ONE HUNDRED THIRTEENTH CONGRESS

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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March 12, 2014

The Honorable John Boehner
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Mr. Speaker:

As you may know, Oversight Committee Chairman Darrell Issa telephoned me last Thursday evening and apologized for his conduct during the Committee's hearing on March 5, 2014. Although I accepted Chairman Issa's apology, it appears that his actions last week in closing down the hearing had significant negative legal consequences that now bar the House of Representatives from successfully pursuing contempt proceedings against former IRS official Lois Lerner.

I am writing today to provide you with an independent legal analysis from two of the nation's preeminent experts in Constitutional law and congressional contempt proceedings: Morton Rosenberg, who served for 35 years as a Specialist in American Public Law at the Congressional Research Service; and Stan Brand, who served as House Counsel from 1976 to 1983 and "fully subscribes" to Mr. Rosenberg's legal analysis and conclusions.

After reviewing the record before the Committee and the relevant Supreme Court case law, these experts now conclude that in his rush to close down the hearing, Chairman Issa committed a "fatal" procedural error by failing to meet the prerequisites required by the Supreme Court in order to hold a witness in contempt.

Specifically, these legal experts conclude that by prematurely adjourning the hearing without first overruling Ms. Lerner's Fifth Amendment assertion and clearly directing her to answer the Committee's questions, Chairman Issa failed to take the basic—but Constitutionally required—steps necessary to hold her in contempt.

These experts also conclude that the Committee cannot remedy these deficiencies because Chairman Issa officially "adjourned" the hearing and forfeited the ability to recall Ms. Lerner under the subpoena he issued for her appearance. Although he could issue a new subpoena, these experts conclude that any claim that she waived her Fifth Amendment rights in the previous proceedings has now been lost as a result of Chairman Issa's actions.

Failure to Overrule Fifth Amendment Assertion and Order Lerner to Testify

In 2012, the non-partisan Congressional Research Service (CRS) issued a 78-page report entitled "Congress's Contempt Power and the Enforcement of Congressional Subpoenas." This report explains very clearly that, in order to hold a witness in contempt of Congress, the Supreme Court requires that a Committee Chairman explicitly overrule any objection offered by a witness and order her to testify notwithstanding that objection—key steps that Chairman Issa failed to take with Ms. Lerner.

According to the CRS report, these requirements are based on the Constitutional due process rights of the witness. To hold a witness in contempt, CRS explained that the witness must "willfully" violate a clear and direct order from the Chairman:

> Because of the willfulness requirement, and to satisfy constitutional due process standards, when a witness objects to a question or otherwise refuses to answer, the chairman or presiding member should rule on any objection and, if the objection is overruled, the witness should be clearly directed to answer.[1]

Today, Mr. Rosenberg sent a memo he authored which analyzes the Committee's record with respect to Ms. Lerner, as well as the Supreme Court case law on this issue. The memo states:

> I conclude that the requisite legal foundation for a criminal contempt of Congress prosecution mandated by the Supreme Court rulings in *Quinn, Emspak and Bart* have not been met and that such a proceeding against Ms. Lerner under 2 U.S.C. 194, if attempted, will be dismissed. Such a dismissal will likely also occur if the House seeks civil contempt enforcement.[2]

In the same memorandum, Mr. Brand states that he "has reviewed this memorandum and fully subscribes to its contents and analysis."[3] Mr. Brand explains:

> [A]t no time did the Chair expressly overrule the objection and order Ms. Lerner to answer on pain of contempt. Making it clear to the witness that she has a clear cut choice between compliance and assertion of the privilege is an essential element of the offense

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[1] Congressional Research Service, *Congress's Contempt Power and the Enforcement of Congressional Subpoenas: Law, History, Practice, and Procedure* (Aug. 17, 2012) (RL34097).

[2] Memo from Morton Rosenberg and Joined by Stanley M. Brand, to Ranking Member Elijah E. Cummings, House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform (Mar. 12, 2014) (http://democrats.oversight.house.gov/uploads/Expert%20Opinion%20on%20Issa%20Contempt%203%2012%2014.pdf).

