

[15:30:00] PAMELA BROWN, CNN SENIOR WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENT: What stuck out to me too, is the Attorney General was very defensive in how he's handled this.

Says, look, I just put out the redacted report. This was more than the regulations required of me. But the key here is the placeholder that he said. He said, look, I just put out a placeholder, that was the four-page memo, before the full report was out.

But that placeholder is what shaped the public narrative. And that is key. And that is what is given Democrats ammunition in this hearing today and that was the impetus for this letter from Robert Mueller. Saying, look, this placeholder you put out, that four-page memo didn't capture the scope. And his concern in this letter was that the public -- that the narrative of the investigation that took two years to do was going to be baked in by the time the report was out.

GLORIA BORGER, CNN CHIEF POLITICAL ANALYST: And he blames it on the press. Barr said well the conversation was really about the way the media was interpreting this. When, in fact, this letter is not about the media. This letter is about the fact that your communication, your summary did not capture the context, nature and substance of my work and therefore the media has a muddled view of what we did.

WOLF BLITZER, CNN HOST: He didn't use the word media, he used the public.

BORGER: Right. Barr used -- Barr used the media as kind of the interpreter.

BLITZER: Right.

BROWN: Look, there was a big conversation. We were talking about this in media after the four-page memo was well why didn't Robert Mueller make a decision. Why did he punt -- that word punt? And I think that was really frustrating it seems like to Robert Mueller's team because there was

-- wasn't an explanation for it in the four- page memo and so that is also something that the team wanted to clear up.

BLITZER: One thing that the White House -- the President might not specifically the President might not be too happy with when he heard what Bill Barr's Attorney General was saying -- and Laura I'll let you weigh in on this -- was he made it abundantly clear that Russia did interfere in the election in the 2016 election. That Russia interfered to sow dissent here in the United States. To make it clear that the Russians wanted to hurt Hillary Clinton's campaign and help Donald Trump's campaign and that they are continuing to do that to this very day and is likely to intensify going into 2020. That's what Bill Barr, the Attorney General himself, had to say.

LAURA JARRETT, CNN CORRESPONDENT: Right. Those facts are undeniable. There is now report, a definitive treatise on all of the ways in which he did that so that he couldn't deny that. But I don't think that he offered the most sort of robust, loud explanation on all of those issues. Especially compared to some other administration officials --

BLITZER: That is the whole reason why this investigation began.

JARRETT: Of course but think about people like FBI director Chris Wray or Dan Coats, ODNI. Those were officials who have come out sort of saying the red light is flashing about this. That was not Bill Barr today. At least in my view of how he offered the depiction of what the issue is. He kept saying, well what do you mean by receptivity to Russian help and we know what that means.

JAKE TAPPER, CNN HOST: And this is an important point, because as we go into 2020, the question of what are foreign countries going to try to do and what is the role -- what are political operatives supposed to do if they get approached. And we have on one hand, Jared Kushner belittling what the Russians did as a couple of Facebook ads. We have Rudy Giuliani saying to me, a couple of Sundays ago, that it's not a crime to get information from the Russians.

And here today you have William Barr not definitive on the question of what do you do, what should someone do if a foreign individual says we have ways to help. Now he said if it is a foreign intelligence agent, clearly you should reject it. And he made -- and he underlined foreign intelligence --

BLITZER: We have the clip. This is -- this is number three.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

SEN. CHRIS COONS (D-DE): If a foreign intelligence service, a representative of a foreign government --

WILLIAM BARR, ATTORNEY GENERAL: Yes.

COONS -- says, we have dirt on your opponent.

BARR: Yes.

COONS: Should they say, I love it, let's meet? Or should they contact the FBI.

