What the Cohen, Manafort Verdicts Mean for Our Future

The mixed verdict in the trial of Paul Manafort, Donald Trump’s former campaign manager, along with the guilty plea on campaign finance violations by the U.S. president’s former lawyer, Michael Cohen, is a sign of just how messy—and perhaps inconclusive—Special Prosecutor Robert Mueller’s probe into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election will be. But Tuesday’s events also point to broader destabilization in U.S. politics.

As November’s midterm elections approach, Trump is increasingly hostile to swathes of the U.S. national security, intelligence and law enforcement establishment. He is also getting better at manipulating Washington’s levers of power, and as he relies on whipping up his electoral base ahead of the vote, he’s increasingly likely to turn the latest legal developments to his advantage.

Manafort was found guilty on eight charges of tax and bank fraud and failing to disclose foreign bank accounts; the judge declared a mistrial on the remaining 10 charges after the jury could not reach a verdict on them. In the same hour that the federal jury in Alexandria, Virginia, convicted Manafort, Cohen was in federal court in Manhattan, pleading guilty to one count of willfully causing an unlawful corporate campaign contribution and one count of making an excessive campaign contribution.

Neither case may provide Mueller with direct proof that there was deliberate collusion between Russia and the Trump presidential campaign, but they were clear signs of just how vulnerable those around the president are to financial charges around fraud and tax evasion in particular. Jail time for Manafort and Cohen now seems all but inevitable unless the president can find a way to pardon them, and that seems unlikely without considerable political risk.

The Cohen plea in particular seems to increase the chances that charges of financial irregularities may yet be laid at the door of Trump himself. The New York lawyer, long one of Trump’s closest confidants, told the court that he had made payments to influence the 2016 election at the direction of a candidate for federal office. He did not name the candidate.

Manafort’s case was about tax evasion rather than campaign finance violations, but he still faces further charges in another federal court in Washington next month, as well as a possible Virginia retrial on the charges on which the jury disagreed. At the least, the cases guarantee an ongoing drip feed of news welcomed by those who wish to see the president impeached, but likely to be largely ignored by those who support him.

Trump himself clearly is aware that he could be in legal jeopardy; his interview with Reuters this week made clear his own concerns over being accused of perjury, should he agree to be interviewed by Mueller. The president’s fury at the wider Mueller probe and Manafort prosecution in particular—and what some legal commentators said came dangerously close to clear attempts to put pressure on the jury through rants on social media—is unlikely to stop. Perhaps just as important are the equally unprecedented spats with some of the most established figures in the U.S. defense and intelligence community, which intensified sharply after Trump’s decision to strip former intelligence chief John Brennan of his security clearances.

Legal purists might argue that these disputes—as well as others such as his criticism over the Federal Reserve over a recent rate hike, confrontation with Turkey’s President Tayyip Erdogan and vendettas with the media—are separate from Mueller’s investigation. Technically, they are right—but Trump presents them as part of a wider establishment conspiracy against him. That’s a potent line of attack and defense in an election year, and it’s clear he won’t be shy to use it.

The paradox here is that even as Trump rails about how the system is against him, he is getting better at taking more control within it. In his first year in office, he was often constrained by more experienced officials within the administration, such as Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster. Many of those figures are now gone, and media leaks will have left White House Chief of Staff John Kelly in little doubt that his own position remains vulnerable. Trump, meanwhile, is becoming ever more effective at appointing more like-minded figures such as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Adviser John Bolton.

The longer Trump stays in office, the more acquiescent people he can appoint to key positions. This month, the U.S. military announced a number of new top appointments, all of which will have required presidential approval. Trump’s comments about the Fed rate hike may do little to sway those currently running the Federal Reserve, but they inevitably will shape the views and statements of those who wish to be appointed to it in the future. Trump is also reshaping the bench of the Supreme Court in his favor through his choice of a conservative nominee to replace a retiring judge. Even more important will be developments at the Department of Justice, where Trump has explicitly tried to sideline and undermine those involved in the Mueller probe.

To Trump, these may look like confrontations in which raw political realism outguns legal niceties. He knows removal through impeachment remains unlikely. Even if the Democrats dominate the House of Representatives in November and start the process, they are much less likely to be able to do so in the Senate, which is where any such charges would ultimately be decided.

As long as that remains the case, the more the president is likely to work at exploiting the country's searing political divide—even as his one-time friends face jail. {eoa}

Peter Apps *is Reuters global affairs columnist, writing on international affairs, globalization, conflict and other issues. He is founder and executive director of the Project for Study of the 21st Century; PS21, a non-national, non-partisan, non-ideological think tank. Before that, he spent 12 years as a reporter for Reuters covering defense, political risk and emerging markets. Since 2016, he has been a member of the British Army Reserve and the UK Labour Party. The opinions expressed are his own.*