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Top Takeaways: Comey's high-drama testimony distilled

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Nation Transfixed as Comey Testifies

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WASHINGTON >> Nuanced conversations. Conflicting versions of events. Lingering intrigue.

For all of the things that came into clearer focus with today's testimony from fired FBI Director James Comey, plenty of other questions remain.

A few takeaways from Comey's appearance before the Senate intelligence committee:

THE OBSTRUCTION QUESTION

A central — and unresolved — question from the hearing revolves around whether President Donald Trump was trying to derail the Russia investigation by pressuring, and ultimately firing, the man in charge. Comey delivered his answer clearly.

"It's my judgment that I was fired because of the Russia investigation," he said. "I was fired in some way to change, or the endeavor was to change, the way the Russia investigation was being conducted."

The firing came, Comey said, after he was pushed to drop the probe into former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn. The president told him, "I hope you can let this go," and he took it as more than a mere suggestion.

"I took it as a direction," Comey told the committee.

Trump's lawyer says the president "never, in form or substance" directed Comey to stop investigating anyone, and Republicans suggested Comey was reading too much into it.

"You may have taken it as a direction, but that's not what he said," said Sen. James Risch, R-Idaho.

Whether Trump's behavior and comment amount to obstruction of justice, however, depends not on how Comey understood the comment, but Trump's intent in delivering it.

Finding that out, as Comey noted, is now up to the special counsel, Robert Mueller.

"MY WORD AGAINST HIS"

In one of the unexpected moments of the day, Comey essentially took credit for Mueller being on the case.

The former FBI director and media-savvy operator acknowledged he shared with a friend the memos detailing his conversations with the president and specifically asked the friend to pass them on to reporters.

"My judgment was I need to get that out into the public square," Comey said.

But the goal wasn't just to tell his story. Comey said he wanted to spur the Justice Department to appoint a special counsel to take over the investigation.

Comey knew the whole thing could come down to his word against the president's, and he wanted the memos to serve as proof of his version of events.

With trademark flair, Comey told the committee, "Lordy, I hope there are tapes" of his conversations with Trump.

"If there are tapes," Comey said, "it's not just my word against his."

SESSIONS INTRIGUE

Comey added an element of intrigue to the hearings when he said he knew of a "variety of reasons" why Attorney General Jeff Sessions' involvement in the Russia investigation would be problematic but that he couldn't discuss those reasons "in an open setting."

Sessions recused himself from anything related to the Russia inquiry in March, after it was revealed that he had spoken with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak twice during the presidential campaign. Sessions failed to disclose those contacts during questioning at his Senate confirmation hearing, when he told senators he hadn't had any contacts with Russia.

Even before Comey's cryptic reference today, Democratic senators had been raising more questions about Sessions' contacts with Kislyak.

Sens. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., and Al Franken, D-Minn., have asked the FBI to check into the possibility of a third encounter at an April 2016 Trump campaign event that Sessions and Kislyak attended. The Justice Department has acknowledged that Sessions was at the Mayflower Hotel event in Washington, but said there were no private or side conversations that day.

The Justice Department put out a statement late today saying that Sessions had recused himself because of his involvement in Trump's 2016 presidential campaign — "for that reason, and that reason alone."

BIPARTISAN DISCOMFORT

It wasn't just the Trump administration that made Comey anxious about the need to protect the integrity and independence of the FBI.

He'd had moments of discomfort during the Obama administration as well.

Comey described an episode during the inquiry into Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server when then-Attorney General Loretta Lynch directed him "not to call it an investigation but to call it a matter, which confused me and concerned me."

Comey said that language "tracked" how the Clinton campaign was talking about the FBI's work.

"We had an investigation open at the time so that gave me a queasy feeling," he added.

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