

Bill Kaplan: Indictments: 'More shoes will drop'

Posted on Monday, Nov 6, 2017

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Special Counsel Robert Mueller, investigating Russian election interference in 2016, dropped multiple bombshells, with criminal charges against three former Trump campaign officials. Former Campaign Chair Paul Manafort and his deputy Rick Gates “were charged in a 12-count indictment with conspiracy to launder money, making false statements and other charges in connection with their work advising a Russia-friendly political party in Ukraine” (Washington Post). Trump, lacking impulse control, tweeted: “there is NO COLLUSION.” A miscalculation by Trump.

Shortly after the tweet, a plea agreement was “unsealed” revealing that George Papadopoulos, a Trump campaign foreign policy adviser, “pleaded guilty to making a false statement to the FBI about his efforts to broker a relationship between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin. The case provides the clearest evidence yet of links between Trump’s campaign and Russian officials” (Washington Post). Arizona GOP Senator John McCain reacted to the criminal charges: “This is a centipede. More shoes will drop” (New York Times).

Last weekend the talk in Washington was who would be indicted. White House aides, including former Chief of Staff Reince Priebus, have been interviewed by Mueller’s office. Many are hiring lawyers. A senior Republican told the Washington Post: “The walls are closing in. Everyone is freaking out.” Trump sought refuge from the political storm, with Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson, on the eve of the indictments. But rain canceled their golf. Then came the political hurricane.

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Not just the indictments and plea agreement. Lawyers from Facebook, Google and Twitter testified before congressional committees about the Russian interference. “Lawmakers on Wednesday released a trove of ads that Russian operatives bought on Facebook, providing the fullest picture yet of how foreign actors sought to promote Republican Donald Trump, denigrate Democrat Hillary Clinton and divide Americans over some of the nation’s most sensitive social issues,” e.g., guns, illegal immigration, race and religion – Muslims (Washington Post). 150 million users saw the Facebook ads.

CNN has reported that “Russian-linked Facebook ads targeted Michigan and Wisconsin.” Trump won Michigan by 10,704 votes and Wisconsin by 22,748! That’s on top of likely Russian efforts to hack voting systems in 21 states, including Wisconsin (hit the wrong address there). Moreover, Twitter found nearly 40,000 accounts linked to the Russians, while Google admitted that Russians posted over 1,000 political videos on YouTube. But all the while Senator Johnson calls for Mueller to resign. And, Trump acting like a tin-pot dictator, demands that the Justice Department investigate Clinton. Other GOP heads in sand. Denial is contagious.

House GOP Speaker Paul Ryan told CNN that the Russian investigation is not “a distraction.” Clueless and dancing on a moral pinhead. It overshadows everything: Trump’s trip to Asia, 2018 elections – GOP control of Congress, Trump’s reelection and the GOP legislative agenda. The New York Times said: “But the (Russian) investigation, coupled with dysfunction and polarization in Washington, makes the chances of passing major tax legislation by the end of the year problematic.” McCain is right: “More shoes will drop.”

— Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C. for the *Wisconsin State Journal* from 1995 – 2009.