
Chaos at the House as Republicans storm secure Intel hearing

23/10/2019



Roughly two-dozen House Republicans on Wednesday stormed a closed-door deposition in secure House Intelligence Committee spaces to rail against the Democratic-led impeachment inquiry, a political stunt ratcheting up the GOP complaints about the process that threw the deposition into doubt.

The conservative lawmakers, led by Republican Rep. Matt Gaetz of Florida, barged into the deposition and demanded they be allowed to see the closed-door proceedings.

A source in the room said that as the witness, Deputy Assistant Defense Secretary Laura Cooper, was sitting down to testify, the Republicans stormed through the room's three different doors. Rep. Bradley Byrne of Alabama was yelling at House Intelligence Chairman Adam Schiff, but the California Democrat did not engage, the source said. Other Democrats, including Rep. Val Demings of Florida, shouted back at both Byrne and Republican Rep. Louie Gohmert of Texas, who were yelling about the process.

"It was closest thing I've seen around here to mass civil unrest as a member of Congress," according to a source in the room.

Cooper left the room while the Republicans refused to vacate the space. The source says the Capitol Police and sergeant at arms have been consulted as members refuse to leave the room, and lawmakers say there are ongoing negotiations about how to end the standoff.

The Republicans even walked into the hearing room with their electronics, according to Democratic Rep. Gerry Connolly of Virginia, which is prohibited in the space, known as a SCIF — a sensitive compartmented information facility — because it's a secure room used for discussing and handling classified information. GOP Rep. Mike Conaway of Texas, who is on the House Intelligence Committee, collected the electronics.

"All of us put our electronics in boxes outside," Connolly said. "That SCIF is used by Congress for lots of highly classified purposes. To compromise that to make a point, is deeply troubling."

The Republicans say they forced their way into the secure spaces because Democrats are holding impeachment depositions behind closed doors, denying the public the ability to see what's being said by witnesses that could be used to impeach President Donald Trump.

"Show your face where we can all see the travesty that you are trying to foist on America and the degradation of our Republic that you're engaged in," said Rep. Mo Brooks of Alabama.

But the GOP complaints about the process — Republicans who have been in the room have made the same argument about public hearings and releasing transcripts following nearly every deposition — comes as Republicans have focused their objections on the process rather than the substance of what the witnesses have said.

The GOP disruption comes one day after the committees heard from the top US diplomat in Ukraine, Bill Taylor, who told lawmakers in a lengthy opening statement that Trump had demanded Ukraine launch an investigation to help him politically before US security aid to Ukraine would be released, undercutting White House claims there was no quid pro quo with Ukraine.

Some Republicans in Congress have expressed concerns with Trump's conduct following Taylor's testimony, while continuing to press Democrats to change how they conduct the impeachment inquiry.

"The picture coming out of it, based on the reporting that we've seen, I would say is not a good one," said Sen. John Thune of South Dakota, who as the majority whip is a member of Senate GOP leadership. "But I would say also that until we have a process that allows for everybody to see this in full transparency, it's pretty hard to draw an hard and fast conclusions."

But many Republicans in Congress remain fiercely loyal to Trump.

Brooks responded to questions about his reaction to Taylor's testimony by arguing that just hearing "bits and pieces" of testimony means "you're apt to be fooled."

"We don't know whether what he said is true or not because of the sham processes being used," Brooks said. "We have a judicial system, we have a bill of rights that are designed to guarantee a process so that fact-finders have the best chance of reaching the true conclusion."

Democrats say that Republican complaints about the process are simply unwarranted. Republicans on the three committees — Intelligence, Foreign Affairs and Oversight — have equal time to question witnesses.

Schiff has said that the committee will release transcripts and hold public hearings, but said they are conducting the fact-finding part of the investigation, like a grand jury before a trial, that's

done behind closed doors.

He's argued that keeping witness testimony private in the early stages prevents other witnesses from learning what others are saying and aligning their stories.

Democrats also pointed to the Benghazi Select Committee run by former Rep. Trey Gowdy, a South Carolina Republican who conducted closed-door hearings in that investigation.

"This (investigation) clearly has far too much fact for their comfort level, so they have to stop it from moving forward," said Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, a Florida Democrat who was in the room when the Republicans barged in.

This isn't the first time that Gaetz has tried to enter the House Intelligence Committee spaces during a deposition. He did the same thing last week during a deposition and left after the House parliamentarian said he could not stay because he was not on the committees.

But this time he brought allies and made clear he wouldn't go quietly.
