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Jeff Sessions

Opening Statement to the Senate Intelligence Committee

delivered 13 June 2013, Washington, D.C.



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

Thank you very much Chairman Burr and Ranking Member Warner for allowing me to publicly appear before your committee today.

I appreciate the committee's critically important efforts to investigate Russian interference with our democratic process. Such interference can never be tolerated and I encourage every effort to get to the bottom of any such allegations.

As you know, the Deputy Attorney General has appointed a special counsel to investigate the matters related to Russian interference in the 2016 election. I am here today to address several issues that have been specifically raised before this committee, and I appreciate the opportunity to respond to questions as fully as the Lord enables me to do so. But as I advised you, Mr. Chairman, and consistent with long-standing Department of Justice practice, I cannot and will not violate my duty to protect the confidential communications I have with the President.



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Now let me address some issues directly: I did not have any private meetings nor I -- do I recall any conversations with any Russian officials at the Mayflower Hotel. I did not attend any meetings at that event -- separate. Prior to the speech, I attended -- by the President today -- I attended a reception with my staff that included at least two dozen people and President Trump. Though I do recall several conversations that I had during that pre-speech reception, I do not have any recollection of meeting or talking to the Russian Ambassador or any other Russian officials. If any brief interaction occurred in passing with the Russian Ambassador during that reception, I do not remember it. After the speech, I was interviewed by the news media -- there was a[n] area for that -- in a different room, and then I left the hotel.

But whether I ever attended a reception where -- where the Russian Ambassador was also present is entirely beside the point of this investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 campaign. Let me state this clearly, colleagues: I have never met with or had any conversation with any Russians or any foreign officials concerning any type of interference with any campaign or election in the United States. Further, I have no knowledge of any such conversations by anyone connected to the Trump campaign. I was your colleague in this body for 20 years -- at least some of you -- and I -- I -- and the suggestion that I participated in any collusion, that I was aware of any collusion with the Russian government to hurt this country, which I have served with honor for 35 years, or to undermine the integrity of our democratic process, is an appalling and detestable lie.

Relatedly, there is the assertion that I -- that I did not answer Senator Franken's question honestly at my confirmation hearing. Colleagues, that is false. I can't say "colleagues" now. I'm no longer a part of this body -- but former colleagues. That is false.

This is what happened. Senator Franken asked me a rambling question, after some six hours of testimony, that included dramatic, new allegations that the United States intelligence community -- the U.S. intelligence community! -- had advised President-elect Trump (quote) that "there was a continuing exchange of information during the campaign between Trump's surrogates and intermediaries for the Russian government"¹ (close quote).

I was taken aback by that explosive allegation, which he said was being reported in breaking news that very day, and which I had not heard. I wanted to refute that immediately -- any suggestion that I was part of such an activity.



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I replied (quote) -- I replied to Senator Franken this way (quote), "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" did not -- "didn't have -- did not have communications with the Russians," and -- "and I'm unable to comment on it"² (close quote).

That was the context in which I was asked the question, and in that context, my answer was a fair and correct response to the charge as I understood it. I was responding to this allegation that it we had met -- surrogates had been meeting with the Russians on a regular basis. It simply did not occur to me to go further than the context of the question and to list any conversations that I may have had with Russians in routine situations, as I had had many routine meetings with other foreign officials.

So please hear me now. And it was only in March, after my confirmation hearing, that a reporter asked my spokesperson whether I had ever met with any Russian officials. This was the first time that question had squarely been posed to me. On the same day, we provided that reporter with the information related to the meeting that I and my staff had held in my Senate office with Ambassador Kislyak, as well as the brief encounter in July after a speech that I had given during the convention in Cleveland, Ohio. I also provided the reporter with a list of 25 foreign ambassador meetings that I'd had during 2016. In addition, I provided supplemental testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee to explain this event. So I readily acknowledged these two meetings, and certainly not one thing happened that was improper in any one of those meetings.

Let me also explain clearly the circumstances of my recusal from the investigation into the Russian interference with the 2016 election. Please, colleagues, hear me on this. I was sworn in as Attorney General on Thursday, February 9th. The very next day -- as I had promised to the Judiciary Committee I would do, at least at an early date -- I met with career Department officials, including a senior -- a senior ethics official, to discuss some things publicly reported in the press that might have some bearing on whether or not I should recuse myself in this case.

From that point, February 10th, until I announced my formal recusal on March 2nd, I was never briefed on any investigative details, did not access any information about the investigation. I received only the limited information that the Department's career officials determined was necessary for me to form and make a recusal decision.



