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Attorney General Eric Holder held in contempt of Congress

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The House has voted to hold Attorney General [Eric Holder](#) in contempt of Congress over his failure to turn over documents related to the [Fast and Furious](#) scandal, the first time Congress has taken such a dramatic move against a sitting Cabinet official.

The vote was 255-67, with 17 Democrats voting in support of a criminal contempt resolution, which authorizes Republicans leaders to seek criminal charges against Holder. This Democratic support came despite a round of behind-the-scenes lobbying by senior White House and Justice officials - as well as pressure from party leaders - to support Holder.

Two Republicans, Reps. Steve LaTourette (Ohio) Scott Rigell (Va.), voted against the contempt resolution.

Another civil contempt resolution, giving the green light for the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee to sue the Justice Department to get the Fast and Furious documents, passed by a 258-95 margin. Twenty-one Democrats voted for that measure.

But dozens of other Democrats marched off the floor in protest during the vote, adding even more drama to a tumultuous moment in the House chamber.

The heated House floor fight over Holder capped a historic day in Washington, coming just hours after the Supreme Court, just across the street from the Capitol, issued its landmark ruling upholding most of Barack Obama's health care law. The passions of the day were evident inside the Capitol, where Democrats accused Republicans of ginning up the contempt vote for political purposes while Republicans continued to charge the Justice Department with a cover up on the Fast and Furious scandal.

The fight over the Holder contempt resolution also drew intense interest from outside groups ranging from the NAACP to the National Rifle Association.

In a statement released by his office, Holder blasted the contempt votes as "politically motivated" and "misguided," and he singled out Rep. Darrell Issa (Calif.), chairman of the Oversight and Government Reform Committee and lead Republican on the Fast and Furious probe, for special criticism.

"Today's vote is the regrettable culmination of what became a misguided - and politically motivated - investigation during an election year," Holder said in his statement. "By advancing it over the past year and a half, Congressman Issa and others have focused on politics over public safety. Instead of trying to correct the problems that led to a series of flawed law enforcement operations, and instead of helping us find ways to better protect the brave law enforcement officers, like Agent Brian Terry, who keep us safe - they have led us to this unnecessary and unwarranted outcome."

Holder added: "Today's vote may make for good political theater in the minds of some, but it is – at base – both a crass effort and a grave disservice to the American people. They expect – and deserve – far better."

White House officials also slammed House Republicans for the unprecedented contempt vote. White House Communications Director Dan Pfeiffer said GOP congressional leaders "pushed for political theater rather than legitimate congressional oversight. Over the past fourteen months, the Justice Department accommodated congressional investigators, producing 7,600 pages of documents, and testifying at eleven congressional hearings... But unfortunately, a politically-motivated agenda prevailed and instead of engaging with the President in efforts to create jobs and grow the economy, today we saw the House of Representatives perform a transparently political stunt.

However, Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio), in a brief interview with POLITICO, blamed Holder for the standoff. Boehner said the Justice Department wanted to turn over some Fast and Furious documents - but not all - if the House agreed to drop the contempt resolution, a deal that neither Boehner nor Issa was prepared to make.

"The idea that we're going to turn over some documents, and whatever we turn over is all you're gonna get and you have to guarantee that you're never going to seek contempt, no deal," Boehner said.

Boehner added that Holder never sought a personal meeting with him to resolve the fight, despite suggestions from some Obama administration officials that Holder asked to do so.

(Also on POLITICO: Report: Holder said no 'BS' on guns)

Issa also said the House had to take such a move in order to get to the bottom of the Fast and Furious scandal.

"Throughout this process, I have reiterated my desire to reach a settlement that would allow us to cancel today's vote," Issa said. "Our purpose has never been to hold the Attorney General in contempt. Our purpose has always been to get the information that the Committee needs to complete its work, and to which it is entitled."

