



COHEN GIVES INSIDER DETAILS AT TRIAL AS TRUMP'S DEFENSE ATTORNEY ACCUSES HIM OF SEEKING VENGEANCE - ASSOCIATED PRESS

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Photo: Former President Donald Trump speaks to the media outside Manhattan criminal court before his trial in New York

It wasn't until after a decade in the fold, after his family pleaded with him, after the FBI raided his office, apartment and hotel room, Michael Cohen testified Tuesday, that he finally decided to turn on Donald Trump.

The complicated break led to a 2018 guilty plea to federal charges involving a payment to the porn actor Stormy Daniels to bury her story of an alleged sexual encounter with Trump and to other, unrelated crimes.

And it's that insider knowledge of shady deals that pushed Manhattan prosecutors to make Cohen the star witness in their case against Trump about that same payment, which they say was an illegal effort to influence the 2016 presidential election.

"To keep the loyalty and to do the things that he had asked me to do, I violated my moral compass, and I suffered the penalty, as has my family," Cohen testified Tuesday.

But defense attorneys sought to portray Cohen as motivated by vengeance on his former boss, confronting him on the witness stand with his own profane social media about Trump and wanting to see the former president in handcuffs.

The most stunning moment came outside the courtroom Tuesday, when House Speaker Mike Johnson showed up with Trump, who used his powerful bully pulpit to turn his political party against the rule of law by declaring the trial illegitimate. He and other GOP lawmakers are serving as surrogates while Trump himself remains barred by a gag order in the case following an appeals court ruling Tuesday.

"I do have a lot of surrogates, and they're speaking very beautifully," Trump said before court as the group gathered in the background. "And they come ... from all over Washington. And they're highly respected, and they think this is the greatest scam they've ever seen."

The Republican presidential nominee has pleaded not guilty and denies that any of the encounters took place.

As prosecutors laid out their case, Cohen testified about purposefully mislabeled checks, false receipts and blind loyalty that placed Trump at the center of the scheme. The testimony, somewhat dry for a man who was defined for years by his braggadocio as Trump's problem-zapper, underscored the prosecution's foundational argument — that the case isn't about the spectacle of what Trump was paying for, but rather his effort to illegally cover up those payments.

Cohen has testified in detail about how the former president was linked to all aspects of the hush money scheme, and prosecutors believe Cohen's testimony is critical to their case. But their reliance on a witness with such a checkered past — he was disbarred, went to prison and separately pleaded guilty to lying about a Moscow real estate project on Trump's behalf — could backfire, especially as Trump's attorneys continue to cross-examine him.

Blanche spent no time Tuesday asking about the allegations at the center of the trial, instead working to raise doubts about Cohen's credibility and his motivation for helping prosecutors try to put Trump behind bars.

Amid rapid-fire objections from prosecutors, Blanche probed Cohen's hyperfocus on Trump, suggesting he's attempted to parlay his insider knowledge into a reduced prison sentence and court supervision for his own crimes, and a new career making millions of dollars criticizing Trump.

Cohen was asked to listen through headphones to a snippet of his podcast. Blanche asked Cohen if he recalled one episode in which he said Trump "needs to wear handcuffs and to do the perp walk" and that "people will not be satisfied until this man is sitting inside the cell."

"I don't recall saying that, but I wouldn't put it past me," Cohen testified.

At another point, Blanche asked, "Is it fair to say that you are motivated by fame?"

"No sir, I don't think that's fair to say," Cohen said, later adding, "I'm motivated by many things."

Cohen will be the prosecution's last witness. Trump's defense will begin after Cohen, though it's not clear whether his lawyers will call any witnesses or if Trump will testify in his own defense.

Jurors have already heard how Trump and others in his orbit were reeling after the leak just a few weeks before the 2016 election of an "Access Hollywood" tape in which he bragged about grabbing women by the genitals without their permission. The publication of the tape hastened the payments to Daniels, according to testimony.

Cohen testified that Trump was constantly apprised of the behind-the-scenes efforts to bury stories feared to be harmful to the campaign. And after paying out \$130,000 to Daniels in order to keep her quiet about an alleged sexual encounter, Trump promised to reimburse him.

Jurors followed along as Hoffinger, in a methodical and clinical fashion, walked Cohen through that reimbursement process. It was an attempt to show what prosecutors say was a lengthy deception to mask the true purpose of the payments.

As jurors were shown business records and other paperwork, Cohen explained their purpose and reiterated again and again that the payments were reimbursements for the hush money — they weren't for legal services pursuant to a retainer.

It's an important distinction because prosecutors allege that the Trump records falsely described the purpose of the payments as legal expenses. These records form the basis of 34 felony counts charging Trump with falsifying business records. All told, Cohen was paid \$420,000, with funds drawn from a Trump personal account.

"Were the descriptions here on this check stub false?" Hoffinger asked.

"Yes," Cohen said.

"And again, there was no retainer agreement, is that right?" Hoffinger asked.

"That's correct," Cohen replied.

Prosecutors also spent time working to blunt the potential credibility issues, painting Cohen as a longtime Trump loyalist who committed crimes on behalf of the former president.

On the witness stand, Cohen described in detail the April 2018 raid that marked the beginning of the end of his time being devoted to Trump.

"How to describe your life being turned upside-down? Concerned. Despondent. Angry," Cohen told jurors.

"Were you frightened?" Hoffinger asked.

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

But he was heartened by a phone call from Trump that he said gave him reassurance and convinced him to remain "in the camp."

He said to me, 'Don't worry. I'm the president of the United States. There's nothing here. Everything's going to be OK. Stay tough. You are going to be OK,'" Cohen testified.

Cohen, who once boasted that he would "take a bullet" for Trump, told jurors that he "felt reassured because I had the president of the United States protecting me ... And so I remained in the camp."

It was his wife and family who finally made him see how sticking by Trump was detrimental.

"What are you doing? We're supposed to be your first loyalty," Cohen testified. Asked what decision he made, he responded, "That it was about time to listen to them," he said.

Throughout Cohen's testimony Tuesday, Trump reclined in his chair with his eyes closed and head tilted to the side. He occasionally shifted and leaned forward, opening his eyes and talking to his attorney before returning to his recline. Even some of the topics that have animated him the most as he campaigns didn't stir his attention.

It was a far cry from the scene last October, when the once-fierce allies faced off at Trump's civil fraud trial and Trump walked out of the courtroom after his lawyer finished questioning Cohen.

"Mr. Cohen, do you have any regrets about your past work for Donald Trump?" Hoffinger asked as she concluded her questioning.

"I do," Cohen said. "I regret doing things for him that I should not have. Lying. Bullying people in order to effectuate a goal. I don't regret working for the Trump Organization 'cause as I expressed before, some very interesting, great times."

Long reported from Washington. Associated Press writers Jill Colvin in New York and Lisa Mascaro in Washington contributed to this report.