

Why Cohen's hearing is just the beginning

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03/03/2019



Washington: In testimony before the House Oversight Committee last week, Michael Cohen, US President Donald Trump's former attorney, made several devastating revelations about the president - revelations that portend a new era of accountability for the president and his close associates.

It was a big day, but it is only the first of many.

The House oversight hearing with Trump's former attorney, coming in advance of special counsel Robert Mueller's report, heralds what Democrats in Congress view as the long days ahead providing checks and balances on the Oval Office. For some, the outcome may - or may not - lead to grounds for impeachment. For others, this merely a political exercise and impeachment cannot come fast enough. What is certain, though, is the mounting tension.

The president's former chief counselor, Steve Bannon, had warned before the 2018 elections that Democrats would impeach the president if they won control of Congress.

Republicans are taking up that mantle. At the start of the Cohen hearing, the top Republican on the panel, Rep. Jim Jordan of Ohio, said the only reason for the session was so Democrats could pursue impeachment. Another committee Republican, Rep. Chip Roy of Texas, called the hearing a "circus" not worth Americans' time. And newly elected Republican Rep. Carol Miller of West Virginia said the sole purpose was "discrediting the president."

"If it was not already obvious," Miller said, "there are members here with a singular goal in Congress to impeach President Trump."

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has kept calls for impeachment at bay by insisting that Mueller first must be allowed to finish his work, which reports suggest could happen in the coming weeks, and present his findings publicly - though it's unclear whether the White House will allow its full release.

Cohen will return to Congress next week for more testimony, US lawmakers said, after three days of marathon appearances.

House Intelligence Committee chairman Adam Schiff also revealed that Felix Sater, a Russian-born real estate developer who claims strong connections to the Kremlin, and who reportedly pitched the Moscow Trump Tower project to Trump's team, will testify before the committee on March 14. The public hearing is believed to be the first scheduled appearance before Congress for Sater, who once had an office in Trump Tower and is seen as a mysterious figure who could shed light on dealings between the Trump organization, his campaign and Russia.

Cohen meanwhile will return on March 6 for additional closed-door testimony to the Intelligence Committee, Schiff said. "It was a very productive interview, where he was able to shed light on a lot of issues that are very core to our investigation, and we were able to drill down in great detail," Schiff said, adding that he intended to publicly release transcripts of Cohen's testimony "at the appropriate point."

Cohen - who is to report to prison on May 6 to begin serving a three-year sentence for fraud, tax evasion, illegal campaign contributions and lying to Congress - expressed regret for his years of devoted service to Trump. The onetime lawyer, who has been disbarred, said Trump directed him to lie about hush payments made to a porn actress to silence her claims of a 2006 affair with the real estate tycoon. He also said Trump knew in advance in mid-2016 that WikiLeaks would publish emails stolen by the Russians from rival Hillary Clinton's campaign.

Nevertheless, Cohen produced no fresh evidence that Trump or his campaign colluded with Russia during the election, the subject of an investigation by Mueller.

While Cohen's credibility repeatedly came under attack by the president's allies on the committee, some say there are reasons to trust what the ex-lawyer said. After his prosecutions, Cohen knows well the costs of lying.

"The American people expect us to hold the administration accountable," said Rep. David Cicilline, D-R.I, a member of House leadership. "And if during the course of that we come upon sufficient evidence that warrants his removal, I think they expect us to do that."

But Democrats are not there yet, at all. So far, the Democratic Party's potential 2020 class has tried to avoid the impeachment question altogether, fearful it could undermine the process and trigger a voter backlash. Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts sent an email during the hearing promising, if she becomes president, not to pardon anyone implicated in the Trump investigations. She set down a challenge for others running to do same.

Trump slams Mueller, critics in fiery speech  
Veers off-script to launch tirade about events that led to Russia probe

Published: March 03, 2019 15:20  
Reuters

US President Donald Trump hugs American flag at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) annual meeting at National Harbor near Washington, on March 2, 2019.

Image Credit: REUTERS  
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Why Cohen's hearing is just the beginning  
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Oxon Hill, Maryland -

President Donald Trump on Saturday attacked US Special Counsel Robert Mueller ahead of his report on alleged Russia collusion by the Trump campaign in 2016 and said his political opponents were "trying to take me out with bullshit."

In a speech that lasted more than two hours -- his longest since taking office two years ago -- Trump also vented about Democrats, a proposed "green new deal," illegal immigrants and criticism of his North Korea summit, while voicing optimism about his own re-election prospects in 2020. Addressing a cheering audience at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference in Oxon Hill, Maryland, Trump veered off-script to launch a tirade about

events that led to the Russia investigation.

He mocked his former attorney general, Jeff Sessions, and former FBI Director James Comey, both of whom Trump fired. "We're waiting for a report by people who weren't elected," Trump said of the Mueller report, which is widely expected to be handed over to Attorney General William Barr in the coming days. Deputy attorney general Rod Rosenstein appointed Mueller in May 2017 to take over the Russia investigation after Trump fired Comey, whose agency had led the probe initially. Rosenstein is expected to step down by mid-March.

Swarms of young adults stood to applaud Trump in the packed hotel ballroom where he spoke, at times breaking into chants like "Trump is our Man" and "We Love You." Trump said Comey was Mueller's "best friend," and implied Comey should have been fired before Trump took office. "Unfortunately, you put the wrong people in a couple of positions and they leave people for a long time that shouldn't be there and all of a sudden they are trying to take you out with bullshit, okay?" Trump said.

"Now Robert Mueller never received a vote and neither did the person who appointed him," he added.

Trump still has made no move to fire Mueller, a Republican and respected former FBI director who has conducted his investigation with utmost secrecy. Trump's face perspired as he lashed out at critics after a stressful week during which his former lawyer Michael Cohen accused the president in congressional testimony of breaking the law. Also, the president concluded a summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in Hanoi without reaching a denuclearization deal.

He said he believed he will win in 2020, rejecting critics who said lack of support for Trump was behind the Republican loss of the U.S. House of Representatives last November. "Wait 'til you see what happens when I do run," he said.

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