

TIME cover shows Donald Trump in 'Stormy' conditions



TIME magazine unveils its new cover featuring President Donald Trump in stormy waters. The cover comes after the FBI raided the office of Trump's personal lawyer, Michael Cohen.

As the sun was setting on the evening of April 9, President Donald Trump gathered the Vice President, senior military leaders and his newly minted National Security Adviser around the long wooden table in the Cabinet Room to discuss one of the gravest decisions any Commander in Chief can make: whether to use military force against a foreign threat. The Syrian government had allegedly used chemical weapons on a town near Damascus, killing at least 40 innocent civilians, violating international law and crossing a strategic red line Trump himself had drawn nearly a year earlier.

But the President had something else on his mind. "So I just heard that they broke into the office of one of my personal attorneys," he said, unprompted, after reporters were ushered into the room. "Here we are talking about Syria," Trump grouched, "and I have this witch hunt constantly going on." His generals looking on stiffly, Trump launched into a jaw-dropping diatribe against the nation's highest law-enforcement officers—all appointees of his—and the FBI for its raids earlier in the day of his lawyer's home, office and hotel room. Trump called the searches "disgraceful" and "an attack on our country." Trump got the legal facts of the raids wrong—they had been conducted under warrants approved by a federal judge—but clearly appreciated the magnitude of the moment. It is rare for authorities to seize evidence of potential crimes from any lawyer's office. It is all but unheard of to do it from the personal attorney of the sitting President of the United States.

The raids were reportedly related to alleged payments by Trump's personal lawyer and longtime fixer, Michael Cohen, to the pornographic film actor Stephanie Clifford, who performs as Stormy Daniels. She claims to have had a consensual affair with Trump in 2006. The FBI was also reportedly looking for information about Cohen's possible role in brokering a deal between American Media Inc., which owns the National Enquirer, and 1998 Playboy Playmate of the Year Karen McDougal, who told friends she had an affair with Trump around the same time.

What has long seemed like an ugly but ultimately inconsequential saga in the life of this unorthodox public figure has become a legal and political thicket. Much as how Paula Jones' harassment case against Bill Clinton helped drive his impeachment and the seizure of Anthony Weiner's laptop led the FBI to reopen its probe of Hillary Clinton, Trump's personal history now may threaten his presidency. In politics as in life, the highest falls often come from the basest origins. "It is a President under siege," says Julian Zelizer, a political historian at Princeton University.

It is not yet clear whether the Cohen raids were directly linked to special counsel Robert Mueller's larger investigation of possible collusion between the Trump presidential campaign and Russia. Cohen's lawyer—and it's telling that Trump's own counsel now needs a lawyer—said Mueller had referred the Cohen investigation to the Manhattan U.S. Attorney's office, which oversaw the raid. But to get the warrant from a judge to raid the offices of an attorney, let alone that of the President, nearly all legal experts agree, would have required extraordinary evidence that the FBI might uncover crimes there. Among the roster of possible offenses the FBI was looking for, according to the Washington Post, were campaign-finance violations for the payoffs, bank fraud and wire fraud. Cohen and his lawyer both denied any wrongdoing.

All of which might simply be unseemly if it didn't constitute a circus taking place around the most powerful person on earth. The U.S. President decides the fates of millions of people, and this April he faces multiple crises. Trump has launched an economy-rattling trade fight with China that could have massive consequences on the daily lives of most Americans. In a matter of weeks, he is scheduled to hold a face-to-face meeting with a nuclear-armed tyrant in North Korea who has threatened to destroy Washington. All the while, the Mueller probe moves ahead. And new fuel will soon be added to the fire: ousted FBI director James

Comey's tell-all book comes out April 17.

The President's supporters boast about accomplishments such as the \$1.5 trillion tax cut, an economy that continues to grow and a new trade deal with South Korea. But those closest to Trump are unnerved by his penchant for making matters worse. Asked if he would fire Mueller?which White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders said he "certainly believes he has the power" to do?Trump replied, "Why don't I just fire Mueller? Well, I think it's a disgrace what's going on. We'll see what happens." He reportedly has had to be talked out of doing just that, and has since mused about firing Jeff Sessions, his Attorney General, for recusing himself from the Russia probe. Trump has also considered firing Sessions' deputy, Rod Rosenstein, the only official who, according to regulations, has the power to fire Mueller.

