

Just how 'politically explosive' is the Devin Nunes secret that Esquire uncovered?

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Rep. Devin Nunes (R-Calif.) (Aaron P. Bernstein/Bloomberg News)



A [new investigation by Esquire Magazine](#) claims Rep. Devin Nunes (R-Calif.), has an “explosive” political secret that involves cows, illegal immigrants and political hypocrisy.

The article has the political world buzzing because it uncovers something we didn't know about one of the most prominent and interesting members of Congress in the Trump era. Nunes is the head of the House Intelligence Committee, which leads

Republicans' efforts to investigate Russian election interference. Nunes has been sharply criticized for carrying President Trump's water to get out from under the Russia investigation. It's especially jarring coming from a congressman once viewed as a moderate who eschewed conspiracy-based politics he's now accused of helping propagate.

[\[Devin Nunes's Russia investigation was one long, unforced error\]](#)

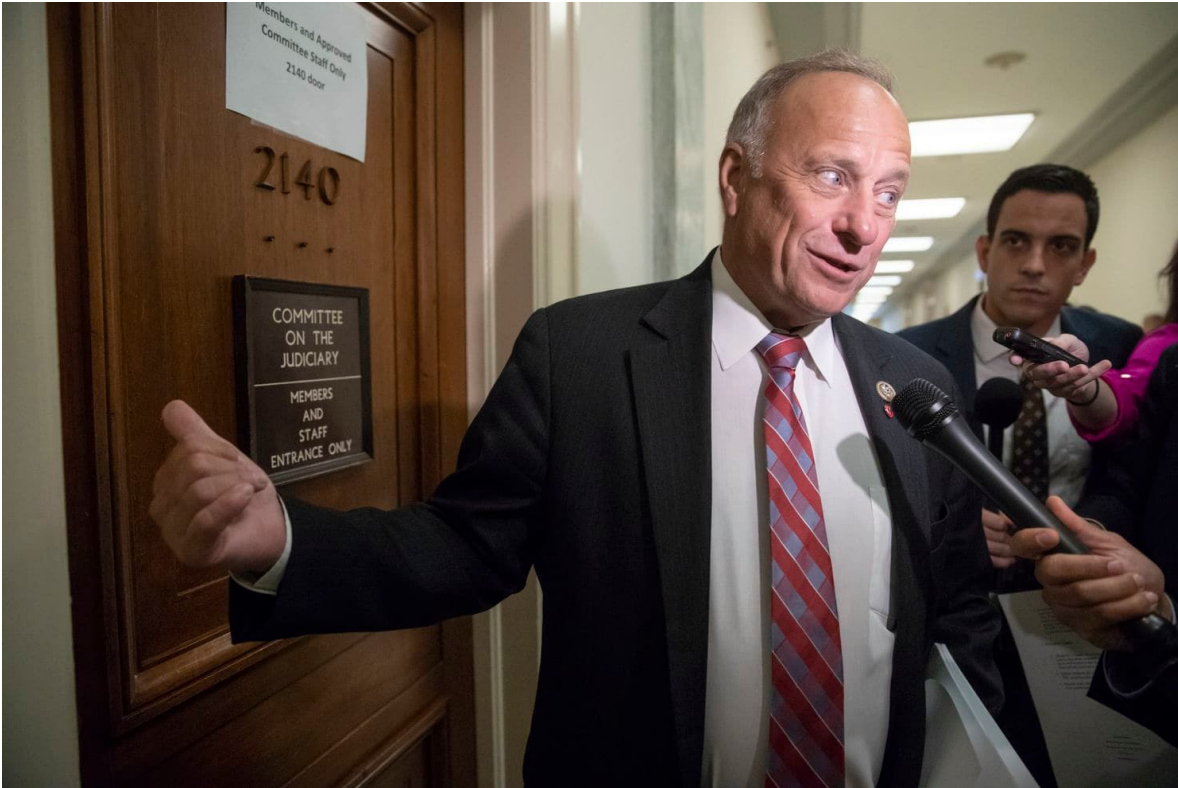
So just how “explosive” is the secret that Ryan Lizza, writing for Esquire, uncovers about the location of the Nunes family farm? That's not really clear, though there is plenty there to dissect — some of it potentially politically consequential for Nunes and some of it that is tough to pin on him. We've got some takeaways for you to consider.

Where there's potential trouble

The Nunes family farm is in Iowa, not California. This is the main secret. Nunes and his family come from a long line of dairy farmers. Most people assume the farm his parents own is in California, where Nunes has held a seat in Congress since 2003. It was — but Lizza reports that Nunes has never publicly acknowledged that his family moved the dairy farm in 2006 to Iowa, and it appears Nunes himself has allowed the story to perpetuate.

