

Impeachment crisis: Democrats, Trump maneuver ahead of televised hearings

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With public televised hearings set to begin on Wednesday, both President Trump and the House Democrats spearheading the impeachment inquiry maneuvered for political advantage over the weekend.

The Democrats have set the open hearings to be phase two of a three-phase approach to impeachment: first, the closed-door depositions before the House Intelligence Committee, whose transcripts have mostly been made public; second, the televised hearings before the same committee, with those believed to be most effective against the president selected as the first-round witnesses; and finally a referral to the House Judiciary Committee, which is expected to decide on articles of impeachment and send them to the full House for a final vote sometime next month.

The emphasis on speed suggests that the Democratic leadership wants to insure that an impeachment vote and possible Senate trial are completed before the Democratic presidential primaries begin in February. Neither House Speaker Nancy Pelosi nor any other top congressional Democrat expects the Republican-controlled Senate to remove Trump from office, which requires a two-thirds majority.

The line-up of witnesses for the first week of televised hearings is remarkable since it consists entirely of State Department officials who still work for the Trump administration testifying publicly against their own boss. Acting ambassador to Ukraine William Taylor will be the lead witness, followed by Deputy Assistant Secretary of State George Kent, and then former ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch.

As the *New York Times* noted Sunday, in a front-page profile headlined “From Dissent to Rallying Cry in State Dept., Diplomats Lead Way in Trump Inquiry:”

“Rarely has the State Department, often seen as a staid pillar of the establishment, been the center of a

revolt against a president and his top appointees ... In fact, when open impeachment hearings begin next week, the first to testify will be diplomats, appearing despite directives from the White House for administration officials to defy Congress on such requests.”

The report continues, “Like the military or the CIA, the State Department is its own separate culture and one that views the world in terms very different than Mr. Trump’s.” Linking these three components of the national-security apparatus—the Pentagon brass, the intelligence operatives and the diplomats—only underscores the real constituency to which the Democratic Party is appealing through its impeachment inquiry.

The Democratic leadership has explicitly forbidden any consideration of Trump’s actions against immigrants and other sections of the working class, or his defiance of the Constitution to build the border wall and lay the foundations for an executive dictatorship in America. The sole basis of the impeachment is what Trump has done to offend the national-security apparatus and leading Democrats like former Vice President Joe Biden.

This is underscored by the three questions released Thursday by House Intelligence Committee chair Adam Schiff as the basis for the televised hearings. They concern 1) whether Trump requested that the Ukrainian government initiate investigations into his political rivals in the US; 2) whether Trump used his powers as president to induce Ukraine to launch the investigations, either by holding up military aid or offering an Oval Office meeting to the president of Ukraine; and 3) whether Trump and his top aides tried to obstruct, suppress or cover up information related to the first two issues.

In that context, Democrats on the House Intelligence Committee said they would treat all instances of Trump officials either refusing to testify or refusing to supply documents as evidence of obstruction. This applies particularly to officials of the Office of Management and Budget, who executed Trump's orders to hold up the military aid to Ukraine, and who have all refused to obey subpoenas by the committee, as well as Mick Mulvaney, the former head of OMB who is now Trump's acting White House chief of staff.

On the Republican side of this conflict within the US ruling elite, there was an air of desperation and clutching at straws, with constantly shifting efforts by House and Senate Republicans to find a credible basis for defending Trump against the attacks of sections of the military-intelligence apparatus they support no less vociferously than the Democrats.

Trump was focused mainly on preventing defections among House and Senate Republicans, concerned that even one vote for impeachment could trigger a much wider disintegration in the party ranks. The president kept up a constant stream of tweets, combining vilification of the Democrats with threats that treason charges could be brought against his critics within the state apparatus and even against their attorneys.

The public posture of House Republicans is denunciation of the impeachment proceedings as an anti-democratic sham, while at the same time making demands for witnesses, such as Hunter Biden, the son of the former vice-president, which they know will be denied by the Democratic majority. They have also listed Nellie Ohr, a researcher for Fusion GPS, which was hired by the Democratic National Committee to do opposition research on Trump, with a focus on Russia, and Alexandra Chalupa, a Ukrainian American activist who worked for the Obama administration and the DNC.

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy has named one of the most rabid Trump defenders, Ohio Representative Jim Jordan, to a temporary position on the House Intelligence Committee, giving the ultra-right congressman a lead role in the televised hearing. Jordan is the former head of the House Freedom Caucus, the most extreme-right faction of the congressional Republicans.

One of the murkier aspects of the impeachment inquiry is the role of former National Security Advisor

John Bolton, who was strongly opposed to Trump's efforts to twist arms in Kiev and was fired by Trump on September 10, one day before the administration reversed itself and delivered the military aid to Ukraine.

Bolton's lawyer, Charles J. Cooper, expressed consternation that the House Intelligence Committee had decided not to subpoena Bolton, indicating that his client knows about "many relevant meetings and conversations" related to Ukraine. Bolton did not appear voluntarily November 7, citing a White House ban on testifying, but he indicated he would honor a subpoena if a federal judge ruled that it took precedence.

The House committee declined to issue a subpoena for Bolton, and dropped a subpoena for his deputy Charles Kupperman, who took the same position, on the grounds that waiting for a court ruling would delay the entire impeachment drive by weeks if not months.



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