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# Key takeaways from Attorney General Sessions' testimony

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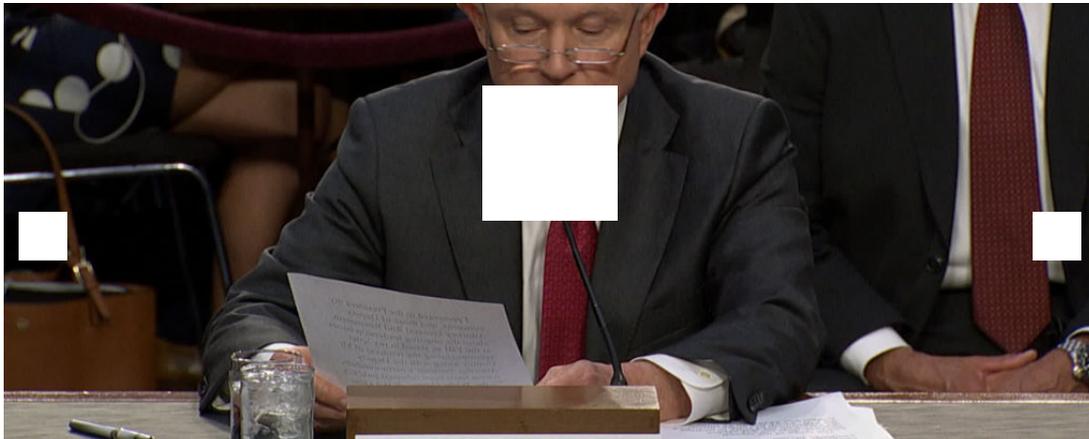
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## Sessions Contradicts Comey on Trump Exchange

AP



WASHINGTON >> Attorney General Jeff Sessions gave more than two hours of sometimes heated testimony today, with Democrats demanding details of matters including conversations with President Donald Trump, interactions with the Russian ambassador and the firing of FBI Director James Comey. The appearance before the Senate intelligence committee gave Sessions a chance to defend himself, but offered little new insight.

Some takeaways from Sessions' appearance before the committee:

## **COLLUSION**

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Sessions, a close Trump adviser during the battle for the presidency, said in his opening statement that it was a "detestable and appalling lie" to suggest he was aware of or participated in any collusion between Russia and the Trump campaign. He said he never met with, or had conversations with, Russians about election interference.

Sessions recused himself from the Russia probe in March after it was revealed he twice met with the Russian ambassador during the campaign but failed to say so at his confirmation hearing. Sessions reiterated today those meetings were in his capacity as a lawmaker and not about the campaign.

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## **RUSSIAN AMBASSADOR**

Sessions was adamant he never had a third meeting with the Ambassador Sergey Kislyak. He did allow for the possibility the men could have had a brief interaction "in passing" at a well-attended reception at the Mayflower Hotel before an April 2016 foreign policy speech by then-candidate Trump. But Sessions said he had no recollection of that.

He's been hounded by speculation over the possibility of a third meeting, with Democratic senators calling for an investigation. But he angrily denounced such claims as "secret innuendo," a likely reference to media accounts of a closed-door briefing

lawmakers had last week with Comey that suggested the FBI had been looking into whether another meeting had taken place.

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## **RECUSAL**

Sessions insisted he stepped aside from the Russia investigation because he was a principal adviser to the Trump campaign, not because he did something wrong or was a subject of the probe. Comey testified publicly last week the FBI was aware of reasons it would be problematic for Sessions to remain involved in the probe before he recused himself.

Sessions was sworn in Feb. 9 but did not actually step away from the investigation until March 2, the day after The Washington Post reported on his two previously undisclosed Kislyak meetings. But he said today he anticipated the conflict of interest and effectively recused himself on his first day on the job, and was never briefed on the Russia investigation.

He disputed that his involvement in Comey's firing violated the recusal. He said he and Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein had long discussed their concerns with Comey's job performance. Namely, they were upset with his very public handling of the Hillary Clinton email probe, which Sessions said was a "usurpation" of Justice Department authority.

Sessions said it would be "absurd" to suggest that a recusal from a single investigation would render him unable to manage the leadership of the FBI.

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## **EXECUTIVE PRIVILEGE**

Sessions repeatedly refused to discuss private conversations with Trump on a wide variety of topics. He did not say he was using executive privilege, but rather adhering to longstanding tradition of Justice Department leaders not revealing private conversations with the president. That position was similar to the one taken at a separate hearing last week by the country's intelligence chiefs.

His refusals to comment, including about conversations with Trump on Comey's firing, repeatedly irked Democrats. But time and again, Sessions returned to lines such as "I am not able to discuss with you or confirm or deny the nature of private conversations that I may have had with the president on this subject or others."

The Justice Department subsequently released decades-old memos from its Office of Legal Counsel that it said supported Sessions' position.

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## COMEY

Sessions contradicted Comey, who last week told the intelligence committee that after an encounter with Trump in which he said Trump pressured him to back off an investigation into the former national security adviser, Comey "implored" Sessions to make sure he was never left alone with the president again — but that Sessions didn't respond.

"He didn't recall this, but I responded to his comment by agreeing that the FBI and Department of Justice needed to be careful to follow department policy regarding appropriate contacts with the White House," Sessions told the panel.

He also said Comey should have shared his concerns about the Trump conversation with another Justice Department official, Dana Boente, who was then acting deputy attorney general, and would have been Comey's direct supervisor.

If Comey had information that Sessions would need to recuse himself, he said, that would have been "double reason" to talk to Boente.

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