Issa also pointed out that then Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) backed a call for a contempt resolution against the Bush White House over the firing of U.S. attorneys back in 2008, which he raised to counter Democratic charges of partisanship.

The practical, immediate impact of the contempt votes will be minimal. Holder remains as attorney general with strong backing from Obama, and any criminal referral after the contempt vote is unlikely to go far.

In a floor speech before the vote, Boehner stressed that Holder and the Justice Department needed to be held accountable for not providing sufficient answers to Congress about what happened during Fast and Furious.

"Now, I don't take this matter lightly. I frankly hoped it would never come to this," Boehner said. "But no Justice Department is above the law and no Justice Department is above the Constitution, which each of us has sworn to uphold."

(Also on POLITICO: Brown: Eric Holder should resign)

But the GOP-led move infuriated other Democrats, especially minority lawmakers, who see racism and unbridled partisanship in the Republican drive to sanction the first African-American to hold the attorney general post in U.S. history.

The Democratic walkout was led by the Congressional Black Caucus, many of whom gathered outside the Capitol while their GOP colleagues moved against Holder.

Rep. Elijah Cummings (Md.), the top Democrat on the Oversight and Government Reform, charged that Republicans, led by Issa, had been unfairly targeting Holder for months.

"They are finally about to get the prize they have been seeking for more than a year – holding the attorney general of the United States in contempt," Cummings said. "In reality, it is a sad failure. A failure of leadership, a failure of our constitutional obligations and failure of our responsibilities to the American people."

Rep. Gerald Connolly (D-Va.), who serves on the Oversight panel, called the vote "a craven, crass partisan move that brings dishonor to this body."

A procedural motion by Rep. John Dingell (D-Mich.), calling for further investigation before any contempt vote, was defeated by Republicans.

During the floor debate, a group of nine black lawmakers, led by Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee (D-Texas), raised a question of the privileges of the House, accusing Issa of interfering with the investigation and withholding critical information from Democrats. The motion disapproved of Issa for "interfering with ongoing criminal investigations, insisting on a personal attack against the attorney general of the United States and for calling the attorney general of the United States a liar on national television," which "discredit[ed] ... the integrity of the House." The motion was not allowed to proceed.

For his part, Issa insisted that the House must act in order to get to the bottom of what happened in the botched Fast and Furious program.

During this under cover operation, federal agents tracked the sale of roughly 2,000 weapons to straw buyers working for Mexican drug cartels. The sting operation failed, and weapons related to the Fast and Furious program were found at the shooting scene when a Border Patrol agent was killed in Dec. 2010.

Relying on what they said was inaccurate information supplied by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives - which comes under DOJ - senior Justice officials told lawmakers in Feb. 2011 that no guns were allowed to "walk" to Mexico. That letter was later withdrawn by the Justice Department as inaccurate.

Issa has been investigating what happened during Fast and Furious for 16 months, and he subpoenaed the Justice Department last October. Since that time, his panel has been squabbling over what documents will be turned over. Justice officials note that 7,600 pages of Fast and Furious material has already been given to Issa, but the California Republican has demanded more.

Obama asserted executive privilege on some of the documents Issa is seeking shortly before the Oversight and Government voted on party lines to approve a contempt resolution against Holder.

Despite a face-to-face session between Issa and Holder recently, the two men never reached a compromise to end the standoff.

Since the Justice Department would have to seek an indictment of Holder - a department he oversees as attorney general - no criminal charges will be brought against him. Previous administrations, including the Bush administration in 2008, refused to seek criminal charges against White House officials when a Democratic-run House passed a criminal contempt resolution over the firing of U.S. attorneys.

Boehner's office, though, is expected to submit a criminal referral to the U.S. attorney for the District of Columbia, Ronald Machen, in the next few days, according to a Republican official.

Issa's aides have already begun discussions with the House General Counsel's office over the anticipated lawsuit against DOJ, but it is not clear when that the legal challenge will be filed.

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