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Michael Caputo emerges from high-stakes testimony on Capitol Hill unbowed

By Tim Graham

Jul 16, 2017



Michael R. Caputo, on leave from his post in the Trump administration, is back in Western New York after being diagnosed with cancer. Ron Sachs/CNP

By Tim Graham



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Michael Caputo stares out the passenger window of his friend's silver BMW 750Li. The car provides a smooth ride, but where Caputo's headed Friday afternoon has his thoughts roiling.

Caputo, a political consultant from East Aurora, is being chauffeured to the Capitol for a closed-door hearing before the House Intelligence Committee.

He's about three hours away from testifying under oath yet still doesn't know which congressmen will interrogate him about Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Roger Stone and umpteen Russians.

Caputo seethes that Rep. Jackie Speier, D-Calif., called him "Putin's image consultant" and mentioned his Ukrainian-born wife – in a March 20 public hearing – as some sort of menace in our midst. Maryna Caputo became a U.S. citizen four weeks earlier.

Mike Conforti, an international gaming businessman who married a Hamburg girl and is tied to Caputo through politics and a love of music, is the driver. Conforti's also in charge of the radio.

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As they wait at a stop light to turn onto the George Washington Memorial Parkway, speed-metal band Motorhead blares.

Kiss the whip, eat the gun/Tell me it ain't fair/Midnight victim, hit and run/I'm so bad, baby I don't care!

Conforti turns to Caputo and belts the last few words.

“Yeah,” Caputo says, “it’s cool. Not too relaxing, though.”

Caputo’s choice would be the Grateful Dead’s 1989 Rich Stadium concert, a soundtrack that calms him. Conforti doesn’t have that show, but he has plenty of other Dead tunes to play.

At least the songs are more serene now. The G.W. Parkway is a gorgeous National Parks Service road that hugs the Potomac River on Virginia’s border. Through the trees, you can see D.C.

With every mile, Caputo’s destination comes into view. His day, however, gets no clearer.

Across the Francis Scott Key Bridge and into D.C., landmarks beckon. There, on the right, is the Watergate complex. Conforti makes note, although Caputo doesn’t offer any acknowledgement.

Caputo is involved in this Trump affair, scandal, whatevergate. Regardless, the Trump campaign’s alleged and disputed ties to Russia, with media grist piling up daily, is becoming the year’s great American political phenomenon.

Donald Trump Jr.’s email dump last Tuesday morning changed the tone of the opening and closing statements Caputo wrote.

The bio at Caputo’s company website heralds him as “the only executive in history who has worked for both the White House and the Kremlin.” He ran a business and lived in Russia from 1995 to 2000. He also worked on Trump's presidential campaign.

So you better believe the House Intelligence Committee wants to have a chat.

Caputo, 55, has a lot to lose. He has a family and reputation to protect. Metaphors surround him along the D.C. streets.

They drive past the White House, where Caputo might have an office had things gone differently. And there's the U.S. Treasury headquarters. He says he has paid off more than \$100,000 in back taxes, but the Trump-Russia investigation could bankrupt him.

Caputo testifies he never spoke with Russians while working for Trump campaign

A lot of people will be happy to hear that. As a WBEN guest and fill-in host, he enjoys baiting liberals. His Twitter account is pockmarked with vulgar replies and putdowns to anyone who approaches him pointedly.

Caputo asserts the Trump-Russia scandal is part of an orchestrated left-wing effort to harass Trump and anybody connected to the campaign and spoil the president's agenda.

"They're going to grind all our bones to dust," Caputo says. "But I'm going to guard my family, my business and my reputation."

He needs a high-test attorney, and there's no GOP subsidy for his expenses. He says he has liquidated his three daughters' college fund to pay for former U.S. attorney and state attorney general Dennis C. Vacco. Caputo also hired political media strategist Gordon Hensley.

Worse yet, Caputo fears the unwanted exposure – intensified by Speier's demonizing words – puts his family in danger. He claims to have received death threats within minutes of Speier's statements. He has applied for a pistol permit.

A left swerve off 15th Street onto Pennsylvania Avenue brings Capitol Hill into prominent view. Caputo used to work there as a communications assistant, but later Friday would say the place felt spiritually different even before the hearing began.

