

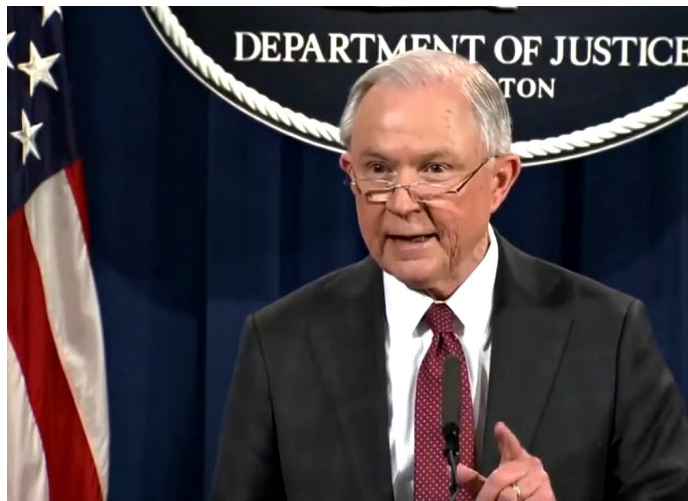


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Jeff Sessions

Press Conference Announcing Recusal from Investigation into Russian Influence in the U.S. Presidential Election Campaign

delivered 2 March 2017, DOJ Conference Center, Washington, D.C.



[AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio]

Attorney General Sessions: It's good to be with you. Welcome to the Department of Justice. Jody [Hunt], thank you for being with me. He is my Chief of Staff. And Jody has been almost 20 years in the Department of Justice.

Let me share a few thoughts.

First, about the comments I made to the committee that have been said to be incorrect in thoughts. Let me be clear: I never had meetings with Russian operatives or Russian intermediaries about the Trump campaign. And the idea that I was part of a (quote), "continuing exchange of information" during the campaign between Trump surrogates and intermediaries for the Russian government is totally false.



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That is the question that Senator Franken asked me at the hearing.¹ And that's what got my attention. As he noticed -- noted, it was the first -- just breaking news. And it got my attention. And that is the question I responded to. I did not respond by referring to the two meetings, one very brief after a speech, and one with two of my senior staffers, professional staffers, with the Russian ambassador in Washington -- where no such things were discussed.

In my reply to the question -- My reply to the question of Senator Franken was honest and correct as I understood it at the time.² I appreciate that some have taken the view that this was a false comment. That is not my intent. That is not correct. I will write the Judiciary Committee soon, today or tomorrow, to explain this testimony for the record.

Secondly, at my confirmation hearing I promised that I would do this: [I]f a "specific matter arose where I believed my impartiality might reasonably be questioned, I would consult with the Department ethics officials regarding the most appropriate way to proceed," (close quote).³

That's what I told them at the confirmation hearing. And I have been here just three weeks today. A lot has been happening in this three week period. I wish I'd had more of my staff on board, but we're still waiting for confirmation for them.

Much has been done. Much needs to be done. And -- But I did and have done as I promised. I have met with senior officials shortly after arriving here. We evaluated the rules of ethics and recusal. I have considered the issues at stake. In fact, on Monday of this week, we set a meeting with an eye to a final decision on this question. And on Monday, we set that meeting today. So this was a day that we planned to have a final discussion about handling this.

I asked for their candid and honest opinion about what I should do about investigations, certain investigations. And my staff recommended recusal. They said that since I had involvement with the campaign, I should not be involved in any campaign investigation. I have studied the rules and considered their comments and evaluation. I believe those recommendations are right and just.

Therefore, I have recused myself in the matters that deal with the Trump campaign.



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The exact language of that recusal is in the press release that we -- we will give to you. I -- I've said this, (quote), I have now "decided to recuse myself from any existing or future investigations of any matter[s] relat[ed] in any way to the campaigns for President of the United States."⁴ I went on to say, "this announcement should not be interpreted as confirmation of the existence of any investigation or suggestive of the scope of any such investigation"⁵ because we in the Department of Justice resist confirming or denying the very existence of investigation[s]."

So, in the end, I have followed the right procedure, just as I promised the committee I would, just as I believe any good attorney general should do. And a proper decision, I believe, has been reached. So, I thank you for the opportunity to make those comments, and would be pleased to take a few questions.

Okay.



Question: Just to clear up any confusion over this, could you just explain a little bit about the September 8th meeting? Who on your staff was there? And what was discussed with the Russian ambassador?

Attorney General Sessions: The Russian ambassador apparently sent a staffer to my office -- I did not see him -- and asked for a meeting, as so many of the ambassadors were doing. And we set up a time, as we did -- as we normally did. And we met with him. Two of my senior staffers were there, and maybe a younger staffer, too. And they both [are] retired Army colonels, and not politicians, and we had a -- we listened to the ambassador and to what his concerns might be.

[crosstalk]

Question: Which were what?



