

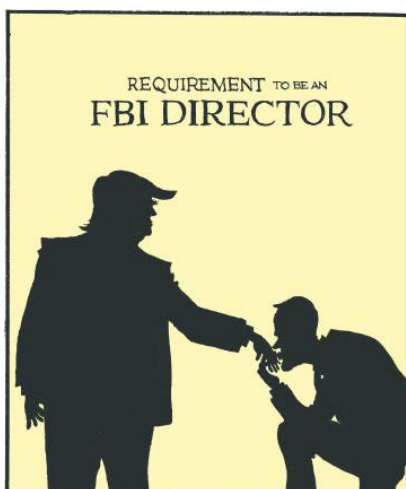
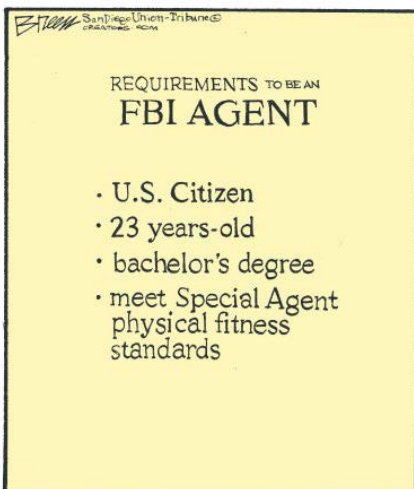
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FRANCE - EUROPE

THE WALL
STREET
JOURNAL

Emmanuel Macron Bets on Rookies to Win French Parliamentary Election

William Horobin

NICE, France—French President Emmanuel Macron's quest to win a parliamentary majority and pass contentious labor reforms hinges on candidates like Caroline Reverso-Meinietti.

A lawyer by training, the 31-year-old has never before run for public office. When voters head to the polls for the first round of legislative election on Sunday, Ms. Reverso-Meinietti will represent Mr. Macron's party on the ballot, competing with seasoned candidates who would have likely brushed neophytes like her aside in any other year.

Polls suggest 2017 will be a political year like none other in France's recent history. The wave of support that carried Mr. Macron, 39, to victory last month is likely to propel his fledgling political party, La République en Marche, into the driver's seat of the 577-seat National Assembly.

A nationally representative survey conducted by Ipsos Sopra-Steria between June 2 and June 4 showed his party garnering 29.5% of the first-round vote, followed by the center-right Les Républicains with 23%. Projections by the same pollster indicate the second-round vote on June 18 would hand Mr. Macron a clear majority, with between 385 and 415 seats.

A victory for Mr. Macron's party in constituencies like Nice would amount to a deathblow for France's political establishment. It would also strengthen the new president's hand in pushing unpopular economic overhauls through parliament—something Mr. Macron and his European allies say is vital to fixing

the European Union and its common currency.

By streamlining France's sclerotic labor code, Mr. Macron hopes to persuade Germany and other northern European countries to allow the strongest members of the eurozone to act as financial backstops for the weakest.

"Without this majority we will be blocked for another five years," Ms. Reverso-Meinietti said.

Mr. Macron's party flaunts the inexperience of its candidates as it makes a play for seats in conservative strongholds long considered impervious to challengers. Nice is the fiefdom of incumbent Eric Ciotti, a conservative stalwart and Républicains party chieftain whose tough-on-terror résumé has long made him unassailable for opponents from any party, including the far-right National Front of Marine Le Pen.

Nice was the target in July of an Islamist terrorist's truck attack that killed 86 people among the thousands lining the coastal city's promenade to watch a Bastille Day fireworks display. Mr. Ciotti, who headed a 2015 parliamentary commission on jihadist networks, has held his district for a decade.

Mr. Macron has maneuvered to divide Mr. Ciotti's party by appointing senior lawmakers from Les Républicains as ministers in his new government. The president has also backed away from fielding his own candidates in about 50 constituencies—including some in the Nice area—where Les Républicains candidates have indicated they would ally with the French leader if elected.

Mr. Ciotti said Mr. Macron was focusing on politicking "with the complicity of those who betrayed their beliefs to get a position."

On Saturday, the president dispatched top ministers—one from Les Républicains and the other a Socialist—to Nice to campaign alongside Ms. Reverso-Meinietti.

"There is a national reconfiguration taking place. We have to take part and leave our bitterness to one side," said Budget Minister Gérard Darmanin, an ally of former French President and Les Républicains leader Nicolas Sarkozy.

As Mr. Darmanin arrived, Mr. Ciotti's supporters fanned out around city hall and a nearby flower market to hand out leaflets and urge voters not to give Mr. Macron a blank check.

"We have a lawmaker who is doing the job. There's no reason to change," said Anthony Bressy, a 28-year-old campaigner for Mr. Ciotti.

Ms. Reverso-Meinietti's foray into politics began in January when she spent 10 minutes filling out an online application to become a parliamentary candidate for Mr. Macron's movement.

At the time, Mr. Macron was behind in the polls, and Ms. Reverso-Meinietti's friends mocked her as utopian, she recalled.

Nice is one of the most challenging districts for Mr. Macron. François Fillon, the presidential candidate for Les Républicains, garnered the largest share of the vote here in the first round of the presidential election. Mr. Macron finished third behind Ms. Le Pen of the National Front, which is also fielding a

candidate here for the legislative election.

To qualify for the runoff, Ms. Reverso-Meinietti needs to either finish in one of the top two spots Sunday or garner support from more than 12.5% of registered voters. Doing so would require siphoning votes from Mr. Ciotti as well as driving turnout of leftist voters.

Mr. Macron's commanding presidential victory has given Ms. Reverso-Meinietti's candidacy a shot in the arm.

"People in Nice want to be part of this dynamic," she said. "They don't want to be left at the back of the class."

On the campaign trail here Saturday, Ms. Reverso-Meinietti handed out leaflets at a popular downtown park that Mr. Ciotti inaugurated in 2013.

Sonia Adrien, a bathroom janitor at the park, said she welcomed a young candidate but that wasn't enough to change her vote.

"Mr. Ciotti has done so much for the town of Nice. It's really the important point here," Ms. Adrien said.

Handing out leaflets for Ms. Reverso-Meinietti at the same market, Nadine de Fondaumiére, a recently retired high-school teacher, said divisions among conservatives could help Mr. Macron's candidate win. Still, she expects it will be difficult for Ms. Reverso-Meinietti.

"If she beats Eric Ciotti, it would be a real thunderbolt," Ms. de Fondaumiére said.

The
Washington
Post

Rampell : Macron attempts a feat that Trump wouldn't dare

The newly elected French president is attempting a feat that the newly elected American president wouldn't dare: leadership.

Emmanuel Macron, the youngest French head of state since Napoleon, has stolen many American hearts thanks to his moving defense of the Paris climate

accord, gutsy news conference with Vladimir Putin and, of course, the fact that he married a much older woman.

But here in France, his primary public contribution is expected to be on a different front: the economy.

For decades, France has struggled with stagnant labor markets and intractably high unemployment. The jobless rate stands at 9.6 percent,

which — believe it or not — is a five-year low.

Also for decades, French politicians have tried to reform the system. Macron's predecessor, François Hollande, suffered recordlow approval ratings, partly due to the violent strikes and chaos that erupted when he worked to reform labor laws last year.

Rather than shying away from this hot-button issue — which Macron had overseen as Hollande's economy minister — Macron made it a centerpiece of his presidential campaign. And after this Sunday's first-round parliamentary elections, which his brand-new political party is projected to win in a landslide, his government will likely claim a public mandate to finally fix the system.

So what exactly is wrong with the job market in France?

The problem isn't generous health-care benefits or onerous environmental protections or the usual "job-killing" regulations that American politicians so often vilify — and that the French love.

It's that it's virtually impossible, or at the very least prohibitively expensive, to fire employees. Which makes hiring employees unattractive, too.

In France, firings and layoffs can generally happen under very limited circumstances, including gross negligence and "economic reasons." Laid-off employees can then challenge their dismissals in court, where judges are seen as somewhat hostile to employers.

Judges, for example, have wide latitude in deciding what counts as a justifiable "economic reason" for a layoff. They may decide that multinational firms that are losing money in France are not allowed to pare back their French workforce if they are collectively profitable in other countries, according to Jean-Charles Simon, an economist and

former manager of the country's main employer organization, Mouvement des Entreprises de France, or MEDEF.

A layoff in such a case could be deemed unfair. Furthermore, there is no cap on the damages that judges can award for unfair dismissal, meaning employers' potential risks are essentially limitless. The whole process can take years to resolve, too.

Unsurprisingly, employers turn whenever possible to temporary, short-term contract workers, who enjoy fewer protections. This has led to a two-tier labor market with ironclad job security for some and virtually none for the rest.

In fact, about two-thirds of job contracts signed each year are fixed-term arrangements lasting less than a month, according to Francis Kramarz, director of CREST (the Center for Research in Economics and Statistics) and professor at École Polytechnique and ENSAE. Young workers often find themselves doomed to an endless series of short-term gigs, with no opportunities for upward mobility.

In addition to job protections, other rigid policies have made France a difficult place to run a business, particularly for smaller firms.

Only about 8 percent of French workers belong to unions, but thanks to French labor law, 98 percent of workers are covered by national, industry-wide union-negotiated contracts. These can set generous and inflexible pay scales, overtime rates and severance packages, regardless of firm size, resources or whether any of its employees actually belong to a union.

Arguably this is one reason larger firms have not pushed harder for market reforms. They know how to work the system, have lawyers on staff and can absorb many of the steep costs that smaller firms cannot.

"This is a system for insiders, and insiders collude to keep it in place," complains Pierre Cahuc, an economics professor at CREST and École Polytechnique.

Nor are trade unions terribly keen on revamping the broken system, because they fear that their hard-

won worker protections will disappear.

Macron has framed his agenda — which includes making it easier to ax workers, capping damages in unfair-dismissal cases and decentralizing collective bargaining — as both pro-business and pro-worker, given that it would grant additional opportunities to job-seekers. In some ways he plans to expand worker protections by making entrepreneurs and those who voluntarily quit their jobs newly eligible for unemployment benefits. The goal would be to encourage risk-taking.

Macron plans to transform labor laws by summer's end. That certainly seems ambitious, given that the unions that organized last year's tumultuous strikes and protests have threatened a repeat performance.

Nonetheless, it's hard not to admire, and perhaps even envy, Macron's political impulses here. In the face of divisive economic challenges, he is choosing not to pander and scapegoat but to restructure and reinvent.



Macron Goads Trump, Promoting France as Hub for Climate Science

Helene Fouquet
and Gregory

Viscusi

French President Emmanuel Macron won plaudits at home and abroad when he trolled U.S. President Donald Trump on social media for abandoning the Paris climate accord. So he's decided to keep at it.

The French government Thursday released a website -- www.makeourplanetgreatagain.fr -- to entice U.S.-based scientists, entrepreneurs and students to pursue climate-related work in

France, following the president's personal appeal on June 1.

Hours after Trump said he was withdrawing from the Paris Accord on carbon emissions, Macron took to social media and -- speaking in English -- invited scientists to move to France from the U.S. He even parodied Trump's signature campaign slogan with a call to "make our planet great again." The French Foreign Ministry then released a video where it scribbles corrections over what it says were false assertions in the

White House's own video explaining why Trump decided to quit the pact.

The French leader's strategy to be the thorn in Trump's side is no coincidence. One of Macron's close aides said the president sees his role as being a "gadfly" in international affairs -- an irritant who challenges the perceived complacency of others -- especially with a U.S. leader who has questioned his nation's attachments to international treaties and historical alliances.

The site, which cost 22,000 euros (\$25,000) to set up, at this point just

has links to French universities and to agencies that promote investment in France, and doesn't include any new projects.

The English-language website "aims to facilitate action for the protection of our planet and to help those who want to be involved in projects, pursue research, business activities, financing, or to set up in France," Macron's office said in a statement.

"This call to unite efforts for the protection of our planet shows France's desire to play a leading role against climate warming," it said.

VOX // French President Macron said US climate researchers should come to France. He wasn't joking.

French President Emmanuel Macron doesn't kid around.

Last week, the newly minted French leader delivered a bruising rebuke of Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris accord in a televised address. And in a jab at just how backward US climate politics have become, he invited American climate researchers to move to France.

Today, he made that invitation official.

Don't be fooled by the cheeky slogan "Make Our Planet Great

Again" and the snazzy graphic design — this is an actual policy and platform to recruit climate researchers. France, it boasts, has "top-level research infrastructure and laboratories as well as an effervescent startup ecosystem."

American researchers fed up with the Trump administration's rejection of the urgency of climate change can fill in a form detailing their vocation, nationality, and research interests. Then they get a customized pitch for why they ought to move to France.

To court other frustrated scientists, the site lists open positions in France, rules for eligibility, and available research grants. At the end of all that, eligible candidates are asked to upload one-page CVs and wait for responses, which are promised to come within a month.

And it isn't just scientists that Macron is looking to attract. Entrepreneurs, students, and even entire organizations are invited to apply, as long as they share an interest in climate action.

This underlines what my colleague Alex Ward said last week about this

invitation as a strategic move. By encouraging American innovators, and now businesses and students, to move to France, Macron directly challenges Trump's argument that pulling out of the Paris accord is in America's economic interest. He's also not hiding the fact that that he thinks he can lure top talent away.

The jury's still out on whether American researchers will take him up on his offer, though there's certainly some enthusiasm on social media.

This new recruitment effort is hardly the first time that Macron has stood

up to Trump, or even to other world leaders. But it's the first tangible

evidence we have that this new French president puts his money

where his mouth is, and that's significant.

The New York Times

Castle

Britons quickly started wondering whether Mrs. May would have to resign.

One Conservative lawmaker, Anna Soubry, said on national television that it had been a "dreadful campaign" and would force the prime minister to "consider her position."

The opposition Labour Party, led by Jeremy Corbyn, was projected to be on track for 262 seats, up 30 from 2015, significantly elevating Mr. Corbyn's standing after predictions that his party would be further weakened.

"Whatever the final result, we have already changed the face of British politics," Mr. Corbyn said.

Last month, in an effort to show "just how much is at stake" in the election, Mrs. May acknowledged that even a small loss of seats would amount to a defeat.

"The cold, hard fact is that if I lose just six seats, I will lose this election, and Jeremy Corbyn will be sitting down to negotiate with the presidents, prime ministers and chancellors of Europe," she wrote in *The Daily Mail*.

But early on Friday, Mrs. May hinted that her Conservative Party would try to form a government even if it did not have a majority, arguing that Britain needed "a period of stability."

If the Conservative Party "has won the most seats and probably the most votes, then it will be incumbent on us," she said.

The Scottish National Party was projected to fall to 35 seats from 56, while the centrist Liberal Democrats were projected to win 12 seats, up four from 2015.

The forecast raised the prospect that neither major party would be able to form a government without help from another party. If a coalition cannot be formed, another election could be in the offing.

And there was a wild card. Northern Ireland's Sinn Féin party, which won seven seats, said it would not occupy them, in keeping with its longstanding policy. That would lower the threshold for Mrs. May's party to establish an effective majority.

The former chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, said

UNE - Theresa May Loses Overall Majority in U.K. Parliament

Steven Erlanger and Stephen Stephen

that for Mrs. May losing a majority would be "completely catastrophic" for her and the Conservative Party. But he added that it was also difficult to see how the Labour Party could put together a coalition government.

"So it's on a real knife edge," he said.

Clearly, Britons confounded expectations and the betting markets once again. The uncertainty could complicate Britain's exit from the European Union, known as Brexit. Negotiations over the withdrawal are scheduled to start in just 11 days. European leaders want a stable, credible British government capable of negotiating, but Mrs. May's plea to voters for a strong mandate for Brexit failed badly.

The official outcome of the vote may not be known until lunchtime on Friday. But the British pound fell sharply after a national exit poll showing that the Conservatives could lose their majority. Within seconds of the exit poll's release, the pound lost more than 2 cents against the dollar, falling from \$1.2955 to \$1.2752.

Simon Hix, a professor of political science at the London School of Economics, said the projections showed the public's resistance to the complete break from Europe that Mrs. May has championed. Still, Mrs. May was set to win, he asserted. "She hasn't lost this election," he said.

But Steven Fielding, professor of political history at the University of Nottingham, said that he was almost speechless at the projections. If they held, he said, Mrs. May "is gone."

"It's just a matter of time — even if they have a reduced majority," he continued. "She asked for a mandate, she expected a strong endorsement, so her judgment is completely under question."

"She was terrible in the campaign," he added. "She is primarily the person who will be seen to be responsible for this."

Kallum Pickering, a senior economist at Berenberg Bank in London, also suggested that Mrs. May was in trouble.

"Even if May manages to cling on to a majority, we see a real risk that her leadership is challenged, especially following an unsuccessful election campaign that has managed to both weaken her personal credibility and make far-left Labour leader Corbyn relevant

again," he said as the votes were being counted.

Given the two terrorist attacks that took place during the campaign, security was tight on Thursday as Britons voted, with a heavy police presence.

Maria Balas, 28, a waitress, said security was the prime issue. "England is under attack and at this time we need a strong leader more than ever," Ms. Balas said after casting her vote for the governing Conservative Party. "I don't like Theresa May, and I wouldn't have bothered to vote if this election was all about giving her more power to take us into the mess of Brexit, but now we are dealing with a security crisis and I think she is the most qualified person in the running who can deal with that."

In London's eastern borough of Hackney, however, young people seemed more concerned about future job prospects.

"The Tories only care about the rich and their interests," said Luke Wright, 26, who earns £7.50 an hour, or about \$9.70, working at a stationery shop. "If Labour won I'd have a chance to make more cash and get out of this job that I'm overqualified for."

Mrs. May, 60, rolled the dice on April 18 when she broke her promise not to call an early election, three years ahead of schedule, but did so only because she believed the dice were loaded in her favor.

She went into this election with a 20-point lead in most polls and a working majority of just 17 seats in the 650-seat House of Commons, the lower house of Parliament.

While she was personally against Britain's exit from the European Union, or Brexit, in the June 2016 referendum, the vote in favor caused David Cameron to resign, and she emerged as a kind of accidental prime minister.

But she promised voters that she would honor the results of the referendum, using her reputation for toughness "to get the best deal for Britain."

Now, her decision to call a snap election is raising comparisons to Mr. Cameron's decision to hold the referendum in the first place.

"May is a policy politician; she does a very good job in office, and she is a lousy campaigner," said Robert Worcester, the founder of the

MORI/Ipsos polling and research organization. "There was just mistake after mistake coming through."

Mrs. May pledged to curtail immigration, an effort to reach out to the nearly 13 percent of voters in 2015 who voted for the U.K. Independence Party, whose platform was anti-immigrant and pro-Brexit. Many of those voters, especially in the West Midlands and the north, were traditionally Labour supporters, but with the collapse of UKIP, many of them were thought to lean to the Conservatives.

That meant Labour-held seats seemed ripe for the picking, especially since northerners were not enamored of Mr. Corbyn, 68, a far-left urbanite. He seemed weak on defense and security, shaky on economic management and passionate about places like Venezuela and Nicaragua, and had once had strong sympathies for the Irish Republican Army and liked to make jam.

And the centrist Liberal Democrats, who emphasized rerunning the Brexit debate in a second referendum, were getting very little traction. While the business elite were laser-focused on the issue of Britain's future relationship with the European Union, opinion polls showed that the general population had moved beyond that and cared more about domestic issues.

Strangely, for such an important issue, the economic impact of Brexit barely figured in this campaign, perhaps because its strongest effects, should they materialize, will not be felt for some time.

Mrs. May and the Conservatives ran an unusually personal campaign, trying to emphasize the differences between her and Mr. Corbyn on questions of leadership, reliability, economic competence and security, helped by the rabidly anti-Corbyn, pro-Brexit tabloid press.

But the Conservatives did not count on her poor performance on television and shaky presence on the campaign trail, particularly when confronted by hostile questioning. Rather than "strong and stable," as her mantra went, Mrs. May could seem brittle and querulous, repeating slogans rather than dipping into substance.

Her party's manifesto was also vague on figures, and her effort to find more funds for social benefits backfired when she announced, with

little consultation with her cabinet colleagues, her intention to charge the better-off more for extended benefits, saying that old people could keep assets up to 100,000 pounds, including the value of their homes. Quickly labeled “the dementia tax,” it damaged her badly with the Conservatives’ main supporters: older Britons.

“Theresa May doesn’t look happy on the campaign trail,” said Mark Wickham-Jones, professor of political science at the University of Bristol. “And Labour have proved quite effective at chipping away at things like her reluctance to debate.”

At the same time, Mr. Corbyn, who survived an attempt last year by his

own members of Parliament to unseat him as Labour leader, had a very good campaign. Appealing to the young, especially in the big cities, Mr. Corbyn ran on a platform promising more social justice, free college tuition, more money for the National Health Service and welfare, the re-nationalization of the railways and utilities, and much higher taxes on corporations and those earning over £80,000, about \$104,000, a year.

His performances on television were calm and avuncular, with a touch of humor. And as the campaign wore on, he appeared to win back the support of most Labour voters in 2015, plus some Liberal Democrats and Greens.

The polls narrowed. But the Conservatives never lost their lead in any major poll. And party professionals on the ground, especially in marginal seats in the Midlands and the north that the Conservatives had targeted, reported continuing resistance to Mr. Corbyn as a credible prime minister.

The campaign was also marred by two terrorist attacks that caused numerous casualties, in Manchester on May 22 and then, last Saturday, in London. These also seemed to work against Mrs. May, at least at first. As home secretary for six years before becoming prime minister, she was criticized for the security services’ failure to stop the plots and for supporting cuts in beat policing.

Yet, late polling indicated that she benefited from her tough response — especially after the London attack, when she promised new counterterrorism legislation — and had widened the gap with Labour at the end.

The candidates spent the last day of official campaigning racing around the country — Mrs. May by jet, Mr. Corbyn by train. “They underestimated us, didn’t they?” he told a rally in Glasgow.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

UNE - U.K. Voters Deliver Stunning Setback to Theresa May’s Conservatives

LONDON—British voters delivered a stinging rebuke to Prime Minister Theresa May and her ruling Conservative party, depriving her of a majority in Parliament and thrusting the country back into a new period of uncertainty as it prepares to depart from the European Union.

Mrs. May called the election in April, betting she could substantially increase her party’s 17-seat majority and strengthen her hand as she negotiated an EU exit. As polls closed, that gambit immediately appeared to backfire, and as tallying went on, her party lost rather than gained seats.

By early morning, it was clear there would be a so-called hung Parliament, in which no party has command. The surprising blow immediately put Mrs. May’s leadership of her party and of the government in question.

The prime minister acknowledged the uncertain outcome early Friday. “At this time more than anything else, this country needs a period of stability,” Mrs. May told reporters upon winning her own seat. “If the Conservative Party has won the most seats and most votes, it will be incumbent on us to ensure that the country has that period of stability.”

With most races decided, projections put her ruling Conservatives short of the 326 seats needed to win a majority in Britain’s 650-seat Parliament. Early Friday, the British Broadcasting Corporation said it saw the Conservatives winning 318 seats, compared with 330 in the outgoing Parliament. The main opposition Labour Party gained ground to win what some projections put at 267 seats.

The pound sank sharply against the dollar after the exit polls and remained low through the night but the U.K.’s FTSE 100 stock index rose more than 1% in early trading.

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn called on Mrs. May to resign. “The prime minister called the election because she wanted a mandate and the mandate she got is lost seats...and a lost mandate,” he said. “I would think that that’s enough to go.”

Steven Fielding, professor of political history at the University of Nottingham, said Mrs. May’s future as prime minister was at risk.

“The capital she had with her own party—that’s been spent, that’s all gone,” he said. “If you call an election to reinforce your authority, to reinforce your negotiation hand and you don’t get that endorsement, clearly people are going to ask questions about you.”

Projections early Friday suggested a Labour gain of more than 35 seats. In other surprises, the Scottish Nationalist Party lost more than a dozen seats and the Liberal Democrats appeared to have gained several seats.

In a major win in London, the Labour Party gained Battersea from the Conservatives, a sign that anti-Brexit sentiment may have hurt the Conservatives in areas where a majority of people voted to stay in the EU. In another significant result, Labour Party held on to Bridgend in Wales, a key Conservative target that Mrs. May visited near the start of the campaign.

The political uncertainty comes as Britain prepares to begin talks on June 19 on extricating itself from the EU after 44 years. The two sides already face a tight timetable to agree on a host of complex issues.

Depending on the election’s final results, forming a working government could turn out to be a drawn-out process that would threaten to leave Brexit negotiations on hold.

The prospect of a stable coalition similar to the one formed quickly in 2010 between the Conservatives and the smaller Liberal Democrats seems distant. The Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National Party have ruled out joining a coalition, though leaders have said they would consider a looser alliance.

In the event of a hung parliament in the U.K., the incumbent government gets first shot at crafting an administration. The Conservatives may be able to turn to longtime allies in Northern Ireland to support their policy program.

The result marks a startling gain for Mr. Corbyn, a veteran left-winger. He squeaked onto a Labour Party leadership ballot in 2015 and was expected to come in a distant last in a field of four. Instead, Mr. Corbyn galvanized young backers to win that contest. Support from younger voters during the recent seven-week campaign—and a manifesto that struck a chord with the wider public—helped Labour close a yawning polling gap with the Conservatives, though no poll before the elections put Labour in the lead.

If in the coming days the Conservatives can’t build a majority large enough to govern, Mr. Corbyn may get a chance. He can potentially draw on a broader range of center-left parties to build a looser parliamentary alliance, including the SNP, Liberal Democrats and Greens.

Either outcome leaves the path to Brexit more unclear.

Mrs. May, who campaigned for the U.K. to remain in the EU before the June referendum mandated its exit, has laid out plans for a clean break with the bloc, including leaving the European single market to gain tighter control of immigration.

Mr. Corbyn’s Labour Party said it would prioritize retaining the benefits of the single market and keeping closer links to the EU, hinting at a softer approach to talks. But with the party’s backers split between young, urban voters and traditional working-class strongholds that favored Brexit, it has struggled to lay out a clear plan on the issue.

Potential partners have conflicting and sometimes irreconcilable objectives. Some, such as the SNP and Liberal Democrats, hope to keep the U.K. in the single market, complicating the two main parties’ plans. Northern Ireland’s Democratic Unionist Party, a potential ally for the Conservatives, would likely demand its region gets special treatment in any Brexit deal as the price of its support.

To the surprise of most observers—and likely to Mrs. May’s detriment—the election campaign wasn’t dominated by Brexit. Voters paid more heed to bread-and-butter issues such as health care and pensions.

It was on one of those issues that Mrs. May appears to have made a damaging judgment, presenting a complex plan to finance elderly care that bombed with graying voters and their likely heirs, who feared they would have to pay more.

The campaign was twice suspended in response to terror attacks, allowing the Labour Party to focus

on cuts to police numbers during Mrs. May's six years as the minister responsible for security. Any new government will face the immediate challenge of overhauling the country's counterterrorism strategy.

In Mr. Corbyn, Mrs. May and her team encountered a more formidable foe than they had anticipated. His avuncular style and refusal to abandon long-held but unpopular positions contrasted with what many saw as Mrs. May's

robotic campaign appearances and policy reversals.

Maria Caulfield, a Conservative lawmaker in Lewes, said the results would change Parliament. "It's going to be a tense few days while we find

out the results of this election and seeing who is going to be forming the next government," she said.

**The
Washington
Post**

UNE - Jeremy Corbyn calls on Theresa May to resign as British election results show losses for Conservatives

LONDON — British Prime Minister Theresa May's bet that she could strengthen her grip on power by calling an early election backfired spectacularly on Friday, with her Conservative Party losing its parliamentary majority and May facing calls to resign.

The outcome — an astonishing turn following a campaign that began with predictions that May would win in a historic landslide — immediately raised questions even among her fellow Tories about whether she could maintain her hold on 10 Downing Street.

It also threw into disarray the country's plans for leaving the European Union, threatening to render Britain rudderless just days before talks were to begin with European leaders over the terms of the nation's exit.

As of 5 a.m., a projection based on final results in nearly every district nationwide put the Conservatives at 318 seats — eight short of what they would need for a working majority in the 650-member Parliament and well down from the 331 they won just two years ago.

The Labour Party was forecast to win 262 seats — an unexpected gain of dozens of seats under far-left leader Jeremy Corbyn. The outcome gave him at least a chance, albeit a remote one, of becoming prime minister — something virtually no one had thought possible before Thursday's vote.

The results mark the second time in as many years that the British body politic has defied predictions, scrambled the country's direction and bucked the will of a prime minister who had gambled by calling a vote when none had been required.

But unlike last year's E.U. referendum — which delivered a clear if close verdict to get out of the bloc — the will of the voters who cast ballots Thursday was not nearly as easy to decipher.

There was no doubt that the Conservatives would emerge, again, as the largest party. But as Labour unexpectedly picked off seats — especially in areas of London that had voted last year to remain in the E.U. — May's once-

undisputed political authority was being called into question.

A triumphant Corbyn, crowing that the country had "had enough of austerity politics," demanded that she resign.

"The prime minister called the election because she wanted a mandate," Corbyn said in an early-morning speech after winning reelection to his north London district. "Well, the mandate she's got is lost Conservative seats, lost votes, lost support and lost confidence. I would have thought that is enough for her to go, actually."

Minutes later, May — her voice trembling — delivered her own speech in which she said that as long as the Conservatives remain the largest party, they should be allowed to govern.

"The country needs a period of stability," she said.

But it was not a given that May would be allowed to stay on. Within her own party, Thursday's results represented a catastrophic outcome that may prompt a search for a new leader — even if the Tories ultimately have the votes necessary to continue to govern.

"It was a dreadful campaign — and that's me being generous," Anna Soubry, a Tory member of Parliament who narrowly won reelection, told the BBC.

Asked whether May should resign, Soubry replied: "It's bad. She's in a very difficult place."

Other top Tories were declining to appear on television to discuss May's fate amid internal party discussions over whether Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson or another senior figure should be brought in to replace her, BBC anchors reported as dawn broke Friday.

The election results meant that no party won a majority — a scenario known as a hung parliament.

The outcome set off a free-for-all, with both Labour and the Tories seeking to forge alliances that get them to the magic number for a majority.

It is far from clear which parties would team up, or under what arrangements, to try to govern. A "progressive alliance" — including Labour, the Liberal Democrats, Scottish and Welsh nationalists, and others — may have as many seats as the Conservatives. But the Conservatives also have a potential coalition partner in Northern Ireland's right-of-center Democratic Unionist Party, which emerged with 10 seats.

The results — and the turmoil they portend — prompted an immediate drop in the pound, which fell 2 percent against the dollar within minutes after exit polls were released following the end of voting Thursday night.

Tories were incredulous at the early numbers, saying that they thought the results had undersold the party's performance and that official tallies would give them a higher total.

But as the results rolled in, they grew more somber and acknowledged suffering losses that virtually no one had foreseen.

In Europe, observers were bracing for yet more instability out of Britain.

"Could be messy for the United Kingdom in the years ahead," tweeted former Swedish prime minister Carl Bildt. "One mess risks following another. Price to be paid for lack of true leadership."

The results drew intense scrutiny to May's choice to gamble by going back on repeated promises not to call an election before the one that had been due in 2020.

In April, with her popularly spiking and the country seeming to rally around her vow to be a "bloody difficult woman" in talks with European leaders, May stunned Britain with her call for a snap vote that she thought would give her a stronger mandate before the negotiations began.

Observers hailed the move as a cunning bit of political strategy and predicted she would secure the sort of overwhelming parliamentary majority that predecessors Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair had enjoyed.

But after that, little went according to plan.

