

Special counsel pick could boost faith in Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON (AP) — There could be a side benefit for Rod Rosenstein in appointing a special counsel to head an investigation into possible Russian coordination with the Trump campaign: reviving his own reputation, heavily battered for his role in the firing of James Comey, who had been leading the probe.

The Wednesday decision to name former FBI Director Robert Mueller, an apolitical outsider, to oversee the case seemed intended to restore public faith in an independent Justice Department following a series of headache-inducing headlines. But Rosenstein's own professional standing could start to recover as well.

"He appointed Mueller because he was cognizant enough to understand whether or not he thought he could be fair in the investigation was irrelevant," said Steven Silverman, a

Baltimore attorney who has known Rosenstein for years. "The important part is the public perception of the Russia investigation."

"Kudos for him for recognizing that appearances are equally important as a fair and just process and investigation," Silverman added.

At his March confirmation hearing for the deputy attorney general job, Rosenstein refused to commit to the appointment of a special counsel to oversee the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, saying he was aware of no requirement to recuse himself and had no first-hand knowledge of the probe anyway.

Much has changed since then.

There have been growing questions from Democrats about the ability of Justice Department leaders to carry out the probe independent of



AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin
Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein arrives on Capitol Hill Thursday for a closed-door meeting with senators after appointing former FBI Director Robert Mueller to oversee the investigation into ties between Russia and President Donald Trump's campaign.

the White House.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions recused himself in March after acknowledging undisclosed contacts with the Russian ambassador during the campaign, leaving the matter in Rosenstein's hands.

Rosenstein himself in the last week has come under intense criticism as the author of a memo that chastised Comey for his handling of the Hillary Clinton email case, which the White House initially cited as justification

for the firing.

President Donald Trump later acknowledged that he had already thought about dismissing Comey and had been perturbed by "this Russia thing," fueling criticism that Rosenstein's memo merely served as a pretext so the president could fire Comey amid an aggressive investigation into his campaign.

The timeline was further muddled Thursday when Democrats emerged from a closed-door meeting with Rosenstein saying he knew Comey would be removed prior to writing the memo, even as Trump insisted again that he had gotten a "very, very strong recommendation" from Rosenstein.

No matter the reason for the firing, public outcry mounted for Rosenstein to appoint an outsider to oversee the probe. It was an unusual spot for the veteran

prosecutor, who cultivated a reputation as an apolitical law enforcement official.

Rosenstein has publicly denied being conscious of his reputation, telling a Baltimore business group this week: "I took an oath to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States. There is nothing in that oath about my reputation."

Yet there's no question that Comey's firing at least temporarily hobbled Rosenstein's public standing. Friends and colleagues say it's been tough to see him in such a difficult spot, especially when they consider him upright, impartial and an unlikely political pawn.

His selection of Mueller, a taciturn former federal prosecutor who led the FBI through the Sept. 11 attacks, received bipartisan embrace. He has served presidents of both political parties.

BRIEFLY

Trump, dogged by questions at home, makes first trip abroad

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump's maiden international trip, a five-stop marathon across the Middle East and Europe, has long loomed as a crucial first test abroad for the chaos-courting president.

Now, with the eyes of the world upon him, the president will embark on his big trip carrying the baggage of dire troubles at home. As he tries to calm allies worried about his "America First" message, he'll be followed by fallout from his firing of FBI Director James Comey and the appointment of a special counsel to probe the president's campaign ties with Russia.

Trump's trip was always going to be dramatic. U.S. allies have been rattled by his warnings about pulling back from the world. He is tasked with urging a united front against terror by appealing to some of the same corners of the Muslim world he has tried to keep out of the United States with his travel ban. Last week, he added new layers of complication by disclosing classified intelligence to a longtime adversary.

Still, the White House once hoped the trip, wrapped in the pomp and circumstance of diplomatic protocol, could offer a chance at a reset after a tumultuous first four months in office. Trump's advisers saw it as an opportunity for the United States to boldly reassert itself on the world stage and resume a leadership role that the administration believes was abdicated by President Barack Obama. Trump's powerful senior adviser, his son-in-law Jared Kushner, led a West Wing team to craft the agenda, laden with religious symbolism.

Still, Trump hasn't been eager to seize the opportunity. It's been more than a half-century since any president waited as long to take his first foreign trip.

Chaffetz to resign, raising doubts about Trump probe

ALPINE, Utah (AP) — Rep. Jason Chaffetz announced Thursday he will resign from Congress next month, saying a "mid-life crisis" had compelled him to step away from his chairmanship of the House Oversight Committee just as it is poised to investigate President Donald Trump's firing of the FBI director.

The announcement by Chaffetz, 50, was the latest upending of the Republican-controlled congressional investigations into Trump.

Chaffetz's announcement came a day after he tweeted that he had invited ex-FBI Director James Comey to testify next week at a hearing of the oversight committee he leads.

Comey was fired last week amid an FBI investigation into whether Trump's presidential campaign associates colluded with Russia to influence the presidential election outcome to benefit him.

Chaffetz, a Utah Republican who had just started his fifth term in Congress, used his post as chair of the oversight committee to doggedly investigate Hillary Clinton before the 2016 presidential election and raise his political profile.

But Trump complicated Chaffetz's life. He rescinded his endorsement of Trump last year after recordings surfaced of the reality show star bragging about groping women, only to hastily re-endorse Trump shortly before the FBI announced it was reviving its investigation into Clinton's emails.

After Trump won the election, Chaffetz became a lightning rod for criticism that Republicans weren't aggressively policing Trump.

Senate chairman: Flynn has not responded to subpoena

WASHINGTON (AP) — The chairman of the Senate intelligence committee said Thursday that ousted National Security Adviser Michael Flynn hasn't responded to a subpoena from the panel in its probe of Russia's meddling in the 2016 presidential election.

Republican Sen. Richard Burr of North Carolina had to retract a statement made hours earlier that Flynn's lawyer had told the committee he would not comply with the subpoena.

Legal experts say it's unlikely Flynn would agree to turn over the personal documents because he would be waiving his constitutional protection against self-incrimination by doing so. Flynn, though his lawyer, had earlier asked for immunity from "unfair prosecution" in exchange for agreeing to cooperate with the committee.

Flynn's attorney Robert Kelner did not respond to phone messages and emails seeking comment.

The Senate committee is one of several on Capitol Hill investigating possible collusion between Russia and President Donald Trump's 2016 campaign. Flynn is also the target of other congressional investigations as well as an ongoing FBI counterintelligence probe and a separate federal investigation in Virginia.

Flynn, a retired Army lieutenant general, was fired from his position as Trump's national security adviser in February. At the time, Trump said he fired Flynn because he misled senior administration officials, including the vice president, about his contacts with Russian officials.

The Senate committee issued the subpoena for Flynn's records on May 10 after he declined to cooperate with an April 28 request for documents. That request was similar to ones received by other Trump associates, including former campaign chairman Paul Manafort, Trump associate Roger Stone and former Trump foreign policy adviser Carter Page, a person familiar with the Senate investigation said.



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