

Trump in open clash with FBI over Russia probe

Patrick Martin
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The political conflict in Washington expressed in the Russia investigation has reached a new and extraordinary level of intensity, with the White House expected to deliver a public rebuff to the FBI and the Justice Department Friday. White House officials told the press Thursday afternoon that President Trump had approved the public release of the so-called “Nunes memo” over the vociferous objections of the FBI, and that it would probably be sent back to Congress for release sometime Friday.

The Nunes memo is a four-page document drafted by the staff of the House Intelligence Committee, chaired by Republican Representative Devin Nunes of California. It reportedly states that the FBI initiated wiretap surveillance of former Trump foreign policy adviser Carter Page in October 2016, at the height of the presidential election campaign, based on unproven allegations of ties between Page, Trump and the Russian government.

These allegations make up the bulk of a 35-page report prepared by Christopher Steele, a former British intelligence agent hired by Fusion GPS, a Washington-based muckraking firm that was commissioned by the Democrats to conduct opposition research into Trump. Steele compiled raw, unverified material supplied by his Russian contacts, purporting to document Trump’s efforts to develop business in Moscow and the Russian government’s efforts to cultivate relations with Trump’s campaign staff and advisers.

Whatever its own lies and distortions, the Nunes memo apparently asserts one irrefutable truth. It argues that the Russia investigation was concocted, without any genuine basis in fact, by sections of the intelligence apparatus who supported Hillary Clinton’s campaign.

Despite the massive media propaganda on this issue, no actual evidence has ever been presented of Russian interference in the 2016 elections (whether through hacking or through the purchase of small quantities of pro-Trump advertising on social media). This bogus issue has been placed at the center of American political life to promote a definite line in foreign policy, demanding greater US military intervention in the Syrian civil war and a more militantly anti-Russian posture in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Central Asia.

Both sides in the conflict in official Washington are reactionary and antidemocratic. While Trump speaks for sections of Wall Street, allied with fascistic and racist factions of the ultra-right, the Democrats defend big business with equal fervor, while voicing the concerns of the dominant sections of the military-intelligence apparatus.

The Republican majority on the House Intelligence Committee pushed through a vote to make the Nunes memo public in a party-line vote on Monday night, which started the clock on a five-day period for White House review before release of the document. At the same time, the committee voted to keep secret a minority report by the committee Democrats rebutting the memo.

“It’s clear that top officials used unverified information in a court document to fuel a counterintelligence investigation during an American political campaign,” Nunes said in a statement after the vote. “Once the truth gets out, we can begin taking steps to ensure our intelligence agencies and courts are never misused like this again.”

FBI Director Christopher Wray has stridently opposed the release of the memo. Remarkably, Nunes initially opposed even allowing the FBI to see the memo, and the committee voted not to permit Wray to address them in person before the vote to release it.

Wray and Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein went to the White House Monday afternoon to appeal for support, only to be flatly rebuffed in a meeting with chief of staff John Kelly and White House counsel Don McGahn. Trump did not even bother to speak with them—both his own appointees to top Justice Department positions.

On Wednesday, the FBI released an unprecedented statement denouncing the House Intelligence Committee decision to release the memo (and implicitly criticizing Trump’s support for that action). The two-paragraph statement was not issued under Wray’s name—an apparent signal that he did not intend to provoke his own firing—but it was nonetheless an unmistakable act of defiance.

“With regard to the House Intelligence Committee’s memorandum, the FBI was provided a limited opportunity to review this memo the day before the committee voted to release it,” the statement said. “As expressed during our initial review, we have grave concerns about material omissions of fact that fundamentally impact the memo’s accuracy.”

Nunes replied in even more strident terms, declaring in a statement: “Having stonewalled Congress’ demands for information for nearly a year, it’s no surprise to see the FBI and DOJ issue spurious objections to allowing the American people to see information related to surveillance abuses at these agencies.”

House Speaker Paul Ryan, addressing the question Thursday during a Republican congressional retreat in West Virginia, said that the public needs to know if federal agents “brought bias or cut

corners or did something wrong.” He cited concerns about the Justice Department’s “violating American civil liberties.” Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, standing side-by-side with Ryan, said that Nunes is “handling this just right.”