Thursday's vote follows a turbulent campaign that was interrupted by two mass-casualty terrorist attacks, and that was marked by a faltering performance by May even as Corbyn exceeded expectations.

May — known for her resolute and no-nonsense persona — claimed the nation's top job only last year, emerging from the political wreckage of the country's choice to leave the E.U.

Since then she has had only a slender majority in Parliament — won in a 2015 election when the country was governed by her predecessor, David Cameron — and she had feared that without a bigger cushion she would lack the latitude she needs in steering the country to Brexit.

But the approval May enjoyed in office didn't translate to the campaign trail. A politician who endlessly touted herself as a "strong and stable" finished the race being tagged by critics as "weak and wobbly" after high-profile U-turns, including a particularly disastrous bid to force senior citizens to pay more for social care — a measure derisively dubbed "the dementia tax."

She also ducked debates, and rarely mingled with voters in unscripted moments.

"We've learned what we suspected all along: She's not particularly fast on her feet, she's not a natural campaigner, she's not really a people person," said Tim Bale, a politics professor at Queen Mary University of London.

Lacking the common touch, May's strategy was to focus the campaign on a presidential-style choice between her leadership skills and those of Corbyn. She relentlessly hammered her rival as a far-left throwback to another era who would leave the country vulnerable in both the Brexit talks and at a time of growing terrorist threats.

Corbyn — for decades a backbencher who unexpectedly vaulted to the party's leadership in 2015 with his Bernie Sanders-style message of taking on the 1 percent

— faced a steeply uphill challenge to sell himself as a potential prime minister.

But he was widely seen to have mounted a far more credible challenge than many thought possible, running a nothing-to-lose campaign focused on ending seven years of Tory austerity policies and shrinking the gap between rich and poor.

Even if he doesn't prevail, his performance has undoubtedly saved his job as Labour leader — a stinging blow for more-centrist party figures who had quietly hoped the harsh glare of a national campaign would leave him exposed and force him to step aside.

Deep into Friday morning, Labour lawmakers who had spent nearly two years trying to overthrow Corbyn lined up to appear on television and sing his praises.

The results are a vindication of Corbyn's decision to focus the campaign on Tory budget cuts rather than allow it to be defined by Brexit.

May had wanted the vote to be a referendum on her Brexit plan. But Corbyn spent little time discussing the issue.

Like the prime minister, Corbyn halfheartedly favored a vote to "remain" in the E.U. during the Brexit referendum. But also like May, he promised not to obstruct the will of voters and to follow through on their desires if they approved an exit.

Negotiations with the remaining 27 members of the E.U. are due to kick off in a little over a week. Even before Thursday's vote, May had faced long odds in delivering the successful exit she has promised. If she is still in office, her job has become even harder following the rejection of her plea for a broader mandate.

May had vowed a hard break with the bloc that leaves Britain outside the single market, the customs union and the European Court of Justice. But she has also promised to deliver a free-trade deal that will preserve the best elements of membership without many of the onerous burdens.

European leaders scoff at such a notion, and say that Britain's demands for E.U. benefits without responsibilities will have to be denied lest the country's departure trigger a rush to the exits by other nations demanding the same sweetheart deal.

If she prevails, May also will be under pressure to deliver on pledges to expand the powers of police and other security services following three deadly terrorist attacks this spring, including two in the midst of the campaign.

After the most recent attack — a van-and-knife rampage in London

that left eight dead — May said that "enough is enough" and promised a sweeping review of the nation's counterterrorism rules.

Many observers thought the attacks would play to May's advantage. But Corbyn managed to flip one of his potential areas of weakness — security — to a strength by hitting out at May for the cuts to police budgets she had authorized as the nation's home secretary, the top domestic security official.

He promised to put more cops back on the beat — a message that aligned with his broader mantra.

"It's sort of like Labour offering a huge platter of beautiful juicy burgers and steak and fried food in front of voters. And the Tories are like, 'Think about the bill!' and the voters are like, 'We don't want cold radish again!'" said Rob Ford, a politics professor at the University of Manchester. "You can see why people find that appealing."

POLITICO Theresa May clings on after UK returns a hung parliament

Cynthia Kroet

LONDON — Britain woke up Friday morning more divided and uncertain about its future than anyone thought possible.

A general election that was supposed to settle political and constitutional questions thrown up by Britain's exit from the European Union failed — answering none, raising more and leaving no party with a majority in parliament.

From a position of relative strength, dominating a compliant parliament which had accepted Brexit, Prime Minister Theresa May was left struggling to cling on to her job, unsure whether she would even be able to form a government.

By midday, aides had made clear she intended to stay on, at least for now, and would aim to establish a government with the support of Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party. Downing Street said she would go to Buckingham Palace at 12:30 p.m. U.K. time to tell the Queen she was in a position to form an administration.

With one constituency still to declare its result, May's Conservatives had won 318 seats in the 650-member House of Commons. Labour won 261, the Scottish National Party 35, the Liberal Democrats 12, and other parties 23 seats.

After a night of political drama which saw Labour's vote share surge by 10 points, halving its 2010 deficit, three things seem certain: May is deeply damaged; Jeremy Corbyn is safe as Labour Party leader for as

long as he wants; and Britain is in for a prolonged period of political instability which may only be solved by a second general election.

If Brussels had come round to the prospect of an unyielding two-year Brexit negotiation under May — grating in its parochialism maybe, but at least grown-up — they now face the nightmare prospect of a new partner across the table or a weakened May beholden to her backbenchers and a small retinue of Northern Irish MPs.

Labour said it was ready to form a minority government, although it seemed unlikely the party could garner the necessary support from other parties.

"We are offering to put forward the program on which we fought the election. We have done no deals, no pacts with anybody," Corbyn said. "We will put forward our point of view. We are of course ready to serve."

Brexit is also now up in the air — as even David Davis admitted. The Brexit secretary told Sky News at 2:30 a.m. that the election was, in part, about getting a mandate for "the sort of Brexit we want." It was also designed to give the government more time to complete the process by ensuring that the incoming administration would have a clear five years before having to call an election.

He suggested the U.K. government may have lost a mandate to exit customs union and single market. "[Our manifesto] said we wanted to leave the customs union and the

single market, but get access to them. That's what it was about, that's what we put in front of the British people, we'll see by tomorrow whether they've accepted that or not," he said.

Nigel Farage was quick to warn that he would re-enter the political fray if Brexit was softened. "We may well be looking down the barrel of a second referendum."

The Democratic Unionist Party — if they form an alliance with the Tories — will look to soften Brexit around the edges, particularly in order to ensure there is no threat to the soft border with the Republic of Ireland, so crucial for the region's economic security.

Calls for May to quit

Boris Johnson is the most obvious Tory winner from the fallout. When a steady but uninspiring leader has been found wanting, they may turn — sooner or later — to a tried and tested winner with the charisma to take on Corbyn.

Some Conservatives called for May to go but many others were conspicuously quiet while they reflected on their next moves.

Anna Soubry, a former minister, said May needed to "consider her position". On ITV, former Chancellor George Osborne, whom May fired on taking office, did not hold back: "The manifesto, which was drafted by her and about two other people, was a total disaster. It must go down now as one of the worst manifestos in history by a governing party. I say

one of the worst, I can't think of a worse one."

Corbyn was also quick to call on May to quit. "This election was called in order for the prime minister to gain a larger majority in order to assert her authority. The mandate she's got is lost Conservative seats, lost votes, lost support and lost confidence. I would have thought that's enough to go, actually, and make way for a government that will be truly representative of all of the people of this country."

The one consolation for Tory MPs was the party's performance in Scotland, whose place in the union looks more secure after a wounding night for the SNP, which lost seats — and its leader in Westminster Angus Robertson, and former First Minister Alex Salmond — to the three unionist parties.

In the early hours of the morning May appeared, voice clearly shaking, to give what amounted to a holding statement at her count in Maidenhead, pleading for a "period of stability" for the country, but failing to address her own future.

"Votes are still being counted," she said, "but at this time more than anything else this country needs a period of stability. If, as the indications have shown, the Conservative Party has won the most seats and probably the most votes then it will be incumbent on us to ensure that we have that period of stability and that is exactly what we will do."

Corbyn, despite finishing a distant second, was the clear winner of the

night, forcing many of his fiercest opponents to eat their words.

Labour's Peter Hain, a former minister, said Corbyn had

"harnessed an enormous protest movement in this country" to defy expectations.

"I don't think people saw him as a prime minister but they saw him as someone who spoke up for their values against a political class who weren't listening. Brexit is now up for

grabs. It's going to be very difficult to have the hard-right Brexit she wanted."



Raphael : Theresa May's Biggest Mistake - Bloomberg

It's happened again: The leader of a mainstream party was given favorable election odds, ran a poor campaign, got trounced on social media and was taught a painful lesson by voters. It's tempting to ask if they'll ever learn.

Theresa May, the U.K. prime minister, is known as a careful plodder, more technocrat and master-of-the-brief than gladiator. But she took the biggest gamble possible in politics: She called an election she didn't have to call in a bid to increase her governing majority. David Cameron did something similar in deciding to put Britain's membership in the European Union up for a vote last year. Both thought victory was assured and both were punished for their hubris.

It isn't clear yet if May will lose her job as Cameron did. But the election has big implications regardless -- for politics, domestic policy and especially the Brexit negotiations that begin in 11 days.

As the initial exit polls showed a loss of Tory seats last night, the realization set in that, once again, voters weren't following the script. The Conservatives ended the night having lost their governing majority and facing a hung parliament; they're projected to get 318 seats. They will most likely stagger

on as a minority government, getting support where they can.

This is miles from the thumping majority May expected. And Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party pulled off a historic reversal of fortune from the start of the campaign, when it trailed the Tories by more than 20 percentage points. Labour is expected to add around 35 seats from the 232 it received in 2015, an extraordinary coup. Only a short while ago, union boss Len McCluskey was saying that 200 seats would be a good result.

It may seem that Thursday's election changes little: A Conservative prime minister will still occupy 10 Downing Street and Brexit still means Brexit. But in Britain's winner-take-all system, a narrow majority can change the landscape significantly.

One immediate question is whether May will continue as prime minister; that's hard to imagine now. The Conservatives are an unforgiving bunch. But they may decide that with the Brexit negotiations beginning so soon, and with such a slim majority, there's too much to lose now to succumb to in-fighting and become distracted by another leadership election.

If May stays on, her job will become much harder. The fact of Brexit doesn't change with this election, but the shape of it almost certainly does. The government will have to rely on parties that disagree with its

approach to pass a hugely complex deal -- if one is reached at all -- through two houses of parliament. That may mean a gentler Brexit; or just a more confusing one.

Assuming May achieves a new trade deal with the EU and a smooth exit in 2019, Bloomberg Intelligence's forecast is that the U.K. economy will still be 2 percent smaller than had it remained in the EU. With a weakened Conservative government, that may be optimistic.

Where did May go wrong? Set aside her manifesto U-turn, her wooden television performances, the awkward refusal to join the debate, and her overuse of the phrase "strong and stable." May simply fought a negative campaign. The Tory marketing material that arrived in our home mainly warned of doomsday scenarios under a Labour leadership, in language that was suggestive of a hostile alien landing -- it was reminiscent of Hillary Clinton's warning of Donald Trump's invasion, which likewise backfired.

In the U.K. election, the scaremongering was even less effective, just as the scaremongering about Brexit didn't work. Voters don't like being bullied. Today's Labour voters, many of them young, don't remember the socialist experiments of 1970s but are still smarting from the financial crisis. They find Corbyn's promises of stimulus and spending on

services attractive; "nationalization" isn't such a dirty word to them.

Ultimately, May seemed to harbor the same twin conceits as Cameron, Clinton and even France's mainstream parties: All underestimated the appeal of their opponent's message, and all assumed that voter support was sticky -- that once you have it, you get to hold it. Like a fading brick-and-mortar retailer, they banked on loyalty that no longer exists.

Today's voters instead resemble online shoppers. They can move quickly and impulsively, but are also ruthless, inclined to deliver a scathing review, and quick to demand a refund if they aren't happy. Misreading that was May's biggest error: She looked at poll figures back in April and saw a stock instead of a flow. With party loyalty at a low in the U.K., as elsewhere, there's more onus on a leader's personality, so each one of May's missteps -- and there were many -- were magnified.

There's irony in how May got here. Cameron sought to put an end to Tory divisions over Europe by holding a referendum that would settle the matter, unite the party and keep it in power. When his gamble failed, May inherited Brexit and the party, with its simmering divisions. She called a vote of her own to settle any remaining doubts and strengthen her hand. Her party is still clinging to power -- but only just.



Theresa May's Disastrous Gamble: Britain's Hung Parliament Threatens Brexit

Sykes & Hines

LONDON—Britain has been plunged into chaos and uncertainty after the country's general election saw no party win an overall majority of lawmakers in the country's legislature, resulting in a "hung parliament."

The result, which seems likely to derail Brexit negotiations, was a personal and political disaster for Theresa May, the Conservative prime minister who called the early election and had been widely expected to sweep the boards, but instead lost seats.

The Conservative party, does, however, remain the largest party.

It is expected that the Conservatives will win 319 seats to Labour's 261—but May's authority has been, perhaps fatally, undermined.

In a tumultuous night of election drama, May was humbled by the British electorate and the hard-left Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who was previously being written off as the weakest major party leader in a generation.

There were widespread calls for May to resign as the extent of the debacle became clear. She called the snap general election in order to strengthen her Brexit negotiating hand, but instead saw her gamble backfire as the Labour party gained 30 seats, depriving the

Conservatives of their narrow overall majority in the House of Commons.

May did not indicate that she would resign however, appearing to suggest, as she made a short speech after winning her own seat, that she would attempt to form a government, saying, "This country needs a period of stability."

The most likely option is for the Conservatives to ally with the small Northern Irish unionist political party, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), which has 10 Members of Parliament (MPs).

Corbyn led calls for May to step down, saying, "Make way for a government that will be truly

representative of all of the people of this country."

With just nine days to go until the official start date of Brexit negotiations, the result was immediately hailed by those opposed to a hard Brexit as a clarion call for a moderate alliance.

Corbyn said during the campaign that he respected the Brexit referendum result, but wanted the U.K. to stay in the single European market, something May had ruled out.

The only member of the Green Party to be returned to Parliament, Caroline Lucas, said that she hoped "progressives" could and would work

together to avoid the “extreme” Brexit that Theresa May wanted.

The Liberal Democrats, the only party to explicitly campaign on a platform of remaining in the EU, are expected to take 14 seats, up from the eight they held going into the election.

As dawn broke, it became clear that the Conservatives, while remaining the largest party, could not win the 326 seats needed for an overall majority.

Whether she is able to form a minority government or not, the result is dismal for Britain’s second female prime minister. She called the snap election to increase her slender majority of 12 in the House of Commons but will now end up with far fewer seats.

Throughout the night, tension built as early vote counts suggested that exit-poll predictions, which pointed to a hung parliament, were holding up, with signs of an unexpected Brexit backlash against May in areas that voted to Remain in Europe.

As the results came in, there were some clear regional patterns. Labour swept London on an apparent surge of anti-Brexit sentiment, but the Conservatives performed strongly against the Liberal Democrats outside the capital. In Scotland, the Scottish National Party had a terrible night, losing seats to all three of their main rivals, which should mean the prospect of a second Scottish independence referendum in the near future is receding.

Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson said the SNP losses mean a second independence referendum is now “dead.”

“It isn’t clear who has won this election. but it’s very obvious who

has lost, and Mrs. May should face the consequences,” said former SNP leader Alec Salmond, who lost his own seat.

Conservative Member of Parliament Anna Soubry acknowledged that her boss, Theresa May, had a “dreadful” election. “I think she’s in a very difficult place,” she said. “She needs to consider her position.”

The former Tory minister admitted that the result may change the government’s Brexit negotiating position.

By May’s own rationale, a strong majority was required in order to be able to deliver successful Brexit negotiations. Politicians from all of the main parties said overnight that the Brexit situation had now changed. It is still unlikely that Britain will remain in the EU but there may now be room for negotiating a compromise deal that keeps Britain in the single market or sees the U.K. continue to make substantial contributions in order to be allowed partial access.

Even the most fan has spent the last six weeks talking about ways in which the Labour Party could have a good defeat. Hardly anyone believed that Britain could be forced into a hung parliament.

“This is astonishingly bad,” said Simon Hix, professor of political science at the London School of Economics. “The knives have been out for several weeks. It’s a question of how long May can survive this.”

She was seen as a safe pair of hands when she assumed the role in July last year, but she only had a working majority of 12 in the House of Commons, which meant factions on either wing of the Conservative Party were able to hold her hostage on a host of issues, principally involving Britain’s complicated

divorce proceedings from the European Union.

May wanted a much bigger majority—and a mandate of her own. David Cameron’s post-Brexit resignation and an abortive Tory leadership election made her the default choice. She wanted to be able to say the country had chosen her.

Her wish has in one sense been granted because she won the most seats—but it has come at catastrophic cost.

Sir Robert Worcester, who founded the MORI polling company in 1969, said he saw strong parallels between May and Hillary Clinton. “It’s a very good comparison—May was very good running a department, being a senior minister but a lousy campaigner,” he told *The Daily Beast*. “Neither have the charm oozing out of them like Bill Clinton, but May could have done better, everything was so fixed—closed events with no questions, she could have taken a bit of heckling, maybe gone to Speaker’s Corner?”

What looked like a guaranteed landslide election—with much of the electoral map turning blue for the Conservatives—appeared to transform into a much tighter race during the short campaign.

Last month, districts like Ilford North, a suburb to the east of London that has bounced back and forth between Labour and the Conservatives since 1992, were expected to easily revert to the Tories as the Labour vote was wiped out in all but the most urban of areas.

Yet polls this week suggested that swing districts were very much back in play, and, in the event Labour successfully defended its tiny majority in Ilford North.

Britain does not have a presidential system, so votes are cast for prospective members of Parliament (MPs) who will, in turn, select a prime minister.

However, in reality, most voters interviewed by *The Daily Beast* said the decision for them was a straight shootout between May and Corbyn.

“This is the most appalling election I’ve come across,” said Patricia Miller, 82, a retired company assistant. “At the beginning of this, I thought Theresa May was strong and stable, and Jeremy Corbyn was unelectable, but she has struggled in stressful situations in the campaign.”

Sam Jameson, 39, who runs her own cosmetics company called Soapsmith, said she had voted Conservative.

“People would have expected me to vote Labour,” she said. “I do like Corbyn, he’s got some nice policies that people want—like nationalization—but he’s got a raggle-taggle bunch of MPs.”

Labour achieved their stunning result with the most left-wing manifesto in a generation, which promised to bring rail and water back into public ownership, raise tax on companies and wealthy individuals, and increase spending on the National Health Service, education, and social care.

Joan Stansfield, 60, said she had decided to return to the Labour fold in recent weeks because Westminster had become stale. “My generation has been very selfish. Corbyn has brought a new freshness to politics,” she said.

But no-one was expecting *this* much freshness.

POLITICO 5 takeaways from the UK election

Charlie Cooper

LONDON — It was an astonishing election by any estimation. A prime minister humiliated, a Labour leader dismissed as a no-hoper massively outperforming expectations, Britain’s government and the nature of its upcoming exit from the European Union thrown into the air.

Here are some key takeaways from the U.K.’s June 8 election.

1. Return of two-party politics

The combined vote share of the two main parties, as it stood at 5:30 a.m. U.K. time with more than 620 seats declared, was 82.7 percent, up from 67.3 percent just two years ago and

the highest in any general election since 1970.

Despite their misery at losing their majority, the Conservatives, on 42.3 percent of the vote, polled better than they have done since 1983. Labour’s 40.4 percent is its best national performance since Tony Blair’s second general election in 2001.

There are several explanations for Britain’s dramatic return to dominance of the Conservative and Labour.

UKIP collapsed. In recent elections, the anti-EU party was a recipient of the so-called protest vote, and a lightning rod in 2015 for voters

concerned about immigration and the influence of Brussels. That year it took 12.7 percent of the vote, giving the Euroskeptic party, in terms of vote share at least, third place. But last year’s EU referendum turned UKIP’s unique selling point — its intention to get Britain out of the EU — into the mainstream policy goal of both the Conservatives and Labour. Millions of voters who had deserted traditional leading parties for UKIP “came home” in 2017.

Meanwhile, the collapse of the traditional third party, the Liberal Democrats, in 2015, after entering coalition government with the Tories and losing its longstanding protest

vote, has not been reversed. In fact, the party appears likely to take an even lower national vote share this time after a campaign that bet the house on an ardently pro-EU stance. Britain’s first past the post electoral system means the party will likely take marginally more seats this time, but as a recipient of a major segment of the U.K. population’s vote — in 2010, 23 percent backed it — the party seems diminished, perhaps permanently so.

Add in the shine coming off the SNP’s offer of Scottish independence north of the border and left-wing Green supporters

flirting with Corbyn, and you have a formula for two-party dominance.

2. Failure of political intelligence

Pollsters have not forgotten getting the 2015 election badly wrong. Most predicted the parties would be neck-and-neck throughout, only to see the Conservatives comfortably become the largest party. A subsequent inquest led to a range of new polling methods.

For most, it didn't work out. The majority of polling companies gave the Conservatives a comfortable lead going into polling day. The actual result proved much closer to the result predicted by Survation and projections by an experimental model used by YouGov called MRP — multi-level regression and post-stratification, for the nerds out there — which received considerable disdain for veering so far from the trend during the campaign. Both gave more credence than other polling companies to claims from young voters that this time, despite historical precedent, they would go out and vote. So it has proved.

But it is not just the pollsters who had it wrong. None of the Conservative and Labour MPs POLITICO spoke to in the final days of the campaign predicted this. Jim Messina, the election data guru who helped Barack Obama reach the White House and a member of May's team, declared on Twitter on May 31 after YouGov's new modeling first projected a hung parliament that he was "laughing at yet another stupid YouGov poll."

Newspapers and broadcasters also failed to pick up on the scale of the Labour surge coming down the track. Labour did however, dominate on social media channels. According to Campaign magazine it has a

much higher level of engagement on Facebook — around 80,000 to 100,000 engagements daily in the last week of the campaign, compared 30,000 to 40,000 for the Conservatives.

Obviously you can't tell who's winning by looking at social media, but nor it seems can you tell by looking at most polls.

3. Brexit democratic revolution ain't over

Turnout, as of 6 a.m., was 68.7 percent — the highest in a U.K. general election since Tony Blair's landslide win in 1997. It seems likely the high figure can be attributed, in part, to many who voted in Britain's EU referendum for the first time voting again.

It is also likely, though we will have to wait for detailed demographic information, that Corbyn's popularity among young voters — as demonstrated in all polls — motivated a higher youth turnout than normal. Just 43 percent of 18 to 24-year-olds voted in 2015. Estimates of how many voted in the EU referendum vary, but it seems to have been far higher, perhaps as high as 70 percent. The vast majority backed Remain and may have felt like a vote for Corbyn — despite his embrace of Brexit — was a vote for revenge on the older generations, a large majority of whom back Brexit and the Conservatives.

It was those polling companies that did the least to down-weight the voting intentions of young respondents that came closest to the actual vote share margins — the revenge of Britain's young.

4. Big beasts fallen

At every election, amid the cheers of the victors, Britain rings to the dying moans of many a big beast's political life. 2017 was no exception.

Several Conservative ministers fell to the Labour surge. Cabinet Office minister Ben Gummer, an influential figure in May's short-lived first administration, lost his Ipswich seat to Labour's Sandy Martin. Health minister Nicola Blackwood lost her strongly Remain-voting Oxford West seat to the pro-EU Liberal Democrats' candidate Layla Moran. Labour's hugely successful night in London saw Treasury minister Jane Ellison lose her Battersea seat to Labour opponent Marsha de Cordova.

Elsewhere, the former Liberal Democrat leader, and one of Parliament's leading experts on the EU, Nick Clegg, lost his Sheffield Hallam seat to Labour. Clegg, whose support in the area plummeted after he took the Lib Dems into coalition with the Conservatives in 2010, was run close in 2015 and lost the seat this time by more than 2,000 votes. He said the new Parliament would preside over "a deeply, deeply divided and polarized nation" — most of all "between young and old."

In Scotland, the SNP's bad night was compounded by losing its former leader Alex Salmond from Parliament, along with its Westminster leader Angus Robertson. Their Brexit spokesman, Stephen Gethins, clung on in Fife North East by just two votes.

5. Sweet revenge

"What are we doing losing Battersea?" asked George Osborne, aghast.

His decision to join ITV's election night coverage gave the country a hugely enjoyable study of a scorned man, vindicated. The former Chancellor, the man who was once the smart better's choice for next prime minister, was sacked by Theresa May less than a year ago after he and David Cameron botched the EU referendum. She reportedly told him to "get to know the party better."

Osborne, who advised against holding a referendum in the first place, and helped to mastermind the Tories' successful 2015 campaign, must be tempted to suggest that May spend some time getting to know the country better.

Now the editor of the London Evening Standard, Osborne appeared on ITV's panel with his former opponent, Labour's ex-shadow chancellor Ed Balls.

He didn't pull his punches. On seeing the shock exit poll that projected a hung parliament, he made the early call of a "catastrophic" night for his party.

Later, in the early hours of the morning, he let rip at May and the team of advisors who ousted him. The Conservative manifesto 2017 "which was drafted by her and about two other people was a total disaster and must go down now as one of the worst manifestos in history by a governing party.

"I say one of the worst, I can't think of a worse one."

A dish of revenge served cold for Theresa May's breakfast.



Simpson : That Time Theresa May Forgot that Elections Come With Opponents

Like war, elections are not exercises in project management.

Yet Prime Minister Theresa May approached last night's general election as if it were — just one more sequential step on her Brexit planning timeline, something to neatly check off between the formal Article 50 notification to leave the European Union in March, and the start of negotiations with the EU later this June. This mechanistic approach, in turn, translated into a tedious and robotic campaign, which combined a monomaniacal focus on "strong and stable leadership" with an effort to build a bizarre personality cult around May, to the

point where Tory literature barely mentioned the Conservative Party.

This left the Tories with no positive message, and when a live Labour enemy showed up, May's script fell apart. If current projections regarding the one still undeclared seat are right, this morning finds the Conservatives with 319 seats in Parliament (out of 650): 11 fewer than before, and short of an overall majority of 326. Labour, by contrast, picked up 29 additional seats, and while still behind on 261, boosted its share of the vote by more than any party since 1945. Now twice in two years, a Conservative prime minister who promised stability has delivered chaos.

The biggest hole in the Tory battle plan should have been obvious: Whether or not one thinks Brexit is a good idea, it is plainly not about stability, or continuity.

The biggest hole in the Tory battle plan should have been obvious: Whether or not one thinks Brexit is a good idea, it is plainly not about stability, or continuity. It's potentially the most radical change in U.K. domestic and foreign policy in half a century, a step that will change the daily lives of everyone in this country and that of their children.

May was consistently caught between these two realities, backing Brexit, but refusing to commit to its potential for upheaval, good or bad.

And when pushed, the woman who sought to project strength and stability proved to be a rather spineless politician, who meekly told people what they wanted to hear. Business heard that there would be no sharp break with the vital EU single market; her base heard that she would be a "difficult woman" who would not simply accept the EU's terms to stay in that market (which would involve a relationship like Norway's, in which the U.K. accepts many EU rules). In the end, her genuine attitude to Brexit remained opaque, and she sounded evasive and nervous when questioned on this most fundamental point.

The other major Tory mistake in this election was to overlook the generational divide that now defines British politics. Today, the 18-25 and 65+ age groups, respectively, form the key Labour or Conservative constituencies. (Socioeconomic class, however, appears from the same data set to show roughly the same spread across both parties). The Tory dependence on older voters explains why May had to U-turn on her policy to have them pay more for social care, which was received with outrage, even if it made fiscal sense. This shift on a major manifesto commitment blew up her strong and stable image, upon which her campaign was founded.

But of course, credit where credit is due. Jeremy Corbyn, who has been much maligned over the last two years now looks like he will end up outliving two Conservative prime ministers. His biggest strength, in contrast to May, is his sincerity, which was even recognized during the campaign by the likes of Nigel Farage. Unlike May, people trust that he means what he says, even if they disagree with him. His biggest weaknesses are his own hard-left political views, which are well outside of the mainstream. But that problem was mitigated by Labour's manifesto, which reflected the attitude of the majority of Labour MPs, and was far closer to the center than Corbyn's own views. It also didn't hurt that many seem to have voted for Labour as a protest

against an arrogant Tory campaign that took victory, and by implication the British people, for granted.

So what now?

We have a hung Parliament in which no party has the necessary 326 majority to form a government by itself. The last time this occurred was in 2010, leading to a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition with a majority of 36. Today, however, the most likely outcome is that the Tories form a coalition with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) from Northern Ireland, which adds their 10 seats to the 319 Tory seats to give a wafer-thin majority of only 3.

That outcome is a recipe for unstable government. Even beyond obvious frictions over the terms of access to the EU single market, the Brexit deal as a whole requires agreement on a range of issues, from the customs union (which is distinct from the single market) to a "Great Repeal Bill" which seeks to convert all EU law to U.K. law, while leaving out unwanted parts.

The customs union will be very thorny with the DUP, who do not want a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland

The customs union will be very thorny with the DUP, who do not want a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland; there is no realistic way to keep the border open without effectively accepting all

the EU's terms, as the Irish-Northern Irish border is soon due to become an EU external border. Likewise, the Great Repeal Bill deals with a whole range of contentious issues that will be very hard to get through if the government cannot afford to lose even three votes. In short, do not be surprised if we see new elections within a year.

May herself has refused to resign, and she could stumble on for a while for want of an alternative if the hard Brexiteers stand behind her. But her authority has taken a mighty blow, and having called this election in part to get out of the grip of the right wing of her own party, she now finds herself hostage to them.

What about Brexit, the most important issue in the country today? One argument says that a so-called soft Brexit, in which the U.K. economy stays plugged into the EU single market, is now more likely, given that was what the Labour party effectively campaigned for, and they now have more influence in Parliament.

But this argument is problematic. For with such a thin majority, the hard Brexiteers can now without difficulty frustrate any government, whether led by May or not, that does not take a hard line on EU negotiations. In my view, the result actually makes an accident, in which the U.K. crashes out the EU without a deal, more likely. (The hard Brexiteers will tell you that the EU needs a deal as much as the U.K.,

and so the U.K. has the leverage to get a deal on London's terms that has all the benefits of the single market without any of the burdens. Ignore them. That is pure fantasy).

If there is a glimmer of stability that has emerged from this election it is that of the United Kingdom itself. The Scottish National Party did badly, losing 21 MPs, including their leader in Westminster, Angus Robertson. This makes the case for a second Scottish independence referendum recede into the distance, for now.

Theresa May has only herself to blame for this mess. She called for battle, but forgot about the enemy. Her side have just about won the field, but at far too high a cost. Several members of her Cabinet lost their seats fighting for her, and far from cauterizing the wounds of the Brexit referendum, her strategy has only increased the bad blood all round that has flowed from that vile, divisive experience.

Two weeks ago, when the Tories still expected to come out of this with a massive new majority, Theresa May attacked Jeremy Corbyn as being "naked and alone" — as if he were leading Labour as one might do a nudist colony, who see nothing ridiculous about themselves. But as fate would have it, as a nervous peace descends on the battlefield, like a medieval knight thrown from her horse, May finds herself stripped of her armor, naked, alone, and possibly left for dead.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

In U.K. Election, Jeremy Corbyn Defies Expectations

Jenny Gross

LONDON—Two months ago, Jeremy Corbyn was ridiculed as one of the weakest candidates for prime minister in British political history, a sure bet to steer his opposition Labour Party to humiliating defeat and diminished influence.

