
JEFF SESSIONS CALLS ACCUSATIONS OF RUSSIA COLLUSION AN 'APPALLING LIE'

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The US attorney general, Jeff Sessions, has rejected allegations that he took part in collusion with Moscow to influence the 2016 election as an appalling and detestable lie.

In a heated, often testy hearing of the Senate intelligence committee, Sessions refused to answer questions about his discussions with Donald Trump, on the grounds that the president could claim executive privilege over those discussions at a later date.

Under persistent questioning from Democratic senators, the attorney general repeatedly claimed he could not recall details of contacts between the Trump campaign and Russian officials.

And in a startling admission from the countrys top justice official, he said he had not received, nor had he asked for, a briefing on Russian intervention in the 2016 presidential election. He said he could not recall any conversations with Trump about the Russian role in the election throughout the transition period.

Over the course of more than two and a half hours, Sessions faced a hail of questions about his meetings with the Russian ambassador to Washington during the campaign, his recusal from inquiries over possible collusion between the Trump campaign and the Kremlin, and his role in the firing of the FBI director, James Comey.

At one point, Sessions, formerly a senator for Alabama, complained: Im not able to be rushed this fast. It makes me nervous.

Some of the most heated exchanges were over his refusal to talk about White House conversations on the Russia investigation and Comeys dismissal on 9 May, even though Trump has not invoked executive privilege. Democrats on the committee reminded Sessions he was under oath.

You are obstructing this congressional investigation by not answering these questions, Martin Heinrich, a Democratic senator from New Mexico, warned him.

Sessions insisted: I am not stonewalling. I am following the historic practices of the department of justice.

Sessions testifies before the committee. He refused to answer questions about his private discussions with Donald Trump.

Sessions testifies before the committee. He refused to answer questions about his private discussions with Donald Trump. Photograph: Jonathan Ernst/Reuters

A justice department official later confirmed that declining to answer questions at a congressional hearing about confidential conversations with the president is long-standing executive-branch-wide practice, citing a 1982 justice department memorandum. The memorandum gives the president the right to invoke executive privilege to cover military, diplomatic or national security secrets and a more limited privilege in keeping law enforcement investigations secret.

So far Trump has not invoked executive privilege, but Sessions argued the president could do so at a later date.

I am protecting the right of the president to assert it if he chooses, and there may be other privileges that apply, he said. At this point, I believe its premature for me to deny the president a full and intelligent choice about executive privilege.

The frustration of the Democrats on the committee turned to disbelief when Sessions said that since being sworn in as attorney general in February, he had not received a briefing on Russian meddling in the 2016 election, despite a consensus among US intelligence agencies that it represented a significant security threat.

You never asked about it? Angus King, an independent, asked.

No, Sessions admitted.

At the outset of the hearing, Sessions delivered a prepared statement denying any contacts with Russian officials about the campaign.

I have never met with or had any conversation with any Russians or any foreign officials concerning any kind of interference in any campaign in the United States, Sessions told the senators. I have no knowledge of any conversations held along those lines by anybody in the Trump campaign.

He added, his voice rising in indignation: I was your colleague in this body for 20 years, and the suggestion that I participated in any collusion or that I was aware of any collusion with the Russian government to hurt this country, which I have served with honor for over 35 years, or to undermine the integrity of our democratic process, is an appalling and detestable lie.

At his confirmation hearing on 10 January, Sessions told the Senate: I did not have communications with the Russians, a claim that was later proved untrue when the Washington Post revealed he had had two meetings with the Russian ambassador to the US, Sergey Kislyak, during the campaign.

Sessions argued that his statement at the confirmation hearing was not a lie because of the context in which it was made, under questioning by the Democratic senator Al Franken of Minnesota about collusion.

He asked me a rambling question that included dramatic new allegations that the United States intelligence community had advised President-elect Trump that there was a continuing exchange of information during the campaign between Trumps surrogates and intermediaries for the Russian government, Sessions said. I was taken aback by these explosive allegations, which he said were being reported in breaking news that day. I wanted to refute immediately any suggestion that I was a part of such an activity.

He said his two meetings with Kislyak in July 2016, on the margins of the Republican convention

and in September in his Senate office, had been routine and among many such encounters with foreign officials as a senator. Sessions said he raised the issue of Ukraine with the ambassador, but could not recall mention of Syria or Russian interference in the US election.

He flatly denied recent reports that he had had a third meeting with Kislyak in Washingtons Mayflower hotel in April 2016.

I did not have any private meetings, nor do I recall any private conversations, with any Russian officials at the Mayflower hotel, Sessions said. I attended a reception with my staff that included at least two dozen people and President Trump. I did not have any recollection of meeting or talking to the Russian ambassador. If any brief interaction occurred in passing, I do not remember it.

Democratic Senator Kamala Harris questions Jeff Sessions during his more than two-and-a-half-hour testimony.

Asked about other reported contacts between members of the Trump campaign and Russian officials, the attorney general repeatedly replied he could not recall any.

Sessions said that the reason he recused himself on 2 March was in line with justice department regulations that require recusal by an official from any investigation into a campaign in which that official participated.

As for the dismissal of Comey as FBI director on 9 May, he said he had raised his concerns about Comeys performance in handling the investigation of Hillary Clintons use of a private email server even before his confirmation as attorney general in February. When it was pointed out that the Trump campaign had previously applauded Comeys behaviour, Sessions said that looking at it from the point of view of the justice department had given him a different perspective.

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In the run-up to Trumps shock decision to fire Comey in May, it was reported that Sessions had come up with the reason for getting rid of him. The White House claimed that the president came to his decision after concerns about Comeys performance were raised by Sessions and his deputy, Rod Rosenstein, who wrote a critical appraisal of Comey focusing on his handling of the investigation into Hillary Clintons use of a private email server.

However, Trump appeared to contradict that rationale in a television interview and in a reported Oval Office conversation with Kislyak and the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, on 10 May, in which he suggested he had decided to get rid of Comey because of the Russia investigation. If that version is true, it would strengthen the case that the FBI directors dismissal amounted to obstruction of justice, in which Sessions could be an accomplice.

Trump told NBC that Russia thing had played a part in his decision.

In fact when I decided to just do it, I said to myself, I said: You know, this Russia thing with Trump and Russia is a made-up story, its an excuse by the Democrats for having lost an election that they should have won, Trump told Lester Holt.

Kaynak/Source: