

HAS THIS BEEN THE PLAN SINCE AUGUST 2017?

Maggie Haberman just observed that Jeff Sessions' resignation letter is not dated. (Update: NYCSouthpaw actually noted that before Maggie did.) While some of the details in it – such as his claim to have “prosecuted the largest number of violent offenders and firearm defendants in our nation’s history” – seem to reflect the full 22 months of his tenure, nothing in it clearly marks it as having been written today. So I think that is what *probably* happened.

But there’s a scenario that makes me wonder whether this isn’t what Trump has been planning since July 2017, the last time Trump got really furious with Jeff Sessions.

Consider this timeline:

July 19, 2017: Maggie and Mike tee up a question (obviously working from the White House script) about how investigating Trump’s finances would represent crossing a red line.

On July 25 and 26, 2017, Trump took to Twitter to bitch about Sessions.



July 26, 2017: In a CNN interview, Whitaker

describes how you could defund the Special Counsel and thereby end his work.

I could see a scenario where Jeff Sessions is replaced, it would recess appointment and that attorney general doesn't fire Bob Mueller but he just reduces his budget to so low that his investigations grinds to almost a halt.

On July 27, 2017, Whitaker said it would be a mistake to provide Mueller any further protection.

August 4, 2017: Whitaker recommends an article that describes, "with a little planning he could install a true believer to a political position at DOJ—as a sleeper agent—and then (after easing out Sessions) elevate him or her to attorney general."

August 6, 2017: Whitaker uses the Red Line comment Maggie and Mike teed up to describe Mueller pursuing Trump's finances as improper.

On August 25, 2017, Whitaker suggested searching Manafort's condo with a dozen agents was designed to intimidate him.

On September 22, 2017, Whitaker was hired to be Sessions' Chief of Staff.

In other words, Trump may have been pursuing this plan since July 2017.

If so, then Mueller may have already anticipated that, because he asked four questions about that episode in March, as well as questions about what he did in response to Sessions' earlier recusal.

- What did you think and do regarding the recusal of Mr. Sessions?
- What efforts did you make to try to get him to change his mind?

- Did you discuss whether Mr. Sessions would protect you, and reference past attorneys general?
- What did you think and what did you do in reaction to the news of the appointment of the special counsel?
- Why did you hold Mr. Sessions's resignation until May 31, 2017, and with whom did you discuss it?
- What discussions did you have with Reince Priebus in July 2017 about obtaining the Sessions resignation? With whom did you discuss it?
- What discussions did you have regarding terminating the special counsel, and what did you do when that consideration was reported in January 2018?
- What was the purpose of your July 2017 criticism of Mr. Sessions?

Whatever it was, Trump obtained Sessions' resignation before today's press conference, so it's possible Whitaker already tried to move against Mueller today, relying on the ground work he laid over a year ago.

The one thing that would suggest otherwise is the plea deal Manafort entered. I've argued that it is pardon proof, partly because it would include state charges and partly because Manafort would lose all his ill-gotten gains if Trump didn't pardon him first. For reasons I

won't write up yet, I'm not sure that's entirely true (though Manafort has provided a lot of information in the last several months).

That'd be way better planning than Trump has pulled off on any other thing. But then, protecting himself is the thing he's best at.

Update: I've added a few things to this timeline.

Update: According to John Q Barrett, who spent some time in the CNN Green Room last year, his entire point for going on CNN was to curry favor with Trump.

Whitaker told me in June 2017 that he was flying out from Iowa to NYC to be on CNN regularly because he was hoping to be noticed as a Trump defender, and through that to get a Trump judicial appointment back in Iowa.

And this (very detailed) WaPo piece describes Trump as telling aides he would not recuse, which raises questions about whether Whitaker told him so directly.

Trump has told advisers that Whitaker is loyal and would not have recused himself from the investigation, current and former White House officials said.