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Attorney General Sessions: Well, it was just normal things, such as I started off by saying - I -- I don't remember a lot of it. But I do remember saying I'd gone to Russia with a church group in 1991, and he said he was not a believer himself, but he was glad to have church people come there. Indeed, I -- I thought he was pretty much of an old-style Soviet-type ambassador.

And so, we talked about a little bit about terrorism, as I recall. And somehow the subject of the Ukraine came up. I had had the Ukrainian ambassador in my office the day before. And to listen to him, nothing that Russian -- Russia had done nothing that was wrong in any area, and everybody else was wrong with regard to the Ukraine. It got to be a little bit of a testy conversation at that point. It wrapped up. He said something about inviting me to have lunch. I did not accept that, and that never occurred.

Question: [inaudible]?

Attorney General Sessions: I don't recall. But most of these ambassadors are pretty gossipy and they like -- this was in the campaign season, but I don't recall any specific political discussions.

Question: Beyond those two --

Attorney General Sessions: All right.

Question: Beyond those two meetings, do you recall meeting with Ambassador Kislyak any other times?

Attorney General Sessions: I don't recall having met him. I mean, it's possible. I'm on [the] Armed Services Committee and things happen, but I don't recall having met him before those two meetings.

Question: ...sanctions. You said you...on the question of sanctions -- do you think -- why do you think he sought the meeting with you? Did he consider you a representative of the Trump campaign?



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Attorney General Sessions: I think ambassadors are always out trying to find out things and -- and advance their agenda. Most of the countries' ambassadors that I met with, they would lay out the case for -- Ukraine would lay out its case -- Poland laid out its case, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Japan, Canada, Australia. I met with all of those ambassadors over the year, and so I -- I think that's why [inaudible].

Question: Did you consult -- Did you consult with the White House about your decision? And just to follow on the last question, with hindsight, do you believe that this is a coincidence that the Russians asked you for a meeting? Did you believe you were targeted because it came at the height of Russia's interference? And at the same time, then-candidate Trump was giving an interview to RT saying that he didn't believe there was anything to the reported interference.

Attorney General Sessions: I don't recall and don't have a sense of any connection whatsoever about that. I'm not sure I even knew what -- when we set up the meeting -- what was going to be going on in the world at the time, so I can't speak for what the Russian ambassador may have had in his mind.

Question: Have you met with any other Russian officials or folks connected to the Russian government since you endorsed Donald Trump?

Attorney General Sessions: I don't believe so. I -- we may -- you know, we meet a lot of people, so --

Question: [inaudible] separate from those two meetings you discussed with the ambassador?

Attorney General Sessions: I don't believe so.

[crosstalk]

Question: The White House press secretary and the President himself both said today that they think you should not recuse yourself from these investigations. Could you [inaudible]?



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Attorney General Sessions: I did share with White House counsel, or my staff has, that I intend to recuse myself this afternoon. But I -- I feel like -- because they didn't -- they don't know the rules, the ethics rules, most people don't and -- but when you evaluate the rules, I feel like that I am -- I should not be involved investigating a campaign I had a role in.

One more question and we'll wrap this up.

Question: Two questions if I may. One, you were already considering recusal before today, is that correct? And secondly --

Attorney General Sessions: Yeah.

Question: And secondly, when you answered Senator Franken's question, were you just not thinking of the meeting with the Russian ambassador, or did you not consider it relevant?

Attorney General Sessions: I was taken aback a little bit about this brand new information, this allegation that surrogates -- and I had been called a surrogate for Donald Trump -- had been meeting continuously with Russian officials, and that's what I -- it struck me very hard, and that's what I focused my answer on. And in retrospect, I should have slowed down and said, "But I did meet one Russian official a couple of times. That would be the ambassador."

Thank you all. Take care.

¹ **Senator Franken's question:** "CNN just published a story alleging that the Intelligence Community provided documents to the President-elect last week that included information that quote, "Russian operatives claim to have compromising personal and financial information about Mr. Trump." These documents, also allegedly, stated quote, "There was a continuing exchange of information during the campaign between Trump surrogates and intermediaries for the Russian government." [emphasis added] Now again, I'm telling you, this as it's coming out, so you know. But, if it's true, it's obviously extremely serious. And if there is any evidence that any one affiliated with the Trump campaign communicated with the Russian government in the course of this campaign, what will you do?"

² **Senator Sessions' response:** "Senator Franken, I'm not aware of any of those activities. I have been called a "surrogate" at a time or two in that campaign, and I didn't have -- not have communications with the Russians, and I'm unable to comment on it." [Source: Audio-to-text transcription by Michael E. Eidenmuller of C-SPAN recorded video "Attorney General Confirmation Hearing, Day 1, Part 2, 10 January 2017]

³ Senator Sessions offered this written statement to a series of questions about conflicts of interest in relation to President Trump's election campaign as recorded in the Senate Judiciary Committee's "Questions for the Record" questionnaire.

⁴ *Attorney General Sessions Statement on Recusal* [<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/attorney-general-sessions-statement-recusal>]

⁵ Ibid