

WHY WAS PAUL MANAFORT FIRED?

In an attempt to sow outrage because the lifetime Republican Stefan Halper asked Carter Page and George Papadopoulos some questions, the frothy right is now focusing on why DOJ didn't tell Donald Trump his campaign, the one that asked all manner of people to work for "free," was infested with suspected foreign assets. They point to this passage in the GOP House Intelligence Report to suggest that if only DOJ had told Trump which of the suspected assets in his campaign they knew about, he would have fired them.

The Trump campaign did not receive a general counterintelligence briefing until August 2016, and even then, it was never specifically notified about Papadopoulos, Page, Manafort, or General Flynn's Russia ties. 10.; Further, the counterintelligence briefing provided to Trump and his top advisors did not identify any individuals by name, but rather focused on the general threat posed by adversaries, including Russia and China.

The suggestion that Trump would have fired these men is mostly without merit – after all, after President Obama gave Trump very specific warnings about Mike Flynn, Trump promoted him to oversee all of national security.

Moreover, these frothy defenders of individual liberty are effectively demanding that some kind of Nanny Running Mate do the vetting that – as the HPSCI report also admits – Trump never did.

While the Committee will not go into further detail on the charges against Manafort due to ongoing litigation concerns, Special Counsel Mueller's indictment of Manafort illustrates the necessity for U.S. presidential

campaigns to better investigate individuals who serve in senior positions within the campaign. If the accusations against Manafort are true, he should have never served as a senior official with a campaign for the U.S. presidency, much less campaign chairman or manager.

I mean, sure, DOJ could have done the vetting of Trump's "free" staffers that the billionaire candidate refused to do, but it would have involved the kind of review of communications and balance sheets that Trump would call "Spying," and it'd be much more intrusive "Spying" than asking lifetime GOP operative Halper to ask a few questions.

All that said, particularly giving how it took place the day after Trump's first intelligence briefing on August 17, I am increasingly interested in the campaign's decision to fire Paul Manafort. Here's how the GOP House Intelligence Report spins it.

Then-campaign manager[Corey Lewandowski] testified that, when Manafort was hired, [redacted] made no attempt to vet him and was entirely unaware of Manafort's past work in Ukraine.⁸⁵ In May 2016, Manafort was promoted to campaign chairman and, after [Lewandowski] was fired the next month, "evolve[d]" into the role of de facto campaign manager.⁸⁹

(U) Manafort left the campaign in August 2016 following news reports that he had received \$12.7 million in secret payments for his work on behalf of Yanukovich's Party of Regions; news reporting also alleged that Manafort and his aide Rick Gates had "directly orchestrated a covert Washington lobbying operation" on behalf of the party—while failing to register⁹⁰ as foreign agents. Campaign press secretary Hope Hicks recalled that, after

receiving press inquiries about Manafort's "professional history," a major story broke⁹¹ on the evening of August 14, 2016. According to Hicks, "Trump had made a decision to make a change in leadership on the campaign outside of Paul's issues that were being publicly reported," but those issues "certainly contributed to expediting and intensifying the way in which his role changed, and then ultimately he was fired at the end of that week."⁹² Trump directed his son-in-law Jared Kushner to ensure Manafort departed the campaign on August 19, which he did.⁹³ As Kushner put it, "[t]here was a lot of news that was out there and the decision was that it was time for him to resign."

But here's the story as told by Don Jr in his admittedly demonstrably false testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Q. And returning briefly to Mr. Manafort, what was your understanding of how Mr. Manafort ceased to be affiliated with the campaign?

A. I believe there was stuff coming out about Paul that he denied, but he didn't want to drag any other aspects of that life into the campaign and the work that we were doing. So he removed himself from his position as campaign chairman.

Q. And did he discuss with you or, to the best of your knowledge, anyone else on the campaign his ties with Ukrainian business or Russian interests, his alleged ties?

A. No, not that I recall.

Now, these are not entirely inconsistent stories. In both versions, when Manafort's ties to Yanukovich became a liability, he was ousted. Though if Manafort's ties to Ukraine were the

primary problem, then Rick Gates should have been ousted at the same time, and he not only remained on the campaign, but stayed on through the inauguration, helping Tom Barrack sell foreigners (including, but not limited to, wealthy Russians) inauguration access.

But, for starters, I find it absurd to suggest that Manafort was ousted because of allegations about his ties to Russia and Ukraine, but that he never spoke about that with the family. You might argue that Don Jr just remained ignorant of the details, but Trump's spawn, including Don Jr., were instrumental in ousting Lewandowski and elevating Manafort in the first place, so I find it doubtful Manafort would in turn be ousted without their feedback. Indeed, Jared's reported role in the firing makes it clear he, at least, was centrally involved.

So I find Junior's claim that he didn't discuss his Ukrainian and Russian ties just as dubious as these other answers.

