

Tulare's Devin Nunes jumps into fire as new House intelligence panel chief

By Michael
Doyle



Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Tulare, takes on a big, shadowy job as new chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.

TOBY JORRIN — Bee Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Rep. Devin Nunes started his new spy-oversight work with a jolt.

On Tuesday, at the opening of the 114th Congress, the Tulare Republican claimed the gavel as chairman of the [House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence](#). About 18 hours later, two men carrying automatic weapons and shouting “Allahu Akbar” — “God is great” — killed 12 people and wounded 11 at the Paris office of a French satirical magazine.

“There’s nothing like the first day on the job and having a massive terrorist attack,” Nunes said in an interview this week. “The ink hadn’t even dried from when I was officially appointed.”

But terror wouldn’t wait. On Wednesday, Nunes and his intelligence panel members convened in their tightly secured, underground office for about 25 minutes to discuss the Paris attack. The committee met again for about 30 minutes Thursday for an update.

And this was just the start for [Nunes, a 42-year-old lawmaker](#) in his sixth term in the House of Representatives.

Nunes must now oversee a bureaucratically savvy and technically sophisticated community accustomed to keeping its own counsel.

“The intelligence oversight job is exceptionally difficult,” said Steven Aftergood, director of the [Project on Government Secrecy](#) at the [Federation of American Scientists](#). “They need to adapt to an oversight environment which is both secretive, for security reasons, and yet is also intensely politicized.”

The congressional overseers, Aftergood added, “need to be familiar with a range of intelligence disciplines, and at least somewhat acquainted with the underlying techniques and technologies.” The oversight can be even more awkward, he said, because lawmakers are “almost entirely dependent on the agencies that they oversee.”

A graduate of [California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo](#), where he majored in agricultural business, Nunes didn’t serve in the military or intelligence services. Instead, he’s learned the intelligence business as a member of the House committee for the past four years.

[House Speaker John Boehner](#) initially selected Nunes for the panel and then tapped him to replace the retired Rep. Mike Rogers of Michigan, a former Army officer and FBI agent, as chairman.

“He’s a good man,” [Rep. C.A. Dutch Ruppersberger of Maryland](#), the committee’s former top Democrat, said of Nunes. “He’s smart, he’s hardworking and he’s taking his job very seriously.”

Nunes also has a good sense of humor, Ruppersberger added. This can help, committee members note, during the long overseas trips that come with the intelligence territory.

In 2013, House travel records show, Nunes went on Intelligence Committee business to Europe for five days in November and to Europe and the Middle East for 14 days in August. Public records for the House Intelligence panel members don’t identify the countries visited.

Hint: They’re not all garden spots.

“My goal is to make sure we are getting our members out to every corner of the world,” Nunes said. “You cannot conduct serious oversight work without getting on the ground and actually talking to the folks that are doing the work.”

As chairman, Nunes said his own foreign travel might change somewhat, though the father of three young children also hopes it doesn’t become more frequent. The chairmanship brings with it enough other private and public demands.

As a member of the “[Gang of Eight](#)” — party leaders from both houses of Congress and the top Republican and Democrat on their respective Intelligence committees — Nunes will be notified of certain particularly sensitive covert actions. He’s also part of the “Gang of Four,” lawmakers informed of certain other intelligence actions. This group is composed of the top Republicans and Democrats on the House and Senate Intelligence panels.

During the George W. Bush administration, for instance, the Gang of Eight was among the few initially briefed about the [National Security Agency](#)’s warrantless surveillance program. Joining Nunes in the current Gang of Eight is the House committee’s new ranking Democrat, [Rep. Adam Schiff](#) of Burbank.

“There will be no shortage of issues to come before Congress in this session,” Schiff predicted.

Publicly, too, the chairmanship brings fresh demands. Rogers, Nunes’ predecessor, regularly accepted the media invitations that the position attracts like metal filings to a magnet. Since 2009, [data](#) compiled by [American University](#) researchers show, Rogers appeared more than 62 times on the Sunday television talk shows. Only four other members of Congress appeared more often.

Rogers has now retired and the media’s appetite has shifted to Nunes, whose office received about a dozen requests

from reporters and television producers following the Paris attack. Nunes, though, suggested he'll be appearing less frequently as he concentrates on his covert responsibilities.

"We have to watch over the intelligence community to make sure we know everything they are doing, when they are doing it, and make sure that our colleagues are in the loop, so there are no surprises," he said.

On intelligence policy, Nunes resembles Rogers in some ways. Like his predecessor, Nunes thinks it was a mistake for the [Senate Select Committee on Intelligence](#) to make public its 525-page [executive summary](#) of CIA detention and harsh interrogation practices. Similarly, he's supportive of the NSA's expansive surveillance practices.

Pointedly, [Nunes told](#) the news outlet [Politico](#) last year that [Michigan Republican Rep. Justin Amash](#) was "al Qaida's best friend in the Congress" for pushing an anti-surveillance amendment. Rogers was likewise harsh in his denunciations of Amash, whose 2013 amendment cutting surveillance fell just short of passage in a 205-217 vote.

Nunes is quietly making some changes to the committee, which had 21 members and a staff of about 30 in the preceding Congress. Damon Nelson, an Air Force veteran and Tulare native who's long handled water issues for Nunes, has shifted over to the committee as a senior adviser.

Nunes has also rejiggered the panel's subcommittees, designing four to handle specific intelligence agencies. Indicative of the phraseology that permeates the spook world, Nunes said one of the new subcommittees would handle "defense and overhead architecture." This means spy satellites.

The new subcommittees, Nunes said, will play a bigger role in writing the annual intelligence authorization bill, which sets funding and policy for agencies that range from the satellite-operating [National Reconnaissance Office](#) to the eavesdropping and code-breaking NSA.

"My hope is when you empower a subcommittee chairman, you can cover a lot more ground," Nunes said.

The most recent intelligence authorization act easily passed the House by a bipartisan 325-100. [The publicly released bill itself](#), at only 23 pages, barely scratches the surface. Key details, including dollar amounts, remain classified. It's a lot, though. All told, the intelligence community has divulged that it spends roughly \$50 billion a year.

Key committee deliberations also remain cloaked.

In November 2013, for instance, Schiff offered an amendment to require an annual report on U.S. drone strike casualties. The committee debated in secret. Back in public, Nunes joined in voting down the amendment by 15-5.

Schiff praises Nunes' work on the committee, and the two are mutually respectful. The 2013 disagreement on drone strikes, though, likely presaged future policy debates between the key lawmakers, some of which the public will never hear.

"I think I'm an even broker," Nunes said, "and will do my best to work with Mr. Schiff."

Contact Michael Doyle: mdoyle@mcclatchydc.com, (202) 383-0006 or [@MichaelDoyle10](https://twitter.com/MichaelDoyle10) on Twitter.

Copyright

© 2015 www.fresnobee.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.fresnobee.com>