

Judiciary hearing sets stage for Trump impeachment charges

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The House Judiciary Committee convened Monday to formally receive the investigative findings against President Donald Trump as Democrats pushed toward articles of impeachment and the White House and its allies launched an aggressive attack on the proceedings.

Chairman Jerrold Nadler was interrupted immediately by a protester who shouted, “We voted for Donald Trump!” as the committee was gavelled open. The protester was escorted from the House hearing room by Capitol Police.

Nadler pressed ahead with opening remarks, saying, “President Trump put himself before country.”

The committee is to vote soon, possibly this week, on two or more charges of abuse of power, bribery and obstruction against the Republican president. Democrats say Trump’s push to have Ukraine investigate rival Joe Biden while at the same time withholding U.S. military aid ran counter to U.S. policy and benefited Russia.

“The record on this point is also clear: Multiple officials testified that the president’s demand for an investigation into his rivals was a part of his personal, political agenda, and not related to the foreign policy objectives of the United States,” Nadler said.

“The integrity of our next election is at stake.”

The hearing sets off a pivotal week as Democrats march toward a full House vote expected by

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Christmas. In drafting the articles of impeachment, Speaker Nancy Pelosi is facing a legal and political challenge of balancing the views of her majority while hitting the Constitution's bar of "treason, bribery or other high crimes and misdemeanors."

Trump spent the weekend tweeting against the proceedings. He and his allies acknowledge he likely will be impeached in the Democratic-controlled House, but they also expect acquittal next year in the Senate, where Republicans have the majority. Trump's team is turning attention elsewhere, including Monday's release of a long-awaited Justice Department report into the 2016 Russia investigation.

"Impeachment Hearing Hoax," Trump tweeted Sunday.

In advance of the hearing, Nadler sent a letter to the White House late Sunday officially forwarding the House Intelligence committee's report, along with additional evidence supporting impeachment. It also invited White House officials to review sensitive materials in a classified setting.

The White House is refusing to participate in the process, which it calls a sham, and the top Republican on the panel, Rep. Doug Collins of Georgia, asked to postpone the hearing, criticizing Democrats for moving too swiftly. One legal scholar testified last week it would be the quickest impeachment in modern history.

"This is just how desperate they are — desperately focused on impeaching this president," said Collins who accused the Democrats of unleashing thousands of pages of documents his side had no time to review before Monday's session. "This is a show. This is a farce. This is whatever you want to call it. The American people are having their tax dollars wasted on this impeachment of this president."

Trump, meanwhile, is heading out for campaign rallies to shift attention away from the House. During the weekend, he was focused on a related matter, the Justice Department inspector general's findings on the FBI's decisions to investigate Russian interference in the 2016 election. The president has long called special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia probe a "witch hunt," but the inspector general's report is expected to reject the claim that it was illegitimate, according to people familiar with its findings.

Trump tweeted Sunday, "I.G. report out tomorrow. That will be the big story!"

Democrats say Trump abused his power in a July 25 phone call when he asked Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy for a favor in investigating Democrats. That was bribery, they say, because Trump was withholding nearly \$400 million in military aid that Ukraine depended on to counter Russian aggression.

Trump and his aides have made clear that they now see his impeachment in the House as inevitable and have shifted their focus. A vote to convict requires a two-thirds vote of the Senate, where Republicans hold 53 of 100 seats. It is unlikely that Republican senators would cross party lines and vote to remove Trump from office.

As Democrats draft the articles, Pelosi's challenge will be to go broadly enough to appease her liberal flank, which prefers a more robust accounting of Trump's actions reaching back to Mueller's findings. At the same time, centrist lawmakers prefer charges more tailored to Ukraine. Democratic leaders were to meet Monday evening.

Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Calif., the chairman of the Intelligence Committee, said Democrats should approach the question of what to include in the articles the way a prosecutor brings forward “the strongest and most overwhelming evidence and not try to charge everything, even though you could charge other things.”

Schiff said, “I think we should focus on those issues that provide the greatest threat to the country. And the president is engaged in a course of conduct that threatens the integrity of the next election, threatens our national security.”

Monday’s hearing was to receive the Intelligence panel’s report on the inquiry, with lawyers from both parties testifying in what was expected to be a daylong session.

Nadler, in television interviews, declined to say ultimately how many articles of impeachment Democrats will present but said they will involve “certainly abuse of power” and likely “obstruction of Congress.”

He pointed to a “pattern” of conduct by Trump in seeking foreign interference in elections but would not commit to including the evidence of obstruction of justice in special counsel Robert Mueller’s Russia investigation as part of the articles of impeachment.

In his report, Mueller said he could not determine that Trump’s campaign conspired or coordinated with Russia in the 2016 election. But Mueller said he could not exonerate Trump of obstructing justice in the probe and left it for Congress to determine.

House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy criticized Democrats for their timeline, which he said was aimed unfairly at preventing the nation’s voters from making their own choices in the 2020 election.

“If they do not impeach him, they cannot beat him at the polls,” McCarthy, R-Calif.

Trump said during the weekend that his personal attorney, Rudy Giuliani, wants to take the information gathered from Giuliani’s investigations and a recent trip to Ukraine to the U.S. attorney general and to Congress.

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