Q. Are you aware of any ties, direct or indirect, past or present, between Mr. Manafort and the Russian government?

A. I've read that since, but I'm not aware of anything specific, no.

Q. Were you aware of Mr. Manafort's relationship with and work on behalf of Viktor Yanukovich?

A. Again, I've heard that since, but not at the time, no.

[snip]

Q. Do you know Konstantin Kilimnik?

A. Not that I'm aware of.

Plus – something that always gets forgotten in this timeline – between the time the most damning NYT story came out, the time Trump got his first intelligence briefing on August 17 and the day Trump fired Manafort on August 19, he

demoted him, also on August 17, putting Steve Bannon and Kellyanne Conway in charge.

Donald Trump, following weeks of gnawing agitation over his advisers' attempts to temper his style, moved late Tuesday to overhaul his struggling campaign by rebuffing those efforts and elevating two longtime associates who have encouraged his combative populism.

Stephen Bannon, a former banker who runs the influential conservative outlet Breitbart News and is known for his fiercely anti-establishment politics, has been named the Trump campaign's chief executive. Kellyanne Conway, a veteran Republican pollster who has been close to Trump for years, will assume the role of campaign manager.

[snip]

Trump issued a statement hours later. "I have known Steve and Kellyanne both for many years. They are extremely capable, highly qualified people who love to win and know how to win," he said. "I believe we're adding some of the best talents in politics, with the experience and expertise needed to defeat Hillary Clinton in November and continue to share my message and vision to Make America Great Again."

[snip]

Trump's stunning decision effectively ended the months-long push by campaign chairman Paul Manafort to moderate Trump's presentation and pitch for the general election. And it sent a signal, perhaps more clearly than ever, that the real estate magnate intends to finish this race on his own terms, with friends who share his instincts at his side.

Manafort, a seasoned operative who joined the campaign in March, will

remain in his role, but the advisers described his status internally as diminished due to Trump's unhappiness and restlessness in recent weeks over his drop in the polls and reports over lagging organization in several key states. He told some friends that he was unsure if he was being given candid assessments of news stories and the campaign's management.

While Trump respects Manafort, the aides said, he has grown to feel "boxed in" and "controlled" by people who barely know him. Moving forward, he plans to focus intensely on rousing his voters at rallies and through media appearances.

Even after the NYT black ledger story, Manafort was being portrayed as a moderating influence in Trump's campaign. Reports about Manafort's firing focus more on his treatment of Trump as a child than on his corruption. Even the NYT's coverage of the firing, in the wake of their blockbuster black ledgers story, minimized the import of that on his ouster, waiting until the very last paragraphs of a long article to describe how the stories led to his loss of support among his kids, especially Jared.

At the same time, the new accounts of Mr. Manafort's ties to Ukraine quickly eroded the support that he had from Mr. Trump's family during his earlier battles with Mr. Lewandowski.

According to people briefed on the matter, Jared Kushner, Mr. Trump's son-in-law, expressed increasing concern after a Times article published on Sunday about allegations of cash payments made to Mr. Manafort's firm for his work on behalf of his main client, Viktor F. Yanukovich, the former Ukrainian president, who is an ally of Mr. Putin.

Mrs. Clinton's campaign has repeatedly sought to yoke Mr. Trump to Mr. Putin, citing Mr. Trump's praise for the Russian leader. And the avalanche of stories about his work for pro-Russian entities in Ukraine were becoming untenable for the campaign, according to people briefed on the discussions.

"The easiest way for Trump to sidestep the whole Ukraine story is for Manafort not to be there," said Newt Gingrich, the former House speaker who has become a counselor to Mr. Trump.

In North Carolina on Thursday, Mr. Trump was informed of the newest such report: an Associated Press article that, citing emails, showed that Mr. Manafort's firm had orchestrated a pro-Ukrainian lobbying campaign in Washington without registering as a foreign agent.

That was enough, according to people briefed on the calls, for Mr. Trump to call Mr. Bannon and Ms. Conway.

I raise this for two reasons. First, retaining Gates while firing Manafort shows that the concern about Russian ties was only PR, at best. I admit when I first started writing this, I thought firing Manafort might have been a reaction against his willingness to chum up to Russia, possibly up to and including sharing information via Kilimnik with Oleg Deripaska. I believe that at various times in the Trump campaign, he tried to get out of the devil's bargain he made with Russia, and entertained the possibility that firing Manafort was one of those efforts. But the retention of Gates makes that unlikely.

All that said, Don Jr's explanation, like his father's, are convenient post hoc justifications (though this Corey Lewandowski story, which relies on Steve Bannon's, has the same emphasis).

Still, I find the coincidence of the decision to fire Manafort and that first briefing to be interesting. Did the warning that Russia was attempting to infiltrate his campaign make him more sensitive to Manafort's burgeoning Russia scandal?

One way or another, I'd love to revisit the events of that week to measure how much Trump and Junior – as distinct from Jared – cared about Manafort's ties with Russia.