

Senate Intelligence Committee Russia Probe Press Conference

October 4, 2017

SENATOR RICHARD BURR:

Busy day around the country. Mark and I recognize the tragedy of Nevada this week, and at this point I'm glad to say that it doesn't seem to have a terrorism nexus. That's not always the outcome, but our hearts and our prayers go out to all the individuals who were affected both directly and indirectly, and I can assure you that from an intelligence committee standpoint and in the agencies they are providing this many assets to local law enforcement and to those people that are tasked with investigation of this unbelievable act.

So we're here to update you and the American people about the investigation into Russia's meddling in the 2016 election. When we started this investigation on 23 January of this year, we had a very clear focus.

We were focused on an evaluation of the ICA, the intelligence community assessment, of Russia's involvement in our 2016 election. Additionally, the investigation was to look into any collusion by either campaign during the 2016 elections. The third piece was an assessment of the ongoing Russian active measures, including information and influence campaigns that may still exist and may be ongoing. The investigation started with those three buckets of interest. Now we're over 100 interviews later, which translates to 250 plus hours of interviews; almost 4000 pages of transcripts; almost 100000 thousand pages of documents reviewed by our staff and some by members. It includes highly classified intelligence reporting. It includes e-mails campaign documents and technical cyber analysis products. The committee has held 11 open hearings this calendar year that have touched on Russia's interference in U.S. elections. I can say that our dedicated Russia investigative staff have literally worked six to seven hours a day since 23 January to get us to the point we are today.

SENATOR MARK WARNER:

Six or seven days a week.

SENATOR BURR:

Six or seven days a week, excuse me. So far in the interview process we have interviewed everybody who had a hand or a voice in the creation of the intelligence community assessment. We have spent nine times the amount of time that the community spent putting the ICA together, reviewing the ICA, and reviewing all the supporting documents that went in it. But in addition to that the things that were thrown on the cutting room floor that they might not have found appropriate for the ICA itself, but we may have found of relevance to our investigation.

We have interviewed every official of the Obama administration to fully understand what they saw what clarity and transparency they had and the Russian involvement and more importantly what they did or did not do and what drove those actions.

Again I'm reminded that we will come out with a finding at some point.

And part of that hopefully will be recommendations with the changes we need to make. So we've tried to think thoroughly through this as we can. We have interviewed, literally, individuals from around the world. So for those of you that choose to stake out when the next witnesses come in there are some that have snuck through because you don't know who they are. Now it's safe to say that the inquiry has expanded slightly.

Initial interviews and document review generated hundreds of additional requests on our part for information. It identified many leads that expanded our initial inquiry the volume of work done by the staff has prepared the committee. To look at some areas of our investigation that we hope will very soon reach some definite conclusion. But we're not there yet. We're not ready to close them. One of those areas is the ICA itself. Given that we have interviewed everybody who had a hand in the ICA I think there is general consensus among members and staff that we trust the conclusions of the ICA. But we don't close our consideration of it in the unlikelihood that we find additional information through the completion of our investigation. The Obama administration's response to Russian interference – as I said we have interviewed every person within the administration, they have volunteered and they have been unbelievably cooperative to come in and share everything they knew and in most cases were interviewed for over two hours.

The meeting at the Mayflower — I mean be specific. These are not issues that are closed. We have not come to any final conclusions. We have interviewed seven individuals that attended the Mayflower event. The testimony from all seven were consistent with each other. But we understand that with the current investigation open there may be additional information we find that pulling that thread may give us some additional insight that we don't see today.

Changes to the platform committee: And again I'm addressing some things that have been written by you in this room and they may not have been on our chart but we felt that we had to dig deeply into them. We have, the committee staff, has interviewed every person involved in the drafting of the campaign platform. Campaign staff was attempting to implement what they believed to be guidance to be strong, to be a strong ally in Ukraine but also leave the door open for better relations with Russia. I'm giving you the feedback we got from the individuals who were in the room making the decision. Again not closed - open for the continuation.

