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WHITE HOUSE

Behind Comey's firing: An enraged Trump, fuming about Russia

The president deliberated for more than a week before ousting the FBI chief who was investigating Trump associates.

By **JOSH DAWSEY** | 05/10/17 12:02 AM EDT



President Donald Trump had grown angry with the Russia investigation and that the FBI director wouldn't support his claims that President Barack Obama had tapped his phones in Trump Tower. | Getty

President Donald Trump weighed firing his FBI director for more than a week. When he finally pulled the trigger Tuesday afternoon, he didn't call James Comey. He sent his longtime private security guard to deliver the termination letter in a manila folder to FBI headquarters.

He had grown enraged by the Russia investigation, two advisers said, frustrated by his inability to control the mushrooming narrative around Russia. He repeatedly asked aides why the Russia investigation wouldn't disappear and demanded they speak out for him. He would sometimes scream at television clips about the probe, one adviser said.

Trump's firing of the high-profile FBI director on the 110th day since taking office marked another sudden turn for an administration that has fired its acting attorney general, national security adviser and now its FBI director, who Trump had praised until recent weeks and even blew a kiss to during a January appearance.

The news stunned Comey, who saw his dismissal on TV while speaking inside the FBI office in Los Angeles. It startled all but the uppermost ring of White House advisers, who said grumbling about Comey hadn't dominated their own morning senior staff meetings. Other top officials learned just before it happened and were unaware he was considering firing Comey. "Nobody really knew," one senior White House official said. "Our phones all buzzed and people said, What?"

By ousting the FBI director investigating his campaign and associates, Trump may have added more fuel to the fire he is furiously trying to contain — and he was quickly criticized by a chorus of Republicans and Democrats. "The timing of this firing was very troubling," said Sen. Ben Sasse, a Nebraska Republican.



Trump shocks with ouster of FBI's Comey

By JOSH GERSTEIN

Trump had grown angry with the Russia investigation — particularly Comey admitting in front of the Senate that the FBI was investigating his campaign — and that the FBI director wouldn't support his claims that President Barack Obama had tapped his phones in Trump Tower.

Bipartisan criticism of Comey had mounted since last summer after his lengthy statement outlining why he was closing the investigation into Clinton's private email server.

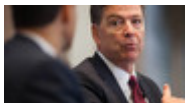
But the fallout seemed to take the White House by surprise. Trump made a round of calls around 5 p.m., asking for support from senators. White House officials believed it would be a "win-win" because Republicans and Democrats alike have problems with the FBI director, one person briefed on their deliberations said.

Instead, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer told him he was making a big mistake — and Trump seemed "taken aback," according to a person familiar with the call.

By Tuesday evening, the president was watching the coverage of his decision and frustrated no one was on TV defending him, a White House official said. He wanted surrogates out there beating the drum.

Instead, advisers were attacking each other for not realizing the gravity of the situation as events blew up. "How are you not defending your position for three solid hours on TV?" the White House aide said.

Two White House officials said there was little communications strategy in handling the firing, and that staffers were given talking points late Tuesday for hastily arranged media appearances. Aides soon circulated previous quotes from Schumer hitting Comey. After Schumer called for a special prosecutor, the White House huddled in press secretary Sean Spicer's office to devise a strategy and sent "fresh faces" to TV, one White House official said.



Timeline of events leading to Comey's firing

By **NOLAN D. MCCASKILL**

By Tuesday night, aides were using TV appearances to spin the firing as a simple bureaucratic matter and call for an end to the investigation. "It's time to move on," Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the deputy press secretary, said on Fox News.

In his letter dismissing Comey, Trump said the FBI director had given him three private assurances that he wasn't under investigation. The White House declined to say when those conversations happened — or why Comey would volunteer such information. It is not the first time Trump has publicly commented on an ongoing investigation — typically a no-no for presidents. He said earlier this month that Comey had done Clinton a favor by letting her off easy.

Trump received letters from Rod Rosenstein, the deputy attorney general, and Jeff Sessions, the attorney general, calling for Comey's dismissal, on Tuesday, a spokesman said. The president then decided to fire him based on the recommendations and moved quickly. The spokesman said Trump did not ask for the letters in advance, and that White House officials had no idea they were coming.

But several other people familiar with the events said Trump had talked about the firing for over a week, and the letters were written to give him rationale to fire Comey.

The decision marked a turnabout for Trump. On the campaign trail, the candidate led chants of "Lock her up!" and praised Comey's "guts" in October for reopening the probe into her email server. He joked openly with Comey at the White House two days after the inauguration.

Trump, as one White House official noted, believed Comey was too soft on Clinton — not too unfair, as Rosenstein's letter Tuesday indicated.

At FBI headquarters, one senior official said the bureau was essentially in lockdown, not answering calls flooding in and referring all questions to the Justice Department. "I got nothing for you. Sorry," said the official. "We were caught totally off guard. But we are not commenting in any kind of way, and referring calls to DOJ."

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Comey had flown on an FBI plane to Los Angeles for a "diversity and recruiting" event. Trump's director of Oval Office operations, longtime security aide Keith Schiller, hand-delivered the dismissal letter to FBI headquarters.

By Tuesday evening, the shock that had spread throughout the ranks of current and former FBI officials was mixed with a growing sense of anger among the many Comey loyalists, and demands for answers as to why the director had been fired — and why now.

"We just have no idea why this happened. No idea," said one recently retired top FBI official who worked closely with Comey on many high-profile investigations. "No one knew this

was coming. Everyone is just shocked that this happened."

There was no immediate front-runner for the job, one White House official said. "If there's a list, I haven't seen it," said one senior White House official.

While shock dominated much of the FBI and the White House, the mood was more elated at Roger Stone's house in Florida. Several Stone allies and friends said Stone, who has been frequently mentioned in the investigation, encouraged the president to fire Comey in conversations in recent weeks.

On Twitter, Stone signaled praise for the move by posting an image of Trump from *The Apprentice* saying "You're fired."

Stone declined to comment Tuesday night but said he was enjoying a fine cigar.

Josh Meyer, Tara Palmeri and Annie Karni contributed to this report.