



AP Photo/Andrew Harnik

Former FBI director James Comey is greeted by Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Richard Burr, R-N.C. at the beginning of the Senate Intelligence Committee hearing on Capitol Hill, Thursday.

Comey says he was fired over Russia probe, blasts 'lies'

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former FBI Director James Comey asserted Thursday that President Donald Trump fired him to interfere with his investigation of Russia's ties to the Trump campaign, bluntly accusing the White House of spreading "lies, plain and simple."

Comey also revealed that he'd orchestrated the public release of information about his private conversations with the president in an effort to further the investigation.

Comey's testimony, at a hugely anticipated congressional hearing that captured the country's attention, provided a gripping account of his interactions with Trump and underscored the deep distrust that had soured their relationship before his stunning firing last month.

In occasionally explosive statements, Comey portrayed Trump as a chief executive dismissive of the FBI's independence and made clear that he interpreted Trump's request to end an investigation into his former national security adviser as an order coming from the president.

He expressed confidence that the circumstances of his firing, and Trump's overall behavior toward him, could be investigated by special counsel Robert Mueller for possible obstruction of justice. But he declined to offer an opinion on whether it met such a threshold.

Trump's private attorney, Marc Kasowitz, seized on Comey's admission that he had told Trump on multiple occasions that he was not personally under investigation and maintained the testimony made clear that Trump "never, in form or substance, directed or suggested that Mr. Comey stop investigating anyone."

Kasowitz also jumped on Comey's revelation that he had released details of his private conversations with the president, casting the former FBI director as one of the "leakers" set on undermining the Trump administration.

Still, there's no doubt the veteran lawyer made for a challenging adversary.

"It's my judgment that I was fired because of the Russia investigation," Comey said toward the end of more than two hours of testimony before the Senate intelligence committee. "I was fired in some way to change, or the endeavor was to change, the way the Russia investigation was being conducted."

"That is a very big deal, and not just because it involves me."

At one point he practically dared Trump to release any recordings of their conversations, a prospect the president once alluded to in a tweet.

"Lordy, I hope there are tapes," Comey said, suggesting such evidence would back up his account over the president's.

Thursday's hearing was Comey's first public appearance since his sudden May 9 firing and it brought Washington and other parts of the country to a standstill as Americans sat glued to their screens, harkening back to the Watergate congressional hearings that held the nation rapt four decades earlier.

Republicans mindful of the gravity of the moment worked feverishly to lessen any damage from the hearing. They tried to undermine Comey's credibility by issuing press releases and

even ads pointing to a past instance where the FBI had to clean up the director's testimony to Congress.

In his opening statement, Comey somberly accused the Trump administration of spreading "lies, plain and simple" in the aftermath of his abrupt ouster, declaring that the administration "chose to defame me and, more importantly, the FBI" by claiming the bureau was in disorder.

He then dove into the heart of the fraught political controversy around his firing and whether Trump interfered in the bureau's Russia investigation, as he elaborated on written testimony released a day earlier.

In that testimony, Comey said that Trump demanded his "loyalty" and directly pushed him to "lift the cloud" of investigation by declaring publicly the president was not a target of the FBI probe into his campaign's Russia ties.

He said that when Trump told him he hoped he would terminate an investigation into Michael Flynn, the ousted national security adviser, he interpreted that as a directive.

"I mean, this is the president of the United States, with me alone, saying, 'I hope this,'" he said. "I took it as, this is what he wants me to do."

Asked whether that February Oval Office discussion amounted to obstruction of justice, Comey said he expected that to be a matter for Mueller, the former FBI director who has taken over the Justice Department's investigation.

He said that while he found the exchange disturbing, "that's a conclusion I'm sure the special counsel will work towards, to try and understand what the intention was there, and whether that's an offense."

In a startling disclosure, Comey revealed that after his firing he actually tried to spur the special counsel's appointment by giving a damning memo he had written about a meeting with Trump to a friend to release to the media.

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

The February meeting was one of several one-on-one encounters that Comey said made him feel such intense discomfort that he felt compelled to document them in memos.

"I was honestly concerned that he might lie about the nature of our meeting, so I thought it really important to document," Comey said. "I knew there might come a day when I might need a record of what happened not only to defend myself but to protect the FBI."

Trump himself was expected to dispute Comey's claims that the president demanded loyalty and asked the FBI director to drop the investigation into Flynn, according to a person close to the president's legal team who demanded anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss legal strategy. Instead, Kasowitz pushed back and the president remained conspicuously silent on Twitter during the hearing despite expectations he might respond.

Many Democrats still blame Comey for Clinton's loss, leading Trump to apparently believe they would applaud him for firing Comey.

GOP-run House votes to roll back financial rules

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Republican-led House approved sweeping legislation Thursday to undo much of former President Barack Obama's landmark banking law created after the 2008 economic crisis that caused millions of Americans to lose their jobs and homes.

The largely party-line vote was 233-186, as Republicans argued the rules designed to prevent another meltdown were making it harder for community banks to lend and hampered the economy. No Democratic lawmakers supported the measure; only one Republican opposed it.

"Our community banks are in trouble," said Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis. "They are being crushed by the costly rules imposed on

them by the Dodd-Frank Act. This law may have had good intentions but its consequences have been dire for Main Street."

House passage was widely expected, but the Republican overhaul of the 2010 Dodd-Frank law is unlikely to clear the Senate in its current form. Senators have said they'll spend the next few months trying to find common ground on legislation designed to boost the economy. Potential areas for compromise include changes to how much capital banks must maintain and decreasing the paperwork burden for small lenders.

President Donald Trump had said he wants to do "a big number" on Dodd-Frank, and the House vote marks progress.

The overhaul bill targets the heart of the law's restrictions on banks by offering a trade-off: Banks could qualify for most of the

regulatory relief in the bill so long as they meet a strict requirement for building capital to cover unexpected big losses.

Democrats defended the Dodd-Frank law, saying it has meant financial security for millions of people and that undoing it would encourage the kind of risky lending practices that invite future economic shocks.

Qatar rejects 'blockade,' denies terror allegations

DOHA, Qatar (AP) — Arab states have no right to "blockade" Qatar, the country's top diplomat said Thursday, insisting the campaign by Saudi Arabia and its allies to isolate the tiny, energy-rich nation is based on "false and fabricated news."

In an interview with The Associated Press,

Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani repeatedly denied that his country funded extremists and he rejected the idea of shutting down its Al-Jazeera satellite news network.

He said Qatar, as an independent nation, also had the right to support groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, despite the fact that its neighbors outlawed the Sunni Islamist organization.

Sheikh Mohammed's hard line mirrored that of a top Emirati diplomat who told the AP on Wednesday that the United Arab Emirates believes "there's nothing to negotiate" with Qatar.

Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and other countries severed diplomatic ties with Qatar earlier this week and cut off air, sea and land travel to the nation.



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