

James Comey: A Comprehensive Profile

Early Life, Education, and Legal Career: James Brien Comey Jr. was born December 14, 1960, in Yonkers, New York [britannica.com](#) and grew up in Allendale, New Jersey [britannica.com](#). He studied chemistry and religion at the College of William & Mary (B.S. 1982) and earned his law

degree from the University of Chicago (J.D. 1985) [britannica.com](#) [britannica.com](#). After law school he clerked for U.S. District Judge John M. Walker Jr. in Manhattan, then practiced at the New York office of Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher [justice.gov](#). In 1987 Comey joined the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York (SDNY), serving under U.S. Attorney Rudy Giuliani [britannica.com](#). From 1993 to 1996 he was in private practice (partner at McGuireWoods in Virginia) [britannica.com](#), then returned to government as an Assistant U.S. Attorney in the Eastern District of Virginia (Richmond) from 1996 to 2001 [britannica.com](#). In Richmond he led the prosecution of the 1996 Khobar Towers terrorist attack on a U.S. facility in Saudi Arabia [justice.gov](#).

In January 2002 Comey became U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York, a top federal prosecutor's post [justice.gov](#) [britannica.com](#). In that role he oversaw major terrorism and financial-fraud cases, supervising prosecutions of corporate executives (WorldCom, Adelphia, ImClone) [justice.gov](#). His office also brought charges against celebrity Martha Stewart for insider trading; Stewart was convicted in 2004 [britannica.com](#). (Earlier, from 1987–1993, Comey was Deputy Chief of the SDNY Criminal Division and led the prosecution of mob boss John Gambino [justice.gov](#).) Thus by the early 2000s Comey had a reputation as a high-profile federal prosecutor of both terrorism and white-collar crime.

Service in the U.S. Department of Justice (Bush Administration): In late 2003 President George W. Bush nominated Comey as Deputy Attorney General of the United States, the Justice Department's second-in-command [justice.gov](#). He served as Deputy AG from December 2003 until August 2005 [justice.gov](#). During that time he also briefly acted as Attorney General in March 2004, when AG John Ashcroft was hospitalized. In that episode Comey famously refused to certify the continuation of the Bush administration's secret NSA warrantless wiretapping program. He informed the White House that he would not reauthorize the program absent a clear legal basis [brookings.edu](#). (Ashcroft himself, from his hospital bed, upheld

Comey's decision brookings.edu.) This stand received praise from civil libertarians and criticism from administration officials, highlighting Comey's emphasis on the rule of law. He also defended the Bush Justice Department's detention of alleged terrorist Jose Padilla as an "enemy combatant," drawing some left-right debate britannica.com.

After the hospital showdown, Bush publicly affirmed the DOJ's change: he signed a revised 45-day authorization of the surveillance program under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court's oversight. In 2005 Comey left government service to become General Counsel and Senior Vice President at Lockheed Martin britannica.com. He later joined Bridgewater Associates (a Connecticut hedge fund) as General Counsel (2010–2013) britannica.com.

FBI Director (2013–2017): In June 2013 President Barack Obama nominated James Comey to succeed Robert Mueller as FBI Director britannica.com. The Senate confirmed him unanimously, and Comey was sworn in as the seventh Director of the FBI on September 4, 2013 fbi.gov britannica.com. (Although the FBI Director is appointed for a 10-year term to insulate the post from politics, a sitting president does have firing authority latimes.com.) Under Comey's leadership the FBI prioritized counterterrorism, organized crime, and cybersecurity threats. In early 2016 Comey grappled with the high-profile encryption debate. When the FBI asked Apple to unlock the San Bernardino shooter's iPhone, Comey testified that the case's outcome would have far-reaching implications. He conceded to Congress that the resolution "will be instructive for other courts" dealing with similar encrypted-devices cases theguardian.com. Comey also pushed FBI modernization efforts, including recruiting scientists, engineers, and linguists, and stressed diversity in the Bureau's workforce.

Hillary Clinton Email Investigation (2016):

In 2015 the FBI opened a criminal investigation into Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server while Secretary of State. After nearly a year of inquiry, Director Comey publicly announced the outcome on July 5, 2016. In an unprecedented press conference, he stated that Clinton had been "extremely careless" in handling classified material but that the FBI would not recommend prosecution britannica.com. Comey noted her "poor judgment" but cleared her of criminal wrongdoing britannica.com. His decision not to charge Clinton was sharply criticized by her Republican opponents at the time britannica.com.

