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Senate Trump-Russia Probe Has No Full-Time Staff, No Key Witnesses

There are just seven part-time staffers working on the Senate inquiry. Not one of them is a trained investigator. And they haven't interviewed a single player in Trump's orbit.



TIM MAK 04.23.17 9:00 PM ET



The Senate Intelligence Committee's probe into Russia's election interference is supposedly the best hope for getting the public credible answers about whether there was any coordination between the Kremlin and Trump Tower.

But there are serious reasons to doubt that it can accomplish this task, as currently configured.

More than three months after the committee announced that it had agreed on the scope of the investigation, the panel has not begun substantially investigating possible ties between the Trump campaign and Russia, three individuals with ties to the committee told The Daily Beast.

The investigation does not have a single staffer dedicated to it full-time, and those staff members working on it part-time do not have significant investigative experience. The probe currently appears to be moving at a pace slower than prior Senate Intelligence Committee investigations, such as the CIA torture inquiry, which took years to accomplish.

No interviews have been conducted with key individuals suspected of being in the Trump-Russia orbit: not Michael Flynn, not Roger Stone, not Carter Page, not Paul Manafort, and not Jared Kushner, according to two sources familiar with the committee's procedures.

"It's either a real investigation or not," said one individual with knowledge of the committee's activities. "You have to have an approved investigative guide. You have to make it formal. Can you have a credible investigation with only seven part-time staffers, doing everything in secret?"

This is despite the committee's leadership giving off a bipartisan, cooperative impression to the public.

Thus far the Senate Intelligence Committee has been focused only on reviewing the Intelligence Community Assessment, "Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections," a declassified version of which was publicly released in January. The public assessment concluded that Russia had actively sought to interfere in the presidential

race, and had a preference for Donald Trump, and does not draw conclusions about any possible Russia ties to Team Trump.

Committee Chairman Sen. Richard Burr told the public in an update of the committee's work on March 29 that this topic was a core mission of the investigation: "to look at any campaign contacts from either [campaign] with the Russian government or Russian government officials that might have influenced, in any way, shape, or form, the election process," he said.

The committee has sent letters to various individuals and entities to ask them to preserve documents relevant to the investigation. Carter Page, Roger Stone, and federal agencies have reportedly been among the subjects of these requests. But there is no timeline on when the committee will request the documents they've asked subjects to preserve.

In one hint about the inadequacies of the investigation, Senate Intelligence Committee member Sen. Ron Wyden last month sent a letter to the Republican and Democrat heads of the panel, imploring them to look into financial relationships between Russia, President Trump, and his associates. The implication behind the letter? That the committee wasn't already looking into it.

And there appears to be a casual informality about the way the committee is conducting itself. For example, when the committee privately decided upon the scope of their investigation, it held no formal vote, according to a source familiar with the committee's procedures. While there is a transcript of their decision, there was no roll call vote that can be used to hold individual senators accountable for the decision to move forward.

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Thank you for subscribing to the Daily Digest and Cheat Sheet. We will not share your email with anyone. Meanwhile, the committee has done two major things to date. They have secured access agreements with the intelligence community to review documents, a process which took two months; and they have completed an initial round of interviews with intelligence analysts behind the Intelligence Community Assessment.

Part of the reason why the committee has not acted more swiftly is because of its current structure. The Senate Intelligence Committee is typically an oversight panel, not an investigative one. It is set up more to review than to actively probe.

“The biggest obstacle now for a serious investigation into Trump-Russia ties is dedicated resources for staffing,” said a source with ties to the committee. “Serious consideration is being given to getting outside resources, as is customary in many large Capitol Hill investigations. Serious work requires serious investigative skills and resources, which wouldn’t naturally be resident in a committee like Senate Intel.”

The committee previously announced that seven staffers had been assigned to review classified documents related to the Russia investigation. These are the majority and minority staff directors, joined by three Republican aides and two Democratic aides.

