House and Senate deadlocked over Trump impeachment trial

Barry Grey
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With both houses of Congress having reassembled after a two-week holiday recess, the impasse remains between the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives and the Republican-controlled Senate over the procedure to be followed in an eventual Senate trial of Donald Trump, the third president in US history to be impeached by the House.

The deadlock over the trial, itself an expression of the intensity of the political crisis in Washington, has now been overtaken by the war crisis triggered by Trump's illegal drone missile assassination of Iranian Gen. Quassem Suleimani. That act of war was itself a response to mounting geopolitical, economic and social contradictions confronting American imperialism, and, above all, the growth of social tensions and working class resistance within the United States.

Following the December 18 party-line vote by the House to approve two articles of impeachment against Trump, one for abuse of power and the other for contempt of Congress, Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi announced that she would not forward the impeachment articles to the Senate until she was satisfied that the Republican leadership would ensure a "fair" trial, including testimony from new witnesses who had not appeared before the House impeachment inquiry.

Senate rules preclude the commencement of an impeachment trial until the upper chamber has officially received the impeachment articles from the House. As a result, the start of the trial has been indefinitely delayed.

While the expected outcome of a trial is a vote to acquit Trump (conviction and removal from office require a two-thirds vote of the 100-member chamber), the deadlock over the process reflects the intensity of the impeachment crisis.

On Tuesday, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (Republican from Kentucky) told the Republican caucus that he had the votes to begin a trial without complying with Democratic demands that the Senate commit itself to hearing new witnesses and gaining access to documents that had been withheld from the House on the orders of the White House. With the Republicans holding a 53-47 majority, it would take four Republican defections to pass a procedural framework ensuring the admission of new testimony.

McConnell's announcement followed the statement Monday by John Bolton, former national security adviser to Trump, that he was reversing his refusal to testify during the House hearings and would testify in a Senate trial if subpoenaed. A notorious neo-con war hawk who has advocated wars for regime change against Iran, North Korea and Venezuela, and who was an architect of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Bolton clashed with Trump over the latter's decision to temporarily withhold $391 million in military aid to the anti-Russian regime in Ukraine. He was forced out of his White House post in September.

It was the decision to withhold the military aid from Ukraine, which is fighting a US proxy war against Russian-backed separatists and is seen by Washington as a front-line state in its drive to cripple and ultimately carve up Russia, not Trump's alleged solicitation of Ukrainian interference in the 2020 election, that triggered a furious conflict within the state and the Trump administration itself. This conflict, which erupted more than a month before the notorious July 25 phone call between Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, convinced the Democratic leadership, acting in concert with the CIA, to proceed with impeachment.

McConnell's announcement on Tuesday was designed to scotch media speculation that Bolton's announcement would compel the Senate Republicans to back down and agree to the Democrats' terms for the trial of Trump. He remains adamant, following talks with Trump, that the procedural framework will allow for opening arguments by the House impeachment managers and Trump's defense, followed by questions to both sides from the senators, with the issue of witnesses and new documents to be decided following these first two phases.

Pelosi responded to McConnell's statement by telling Democrats at a closed-door meeting Tuesday that she would send the articles of impeachment to the Senate "soon," but not until she finds out more about the procedure for

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conducting the Senate trial.

While the House reconvened on Tuesday, the Senate reassembled last Friday. Its first session was dominated by dueling floor speeches on the impeachment trial by McConnell and Democratic Minority Leader Charles Schumer of New York.

McConnell chided the Democrats for delaying the trial, accusing them of getting "cold feet" after having voted for impeachment. "Instead of sending the articles to the Senate, they flinched," he declared. McConnell claimed the delay was due to the absence of any genuine case for impeachment against Trump.

He justified his refusal to agree in advance to new witnesses by citing the 100-0 vote in the impeachment trial of Bill Clinton in 1999 to begin the process with the presentation of arguments and questions from the senators, while leaving the issue of witnesses and documents to be determined at a later point in the trial.

In his reply, Schumer pointed out that in the current case, unlike the Clinton precedent, the White House sought to block all testimony and access to documents by ordering an across-the-board boycott of the House impeachment inquiry by current and former administration officials.

He accused the Republicans of a "cover-up" and named four witnesses whose testimony the Democrats are demanding. The four are Bolton, acting White House Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney, his top aide Robert Blair, and Michael Duffey, the associate director of national security programs at the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

This list is significant both for the individuals it includes and those it excludes. All four were intimately involved in the intra-state conflict over Trump's withholding of military aid to Ukraine, but only marginally involved in the White House effort to pressure Ukrainian President Volodymyr to announce a corruption investigation into former Vice President and 2020 presidential candidate Joe Biden and his son Hunter.

The July 25 phone call between Trump and Zelensky was seized on by Trump's opponents in the intelligence, military and foreign policy establishment to claim a "quid pro quo" linking resumption of the military aid to the announcement of an investigation. Based mainly on this single phone call, the Democrats constructed the central charge in their impeachment drive—that Trump abused his power by soliciting foreign intervention in the 2020 election against a leading contender for the Democratic nomination.

Notably absent from the list of witnesses demanded by the Democrats is the individual most directly involved in Trump's efforts to pressure the Ukrainian regime to investigate the Bidens—Trump's personal lawyer and the former mayor of New York City, Rudy Giuliani.

That the Democrats' impeachment drive is essentially designed to mobilize dissident factions within the state against Trump and effect a more aggressive posture against Russia—and has nothing to do with the defense of democratic rights—is further underscored by the central place in the Democrats' agitation given to a recent article published by the national security blog *Just Security*.

The article, published January 2, cites unredacted emails from White House officials documenting the conflict between the White House and the Pentagon over the withholding of the military aid package and naming Trump himself as the author of the hold. (The latter is hardly a revelation, since Trump has boasted of ordering the hold on the military aid, claiming he did so as part of a campaign against corruption in Ukraine.)

The email cited most widely in the press is an August 30 message from OMB official Duffey to the acting Pentagon comptroller, which states: "Clear direction from POTUS to hold."

The *New York Times* published an editorial on January 4 based on the *Just Security* report arguing that the "new evidence" it provided proved the Democrats' allegations against Trump and undermined the position of McConnell and the Republicans on the Senate trial.

Schumer directly cited the article and Duffey's email in his speech Friday on the Senate floor, claiming that they "further expose the serious concerns raised by Trump administration officials about the propriety and legality of the president's decision to delay military assistance to Ukraine."

These developments underscore the right-wing, pro-war basis of the Democrats' impeachment drive and the fact that the political conflict in Washington is between two reactionary factions of the ruling class and the state, both of which, despite their bitter tactical differences, agree on the pursuit of war as an instrument of imperialist foreign policy and an intensification of attacks on the democratic and social rights of the working class.

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