

**Center for Strategic and International Studies**

**Bob Schieffer's "About the News" with H. Andrew Schwartz  
Podcast**

**Subject: "Comey Fired: David Ignatius of the Wash Post on the  
Mystery Surrounding the FBI Director's Dismissal"**

**Speaker:  
David Ignatius,  
Columnist,  
The Washington Post**

**Hosts:  
H. Andrew Schwartz,  
Senior Vice President for External Relations,  
CSIS**

**Bob Schieffer,  
CBS Political News Contributor;  
Former Host, "Face the Nation," CBS News**

**Date: Wednesday, May 10, 2017**

*Transcript By  
Superior Transcriptions LLC  
www.superiortranscriptions.com*

(Music plays.)

BOB SCHIEFFER: I'm Bob Schieffer.

H. ANDREW SCHWARTZ: And I'm Andrew Schwartz.

MR. SCHIEFFER: And these are conversations about the news. We are in the midst of a communications revolution. We have access to more information than any people in history. But are we more informed, or just overwhelmed by so much information we can't process it?

MR. SCHWARTZ: These conversations are a year-long collaboration of the Bob Schieffer College of Communication at Texas Christian University and the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

(Music plays.)

MR. SCHIEFFER: Our guest this time is David Ignatius, the associate editor and columnist at The Washington Post. I would begin this introduction this way: When David speaks, I listen. When he writes, I read it. He is one of the most well-sourced Washington reporters and one of the most incisive voices in Washington, especially on foreign policy and national security. He comes from good stock, for want of a better way of saying it. His dad was secretary of the Navy in the Johnson administration, has long been known as one of Washington's wise men. His mother traces her lineage back to the famous religious figure Cotton Mather. Her folks came over on the Mayflower. His parents are still an active part of the Washington scene. They are a remarkable couple.

David, welcome. It's not hard to come up with a first question. What do you make of this latest Donald Trump shocker, the firing of FBI Director James Comey?

DAVID IGNATIUS: Well, it was a shock. It was one of those moments that I bet I'll remember 10 years from now just where I was when I heard the news that Comey had been fired. You had the feeling of sudden vertigo, of sort of falling through our government political space, not sure where you'd land. As we've learned more about it over the last 18 hours or so, as we – as we had this conversation, here's what I know. And this is drawn largely from conversations with FBI sources and others who are knowledgeable about the administration and what it's doing.

The Trump transition team began talking about removing James Comey as head of the FBI before the inauguration. They had serious discussions about getting him out. Trump had been furious at him for not taking the Hillary email matter seriously enough. He thought he'd given here the election. Then he was happy that he'd, in the last days of the election, released additional information about his inquiry and said nice things about him, but there was a fundamental anger and feeling that he was not the right man for the Trump FBI. In theory, this is a 10-year term. He just was in his third year of it. So it would have been unusual to replace him. And they decided during the transition to keep him in the job. The judgement that was made by

Vice President Pence and others who were part of this process of staffing the administration was it's more trouble than it's worth to get him out. But that's the prehistory, they'd always thought maybe we ought to make a change here.

I think as the focus on the Russia investigation gathered steam, two things happened. Democrats who'd been extremely suspicious of Comey, and had thought – with some reason, I think – that he may have cost Hillary Clinton the election with his statements about her email system, began to warm to him. And began to think that his investigation of Russia's covert action during the 2016 campaign was our best guarantee of the rule of law, of accountability, of eventually going after Trump's associates, if they were guilty.

Simultaneously, I think, Republicans began to really lose confidence in him, and to see him as an enemy of the president. And there was a lot of pushing back and forth at the FBI in the last few months. The White House wanted the FBI to focus on the leaks of information about people like Mike Flynn. How did the news media learn that Mike Flynn had talked to Sergey Kislyak, the Russian ambassador? How did the news media learn that Sally Yates, the acting attorney general, had come to the White House to warn the White House that Michael Flynn was subject to blackmail?

The Trump White House thought these were the issues that mattered. The FBI should be investigating these leaks, not the question of Russian hacking, which Trump has repeatedly referred to as a hoax. He's been so dismissive of this as an issue from the beginning that it's almost as if you wonder why is he being so defensive about it. So I think that was what was on the table.

