

An Overdue Move

President Trump made a mistake not in firing James Comey but in waiting so long to do it.

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President Trump's dismissal of James Comey as FBI director was unfortunate only in that it should have occurred sooner. Comey, however gifted he may have been as a prosecutor, was a loose cannon whose record over the last year was peppered with bizarre statements and errors of judgment.

Last July, Comey announced that he would not recommend that criminal charges be brought against Hillary Clinton for her use of a personal server to exchange emails while she was secretary of state. But he followed this statement with a detailed excoriation of the impropriety of Clinton's behavior, calling her and her colleagues "extremely careless." Comey concluded, "to be clear, this is not to suggest that in similar circumstances, a person who engaged in this activity would face no consequences. To the contrary, those individuals are often subject to security or administrative sanctions. But that is not what we are deciding now."

This statement, far from "clear," only confused the issue. If the activity under investigation would generally deserve sanction, why wasn't that the case for Clinton? Instead of laying the question of Clinton's corruption to rest, Comey hinted that she was not being charged because it would be impossible to prosecute her—exactly the kind of special treatment for the elite that angered so many Americans during the election. Comey thus turned up the heat of suspicion and mistrust.

As FBI director, Comey, a former high-ranking federal prosecutor and deputy attorney general, seemed unwilling or unable to embrace the role of cop. No FBI director has ever before made such a disclosure about his recommendations to charge or not charge a subject of an investigation: that's normally left to prosecutors. Comey's unprecedented action was planned prior to the revelation that then-attorney general Loretta Lynch had met in private with former president Bill Clinton; Comey apparently wanted to reserve the moment in the spotlight for himself.

Then, in October, a few days before the most contentious presidential election in modern history, Comey went public again, this time to announce that the FBI was reopening the investigation into Clinton's emails because some had been downloaded onto Anthony Weiner's laptop. Clinton now considers this revelation, which turned out a few days later to have been an overstatement, to be the key reason why she lost the election.

It's unlikely that concerns over Clinton's emails outweighed her failure to convey a coherent economic vision in the minds of the white working-class voters who chose to support Donald Trump instead—or in the minds of the black voters who stayed home instead of going to the polls. But Comey's interjection of himself into the race at such a crucial moment, with news that turned out not to affect the Clinton investigation one way or another, was further evidence of his poor judgment, which always seemed to tilt in the direction of his own aggrandizement.

Regarding the investigation into President Trump and his advisors' supposed connection to Russian operatives determined to tilt the election in his favor, Comey has played peekaboo for almost a year, alternately insinuating and denying that any real evidence exists. In his March testimony before the House, Comey made bizarre statements about Vladimir Putin's deepest feelings and agreed with Democratic lawmakers as they spun elaborate theories about "close-knit cabals" involving Trump associates and KGB diehards. "They wanted to hurt our democracy," explained Comey without reference to evidence or fact, "hurt her, help him . . . Putin hated Secretary Clinton so much." Last week, Comey told the Senate that Russia presents "the greatest threat of any nation on earth" to American democracy, and that he expects "to see them back in 2018, especially 2020."

So far, no evidence has been presented to demonstrate that any state or organization, least of all Russia, had anything to do with tricking John Podesta into revealing his email password, which is what led to the exposure of the DNC emails—the episode now considered synonymous with "hacking the election." Yet Comey, as the nation's top law-enforcement officer, felt comfortable entertaining wild, conspiratorial speculations in the Senate, without evidence.

It is unfortunate that it took Trump so long to fire Comey; he should have done so in January, when he took office. The timing of this decision will now surely cause the president other problems.

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