When Trump abruptly canceled a trip to Latin America, White House officials said it was because of the Syria matter. But aides later confirmed it was also because he wanted to figure out what to do about the Mueller investigation.

Should Trump move to fire Mueller or any of the officials overseeing his probe, it would be a remarkable twist of history: his version of President Nixon's "Saturday night massacre," prompted not by prosecutors unearthing illegal business dealings or alleged ties to Russia but by claims from a porn actor and a former Playboy bunny that Cohen orchestrated hush-money payments to bury details of alleged affairs with the President. Trump's supporters believe such a firing would have its own internal logic, coming after the President's feeling that the special prosecutor's investigation traveled too far from its original purpose.

Trump's scandals with women aren't new, of course. He was elected after voters heard a leaked tape from the Access Hollywood set in 2005 of Trump bragging about groping, kissing and forcing himself onto women, and after 19 women went public with allegations of sexual misconduct against him. (Records related to the tape were also reportedly of interest to investigators in the Cohen raid.) But what has come to light since are the machinations of Trump's entourage, as it worked to keep quiet two of his alleged affairs. As the Cohen raids show, that could create potentially crippling legal vulnerabilities for the President and those close to him.

Clifford says she met Trump in July 2006 at a celebrity golf tournament at Lake Tahoe. She was making a paid appearance, and the two rode in a golf cart together before Trump invited her to his hotel, Clifford said in a 2011 interview with In Touch Weekly that was published this January. After having sex, Clifford said Trump repeatedly promised to give her a spot on The Celebrity Apprentice. Melania Trump had recently given birth to the couple's son, Barron. During an interview with 60 Minutes in March, Clifford said a man approached her in a Las Vegas parking lot in 2011 and physically threatened her. "Leave Trump alone," he allegedly said. "Forget the story." Cohen has denied having anything to do with the threats.

Model and actor McDougal says she met Trump in 2006, while he was filming an episode of The Celebrity Apprentice at the Playboy Mansion in Los Angeles. Trump asked for her number, she said in an interview with CNN. McDougal described in detail a 10-month relationship with Trump she believed was based on love. "He always told me he loved me," she said.

McDougal, who was a preschool teacher before becoming a model, said she voted for Trump in November and that her contact with him was facilitated by one of his bodyguards. At one point, she said, Trump brought her into his Manhattan apartment. The visit made her feel "guilty, very guilty," she said. It ultimately convinced her to end the affair.

Sanders said in March that Trump has "made very well clear that none of these allegations are true." That may be. But at some point, Trump's personal lawyer, Cohen, allegedly got involved.

Cohen has worked for Trump since 2006, when he was hired as executive vice president of the Trump Organization and special counsel. He resigned once Trump became President to act as his personal lawyer. Cohen liked to be known as the "fixer," doing whatever needed doing to defend his boss. And he relished playing the tough guy. In 2015, Cohen threatened a reporter who was writing a story about Ivana and Donald Trump's divorce. "I'm warning you, tread very f-cking lightly," Cohen said, according to the Daily Beast. "Because what I'm going to do to you is going to be f-cking disgusting."

Three months before the election, American Media Inc., which is run by Trump confidant David Pecker, reportedly paid McDougal \$150,000 for the exclusive rights to her story. But it never ran; the payment appears to have been what is known in the tabloid world as "catch and kill," in which a paper buys a story to prevent it from coming out. Cohen reportedly knew about the deal.

Nearly three months later, as voters readied to go to the polls, Clifford says, Cohen offered her \$130,000 to agree to remain silent about the affair. The Wall Street Journal broke news of the hush-money payment in January. Clifford is suing Trump, accusing him of never actually signing their agreement. She also claims Cohen breached the deal by giving the news media a statement in February that confirmed the existence of the payment, and she is suing him for defamation.

When federal agents came knocking on Cohen's door, they were reportedly interested in documents related to any payments and arrangements that Cohen may have made for Clifford and McDougal, among other matters. The Clifford payment could be a violation of campaign-finance law, legal experts have warned. If the payment was made to help Trump win the election, it could be

considered an in-kind campaign contribution, the legal limit for which is \$2,700.

But Cohen's trouble may run much deeper. Investigators are already interested in possible commission of bank-fraud crimes, which can carry a penalty of up to 30 years in jail.

