

Trump's numerous attempts to play the victim on 'election interference'

Analysis by Aaron Blake

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A rubber mask of Donald Trump, part of the merchandise offered to his supporters at Freedom Plaza in Washington on Jan. 5, 2021 — the day before the Capitol insurrection. (Astrid Riecken for The Washington Post)

One of Donald Trump's most tried and true political strategies is rubber-and-glue: When he gets accused of something serious, he'll just accuse his opponents of the same thing in the service of creating distractions.

Mentally unstable? It's actually his opponents who fit the bill. A "bigot" and a "racist?" Again, his opponents. Ditto inflammatory rhetoric, threatening democracy, being a puppet for Vladimir Putin, habitual lying, obstruction of justice, and on and on.

But rarely has this strategy been as pronounced and transparent as it is right now. Amid his first criminal trial in Manhattan, Trump has relentlessly claimed his various prosecutions and civil court cases amount to 2024 “election interference.”

It’s not only the same crime that he stands accused of in this case; Trump’s own actual and alleged election interference defines *most* of his biggest scandals and legal issues to date. “ELECTION INTERFERENCE!!!” Trump posted on social media Monday morning, adding in another post: “It’s all about Election Interference. Sad!” “This is done for purposes of hurting the opponent of the worst president in the history of our country,” Trump said at the courthouse Monday morning. Trump even on Sunday night seemed to nod to the rubber-and-glue strategy.

“Tomorrow morning I report to a New York Criminal Court for a Trial on, somewhat ironically, ELECTION INTERFERENCE,” he wrote. This from a man who is accused of that crime in three of his four criminal indictments, was impeached twice for alleged election interference-related offenses, and experienced his first big controversy as president for the same. Trump has also unapologetically solicited political favors involving electoral opponents from foreign governments, despite foreign election interference being illegal.

The tenuousness of Trump’s argument is readily apparent. Trump claims that merely holding a trial while he’s a candidate for president — and a gag order preventing him from saying things that could taint the proceedings — amounts to interfering in an election.

People can make their own judgments about how substantial the “hush money” charges in Manhattan are. But the case pertains to an established crime and a rather transparent effort to withhold information from Americans at a crucial juncture in the 2016 election. (Trump is accused of illegally covering up a \$130,000 payment to adult-film actress Stormy Daniels to prevent her from going public with allegations of an affair on the eve of the election.)

It’s also something Trump lied about, for whatever reason. And it’s a trial to be decided by a jury of Trump’s peers that should be wrapped up well in advance of the party conventions this summer, allowing Americans to render their own decisions on the proceedings. In other words, it’s a lot more substantial than a supposedly ill-timed criminal trial. And at the very least, we’ll soon have an actual verdict on Trump’s own alleged election interference.

Below is a summary of how what’s known about Trump’s actions compares to this purported “election interference.”

The Manhattan “hush money” case

Whether Trump’s and his then-lawyer Michael Cohen’s efforts to keep Daniels silent changed the results of a tight 2016 election, we’ll never know. But there is evidence that they feared the impact of her allegation on the campaign. As far back as 2015, Trump and Cohen met with David Pecker, the then-chairman of American Media Inc. and publisher of the National Enquirer tabloid. Pecker, who became the first witness in the trial Monday, offered to buy the rights to stories that would reflect poorly on Trump’s campaign and bury them — a practice known as “catch and kill.” Cohen has also released a September 2016 recording featuring Trump that suggests the efforts to bury such stories was indeed related to the campaign.

The Russia investigation

Special counsel Robert S. Mueller III’s report did not establish that Trump or members of his campaign conspired with Russia in its efforts to influence the 2016 election. But it did find that Russia targeted a hacking operation at Hillary Clinton’s personal office just hours after Trump said publicly, “Russia, if you’re listening, I hope you’re able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing.” (Trump claimed it was a joke, even as he has continued to solicit foreign help in campaigns.)

Top Trump advisers also met at Trump Tower with a Russian promising dirt on Clinton. And a bipartisan Senate report left open the possibility that there was more “collusion” beneath the surface.

The Ukraine scandal and impeachment

Apparently undeterred by the Russia investigation, Trump dispatched lawyer Rudy Giuliani to work with Ukrainian officials to try to dig up dirt on Trump’s likeliest opponent, Joe Biden, early in the 2020 campaign. It’s something Giuliani freely admitted was politically motivated . Giuliani insisted he wasn’t meddling in the election but was instead “meddling in an investigation ... because that information will be very, very helpful to my client, and may turn out to be helpful to my government.”

Trump was impeached after a phone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky emerged on which Trump connected U.S. actions that Ukraine desired to Zelensky announcing an investigation involving the Bidens. Multiple witnesses said there was a quid pro quo.

Jan. 6 impeachment and indictments

Trump’s efforts to overturn the 2020 election based upon lies about voter fraud will be fresher in people’s minds. He’s now been indicted both federally and in Fulton County, Ga., for

alleged election subversion. The accusations are that he illegally pressured state officials, organized slates of “fake electors,” tried to misuse the Justice Department, pressured then-Vice President Pence, and exploited the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection to try to prevent Congress from confirming Biden’s victory.

Whether any of these actions will be determined to be illegal, his role in them is largely a matter of public record. There was no real reason to doubt the 2020 election results, but Trump pulled multiple levers in service of trying to overturn it. He was also impeached shortly after Jan. 6. The charge then was incitement of insurrection rather than election interference more broadly, but the idea was that Trump whipped up the crowd in hopes of changing the result in Congress that day. A historic number of Senate Republicans (seven) voted to convict him, and many others who voted to acquit him indicated their vote was based upon a technicality rather than Trump’s innocence. “What former president Trump did to undermine faith in our election system and disrupt the peaceful transfer of power is inexcusable,” the No. 2 Senate Republican, Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.), said while voting for Trump’s acquittal.

By Aaron Blake

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