BARR: If a foreign intelligence service does, yes.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

TAPPER: So that's really interesting that he did that. Because what happened with the Trump Tower meeting as we all know is that a friend of Don Jr -- Donald Trump Jr. reached out and said a Russian government lawyer has information. That is not a -- we don't know who she is particularly in terms of whether or not she was operating on the Russian government at the time or not. But that is not how Bill Barr is defining it. Bill Barr is defining it like, if you see Inspector Clouseau walk over with a mustache and you know, a secret agent watch, then obviously you shouldn't take the information. But that's not what we're talking about here.

SHAN WU, CNN LEGAL ANALYST: Exactly, and Barr kind of wants to have it both ways. He likes to say. He thinks it is bizarre that they didn't brief the Trump campaign given they have these U.S. -- former U.S. attorneys.

TAPPER: Although they were briefed. He had to later take that back.

WU: He had to take that back, but at the same time if you have that legal expertise, why wasn't the campaign making use of that. So that's something he's trying to hide.

[15:35:00] LAURA COATES, CNN LEGAL ANALYST: And why it was so important, Senator Klobuchar's line of questioning. Where she was trying to hone in on the idea of the totality of circumstances. While Barr continued to try to pars out each individual instance of obstructive behavior as outlined in the report, trying to downplay perhaps or in isolation it wouldn't have the same gravitas. Senator Klobuchar made a point of saying, OK, if you want to talk about it in isolation, I could see each individual instance not making the cumulative aspect of saying this is actually a pattern of behavior that we have to legislative against.

Number one, if there is the gap between what is wrong and what is unlawful, but also holding him to his own word at the confirmation hearing. When said, look, if this person does X, and this will be obstruction. Well then, he said, well, OK, what I really meant in an area like the Trump Tower meeting, for example, that's not the same thing. And so you have the Clouseaus.

So I think it's really important about how he reacted to people who frankly, both were former prosecutors, Harris and Klobuchar asking questions about -- hold on, this whole standard of the law that you were the head of the Department of Justice you should know about, we always look at the totality and that is as important as the individual incidents. Why not honor it.

BLITZER: And I think it is clear that if any of the campaigns going into 2020, the Democratic, Republican, Presidential campaigns, if any of the individuals get word from a hostile foreign intelligence service, we have dirt on your opponent, what you do immediately is you call the FBI.

BORGER: But are you going to know it's a hostile intelligence service

BLITZER: If you suspect at all its somebody --

BORGER: Where there's no badge they wear.

BLITZER: -- who has connections. Usually you could tell pretty quickly. Everybody, stand by. The calls for the Attorney General to resign after today's testimony, they are growing right now among a lot of Democrats including 2020 Presidential candidates. We'll have more on that when we come back.

[15:40:00] (COMMERCIAL BREAK)

TAPPER: Attorney General Bill Barr grilled by Democratic Senators on Capitol Hill today over the Mueller report. His handling of it at one-point Attorney General Barr defended President Trump characterizing him as a falsely accused man. Take a listen.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

BARR: How did we get to the point here where the evidence is now that the President was falsely accused of colluding with the Russians. And accused of being treasonous. And accused of being a Russian agent. And the evidence now is that was without a basis. And two years of his administration have been dominated by the allegations that have now been proven false. And, you know, to listen to some of the rhetoric, you would think that the Mueller report had found the opposite.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

TAPPER: Jeff Toobin, you wanted to weigh in.

JEFFERY TOOBIN, CNN CHIEF LEGAL ANALYST: Well I just found that such an astonishing and revealing expression of why Barr has acted the way he has. The idea that because the -- Mueller did not find a prosecutable case of collusion, anything Trump did was justifiable. I mean, I thought that was such a distortion of what -- of the history here.

Remember what it was that prompted the appointment of Mueller in the first place, it was the firing of James Comey. It was the interference with the Russia investigation. That is something Barr has read out of the entire process here. The reason Mueller was appointed was not just because of the collusion investigation, it was because the President was interfering with the investigation. And, as Mueller found, continued to do so.

