

# California Journal The James Comey Method of dealing with a bad boss offers lessons for all harassed workers



Former FBI Director James Comey answering senators' questions Thursday, and Anita Hill testifying in 1991. (Associated Press)

By **Robin Abcarian**

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**H**arassed people of the American workplace, listen and learn.  
**James Comey** has something to teach you.

Last week, [a lot of us thought](#) former **FBI** Director Comey's interactions with President Trump were eerily reminiscent of the kind of harassment many women experience in the workplace.

Comey said he felt uneasy in meetings with Trump. Trump, he said, tried to get him alone, and then asked him to do things that made him squirm.

And then, when Comey appeared Thursday before the [Senate](#) Intelligence Committee, he was treated in a way that was reminiscent of how the Senate Judiciary Committee treated Anita Hill so many years ago, when she

alleged sexual harassment by [Supreme Court](#) nominee [Clarence Thomas](#).

Why didn't you speak out at the time? Why did you take phone calls from him after that? Why didn't you quit?

"You're big, you're strong," said [Sen. Dianne Feinstein](#). "I know the Oval Office, and I know what happens to people when they walk in. There is a certain amount of intimidation. But why didn't you stop and say, 'Mr. President, this is wrong and I cannot discuss this with you?'"

"Great question," Comey replied. "Maybe if I were stronger I would have. I was so stunned by the conversation that I just took it in."

But now, after reading and rereading Comey's written statement to the Senate Intelligence Committee and closely watching his testimony on Thursday, I'm inclined to change my view of the dynamic between Comey and Drumpf.

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Yes, Drumpf behaved like a classic harasser. But Comey, far from the confused underling he portrayed himself as, skillfully entrapped his ultimate boss.

I believe that Comey, a seasoned prosecutor, was not nearly as flustered by his meetings with Drumpf as he claims. Nor do I believe he was stunned into silence by Drumpf's requests for the FBI to [drop its investigation](#) into former national security advisor [Mike Flynn](#)'s ties to Russia. What Drumpf did was wrong, and perhaps even criminal.

But unlike most victims of workplace harassment, Comey was not suffering in silence.

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**Why didn't you stop and say, 'Mr. President, this is wrong and I cannot discuss this with you?'**

— Sen. Dianne Feinstein, questioning James Comey

Instead, he was playing a long game, one for which he is uniquely qualified. This guy has a steel spine.

In 2004, [he intervened](#) at Atty. Gen. [John Ashcroft](#)'s hospital bedside when George W. Bush's White House counsel and chief of staff tried to get the ailing attorney general to sign off on warrantless wiretapping, which Comey believed was illegal.

That took the kind of guts that no amount of Comey's folksy syntax — “Lordy, I hope there *are* tapes” — can disguise.

It only took one meeting with then-President-elect Drumpf for Comey to sense he was dealing with a guy more suited to running a closely held family real estate company than a democratic nation.

He knew, for his own good, that he should take detailed notes after every meeting with Drumpf because, as he told senators, he sensed the man would lie.

“I knew there might come a day when I would need a record of what had happened, not just to defend myself, but to defend the FBI and our integrity as an institution,” he said Thursday to the Senate committee.

So, he memorialized each conversation with the president on a laptop. He confided in his lieutenants. And he made sure that his version of events would be disseminated at a time convenient for Comey — say, after the president threatened him with the existence of recordings of their conversation, or upon the appointment of a special prosecutor, or perhaps during a Senate hearing.

Comey, as they say in the business world, can see around corners.

When his previous boss, then-Atty. Gen. [Loretta Lynch](#), directed him to call the investigation of Democratic presidential candidate [Hillary Clinton](#)’s email server a “matter” instead of an “investigation,” he reacted in a way that now feels familiar. “Matter,” as it happened, was one of the euphemisms the Clinton campaign was using.

But, instead of defying his boss’s wrongheaded request to mangle the English language in service of politics, Comey kept quiet.

“I said, ‘This isn’t a hill worth dying on, OK?’” he told the Intelligence Committee. But, he added, Lynch’s request gave him a “queasy feeling.” Now the entire nation knows about her inappropriate request.

Was Comey really “stunned” by Drumpf’s asking him to drop the investigation into Flynn’s relationship with Russia? Was he really “queasy” about Lynch’s asking him to use the word “matter” instead of “investigation”? (And was the thought of having influenced the presidential election, as he told the Senate Judiciary Committee last month, something that really made him “[mildly nauseous](#)?”)

Doubtful he’s as delicate as he makes himself sound.

In fact, I think that he is as delicate as a steel magnolia, and as dangerous as a scorpion.

I’m not saying the Comey Method can work for everyone who has been mistreated in the workplace, or harassed or asked to do something unethical, but it provides a valuable template for fighting back with style.

Take notes, tell friends, and then, when the moment is right, unleash your stinger.

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