Down Pennsylvania Avenue, they pass the gilded Trump International Hotel, and you have to wonder if Trump even thinks about Caputo anymore, wonders how he's handling the burden. Caputo says neither Trump nor anyone from the White House has reached out with words of support.

On the radio, the Dead plays on with "The Music Never Stopped."

Caputo says the Trump campaign never paid him, didn't respond to his invoices. He says he got stiffed for his work on the New York Primary and at Trump Tower, although he shrugs that off as sadly typical of political campaigns in general and remains fiercely loyal to the president.

Two buildings down from Trump International Hotel is the U.S. Department of Justice, and directly across from the DOJ is FBI headquarters. Caputo was silent, but perhaps he whistled past these graveyards in his head. Vacco says each investigative agency has made "zero" contact despite Speier's barbed remarks.

Conforti eventually pulls the car around the Capitol on Constitution Avenue, past the U.S. Foreign Surveillance Court, U.S. Bankruptcy Court and Senate office buildings. He turns right on First Street, then left on East Capitol Street to pull over between the Library of Congress and the Supreme Court Building.

Across the street and down a stairway is the Capitol's entrance.

"Knock 'em dead, brother," Conforti says within a bear hug. "This is nothing for you. Nothing. You got this."

"Just don't perjure yourself."

It's unclear whether Conforti's attempts at levity or providing his friend little distractions or getting him psyched up have worked.

Caputo remains chatty through the security screening, but for the second time in about a half hour – he left it behind at lunch, too – forgets to collect his red binder, the vital hearing playbook he has assembled. Imagine if Thurman Thomas had misplaced his helmet for the entire Super Bowl XXVI.

Vacco admits he's nervous, too. He's never been involved in a closed-door Congressional hearing. He takes a deep breath and smiles. This experience is just as new for senior associate attorney Eric M. Soehnlein, who marvels that he's about to participate in a proceeding Vacco has not.

Caputo and his lawyers step out of an elevator and closer to their destination. CNN reporter Manu Raju recognizes Caputo first and tries to stop him. Caputo pretends not to hear.

They walk down the stairs of the Capitol atrium toward Room HVC-304, the House Intelligence Committee office, the belly of the beast.

Ear buds in place, Caputo listens to the Dead at Rich Stadium 1989 off his iPhone.

On the other side of the door, still-unidentified U.S. representatives will grill Caputo. He hopes Speier waits inside, but he plans to give whomever is listening an earful, to express how the Trump-Russia saga directly impacts a family in East Aurora.

* * *

Three days before testifying, Caputo reflects over beers on his front porch. The sun has set. A lawnmower fires up in the distance. His East Aurora neighborhood appears to lead the nation in people-walking-dogs per capita.

On the driveway's black asphalt, 4-year-old Ana and 3-year-old Lia draw with chalk and chase each other in electric cars, a pink sports car and Volkswagen hippie bus. Maryna chats with visitors, while black cat Cleopatra Flowers darts about.

"All I got," Caputo says, "is right here."

Caputo learned seven years ago he had a daughter. She's in her early 30s. He has worked on building a relationship with her. He also has a daughter from his first marriage to a Russian now living in Manhattan. Speier also cited Caputo's first wife as a reason to speculate about his connections.

Caputo expresses regret for not being closer to his oldest two daughters. He was a wanderer with an adventurous streak since childhood.

The porch swing he hung last summer symbolizes what stability means to him today.

"I want my daughters to have their first dates on that porch swing," he says. "I want them to walk to the same school for 12 years."

Born in Fort Bragg, N.C., his parents divorced when he was 5. He lived with his mother in rural Ohio until he was 14, when he chose to live in Buffalo's Southtowns with his father, owner of an insurance agency and married five times.

The boy was a fledgling delinquent, but devoured Elbert Hubbard's manuscripts while briefly living on the Roycroft Campus. "A Message to Garcia," an 1899 essay about determination, is Caputo's favorite.

He bounced from Iroquois to Orchard Park to Hamburg High. He joined the Army, was introduced to communications, discovered a passion for Republican politics and attended the University at Buffalo.

He was a writer for Congressman Jack Kemp's presidential campaign and worked with Central and South American contras through the Council for Inter-American Security, pounding Ronald Reagan's anti-Communism propaganda drum. He handled media operations for the House of Representatives and the failed George Bush/Dan Quayle re-election campaign.

