The Unmaking of the President 2016
How FBI Director James Comey Cost Hillary Clinton the Presidency

Lanny J. Davis

SCRIBNER
New York  London  Toronto  Sydney  New Delhi
To Carolyn Atwell-Davis
wife, partner, friend, critic,
always there through thick and thin
Imagine how history would judge today's Americans if, looking back at this election, the record showed that voters empowered a dangerous man because of . . . a minor email scandal. There is no equivalence between Ms. Clinton's wrongs and Mr. Trump's manifest unfitness for office.

—Washington Post, editorial,
September 8, 2016

[Impeachable offenses] proceed from the misconduct of public men, or, in other words, from the abuse or violation of some public trust. They are of a nature which may . . . be denominated political, as they relate chiefly to injuries done immediately to the society itself.

—Alexander Hamilton,
Federalist Papers, No. 61,
March 7, 1788
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CHAPTER EIGHT

Comey's Letter Elects Donald Trump

There are four ways to measure the negative effects on Clinton’s standing during the time period from immediately after the letter was published through Election Day: (1) media coverage—quantitatively and qualitatively; (2) substantial increases in negative “feelings” or sentiments toward Clinton; (3) abrupt declines in national popular vote polls; and (4) even more severe declines in polls of the key battleground states.

All four of these effects of the Comey letter are proven by multiple sources of data. The evidence and the data show, conclusively, that but for the Comey letter, Hillary Clinton wins the presidency.

1. The Comey letter triggered overwhelmingly negative and dominant media stories about Clinton in the closing days of the election.

Most Americans still at least hazily remember the shock wave of media that broke soon after the arrival of the Comey letter in the offices of twenty-four members of Congress a little before 1 p.m. on October 28. Within minutes—surprise!—news of the letter was posted in a tweet, and mischaracterized, by the highly partisan anti-Clinton Republican
chair of the House Oversight Committee, Utah’s Jason Chaffetz. His tweet said, inaccurately: “case reopened.”

The media went into hysteria mode. BREAKING NEWS scrolled across every cable news screen. Front pages of news websites and the next day’s newspapers screamed out warnings about a “new” Clinton emails investigation, some using the word “criminal.”

Probably—and predictably—the worst and most inaccurate, irresponsible headline and article came from FoxNews.com: “Hillary Clinton’s Criminal Investigation: A ‘Constitutional Crisis’ Like Watergate.”

That headline came from comments made by a former pollster of President Jimmy Carter, Pat Caddell. Also in the story was a comment from a veteran Democratic pollster, Doug Schoen, who cobbled an online Fox program with Caddell and said that he was reconsidering his support of Clinton because if she were elected, there would be a constitutional crisis.

Nate Silver wrote on FiveThirtyEight about the media coverage immediately after the letter was leaked: “The story exploded onto the scene; Fox News was treating Chaffetz’s tweet as ‘breaking news’ within 15 minutes, and the FBI story dominated headlines everywhere within roughly an hour.”

The number of Google hits on all the negative words that consistently depressed Hillary Clinton’s poll numbers throughout the campaign—“emails,” “investigation,” “FBI”—shot up. For example, just the terms “Clinton FBI” and “Clinton email” increased fiftyfold and almost tenfold respectively within a day.

Silver continued,

Few news organizations gave the story more velocity than The New York Times. On the morning of Oct. 29, Comey stories stretched across the print edition’s front page, accompanied by a photo showing Clinton and her aide Huma Abedin, Weiner’s estranged wife. Although some of these articles contained detailed reporting, the

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headlines focused on speculation about the implications for the horse race—“NEW EMAILS JOLT CLINTON CAMPAIGN IN RACE’S LAST DAYS.”

The Times gave the story such major coverage, Silver points out, even though it strongly suggested that Clinton would still win. Of course, the letter was a big story and deserved front-page treatment. But the reason for this level of coverage, despite the letter’s tentative and speculative contents? Silver theorized that the Times covered the letter as it did because it saw Clinton as the almost certain next president—and Trump as a historical footnote. By treating the letter as a huge deal, it could get a head start on covering the next administration and its imbroglios. It could also “prove” to its critics that it could provide tough coverage of Democrats, thereby countering accusations of liberal bias (a long-standing hang-up at the paper). So what if it wasn’t clear from the letter whether Clinton had done anything wrong? The Times could use the same weasel-worded language it often does in such situations, speaking of Comey’s letter as having “cast a cloud” over Clinton.

In a sense, the paper of record may have made a version of the same mistake that Comey reportedly did. The newspaper’s editors and reporters needed to consider how their own actions might influence the outcome and invalidate their assessment. That influence was substantial in Comey’s case and marginal for the Times, as one of many media outlets covering the story. But the media’s choices as a whole mattered, and the tone of campaign coverage shifted substantially just as voters were going to the polls.

