

## Declassification of Russia investigation materials poses a risky gambit for GOP

By Manu Raju and Laura Jarrett, CNN

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(CNN) — An outspoken bloc of House conservatives continues to call on President Donald Trump to declassify materials related to the Russia investigation as soon as this week, but their latest effort could backfire if it fails to confirm their allegations of serious misconduct, according to several current and former US officials.

Republicans who are pushing hard for the public release of the documents flatly acknowledge they are not sure whether the move will help or hurt their arguments about improper conduct in the Russia investigation.

"We don't know, which is why we need to see them," said Rep. Jim Jordan, a member of the House Freedom Caucus and a leading critic of the Russia probe, when asked what he believes the documents will show. "Transparency is a good thing, and the American people need to know what's in there."

For months, Trump's allies on Capitol Hill have championed the narrative that the Justice Department and FBI wrongfully obtained a surveillance order on Trump foreign policy aide Carter Page under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, and their main argument focused on the memos of salacious material authored by ex-British intelligence agent Christopher Steele, who they say harbored anti-Trump bias they claim was not fully disclosed in the FISA application or its renewals.

The FBI released redacted versions of the FISA warrant applications in July, prompting calls by some Republicans for declassification they believe would help them make their case publicly that the warrant was inappropriately obtained. The redacted FISA application showed that the FBI raised concerns that Page was the subject of Russian recruitment and might have been working with the Kremlin, allegations Page has denied. And in a footnote, it did disclose a political motivation behind the Steele dossier, specifically saying that the person behind it was likely looking for information to discredit Trump's campaign.

[Some 30 members of Congress](#) have reviewed largely unredacted copies of the highly sensitive FISA applications, but several of the most vocal proponents of the current declassification campaign have not.

Rep. Mark Meadows, chairman of the House Freedom Caucus and a close ally of Trump's, acknowledged he wasn't aware of what information is contained in the documents.

"I just believe transparency is better -- regardless of which narrative it helps," Meadows told CNN.

Republicans are also now asking Trump to release the FBI's interview notes, known as 302s, from interviews with Justice official Bruce Ohr after his meetings with both Steele and Glenn Simpson, the head of the research firm Fusion GPS that hired Steele.

But further removing redactions on the FISAs and releasing the 302s could run the risk of upending the narrative House Republicans have spent months crafting if the documents confirm that the FBI had more than the dossier to justify the surveillance of Page -- and if they show that Ohr was working appropriately in reporting leads in the Russia probe.

Political jockeying with intelligence gleaned in the Russia investigation has already resulted in public confirmation of inconvenient facts for Trump allies.

For instance, a highly controversial memo from the GOP and House Intelligence Committee Chairman Devin Nunes about the application process for the FISA warrant was released in February. The memo was supposed to show the FBI abused its surveillance authority, but it acknowledged that FBI counterintelligence investigation was "triggered" by the actions of foreign policy adviser George Papadopoulos in July 2016, months before the Page FISA application was ever filed. The FBI issued a rare public warning that the memo omits key information that could impact its veracity.

Jordan told CNN they also want Trump to declassify a request by Nunes about certain information that was only made available to the top leaders in Congress who comprise the so-called Gang of Eight whom the executive branch briefs on classified intelligence. A source with knowledge of the situation said that request includes matters related to the FBI's use of a confidential intelligence source during the Russia probe. Trump has said that the FBI was spying on his campaign in 2016, something he branded "spygate," but lawmakers from both parties who have reviewed the intelligence reject that assertion.

It's unclear how many of the documents Trump will ultimately release and how much information will remain redacted, and White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders sidestepped a question on the topic on Monday. But Republicans believe that Trump, who is eager to find ways to sow doubt about special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation and castigate the FBI, is poised to declassify the relevant records in a matter of days.

### **Political pressure**

Doing so, however, would spark concern from some quarters, including from Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman, Richard Burr. When the Justice Department was forced to release the redacted version of the FISA application to monitor Page in July, Burr said there were "sound reasons" to approve the warrant, breaking with House conservatives who said it showed wrongdoing. And he raised concerns about the release of the heavily redacted documents.

"I cease to be amazed by how much stuff we release publicly now," Burr said in July.

A Burr spokesperson said that the chairman still stands by that sentiment.

Sen. Mark Warner, the top Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, called on "responsible adults" in the administration to convince the President "to back off this terrible idea."

"FISA applications are classified for good reason and shouldn't be declassified in an effort to undermine an ongoing investigation," Warner told CNN on Monday. "Every time the White House acts in support of House Republicans to stop the Mueller investigation, they are doing damage to national security and the rule of law."

Former Justice Department officials echoed the concerns, one calling it a "slippery slope."

"You look back and say, 'Wow, I can't believe we've gone from point A to X, when previously we didn't want to go from A to B,'" the official said.

David Laufman, the former chief of the Counterintelligence and Export Control Section at the Justice Department's National Security Division, said it was "extraordinary" that the department released the redacted Page FISA application in the first place, explaining that defendants routinely seek discovery of FISA applications in an attempt to undermine the prosecution, and department lawyers have always contested those efforts.

"Typically, the department could count on the executive branch -- including the White House counsel's office -- to fully support it in pushing back on the public disclosure of such a document," Laufman said. "Here, it appears the White House is a cheerleader for that effort."