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As such, I have no knowledge about this investigation as it -- as ongoing today, beyond what has been publicly reported. I don't even read that carefully. And I have taken no action whatsoever with regard to any such investigation.

On the date of my formal recusal, my Chief of Staff sent an email to the heads of relevant departments, including by name to Director Comey of the FBI, to instruct them to inform their staffs of this recusal and to advise them not to brief me or involve me in any way in any such matters. And in fact, they have not. Importantly, I recused myself not because of any asserted wrongdoing or any belief that I may have involved in any wrongdoing in the campaign, but because a Department of Justice regulation, 28 CFR 45.2, I felt required it. That regulation states, in effect, that Department employees should not participate in investigations of a campaign if they served as a campaign advisor.

So the scope of my recusal, however, does not and cannot interfere with my ability to oversee the Department of Justice, including the FBI, which has an 8 billion dollar budget and 35,000 employees. I presented to the President my concerns, and those of Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, about the ongoing leadership issues at the FBI -- as stated in my letter recommending the removal of Mr. Comey, along with the Deputy Attorney General's memorandum on that issue, which have been released publicly by the White House. Those represent a clear statement of my views. I adopted Deputy General Rosenstein's points that he made in his memorandum and made my recommendation. It is absurd, frankly, to suggest that a recusal from a single specific investigation would render the Attorney General unable to manage the leadership of the various Department of Justice law enforcement components that conduct thousands of investigations.

Finally, during his testimony, Mr. Comey discussed a conversation that he and I had about the meeting Mr. Comey had with the President. I am happy to share with the committee my recollection of that conversation that I had with Mr. Comey.

Following a routine morning threat briefing, Mr. Comey spoke to me and my Chief of Staff. While he did not provide me with any of the substance of his conversation with the President -- apparently, the day before -- Mr. Comey expressed concern about proper communications protocol with the White House and with the President.



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I responded -- now, he didn't recall this -- but I will -- I -- I responded to his comment by agreeing that the FBI and the Department of Justice needed to be careful to follow Department policies regarding appropriate contacts with the White House.

Mr. Comey had served in the Department [of Justice] for the better than two decades, and I was confident that he understood and would abide by the well-established rules limiting communications with the White House, especially about ongoing investigations. That's what so important to control. My comments encouraged him to do just that and indeed, as I understand it, he, in fact, did that. Our Department of Justice rules on proper communications between the Department and the White House have been in place for years. Mr. Comey well knew them, I thought, and assumed correctly that he complied with them.

So I will finish with this. I recused myself from any investigation into the campaign for President, but I did not recuse myself from defending my honor against scurrilous and false allegations. At all times throughout the course of the campaign, the confirmation process, and since becoming Attorney General, I have dedicated myself to the highest standards. I've earned a reputation for that, at home and in this body, I believe, over decades of performance. The people of this country expect an honest and transparent government and that's what we're giving them. This President wants to focus on the people of this country to ensure they are treated fairly and kept safe. The Trump agenda is to improve the lives of the American people. I know some have different ways of achieving this, and different agendas, but that is his agenda and it's [one] I share.

Importantly, as Attorney General, I have a responsibility to enforce the laws of this Nation, to protect this country from its enemies, and to ensure the fair administration of justice. And I intend to work every day with our fine team and the superb professionals in the Department of Justice to advance the important work we have to do. These false -- false attacks, the innuendos, the leaks, you can be sure will not intimidate me.

In fact, these events have only strengthened my resolve to fulfill my duty, my duty to reduce crime, to support our federal, state, and local law enforcement officers who work on our streets every day. Just last week, it was reported that overdose deaths in this country are rising faster than ever recorded. Last year was 52,000. The New York Times just estimated next year will be 62,000 overdose deaths. The murder rate is up over 10 percent -- the largest increase since 1968.



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Together, we are telling the gangs, the cartels, the fraudsters, and the terrorists -- we are coming after you. Every one of our citizens, no matter who they are or where they live, has the right to be safe in their homes and communities. And I will not be deterred -- I will not allow this great Department to be deterred from its vital mission.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Warner. I have a great honor to appear before you today, and I will do my best to answer your questions.

¹ Senator Franken: "CNN has just published a story -- and I'm telling you this about a news story that's just been published. I'm not expecting you to know whether or not it's true or not. But 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 claimed 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's surrogates and intermediaries for the Russian government.'" [emphasis added; Source: AmericanRhetoric.com transcript of C-SPAN Footage via YouTube]

² AmericanRhetoric.com transcript of C-SPAN Footage via YouTube]