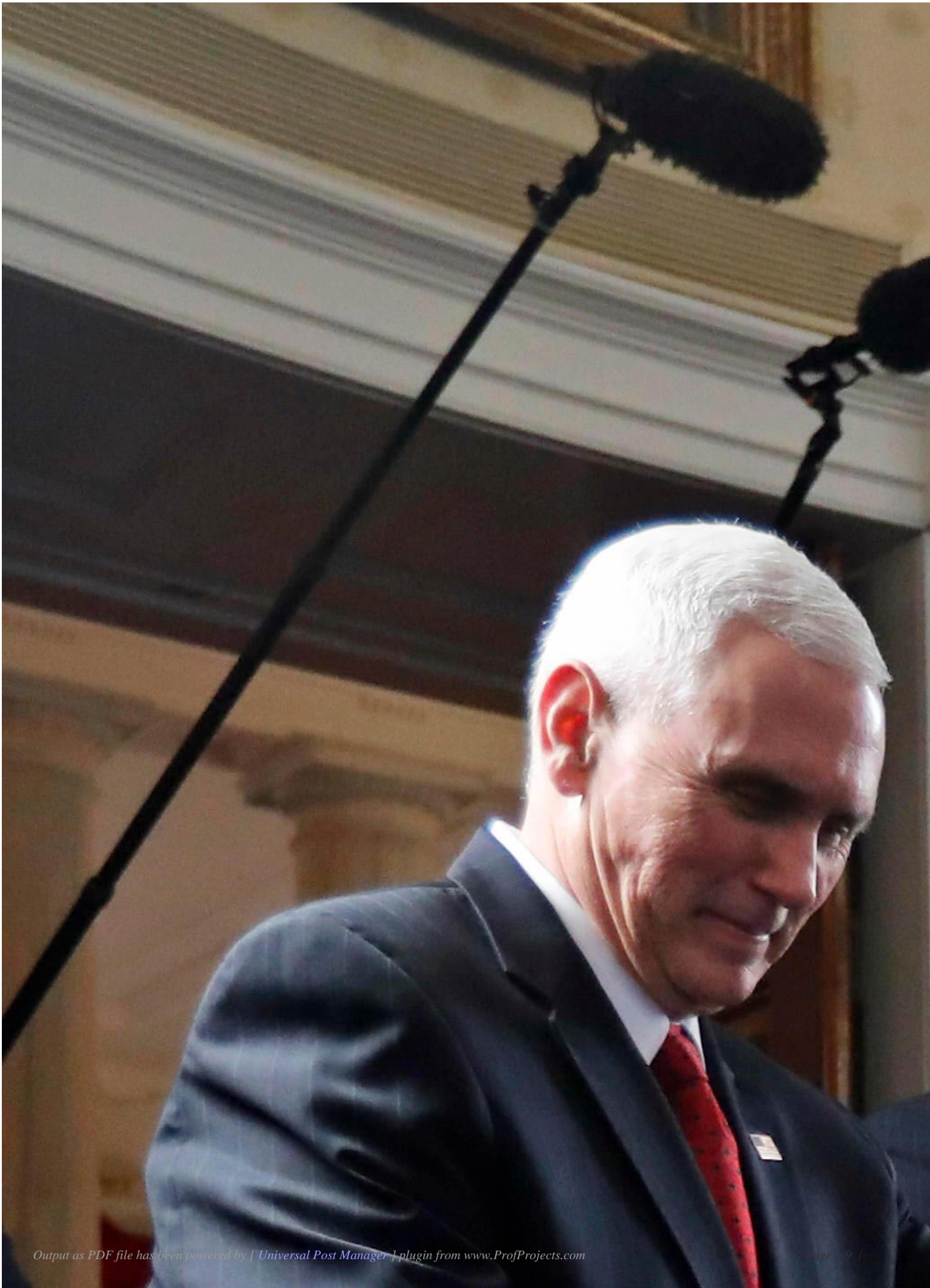


President Donald Trump fired FBI Director James Comey!





Donald Trump: "I have received the attached letters from the Attorney General and Deputy Attorney General of the United States recommending your dismissal as the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. I have accepted their recommendation and you are hereby terminated and removed from office, effective immediately. While I greatly appreciate you informing me, on three separate occasions, that I am not under investigation, I nevertheless concur with the judgment of the Department of Justice that you are not able to effectively lead the Bureau.

It is essential that we find new leadership for the FBI that restores public trust and confidence in its vital law enforcement mission.

I wish you the best of luck in your future endeavors!"

Trump adviser Kellyanne Conway explicitly denied any connection between Comey's dismissal and the ongoing Trump-Russia investigation, the existence of which Conway seemed to dispute even though Comey publicly confirmed it in March with the Justice Department's approval. "This has nothing to do with Russia," Conway said on CNN Tuesday night. "It's not a cover-up."

CNN reported late Tuesday that it learned just before the White House's announcement that grand jury subpoenas were issued in connection with an inquiry into former Trump national security adviser Michael Flynn and consulting work he did after leaving the government in 2014. White House press secretary Sean Spicer told reporters Tuesday evening that he was unaware of the report.