But Mr. Corbyn's party confounded expectations by gaining significant clout in Parliament, not losing it. The humiliation was on the other side of the contest, as Prime Minister Theresa May's ruling Conservatives lost their majority, leaving no party clearly in command.

With most races decided, Labour won what some projections put at 267 seats in the 650-seat Parliament, a big increase—compared with 318 seats for Mrs. May's Conservatives.

"If there is a message from tonight's results, it's this: The prime minister called this election because she wanted a mandate," Mr. Corbyn said. "Well the mandate she's got is

lost Conservative seats, lost votes, lost support and lost confidence."

Supporters saw his better-than-expected performance as a powerful vindication of his leftist platform. Tony Travers, politics professor at the London School of Economics, said the results will spur Mr. Corbyn's supporters to say his model, as opposed to the more centrist ideology of former Prime Minister Tony Blair, will win in the next election.

"He will have won it while losing," Mr. Travers said. "The expectations for her were too high at the beginning of the election, and for him the expectations were so low that he could never have done much worse than those expectations."

More moderate Labour voters and members of Parliament, however, were likely to view the party's third straight failure to win an election as proof that it needs a fresh strategy.

Mrs. May's decision to call snap elections seven weeks ago reflected her confidence that she could

expand her party's majority in Parliament and strengthen her government's mandate in what are expected to be arduous and contentious talks over Brexit, which begin later this month.

Instead, her showing, if confirmed, marks a significant blow to Mrs. May and raises questions about her grip on the party and her ability to stay on as leader.

Having run an surprisingly effective campaign, Mr. Corbyn faces no such predicament.

From a low of 15% in March, the percentage of people who thought Mr. Corbyn was doing well rose to 34% this week, according to a poll by YouGov PLC. Meanwhile, Mrs. May, 60, saw her rating slide from 53% to 46% during the period.

Mr. Corbyn's smooth campaign, compared with a wobbly one by Mrs. May, burnished his image. His antiwar, antiausterity message, which has remained mostly unchanged during his 34 years in Parliament, tapped the frustration of

voters with centrist politics. His campaign slogan—"For the Many, Not the Few"—resonated with voters, some of whom are feeling the pinch after years of Conservative cuts to public services.

As results poured in, Mr. Corbyn said in a tweet: "Whatever the final result, our positive campaign has changed politics for the better."

Labour's platform also was sunnier than the Conservative's, boasting promises to increase funding for Britain's National Health Service and to make college tuition free again.

Mr. Corbyn appeared to draw support during the campaign from his outspoken criticism of President Donald Trump. While voters criticized Mrs. May for not opposing Mr. Trump's decision to pull out of the Paris climate agreement more strongly, the Labour leader said he would take a tougher approach than the prime minister.

The Labour Party's social-media campaign also was more aggressive. Momentum, a pro-

Labour initiative, helped the party reach younger voters with an app that allows activists to phone other Momentum members and encourage them to canvass voters. It also used graphics, memes and video clips to counter negative messaging by the Conservatives and right-wing newspapers.

A video of Mrs. May refusing to debate Mr. Corbyn attracted 4.3

million views in three days, Momentum said. A website that provided directions to campaign events in swing districts and offered carpooling options was also effective, a spokesman for the group said.

As voters cast their ballots in Islington in north London, some said Mr. Corbyn's well-run campaign had improved their opinions of him. "He

[used to] look a bit disheveled and didn't come across like a credible leader but he definitely upped his game," said Catherine Shipley, a 38-year-old mother of two.

Anand Menon, professor of European politics at King's College London, said Mr. Corbyn had drawn higher-than-anticipated support at the polls because of his ability to

connect with voters at campaign appearances and on television.

"He's been lucky that he's against an opponent who is worse than he is at the things he's bad at," he said. "He's overall been better than expected, but given how bad Theresa May is and has been, that's quite a low bar."

POLITICO 8 election blunders that cost Theresa May her majority

Annabelle
Dickson

LONDON — She took a gamble and it backfired spectacularly.

Theresa May called an election when she had no need to do so, betting that she would trounce Jeremy Corbyn's Labour party and win an increased majority before beginning Brexit negotiations with the EU.

Now her Conservatives have lost their majority after a weak and wobbly campaign that undermined the party's message of "strong and stable" leadership.

As the campaign drew to a close, POLITICO spoke to veterans of U.K. election battles who shed light on May's key mistakes.

1. Failing to 'roll the pitch'

May's predecessor David Cameron talked about "rolling the pitch" — the cricketing term for preparing the ground — ahead of election campaigns. Instead, the Conservative manifesto centerpiece — plugging the funding black hole for social care by making people foot the bill after their death by drawing on any assets they have over £100,000 — came as a bolt from the blue.

Omitting costings from the Conservative manifesto put the party on the back foot over economic competence.

Craig Oliver, David Cameron's director of communications, said that unless big policy ideas are introduced to people gradually, reactions tend to be "very, very strong."

"I think there is definitely a sense that if you haven't rolled the pitch and actually led people to a certain position then it becomes very hard," he said.

2. A leader but not a campaigner

May was meant to be the Tories' trump card but she has looked like she would rather be anywhere else than on the campaign trail, appearing unsure and wooden.

Ayesha Hazarika, a former adviser to senior Labour politicians, said the Tories' decision to run a presidential-style campaign needed a "high wattage, high voltage person." Anyone with a "modicum of objectivity" would have understood that May was not a "natural confident, fluent performer," Hazarika said. "She doesn't come alive in front of a crowd. Some people are, other people aren't. It is just the fact," she said.

A former Tory campaign staffer said May, who rarely did media interviews in her previous job of home secretary, was "not as nimble" a performer as Cameron because she hadn't had the practice.

3. Team May too small

May prefers to rely on a small circle of close advisers. Hazarika said she should have been more collegiate and drawn more on other talents in the party. "When it went wrong she suddenly looked very, very lonely," she said.

"We know when you are leader, it is easy to develop a clique and a bunker when you are in government. It is dangerous to do that when you are running a political campaign, you can't afford to quickly lose touch with the public and your own grassroots base and your members," she said. "That is obviously what happened with the dementia tax. They clearly were not engaging with members. That is why they missed how much of stinker that dementia tax would be."

Concerns about the economic impact of cutting immigration remained unanswered.

Oliver said: "I also think the other problem was that it was pretty evident that a lot of people in the cabinet felt they hadn't been involved in this and that the policy over social care was as much of a surprise to them."

4. Mixed messages

May's manifesto suggested the party was stealing Labour's clothes with a pitch to the so-called "just

about managing" — working-class voters on lower incomes.

But her decision to renew the Tory manifesto offer of a free vote in parliament on fox hunting, and her support for the return of the blood sport, reminded people that May was still in many ways a traditional Tory.

5. Poor regional strategy

Senior figures close to the Cameron government point to their regional operation in marginal seats as a key to success in the 2015 election.

The party prepared the ground with various financial measures in the run-up to the election, such as funding for infrastructure projects from bypasses to road and rail upgrades, meaning Cameron had something of substance to talk about when interviewed by regional media.

By contrast, May had little to say to the regional media, who play a key role in reaching voters who do not play close attention to national politics. Her interview with the Plymouth Herald got plenty of attention — for the wrong reasons. She delivered "three minutes of nothing."

6. Magic money tree withers

Omitting costings from the Conservative manifesto put the party on the back foot over economic competence.

In the last days of the campaign, the Conservatives returned to the Cameron playbook with claims that Corbyn had a "magic money tree." May and her television debate stand-in Amber Rudd both deployed the line in television appearances.

But the respected Institute for Fiscal Studies think tank delivered a damning verdict of the Conservatives as well as the Labour manifesto, claiming neither had presented an honest set of choices.

The Conservatives and their media allies spent much of their time in the final days of the campaign

portraying Corbyn as a radical Marxist and terrorist sympathizer.

Concerns about the economic impact of cutting immigration remained unanswered.

The May campaign was also light on public letters of support from senior business figures, which often play a role in Conservative election campaigns and can help deflect attention from negative headlines.

Hazarika said Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell's line that the only numbers in the Conservative manifesto were the page numbers was highly effective.

7. No giveaways

A common criticism of the May manifesto was that it didn't give people anything to vote for. Where Corbyn's manifesto was stuffed with giveaways, May's had little in the way of eye-catching goodies.

Oliver said: "There are a lot of people who felt they wanted to not have a manifesto that had stuff that looked like pie in the sky. The result was that when social care fell down and people looked at the rest of the manifesto, it is quite hard to see where the things are that people can feel good about."

8. Corbyn attacks miss target

The Conservatives and their media allies spent much of their time in the final days of the campaign portraying Corbyn as a radical Marxist and terrorist sympathizer. But the genial chap who turned up for a cozy sofa chat on the BBC's One Show magazine program with a jar of jam did not seem like a clear and present danger to the British way of life.

Hazarika said: "Corbyn has had so much thrown at him that the attacks seemed really late in the day and they weren't telling anybody anything new."

For U.K. Conservatives, Potential Leadership Successors Emerge

Jenny Gross

LONDON—The Conservatives' stunning setback in Thursday's national elections has weakened Prime Minister Theresa May and raises the possibility that she may not be able to continue as her party's leader.

In a speech after being re-elected as a member of Parliament early Friday morning, Mrs. May signaled that she may seek to hang on to her position despite the setback at the polls, saying Britain needs a "period of stability."

Should she decide to resign or be forced out, however, there are several candidates her party could put forward to replace her.

Betting companies immediately offered odds on her potential replacements. Irish bookmaker Paddy Power PLC had Britain's Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson in the lead, followed by Brexit minister David Davis and then Treasury chief Philip Hammond.

Mr. Johnson was one of the highest-profile campaigners for Britain's exit from the European Union. After Britons voted last year to leave the bloc, he sought to become prime minister but dropped out of the race at the last minute after his close ally Michael Gove withdrew his support. Mrs. May got the job instead.

Mr. Davis, who is overseeing the country's exit negotiations with the European Union, ran an unsuccessful leadership campaign

against former Prime Minister David Cameron in 2005. One of a handful of government ministers who supported Brexit during the referendum campaign, he is a longtime campaigner against EU membership and has a following among euroskeptics in his party.

Mr. Hammond, the Treasury chief, would be seen as an experienced hand that could steer the country through thorny negotiations. But given his support for staying in the EU and apparent rifts with the prime minister over economic policy, it may be difficult for him to command authority within the party.

Another possible contender is Amber Rudd, the minister overseeing Britain's security and policing brief and an ally to Mrs.

May. Ms. Rudd shone throughout the campaign, representing the Conservatives during the general election debate. She campaigned to stay in the EU and, like Mr. Hammond, may struggle to win support from euroskeptical lawmakers.

The Conservatives will be eager to find a replacement quickly, since Brexit negotiations are due to start in earnest later this month.

"We need someone to go and sit at the table a week from Monday," said Anand Menon, professor of European Politics and Foreign Affairs at King's College London. "At the moment, we don't know who that might be. The clock is still ticking."



Let Us Try to Unpack All the Ways The U.K. Election Could Break

E. Tamkin

How's your day going? Badly? Did your boyfriend leave you? Did your mother guilt trip you? Did you disgrace your political party and yourself in a snap election that you yourself decided to call?

If the latter, you are probably British Prime Minister Theresa May, who by late Thursday was tottering between a fingernail hold on a technical majority in the House of Commons, a mind-bending quest for a coalition government, a close miss that could leave a hung Parliament, or, because at this point, why not, a "national unity" grand coalition government of the sort forced on Britain in the 1930s.

Either way, it's light years away from the resounding, unifying result she

hoped for when she reversed her earlier pledge and courageously took her case to the polls.

David Davis, the U.K. chief of Brexit negotiations, has conceded that the government may have lost its mandate to exit the single European market in favor of limiting free movement of European peoples — in other words, May's "hard Brexit" may now be off the table.

Official Brexit negotiations are set to start in 11 days. The clock on the two-year negotiations did not stop because May called snap elections; the official negotiation start date was not pushed back because she decided she wanted a stronger mandate.

While Theresa May's party fights to hold on to its leadership position, the

Liberal Democrats — the only of the three traditionally mainstream parties to have steadfastly opposed Brexit — failed to turn that straw into electoral gold. In fact, Nick Clegg, deputy prime minister in the coalition government with David Cameron, the last prime minister to hold a vote he didn't have to that ended disastrously, lost his seat. (Current Lib Dem leader Tim Farron managed to keep his seat.)

It is perhaps worth noting that the Scottish Nationalist Party, which seemed emboldened by the hypocrisy of May holding a snap election while denying them a second crack at an independence referendum, did not translate that nationalist rage into votes, and indeed lost seats. Also, the U.K. Independence Party (UKIP) appeared to secure zero seats. Its

former leader, Nigel Farage — whose Brexiteering arguably got Britain into this mess in the first place — said himself that it appeared UKIP was inconsequential in this election.

Though Labour probably did not, in the end, win the day, and though far-left Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn seems still unlikely to become the next prime minister, the reality remains that Labour put in a far stronger showing than May expected when she called for elections in mid-April. And, far from demonstrating herself to be strong and stable, and the country united, she has revealed herself to the United Kingdom, and to Europe, to be weak and wobbly, and the national mood for a hard Brexit a lot weaker than it looked yesterday.

Pro-EU Voters Make Their Voices Heard, Poll Suggests

Jason Douglas in London and Simon Clark in Lewes, England

Brexit-supporting British tabloids dubbed them "Re-moaners"—supporters of staying in the European Union who had struggled to come to terms with the result of last year's Brexit referendum.

An exit poll following Thursday's national election suggested there might be more of them than pollsters thought.

The Liberal Democrats, the only party in Britain's national election to suggest the country would be better off if it remained within the EU, were projected to win 14 seats, according to an exit poll sponsored by British

broadcasters. If that prediction was borne out in the final results, the party would add six seats to its existing tally of eight, marking its best performance in a national election since 2010.

The potential gain is larger than many pollsters predicted. The party had been struggling in opinion polls before the vote, rarely polling higher than 7% or 8%, a similar share to what it picked up in the previous election in 2015.

Surveys had suggested that opponents of Brexit had resigned themselves to the result of last year's referendum, when Britons voted 52% to 48% to leave the EU. A May survey of more than 5,000

voters by polling firm YouGov PLC found that about half of those who voted to remain in June 2016 believed the government had a duty to implement the public's decision.

YouGov's research suggested the main beneficiaries of this trend appeared to be the ruling Conservatives, who were picking up many of this new group as well as hard-core Brexit voters who had previously been drawn to the anti-EU UK Independence Party.

Thursday's exit poll suggests pro-EU voters may have reconsidered. The pro-Brexit Conservatives of Prime Minister Theresa May were projected to fall short of an overall majority in Britain's 650-seat

Parliament, with around 314 seats. The main opposition Labour Party—which also supports Brexit but advocates a softer approach to the divorce—were projected to win 266. The findings of the exit poll were uncertain and the final tally may be different.

Later, the British Broadcasting Corporation said it saw the Conservatives winning 318 seats, compared with 330 in the outgoing parliament. Sky News, meanwhile, said its analysis suggested between 308 and 328.

In Lewes, a seat in southeast England, 54-year-old planning consultant Andrew Simpson said he planned to vote for the Liberal

Democrats “so we have a more effective opposition and a better negotiation on Brexit.”

The constituency, centered on a town of 17,000 built around a medieval castle, went to the Conservatives in 2015 after 18 years of Liberal Democrat rule but voted against Brexit. The pro-EU Liberals were hoping to win it back, aided by voters such as Mr. Simpson who are frustrated by the two main parties' tough stance on Brexit. However, early Friday the Conservatives appeared to have held on, with MP Maria Caulfield re-elected.

“I think it's going to be a very different Parliament and it's going to be a tense few days while we find out the results of this election and seeing who is going to be forming the next government,” Ms. Caulfield said in an interview.

The Conservatives say they will pull the U.K. out of the bloc's single market—which sets rules for trade in goods and services—and replace EU membership with a new free-trade accord. They also want to exit from the bloc's customs union, which places common tariffs on goods coming from outside its

borders, and end the jurisdiction of European courts over British affairs.

Labour said that it would seek to “retain the benefits” of the EU's single market but has been hazier on how it would achieve that objective. It said it will end unfettered immigration from the EU while protecting the rights of EU citizens already in Britain.

The Liberal Democrats, by contrast, say they “passionately believe” the U.K. would be better off staying in the EU and would offer voters a second referendum on whether to stay in the 28-member club.

Robert Hill, 73, a retired shoe retailer, said he voted to remain in the referendum last year but is now backing Mrs. May. “As I see it, in a democratic society, we voted to leave so we've just got to get behind it and negotiate our way to a satisfactory ending,” he said.

Meantime, Robert Pick, a longtime Conservative voter, is supporting the Liberal Democrats this time because he is unhappy about leaving the EU. “This is a protest vote,” he said. “I find the whole Brexit thing incredibly depressing.”



Could British Election Results Derail Brexit?

T. Sykes

As news of the shock humbling of Theresa May's Conservative party in the British general election sinks in across Europe, questions are being asked Friday about what the result means for Brexit, as the process of the U.K. leaving the European Union has become known.

Some commentators and politicians are suggesting that the Brexit—which is supposed to take effect in January 2019—could be softened, delayed, or even entirely derailed by the election result.

Indeed, preventing the timetable from slipping is a key part of Theresa May's argument as to why she should stay in power.

The imminent start of Brexit negotiations, May says, is the reason why she should not stand down as Tory leader.

May is said to have agreed to form a coalition with a small Northern Irish party, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).

May deliberately framed the election as a vote on Brexit, at one stage going so far as to write on her

Facebook page: “The cold hard fact is that if I lose just six seats I will lose this election, and Jeremy Corbyn will be sitting down to negotiate with the presidents, prime ministers, and chancellors of Europe.”

Corbyn, the hard-left Labour party leader, said in the course of the campaign that while he would respect the outcome of the referendum, he wanted the U.K. to remain inside the single market.

Given that the EU has said that it is not possible for the U.K. to remain inside the single market without also agreeing to freedom of movement—a key red line for many voters, as well as May, whose pledge to bring back control of U.K. borders is a key part of her Brexit plans—it is not clear how that particular circle can be squared, even by the magic of Corbyn.

Corbyn also pledged to unequivocally confirm the right of 3.5 million EU nationals who have settled in the U.K. to stay.

But many are suggesting that the election sounds the death knell for the uncompromising “hard” Brexit vision of that May appeared to be peddling.

Indeed, in the early hours of Friday morning, Brexit secretary David Davis suggested the election result could prompt a rethink of their strategy.

Questioned about the Tory's manifesto pledges on the single market and customs union, he said: “That's what it [the election] was about, that's what we put in front of the people. We'll see tomorrow whether they've accepted that or not. That will be their decision.”

One articulate expression of the hopes of defeated Remainers came from the lips of the Green Party's only successful candidate, Caroline Lucas, who said that she hoped “progressives” “could and would work together” to avoid the “extreme” Brexit that Theresa May wanted.

Across Europe, the official position of politicians and technocrats is simple: This is an internal British matter. Britain is the one who has said it wants to leave the EU. If the country has changed its mind, the suggestion has been made, it only needs to put its cap in its hand and say so.

In the meantime, European politicians and technocrats appeared to be relishing the election

result and using it to rub salt into Conservative wounds.

Guy Verhofstadt, the European Parliament's Brexit representative, described the result in a tweet as “yet another own goal—after Cameron now May,” adding: “I thought Surrealism was a Belgian invention.”

Donald Tusk, the European Council president, tweeted: “We don't know when Brexit talks start. We know when they must end. Do your best to avoid a ‘no deal’ as result of ‘no negotiations.’”

The European Commission president, Jean Claude Juncker, said he feared it would not be easy for Theresa May to form a stable government.

“We are ready to start negotiations,” Juncker said, according to The Guardian. “I hope that the British will be able to form as soon as possible a stable government. I don't think that things now have become easier but we are ready.”

Former Finnish Premier Alexander Stubb tweeted: “Looks like we might need a time-out in the Brexit negotiations. Time for everyone to regroup.”

INTERNATIONAL



Qatar Crisis Turns Into Proxy Battle of Mideast Rivals

Yaroslav Trofimov

Qatar may be tiny, but that's where all the major fault lines in the Middle East are converging these days.

The sudden cutoff of ties with Qatar by several Saudi-led Arab states has already turned into a proxy fight

between supporters and opponents of political Islam and between partners and enemies of Iran.

After a series of tweets against Qatar by President Donald Trump, the conflict has also been infused with the simmering hostility between

the American president and his European critics such as Germany.

Pitting one group of longstanding American allies against another, the Qatar confrontation has put the U.S.—which maintains more than 10,000 troops in the Persian Gulf emirate—squarely in the middle. If

allowed to escalate, it risks undermining the U.S. campaign against Islamic State and the war in Afghanistan, both run out of the Al Udeid base near Qatar's capital Doha.

The crisis over Qatar began just days after Mr. Trump essentially

endorsed Saudi Arabia's claim to lead the Arab and Muslim world at a summit with dozens of regional leaders convened by King Salman in May in Riyadh. That claim is far from being universally accepted, even in Saudi Arabia's immediate neighborhood where Qatar—fueled by its natural-gas wealth—has long been a maverick.

Whether Saudi Arabia brings Qatar to heel, and at what cost, will be a major test of the kingdom's rising ambitions.

Geopolitical rivals including Turkey, Russia and predictably Iran are already lining up behind Qatar to make sure that doesn't happen. On Wednesday, Turkey's parliament rushed a vote authorizing the dispatch of as many as 3,000 troops to Qatar. With Saudi airspace now closed to Qatari planes, Turkey and Iran have also offered a logistic lifeline allowing Doha to escape isolation.

The immediate trigger for the Qatar crisis was almost comical in nature: a statement, allegedly by Qatar's emir, that criticized Saudi Arabia and Mr. Trump. It was published online by the Qatari news agency following the Riyadh summit. Qatar quickly said the news agency had been hacked and that the emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad, never made these remarks. But by then, it didn't really matter.

State-controlled media in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt went on a campaign against Qatar, demanding it end support for Islamist groups such as

Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas and distance itself from Iran.

After a defiant Sheikh Tamim made a phone call to the Iranian president, the Saudi-led nations on Monday cut diplomatic ties with the emirate and closed their land, airspace and ports to Qataris and Qatari trade. Unless Qatar buckles, these states envision additional sanctions such as punishing international companies that do business with Qatar.

"For now, the Saudi camp seems to be dealing with Qatar as a Saddam with chemical weapons. They are adamant to escalate until the Qataris bow down," said Hassan Hassan, a fellow at the think tank Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy.

These steps are extraordinary considering that, just a week ago, Qataris, Emiratis and Saudis could freely live and work in each other's countries under Gulf Cooperation Council rules.

But Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the U.A.E. have all nursed their own longstanding grievances with Qatar.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al Sisi resents Qatar's traditional support for the Muslim Brotherhood, his key domestic foe ever since he overthrew President Mohammed Morsi, a Brotherhood member, in 2013. One of the charges on which Mr. Morsi has been jailed is spying for Qatar. And one of Mr. Sisi's first steps after seizing power was also to detain the staff of Al Jazeera, the Doha-based TV network that reflects Qatar's ambitions to be a regional power.

The U.A.E., one of Mr. Sisi's key backers, has its own history of hostility with Qatar. The U.A.E.'s de facto leader, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, is staunchly opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood and has championed an uncompromising crackdown on Islamists across the region.

This approach has put Qatar and the U.A.E. on opposite sides of the civil war in Libya, in addition to dividing them over Egypt. U.A.E. and Saudi Arabia briefly recalled their ambassadors from Doha in 2014.

Then there is the issue of Iran. Qatar's main natural-gas field—the source of the emirate's wealth—is shared with Iran, a reality that forces Doha to adopt a relatively soft line toward Tehran. Unlike Saudi Arabia and a number of its allies, Qatar didn't cut diplomatic ties with Tehran after the Saudi Embassy there was ransacked in January 2016. But it did join—until this week's expulsion—the Saudi-led coalition fighting pro-Iranian Houthi forces in Yemen.

With Qatar facing Saudi and U.A.E. pressure to expel exiled members of the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, the crisis has already provoked a rupture between Saudi Arabia and another major Sunni power, Turkey.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, an Islamist himself, has refused to recognize the legitimacy of Mr. Sisi's rule and has offered shelter in Turkey to the Brotherhood and Hamas. In a departure from his recent rapprochement with Riyadh,

he has condemned the sanctions against Qatar and praised the emirate's "coolheadedness" and "constructive approach."

The harshness of the Saudi-led campaign against Qatar has also given pause to Kuwait and Oman, two fellow GCC monarchies that are trying to mediate the dispute. Both fear they could be next if Qatar loses the ability to run its affairs autonomously, something that already happened to Bahrain following a 2011 deployment there by Saudi and Emirati troops.

Kuwait has Muslim Brotherhood members in parliament and, like Oman, is trying to remain neutral in Saudi Arabia's confrontation with Iran.

From Tehran's standpoint, meanwhile, the Qatar crisis can only offer benefits, at least in the short run. The dispute has already undermined the GCC, weakened attempts to establish Sunni unity against Iran, and is likely to undermine Turkish-Saudi cooperation on behalf of Sunni rebels in Syria, said Vali Nasr, dean of School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University and a former State Department official.

"The split, Tehran thinks, shows Saudis to be heavy-handed," Mr. Nasr said. "That will worry many actors and open doors for Iran in the region and across the Muslim world."



Block : Qatar is a financier of terrorism. Why does the U.S. tolerate it?

Joshua S. Block

Five Arab countries cut ties

to Qatar on Monday, deepening a rift among Persian Gulf nations over that country's support for radical Islamist groups. The United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Yemen all announced they would withdraw their diplomatic staff from Qatar and cut air and sea traffic to the country.

As part of what former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice termed the "New Middle East," Qatar has emerged as one of the region's most consequential players and one of the richest countries in the world. It has also positioned itself as one of the strongest supporters of the Arab Spring, preaching democracy abroad. But behind the polished façade of skyscrapers and luxury shopping malls lies a dark reality. Ruled by the Al-Thani clan, the onetime

British protectorate has become a financier of terrorism.

One week after welcoming U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis in April, Qatar hosted a conference by Hamas. The Al-Thani family is a major backer of the terrorist organization, pouring millions every year into the Gaza Strip to cement Hamas' grip on power. Last year alone, Qatar transferred \$31 million to Hamas, and the country is expected to pledge an additional \$100 million to Gaza.

Also on the list of Qatar's beneficiaries is the radical Muslim Brotherhood, the parent organization of Hamas. The Qatari government has bankrolled the Muslim Brotherhood and affiliated groups with billions of dollars across the Middle East. Qatar was a key supporter of the Mohamed Morsi-led regime in Egypt, and members of the Egyptian Brotherhood have lived in Doha for decades. Brotherhood

figures are frequently featured on the Qatari-owned Al Jazeera network, spreading their anti-Western world view to more than 60 million people.

Qatar has emerged as a key financier of the Syrian opposition, including Salafi jihadist groups as well as Sunni Islamist organizations. Diplomatic sources estimate that Qatar has invested at least \$1 billion in anti-Bashar Assad forces, with people close to the Qatari government putting the number as high as \$3 billion. Qatar has channeled weapons and money to Islamist rebels, notably to the notorious organization Ahrar al-Sham, which has known ties to Al Qaeda. Far from being a force of moderation, Ahrar al-Sham has fought alongside Jabhat al-Nusra, also known as Al Qaeda in Syria. Qatar's ruling emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, has been trying to get Jabhat al-Nusra off America's

terror list by championing a cosmetic separation between the group and the umbrella Al Qaeda branch. It now operates under the banner of Fateh al-Sham.

In a smart PR move, the government in Doha has financed Western research institutions and think tanks with hundreds of millions of dollars to push the myth of moderate Islamist groups in Syria. Qatar cites Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra as examples, claiming that their sole purpose is to remove Assad. Too many Western leaders accept this rhetoric. One exception is Germany, which has gone so far as to implicate Qatar as a sponsor of Islamic State.

Qatar's close cooperation with Iran puts the country at odds with Gulf powers that are firmly aligned against the theocratic regime in Tehran. "Iran represents a regional and Islamic power that cannot be ignored and it is unwise to face up

against it," Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani reportedly said at a military ceremony in May. "It is a big power in the stabilization of the region." He also reportedly described Hamas and Hezbollah as a resistance movement, calling Hamas "the legitimate

representative of the Palestinian people." (The Qatari government later claimed that the Qatar News Agency's website was hacked.)

Western leaders have largely turned a blind eye to Qatar's abysmal human rights record at home and

malevolent behavior abroad. This is partly due to the significance of the al-Udeid air base, from which nearly all coalition airstrikes against Islamic State are being conducted. But there may be more costs to our ongoing partnership with Qatar than benefits. Now that our allies are

publicly breaking with the Gulf state, Washington should put pressure on the government in Doha to pick a side. Qatar has gotten away with its opportunistic, two-faced foreign policy for too long.

**The
New York
Times**
Sheera Frenkel

Hacking in Qatar Highlights a Shift Toward Espionage-for-Hire

David D.
Kirkpatrick and

The cyber-intrigue was the opening skirmish in a pitched battle among ostensible Gulf allies this week. Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. rallied dependent Arab states to cut off diplomatic relations, travel and trade with Qatar, and the unity of the American-backed alliance against the Islamic State and Iran has been fractured.

But the dirty tricks also heralded a broader transformation in international espionage. The dust-up in the Gulf is the clearest sign yet that cyberattacks coupled with disinformation campaigns are no longer the exclusive domain of sophisticated powers like Russia. Any country can get in the game for the relatively low price of a few freelance hackers.

The F.B.I. and other experts concluded the hack of Qatar's news agency was the result of a computer break-in, and was most likely carried out by Russian hackers for hire, according to American and Qatari officials briefed on the investigation. F.B.I. officials told The New York Times that Russian mercenary hackers have frequently come up in investigations of attacks sponsored by nation-states.

In fact, the hacking war in the Gulf region has likely been going on for years, though it has never played out on such a public stage. In 2015, for example, an Arab intermediary with ties to Qatar provided The Times with internal emails from the Emirati Foreign Ministry which stated that the U.A.E. was knowingly violating a United Nations resolution by shipping weapons to Libyan militias.

"The fact of the matter is that the U.A.E. violated the U.N. Security Council Resolution on Libya and continues to do so," Ahmed al-Qasimi, a senior Emirati diplomat, wrote in an internal email that was dated Aug. 4, 2015, and provided to The Times. Other internal Emirati emails about Libyan dealings and North Korean arms deals surfaced through Qatari-linked websites and the Guardian newspaper.

Qatar has, at times, backed its own Libyan client militias on the other side of a three-year proxy war against the U.A.E. — with both sides confounding Western attempts to broker a unity government in Libya.

In a report scheduled to be released on Friday, two independent cybersecurity researchers claim that at least one group of hackers can be found working as freelancers for a number of Gulf states, and that their methods bear a striking resemblance to the methods used to hack the Emirati ambassador.

"They seem to be hackers-for-hire, freelancing for all sorts of different clients, and adapting their skills as needed," said Collin Anderson, who is one of the researchers. Mr. Anderson and his partner, Claudio Guarnieri, have nicknamed the group Bahamut, after a monstrous fish floating in the Arabian Sea in the Jorge Luis Borges novel "Book of Imaginary Beings."

The group regularly uses spear phishing attacks — emails designed to look innocent but contain malicious software applications. While it is not yet clear if Bahamut was behind the hack of the ambassador's email, the group targeted a number of Emirati diplomats as well as other public figures in the Gulf region.