But Barr has -- only sees the exculpatory part of the investigation on the Russia part. I just thought if you want it in a nutshell, how Barr feels about this whole process, that quote tells you it.

TAPPER: All right, and Barr also -- let me bring in Phil Mudd, former FBI official. Barr also in that monologue questioning the notion of how did we get here? Why did this even happen? Volume one of the Mueller report is pretty clear in detail in terms of all of the contacts that the Russians made or attempted to make with people on the Trump team as well as the definitively proven interference by the Russians in the election. Forgetting that the Trump part of it, in terms of hacking, in terms of releasing information. As a former FBI official, looking through volume one here, I mean, is this cooked up? Is this -- does this seem fraudulent or like a hoax to you?

PHILIP MUDD, CNN COUNTERTERRORISM ANALYST: I'm with Jeffrey. I find this fascinating how the Attorney General is characterizing the investigation. There are couple questions. Number one, the answer we know already. Is it appropriate to investigation foreign intelligence involvement in the election? Not only is it appropriate we have a bunch of indictments.

Number two, forget about the legal part. It is appropriate for a U.S. election official to accept information from a foreign power. I mean, I think that the Congress and others beyond the investigation should be saying we have ample evidence that people in a campaign were willing to accept information. This is completely unacceptable. But the final thing and Jeffrey was touching on this.

Shouldn't we go into the investigation saying, hey, I'm the IRS. I'm looking at Jake Tapper's IRS information, his tax returns. Until we're confident that we'll convict him. And we're confident on the front and we're going to convict him. We shouldn't open the investigation. There's ample reason to open this investigation. Do we have to prove from the outset that we'll convict somebody before we open it? That sounds like a kangaroo court. I don't know what he's talking about -- Barr's talking about there.

[15:45:00] TAPPER: And Phil, while we have you, I want to get your reaction to something else that Attorney General Barr said. Obviously, there is this letter that has been released now. A letter that Mueller wrote to the Attorney General after the Attorney General wrote that four-page letter. Explaining basically it was a summary. Even though he denies it was a summary. He says it was basically just the top line verdicts of not guilty for the President.

And Mueller didn't care for the letter. He objected to it. He didn't like the fact that Mueller didn't release the executive summaries that he had written that were already pre-redacted. Everything in there was OK to use. And here is what Attorney General Barr had to say at the end of the hearing -- perhaps a little exhausted -- about the letter.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

BARR: You know, the letter is a bit snitty and I think it was probably written by his --

(END VIDEO CLIP)

TAPPER: A bit snitty and I think it was probably written by one of his staffers. So what is your reaction to that?

MUDD: That is absolutely nonsense. It's one of the rare mistakes I saw the Attorney General make. Whether you disagree with him or not, he walked away without making huge headlines. And also, by the way, without mentioning the President's name often, interesting. It was all about Barr and not about the President.

To suggest that a subordinate wrote a letter, I spent maybe a thousand threat briefings with the director and can't tell you how many times we go into threat briefing or a conversation with a field office, vaguely humorous --

TAPPER: When you say director, you're talking about Mueller?

MUDD: Director Mueller. Yes, I sorry, I can't say special counsel, he's the director, four and a half years . And you'd say director, you cannot ask them what color the car was. Which is code to saying, you can ask high-end questions about the investigation but as a career prosecutor he would start go down a rabbit hole. Saying well, three days ago on the surveillance for this -- you can't ask those questions.

To suggest that somebody with that level of interest in the detail of an investigation, to suggest that he would simply say on a two-year investigation the most significant political investigation in this country in 50 years since Watergate, he simply told a subordinate go draft it and I won't review it. That is disrespectful. He made a mistake and I think he was tired --

BLITZER: (CROSSTALK) signed.

MUDD: Yes.

BLITZER: A staffer may have drafted the letter, but he approved it and he signed it and it was submitted.