Caputo went to Russia in 1994, he says, "to watch the Soviet Union die." He originally was dispatched to Moscow by the Clinton administration to help Russians understand democratic principles under the U.S. Agency for International

Development.

Caputo now says he was there to meddle. He ran afoul of a superior for public comments that didn't align with the U.S. State Department and was dismissed.

An established political adventurer, he remained in Russia to capitalize on its burgeoning business environment. His model:

- Advise U.S. companies how to get a foothold in Russia
- Advise Russian political candidates for free
- Lobby those officials on behalf of American clients

Caputo estimates he delivered 150 speeches around Russia, organized the country's version of MTV's "Rock the Vote" campaign and worked with President Boris Yeltsin.

When the ruble crashed in the late 1990s, American companies lost interest in Russia, but political candidates still expected Caputo to work for free. His business became untenable.

He insists he crossed paths with Putin only twice. In 1995 or '96, he says, he shared a drink with Putin, then St. Petersburg's deputy chairman, for a presentation on election law. After a crowded celebration for new federation council vice chairman Vladimir Platonov, at the house Caputo was renting in 1999, he would spot Putin in a photograph, but Caputo claims he didn't know Putin was there.

So how did Speier get the idea Caputo's role in 2000 was "to improve Putin's image in the United States"?

Caputo believes it started with a March 2016 Buffalo News profile that stated he "helped President Vladimir Putin weather U.S. government criticism for taking over an independent TV station."

The radical adventures of conservative radio host Mike Caputo

Gazprom Media, which hired Caputo for that job, wasn't mentioned in The News article.

The Daily Beast in November 2016 cited The News' article in asserting "one goal of Caputo's contract with Gazprom Media in 2000 was to improve Vladimir Putin's image in the United States."

Speier made her comments March 20 while questioning then-FBI Director James Comey and NSA chief Michael Rogers about Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election.

An interactive Washington Post feature published 11 days later shows a flow chart between "Team Trump" and "Russian Ties." The Washington Post lists 19 members of "Team Trump," with Caputo among only four (Trump, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn are the others) with a direct line drawn to Putin.

The Washington Post, without citing a source, writes that in "2000 Caputo enters a contract with the Russian conglomerate Gazprom Media to improve Putin's image in the United States." The thumbnail adds a Buffalo News quote, but links to the story that doesn't mention Gazprom.

After a long Speier soliloquy about Caputo's perceived Russian entanglements at the March 20 public hearing, Comey and Rogers each stated under oath he had no knowledge of Caputo or Gazprom Media.

Caputo to meet with House panel July 14, but he hasn't heard from FBI

Vacco underscores the significance neither the FBI nor DOJ has reached out to Caputo for questioning despite Speier's remarks.

Tweets sent to her husband accuse Maryna Caputo of being a mail-order bride, a refugee, maybe even a foreign agent.

“I’ve never been to Russia in my life,” says Maryna, an administrator in the Canadian consulate’s downtown office until it closed in 2012.

Ukrainians and Russians aren’t interchangeable. Many if not most Ukrainians – at least since the 1930s – detest the Russian government.

They met on a 2007 Ukraine parliamentary campaign that taught Maryna, although merely a translator, she didn’t have an appetite for politics. The campaign manager was murdered. She thankfully already had left to work with a European Union youth group in France.

Caputo and Maryna Ponomarenko, despite their 22-year age difference, were equally smitten.

“It was his general demeanor,” Maryna says. “He was very bold, very confident, determined.”

But his full-time U.S. residence was a tugboat off the Miami Beach coast. His companion was August West, an African grey parrot.

Caputo felt he was in danger. He’d written a harsh July 2004 Washington Post column. Incensed by the killing of Forbes magazine correspondent Paul Klebnikov in Moscow, he lashed out at Putin’s government and notorious oligarch Boris Berezovsky.

“Russia hasn’t changed in the past decade,” Caputo wrote, “and at this trajectory it won’t be truly civilized for generations. Those who killed Klebnikov are killing today, plan to kill tomorrow, and know they’ll roam free to kill for years to come. Hell-bent on getting rich, they have no boundaries. Raised in a communist world devoid of morals, they have no soul.”

