

James Comey: A Higher Loyalty: Truth, Lies, and Leadership
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I took this book along on a family reunion, a week spent in the Sonoma wine country, eight of us, educated professionals and four very bright grandchildren. I wound up reading sections of this remarkable book to them all, and digested their comments. We were all enlightened by Comey's account.

Over the past several months, watching TV interviews and reading some less than enthusiastic reviews, I am weighing in with my own.

Comey had a lifetime career in the FBI, an organization that he loved, rising in its leadership to the top spot, appointed by President Obama to a ten-year term---until he refused to pledge loyalty to President Trump, which got him fired. All Federal personnel must take an oath to support and defend the US Constitution, not any other agency or person. Hitler had consolidate his power by abolishing the existing German military and civil service oaths and replaced them with the oaths dedicated to him personally. Comey knew this.

The Intelligence Community (sixteen different Federal organizations), are deliberately structured to serve, yet be independent, of the President so that there would be no contamination of justice with politics. This independence was emphasized after President Nixon had attempted to use such agencies for his political purposes. The ten-year term for the FBI head was designed that way for this very purpose: to be out of the tempting reach of an overreaching executive.

The FBI, under the long direction of founder J. Edgar Hoover, was a badly tainted institution in which Hoover threatened and blackmailed Presidents and members of Congress with collected "dirt." After Hoover's death, the next directors worked hard to create an ethical FBI that owed its loyalty to the US Constitution. We would do much better if all our institutions (such as Congress) were loyal to the Constitution, not to their political party.

Comey has written a painfully honest book, not glossing over his many human mistakes, from which he tried to learn. He was a pudgy nerd in school, making him a target for bullies, yet in college (by then reaching his six foot-eight height) he joined his buddies in fraternity bullying. This made him ashamed and he stopped. He also learned that a convenient lie (not confessing that despite his height, he was not a basketball player in college) could make it easier to lie about other things. He stopped lying before it became a pattern. What comes through is his self-awareness and the desire to be a good person.

Throughout his career, he benefitted from having good role models, and a few bad ones, who served as cautionary. He developed a management style of his own, modeled after his first boss in high school, a grocery store owner who employed school kids for their first jobs and work experience. He was exacting, but kind, modeling decency for his young stock clerks and cleaners.

In the FBI, he had several interesting role models: Rudy Giuliani, about whom a colleague warned: "The most dangerous place to be in New York City is to get between Giuliani and a microphone." A far better model was Helen Fahey, the US Attorney who supervised all federal prosecutors in the eastern half of New York State. She had stayed home to rear her children, then worked in various capacities in the Defense Department starting as a typist. Over the next 17 years, she pursued her education one job, one month, and one class at a time. She was admitted to law school without her college degree because of her high test scores and work history.

As a boss, she was comfortable in her own skin enough to not be threatened by Comey's press attention. She cultivated his skills, gently thumping him when necessary and encouraging his growth. Comey learned that a good boss puts the interests of the team and their important job over their own feelings or worries about personal reputation. This was the model that Comey adopted when he became FBI chief.

He was asked to serve in the George W. Bush administration where he first encountered conflicts of interest. As a member of the Justice Department, he considered it his duty to always speak truth to the President. The issue of torture became the hot button conflict. The Intelligence Department had enough experience with criminals and

terrorists to know that torture doesn't work; careful interrogation and cultivating trust works much better.

But one faction in the Bush administration (led by Vice President Cheney) was hell-bent on defending torture when it came to terror suspects. President Bush deferred to them until he understood what Comey was telling him and he modified the torture ruling. Even with this modification, that torture policy has blackened the reputation of the US as a just society.

This conflict soured him for a few years in which he left the FBI and took up much better paying positions in private enterprise and ultimately as a university law school professor. He was supporting a wife and five children approaching college age. Many people do not realize that government service is not lucrative if one is an honest person (the exceptions being the long list of Representatives and Senators convicted of corruption).

