

RUDY GIULIANI DONALD TRUMP CORRUPTION

Giuliani and Trump: Bound by Corruption From the Beginning?

To understand how the onetime odd couple became partners in political crime, you have to go back to 1980s New York and a tale of money laundering, mortgage fraud, and, yes, an election.

By Tom Robbins

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Then-President-elect Donald Trump poses with former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani at the Trump National Golf Club Bedminster clubhouse in New Jersey on November 20, 2016. (AP / Carolyn Kaster, File)

It is a musty notion from a bygone era, but once upon a time the idea that Rudy Giuliani and Donald Trump could be a tag team in search of political dirt on common enemies was as foreign as the Ukrainian soil they now till.

In the New York of the 1980s, when both rose to prominence, they were at opposite poles of the civic landscape.

One was a swaggering crime-buster taking down Mafia bosses, Wall Street predators, and corrupt politicians. The other was a rules-bending real estate tycoon, a shiny emblem of the age of Greed Is Good, bent on success at any cost.

Yet both reveled in public brazenness. Giuliani walked stockbrokers off the trading floor in handcuffs. Trump ripped down precious landmarks to make way for his buildings. Both were also fluent in the language spoken among the elite of New York deal-makers, where favors are traded, punches are pulled, and the public interest always finishes a dismal last.

And, as laughingly obvious as it is today, those of us back then who cheered on the prosecutor, while raking the muck on the developer, eventually learned the hard way that these two were cut from the same cloth, destined for a partnership far more enduring than their many marriages.

The first glimmerings of that lesson surfaced one night in an Italian restaurant in Greenwich Village as Jack Newfield, the legendary investigative digger, and I dined with a federal agent named Tony Lombardi.

Although technically employed by the Internal Revenue Service, Lombardi's only apparent duties were to serve as the trusted special investigator for Giuliani, then the hard-charging United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York.

While Giuliani had at his beck and call a squad of FBI agents and other investigators, he preferred Lombardi for sensitive assignments. It was Lombardi, a dapper man given to double-breasted suits and pocket hankies, who was asked to look after the unstable daughter of a judge facing corruption charges, who had been persuaded to provide testimony for the prosecution against her own mother. It was Lombardi who was detailed to work on an investigation into city contracts granted to a health consultant rumored to have been the lover of Mayor Ed Koch, against whom Giuliani was then pondering a campaign.

Along with a bevy of other local reporters, we knew that Tony Lombardi was, as our friend and *Village Voice* colleague Wayne Barrett dubbed him, "the eyes, ears and mouth of Rudy Giuliani."

That night, amid the opening pleasantries, Lombardi shot the French cuffs from his suit jacket, leaned forward on the table, and announced: "I have another year or so to go with the department, and then I'm going to be head of security for Donald."

No last name was needed to explain this promising exit plan from public service. This was 1988, and Donald Trump had forced himself into public consciousness like the car alarms that blared mercilessly without stop. He had already put his name on a soaring tower in midtown, repaired an ailing city skating rink in Central Park, launched casinos in Atlantic City, and publicly toyed with the idea of running for president.

Lombardi's comment was decidedly off-kilter with what was on the menu that evening. Two years earlier, Giuliani had won convictions against a ring of scoundrels who had been happily looting city coffers under the nose of the Koch administration. Most prominent among his scalps was that of Stanley Friedman, the goateed Democratic Party chieftain from the Bronx who had been nailed while attempting a flimflam worth millions on the city's transportation department.

An ex-deputy mayor, Friedman had been a partner in the law firm of Roy Cohn, Senator Joseph McCarthy's Iago, a master of the legal dark arts and lawyer to some of the biggest mobsters Giuliani was simultaneously pursuing. While Friedman had worked from the top floor of Cohn's East Side townhouse and law office, Cohn had been on the ground floor offering lessons in the use of bluster, bravado, and outright lies to his prize client and pupil, Donald Trump.

If Rudy Giuliani was the anti-corruption scourge of New York, Cohn's budding protégé should have been a likely suspect, even a prized quarry.

At the table, Lombardi offered no details about how his richly rewarding job offer had arisen. In the course of business, he said, he had come to know Trump. The two had grown friendly. The discussion then moved on to more pressing matters.

It wasn't until several years later, thanks to the steady drilling of Barrett and fellow *Voice* reporter William Bastone, that we learned the back story: At the time of our meeting, Lombardi had recently finished a quiet inquiry on behalf of his boss into allegations that organized crime figures had laundered hefty sums of cash as they bought apartments in Trump Tower, the flagship of the developer's then growing empire.