[3] *Id.*

and the absence of such a demand is fatal to any subsequent prosecution.[4]

In their analysis, these legal experts explain that Chairman Issa failed to take the steps required to hold Ms. Lerner in contempt:

> After his final question Chairman Issa adjourned the hearing without allowing further questions or remarks by Committee members, and granted her "leave of said Committee," stating, "Ms. Lerner, you're released." At no time during his questioning did the Chair explicitly demand an answer to his questions, expressly overrule her claim of privilege, or make it clear that her refusal to respond would result in a criminal contempt prosecution.[5]

The legal experts add that, "at no stage in this proceeding did the witness receive the requisite clear rejections of her constitutional objections and direct demands for answers."[6]

Recognizing that the Committee voted on June 28, 2013, to conclude that Ms. Lerner had waived her Fifth Amendment rights, these experts explain that, to comply with Supreme Court case law, Chairman Issa was required to overrule Ms. Lerner's objections at the hearing last Wednesday and direct her to answer:

> More significantly, the Chairman's opening remarks were equivocal about the consequence of a failure by Ms. Lerner to respond to his questions. As indicated above, he simply stated that "the Committee *may proceed to consider* whether she will be held in contempt." Combined with his closing remarks in the May 2013 hearing, where he indicated he would be discussing the possibility of granting the witness statutory immunity with the Justice Department to compel her testimony, there could be no certainty for the witness and her counsel that a contempt prosecution was inevitable. Finally, it may be reiterated that the Chairman during the course of his most recent questioning never expressly rejected Ms. Lerner's objections nor demanded that she respond.[7]

Adjournment of Hearing Extinguished Subpoena and Fifth Amendment Waiver Claim

These legal experts also conclude that, if Chairman Issa were to issue a new subpoena to require Ms. Lerner to return to the Committee in an attempt to remedy these Constitutional defects, the Committee would not be able to rely on her statements at previous proceedings to argue that she waived her Fifth Amendment rights.

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[4] *Id.*

[5] *Id.*

[6] *Id.*

[7] *Id.* (emphasis in original).

They explain that a waiver of rights under the Fifth Amendment is specific to the proceeding in which the witness waives them:

> The courts have long recognized that a witness may waive the Fifth Amendment right to self-incrimination in one proceeding, and then invoke it later at a different proceeding on the same subject.[8]

They add that recalling Ms. Lerner to appear at a future hearing to attempt to correct these Constitutional defects would result in the loss of any claim that she waived her Fifth Amendment rights:

> Since Ms. Lerner was released from her subpoena obligations by the final adjournment of the Committee's hearing, a compelled testimonial appearance at a subsequent hearing on the same subject would be a different proceeding.[9]

There can be no doubt that Chairman Issa officially adjourned last Wednesday's hearing since this was his primary argument in denying me an opportunity to speak. In fact, in the hours after the hearing, Chairman Issa referenced more than a dozen times on national television that he had adjourned the proceedings, including four times inside the hearing room,[10] six more times during a press conference outside the hearing room,[11] three more times during an interview that evening on Fox News,[12] and four more times the next day during a different interview on Fox News, when he stated: "The fact is that yesterday is one of those times that I had adjourned and according to the rules, I was done."[13]

Mr. Speaker, even you noted that Chairman Issa had adjourned the proceedings, arguing: "I think Mr. Issa was within his rights to adjourn the hearing when he did."[14]

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[8] *Id.*

[9] *Id.*

[10] House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, *Hearing on "The IRS: Targeting Americans for Their Political Beliefs"* (Mar. 5, 2014) (online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqVQTxJOj9A).

[11] Press Conference with Chairman Darrell E. Issa, House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, C-Span (Mar. 5, 2014) (online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Tu6n8X2mKQ&feature=youtu.be).

[12] *On the Record with Greta Van Susteren,* Fox News (Mar. 5, 2014) (online at www.foxnews.com/on-air/on-the-record/2014/03/06/inside-heated-exchange-between-issa-and-cummings-and-battle-over-former-irs-official-lois).

