House Democrats issue wide-ranging subpoenas in Trump investigation

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Four committees of the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives issued subpoenas and document demands Monday directed at the Trump White House, the Trump Organization (Trump's family business) and the 2016 Trump campaign, in a coordinated effort to investigate a wide range of allegations against the US president.

The broadest and most politically significant document request came from the House Judiciary Committee, which has jurisdiction over any effort to impeach Trump for "high crimes and misdemeanors," under the US Constitution. The committee sent document demands to 81 individuals and organizations associated with Trump.

Those targeted included his two sons, Don Jr. and Eric, who co-manage the Trump Organization, as well as the organization's CFO Allen Weisselberg, and several other officials of the business. Weisselberg was named last week more than 30 times in the congressional testimony of former Trump lawyer and "fixer" Michael Cohen, as the man responsible for implementing a series of questionable tax avoidance schemes, bank loan applications, and payoffs, at Trump's direction.

Three other House committees, on Intelligence, Foreign Affairs and Government Oversight, sent letters to the White House and the State Department, demanding access to government translators who worked on Trump-Putin meetings and telephone conversations, as well as the transcripts and tape recordings of those conversations.

While Trump said that the White House would cooperate with the Judiciary Committee document requests, it is unlikely that the White House or State Department will comply with demands to produce translators and other records of talks between Trump and Putin. Such witnesses and materials have been treated as confidential by previous presidents.

The Judiciary Committee request encompasses virtually every publicly reported allegation against Trump. It includes key witnesses who have testified before the Russia investigation headed by Special Counsel Robert Mueller, including former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort, his former top aide Rick Gates, former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn and other former campaign and White House aides, as well as current Trump personal lawyer Jay Sekulow.

Significantly, the committee sent requests to WikiLeaks and its founder and former editor Julian Assange, in an effort to perpetuate the smear campaign that the group acted as a conduit for Russian government hackers who allegedly obtained internal emails of the Democratic National Committee and Hillary Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta and supplied them to the whistleblower website.

The purpose of this smear campaign is twofold: to support the ongoing efforts by the US intelligence agencies to criminalize WikiLeaks and extradite Assange to the United States for trial on espionage and conspiracy charges, and to cover up the actual content of the material published by WikiLeaks, which discredited Clinton by documenting efforts by the DNC to rig the primary contest against her main rival, Senator Bernie Sanders, and making public the text of speeches Clinton gave to Wall Street audiences, promising to take care of their interests.

The Judiciary Committee demanded documents from nearly every person named by Cohen in his public testimony before the House Government Oversight Committee last week, including the Trump Organization as an entity, as well as its top officers, Weisselberg and Trump's two oldest sons.

The committee sent a document request to Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and adviser, but not to Ivanka Trump, the president's older daughter and Kushner's wife, although Cohen named her as one of those informed of his activities as a go-between in negotiations for the building of a Trump Tower in Moscow.

Committee Chairman Jerrold Nadler of New York announced the document requests in an appearance on the ABC News Sunday morning interview program "This Week." He underscored that the Democrats were looking into many areas of Trump's business activities that had nothing to do with Russia or the Mueller investigation. He

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indicated that his panel will investigate allegations of violations of campaign finance laws—through the payoffs to two women who had alleged sexual relationships with Trump—as well as violation of the emoluments clause of the Constitution, which bars a president from receiving payments or things of value from foreign governments or persons, as well as the use of political office for personal gain.

While Nadler avoided using the word “impeachment” in any of the letters or the press release announcing them, his committee has jurisdiction over impeachment and several House Democrats have already introduced resolutions of impeachment which have been referred to the committee for consideration. Nadler said on ABC that he believed Trump was guilty of obstruction of justice by firing FBI Director James Comey and making repeated public statements criticizing the Russia investigation. Obstruction of justice was one of the charges brought against President Richard Nixon in 1974, and against President Bill Clinton in 1998.

House Republicans charged that the Democrats were ramping up the machinery of congressional investigations because they expected the Mueller report would not recommend charges against Trump, whether in relation to allegations of collusion with Russia during the 2016 presidential campaign or obstruction of justice after Trump took office.

The legal procedure being followed begins with the letters demanding documents. Those who fail to comply within two weeks will then receive subpoenas, which can be issued on the authority of Nadler alone. In the event that witnesses refuse to testify or claim executive privilege, the Judiciary Committee could issue a contempt citation, but it would then be up to the executive branch—either the Justice Department or the US Attorney for the Southern District of New York—to compel testimony or document production using the threat of arrest.

In the likely event that the executive branch refuses to take action, the House of Representatives could seek a court order, an action taken on at least one occasion under the Obama administration, when Attorney General Eric Holder was found in contempt by the House, then under Republican control.

The House Intelligence Committee is reportedly investigating the Trump Organization’s efforts to build a Trump Tower in Moscow, as well as any discussions the president may have had with key witnesses like Paul Manafort and Michael Cohen on the subject of a possible presidential pardon. Michael Cohen testified behind closed doors for eight hours Thursday on those subjects, among others, and he is to return March 6 for a final day of secret testimony.

House Judiciary Committee Democrats said that there would be additional document requests besides the 81 notices sent out Monday. This would also include demanding the Justice Department turn over the final report of Special Counsel Mueller, which Trump administration officials have suggested might be withheld, particularly if Mueller declines to recommend either indictment or impeachment of the president.

The House Government Oversight Committee has requested White House documents on the issuing of security clearances, particularly as it relates to the long-delayed and only partial issuance of a clearance to Jared Kushner, who has served as Trump’s principal aide for Mideast diplomacy. Committee Chairman Elijah Cummings gave the White House a Monday deadline to respond to document requests filed as long ago as January.

Two other House committees have also taken steps to investigate Trump. The House Ways and Means Committee has begun the process for obtaining Trump’s tax returns, which the billionaire president has long refused to make public, although the Committee has yet to file a formal request with the Department of the Treasury and IRS.

The House Financial Services Committee, chaired by Representative Maxine Waters, a frequent target of racially abusive language by Trump, is seeking documents related to the applications by the Trump Organization for bank loans. According to Cohen, the Trump Organization regularly overvalued its assets in loan applications while grossly under-valuing them for tax purposes.

The author also recommends:

The Trump presidency: From the Manhattan underworld to the White House

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