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## The House Intel Committee's Russia Report Doesn't Let Trump Off The Hook

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The Republican majority of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence released an over 250-page report Friday outlining its months-long investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election. The full report, the key findings of which were published in March, finds that the Trump campaign did not collude with Russia. But it shouldn't be held up as any sort of evidence of the president's innocence—even though Trump and his political allies have already begun to use it as such.

The committee's Democrats argue that the investigation was not carried out in good faith. Their Republican counterparts don't dispute that Moscow wanted to influence the election, but say they couldn't find direct evidence that Putin helped Trump win. The question, though, is whether they really tried to look.

### What the Report Says

The heavily redacted report doesn't absolutely excuse Trump and his associates for their contacts with Russians. It does call the communications between Trump campaign associates and Wikileaks "ill-advised." The committee also says it has "concerns" that Carter Page, a former Trump foreign policy advisor, may have given an incomplete account of his activities in Moscow in 2016. It also found that Jared Kushner, Donald Trump Jr., and Paul Manafort attended a meeting on June 9 at Trump Tower where they expected to receive dirt on Hillary Clinton, but did not. That finding appears to contradict the written testimony Kushner submitted to Congress.

Overall, however, the report concluded that there was no conspiracy between Trump and Russians interested in disrupting the election.

"Even though this is a report coming from the control of one party, when Democrats have been pressed on their claim that there is evidence of collusion they have uniformly cited public information," says Jonathan Turley, a professor at George Washington University Law School who has served as counsel on a number of national security cases. "It was basically stating what most of us have concluded, that there is no strong nexus that they have found of collusion."

Whatever criticisms the report contained mostly targeted Democrats and intelligence agencies, including Barack Obama's administration for its "slow and inconsistent" response to Russia's meddling efforts, as well as the FBI, for inadequately notifying victims of Russian hacking. The report also scolds the surveillance of former Trump campaign advisor Carter Page, an incident which has become a mainstay for the Republican majority of the committee, chaired by California Republican Devin Nunes.

If that name sounds familiar, that's because Nunes is the guy behind the largely underwhelming FISA memo, which purported to show that federal law enforcement officials abused their surveillance powers in investigating Page. That's the same memo that spawned the #ReleaseTheMemo movement back in February. Nunes is a notorious presidential ally who has repeatedly visited the White House.

Some of the report's vitriol appears to be quite a stretch, including one long passage that critiques Hillary Clinton's campaign for hiring the research firm Fusion GPS to investigate Trump's connections to Russia. "Rather embarrassingly, the report devotes several pages of incredibly tortuous logic to arguing that commissioning Fusion GPS to do opposition research on Trump constitutes a 'substantial link' between Russia and the Clinton campaign," says Julian Sanchez a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute where he focuses on national security. "This is, unfortunately, pretty consistent with Devin Nunes' apparent determination to transform the once relatively apolitical [House Intelligence Committee] into a propaganda arm of the White House."

A particularly perplexing aspect of the report is just how many redactions it has, many of which appear to censor already-public information. Nunes, the chair of the committee, called the redactions "excessive and unjustified" in a statement and said he "looks forward to publishing a less redacted version in the near future."

### **What the Report Doesn't Say**

In a dissenting memo published alongside the key findings in March, the Democratic minority of the committee accused Republicans of engaging in a "systematic effort to muddy the waters, and to deflect attention away from the President." The Democrats argue the investigation was ended prematurely and failed to interview key witnesses, including Reince Priebus, Trump's former chief of staff, as well as Stephen Miller, the president's current senior policy advisor.

The Republicans did interview a number of key players in Trump's orbit, but their statements were mostly accepted as credible without much scrutiny. "The House 'investigation' as sketched in this report essentially boils down to asking Trump campaign officials whether they colluded with Russia, and declaring the case closed when they all said 'no,'" says Sanchez. Critically, they seem to have rejected numerous requests to subpoena documentary evidence that might call those accounts into question."

"The House investigation was beset by partisan overtones from the beginning. Representative Nunes, chair of the committee, took every opportunity to act as an apologist for the Trump White House and to dismiss both the seriousness of Russian intervention in the election and the

possible involvement of Trump campaign personnel," says William C. Banks, the director of the Institute for National Security and Counterterrorism at Syracuse University College of Law.

While the House's investigation into Russian meddling may be over, revelations about the Trump campaign's potential involvement with Russia continue to pile up. The report's findings come as special counsel Robert Mueller's team has already secured guilty pleas from several of Trump's associates, including Rick Gates and George Papadopoulos. The same day the report came out, a federal judge also threw out a lawsuit from former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort challenging the scope of Mueller's investigation. The Senate Intelligence Committee is also moving forward with its own investigation into Trump's dealings with Russia.

However much the president may feel that the House's report exonerates him, it's far from the last word.