What we don't know, and I hope we will know, is what led to the rush to pull the trigger this week? The events of yesterday were strange. The supporting documentation from the Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein was done during the day. It's an odd document. It's a kind of slapdash, to me, compilation of op-ed pieces. It's not a reasoned legal memo arguing that this man needs to be replaced. It's a – it's a hurried document. People in the White House were – except for a very small circle – were not aware that the president was about to fire Comey. Obviously Comey himself was not aware. He was in California making a speech and somebody saw on television that he was being fired. That's how little preparation was done.

So what was – what was the rush? What required this to be done in such unusual haste? How is Rod Rosenstein, the deputy attorney general, in a position to be writing this memo making the case for replacing the head of the FBI? Who asked him to do that? Where did that instruction come from? If you read carefully the letter from Jeff Sessions, the attorney general, he speaks about his own judgment that it was time for a change. There's almost the implication that he had encouraged Rosenstein when he took the job, only a couple weeks ago, to make this one of his subjects of interest.

Is it possible that Comey had come up with new information which he was about to brief the Senate Intelligence Committee? His testimony in a closed session of the Senate Intelligence Committee was scheduled for later this week. That's the only thing I know of that was immediately looming that might have led somebody to say this is – this is trouble. We need to

get our arms around this.

So there's a lot of riddles about the event. What's clear, just to conclude this opening thought, is that we're – I'm told the Trump White House thought they would be able to change the subject from Russia, from what they thought had been another bad Flynn hearing with former Acting Attorney General Sally Yates on Monday, and change the subject. I think the consequence of firing Comey has been to deepen focus on that subject. And if they think they're out of the woods, boy, are they wrong.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Well, so many times during the campaign we often referred to it as the dead cat theory. In other words, if you're having a dinner party and somebody throws a dead cat in the center of the table, the conversation immediately switches to the dead cat no matter what else people were talking about. And so many times during the campaign when the campaign appeared to be headed in one direction, Trump would throw a dead cat on the table. He would immediately shift the focus back to him and to a totally different subject.

And what you're kind of alluding to here is that maybe he did it this time. But as I watched television last night, and watched the reporters who were on the White House lawn, they kept talking about – the staff was totally blindsided by the reaction. They didn't expect this blowback. Well, how in the world – that's just inexperience or incompetence or not knowing much about politics or Washington to be surprised at the blowback. I mean, I don't know how they could be expecting anything else.

MR. IGNATIUS: I don't either. I asked one of my Republican friends, who's friendly with Trump, last night: Are these folks living on cloud cuckoo land, as the Brits like to say? And this person said, yes, they are. (Laughs.) That's exactly right. They're just not getting the likely consequences of their – of their actions.

I'm not sure whether it's entirely that. You know, I think they have a very combative approach. I think where Steve Bannon was on the ropes in the White House three weeks, a month ago, Steve Bannon's back. The combative Bannon line is very much engaged now. The kinder, gentler line we associate with Jared Kushner and Ivanka and other advisors I think is in retreat a little bit. And I think Trump is really hunkering down now for a fight. I think the most significant piece of documentary information that came out of the firing of Comey is the brief passage in Trump's own letter in which he says – notes that Comey, in his language, had told him on three separate occasions that he was not the subject of a criminal investigation.

Why did he say that? Well, maybe it's just the vanity of wanting to assert that, you know, there's nothing wrong with me. Maybe, I think more likely, it's to form a record that will then be carried on to whoever is appointed the next FBI director, to establish, you know, in the words of the president, there is no investigation of Donald Trump for you to continue. It's been stated by the former FBI director that that investigation, though described in the press, doesn't exist. It's an interesting way, if so, of putting up a little kind of roadblock to the things that they would find dangerous.

MR. SCHIEFFER: But, David, do we have any evidence of when and where Comey told

him he was not the subject of an investigation?

MR. IGNATIUS: None. And I think it's important that that – that that – Comey will say, if he's asked, I suspect, that he can't answer – now he can't answer because he's a former FBI director. But at the time, he would have said: I can't answer because that conversation with the president was about classified information.