The last one I want to cover is the Comey memos. This topic has been hotly debated and the committee is satisfied that our involvement with this issue has reached a logical end as it relates to the Russia investigation. Now again this is not something that we've closed but we have exhausted every person that we can talk to get information that's pertinent to us relative to the Russia investigation. Questions that you might have

surrounding Comey's firing are better answered by the general counsel or by the Justice Department, not the Select Committee of Intelligence in the United States Senate.

There are concerns that we continue to pursue: collusion. The committee continues to look into all evidence to see if there was any hint of collusion. Now I'm not going to even discuss the initial findings because we haven't any. We've got a tremendous amount of documents still to go through. And just to put it in perspective I said we've done over 100 interviews over 250 hours. We currently have booked for the balance of this month 25 additional interviews that may not end up being the total but as of today there are 25 individuals booked to meet with our staff before the end of this month alone pertaining to the Russian investigation. We have more work to do as it relates to collusion, but we're developing a clearer picture of what happened. What I will confirm is that the Russian intelligence service is determined, clever, and I recommend that every campaign and every election official take this very seriously as we move into this November's election. And as we move into preparation for the 2018 election I will ask Vice-Chairman to cover the other areas that were in the process of pursuing.

SENATOR WARNER:

Thank you, Richard. And I am on a saying at the outset again. I am very proud of this committee and proud of the way the committee has acted. I'm proud of our staff and the enormous amount of work they've done. I know Chairman and I see many of you daily in the hallways and know that this feels like it's taking a long time. It is taking a long time. But getting it right and getting all the facts is what we owe the American people. And as we've seen, for examples, stories that emerged in the late summer around Mr. Trump Jr's meeting and possibilities in the Trump Tower Moscow. You know, Chairman, I would love to find ways to close things down, but we also still see strains and threads that we need to continue to pursue. I want to touch on two subjects.

The first is echoing what Richard said. The Russian-acted measures efforts did not end on Election Day 2016. They were not only geared at the United States of America. We've seen Russian active measures take place in France. We've seen concerns raised in the Netherlands. We've seen concerns raised in Germany and we need to be on guard. One of the things that is particularly troubling to both of us is the fact that, become evident that 21 states electoral systems were not all penetrated, but there was at leastthere was at least ... trying to open the door in these 21 states. It has been very disappointing to me and I believe the chairman as well, that it took 11 months for the Department of Homeland Security to reveal those 21 states and still don't know why exactly last Friday was the date they chose to reveal that information but I still believe there needs to be a more aggressive whole of government approach in terms of protecting our electoral system. Remember, to make a change even in a national election doesn't require penetration into 50 states arguably in states like the chairman's and mine that could be key you could pick two or three states and two or three jurisdictions and alter an election.

And I believe in a state like mine, where in Virginia and New Jersey in 34 days, we have elections, I'm glad to see the DHS has said they are going to up their game and particularly help those states with elections that are happening this year.

But we need to make sure that there is an organized, again, whole of government approach. I know in Virginia, for example, even before we discovered that we were one of the 21 states, I think the state electoral board in an abundance of caution decertified one set of machines that were touch screens that didn't have kind of a paper ballot or a paper trail. That's one of the things we wanted to emphasize with this briefing that this is an ongoing concern and that if states don't proactively move forward very shortly we'll be getting into primary seasons early on in 2018. And this is a this is an ongoing challenge. And again I'd point out even after last week, Wisconsin, Texas, and California still have some lack of clarity about whether the appropriate individuals were notified.

I also want to raise an issue that the chairman and I have been working jointly on as well, and that is the Russian's use of social media platforms - social media platforms that increasingly the vast majority of us turn to for information, for news, in a way that is very different. If you look, for example, in the realm of political advertising, we've seen an over 700 percent increase in the use of digital political advertising between 2012 and 2016. The expectation is that may double or triple again in terms of the next election cycle because of the ability to target voters. I was concerned at first that some of these social media platform companies did not take this threat seriously enough. I believe they are recognizing that threat now. They have provided us with information.