By Thursday evening, press accounts of the crisis were full of speculation that Wray might resign in protest once the memo was made public Friday, and that Trump was preparing to fire Rosenstein, who is the top Justice Department official overseeing the Russia investigation by special counsel Robert Mueller, since Attorney General Jeff Sessions recused himself from that role last year.

The spectacle of a president openly at war with his own appointees at the FBI and Justice Department only underscores that the conflict in Washington is not a matter of personalities or mere partisan conflict between the two corporate-controlled parties, but a more fundamental conflict within the state machine itself.

Congressional Republicans, normally down-the-line defenders of the FBI and other agencies of state repression, are now posturing as advocates of civil liberties and the rights of individuals to be free of unwarranted government spying—as long as those individuals are Donald Trump and his top aides.

Nunes, who claims to oppose “abuses” by the intelligence agencies, was a leading proponent of the recent push to reauthorize Section 702 of the PATRIOT Act, which authorizes virtually unlimited warrantless spying on the communications of Americans, provided it is conducted on the pretext of combating “terrorism.”

Republicans like Ryan and McConnell, now posing as defenders of “civil liberties,” are relentless defenders of police violence and repression, and have led the charge for the most savage measures to be used against those genuinely engaged in the exposure of the crimes of the US military-intelligence apparatus, like Chelsea Manning, Julian Assange and Edward Snowden.

On the other side, Wray and Rosenstein are defending the unfettered power of the intelligence apparatus to spy on anyone and everyone, including political candidates and their top aides, without the slightest democratic accountability.

Significantly, Thomas O’Connor, president of the FBI Agents Association, issued a statement Thursday supporting Wray. It praised Wray for “standing shoulder to shoulder with the men and women of the FBI as we work together to protect our country from criminal and national security threats.”

While Nunes and the Republicans claim that the FBI “abused” the FISA process to obtain a warrant to conduct surveillance of former Trump aide Carter Page, the FISA process itself, supported by the entire political apparatus, is an abuse of democratic rights.

The secret court hears applications from the intelligence agencies for spying warrants and invariably, 99.9 percent of the time, rubber-stamps them. There is no opportunity for those targeted for spying to oppose the request for a warrant—on the contrary, they do not even know about it, since the entire proceeding is conducted behind closed doors.

The conflict between Trump and the FBI has allowed the congressional Democrats to adopt their favorite role, as the most ardent defenders of the military-intelligence apparatus. The

ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, Adam Schiff, has issued a barrage of statements upholding the integrity of the FBI, one of the main instruments of the capitalist state for the attack on democratic rights.

In an op-ed published in the *Washington Post* Thursday, Schiff portrayed Nunes as a virtual traitor, claiming that his memo “smears the FBI and the Justice Department—all while potentially revealing intelligence sources and methods.” He attacked Nunes for declaring “that the Justice Department and the FBI themselves were under investigation,” as though such a probe would be intrinsically forbidden. And he warned of “the risk of a constitutional crisis” if Trump should follow up release of the memo by firing Special Counsel Mueller or Deputy Attorney General Rosenstein.

Schiff ends with a warning that the Republicans are disrupting the bargain that underlay the creation of the House and Senate intelligence committees after the 1972-74 Watergate scandal:

“In exchange for the intelligence community’s willingness to reveal closely guarded national secrets to a select group of members and staff for the purposes of oversight, the committees and the congressional leadership pledged to handle that information responsibly and without regard to politics. That contract has now been spectacularly broken by the creation of a partisan memo that misrepresents highly classified information that will never be made public. Intelligence agencies can no longer be confident that material they provide the committee will not be repurposed and manipulated for reasons having nothing to do with national security. As a result, they will be far more reluctant to share their secrets with us in the future.”

Schiff is making an extraordinary acknowledgement of the real relationship of power in Washington: that it is the unelected officials of the intelligence apparatus, not the elected members of Congress, who actually call the shots. The Democratic and Republican politicians serve only as window dressing, and their conflicts give the illusion of democracy, while the entire system is dedicated to the oppression and robbery of working people, both in the United States and around the world.



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