Shortly before the 2016 election, the case resurfaced. On October 28, Comey wrote to Congress saying the FBI had "discovered" new emails that were pertinent to the investigation britannica.com. These emails had come to light during an unrelated probe of former

Congressman Anthony Weiner npr.org. The disclosure, just 11 days before Election Day, drew furious criticism from Democrats (Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta called the timing “extraordinary” npr.org). Republicans largely hailed the announcement as reinforcing Clinton’s problems. Two days before the election, Comey announced that the new emails did not change the earlier conclusion of no criminality britannica.com. (Clinton ultimately lost the election on November 8, 2016, by a narrow margin.) In later inspections, the Justice Department’s Inspector General found no evidence of bias in the Clinton probe. However, it faulted Comey’s deviations from normal FBI procedures — calling him “insubordinate” — and said those departures “damaged the agency’s reputation for fairness” britannica.com.

Russia Investigation and President Trump (2016–2017):

During the 2016 campaign, Russia’s interference in the election became a major national security concern. Comey’s FBI was quietly investigating possible links between Russian officials and Trump campaign associates. In January and February 2017, President Trump personally raised the issue with Comey in private meetings. According to Comey’s later congressional testimony, at one Oval Office meeting on February 14, 2017, Trump asked Comey to drop the investigation into incoming National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, saying, “I hope you can see your way clear to letting this go, to letting Flynn go” factcheck.org. Comey interpreted this as a directive to end the Flynn probe. He kept meticulous memos of all these interactions.

When Trump accused his predecessor of wiretapping his phones, Comey publicly refuted that claim under oath. On March 20, 2017, Comey testified to the Senate Judiciary Committee that the FBI had found no evidence of Obama-era wiretaps on Trump Tower britannica.com. He also confirmed that since July 2016 the FBI had been investigating Russian interference and whether the Trump campaign had coordinated with Russia britannica.com. Comey acknowledged that he had not disclosed the Russia probe during the campaign (unlike the Clinton case) for fear of being seen as influencing the election britannica.com.

After his dismissal, Comey arranged for one of his memos — detailing the February 14 Flynn encounter — to be given to the media. He testified that he did this “to prompt the appointment of a special counsel” factcheck.org. Within days, Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein appointed former FBI Director Robert Mueller as Special Counsel to continue the Russia investigation. Reacting on May 12, 2017, Trump tweeted: “James Comey better hope that there are no ‘tapes’ of our conversations before he starts leaking to the press!” theguardian.com. (This implied that Trump had secretly recorded their meetings, though White House officials later did not confirm this.) Trump later admitted in interviews that the Russia

investigation ("this Russia thing") was on his mind when deciding to fire Comey [theguardian.com](#) . Thus the Russia probe, and Comey's revelations, became a defining post-FBI issue for both men.

Firing as FBI Director (2017): On May 9, 2017, President Trump abruptly fired James Comey as FBI Director. A Justice Department statement, based on Rosenstein's memorandum, said Comey was being dismissed "for the reasons expressed by the Deputy Attorney General" — namely, criticism of Comey's handling of the Clinton email inquiry [latimes.com](#) . In Trump's formal letter to Comey, the president accepted that rationale and wrote that he "greatly appreciate[d]" Comey informing him on multiple occasions that the president was not personally under investigation [latimes.com](#) . The White House lauded the change as "a new beginning" for the FBI and noted that, while FBI directors have fixed 10-year terms, past presidents from both parties have exercised the power to remove them (the last such firing was President Clinton's removal of Director William Sessions in 1993) [latimes.com](#) .

The firing set off immediate controversy. Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Patrick Leahy (D-VT) denounced it as "nothing less than Nixonian," given that it occurred "in the midst of one of the most critical national security investigations" the country had seen [latimes.com](#) . In Congress and the media, Republicans and Democrats interpreted the dismissal very differently. Senate Republicans like John Cornyn (R-TX) and Ted Cruz (R-TX), both on the Judiciary Committee, insisted Trump was acting within his rights. Cruz stated that the FBI Director "needs to be above reproach" and argued Comey had "lost the confidence of both Republicans and Democrats" [texastribune.org](#) . Cornyn said bluntly, "This doesn't change anything. The Department of Justice is going to continue its investigation," adding that Congress would scrutinize the next director's integrity [texastribune.org](#) . Texas Democrat Joaquin Castro called the firing "extremely suspicious" and urged an independent commission to investigate Russian interference [texastribune.org](#) . Even some Republicans voiced concern: Rep. Will Hurd (R-TX) said the timing — while the Justice Department Inspector General was examining Comey's handling of the Clinton case — was "troubling" and risked damaging public trust in the FBI [texastribune.org](#) .

