

Fight fire with fire: opponents borrow from Trump's playbook

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Looking to get ahead in President Donald Trump's Washington? Borrow his media playbook.

With suggestive statements, cryptic tweets, provocative lawsuits and must-see television interviews, Trump's adversaries are using some of his own tactics to grab — and keep — the spotlight. From adult film star Stormy Daniels to former FBI Director James Comey, each has become a must-see supporting character in the president's daily drama.

At the moment, the most visible is Daniels, who received a \$130,000 payment to stay silent about an alleged affair with Trump and is now seeking to invalidate a non-disclosure agreement. She and her attorney Michael Avenatti have teased out details of her relationship with Trump for weeks, with Avenatti giving explosive interviews almost daily and Daniels taunting the president on social media.

Avenatti and Daniels have also hinted she might have proof of the affair. Avenatti tweeted a photo of a CD-Rom that purported to contain evidence. And when Daniels was asked on CBS' "60 Minutes" if she had texts, images or other items, she replied: "I can't answer that right now."

It was, of course, the kind of cliffhanger Trump has perfected.

He mastered the art of the tease, building suspense in the name of more attention, long before he ran for office. He's employed similar tactics in the White House, bringing reality show stylings to the often mundane functions of government.

"He does like to create some mystery around the great Oz behind the curtain," said George Rush, former gossip columnist at the New York Daily News.

As a Manhattan real estate developer, Trump dished out news scoops and gossip items — sometimes about his properties, sometimes about his personal life — in order to boost his own celebrity and interest in his buildings. He'd play one New York tabloid off the other to increase the buzz for his brand.

He took it further as the star of "The Apprentice," a reality TV show that portrayed Trump as America's CEO, and built suspense by firing a cast member each week.

Now in the White House, Trump plays every decision for maximum suspense.

He paraded prospective Cabinet secretaries before a press pack at his private golf club and through the lobby of his Manhattan skyscraper. He's dragged out global policy decisions, tossing out a "stay tuned" last fall when asked if he'd negotiate with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. And he has kept Washington guessing on how he would respond to the investigations of Russian election meddling, often employing the same suspenseful, and perhaps ominous, catchphrase: "We'll see what happens."

"Trump helped create an atmosphere of media chaos," said Jeffrey McCall, a communications professor at DePauw University. "Into that atmosphere you have any number of people wanting to show up."

Indeed, Daniels' lawyer has become a daily presence on cable TV, seeming almost to taunt the president and daring Trump to respond.

Her "60 Minutes" interview came just days after former Playboy model Karen McDougal tearfully told CNN about a monthslong affair with Trump that she described as a "real relationship." McDougal has filed suit in Los Angeles seeking to invalidate a confidentiality agreement with American Media Inc., the company that owns the supermarket tabloid National Enquirer.

A third woman is also taking Trump on in court. A New York City judge has ruled that a defamation lawsuit by Summer Zervos, a former contestant on "The Apprentice," can move forward while the president is in office. Zervos has accused Trump of unwanted sexual contact in 2007 after she had appeared on the show with him, and sued after he dismissed the claims as made up. Her lawyers have said they want to depose Trump.

Then there's Comey, the former FBI director who was fired by Trump last year. Comey has an upcoming book, "A Higher Loyalty," which has already topped Amazon.com's best-seller list. He's been keeping interest alive on Twitter and has a series of high-profile interviews set up.

In February, Comey tweeted a picture of himself in a recording booth and said: "Lordy, this time there will be a tape. Audio book almost finished." It was a reference to one of Trump's teases — a tweet he sent out, saying Comey "better hope that

there are no 'tapes' of our conversations before he starts leaking to the press!" Eventually Trump acknowledged that he did not tape any conversations.

"Comey, he hasn't been just a flash in the pan," said McCall. "Comey, he keeps surfacing, he disappears from the agenda and he finds a way to get back in."

Other Trump-land characters seeking the spotlight include former aide Omarosa Manigault Newman, who exited the White House recently and headed straight for "Celebrity Big Brother," where she suggested she was thinking of writing a tell-all book.

Offering a mantra for the Trump era, she said: "I have to tell my truth. I'm tired of being muted."

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