We think it's important that the three companies that we've invited - Google Twitter and Facebook - will appear in a public hearing so that Americans can again hear both about how we're going to protect, I would argue, three areas. One, making sure that if you see an ad that appears on a social media site, then Americans can know whether the source of that ad was generated by foreign entities. Two, make sure that if you see a story that is trending and becoming more popular, whether that trending is because a series of Americans are liking that story or liking that particular page generated by real individuals or whether that's generated by bots or in some cases it may be falsely identified accounts. For example, Facebook has indicated between 30,000 - 50,000 of such accounts were taken down in France because, due to Russian interference in France. And third just the notion that—both of us have been in politics a long time— if you have somebody wanting an ad for you against you, you ought to be able to be able get out and take at least a look at that content the same way that if ads are run for or against you on the radio or newsprint you can at least get a look at the content.

This is an ongoing process. But we're seeing increasing levels of cooperation. And with that I'll turn it back over to the chairman and be happy to take questions.

SENATOR BURR:

Let me just say that many of you have asked us, "Are we going to release the Facebook ads?" We don't release documents provided to our committee, period.

I'll say it again. The Senate Intelligence Committee does not release documents provided by witnesses, companies, or whoever, whatever the classification. It's not a practice that we're going to get into. Clearly if any of the social media platforms would like to do that, we're fine with them doing it because we've already got scheduled an open hearing because we believe the American people deserve to hear it firsthand.

And just to remind people on October the 25th we will have another open hearing, number 12, with Michael Cohen. On November 1st, we have invited the social media companies that Mark mentioned to be our guest at an open hearing and we feel confident that they will take us up on it.

As it relates to the Steele dossier:

Unfortunately the committee has hit a wall. We have on several occasions made attempts to contact Mr. Steele, to meet with Mr. Steele, to include personally the vice chairman and myself as two individuals making that connection. Those offers have gone unaccepted. The committee cannot really decide the credibility of the dossier without understanding things like who paid for it. Who are your sources and sub sources?

We're investigating a very expansive Russian network of interference in U.S. elections. And though we have been incredibly enlightened at our ability to rebuild backwards the Steele dossier up to a certain date, getting past that point has been somewhat impossible. I say this because I don't think we're going to find any intelligence products that unlocked that key to pre-June of 2016. My hope is that Mr. Steele will make a decision to meet with either Mark and I or the committee or both so that we can hear his side of it versus for us to depict in our findings what his intent or what his actions were.

And I say that to you but I also say it to Chris Steele.

Potential witnesses that we might ask to come in in the future: I strongly suggest that you come in and speak with us if we believe that you have something valuable to bring to the committee. If you don't voluntarily do it, I will assure you today you will be compelled to do it. I can compel you to come, I can't compel you to talk. But that would be in a very public...done in a very public way if in fact you turned down the private offer.

The committee has proven to be balanced, professional and proved that we're willing to listen to everybody.

Let me say in closing for those following our investigation in the press. I want you to know that you only see glimpses of the amount of work the committee has done. We're doing much of our work behind closed doors to ensure the privacy and the protection of witnesses and sensitive sources and methods. It's become increasingly clear that the committee has stayed focused on building the foundation to be able to finish our investigation thoroughly and in an accountable way. I'm confident today that when we started, we chose wisely by choosing our professional staff to do this investigation and

not to the talking heads all around the country that suggested we couldn't do this unless we went out and hire a whole new group. And I think the numbers here reflect that.

Ultimately, we look forward to completing our work and presenting our findings to the public. I can't set a date as to when that will be. Mark can't set a date as to when that can be. We will share with you when we have exhausted every thread of intelligence, every potential witnesses that can contribute anything to this. I don't by any stretch of the imagination tell you that there have been value to everybody we've met with. But if we hadn't met with them, then you would have questions as to why we didn't. Now the truth is nobody in this room, and Mark and I might be included, and none of us in this room may know everybody we've met with.

We're not going to share who we interview. We're not going to share what we asked, and we are certainly not going to share what they tell us. We're not going to share with you the documents that we got. But when you receive 100000 documents plus a large group of that coming from the Trump campaign alone, when you look at this country's most sensitive intelligence products, let me assure you if we're going to get the best view of what happened that anybody could possibly get at the end of this process we will be sure that we present to the American people our findings as best we have been able to accumulate them. So with that I'll be happy to open up for questions. Chad.

REPORTER:

Have you seen any evidence of a nexus between these Russian Facebook ads with the Trump campaign or with any political campaign?