Other news organizations have reported receiving leaked Emirati emails from a group calling itself GlobalLeaks and using email addresses ending in .ru, suggesting the mercenary hackers may be Russians or wish to pose as Russian.

The Emirati ambassador, Yousef al-Otaiba, is well known for his assiduous efforts to convince American think tanks and government officials that Qatar had threatened the stability of the region by cheering the Arab uprisings of 2011 and, in particular, by backing the Muslim Brotherhood.

Mr. Otaiba, a charismatic figure who speaks nearly native-sounding English, has also served as a personal tutor in regional politics to Jared Kushner, the son-in-law and a senior adviser to President Trump.

Several of the newly leaked emails appear to include examples of Mr. Otaiba pressing anti-Qatari arguments with American officials, who banter with him like old friends.

In a Feb. 10, 2015, exchange between Mr. Otaiba and Elliott Abrams, a former Republican White House official, Mr. Abrams appears to joke about the Emirates' support for the military coup that removed Egypt's Qatari-allied Islamist president in 2013, almost suggesting that something similar should happen in Qatar. "Too bad the Qatari armed forces can't... well, I shouldn't say such things. That would be undemocratic," the email said.

In another leaked exchange, John Hannah, another former Republican White House official, who is now with the pro-Israel Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, emailed Mr. Otaiba to complain that an Emirati-owned hotel in Doha was providing space for a Hamas news conference.

"How's this," Ambassador Otaiba replied. "You move the base then we'll move the hotel :-)." (He was obliquely referring to the major American air base in Qatar, Al Udeid, that has been the headquarters for operations against the Islamic State.)

In fact, on Thursday, the government of Qatar listed the hacking attack as part of a broader public influence campaign that has been appearing in American newspapers and think tank conferences. A timeline the government distributed to reporters, identified a series of 14 op-ed articles that appeared across the American media in a sudden flurry beginning around the same time — late April — all singling out Qatar for supporting Islamist militants or extremists.

President Trump arrived in the region on May 20, weeks after the barrage of criticism began, for an Arab summit in Saudi Arabia. "He told us exactly: 'We have to work together in stopping the funding of extremist groups in the region and whenever I read reports about this region I read about Qatar and

Saudi,'" the Qatari foreign minister, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, recalled on Thursday.

"Mr. President," the foreign minister said he replied, "are the reports based on media reports or intelligence reports? If it is based on media reports, then this is something we cannot answer."

"We assured them that we have strong cooperation with our security agencies," the foreign minister added.

Then, three days after the Trump meeting in Riyadh, the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies held a conference in Washington dedicated to criticism of Qatar, titled "Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood's Global Affiliates."

Robert M. Gates, the former defense secretary and a friend of Mr. Otaiba, gave the keynote. Attendees included many of the authors of the critical op-ed articles and senior Obama administration officials. Organizers encouraged Mr. Otaiba to attend, and his staff sent Abu Dhabi, the Emirati capital, a detailed report.

No representative of Qatar was invited. The hack of the Qatari news agency took place after midnight that night.

Mr. Anderson, the cyber security researcher, said the low cost and relative ease of hiring hackers meant that more such attacks would surely follow.

"This is the future for what countries all around the world can do," he said, "if they have the money and the resources."

By Thursday night, Qatar's Al Jazeera network reported that hackers were attempting to overload and crash its internet servers.

Walt : Making the Middle East Worse, Trump Style

Behind the bluster, bombast, tweetstorms, and general atmosphere of comic opera, is the Trump administration reverting to the successful Middle East grand strategy that both Democratic and Republican presidents followed during the Cold War? Leon Hadar thinks it is, and he believes this approach makes a lot more sense than George W. Bush's efforts at militarized "regional transformation" and nation-building or Barack Obama's Wilsonian embrace of the Arab Spring.

Writing in the *American Spectator*, Hadar suggests Trump has decided to "deal with the Middle East as it is," and is aligning the United States firmly with dictators and autocrats, much as it did at the height of the Cold War. This approach, he writes, "was a strategy that worked quite well," by simultaneously preserving Western access to Middle East energy supplies and containing Soviet expansionism.

Today, he suggests, strong U.S. support for its Sunni partners (and Israel) will "re-establish a stable status-quo" and contain Islamic extremism. He also praises Trump's rejection of a "make-believe 'peace process'" that involves bullying Israel, and thinks moderate Arabs can convince the Palestinians to "take the route towards co-existence" with Israel and "eventually lead to a peace deal." By returning the United States to its old grand strategy, in short, Trump will succeed where all of his predecessors have failed.

I'd love to believe him, but reasons for doubt keep intruding. There's no question that Bush and Obama's Middle East policies were costly failures, and Bill Clinton's track record in the region is hardly something to be proud of. But Hadar's embrace of Trump's approach misunderstands U.S. grand strategy in the past, misreads the situation the United States faces today, and greatly overstates the prospects for success.

During the Cold War, the United States backed a number of Middle Eastern countries as part of the broader strategy of containment. Why? Because the United States wanted to prevent the Soviet Union from gaining influence or control over the energy supplies on which the industrial economies of the West depended. Containing Soviet influence entailed allying against Soviet clients such as Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, and supporting Israel, the Shah of Iran, the conservative

Arab monarchies, and eventually Egypt after it abandoned Moscow and realigned in the 1970s.

When the shah fell in 1979, the United States created the rapid deployment force (RDF) in order to deter a Soviet grab for the Persian Gulf. But Washington still acted primarily as an "offshore balancer" and kept the RDF out of the region until it was needed. The United States played a balance-of-power game within the region: tilting toward Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War and then sending the RDF to oust Iraq from Kuwait in 1991.

There is no potential hegemon in the Middle East today, and as yet no external "peer competitor" like the former Soviet Union who might conceivably dominate the region. There is therefore no need for the United States to double down on its present commitments to any Middle Eastern countries. None of America's current partners deserve unconditional support on either strategic or moral grounds: 1) Egypt is a brutal military dictatorship with a failing economy and of modest strategic value; 2) Saudi Arabia is a fundamentalist theocracy, is helping destroy Yemen and Syria, and engaged on a massive economic reform project that may fail catastrophically; 3) Israel is marching rightward toward full-fledged apartheid; and 4) Turkey is a mockery of democracy that has gone from "zero problems with neighbors" to problems with nearly all of them. Trump is easily seduced by foreigners who cater to his vanity — as his Saudi hosts clearly realized — but stroking the president's ego is not the same as contributing to the U.S. national interest.

Facing an environment like this, a smart superpower would hedge. Instead of trying to create some sort of Sunni axis, the United States should return to the underlying logic of its earlier approach. The core U.S. interest in the Middle East, as in other vital areas, is to preserve a rough balance of power and prevent any single state (or external great power) from dominating. The Middle East is as divided today as it has ever been, which means the core U.S. objective is easy to achieve. Accordingly, the United States should be reaching out to countries like Iran, instead of jumping deeper into bed with Tel Aviv, Cairo, Riyadh, and Ankara. As the director of the CIA's political Islam strategic analysis program, Emile Nakhleh, recently wrote, "Taking sides in the perennial sectarian feud between Sunni and Shia Islam or between Saudi Arabia and Iran is, in the long

run, inimical to American national security and interests in the Islamic world."

A more balanced approach to the region would encourage all states in the region to do more to win America's favor. If Saudis, Israelis, Egyptians, and Turks understood that the United States was talking regularly to Iran and that closer relations with Teheran were a real option, they would have to think seriously about what they could do to remain in our good graces. (The same logic would work in reverse, of course: Our ties to these states gives Iran a reason to court us as well, and especially if their leadership become convinced we might actually respond positively to them.)

Because all the United States really cares about is maintaining a robust balance of power in the region, we have the luxury of playing these states off against each other. And so we should.

Because all the United States really cares about is maintaining a robust balance of power in the region, we have the luxury of playing these states off against each other. And so we should. Needless to say, this would require Trump (and Congress) to ignore the blandishments and propaganda emanating from the Israeli and Saudi lobbies, who have been working overtime to demonize Iran and convince Trump to give our traditional (but unhelpful) allies whatever they want. Don't hold your breath.

Furthermore, the idea that Saudi Arabia and other, moderate Arabs can convince the Palestinians to abandon their national aspirations and make peace with Israel is one of those perennial illusions that have hamstrung U.S. diplomacy for decades. As Nathan Thrall makes clear in his brilliant new book, *The Only Language They Understand: Forcing Compromise in Israel and Palestine*, the main obstacle to peace is not Palestinian intransigence but Israel's indifference, and in particular, the lack of any real incentive for Israel to make peace as long as Uncle Sam continues to subsidize and protect it. And the idea that what is needed is greater Palestinian flexibility is risible: After a century of defeats, encroachments, and betrayed promises (as well as some of their own mistakes), the Palestinians have hardly any compromises left to give.

I don't think Trump cares one way or the other about Israelis or

Palestinians (if he did, why would he assign the peace process to his overworked, inexperienced, and borderline incompetent son-in-law?) but jumping deeper into bed with Saudi Arabia and Egypt isn't going to produce a breakthrough.

The folly of Trump's approach became clear on Monday, when (Sunni) Saudi Arabia and five other Sunni states suddenly broke relations with (Sunni) Qatar over a long-simmering set of policy disagreements. As Robin Wright promptly tweeted, "So much for #Trump's Arab coalition. It lasted less than two weeks." Trump's deep embrace of Riyadh didn't cause the Saudi-Qatari rift — though he typically tried to take credit for it with some ill-advised tweets — but this dispute exposed the inherent fragility of the "Arab NATO" that Trump seems to have envisioned. Moreover, taking sides in the Saudi-Qatari rift could easily jeopardize U.S. access to the vital airbase there, a possibility Trump may not even have known about when he grabbed his smartphone. And given that Trump's State Department is sorely understaffed and the rest of his administration is spending more time starting fires than putting them out, the United States is in no position to try to mend the rift and bring its putative partners together. All of which augurs poorly for the region and for this putative "new" (old) strategy.

Last but not least, Trump's response to the recent terrorist attack in Tehran was both insensitive and strategically misguided. Although the State Department offered a genuine and sincere statement of regret, the White House's own (belated) response offered only anodyne sympathies and snarkily concluded: "We underscore that states that sponsor terrorism risk falling victim to the evil they promote." A clearer case of "blaming the victim" would be hard to find, and all the more so given Trump's willingness to embrace regimes whose policies have fueled lots of terrorism in the past.

Contrast this with how Iranian President Mohammad Khatami responded after 9/11: He offered his "condolences" and "deepest sorrow" for the American people and called the attack a "disaster" and "the ugliest form of terrorism ever seen." There was no hint of a lecture or snide schadenfreude in Khatami's remarks, even though it was obvious that the attacks were clearly a reaction (however cruel and unjustified) to prior U.S. actions. It is hard to imagine any modern

American presidents responding as callously as Trump did.

There is one way Trump's approach is consistent with his predecessors, however. Despite some common

elements, Clinton, Bush, and Obama all found their own unique ways to screw up the Middle East. Clinton did it with dual containment and a bungled "peace process," Bush by invading Iraq, and Obama

by naively embracing the Arab Spring and thinking drones and special forces would fix things elsewhere. But Trump was equal to the task: He has his own special approach to making the Middle East

worse. Why should that troubled region be any different than the rest of the world?

**The
New York
Times**

UNE - Iran

Thomas
Erdbrink

Official Iranian news accounts said the men were killed and the woman blew herself up.

It was Iran's worst episode of terrorism in years, exposing security lapses and undermining government assertions that the country is a beacon of calm in the volatile Middle East.

The attacks also appeared to be the first time that Iran, a predominantly Shiite Muslim nation, had been successfully targeted by the Islamic State, which considers Shiites to be religious traitors.

A government statement issued Thursday about the attacks said the male assailants had left Iran at an unspecified time to fight for the Islamic State in Mosul, Iraq, and in Raqqa, Syria, the group's de facto capital.

They returned to Iran last July or August under the leadership of a

commander with the nom de guerre Abu Aisha, the statement said, and had "intended to carry out terrorist operations in religious cities."

The statement did not specify whether they were Iranian citizens or provide further information about the female assailant.

But Reza Seifollahi, deputy chief of the Supreme National Security Council, was quoted by the independent newspaper Shargh as saying the men were Iranian.

If true, that would be an unusual acknowledgment, given the antipathy between the Islamic State and Iran. Most of Iran's 80 million people are Shiites, although sizable Sunni minorities inhabit some border regions and the Islamic State has sought to recruit from among them.

In March, the Islamic State released a video featuring Iranian fighters, in which it called on Sunnis in Iran to form cells and attack Shiite forces,

according to the SITE Intelligence Group, which analyzed the video.

Several witnesses to the attacks reported that the assailants had spoken Arabic with an Iranian accent, suggesting that they were ethnic Arabs living in Iran.

In Khuzestan, an oil-rich province that borders Iraq and that is home to many Arabs, both Sunni and Shiite, a video emerged two weeks ago of men in black carrying weapons and shouting slogans on the streets of Ahvaz, the provincial capital. They were arrested the next day, the Intelligence Ministry said.

A southeastern province, Sistan and Baluchistan, is home to several extremist Sunni groups that have committed bombings, assassinations and other attacks on Iranian security forces and officials in recent times. Iran's intelligence minister, Mahmoud Alavi, said on Thursday that Iran had broken up "a hundred terrorist plots" over the past two years, according to the news

site Asr-e Iran. Former inmates of Evin Prison in Tehran have said they saw dozens of incarcerated Sunni extremists, often Kurds and Baluchis. Several of them have been hanged.

Mr. Alavi suggested the assailants killed on Wednesday had affiliations with the ultraconservative form of Sunni Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia, Iran's regional rival, but stopped short of directly blaming the Saudis.

"There is this belief in the world that Saudi Arabia is the ideological source of these terrorist movements, but it is too soon to say Saudi Arabia was behind the attack because we don't want to make statements without evidence," Mr. Alavi was quoted by the Iranian Students' News Agency as saying during a visit to victims at a Tehran hospital.

Saudi Arabia has denied any complicity in the attacks.

**THE WALL
STREET
JOURNAL.**
Fitch in Dubai

Islamic State Members in Deadly Tehran Attack Were Recruited in Iran

Aresu Egbali in
Tehran and Asa

Iranian officials on Thursday blamed Islamic State for unprecedented attacks that killed 17 people in Tehran this week, saying the attackers had been recruited within Iran, as an investigation into the incidents intensified.

"Those individuals who carried out the attacks on Wednesday in Tehran had joined Islamic State from different places inside Iran," Reza Seifollahi, deputy secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, said on state television. Another official identified three of the people involved in the attacks as Iranians.

Iranian authorities haven't released the attackers' identities but the Intelligence Ministry published grisly photos purporting to be of five of their bodies, along with their first names.

The twin attacks took place at Iran's parliament in Tehran and the shrine of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Islamic Republic's founding figure, which lies south of the city center.

They were the first Islamic State-claimed attacks inside Iran, bringing the regional battle against the Sunni Muslim extremist group to the heart of Shiite Iran.

The breach in security at two heavily guarded and symbolic pillars of the Iranian system could raise questions about the country's military strategy and the ability of newly re-elected President Hassan Rouhani's ability to shield it from extremism, analysts have said.

Many Iranians were defiant in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, exchanging messages on social media expressing togetherness, although some also pointed to the costs of Iran's military involvement in Syria and Iraq and its failure to keep extremism at bay.

Iranian leaders, including Mr. Rouhani, said the attacks would only strengthen Iran's resolve to fight terrorism. "The Iranian nation will withstand terror, violence and extremism more resiliently than before," he said, according to the official Islamic Republic News Agency.

Islamic State claimed responsibility shortly after the attacks in a statement posted to its official Amaq news agency.

The attackers were working in concert with Islamic State in areas of the Middle East controlled by the extremist group, Mr. Seifollahi said.

Islamic State once held large swaths of territory across its self-declared caliphate in Iraq and Syria, but has more recently fallen back on guerrilla-style suicide attacks as it faces battlefield losses.

The attackers had joined Islamic State and left Iran to fight in Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria, an intelligence ministry statement said Thursday. It didn't say when they left.

They returned to Iran in July of last year under the command of an Islamic State operative identified as Abu Ayesheh, it said, intending to strike the country's holy cities.

They then fled Iran to an unnamed location after their network was crushed and Abu Ayesheh was killed, it said, but didn't elaborate

on when or how they returned to carry out Wednesday's attacks.

Iranian authorities have foiled more than 100 terrorist plots in the past two years, Intelligence Minister Mahmoud Alavi told state television, and the country has long relied on tight monitoring to combat attempts by Islamic State to carry out attacks on its soil.

Security forces arrested 11 people last October on suspicion of planning Islamic State terror attacks, and seized large amounts of explosives. State media said the authorities disrupted another attack last June.

Official accounts published Wednesday by Iranian state media said three attackers dressed as women tried to enter the parliament complex on the pretext of a meeting with lawmakers. They killed a guard at the entrance before shooting people inside. One of the attackers blew himself up. It took security forces several hours to kill all the attackers.

In an attack at the shrine around the same time, security forces stopped

two attackers who were trying to enter.

One blew himself up in the courtyard, and security forces then targeted the second, according to Hossein Zolfaghari, deputy interior minister for military and security.

A person working at the shrine was killed in that attack, state television said.

Iranian authorities said they arrested six people in connection with the attacks. They included a woman, who was taken into custody at the shrine and was being interrogated by intelligence forces, Alaeddin Boroujerdi, the chairman of the parliament's national security and foreign policy committee, was quoted as saying by the semiofficial

Mehr News Agency.

The woman, who was arrested at the shrine, was an Iranian from the south of the country and was suspected of managing the cell that carried out the attack, Mohammad Javad Jamali, a member of the Iranian parliament's national security and foreign policy committee, told the semiofficial Iranian Students' News Agency.

Her accomplices in that attack were Iranians from the western part of the country, he added, and they weren't relatives of the woman. He provided no further details.

Islamic State has encouraged its followers to attack Iran. In a statement distributed Wednesday, it said the group "will not let pass a single opportunity in which they can

attack them, shed their blood, shake their security and destroy the institutions of their polytheist state," according to a translation by SITE Intelligence Group, which tracks jihadist activity online.

Sunni Islamic State considers Shiites apostates and polytheists. The vast majority of Iranians are Shiite.

Global leaders condemned the rare attacks, including U.S. President Donald Trump who said he grieved for the victims and the Iranian people. But his remarks caused controversy when he underscored "that states that sponsor terrorism risk falling victim to the evil they promote."

In a tweet Thursday, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif called Mr. Trump's statement "repugnant."

The U.S. has designated Iran a state sponsor of terrorism since 1984. The designation relates mainly to Iran's support for Shiite militias in Iraq, Shiite militia in Lebanon and Palestinian militancy, according to a State Department report.

In 2011, however, the U.S. Treasury Department put sanctions on six alleged al Qaeda operatives who it said had reached a deal with the Iranian government to use the country as a pipeline for money and fighters.



Wade : By Rubbing Salt in Iran's Wounds, Trump Accomplished Nothing

The United States on Wednesday woke to the news that the Islamic State had targeted the people of Iran, with assailants striking the parliament building and the mausoleum of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who inspired the country's revolution in 1979. The attack claimed 12 lives and injured 42 innocent bystanders.

The United States is right to have assigned Iran to a place of ignominy on the list of state sponsors of terror. Even where we've found common ground with Iran, for example on the nuclear agreement, we've never once made light of our significant differences and disagreements. And we shouldn't.

But on the day that terror strikes at the heart of any country, the right thing to do — the diplomatic and decent thing to do — is to condemn the terror and express sympathy for the victims. On a day when an adversary like Iran is struck by our common enemy, the Islamic State, it also wouldn't be hard to argue that the strategic thing to do would be for the United States to condemn the act. Period. End of story. And maybe, just maybe, an unintended silver lining of tragedy might be greater cooperation with Iran against the Islamic State.

Apparently, this kind of nuance or dignity isn't in President Donald Trump's diplomatic playbook.

The statement by the president on the terrorist attacks in Iran was at best a missed opportunity — and at worst reflected a missing chip in his foreign policy hardwiring.

It was also a strangely shortsighted dismissal of history for a president who still counts himself a New Yorker. Perhaps he has forgotten how Iran reacted when it was America suffering a tremendous loss. On September 11, 2001, the Iranian president and even the anti-American supreme leader both expressed their condolences to the United States, and thousands of Iranians amassed in spontaneous candlelight vigils to mourn with us. To some extent, was Iran's position in 2001 due in part to a political and diplomatic bet that our attackers were Sunni extremists — Iran's archenemy in a broader sectarian divide that has cost the region an untold number of lives? Probably. But it was still a moment of opportunity to explore for potential geopolitical gain, and it was certainly an appropriate response from one country to another, since terrorism anywhere should be rejected in the strongest terms.

It is hard to know what to make of the president's foreign policy. But as we saw this week with his tweets on Qatar, he never seems to miss an opportunity to reduce geopolitics to self-defeating and self-contradicting soundbites.

Trump, of course, wasn't alone in misreading the moment. In the same news cycle as the largest terrorist attack inside Iran in a decade, just weeks after Iran's more pro-engagement president was reelected with a mandate to deepen ties with the West, the U.S. Senate voted for cloture on the Countering Iran's Destabilizing Activities Act of 2017. It was odd timing — regardless of what you think about

the bill. (Imagine if Congress passed the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act the same day extremists detonated suicide vests in Riyadh.) While this bill was amended in committee to avoid some of the more blatant provisions that could undermine the Iran nuclear deal, many experts believe it still poses a threat to the agreement — while most of them agree it doesn't give the United States any new leverage to counter Iranian misdeeds. But, regardless of whether you believe this bill should ultimately be approved or not, when the one thing Congress can control is its own voting calendar, it should have waited to sanction Iran — thereby guaranteeing that as the country mourned, it would not also wake up to headlines about new tension with the United States. Why do that, especially when Iranian public opinion already casts the United States as woefully misinformed and applying a double standard to Sunni as opposed to Shia extremism — a problem this president's statements and warm interactions with Saudi Arabia have only exacerbated.

The attacks in Iran were carried out by a group we've been battling for almost three years — extremists who have beheaded innocent Americans. With Trump's stepped up rhetoric about defeating the Islamic State, why not instead reach out to Iran about greater cooperation against our shared enemy? Testing Iran this way would either result in progress, or expose Iran as a country unwilling to do the hard things needed to defeat these extremists.

Instead, the administration has contributed to an ever-increasing perception in the region: that we have chosen sides in a sectarian divide to which the United States has never been a party.

The hard truth is that counterterrorism efforts are rarely zero-sum — especially in a region of the world filled with longstanding sectarian feuds and complicated, ever-shifting allegiances. Don't forget, U.S. soldiers actively depend upon the efforts of Iranian-supported troops in the fight against the Islamic State in Iraq (even while we actively counter Iran in Syria, where it is allied with the regime of President Bashar al-Assad).

Were Trump engaged in advancing America's long-term, strategic goals, he would see the value of diplomacy in times of crisis, especially with those nations with which we disagree — sometimes most vehemently — and he would make it a point to publicly recognize the humanity of people everywhere who are affected by terrorism.

Yesterday's attacks would have been an appropriate juncture for the Trump administration to start a dialogue through which we might eventually solve some of the issues with Iran that anger and animate us. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has indicated that he is open to negotiating with the West on these issues, but Trump missed a window to begin testing that very proposition.

Gordon & O'Hanlon : On foreign policy, Trump isn't a complete disaster

By David Gordon
and Michael
O'Hanlon

President Trump's foreign policy has been taking a shellacking lately. With his insensitive tweets after the terrible June 3 attacks in London, ongoing allegations of improper ties between his presidential campaign and the Russians, and ill-advised intelligence disclosures, the new president's second 100 days in office are not going any easier than the first 100. Of course, much of the brouhaha is Trump-induced. And there is perhaps an element of poetic justice in seeing a man who insulted his way to the presidency paid back in kind. But the nation's politics will be further dragged down — and Trump's critics will be less likely to influence his future policies — if things become so poisoned that every debate ends up in a zero-sum shouting match between the White House and its critics.

Although there is certainly a lot to worry about in Trump's approach to the world (leaving aside his domestic policies, a separate and equally serious subject), there are several hopeful signs. His critics (including us) need to remember these facts, and support his good decisions, even as we continue our strong critiques when he goes astray.

First is the quality of his national security team — which Trump handpicked, to his credit. The top advisers appear collectively as good as any in modern U.S. history. But the widespread sighs of relief that were almost audible when Jim Mattis, Nikki Haley, H.R. McMaster, John F. Kelly and Rex Tillerson joined the administration have stopped. Indeed, some critics have even called for their resignations (which would be deeply counterproductive). An inner circle of White House advisers with extreme views complicates things, of course. But national security adviser McMaster has successfully persuaded the president not to include the firebrand Stephen K. Bannon on the National Security Council, among other encouraging steps.

Trump's national security team has already walked back many of candidate Trump's controversial, even dangerous, ideas. In his first week in office, Defense Secretary Mattis reassured the Asian region about the United States' continued commitment to its allies and interests there — a message that he and Secretary of State Tillerson reiterated this week and that Vice President Pence has conveyed as well.

The cruise missile strike in Syria in April was a proportionate response

to an abominable action by the government of President Bashar al-Assad. In Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, Trump has built on President Barack Obama's policies, gradually and modestly escalating U.S. involvement in most of those places.

Trump has wisely chosen not to use military force in response to North Korean provocations, attempting instead to work with China to apply economic pressure. And he dropped his campaign promise to designate China a currency manipulator and has not pushed his proposed 45 percent tariffs on all trade with China — actions that would have risked a trade war and recession.

Yet Trump has not turned a blind eye to China's behavior when it has been troublesome. Notably, the U.S. Navy recently conducted freedom-of-navigation exercises in the South China Sea, designed to push back against China's assertive claims there. These were done in matter-of-fact style, without tweets or other histrionics.

Then there is the NATO Article 5 question. To be sure, Trump insults allies in ways we find off-putting at best, and often disturbing. But the recent outcry over his supposed abandonment of NATO has been badly overdone. In his speech in Brussels in May, Trump explicitly

said that the United States would not leave allies in the lurch, even if he failed to voice commitment to the alliance's formal mutual-defense pledge as codified in Article 5 of the 1949 treaty.

Paying lip service to that article would not have settled any issue over European security. Its language is intentionally ambiguous: The way NATO should respond to one scenario is necessarily different from how it should respond to another.

Also, in this business, actions speak at least as loudly as words — and we still have thousands of U.S. troops undergirding our commitment to Poland and the Baltic States. Trump hasn't suggested pulling these forces back. Nor has he unconditionally lifted sanctions on Russia over the Ukraine crisis, as some feared he might.

This president is not exactly our cup of tea when it comes to foreign policy. But he has shown some openness to advice, rationality and dialogue — and his critics should be careful about closing off all avenues of communication with an administration that is still feeling its way.

Mishra : India's Illiberal Democracy

Remorselessly attacking the media, President Donald Trump advances a worldwide culture of impunity. Demagogues and despots flourish in his long shadow: Elected ones, presidents Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey and Vladimir Putin of Russia, as well as the house of Saud, use the opportunity to expand their power and crush their critics. But nowhere is the ongoing global assault on democratic norms as multi-pronged, devastating and poorly scrutinized as in India, ruled by a Hindu supremacist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

In recent months, there have been a series of mob attacks on people suspected of involvement in the beef trade, which Prime Minister Narendra Modi turned into a volatile electoral issue in 2014. Last week, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), India's main investigative agency, raided homes and offices of the founders of NDTV, the only major TV station to remain critical of Modi's government.

The ostensible cause was a criminal complaint about an unpaid bank loan, filed three days before the raid by an individual (NDTV claims that it has paid back the loan). The real reason seems to be an on-air confrontation between a NDTV anchor and the BJP national spokesperson that ended with the latter's expulsion.

Intimidation of the media by the government is nothing new in India. But the flimsiness of the CBI's case against NDTV, and the swift and draconian nature of its response, point to an emboldened mood in Modi's government; they reveal, too, some ingeniously hybrid methods of repression that Erdogan and Putin can only envy.

For Modi's government has managed to stoke a mass hysteria against various "anti-nationals" while also deploying the government's huge machinery to facilitate and legitimate violent acts. The chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, a hardline priest appointed by Modi, personally unleashed the "Anti-Romeo"

squads, vigilante groups that punish couples guilty of Western-style public displays of affection. The BJP's ministers have been quick to defend the recent mob assaults on suspected beef traders and beekeepers and to blame their victims.

Far from condemning such officially sponsored mayhem, and affirming the rule of law, anchors on news television channels help amplify mob fury. The synergy between a jingoistic media and the government's institutions was most recently on display in the case of an Indian army major in Kashmir who had tied a civilian to the bonnet of a jeep and then paraded him through several villages for nearly five hours.

India's hyper-nationalist new army chief, promoted above his seniors by Modi, bestowed a certificate of recommendation upon the major, and hailed his method as a necessary "innovation" in India's war with vicious anti-nationals in Kashmir. The major himself, exonerated by an army inquiry, appeared on a private television

channel to defend his blatant violation of many international norms. His act then was endorsed by talking heads in television studios and the BJP's armies of internet trolls.

The machinery of rage and outrage went into overdrive when Twitter evidently forced a BJP member of parliament to delete a tweet demanding that the novelist Arundhati Roy, a longstanding critic of Hindu chauvinism, be tied to the bonnet of a jeep. Most recently, the respected Indian academic Partha Chatterjee was hounded on television for comparing the Indian army's use of human shields in Kashmir to the brutal methods of British colonialists in India.

Modi himself assumes a regal indifference as civil society in India is steadily destroyed by his allies and supporters. He certainly doesn't have to worry much about international disapproval, or even scrutiny. The world seems too distracted by Trump's antics, and the extreme volatility they inject into

political and economic realms on several continents.

It is also true that, no matter how horrifying the news from India is, the country remains for many commentators in the West a mostly cuddly democracy and "rising" economic power. A recent article in the *New York Review of Books* was

not untypical in this regard. "In Narendra Modi, India now has dynamic leadership for the first time in many years," wrote Jessica T. Mathews, the former president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. After nodding briefly to criticism of Modi for restricting civil liberties, Mathews added, offering no evidence

whatsoever, that "Modi may be consolidating enough political strength to force through long-needed reforms in New Delhi."

For those who breathe the toxic atmosphere of India today, such assessments spring from a cloud cuckoo-land of fantasy. For the rapid poisoning of India's public culture

renders the question of economic reform moot. The contemporary world's greatest experiment in democracy is dying. It is a measure of the sad and crazy times we live in that we cannot even see this tragedy.

ETATS-UNIS

**The
New York
Times**

UNE - For Trump, the 'Cloud' Just Grew That Much Darker

Peter Baker

Mr. Comey gave ammunition to the president's side, too, particularly by admitting that he had orchestrated the leak of his account of his most critical meeting with Mr. Trump with the express purpose of spurring the appointment of a special counsel, which he accomplished. The president's defenders said Mr. Comey had proved Mr. Trump was right when he called the former F.B.I. director a "showboat" and a "grandstander," a conclusion Democrats once shared when he was investigating Hillary Clinton last year.

James B. Comey, the former F.B.I. director, testified before the Senate Intelligence Committee.

But Mr. Comey also revealed that he had turned over memos of his conversations with Mr. Trump to that newly appointed special counsel, Robert S. Mueller III, suggesting that investigators may now be looking into whether Mr. Trump obstructed justice by dismissing the F.B.I. director.