Several months later, in August 2017 the Justice Department Inspector General released a report on the Clinton email investigation. It criticized Comey's "poor judgment" in making public announcements and deviations from FBI procedure, calling him "insubordinate" to DOJ leadership [britannica.com](#) . However, the IG found no evidence that Comey's actions were driven by political bias.

Post-FBI Career and Public Discourse: After leaving the FBI, Comey remained a prominent public figure. In April 2018 he published a memoir, *A Higher Loyalty: Truth, Lies, and*

Leadership (2018), which became a New York Times bestseller. In it he detailed his career and criticized President Trump, famously describing Trump as “unethical, and untethered to truth”

britannica.com . He went on book tours and gave many interviews. In a widely viewed April 2018 interview on ABC News, Comey called President Trump “morally unfit” for office and said that Trump “lies constantly about matters big and small” theatlantic.com . He also said he could not say whether Trump had been compromised by Russia, but he firmly believed a president must adhere to American core values (especially truth) theatlantic.com . In January 2021 Comey released a second book, *Saving Justice: Truth, Transparency, and Trust* npr.org , which he described as a sequel defending the work of the FBI and Justice Department. His books and speeches underscored his view that public servants owe their loyalty not to any president or party but to the “justice itself,” the rule of law, and institutional integrity npr.org theatlantic.com . (Comey’s 2016–17 clash with Trump was dramatized in the 2020 Showtime miniseries *The Comey Rule*, starring Jeff Daniels.)

Impact on Politics, Institutions, and Legacy: James Comey’s tenure and its aftermath have had a lasting impact on American politics and public trust in institutions. His handling of the Clinton email probe, especially the pre-election letter, remains controversial: many Clinton supporters blamed his interventions for affecting the election result npr.org britannica.com , while critics argued his actions exemplified necessary transparency. The Justice Department’s Inspector General later concluded that Comey’s highly public decisions — such as the July 2016 press conference and the October 2016 letter — were inappropriate departures from FBI norms britannica.com . His abrupt firing in May 2017 further polarized opinion: some saw it as a politically motivated attack on the rule of law, while others defended it as a lawful exercise of presidential authority latimes.com texastribune.org . Veteran FBI officials warned that the episode could erode the Bureau’s independence, noting that a “cloud of suspicion” would hang over the next director latimes.com .

Comey’s legacy is thus mixed and hotly debated. To supporters on the left and many civil libertarians, he is viewed as a principled career prosecutor who resisted political pressure and highlighted ethical standards. To critics on the right and some law-and-order conservatives, he is seen as someone who allowed FBI operations to become entangled in partisan politics. In any case, his actions have prompted Congress and watchdogs to reexamine FBI oversight, clarified questions about executive power over independent agencies, and underscored the tensions inherent in high-profile investigations. As one analysis notes, Comey’s dismissal set in motion Robert Mueller’s special-counsel probe, which “haunted Trump’s first two years” and helped usher Democrats into the House in 2018 npr.org . For better or worse, James Comey’s career — especially the tumultuous period of

2016–2017 — has become a touchstone for debates over transparency, accountability, and trust in American institutions.

Sources: Authoritative reports, official records, and major news outlets were used, including U.S. Justice Department and FBI biographies [justice.gov](https://www.justice.gov) [britannica.com](https://www.britannica.com) , *Britannica* summaries [britannica.com](https://www.britannica.com) [britannica.com](https://www.britannica.com) , and contemporary journalism (e.g. *The Los Angeles Times*, *NPR*, *The Guardian*, *The Atlantic*) [latimes.com](https://www.latimes.com) [npr.org](https://www.npr.org) [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com) [theatlantic.com](https://www.theatlantic.com) . All key facts, dates, and quotations above are supported by these sources.

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