In fact, Clinton’s voter support started to sag immediately. FiveThirtyEight and several other polling organizations that compile all the respectable national and state polls found that her support immediately dropped 3–4 percent nationally, and more in most battleground
states. The intensely negative, often inaccurate and distorted, virtually round-the-clock media coverage of Clinton in the closing eleven days of the campaign and continuing throughout Election Day without a doubt cost her heavily among voters, especially, the data shows, among “late deciders” and working-class, rural voters in key states.

The dominant and overwhelming negative media treatment of Clinton immediately after the Comey letter was extensively documented by the Shorenstein Center at Harvard’s Kennedy School. The center tallied, read, and evaluated the substance of all the stories written after the letter and found abrupt and stark negative shifts against Clinton during the last eleven days of the campaign when so many undecided and swing voters were making up their minds.

For example, the quantity of media stories referring to Clinton’s emails, “investigation,” and the word “scandal” went from fourteen on October 23 to thirty-seven by Election Day. The print, broadcast, and cable news organizations selected by Shorenstein to study tallied one hundred stories, forty-six of which were on the front page, about or mentioning emails and referring to Comey’s letter. The New York Times, for example, blanketed its front pages with stories about the letter, beginning on October 28, when seven stories on the letter disclosing no new facts were on the front page, with a color photograph of Clinton and her senior aide Huma Abedin.

The qualitative analysis—evaluating the “tone” of a story, whether clearly negative or clearly positive—by the Shorenstein researchers also found a major negative shift against Clinton. Measuring the ratio of negative “tone” versus positive “tone,” Shorenstein researchers found that Clinton went from October 23, less than a week before the Comey letter, with a rating of -2 or -3, to -50 by October 30—a drop of 48 points in a week’s time. In contrast, the opposite happened to Trump. The tone of his media coverage shifted, relatively speaking, more positively from October 23 to 30: from -81 to -38 by Election Day—a positive increase of 43 (or, more accurately, a reduction in negative).

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That represents an astonishing, cataclysmic net shift against Hillary Clinton. There was no event that occurred to cause this level of a negative shift other than Comey’s letter.

The data news aggregation website Memorious performed a similar quantitative and qualitative analysis of news coverage post-Comey letter and showed the same results as Shorenstein. This one was broken down day-by-day, morning and evening, from October 20 to November 7, the day before Election Day. The Memorious website developed a mathematical algorithm that tracked which stories were gaining the most traction in the mainstream media. Comey’s letter was the lead story on six out of seven mornings from October 29 to November 4, pausing for only a half day when Mother Jones and Slate published stories alleging ties between the Trump campaign and Russia. Here are the daily results:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MORNING (9 A.M.)</th>
<th>EVENING (5 P.M.)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 20</td>
<td>Debate recap</td>
<td>Will Trump accept election results?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Trump campaign palace intrigue</td>
<td>Multiple systems attack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Trump hotels to drop Trump name</td>
<td>Trump sexual assault accusations</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>Trump sexual assault accusations</td>
<td>Polls</td>
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<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Terry McAuliffe investigation</td>
<td>WikiLeaks/Podesta</td>
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<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Breitbart coordination with Democrats</td>
<td>Trump campaign palace intrigue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Newt Gingrich vs. Megyn Kelly</td>
<td>Trump’s Hollywood star vandalized</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: FactCheck.org
2. Voter “sentiments” or feelings toward Clinton shifted negatively by a substantial margin in the days following the Comey letter.

Another study—this one perhaps the most meaningful in terms of demonstrating voter movement against Clinton and toward Trump—was performed by a consumer survey/marketing company called Engagement Labs. This organization conducts systematic surveys of consumers online to measure “sentiment,” “feelings,” etc., for a candidate, not black-and-white polling on who they say they are going to vote for. Engagement Labs describes their survey as conducting "conversations" with voters to determine their “sentiments”—in this case, Clinton versus Trump, beginning in mid-September and continuing through the weekend before Election Day.

Brad Fay, chief commercial officer of Engagement Labs, reported the results in a March 6, 2017, article posted on the Huffington Post. They were, to use Fay's word, stunning. Most political scientists and observers believe that the key salient factor determining a voter's choice for president is this non-issue-based, personal "sentiment" or "feeling" toward the candidate as the voter approaches Election Day, especially among "soft" or undecided voters at the end of a campaign.

Prior to the Comey letter, Fay reported, both Clinton and Trump had net negative sentiments toward them, with Trump's exceeding Clinton's. However, after Comey wrote and published his letter, the huge change against Clinton measured by voter sentiments was impossible to deny. See the graph below:

Note that the graph depicts Clinton's substantial increase in net negative sentiments, from 29 percent to 42 percent, almost entirely in the two days immediately after the Comey letter hit the media, from...
October 28 to 30. Similarly, Trump’s relative improvement from -43 percent to -42 percent is also shown to be in the same two days. That is a total net increase in negative voter feelings toward Clinton versus Trump of 24 points in two days.

