

AP

Justice report provides ammo for both Trump and his critics

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WASHINGTON (AP) — A Justice Department watchdog report has turned into Washington's latest Rorschach test, with President Donald Trump and his critics each cherry picking what they want to see from its findings to either discredit or defend investigators conducting the probe into the White House.

The 500-page report, which was more than a year in the making, offered a nuanced conclusion about the bureau's handling of the Hillary Clinton email probe, criticizing the FBI and its former director James Comey personally but not finding evidence that political bias tainted the investigation in the months and days leading up to Trump's election.

But Trump wielded it as a blunt instrument on Friday, bludgeoning the integrity of the Justice Department by pointing to the politically-charged communication among FBI employees as proof that the FBI was biased "at the top level" and "plotting against my election."

"The end result was wrong. There was total bias," Trump declared Friday. "Comey was the ring leader of this whole, you know, den of thieves. It was a den of thieves."

Trump allies seized upon text messages between agents, pointing to one from August 2016 that said "We'll stop it" with regard to a potential Trump victory and another from a bureau lawyer that said "Viva le resistance." And Trump took it one step further, barreling out of the White House Friday for an unannounced, early-morning television interview that turned into a nearly hour-long freewheeling give-and-take with reporters, during which he returned time and again to assert that report had exonerated him amid Mueller's ongoing probe into Russian election interference.

"There was no collusion. There was no obstruction. The IG report yesterday went a long way to show that," Trump said on the White House North Lawn. "And I think that the Mueller investigation has been totally discredited."

But Trump's claim was baseless: the report made no conclusions about the president's involvement. But its criticism of Comey — levied by an inspector general appointed by President Barack Obama — is important to Trump as he tries to inoculate himself against accusations that he obstructed justice by firing the FBI director last May.

The president's lawyers want to paint the dismissal as something he was both authorized to do under the Constitution and correct to do based on Comey's performance. The White House initially said Trump fired Comey over his handling of the Clinton investigation, though the president himself later muddled that explanation when he said he was thinking of "this Russia thing."

The report did scold Comey for announcing his conclusion that Clinton should not face charges, saying it was insubordinate and extraordinary that he would not have coordinated the statement with his Justice Department bosses. It also chastised him for announcing, again without Justice Department backing, that the investigation would be reopened because of newly discovered emails on Anthony Weiner's laptop.

Judgments on how the report would impact Trump's legal future predictably broke down along party lines.

Rep. Mark Meadows, a North Carolina Republican, said he thinks the report may exonerate Trump even though it passes no judgment on his guilt or innocence.

"If you look at the fruit of the poisoned tree, you can't have that kind of bias in somebody wanting to make sure the president gets defeated leading an investigation," Meadows said. "I don't think any of us would want our enemy investigating us."

But Sen. Richard Blumenthal, Democrat from Connecticut, declared that "any effort to use this report as an excuse for shutting down the special counsel's investigation is both disingenuous and dangerous."

"Nothing in this report detracts from the credibility of the special counsel's investigation," Blumenthal said, "and nothing here suggests the special counsel investigation resulted from FBI bias or improper conduct."

Though the report doesn't validate all of Trump's claims, it does make clear that some employees involved in the Clinton and subsequent Russia investigation communicated to each other about wanting Trump to lose.

Much of the public attention has been focused on Peter Strzok, a seasoned FBI counterintelligence investigator who worked the Clinton investigation and was later on Mueller's team until anti-Trump text messages with an FBI lawyer, Lisa Page, were discovered and brought to the special counsel's attention.

Among the text exchanges that have been made public is one from August 2016 in which Page said, "(Trump's) not ever going to become president, right? Right?!" Strzok responded by saying, "No. No he's not. We'll stop it."

Those text exchanges caused the inspector general to evaluate whether any of Strzok's decisions were affected by political considerations, and raised concerns that there was a "willingness to take official action to impact the presidential candidate's electoral prospects."

The watchdog office said it could not be certain that the decision to prioritize the Russia investigation in October 2016 over scouring the Weiner laptop for possible evidence against Clinton was free from bias. But the report also noted that Strzok was not the sole decision-maker and that he and Page sometimes advocated for more aggressive investigative steps than others in the Clinton investigation. His lawyer also issued a statement saying there was no evidence that Strzok's political views affected his actions.

But others, though critical of Comey, believed the report actually helps fortify the Department of Justice against Trump's attacks.

"I think it essentially concludes what was obvious at the time, and that's that Comey was just largely ignoring rules, both in July and in October," said Matt Miller, a former Department of Justice official under Attorney General Eric Holder. "That's not really a surprising conclusion for anyone who knows how DOJ is supposed to work."

Miller expressed particular exasperation with an email included in the report in which Comey told intelligence leaders that he did not think it wise to make an official statement on Russian meddling in American politics one month before the election for fear of creating an "October surprise" — which was sent just weeks before he threw the race into upheaval by reopening the case over Weiner's laptop. Still, he said he was not surprised by the inspector general's conclusion that Comey's actions weren't motivated by political bias.

"I never thought that's what it was. I thought it was a misplaced confidence in his own righteousness, combined with really inappropriate pressure from one political party that wasn't matched by the other."

Lemire reported from New York. Associated Press writer Mary Claire Jalonick contributed reporting.

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