MR. SCHIEFFER: The other part – it seems to me that the threshold question here about all of this is: Did Donald Trump fire Comey because he mistreated Hillary Clinton? And that was what was stated in Rosen –

MR. IGNATIUS: Rosenstein.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Rosenstein's letter. I find that totally implausible.

MR. IGNATIUS: I do too. I used that same word, Bob, in my column this morning, that I felt it was implausible. The idea that Donald Trump is crying crocodile tears for Hillary Clinton is ludicrous. It just doesn't wash. Now, what does wash with me, to be fair, is the critique that James Comey had increasingly become and erratic, to some extent self-serving director of the FBI. As one FBI veteran put it to me in a recent conversation, he swung at the ball three times on Hillary Clinton's emails and missed each time, in different ways with different mistakes.

But it wasn't just the emails matter. He had, as we can see now, poor judgement about the way he disclosed that investigation, violating Justice Department guidelines. He had poor judgement about disclosing what turned out to be a very limited additional matter to investigate involving Huma Abedin's emails. He had poor judgement in how he talked about all this with committees of Congress. The phrase, "I was mildly nauseous" about thinking about a potential political role I might have played doesn't suit well with an FBI director.

And to take an issue that has nothing to do with the presidential election, I think he showed poor judgement in the way he pursued the subpoena for the iPhone information in the San Bernardino bombing case. That's a long time ago, but you may remember that the FBI issued a very controversial subpoena. It's not that I think the FBI doesn't need to have access to records about terrorism. It's that people who know this world told me this very public campaign was completely misguided, that there were technologies, tools, ways to do this that were better left secret, quiet. The FBI could use them.

There was no reason for Comey to have staged this kind of big, dramatic confrontation. The phrase he used was "going dark." And he was – you know, as on so many things, he was making himself a public figure, kind of crusading on this issue, much as he – and I think a reasonable person would look at that record, as The New York Times did in a superb investigative project that went over several pages that appeared a couple weeks ago about Comey and Comey's decisions, and would make a judgement: Comey has really become quite erratic.

That said, he's also become a symbol of the trust and continuity that the investigation of

the Russia matter would be carried out. So I think a reasonable person would say, yes, Comey has having his problems as FBI director. But even so, the cost of trying to chuck him out – especially in this hurried way, with weird lack of documentation – was a mistake.

MR. SCHIEFFER: I want to bring Andrew Schwartz in. But let me just ask you about this: If we stipulated that all of the things that you've just cited would be a reason to fire Comey, it still comes back to what you mentioned in the very beginning. Why now? Why such a rush? Those are the questions I think that now have to be answered if we're to come to some conclusion about this.

MR. IGNATIUS: President Trump wants the Russia investigation to go away. He thinks it's, as he says, a hoax. He acts very defensive about it. We can only guess as to why. There's an excellent thing. I refer people to a blog called Lawfare, which has done a wonderful analysis of the possible explanations for Trump's behavior, ranging all the way from he's a – he's a tool of Russia to the, you know, this is just an accident of no consequence. But he wants this to go away. And his problem is, it's not going to go away. So if he keeps trying to bottle it up, we're going to be taken, as a country, to a darker and darker place.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Before it goes away, aren't the American people entitled to know what it was that went away?

MR. IGNATIUS: Of course they are. And they're entitled to a full investigation and then disclosure of that investigation, either through criminal actions or simply a report.

MR. SCHWARTZ: David, I want to ask you about that dark place that the American people may be going. Does this have a corrosive effect on the American people, in your judgement?

MR. IGNATIUS: Well, I think when our institutions are tampered with by the executive branch – we now have three significant firings, of Sally Yates allegedly because she wouldn't support the president's immigration ban, of Preet Bharara the very aggressive U.S. attorney who was looking into all kinds of things that involve Trump interests, Trump political friends, foreign policy matters of importance, and now the firing of the FBI director. And when people see the executive branch willy-nilly throw these people out, overtime, I think, they see – they begin to think that we have a lawless government.