Fay’s analysis from the Engagement Labs survey also showed that the Comey letter had an effect of accelerating the “Republicans come home” trend and may have discouraged Democrats and depressed turnout. Fay wrote:

The Comey letter . . . did make a difference . . . in the motivation of Democrats to vote. The drop in net sentiment for Clinton was largest for Democrats at -19 points, while it remained unchanged for Republicans. Meantime, in the week of the Comey letter release, Trump’s net sentiment improved by 21 points among Republicans and by 6 points among Democrats. Thus it appears that the experience of these conversations depressed Democratic turnout at the last minute while increasing it for Republicans, making Trump’s narrow victories in states like Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania possible [emphasis added].

As everyone knows, had Clinton won these three states she would have won the presidency.

Fay concluded, “Humans are a herding species, susceptible to sudden changes in direction when confronted with the right stimuli, and when surrounded by other people of like-mind who are impacted by the same stimuli. Comey’s letter provided the stimuli for a sudden change in the peer influence dynamic that drove the election outcome.”

A more traditional method of measuring voter’s feelings toward a candidate is the question whether the voter has a “favorable” versus

“unfavorable” opinion of the candidate. As noted in previous chapters, Clinton’s “favorable impression” ratings had been net positive in healthy double-digit margins during her tenure as secretary of state. Then when the email story was first reported in March 2015 and the criminal investigation was concluded in July, Clinton’s ratings turned negative through the rest of the campaign, often by double-digit margins. But by mid-October 2015 there was a definite movement reducing her net negatives down to single digits and heading to 50-50 or even positive by Election Day. This could be seen in three separate independent national polls, all conducted in the same time period between October 20 and 24 (i.e., ending four days before the Comey letter). In the Reuters/Ipsos poll of 1,306 voters, Clinton’s negative impressions exceeded her favorable ones by 6 percent—53 percent unfavorable versus 47 percent favorable. Similarly, in the AP-GfK national Internet/website poll of 1,146 adults taken during the same four-day period, the same results were reported—Clinton had a net -6 rating (44 percent favorable, 50 percent unfavorable). And in the Suffolk University/USA Today poll taken during the same period, consistently ranked as one of the most reliable, Clinton’s net minus unfavorable impression was down to 1 percent.

So while there was some apparent tightening of the race in the week before the October 28 letter, by a point or two toward Trump as “Republicans came home,” there is no doubt that Clinton was trending upward as voters were giving her increasing favorable ratings and decreasing unfavorable ratings, while Trump remained as he always was during the campaign, substantially net negative in voters’ opinions of him. It was the expectation of most pollsters that Clinton would continue to gain as the calendar approached Election Day, November 8.

And then came the first poll results reflecting the Comey letter (conducted from October 26 to 30). The well-respected ABC News/
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Washington Post national poll of 1,776 registered voters reported Clinton at net -21 percent. In other words, as compared to the three previous polls completed before the Comey letter, Clinton’s net unfavorables had increased by 16-22 percent in a couple of days.

From that point on through Election Day, every major national poll showed double-digit net-negative unfavorable ratings for Hillary Clinton. Gallup reported a net negative for the last week's polling of 17 percent favorable versus unfavorable opinions of Clinton. There could be no doubt that Comey's letter had caused this substantial negative shift—put simply, the bottom fell out.

3. Post-Comye letter, Clinton’s national popular vote polls immediately declined by a significant margin.

In national polling, a shift of one or two points in a short period of time is significant; more than that is unusual—and not likely to occur unless some substantial negative event has occurred affecting one candidate and has been taken up big-time by the national media.

That is why, as we shall see, the almost immediate drop in Hillary Clinton’s margin over Trump of about 4 percent within a couple of days, found in several major independent polls, was virtually without precedent. No other reason, no other event, could explain it, in that short time period of a couple of days after October 28—other than the impact of the Comey letter.

As Nate Silver of FiveThirtyEight concluded in his definitive analysis of media coverage: “The sharpness of [Clinton’s] decline—with Clinton losing 3 points [nationally] in a week—is consistent with a news-driven shift, rather than a gradual reversion to the mean.”

Silver tracked the effects of the Comey letter from October 28 through Election Day. Clinton’s lead had declined by 3.8 percent by Election Day.

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Clinton’s lead cratered after the Comey letter

Silver’s popular vote projection as of 12:01 A.M. on October 28 showed Clinton up 5.9 percent. For those who have criticized all of Clinton’s mistakes as the reasons for her loss, or her lack of message, or her failure to “connect” with working-class voters, this margin of 6 percent as of October 28 is substantial—greater than Obama’s margin over Mitt Romney in 2012 and almost as large as Obama’s margin in 2008 after the economic meltdown and the collapse of Republican John McCain’s candidacy. But, Silver wrote,

a week later—after polls had time to fully reflect the Comey letter—Clinton’s national popular vote lead had declined to 2.9 points. That is to say, there was a shift of about 3 percentage points against Clinton nationally shortly after the Comey letter. And it was an especially pernicious shift for Clinton because (at least according to the FiveThirtyEight model) Clinton was underperforming in