MUDD: He would never let a letter go out saying I reviewed every word and by the way that comma is in the wrong place. By the way I wouldn't use that adjective. That is not Robert Mueller. That was not appropriate.

BORGER: So here is the question. Because I had to look up snitty. Which means agitated or annoyed and he described the letter as that. Now a lot of what I know about Bob Mueller comes from you. But would he -- would he let his rancor show or his ire, let me put it that way, in a letter if he -- because it's amazing that he put it in writing in the first place. But is he someone who would generally do that? Or would he do it because he was really upset? I mean, I don't know him.

MUDD: Let me try to take you inside his head. Upset is not a word I would use to describe director Mueller. OK, so you go back to his marine ancestry. When he talked about an audience. If I was with him in FBI audiences, United States and overseas, people would say, you know, what made you who you are? And he would say, I was a marine officer in Vietnam, duty, honor, country. So he does his duty. I'm tired but if you want me to do

this investigation for two years, this God forsaken investigation I'll do it. Twelve years as FBI director. I'll still come back.

After that service as FBI director he comes back and says, here's a summary that we think is clearable and somebody misrepresents that summary. I don't misinterpret what he's saying in that letter. What he's saying is -- especially that word substance. Which means you not only mischaracterize some of the themes of my investigation, you mischaracterize the facts. For somebody who believes in duty, honor, country, to go two lanes over and say you also mischaracterized what I said to the American people, man, that was stunning.

TAPPER: And let me read this -- the letter because he said that he said Barr's letter, quote, did not fully capture the context, nature and substance of this office's work and conclusions. I just wanted to follow-up.

BORGER: That's not snitty.

BLITZER: It was not a snitty letter by any means. He did defend his -- he used to work at CIA as well, Phil. He did defend his use of the word "spying," The allegation that there were career officials in the FBI and elsewhere who were spying on the Trump campaign during the election process. Listen to this.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

SEN. SHELDON WHITEHOUSE (D-RI) : -- you ever referred to authorized department investigative activities officially or publicly as "spying"? I'm not asking for private conversations.

BARR: I'm not going to abjure the use of "spying." I think, you know, the word my first job was in the CIA and I don't think "spying" has any pejorative connotation at all. And the question is always whether or not it's authorized and adequately predicated spying. I think "spying" is a good English word that, in fact, doesn't have synonyms because it's the broadest word incorporates really all forms of covert intelligence collection. So I'm not going to back off the word "spying." Except I will say --

WHITEHOUSE: When did you decide --

[15:50:00] BARR: I'm not suggesting any pejorative and I used frequently. Ask the media. As the media.

WHITEHOUSE: When did you decide to use it? Was it off the cuff in the hearing that day or did you go into that hearing intending to use the word "spying"?

BARR: It was actually off the cuff, to tell you the truth.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: What did you think?

MUDD: Painful. I mean look, technically, if I listened to your phone call or read your email, I suppose I could say I was spying on Wolf Blitzer. Let me give you a different perspective. There're 35,000 FBI employees. There's six people around the table here. As American citizens, would you like a domestic spying agency? The FBI officers I worked with, regardless of the technicalities would look at you and say, we don't spy. If we're going to listen to your phone or go to an email, we go to a judge and have a court-authorized investigation. It's not about technically whether reading your email is spying, it's about what the message is to the American people. We don't spy in this country.

TAPPER: And the larger issue, really, beyond the word choice of "spying" is whether or not the FBI conducted surveillance of any sort on anybody affiliated with the Trump campaign that was inappropriate.

BLITZER: Or unauthorized.

TAPPER: Or unauthorized. And as of now, we don't know of any case like that, right?

WU: That's exactly right. And I think one thing that Barr is trying to do here is, I think his choice of the word "spying" is maintain to echo what the President is saying. I mean, he knows very well how loaded that word really is. And that's a very deliberate choice.

ELIE HONIG, CNN LEGAL ANALYST: And to add to Shan's point, he did the same thing with collusion. He was asked today, why did you keep using that word "no collusion?"