"This was a devastating day for the Trump White House, and when the history of the Trump presidency is written, this will be seen as a key moment," said Peter H. Wehner, who was White House adviser to President George W. Bush. "My takeaway is James Comey laid out facts and was essentially encouraging Mueller to investigate Trump for obstruction. That's a huge deal."

The White House was left in the awkward position of trying to minimize the damage. Mr. Trump himself remained uncharacteristically silent, while his advisers kept the daily briefing off camera and sent out the backup to Sean Spicer, the press secretary. "I can definitively say the president is not a liar," Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the principal deputy press secretary, told reporters.

Washington has not seen a spectacle quite like this since the days of Watergate, Iran-contra or President Bill Clinton's impeachment. Whatever the controversies under Mr. Bush and President Barack Obama, neither was ever accused of personal misconduct by a current or former law enforcement official in such a public forum.

Indeed, Mr. Comey highlighted the difference by noting that he had never taken notes of his conversations with either of those presidents because he trusted their basic integrity, but he did write memos about each of his one-on-one encounters with Mr. Trump because "I was honestly concerned that he might lie about the nature of our meeting."

In any other presidency, the events laid out by Mr. Comey — Mr. Trump asking for "loyalty" from the F.B.I. director who was investigating the president's associates, then asking him to drop an investigation into a former aide and ultimately firing him when he did not — might have spelled the end.

We analyze the surprises and bombshells of James Comey's Senate testimony, and get the inside story on that leaked memo.

But Mr. Trump has tested the boundaries of normal politics and upended the usual rules. To his supporters, the inquiries are nothing more than the elite news media and political establishment attacking a change agent who threatens their interests.

"This is like an explosive presidency-ending moment," said John Q. Barrett, a law professor at St. John's University in New York and an associate independent counsel during the Iran-contra investigation in Ronald Reagan's presidency. "But we have a different context now."

The articles of impeachment drafted against President Richard M. Nixon and Mr. Clinton both alleged obstruction of justice, in effect making clear that such an action could qualify under the "high crimes and misdemeanors" clause of the Constitution. The "smoking gun" tape that doomed Mr. Nixon in 1974 recorded him ordering his chief of staff to have the C.I.A. block the F.B.I. from investigating the Watergate burglary. Critics said that Mr. Trump's comments to Mr. Comey effectively cut out the middle man.

The House impeached Mr. Clinton in 1998 for lying under oath and obstructing justice to cover up his affair with Monica Lewinsky, a former White House intern, during a sexual harassment lawsuit. The obstruction alleged in Mr. Clinton's case was persuading Ms. Lewinsky to give false testimony, advising her to hide gifts he had given her to avoid any subpoena and trying to find her a job to keep her happy. After a trial, the Senate acquitted him.

As a political matter, both Mr. Nixon and Mr. Clinton faced a House under control of the opposition party, while Mr. Trump has the benefit of a Republican House that would be far less eager to open an impeachment inquiry. And for all of the fireworks on Thursday, the reaction in Congress still broke down largely along partisan lines, with Democrats in attack mode and Republicans either defending Mr. Trump or remaining silent. That may leave the question to Mr. Mueller.

"The polarization seems even worse than during the Lewinsky investigation, which I hadn't thought possible," said Stephen Bates, an associate independent counsel during the investigation into Mr. Clinton. "Everyone gets judged in terms of helping or hurting Trump. Whatever Mueller does, half of the country will call him courageous and

half will call him contemptible. We just don't know which half is which."

The defense on Thursday was left to Mr. Trump's personal lawyer, Marc E. Kasowitz, who selectively used Mr. Comey's testimony, disputing the damaging parts while citing the parts he considered helpful. He denied that the president had ever asked Mr. Comey for loyalty or to let go of the investigation into Michael T. Flynn, the former national security adviser. But he cited Mr. Comey's statement that the president himself was not under investigation at the time the F.B.I. director was fired.

He also assailed Mr. Comey for leaking details of his conversations with the president to prompt the appointment of a special counsel, although they were not classified. "It is overwhelmingly clear that there have been and continue to be those in government who are actively attempting to undermine this administration with selective and illegal leaks of classified information and privileged communications," he said. "Mr. Comey has now admitted that he is one of these leakers."

Tellingly, the Republicans on the Senate Intelligence Committee paid no heed to the talking points distributed in advance by the Republican National Committee at the behest of the White House. Instead of attacking Mr. Comey's credibility, as the R.N.C. and Donald Trump Jr. did, the Republican senators praised him as a patriot and dedicated public servant. They largely accepted his version of events, while trying to elicit testimony that would cast Mr. Trump's actions in the most innocent light possible.

Mr. Comey cooperated to some extent by trying not to go too far beyond the facts as he presented them, declining, for instance, to say whether he thought Mr. Trump's statements amounted to obstruction of justice.

"In a credibility battle between Trump and Comey, everybody knows Comey is going to win that war," said Adam W. Goldberg, who was an associate special White

House counsel under Mr. Clinton during Kenneth W. Starr's investigation.

For Mr. Trump, the battle with Mr. Comey now overshadows much of

what he wants to do. Major legislation is stalled. Mr. Kasowitz said the president was "eager to continue moving forward with his agenda, with the business of this

country, and with the public cloud removed."

For now, though, the cloud remains.

**The
Washington
Post**

UNE - Comey: White House lied about me, FBI

Former FBI director James B. Comey on Thursday used a dramatic appearance before a national audience to sharply criticize the character of the president, accusing Trump of firing him over the Russia investigation and then misleading the public about the reasons for the dismissal.

Trump and his team, Comey said, told "lies, plain and simple," about him and the FBI in an effort to cover up the real reason for his sudden sacking last month. Comey said that after one particularly odd private meeting with the president, he feared Trump "might lie" about the conversation, prompting him to begin taking careful notes after each encounter.

Comey revealed that after he was fired, he leaked notes on his interactions with Trump to the media, hoping that sharing the information would prompt the appointment of a special counsel to investigate the administration over possible links to Russia.

"It's my judgment that I was fired because of the Russia investigation," Comey said. "I was fired, in some way, to change — or the endeavor was to change the way the Russia investigation was being conducted."

Comey's testimony threatened to deepen the legal and political crisis engulfing the White House, which has struggled to respond to growing questions about the president's conduct.

"I can definitely say the president is not a liar," said White House deputy press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders after the hearing. "I think it's frankly insulting that that question would be asked."

Over nearly three hours of testimony in a packed hearing room, Comey grimly recounted the events that he said showed the president sought to redirect the Russia probe away from his former national security adviser, Michael Flynn, and get the FBI to publicly distance the president himself from the probe.

As Comey spoke, most senators on the dais sat spellbound. Republican members of the Senate Intelligence Committee sought to soften

Comey's version of events, noting that Trump never ordered him to drop the Flynn investigation but merely "hoped" he would. Democrats tried to build a case that Trump had obstructed justice by firing Comey.

Pressured by the administration to focus on the president's legislative ambitions rather than the politically consuming investigation, Republican leaders defended the president after the hearing, with House Speaker Paul D. Ryan (Wis.) casting Trump as a political novice who isn't "steeped in the long-running protocols" of Washington and is "just new to this."

Comey declined to say whether he thought the president had obstructed justice, saying that was a determination to be made by Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller III.

In response to Comey's testimony, Trump's personal lawyer, Marc Kasowitz, released a statement saying the president "never, in form or substance, directed or suggested that Mr. Comey stop investigating anyone."

Kasowitz also accused Comey of trying to "undermine this administration with selective and illegal leaks of classified information and privileged communications."

Comey and Trump's interactions: what we know so far

The hearing, broadcast nationally by at least 12 television networks, was held in a cavernous space in the Hart Senate Office Building with hundreds of seats to accommodate the intense interest. Several lawmakers who do not serve on the committee took seats in the audience, a rarity on Capitol Hill. Most were Democrats eager to hear Comey's claims of presidential impropriety.

Inside the hearing room, people audibly groaned or gasped when Comey said he had "no doubt" that Russian government officials were behind the hacking of the Democratic National Committee last year.

Anticipation for the hearing stretched far beyond the Hill. Sen. Joe Manchin III (D-W.Va.) walked into the hearing with a binder that included 20 of more than 600

questions he said were submitted to him by constituents.

Comey began his testimony by saying he became "confused and increasingly concerned" about the public explanations by White House officials for his firing on May 9, particularly after the president said in an interview that he was thinking about the Russia investigation when he decided to fire him.

The former director wasted little time repudiating White House statements that he was fired in part because of low morale among FBI employees who supposedly had soured on his leadership. Comey said the administration "chose to defame me and more importantly the FBI."

"Those were lies, plain and simple," Comey said. "And I'm so sorry that the FBI workforce had to hear them, and I'm so sorry the American people were told them."

His most damning remarks were directed at the president, but in the course of his testimony, Comey also raised doubts about the judgment of a host of other people, including Justice Department officials such as former attorney general Loretta E. Lynch and current Attorney General Jeff Sessions.

During questioning, Comey said that while the Hillary Clinton email case was ongoing, Lynch asked him to refer to the probe as a "matter" rather than an "investigation."

The former FBI director said he thought that that wording "gave the impression that the attorney general was looking to align the way we talked about our work with the way the campaign" talked about it. "That was inaccurate," he said. "That gave me a queasy feeling."

Regarding Sessions, Comey said he took his concerns about one particular conversation with Trump to the new attorney general and said he did not want to be left alone again in a room with the president. Comey said Sessions's body language gave Comey the impression there was nothing to be done.

Comey described his state of mind as he tried to navigate a number of tense conversations with the president about the investigation into possible coordination between

Trump associates and Russian operatives.

In his written testimony, released Wednesday, Comey described being summoned to a private dinner at the White House in January with the president, who told him: "I need loyalty. I expect loyalty."

Comey said the conversation, in which Trump asked whether Comey intended to stay on as FBI director, despite three prior discussions in which Comey had said he did, raised concerns in his mind.

"My common sense told me what's going on here is he's looking to get something in exchange for granting my request to stay in the job," Comey testified.

Comey made clear he felt the discussions were improper since Trump repeatedly pressed him about specific investigations that involved people close to the president.

The former FBI director described another interaction in February, one day after Flynn was forced to resign as national security adviser for misleading Vice President Pence about his contacts with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak.

A number of senior officials had met with the president in the Oval Office to discuss terrorism. At the end of the meeting, according to Comey, Trump asked everyone to leave but Comey.

Sessions, the attorney general, lingered until the president told him to leave, too, Comey said.

"My sense was the attorney general knew he shouldn't be leaving, which is why he was lingering," Comey said. "I knew something was about to happen which I should pay very close attention to."

Once they were alone, Comey said, the president told Comey he hoped he could let go of the investigation into Flynn.

"When it comes from the president, I took it as a direction," Comey said.

At the time Flynn was fired, he was being investigated for possibly lying about his conversations with the Russian ambassador, Comey said.

He said he was shocked and concerned about the president's request, but decided not to tell

Sessions about it because he expected that the attorney general would soon recuse himself from the Russia probe, which he eventually did.

It was after this meeting that Comey went to Sessions about never being left alone with Trump again.

Comey's account made clear that his relationship with Trump was fraught from their very first meeting, which occurred before the inauguration, when he told the president-elect that a dossier of unsubstantiated allegations against him had been circulating around Washington.

"I didn't want him thinking that I was briefing him on this to sort of hang it over him in some way," Comey said. "He needed to know this was being said, but I was very keen to

not leave him with the impression that the bureau was trying to do something to him."

Comey acknowledged, as the president has claimed, that he repeatedly told Trump that he was not personally under investigation. But he also said that in private meetings and one-on-one phone calls, the president repeatedly asked him to say publicly that he was not personally under investigation — something Comey did not want to do.

After firing Comey, the president tweeted a suggestion that there could be tapes of their private talks.

"The president tweeted on Friday after I got fired that I'd better hope there are not tapes," Comey said. That made the ex-FBI director think any such tapes would back up his

account of Trump's improper statements, so he said he asked a friend of his to share with a reporter a memo he had written about the February conversation.

"I thought it might prompt the appointment of a special counsel," Comey said.

Asked by Sen. Roy Blunt (R-Mo.) why he felt he had the authority to do that, Comey replied: "As a private citizen, I felt free to share that. I thought it was very important to get it out."

The friend is Daniel Richman, a law professor and a former federal prosecutor who confirmed his role but declined to comment further. The reporter is Michael Schmidt of the New York Times, who declined to comment.

A special counsel was appointed — Mueller, who is a former colleague of Comey's — and Comey has provided him with his memos, he testified Thursday.

Comey said he still has no idea whether the president has tapes of their conversations, but he said: "I hope there are, and I will consent to the release of them. ... The president surely knows whether he taped me, and if he did, my feelings aren't hurt."

When the hearing was over, Sens. Richard Burr (R-N.C.) and Mark R. Warner (D-Va.), the two senior members of the committee, walked out to greet reporters camped in the hallway outside.

"This is nowhere near the end of the investigation," Burr said.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Tau

UNE - Comey Says He Felt Trump Directed Him to Drop Flynn Probe

Del Quentin Wilber and Byron Tau

WASHINGTON—Former FBI Director James Comey told senators Thursday that he felt President Donald Trump had directed him to drop an investigation into a former adviser, and that after his firing he leaked accounts of his conversations with the president in hopes of sparking the appointment of a special counsel.

His comments came in a highly anticipated hearing before the Senate Intelligence Committee that included Mr. Comey's testimony that he believed that he was receiving an order when Mr. Trump said he "hoped" he would be able to end the Federal Bureau of Investigation's inquiry into former national security adviser Mike Flynn.

Mr. Comey declined to offer his opinion on whether he thought Mr. Trump was trying to obstruct justice, but he said that issue is something that the recently appointed special counsel would examine. He also confirmed he told Mr. Trump that he wasn't under investigation as part of the FBI's probe into Russia's alleged interference in the 2016 presidential election.

Mr. Comey's public testimony lasted more than 2 1/2 hours and allowed the former FBI chief to speak publicly on a range of topics surrounding his interactions with the president, including his decision to document all conversations with the president because he believed Mr. Trump "might lie" about them later.

Mr. Comey began his testimony by protesting Mr. Trump's handling of

his firing, saying the administration's "shifting explanations...confused me and increasingly concerned me." He later said investigators are looking at whether Mr. Flynn lied to the FBI and suggested that they had additional information on Attorney General Jeff Sessions and his dealings with Russia.

After the hearing, the president's personal attorney, Marc Kasowitz, said Mr. Trump was pleased that Mr. Comey said publicly that the president wasn't personally under investigation. But he disputed much of Mr. Comey's testimony about his private conversations with Mr. Trump and pointed out that Mr. Comey "unilaterally and surreptitiously" released "privileged communications with the president" to the media.

Thursday's hearing made it clear Mr. Comey believed the president had actively tried to influence the course of the FBI's investigation into Mr. Flynn, who was forced to resign after making false statements about his conversations with a Russian diplomat. But because the most damning accounts involved one-on-one encounters with the president—and Mr. Trump disputes Mr. Comey's version—investigators face a challenge as they examine the matter.

"It's my judgment that I was fired because of the Russia investigation," Mr. Comey said.

Mr. Comey said he understood the president to be urging him to move quickly to conclude the investigation, which he felt would clear his name. "I interpreted that as he was frustrated that the Russia investigation was taking up so much time and energy...and it was making

it difficult for him to focus on other priorities of his," he said.

In his testimony Thursday, Mr. Comey described Mr. Trump's conversation with him about the Flynn investigation as "very disturbing" and "very concerning." Mr. Kasowitz denied that the president asked Mr. Comey to drop the probe.

As to whether the president's alleged statements amounted to obstruction of justice, Mr. Comey said, that was "a conclusion I'm sure the special counsel will work towards, to try and understand what the intention was there and whether that's an offense."

Mr. Comey also suggested investigators are pursuing several lines of inquiry, including Mr. Flynn's statements to investigators and Mr. Trump's behavior. Later in the day, the former director spoke to lawmakers in closed session.

In his remarks, Mr. Kasowitz criticized government officials who he said "are actively attempting to undermine this administration with selective and illegal leaks of classified information and privileged communications." He added: "Mr. Comey has now admitted that he is one of these leakers."

After Mr. Trump tweeted on May 12 that Mr. Comey "better hope that there are no 'tapes' of our conversations before he starts leaking to the press," Mr. Comey testified Thursday that he decided to provide information to the media.

Mr. Comey said he ensured that a friend, Columbia Law Professor Dan Richman, would provide the contents of memos Mr. Comey had written on his discussions with Mr.

Trump to the media, including one in which he recalled Mr. Trump saying he hoped the director could see his way "to let Flynn go."

"I thought [the memos] might prompt the appointment of a special counsel," Mr. Comey said. The former director said he began writing such memos because he was concerned the president might misrepresent their encounters. Because of "the nature of the person," he said, "I was honestly concerned he might lie about the nature of our meetings."

Mr. Comey added, "Lordy, I hope there are tapes." White House representatives have repeatedly declined to confirm or deny whether there is a White House taping system.

Mr. Kasowitz pushed back Thursday on Mr. Comey's statement that Mr. Trump, during a private dinner at the White House, had told Mr. Comey he expected loyalty.

"The president never, in form or substance, directed or suggested that Mr. Comey stop investigating anyone, including suggesting that Mr. Comey 'let Flynn go,'" Mr. Kasowitz said. "The president also never told Mr. Comey, 'I need loyalty, I expect loyalty' in form or substance."

Mr. Comey said he assured the president he was not under investigation during a Jan. 6 briefing in which he discussed the existence of a dossier containing unsubstantiated, salacious allegations about Mr. Trump. He made that assurance at other points, as well.

Mr. Comey said he wanted to reassure Mr. Trump this was not a "J. Edgar Hoover type situation," referring to the FBI's first director, who was notorious for keeping damaging information on powerful officials. "I didn't want him thinking I was briefing him on it to have it hanging over him in some way."

Mr. Comey's abrupt firing on May 9 set off a chain of events that led to the appointment of Robert Mueller as special counsel to oversee the Russia probe.

The Senate Intelligence Committee, and several other congressional panels, is investigating Russia's alleged interference in the 2016 election. The Russian government denies that, and Mr. Trump has called the probes a "witch hunt." He has said no one on his campaign had coordinated with the Kremlin.

At the hearing, senators of both parties asked Mr. Comey why, if he found the president's conduct objectionable, he didn't raise the alarm or confront Mr. Trump. "It's a great question. Maybe if I were stronger I would have," Mr. Comey said. "I was so stunned by the conversation that I just took it in."

Afterward, lawmakers expressed concern about various parts of Mr. Comey's account. House Speaker Paul Ryan (R., Wis.) said the FBI and Justice Department need to be independent but that Mr. Trump may not have been familiar with accepted practices.

"The president's new at this. He's new to government. He probably wasn't steeped in the long-running protocols that established the relationships between DOJ, FBI and White Houses," Mr. Ryan said.

When a reporter noted that Mr. Trump has a large staff to advise him, Mr. Ryan said he was "not saying it's an acceptable excuse—it's just my observation."

Sen. Michael Bennet (D., Colo.) said the legal case for obstruction of justice is a "critical question that the special counsel must examine further."

"We must also keep our eye on the larger issue: Russian interference in our elections," he said.

Mr. Comey didn't spare his former bosses, Mr. Sessions and his predecessor, Loretta Lynch. He said said he felt "queasy" last year when Ms. Lynch asked him to call the FBI's probe of Democrat Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server a "matter" rather than an "investigation."

And he said he wasn't able to discuss the Russia investigation with Mr. Sessions because he was "aware of facts that I can't discuss in an open setting that would make his continued engagement in a Russia-related investigation problematic."

Earlier in his testimony, Mr. Comey said he believed the president had mistreated him and the FBI by claiming the bureau was poorly led and disorganized.

"Although the law required no reason at all to fire an FBI director, the administration then chose to defame me, and more importantly the FBI, by saying the organization was in disarray, that it was poorly led, that the workforce had lost confidence in its leader," Mr. Comey said. "Those were lies, plain and simple."



Nichols : James Comey's testimony is a disaster for Trump administration

The testimony of former FBI director James Comey today was a remarkable moment in American politics. President Trump's supporters will lean heavily (and rightly) on the fact that there was no direct accusation of criminal acts against the president, which might be a low bar but it is nonetheless an important one. And Comey vindicated at least one of the White House's talking points: that the president was correct when he said he was not under direct FBI investigation.

Beyond that, however, this cannot be considered anything but a political disaster for an administration already embroiled in a major scandal of its own making.

In short, the American people were treated to the astonishing sight of a former FBI director repeatedly calling the president of the United States a liar, including twice in the very first minutes of his testimony. Comey then went farther, in effect daring the president to contradict him. When the subject of Trump's tweet about tapes came up, for example, Comey said: "Lordy, I hope there are tapes." When Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., curtly asked Comey if he would agree to release his personal notes in exchange for the president releasing any tapes, Comey merely said, "Sure."

Trump's defenders, however, have a point that there is no smoking gun here in terms of a direct accusation from Comey that the president tried to obstruct justice. But Comey didn't have to make that charge directly. He repeatedly relayed the circumstances of his meeting with Trump, including the president's request that everyone leave the room. "Why did he kick everyone out of the Oval Office?" Comey asked. "To me, as an investigator, that is a very significant fact." When asked why he wrote down a record of his dinner at the White House, Comey cited "the circumstances, the subject matter," and "the nature of the person," a remarkable thing for the nation's top law enforcement officer to say about a discussion with the nation's chief magistrate.

GOP senators, in a bizarre maneuver, pressed Comey for not simply quitting his job or reporting Trump for a felony. "You kept showing up to work," Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Mo., said. This is an odd charge in itself — imagine how Comey would have been smeared for resigning after one dinner with the president — and it allowed Comey to shoot back that staying was the only way to protect ongoing investigations. Sen. John Cornyn, R-Tex., gamely noted that firing Comey changed nothing about those investigations; Comey coolly

replied that this was true only because special prosecutor Robert Mueller was now on the case. (Cornyn reacted by shifting the discussions to Hillary Clinton, always a reliable Republican escape hatch.)

Other senators hammered on the fact that the president issued no direct order to drop the investigation into now-fired national security adviser Mike Flynn. Comey, in response, made clear that he knew what he was being asked. "When a President of the United States in the Oval Office says something like 'I hope' or 'I suggest' or 'would you,' do you take that as a directive?" Sen. Angus King, I-Maine, asked. "Yes," Comey replied. "Yes, it rings in my ear as kind of, 'Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?'," a reference to the famous utterance of King Henry II before the murder of his enemy Thomas a Becket. This was a great moment for history buffs, but it is an awful moment in the history of American politics.

Comey showed the most passion on the subject of Russia's interference in the 2016 American presidential election, a point Democrats will likely (and incorrectly) seize on as evidence that Trump did not win the election fairly. This partisan talking point will miss Comey's far more important

warning: Russian interference was a direct attack on our political system, and it's not over. "They will be back," Comey said emphatically.

Comey's testimony is not even close to the end of this episode. As Comey himself noted, there were multiple matters he could not talk about in an open session. He repeatedly stressed that many of the questions raised today — including whether Trump tried to obstruct justice — will fall to Mueller, a possibility that likely chills the blood of the White House and national Republicans. In that respect, Comey left tantalizing clues. Asked why he suspected that Attorney General Jeff Sessions would have to recuse himself from any Russia matters, for example, Comey demurred, implying the answer was both classified and yet to be investigated.

The Democrats who hoped Comey would nail shut a charge of obstruction of justice were too hopeful. The Republicans who hoped Comey could be smeared and discredited were too cynical. This is the opening soliloquy in a potential tragedy that has many more characters to be heard from in subsequent acts, and none more important than another former FBI director: Robert Mueller.

POLITICO Comey's devastating indictment of President Donald Trump

By Todd Purdum

He presented himself as anything but a fearsome G-man. He

wondered what he might have done differently "if I were stronger." He confessed that he had hustled his adversary off the phone in "kind of a

slightly cowardly way" to avoid refusing his demands. He was "worried very much" about being in the mold of his most infamous

predecessor, J. Edgar Hoover, by seeming to hold his superior hostage over salacious allegations about his sex life.

But in more than two hours of steady, soft-spoken Senate testimony, former FBI Director James Comey nevertheless delivered a quietly devastating indictment of President Donald Trump, confiding that he had kept contemporaneous notes of their every conversation for one overriding and unflinching reason: "I was honestly concerned that he might lie."

Comey's testimony may or may not go down in the annals of great Washington scandals. His Republican interlocutors on the Senate Intelligence Committee succeeded in eliciting his repeated confirmation that, so far as he knew, Trump has never been personally under FBI investigation for possible collusion with the Russians — or anything else, for that matter. Further, Comey repeatedly conceded that neither Trump's efforts to get him to confirm that fact publicly, nor the president's single request to back off investigating the Russia-related activities of the fired national security adviser Michael Flynn, had ever impeded the ongoing inquiry that is now in the hands of special counsel Robert Mueller.

But Comey's appearance Thursday will certainly rank with the great self-deprecating performances of past witnesses like Lt. Col. Oliver North in the Iran-Contra scandal, or Sen. Sam Ervin, chairman of the Watergate select committee, who liked to insist that he was "just a country lawyer." In his own telling, Comey was just an ordinary guy doing his job in extraordinary circumstances, a bona fide Eagle Scout who, gosh darn it, is far too modest to say so out loud.

"My mother raised me not to say things like this about myself, so I'm not gonna," Comey said when Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-N.M.) asked him whether he wanted to say anything about why people should believe him and not the president. Similarly, Comey said he would have to leave it to others to say whether the president had obstructed justice.

Yet the damage was already done. Comey had not finished testifying before the White House deputy press secretary, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, was moved to insist, "I can definitively say the president is not a liar. I think it's frankly insulting." Such protestations from any White House are never a good thing. (See Richard Nixon's, "I am not a crook," and Bill Clinton's, "I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky," just for starters).

In fact, Comey's testimony repeatedly and emphatically contradicted Trump's account of events on multiple points: It was Trump, he said, not himself who asked to have a dinner on Jan. 27 (he had to break a date with his wife to do so), at which the president then demanded Comey's "loyalty." Contrary to Trump's public insistence that he never asked Comey to back off the Flynn investigation, Comey testified that on Valentine's Day the president cleared the Oval Office of the attorney general and other officials and then did just that.

At one point, Sen. James Lankford (R-Okla.) told Comey that he found Trump's request about Flynn — "I hope you can see your way clear to letting this go" — to be "a pretty light touch" from someone who might be trying to block an investigation. But neither Lankford nor any of his other Republican colleagues questioned the veracity or specificity of Comey's essential account — something that the low-key, Joe Friday tenor of the former director's testimony would have made all the tougher to do in any case.

For all his insistence that he had been "stunned" by Trump's request to curtail the Flynn inquiry, Comey made it clear that he had never been too stunned to deploy the tactics of a skilled Washington infighter. When the president tweeted that he might have tapes of the conversations, Comey testified that he awoke in the middle of the night and thought, "Holy cow, there might be tapes." That impelled him to leak his own memos (which he had deliberately written with unclassified status, so they could be shared easily within the FBI) to the press through a friend, in the explicit hope that they might prompt the appointment of a special prosecutor.

"Lordy, I hope there are tapes," he told Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) at one point.

And in a subtle window into the investigator's art, Comey suggested that he had refrained from sharing what he considered to be the president's improper requests with agents working on the Russia case not only to avoid infecting their inquiry, but because he believed the president's request was "a very disturbing development, really important to our work." That implies that Comey feared the president's own words and actions might eventually become the subject of official inquiry — as they presumably now have.

Comey's humble demeanor did not keep him from defending his honor, as he hotly did at the outset of his testimony, when he confessed to confusion and ultimately outrage at the Trump administration's shifting explanations for his firing. "Although the law required no reason at all to fire an FBI director," he said, "the administration then chose to defame me and more importantly the FBI by saying that the organization was in disarray, that it was poorly led, that the workforce had lost confidence in its leader. Those were lies, plain and simple."

But for the most part, Comey portrayed himself less as a threatening Torquemada than as a shocked straight arrow, struggling to cope with a president whose behavior and demeanor had unnerved and confounded him from their first meeting.

When Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine) asked Comey to confirm that he had told Trump at their first meeting on Jan. 6 at Trump Tower that he was not the subject of any "counterintelligence investigation" into Russian meddling, Comey took some pains to say that the context was more specific. He had just briefed Trump on the contents of an unverified dossier alleging that the Russians had compromising evidence about Trump's personal behavior.

"I was briefing him about salacious and unverified material," Comey said. "It was in a context of that that he had a strong and defensive reaction about that not being true. My reading of it was it was important for me to assure him we were not personally investigating him." He added, "It was very important because it was, first, true, and second, I was worried very much of being in kind of a — kind of J. Edgar Hoover-type situation. I didn't want him thinking I was briefing him on this to sort of hang it over him in some way."

Hoover, who ran the FBI for just shy of 48 years, was well known for keeping secret files that he used to intimidate a range of politicians and public figures.

At another point, Feinstein wanted to know why Comey had not rejected Trump's request about Flynn out of hand.

"Now, here's the question," she said. "You're big, you're strong. I know the Oval Office and I know what happens to people when they walk in. There is a certain amount of intimidation. But why didn't you stop

and say, 'Mr. President, this is wrong. I cannot discuss this with you.'"

"It's a great question," Comey replied. "Maybe if I were stronger, I would have. I was so stunned by the conversation that I just took it in."

When Feinstein asked Comey why he had told Trump in a March 30 phone conversation that he would see what he could do about getting the word out that Trump was not personally under investigation, Comey again suggested his response had been nothing to brag about.

"It was kind of a cowardly way of trying to avoid telling him, we're not going to do that," he said. "That I would see what we could do. It was a way of kind of getting off the phone, frankly, and then I turned and handed it to the acting deputy attorney general."

Comey made it clear that he was still smarting from the firestorm of criticism that greeted his handling of the investigation into Hillary Clinton's private email server last year, acknowledging that "it caused a whole lot of personal pain for me." But he insisted that, even knowing all he knows now, he would not have handled the matter differently. He acknowledged that Clinton herself might have fired him if she had won.

In an answer to Sen. Joe Manchin (D-W.Va.), about whether Trump had ever expressed serious concern about the underlying issue at hand — the deliberate Russian interference in last year's election — Comey turned passionate, displaying more emotion than in any other response.

"The reason this is such a big deal," he said. "We have this big messy wonderful country where we fight with each other all the time. But nobody tells us what to think, what to fight about, what to vote for except other Americans. And that's wonderful and often painful. But we're talking about a foreign government that using technical intrusion, lots of other methods tried to shape the way we think, we vote, we act. That is a big deal. And people need to recognize it. It's not about Republicans or Democrats. They're coming after America, which I hope we all love equally."

For at least a fleeting moment, that seemed to be a statement on which all members of the committee might agree.

Goldberg : James Comey Testimony Confirms Donald Trump Is Own Worst Enemy

For those who hoped that former FBI director James Comey was going to provide some bombshell evidence — or any evidence at all — that Donald Trump colluded with the Russians to steal the 2016 election, Thursday's Senate testimony had to be a major letdown. Of course, that was a foolish hope in the first place, since even if such evidence existed, Comey was never going to divulge it in an open Senate hearing.

For Trump's most ardent supporters, Comey's testimony exonerated the president. Trump's lawyer, Marc Kasowitz, responded to Comey's written testimony: "The president feels completely and totally vindicated." And in a sense he should.

Comey confirmed what Trump had said when he fired the FBI director last month: Comey had told the president on three different occasions that he wasn't the target of a criminal investigation. What drove Trump nuts was that Comey wouldn't say that publicly. Now he has.