[13] *The Kelly File,* Fox News (Mar. 6, 2014) (online at www.foxnews.com/on-air/the-kelly-file/transcript/2014/03/07/issa-i-broke-no-rules-adjourning-irs-hearing).

[14] The Honorable John Boehner, Speaker, U.S. House of Representatives, *Press Conference* (Mar. 6, 2014) (online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISA3DrqhqYA).

Conclusion

Over the past month, Chairman Issa had two distinct opportunities to obtain information from Ms. Lerner that he rejected without consulting with other Committee Members.

On February 26, 2014, Ms. Lerner's attorney sent a letter to the Committee explaining that he had met privately with Chairman Issa's staff and that, during that meeting, "The staff asked if I would provide a proffer of the testimony she would give if immunized, and I agreed to do that." Accepting a proffer does not grant immunity to the witness and does not bind the Committee in any way, but allows the Committee to obtain information without requiring the witness to waive her Fifth Amendment rights. Chairman Issa never obtained the proffer. Since I was not invited to the meeting with Ms. Lerner's attorney, I attempted to ask about this proffer at the Committee's March 5 hearing, but Chairman Issa closed down the hearing and refused to allow me to speak.

In addition, on March 1, 2014, Ms. Lerner's attorney informed Chairman Issa's staff that Ms. Lerner would consider testifying before the Committee if she could have an extension until March 12 since her attorney was traveling. In response, Chairman Issa's staff told Ms. Lerner's attorney that the Chairman would consult with Committee Members and provide an answer on Monday, March 3. Instead of granting this extension, Chairman Issa appeared on Fox News Sunday on March 2 and stated incorrectly on national television that Ms. Lerner had agreed to testify before the Committee on March 5. Ms. Lerner's attorney immediately and publicly stated that no such agreement had been reached, and then he suspended further negotiations.

I do not understand why Chairman Issa took these steps since granting a simple one-week extension could have helped the Committee obtain Ms. Lerner's testimony. His actions make it appear that he is more interested in having an unnecessary contempt fight than in actually obtaining the information and testimony he claims he wants.

Unfortunately, it no longer may be possible to pursue these avenues at this point because Ms. Lerner's attorney has lost faith in the Committee's credibility, particularly after Chairman Issa's statements about their negotiations on national television. Ms. Lerner's attorney stated: "We completely lost confidence in the fairness and the impartiality of the forum. … It is completely partisan."[15]

As a result, rather than obtaining hearing testimony directly from Ms. Lerner, all the American people have to show for Chairman Issa's partisan actions over the past month is a botched contempt proceeding. Nevertheless, I continue to hope that the Committee can obtain relevant information in this investigation through all legitimate means.

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[15] *Lerner Again Takes the Fifth in Tea Party Scandal,* USA Today (Mar. 5, 2014) (online at www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2014/03/05/lois-lerner-oversight-issa-irs/6070401/).

Although our Committee has identified absolutely no evidence to support the central Republican allegations in this investigation—that the White House directed these actions or that they were politically motivated—the Chairman's actions are still a disappointment for those of us who had hoped to obtain answers to our questions about IRS mismanagement in order to move forward in a constructive manner.

Sincerely,

Elijah E. Cummings
Ranking Member

cc: The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Democratic Leader

The Honorable Darrell E. Issa
Chairman, House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

March 12, 2014

To: Honorable Elijah E. Cummings
Ranking Minority Member,
House Committee on Oversight
And Government Reform

From: Morton Rosenberg
Legislative Consultant

Re: Constitutional Due Process Prerequisites for Contempt of Congress Citations and Prosecutions

You have asked that I discuss whether, at this point in the questioning of Ms. Lois Lerner, a witness in the Committee's ongoing investigation of alleged irregularities by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) in the processing of applications by certain organizations for tax-exempt status, the appropriate constitutional foundation has been established for the Committee to initiate the process that would lead to her prosecution for contempt of Congress. My understanding of the requirements of the law in this area leads me to conclude that the requisite due process protections have not been met.

