

Knives out in the White House as fired aide releases tapes of Trump, Kelly

By Tom Hall
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For the past several days, the official American politics has been gripped by the extraordinary revelation that former Trump aide Omarosa Manigault-Newman, known in media shorthand by her first name only, had secretly recorded her Trump and White House chief of staff John Kelly.

Manigault-Newman gave recordings to the press of her December 2017 firing by Kelly in the White House Situation Room and a subsequent phone call with Trump, in which he claimed to be unaware of what his own chief of staff had just done.

The fired aide has made nonstop appearances on cable television over the last week to promote her new book, *Unhinged: An Insider's Account of the Trump White House*, which was released yesterday. She claims to be in possession of many other recordings taped secretly during her time in the White House, including conversations with Trump's daughter Ivanka and son-in-law Jared Kushner.

The White House struck back Tuesday morning, with the Trump campaign filing for arbitration in New York City, alleging that Manigault-Newman was violating the non-disclosure agreement she signed when she joined it in 2015. The agreement is an extraordinary lifetime gag rule that is likely illegal and unenforceable, but can be used to tie up a former employee in expensive legal proceedings.

The media furor over the tapes and the newly released book is out of all proportion to the actual content of both, which provide no significant new information. The book itself consists almost entirely of unverifiable accusations against Trump and various figures within the White House, of a highly subjective and personal character.

Much of the press coverage has focused on claims by Manigault-Newman, who has long been the most

prominent African-American in Trump's inner circle, of the existence of a tape of Trump uttering a racial slur against black people during filming of his NBC reality program "The Apprentice." She claims that she had spent months while in the White House trying, without success, to locate the recording, and released recordings yesterday of staffers discussing contingency plans should it eventually surface. However, the "revelation" that Trump, who infamously called African nations "shithole countries," is a racist, would come as a surprise to no one.

Nevertheless, a picture is beginning to emerge of an executive branch in crisis, in which aides are recording each other, leaking to the media, and collecting dirt on each other to hold in reserve for later, either for personal financial gain, political leverage, self-defense in case of criminal charges brought by special prosecutor Robert Mueller, or some combination of all three.

Manigault-Newman's release of secret tapes follows the revelations that Michael Cohen, Trump's ex-personal lawyer, had secretly taped confidential conversations with Trump, before his own offices were raided by police under Mueller's orders. Trump himself is said to regularly record his own phone conversations, and threatened former FBI Director James Comey with alleged recordings last year, although none materialized.

The fact that Kelly decided to fire Manigault-Newman in the Situation Room is itself extraordinary. This is the ultra-secure, innermost underground sanctum of the White House, established after the Cuban Missile Crisis, where nuclear wars are planned for and the assassination of Osama bin Laden was tracked by Obama and his top aides in real time. According to Manigault-Newman's recording, Kelly

locked the door behind her and issued gangster-style threats, stating that “if we make this a friendly departure...then you can go on without any type of difficulty in the future relative to your reputation.”

The fact that she nevertheless privately recorded Kelly is, according to former White House officials who spoke with the media, an unprecedented violation of security procedures, one that opens her up to prosecution, something which Ronna McDaniel, chairwoman of the Republican National Committee, has already called for.

Especially given the prospect of the Democrats regaining one or both houses of Congress in November, raising the prospect of much broader investigations than the Mueller probe, or actual impeachment, the existence of numerous tape recordings of White House conversations represents a major danger to the Trump administration. It was the court-ordered release of tapes of Oval Office conversations that led to the forced resignation of Richard Nixon in 1974, in the Watergate scandal.

There is undoubtedly anxiety among many White House personnel that the Trump administration is a sinking ship that they may go down on. As one unnamed ex-staffer told *Politico*, many of them had taken significant “reputational risks” by joining the Trump campaign in the first place.

All sides in the dispute have the filthiest character. An entry-level aide to Vice President Al Gore during the Clinton administration, Manigault-Newman began her association with Trump in 2004 when she appeared on his reality television show “The Apprentice.” As a Trump campaign staffer in 2016, she defended Trump from his critics in expansive terms, declaring that “every critic, every detractor, will have to bow down to President Trump.”

Trump, for his part, responded to her accusations with a typical Twitter tirade against his former associate. “Wacky Omarosa, who got fired 3 times on the Apprentice, now got fired for the last time. ... When Gen. Kelly came on board he told me she was a loser & nothing but problems. I told him to try working it out, if possible, because she only said GREAT things about me—until she got fired!”

The accusations of an aide who served as a Trump toady for 13 years are of an obviously mercenary character, pitched to the particularly debased climate

within Washington, where the various factions of the ruling class are brawling in the gutter to pursue their own reactionary aims. After being fired from her White House post, Manigault-Newman allegedly turned down a lucrative sinecure from Trump in exchange for her silence. She calculated, however, that her personal fate would be better served by defecting to Trump’s opponents in the ruling class.

In her appearances on television news programs, Manigault-Newman has thrown her weight behind the unverified claims of Russian “collusion.” On MSNBC yesterday, she admitted to having met investigators under special counsel Robert Mueller and made vague, unsubstantiated claims that the Trump campaign had advance notice of the publication of Hillary Clinton’s e-mails by Wikileaks.

The claim Wikileaks released these e-mails at the instigation of the Russian government to tip the election in Trump’s favor is central to the anti-Russian campaign organized by the Democrats and sections of the military and intelligence apparatus who are opposed to Trump’s relaxing of tensions with Russia. It is also central to their campaign to smear Wikileaks and other oppositional groups online as purveyors of “Russian propaganda.”

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