

## POLITICS

# Trump Foot Soldier Sidelined Under Glare of Russia Inquiry

By MICHAEL SCHWIRTZ, WILLIAM K. RASHBAUM and DANNY HAKIM JULY 2, 2017

Just over a decade ago, Donald J. Trump was locked in conflict with a group of apartment owners who had taken control of the condominium board at his new glass tower across from the United Nations. Faced with accusations of financial impropriety and an affront to his authority, Mr. Trump turned to Michael D. Cohen, a former personal injury lawyer who helped run a taxi fleet.

Mr. Cohen did not seem to have extensive expertise in the arcana of New York City condo rules. But he had something Mr. Trump seemed to value more: devotion to the Trump brand. He had already purchased a number of Trump properties and had persuaded his parents, in-laws and a business partner to buy apartments in Mr. Trump's flashy new development, Trump World Tower.

Plus, he had read Mr. Trump's book "The Art of the Deal." Twice.

With Mr. Cohen's help, Mr. Trump regained control of the board, orchestrating a coup that culminated in a standoff between his security detail and private guards hired by the disgruntled owners, according to people who were there. Details of the dispute's resolution are secret because of a confidentiality agreement, but Mr. Cohen said that his task was "masterfully accomplished."

He went on to serve as a key confidant for Mr. Trump, with an office near the boss at Trump Tower on Fifth Avenue. Officially, his title was special counsel, but he appears to have served more as a kind of personal arm-twister. If anyone crossed

Mr. Trump or stood in his way, Mr. Cohen, who was known to sometimes carry a licensed pistol in an ankle holster, would cajole, bully or threaten a lawsuit, according to a half-dozen people who dealt with him over the years.

“If somebody does something Mr. Trump doesn’t like, I do everything in my power to resolve it to Mr. Trump’s benefit,” Mr. Cohen once said during an interview with ABC News. “If you do something wrong, I’m going to come at you, grab you by the neck, and I’m not going to let you go until I’m finished.”

Since Mr. Trump became president, his need for loyal foot soldiers like Mr. Cohen has never been greater. But instead of helping his longtime employer navigate F.B.I. and congressional investigations into whether his campaign colluded with Russia in the 2016 election, Mr. Cohen now appears to be outside the Trump inner circle, a man on the defensive.

The House Intelligence Committee has summoned him for questioning in its inquiry. (Mr. Cohen’s lawyer in Washington said his client was cooperating.) He is under scrutiny by the F.B.I., along with other Trump associates, in the Russia investigation. An unverified dossier prepared by a retired British spy and published this year said that Mr. Cohen had met overseas with Kremlin officials and other Russian operatives, which he has denied. (He once posted on Twitter, “The #RussianDossier is WRONG!”)

He has also attracted attention for playing a role in a failed effort to open a back channel for peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, where his wife’s family is from.

After years of loyal service to Mr. Trump, Mr. Cohen, 50, expected to be offered a senior administration post, according to four people who know him, speaking on the condition of anonymity because they feared angering Mr. Cohen.

He was given no such job.

On the networking site LinkedIn, Mr. Cohen refers to himself as the “personal attorney to President Donald J. Trump,” but his precise role and current relationship with the president is unclear, and he would not elaborate. The White House did not

respond to requests for comment. In recent weeks, another lawyer, Marc E. Kasowitz, seems to have largely taken Mr. Cohen's place as Mr. Trump's personal lawyer.

"Clearly my life has changed since Trump became POTUS and I accepted the role as personal attorney to the president," Mr. Cohen wrote in a text message in response to a question from a New York Times reporter last week. "This change has come with both many pros and cons."

And so Mr. Cohen has found himself increasingly relegated to the role of second-string defender. He has chastised critics, including Snoop Dogg ("There's so much more that Snoop can do for this country") and Johnny Depp ("Way to use your notoriety for good, Captain Jack-Ass!").

Like Mr. Trump, he lashes out at critics on Twitter, where he also spends quite a bit of time fighting with anonymous critics, or trolls — calling them "haters" and "idiots," sometimes within the comment threads of Mr. Trump's tweets.

In one such exchange last week, a Twitter user named Corvetteman, who has 88 followers and a profile photograph of an orange cat, called Mr. Cohen "a joke." Mr. Cohen replied: "Reminder...@realDonaldTrump won! Wake up #hater."

## Ascent to Trump Tower

Mr. Cohen was already a wealthy man with his own small real estate empire by the time he joined Mr. Trump's orbit. Even so, his ascent from a lawyer handling personal injury cases out of an office shared with his taxi company — first in Manhattan, then in Queens — to the 26th floor of Trump Tower is a remarkable New York story.

Mr. Cohen comes from a long line of doctors and lawyers. His father survived the Holocaust in Poland and went on to become a physician on Long Island. An uncle close to the Cohen family, Morton W. Levine, is a doctor and businessman. He ran summer weight-loss and fitness camps for children decades ago and has long owned a Brooklyn catering hall, El Caribe, a popular site for weddings and retirement parties that was a meeting spot in the 1980s and 1990s for Italian and Russian mobsters. (Dr. Levine was never charged with any wrongdoing.)

In an interview, Mr. Cohen said he became a lawyer to appease one of his grandmothers, who threatened to leave him out of her will if he did not. “You don’t really have any money,” he said he replied, “to which she slapped me across my face.”

He saw himself as an entrepreneurial risk taker from an early age.

While a student at American University in Washington, he said he imported luxury cars into the United States. He also invested in a casino boat that went bust and helped his family organize an ethanol business in Ukraine that failed.