Comey's long history in prosecuting the New York Mafia gave him insights and concerns when he met his new president, Donald Trump. The "Costa Nostra" (the Mafia's name meaning "this thing of ours") has a code of loyalty, a one-way system in which everyone exhibits loyalty to the chief while he owes loyalty to no one nor to anything other than himself. This is also the model for every dictatorship the world has seen.

Comey was alarmed to find that President Trump had surrounded himself with loyalists who learned not to do anything but praise and obey the chief. (We have seen for ourselves the embarrassing flattery heaped on Trump by his cabinet.) Comey, when asked to pledge loyalty to Trump, said that he would always tell the President the truth. His loyalty was to the Constitution. When he would not knuckle under, he was fired in a humiliating manner: in a "tweet" released on TV with no heads-up from anyone in the White House.

But I think this book has more legs than its contemporaneity: it is an excellent exploration of good management, an issue that runs from parenthood to the work-world, and, ultimately, government. Comey established standards when running the FBI that could serve as an incubator for future generations of people in public service. He writes:

"We would teach that great leaders are (1) people of integrity and decency; (2) confident enough to be humble; (3) both kind and tough; (4) transparent; and (5) aware that we all seek meaning in work. We would also teach them that (6) what they say is important, but what they do is far more important, because their people are always watching them. In short, we would demand and develop ethical leaders."

In addition, he promoted work balance: taking time with family and having outside recreational pursuits. He urged that such balance would recharge and make work a happy place.

Apologizing for mistakes is not a sign of weakness, a truth not believed by President Trump. Comey reminds us that most presidents before Trump regretted and confessed to mistakes. Our first president, George Washington, in his farewell address to his new country in 1796 said: "Though in reviewing the incidents of my administration, I am unconscious of intentional error, I am nevertheless too sensible of my defects not to think it probable that I may have committed many errors." That was humble indeed, and I believe he meant it. A refusal to apologize is an indication of a major character flaw.

For people reading this book to try to fathom why Comey made choices that may have been one of the factors leading to the defeat of Hillary Clinton, Comey provides the entire context. He was facing two choices, he said: a terrible choice and a catastrophic one. The terrible one was to reopen the investigation into Hillary Clinton's e-mails found late in the campaign on Anthony Wiener's lap top. If he did not reopen it and damaging information would emerge after Clinton was elected, the FBI would have been seen as playing politics. A catastrophic consequence of that would have been serious damage to the nation's trust of the FBI. He chose protection of his agency and the Constitution.

Why did he not simultaneously reveal that the FBI was already investigating Trump's inner-circle collusion with the Russians to tilt the election, his answer was that this was an ongoing investigation that should not be revealed until concluded, FBI policy.

Both of these decisions were terrible for the country----in hindsight. Everybody (including Trump himself) expected Clinton to win; this expectation was responsible for the scrupulousness of both Comey and President Obama, both of whom tip-toed around seeming partisan and tipping the scales for Clinton. Of course, their good intentions, we now know, led to another outcome.

I found the book's conclusion comforting. Our country is in flames with poisonous divisions, yet the very divisive political climate created by our president may be doing us a great service. We are having to think again of what good character is; what norms of decent behavior are; and revisit the values of our separation of powers and the institutions that make our democracy sometimes slow, but proof against a potential dictator. He writes:

"Policies come and go. Supreme Court justices come and go. But the core of our nation is our commitment to a set of shared values that began with George Washington---to restraint and integrity and balance and transparency and truth. If that slides away from us, only a fool would be consoled by a tax cut or a different immigration policy."

He notes that there is a countrywide focus by thoughtful people to resist creating a new norm where lying is widely accepted. "\205the Trump presidency has ignited a focus on truth and ethics. Parents are talking to their children about truth-telling, about respect for all people, about rejecting prejudice and hate. Schools and religious institutions are talking about values-driven leadership."

"The next president, no matter the party, will surely emphasize values---truth, integrity, respect and tolerance---in ways an American leader hasn't need to for more than forty years [since the Nixon impeachment]. The fire will make something good grow.

I certainly agree with this aspiration to see Americans choose a higher loyalty, to find truth among lies, and to pursue ethical leadership. This book will help us all in thinking about this goal.