

# Mueller dismisses exoneration claims

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AP Photo/Andrew Harnik

Robert Mueller testifies before the House Judiciary Committee.

WASHINGTON — Robert Mueller on Wednesday bluntly dismissed President Donald Trump's claims of total exoneration in the federal probe of Russia's 2016 election interference, telling Congress he explicitly did not clear the president of obstructing his investigation. The former special counsel also rejected Trump's assertions that the probe was a "witch hunt" and hoax.

In hours of sometimes halting and stilted testimony, unfolding at a moment of deep division in the country, Mueller also condemned Trump's praise of WikiLeaks, which released Democratic emails stolen by Russia. He declared Russian election interference one of the greatest challenges to democracy that he had encountered in his career.

Russia, he said, is "doing it as we sit here."

Mueller's reluctance at the televised Capitol Hill hearings to stray beyond his lengthy written report, and his reliance on terse, one-word answers, produced few if any new revelations to move Americans who may be hardened in their opinions about the success of Donald Trump's presidency and whether impeachment proceedings are necessary. But that didn't stop Republicans and Democrats from their own divergent paths to question Mueller.

Trump's GOP allies tried to cast the former special counsel and his prosecutors as politically motivated. They referred repeatedly to what they consider the improper opening of the investigation.

Democrats, meanwhile, sought to emphasize the most incendiary findings of Mueller's 448-page report and weaken Trump's reelection prospects in ways that

Mueller's book-length report did not. They hoped that even if his testimony did not inspire impeachment demands — House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has made clear she will not pursue impeachment, for now — Mueller could nonetheless unambiguously spell out questionable, norm-shattering actions by the president.

Yet Mueller appeared unwilling or unable to offer crisp sound bites that could reshape public opinions.

He frequently gave single-word answers to lawmakers' questions, even when given opportunities to crystallize allegations of obstruction of justice against the president. He referred time again to the wording in his report. He declined to read aloud hard-hitting statements in the report when prodded by Democrats to do so.

But he was unflinching on the most-critical matters.

In the opening minutes of the hearing, the chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, Rep. Jerrold Nadler, a New York Democrat, asked Mueller about Trump's claims of vindication in the investigation.

"Did you actually totally exonerate the president?" Nadler asked.

"No," Mueller replied.

When Rep. Adam Schiff, the Democratic chairman of the House intelligence committee, asked, "Your inves-

tigation is not a witch hunt, is it?"

"It is not a witch hunt," Mueller flatly replied.

He gave Democrats a flicker of hope when he told Rep. Ted Lieu of California that he did not charge Trump because of a Justice Department legal opinion that says sitting presidents cannot be indicted. That statement cheered Democrats who understood him to be suggesting that he would otherwise have recommended prosecution on the strength of the evidence.

But Mueller later walked back that statement, saying, "We did not reach a determination as to whether the president committed a crime." His team, he said, "never started the process" of evaluating whether to charge the president.

Though Mueller described Russian government's efforts to interfere in American politics as among the most serious challenges to democracy he had encountered in his decades-long career — which included steering the FBI after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks — Republicans focused on his conclusion that there was insufficient evidence to establish a criminal conspiracy between the Trump campaign and Russia.

"Those are the facts of the Mueller report. Russia meddled in the 2016 election," said Rep. Doug Collins, the top Republican on the House

Judiciary Committee. "The president did not conspire with Russians. Nothing we hear today will change those facts."

Mueller, pressed as to why he hadn't investigated a "dossier" of claims that the Republicans insist helped lead to the start of the probe, he said that was not his charge.

That was "outside my purview," he said repeatedly.

Mueller mostly brushed aside Republican allegations of bias, but in a moment of apparent agitation, he said he didn't think lawmakers had ever "reviewed a report that is as thorough, as fair, as consistent as the report that we have in front of us."

And when he was pressed on the fact that multiple members of his team had made contributions to Democratic candidates, Mueller bristled at the implication that his prosecutors were compromised.

"I have been in this business for almost 25 years, and in those 25 years I have not had the occasion to ask somebody about their political affiliation," Mueller said. "It is not done. What I care about is the capability of the individual to do the job and do the job quickly and seriously and with integrity."

Mueller, known for his taciturn nature, warned that he would not stray beyond what had already been revealed in his report. And the Justice Department instructed him to stay strictly within those parameters, giving him a formal directive to point to if he faced questions he did not want to answer.

Trump lashed out ahead of and during the hearings, saying on Twitter that "Democrats and others" were trying to fabricate a crime and pin it on "a very innocent President." That was a continuation of the past two years during which Trump has made Mueller a regular target in an attempt to undermine his credibility.

# New British PM Johnson faces Brexit conundrum

By JILL LAWLESS  
and DANICA KIRKA  
*Associated Press*

LONDON — Boris Johnson took over as Britain's prime minister Wednesday, vowing to break the impasse that defeated his predecessor by leading the country out of the European Union and silencing those he called "the doubters, the doomsters, the gloomsters" who believe it can't be done.

But the brash Brexit champion faces the same problems that flummoxed Theresa May during her three years in office — heading a government without a parliamentary majority and with most lawmakers opposed to leaving the EU without a divorce deal.

Johnson has just 99 days to make good on his promise to deliver Brexit by Oct. 31 after what he called "three years of unfounded self-doubt."

He optimistically pledged to get "a new deal, a better deal" with the EU than the one secured by May, which was repeatedly rejected by Britain's Parliament.

"The people who bet against Britain are going to lose their shirts," he said, standing outside the shiny black door of 10 Downing St.

Trying to avoid the political divisions that plagued May, Johnson swept many of her ministers from office to make way for his own team, dominated by loyal Brexiters. He appointed Sajid Javid to the key role of Treasury chief, named staunch Brexit supporter Dominic Raab as foreign secretary and made Priti Patel the new home sec-

retary, or interior minister. Michael Gove, who ran the 2016 campaign to leave the EU alongside Johnson, also got a Cabinet job.

Over half of May's Cabinet quit or resigned, including ex-Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt, Johnson's defeated rival for the Tory leadership, who said he had turned down the chance to stay in government in a different job.

In his first speech as prime minister, Johnson let loose with a scattershot spray of promises — from more police on the streets to ending a ban on genetically modified crops to faster internet access.

To the many critics of the polarizing politician who find the phrase "Prime Minister Boris Johnson" jarring, it was typical of a verbal vim that is not always wedded to hard facts.

For the 55-year-old Johnson, walking into the Downing Street residence was the culmination of a life's ambition. The flamboyant, Latin-spouting former London mayor and foreign secretary helped lead the 2016 campaign to get Britain out of the EU and is now the darling of Brexit backers who feel frustrated that, three years later, the country is still in the bloc.

Judging by his words on Wednesday, Johnson's approach to the EU will be a mix of charm and threats.

He vowed to keep relations with the EU "as warm and as close and as affectionate as possible" and promised the 3 million EU nationals in Britain "absolute certainty" that they can stay. May made the same promise, but it still is not enshrined in law.



Boris Johnson

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