Inspector general’s report fuels Trump-FBI conflict

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The Justice Department inspector general issued a 500-page report Thursday that charged former FBI Director James Comey with deliberately violating longstanding procedures during the Hillary Clinton email investigation, while claiming that Comey was not motivated by political bias when he damaged her campaign.

These “extraordinary and insubordinate” actions included both Comey’s harsh public criticism of Clinton at a press conference in July 2016 and his letter to Congress in late October 2016, just ten days before the election, announcing the investigation was being reopened. In each instance, Comey did not clear his actions with his nominal supervisors, Attorney General Loretta Lynch and Deputy Attorney General Sally Yates.

The Trump White House and its congressional supporters have been hyping the report by Inspector-General Michael Horowitz for weeks in advance, suggesting that it would provide evidence of systematic anti-Trump bias in the FBI and thus discredit the investigation into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 campaign and Trump campaign collusion with it, begun initially by the FBI and now run by Justice Department special counsel Robert Mueller.

The content of the report appears to be rather the opposite, or at best a mixed bag, documenting both pro-Clinton sentiments among a handful of top FBI officials, and a series of decisions by Comey that had a devastating negative effect on the Clinton campaign.

The White House cited the report as a vindication of Trump’s repeated public denunciations of FBI bias against him, which he claimed was the basis of the Mueller investigation. Press secretary Sarah Sanders said during Thursday’s press briefing, “The President was briefed on the IG’s report earlier today and it reaffirmed the President's suspicions about Comey's conduct and the political bias among some of the members of the FBI.”

Only two hours later, FBI Director Christopher Wray held an extraordinary press conference to defend the bureau against the attacks of the man who appointed him. He cited the finding of the inspector-general that there was no systematic political bias, either pro-Clinton or pro-Trump, driving the FBI’s decision-making process during its investigations into Clinton’s use of a private email server and Trump’s relationship with various individuals claiming to represent the Russian government or to have derogatory information about Clinton derived from Russian sources.

Wray’s remarks, and comments by other officials to the press, suggested that the IG report would be the basis for several personnel decisions in the next few days. The most widely expected action would be the firing of Peter Strzok, the FBI assistant director who worked on both the Clinton and Russia investigations. Strzok was removed from the Russia investigation after it came to light that he had exchanged anti-Trump text messages with his girlfriend at the time, Lisa Page, then counsel to Deputy FBI Director Andrew McCabe, who was in charge of both probes.

Congressional Democrats sought to insulate the Mueller investigation from any negative repercussions from the inspector-general’s report. Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer, in a speech on the Senate floor only hours before the release of the report, declared, “There is no reason — no reason — to believe that it will provide any basis to call the special counsel’s work into question … The IG report concerns an entirely separate investigation from the Russia probe that special counsel Mueller is conducting.”

Two leading House Democrats, Representatives Jerry Nadler and Elijah Cummings, issued a joint statement arguing, “The stark conclusion we draw after reviewing this report is that the FBI’s actions helped Donald Trump become President.” They added, “As we warned before

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the election, Director Comey had a double-standard: he spoke publicly about the Clinton investigation while keeping secret from the American people the investigation of Donald Trump and Russia."

There is little doubt that the principal result of FBI Director Comey's actions during 2016 was to undermine the Clinton campaign. The IG report notes that Comey decided on his own to denounce Clinton's conduct publicly at a press conference in July 2016, at which he called her conduct "extremely careless" while saying he would not recommend she be prosecuted. He did not clear his statement in advance with the leadership of the Justice Department, Lynch and Yates.

"We found that it was extraordinary and insubordinate for Comey to conceal his intentions from his superiors, the Attorney General and Deputy Attorney General, for the admitted purpose of preventing them from telling him not to make the statement, and to instruct his subordinates in the FBI to do the same," Horowitz's report says.

Again, in October 2016, Comey decided on his own to send a letter to Congress making public the reopening of the investigation after the discovery of more Clinton emails on a laptop belonging to former Representative Anthony Weiner, husband of Clinton's closest aide, Huma Abedin.

This was a gross violation of a longstanding Justice Department policy against making any public prosecutorial move, positive or negative, related to a political candidate, within 90 days of an election. But Comey did not inform either Lynch or Yates that he intended to breach this policy.

Inspector-General Horowitz said his office reviewed more than 1.2 million documents and interviewed more than 100 witnesses. His report endorses the substance of Comey's decision in July 2016 against recommending prosecution of Clinton, while harshly criticizing both the scale of the announcement—the FBI normally says nothing about investigations that are closed without bringing charges—and the harsh tone of Comey's statement.

Besides Comey, the report's main criticism falls on Strzok, suggesting that his pro-Clinton bias led him to direct resources to the Russia investigation in late September 2016, when top FBI officials first learned of the Anthony Weiner laptop.

The report states: "We did not have confidence that Strzok's decision to prioritize the Russia investigation over following up on the midyear-related investigative lead discovered on the Weiner laptop was free from bias." This contributed to a delay in taking action on the laptop, which, ironically, multiplied the political impact of the revelation, made by Comey only ten days before the election, that the email probe was to be reopened.

One thing is clear, even from press accounts of the 500-page report: the FBI, far from being a "politically neutral" or "apolitical" agency, is very much a political police force. The same factional disputes within the ruling elite that rage through Congress, the corporate-controlled media, and the rest of official Washington, also consume the FBI.

How could it be otherwise, given that the FBI has long been one of the principal instruments for the defense of corporate America against political opposition from below, persecuting left-wing, socialist, labor and civil rights organizations for more than a century since it was first founded.

For nearly half that period, from 1924 to his death in 1972, the FBI was under the direction of the loathsome J. Edgar Hoover, who accumulated dossiers on virtually every figure in American political life, guaranteeing his own untouchability, regardless of changes of party or administration, since he "had something" on everyone.

The exposures of mass US government spying on the antiwar and civil rights movement thoroughly discredited the FBI in the 1970s. The FBI wiretapped Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders, conspired with Ku Klux Klan terrorists, and may have played a role in King's assassination. It systematically spied on anti-war and left-wing organizations, sending so many agents into the Communist Party and the Socialist Workers Party that it effectively controlled both groups.

In the decades since Hoover's death, there has been a systematic effort to build up the FBI and repair the damage done by the exposures of illegal surveillance and other crimes. But these were not merely the crimes of Hoover personally, but intrinsic characteristics of an agency which is one of the most important instruments of repression for the American ruling elite.

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