

The Tale of Stormy Donald

His willful self-indulgence catches up to President Trump.

By

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Every sentient voter in 2016 understood that Donald Trump had a bad history with women. He survived politically because his opponent had spent 20 years denying or apologizing for even worse behavior by her husband. But mistakes of character tend to catch up with everyone, and that's what is now happening with President Trump and his many women.

Stormy Daniels (real name: Stephanie Clifford) may be a porn star and admitted liar with a shark for a lawyer, but her tale on CBS's "60 Minutes" Sunday still has the potential to harm Mr. Trump. That's not because of the 2006 hookup or its mockable details. Mr. Trump denies that it happened, but then why did his lawyer Michael Cohen go to such lengths to keep it quiet before Election Day in 2016?

The problem as ever is the cover-up. The Journal broke the story earlier this year that Mr. Cohen paid Ms. Clifford \$130,000 in late October of 2016 not to talk about the liaison with Mr. Trump. On Sunday Ms. Clifford agreed it was "hush money." The legal agreement has now broken down in mutual recriminations, and Mr. Cohen insists that he paid the \$130,000 on his own without any discussion or repayment from Mr. Trump.

The legal issue is whether Mr. Cohen's payment violated campaign-finance laws by exceeding the \$5,400 donation limit from any individual. John Edwards, the former Democratic vice presidential nominee, was indicted in 2011 for using illegal campaign donations to conceal news about his mistress from voters.

A jury acquitted Mr. Edwards in 2012, in part due to the complexity of campaign-finance law, but that may not matter to Robert Mueller. The special counsel is supposed to be investigating Russian interference in the 2016 election but has already gone far afield to

indict Paul Manafort and Rick Gates on money-laundering charges. Don't be surprised if he also tries to squeeze Mr. Cohen to get to Mr. Trump.

It's impossible to predict how all of this will play out politically. Many Trump partisans will refuse to believe it or claim it's irrelevant. But our guess is that at the margin this contributes to a growing public belief that Mr. Trump's personal flaws are undermining his chances for a successful Presidency.

Two months ago he had emerged from a tumultuous first year with the triumph of tax reform and rising poll numbers. The strong economy had Republicans closing the gap with Democrats on who should run Congress next year. But Mr. Trump can't resist promoting White House strife and making himself the center of political tumult.

His recent selections of John Bolton and Mike Pompeo for his security team are first rate. But Mr. Trump's reality-TV dismissal of their predecessors was nasty and chaotic. On Friday he threatened to veto a budget bill his own staff had been negotiating for weeks—further souring voters on the GOP Congress. Doesn't he realize that if Democrats win the House, they will vote to impeach him?

Mr. Trump can't retain the best legal counsel because no one wants a client who ignores all advice. He wants to answer questions from Mr. Mueller but probably won't prepare enough to avoid even accidental self-incrimination. The Stormy Daniels case is typical of Mr. Trump's pre-presidential behavior in thinking he can, with enough threats and dissembling, get away with anything. He's never understood that a President can't behave that way, and this may be the cause of his downfall.