

POLITICS

Hopes Dim for Congressional Russia Inquiries as Parties Clash

By NICHOLAS FANDOS OCT. 22, 2017

WASHINGTON — In a secured room in the basement of the Capitol in July, Jared Kushner, President Trump’s son-in-law and senior adviser, fielded question after question from members of the House Intelligence Committee. Though the allotted time for the grilling had expired, he offered to stick around as long as they wanted.

But Representative Trey Gowdy, who spent nearly three years investigating Hillary Clinton’s culpability in the deadly 2012 attack in Benghazi, Libya, was growing frustrated after two hours. You are in an unwinnable situation, Mr. Gowdy, a South Carolina Republican, counseled Mr. Kushner. If you leave now, Democrats will say you did not answer all the questions. If you stay, they will keep you here all week.

The exchange, described by three people with knowledge of it, typified the political morass that is crippling the House Intelligence Committee’s investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 election — and whether the Trump campaign colluded in any way.

But the problems extend beyond that panel. All three committees looking into Russian interference — one in the House, two in the Senate — have run into problems, from insufficient staffing to fights over when the committees should wrap

up their investigations. The Senate Judiciary Committee's inquiry has barely started, delayed in part by negotiations over the scope of the investigation. Leaders of the Senate Intelligence Committee, while maintaining bipartisan comity, have sought to tamp down expectations about what they might find.

Nine months into the Trump administration, any notion that Capitol Hill would provide a comprehensive, authoritative and bipartisan accounting of the extraordinary efforts of a hostile power to disrupt American democracy appears to be dwindling.

"Congressional investigations unfortunately are usually overtly political investigations, where it is to one side's advantage to drag things out," said Mr. Gowdy, who made his name in Congress as a fearsome investigator of Democrats. He added, "The notion that one side is playing the part of defense attorney and that the other side is just these white hat defenders of the truth is laughable."

Instead, he said, he is looking to Robert S. Mueller III, the special counsel, to conduct an apolitical investigation.

None of the challenges have thus far stopped the committees. And given the closed-door nature of their work, prominent new avenues of inquiry could always emerge, such as Russia's use of social media to sow chaos and discord, capable of influencing the public discourse.

But all three are up against a ticking clock, with Republicans in both chambers eager to wrap up the investigations before too long.

Particularly in the House, partisan fighting is likely to undermine whatever conclusions the committee reaches. One lawmaker said the committee would probably produce two reports. The first, written by Republicans, is expected to forcefully say there is no proof that anyone around Mr. Trump worked with Russia to tip the election. A Democratic report will probably raise unanswered questions and say that the committee was never fully committed to answering them.

The panel has been on rocky ground for months, with much of the controversy surrounding the committee's chairman, Representative Devin Nunes of California.

Mr. Nunes was forced to step aside from leading the investigation in April after it was disclosed that he had received classified information from the White House that showed that Mr. Trump and his associates were incidentally swept up in foreign surveillance by American spy agencies.

Mr. Nunes handed control to three of the committee's Republicans, Representatives K. Michael Conaway of Texas, Tom Rooney of Florida and Mr. Gowdy. Mr. Conaway, a well-liked accountant, helped put the investigation back on track and has maintained a productive relationship with Representative Adam B. Schiff of California, the panel's top Democrat.

But Democrats say Mr. Nunes, whose signature is required to issue subpoenas, has continued to meddle around the edges of the investigation, driving Republican inquiries into who financed a dossier of unsubstantiated information on purported links between the Trump campaign and Russia. Mr. Nunes, they say, is also participating in an investigation into the revealing of Trump associates caught up in American surveillance by Obama administration officials.

"Frankly, I have been doing everything I can to try to get us to do a credible investigation and to reach a common conclusion," Mr. Schiff said. "I view these things as obstacles that are in the way to overcome, and I am doing my best to overcome them almost daily."

A spokesman for Mr. Nunes did not reply to a request for comment.

Democrats were also incensed by Mr. Gowdy's remarks to Mr. Kushner in July, which they said were representative of efforts by some Republicans to cut the investigation short. Shortly after the meeting, Mr. Schiff publicly accused Mr. Gowdy of playing defense attorney for the administration.

