

U.S.

Poll-Rigging for Trump and Creating @WomenForCohen: One IT Firm's Work Order

Behind the scenes, Michael Cohen hired RedFinch Solutions, then allegedly stiffed it—and his boss



Michael Cohen, President Trump's former lawyer, arriving for his sentencing at the federal court house in Manhattan last month. PHOTO: JEENAH MOON/REUTERS

By Michael Rothfeld, Rob Barry and Joe Palazzolo

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In early 2015, a man who runs a small technology company showed up at Trump Tower to collect \$50,000 for having helped Michael Cohen, then Donald Trump's personal lawyer, try to rig online polls in his boss's favor before the presidential campaign.

In his Trump Organization office, Mr. Cohen surprised the man, John Gauger, by giving him a blue Walmart bag containing between \$12,000 and \$13,000 in cash and, randomly, a boxing glove that Mr. Cohen said had been worn by a Brazilian mixed-martial arts fighter, Mr. Gauger said.

Mr. Cohen disputed that he handed over a bag of cash. "All monies paid to Mr. Gauger were by check," he said, offering no further comment on his ties to the consultant.

Mr. Gauger owns RedFinch Solutions LLC and is chief information officer at Liberty University in Virginia, where Jerry Falwell Jr., an evangelical leader and fervent Trump supporter, is president.

MICHAEL COHEN: FULL COVERAGE

- Highlights from The Wall Street Journal on Trump's former lawyer

Mr. Gauger said he never got the rest of what he claimed he was owed. But Mr. Cohen in early 2017 still asked for—and received—a \$50,000 reimbursement from Mr. Trump and his company for the work

by RedFinch, according to a government document and a person familiar with the matter. The reimbursement—made on the sole basis of a handwritten note from Mr. Cohen and paid largely out of Mr. Trump’s personal account—demonstrates the level of trust the lawyer once had within the Trump Organization, whose officials arranged the repayment.

The Trump Organization declined to comment. Rudy Giuliani, a lawyer for Mr. Trump, said Mr. Cohen’s being reimbursed more money than he paid RedFinch showed the former Trump lawyer to be a thief. “If one thing has been established, it’s that Michael Cohen is completely untrustworthy,” he said.

The reimbursement was mentioned by federal prosecutors when they charged Mr. Cohen in August with eight felonies, including campaign-finance violations for arranging hush-money payments to an adult-film star and a Playboy model who allege Mr. Trump had extramarital sexual encounters with them.

Prosecutors wrote in a charging document that when Mr. Cohen asked Trump Organization executives for a \$130,000 reimbursement for a hush payment he made to Stephanie Clifford, the porn actress known as Stormy Daniels, he also scrawled a handwritten note asking for \$50,000 he said he spent on “tech services” to aid Mr. Trump’s campaign. Prosecutors didn’t name the company providing those services, but people familiar with the matter say it was RedFinch.

Mr. Cohen’s dealings with the company and Mr. Gauger haven’t previously been reported.

Mr. Cohen has pleaded guilty to campaign-finance violations, tax evasion, lying to Congress and other charges. He was sentenced last month to three years in prison. None of the charges were connected to his interactions with Mr. Gauger and RedFinch.

The episode further illustrates how the former self-described fixer for Mr. Trump, who incriminated the president in the hush payments, once operated in secret to advance his boss’s political fortunes. Mr. Cohen’s dealings involving Mr. Trump over the years, including during the 2016 presidential race, will be a focus of Mr. Cohen’s testimony at a Feb. 7 hearing before the House Oversight Committee.



John Gauger, owner of IT firm RedFinch Solutions. PHOTO: LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

Mr. Gauger's lawyer, Charles E. James Jr. of the firm Williams Mullen, said federal investigators interviewed Mr. Gauger about his interactions over six years with Mr. Cohen, from their first meeting in 2012 until last April, when the Federal Bureau of Investigation raided Mr. Cohen's home, office and hotel room.

Mr. Gauger, who recounted those dealings to The Wall

Street Journal, said that though Mr. Cohen promised him lucrative work for the presidential campaign, his activities related to Mr. Trump consisted of trying unsuccessfully to manipulate two online polls in Mr. Trump's favor.