In 1992, he began working as a personal injury lawyer in New York and eventually opened his own practice. He and his family also began buying taxi medallions, purchased through companies with names like Sir Michael Hacking Corp and Mad Dog Cab Corp. He and his wife, Laura, acquired more than 30 New York City taxi medallions, once worth millions of dollars, and he owned 22 more in Chicago, according to public records.

He also once had his own political ambitions. He ran for the New York City Council as a Republican in 2003 and lost, and later flirted briefly with running for the New York State Senate, but dropped out after a month.

Several of the men he associated with in business dealings over the years faced legal problems of one sort or another. His boss at his first law firm, a personal injury practice, pleaded guilty to bribery in an insurance scheme. His father-in-law, who once also owned taxi medallions, pleaded guilty to tax-related charges more than two decades ago. Two of his partners in the taxi business have paid hundreds of thousands of dollars in fines and settlements for various violations. Mr. Cohen, though, has avoided legal troubles.

From 2011 to 2014, he purchased four small apartment buildings in Manhattan and sold them for a total of \$32 million. In 2015, he paid \$58 million for a seven-story apartment building on the Upper East Side.

Those who have known him for years said Mr. Cohen had a penchant for luxury, like Mr. Trump. Mr. Cohen was married at the Pierre, a legacy luxury hotel

overlooking Central Park, drove a Porsche in college and at one point owned a Bentley.

It was his purchase of blocks of apartments in Trump buildings starting around 2001 that seems to have caught Mr. Trump's eye. At the time of the 2006 board dispute, Mr. Cohen was overseeing the finishing touches on his new apartment at Trump Park Avenue. Not long after the dispute was resolved, Mr. Cohen said, he was summoned to Trump Tower and offered a job.

At the time, he was a partner at the Phillips Nizer LLP law firm. He said that he immediately accepted Mr. Trump's offer and never returned to his old office, where he had worked for about a year. Instead, he moved into an office previously used by Mr. Trump's daughter Ivanka Trump.

Explaining his relationship with Mr. Trump, Mr. Cohen said in an interview last month with The Times, "When he finds someone who he considers capable, does a great job and accomplishes the task, he tends to go back to that person again and again and again." He added, "He's comfortable with people who he deems worthy."

The scope of Mr. Cohen's job with Mr. Trump is not clear. After a decade of working for the Trump Organization, he has left little public record of his accomplishments. An effort to develop Trump-branded golf communities in New Jersey and in Fresno, Calif., floundered, along with a mixed martial arts venture with a Russian fighter as the headliner. Mr. Cohen did some scouting and groundwork for possible Trump condominium towers in the former Soviet republics of Georgia and Kazakhstan, but those deals never materialized.

He has declined to discuss the details of what he did at the company, and the Trump Organization did not respond to requests for comment. Some people who worked with him also declined to describe Mr. Cohen's tenure, with several of them saying they feared being sued.

Mr. Cohen's younger brother, Bryan Cohen, said he was a different person than his public appearances might suggest, describing him more as a father figure growing up in the Five Towns section of Long Island.

The man he became, Bryan Cohen surmised, would have made a good contestant on Mr. Trump's reality show "The Apprentice."

"I believe that my brother represents the type of person that the show depicted that Trump liked and appreciated," Bryan Cohen said. "He had a combination of smarts, street smarts, and those things are not mutually exclusive. He's successful, aggressive. That seemingly was a winning combination on the early seasons of 'The Apprentice.'"

Throughout it all, Michael Cohen has clearly idolized his boss.

He has described Mr. Trump as "our patriarch" and "the greatest deal maker of this century." He has said that he patterned his life after "The Art of the Deal," and he shares Mr. Trump's taste for boxy suits and long silk ties. He even sounds a bit like Mr. Trump, with a punchy edge to his New York accent.

## Life on the Outside

Mr. Cohen said in January that he planned to leave his job with the Trump Organization to avoid any perception of a conflict of interest as one of Mr. Trump's lawyers.

He has recently been spending time in Washington. The Republican National Committee named him to its finance leadership team this year, and in April, the international law firm and Washington lobbying powerhouse Squire Patton Boggs formed a "strategic alliance" with Mr. Cohen's law practice.

Several people with knowledge of Mr. Cohen's involvement with Squire Patton Boggs said he had been brought on as a sort of rainmaker because of his business contacts in the United States and abroad. He will operate out of the firm's New York office and will be able to take advantage of its global reach to help his own clients.

He is also conferring with his lawyer, Stephen M. Ryan, of the firm McDermott, Will & Emery, to prepare for his appearance before the House committee. Its Senate counterpart is conducting its own Russia inquiry, with which Mr. Cohen is

cooperating, the lawyer said, but that panel has not called Mr. Cohen for questioning.

Mr. Cohen is still working hard for Mr. Trump. In recent weeks, he was soliciting donations for the president's victory fund, a joint fund-raising effort between Mr. Trump and the Republican National Committee. "Proud to say I raised over \$500K today," he said in a recent text message. He later said preliminary figures indicated that he had brought in about \$2 million.

At a \$35,000-a-plate fund-raiser last week at the Trump International Hotel in Washington, Mr. Trump acknowledged the efforts of his former employee, whom he said he had not seen in a month.

"Michael is a great lawyer, loyal, a wonderful person, talented, loves being on television," Mr. Trump said, according to an audio recording of the event. "I miss you, man," he added.

Susanne Craig contributed reporting. Kitty Bennett and Susan C. Beachy contributed research.

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