

WASHINGTON (AP) — Attorney General Eric Holder on Thursday became the first Cabinet member to be held in contempt by a chamber of Congress, a rebuke pushed by Republicans seeking to unearth the facts behind a bungled gun-tracking operation. Most Democrats dismissed the action as a political stunt.

The House vote on the criminal contempt resolution was 255-67, with more than 100 Democrats walking out in a boycott. African-American lawmakers led the walkout as members filed up the aisle and out of the House chamber to protest the action against Holder, the nation's first black attorney general. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., joined the boycott, saying Republicans had gone "over the edge" in their partisanship.

Seventeen Democrats voted with Republicans in favor of the resolution, while two Republicans — Reps. Scott Rigell of Virginia and Steven LaTourette of Ohio — voted against it.

The National Rifle Association pressed hard for the contempt resolution, leaning on members of both parties who want to stay in the NRA's good graces. The group said the administration tried to use the gun operation, called Fast and Furious, "to advance its gun-control agenda."

Nebraska Republicans Lee Terry, Adrian Smith and Jeff Fortenberry, Iowa Republicans Steve King and Tom Latham, and Iowa Democrat Leonard Boswell all voted for the resolution.

"Congress was forced to act and seek the truth because the attorney general and the Department of Justice chose to ignore their obligations to this governing body by refusing to provide a full and complete accounting of a botched federal operation," Terry said.

Holder said afterward that the vote was merely a politically motivated act in an election year.

"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 they deserve — far better," he said in New Orleans.

The attorney general said the House vote would result in an unnecessary court fight.

Republicans "were not interested in bringing an end to this dispute or even obtaining the information they say they wanted," he said. "Ultimately, their goal was the vote that — with the help of special interests — they now have engineered."

The vote on a criminal contempt resolution sent the matter to the U.S. attorney for the District of Columbia, who serves under Holder. In previous contempt cases, federal prosecutors in the nation's capital have refused to act on congressional contempt citations against members of their own administration.

A separate vote on civil contempt passed 258-95, with 21 Democrats supporting it. It will allow the House to hire its own attorney to bring a civil lawsuit in an effort to force Holder to turn over the documents.

In that vote, Terry, Smith, King, Latham and Boswell were in favor. Fortenberry didn't vote.

Under Operation Fast and Furious, about 2,500 illegal weapons were circulated on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. Two of those weapons were recovered at the scene of the fatal shooting of U.S. Border Patrol Agent Brian Terry in 2010.

Holder has said he didn't learn of the tactics in the operation until after it was the subject of news reports. Since then, he has banned the use of similar methods and asked the department's inspector general to investigate the operation.

The Justice Department has refused to turn over subpoenaed documents to the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, saying it had already provided more than 7,000 pages of materials related to Fast and Furious.

President Barack Obama last week asserted executive privilege, blocking release of the additional materials, which cover a period last year after the operation had been shut down.

During Thursday's debate, Republicans said they were seeking answers for Brian Terry's family. Democrats insisted that they, too, wanted the family to have all the facts, but argued that only a more thorough, bipartisan investigation would accomplish that. Terry's family issued a statement through the Brian Terry Foundation, saying: "The Terry family takes no pleasure in the contempt vote against Attorney General Eric Holder. Such a vote should not have been necessary. The Justice Department should have released the documents related to Fast and Furious months ago."

No Cabinet member had ever been held in contempt by either chamber of Congress, said Senate Historian Donald Ritchie. The only head of an executive agency held in contempt was Anne Gorsuch Burford, who served as administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency under President Ronald Reagan, Ritchie said. The House cited her for contempt in 1982.

Holder became the first attorney general held in contempt by a congressional committee since Janet Reno in 1998. House GOP leaders opted against a floor vote on Reno, who served under President Bill Clinton.

World-Herald staff writer Joseph Morton contributed to this report, which includes material from Bloomberg News and Mc-Clatchy Newspapers.