During the presidential race, Mr. Cohen also asked Mr. Gauger to create a Twitter account called @WomenForCohen. The account, created in May 2016 and run by a female friend of Mr. Gauger, described Mr. Cohen as a "sex symbol," praised his looks and character, and promoted his appearances and statements boosting Mr. Trump's candidacy.

When Mr. Cohen requested the \$50,000 reimbursement for technology services, he didn't tell Trump Organization executives what specific services were performed, and they didn't ask, people familiar with the matter said.

The reimbursement he obtained for the deal with Ms. Clifford and the technology work was paid to him over the course of a year and characterized by the Trump Organization as legal fees, though it didn't pertain to any legal work he performed at the time, prosecutors said. Overall, Mr. Cohen was paid \$420,000, mostly from Mr. Trump's personal account, including \$180,000 to reimburse him for Ms. Clifford and RedFinch, a \$60,000 bonus, and another \$180,000 to cover taxes he would owe because the money would be declared as income, according to prosecutors.

Richard Hasen, an election-law expert and law professor at University of California, Irvine, said Mr. Cohen had an obligation to disclose the payment to RedFinch as an independent expenditure if it was for campaign-related work he didn't discuss with the Trump campaign. Had he coordinated with the Trump camp, the campaign would have been required to report any unpaid-for work as an in-kind contribution.

The connection between Messrs. Trump and Cohen and Liberty University dates at least to 2012, when Mr. Falwell invited Mr. Trump to give a speech and Mr. Cohen accompanied him. Soon after, Mr. Gauger was introduced to Mr. Cohen, helped him set up an Instagram account and gave him his cellphone number should he need more assistance, he said.

Over the next several years, Mr. Cohen asked Mr. Gauger for help with services intended to elevate positive content in internet-search results for himself and for friends, Mr. Gauger said. While he didn't pay for most of what Mr. Gauger did, Mr. Cohen often promised to connect RedFinch with executives at Mr. Trump's hotel and golf-course businesses, though he never did, Mr. Gauger said.

In January 2014, Mr. Cohen asked Mr. Gauger to help Mr. Trump score well in a CNBC online poll to identify the country's top business leaders by writing a computer script to repeatedly vote for him. Mr. Gauger was unable to get Mr. Trump into the top 100 candidates. In February 2015, as Mr. Trump prepared to enter the presidential race, Mr. Cohen asked him to do the same for a Drudge Report poll of potential Republican candidates, Mr. Gauger said. Mr. Trump ranked fifth, with about 24,000 votes, or 5% of the total.

After making the cash payment at Trump Tower, Mr. Cohen kept saying he would pay the balance of the \$50,000 but never did, Mr. Gauger said. Mr. Cohen also promised to get RedFinch work for Mr. Trump's campaign. He set up two phone calls for Mr. Gauger with campaign officials, who didn't hire him, he said.

"Mr. Cohen promised but never was able to develop the business he predicted," said Mr. James, Mr. Gauger's lawyer.

Mr. Cohen did give Mr. Gauger some other paying work. Early in 2016, Mr. Cohen hired RedFinch to help create positive web content about the chief executive of CareOne Management LLC, a New Jersey assisted-living company that had given Mr. Cohen a consulting contract.

Mr. Cohen sent RedFinch checks totaling \$50,000 for that work, Mr. Gauger said. Mr. Cohen collected \$200,000 from CareOne but didn't pay taxes on it, according to the charging document filed by federal prosecutors, who didn't identify the assisted-living company by name. Mr. Cohen pleaded guilty to evading taxes on that income. CareOne didn't respond to a request for comment.

Mr. Cohen asked Mr. Gauger to create the @WomenForCohen account, still active in 2019, to elevate his profile. The account's profile says it is run by "Women who love and support Michael Cohen. Strong, pit bull, sex symbol, no nonsense, business oriented and ready to make a difference!"

Mr. Gauger said he last spoke with Mr. Cohen in April 2018, shortly after the raid by federal agents. He said Mr. Cohen told him the investigation was about taxes and how he had accessed money from some of his accounts. “It’s not a big deal,” Mr. Cohen said, according to Mr. Gauger.

—*Rebecca Ballhaus and Rebecca Davis O’Brien contributed to this article.*

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