SENATOR BURR:

Chad - we haven't even had our hearing yet, so any of the social media platforms, I think if you look at it from 10,000 feet, the subject matter of the ads seems to have been to create chaos in every group that they could possibly identify in America. From a standpoint of any involvement, let us have the opportunity to have these folks and ask them the questions. In many cases they didn't even take advantage of some of the most technical targeting tools that exist within those social media companies. So I would defer answering your question until we've completed the investigation.

SENATOR WARNER:

Let me just say that that I believe, and I think you will see that there will be more forensics done by these companies. Again when we just look at scale, France versus the United States for example, on one of the platforms Facebook in terms of what happened. I think they've got some more work to do, and I'm pleased to say I think they are out doing that work better.

REPORTER:

Senator Burr, the president has said repeatedly that any talk of collusion is a hoax. You've gone through all of these documents, you've interviewed all these people. At this point, is the president right? Is this a hoax?

SENATOR BURR:

I'm going to let you guys quote the president and ask him questions about what he says. It's not going to be the committee where we're going to have any evidence

REPORTER:

But do you have any evidence to suggest to rule out that the president knew anything about any of these contacts between any of his associates and the Russians?

SENATOR BURR:

Let me go back and say, because I thought I was pretty clear, that the issue of collusion is still open, that we continue to investigate both intelligence and witnesses, and that we're not in a position where we will come to any type of temporary finding on that until we've completed the process.

REPORTER:

So you say that the issue of collusion is still open. Are you pursuing the question of whether there is a link between the ads that appeared on the social media sites and the Trump campaign?

SENATOR BURR:

Well let me just say, and I'll let Mark address it if he'd like to, if there was any connection that would be pertinent to our investigation of Russia's influence in the elections, we have had incredible access and cooperation by those social media companies. Some of them have been interviewed twice. At the end of the day, we will be prepared to ask the right questions that will answer some of your questions at the open hearing.

SENATOR WARNER:

So we also have to get we have to get to the universe first. I was concerned on the frontend of the first pass was not a thorough enough pass. For example, I cited the fact that one entity, the only ads that were produced were paid for in rubles. There are various forms of payment. So I think I think the companies are increasingly understanding that their actions need to match their public statements. That they realize how important it is to maintain the integrity of our democratic process.

REPORTER:

Would you call on Facebook to release those ads?

SENATOR WARNER:

I think at the end of the day it's important that the public sees these ads.

REPORTER:

Senator - two questions. You talked about that level of cooperation that you've gotten from Obama administration officials. Can you characterize the level of cooperation and candor you've seen from Trump campaign officials and those in the Trump orbit?

SENATOR BURR:

I can't think of a Trump campaign official that we have asked to come in that has not come in. There are some individuals that may have been involved in the Trump campaign that up to this point we might have limited the scope of our questions, but with the full intent of them coming back when we knew a little bit more and had pulled a few more intelligence threads.

REPORTER:

When you compare what they've said to you to the documents that you've reviewed, do you find that they've been truthful?

SENATOR BURR:

I don't think that ... I think our interviews to this point, outside of the five specific areas of buckets that that we knew exactly what the universe people we want to talk to we knew what we were trying to find out, that were very much in an exploratory mode trying to piece together what people did, where they were, who they talked to. In most cases we have access to email records text messages phone records voluntarily. Usually when you get something like that voluntarily somebody is probably going to tell you the truth when they answer the questions. But the reason that we can't definitively answer some of your questions today is we will take everything that our staff has put in the transcripts and we will test that against every piece of intelligence and other interviews that we've done. To suggest that we've done that to everybody thoroughly would be misleading. So let us go through that process. But I will assure you that if somebody has come in and not been truthful with us, we will catch them on that and they will come back and that will be the subject of great intensity.

REPORTER:

Based on the work done so far, what's your assessment of what the Russians did do in 2016, what they're doing now, and what you portend they will do in the future?

SENATOR WARNER:

Well I would just say, I think there is large consensus that they hacked into political files, released those files, in an effort to influence the election. We think they actively tried to at least test the vulnerabilities of 21 states electoral systems. And we feel that they used the social media firms, both in terms of paid advertising and what I believe is more problematic, in creating false accounts and others that would drive interest toward stories or groups. And generally those stories or groups were to sow chaos and drive division in our country. And I think that the pattern that they used in America, they have used in other nations around the world. And I fear sometimes if you add up all they've spent, that was a decent rate of return for them on their own.

