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Wrenched From Scandal to Success, Trump Looks Ahead, and Over His Shoulder

By PETER BAKER DEC. 2, 2017

WASHINGTON — The highs and lows of a presidency rarely come in such quick succession. But within hours, President Trump watched as one of his closest former aides pleaded guilty and promised to help prosecutors seek out more targets, then stayed up late to cheer on the Senate as it broke through months of gridlock to pass the largest tax cuts in years.

Scandal and success in short order left the White House whipsawed and searching for a path forward that would generate more of the latter while knowing that the former is not going away anytime soon. Michael T. Flynn, the former national security adviser who pleaded guilty to a felony on Friday, was the fourth person near Mr. Trump to be charged and few in Washington expect him to be the last.

No president in modern times has faced such a major investigation so early in his term even as he was still seeking to establish his political footing, much less one with as little popular support in polls as Mr. Trump has. The challenge for Mr. Trump in the weeks to come will be how to press forward on his agenda without

letting the ominous drumbeat of indictments and court hearings consume his presidency.

“The White House has to continue to operate and cannot be perceived as waiting for the next testimony, the next announcement or the unanticipated issue,” said Tom Griscom, a former White House official who helped President Ronald Reagan recover from the Iran-contra scandal in the 1980s. “The American people wanted to see a president that was engaged and able to move his agenda even with the distraction of an investigation.”

Initially at least, Mr. Trump followed that script on Saturday morning but his restraint did not last long. “What has been shown is no collusion, no collusion,” he told reporters when he left the White House for a day trip to New York. “There’s been absolutely no collusion, so we’re very happy.”

Within a couple of hours, he went to Twitter for a more forceful response. “I had to fire General Flynn because he lied to the Vice President and the FBI,” Mr. Trump wrote. “He has pled guilty to those lies. It is a shame because his actions during the transition were lawful. There was nothing to hide!”

And by evening, he was trying to shift attention back to Hillary Clinton. “Many people in our Country are asking what the ‘Justice’ Department is going to do about the fact that totally Crooked Hillary, AFTER receiving a subpoena from the United States Congress, deleted and ‘acid washed’ 33,000 Emails?” he wrote, referring to email messages that Mrs. Clinton’s lawyers deemed unrelated to her government work. “No justice!”

The special counsel investigation into Russia’s interference in last year’s election has driven him to fits of anger for months, and his staff could hardly be surprised that he would vent that again. From their point of view, his first comments on Saturday at least were not aimed at investigators.

“The Flynn plea is important, too, because it shows that the cracks in the White House front that everyone suspected are real,” said David Greenberg, a presidential historian at Rutgers University. “And they may widen. It seems likely to deepen the sense of siege in the West Wing. That siege mentality can be crippling.”

History offers mixed lessons. Watergate obviously destroyed Richard M. Nixon's presidency and even that of his successor, Gerald R. Ford, who was punished by voters for pardoning him. President Bill Clinton survived being impeached for lying under oath about sexual liaisons with Monica S. Lewinsky only after a Senate trial in which lawmakers opted against removing him from office.

Even a less sweeping, less threatening scandal can have a chilling effect on a White House. When Vice President Dick Cheney's chief of staff, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, was indicted on a charge of lying to investigators about the leak of a C.I.A. officer's identity, West Wing colleagues were demoralized. One later called it "the lowest point" of his White House tenure. And it led to deep tension between Mr. Cheney and President George W. Bush over whether Mr. Libby should be pardoned.

The key for Mr. Reagan and Mr. Clinton was convincing the public that they were not distracted by the investigations but instead remained focused on doing their jobs and serving the American people. In Mr. Clinton's case, at least, it was partially an act — while he was able to effectively manage major foreign policy issues even at the height of the impeachment debate, in private he was consumed by the investigation, raged endlessly about his tormentors and at times seemed deeply distracted.

Aides found Mr. Clinton absently playing with old campaign buttons, and at a meeting with the Congressional Black Caucus, it fell to an adviser to conduct the discussion while the president's mind drifted off. On another occasion, the head of the World Bank called a top White House official after a meeting with Mr. Clinton to say, "It's like he isn't there." During a visit to the Middle East, an aide noticed Mr. Clinton trying to keep his mind from wandering off by scribbling on a yellow legal pad, "Focus on your job, focus on your job, focus on your job."

Mr. Trump is hardly a model of political discipline, and keeping him focused has been a major preoccupation of his staff from the beginning. Ty Cobb, the White House lawyer overseeing the response to the investigation, has repeatedly urged Mr. Trump to keep quiet about it, with mixed results. John F. Kelly, the retired Marine general serving as White House chief of staff, tries to keep Mr. Trump's day filled with meetings on policy issues but has yet to tame the president's Twitter habit.

“To be sure, an event like this can be a drain on morale, especially for those who worked with and like General Flynn,” said Shannen W. Coffin, a former counsel to Mr. Cheney. “For the rest of the White House, it’s important not to get dragged down into the Washington speculation game, and that they keep their eyes on the ball on the president’s priorities in domestic policy, judicial appointments, national security and the like.”

Mr. Coffin pointed to Mr. Kelly, who has enforced more order on the West Wing operation, if not on the president himself. “With some internal discipline, which the chief of staff has imposed, there’s no reason this should become all consuming,” he said.

Mr. Trump has options for short-circuiting the investigation that other presidents might not have contemplated in similar circumstances. Having already fired James B. Comey as F.B.I. director, Mr. Trump could likewise fire Robert S. Mueller III, the special counsel, or he could pardon Mr. Flynn or others swept up in the investigation. Either tack would almost surely provoke a bipartisan firestorm and, critics warned, potentially expose Mr. Trump to impeachment proceedings for obstruction of justice.

Lawmakers were quick to warn Mr. Trump away from such a course in the hours after Mr. Flynn’s plea. “I think any pardons or any type of shenanigans with this whole process would be very troublesome,” said Senator Joe Manchin III of West Virginia, one of the Democrats considered friendliest with Mr. Trump.

Assuming the Senate and House reconcile their different versions of the tax cuts and send a final bill to the president for his signature, it will provide a burst of momentum near the end of an otherwise rocky first year for Mr. Trump. What remains unclear is whether he can keep that going. Mr. Trump and lawmakers have just days to agree on spending legislation to avert a partial government shutdown, and even if they fulfill that most basic of governmental responsibilities, there are no easy areas of agreement looming next.

The tax cuts presumably will keep the current economic surge going in the short term as markets hit records and Mr. Trump has effectively used his executive power to slash regulations to the delight of the corporate world. But on immigration,

infrastructure, health care and other issues, no ready consensus exists even among Republicans, much less across the aisle, for major legislation.

Given that, many analysts expect Mr. Trump to continue his practice of instigating polarizing debates over divisive issues, like slamming kneeling National Football League players or distributing anti-Muslim videos. His advisers harbor little hope of expanding his popular support in the short term and appear mainly intent on holding his base of 35 to 40 percent of the public.

“To move forward, they are just going to have to hunker down with the lawyers and rally the base,” Mr. Greenberg said. “Unless or until this gets still worse.”

Jonathan Martin contributed reporting.

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