This does resemble what happened in the Nixon administration. When they see a man who is attorney general, our top law enforcement officer, who said he would recuse himself from any matters involving the Russia investigation, who then fires the FBI director who is leading the FBI investigation, people begin to say: What is going on here?

MR. SCHWARTZ: And you mentioned a few minutes ago that Bannon is back. Of course, Bannon famously talked about the deconstruction of our institutions. Why is Bannon back, and is this more of that deconstruction?

MR. IGNATIUS: I'm guessing, because these are – this is inside a White House that's

largely closed to me. But from what I've heard the thing about Trump is that he – he'll kind of go in both directions. He'll think Bannon's stuck his neck out too far, Bannon's taking too much credit, he's making the show about Bannon. There's only one star in this show and that star is Donald Trump. Who's this Bannon guy? So he's encourage leaks, discussion, criticism. And, you know, all of a sudden the question is, is Bannon going to survive in the White House.

Then I'm told that in meetings you could hear him needle Jared Kushner, his son in law. If – well, if something good happened it must be Jared's doing. Jared's so – all I read about is Jared. Jared must be so fantastic. You know, just sticking the needle in. I'm told he does that with Mike Pence. Oh, well, we wouldn't want to talk about that with Mike Pence around. We know Mike Pence doesn't like to talk about certain – anything he doesn't think is, you know, morally appropriate. Well, it's – so it's this kind of – it's like a jocular men's club, you know, needling the guys, fraternity sort of environment. And so I think that's a part of it. He's putting in the needle. I think Bannon's tough-guy approach must appeal to Trump, especially when Trump's on the ropes.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Yeah. I mean, one of the things that we keep wondering is about the fraternity. You wrote about this a few weeks ago, about Trump might think of adopting some of Harry Truman's values, some of his manly virtues, as you called it. Do you see any – for a while it seemed like well maybe he was going to do that. Maybe people like Gary Cohn were a great influence. Jared and Ivanka had a moderating influence. Where do you see that going now?

MR. IGNATIUS: Well, people said to me after I wrote that, are you out of your mind likening Donald Trump to Harry Truman? I mean, how would that ever happen? I think the most positive thing you can say about this president is that, for all his vanity, his braggadocio, his really negative qualities, he wants to be a good president. And the reason I say that is I look at his national security team. After the misstep of appointing Michael Flynn, which he fixed, he appointed pretty darn good people. I think Jim Mattis is a good secretary of defense. I think Rex Tillerson can be an excellent secretary of state. I think H.R. McMaster and working with Dina Powell are a superb fit at the National Security Council. I think General Kelly is a good homeland security advisor.

So this is a good team. And more to the point, there's evidence that he listens to them. When they presented him with options for a tough but limited strike on the Syrian airbase, Trump took that advice. When people said, Mr. President, you got to be careful about North Korea. If you think you can – there's a military solution here you're delusional. He began to think, OK, what's an alternative? How do I work with China? So I see that positive side.

The part of him that remains scary is the way in which he gets so hunkered down and combative – that prickly, double-down side of his character. When he's cornered, rather than think about, you know, how to make a reasonable compromise and exit, he instead gets more aggressive. And I think that's what we're seeing on the Russia issue. I think it's going to increase. I think we'll see an effort now to shift the focus to leaks and leak investigations, leak prosecutions. I think that will be in part an effort to go after the previous administration. And, you know, one thing Donald Trump is comfortable about is running against Hillary Clinton and the Obama team. He does it every chance he can get. So I think we'll see more on that.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Well, do you feel – I don't want to overstate this – but it seems to me that he had a lot of things he needed to get done in the next month or so. He's leaving Friday – Friday week, I guess, to go to the Middle East on his first foreign trip. I don't see that this helps that very much. I mean, he's going just after firing Comey. And that's bound to raise questions in every capital that he goes to. Maybe I'm putting too much importance on this. He's trying to put together something to replace Obamacare. I don't see how that is helped by this. I don't see how his economic plans and the tax cut is helped by this new controversy. Has he put his presidency on the line here? Is his presidency now in peril, David?