SENATOR BURR:

Look let me add to that if I can. We can certifiably say that no vote totals were affected, that the tallies are accurate. The outcome of the election, based upon the counting votes. They did not in any way shape or form that we've been able to find alter that. I want to reiterate something that Mark said. You can't walk away from this and believe that Russia is not currently active in trying to create chaos in our election process.

I assume that the same tactics that we saw in Montenegro and in France, in Belgium and in the United States will continue to be tested within our structure of the election process here.

REPORTER:

Thank you, Senator. Pivoting off that point, you just noted that Facebook - they say 10 million people saw their ads, there was an information campaign waged against one candidate by the Russians, and of course they probed 21 states, perhaps more that we didn't catch. So can you definitely look at the American public, Senator Burr, and say that the election was not influenced in any way by this massive Russian operation?

SENATOR BURR:

Well, let me take issue with your premise of your question. Neither Mark nor I said that there was a campaign targeted against one. We're looking at both campaigns.

REPORTER:

Well that is what the ICA has said.

SENATOR BURR:

The ICA did not look at collusion of the campaigns. The ICA looked at Russian - let me finish - Russian involvement in the election process. We're in agreement with that. We have not come to any determination on collusion or Russia's preferences. If we used solely the social media advertising that we seen, there's no way that you can look at that and say that that was to help the right side of the ideological charge and not the left or vice versa. They were indiscriminate.

One of the things that's most challenging to this investigation is, with the exception of certain pieces that have already been discussed, it seems that the overall theme of the Russian involvement in the U.S. elections was to create chaos at every level. And I would tell you the fact that we're sitting here nine months later investigating it ... They have been pretty darn successful.

REPORTER:

Chairman Burr, how would you rate the administration and the country's response to this in terms of preventing something like this from happening in the future? And how ready are we for Virginia's election and 2018? What more needs to be done?

SENATOR BURR:

I'll let Mark address Virginia. But let me just say this. Our role is not to necessarily suggest here the things we need to do. Our investigation should create a roadmap for communities of the proper jurisdiction to follow for states to follow. Mark and I made a decision to take the initiative in our authorization bill. That we require in our authorization bill that there be a designated person in every state who has a security clearance to be briefed on election issues. We couldn't say Secretary of State because that's not the case in every state but we felt compelled with what we had learned to make sure that just the fact that somebody wasn't clear to the high level would put a state out there not being notified. So we've made some steps in the right direction as we see those things that we think it's appropriate for do we will do if we say it's not appropriate for us to do. We will hopefully convey that in a way that presents a roadmap for somebody else.

REPORTER:

Are you satisfied that the administration is paying close enough level of attention to this?

SENATOR WARNER:

And I appreciate what Richard just said. I think you're putting this impetus in our intel bill. I mean it was it seemed very strange to me that somehow there was an excuse being even we can't tell top election official because he or she may not have high enough clearance. I'm glad to see, as of last Friday, DHS has changed that position.

But I do believe we need more, and this is you know I would say that, this administration or any administration, a whole of government approach about protecting our electoral system, but we need a whole of government approach for that matter and the society approach in terms of our cyber vulnerabilities across the board.

I came from a hearing this morning where there was pretty uniform consensus that the Equifax breach where most of our private personal, financial information may be in the hands now of rogue elements, and that there wasn't an appropriate cyber protection

there. So this is why we characterize some of these ... wild wild west this whole realm in cyber. We all need to step up our game center as the Russian lawyer who never had a problem like you or do you think this is.

REPORTER:

Do you think that this report needs to be done, that your conclusion has happened before the 2018 election in order to warn people about what can happen next and where do you think the most work needs to be done?

SENATOR BURR:

I'm not going to set an artificial deadline but I think Mark and I would agree we we've got to make our facts as it relates to Russia's involvement in our election available to the public prior to the primaries getting started in 2018 which means sometime in the next year but it's still my aspirational goal to finish the entire investigation this calendar year, don't think I've changed. But, when we started nine months ago. I saw three buckets, and today I talked about five or six. So I didn't dream then what would what would have been to an end and predict what witnesses are going to share with us that might lead us in a different direction.