Caputo, armed with .40-caliber Glock and Kel-Tec 380 pistols, would motor off into the Atlantic Ocean until his cell signal reached two bars. Then he'd drop his anchor and conduct business from there.

Maryna eventually moved to India to study at the Yoga Vidya Gurukul ashram. They occasionally would meet in Paris or Amsterdam, but in 2008 he decided he couldn't be apart from her anymore.

Caputo wooed her in India for a week and a half. He took her to a famed tiger preserve, the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel and rented a rice boat with a captain and a chef to take them down the Kerala River.

He painstakingly disclosed all his skeletons and asked, "Are you OK with all that?"

He also promised he would stay out of politics. On the steps of Fort Tiracol in Goa, on a cliff overlooking the Indian Ocean, she said, "Yes."

Surrounded by unsuspecting friends, they staged a surprise wedding on the roof of his tugboat in June 2009.

The newlywed Caputos and August West sailed north on an extended honeymoon.

"Those six or seven weeks were the best times of my life," Caputo says, "and I saw nobody but her."

In the Chesapeake Bay, they encountered a freak storm. The tugboat's engine blew. A black plume rose. He was covered in motor oil. Five-foot waves crashed into them. They pulled on their life jackets, a moment made more harrowing by Maryna's admission at the beginning of the trip she couldn't swim. They radioed a Mayday alert and were about to jump before help arrived.

On the dock and shaken, Caputo's cell rang. Roger Stone needed help on a gaming referendum in Cleveland.

Was it serendipity or a harbinger of doom?

“Roger offered me a gig to pay our bills and for a new engine,” Caputo shrugs.

* * *

Caputo’s intention was to help Stone with the referendum and then take over his father’s Orchard Park insurance agency. He vowed to Maryna, after all, he was done with elections.

But he couldn’t resist. He ran Carl Paladino’s unsuccessful 2010 gubernatorial campaign.

Three years later, Caputo contributed on Trump’s bid to purchase the Buffalo Bills. Caputo, with Trump’s blessing, coordinated an anti-Bon Jovi campaign to whittle the field. He helped Stone on Trump’s 2016 presidential run.

Caputo considers Stone his big brother and mentor on the finer arts – some would consider much of it skullduggery – of campaign public relations. Stone is a cutthroat dandy, equally adept with a scalpel as napalm.

“Things that aren’t illegal but you need to go to confession for,” Caputo says with a smile.

The Black, Manafort & Stone consulting firm established the current culture of D.C. lobbyists. They guided Ronald Reagan to victory, but their client list also included strong-arm dictators aligned with the United States.

Stone was Kemp’s senior adviser in 1987 and 1988. That’s where Caputo’s admiration for Stone grew. That’s also how he met Conforti, who married Lynn Schmidt, daughter of the man who snapped the ball to Kemp with the Bills, center Bob Schmidt.

As much as Caputo wanted to help Trump win, Maryna was unimpressed.

“It’s not going to end well,” Maryna recalls thinking. “I could just feel it.”

Caputo directed Trump's victorious New York Primary campaign, transitioned to senior adviser in Trump Tower and headed Trump's communications group for the Republican National Convention. Caputo resigned in June 2016 after posting a tweet to mock just-fired campaign manager Corey Lewandowski.

**Caputo resigns from Trump campaign after tweet, says he's
'falling on his sword'**

Stone proved correct despite the turbulence. Trump upset the establishment.

Caputo claims the Russia scandal is an attempt to punish Trump, Stone, Manafort and anybody else for wrecking so many well-laid plans.

Caputo's headaches haven't abated, not with his reputation and wife lugged into the public arena.

"It's very offensive that being married to a Russian or Ukrainian is a crime now," Maryna says on the porch three nights before her husband's hearing.

Caputo is thankful his wife isn't the type to rub it in.

"She's always got my back," Caputo says. "For me, a lot of this is heady, full of stress."

Maryna nods across the way from him on the porch.

"But I know, no matter what happens during the day, my wife and girls are there for me when I come home. I've been at this alone for a long time. I'm blessed to have them."

* * *

Inside Room HVC-304, the belly of the beast, Caputo removes the large, silver skull ring on his right middle finger.

