
POLITICS

Sam Nunberg's Spectacular Stunt

The former Trump aide says he received a subpoena from Special Counsel Robert Mueller—and then responded with a blustering, baffling series of live appearances on cable television.

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“By the way, you know I’m the number one trending person on Twitter?”

It was just after 8 p.m. on Monday night, and the suddenly-famous Sam Nunberg had phoned me from Dorrian’s Red Hand Restaurant, a yuppie hangout on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, where he was reveling in his triumph.

After announcing earlier that day his intention to defy a grand-jury subpoena he says he received in the Russia investigation (“Arrest me,” he’d dared prosecutors), the former Trump aide had spent the day conducting a manic media blitz—popping up on multiple cable-news programs, granting interviews to dozens of journalists, and hijacking the news cycle with a car-crash procession of blustery soundbites. Legal experts were warning that his failure to cooperate with Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation could put him in serious legal jeopardy—but at this moment, it seemed, Nunberg was in a celebratory mood.

“Can you report this?” he asked me at one point during our conversation, his voice taking on a gleeful tone. “You have to report this: *The champ champ does whatever the fuck he wants.*”

“The ... who?” I asked.

“The champ champ!”

The “champ champ” turned out to be a reference to one of his favorite UFC fighters.

As we spoke, Nunberg alternated between this unalloyed bravado and a kind of meta amusement at the media frenzy his performance had commanded. He seemed to take special pleasure in speculating about how Mueller might be reacting to the spectacle. “You know what the funny thing is?” he boasted. “He’s thinking I’m, like, playing eight-dimensional chess with Donald Trump.”

Well, I asked, are you?

He guffawed. “*No!*”

On this count, at least, I was inclined to believe him—and yet the question remained: What exactly *was* Nunberg doing?

The mystery of his motivations had hovered over the day’s astonishing events, and theories attempting to explain his bizarre behavior had proliferated quickly. Some believed he was responding to being caught in a genuine conspiracy—auditioning for immunity, perhaps, or covering up crimes committed by allies in the president’s orbit.

CNN’s Erin Burnett told him—during a live broadcast—that she smelled alcohol on his breath. (I asked him if he’d been drinking that night. “No,” he insisted angrily.) Others worried that he might be experiencing some kind of personal breakdown. “I know it’s compelling to watch Sam’s interviews right now,” conservative commentator S.E. Cupp tweeted Monday night, “but I’m actually concerned that someone I’ve known a long time is not okay.”

Meanwhile, Nunberg’s own explanation for his behavior was so simplistic and strange that it was hard to take at face value: After being ordered to hand over his past private correspondence with several former Trump advisers, he said, he was sorting through his inbox Monday morning and determined that complying with the subpoena would be an intolerable hassle. After all, he explained, “I have a life.”

I won't venture a guess as to which theory best explains his actions. But as anyone who's known Nunberg for a while can attest, his behavior Monday doesn't necessarily require special explanation. He's been pulling stunts like this for years—this is just the first time he's gotten the kind of audience he's always craved.

I first met Nunberg in person in 2014, when he arranged for me to interview his boss, Donald Trump, on a flight from New Hampshire to New York. Thanks to an unexpected blizzard that effectively shut down LaGuardia Airport, we ended up flying to Palm Beach instead, where I spent 36 hours marooned at Mar-a-Lago with Trump as my host and Nunberg as my sidekick.

At the time, what most struck me about Nunberg was the way he seemed to mimic Trump's speaking cadences (“fantastic,” “huge,” “loser”) and sartorial aesthetic (wide lapels, shiny ties, thick knots). But, as I would later learn, his true mentor was actually Roger Stone.

As Nunberg told it, he was sitting in a law-school class one day when someone emailed him a *Weekly Standard* profile of the notorious Republican operative. Stone was described in the piece as a “Nixon-era dirty trickster” and “professional lord of mischief,” and he was quoted talking about politics as “performance art ... sometimes for its own sake.”

