

Not-so-special counsel after all

Robert Mueller certainly looks as if he could use a rest. Give the man credit. There's nothing more exhausting than trying to analyze the inner workings of Donald Trump's mind.

The special counsel made a brief farewell address, after two years and a 448-page report. "If we had had confidence that the president clearly did not commit a crime, we would have said so," he told America.

That was the bottom line, a sort of vague double negative that wouldn't work in the first grade:

"Bobby, did Sylvia pull the class bunny's tail while I was out of the room?"

"Teacher, if I had had confidence that Sylvia clearly did not commit any infraction of the bunny rules, I would have said so."

At that point, one would hope said teacher would write a letter to Bobby's mom, expressing concern that the kid might grow up to be a self-protective weenie.

If Mueller's speech had been accompanied by Real English subtitles, they'd have said something like: "Look, the guy obstructed justice, but you can't charge a president with a crime while he's in office. You're gonna have to impeach him first."

But there was no helpful translation. So you know what happened.



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"The case is closed! Thank you," tweeted the president, who magically interpreted Mueller's statement as saying that "there was insufficient evidence and therefore, in our Country, a person is innocent."

Try to imagine some other inhabitant of the White House responding to an investigation into whether he had been engaged in a deeply illegal cover-up. Wouldn't you be a little suspicious if he referred to himself the way a defense lawyer might refer to a presumably guilty client?

Well, at least he didn't say "Trump is innocent!" Those third-person speeches are getting a little weird.

When Mueller issued his very long report two months ago, the president responded with triumphant cries of "No collusion" and a vow to turn his attention to making the Republicans "the party of health care!" You can see how well that's been going. Trump hasn't even been able to make them the party of road repair.

But he's still ... here. And Mueller, for all his warning bells about a president who you can't say didn't commit a crime, isn't planning to be any further help. He made it pretty clear that if he's forced to testify before a congressional committee, he'll just point to his mammoth report. Anybody who wants to drive home the obstruction of justice issue might have to find some other for-

mer special counsel to help out.

The biggest message Mueller wanted to leave with the American public was a very loud howl about Russia's attempts to undermine the American democratic system by hacking into the Clinton campaign computers and releasing private information that it stole there.

And it succeeded. A foreign power helped to throw the election to the candidate its leaders liked. It was exactly the sort of disaster the Founding Fathers would have pictured if their worst nightmares featured computers. They passed the Alien Sedition Act in 1798, noted historian H.W. Brands, "amid concern that French revolutionaries were trying to undermine the American Republic."

Brands said that kind of worry was also what prompted the founders to require that all presidents be born in the United States. And Donald Trump fulfills that description to a T. The man may be a remorseless liar who has no interest whatsoever in any aspect of American democracy that doesn't directly affect his own personal fortunes. But he's from here. Think positive.

Trump hates to hear warnings about Russia, since he does sort of suggest that he truly lost the election. (Even as it was, all the Russian oligarchs and intelligence chiefs in the world weren't effective enough to win him the popular vote.)

Kirstjen Nielsen, the recently axed homeland security secretary, ticked off our commander in chief when she

started working on plans to guard against Russian interference in 2020. A senior administration official told *Times* reporters that Nielsen was warned it "wasn't a great subject" to discuss in front of the president.

Trump did his own research, of course, by simply asking Vladimir Putin. ("He said he didn't meddle. ... I really believe that when he tells me that, he means it.") Later, when 13 Russian nationals were indicted for interfering in the election, the president just moved on to arguing that even if it happened, it didn't really matter. ("The results of the election were not impacted.")

But let's get back to Mueller. What did you think about his address to the nation?

A) That was about a 448-page report, right? Didn't totally focus. I was busy ... buying condiments for the pantry.

B) Thrilled to learn our president won't be distracted by criminal charges while he's in office.

C) Can't we do something about the "while in office" part?

It's been quite a ride. When Mueller became special counsel, a lot of us thought he'd wind up as a chapter in the history books of the future. Well, maybe at least an asterisk.

Gail Collins is an American journalist, op-ed columnist and author, most recognized for her work with the New York Times.



It's time for America's dairymen to get paid

Hats off to Beth Ford for calling out President Trump's questionable arithmetic.

In a recent interview with Bloomberg, Land O'Lakes Inc.'s chief executive noted that while tariffs have cost America's dairies around \$2 billion, the men and women struggling to save their farms only received about \$250 million in aid during the first round of government payouts last year.

"The math last time wasn't terrific," she diplomatically understated.

Ford's observation comes as the Trump administration announced a \$16 billion



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program to assist farmers caught in the crossfire of the president's endless trade war. Retaliatory tariffs are coming tit-for-tat with China even as a still-unratified trade pact with Mexico and Canada continues to languish before Congress.

America's farmers and dairymen are proud, hard-working people. Their mantra, from day one, has been, "Trade, Not Aid." They'd much prefer competing in

thriving open markets for their products than receiving government handouts.

But it's hard not to feel insult added to injury, when the U.S. Department of Treasury is reporting the nation is on pace to

collect \$72 billion in customs revenue this year. It's an unpalatable thought to see the government lining its pockets with higher tariffs even as 3,000 dairy farms across the country folded last year alone.