He says he never wore the thing, a replica of one worn by Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards, in front of Trump, so he's not going to wear it in front of the House Intelligence Committee.

Caputo does, however, sport Grateful Dead cufflinks.

He finally learns Friday who's on the firing line: Adam Schiff, D-Calif.; Eric Swalwell, D-Calif.; Denny Heck, D-Wash.; and Tom Rooney, R-Fla.

Speier is nowhere to be found. Her office did not respond to The Buffalo News' July 10 request for an interview.

The hearing's mood is casual. Rooney doesn't wear a jacket and offers him a bag of Cheetos.

How difficult would it be to maintain the gravitas of a confidential hearing and answer a congressman's probing questions about a political scandal with orange crumbs in your teeth? Caputo declines.

Caputo rebuts Speier's remarks, point by point, in his opening statement. He reminds the House Intelligence Committee he requested an open hearing to address Speier's statements in public, the same way she made hers.

He testifies that he did one job in Russia in 2012. Other than that, he hasn't done anything from 2004 to now.

From 2001 to 2012, he didn't step foot in Russia. He swears under oath he never discussed Russian contacts with Trump or any member of the campaign.

The possibility of drawing Schiff, the ranking Democrat on the committee, was a concern entering the hearing. But Caputo concedes Schiff treated him professionally.

Caputo and his attorneys sit for three hours of testimony. Heck doesn't ask any questions.

Caputo in his closing statement quotes the Grateful Dead (“There is no ripple in still water when there was no pebble tossed. This is just politicians throwing stones”) and an ode to Jack Kemp his son Jimmy wrote Thursday, which would have been Jack’s 82nd birthday. He asks leaders to “dial back the rhetoric that has led to threats and violence.”

Caputo emerges from the hearing for a 14-minute news conference in front of five TV cameras and a gaggle of reporters. He tapes a standalone segment with Spectrum News, the lone Buffalo station to send a crew. A few hours later, Caputo reveals he felt faint toward the end of that interview and nearly went down.

The whirlwind got to him. But outside the Capitol, in the drenching humidity, he regains momentum with an impassioned WBEN interview, then dinner.

Vacco gives his client's performance before the House Intelligence Committee an A-plus.

“I was anxious about the unknown,” Vacco says. “I know Mike very well, but I’m always worried about what I don’t know.

“But nothing came up that, A) we didn’t already know, and, B) we weren’t prepared for.”

Caputo, Vacco and Soehnlein are in agreement: The inquiries were wearisome. A lot of the same Russian names were broached repeatedly.

“What’s clear to see from the questioning by the minority is Roger Stone is in their crosshairs,” Vacco says later over celebratory drinks at Bistro Bis on 15th Street Northwest.

Adds Soehnlein: “It seems they’ve identified a series of events they believe are tied together.”

Even so, Vacco predicts the legal ordeal is not over for Caputo. There are three committees. The Senate version already has reached out. But former FBI director Robert Mueller's independent investigation has not contacted them.

Caputo has picked Bistro Bis because he's going to be a live guest on "Tucker Carlson Tonight" across the street.

Caputo sips his second bourbon old fashioned and waits for his beef bourguignon when Vacco asks,

"What time do you need to be at the studio?"

Caputo replies, "7:45."

Vacco taps his cellphone, showing it's 7:38.

Caputo dashes off, but returns in time to say goodbye to Vacco and Soehnlein, who must leave for the airport before Caputo's dinner comes.

Within a half hour, Caputo summons an Uber to return him to the Confortis and a couple of more celebratory bourbons.

Before he makes it back, heading the opposite direction he rode along the George Washington Parkway 12 hours earlier, he's amazed at the positive feedback from Western New Yorkers he doesn't know. They tell him they're proud of him.

"Look at this one," he says, the bluish-white glow of his iPhone lighting up the backseat. "I have no idea who this person is.

"And don't for one second ever let anybody tell you these gestures don't matter."

Congratulations and atta-boys arrive through Twitter and via text. There are various ways to find his number online.

But that's how the threats and insults reach Caputo, too.

The stress of Friday’s closed-door hearing released, he laughs them off. For now.

“I’ve got so much blocking to do on Twitter tonight,” Caputo says.

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