Nunberg was enthralled by the mythology surrounding Stone, and seemed determined to develop a similar reputation for himself. Soon enough, he was studying under the dark-arts master, and experimenting with his own low-stakes “dirty tricks.” The maxims of amorality espoused by his mentor—canonized as “Stone's Rules”—included, “Admit nothing, deny everything, launch counterattack,” and, “Nothing is on the level.”

Nunberg got his chance to put these lessons to work a couple months after our stay at Mar-a-Lago, when *BuzzFeed* published my profile of Trump. The story displeased the billionaire, and he promptly fired Nunberg, who then retaliated against me by helping to plant a fake story in *Breitbart*. (Headline: EXCLUSIVE—TRUMP: ‘SCUMBAG’ BUZZFEED BLOGGER OGLED WOMEN WHILE HE ATE BISON AT MY RESORT.) Maybe I should have taken it more personally, but I recognized it for what it was—an act of performance art, most likely for its own sake. Years later, Nunberg would tell me the whole mini-controversy was great for his career: “People actually knew who I was after that.”

Trump eventually took Nunberg back and tasked him with laying the groundwork for his presidential bid—only to fire him again shortly after the campaign launched in 2015. (The stated reason for his dismissal this time was

the discovery of racist comments in Nunberg's old Facebook posts, though most insiders believed campaign manager Corey Lewandowski was the one responsible for muscling him out.)

Banished from the arena, Nunberg spent much of the 2016 campaign season trying to get back in the game by engineering big, headline-grabbing feuds with his former boss. He endorsed Ted Cruz in the primaries, and released a withering statement about Trump's qualifications. He picked fights with the candidate's staffers, and worked to knife his rivals in the press. At one point, Trump sued Nunberg for \$10 million over breach of his confidentiality agreement, and Nunberg responded by filing his own legal action against Trump. And yet, through it all, the erstwhile adviser remained a decidedly low-profile figure—even as people like Steve Bannon and Kellyanne Conway were becoming household names.

I reconnected with Nunberg in the spring of 2016 over lunch at an upscale Brooklyn steakhouse (his choice, my treat), and we kept in touch through the rest of the election. He often seemed frustrated, restless, and wounded by the way Trump had treated him. "I loved Donald like an uncle," he told me once. "He's always hard on me—I don't know why," he lamented another time.

After Trump was elected, Nunberg allied himself with Bannon, and became a frequent source of gossip for reporters covering the West Wing. He seemed to enjoy this role, but it wasn't until Monday that he fully stepped out from behind the scenes—and whatever other reasons he may have had for defying Mueller, he was clearly relishing the attention. One of the first things he said to me when he called was, "I pulled a Roger Stone!"

We only spoke for about 20 minutes Monday night—he said he was with his father, "who's about to kill me," and his lawyer—but as our conversation wound down, I tried to get Nunberg to grapple more seriously with the potential repercussions of his actions. I noted that Susan McDougal had spent 18 months in jail on contempt charges in the 1990s for failing to answer questions before a grand jury during Kenneth Starr's investigation into President Bill Clinton.

"Have you thought this through?" I pressed him. "Are you actually willing to go to jail over this?"

"I've thought it through, and I don't think Mueller's willing to send me to jail," he said. "If Mueller sends me to jail, I will laugh and I'll be out within two days."

How would you pull that off? I asked.

“Because I’ll give him my fucking emails!”

Some other, less Stone-ian political operative might have hesitated to admit that he’d just single-handedly dominated American political news for a day by issuing an empty threat he had no intention of following through with—but not Nunberg. He simply went on about the next stages of the stunt, musing about how he might be willing to spend a day or two in jail before handing over his emails just to “show that this whole thing is a joke and Mueller’s an asshole.”

Still, he doubted it would come to that. “They don’t know what to do,” he said, proudly. “Nobody’s done a spectacle like this before.”

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