Comey memoir ignites new round in anti-Russia campaign against Trump

Patrick Martin
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Excerpts from a new memoir by former FBI Director James Comey, leaked to the press on Thursday, have ignited a new round of attacks and counterattacks in the ongoing conflict within the US political establishment. Following Monday's FBI raid on Trump's personal lawyer Michael Cohen, the Comey book is being used by the anti-Trump faction within the ruling class and the state to escalate a months-long campaign that increasingly appears aimed at removing Trump from office.

Anti-Trump forces within the establishment are focusing more and more on sensational sexual allegations, and Trump's responses are taking on an increasingly hysterical character, exposing the depraved and anti-democratic character of American bourgeois politics. In a series of tweets posted Friday, Trump denounced Comey, whom he fired last May, as a liar and "slime ball."

The book itself is not being released to the public until Tuesday, so the leaked excerpts represent an aggressive marketing campaign that will boost sales and pump millions into Comey's own pockets. This is combined with a series of television appearances, including an hour-long interview with George Stephanopoulos of ABC scheduled for broadcast Sunday night.

Substantively, the Comey memoir apparently contains no significant revelations about Trump or his top aides and their connections to Russia or alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 elections. There is much detail on Trump's appeals for loyalty from the then-FBI director. But Comey concedes that while offensive and possibly unethical, Trump's efforts to intercede with the FBI on behalf of his closest cronies, such as fired National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, may not have been illegal.

That has not stopped the media from picking up the most salacious and degrading sections of the book and flogging them. For their part, pro-Trump media and Republican Party publicists have launched a campaign to vilify "Lyin' Comey," frequently citing Democratic criticism of Comey for his earlier actions during the 2016 campaign in relation to the Hillary Clinton email investigation.

The main focus of the press coverage is Comey's claim that Trump approached him in January 2017, at a previously reported meeting at Trump Tower, and asked him to initiate an FBI investigation to discredit the so-called Steele dossier, which includes unverified material on Trump's activities in Russia collected by a former British spy working as a contractor for the Democratic National Committee.

According to Comey, Trump was most concerned about the claim that while in Moscow on a business trip in 2013 he had hired prostitutes to urinate on themselves in the same hotel suite used by President Barack Obama "as a way of soiling the bed." He asked Comey to have the FBI disprove this claim, which he said was very painful to his wife Melania.

This is presumably the low point of the 304-page book, and the first time that a top Washington insider has wallowed in such degrading material with so much detail. Reviews of the book based on advance copies suggest that Comey returns to the subject several times, relating at least four separate requests by Trump to rebut the Steele dossier on this point.

Press accounts have also cited Comey's comparison of the atmosphere of lies and flattery surrounding Trump in the White House to that of a Mafia clan. Comey, or a ghostwriter, describes feeling "flashbacks to my earlier career as a prosecutor against the Mob."

That Trump and his inner circle resemble a corrupt mob boss and his courtiers comes as no surprise. Trump was steeped in gangsterism and corruption in the course of his many decades in New York City real estate, casino gambling, "reality" television and their many intersections with capitalist politicians of both the

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Democratic and Republican parties.

There is a great deal of personal animus towards Trump in the excerpts from the book made public in the media, ranging from the trivial—the size of Trump's hands, the marks on his face and the style of his hair—to characterizations of the president as liar-in-chief, bullying boss and, occasionally, smarmy supplicant. All this seems well calculated to meet the demands of the market for an anti-Trump diatribe, where Comey can expect a significant monetary reward.

Beyond the immediate pecuniary motives and self-justification, the Comey book is intended to become a further weapon in the campaign to destabilize the Trump administration being waged by sections of the military-intelligence apparatus and the Democratic Party. The driving force of this campaign is a deep conflict over foreign policy, particularly in relation to US policy towards Russia, both in the Middle East and more broadly.

The timing of the book's publication is remarkable from a number of standpoints. It comes during a week of intensifying crisis over Syria, with Trump threatening imminent military action against the government of Bashar al-Assad that could lead to a direct conflict with Assad's principal allies, Iran and Russia.

It is also striking that Comey has issued this volume while the investigation by Special Counsel Robert Mueller into alleged Russian interference in the US elections and possible collusion with the Trump campaign is at a critical point, following the raid on Cohen, which was based on a referral by Mueller to the US attorney for the Southern District of New York.

Comey is an experienced prosecutor who led the FBI for five years. He well understands the potential impact of such a book. His dismissal by Trump triggered the appointment of Mueller as special counsel by the Department of Justice and his firing is one of the events portrayed in the media as "obstruction of justice," a potentially impeachable offense. Under those circumstances, to have a major figure in the probe write a first-person account of these events, amid massive media attention, could be considered an effort to prejudice any future jurors and public opinion more generally.

The book itself, as well as the publicity campaign surrounding it, seems tailored to produce a subjective explosion from Trump in which he might make a damaging admission. Thus Comey appeared on ABC News's "Good Morning America" Thursday to give an advance peek at his hour-long Sunday night interview, and the segment showed him declaring that it was "possible" that a "pee tape" exists of Trump with the Moscow prostitutes. Trump's seemingly unhinged tweets came only minutes after Comey's appearance.

Also on Friday, in a move clearly directed against the Mueller investigation, Trump pardoned Lewis "Scooter" Libby, the former chief of staff of Vice President Dick Cheney. Libby was convicted in 2007 of lying to a grand jury and obstructing justice and sentenced to a $250,000 fine and 30 months in prison. George W. Bush commuted Libby's prison sentence before he left office, but he rejected repeated appeals from Cheney to pardon the vice president's former aide.

Libby was indicted, tried and convicted in connection with the leaking of the identity of a covert CIA agent, Valerie Plame, in July of 2003. Plame's husband, Joseph Wilson, a former US ambassador in Africa, published a column in the *New York Times* that month debunking Bush's claim that Saddam Hussein had purchased yellow cake uranium from Niger.

Shortly thereafter, syndicated columnist Robert Novak published a commentary outing Plame as a CIA operative, a breach of classified information. Comey, then deputy attorney general, appointed a special counsel to investigate the case, leading to Libby's indictment and conviction for perjury and obstruction.

Trump's pardon of Libby is a signal both to Mueller and to those targeted in his investigation that the president is prepared to pardon those who refuse to cooperate or give false information to prosecutors. That could potentially include former top aides such as fired National Security Adviser Michael Flynn, who pleaded guilty to a perjury charge in a plea bargain with Mueller, and Paul Manafort, Trump's former campaign manager who is fighting criminal charges brought by Mueller.

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