

The Washington Post

Explosive William Barr news points to Trump's weakness and panic

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October 25, 2019

Let me make an admittedly tentative suggestion about the explosive news that William P. Barr's review of the origins of the Russia investigation has become a criminal probe:

Don't freak out.

Yet.

No question, it's deeply worrying that the Attorney General's review — which President Trump badly wants in hopes of discrediting the origins of the special counsel investigation that revealed bottomless corruption on his part — now appears to be a criminal matter.

The Post and the New York Times both cite sources who confirm this, noting that this gives John Durham, the U.S. attorney from Connecticut who's running the review with Barr, additional investigative powers.

What Attorney General Barr said vs. what the Mueller report said | The Fact Checker

As it turns out, the attorney general took liberties in describing the results of special counsel Robert S. Mueller III's investigation. (Joy Sharon Yi/The Washington Post)

Let's also stipulate upfront that when we're talking about Barr, the most nefarious designs imaginable must be treated as a serious possibility. Barr appears willing to manipulate the U.S. law enforcement machinery to an extraordinary degree to protect Trump from accountability and to propagandize away Trump's corruption and likely criminality.

So one cannot rule out Barr potentially carrying out Trump's directive to prosecute his political opponents — the “deep state” denizens Trump baselessly claims tried to derail his candidacy. Indeed, the Times bluntly notes that this news will “raise alarms” that Trump “is using the Justice Department to go after his perceived enemies.”

However, it is at least *possible* that this development isn't quite as serious as it seems — and that this might be yet another effort to calm the Audience of One, the Mad King who is raging at everyone for not shielding him from the impeachment inquiry closing in all around him.

What's in the Mueller report?

A redacted version of special counsel Robert S. Mueller III's report was released to the public on April 18. Here's what's in it. (Brian Monroe, Monica Akhtar/The Washington Post)

Consider: The Times and Post both carefully note that it's not clear what potential crime Durham and Barr are investigating, how serious it is, or when this criminal investigation started.

As Cato Institute senior fellow Julian Sanchez notes, this signals the possibility that the criminal matter could be something relatively less serious — say, an examination of early leaks out of the Russia probe. Putting this out now, Sanchez notes, helps overshadow the impeachment inquiry’s fusillade of devastating revelations, by creating the impression that the “Deep State coup is about to come crashing down.”

Who do you think frantically wants to create that impression? The Mad King does.

Trump knows this will get worse

The larger context supplies additional grounds for this possibility. Trump has been raging over the failure of Senate Republicans to protect him from impeachment, and he was cheered when House Republicans pulled their sad storming-of-the-hearing stunt.

Meanwhile, right now, Trump has particularly good reasons for wanting to see more protective actions taken, because the revelations are *unquestionably* going to get worse.

CNN reports that Tim Morrison, a top National Security Council adviser, will likely confirm key aspects of Ambassador William B. Taylor Jr.’s explosive testimony that Trump withheld military aid to leverage Ukraine into launching sham investigations undercutting 2016 Russian interference and smearing potential 2020 opponent Joe Biden.

This helps explain why Republicans are increasingly panicked: White House officials privately concede they’re losing the public battle over the inquiry, because it’s producing “devastating revelations.” Meanwhile, GOP senators are increasingly searching for fig-leaf ways to show the base they’re behind Trump without “defending his actions.”

When Trump feels particularly vulnerable, he’s prone to venting privately at his attorney general — whom he views as his own criminal defense attorney — and demanding stepped-up protection against other legal entities, as he did with Jeff Sessions.

So it’s not hard to envision Trump privately raging at Barr that the investigation of the investigators needs to hurry up and show that the real criminals are those out to get Trump. Presto: Leaks suddenly tell us there’s a criminal investigation, with no indication of its seriousness, its target, when it started, or where the leaks came from.

Barr is deeply dangerous

To be clear, I’m not saying Barr’s machinations aren’t deeply dangerous. They absolutely are.

Barr is at the nexus of everything. Trump told the Ukrainian president to contact Barr to help carry out his corrupt scheme. His acting chief of staff sought to legitimize it by connecting it to the Justice Department’s review of the special counsel probe’s origins. Ambassador Gordon Sondland apparently discussed another version of that same idea.

The Justice Department keeps denying Barr’s connections to the Ukraine scheme. But this pattern suggests there might be more overlap than we know. On top of all this, Barr’s Justice Department tried to keep Trump’s Ukraine plot buried by advising against the transmission of the whistleblower complaint about it to Congress, and by declining to investigate its charges.

What’s more, we don’t know what, exactly, Barr is criminally probing right now.

Barr is traveling the world to validate an absurd conspiracy theory holding that the Russia investigation originated in a U.S. “deep state” effort to set up the Trump campaign.

Given Barr’s apparent willingness to place law enforcement at Trump’s political disposal, it’s very possible Barr’s designs are maximally nefarious. But one can also imagine the criminal probe is of some intermediate matter. Marcy Wheeler runs through a few such possibilities, none of which appears all that serious.

Regardless, no matter what Barr does to discredit the special counsel investigation, he cannot make its extensive findings of Russian sabotage of the 2016 election, and Trump’s likely criminal efforts to cover it up, disappear. The same goes for the devastating Ukraine revelations now emerging about Trump. All Barr can do is try to fog those facts over with misdirection and propaganda.

Barr has the power of law enforcement at his disposal to do that, and the implications of what we’re seeing are terrifying. But another way to think about this is that it all leads back to Trump’s desperate panic.

Of course, if that panic mounts, it could make this situation *even more* dangerous.