The farm economy in the Upper Midwest "might generously be described as struggling to tread water," the Federal Reserve Bank's Ronald Wirtz recently told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

For an administration that has promised to do great things for America's farmers, it has yet to hold up its end of the bargain for dairy farmers. So far, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has offered little insight on how it will divvy up this new allocation for direct payments.

Search to find your legislator's con-

tact information. Let them know the dairy industry has showed its patriotic loyalty but now it's time for a solution and an end to the bleeding.

The dairy industry is in the midst of a six-year downturn. With little hope of a quick resolution on the Chinese trade talks, the prospects for those hanging on to their herds grow dimmer by the day.

If Trump can't offer open trade, it's time we demand fair aid to dairy farmers.

Laurie Fischer is CEO of the American Dairy Coalition, a farmer-led national lobbying organization of modern dairy farmers. We focus on federal dairy policy. For more information, call 920-965-6070 or email info@americandairycoalitioninc.com.

Joe Biden: Be proud of your crime bill

Joe Biden has been attacked by politicians on the left — and now, thanks to Donald Trump, on the right — for his role in shepherding the 1994 crime bill through Congress. One of these attacks is simply cynical. The other is dangerous.

For those whose memories of early 1990s America are either foggy or nonexistent, it's worth recalling what life in much of urban America was like back then. A sample:

"The death yesterday of a 41-year-old armed security guard from Long Island was not an uncommon occurrence in East New York," *The Times* reported on Dec. 20, 1993. "Indeed, it followed 13 other killings in the 75th Precinct in the last nine days."

"What was uncommon about the killing," the report continued, "was that it broke a 20-year record for homicides in a single precinct, although with a footnote. Maurice Matola, the victim, was by unofficial count the 124th person killed this year in the 75th Precinct. ... Last night, a shooting on Georgia Avenue made Anthony Broadnax, 17, the 125th person killed."

Fast-forward more than two decades to another story in *The Times* about the same neighborhood. "Once the 'Killing Fields,' East New York Has No Murders in 2018," ran an April 2018 headline, noting that the neighborhood had experi-



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enced a 129-day stretch without homicides. Citywide, New York ended last year with just under 300 murders, down 85% from the 1,960 it suffered in 1993.

Put those numbers in a different perspective: If the murder rate in New York had persisted at its 1993 level over the next 25 years, 49,000 people would have been killed. Instead, some 15,000 were. That's 34,000 New Yorkers spared. Nationwide, the equivalent figure exceeds 150,000. Those were the teenagers who did come home that night, the mom or dad or sibling who wasn't missed at dinner. It's one of the most impressive social achievements of the past 30 years.

What did the 1994 crime bill have to do with it?

There's a topic for a long debate. The bill coincided with an economic boom, the cresting of the crack-cocaine wave and, according to one notorious theory, the unintended benefit of legalized abortion eliminating thousands of would-be criminals before they had a chance to be born.

But economic growth has no obvious correlation with crime (homicide rates fell during both the Great Depression and the Great Recession). Property crimes have continued to fall despite the current opioid epidemic. And the abortion theory runs afoul of the questionable hypothesis that unwanted pregnancies, if brought

to term, are likelier to produce criminally disposed kids.

What really changed after 1994 was that we hired more cops, incarcerated more offenders, and, most importantly, policed our streets a lot better. That year's crime bill wasn't the only reason those changes took place, or perhaps even the main one. What it did do, however, was move the country, with fractious but bipartisan support, in the right direction: of more policing and tougher enforcement and a powerful refusal to continue defining criminal deviancy down in the face of those who said we just had to take it. It was an act of moral clarity married to political possibility, which is what statesmanship is all about.

The result is a vastly safer country. That Biden played a major role in it is something for him to trumpet, not apologize for.

Side effects? There have been a few. There may be a case that long prison terms cripple the lives and prospects of offenders, with disproportionate consequences for racial minorities. But locking up violent offenders (whose victims are also, disproportionately, racial minorities) creates a far greater margin of safety for those who don't disobey the law.

There are also plenty of stories of aggressive, abusive and sometimes trigger-happy policing. But there's also mounting evidence that under-policing hits minority communities much harder than over-policing. Just look at Balti-

more, city of discouraged cops, terrified residents — and a record-high homicide rate.

As for the political criticism, Biden can shrug off Trump's cheeky tweet that "African Americans will not be able to vote for you," since it only reminds voters that Trump sees him as his most formidable rival. Besides, it was support from the Congressional Black Caucus that helped get the bill passed in the first place.

But the former vice president would be smart to take on the barbs from the left, especially from people like Bill de Blasio. The progressive mayor could never have been elected to his current office (much less aspired to a higher one) had 25 years of ever-lower crime not made New Yorkers remarkably nonchalant about the need for safe streets. "Makin' mock o' uniforms that guard you while you sleep," as Kipling wrote, is the pastime of people who lack either the wit to recognize the source of their good fortune or the decency to be grateful for it. Or, in de Blasio's case, both.

Meanwhile, violent crime in East New York seems to be rising again. Biden ought to pay a visit. He can say: We saved communities like this once before, by being tough and smart in the face of naysayers from both parties. He should add: On his watch, he'll never risk losing them again.

Bret Stephens is a columnist for The New York Times.