

Conflicts flare between Trump and House Democrats

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The conflict between the Trump administration and congressional Democrats intensified along a wide range of issues Monday. Attorney General William Barr refused to supply an unredacted copy of the Mueller report to the House Judiciary Committee and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin rebuffed a request by the House Ways and Committee for six years of Trump's tax returns.

The divisions conform to the reactionary and right-wing framework of US politics. Trump is basing his position on claims of unlimited presidential power, while the Democrats are escalating the anti-Russia campaign that has been the focus of their opposition to Trump since he took office.

Judiciary Committee Chairman Jerrold Nadler said the panel would vote Wednesday to hold Barr in contempt of Congress, the first step in a protracted process that is unlikely to lead to any actual sanctions against the attorney general, since a contempt citation would be sent to the Justice Department for enforcement against its own leader.

"Even in redacted form, the Special Counsel's report offers disturbing evidence and analysis that President Trump engaged in obstruction of justice at the highest levels," a statement released by the committee argued. "Congress must see the full report and underlying evidence to determine how to best move forward with oversight, legislation, and other constitutional responsibilities."

The statement added, "that includes whether to approve articles of impeachment with respect to the President or any other Administration official, as well as the consideration of other steps such as censure or issuing criminal, civil or administrative referrals."

Several rank-and-file Democratic representatives have already suggested impeachment charges, but the Democratic leadership, including both Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Chairman Nadler, have rejected any immediate

move in that direction.

A contempt citation similar to that proposed against Barr was approved by a Republican-controlled House against then-Attorney General Eric Holder during the Obama administration. The contempt citation was effectively killed by non-enforcement on the part of the Justice Department. The House went to court seeking a judicial order, but the process took so long that Holder was no longer attorney general when the court order was finalized.

Barr refused to appear before the House Judiciary Committee Thursday, the day after he had testified at length before its Senate counterpart, brushing aside most Democratic queries with long-winded filibustering, quibbles and hair-splitting, protected by the Republican majority from any serious follow-up.

Under the procedure set by the House panel, the committee's majority and minority counsel would have questioned Barr for 30 minutes each. The attorney general was clearly unwilling to undergo such an interrogation, which would likely have focused on differences between Barr and Special Counsel Robert Mueller over whether there was evidence of obstruction of justice by Trump in relation to the Russia investigation.

The House panel is expected to summon Mueller to testify about his report and his differences with Barr. While Barr told the Senate panel that he had no objection to Mueller testifying, President Trump reversed the administration's position in a tweet over the weekend, when he declared that Mueller should not testify: "No redos for the Dems!"

Mueller is still technically a Justice Department employee and under the direction of the president, but his appointment is expected to lapse shortly, making Trump's opposition to his testimony a moot point from then on.

Democratic congressional leaders and presidential

candidates continued to flog the dead horse of supposed Russian intervention in the 2016 elections, even though the Mueller report was categorical that there was no evidence of collaboration between the Trump campaign and Russia.

The actual evidence of Russian “meddling” is limited to unsupported claims by US intelligence agencies that Russian operatives spent under \$100,000 on Facebook ads unfavorable to Hillary Clinton (in a \$5 billion election!), and equally unsupported claims that Russian hackers obtained internal Democratic Party emails that were leaked to WikiLeaks and made public.

The emails were greatly embarrassing to Clinton because they were true. They documented Democratic National Committee efforts to rig the primaries for Clinton over Bernie Sanders and provided the text of Clinton closed-door speeches to Wall Street audiences in which she promised to look out for the bankers’ interests.

Nonetheless, Senator Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, a Democratic presidential candidate, denounced Trump for his recent phone conversation with Russian President Putin. “We know that his own FBI director has said that 2018 [the midterm election] was a dress rehearsal and that Russia is going to try this again. His director of intelligence said that they’re getting bolder,” she said on CNN’s “State of the Union.”

“All of this happens, and what does he do? He goes and cuddles up to Vladimir Putin again,” she said. “That is wrong. And he then makes it worse by calling it a hoax.”

Another presidential hopeful, Representative Eric Swalwell of California, who sits on the Judiciary Committee, speaking on the CBS program “Face the Nation,” said that the Trump administration could not be relied upon to protect future US elections from Russia. As for the current confrontation over the Mueller report, “I’m recommending that we impeach Atty. Gen. Barr so that we can get the information we need to protect our country.”

Adding fuel to the fire, nearly 400 former federal prosecutors signed on to a statement circulated among career Justice Department officials—in both Democratic and Republican administrations—declaring that the evidence assembled by Mueller would have been sufficient for criminal charges of obstruction of justice against Trump. The statement was released to the media Monday afternoon.

“Each of us believes that the conduct of President Trump described in Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s report would, in the case of any other person not covered

by the Office of Legal Counsel policy against indicting a sitting President, result in multiple felony charges for obstruction of justice,” the former prosecutors wrote.

The signatories including several prominent Republicans, including William Weld, a former deputy attorney general and governor of Massachusetts, who is running against Trump for the Republican presidential nomination; and Paul Rosenzweig, a top deputy to independent counsel Kenneth Starr, who spearheaded the investigations that led to the impeachment of President Bill Clinton.

Late on Monday, Treasury Secretary Mnuchin sent a letter to House Democrats denying the Ways and Means Committee access to Trump’s tax returns. The power of the committee to review any individual’s tax returns is written explicitly into a 1924 law, passed after the Teapot Dome scandal, but it has never before been used against a president, because no president in the modern era has refused, like Trump, to release his tax returns for public scrutiny.

In his letter, Mnuchin wrote: “In reliance on the advice of the Department of Justice, I have determined that the Committee’s request lacks a legitimate legislative purpose, and ... the Department is therefore not authorized to disclose the requested returns and return information.”

House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Richard Neal has threatened legal action to compel the Treasury to release the returns. The Democratic-controlled New York state legislature is considering a bill that would allow the state tax department to turn Trump’s state returns over to Congress, and specifically to the Ways and Means Committee.



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