

News from 20[redacted]: Mueller Speaks!

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1 Editor's note

In preparation for this, the [redacted] anniversary of Robert Mueller's resignation as Special Counsel, he agreed to sit for an interview. As interviewer, we chose Robert De Niro, the actor. An odd choice, you say? But as readers with long memories may recall, not only did Mr. De Niro play the role of Mr. Mueller on "Saturday Night Live," but he also, on the fateful day in question, authored an opinion piece, published here in The New York Times, in which he sharply disagreed with one aspect of Mr. Mueller's remarks. And so we thought it appropriate to give the two men an opportunity to clear up any misunderstandings that might have been involved. Which, we are proud to say, they did.

The transcript of the interview has been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.

2 Text of the Interview

Mr. De Niro: Good morning, Bob. It's good to have this chance to talk over old times. It feels like we were in a war together, y'know?

Mr. Mueller: Glad to be here. Yes, it does feel a little bit like that.

Mr. De Niro: Well, let's get right down to it. You said that your report spoke for itself. I said it didn't. And I've wondered ever since: why did you think that it did?

Mr. Mueller: Yes. A lot of good, intelligent people had that same reaction—"No, it doesn't"—though to me it seemed obvious that it did. I've tried to understand where that difference came from.

In hindsight, it's possible that "speaks for itself" was not the ideal choice of words. Let me ask *you* a question: suppose that, instead of "the work speaks for itself," I had said "The report says what it says." Would you have disagreed with that?

Mr. De Niro: Well . . . no, I guess I couldn't have. But there was still something missing, you know? Maybe the real point was that the report didn't say everything that needed to be said.

Mr. Mueller: Now that is something that I can understand. Mind you, I still would have disagreed with you, at the time. But now I'm just curious: what else is it that you wanted me to say?

Mr. De Niro: (*His body language suggests that his is now playing the role of a witness at a hearing.*) Sir, I do not recall. (*Breaks character.*) And hey, I thought I was supposed to be interviewing you.

Mr. Mueller: Perhaps we can interview each other. And about not recalling: are you sure? Remember, this is not the kind of interview I used to do, in which you can go to jail for giving a wrong answer. So why don't you relax, and free-associate for a bit, and see if anything comes up?

Mr. De Niro: All right. (*Pauses.*) Well, I know what *I* would have said, if I had been in your shoes.

Mr. Mueller: And what is that?

Mr. De Niro: I would have said: "Congress, you need to impeach this son of a bitch."

Mr. Mueller: I can believe that you would have. So now why don't you be the interviewer again, and ask me why I didn't say . . . something to that effect?

Mr. De Niro: All right, why didn't you?

Mr. Mueller: Because it wasn't my job.

Mr. De Niro: I can't believe that those words just came out of your mouth! You didn't feel like it, so you didn't do it, just because it wasn't in your job description? A dedicated public servant like . . . ?

Mr. Mueller: (*Interrupting.*) Excuse me, that's not what I meant. Perhaps "It wasn't my job" wasn't an ideal choice of words, either. It's not that I didn't have the responsibility to do it, it's that I didn't have the *authority* to do it. To determine whether a given set of facts constitutes grounds for impeachment: that authority belongs to Congress, and to Congress alone.

Mr. De Niro: But didn't you have an opinion about it?

Mr. Mueller: As an individual citizen, perhaps I did. But if I had voiced such an opinion, everyone would have thought that I was speaking in my capacity as Special Counsel. And that would not have been appropriate. It would have been like a judge saying to a jury, "Look, this defendant is guilty, but only you have the authority to say whether he is."

Mr. De Niro: All right, Mister Always-Appropriate, if you say so. You weren't supposed to tell them how to decide the case. But couldn't you at least have said, "Hey, Congress, I suggest that you take a good look at this report. You just *might* decide—in your sole authority, of course—that there's stuff in there, that"—how did you say it?—"constitutes grounds for impeachment."

Mr. Mueller: You know, I don't believe I even thought of that. I must have been assuming that it didn't need to be said: that the members of Congress would understand that that was their responsibility, without my having to hit them over the head with it.

Mr. De Niro: So, the real essence of your statement, that day, was simply "I've done my job. Congress, it's time for you to do yours"?

Mr. Mueller: I suppose you could put it that way. And I feel really [redacted] about the fact that they [redacted] do it.

Mr. De Niro: Well, I guess that about wraps up the heavy stuff. Could I just ask you one more question, out of my own curiosity?

Mr. Mueller: Sure.

Mr. De Niro: You met President [redacted], right? What was she really like, in person?

Mr. Mueller: Sir, I do not recall.