

WHO VIOLATED THEIR DESIGNATED ROLE: EZRA COHEN-WATNICK OR SUSAN RICE?

In the original version of the latest right wing claim – that Susan Rice requested that multiple incoming Trump figures’ names be unmasked in intercepts – Mike Cernovich describes the genesis of Devin Nunes’ concern this way:

The White House Counsel’s office identified Rice as the person responsible for the unmasking after examining Rice’s document log requests. The reports Rice requested to see are kept under tightly-controlled conditions. Each person must log her name before being granted access to them.

Upon learning of Rice’s actions, H. R. McMaster dispatched his close aide Derek Harvey to Capitol Hill to brief Chairman Nunes.

But as Eli Lake – fresh off having apologized for letting Devin Nunes use him – tells the story, close Mike Flynn associate Ezra Cohen-Watnick discovered it and brought the discovery to the White House Counsel’s office, whereupon he was told to “end his own research” on unmasking.

The pattern of Rice’s requests was discovered in a National Security Council review of the government’s policy on “unmasking” the identities of individuals in the U.S. who are not targets of electronic eavesdropping, but whose communications are collected incidentally. Normally those names are redacted from summaries of monitored conversations and appear in reports as

something like "U.S. Person One."

The National Security Council's senior director for intelligence, Ezra Cohen-Watnick, was conducting the review, according to two U.S. officials who spoke with Bloomberg View on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss it publicly. In February Cohen-Watnick discovered Rice's multiple requests to unmask U.S. persons in intelligence reports that related to Trump transition activities. He brought this to the attention of the White House General Counsel's office, who reviewed more of Rice's requests and instructed him to end his own research into the unmasking policy.

This repeats a claim Lake had made in his earlier apology post, which he presented as one detail in the NYT version of this story that was not accurate.

Another U.S. official familiar with the affair told me that one of the sources named in the article, former Defense Intelligence officer Ezra Cohen-Watnick, did not play a role in getting information to Nunes. This official said Cohen-Watnick had come upon the reports while working on a review of recent Justice Department rules that made it easier for intelligence officials to share the identities of U.S. persons swept up in surveillance. He turned them over to White House lawyers.

But it adds the detail that Cohen-Watnick had been told to stand down. That would explain why Lake and others would want to claim that Cohen-Watnick wasn't involved in dealing all this to Nunes: because he had already been told not to pursue it further. If the multiple accounts saying he was involved in the hand-off to Nunes, it appears he did.

The WaPo's version of this included a detail not included by the right wingers: that Cohen-Watnick went to John Eisenberg, not Don McGahn, with his "discovery." Eisenberg is significantly responsible, dating back to when he was at DOJ, for ensuring that ordinary Americans would be sucked up in surveillance under PRISM. For him to be concerned about the legal unmasking of Americans' identities (to the extent that did exist – and the record is still unclear whether it did) is laughable.

The timing of Cohen-Watnick's research – dating back to February – intersects in interesting ways with the timeline in this March 14 Politico story of H.R. McMaster's attempt to sideline him, which was overruled by Steven Bannon.

On Friday [March 10], McMaster told the National Security Council's senior director for intelligence programs, Ezra Cohen-Watnick, that he would be moved to another position in the organization.

The conversation followed weeks of pressure from career officials at the CIA who had expressed reservations about the 30-year-old intelligence operative and pushed for his ouster.

But Cohen-Watnick appealed McMaster's decision to two influential allies with whom he had forged a relationship while working on Trump's transition team – White House advisers Steve Bannon and Jared Kushner. They brought the matter to Trump on Sunday [March 12], and the president agreed that Cohen-Watnick should remain as the NSC's intelligence director, according to two people with knowledge of the episode.

The House Intelligence Committee first asked NSA, CIA, and FBI for details on unmasking on March 15, the day after this story broke, at which point Nunes already knew of the White House effort. When Nunes first blew this up on

March 22, he falsely claimed that that March 15 request had been submitted two weeks earlier.

It's clear the right wing wants to shift this into Benghazi 2.0, attacking Susan Rice for activities that are, at least on the face of it, part of her job. But the only way the White House could be sure that she (or Ben Rhodes, who they're also naming) were the ones to leak this would be to investigate not just those two, but also all the FBI (which would have access to this information without unmasking these names, which not a single one of these right wing scribes admit or even seem to understand). That is, the only way they could make credible, as opposed to regurgitated right wing propaganda accusations about leakers is to have spied even more inappropriately than they are accusing the Obama White House of doing.