

‘How do we use [this] to get whole?’: The most intriguing new Paul Manafort-Russia email

By **Aaron Blake** September 20

This post has been updated.

The trouble Paul Manafort is in is still coming into focus. The latest development: emails he sent to a Ukraine-based employee of his consulting business talking about setting up a briefing with a Russian oligarch close to Vladimir Putin.

The Washington Post's Tom Hamburger, Rosalind S. Helderman, Carol D. Leonnig and Adam Entous just broke that big story, and it comes on the heels of a New York Times report this week that investigators have told Manafort they plan to indict him — apparently in hopes of getting him to flip on President Trump.

For me, though, the most intriguing email in The Post's report is this one:

In one April exchange days after Trump named Manafort as a campaign strategist, Manafort referred to his positive press and growing reputation and asked, “How do we use to get whole?”

Manafort spokesman Jason Maloni said Wednesday that the email exchanges reflected an “innocuous” effort to collect past debts.

“It’s no secret Mr. Manafort was owed money by past clients,” Maloni said.

We can argue over what's innocuous and what's not, but that seems to be an acknowledgment from his own spokesman that Manafort was discussing how he could leverage his status as a leading strategist on an American presidential campaign to chase down debts he was owed — i.e. to enrich himself financially.

The Post's team writes that this is, in fact, the angle investigators are taking -- suspecting that this email reflects a desire by Manafort to profit from his position. In his emails to his Kiev-based employee, Konstantin Kilimnik, Manafort repeatedly brings up the money he thinks he is owed by clients he had worked for in Eastern Europe. The questions from there are what Manafort might have done to get that money and whether it was legal.

The other part of The Post's report — Manafort's offer of a briefing with Russian billionaire Oleg Deripaska — is perhaps a little bit easier to explain away; after all, the 2008 GOP presidential nominee, Sen. John McCain (Ariz.), met with Deripaska (albeit controversially) at an economic conference in Switzerland. That meeting was organized by top McCain aide Rick Davis, who was one of Manafort's business partners. (Deripaska was described on U.S. diplomatic cables from 2006 as “among the 2-3 oligarchs [Vladimir] Putin turns to on a regular basis.”)

But the question with Manafort, at this point, seems to be less about whether he might have facilitated some kind of collusion with Russia and more about whether special counsel Robert S. Mueller III has enough evidence to pin charges on him, thereby forcing Manafort to confront a decision about whether he wants to cut a deal. We don't know a ton about exactly what the government's case against Manafort is built on, but, according to the Times, investigators are confident enough to flat-out threaten Manafort with an indictment. Their decision to raid his Alexandria home with a no-knock warrant was also seen as evidence of how serious the Manafort investigation had grown. Pursuing that type of warrant means you believe the subject might destroy evidence.

This is now about leverage, and all indications are that this leverage is increasing.

Update: Trump's lawyer, Ty Cobb, has responded. He tells Bloomberg's Margaret Talev that it would be "truly shocking" if Manafort sought personal gain from his position. It's an interesting tack from the White House, given Manafort could be tempted to flip on Trump.

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