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Mueller testimony reignites partisan quarrel

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Former special counsel Robert Mueller on Wednesday testified before Congress for more than six hours about his nearly two-year investigation into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and whether Donald Trump had obstructed justice after taking office.

Though Mueller's testimony to two House committees expectedly offered no new revelations, his appearance was enough to ignite a new episode of partisan quarrel.

In his opening statement to the House Judiciary Committee on Wednesday morning, Mueller defended the integrity of the wide-ranging probe, which Trump and his political allies have repeatedly called a "hoax" or a political "witch hunt."

Mueller, who answered most questions with short sentences, reiterated that his 448-page investigative report did not exonerate Trump of obstructing justice, but made clear that he would not say if the president committed a crime.

"Based on Justice Department policy and principles of fairness, we decided we would not make a determination as to whether the president committed a crime. That was our decision then and it remains our decision today," Mueller told lawmakers.

While citing Justice Department rules that he could not prosecute a sitting president, Mueller also suggested that Trump could face legal hurdles after leaving the White House.

Trump, who has renewed his attacks on Mueller's investigation, told reporters at the White

House on Wednesday afternoon that the inquiry created a "phony cloud" over his administration and called Wednesday's hearings "all non-sense."

Mueller was appointed by the Justice Department in May 2017 to take over the Russia probe by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

The former FBI director concluded his work in March this year by submitting a 448-page, confidential report to Attorney General William Barr, a Trump political appointee sworn in about a month earlier.

The public version of the report stated that there was no evidence that Trump's campaign conspired with the Russian government during the 2016 election but didn't conclude if the president had obstructed justice.

Instead, Mueller recounted multiple episodes involving Trump and discussed potential legal theories for connecting these actions to elements of an obstruction offense.

It was Barr and his then deputy, Rod Rosenstein, who named Mueller as special counsel, that concluded that prosecutors did not have "sufficient" evidence to support a charge in the obstruction case, a decision that has drawn scrutiny from Democrats, who have called for more investigations and Mueller's congressional appearances.

House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff, a California Democrat, said that investigations by his party, which controls the House, will continue. Jerry Nadler, chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, said that his panel will file lawsuits this week to obtain more information about Mueller's report.

However, reactions from the Republicans were sharply different.

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy said that the hearings "should be the end of the chapter that we put America through," meanwhile, Congressman Jim Jordan of Ohio said "it's definitely time to move on."

The Russia investigation led to criminal charges against 34 individuals, including several former Trump campaign associates, and three Russian entities.

Russia has repeatedly denied meddling in the election.

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