

7 Surprise Take-Aways From James Comey's Testimony

Former FBI Director James Comey didn't let every cat out of the bag in his prepared opening statement to the Senate Intelligence Committee, released the day before his testimony.

The initial words under oath Thursday morning from Comey, who President Donald Trump fired May 9, barely resembled that earlier statement. And during questions and answers, he offered some surprises.

"Lordy, I hope there were tapes," Comey exclaimed at one point to Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., referring to a one-on-one dinner conversation with Trump in which his loyalty was a topic.

He talked mostly about Trump, but also about the president's vanquished opponent Hillary Clinton and political pressure from Loretta Lynch, former President Barack Obama's second attorney general.

The ousted FBI director also reaffirmed several times that Trump never was personally under investigation. The hearing before the Senate committee, which lasted nearly three hours, also contained a few awkward exchanges.

Here are seven key points from Thursday's much-talked-about event:

1. Neither Trump Nor His Administration Asked Comey to Back Off Russia Probe.

Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Richard Burr, R-N.C., asked whether there was any doubt Russia sought to interfere in the 2016 presidential election. Comey responded that there was no doubt.

"There's no fuzz on this whatsoever," he said at one point.

But Comey assured the committee the Russians' actions didn't change a single vote, to his knowledge.

Burr asked: "Are you confident that no votes cast in the 2016 president election were altered?"

Comey replied: "I'm confident. When I left as director, I'd seen no indication of that whatsoever."

Burr followed up: "Did the president at any time ask you to stop the FBI investigation into Russian involvement in the 2016 elections?"

Comey responded: "Not to my understanding, no."

Burr: "Did anyone working in this administration, including the Justice Department, ask you to stop the FBI investigation of Russian involvement in the U.S. election?"

Comey: "No."

In a statement read to reporters after the hearing, Trump's personal lawyer, Marc Kasowitz, said Comey's testimony on this matter conflicted with "false press accounts." Kasowitz said:

Mr. Comey has now finally confirmed publicly what he repeatedly told the president privately: That is, the president was not under investigation as part of any probe into Russian interference. Mr. Comey also admitted that there is no evidence that a single vote changed as a result of any Russian interference.

Mr. Comey's testimony also makes clear that the president never sought to impede the investigation into attempted Russian interference in the 2016 election, and in fact, according to Mr. Comey, the president told Mr. Comey 'it would be good to find out' in that investigation if there were 'some satellite associates' of his who did something

wrong.

2. A New Revelation About Loretta Lynch.

Burr later asked Comey whether his decision not to bring charges in the FBI's investigation into Clinton's use of a private email server as secretary of state was a result of a private meeting between then-Attorney General Loretta Lynch and former President Bill Clinton.

In a surprise, Comey said that was just one of the reasons.

"I had to do something separately to protect the credibility of the investigation, which meant both the FBI and the Justice Department," Comey said regarding his July 5 news conference.

Comey also said Lynch, head of the Justice Department as attorney general, seemed to try to interfere with the probe of the Democratic nominee by pushing a political line.

"At one point, the attorney general had directed me not to call it an 'investigation,' but instead to call it a 'matter,' which confused me and concerned me," Comey said. "But that was one of the bricks in the load that led me to conclude I have to step away from the department to close this case credibly."

In his much-criticized press conference, Comey announced he wouldn't recommend charges against Hillary Clinton for doing official business using a private email account and email server, but called her behavior reckless.

3. McCain Alleges Double Standard.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., sharply suggested that Comey's FBI applied a double standard in concluding Clinton broke no laws in the email investigation, even though she potentially exposed classified material to the Russians and other adversaries. McCain appeared to suggest that the bureau treated Trump differently in the probe into Russia's interference in the election, which includes unsubstantiated

claims of “collusion” between the Trump campaign and the Russians.

Comey seemed to try to make a distinction between the two investigations.

“The Clinton investigation was a completed investigation the FBI had been deeply involved in, so I had the opportunity to understand all of the facts and apply those facts against the law as I understood them,” Comey said. “This investigation was underway, still going when I was fired. It’s nowhere near in the same place.”

McCain said he understood this during an eight-minute exchange, but continued to critique the former director. In his view and the view of other Americans, McCain said, “there are a whole lot of questions remaining.”

However, it wasn’t clear whether the Arizona Republican was referring to the Trump-Russia probe, the Clinton email probe that had a Russian angle, or both.

“So both President Trump and former candidate Clinton were involved in the investigation, yet one of them, you said, there is going to be no charges, and the other you said the investigation continues,” McCain said. “Well, I think there is a double standard there, to tell you the truth.”

4. Trump Told ‘Lies, Plain and Simple,’ Comey Says.

Comey testified that he believes he was fired because of the Russia investigation, and that Trump was being dishonest about the reasons for the firing. At one point he said he kept notes of meetings with Trump because the president might “lie” about what was said.

“Even though I was appointed to a 10-year term, which Congress created in order to underscore the importance of the FBI being outside of politics, I understood that I could be fired for

any reason and for no reason at all," Comey told the panel.

"The shifting explanations [from the Trump administration] confused me and increasingly concerned me because the president and I had multiple conversations about my job both before and after he took office, and he repeatedly told me I was doing a great job and he hoped I would stay."

The former FBI director continued:

It confused me when I saw on television the president saying that he actually fired me because of the Russia investigation, and learned again from the media that he was telling other parties that my firing had relieved great pressure on the Russia investigation. I was also confused by the initial explanation I was offered publicly, that I was fired for the decisions I had made during the election year. That didn't make sense to me for a whole bunch of reasons.

The administration then chose to defame me, and more importantly the FBI, by saying the organization was in disarray, that it was poorly led, that the workforce had lost confidence in its leader. Those were lies—lies plain and simple.

Comey later said one reason he kept memos of his nine one-on-one conversations with Trump is that he didn't want the White House to mischaracterize the contents.

White House deputy press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders responded to a reporter's question of whether Trump is a liar, while directing all questions about the hearing to Trump's personal attorney.

"I can definitively say the president is not a liar," Sanders said. "I think it is frankly insulting that question would be asked."

5. The Flynn Conversation.

The man-to-man conversation Trump had with Comey about national security adviser Mike Flynn, whom the president had fired the day before for misrepresenting contacts with the Russian ambassador, was a major point of the hearing.

During that Oval Office meeting, which Comey said took place Feb. 14 after Trump “kicked out” other high administration officials, Comey recalled that Trump told him of Flynn: “He is a good guy and has been through a lot ... I hope you can see your way clear to letting this go, to letting Flynn go. He is a good guy. I hope you can let this go.”

Comey said he replied, “He is a good guy.” But, he recalled, he said nothing else.

Many Democrats have said the president’s remarks could amount to obstruction of justice, if Trump was seeking to shut down the FBI’s investigation into Flynn’s Russian ties.

Sen. James Risch, R-Idaho, pressed Comey, asking, “He did not direct you to let it go?”

Comey responded: “Not in his words, no.”

Risch: “He did not order you to let it go?”

Comey: “Those words were not an order.”

Risch continued: “Do you know of any case where a person has been charged for obstruction of justice or for that matter any other criminal offense where they said they ‘hoped’ for an outcome?”

Comey explained how he interpreted what Trump said to him about Flynn.

“I don’t know well enough to answer. The reason I keep saying his words is, I took it as a direction,” Comey said. “When

it's the president of the United States with me alone saying 'I hope this,' I took it as, 'This is what he wants me to do.' I didn't obey that, but that's the way I took it."

Risch: "You don't know anyone that has been charged for hoping something?"

Comey: "That is correct."

Kasowitz, the president's lawyer, later stressed Trump never gave any order.

"Consistent with that statement, the president never, in form or substance, directed or suggested that Mr. Comey stop investigating anyone, including suggesting that Mr. Comey 'let Flynn go,'" Kasowitz said. "As he publicly stated the next day, he did say to Mr. Comey, 'General Flynn is a good guy, he has been through a lot.'"

6. Feinstein to Comey: 'You're Big, You're Strong.'

In an exchange that would sound a bit awkward in isolation, Feinstein referenced Comey's 6-foot 8-inch frame in talking about his Oval Office encounter with Trump about Flynn.

"You're big, you're strong," Feinstein told Comey.

"I know the Oval Office, and I know what happens to people when they walk in," she continued. "There is a certain amount of intimidation. But why didn't you stop and say, 'Mr. President, this is wrong—I cannot discuss that with you'?"

Comey didn't exactly sound commanding in responding.

"Maybe if I were stronger, I would have," Comey said. "I was so stunned by the conversation that I just took it in."

At other points, Comey said he wasn't "Captain Courageous" and perhaps had acted in a "cowardly" manner in responding to Trump.

7. Comey Confirmed as a Leaker.

The hearing also focused on Comey's Jan. 27 dinner with Trump at the White House, when, he said, the president asked for his loyalty as FBI director seven days after his inauguration. Trump denied this in an interview, while also saying nothing would be wrong with that.

Comey said he asked a close friend who works at Columbia University School of Law to leak content from his Justice Department memos on Trump to a reporter.

"The president tweeted on Friday that I better hope there's not tapes," Comey recalled to the Senate committee:

I woke up in the middle of the night on Monday night, because it didn't dawn on me originally that there might be corroboration for our conversation, there might be a tape. My judgment was that I needed to get that out to the public square, and so I asked a friend of mine to share the content of the memo with a reporter. I didn't do it myself for a variety of reasons.

While still FBI director, Comey testified that he never had leaked confidential information or asked a subordinate to do so.

Trump's personal lawyer, Kasowitz, speaking to reporters at the National Press Club after Thursday's hearing, asserted that Comey now was an admitted leaker.

"It is overwhelmingly clear that there have been and continue to be those in government who are actively attempting to undermine this administration with selective and illegal leaks of classified information and privileged communications," Kasowitz said. "Mr. Comey has now admitted that he is one of these leakers."

Kasowitz continued:

Today, Mr. Comey admitted that he unilaterally and surreptitiously made unauthorized disclosures to the press of privileged communications with the president. The leaks of this privileged information began no later than March 2017 when friends of Mr. Comey have stated he disclosed to them the conversations he had with the president during their January 27, 2017, dinner and February 14, 2017, White House meeting.

Today, Mr. Comey admitted that he leaked to friends his purported memos of these privileged conversations, one of which he testified was classified. Mr. Comey also testified that immediately after he was terminated he authorized his friends to leak the contents of these memos to the press in order to 'prompt the appointment of a special counsel.'

Although Mr. Comey testified he only leaked the memos in response to a tweet, the public record reveals that The New York Times was quoting from these memos the day before the referenced tweet, which belies Mr. Comey's excuse for this unauthorized disclosure of privileged information and appears to be entirely retaliatory.

Ken McIntyre contributed to this report.

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