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The Trump Administration's Looming Political Crisis

It's been a chaotic year since the election. But the Mueller investigation signals that the most eventful days are still ahead.

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It was only a year ago that voters delivered Donald Trump to the Presidency. It feels much longer. Trump's Twitter storms and erraticism can seem to slow time. There was his initial travel ban, last January, followed by protests at airports, court injunctions, a new travel ban, further injunctions, and an intervention by the Supreme Court. Add to this his adventures in nuclear brinkmanship; his assault on Obamacare; his moves to tear apart the world's free-trade system; and his use of the White House bully pulpit to normalize white supremacy.

It may seem many months ago, yet it was only in mid-August that he took note of the "very fine people" attending a neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville, where a white nationalist murdered a counter-protester. Steve Bannon may think of all this as a strategy of disruption. But Trump's conduct rarely suggests deliberation; it more often seems to express his anger, his tiresome ego, and his instincts for performance.

It requires fortitude to accept the likelihood that the Trump Presidency is about to become more eventful still. The investigations into Vladimir Putin's interference in the 2016 election, and the possibility that Trump's campaign colluded with Russia, are intensifying. The accusation that Russian covert operations influenced the Presidential vote clearly drives Trump to distraction. He has repeatedly denied that his campaign collaborated with Russia, and he insists that Putin's activity contributed nothing to his victory. Yet the latest revelations do not bode well for the President.

Last week, congressional committees summoned representatives from Facebook, Google, and Twitter to grill them about how they could possibly have allowed polarizing, race-baiting ads to be placed on their platforms by companies linked to the Kremlin. On Facebook alone, during the campaign, Russian ads reached more than a hundred million Americans. It is shocking that only now, and after early denials from Facebook that the ads were a serious problem, are we discovering the vast online spread of manipulative content linked to Russia. At a minimum, as Representative Adam Schiff, the senior Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, put it, "the Russians mounted what could be described as an independent expenditure campaign on Mr. Trump's behalf." Yet Facebook has often evaded accountability, whether regarding privacy violations, its monopoly power, or abuses of its platform by malevolent actors. Mark Zuckerberg, its chief executive, and Sheryl Sandberg, its chief operating officer, did not go to Washington last week. They were on a conference call about Facebook's quarterly profits of nearly five billion dollars.

The Justice Department has also made a leap forward in its efforts to clarify Russia's interference and to prosecute anyone involved in illegality. Last week, Robert Mueller, the special counsel, announced the indictment of Paul Manafort, Trump's former campaign manager, and an associate, Rick Gates, on charges of fraud and money laundering stemming from their work for pro-Russian politicians in Ukraine. Most of Manafort's activity was previously known, and the charges did not touch upon collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia. Still, the indictment served notice to Manafort that if he wishes to avoid a long prison sentence he might consider talking with Mueller's investigators about, for example, what Trump knew about Russia's efforts to help him get elected.

Another former Trump aide has already decided to turn state's evidence. Mueller announced that George Papadopoulos, who advised Trump on foreign policy during the campaign, had pleaded guilty to making false statements to the F.B.I. Papadopoulos was arrested in July, but it was revealed only last week that he has apparently been cooperating with Mueller's team. Sometimes a witness's cooperation is kept secret so that the person can clandestinely record conversations with other targets

of an investigation; it's not known whether Papadopoulos did this. In any case, the statement chronicling his admissions reads like a treatment for a mediocre political thriller. It recounts Papadopoulos's discussions in Italy and London with a Russia-connected "Professor." (Joseph Mifsud, who is affiliated with the University of Stirling, in Scotland, has acknowledged that he is that individual but has denied any wrongdoing.) It also contains repeated references to getting Russian help in obtaining "dirt" on Hillary Clinton. Papadopoulos's LinkedIn profile includes an endorsement of him from Trump: "Excellent guy." Last week, on Twitter, Trump changed his assessment, calling Papadopoulos a "low level volunteer" who had proved to be a "liar."

A Justice Department investigation of a sitting President or his senior aides creates its own ecosystem of betrayals and political calculations. When considering Donald Trump's position, it is natural to reflect on Watergate and the events that led to Richard Nixon's resignation, in 1974. The political equation is more favorable for Trump than it was for Nixon. During Watergate, when the evidence against the President began to look damning, Republican leaders in Congress encouraged him to resign, for the sake of the Party. Since then, the G.O.P. has shifted sharply to the right, and it is now consumed by conflicts between populists and traditionalists. Trump remains popular with committed Republican voters, and the Party's congressional wing has so far been largely supine.

The most resonant episode from Watergate may be the Saturday Night Massacre, carried out by Nixon in October, 1973. The President found an official to fire Archibald Cox, a special prosecutor investigating Nixon's inner circle for obstructing justice, after the Attorney General and the Deputy Attorney General resigned rather than do so. The episode offers a precedent for Trump, but an ambiguous one, given Nixon's fate. The President's allies at Fox News and at the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial page continue to denigrate Mueller, priming the Republican base for a day when Trump might decide to fire him. Judging by Trump's tweets, there can be no doubt that he would if he thought he could get away with it.

Such an intervention would precipitate a political crisis with an unpredictable outcome. Trump occupies the White House in an era of heightened Presidential powers. He may be constrained by his unpopularity outside the Republican Party, as well as by the professionalism of the F.B.I., the judiciary, and the press. But, as Archibald Cox observed just before he was fired, "Eventually, a President can always work his will." In all probability, the country's most dangerous trials during the Trump Administration lie ahead. ♦

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