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Nunes steps away from Russia probe

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By Zach Winslett

(RNN) - The chairman of the committee investigating the White House's connections to Russia temporarily stepped aside from the investigation on Thursday amid accusations of ethics violations.

Rep. Devin Nunes, R-CA, will remain involved on other matters before the committee, but Rep. Mike Conaway, R-TX, will take lead in the investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election.

In a statement, Nunes said he was stepping aside from the investigation despite calling the ethics complaints made against him "entirely false and politically motivated." He called those who filed them "left-wing activist groups."

He said he believed temporarily stepping aside was in the best interest of the investigation. He will seek to defend himself before the Office of Congressional Ethics as soon as possible.

The ethics charges against Nunes claim he is not an impartial investigator and loyal to the White House and President Donald Trump. The committee also suggested he may have disclosed classified information.

"The Committee is aware of public allegations that Rep. Devin Nunes may have made unauthorized disclosures of classified information, in violation of House Rules, law, regulations, or other standards of conduct," the ethics committee leadership wrote in a statement.

House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-WI, said he continued to trust Nunes, and he expressed confidence in Conaway's ability to lead the investigation.

"Devin Nunes has earned my trust over many years for his integrity and dedication to the critical work that the intelligence community does to keep America safe," Ryan said during an address that was focused on Republican efforts to change health care. "He continues to have that trust, and I know he is eager to demonstrate to the Ethics Committee that he has followed all proper guidelines and laws. In the meantime, it is clear that this process would be a distraction for the House Intelligence Committee's investigation to Russian interference in our election."

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Paul Ryan
@SpeakerRyan

My statement on Chairman Nunes: spkrryan.us/2o6a7GI
3:46 AM - 6 Apr 2017
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Rep. Adam Schiff, the ranking Democrat on the committee, was among the people calling for Nunes to step down due to questions of his credibility.

"I'm sure it was a very difficult decision for him, but it is in the best interest of the investigation," Schiff said. "It will allow us to have a fresh start moving forward."

The congressman said the he looked forward to working with Conaway on the Russian investigation and continuing to work with the chairman on other House Intelligence inquiries.

"The investigation never went into hiatus; we've continued to develop our witness list," he said.

Schiff added that the documents Nunes shared with the president, which served as the catalyst for ethics investigation into the chairman, had been shared with the rest of the committee.

Nunes said March 22 that he had discovered conversations from members of the Trump transition team had been collected in surveillance by U.S. agencies.

He said it appeared they had been gathered legally through "incidental collection" - a term used when surveillance of a foreign individual captures communication or mentions of U.S. citizens. He also said at least one team member had been "unmasked" - U.S. citizens are typically not identified in intelligence briefings, although exceptions are allowed if the identity is pertinent to the intel gathered.

Nunes relayed the information in a news conference and then with Trump before sharing with members of the intelligence committee.

The president used it as vindication for his unproven wiretapping claims he tweeted about, even though Nunes specifically said he had seen no evidence proving that.

It was later revealed that Nunes, who served as a member of the Trump transition team, had received the information from a White House source. Critics accused him of attempting to provide political cover for Trump's accusations and draw attention away from Russian ties to Trump's campaign.

Nunes said the intelligence did not pertain to Russia at the March 22 press conference.

In a public hearing before the committee, FBI Director Jim Comey confirmed a criminal investigation is ongoing into Russia's meddling in the presidential election. Comey said the investigation included looking into possible links between the Trump campaign and Russian officials.

A Senate intelligence committee also has an ongoing investigation into Russia's interference.

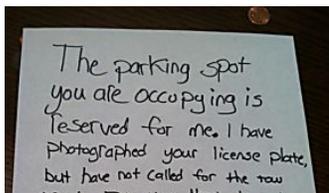
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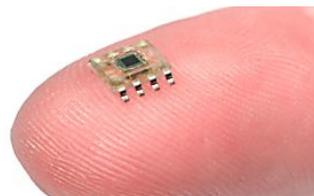


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