

OPEN THREAD: IS THAT A SMILE? [UPDATE]

[FYI, update is at the bottom of this post./~Rayne]

I'm putting up an open thread since the BDTS thread is filling up as the Oversight Committee's hearing continues.

There have been some developments in the case of National Enquirer owner AMI's extortive letter to Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, threatening to leak sext images exchanged with his paramour.

If you haven't read Bezos' open letter to AMI you really should. There's something about AMI's attempt that's more than squicky; it smells sloppy and desperate.

Perhaps it merely reflects what Bezos says about AMI's David Pecker – that Pecker was “apoplectic” about Bezos' attempt to investigate the source of personal text messages leaked by AMI outlet National Enquirer.

Or perhaps it reflects some urgency related to the level of interest from other parties.

In any case, there were a number of discussions in Twitter last night as to whether AMI's letter met the legal definition of extortion. Former fed prosecutor Renato Mariotti published a thread on the topic and former fed prosecutor Mimi Rocah also had questions about the letter.

Bloomberg reported today that the feds in SDNY are now looking into National Enquirer's treatment of Bezos' affair and whether it violates the agreement AMI entered into regarding the Michael Cohen “Catch and Kill” hush money case. The agreement prohibited further illegal activity.

What was it about Bezos' private investigations that set off David Pecker so badly he'd not think about the implications to AMI's agreements?

Bezos appears confident – though he hasn't confirmed this in public – that the messages he exchanged with his married lover were entirely private. This suggests that their leakage was through illegal means.

Why would Pecker risk the possibility such an extortive act might expose illegal surveillance methods had been used against Bezos?

The one other recent case where Pecker's name has come up in regard to aggressive surveillance and shaping news media coverage was that of Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein. Pecker and Weinstein have been characterized as friends:

Mr. Weinstein held off press scrutiny with a mix of threats and enticements, drawing reporters close with the lure of access to stars, directors and celebrity-packed parties. Some journalists negotiated book and movie deals with him even as they were assigned to cover him. The studio chief once paid a gossip writer to collect juicy celebrity tidbits that Mr. Weinstein could use to barter if other reporters stumbled onto an affair he was trying to keep quiet. He was so close to David J. Pecker, the chief executive of American Media Inc., which owns The Enquirer, that he was known in the tabloid industry as an untouchable "F.O.P.," or "friend of Pecker." That status was shared by a chosen few, including President Trump.

(source: Weinstein's Complicity Machine, 05-DEC-2017)

Weinstein had hired Black Cube to bat clean up on stories about his sexually abusive behavior. Who referred this private investigation firm to Weinstein?

It's also possible the effort to silence Jeff Bezos and the Washington Post (owned by Bezos

through holding company Nash Holdings) was driven not by Pecker's relationship with Donald Trump but by Pecker's desire to do business in Saudi Arabia. What resources would have been used to obtain Bezos' text messages if Pecker was already tied up with KSA?

Saudi Arabia has now responded by denying any involvement in the conflict between Bezos and AMI, minimizing the dispute as a "soap opera."

Again, treat this as an open thread.

UPDATE – 4:15 P.M. ET –

Activist Iyad El-Baghdadi has just finished a thread looking at the Bezos-AMI dispute. He had already pointed out each allusion to Saudi Arabia in Bezos' letter; in his Twitter thread he says a Saudi whistleblower told him Crown Prince MBS is obsessed with the Washington Post and targeting WaPo journalists.

But the bit that clicked for me with regard to David Pecker: with its extortive letter attempting to blackmail performance from Bezos, if AMI was acting on behalf of or in coordination with a foreign nation-state, they may be in violation of Foreign Agents Registration Act.

Now one needs to ask themselves, assuming AMI did this for MBS/KSA, was this the first time they acted on behalf of another nation-state? Or have they acted as agents for foreign powers before and it's all in their vaults?

Where's that popcorn?