A [Wall Street Journal editorial](#) from July, with a Tulare, Calif., dateline, opens with this line: “It's 105 degrees as I stand with Rep. Devin Nunes on his family's dairy farm.” (That was probably his uncle's farm; the one owned by his parents is in Iowa.)

What's also interesting about the move to Iowa will make our next takeaway more salient: The farm is in the district of one of the most anti-immigrant members of Congress, Rep. Steve King (R-Iowa).



Rep. Steve King (R-Iowa) (J. Scott Applewhite/AP)

The Nunes family farm may employ undocumented immigrants. Lizza talks to anonymous sources who claim that the Nunes farm uses undocumented workers, and he talks to other people on the record who say almost every dairy farm in Sibley, Iowa, where the dairy farm is located, also uses undocumented workers. “In every conversation I had with dairy farmers and industry insiders in northwest Iowa, it was taken as a fact that the local dairies are wholly dependent on undocumented labor,” he writes.

When it comes to immigration, Nunes has been more moderate. He has supported immigration reform. But he refuses to criticize Trump’s more far-right immigration platforms.

Lizza concludes that Iowa’s reliance on undocumented labor is more a symptom of the agricultural economy — dairy farming has low profit margins — and a broken immigration system than any nefarious plot by the Nunes family or other dairy farmers to escape paying more for wages. “I would love it if all my guys could be legal,” one unnamed dairy farmer tells Lizza.

That still leads us to the most politically fascinating piece of the article, and it has arguably nothing to do with Nunes.

This small town in Iowa is a microcosm of the country’s paradox on illegal immigration. Residents rely on undocumented immigrants for their economy, yet

79 percent of the county voted for Trump. That's not a surprise, given that this district repeatedly sends King, who is one of the most controversial and outspoken opponents of immigration in Congress, back to Washington. But it's hard to square the county's politics with the fact its economy is driven by undocumented workers, who get paid less than documented workers and, thus, help keep the dairy farms afloat.

How this one small town seems to split the difference between voting for Trump and King when they need the immigrants those politicians threaten to take away: Many members to whom Lizza talked say they like Trump but don't agree with his hard-line immigration positions. Still, Trump's central campaign promise was centered on sending undocumented immigrants back or keeping them out. His administration still regularly tries to blame America's woes on undocumented immigrants.

What may not be such a big deal



A man installs opposition signs protesting Nunes in the congressman's hometown of Tulare, Calif. (Mark Ralston/AFP)

Nunes's role in all of this isn't clear. Nunes has no financial stake in his family's dairy farm. It does seem disingenuous that he has let continue the perception that his family farm is in California. It would certainly be politically inconvenient for Nunes to acknowledge that his family's dairy farm relocated. Owning a business in the

community that dates back decades is quite possibly the best way to show constituents you're one of them, and Nunes can't claim that anymore.

The article did take on another odd dimension, one readers have seized on, when at one point members of Nunes's family or their associates apparently began trailing Lizza in his car:

When I walked in the front door of the mayor's office, I had noticed a mud-spattered white Yukon [a vehicle he saw on the Nunes farm] parked outside. As I was driving to my next interview, I looked in the rearview mirror and noticed the white Yukon again. I drove aimlessly, crisscrossing streets from one end of town to the other. Everywhere I turned, the white Yukon appeared. I was being followed. When I turned the tables and followed the car back, it raced off. We played cat and mouse like that for more than an hour until I finally got a good glimpse of the driver: It was a middle-aged woman with curly, red hair who had a cell phone stuck to her left ear. The cat-and-mouse game started to feel a little dangerous, so I left town for a couple hours. On my way back into Sibley, the same car passed me on the highway. This time, the chubby man from the Lantern was driving. He smiled and waved.

But again, it's not clear that Nunes himself had anything to do with that.

Democrats already hoped to capitalize on Nunes's ties to Trump to unseat him in a district that voted for Trump but isn't nearly as pro-Trump as Nunes himself has become. Several polls over the summer and in September show Nunes with a single or even double-digit lead over his Democratic challenger, Andrew Janz.

There is evidence that Nunes's support in California is slipping. He has consistently won election with more than 60 percent of the vote, but the limited polling shows him ahead with 55 percent or so.

Nunes is a major figure in the Trump era. So it's no surprise to see detailed investigations into him and his family. It's just not clear what this article says about Nunes or what impact it will have on his reelection.