Republicans have returned the biting words, sharply criticizing Mr. Schiff, whose frequent television appearances irk them. Mr. Rooney used a vulgarity when he called Mr. Schiff's comments about the Kushner interview nonsense. And Mr. Gowdy said on Friday that he had been compelled to weigh in by the Democrats' repetitive and meandering questions — and that a transcript would show his own questions to have been appropriately aggressive.

The Republican said it had become clear where the committee was headed.

“Will our private conclusions be the same? Yes,” Mr. Gowdy said. “Will our public pronouncements be the same? No, of course not.”

“This is politics,” he added.

Across Capitol Hill, the tone has been different. The chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Richard M. Burr, Republican of North Carolina, and its top Democrat, Mark Warner of Virginia, have worked to project a collaborative rapport that committee members insist is real.

At a rare news conference this month, the two senators said they had already expended significant resources verifying the conclusions of America’s spy agencies about Russia’s efforts to meddle in the election and were now taking steps to better understand its use of social media campaigns and to investigate the collusion question.

“At the end of the day, what we owe the American people is the truth,” Mr. Warner said in an interview on Thursday. “And if there’s something there, then they should know that. And if there’s not something there, I’ll be the first to acknowledge that.”

But other committee members have sought to contain expectations. At the news conference, Mr. Burr said investigators had “hit a wall” in their work on the dossier, which holds some of the most salacious allegations of collusion, because its author, Christopher Steele, would not meet with the committee. Mr. Burr also said he did not have a mandate to look for criminal activity.

“The special counsel is focused on criminal acts; we’re not focused on criminal acts,” he said. “If we find one, then they’re the first phone call we make.”

Senator Dianne Feinstein, Democrat of California and a former chairwoman of the committee, told CBS’s “Face the Nation” this month that Mr. Mueller stood a much better chance of reaching a definitive conclusion about collusion than the committees did.

“There’s no proof yet that it’s happened, and I think that proof will likely come with Mr. Mueller’s investigation,” Ms. Feinstein said. “He’s got the ability to use a grand jury. He’s got the ability to use the power of subpoena without question. And he’s got the ability to do a criminal investigation.”

Both intelligence committees will also face questions about how much of what they find can be declassified and shared with the public. Mr. Burr said on Wednesday that his goal was to have the “meat of our business” done by late spring, in time for state governments to make changes to their voting systems before next year’s midterm elections. He said he would push to declassify the findings as much as possible.

The Judiciary Committee, meanwhile, has struggled to get a fledgling investigation off the ground. Ms. Feinstein, the committee’s top Democrat, and its chairman, Senator Charles E. Grassley, Republican of Iowa, agreed this summer to begin investigating a cluster of topics related to the firing of James B. Comey as F.B.I. director, including Mr. Comey’s handling of the Clinton email case and the Trump campaign’s interactions with Russia.

Given its jurisdiction over the Justice Department, the panel is the best positioned on Capitol Hill to unravel the Comey saga, including possible obstruction of justice. But after a brief flurry of activity earlier this fall — including a closed-door interview with the president’s eldest son, Donald Trump Jr. — investigators reached an impasse in recent weeks, as Democrats and Republicans haggled over the next witnesses to call and documents to request.

Mr. Grassley has spent weeks negotiating with the Justice Department on the committee’s behalf to try to gain access to two key F.B.I. officials who worked closely with Mr. Comey, Carl Ghattas and James Rybicki. Hopes of interviewing Paul J. Manafort, Mr. Trump’s former campaign chairman, collapsed over the summer after prosecutors working for Mr. Mueller warned Mr. Manafort that they planned to seek criminal charges against him.

On Wednesday, Mr. Grassley unilaterally sent a flurry of letters requesting interviews with and information from current and former Justice Department officials, as well as Mr. Kushner and others involved in a June 2016 meeting at

Trump Tower between Trump campaign officials and a Russian lawyer said to be offering incriminating information about Mrs. Clinton.

Senators said they were still hopeful that the committee would break through the logjam, but a deal had not been reached as of Friday.

“The American people deserve a public investigation,” said Senator Richard Blumenthal, Democrat of Connecticut, noting that the Judiciary Committee could work more publicly than the intelligence panels. “They deserve witnesses who will give an accounting in public under oath.”

Reporting was contributed by Matt Apuzzo, Adam Goldman, Mark Mazzetti, Matthew Rosenberg and Sharon LaFraniere.

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A version of this article appears in print on October 23, 2017, on Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Hopes Dwindle For 3 Inquiries On Russia Ties.

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