But there's a problem. After the hearing, Kasowitz denied all the damning parts of Comey's testimony. The president never told Comey "I need loyalty, I expect

loyalty," Kasowitz insisted, and Trump never asked Comey to drop any investigation into Flynn. In short: Comey's a liar and Trump isn't.

Given the pains to which Comey went to write down his version of the meeting with Trump, not to mention Comey's immediate conversations with colleagues and the utter plausibility of his account, Trump's denials seem thoroughly unconvincing to me. But more to the point, if Comey were inclined to lie, he would have — and certainly could have — invented a far, far more damning story. If your defense is that Comey is a liar, you can't cherry-pick the helpful bits and shout, "Vindication!"

Ultimately, the most obvious lesson of this unprecedented political fiasco should be the same for both Democrats and Republicans. Many Democrats want to believe in a stolen-election theory that would reveal Trump as an evil genius. The president's most vocal supporters, starting with the president himself, still insist that he's not evil, but that he is a genius. Indeed, the president says so himself.

"I know what I'm doing. I'm a smart person. The highest level of smart," he told *People* magazine. "People

are saying Donald Trump is a genius," he told the *New York Times*.

When asked by MSNBC's Mika Brzezinski in 2016 which experts he speaks with, Trump replied, "I'm speaking with myself, number one, because I have a very good brain. . . . My primary consultant is myself, and I have, you know, I have a good instinct for this stuff."

Who knows what his IQ is, and to be sure that technique worked for him as a candidate. But when it comes to how the presidency works, Trump is an amateur, a bumbler and, very often, his own worst enemy.

Thursday's hearing was just the latest proof of that. If Trump hadn't fired Comey, or possibly if he'd just fired him in a sensible and professional manner, Comey might not have testified at all. There almost certainly wouldn't be a special counsel in the form of another former FBI director, Robert Mueller. If Trump hadn't violated all good sense and asked for a private session with Comey to ask (allegedly) for loyalty and for him to drop the Flynn investigation, Comey would have had little to testify about, given that he can't talk about the Russia investigation.

According to Comey, Trump believed the Russia investigation was a "cloud" over his presidency, preventing him from making great "deals" for America. Democrats and the media, desperate to explain away Hillary Clinton's humiliating defeat, surely deserve their fair share of blame for that cloud. But no sensible person can deny that Trump — with his obsessive tweeting and aphasic outbursts — has done almost everything he can to make that cloud thicker and darker than necessary. It's like he had a fog machine installed next to his giant TV.

If Trump had simply focused on making great deals for America — whatever that means — rather than obsessing over the Democrat-fueled myth that he was being investigated, he wouldn't have an approval rating in the mid-30s, and the Democrats would be on their heels. But he opted to rely on his instincts. And now the harshest irony is that, as Comey intimated Thursday, it may no longer be a myth that Trump is being personally investigated. Mueller is now looking at whether the president obstructed justice. I'm inclined to think he didn't. But Mueller wouldn't be looking at all were it not for Trump's super instincts.

The
New York
Times

Editorial : Mr. Comey and All the President's Lies

The Editorial Board

Weeks after being described by Donald Trump as a "nut job," James Comey on Thursday deftly recast his confrontation with the president as a clash between the legal principles at the foundation of American democracy, and a venal, self-interested politician who does not recognize, let alone uphold, them.

In sworn testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee, Mr. Comey, the former F.B.I. director, made clear that he had no confidence in the president's integrity. Why? "The nature of the person," he said. Confronted with low presidential character for the first time in his career, Mr. Comey began writing meticulous notes of every conversation with Mr. Trump. "I was honestly concerned that he might lie about the nature of our meeting," he said.

Mr. Comey said he was stunned during one Oval Office meeting by Mr. Trump's request — which he

very reasonably understood as an order — to drop the F.B.I. investigation into Michael Flynn. Mr. Flynn had been forced to resign as national security adviser the day before, after lying about his contacts with Russia. And Russia, Mr. Comey usefully reminded the senators, had gone to unprecedented lengths to disrupt the 2016 presidential election, using "overwhelming" technological firepower.

"This is about America," Mr. Comey kept saying. Russia "tried to shape the way we think, we vote, we act — that is a big deal," he added. "They're coming after America. . . . They want to undermine our credibility in the face of the world."

And yet Mr. Trump, the beneficiary of Moscow's meddling, has never appeared even slightly concerned by this Russian attack. He told Mr. Comey to stand down and fired him when he refused. "I was fired because of the Russia investigation," Mr. Comey testified. "That is a very big deal." As he decried Russia's attempt to "dirty"

American democratic institutions, Mr. Comey could as well have been talking about Mr. Trump's behavior.

With restrained fury, Mr. Comey described President Trump's remarks last month that the bureau was a mess and that the director had lost the trust of his agents as "lies, plain and simple."

Confronted later with the sworn testimony of a dignified and affronted lawman, the White House press office, its own credibility in tatters, was left to feebly insist, "The president is not a liar."

Mr. Comey is a wily bureaucratic infighter, a sometimes self-righteous official who wrote his notes with care so they would remain unclassified, and therefore eligible to be released to the public. He acknowledged that he engineered some of the notes' release, which *The Times* reported last month, to spur the appointment of a special counsel in the Russia investigation. After firing Mr. Comey, Mr. Trump thought he'd cow him by tweeting about the possibility that their

private conversations were taped. Mr. Comey bested him with a single sentence on Thursday, telling the panel he hoped there were tapes, as "corroboration" of the abuse of power he'd witnessed.

Republicans asked Mr. Comey why he didn't say publicly that Mr. Trump wasn't under investigation, which is just what Mr. Trump wanted. He replied that he didn't want to reverse himself should Mr. Trump later come under investigation. Republicans asked why he didn't try to educate a president so ignorant of the F.B.I.'s role that he risked incriminating himself. But Mr. Comey wasn't suggesting Mr. Trump was foolhardy or inexperienced: He portrayed him as an unscrupulous leader whose request put the nation at risk. The Russia investigation, he said, is "an effort to protect our country from a new threat that quite honestly will not go away anytime soon."

There is an aspect to public servants like Mr. Comey that Mr. Trump and his administration seem unable to comprehend, to their peril

— a dedication to their roles that places service above any president's glory.

When Mr. Trump demanded that Mr. Comey pledge his personal "loyalty," he refused, offering only

his "honesty." When Loretta Lynch, President Barack Obama's attorney general, asked him last year to call the criminal investigation into Hillary Clinton's private email server "a matter," he reluctantly complied, but he was repelled by the "political"

nature of the request, he said Thursday.

The F.B.I.'s mission, Mr. Comey declared, "is to protect the American people and uphold the Constitution of the United States." Let's hope

that the principles he articulated, and those who hold them, guide this investigation in the days ahead.

**The
Washington
Post**

Editorial : Comey painted a picture of a president abusing his authority

FORMER FBI director James B. Comey, testifying under oath Thursday to the Senate Intelligence Committee, painted a picture of a president grossly abusing his executive authority. According to Mr. Comey, President Trump pressured him to declare his loyalty, pressured him to drop an investigation of former national security adviser Michael Flynn and then fired him in an effort to alter the course of the FBI's investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election and possible collusion by the Trump campaign. However Mr. Trump and his allies may spin the testimony, these are serious and disturbing allegations. Also disturbing is the revelation that Mr. Trump showed little concern about the underlying offense — Russia's efforts to subvert American democracy.

Disappointingly, Republican senators at the hearing for the most

part tried to play the part of Trump defense lawyers, challenging or playing down Mr. Comey's testimony. Their efforts for the most part boomeranged. Sen. James E. Risch (R-Idaho), for example, implied that Mr. Trump's pressure regarding the Flynn investigation was no big deal because he did not issue a flat command. "He did not order you to let it go," Mr. Risch said. "He said, 'I hope.'" Mr. Comey responded with a brief lesson on the power of the presidency. "I took it as a direction," Mr. Comey said. He added that it was "very significant" that the president asked everyone else to leave the room before expressing his "hope," saying that an investigator would note what this indicated about the president's intent.

Sen. Roy Blunt (R-Mo.) minimized Mr. Flynn's misdeeds, arguing it is unlikely he would be charged with breaking the Logan Act. Mr. Comey pointed out that Mr. Flynn may have

lied to government investigators — as well as to the vice president, exposing himself to Russian blackmail — which would be no small lapse.

Sen. John Cornyn (R-Tex.) suggested that firing Mr. Comey was probably not a good way to end the Russia inquiry, implying that the president could not have meant to obstruct the probe. Yet throughout, Mr. Comey cited the president's statement that he had the Russia matter on his mind when he fired Mr. Comey. The ousted FBI director explicitly drew the conclusion the facts suggest: "I was fired in some way to change, or the endeavor was to change, the way the Russia investigation was being conducted."

Overall, the Republican effort to minimize the president's transgressions served only to make those senators look small. Mr. Comey, a man of integrity, explained over the course of his

testimony that the president's requests breached a barrier that must be maintained between the president and the FBI, "shocked" career law enforcement officials and were unprecedented in his long experience. He described the president as a man law enforcement could not trust, an unusually irresponsible politician who he feared would "lie" to the public and who dishonestly defamed the FBI. That, he said, is why he kept such careful notes of his meetings with the president.

Finally, Mr. Comey reminded senators that no one, least of all the president, should be uninterested in investigating and responding to the Russians' hostile activities. "It's not a Republican thing or a Democratic thing. It really is an American thing," Mr. Comey said. "They're just about their own advantage. They will be back."

**Los
Angeles
Times**

Editorial : In a credibility contest with Trump, James Comey is the obvious winner

The Times Editorial Board

Even though his prepared statement had been released and read by millions of Americans a day earlier, former FBI Director James B. Comey's testimony Thursday before the Senate Intelligence Committee was sensational, riveting and sickening.

Not only did Comey, as expected, say that President Trump repeatedly demanded his "loyalty" and beseeched him to abandon an investigation of former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn. He also told the committee that he made detailed notes of their conversations because he was "honestly concerned that [Trump] might lie" about it later. And he said he concluded that he was fired because of the

FBI's investigation of possible ties between Russia and the Trump campaign. The administration's alternative explanations — including that the FBI was in disarray and was being poorly led — were, he said, "lies, plain and simple."

Comey's performance was believable and deeply troubling, as he responded calmly and confidently to questions from members of the committee, including Republicans who acted more as defense counsel for Trump than as impartial investigators. Sen. James Risch of Idaho, for instance, tried to dismiss Comey's claim that Trump had told him, in a one-on-one meeting in the Oval Office, that "I hope you can see your way clear to letting this go, to letting Flynn go." Risch said: "He didn't direct you to drop the case," to which Comey replied, "Not in those words [but] I

took it as a direction." Given the context — the president of the United States leaning on a subordinate in a room from which everyone else has been dismissed — who wouldn't?

Marc Kasowitz, a lawyer for Trump, contradicted Comey's assertions, saying the president had never sought a loyalty pledge from the director or tried to stop the investigation of Flynn. That strikes us, frankly, as far-fetched. Kasowitz also noted — correctly — that Comey had confirmed that he privately had told Trump at various times that he himself wasn't then under investigation by the FBI as part of its Russia probe.

The problem for Trump is that Comey is an experienced public servant with a reputation for rectitude, while Trump is a serial

prevaricator whose campaign is currently being investigated not only by two congressional committees but by a special counsel whose mandate could be expanded to include the circumstances of Comey's dismissal. Trump shouldn't be surprised that he's the one with the credibility problem.

Trump's behavior toward Comey may or may not meet the legal definition of obstruction of justice, but any American can see that it was grossly inappropriate. It's yet another misstep by an undisciplined, arrogant president who appears to have no compunction about breaking the rules when it comes to advancing his own interests.

Bloomberg

Hunt : Republicans Weren't Smiling About Comey or Trump

The former director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation told the Senate Intelligence Committee on Thursday that he was convinced

that Trump fired him on May 9 because he refused to tamp down the Russia investigation. He said he took notes of his conversations with the chief executive because he feared that Trump would lie about

them, and accused the White House of spreading lies about why he was ousted. By contrast, he said he didn't take notes of personal dealings with two other presidents, George W. Bush and

Barack Obama, suggesting that he never doubted their integrity.

Republicans on the committee spent most of their time trying to paint a benign picture of Trump's

actions, even questioning Comey's motives. Senators Marco Rubio and Tom Cotton were especially vehement in disputing Comey's malign interpretation of Trump's requests for personal loyalty and to drop the FBI investigation of former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn, but even typically less partisan lawmakers like Susan Collins and John McCain took the same approach.

In the packed hearing room, with long lines of spectators waiting to get in, Republicans sat grimly even during occasional lighter moments.

They tried to score points by emphasizing Comey's testimony about conversations in which he told Trump that he wasn't personally a subject of an intelligence investigation. That, in the Republicans' telling, should be taken as evidence that Trump had clean hands when it came to Russian interference.

The argument fell flat. As Comey explained, his characterization of Trump's relationship to the investigation was true "as of the moment." Usually, an investigation doesn't get to the top figure until much more spade work has been done. More than four decades ago, President Richard Nixon wasn't a subject of a criminal investigation in the early stages of the one that eventually forced him from office.

The Washington Post

What does the FBI director do when he suspects the president is a manipulative liar? The answer in James B. Comey's case is that he writes memos, tries to evade demands for loyalty — and anguishes about protecting himself and the FBI.

But by Comey's own admission, perhaps he should have done more.

The big news had already surfaced before Comey's appearance Thursday in front of the Senate Intelligence Committee, with the release of his prepared testimony. What we got at the hearing was the raw morality play, told in Comey's words, about his dealings with a president whose behavior frightened him.

"I was honestly concerned that he might lie about the nature of our meeting, and so I thought it really important to document," Comey said about his Jan. 6 meeting with President Trump. Comey had just briefed the president-elect, alone, about salacious, unverified details of a dossier alleging various Trump escapades in Moscow.

While many of the particulars of Comey's testimony had been previously reported, the picture of the former FBI chief, known for his integrity, taking the oath to tell the truth about Trump under penalty of perjury was a powerful one and not comforting to the White House.

He added fresh details to descriptions of Trump's efforts to influence him, stressing that the president once asked other officials to leave the room so he could make his appeals in private. That, Comey said, made him think Trump was giving him "direction" to drop the investigation of Flynn's ties to Russia, even in the absence of a direct order. He demurred when asked whether he thought Trump was obstructing justice, saying that matter should be left to the newly appointed special counsel, Robert Mueller, in whom he expressed confidence.

The investigation has focused on possible collusion between Russia and Trump campaign aides and the dissemination of fake news articles hostile to Hillary Clinton and of emails stolen from the accounts of Democratic Party workers during the presidential campaign. But Mueller has the authority to expand the probe more widely.

Mueller, a respected former FBI director, already has enlisted the Justice Department's top financial-fraud expert as part of an

examination of business connections the president may have with Russia. He also is expected to bring in tax experts, possibly to look at Trump's tax returns, which Trump has refused to make public.

Crucially, Congress need not concern itself with the question whether Trump committed a crime by obstructing justice or abusing his powers. Lawmakers have the authority to decide whether interfering with a lawful investigation constitutes sufficient grounds for impeachment even if not for criminal prosecution. According to multiple reports, the president has asked several top intelligence officials to intervene with the probe.

Two presidents in history have been accused of obstruction of justice, Bill Clinton and Richard Nixon. The Clinton case involved lying about a sexual relationship with a White House intern, and possible efforts to influence the case with gifts to the young woman and conversations aimed at altering his secretary's recollections of events. The Senate -- and the public -- rejected the argument that these actions were serious enough to justify removal from office.

By contrast, the charges against Nixon were overwhelmingly supported by the House Judiciary Committee in 1974, as well as by most of the public. At the heart of the case was evidence that Nixon

had "knowingly misused" the FBI and Central Intelligence Agency to thwart an investigation.

Comey didn't go that far with respect to Trump, avoiding testimony on details of what's being investigated by Mueller.

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Thus Thursday's hearing was never destined to have the impact of classic Senate showdowns like the one on communist influence on the Army in 1954 led by Senator Joseph McCarthy. After a particularly offensive attack, the lawyer representing the Army, Joseph Welch, shot back: "Have you no sense of decency sir? At long last, have you left no sense of decency?" It was a key moment in the demise of the Wisconsin bully.

During the Watergate scandal there was remarkable testimony from former Nixon White House Counsel John Dean, who outlined the president's participation in the coverup of a litany of offenses that led to his ouster.

Ignatius : In James Comey's testimony, there are no happy endings

Times details of a memo recounting Trump's Feb. 14 request, "I hope you can let this go," referring to the FBI investigation of former national security adviser Michael Flynn.

Thursday's hearing offered a haunting portrait of a moralist confronting a dealmaker. Comey conveyed his fastidious attention to ethics, and to his own reputation. He spoke of his "personal pain" in dealing with the Hillary Clinton investigation, his concern for morale if FBI agents heard that Trump "wants [the Flynn investigation] to go away."

He wrote memos after his encounters and briefed his closest aides. But he didn't take the evidence of what he saw as Trump's wrongdoing to Justice Department superiors or congressional oversight committees.

It was "Pilgrim's Progress" meets "House of Cards" when Comey arrived for a one-on-one dinner at the White House on Jan. 27. Comey described his fear that Trump wanted to create a "patronage" debt by making Comey ask for his FBI job. He said that Trump might have

similarly hoped to induce an obligation in a March 30 phone call suggesting that he hadn't questioned the Democratic political ties of the wife of Comey's deputy. As Trump stressed so baldly, in Comey's telling, he wanted loyalty — much as a feudal lord might seek allegiance from his barons.

Comey imagined that by offering Trump only "honest loyalty" during the dinner, he had diluted his demand. But in their last phone call, on April 11, Trump protested: "I have been very loyal to you, very loyal; we had that thing you know." Comey didn't push back. He wrote another memo.

The most poignant moments in Thursday's hearing were Comey's reflections on what he might have done differently. When Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) asked why he hadn't rejected outright Trump's "hope" that he close the Flynn investigation, Comey answered: "Maybe other people would be stronger in that circumstance. . . . Maybe if I did it again, I would do it better."

Later Comey was pressed about why he accommodately told

Trump in the March 30 call that he "would see what we could do" to lift the "cloud" of the Russia investigation. He conceded that his response was "a slightly cowardly way ... of getting off the phone, frankly."

What is it about being FBI director that makes people so concerned about image, yet unable to be entirely independent of the politicians they serve? That's been part of the bureau's history ever

since J. Edgar Hoover. Comey couldn't escape it.

Comey's personal ethical dilemmas are now interwoven with the nation's political history. It's the stuff of high drama — the temporizing

ethicist meets the amoral bulldozer. The story didn't have a happy ending for Comey — or, it seems, for the country.



Zelizer : Comey hearing's bottom line: We can't trust Trump

Almost as soon as former FBI Director James Comey started his session with the Senate intelligence committee Thursday, he characterized the President and his White House as liars. Comey was not subtle. He said that the Trump team "told lies" when explaining why the President fired him.

He explained to senators that he kept careful notes about each encounter with the President because of his wariness about Trump. "I was honestly concerned he might lie about the nature of our meeting. It led me to believe I've got to write it down. ... I knew there might come a day when I would need a record of what would happen, not just to defend myself but to defend the FBI."

This was stunning to hear from a private citizen who was recently a high-ranking official in the executive branch. Comey was not saying that the President is someone who tends to be elusive or who uses words in tricky ways, but more fundamentally that he is a person who can't be trusted even in a private meeting with the head of the FBI.

It was such an extraordinary portrayal of the President that White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders had to tell reporters right away that "I can definitively say the President is not a liar, and I think it's frankly insulting that question would be asked."

Trump is not the first commander in chief to be called out for the veracity of his statements.

Louisiana's Huey Long called FDR a liar as early as 1933. Liberal Democrats were blasting President Lyndon Johnson after the Tet Offensive in 1968 for not being honest about the situation in Vietnam.

During the congressional investigation into Richard Nixon's Watergate scandal, officials such as John Dean were blunt with legislators about why the President could not be trusted in his denials that anything improper had taken place. The "smoking gun" tapes offered vivid proof to the nation that Nixon could not be trusted at his word.

President Ronald Reagan falsely denied to Americans that the United States had traded weapons to Iran for hostages and was blamed for members of his administration lying to Congress about their providing support to the Nicaraguan Contras despite a congressional ban on doing so.

Congressional Republicans in the 1990s spoke frequently about President "Slick Willie" Bill Clinton and his trouble with the truth, as was evident when he wagged his finger at the nation and said he never had sex with "that woman" Monica Lewinsky.

Some Democrats accused President George W. Bush of lying about Iraq having weapons of mass destruction. Sen. Harry Reid called Bush a "liar" with regard to a decision about storing nuclear waste in Nevada. On the floor of the House, South Carolina Republican Joe Wilson yelled out, "You Lie!" as President Barack Obama discussed elements of his health care bill during a televised speech to Congress.

Yet the problem with Trump seems qualitatively different in scale and scope. The fact that Comey was so willing to use the term "lie" in his description of the President points to a fundamental character problem in the Oval Office.

Before the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump fueled the birther movement, which was based on a lie about Obama's birthplace.

During the campaign, candidate Trump made or repeated a long list of statements about Hillary Clinton and the Democrats that had no basis in truth.

Since his inauguration, we have seen how the President is willing to say things publicly that are blatantly false -- from crowd sizes to allegations of voter fraud -- while Republicans have thrown their hands up in frustration as they watch Trump contradict himself or his Cabinet. Comey made clear it Thursday that even in the most private setting, there are officials working for the President who felt the same level of distrust about their leader.

While all presidents lie, Trump seems to have made this a dangerous art form. He is someone who appears to be willing to lie without restraint, about almost anything, and with reckless abandon. He has fueled a political atmosphere filled with false information and misstatements that destabilize our public discourse. Indeed, Trump triggered an entire debate in the media about whether reporters should use the word "lie" to describe a president's statements.

Because of his problematic character, our commander in chief does not have much credibility in this investigation and when it comes to governance. Outside of his base of support, there are many politicians, foreign leaders, journalists and voters who don't believe what the President has to say.

While lying is not an impeachable offense, it is a huge problem when it comes to governance, and it weakens his ability to persuade the public that the accusations being launched against him are not true. The public record of lying is too robust to take Trump at face value.

He can still count on the Republican Congress to protect a Republican President. He and his advisers know that many members of Congress, including Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, will be extremely cautious before triggering any kind of impeachment proceeding.

But Trump does find himself in Nixon territory, and a large part of his problem is the utter lack of credibility that result from his own statements. On Thursday, Comey confirmed this impression in a way that few other Americans could.

Some of Trump's supporters are trying to defend his loose style, including the way that he spoke to Comey as "Trump being Trump." New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie dismissed the remarks as "normal New York" talk -- just like the statements on the "Access Hollywood" tapes were dismissed by supporters as merely "locker room talk" -- while he and others have defended Trump as an outsider trying to learn the ways of Washington.

Comey offered a much more hard-hitting assessment. He just said that the President lies and, based on his written testimony, that he is someone who is willing to intimidate, to threaten and to be extraordinarily aggressive with people he does not like.

While some Republicans are trying to spin his behavior as acceptable, it is not. Even if there was no intention to obstruct justice and there was no collusion with the Russians during the election, there is ample evidence of extremely problematic behavior that can slip into the abuse of power and dangerous policy decisions.



Naftali : Comey is the opposite of J. Edgar Hoover

Today, James Comey became the first FBI director ever to admit to being a public whistleblower. At a key moment in the over two hours of testimony, Comey volunteered that through a friend at Columbia Law School, he decided to leak the

contents of his contacts with President Trump to the press (after the President lied about the circumstances surrounding Comey's firing).

James Comey really is the "anti-Hoover" and this is not a matter of historical interpretation. Comey

shared with the senators, and the millions watching on television or their iPhones that the infamous FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover was the negative example he had in mind as he tried to puzzle out how to deal with President Trump

He said he told Trump about the Steele dossier because "I was worried very much about being in kind of a J. [Edgar] Hoover-type situation. I didn't want him thinking I was briefing him on this to sort of hang it over him in some way." In other words, he had not wanted to practice the subtle blackmail of the

powerful that had kept Hoover in office for five decades.

Comey's understanding of the history of the bureau under Hoover is a likely Rosetta Stone for understanding the controversial steps he took, not only in the Russia investigation but also with regard to the investigation of Hillary Clinton's email server. In the 1970s, the public learned of how Hoover had politicized the bureau, and in the decades since, the FBI had successfully fought to recover public trust as an apolitical, nonpartisan organization.

Comey contorted himself and the bureau in the toxic political environment of 2016 and early 2017 to maintain that trust. In today's testimony, Comey also explained how concerns about the judgment of the Obama Justice Department had motivated him to make the public statement in July 2016 regarding the status of the Clinton email investigation.

It is safe to say that no director of an American investigative body has faced as many agonizing decisions in as little time as James Comey. To explain why he decided to leak to the press, Comey told the committee:

"[T]he president tweeted on Friday [May 12] after I got fired that I better hope there's not tapes. I woke up in the middle of the night on Monday night because it didn't dawn on me originally, that there might be corroboration for our conversation. There might be a tape. My judgment was, I need to

get that out into the public square. I asked a friend of mine to share the content of the memo with a reporter."

Comey did not explain why the existence of presidential recordings should compel the release of his own record.

After all, Richard Nixon's tapes confirmed John W. Dean's testimony of that president's role in obstructing justice, but perhaps he worried that this president would release an adulterated or edited version of their conversation. So, he wanted his version out first

Comey did make clear, however, that he had a goal in mind beyond personal vindication. He believed the situation -- created by the President's actions -- required the appointment of a special counsel. Some may quibble with Comey's choice of tactics, but what is indisputable is that yet again President Trump had hurt his presidency with a tweet.

The President's defenders have already jumped on Comey's acknowledged leaking to attack the former FBI director's credibility, but as Comey made clear, he was motivated by concern about the honesty of this President. Indeed, Comey's testimony confirmed to the American people that up close he observed something odd and deeply unsettling about the 45th president.

The reason Comey took notes on his conversations with President Trump was that, unlike George W.

Bush and Barack Obama, he didn't trust this president.

Even more damaging to the President is the fact that at today's hearing all of the senators, regardless of party, conveyed nothing but trust in James Comey. From the moment the chair of the committee, Sen. Burr, a Republican from North Carolina, introduced Comey as "Jim," it was clear this would be a friendly hearing in which the star witness was held in almost universal respect as a fine public servant.

There were, nevertheless, some partisan moments. A few defenders of the President pressed Comey to rule out the most dangerous theories of collusion in 2016 and obstruction in 2017. And each would be disappointed. Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida urged Comey to be precise about which investigation he thought Donald Trump hoped would go away -- the Michael Flynn perjury case or the entire Russia investigation.

Comey said that he felt the President was only referring to the Flynn perjury case, but the fact remained that the President had interceded in an ongoing criminal investigation. Tom Cotton of Arkansas later asked Comey point-blank whether he thinks Donald Trump colluded with Russia. Comey's response? "That's a question I don't think I should answer in an open setting."

Tom Cotton was not the first senator whose question Mr. Comey politely refused to answer lest he

reveal national security or privacy information. Throughout the hearing, we were reminded that there is a world of information about the status of the Russia investigation that we do not know

Indeed, our best glimpses into that compartment of information in this hearing came from the other senators' questions. Sen. Kamala Harris's questions seemed to foreshadow future revelations of as yet unacknowledged meetings between Trump associates and the Russians and of the destruction of potentially important evidence.

Despite the drama, today's hearing was about much more than political theater and public fascination with the most famous FBI director since Hoover. Both the Senate Intelligence Committee Chair, Sen. Burr and the ranking minority member, Sen. Mark Warner of Virginia, made clear to viewers that the Russia investigation is not fake news or some political witch hunt.

Both stressed the importance of "get[ting] to the bottom" of Russia's intervention in our 2016 election and the possibility that the Kremlin had help from Americans. Regardless of what defenses may come from the Trump White House in the days to come, the Russia investigation and the issues of collusion in 2016 and obstruction of justice in 2017 will not be going away any time soon.

Trump's tweeting and James Comey's conscience made sure of that.

POLITICO Comey handed Mueller a fat case file on Trump

By Darren Samuelsohn

James Comey refused to say on Thursday if he believed President Donald Trump obstructed justice. But the ousted FBI director gave Robert Mueller plenty to work with as the special counsel investigates whether the president or his allies committed any crimes.

During two riveting hours before the Senate Intelligence Committee, Comey testified Trump requested his "loyalty," urged him to end a probe into then-National Security Adviser Michael Flynn and then, while stewing over what the Russia investigation was doing to his administration, the president fired him.

Comey declined to render his own legal opinion as to whether what Trump did was illegal, but he did explain that this critical question — along with the notes he took from his conversations with the president — now resides with Mueller.

"I don't think it's for me to say whether the conversation I had with the president was an effort to obstruct," Comey said. "I took it as a very disturbing thing, very concerning, but that's a conclusion I'm sure the special counsel will work towards to try and understand what the intention was there, and whether that's an offense."

Mueller himself may not have been surprised by Comey's much-anticipated Senate testimony since he'd already been briefed on what would be said. But with Comey's story now widely aired publicly, it did give lawmakers, as well as veteran prosecutors and defense attorneys, a chance to reflect on what Mueller is now working with as he gets started on a probe that essentially has an unlimited budget and all the time he needs to go in whatever directions he needs to.

Samuel Buell, a former federal prosecutor who worked with one of Mueller's newly hired top deputies prosecuting Enron executives in the

early 2000s, said Comey's testimony "greatly sharpened the focus" on questions surrounding the obstruction of justice controversy that now sits on Trump's doorstep.

"All the other events lend emphasis, meaning and context to that event but that event is the real issue," he said of Trump's Feb. 14 Oval Office meeting during which the president allegedly pulled Comey aside and suggested the FBI director should "let this go" concerning the Flynn probe.

Comey's written testimony — released Wednesday by the Senate Intelligence Committee — also described two other phone calls he had with Trump in which the president again brought up the investigation into Flynn.

Neil MacBride, a former U.S. attorney and Obama-era associate deputy attorney general, said he took away from Comey's testimony that the FBI director thought his job

"might hang in the balance" because of the president's requests.

"Mueller needs to decide if this was just an outsider president naively breaching established D.C. protocols, or whether the three conversations were done 'corruptly' to pressure Comey to wind down the Flynn investigation," MacBride said. "While Comey was careful not to say explicitly it was the latter, i.e., potential obstruction of justice, as of today that's hands-down the most important question Mueller faces in the entire investigation."

Several sources interviewed Thursday after Comey concluded his public testimony said they hadn't heard enough for Mueller to make a slam-dunk case before either a judge or jury.

"It'd be much more compelling to a fact finder if Comey said, 'Yeah, I felt completely intimidated. I decided to drop the case because of it,'" said Peter Zeidenberg, who served on the Justice Department's

special prosecution team during the George W. Bush-era Valerie Plame Wilson investigation and now works as a partner at Arent Fox.

Still, Zeidenberg said Comey's explanation that he believed Trump was directing him to drop the Flynn investigation could be significant. "While not dispositive, this fact strengthens a potential obstruction case," he said.

William Jeffress, a white-collar defense attorney who represented Vice President Dick Cheney's top aide, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, during the Wilson investigation, agreed the Comey testimony stopped short of making an air-tight case for an obstruction of justice charge.

"But it makes very clear that Trump has no appreciation or respect for the independence of law enforcement in our system," he said. "And calling out Trump's lies was very forceful and damaging to the president."