My views in this matter have been informed by my 35 years of work as a Specialist in American Public Law with the American Law Division of the Congressional Research Service, during which time I concentrated particularly on constitutional and practice issues arising from interbranch conflicts over information disclosures in the course of congressional oversight and investigations of executive agency implementation of their statutory missions. My understandings have been further refined by my preparation for testimony on investigative matters before many committees, including your Committee, and by the research involved in the writing and publication by the Constitution Project in 2009 of a monograph entitled "When Congress Comes Calling: A Primer on the Principles, Practices, and Pragmatics of Legislative Inquiry."

Briefly, the pertinent background of the situation is as follows. Ms. Lerner, who was formerly the Director of Exempt Organizations of the Tax-Exempt and Government Entities Division of IRS, was subpoenaed to testify

before the Committee on May 22, 2013. She appeared and after taking the oath presented an opening statement but thereafter refused to answer questions by Members, invoking her Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination. The question was raised whether Ms. Lerner had effectively waived the privilege by her voluntary statements. On advice of counsel she continued to assert the privilege. Afterward, on dismissing Ms. Lerner and her counsel, Chairman Issa remarked "For this reason I have no choice but to excuse this witness subject to recall after we seek specific counsel on the question whether or not the constitutional right of the Fifth Amendment has been properly waived. Notwithstanding that, in consultation with the Department of Justice as to whether or not limited or use of unity [sic: immunity] could be negotiated, the witness and counsel are dismissed." Thus at the end of her initial testimony, there had been no express Committee determination rejecting her privilege claim nor an advisement that she could be subject to a criminal contempt proceeding. There was, however, some hint of granting statutory use immunity that would compel her testimony. On June 28, 2013, the Committee approved a resolution rejecting Ms. Lerner's privilege claim on the ground that she had waived it by her voluntary statements.

Still subject to the original subpoena, Ms. Lerner was recalled by the Committee on March 5, 2014. Chairman Issa's opening statement recounted the events of the May 22, 2013 hearing and the fact of the Committee's finding that she had waived her privilege. He then stated that "if she continues to refuse to answer questions from Members while under subpoena, the Committee may proceed to consider whether she will be held in contempt." In answer to the first question posed by Chairman Issa, Ms. Lerner expressly stated in response that she had been advised by counsel that she had not waived her privilege and would continue to invoke her privilege, which she did in response to all the Chair's further questions. After his final question Chairman Issa adjourned the hearing without allowing further questions or remarks by Committee members, and granted her "leave of said Committee," stating, "Ms. Lerner, you're released." At no time during his questioning did the Chair explicitly demand an answer to his questions, expressly overrule her claim of privilege, or make it clear that her refusal to respond would result in a criminal contempt prosecution.

In 1955 the Supreme Court announced in a trilogy of rulings that in order to establish a proper legal foundation for a contempt prosecution, a jurisdictional committee must disallow the constitutional privilege objection and clearly apprise the witness that an answer is demanded. A witness will not be forced to guess whether or not a committee has accepted his or her objection. If the witness is not able to determine "with a reasonable degree of certainty that the committee demanded his answer despite his objection," and thus is not presented with a "clear-cut choice between compliance and non-compliance, between answering the question and risking the prosecution for contempt," no prosecution for contempt may lie. *Quinn v. United States,* 349 U.S. 155, 166, 167 (1955); *Empsak v. United States,* 349 U.S. 190, 202 (1955). In *Bart v. United States,* 349 U.S. 219 (1955), the Court found that at no time did the committee overrule petitioner's claim of self-incrimination or lack of pertinency, nor was he indirectly informed of the committee's position through a specific direction to answer. A committee member's suggestion that the chairman advise the witness of the possibility of contempt was rejected. The Court concluded that the consistent failure to advise the witness of the committee's position as to his objections left him to speculate about this risk of possible prosecution for contempt and did not give him a clear choice between standing with his objection and compliance with a committee ruling. Citing *Quinn,* the Court held that this defect in laying the necessary constitutional foundation for a contempt prosecution required reversal of the petitioner's conviction. 349 U.S. at 221-23. Subsequent appellate court rulings have adhered to the High Court's guidance. See, e.g., *Jackins v. United States,* 231 F. 2d 405 (9th Cir. 1959); *Fagerhaugh v. United* States, 232 F. 2d 803 (9th Cir. 1959).