The charge had come from a mob-tied financial consultant facing federal tax fraud indictment looking to help himself by offering to tell a far more interesting story. The consultant said he had helped the underworld figures—most notoriously, Robert Hopkins, a numbers kingpin working for the Luchese crime family—buy the apartments at Trump's complex with fraudulent mortgages. The developer himself, the consultant alleged, had been present as suitcases of cash had changed hands at Hopkins's closing.

The purchase landed Hopkins two apartments worth \$2 million on the upper floors of Trump Tower. That's where the Manhattan DA found him when he was arrested in 1986, charged with orchestrating a mob hit. Hopkins's defense lawyer? Another partner of Roy Cohn.

This was potentially rich Giuliani territory: The Mafia, bank fraud, and a possibly complicit high-profile figure. But the investigation ended before it even began. Instead of building a case by working his way through knowledgeable witnesses and records, Lombardi went straight to Trump himself with the allegation. He was

quickly won over. As the agent later told Barrett in a 1993 *Voice* story about the episode, he was so impressed with Trump's openness and honesty that he decided there was nothing to investigate. "The guy met me without an attorney," Lombardi said. "He answered all my questions. There was never any hesitation."

All of this, Lombardi insisted, was done with the approval of higher-ups at the US Attorney's office. "[E]veryone that should have known about this thing knew," he said.

There was another possible reason for the sudden lack of prosecutorial interest. That spring, Trump began touting Giuliani as a would-be mayor, claiming he could raise \$2 million in a half hour if the US Attorney decided to run.

Of course, that was just Trump spin. He did briefly back Giuliani and raised a few thousand for his failed 1989 race, but by 1993 Trump was hedging his bets, hoping for approvals by David Dinkins, the sitting mayor, for his pending projects.

Things didn't work out for Tony Lombardi in the end. An internal investigation by the IRS faulted him for engaging in prohibited fundraising for Giuliani and abusing his authority with sources. He wound up jilted by Trump, who gave the security job to someone else, and by Giuliani, who never offered him even a nominal post in City Hall. Lombardi died in 2015.

Giuliani now works feverishly on behalf of the man he once investigated. Eyes bulging, waving his phone with McCarthy-like flair as he insists it holds all the damning information he has discovered, he thunders away on the talk shows. Once-loyal fans say they hardly recognize that man. But he's not the one who has changed. He is the same zealous, win-at-any-cost inquisitor he always was, a genuine "Made in New York" schemer. Just like his client.

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COMMENTS (2)

In the Ukraine Scandal, Trump Won't Be Taking the Fall Alone

Administration stalwarts Mike Pence, Mick Mulvaney, William Barr, and Mike Pompeo are all implicated, too.

By Joan Walsh

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President Donald Trump greets Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at the State Department on May 2, 2018, as Vice President Mike Pence watches. (AP / Evan Vucci)

After weeks of ever-worsening news about how Donald Trump, according to multiple accounts, held up military aid to Ukraine until the country promised to investigate Joe Biden's (fabricated) corruption and Trump's nutty conspiracy theories about the origins of the Russia probe, it remains remarkable how this godless New York grifter so thoroughly took over a political party that pretended to be about sober conservatism, Christian piety, and balanced budgets. Let's look at four administration stalwarts up to their necks in this mess: Vice President Mike Pence, Attorney General William Barr, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and acting White House chief of staff Mick Mulvaney. Together they represent the four tent poles of the modern GOP circus: the extreme Christian right, the stolid GOP establishment, the corporate Koch brothers wing, and the allegedly anti-deficit, actually white nationalist Tea Party. When those tent poles go down, they could bring the whole sad party with them.

Barr is starting to make career racist Jeff Sessions look like Eric Holder. Even Trump critics in the legal community hoped Barr would cure what ailed the Justice Department after Sessions's impaired successor—remember Matt Whitaker?—had to leave the stage. Instead Barr has turned out to be just what Trump asked for: his Roy Cohn.

Over the past month we've learned that Barr traveled to foreign capitals, at least once circumventing local US diplomatic staff, to “investigate” the debunked notion that some of America's top allies helped gin up the Russia probe to discredit Trump's presidency. Equally disturbing, Barr ignored the recommendation of the CIA's general counsel to criminally investigate Trump's heavy-handed “requests” of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky—even though Trump mentioned Barr on the call, which many believe means the attorney general should have recused himself. (Who knew Sessions had more professional integrity?)