There are multiple dangers for Trump too. For more than a decade, Cohen handled matters large and small for the freewheeling businessman. And Cohen was the man helping Trump make many of his deals. The mere fact that investigators seized communications between Trump and Cohen should be concerning to both men.

After the Cohen raids, Trump tweeted that "attorney-client privilege is dead!?" But there's an exception: privilege doesn't apply if the communications between an attorney and client are determined to be facilitating criminal activity. If Trump is the client in question, the findings from the Cohen raid could implicate him directly.

Trump was already facing a daunting challenge from the Mueller investigation, and Cohen opens an entirely new front. And each could spawn further probes as investigators, armed with court-ordered warrants, dig deeper into a world Trump considers private. "[Cohen's] greatest danger is as bait to get Trump to aggressively move against Mueller or the Department of Justice," says Jonathan Turley, a professor at the George Washington University Law School. That could trigger calls for impeachment, or bolster an obstruction-of-justice case. One day before the FBI raid, Cohen tweeted, "A person who deserves my loyalty receives it." He tagged Trump's personal Twitter handle and added, "I will always protect our @POTUS."

What happens next may in part depend on how strong that loyalty is. If Cohen is indicted, he could be offered a deal to flip on Trump. (The President's pardon power does not apply to state-level crimes.) "Having a cooperating fix-it man is the dream of any prosecutor," says Turley.

It's worth pausing to reflect on just how unusual all this is. Presidents don't often face lawsuits related to extramarital affairs, let alone those with porn stars and Playmates. Their press secretaries aren't left to answer questions about FBI raids on the homes of campaign aides and attorneys. Nor do they tend to accuse the people charged with upholding the nation's laws of attacking the country.

On this count, Trump has only himself to blame. Good legal advice would generally have someone in Trump's position lay low. But at every turn, he has taken steps to make matters worse. On a flight back from West Virginia on April 5, Trump told reporters on Air Force One that he knew nothing about Cohen's payment to Clifford, which to some experts suggested she was no longer bound by the nondisclosure agreement.

Such antics become all the more important as Trump faces the possibility of being deposed by Mueller in the Russia investigation. Negotiations for his testimony are ongoing. Those close to the President, who are used to his volcanic temper and propensity to voice whatever comes to mind, worry what might happen now. "He should do as little talking as possible," says Alan Dershowitz, a professor emeritus at Harvard Law School and TV pundit, who dined with Trump on April 10 as part of a pre-planned meeting on Middle East issues. Dershowitz says he hasn't offered Trump direct legal advice, but says if he did, it would be that "his best course of action is to try to limit discussions with the prosecutors. No one in his position has ever been helped by a prosecutor."

But Trump is increasingly short of advisers to urge caution. Communications adviser Hope Hicks, one of Trump's closest confidants, left on March 29, while National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster, Homeland Security adviser Tom Bossert and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson were all recently forced out.

Around the West Wing, the expectation is that Trump is far from done. Sessions, Rosenstein and White House chief of staff John Kelly are all on thin ice. Trump blames Sessions and Rosenstein for his legal woes. In Trump's mind, had Sessions not recused himself from the inquiry into Trump campaign's possible ties to Russia—which was required by the Justice Department, since Sessions was a major voice inside the campaign—then Rosenstein could not have appointed Mueller. Even Trump's own aides acknowledge that the President fails to see how he made matters worse by firing Comey when the FBI director wouldn't drop his own probe into Russia.

In the wake of the Cohen raids, even Republican lawmakers had stark warnings for Trump. "It would be suicide?" for Trump to fire Mueller, Iowa Senator Chuck Grassley said. On April 11, Grassley said the Senate Judiciary Committee plans to advance a bipartisan bill to protect Mueller if Trump attempts to fire him. South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham tamped down the idea Trump is considering taking out Rosenstein: "I'm confident that would be the beginning of the end of his presidency, and he's not going to do that."

Since the night of Nov. 8, 2016, Trump's political and philosophical opponents have been publicly and repeatedly asking, How long can this last? Those who have concluded "not much longer?" have been vexed time after time. After all, this is a man who defied convention and criticism to achieve the highest office in the country, not to mention one who spent decades honing his abilities as a media provocateur. Skilled as Trump has been at deploying suspense, misdirection and invective to his advantage over the last 15

months, the Trump reality show appears closer than ever to colliding with reality itself.

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