

BURIED AMID THE JOHN DOWD NEWS, MUELLER'S TEAM SEEMS TO THINK TRUMP KNOWS ABOUT THE JUNE 9 MEETING

I didn't get a chance to unpack this story before John Dowd up and resigned. It lays out the four areas that Dowd was, until yesterday, negotiating with Mueller's office regarding Trump's testimony. It actually provides less detail than the WaPo and CNN stories I covered here. Those stories laid out that Mueller's team was asking specific questions about:

Flynn's Firing

- Whether Trump knew about Flynn's communications with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak during the presidential transition?
- What instructions, if any, the president gave Flynn about the contact? Whether he fired Flynn because he had misled Vice President Pence about his contact with Kislyak?

Comey's Firing

- Whether he fired Comey because he had mishandled an investigation of Democratic presidential candidate

Hillary Clinton?

- What was Attorney General Jeff Sessions' involvement in the Comey dismissal?

While far less detailed than those earlier articles, however, yesterday's pre-Dowd departure story describes Mueller's team asking questions about four areas (I've reordered these to make them chronological):

1. The circumstances surrounding [the June 9, 2016] Trump Tower meeting
2. The President's role in crafting a statement aboard Air Force One that miscast Donald Trump Jr.'s campaign June 2016 meeting with Russians in Trump Tower
3. The firing of national security adviser Michael Flynn
4. The firing of FBI Director James Comey

It was this focus, according to CNN, that pissed Trump off because,

The focus on Trump himself in Mueller's pursuits has alarmed and angered the President, who adhered to a legal strategy of holding back set by his attorney John Dowd and White House special counsel Ty Cobb, who have said for months the investigation was likely to conclude soon.

And now Dowd is gone and Ty Cobb is reportedly likely to follow him, to be replaced by table-pounders who will make noise rather than argue the facts.

Bullet 1 – seven words slipped into the CNN story between stuff we’ve long talked about Trump’s involvement in – ought to be blaring headlines.

BREAKING: “Robert Mueller’s prosecutors are going to ask the President about the circumstances surrounding the meeting at which some Russians, including representatives from Trump’s old business associate Aras Agalarov, pitched Junior, Jared, and Trump’s corrupt campaign manager, on dirt about Hillary in the context of relaxing sanctions,” the headline should have read.

Call me crazy. But I doubt Mueller’s team would ask the President about this unless they had reason to believe Trump knew something about it.

And that changes the import of the three other bullets dramatically.

For example, most people have assumed Bullet 2, Trump’s claim this meeting pertained to adoptions and not dirt-for-sactions, is about obstruction charges (Elizabeth de la Vega lays out how that might serve as the basis for one or another conspiracy charge here). But that ignores that Trump spent the weekend leading up to that statement meeting, twice, with Vladimir Putin, including that bizarre meeting over dinner with no babysitter right before the White House released the statement.

BREAKING: The President met twice with Vladimir Putin while he was taking the lead on responding to questions about a meeting we’re all pretending Trump knew nothing about, and then came out with the spin that Vladimir Putin would most likely give it, the designated Russian propaganda line to cover up its campaign against Magnitsky sanctions.

Which brings us to Bullet 3: Whether Trump (via KT McFarland serving as a go-between from Mar a Lago) ordered Flynn to ask Sergey Kislyak to hold off on responding to sanctions, and if so, why he fired Flynn for doing what he told him to do.

Trump surely didn't fire Flynn because he lied to Mike Pence (if indeed he did lie). Did he fire Flynn because he didn't lie about it, making an otherwise marginally legally problematic discussion a legally problematic issue? Or did he fire Flynn because he believed it was the most efficacious way to make the focus on his efforts to roll back sanctions on Russia go away?

Bullet 4. Mueller's prosecutors want to know why, a day before the Russians showed up for a meeting at which Trump refused to have US press, Trump fired Comey, and then told the Russians,

"I just fired the head of the F.B.I. He was crazy, a real nut job," Mr. Trump said, according to the document, which was read to The New York Times by an American official. "I faced great pressure because of Russia. That's taken off."

Mr. Trump added, "I'm not under investigation."

Laid out like this, this is what Mueller's four bullets might look like:

1. What Trump knew about the dirt-for-sanctions relief deal his one-time business partner Aras Agalarov pitched
2. Whether Trump gave his National Security Adviser orders to deliver that dirt-for-sanctions deal even before being inaugurated
3. Why Trump fired Flynn if he was following his orders delivering on that dirt-for-sanctions deal

4. What Trump meant when he said he fired Comey because firing him took care of the great pressure he had because of Russia

Even as Mueller was negotiating these four questions, Trump called up Putin, at which, according to the Kremlin, "It was agreed to develop further bilateral contacts in light of [the fact that Trump had just fired Rex Tillerson, the next guy standing in the way of fulfilling the dirt-for-sanctions relief deal]. The possibility of organizing a top-level meeting received special attention." "We will probably get together in the not-too-distant future," Trump said of the call on Tuesday. "I suspect that we'll probably be meeting in the not-too-distant future," he said a second time, a line that reportedly surprised his aides, another piece of news lost in the legal team shake-up. "I think, probably, we'll be seeing President Putin in the not-too-distant future," Trump said a third time in his public comments.

So now Dowd is gone, which is probably lucky for him because otherwise he'd be business negotiating over Bullet 5.

5. Why did Trump fire Rex Tillerson and how does that relate to this big new push to meet with Putin again?