Trump's personal attorney, Marc Kasowitz, publicly refuted Comey's testimony later Thursday and insisted several parts of it were inaccurate. The president's Republican allies tried another defense, saying Trump was just naïve in his interactions with his own FBI director. "The president's new at this," House Speaker Paul Ryan told reporters during a morning news conference while Comey was still testifying. "He's new at government."

But those arguments, according to both prosecutors and defense attorneys, wouldn't be very effective.

"That the president, through his attorney, is flatly denying the occurrence of the key conversation

— in the face of clear testimony from one of the most credible witnesses one could ever come across — underlines the seriousness of this," said Buell, now a law professor at Duke University.

Invoking then-President Bill Clinton's infamous grand jury testimony in the investigation over Monica Lewinsky, which ultimately led to the Democrat's House impeachment, Buell added of the Trump lawyer's defense: "This is reminiscent of 'I did not have sexual relations with that woman ...'"

The Trump backers who came to the president's aid by noting his inexperience in governing also are missing a key legal point, Zeidenberg said.

"You do not need to understand the obstruction of justice statute to violate it," he said. "You still violated the law."

Those kinds of mistakes, he added, can put politicians in hotter water than the original crime that prompted the investigation.

"The fact that he's a bull in the China shop, that defense doesn't really strike me as one that'd be successful," Zeidenberg said. "That's why people like that who are reckless get in trouble, because they do foolish, stupid things like try to get the director of the FBI to drop an investigation. That's how you get yourself in big trouble by not knowing the rules."

Mueller hasn't spoken publicly about the Russia-Trump investigation since his appointment, and his spokesman on Thursday declined comment when asked about Comey's testimony. That silence, designed to minimize speculation about his intentions, has left plenty of room for

Congress, where a handful of Republican-led committees have launched their own probes.

North Carolina GOP Sen. Richard Burr, the chairman of the Intelligence Committee, told reporters after the Comey hearing that he hopes to meet with Mueller next week "to work out clear pathways for both investigations, his and ours to continue, to work on deconfliction of potential testimony."

Comey in his remarks said he didn't think Congress would get in the way of Mueller. "I'm sure you'll be able to work it out with him to run it in parallel," the former FBI director said.

Only a few details on the status of Mueller's probe came out in dribs during Wednesday's hearing in front of the same Senate committee. There, acting FBI Director Andrew McCabe confirmed that he's spoken with Mueller and added that the special counsel and his team "are currently in the process of determining what that scope is" of their investigation.

MCCabe, who replaced Comey last month, also said "determining exactly where those lanes in the road are, where does Director Mueller's scope overlap into our pre-existing and long-running Russian responsibilities, is somewhat of a challenge at the moment."

When asked by lawmakers to speak more openly about the Mueller investigation, Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein urged the committee to work with the special counsel as their "point person" for deciphering what DOJ and FBI officials can say in public about the probes.

Rosenstein also acknowledged that while he had the authority to remove Mueller under DOJ regulations, he insisted it was unlikely to happen. "Although it's theoretically true that there are circumstances where he could be removed by the acting attorney general, which, for this case at this time, is me, your assurance of his independence is Robert Mueller's integrity and Andy McCabe's integrity and my integrity," he said.

Mueller's probe will pick up several outstanding lines of inquiry surrounding the 2016 Trump campaign, including Flynn's lobbying on behalf of a Turkish businessman with ties to Russia and former campaign manager Paul Manafort's business dealings with a pro-Kremlin government in the Ukraine. It's also fair game to examine the hacking of former Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta's emails and their release in drip-drip fashion during the peak of the campaign on WikiLeaks.

"I know everyone wants to talk about obstruction of justice, but there's so many problematic legal issues," said one prominent white-collar defense attorney who requested anonymity because his firm was working for a client caught in the investigation. "That's not the only thing Mueller might have at the end of the day."

But thanks to Comey's public testimony about his meetings with Trump and his firing, Buell said the Mueller probe seems destined to cover this ground. "It is almost certain," he said, "that any conclusion of that investigation will include, at the least, a statement from the special counsel to the Justice Department about whether the president committed a federal crime."



Comey hearings fallout? Depends on the listener.

The Christian Science Monitor

Former FBI director James Comey's testimony in the Senate, a moment of high anticipation like few in recent Washington history, put questions about unorthodox presidential behavior at center stage.

At its heart, the hearing raised a profound question about President Trump: Was he trying to obstruct justice amid an investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 election and possible collaboration between Trump associates and Russian officials, or was he simply unaware of what a president should or should not do?

"It's all about trying to figure out what's going on in someone's

mind," says Julie O'Sullivan, a former federal prosecutor and law professor at Georgetown University.

In Mr. Comey's telling, President Trump said he hoped Comey would "let go" an investigation into former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn and his dealings with Russian officials.

"I took it as a very disturbing thing, very concerning," Comey said Thursday in testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee. "But that's a conclusion I'm sure the special counsel will work toward to try and understand what the intention was there and whether that's an offense."

Comey also asserted that Trump had asked him for a pledge of

"loyalty" in a private dinner one week after the inauguration. That was a highly unusual request for a president to make of an FBI director, who is meant to function as an independent actor. Comey said he acceded to a pledge of "honest loyalty," clearly uncomfortable with the phrase but not wanting to belabor the point.

News was made: Comey revealed that it was he who leaked key content of his memos — contemporaneous notes about interactions with Trump both before and after he became president — to a New York Times reporter via a friend who teaches law at Columbia University.

And in the quote of the day, he expressed hope that Trump had

indeed taped their Oval Office conversation about Mr. Flynn, suggesting it would bear out Comey's version.

"Lordy, I hope there are tapes," Comey said.

Republicans spun Comey's testimony differently, saying it showed Trump as someone new to government and unsure of appropriate behavior for a president of the United States.

When Trump discussed the Flynn investigation with Comey in the Oval Office on Feb. 14, a day after Flynn's firing, the president had first asked the others in the room to leave, according to Comey — including Attorney General Jeff Sessions. That created an awkward

dynamic that, to some legal observers, suggested an effort by Trump to obstruct justice.

But to House Speaker Paul Ryan, Trump's handling of the meeting showed that he wasn't steeped in the protocols of how a president interacts with law enforcement.

"The president's new at this," Speaker Ryan told reporters Thursday. "He's new at government."

The weight of history hung heavy in the Senate committee room. Two presidents in recent decades, Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton, faced impeachment proceedings that centered in part on obstruction of justice.

In the eyes of some members of Congress and legal observers, Trump's behavior did rise to the level of obstruction of justice. But Comey did not offer such a conclusion, and was not expected to. His job as head of the FBI was simply to find facts, not formulate charges. As a witness to Trump's behavior, he took the same approach.

But in saying that the new special counsel, Robert Mueller, would address that question in his investigation of Russian meddling in

the 2016 US election, Comey laid down a road map for how one could conclude that Trump had obstructed justice. Comey said he was "stunned" by Trump's request regarding Flynn, and that top FBI officials found that point to be of "investigative interest."

"Why did he kick everybody out of the Oval Office?" Comey said. "That, to me as an investigator, is a very significant fact."

'A consciousness of guilt'

That Trump is an outside-the-box president is beyond dispute. His unorthodox behavior – from unfiltered tweets, to "politically incorrect" assertions, to a rejection of presidential norms – stems from a free-wheeling career in business and entertainment, and no background in politics or public service.

In the modern era, most presidents have sought to expand the bounds of presidential power through executive action. But there's a difference between aggressive moves to enact policy and possibly crossing legal lines to achieve other goals.

"I would draw a distinction between the kinds of things that presidents do in pushing the bounds of their

constitutional powers toward a policy end and pushing the envelope of presidential power in the realm of a criminal investigation," says Barbara Perry, director of presidential studies at the University of Virginia's Miller Center.

Legal experts cite as an example Trump's decision on Feb. 14 to ask others, including Mr. Sessions, to leave the Oval Office so he could discuss the Flynn investigation one-on-one with Comey, as recounted by Comey. Trump's statement that he hoped Comey would "let this go," according to Comey, in and of itself doesn't prove that Trump knew he may have been crossing a line – particularly given suggestions that Trump may not have known better. But other factors may be troubling.

"To some extent, I could buy that, because he isn't a politician of the sort we usually have," says Ms. O'Sullivan of Georgetown University. "But he asked [Vice President] Pence and Sessions, [Comey's] boss, to leave the room. That indicates a consciousness of guilt – that he was about to do something that he didn't want other people to know about."

Jens Ohlin, a law professor at Cornell University, agrees that

Trump's Oval Office comment to Comey about Flynn is not, on its own, necessarily proof of obstruction of justice.

"But that, combined with the decision to fire Comey, starts to look like obstruction of justice," says Dr. Ohlin. "Trump asking him to stop the investigation, then Trump firing him, then Trump admitting in a TV interview that he fired him because of the Russia investigation – all of that together is, I think, very significant."

The legal definition of "obstruction of justice" entails not just the action itself, but a corrupt intent to engage in influencing, obstructing, or impeding justice.

For Trump, however, the danger would not come in a courtroom, but in Congress, in the event of an impeachment attempt. Impeachment is a political act, but is informed by the law.

The House of Representatives is not close to launching an impeachment effort, especially with a Republican majority. But at the very least, the Comey hearing represents the latest distraction for a White House eager to focus on its policy agenda.



Lake : Comey Promised 'Honest Loyalty' to the President, But Didn't Deliver

James Comey: the man who always tries to have it both ways, and sometimes succeeds.

The former FBI director's testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee on Thursday was a feast of contradiction and self-serving showmanship.

Comey said he felt uncomfortable with the president's pressure to drop an investigation into Michael Flynn, Trump's first national security adviser. So uncomfortable that he wrote memos after conversations with the president, to record what was said by whom. But Comey kept all of this information closely held until he was fired and never tried to challenge the president directly in these conversations. So just how uncomfortable was he?

Comey told senators Thursday that Trump defamed him. In his opening oral statement, he said Trump's contentions that there was a morale problem at the bureau under Comey were "lies, plain and simple." And yet later on, Comey said he took Trump at his word when the president told NBC News that he was fired because of the Russia investigation. Why believe the

president when you know him to be a liar?

None of this gets Trump off the hook. Comey's testimony portrays a president who governs like Tony Soprano -- with implied threats and bravado. These anecdotes suggest Trump has no appreciation for the independence of federal law enforcement and the dangers of politicizing the FBI.

But Comey also has some explaining to do. Here we have a former FBI director who presents himself as the last honest man in Washington. He makes a point of elaborately explaining his actions as by-the-book law enforcement. And yet his own story is a kind of paradox. He says that he felt pressured but that he did not give in to the pressure. He blows the whistle now, but didn't at the time.

Comey said he considered Trump's request to drop the Flynn investigation, a day after Flynn was fired, to be a "directive." That's not quite an order, but it's close. Yet Comey ignored that directive. He paid close attention in his meeting with Trump. He took notes and shared them with the FBI's senior leaders, but he made sure to shield

his own workforce from this information, fearing it would have a "chilling effect" on the investigators digging into Flynn.

Very well. This however raises an important question. If Comey believed knowledge of the president's wishes to drop the Flynn investigation would pressure investigators, why leak it to the New York Times? Now every FBI agent in the country knows what Comey had hoped they would never learn.

It turns out that Comey's calculation on the Flynn request changed after he was fired. In a rare moment of Washington candor, the former FBI director acknowledged his own leak. "My judgment was I needed to get that out in the public square, so I asked a friend of mine to share the content of the memo with a reporter," he said. "Didn't do it myself for a variety of reasons, but I asked him to because I thought that might prompt the appointment of a special counsel."

Well what do you know? Comey's leak worked. Soon after the story hit the Times, the deputy attorney general Rod Rosenstein appointed another former FBI director, Robert Mueller, as special counsel.

So why didn't Comey act sooner? If it was a good idea after he was fired, wasn't it also good idea before he was fired? He didn't really say. At one point, he said he believed the most important thing he could do would be to stay in his position to make sure the FBI wasn't tainted by the president's pressure. (How convenient.) At the same time, Comey acknowledged that Trump said he should investigate whether any of his associates (Trump called them satellites) did anything illegal or improper.

Clear thinking from leading voices in business, economics, politics, foreign affairs, culture, and more.

In his many memorialized meetings, Comey never really challenged Trump directly on these requests. The closest he came was to ask the deputy attorney general to never allow him to be in a one-on-one meeting again with Trump. When Trump asked him to drop the Flynn investigation, Comey demurred and simply agreed Flynn was a "good guy." In the hearing he said he hoped his non-answer on dropping the investigation would be a signal to the president that he couldn't do this. When Trump asked for his

loyalty, he promised him his honesty, and then ultimately his "honest loyalty."

It turns out that Comey didn't deliver Trump his loyalty or his honesty. If he had, he would have told the

president at the time that what he was being asked to do was wrong and that he would not work under

such conditions. Instead, Comey took notes and waited for Trump to strike first.



President Trump's a liar. Now what?

The millions of Americans who watched — from homes and businesses, bars and classrooms across the USA — James Comey's extraordinary congressional testimony on Thursday saw several sides to the 6-foot-8 lawman from Yonkers, N.Y.

They saw the seasoned federal agent, who quickly sized up the newly elected President Trump as a liar and memorialized their every encounter.

They saw the savvy operator, who had a friend leak the unclassified notes about Trump to *The New York Times* as a way to engineer appointment of a special counsel.

They saw the all-too-human careerist, who failed to directly

challenge improper requests from Trump and who, a year earlier, acceded to the attorney general's desire to characterize the criminal investigation into Hillary Clinton's email as a mere "matter."

And they saw the unapologetic patriot, who expressed the outrage about Russian meddling in our democracy that Americans should be — but aren't — hearing from their president.

What they most assuredly did not see was "a real nut job," as Trump is said to have described Comey to Russian officials in the Oval Office the day after unceremoniously firing the FBI director less than four years into his 10-year term.

During Comey's breathlessly awaited sworn testimony to the

Senate Intelligence Committee, he calmly and credibly laid out a case that the president has lied repeatedly — about why Comey was fired, about who invited whom to dinner at the White House, about whether Trump sought his "loyalty" and, most damning, about whether Trump sought to derail a criminal investigation of former national security adviser Michael Flynn.

All this adds to the credibility crisis surrounding the White House that has undermined the president's agenda at home, stymied the administration's efforts to recruit top talent, and frayed longstanding alliances abroad.

Whether Trump is a criminal as well as a liar is a more complicated matter, one that will depend on legal definitions of obstruction of justice

and additional evidence to be uncovered by special counsel Robert Mueller and congressional investigators.

While the inquiries unfold, two supreme ironies stand out:

One is that Trump wasn't a target of the Russia investigation, but because of his own actions in the Oval Office, the president is surely now in Mueller's crosshairs.

The other is that Comey, who helped Donald Trump become president with an October-surprise announcement that the Clinton email inquiry had been re-opened (only to find nothing), could turn out to be the man most responsible for hastening Trump's departure from office.



Trump's Incompetence Defense - The Atlantic

Adam Serwer

During former FBI Director James Comey's dramatic testimony before the Senate on Thursday, Republican senators settled on a pair of strange arguments for why President Trump hadn't obstructed justice: He didn't try very hard, or he was really bad at it.

Comey testified that the president asked Comey to shut down the FBI investigation into former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn, who was ousted after lying about his contact with Russian officials, saying, "I hope you can see your way clear to letting this go, to letting Flynn go. He is a good guy. I hope you can let this go." Comey testified that he took that statement as "direction." Republicans weren't convinced.

"Do you know of any case where a person has been charged for obstruction of justice or, for that matter, any other criminal offense, where they said or thought they hoped for an outcome?" Idaho Republican Jim Risch asked. Comey said he did not, but *New York Times* legal reporter Adam Liptak quickly found one such example.

Senator James Lankford of Oklahoma took a similar tack. "If this seems to be something the president is trying to get you to drop it," Lankford said, "it seems like a light touch to drop it, to bring it up at that point, the day after he had just fired Flynn, to come back here and

say, I hope we can let this go, then it never reappears again."

Texas Senator John Cornyn, the number two Republican in the Senate, suggested that firing Comey after not shutting down the Flynn investigation proved Trump wasn't trying to shut it down. "As a general proposition, if you're trying to make an investigation go away, is firing an FBI director a good way to make that happen?" Cornyn asked Comey, who replied that "It doesn't make a lot of sense to me but I'm hopelessly biased given that I was the one fired."

David Gomez, a senior fellow at George Washington University's Center for Cyber and Homeland Security and a former FBI agent, said he didn't find that line of argument persuasive. "I failed to follow Cornyn's logic. Especially given the public reasons for the firing," Gomez said. "Firing the man in charge of the FBI—and replacing him with your own man—is exactly what I would expect if you were trying to impede an FBI investigation."

On the surface, the argument for exculpatory ineptitude may seem absurd; if you try to rob a bank, and you slip on a banana peel and knock yourself out, you have still attempted to rob a bank. But the argument that Trump simply didn't try hard enough to shut down the Flynn investigation is exactly the argument that a defense attorney might make if they were defending a client against an accusation of

obstruction of justice, because it attacks the idea that there's sufficient evidence to support the charge.

The question of intent is ultimately more important than whether or not Trump got what he wanted.

"If an actor has corrupt intent, any act intended to obstruct justice is enough, whether or not it succeeds," said Bruce Green, a former associate counsel in the Iran-Contra affair and a law professor at Fordham. "But the Senators' point here may be that you can't infer from President Trump's acts that he was trying to derail the investigation, because if he really wanted to do so, he could have done so more effectively."

That question of intent is ultimately more important than whether or not Trump got what he wanted. "The obstruction crimes are crimes of attempt, not of result," said John Q. Barrett, a former associate counsel in the Iran-Contra case and a law professor at St. John's. "It's worse certainly if obstruction of justice succeeds, but frankly those are the ones we don't learn about and don't get prosecuted."

To that point, Trump's decision to ask everyone to leave the room before he broached the subject of the Flynn investigation with Comey may ultimately be crucial.

"Often in conducting a criminal investigation, the hardest thing to demonstrate is intent," said Mike

German, a fellow at the Brennan Center for Justice and a former FBI agent. "Asking people to leave the room before you have a conversation is an indication that someone has a bad intent in what they're doing and don't want witnesses."

Risch's focus on Trump's phrasing, that Trump "hoped" Comey would not prosecute Flynn, doesn't leave Trump in the clear. "A light touch or a one time request, or a non-raised voice suggestion, could well be sufficient endeavor to constitute the crime," said Barrett.

Barrett pointed out that the "smoking gun tape," the recording that prompted Richard Nixon's resignation, was a one-time request. On that tape, Nixon was heard asking a CIA official to suggest to the FBI that that the break-in to the Democratic headquarters at the Watergate Hotel in Washington, D.C., was an Agency operation, so that the FBI would abandon its investigation. The break-in had actually been carried out by Nixon-affiliated political operatives.

"When you get in these people when you ... get these people in, say: 'Look, the problem is that this will open the whole, the whole Bay of Pigs thing, and the President just feels that' ah, without going into the details," Nixon is heard saying. "Don't, don't lie to them to the extent to say there is no involvement, but just say this is sort of a comedy of errors, bizarre, without getting into

it." Nixon resigned on August 8, 1974, three days after the tape was released.

"One fleeting suggestion, and that's the whole ballgame politically, for Nixon," said Barrett. "That was impeachable obstruction of justice in one statement."

Politically is the key word here. Even if Trump's actions amount to obstruction of justice, it's not clear a sitting president can be prosecuted—the only remedy might

be impeachment, which Nixon resigned rather than face. As long as Republicans control both houses of Congress, that's an unlikely outcome.

**Los
Angeles
Times**

Welch : Trump was ham-fisted with Comey. But is that criminal?

Matt Welch

"We won!"
President

Trump's lawyer Marc Kasowitz reportedly enthused after former FBI director James Comey released his opening statement in advance of Thursday's televised Senate hearing. "Comey delivers dramatic rebuke of Trump," read the post-testimony headline in The Hill.

What if both sides are right?

Comey did confirm that the president was not under investigation, and that there's no known evidence of Russia tampering with votes in last November's election. At the same time, the nation's former top cop painted a damning portrait of an erratic, lying president whose ham-fisted interactions skirted up to the edge of obstruction of justice.

Whether the latter charge rises to the level of criminality will be a question for special prosecutor Robert Mueller. As Comey himself pointed out back when he declined to prosecute Hillary Clinton over her use of a personal email server, criminal intent matters.

But in the meantime, and in the absence of potentially damning information about, say, Trump's financial relationships with Russian

entities, we may be blundering into a kind of worst-case scenario. What if under all that smoke there's just smoke? What if the president's misbehavior is due to incompetence and boorishness, not corruption and collusion? Are we really prepared to impeach a guy over a tweet?

Democrats call foul — and with justification — when Republicans like House Speaker Paul Ryan shrug and say Trump is "just new to this" governing stuff.

Still, Ryan's not wrong. Being ignorant and/or contemptuous of the mores and rituals of the political class was arguably Trump's biggest selling point as a candidate during 2016's virulently anti-establishment election.

Anxiety-stricken commentators treated each new violation of norms — from the Mexican rapists to the "Access Hollywood" tape to the Muslim ban — as either a campaign-killer, or proof that the country has fallen into moral decay. Trump voters, meantime, viewed the news media's hyperventilation as validation that their candidate was not one of *them*.

This is not presented here as an excuse for Trump, but rather as a practical political problem for America. We know, definitively, that Donald Trump will lie, contradict himself, and step all over the

conventions of presidential behavior. We also know that's what a significant percentage of voters liked, and still like, about the guy.

This administration is almost excruciatingly inexperienced, in part because there isn't a deep bench of political talent who believe in the rough tenets of Trumpism: skepticism of multilateral institutions, mercantilist ideas on trade, belligerence toward radical Islam, suspicion of immigrants. Plenty of administration officials share the president's inability to color inside the lines.

What else do we know? That with the exception of Republican office-holders, who are reluctant to cross swords with the guy, much of official, institutional Washington despises Donald Trump.

The press hates him: Only 20 newspapers nationwide endorsed him for president, compared with more than 240 for Hillary Clinton, and that was before "Fake News" became a hashtag. The intelligence community is no great fan, what with his comparing the CIA to Nazis and all. Wherever you see the establishment in Washington — the Brookings Institute, the Washington Post editorial page, even the organs of establishment conservatism — you see the strongest condemnations of Trump.

Can all these facets of the establishment collude to help derail this presidency? If so, there well better be fire underneath that smoke. Having Michael Flynn call the Russians during a transition to talk about sanctions, and then lie about it, is bad behavior, but only that. Having multiple inappropriate and highly suggestive conversations with the FBI director is a serious breach of conduct, but not Nixonian.

The institutions that Trump disdains are now watching his every move. He will lash back, fire people, write dumb tweets, attempt to influence things he should not. But if that is *all* he does, and there no secret corruption or financial ties exist underneath all that squirrely behavior by administration incompetents, then seizing on those mistakes to prematurely end even the most distasteful of presidencies would come with real danger.

The country is in a kind of emotional state of hyper division that most Americans have never experienced. If people vote for a president to confront the establishment they despise, and then that establishment forces him out on ticky-tack fouls, we may look back on 2016 as a high-water mark in comity.

**The
New York
Times**

Brooks : It's Not the Crime, It's the Culture

David Brooks

Trump was, as always, thinking about himself. Comey had told Trump three times that he was not under investigation. Trump wanted Comey to repeat that fact publicly. When Comey didn't, Trump took it as a sign that Comey was disloyal, an unforgivable sin. So he fired him, believing, insanely, that the move would be popular.

All of this would constitute a significant scandal in a normal administration, but it would not be grounds for impeachment.

The third important lesson of the hearing is that Donald Trump is characterologically at war with the norms and practices of good government. Comey emerged as a superb institutionalist, a man who believes we are a nation of laws. Trump emerged as a tribalist and a clannist, who simply cannot

understand the way modern government works.

Trump is also plagued with a self-destructive form of selfishness. He is consumed by a hunger for affirmation, but, demented by his own obsessions, he can't think more than one step ahead.

In search of praise he is continually doing things that will end up bringing him condemnation. He lies to people who have the power to publicly devastate him. He betrays people who have the power to damage him. Trump is most dangerous to the people who are closest to him and are in the best position to take their revenge.

The upshot is the Trump administration will probably not be brought down by outside forces. It will be incapacitated from within, by the bile, rage and back-stabbing that are already at record levels in

the White House staff, by the dueling betrayals of the intimates Trump abuses so wretchedly.

Although there may be no serious collusion with the Russians, there is now certain to be a wide-ranging independent investigation into all things Trump.

These investigations will take a White House that is already acidic and turn it sulfuric. James Hohmann and Joanie Greve had a superb piece in the Daily 202 section of The Washington Post. They compiled the lessons people in the Clinton administration learned from the Whitewater scandal, and applied them to the Trump White House.

If past is prologue, this investigation will drag on for a while. The Clinton people thought the Whitewater investigation might last six months, but the inquiries lasted over seven

years. The Trump investigation will lead in directions nobody can now anticipate. When the Whitewater investigation started, Monica Lewinsky was an unknown college student and nobody had any clue that an investigation into an Arkansas land deal would turn into an investigation about sex.

This investigation will ruin careers far and wide. Investigators go after anybody they think can yield information on the president. Before the Whitewater investigators got to Clinton they took down Arkansas Gov. Jim Guy Tucker, Webb Hubbell, Susan and Jim McDougal, and many others.

This investigation will swallow up day-to-day life. As Clinton alum Jennifer Palmieri wrote in an op-ed in the USA Today network of newspapers: "No one in a position of authority at the White House tells you what is happening. No one

knows. Your closest colleague could be under investigation and you would not know. You could be under investigation and not know. It can be impossible to stay focused on your job."

Everybody will be affected. Betty Currie, Bill Clinton's personal secretary, finally refused to mention the names of young White House

employees to the investigators because every time she mentioned a name, the kid would get a subpoena, which meant thousands of dollars of ruinous legal fees.

If anything, the Trump investigation will probably be more devastating than the Whitewater scandals. The Clinton team was a few shady characters surrounded by a large

group of super-competent straight arrows. The Trump administration is shady characters through and through. Clinton himself was a savvy operator. Trump is a rage-prone obsessive who will be consumed by this.

The good news is the civic institutions are weathering the storm. The Senate Intelligence

Committee put on a very good hearing. The F.B.I. is maintaining its integrity. This has, by and large, been a golden age for the American press corps. The bad news is that these institutions had better be. The Trump death march will be slow, grinding and ugly.



Medved : Hoping for Trump impeachment? Think again

Despite the public furor surrounding James Comey's Senate testimony, there remains only one certainty about the future of the Trump administration: the president will not be forced from office through the Constitutional impeachment process. Pundits and politicians who agitate for using that mechanism to end the Age of Trump ignore history, delude themselves and damage the country.

Only of the prior 44 have faced serious drives for their impeachment:

Andrew Johnson in 1868, Richard Nixon in 1974 and Bill Clinton in 1998. All three confronted an awkward political reality that left them, with the president's bitter enemies.

This meant that critics of the chief executive could get a majority of the House of Representatives to vote articles of impeachment on a strictly partisan basis, with no reliance on defectors from the president's own party. That's precisely what occurred for Johnson and Clinton, and was about to happen with Nixon when he short-circuited the process by resigning his office.

Yet even in Nixon's case, removal from office wasn't a sure thing if he had chosen to fight it to the bitter end. The Constitution requires a two-thirds of the Senate to oust a

sitting president. In, that would mean that 19 Republican senators (out of 52) would need to join all 48 or their Democratic and Independent colleagues to drive Trump from the White House.

This mathematical reality raises the most powerful of pertinent questions: in the past, how many senators of the president's own party have ever voted to remove him from office?

The answer is a perfect zero.

Democrats voted unanimously to protect both their embattled presidents, Johnson and Clinton. In fact, they were joined who delivered the crucial votes to save Andrew Johnson in 1868, and by on both articles of impeachment, and turning to turn the crusade against Clinton from a mere failure to an embarrassing bust in 1998.

In Trump's case, if evidence of "" looked compelling enough, it's possible to imagine a few Republican senators turning against him — perhaps as many as five or six. But the Constitution requires that impeachment advocates must recruit at least 19 GOP members of the Senate to their cause for any hope of success — an all but impossible undertaking.

This doesn't mean that all or even most Senate Republicans would ignore damning evidence and stand by Trump without condemning his behavior. if the special counsel

strongly implicates the Trump campaign in violations of the law, Republicans will join their Democratic colleagues in enthusiastic denunciation of such behavior — just as then-Senator Joe Lieberman for his shameless conduct during the Monica Lewinsky crisis.

But when the senate finally voted on removing Clinton from the office to which he'd twice been elected, Lieberman voted ", " with all of his Democratic colleagues. GOP senators would find plenty of reason to vote similarly on Trump: he's a political amateur who didn't know what he was doing was wrong; he didn't understand how his subordinates would react to his comments; it all occurred during the campaign and the transition or before his administration was fully staffed, and so forth.

With the White House no doubt hitting back with indictments of "fake news," "Benedict Arnold Republicans" and efforts of some grand conspiracy to thwart the will of the people, it's tough to imagine that more than one third of all Senate Republicans will risk alienating the conservative base by voting to seize power from an embattled president.

Facing these brutal political realities, some impeachment advocates nonetheless nurse forlorn fantasies of the Nixon option: inflicting enough humiliation and frustration upon Trump that he'd be

willing to resign in disgrace, for the sake of party and country, rather than waging a last-ditch fight to save his presidency.

Can anyone who has followed Trump's career imagine that he would ever choose such a humble, apologetic course?

In his resignation speech, Nixon acknowledged that "some of my judgments were wrong." Has Trump ever taken back a single unhinged tweet, let alone expressing regret over major decisions?

Please remember that he's already officially announced his campaign for re-election, and during the last campaign, he answered questions about his faith by declaring he never asks God for forgiveness. The idea that he would walk away from an impeachment fight isn't just unlikely, it's inconceivable.

However heinous or groundless their charges against him, the president's opponents waste their time and the public's patience in efforts to prematurely terminate his presidency.

They should wake up from their toxic impeachment day dreams. Let special counsel Robert Mueller will do his job in investigating Trump's associates, while trying to work with this president for the common good, no matter how appalling his imperfections.



Strassel : All About James Comey - WSJ

Kimberley A. Strassel

What if all the painful drama over Donald Trump and Mike Flynn and Hillary Clinton and Russians wasn't really due to Donald Trump or Mike Flynn or Hillary Clinton or Russians? What if the national spectacle the country has endured comes down to one man, James Comey ?

It was certainly all about the former FBI director on Thursday, as he testified to the nation via the Senate Intelligence Committee. Mr. Comey didn't disappoint. He already had

submitted pages of testimony detailing his every second with President Trump, complete with recollections of moments he felt "strange" or "uneasy" or "awkward." But on Thursday he went further, wowing the media with bold pronouncements: President Trump was a liar; the president fired him to undermine the Russia investigation; the president had directed him to back off Mr. Flynn.

Mostly he pronounced on what is—and is not—proper in any given situation: when handling investigations, interacting with the president, or releasing information.

By the end, something had become clear. Mr. Comey was not merely a player in the past year's palaver. He was *the* player.

It was Mr. Comey who botched the investigation of Mrs. Clinton by appropriating the authority to exonerate and excoriate her publicly in an inappropriate press event, and then by reopening the probe right before the election. This gave Mrs. Clinton's supporters a reason to claim they'd been robbed, which in turn stoked the "resistance" that has overrun U.S. politics.

