

Insults, fighting, shouting: Strzok hearing boils over

Analysis by [Stephen Collinson](#), CNN
Updated 8:50 PM EDT, Thu July 12, 2018



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Washington (CNN) — Even by the clown show standards of the House of Representatives, this was not democracy’s finest hour.

A hearing starring Peter Strzok, the FBI agent who presided over the start of the Russia probe, degenerated Thursday into a theatrical display of animosity, meek outrage, all-out partisan bickering and character assassination as unprecedented members on both sides of the aisle played to

sanctimony, mock outrage, all-out partisan pickering and character assassination as grandstanding members on both sides of the aisle played to the TV cameras.

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FBI agent Peter Strzok passionately defends himself at fiery House hearing

Republicans, posing as grave prosecutors of a state crime, sought to paint Strzok's anti-Trump political commentary in texts to a former lover as a symptom of institutionalized bias that should invalidate special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 election – from which Strzok has been removed.

Democrats battled to defend him from attack after attack, and to turn the focus back onto alleged collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia.

And Strzok, who often wore a bemused smirk as lawmakers squabbled and talked over one another, barged into the hearing loaded for bear. He shouted back at his inquisitors as they bellowed at him and drove them to distraction by refusing to answer questions. He also delivered a passionate and angry defense of the FBI from a GOP attack that he said “deeply corrodes” the bureau.

“I understand we are living in a political era in which insults and insinuation often drown out honesty and integrity,” Strzok told members of the House Oversight and Judiciary committees.

“I have the utmost respect for Congress's oversight role, but I truly believe that today's hearing is just another victory notch in Putin's belt,” he said.

Though Strzok expressed “significant regret” for the way his texts to former FBI lawyer Lisa Page had hurt his family and the FBI, no one would describe Strzok as an unapologetic witness. For hours in the hot seat, he gave as good as he got, demanding time to answer Republican attacks, drawing frequent reprimands from the chair with the words “the witness will suspend.”

Strzok drove Republicans on the committee into ostentatious displays of frustration with variations of his line that his counsel had advised him not to answer certain questions.

“I would like to answer your question ... but at the direction of the FBI I cannot discuss the content,” Strzok told GOP Rep. Jim Jordan in one example.



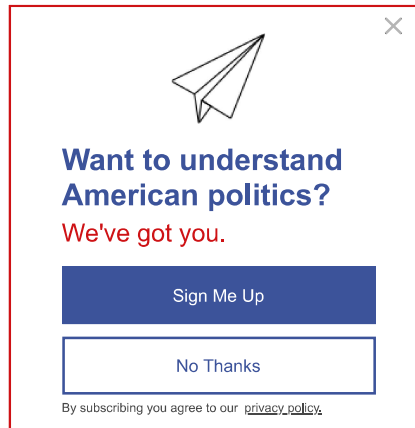
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Lawmaker yells at Gowdy: This is not Benghazi!

Political polarization

If the hearing uncovered any significant revelations about the conduct of the Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump investigations it was not immediately obvious amid the hoopla.



But as an example of the mind-blowing rabbit holes and political polarization spawned by Russia's election meddling operation it was priceless.

As Democratic Rep. Luis Gutierrez of Illinois put it "OK, Kremlin, another good day for you."

For sure, Strzok's texts, read aloud by GOP members of the committee were damning and challenged his claim his dislike for the "horrible, disgusting behavior" of Trump did not mean he could not run a fair investigation.

"You have come in here and said 'I have no bias,'" said Republican Rep. Louie Gohmert of Texas. "And you do it with a straight face and I watched you in the private testimony you gave and I told some of the other guys, 'he's really good, he's lying and we know he's lying and he can probably pass the polygraph.'"



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Moments later the hearing threatened to spin completely out of control when Gohmert accused Strzok of embarrassing himself and other FBI agents.

"I can't help but wonder when I see you looking there with a little smirk, how many times did you look so innocent into your wife's eye and lie to her about Lisa," Gohmert said.

"Mr. Chairman, it is outrageous," one Democrat shouted. Another, Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman of New Jersey asked: "What is wrong with us? You need your medication."

While Republicans repeatedly accused Strzok of bias, Democrats pointed to his failure to expose alleged Russian collusion before the election as proof that his dislike of Trump did not taint the investigation.

Almost every Democrat tried to divert attention from Strzok's texts – some used their questions to refer to all the people who have pleaded guilty in the Russia probe so far, or to refer to what they see as the President's sins.

Gutierrez tried to prove that Strzok could have hurt Trump if he wanted to.

"You did have almost a magical bullet in your hand to derail the Donald Trump investigation and did you use it?"

"No sir," Strzok said.





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Rep. Gowdy grills Strzok over text messages

The committee was repeatedly interrupted by cries of “regular order” as the hearing descended into low comedy and farce.

“Stop badgering him” one Democrat told Jordan as he took aim at Strzok. “Stop interrupting him” shouted another.

Later, when Jordan came back for yet another round of questioning, Strzok greeted him with an amused smile.

At one point, Judiciary Committee Chairman Bob Goodlatte read out one of Strzok’s texts in which he told Page he had just been to a Walmart in southern Virginia and could smell the support for Trump.

“What does Trump support smell like, Mr. Strzok?” asked Goodlatte, drawing a barely credible answer.

“That’s an expression of speech. What I was commenting on living in Northern Virginia – what I mean by that living in Northern Virginia, having traveled 100, 150 miles within the same state I was struck by the extraordinary difference in the expression of political opinion and belief amongst the community there from where I live,” Strzok said.

Watson Coleman sliced through the contentious partisan fervor boiling in the committee room with an attack on Rep. Trey Gowdy.

“If you can’t control yourself, how do you expect this committee to control itself? You’ve been out of control since you’ve been on this committee,” she said.

“Why don’t you leave it alone, this is not Benghazi.”

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