MR. IGNATIUS: I think it's too early to say that. For example, I think his trip to Saudi Arabia and Israel will be very successful. The Saudi Arabia part has been carefully set. The Saudis and other Gulf Arabs are huge fans of Donald Trump. They think he's great. They think at least we have an American president who isn't lecturing us about human rights and this and that, and who's prepared to stand with us against Iran and has our back. So there's actually a new wave of, you know, pro-America, pro-Trump sentiment among the leaders of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt. Now, that – I don't know if that's true of the people of those countries. That's a different – a different matter.

So it'll be a very successful trip. And he'll come out of that stop in Saudi Arabia with, I would guess, some promises from the Arabs to explore the possibility of some kind of dialogue with Israel. I think their idea is, given the very weak and disorganized Palestinian negotiating partner, to instead have the Arab states be the front for the Palestinian issue. And so I think we'll enter a period in which there'll be some of that dialogue. And that will – that will look good. The president will say, see, I told you. This is easier than it looks. He'll come back to the same very messy situation in terms of domestic politics – the health care plan, with no solution in sight. The tax bill, I think they've got just terrible problems unless they're going to just bust the budget coming up with anything that makes sense. And then the Russia investigation.

To conclude on that, the president faces a dilemma. Is he going to try to bust this Russia investigation down to nothing? Is anybody going to be allowed to pursue the question of ties between Trump associates and Russia? That investigation – the FBI launched a formal criminal investigation of that last July. We know that there are at least some FISA surveillance warrants that have been issued as part of that. And we know that now some FBI subpoenas appear to have been issued. So this is – this is now an investigation that's real and moving forward. They're going to try to immunize low-level witnesses to get testimony about more senior people. Is that going to be allowed to continue, or is he going to try to turn it off by installing somebody who's pliant as head of the FBI? We don't know, and I think that's where – before making any predictions – I want to see what happens next.

MR. SCHIEFFER: But you know what's going to happen if they are able to turn off that investigation. We'll be flooded with so many leaks. There will be people inside the government that don't agree with that. And that's going to get out, don't you agree?

MR. IGNATIUS: I do, but I – you know, my version of Watergate – the idea that The Washington Post toppled the president, I never believed. Judge Sirica toppled the president. Our

legal system toppled the president.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Well, the Republicans toppled the president.

MR. IGNATIUS: And if our legal system – if our institutions of government and law enforcement remain intact and solid, and the Republicans have the courage to use them, we'll get through this just fine. But the idea that leaks – that's not going to work.

MR. SCHWARTZ: What are the people that you talk to in the FBI telling you today about how they feel about how all this went down?

MR. IGNATIUS: They are disoriented and upset. That's the simplest way to put it.

MR. SCHWARTZ: And what do they think about the future of this investigation or the series of investigations?

MR. IGNATIUS: I don't have people expressing views one way or another about whether this investigation has legs, whether it's going to lead to indictments. People just won't talk about that. But I – but I am confident – Comey had become by yesterday, when he was fired, a very controversial person within the FBI. He had some supporters who liked him and he had some critics who thought he was really losing it. And what was interesting to me was that after his firing, even the people who were most critical of him were upset by how this had come down.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Well, I want to go back to what you just said. Are you saying that you think it is possible that Trump can just turn this off, that he can block this investigation where it is, and we'll never know how serious it was, or not?

MR. IGNATIUS: Well, I think unless people stand up for the rule of law and insist that efforts to muzzle our legal institutions are unacceptable, yes, you can – I mean, that's – look around the world. Something like that happens every day of the week somewhere.

MR. SCHIEFFER: But not here.

MR. IGNATIUS: And the idea that it couldn't – well, the idea that it couldn't happen here, you know, we're having to reexamine that American confidence. I hope, Bob – I mean, I – it embarrasses me to even imagine that it might happen. But it could happen here, and the idea that leaks to the press are going to save us – you know, we're going to do our job as aggressively as we can. But I think you need – functionally, you need a Congress that is fearless, where Republicans and Democrats say we will – we will insist on continuing this. You need FBI – if they put in a pliant instrument of Trump who refuses to continue with the leads that were being developed, you need FBI agents who go to the committees of Congress and report that improper action and insist that Congress take action to – but that's what's going to do it. It's people like that in the institution.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Well, what do you see as what needs to happen next to get to the

bottom of this?

