



Is Trump Entering a Kill Box?

Given the bravery he showed in stepping out front as the first senator to endorse Donald Trump, Jeff Sessions deserves better from his boss than the Twitter-trashing he has lately received.

The attorney general has not only been loyal to Trump and his agenda, he has the respect and affection of ex-colleagues in Congress and, more broadly, of populists and conservatives nationally.



Trump's tweets about Sessions are only demoralizing his base.

Yet the president is not wrong to be exasperated and enraged.

A yearlong FBI investigation into Russian hacking has failed to produce a single indictment. Yet the president watches impotently as a special counsel pulls together a lethal force, inside his own administration, whose undeclared ambition is to bring him down.

Trump's behavior suggests that he sees the Mueller threat as potentially mortal.

How did we get to this peril point when there is no evidence that Trump or any senior aide colluded in the hacking? As for the June 2016 meeting with the Russians, called by Donald Trump Jr. when told by a friend that Moscow had dirt on Hillary Clinton, even that was no crime.

Foolish, yes; criminal, no. So, again, how did we get to where talk of impeachment and presidential pardons fills the air?

First, Attorney General Sessions, as a campaign adviser and surrogate for Trump who had met with the Russian ambassador, had to recuse himself from the investigation. Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein then assumed oversight authority.

Trump then fired FBI Director James Comey and boasted to Russia's foreign minister about having gotten the "crazy nut job" off his case. His Oval Office comments leaked. Comey then leaked notes of his meeting with Trump. Rosenstein then washed his hands of the mess by naming a special counsel.

And he chose a bulldog, ex-FBI Director Robert Mueller.

Hence, where are we? Despite zero evidence of Trump or his aides colluding in the hacking, a counterintelligence investigation is evolving into a criminal investigation. Mueller is now hiring veteran investigators and prosecutors specializing in white-collar crime.

This is not a witch hunt. It is an Easter egg hunt on the White House lawn, where the most colorful eggs are likely to be the tax returns and the financial records of Trump, who built a real estate empire in a town where winners brag about how they gutted the losers.

Every enemy of Trump is going to be dropping the dime on him to Mueller. Moreover, there is no history of special counsels being appointed and applauded by the press, who went home without taking scalps.

Trump understands this. Reports of his frustration and rage suggest that he knows he has been



Written by [Patrick J. Buchanan](#) on July 28, 2017

maneuvered, partly by his own mistakes, into a kill box from which there may be no bloodless exit.

What Trump needs is a leader at Justice who will confine the Mueller investigation to the Russian hacking, and keep Mueller's men from roaming until they hit prosecutorial pay dirt.

Consider now Trump's narrowing options.

He can fire Jeff Sessions. But that will enrage Trump's base to whom the senator is a loyal soldier. And anyone Trump nominates as AG would not be confirmed unless he or she pledged not to interfere with Mueller.

He could direct Rosenstein to fire Mueller. But Rosenstein would assume the Elliot Richardson role in the Saturday Night Massacre, when that AG refused to fire Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox, resigned, and was canonized as a martyr by the Never-Nixon media.

Even if Trump finds a Justice Department loyalist to play the role of Solicitor General Robert Bork, who carried out Nixon's orders and fired Cox, this would only mean Mueller's departure. Mueller's staff of prosecutors and investigators would still be there, beavering away.

When Archibald Cox was fired, Nixon ordered his entire office shut down. Yet, within days of the firestorm, it was up and running again with a new special prosecutor. And impeachment resolutions were blossoming in the House.

Another Trump option would be to leave Mueller alone and hope for a benign outcome. But from reports of his rage at the recusal of Sessions and unwillingness of Rosenstein to restrict Mueller to the Russian hacking scandal, Trump seems to sense that an unrestricted investigation represents a mortal threat to his presidency.

And all the talk of impeachment and pardons suggests that this city can also see what lies over the next hill. After all, we have been here before.

From his history, Mueller is not a man to be intimidated by charges of bias. These will only steel his resolve to pursue with his subpoena power every document he wants, including tax returns, until he has satisfied himself.

The president is unlikely to view this process with indulgence, and patience does not appear to rank high among his virtues.

We are headed for a collision between President Trump and Director Mueller.

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