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5 on 45: What we learned on Mueller Monday

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CONTRIBUTORS:

ADRIANNA PITA

NORM EISEN

Senior Fellow, Governance Studies

(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network, analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

EISEN: Hello everyone. I'm Norm Eisen from Brookings Governance Studies, and I'm here today to talk about the meaning of the Mueller bombshell—this week's indictment of Manafort and Gates, and the guilty plea that was revealed simultaneously of Papadopoulos.

Let's start with the indictment. The special counsel came out with guns blazing by dropping an indictment of Paul Manafort, Donald Trump's former campaign head, and his deputy and longtime aide Richard Gates for a long pattern of alleged work for foreign, pro-Russian elements continuing over a decade. He indicted them for concealing that, for failing to register as foreign agents, for money laundering involving tens of millions of dollars. The total sum alleged in the indictment, in the papers that were filed, is 75 million dollars. And these charges echoed across Washington, throughout the United States, and around the world because of their extreme seriousness, the potential jail time given the enormous amounts involved, and above all because of the two men's connection to Donald Trump.

While the conduct predated the two of them coming on to that campaign, contrary to President Trump's tweets the indictment alleges that the conduct was going on while Manafort and Gates were working on the campaign. Manafort of course left the campaign in 2016. Gates stayed on. He then did a variety of other work on the campaign, at the Republican National Committee, on the president's inauguration, and has continued to come and go. Reportedly repeated visits to the White House in his capacity working for America First Policies, pro Trump outside group.

So these are two individuals who have had close intimate relations with Donald Trump at the time of the crimes alleged and the total criminal conspiracy, and the first count of the indictment it's shocking to read, conspiracy against the United States. The conspiracy, the overall conspiracy pled, continued up into 2017 and it wasn't just Gates

who was talking to the White House then, Manafort is alleged to have continued to talk to Trump even after leaving his campaign role.

But that wasn't the only event that was so significant on the part of the special counsel because it was a one-two punch. Perhaps anticipating that people would say "wait a minute this Manafort and Gates stuff has nothing to do with collusion," the president took another blow to the solar plexus because the special counsel, Mueller, also released a guilty plea with a gentleman who had been a senior foreign policy expert and a foreign policy adviser for the campaign and that was George Papadopoulos.

He was so important that the president had actually talked about him, tweeted out a picture of him sitting with Papadopoulos and other campaign officials, and the startling thing about the Papadopoulos guilty plea is he pled guilty to lying about his contacts relating to Russia while he was working on the campaign. The most startling of those was that a foreign intermediary, according to the guilty plea, told Papadopoulos that the Russians had dirt on Hillary Clinton including thousands of e-mails. And if that sounds familiar it's because similar representations were made when Donald Trump Jr., Paul Manafort, and Jared Kushner ended up meeting with apparent Russian emissaries in June of 2016 shortly after this April representation was made.

So this was a devastating one two-punch for Donald Trump with his former campaign chief, number two Manafort and Gates, and then also a campaign foreign policy adviser, Papadopoulos, all the subject of Robert Mueller's big day here in Washington D.C..

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