MR. IGNATIUS: I think this is like any criminal counterintelligence investigation. It needs – it's very slow. It needs to be done carefully, systematically. I think it's probably a year at a minimum from being completed. So we need to be patient. We just need to know that people are out there doing their job, and we need periodic reports. Congress needs periodic updates where they're convinced, as our representatives, that this is going as it – as it should. There's a lot of super-classified information that comes from all kinds of sources. Some of them, obviously, are electronic intercepts, but there are other sources. There are all kinds of ways you learn about these matters. And, you know – and they will immunize people. They'll try to squeeze the little guys.

MR. SCHIEFFER: And will this come – will Congress, will the Intelligence Committees, will they play a role in this? Or does it, again, go back, it has to be the FBI that does this?

MR. IGNATIUS: I think the proper role in the end for the Intelligence Committees is what they're there to do, which is oversee the functioning of the intelligence agencies and be a place where people who feel that they're improperly being prevented from doing their work can go and complain. And I think people in the intelligence community take that seriously and use the committees – have for years, and I think they will here.

MR. SCHWARTZ: David, I have one more question. You talked about it's going to be really difficult with the domestic issues when he comes back from the trip. But you also talked about some of the positives in his national security team and some of the things that might happen on this trip. Do you see a coherent foreign policy taking shape in this administration?

MR. IGNATIUS: I see elements that are coherent. I think the idea of using the president's disruptive character to reset the table in some areas where we just had become less effective, less present than I wish we had been would be good.

I think a more active diplomatic partnership with China is something every administration has wanted for the last few decades. The Chinese are doing more on North Korea now than they ever have. That's good. Why? Well, one reason is Trump scared the Chinese, and then reached out and has decided to work with them.

I just was in Saudi Arabia and I saw a young reform-minded deputy crown prince who wants to turn that country into a very different place. If Saudi Arabia, the dominant country in the Sunni Arab world, could get well after being sick for most of my lifetime, that would be a very positive development.

If we can work with Russia. The last few years have been too dangerous. We have been too separate from Russia. So I think if Trump can find a way to work with Putin, not, you know, make concessionary deals but make deals that begin to stabilize Syria, begin to find a way for Ukraine to live as one country, I'm for that too.

So the idea that Trump could end up having a successful foreign policy doesn't seem crazy to me. He's got good advisers, and he needs to listen to them. But most of all, he needs to avoid, you know, being so disruptive that he blows up his own achievements on the way to success.

MR. SCHIEFFER: You know, my experience on all of this – and I mean, I think even before Watergate and going through all of that. I go back to the Kennedy assassination. And I have always felt that if they could have put Lee Harvey Oswald on trial that a lot of these conspiracy theories that are still alive today and will never go away, a lot of that would probably have been put to rest right there.

And I wonder, it seems to me that unless Trump finds some way to get this stuff out in the open in a way that convinces people that, as he contends, there's nothing to this Russia investigation – I mean, one of the things I'd like to know is why he doesn't take it seriously. Why is it he many times during the campaign often appeared to be an apologist for Putin? I'm not saying he was, but I mean, to me he came off that way. Unless he's able to put that to rest, it seems to me this is going to haunt him for the rest of his presidency in one way or another.

MR. IGNATIUS: I think you're exactly right. That's the best argument for doing this in as transparent a way as possible, is if you don't there will be some people who will never begin to accept any achievements by this president, will always think they're tainted, a product of foreign manipulation. It's a dangerous – couldn't agree more.

MR. SCHIEFFER: Well, David Ignatius, we want to thank you. You always bring a lot to the table, whatever table where you happen to be sitting. And we appreciate you being at ours today, and hope we'll see you again.

MR. IGNATIUS: Thank you. Thanks, Bob and Andrew.

MR. SCHIEFFER: For Andrew Schwartz, this is Bob Schieffer. Thanks for listening.

(Music plays.)

(END)