now both felons

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It's difficult to imagine a worse day in the presidency of [Donald Trump](#) than Tuesday, when two gripping legal dramas, one involving his former campaign chairman, [Paul Manafort](#), and the other embroiling his longtime lawyer, [Michael Cohen](#), collided in a surreal split screen crescendo.

In New York, Cohen pleaded guilty in federal court to eight felony counts of tax fraud, bank fraud and campaign finance violations.

Two hundred miles south, in Alexandria, Virginia, a jury found Manafort guilty of eight unrelated felonies: Five counts of felony tax fraud, one count of failing to report a foreign bank account, and two counts of bank fraud.

As the parallel dramas unfolded in federal courthouses Tuesday afternoon, Trump was at first uncharacteristically silent as he traveled to a campaign rally in West Virginia. But then he broke his silence after Air Force One landed.

"Paul Manafort is a good man," Trump told reporters after landing in West Virginia for a campaign rally. "I feel very badly for Paul Manafort." While pointedly refusing to comment on Cohen, the president stressed that Manafort's conviction "doesn't involve me," and called it, "a very sad thing is happening."

Trump also emphasized that Manafort's legal woes have "nothing to do with Russian collusion, absolutely nothing." He then segued into familiar criticisms of special counsel [Robert Mueller](#)'s Russia probe, calling it a "witch hunt and a disgrace."

Cohen implicates Trump

As part of his plea bargain, Cohen admitted to paying hush money to porn star [Stormy Daniels](#) in 2016, "at the direction of the candidate." Trump wasn't identified by name in Cohen's statement, but he was the only candidate who Cohen was working for at the time.

Cohen also admitted to conspiring with a media company, perceived as the publisher of The National Enquirer, to silence another woman, former Playboy model Karen McDougal, during the 2016 presidential election.

Both Daniels and McDougal allege that Trump engaged in extramarital sexual relationships with them. The White House has denied those claims. [Download the entire Cohen plea deal here.](#)

Cohen's lawyer, former Clinton White House aide [Lanny Davis](#), also took pains to underscore that his client had been acting not on his own, but at Trump's behest. "Today, [Cohen] stood up and testified under oath that Donald Trump directed him to commit a crime by making payments to two women for the principal purpose of influencing an election," Davis said in a statement. "If those payments were a crime for Michael Cohen, then why wouldn't they be a crime for Donald Trump?"

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It was a view echoed by legal scholars, several of whom noted that while Trump was not explicitly named in the legal documents, it was clear that he was the "candidate" in question. "Whether or not [Trump is] called an unindicted co-conspirator, that's what the sitting president IS as of close of business today, August 21, 2018, a day that will live in legal infamy. That's the import of two of Michael Cohen's guilty pleas," Harvard legal professor Laurence Tribe said on Twitter.

The significance of Cohen's declaration under oath that Trump directed him to commit the two felony campaign finance violations also drew the attention of [Preet Bharara](#), the former U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York, which prosecuted Cohen. "Michael Cohen in a courtroom in SDNY, under oath, declared that the President directed him to commit a federal crime," Bharara, who was fired by Trump in 2017, tweeted.

Not surprisingly, Trump's lawyer, [Rudy Giuliani](#), took a starkly different view of what Cohen's plea agreement meant for the president. "There is no allegation of any wrongdoing against the President in the government's charges against Mr. Cohen," Giuliani said in a statement to CNBC. "It is clear that, as the prosecutor noted, Mr. Cohen's actions reflect a pattern of lies and dishonesty over a significant period of time."

Futures markets responded quickly to Cohen's implication of the president in criminal acts, [with S&P futures slipping in after-hours trading](#).

WATCH: Manafort guilty on 8 of 18 counts