

Political warfare flares over surveillance of Trump transition team

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There was a new eruption Wednesday of political conflict in Washington over Democratic allegations of secret connections between the Trump campaign and Russia. House Intelligence Committee Chairman Devin Nunes, a California Republican, sparked the latest battle by going to the White House to tell the president that he had learned of “incidental” intercepts of communications by US intelligence agencies involving Trump transition team members.

The actual information delivered by Nunes was hardly earth-shattering. US intelligence agencies monitor the communications of all foreign nationals in the United States, as well as all governments throughout the world. It would be a matter of course that, during the transition period, when officials of the incoming administration were in regular contact with foreign governments, their communications would be intercepted and recorded by the US spy agencies, particularly the NSA and FBI.

In his remarks to the media, Nunes said, “What I’ve read seems to me to be some level of surveillance activity, perhaps legal. I don’t know that it’s right.” He said that Trump himself was among the transition officials whose communications had been intercepted, adding vaguely, “I don’t know that the American people would be comfortable with what I’ve read.”

Nunes said the communications were intercepted entirely incidentally, during routine surveillance of foreign officials, not as part of any criminal investigation. He also said there was no indication that Russian officials, as opposed to those of any other country, were being targeted.

Nunes was himself a member of the Trump transition team at the time of the “incidental collection,” but he did not say whether his own communications had been intercepted. Nor did he reveal who had supplied him

the information, other than to say it was an authorized disclosure from the intelligence agencies, and that the intercepted communications had been widely circulated in these agencies.

By delivering this news to Trump personally, and speaking to the press outside the White House about it, Nunes was doing an immense political favor to the administration, which suffered a damaging blow Monday when both FBI Director James Comey and NSA Director Michael Rogers said there was no information to support Trump’s tweeted claim that President Obama had ordered his offices at Trump Tower to be wiretapped during the campaign.

The political purpose was made evident by the sequence in which Nunes communicated the information about interception of Trump transition communications. He first told Speaker Paul Ryan, leader of the Republican Party in the House, then the news media, then Trump. He did not bother to inform the top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, Adam Schiff.

There is actually no connection between the incidental collection of phone calls between Trump transition officials and foreign governments and Trump’s claim of wiretapping during the election campaign, but Trump nonetheless seized on Nunes’s visit to declare that he felt his charges had been at least “somewhat” vindicated.

Nunes’ actions sparked an angry rebuttal from Schiff, who called a press conference in response to the Republican’s statements. “If accurate, this information should have been shared with members of the committee, but it has not been,” Schiff said. “Indeed, it appears that committee members only learned about this when the chairman discussed the matter this afternoon with the press. The chairman also shared this

information with the White House before providing it to the committee, another profound irregularity, given that the matter is currently under investigation.”

Schiff said he now doubted that the committee could conduct a proper investigation into the charges of Russian interference into the 2016 elections, which the Democrats and their media allies have treated as a proven fact, despite the lack of any real evidence.

Schiff said he would now call on the congressional Republican leadership to support the formation of an independent bipartisan commission, outside of Congress, similar to the 9/11 Commission formed to investigate the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001.

There was divided reaction among Republicans to Nunes’ actions and to the significance of his disclosure. Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, who has joined the Democrats in denouncing the supposedly pro-Russian tilt in Trump’s foreign policy statements, denied that Trump’s claim of surveillance by Obama had been vindicated.

“If the Trump campaign’s conversations are caught up in surveilling a foreign agent, there are rules about what you can release and who you can unmask,” he told reporters. “That’s different than having the Obama administration surveil the Trump campaign.”

Ultra-right Republican Representative Barry Loudermilk of Georgia, a hard-line Trump supporter, denounced the intelligence leaks to the media that have fueled the campaign over alleged Russian hacking. These were “acts of treason,” he said, “targeting the sitting president of the United States.”

The House Intelligence Committee is scheduled to hold a second hearing on March 28 in which three former Obama administration officials will be the principal witnesses: former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, who has said there is no evidence of collusion between the Trump campaign and the Russian government; former CIA Director John Brennan, who several Republicans have claimed is a major source of the intelligence leaks to the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* on the issue; and former Deputy Attorney General Sally Yates, who played a key role in the ouster of Trump national security adviser Michael Flynn, informing the White House of an intercepted conversation between Flynn and the Russian ambassador about US sanctions at a time when

Flynn was denying he had discussed the matter with the envoy.

Nunes told the press that he expected the NSA, FBI and CIA to supply by Friday a full list of Trump transition officials whose communications were intercepted.



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