In sum, at no stage in this proceeding did the witness receive the requisite clear rejections of her constitutional objections and direct demands for answers nor was it made unequivocally certain that her failure to respond would result in criminal contempt prosecution. The problematic Committee determination that Ms. Lerner had waived her privilege, see, e.g., *McCarthy v. Arndstein,* 262 U.S. 355. 359 (1926) and *In re Hitchings,* 850 F. 2d 180 (4th Cir. 1980), occurred after the May 2013 hearing. Chairman Issa's opening statement at the March 5, 2014 hearing, while referencing the waiver decision did not make it a substantive element of the Committee's current concern and was never mentioned again during his interrogation of the witness. More significantly, the Chairman's opening remarks were equivocal about the consequence of a failure

by Ms. Lerner to respond to his questions. As indicated above, he simply stated that "the Committee *may proceed to consider* whether she will be held in contempt." Combined with his closing remarks in the May 2013 hearing, where he indicated he would be discussing the possibility of granting the witness statutory immunity with the Justice Department to compel her testimony, there could be no certainty for the witness and her counsel that a contempt prosecution was inevitable. Finally, it may be reiterated that the Chairman during the course of his most recent questioning never expressly rejected Ms. Lerner's objections nor demanded that she respond.

I conclude that the requisite legal foundation for a criminal contempt of Congress prosecution mandated by the Supreme Court rulings in *Quinn, Emspak and Bart* have not been met and that such a proceeding against Ms. Lerner under 2 U.S.C. 194, if attempted, will be dismissed. Such a dismissal will likely also occur if the House seeks civil contempt enforcement.

You also inquire whether the waiver claim raised in the May 2013 hearing can be raised in a subsequent hearing to which Ms. Lerner might be again subpoenaed and thereby prevent her from invoking her Fifth Amendment rights. The courts have long recognized that a witness may waive the Fifth Amendment right to self-incrimination in one proceeding, and then invoke it later at a different proceeding on the same subject. See, e.g., *United States v. Burch*, 490 F.2d 1300, 1303 (8th Cir. 1974); *United States v. Licavoli,* 604 F. 2d 613, 623 (9th Cir. 1979); *United States v. Cain,* 544 F. 2d 1113,1117 (1st Cir. 1976); *In re Neff,* 206 F. 2d 149, 152 (3d Cir. 1953). See also, *United States v. Allman,* 594 F. 3d 981 (8th Cir. 2010) (acknowledging the continued vitality of the "same proceeding" doctrine: "We recognize that there is ample precedent for the rule that the waiver of the Fifth Amendment privilege in one proceeding does not waive that privilege in a subsequent proceeding."). Since Ms. Lerner was released from her subpoena obligations by the final adjournment of the Committee's hearing, a compelled testimonial appearance at a subsequent hearing on the same subject would be a different proceeding.

In addition, Stanley M. Brand has reviewed this memorandum and fully subscribes to its contents and analysis.

Mr. Brand served as General Counsel for the House of Representatives from 1976 to 1983 and was the House's chief legal officer responsible for representing the House, its members, officers, and employees in connection with legal procedures and challenges to the conduct of their official activities. Mr. Brand represented the House and its committees before both federal district and appellate courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court, in actions arising from the subpoena of records by the House and in contempt proceedings in connection with congressional demands.

In addition to the analysis set forth above, Mr. Brand explained that a review of the record from last week's hearing reveals that at no time did the Chair expressly overrule the objection and order Ms. Lerner to answer on pain of contempt. Making it clear to the witness that she has a clear cut choice between compliance and assertion of the privilege is an essential element of the offense and the absence of such a demand is fatal to any subsequent prosecution.