

## Exclusive: Paul Manafort advised White House on how to attack and discredit investigation of President Trump

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**We now have details as to how the indicted former campaign manager worked with the president to undermine federal law enforcement.**



Paul Manafort, former campaign manager for Donald Trump, exits the E. Barrett Prettyman Federal Courthouse, Feb. 28, 2018 in Washington, DC. *Drew Angerer/Getty Images*

Paul Manafort, who served as the manager for Donald Trump's presidential campaign, provided advice to the president and senior White House officials on the FBI's Russia investigation during the earliest days of the Trump administration. He gave guidance on how to undermine and discredit the FBI's inquiry into whether the president, his campaign aides, and family members conspired with the Russian Federation and its intelligence services to covertly defeat Hillary Clinton during the 2016 campaign, according to government records and interviews with individuals familiar with the matter. Manafort himself was under criminal investigation by the FBI [during this same time](#), a fact then known to the White House.

Last Friday, [special counsel Robert Mueller](#) alleged in [court filings](#) that [Manafort told](#) "multiple discernible lies" to FBI agents and prosecutors, in violation of the cooperation agreement between Manafort and the special counsel's office. Among

those, Mueller charged, were lies by Manafort to investigators that he had not been in contact with anyone in the White House.

“After signing the plea agreement, Manafort stated he had no direct or indirect communications with anyone in the administration while they were in the administration,” the special counsel said in a court pleading, “and that he never asked anyone to try and communicate a message to anyone in the administration on any subject.” Citing text messages, Manafort’s electronic records, and witness interviews, the special counsel wrote: “The evidence demonstrates that Manafort lied about his contacts.”

Those contacts continued after Trump and his associates knew that Manafort was under investigation by the FBI; after he was indicted by two federal grand juries on more than two dozen felony counts of money laundering, bank fraud, tax evasion, and obstruction of justice; and after having been convicted by a federal jury of 10 of those felonies while awaiting trial on other charges. And now we have learned, thanks to reports from [the New York Times](#) and other media outlets, that those contacts continued (through Manafort’s attorney) even after Manafort became a cooperating witness against the president. [The court filings](#), however, did not disclose any information regarding the subjects of the contacts between Manafort and the White House.

Manafort advised administration officials in the spring and summer of 2017 on how to politically undermine the FBI and Mueller investigation in three ways, according to government records and interviews with three people with knowledge of the contacts. He also gave them advice on how some of the witnesses against both him and the president might be discredited. In short, Manafort and Trump were working together to discredit the investigators as well as potential witnesses.

Manafort urged the president to attack the FBI

First, Manafort advised the president and his political surrogates to more aggressively and directly attack the FBI and other elements of the federal law enforcement apparatus investigating his administration. The goal of Manafort’s advice was to “delegitimize” the investigation itself, one person familiar with the advice explained to me. Manafort wanted nothing less than to “declare a public relations war on the FBI,” this same person said. Another goal was to discredit then-FBI Director James Comey and [other senior FBI officials](#) — as it had become increasingly likely [they would be](#) witnesses against the president.

Trump later did just that, but it’s unclear what role, if any, Manafort’s advice played in the president deciding to go on the attack. Other, more influential advisers made similar recommendations to Trump. And Trump likely did not need to hear that advice from Manafort or anyone else. As first lady Melania Trump [once said of her husband](#): “As you may know by now, when you attack him he will punch back 10 times harder.”

Manafort also advised a senior administration official, through an intermediary, to attack the Justice Department, the FBI, and Obama administration officials for seeking court-authorized warrants under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) to eavesdrop on Manafort and a second campaign aide to Trump, Carter Page, as part of counterintelligence and criminal investigations into whether Manafort, Page, and others had conspired with Russia to help Trump win the 2016 presidential election.

FISA warrants are granted only when the court is presented with sufficient evidence that the person who would be the target of surveillance may be acting on behalf of a foreign power, and the legal threshold to obtain such a warrant is high. The Foreign Intelligence Service Court allowed for the electronic surveillance of Manafort prior to, and subsequent to, his role in the Trump campaign.

Trump alleged that then-President Barack Obama authorized the wiretapping of him and his campaign aides as part of an “illegal” scheme to engage in political espionage. Such allegations have since become central to the president’s attacks on the Justice Department, the FBI, and the Mueller investigation — even though Trump and his allies have yet to produce any evidence to show that any of this is true.

As part of these efforts, Trump and his allies on Capitol Hill — most notably, Rep. Devin Nunes (R-CA), the outgoing chair of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence — made public sensitive classified information that endangered the lives of intelligence sources and interfered with ongoing criminal investigations. In May 2018, the Justice Department [wrote to Nunes](#) warning that information he was about to make public would “risk severe consequences, including potential loss of human lives, damage to relationships with valued international partners, compromise of ongoing criminal investigations and interference with intelligence activities.” Nunes released much of the information anyway. Trump [himself ordered](#) the declassification of other intelligence information that law enforcement and intelligence officials warned would do similar damage.

Attacking the use of FISA warrants had no effect on the outcome of Manafort’s criminal case. But a person with firsthand knowledge of Manafort’s thinking — and that of Manafort’s defense team — told me they believed discrediting the FISA process and, more broadly, the federal criminal investigation of him and other Trump campaign aides would make it more politically feasible for Trump to pardon Manafort.

