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The Plum Line Opinion

William Barr just previewed Trump's spin over the Mueller report.



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Attorney General William P. Barr just testified before Congress for the first time since releasing his controversial [four-page summary](#) of the report prepared by special counsel Robert S. Mueller III on the investigation into the Russia scandal.

In so doing, Barr gave us a valuable preview of how the Trump administration will wage the information conflict to come.

While “coverup” might be too strong a word to describe what the administration is planning, what is clear is that they will be carefully managing the information the public gets to see in order to make sure that the narrative of President Trump’s supposed innocence prevails. This is a public relations battle in which the attorney general is a key player.

Here are some of the things we learned in Barr's testimony before a subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee:

- Barr said the redacted version of Mueller's report will be given to Congress “within a week.”
- After first dodging a question on whether he consulted with the White House before releasing his now-infamous four-page letter, Barr later said that he had not showed them the letter before releasing it.

- Barr did not specify whether the White House has seen Mueller’s report.
- Barr has “no plans” to assert executive privilege on the White House’s behalf to keep parts of the report secret.
- Barr made clear that he will not be showing Congress the full report, but only the redacted version. “I don’t intend at this stage to send the full unredacted report to the [Judiciary] committee,” he said. In other words, it will be up to him what Congress and the public see and don’t see.

So here's what's going to happen when the report is released. It will contain plenty of damaging information about the president and those around him, but huge amounts of text will be blacked out. Democrats, distrustful that all of Barr's redactions were truly necessary and were not made in part to protect Trump, will demand to at least have a select group of lawmakers review the unredacted report. Barr will refuse.

Meanwhile, Trump and his Republican allies will insist that the report only exonerates him further, no matter what it actually contains. They will try to repeat the extraordinary success they achieved when Barr’s letter was released, when newspaper headlines and TV news stories trumpeted that Mueller had essentially found Trump innocent, and it wasn’t until later that some investigators on Mueller’s team [leaked word that Barr mischaracterized what they actually found](#) and kept secret summaries they had written specifically for public consumption.

Which brings us to something we need to watch for when Barr gives the redacted report to Congress: Might we hear from Mueller’s investigators again?

Unless Barr has already given the full report to the White House (which is still unclear), there are only two groups of people who have seen it: Mueller’s team, and the group Barr assembled to review and redact the report. If they wind up telling the same story about the redactions — that they were all justified — then we can have some assurance that the redaction process was done appropriately. But if there’s a disagreement between those two groups, then we’ll have cause for serious concern.

We should stress something else, though. Even if Mueller confirms that all of Barr’s redactions were justified, *the redacted material could still contain deeply troubling, even scandalous information about what Trump and his associates did.* In fact, it almost certainly will.

The redactions will cover things that were revealed to the grand jury, things pertinent to ongoing investigations, things that might reveal intelligence sources and methods, and things related to people who were investigated but won’t be prosecuted. That is a

vast area; it might mean most of the report will be redacted. All of those categories could and probably do include information that would deepen our understanding of the scandal and make the full scope of the Trump team's malfeasance clear. But we may never get to see it.

Which won't stop Trump and his allies from making the plainly false claim that if any piece of information was redacted, that means that it was innocent and there's nothing more to see.

As we move forward, it's important to keep in mind that the only reason Barr is attorney general right now is that last year he wrote an unsolicited [19-page memo](#) to the Justice Department arguing that "Mueller's obstruction theory is fatally misconceived." Trump could not have been more clear that he pushed out his first attorney general, Jeff Sessions, because Sessions recused himself from the Russia investigation and couldn't shut it down or otherwise use his authority to protect Trump, and he wasn't going to make that mistake again.

There's been nothing yet to suggest that he did, or that when the redacted Mueller report comes out Barr will be anything less than a full partner in the Republican effort to convince the public that the Russia investigation was much ado about nothing and Trump is an exemplar of ethical and patriotic behavior. I'm willing to be proven wrong on that score, but I doubt I will be.

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