But Barr's perfidy shouldn't surprise us. Instead, it should remind us that the Ukraine scandal is less like Watergate—which, bad as it was, involved only domestic politics—and more like the Reagan-Bush Iran-contra scandal and its aftermath, in which Barr was also implicated as George H.W. Bush's attorney general. While arms for hostages might sound marginally more honorable than arms for political dirt, the attempted trades are comparable: two efforts backed by a GOP White House to subvert the bipartisan foreign policy appropriations of Congress and advance Republican interests. (In case you missed the connection, Trump gave Reagan's attorney general Ed Meese the Presidential Medal of Freedom on October 8.) Barr, who advised Bush to pardon the indicted conspirators of Iran-contra, is up to his neck in both betrayals of his country. He helps prove that even the pre-Trump Republican Party was more interested in power than rectitude. If Congress is not too busy, Barr should be impeached.

As should Pompeo. In 2016, as a Kansas congressman supported by Charles and David Koch—and best known before that for running an aircraft supply company into the ground—Pompeo warned that Trump would be “an authoritarian president who ignored our Constitution.” Now he's helping Trump do just that. After ducking questions about it, Pompeo had to admit he was on the July 25 call in which Trump pressured Zelensky to investigate Biden in exchange for military aid that Congress had already approved. That was bad enough. Then Pompeo attempted to defy Democratic subpoenas for information about the Ukraine mess, complaining his political opponents were “intimidating and bullying” State Department officials. Unfortunately for him, some of those officials have agreed to testify before Congress, and House Intelligence Committee chair Adam Schiff suggested that his committee could include Pompeo's defiance in articles of impeachment involving the administration's habitual obstruction of justice.

Shortly thereafter, former Ukraine envoy Kurt Volker shared a raft of once-encrypted texts that demonstrate the arms-for-political-dirt quid pro quo that Pompeo and other Trump defenders deny existed. Others who were subpoenaed also indicated their willingness to testify. Pompeo should also be impeached. (But Barr comes first.)

Then there's Mulvaney. The South Carolina Tea Party Republican was a founding member of the wing nut Freedom Caucus and purported to be a mortal foe of deficit spending—at least by a black president, as it turns out. Like Pompeo, Mulvaney opposed Trump in 2016, calling him a “terrible human being,” but then took multiple jobs in his administration; he's still Office of Management and Budget head as well as acting White House chief of staff. First he peddled the budget-busting Trump tax cuts. Now he's the guy who gave the order to halt congressionally approved military aid to Ukraine, as Trump directed. He has also been subpoenaed to provide a libraryful of administration documents to the committees investigating impeachment. I don't think you can impeach a White House chief of staff, but Mulvaney will go down in history as a corrupt hypocrite who helped prove that the Tea Party movement was about big racism, not small government.

Which brings us to Pence. Mother save us. He could have been the GOP's modern-day Gerald Ford—who, as Richard Nixon's second vice president, stepped in to save the party when its corrupt leader had to resign—but Pence is now in the running to become the 21st century Spiro Agnew. To be fair, we have no evidence of Pence's personal corruption, which is what brought down Nixon's first VP. But Pence has let himself get so close to Trump that he gives the president impeachment insurance.

After news of the Zelensky call broke, Trump first told reporters, “I think you should ask for VP Pence's conversation, because he had a couple of conversations also.” Then White House officials leaked that Pence's top national security adviser was on the Zelensky call as well, that the vice president had likely received detailed notes on it, and that he'd been sent by Trump to emphasize the administration's concern about corruption when Pence met Zelensky during his trip to Poland in August.

Uncharacteristically, Team Pence pushed back on those claims, but it's probably too late. Trump has set him up so that if congressional Republicans ever begin to walk on two feet again, they will know that impeaching Trump could put in the White House the person behind Pence in the line of succession: Can you say “President Nancy Pelosi”?

If (I can't honestly say "when") Trump's poll numbers sink so far underwater that congressional Republicans abandon him and get behind impeachment, Trump will be swiftly swept away. Mainstream media will lionize the defectors and paper over the rot at the center of the party. Then it will be on the rest of us to remind them that this is Trump's GOP. As Pompeo once said about Trump, "It's time to turn down the lights on the circus."

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