

**POLITICS**

# Trump Stews, Staff Steps In, and Mueller Is Safe for Now

By GLENN THRUSH, MAGGIE HABERMAN and JULIE HIRSCHFELD DAVIS JUNE 13, 2017

WASHINGTON — Last month’s appointment of Robert S. Mueller III as a special counsel to investigate possible collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia enraged President Trump. Yet, at least initially, he holstered his Twitter finger and publicly said nothing.

But behind the scenes, the president soon began entertaining the idea of firing Mr. Mueller even as his staff tried to discourage him from something they believed would turn a bad situation into a catastrophe, according to several people with direct knowledge of Mr. Trump’s interactions. A longtime friend, Christopher Ruddy, surfaced the president’s thinking in a television interview Monday night, setting off a frenzied day of speculation that he would go through with it.

For now, the staff has prevailed. “While the president has every right to” fire Mr. Mueller, “he has no intention to do so,” the White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders told reporters late Tuesday.

But people close to Mr. Trump say he is so volatile they cannot be sure that he will not change his mind about Mr. Mueller if he finds out anything to lead him to believe the investigation has been compromised. And his ability to endure a free-ranging investigation, directed by Mr. Mueller, that could raise questions about the

legitimacy of his Electoral College victory, the topic that most provokes his rage, will be a critical test for a president who has continued on Twitter and elsewhere to flout the advice of his staff, friends and legal team.

Rod J. Rosenstein, the deputy attorney general, who appointed Mr. Mueller, sought to assure a Senate committee on Tuesday that he would not permit Mr. Mueller to be dismissed without legitimate reason, though Mr. Trump could order him to roll back rules that protect the special counsel or fire him if he will not comply.

“As long as I’m in this position, he’s not going to be fired without good cause,” Mr. Rosenstein said. “I’m not going to follow any orders unless I believe those are lawful and appropriate orders,” he added, emphasizing that the attorney general “actually does not know what we’re investigating.”

He said, “Director Mueller is going to have the full independence he needs to conduct that investigation appropriately.”

In his testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee later in the day, Attorney General Jeff Sessions refused to answer what he said was a hypothetical question of whether he would support Mr. Mueller.

The president, when asked by the pool of reporters covering a midday meeting with Republican lawmakers at the White House whether he supported Mr. Mueller, gave no answer, even though he often uses such interactions to make headlines or shoot down stories he believes to be fake.

That may have been by design, according to a person who spoke to Mr. Trump on Tuesday. The president was pleased by the ambiguity of his position on Mr. Mueller, and thinks the possibility of being fired will focus the veteran prosecutor on delivering what the president desires most: a blanket public exoneration.

For Mr. Trump, the line between whim and will is always thin. It is often erased in moments of anger, when simmering grievance boils over into rash action, exemplified by his firing of James B. Comey, the F.B.I. director, after a weekend of brooding at his resort in Bedminster, N.J.

Angered by reports in Breitbart News and other conservative news outlets that Mr. Mueller was close to Mr. Comey, Mr. Trump in recent days has repeatedly brought up the political and legal implications of firing someone he now views as incapable of an impartial investigation. He has told his staff, his visitors and his outside advisers that he was increasingly convinced that Mr. Mueller, like Mr. Comey, his successor as director of the F.B.I., was part of a “witch hunt” by partisans who wanted to see him weakened or forced from office.

But while the president is deeply suspicious of Mr. Mueller, his anger is reserved for Mr. Sessions for recusing himself from the Russia inquiry, and especially for Mr. Comey. Mr. Trump was especially outraged by Mr. Comey’s admission last week that he had leaked a memo with details of his interactions with the president in hopes of spurring the appointment of a special counsel.

Several senior Trump aides believe that Mr. Comey went public with his doubts about the president’s behavior and trustworthiness with the intention of steering Mr. Rosenstein toward appointing his friend Mr. Mueller, according to one longtime Trump associate who remains close to the White House.

The two men worked closely together in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks when Mr. Mueller was F.B.I. director and Mr. Comey was a high-ranking Justice Department official in the George W. Bush administration. Mr. Comey endorsed Mr. Mueller’s appointment when he appeared last week before the Senate Intelligence Committee, further angering Mr. Trump and his staff.

While the president’s aides have sought to sow skepticism about Mr. Mueller, whom they interviewed about the possibility of returning to the F.B.I. job the day before he accepted his position as special counsel, few have advocated his termination, reflecting the recognition that Mr. Trump’s angry reactions to the congressional and F.B.I. investigations now underway are imperiling his presidency.

The pushback also represented growing willingness among staff members to try to keep Mr. Trump from making damaging mistakes — an important internal change in a White House dominated by a president who often demands obeisance.

For all the talk of how no one in the West Wing tells the president “no,” many people do — though often unsuccessfully.

Among the aides most alarmed by the idea of firing Mr. Mueller, according to people familiar with the situation, was Reince Priebus, the White House chief of staff, whom Democrats mocked this week for publicly saying he feels “blessed” to serve Mr. Trump. Donald F. McGahn II, the White House counsel, has also advised against firing Mr. Mueller.

Jared Kushner, the president’s son-in-law and adviser, supported firing Mr. Comey, but he has been less pugnacious lately, administration officials said. Mr. Trump’s wife, Melania, has adopted a more temperate tone, telling her husband that she believed the appointment of Mr. Mueller would speed resolution of the Russia scandal and expressing her view that he would be exonerated, according to two people with direct knowledge of her advice.

Mr. Trump’s allies maintain that Mr. Ruddy’s description in a television interview of Mr. Trump’s deliberations over firing Mr. Mueller represented a secondhand account that echoed comments by Jay Sekulow, a member of Mr. Trump’s legal team, on a Sunday TV show. They suggested that Mr. Ruddy had committed the most grievous sin in Mr. Trump’s eyes: trying to get news media attention for himself on the president’s name.

“Ruddy is nothing more than a journalist who doesn’t know what he’s talking about,” said Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey, echoing the president’s sentiments, according to West Wing aides.

Mr. Ruddy has told friends that he went public with the Mueller story, in part, to prevent Mr. Trump from making a rash decision. He also lashed out at Sean Spicer, the administration’s press secretary, for suggesting he does not speak regularly with the president about important matters.

“It is a sad commentary that Sean Spicer spends so much of his time objecting to my comments at the same time he has done such a poor job in defending the president and promoting his many accomplishments,” Mr. Ruddy said on Tuesday.

Rebecca R. Ruiz contributed reporting.

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