Trump said he fired Comey on the recommendation of Attorney General Jeff Sessions and his deputy, Rod Rosenstein, who both urged new leadership for the FBI.

Letters released by the White House indicated that Trump's decision rested on a surprising predicate: that Comey acted improperly last July when he publicly announced the closing of the FBI's investigation into Hillary Clinton's private email account and again in October when he informed Congress that the probe was being reopened.

Those actions were sharply criticized by former Justice Department officials as unwise departures from the agency's usual policies for handling investigations. The White House sought to pre-empt criticism of Comey's firing by circulating quotes from top Democratic lawmakers saying they had lost confidence in Comey over those actions.

Nevertheless, Democratic criticism of Trump's move was swift and harsh.

"This is Nixonian," Sen. Bob Casey (D-Pa.) said in a statement, adding that the Trump-Russia inquiry must be promptly handed over to an independent counsel.

"Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein must immediately appoint a special counsel to continue the Trump/Russia investigation. This investigation must be independent and thorough in order to uphold our nation's system of justice," Casey said.

One puzzling aspect of the administration's invocation of Comey's statements in the email probe as grounds for his firing was that during the presidential campaign last year, Trump repeatedly cited Comey's public castigation of Clinton for being "extremely careless" with classified information.

"Just look at what the FBI director said about her — her misconduct is a disgrace and embarrassment to our country," Trump said shortly after Comey's announcement last July, while complaining that Clinton should have been charged with a crime.

When Comey reopened the inquiry in October, Trump also praised that move. Before Tuesday, he had given no hint that he was concerned with Comey's public statements on the issue.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York said it was implausible that Trump and his aides decided this month that they had problems with actions Comey took last year.

"The events occurred months ago," Schumer said. "That does not seem to me to be a very logical or persuasive explanation."

Schumer said he spoke with Trump on Tuesday about the decision, telling the president that it was a "big mistake."

Trump aides pointed to Schumer's repeated statements that he'd lost confidence in Comey, but the minority leader said those were not calls for the FBI chief's dismissal.

"I never called on the president to fire Director Comey. I had a lot of questions about how he handled himself," Schumer said.

Some Republican lawmakers were supportive of Trump's action, but others, including Sen. John McCain of Arizona, Sen.

Ben Sasse of Nebraska, Sen. Jeff Flake of Arizona and Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Richard Burr of North Carolina, signaled disapproval.

"I've spent the last several hours trying to find an acceptable rationale for the timing of Comey's firing. I just can't do it," Flake wrote on Twitter.

"I am troubled by the timing and reasoning of Director Comey's termination," Burr said, warning that the move "further confuses" his panel's ongoing probe into Russia's role in the 2016 election. "His dismissal, I believe, is a loss for the Bureau and the nation," Burr added.

Preet Bharara, the former U.S. attorney in Manhattan who was fired by Trump after refusing to resign earlier this year, tweeted his support for Burr's sentiment.

"EVERYONE who cares about independence & rule of law in America should be troubled by the timing and reasoning of Comey firing. Period," Bharara wrote.

Former Attorney General Eric Holder also reacted strongly: "To the career men and women at DOJ/FBI: you know what the job entails and how to do it. Be strong and unafraid. Duty. Honor. Country."

A White House statement issued Tuesday quoted the president as saying he wanted "a new beginning" for the FBI.

"The FBI is one of our Nation's most cherished and respected institutions and today will mark a new beginning for our crown jewel of law enforcement," Trump said.

There was no immediate comment from Comey, who was appointed FBI director by former President Barack Obama in 2013. By law, FBI directors are subject to Senate confirmation and enjoy a 10-year term intended to span at least two presidencies, insulating the director from political pressures.

Comey was traveling on the West Coast on Tuesday and was scheduled to speak at a diversity-focused event in Hollywood on Tuesday night to recruit new agents. Some reports said he was speaking at the FBI office in Los Angeles on Tuesday afternoon when his dismissal was first reported on TV.

"We were caught totally off guard," said one senior FBI official, who asked not to be named.

While the firing appeared to take Comey and his aides by surprise, Trump's dissatisfaction with the bureau has flared up publicly in recent months.

"The FBI is totally unable to stop the national security 'leakers' that have permeated our government for a long time," Trump complained on Twitter in February. He added that investigators "can't even find the leakers within the FBI itself. Classified information is being given to media that could have a devastating effect on U.S. FIND NOW."

At other times, Trump seemed to be on friendly terms with Comey. A couple of days after taking office, Trump was seen on video warmly embracing Comey and giving him a thumbs-up at a White House event saluting law enforcement and first responders.

The White House statement said a search for a replacement for Comey "will begin immediately."

Despite Trump's call for a fresh start for the FBI, for now Trump's decision leaves the agency in the hands of another official whose independence Republicans have questioned: Deputy FBI Director Andrew McCabe.

Republicans have repeatedly raised questions about the new acting FBI director's independence, arguing that his wife's campaign for a Democratic state Senate seat in 2016 should have led him to recuse himself from both the Clinton email probe and the Trump-Russia inquiry.