SENATOR WARNER:

And one of the things and again I think that the committee's been very good at it, is that. you know we're going to follow the facts. And we want to do it as quickly as possible. We want to do it right and follow the facts

REPORTER:

Is the Russian attorney going to come through – the Russian attorney that met with Donald Trump Jr, she's offered to come through and offer testimony in open committee. Have you reach out to her or is she on the 25 on your list?

SENATOR BURR:

How do you know we haven't already interviewed her?

REPORTER:

I didn't say I did. I'm asking.

SENATOR BURR:

Thank you.

[Laughter]

REPORTER:

This is a question for both of you. Is there any progress on creating legislation that would create new laws regulating how political advertising works on these platforms that Republicans have discussed with Democrats. I know that you're are working with Senator Klobuchar are working on something

SENATOR WARNER:

Yeah, Senator Klobuchar and I are working on something that would, I believe be the lightest touch possible. And that light touch would focus on making sure that foreign, paid-for advertising doesn't penetrate our political system. And if there was an ability to at least look at the content that appears in political campaigns the same way that similar rules of the rest of the media already have. Some of the companies, I've heard at least comments that they are they are open to this type of disclosure.

SENATOR BURR:

Well let me just state the fact that it is illegal today for foreign money to find its way into U.S. elections. So it's not like we've got to rewrite some laws. I just want to get clarification.

REPORTER:

I just wanted to get a clarification on this. So far you have not been able to verify the intelligence community assessment .. that Russia was weighing in on the side of Donald Trump?

SENATOR BURR:

We feel very confident that the ICA's accuracy is going to be supported by our committee. We're not willing to close the issue given the nature of the rest of the investigation that we might get a threat of intelligence that suggests possibly an area of the ICA that we pursue... that our interpretation is different. So we're leaving it open. It's not closed. And I think any smart investigation would stay open until we completely ...

SENATOR WARNER:

And that's one of the reasons that we are trying to be very careful here, as Richard mentioned, some of these meetings where we've talked to most folks. We also know we will have to, this has to be talked through with all the balance the committee members and that we're being extra cautious here saying, "We're not reaching final conclusions until we've had those conversations with all of you."

REPORTER:

Could there ever be a point where the meddling from Russia was so overwhelming that it could indeed lead to the negating of the results of the election?

SENATOR BURR:

Maybe, maybe that's a theory people are working under. All I can tell you is that the votes were counted; one person won, and that's how going to stay.

REPORTER:

Prior to the release of your committee's report will there be any coordination on what the Senate Judiciary Committee has found in its own investigation?

SENATOR BURR:

Well listen we're focused on our investigation. Everybody has their jurisdictional lanes. My hope is that they stay within those lanes. We talk. I won't say regularly, but we need to with the special counsel - the special counsel is focused on criminal acts. We're not focused on criminal acts. If we find one then they're the first phone call we make.

REPORTER:

Senator Burr, as you know the president is the commander-in-chief and he's charged with protecting the country, but he hasn't really spoken out on this issue, other than to call it a hoax. Do you want to see him lead some kind of effort – speak out, do something tangible to protect the country from what you consider the ongoing acts from Russia?

SENATOR BURR:

Listen I think the vice chairman alluded to the fact that although it was slow getting DHS to recognize this. It didn't take as long as it did for the last administration to run the clock on it. So we're not trying to look back and can point to things that were done wrong.

Everybody's done things wrong.

REPORTER:

Should the president now take what you're saying today and speak out against and lead some kind of formal effort to protect the country from Russian...

SENATOR BURR:

I'm not asking the president to a press briefing that we give about progress and assume that that in any way shape or form fully encapsulates what our final report will say. What I will say is what the vice chairman pointed out - that the Department of Homeland Security has taken a different posture. It's his administration. I'm sure they

had his direction or his leadership's direction. We're pleased with the progress that they're making but some of the things that hopefully we will be able to point out will be important steps to be incorporated in their thought process moving forward.

Thank you guys. Thank you. Thank. You.