We now know it didn't have to be this way. Mr. Comey explained that he had lost faith in then-Attorney General Loretta Lynch's ability to handle the affair, in part because she had directed him to describe the probe in public as a "matter" rather than an "investigation." That one of President Obama's political appointees outright directed the head of the FBI to play down an investigation is far more scandalous than any accusation aired about Mr. Trump. Mr. Comey said it gave him a "queasy" feeling. But did he call on Ms. Lynch to recuse herself? Did he demand a special counsel? No.

Mr. Comey instead complied with the request. Then he judged that the only proper way to clean up the mess was to flout all the normal FBI protocols. *Vive la resistance.*

It was Mr. Comey who launched an investigation into Russian meddling last July and expanded it to look for possible collusion with the Trump campaign. That may well have been warranted. Yet before the election his FBI had leaked this to the press, casting an aura of illegitimacy on a new president and feeding conspiracy theories based on, in Mr. Comey's words, "nonsense" reporting.

Mr. Comey could have spared us this by simply stating, as he acknowledged Thursday, that Mr. Trump wasn't under investigation. One could argue he had a duty to explain, given that he'd taken the

unusual step of confirming the probe, and given the leaks from his FBI and the flood of fake news that resulted. But no. James Comey judged that (in this case, at least) it would be improper to speak out. So we've had all Russia all the time.

Moreover, it was Mr. Comey who had the discussions with President Trump that he now describes as compromising. On Thursday he claimed to have felt that Mr. Trump was directing him to end the Flynn investigation, even as he simultaneously admitted that Mr. Trump's words ("I hope") expressed no such order. He said he had been deeply uncomfortable that Mr. Trump wasn't following protocol for dealing with an FBI director.

If Mr. Comey truly had believed the president was interfering, he had a duty to report it or to resign. Instead

he maintained Thursday it wasn't his role to pronounce whether Mr. Trump had obstructed justice. Really? This may count as the only time Mr. Comey suddenly didn't have an opinion on whether to render justice or to take things into his own hands.

And why did he agree to dinner with Mr. Trump in the first place? Why keep accepting the president's phone calls? Asked whether he, in those early meetings, ever told the president how things ought to go, he said no. Mr. Comey did nothing to establish a relationship he felt was correct.

Instead, he kept secret memos, something he'd never done before. He wrote them in an unclassified manner, the better to make them public later. He allowed Mr. Trump

to continue, while building up this dossier.

When he was fired, he leaked to the media, through a "close friend," highly selective bits of his privileged communications with the president. And then he stayed silent and let the speculation rage. Thus, for the past month the nation has been mired in a new scandal, fueled by half-leaks. Thank you, yet again, Mr. Comey.

Yes, Russia interfered. Yes, Mr. Trump damages himself with reckless words and tweets. Yes, the Hillary situation was tricky. Yet you have to ask: How remarkably different would the world look had Mr. Comey chosen to retire in, say, 2015 to focus on his golf game? If only.

NATIONAL REVIEW ONLINE

Lowry : James Comey Testimony -- Hits and Misses

Never before has, or presumably again will, a former FBI director say such harsh things about a sitting president of the United States.

In his much-anticipated congressional testimony, James Comey called President Donald Trump a liar who fired him over the Russian investigation. In any other context, involving any other president, Comey's words would be very damaging, perhaps to the point of debilitating.

But his appearance had been billed as Watergate and the Clinton impeachment rolled into one, another step toward Trump getting permanently helicoptered out of the White House in a Nixonian tableau, and by this standard, his testimony didn't deliver.

Comey doesn't have Trump nailed for high crimes and misdemeanors so much as amateurish and ham-handed scheming, which is not an impeachable offense.

The Comey-Trump relationship is a tale of a bureaucratically agile and self-serving careerist matched against an institutionally ignorant and self-serving outsider. One was

careful, memorializing every conversation and calculating his every move; the other was blundering around in the dark — and eventually blew the whole thing up.

The narrative that Democrats want to believe is that Trump is in so deep with the Russians that he took the incredible risk of firing his FBI director to cover his tracks. The picture presented by Comey is instead of a president driven mad by the investigation, in particular by his inability to get the FBI director to say publicly that he isn't under investigation — when, in fact, he wasn't under investigation. Trump became desperate to get this fact out in the public and badgered Comey about it, to no avail.

Even though Comey talks — a lot. He said during last year's campaign that the Hillary Clinton investigation was closed, opened, and closed again. A couple of months ago, he told a congressional committee that a counterintelligence investigation into the Trump campaign was ongoing.

Besides telling Trump he wasn't under investigation, Comey had briefed congressional leaders, telling them the same thing. It

wasn't crazy for Trump to wonder why, with so much blabbing, Comey couldn't simply let this be known? Especially with half the political universe believing that the authorities were rapidly closing in on Trump.

Comey's own account undercuts the idea that Trump wanted to shutter the Russia investigation more broadly. In his written statement to the committee, Comey says that in one phone conversation, Trump said "that if there were some 'satellite' associates of his who did something wrong, it would be good to find that out." In other words: Have at it with Manafort, Page, and Stone, et al.

This doesn't sound like obstruction of justice. Which is not to say there isn't plenty else that is damning. Comey makes it clear, if any doubt remained, that the memo from Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein cataloging Comey's mishandling of the Clinton case prior to his firing was always a ridiculous smokescreen.

As for Trump's request that Comey not pursue a case against Michael Flynn, this wasn't illegal. Trump expressed a hope and an opinion (Flynn had already been punished

enough), and didn't issue an order to drop the case. Even if he had, it would only be obstruction if he had corrupt intent, for which there is no evidence. Still, this conversation was foolhardy and inappropriate.

Finally, in no universe is it OK for a president to demand "loyalty" of his FBI director, as Comey alleges Trump did during their one-on-one dinner at the White House (Trump's lawyer disputes this).

No doubt, if a Democratic president had behaved this way, Republicans would be going bonkers. The Comey testimony was, at the very least, a stinging portrayal of a president who doesn't understand or evidently much care how our government is supposed to work. But that falls short of what Democrats, in their current fevered state, hyped this into. They hoped and expected to get a swift hanging. Comey landed blows, but the political and legal fight goes on.

NATIONAL REVIEW ONLINE

Editors : James Comey Testimony -- Obstruction of Justice Not Proven

James Comey's much-anticipated testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee largely confirmed what we knew already.

The former FBI director painted a deeply unflattering portrait of the president, as self-serving and

dishonest. Comey said that he felt compelled to carefully document his interactions with President Trump because he did not believe that Trump would portray those interactions truthfully, if the need ever arose. Comey also had harsh words about the White House's

misleading explanation for his firing, initially portrayed as a reaction to his handling of the Hillary Clinton e-mail investigation. This character indictment cannot come as a surprise to anyone who has observed Donald Trump over the past two years.

Nonetheless, the legal case that Democrats are trying to mount against the president remains far-fetched. According to Comey, earlier this year President Trump asked Attorney General Jeff Sessions and adviser Jared Kushner to leave the room so he

could talk privately with Comey. During the one-on-one, says Comey, the president said that he “hoped” the bureau could “let go” of its investigation into former NSA director Michael Flynn, the subject of an ongoing criminal inquiry. Democrats have suggested that this statement, taken in concert with Comey’s precipitous firing, constitutes an obstruction of justice. The former FBI director said that he understood the comment about the Flynn investigation as a “directive.”

There are gaping holes in this legal case. The president never followed up on his comment about the Flynn affair, and Comey continued the Flynn investigation (meaning he didn’t really consider it a directive); Trump did not object to investigations into other members of his team, even going so far as to say it would be “good to know” if his subordinates were engaged in wrongdoing; and the only explicit request Trump made of Comey regarding the Russia probe was to state publicly that Trump himself was not under investigation. In this connection, Comey affirmed that he did, in fact, tell the president that he was not personally under investigation —

and on three occasions, as President Trump had previously claimed. (As we have noted, and as Comey reiterated in his testimony, the FBI’s inquiry pertaining to the Trump campaign was a counterintelligence, not a criminal, probe.)

In other words, Comey’s testimony largely backed up what has seemed to be the case for a while: The president, hypersensitive to unfriendly press coverage, behaved irresponsibly by badgering his FBI director about an ongoing investigation and creating yet another situation in which James Comey would have to choose one side of a partisan divide — not unlike the situation into which he was put by Loretta Lynch during the Clinton e-mail investigation. Given his legal power over the FBI director — he has the authority to end any investigation, provided the motivation for doing so is not corrupt, and he has the authority to fire the FBI director at will — it is incumbent upon the president to avoid creating any impression of a conflict of interest. Donald Trump did not do that. However, this is still a far cry from obstruction of justice, as defined by law.

What was almost entirely missing from the hearing was the ostensible center of the Russia investigation — which is Russia itself. Indeed, the last several weeks have signaled a shift in focus of the Democrats and the media from alleged Russia collusion to alleged obstruction. In other words, it’s the supposed cover-up rather than the (so far as we can tell) non-crime.

Although Comey is getting hailed by all the great and good, his own behavior is hardly blameless. One interpretation of his extensive note-taking, coupled with his reluctance to tell his superiors of his concerns about Trump in real time, is that he was saving up ammunition for when it would serve his own purposes. His decision to leak his memos (written to contain no classified information, so they could be spread around as necessary) to the press, instead of taking them to Congress, in order to prompt the Justice Department to appoint a special counsel is a reminder that Comey is a practiced manipulator of the media and the Washington bureaucracy.

What is needed in the aftermath of the Comey hearing is no different

than what was needed all along: a thorough, independent investigation of the swath of concerns raised by Russia’s attempted intrusion into last year’s election. The Senate Intelligence Committee’s ability to conduct a hearing largely devoid of grandstanding and circus antics is encouraging in this regard. President Trump’s nominee to replace Comey at the FBI, Christopher Wray, a Bush-administration hand, has been well received on both sides of the aisle. And while we remain wary of special counsels, Robert Mueller (Comey’s predecessor at the FBI) has a wide investigatory brief and a reputation for doggedness. More facts are sure to come out over the next several months.

In the meantime, President Trump would do well to refrain from insinuating himself any further into this mess. The last several months have shown that Donald Trump’s personal crisis-management is likely to lead only to more crisis.



5 Clues James Comey Just Left Behind

Noah

ShachtmanSpencer Ackerman

It wasn’t just what ex-FBI director James Comey told senators about the lead-up to Donald Trump firing him over his Russia investigation. It was what he intimated, suggested, winked, and implied about possible ties between Team Trump and the Kremlin.

Throughout the three-hour hearing, Comey dropped several breadcrumbs for legislators, FBI investigators, reporters, concerned citizens, and Tweetstormers to follow. Here are five of these enticing potential clues.

American Hackers?

So far, there are few public indications that there were any Americans involved in hacking the 2016 campaign. The Democratic Party networks were infiltrated by the Russian-intelligence-aligned hacking units known as Fancy Bear and Cozy Bear. The disseminators of the exfiltrated data are entities either known to be or suspected of being foreign: DCLeaks, Guccifer2.0 and WikiLeaks. But Comey suggested — perhaps idly, certainly publicly — that there might indeed have been a domestic tie.

As the nearly three-hour hearing drew to a close, Comey mused

about the “vital” importance of special counsel Robert Mueller’s inquiry, owing to the persistent threat from Russian electoral interference. “I know I should have said this earlier, it’s obvious, but if any Americans were part of helping the Russians do that to us, that is a very big deal,” Comey said. “And I’m confident that if that is the case, Director Mueller will find that evidence.”

Establishing a tie not only to Russia but to the hacking units themselves would likely lead to an active criminal case. Nearly two years after the Russians began conducting digital reconnaissance on the Democratic National Committee networks, no American has been accused of aiding them, let alone indicted, let alone convicted.

Thus far, the closest known tie between any American and Russian hacking teams is a series of August 2016 Twitter direct messages between Guccifer2.0 and geriatric dandy and dirty tricksman Roger Stone, a Trump ally, who boasted of knowing about John Podesta’s hacked emails before they were public. Stone also said last summer he was in touch with WikiLeaks’ Julian Assange, ahead of a WikiLeaks Podesta email dump that Stone months earlier mused would be an “October surprise.” WikiLeaks

denies any such contact took place. As well, the *Wall Street Journal* recently reported that Guccifer2.0 was also in contact with a Florida Republican operative, Aaron Nevis, who also posted pilfered DNC documents to his pseudonymous blog.

Trump himself, in July 2016, publicly called for the Russians to hack Hillary Clinton’s private email server to recover 30,000 supposedly deleted emails.

Dodgy Dossier

The infamous “Golden Showers” dossier, compiled by former British spy Christopher Steele, has been widely lambasted as a work of hearsay and fiction. But Comey on Thursday implied there might be something to at least some of the dossier’s claims, even as he called some of the material “salacious and unverified.”

“If you’ve got a 36-page document of specific claims... the FBI would have to, for counterintelligence reasons, try to verify anything that might be claimed in there... Probably first and foremost is the counterintelligence concerns that we have about blackmail. Would that be an accurate statement?” asked Sen. Richard Burr, the committee’s Republican chairman.

“Yes. If the FBI receives a credible allegation that there is some effort

to co-opt, coerce, direct, employ covertly an American on behalf of the foreign power,” Comey answered.

“And when you read the dossier, what was your reaction?” Burr countered.

“Not a question I can answer in open setting, Mr. Chairman,” Comey replied.

The dossier’s most outlandish accusations involved Trump being recorded in lewd acts with Russian sex workers. In his written and oral testimony, Comey said this was a subject Trump brought up more than once. Months after Comey had told Trump about the dossier’s allegations, the president again brought them up. Trump “said he had nothing to do with Russia, had not been involved with hookers in Russia, and had always assumed he was being recorded when in Russia,” Comey wrote.

Shifty Jeff Sessions?

Attorney General Jeff Sessions recused himself from Russia-related inquiry matters on March 2. Sessions did so reluctantly, after it was revealed that he had met with Russian ambassador Sergey Kislyak. But Comey suggested there was something more at work.

Sessions’ recusal was “inevitabl[e],” he told Senator Ron Wyden. But

then Comey said he and the FBI were “also” aware of “facts that I can’t discuss in an opening setting that would make his continued engagement in a Russia-related investigation problematic.”

The fact that Sessions met Kislyak several times is public — Sessions held a press conference about them. If they were the sum total of his “problematic” ties to Russia, Comey would have no need to go into closed session to discuss them.

Additionally, Senator Kamala Harris, a freshman Democrat and former California attorney general, leaned hard into suggestions that Sessions has not fully recused himself from the probe. Comey said his former boss was that he had consulted with “career ethics officials that know how to run a recusal,” but didn’t know how specifically Sessions is fencing himself off from the inquiry.

Vice President Mike Pence has been portrayed as the main victim of Michael Flynn’s perfidy for lying to him about his call with Kislyak about sanctions. However, Comey said it’s his “understanding” that Pence was aware of the concerns surrounding Flynn prior to or during his tenure as national security

adviser. Those concerns included Flynn’s non-disclosure of his lobbying on behalf of Turkey and his payment for a speech to Kremlin-owned network RT. Rep. Elijah Cummings sent a letter to the Trump transition team on Nov. 18 — the day Flynn was announced as national security adviser — informing them of Flynn’s foreign problems. Pence was the head of the transition team, but despite that has claimed he was unaware Flynn was a non-registered foreign agent until Flynn registered with the Justice Department in May.

And it’s not just Pence. Questions also surround what and when CIA Director Mike Pompeo knew about Flynn — whom Comey confirmed on Thursday has been under active criminal investigation.

That investigation stemmed from Flynn lying to FBI agents about his conversations with Kislyak, something that then-acting attorney general Sally Yates first warned the White House about on January 26. Yates’ concern, she would later testify, is that the national security adviser was vulnerable to Russian blackmail, the most serious counterintelligence concern a senior U.S. official can face. Yates testified

that her concerns were discussed within the U.S. intelligence community. One of the officials who might be expected to have been looped in on that is CIA director Pompeo.

On May 11, during Senate testimony, Pompeo told Wyden he had no “first-hand” knowledge of Yates’ concerns — nor even any “second-hand or third-hand knowledge of that conversation either.”

But Comey suggested otherwise on Thursday when Wyden asked if Yates’ fears about Flynn would have been discussed with “anyone at the CIA or Dan Coats’ office, the DNI?”

Comey was far from definitive, but nevertheless answered: “I would assume, yes.”

During the hearing, Sen. Angus King asked a seemingly innocuous question: “What do you know about the Russian bank VEB?”

Comey quickly answered, “Nothing that I can talk about in an open [unclassified] setting.”

But there is quite a bit known about the Russian state-owned

development bank known as VEB, short for Vnesheconobank. The bank, headed by a former intelligence officer Sergei Gorkov, is so close to the Kremlin that the U.S. government sanctioned it after Russia took over Crimea in 2014. (“This is not a bank,” one analyst told the New York Times. “We should rather treat this bank as a government agency.”)

One of the executives still listed on its website, Evgeny Buryakov, is a convicted spy who recently completed his sentence in federal prison and was promptly kicked out of the country. Buryakov’s counterparts in Russia’s foreign intelligence service, or SVR, tried to recruit Carter Page before he became a foreign policy adviser to the Trump campaign.

Most importantly, Jared Kushner, Trump’s son-in-law and top aide, privately met with Gorkov after Trump’s election.

What exactly they discussed is a matter of dispute, but Comey hinted Thursday that whatever investigators uncovered about that conversation—and about the bank—would be extremely sensitive.

the Atlantic James Comey's 'Shock and Awe' Testimony

Amy Zegart

Imagine that two years ago, you sequestered a jury of 12 Americans, kept them in a news-free zone, and brought them today to hear former FBI Director James Comey testify before the Senate Intelligence Committee. Chances are that all of them—no matter what their political beliefs—would be stunned and outraged.

From the perspective of one of these Americans, Comey dropped bombshell after bombshell: The Russians are mucking around in American democratic elections, trying to change how we think, how we act, how we vote—and they will be back. The attorney general cannot be trusted to ensure impartial enforcement of the law. The president fired the FBI director and then lied about why he did it. Yet by the time Comey said these things in an open hearing, all of it was old news. It should have been more shocking than it was, but on some level, Americans were used to it.

historical context here is important. Only one FBI Director has ever been fired since J. Edgar Hoover took the job back in 1924: William Sessions, who was sacked by President Bill Clinton in 1993 after the Justice Department’s own Office of Professional Responsibility found

so many severe ethical lapses, they filled a 161-page report. It included schemes to avoid paying taxes, using government funds to build an expensive home fence that actually reduced the security of the property, using FBI resources for personal purposes, and involving his wife, Alice, in bureau management in “entirely inappropriate” ways. Comey, by contrast, was fired by President Trump for doing his job. Big difference. One was miscarrying justice and abusing power; the other was carrying out justice and speaking truth to power.

Similarly, the only episode in recent history approximating the cloud hanging over the attorney general’s office occurred during the Watergate scandal. That attorney general chose to resign rather than fire White House special prosecutor Archibald Cox and impede an investigation reaching into the White House. This attorney general, by contrast, appears to be implicated in an investigation that reaches into the White House.

Finally, never in American history has a foreign power so deliberately, powerfully, and maliciously tried to distort the cornerstone of American democracy. Comey sent this point home in the hearing, declaring, “There should be no fuzz on this whatsoever. The Russians

interfered in our election during the 2016 cycle. They did it with purpose. They did it with sophistication. They did it with overwhelming technical efforts. ... It is a high confidence judgment of the entire intelligence community. ... It’s not a close call.”

Comey’s testimony delivered a “shock and awe” campaign, FBI-style: calm, cautious, and candid, at once stoic and relatable. It was as though Comey were trying to reach through our television sets and shake the body politic into our collective senses.

And yet, his shock and awe testimony may not shock and awe for long. The biggest story of the day is how unlikely this is to remain the biggest story. In all likelihood, after the Twittersphere dies down, partisans will retreat to their respective corners and business as usual will return to Washington.

Why?

Because of something called the “normalization of deviance:” the more frequently exceptional things happen, the less we think of them as exceptional. Over time, we become desensitized to events that fall far outside the normal range—often with disastrous consequences. The space shuttle *Challenger* exploded in 1986

despite previous shuttle launches that revealed O-ring seals in the shuttle’s rocket boosters were cracking in cold weather. They shouldn’t have been cracking at all. But NASA “normalized” the poor performance of O-rings as acceptable and okayed the launch, even with record low temperatures forecast for liftoff. Seven astronauts, including Christa McAuliffe, the first teacher in space, were killed.

We experience the normalization of deviance in daily life, too. Ever hear a funny noise in your car? The first time, it seems alarming. After living with it for a few days, however, you think it must not be so serious after all. You tell yourself the car seems to be running just fine. You grow accustomed to the noise. After a while you don’t notice it anymore. And maybe the car really is fine. Or maybe the funny noise is an indication that the car is about to experience a catastrophic breakdown (which is what happened to me one night, when I assumed a strange noise in my car was really nothing, until the car broke down on the freeway, at night, in Los Angeles, “without warning.”)

The Trump era has brought the normalization of deviance to politics. In four short months, this administration’s national-security

advisor has had to resign in disgrace for lying about his contacts with Russians and now faces possible criminal charges. The attorney general is so tainted by his own Russian-related activities that he has had to recuse himself from the bureau's investigation of

Russian-related activities. And the FBI director, who by law serves a 10-year term precisely to ensure independence from the president, was fired by the president because he was independent. This is bizarre world. Any one of these events would in normal times be enough to

bring down a president. And yet senators today were talking about whether President Trump's exact words to Jim Comey constituted a hope, a wish, an order, a directive, a threat, or as one senator characterized it, simply a "light touch" approach.

Comey was right about one thing: The Russians "are coming after America." They may not have to. In this era of normalized deviance, we are defeating ourselves.

NATIONAL REVIEW ONLINE

Charen : Trump & Twitter – Character Problem

It began as a rumble and has swelled to a chorus. Anonymous White House aides, outside well-wishers, and Republican apparatchiks are all begging President Trump to stop tweeting. The *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, which has performed acrobatic contortions attempting to coax normality and actual results from the current president, erupted with frustration at what it called the "cycle of Twitter outbursts and pointless personal feuding that may damage his agenda and the powers of the Presidency."

George Conway, a Republican lawyer and Kellyanne's husband, noted that Trump's tweets undermined his own case for the "travel ban."

Remember Tom Barrack, the friend who called Trump the "jeweler" who would "polish America" at the Republican National Convention? He's had it. "The tweeting makes everybody crazy," he told a Bloomberg conference in New York. "There's just no gain in doing it."

Even Newt Gingrich, who has sunk to embracing squalid conspiracy theories (e.g. the Seth Rich smear) for the sake of toadying to Donald Trump, is begging him to refrain from "getting into Twitter fights."

But is Twitter really the problem?

Twitter is just a tool. With or without it, Trump's conduct would be disordered and self-sabotaging. The Comey firing is but one of hundreds of examples. The motive may have been pique at Comey's failure to publicly exonerate him, not an attempt to obstruct justice, but it looks guilty – something Trump might have been able to see if his feelings didn't frequently get the better of him. The crude way Trump fired Comey – without the courtesy of a meeting or even a phone call – guaranteed a new and skilled enemy. Further, it opened the door to a special prosecutor, which cannot end well for any administration. All because Trump couldn't control his impulses.

Twitter played no role in Trump's blurring of classified information to the Russian ambassador and foreign minister, nor in his choice to slander Comey as a "nut job" to them. Twitter wasn't implicated in many other blunders, such as undermining the NATO alliance by refusing to confirm our commitment to Article V, praising the Philippine president for his extrajudicial murders of drug addicts and dealers, or giving a White House platform to such conspiracy mongers as Gateway Pundit.

In any case, the point is not that he tweets, but *what* he tweets. It is Trump's inexplicable and insatiable

appetite for conflict that keeps roiling the waters. When the city of London has just endured another horrific terror attack, the decent thing is to express American sympathy and solidarity. Trump instead picked a fight with London's mayor. Even if he were correctly representing what the mayor had said, it would have been contemptible to choose that moment to snipe. But he did not accurately represent what the mayor had said. Heck, Great Britain is only our most important ally. And he promised to shake things up. Done.

Trump is feuding with his own staff and even with his family. His "mood has become sour and dark," reports the *New York Times*, "and he has turned against most of his aides — even his son-in-law, Jared Kushner — describing them in a fury as 'incompetent,' according to one of those advisers."

This is a reprise of a campaign theme, perhaps the chief campaign theme. America, Trump argued, was being led by boobs and incompetents. "I alone can fix." He did also promise to appoint the "best people," and in some cases, he has done so. But the truth is that *he* is the incompetent, and too vain/insecure to recognize his own faults. When he screws up, he blames those around him. Besides,

even the best people are diminished and tarnished by what Trump requires of them and does to them. After it was reported that Trump blurted out classified information to the Russians, several officials publicly denied it, only to see Trump declare the next day that he had a perfect right to do it. It was the same with the Rod Rosenstein memo supposedly "explaining" the Comey firing. Its shelf life was about 24 hours. He makes liars of previously honorable men and women.

Trump's inexplicable and insatiable appetite for conflict keeps roiling the waters.

It must be a bitter thing to be a Trump surrogate. Even the Trumpiest of Trump's cabinet appointees, Attorney General Jeff Sessions, has offered to resign after repeated clashes with the president. If this crop departs, who will accept positions in this administration?

After one typically crazed week of the Trump presidency, Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.) observed drily that we could all do with a bit "less drama." We could, but the reality TV star we elected has only ever perfected producing just that.



McCallion : Christopher Wray's law firm has ties to Russian energy companies

On paper, Christopher Wray appears to be an excellent choice to serve as the next FBI director. He has "impeccable" academic credentials (Yale law school) and has had a decades-long distinguished career as a federal prosecutor and high-level official in the Department of Justice. As the criminal defense lawyer for New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie during the "Bridgagate" investigation, he did raise some eyebrows when it was learned that one of Christie's "missing" cellphones mysteriously ended up in Wray's possession, but

this is unlikely to derail Wray's confirmation.

The most troubling issue that Wray may face is the fact that his law firm — King & Spalding — represents Rosneft and Gazprom, two of Russia's largest state-controlled oil companies.

Rosneft was prominently mentioned in the now infamous 35-page dossier prepared by former British MI6 agent Christopher Steele. The dossier claims that the CEO of Rosneft, Igor Sechin, offered candidate Donald Trump, through Trump's campaign manager Carter Page, a 19% stake in the company

in exchange for lifting U.S. sanctions on Russia. The dossier claims that the offer was made in July while Page was in Moscow.

Rosneft is also the company that had a \$500 billion oil drilling joint-venture with Exxon in 2012, when Secretary of State Rex Tillerson was Exxon's CEO. However, the deal was nixed by President Obama in 2014, when he imposed the sanctions that crippled Russia's ability to do business with U.S. companies. The lifting of sanctions by the Trump administration would enable Exxon to renew its joint venture agreement with Rosneft, and the law firm of King & Spalding

could end up in the middle of the contract negotiations between those two companies.

The law firm's representation of Gazprom raises even more serious conflict issues for Wray. Gazprom was a partner in RosUkrEnergo AG ("RUE"), which is controlled by Ukrainian oligarch Dmitry Firtash. He is under federal indictment in Chicago for racketeering charges, has had numerous financial dealings with former Trump campaign manager Paul Manafort, and is generally considered to be a member of Russian President Vladimir Putin's inner circle.

Though there is no indication that Wray personally worked on any of the Rosneft or Gazprom legal matters handled by his law firm, he might well have an ethical and legal conflict of interest that would prevent him from any involvement of the FBI's Russian probe. When a law firm such as King & Spalding represents clients, then all of the partners in that law firm have an actual or potential conflict of interest, preventing them from undertaking any representation of any other client that has interests clearly adverse to those of these two Russian companies. These conflict rules continue to apply even after a lawyer leaves the law firm,

so Wray could be ethically barred from involving himself in a federal investigation that includes within its scope a probe of Rosneft, Gazprom and affiliated companies. The public appearance of conflict of interest and impropriety might require him to recuse himself from the investigation.

If Wray was confirmed as the FBI director, and then had to recuse himself with regard to some or all of the Russia-related aspects of the critical investigation being conducted by the FBI and special counsel Robert Mueller, the potential damage to the investigation could be significant. If

Wray refused to recuse himself from the Russia-Trump investigation — or at least acknowledge the potential conflict issue, a serious cloud could be cast over the FBI's level of commitment to the investigation.

One of several reasons why former senator Joe Lieberman was generally considered to be unqualified for the FBI director's job was that his law firm — Kasowitz Benson Torres — has represented Trump for many years, thus creating the appearance of possible favoritism to Trump.

Similarly, the nomination of Wray as FBI director raises serious

questions as to whether Wray — given his law firm's affiliation with Rosneft and Gazprom — would be perceived as an attempt by Trump to install a "Russia-friendly" director at the helm of the FBI.

The Senate must, therefore, proceed cautiously with Wray's confirmation hearing, and demand that any potential conflicts be fully disclosed — and hopefully resolved — before he is allowed to assume the title of FBI director.

**The
New York
Times**

Krugman : Wrecking the Ship of State

Paul Krugman

Why? It's not, whatever Republicans may say, because Obamacare is an unworkable system; insurance markets were clearly stabilizing last fall. Instead, as insurers themselves have been explaining, the problem is the uncertainty created by Trump and company, especially the failure to make clear whether crucial subsidies will be maintained. In North Carolina, for example, Blue Cross Blue Shield has filed for a 23 percent rise in premiums, but declared that it would have asked for only 9 percent if it were sure that cost-sharing subsidies would continue.

So why hasn't it received that assurance? Is it because Trump believes his own assertions that he can cause Obamacare to collapse, then get voters to blame Democrats? Or is it because he's too busy rage-tweeting and golfing to deal with the issue? It's hard to

tell, but either way, it's no way to make policy.

Or take the remarkable decision to take Saudi Arabia's side in its dispute with Qatar, a small nation that houses a huge U.S. military base. There are no good guys in this quarrel, but every reason for the U.S. to stay out of the middle.

So what was Trump doing? There's no hint of a strategic vision; some sources suggest that he may not even have known about the large U.S. base in Qatar and its crucial role.

The most likely explanation of his actions, which have provoked a crisis in the region (and pushed Qatar into the arms of Iran) is that the Saudis flattered him — the Ritz-Carlton projected a five-story image of his face on the side of its Riyadh property — and their lobbyists spent large sums at the Trump Washington hotel.

Normally, we would consider it ridiculous to suggest that an

American president could be so ignorant of crucial issues, and be led to take dangerous foreign policy moves with such crude inducements. But can we believe this about a man who can't accept the truth about the size of his inauguration crowds, who boasts about his election victory in the most inappropriate circumstances? Yes.

And consider his refusal to endorse the central principle of NATO, the obligation to come to our allies' defense — a refusal that came as a shock and surprise to his own foreign policy team. What was that about? Nobody knows, but it's worth considering that Trump apparently ranted to European Union leaders about the difficulty of setting up golf courses in their nations. So maybe it was sheer petulance.

The point, again, is that everything suggests that Trump is neither up to the job of being president nor willing to step aside and let others do the work right. And this is already starting to have real consequences,

from disrupted health coverage to ruined alliances to lost credibility on the world stage.

But, you say, stocks are up, so how bad can it be? And it's true that while Wall Street has lost some of its initial enthusiasm for Trumponomics — the dollar is back down to pre-election levels — investors and businesses don't seem to be pricing in the risk of really disastrous policy.

That risk is, however, all too real — and one suspects that the big money, which tends to equate wealth with virtue, will be the last to realize just how big that risk really is. The American presidency is, in many ways, sort of an elected monarchy, in which a temperamentally and intellectually unqualified leader can do immense damage.

That's what's happening now. And we're barely one-tenth of the way through Trump's first term. The worst, almost surely, is yet to come.