

Trump attacks his own Justice Department in Times interview

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In a lengthy interview Wednesday with three reporters for the *New York Times*, President Trump publicly criticized his own attorney general, Jeff Sessions, and three other Justice Department officials who have the main responsibility for the federal investigation into allegations that the Russian government intervened in the US elections to support Trump against Democrat Hillary Clinton.

Both the content of the interview and the venue were extraordinary. Trump blasted Sessions—his first and most prominent congressional backer during the Republican primary campaign—for recusing himself from oversight of the Russia investigation. And he made his comments to the *New York Times*, the newspaper that has been spearheading the campaign to portray the Trump campaign, and the president himself, as in collusion with Moscow.

Trump called Sessions’s decision to recuse himself “very unfair to the president,” adding, “How do you take a job and then recuse yourself? If he would have recused himself before the job, I would have said, ‘Thanks, Jeff, but I’m not going to take you.’ It’s extremely unfair—and that’s a mild word—to the president.”

He went on to attack the fairness and impartiality of the three Justice Department officials with the main responsibility for the Russia investigation: Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, who now supervises the investigation since Sessions has recused himself; special counsel Robert Mueller, the retired FBI director selected by Rosenstein to run the probe after Trump fired FBI Director James Comey; and acting FBI Director Andrew McCabe, who plays a major role, at least until Trump nominee Christopher Wray is confirmed by the Senate as the new FBI director.

Trump suggested that Rosenstein, a Republican and

the only George W. Bush appointee as US attorney to be retained in office by Barack Obama, was actually a Democrat, because he was a prosecutor in Baltimore, and “There are very few Republicans in Baltimore, if any.”

McCabe came under fire from Trump for the well-publicized connection between his wife Jill, a Democratic candidate for the Virginia state senate in 2013, and Virginia Governor Terry McAuliffe, who directed \$500,000 from political action committees into her failed campaign. McAuliffe, a Democrat, is a long-time political crony of Bill and Hillary Clinton.

Trump spent more time criticizing Mueller, complaining that he hired several lawyers who had contributed money to Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign, and declaring that he had other “conflicts of interest.” He claimed that Mueller had interviewed at the White House for the position of FBI director after the firing of Comey, a previously unreported fact, if true.

The *Times* reporters, Peter Baker, Michael Schmidt and Maggie Haberman, sought to elicit from Trump a threat to fire Mueller—something that is within his powers as president, but likely to produce a political firestorm or even trigger impeachment proceedings. Trump partially obliged, in this exchange near the end of the interview:

SCHMIDT: Last thing, if Mueller was looking at your finances and your family finances, unrelated to Russia—is that a red line?

HABERMAN: Would that be a breach of what his actual charge is?

TRUMP: I would say yeah. I would say yes...

SCHMIDT: But if he was outside that lane, would that mean he’d have to go?

HABERMAN: Would you consider——

TRUMP: No, I think that's a violation. Look, this is about Russia...

The question was finally posed point-blank by Schmidt: "Would you fire Mueller if he went outside of certain parameters of what his charge is?" Only then did Trump hedge, saying, "I can't, I can't answer that question because I don't think it's going to happen." At this point, the interview transcript ends.

Attorney General Sessions responded only indirectly to the publication of the Trump interview, saying that he plans to continue in his position "as long as that is appropriate." White House spokesmen denied that Trump's comments were in preparation to dismiss Sessions and replace him with a nominee who had no links to the Trump election campaign—the reason Sessions was compelled to recuse himself.

Trump's intentions in giving a nearly hour-long interview devoted largely to the Russia investigation are unclear. It may have been a shot across the bow directed at Mueller, warning him to stay away from the Trump family finances. Or it may be a maneuver to shift the focus of media attention, after ten days of press reports directed mainly at his son Donald Trump Jr. and his son-in-law Jared Kushner, for their previously undisclosed meeting with a Russian lawyer last year at Trump Tower.

Kushner is scheduled to testify July 24 at a closed-door session of the Senate Intelligence Committee, while Trump Jr. and former Trump campaign manager Paul Manafort have been summoned to a July 26 public session of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Senate sources told the press that Mueller had given the Judiciary Committee permission to call the younger Trump and Manafort to testify in public.

Mueller's investigation now encompasses the June 9, 2016 meeting at Trump Tower, when Trump Jr., Kushner and Manafort met with Russian lawyer Natalia Veselnitskaya and four other people: publicist Rob Goldstone, who brokered the meeting; Rinat Ahmetshin, a millionaire Russian-American lobbyist and associate of Veselnitskaya's; translator Anatoli Samochornov, a former State Department employee; and Ike Kaveladze, a Russian-American representative of Russian real estate billionaire Aras Agalarov, who set up the meeting through Goldstone. Kaveladze's attorney said Tuesday that he had been telephoned over the weekend by Mueller's office asking whether his

client was willing to be interviewed. Kaveladze has agreed to do so.

Whatever the motivation of the interview, Trump's comments about former FBI Director James Comey give a glimpse of the frenzied infighting within official Washington, driven by conflicts over foreign policy, and by concerns, particularly in the national security establishment, that Trump prioritizes his personal business interests over the longer-term interests of American imperialism.

Trump told the *Times* that he had suspicions of Comey since their meeting two weeks before the inauguration, when he pulled Trump aside after a national security briefing at Trump Tower. Acting as the designated representative of all the intelligence agencies, Comey told him of a dossier assembled by a former British spy that contained unsubstantiated and sensationally sleazy allegations about Trump's conduct during a visit to Moscow. "In my opinion, he shared it so that I would think he had it out there," Trump said. Asked if Comey was using it as "leverage," i.e., to blackmail him, Trump responded, "Yeah, I think so. In retrospect."



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