“We have devoted seven professional staff positions to this investigation. These are staffers who already had the clearance,” Burr said on March 29.

Of the seven staffers so far assigned to review classified documents related to the Russia investigation, none of them has prosecutorial or investigative experience, according to three sources with ties to the committee.

Most of them lack a background in Russia expertise. Not one of the seven is a lawyer.

“I don’t see how you can do this without trained investigators and prosecutors. I think you need to have expertise on the intel side and on the prosecution side. You would

ideally need someone who knows how to do a counterintelligence operation,” said Scott Horton, an attorney who has focused on anti-corruption investigations, with a specialization in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet states.

The investigation already faces a series of obstacles that have heavy requirements on time: the classification of documents, the location of documents at various agencies, and an incredible volume of material.

But of the seven staffers, none has been assigned full-time to the work of the Russia probe, according to four sources with ties to the committee. Every one of the seven staffers has other oversight responsibilities, and thus a dual-hatted role that prevents them from focusing singularly on the investigation.

Of the seven, two are the staff directors of the committee—an enormously demanding job even in the calmest of circumstances, which limits their involvement. One of the seven even attends law school part-time.

“To do a serious investigation would require not less than a dozen full-time staffers... [with] counterintelligence, prosecutorial skills to do it, and people who have a very good sense of the forensic accounting world of Russia and Europe. Without that sort of expertise, you’re not going to get anywhere,” Horton said. “I don’t think they’re deploying the resources that are necessary to do a real investigation.”

The committee’s announcement that seven staffers were dedicated to this project was meant to instill faith in the inquiry. But left unsaid was that the list of seven staffers is also exclusionary: No one outside the list would have access to all the materials in the investigation. This is opposed to what occurred in the later stages of the CIA torture investigation, when all Senate Intelligence Committee staff with proper clearance had access to the materials.

In coming weeks, the committee will add two new staffers, one with decades of experience as a lawyer and expertise in intelligence law. But these two staffers will also have a dual-hatted role, and other responsibilities on the committee.

A spokesperson for the chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee declined to comment.

The committee has been given the green light for \$1.2 million in additional funding over two years for the purposes of the investigation. While the Senate Intelligence Committee had considered hiring dedicated investigators to focus on the Russia investigation, this idea has stalled.

The tragic irony may be that for all of the House Intelligence Committee's public dysfunction, it has actually yielded more results in the public interest and is actually making more progress.

After all, the House Intelligence Committee was where FBI Director James Comey dropped the bombshell that the Bureau was undertaking an ongoing investigation into ties between the Trump campaign and Russia.

The committee appears to be expanding its investigation—Rep. Mike Quigley, a Democratic member of the committee, told The Daily Beast that he traveled to Cyprus to investigate Russian money laundering there as part of the panel's Russia investigation.

“We believe that we’re going to move forward in a positive way,” Quigley said. “The feeling among Democrats is cautiously optimistic. Reset, reboot, move forward.”

The House Intelligence Committee's investigation took a wrong turn when Chairman Devin Nunes engaged in an embarrassing weeks-long debacle: receiving secret documents from the White House in private, then publicly returning to the White House to brief the president on them in an elaborate ruse.

In the process, Nunes triggered a House ethics investigation into the possibility that he may have spilled classified information, and was forced to recuse himself from the Russia investigation.

The process now seems to be getting back on track. It has now begun scheduling open and closed hearings again.

“We tentatively have scheduled the [FBI Director] Comey and [NSA Director] Rogers closed hearing for May 2nd, we are working to schedule the open hearing with [former CIA Director] Brennan, [former Director of National Intelligence] Clapper and [former

acting Attorney General] Yates, and we are working to schedule interviews and get documents,” said a House Intelligence Committee aide.

Ultimately, the House and Senate investigations into Russia and possible Trump ties have both shown reasons to doubt their credibility.

But with the House, it's been a public fiasco. With the Senate, it's been a private tragedy.

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