McCabe also found himself in an awkward spot with the White House in February after he assured White House chief of staff Reince Priebus that press accounts about the Trump-Russia probe were inaccurate. Priebus asked McCabe whether there was something the FBI could do to knock down the stories. The FBI concluded it could not, but news of the White House request was leaked to the media.

The most detailed public basis for Comey's firing was contained in a three-page memo dated Tuesday from Rosenstein, who was confirmed as deputy attorney general on April 25 and took office the next day.

Rosenstein's confirmation may be the trigger that allowed Comey's removal to be discussed by the White House and

Sessions in earnest because Sessions would be hard-pressed to act unilaterally based on Comey's actions in an investigation from which Sessions has recused himself.

Rosenstein faulted Comey on several different counts: for publicly announcing the closure of the Clinton inquiry without input from Justice Department officials, for publicly criticizing Clinton at a July 5 press event at FBI headquarters, and for disclosing the reopening of the probe to Congress last October.

"I do not understand his refusal to accept the nearly universal judgment that he was mistaken," wrote Rosenstein, who previously served as U.S. attorney for Maryland under appointments from Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama. "Almost everyone agrees that the Director made serious mistakes; it is one of the few issues that unites people of diverse perspectives."

Regarding the unusual July statement slamming Clinton and her aides, the deputy attorney general wrote: "The Director laid out his version of the facts for the news media as if it were a closing argument, but without a trial. It is a textbook example of what federal prosecutors and agents are taught not to do."

"We should reject the departure and return to the traditions," Rosenstein added in his memo to Sessions endorsing Comey's removal.

Sessions's one-page letter to Trump urging Comey's dismissal lacked any of those details, likely because Sessions is recused from all matters related to the Clinton email probe as well as the ongoing Trump-Russia investigation. However, the attorney general adopted Rosenstein's rationale and implied that he agreed that Comey ignored Justice Department rules.

"The Director of the FBI must be someone who follows faithfully the rules and principles of the Department of Justice and who sets the right example for our law enforcement officials and others in the Department," Sessions wrote in his letter, also dated Tuesday.

However, two days before the election last November, Sessions said he approved of Comey disclosing to Congress that the investigation was being reopened.

"He had no choice but to report to the American Congress where he had under oath testified," Sessions said on Fox News. "The investigation was over. He had to correct that and say, this investigation is ongoing now."

At a Senate hearing last week, Comey said the Justice Department's policies against public statements in cases where no

charges are brought leave open that possibility in unusual cases — such as the high-profile Clinton probe.

"I think it's important that there be — as there has been for a long time — a recognized exception for the exceptional case," the FBI director said.

Word of Comey's firing came just minutes after the FBI sent Congress a letter clarifying testimony Comey gave during that same Senate Judiciary Committee appearance last week suggesting that former Hillary Clinton aide Huma Abedin forwarded thousands of potentially sensitive emails to her husband, former Rep. Anthony Weiner.

A top FBI official sent a letter to the Senate Judiciary Committee on Tuesday saying that the bulk of the transfer of data Comey mentioned “occurred as a result of a backup of personal electronic devices, with a small number a result of manual forwarding by Ms. Abedin to Mr. Weiner.”

Comey also backed away from a claim that Abedin had a “regular practice” of forwarding messages to Weiner for him to print out.

The FBI letter says Abedin “manually forwarded” two email chains containing classified information to Weiner's account. It does not say how sensitive the information was or whether it was classified at the time it was sent.

FBI veterans reacted to the news of Comey's firing with alarm and sadness.

A longtime special agent working outside of FBI headquarters but with close ties to Comey and other senior officials said the news struck like a thunderclap at FBI field offices around the country, including New York, which is working closely with headquarters on the Trump-Russia investigation.

“I'm literally in tears right now. That's all I have to say,” said the agent, who declined to be named for fear of retribution. The agent, who has known and worked closely with Comey for years, said rank-and-file agents were immediately suspicious of the timing of his firing and questioning whether the investigation into the Trump team's ties to Russia was the precipitating factor, even if the White House and Sessions were waiting for an excuse like Comey's misstep over the Clinton emails.

"I think the way it was done was not real nice,” said former FBI agent Lewis Schiliro, a former assistant director in charge of

the bureau's New York field office. "He could have asked for his resignation and given him a little bit of time to bow out gracefully."

Still, Schiliro said Comey had undermined his status with his Clinton news conference last year. "He brought the bureau into a political situation when it ought not to be. That's not the place for the FBI. I think Comey was trying to play investigator and prosecutor, and putting both hats on was a drastic mistake on his part."

"His press conference ought to have been two sentences: 'The FBI has concluded its investigation. The facts of the matter have been presented to the Department of Justice for a prosecution decision.' Thank you very much and walk off. That's the way it's done," Schiliro said.

While FBI agents generally like Comey, Schiliro said the director had lost public confidence. "People will be arguing for years whether he affected the outcome of this presidential election. That's a big deal."

Comey's dismissal is not entirely without precedent. In 1993, President Bill Clinton fired FBI Director William Sessions, citing a Justice Department report that found various ethical lapses involving his taxes and the installation of a fence at his home at government expense.