

Chairman Johnson Opening Statement December 3, 2020

I became Chairman of this committee in January 2015, and will complete my six-year term at the end of this month. We can all be proud of the more than 100 pieces of legislation we worked on together as a committee that became law. The other more than 200 bills that we passed out of committee, although not signed into law, can still serve as a basis for future legislation.

Our committee and subcommittees also have broad oversight jurisdiction and responsibilities that we have not ignored. We investigated and exposed problems with VA healthcare, human trafficking, national security leaks, and systemic violations of the Hatch Act within the Postal Service. Most recently, we have held eight hearings and roundtables on the current administration's response to the Coronavirus.

It is not surprising that some of our oversight investigations did not receive bipartisan support, in particular, those concerning corruption within the Obama administration. In February 2018, reflecting on his eight years in office, President Obama stated, "We didn't have a scandal that embarrassed us," and further, in May 2018, he stated, "I didn't have scandals." Not only was it denied by the former President, it also was largely ignored by both our Democrat colleagues and most of the media. But nothing could be further from the truth. A short list of the known scandals demonstrates why they should not be ignored and need to be fully investigated and exposed.

- In 2010, guns discovered at the scene of U.S. Border Patrol Agent Brian Terry's murder were linked to several thousand guns that the Obama Justice Department lost track of during Operation Fast and Furious.

- In 2012, the Obama administration initially blamed the attack on the U.S. diplomatic compound in Benghazi, Libya—that resulted in deaths of four Americans—on an anti-Muslim video, not a calculated terrorist attack. The evening of the attack, Secretary Clinton wrote to her daughter, “Two of our officers were killed in Benghazi by an Al Qaeda-like group.” Yet on a Sunday talk show that weekend, National Security Advisor Susan Rice said, “there was a violent protest outside of our embassy sparked by this hateful video. . . . We do not have information at present that leads us to conclude that this was premeditated or preplanned.” Clinton, told the father of one of the Navy SEAL's killed in the attack, "We will make sure that the person who made that film is arrested and prosecuted.” The producer of that video was jailed shortly thereafter, and served a year in prison for a probation violation of a 2010 conviction.

- In 2013, we learned that the IRS was used as a political weapon to target and scrutinize conservative groups seeking tax-exempt status. IRS official Lois Lerner refused to answer questions, and then retired with full pension benefits. In response to congressional inquires, the IRS later admitted that years of potentially-responsive records, including many of Lerner's emails, had been lost, due to hard-drive crashes. No one was ever held accountable.

- In mid-2013, following years of reporting on Obama administration scandals, investigative journalist Sharyl Attkisson announced that her personal

devices had been “accessed and compromised.” The compromise of Ms. Attkisson’s electronic devices occurred around the same time as Obama’s Justice Department began targeting investigative journalists by secretly subpoenaing phone records and obtaining a search warrant for one reporter’s personal emails. To this day, the perpetrators are unknown, and no one has been held accountable.

- In April 2014, then-Vice President Joe Biden became the “public face of the administration’s handling of Ukraine.” Less than one month later, Hunter Biden joined the board of a Ukrainian energy company, Burisma. One State Department official later remarked that “the presence of Hunter Biden on the Burisma board was very awkward for all U.S. officials pushing an anticorruption agenda in Ukraine.” Investigative journalists and whistleblowers have detailed the foreign financial entanglements of Hunter Biden and other members of the Biden family and how they have sought to profit from their family’s last name.
- In 2015, we learned that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton exclusively used a private email server to conduct official State Department business, which raised national security concerns and concerns about the preservation of federal records.
- As early as May 2016, months before investigators interviewed Secretary Clinton, the FBI began drafting what would become then-Director James Comey’s July 5, 2016 statement exonerating her. My investigation found that FBI officials replaced “gross negligence” with “extremely careless” to downplay the seriousness of her conduct; weakened the conclusion that it

was “reasonably likely” that foreign adversaries gained access to Secretary Clinton’s private e-mail account by saying instead that it was “possible”; and removed a reference to the fact that she engaged in “an email exchange with the President [Obama] while Secretary Clinton was on the territory of such an adversary.”