Manafort urged the president to attack the DNC

Second, Manafort counseled the White House to allege — albeit with no evidence to back up said charges — that the pro-Western Ukrainian government had colluded with the Democratic National Committee to try to help Hillary Clinton win the 2016 presidential election. A source with direct knowledge of the matter told me that the White House adopted Manafort’s recommendation in the summer of 2017 to specifically target Alexandra Chalupa, a political strategist and consultant for the

DNC, for allegedly working with Ukrainian officials to hurt Trump's candidacy. Despite a torrent of allegations, no evidence has surfaced that Chalupa or the DNC did anything wrong.

Acting on Manafort's advice, on July 10, 2017, White House press secretary Sarah Sanders [encouraged reporters to investigate](#) how "the Democrat National Committee coordinated opposition research directly with the Ukrainian Embassy." That same week, Fox News's Sean Hannity amplified the allegations evening after evening on his show. Likewise, Republicans on Capitol Hill called for investigations of the "Ukrainian matter." On July 25, 2017, [Trump tweeted](#): "Ukrainian efforts to sabotage Trump campaign – 'quietly working to boost Clinton.' So where is the investigation A.G."

On August 9, 2017, Matthew Whitaker (now the acting attorney general) and a conservative advocacy group he then headed, the Foundation for Accountability and Civic Trust (FACT), formally asked the Federal Election Commission to investigate the DNC's dealings with Chalupa. The complaint was largely based on scant evidence and erroneous information; the FEC has given no indication since that it will investigate the matter further.

Even though the allegations had no factual basis to prove anything improper, they were effective propaganda. The White House made its claims shortly after the first public disclosures that Donald Trump Jr. had hosted a Trump Tower meeting between a self-described intermediary for the Russian Federation and himself, Jared Kushner, and Manafort, in which the Russians promised "dirt" on Clinton. The White House was attempting to draw a parallel between its meetings with foreigners and the DNC's via Chalupa.

But the comparison has [always been a facile one](#), and the White House and its surrogates have not been able to prove any wrongdoing by their counterparts. The Russian Federation — an adversary of the United States — engaged in a covert intelligence effort to influence the outcome of the 2016 presidential election. Trump Jr., Kushner, and Manafort agreed to a meeting with individuals they were told were associated with the Russian government to obtain "dirt" on Clinton. Don Jr. in particular was acting on behalf of his father and his presidential campaign. It is illegal for a political campaign to accept any help from a foreign individual, foreign entity, or former government, and illegal not to disclose it; that is, in part, one of the reasons the Trump Tower meeting has also been a focus of special counsel Mueller's investigation.

Chalupa looked into Manafort's role as an adviser to former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich — who wanted to cut ties with the European Union and become more closely aligned with Russia — and set out to sound the alarm. At one point, she even organized a protest in Manafort's hometown of New Britain, Connecticut, in which protesters held up signs saying, "Putin, hands off the US election." But those endeavors were unrelated to her work for the Democratic National Committee, where

she had been the co-chair of the DNC's affiliate the National Democratic Ethnic Coordinating Council during the 2016 presidential election.

When Chalupa brought up Manafort with anyone at the DNC, they were largely disinterested, and in July 2016, she left her part-time consulting role at the DNC to work full time on her human rights advocacy. The DNC and the Clinton campaign have said that they were uninvolved with her efforts, and no evidence has surfaced to contradict that claim.

Manafort urged the president to attack Clinton and the Steele dossier

Third, in early 2017, Manafort provided the White House specific information on how Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign had sponsored research into ties between the Trump campaign and Russia. More specifically, Manafort provided information to the White House as to how to discredit the so-called Steele dossier, a report written by Christopher Steele, a former head of the Russia desk for the British intelligence agency MI6, about alleged ties that Trump and his associates had to Russia. (Manafort provided background to the White House's attorneys about specific allegations and information in the dossier that he said was suspect.)

Manafort also recommended that Trump play up the fact that the work had been commissioned by a private investigation firm hired by the Clinton campaign, according to a former administration official familiar with the effort.

Manafort's contacts with the White House continued even after his cooperation with Mueller. Without telling prosecutors, Manafort's defense attorneys were secretly providing details of their client's cooperation with the special counsel to the president's legal team, in an apparent effort by Manafort to undermine the investigation or perhaps win a pardon from Trump. In the process, Manafort may have thus helped Trump tailor his [answers to questions](#) recently provided to the special counsel's office.

Harry Litman, a former US attorney and deputy assistant attorney general, [has since commented](#): "The open pipeline between cooperator and suspect Trump may have been not on only extraordinary but also criminal. ... What purpose other than an attempt to 'influence, obstruct, or impede' the investigation of the president can be discerned from Manafort's service as a double agent? And on the Trump side, the communications emit a strong scent of illegal witness tampering."

In short, in trying to cover up and maneuver for a pardon, Manafort and others may have committed even more crimes. Each "discernible lie" Manafort told is a potential new felony charge of lying to federal investigators, perjury, obstruction of justice, or combination thereof. Of obvious interest to the special counsel is whether others, most notably White House officials, conspired with Manafort to lie, mislead investigators, and possibly obstruct justice, and what, specifically, the president of the United States knew about all of this.

