

VICTORIA TOENSING'S STORY ABOUT SAM CLOVIS' GRAND JURY APPEARANCE

In response to Monday's server hiccups and in anticipation that Mueller is nowhere near done, we expanded our server capacity overnight. If you think you'll rely on emptywheel reporting on the Mueller probe, please consider a donation to support the site.

Sam Clovis is the person in the George Papadopoulos plea who told Papadopoulos, just as Paul Manafort's pro-Russian Ukrainian corruption was becoming a scandal, "'I would encourage you' and another foreign policy advisor to 'make the trip[] [to Russia], if it is feasible.'"

Victoria Toensing is a right wing nutjob lawyer whose chief skill is lying to the press to spin partisan scandals.

Clovis has decided that Toensing can best represent him in the Russia investigation, which means in the wake of yesterday's surprise plea deal announcement, a person with "first-hand" knowledge of Clovis' actions decided to tell his side of the story to NBC. Significantly, securing Clovis' testimony is one of the last things Mueller did before springing the Manafort indictment and unsealing Papadopoulos' plea, meaning that's one of the things he was building up towards.

Sam Clovis, the former top Trump campaign official who supervised a man now cooperating with the FBI's Russia investigation, was questioned last week by Special Counsel Robert Mueller's team and testified before the investigating grand jury, a person with first-hand knowledge of the matter told NBC News.

Before I go further, let me note that there are few people who can claim first-hand knowledge of “the matter:” the grand jury, which thus far hasn’t leaked, Mueller’s team, which has shown a remarkable ability to keep secrets, or Clovis or Toensing.

Which is to say this story is likely Toensing and Toensing.

Much later in the article, a person with the same kind of knowledge also confirmed Clovis’ very helpful SSCI testimony.

Clovis was also interviewed recently by the Senate Intelligence Committee, according to a source with direct knowledge.

Thus far Clovis looks very cooperative, huh, per this person who knows what he has been doing?

Having placed Clovis at the grand jury last week, Toensing says she won’t comment on the one thing she can’t directly comment on – what went on there.

His lawyer, Victoria Toensing, would neither confirm nor deny his interactions with the Mueller team.

“I’m not going to get into that,” she said in an interview.

But Toensing does confirm that Clovis is the guy who supported Papadopoulos’ trip to Russia, which she would only know from having prepped his testimony or learned what he was asked in the grand jury.

Toensing confirmed that Clovis was the campaign supervisor in the emails.

She then presents what must be the story he told to explain why emails show him endorsing a trip to Russia even as it became clear why that was a bad idea.

In a statement, Toensing's office said Clovis set up a "national security advisory committee" in the Trump campaign that included Papadopoulos, "who attended one meeting and was never otherwise approached by the campaign for consultation."

[snip]

In the statement, Toensing said the Trump campaign had a strict rule prohibiting travel abroad on behalf of the campaign, and but that Clovis would have had no authority to stop Papadopoulos from traveling in his personal capacity.

To be fair, this story doesn't directly conflict with Papadopoulos' (though Toensing's earlier story, that as a midwestern "gentleman," Clovis would have been unable to tell Papadopoulos no, does conflict – this is probably an attempt, perhaps post-consultation with her client, to clean that up).

But it does adopt a line that permits the possibility Papadopoulos did (make plans to) travel to Russia, but that it was all freelancing (remarkably like Carter Page's trip to Russia was).

That is, this is the story (or close to it) that Clovis told the grand jury last week, before he learned that Papadopoulos had beat him to the punch and told a different (but still not fully public) story.

Now, I'm guessing that all the other people named in the Papadopoulos plea have also already had whatever shot they'll get to tell the truth to the grand jury, but in case they haven't, they can now coordinate with what Clovis said, which is surely part of the point.

But I'd also suggest that Mueller would be sure to get the testimony of everyone who might try to lie before he unsealed the Papadopoulos plea,

so they have to start considering fixing their testimony.

Update: Apparently the White House is rethinking the wisdom of subjecting Clovis to a confirmation hearing next week.