- In late July 2016, the FBI opened Crossfire Hurricane, an investigation of the Trump campaign, because of evidence that a low-level campaign official “*suggested* the Trump team had received some kind of *suggestion*” that Russia might release information damaging to the Clinton campaign.
- Less than one month after the FBI opened Crossfire Hurricane, Lisa Page, counsel to the FBI’s Deputy Director, texted FBI special agent Peter Strzok, lead investigator for Crossfire Hurricane, that “[Trump’s] not ever going to become president, right? Right?!” Strzok replied, “No. No he’s not. We’ll stop it.”
- Beginning in October 2016, the Crossfire Hurricane team submitted FISA applications that contained, according to DOJ’s Inspector General, “at least 17 significant errors or omissions” to obtain warrants to spy on Carter Page. These included reliance on Christopher Steele’s now-debunked, anti-Trump dossier, which “played a central and essential role” in the FISA application; purposefully excluding exculpatory evidence; FBI counsel doctoring a related email; and the apparent failure to act on intelligence reporting that parts of the dossier were the product of a Russian disinformation campaign. The Inspector General found no plausible explanation for why “so many basic and fundamental errors were made by three separate, hand-picked

teams on one of the most sensitive FBI investigations that was briefed to the highest levels within the FBI.”

- In early January 2017, just as the FBI was about to close its investigation of Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn because it did not discover any evidence that he was acting as an agent for Russia, Strzok instructed the FBI case agent to “keep it open for now” and stated that the “7th floor [is] involved.” Days later, the *Washington Post*’s David Ignatius reported a leak of highly classified recordings of conversations between Flynn and the Russian ambassador, Sergey Kislyak, which then became the basis for continued investigation of Flynn under the rarely-used Logan Act.
- In July 2017, our committee released a report detailing 125 leaks in the administration’s first 126 days, 62 of which could harm our national security as defined by the Obama administration. These are the leaks that drove and sustained the false Russian collusion with the Trump campaign narrative.

A common element in each of these scandals is the abuse of executive branch power. If this misconduct remains hidden or goes unpunished, it represents a serious threat to our individual freedoms and our democratic republic. I do not make that statement lightly.

Unfortunately, my efforts to uncover the truth have been severely obstructed by the agencies involved and by entrenched bureaucrats that have every incentive to keep it hidden. This has been true during both the Obama and Trump administrations. For example, the FBI did not make a meaningful production of records about the Crossfire Hurricane investigation until I subpoenaed them in August, and even

then, documents are heavily redacted. In May, Sen. Grassley and I requested a list of Obama officials who unmasked Trump campaign and transition officials. That list has apparently been compiled, but it has not been provided to the committee because it remains stuck somewhere between NSA and DOJ. Without those records, it would not be productive, so we have not yet interviewed the officials involved in those unmaskings.

Finally, just yesterday the State Department produced an unclassified version of an email that Sen. Grassley and I requested in August that still contained several redactions. I was able to review the unredacted version and can only say that what remains classified should not be. The information would not harm national security, but it would reflect poorly on Vice President Biden. That is not a valid reason for classification, or for indefinitely withholding the information from the public.

These investigations have also been hampered by false allegations made against me and Senator Grassley by Senior Democrat leaders, including the committee's Ranking member. In letters, purportedly classified staff memos immediately leaked to the press, and statements on the floor and to the media, they have accused Senator Grassley and me of receiving and disseminating Russian disinformation. This is patently false and is easily proven so by a careful examination of our reports. Yet no matter how many times we issue denials, a compliant media repeats their false allegations. This was the exact same playbook used with the Steele dossier and Russian collusion hoax. These claims are especially galling because in both cases, Democrats were the real peddlers of Russian disinformation.

The purpose of today's hearing is to release and examine two timelines of our investigations to help place these scandals in perspective, release new documents we

have obtained related to the Crossfire Hurricane investigation, and demonstrate how much has been withheld and how many questions remain unanswered. I ask that all this information be entered into the record.

The volume of information that should be considered cannot begin to be covered in a single hearing. Instead, I have invited three witnesses to talk about specific aspects of these scandals in which they have detailed knowledge. Again, I thank the witnesses for the time they have taken to prepare and appear before this committee, and I look forward to their testimony.