TAPPER: In that press conference.

HONIG: Yes, because he said it six times in that press conference. And Mueller goes out of his way in his report to say, in a whole passage, collusion is not a criminal word, it is not a legal word. No real prosecutor has ever used the word collusion in connection with a crime. It is a political word and a loaded one.

BLITZER: We've got some news just coming in from the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Lindsey Graham. If you think that he's going to want to come before the Judiciary Committee and testify, if you think he's going to want Don McGahn, the former White House counsel, to come before the Senate Judiciary Committee and testify, the answer is, absolutely, positively no.

Asked why, he said, because I am not going to do anymore. Enough already, it's over. If there's any dispute about a conversation, then I'll come. But I'm not going to retry the case. I'm not calling McGahn. It is over. So he clearly doesn't want anymore -- he wants it over. He wants to move on.

TAPPER: But of course, the House of Representatives is now controlled by Democrats and they will, I'm sure, feel quite differently. Special coverage continues next, including new reaction from 2020 candidates to what happened today. Stay with us. We'll be right back.

[15:55:00] (COMMERCIAL BREAK)

TAPPER: The Attorney General accuses Mueller of getting snitty with it. "THE LEAD" starts right now.

A Democratic Senator tells the Attorney General, you lied to Congress after it's revealed that Robert Mueller was in the in love with Barr's memo on his report. Did the top law enforcement official in the land mislead Congress and the American people to protect the President? TV's turn to Bill Barr in the White House. President Trump watching

and tweeting his reaction as the Russian investigation continues to hang over his presidency like a dark cloud.

And it's over. Judiciary Chairman Graham, Lindsey Graham says he's not going to call Robert Mueller or Don McGahn to testify. So is this the last word?

Welcome to "THE LEAD." I'm Jake Tapper.

We begin with the politics lead today and a furor on The Hill today as Attorney General William Barr tried to explain his handling of the Mueller report. And just moment ago, Judiciary Committee Chairman, Lindsey Graham, announced he will not call Mueller before his committee. Saying, quote, it's over.

But Graham added he will allow Mueller to testify if the special counsel disagrees with Barr's description of their private conversations. The backdrop of this all, of course, is a letter from special counsel Mueller himself, warning Barr that he did not think that Barr was fully capturing the context, nature, and substance in his four-page memo released March 24th of the investigation. Barr just moments ago dismissed Mueller's words that criticized him as Attorney General.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

SEN. RICHARD BLUMENTHAL (D-CT): There's nothing in Robert Mueller's letter to you about the press. His complaint to you is about your characterization of the report, correct?

BARR: Well, the letter speaks for itself. The letter is a bit snitty and I think it was probably written by one of his staff people.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

TAPPER: A bit snitty. Barr today explaining how he came to clear the President of obstruction of justice, despite ten areas of possible obstruction detailed in the Mueller report. As the Attorney General sparred with Democrats over contents in the report and whether Barr had perjured himself in previous testimony.

There was also another split with Republicans bringing up the Hillary Clinton email controversy and text messages between FBI officials bad mouthing then candidate Trump. Let's bring in CNN's Manu Raju, who's on Capitol Hill. And Manu, why is chairman Graham saying he will not call Mueller to testify?

MANU RAJU, CNN SENIOR CONGRESSIONAL CORRESPONDENT: Well, he wants to focus on the start of the Russia investigation, which he believes was handled poorly by the FBI. He did say he plans to send a letter to Robert Mueller, asking him to detail anything he disagrees with, with the way Bill Barr testified. But that is not enough for Democrats who want Bob Mueller to testify and who are contending that Bill Barr lied to Congress.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

BARR: It was my baby. And I was making a decision as to whether or not to make it public.

RAJU (voice-over): Reporter: Attorney General Bill Barr, defiant while under fire for his handling of Robert Mueller's report.