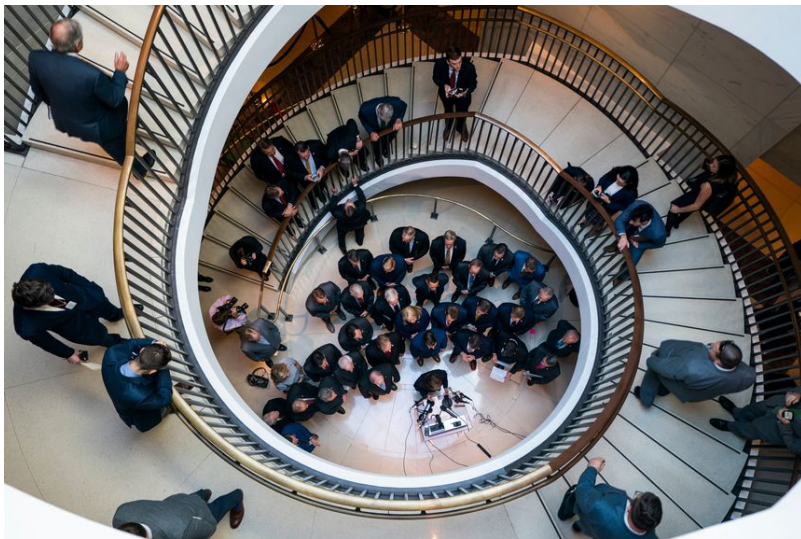


POLITICS

GOP Lawmakers Storm Hearing On Impeachment

Protest over closed-door nature of House's inquiry delays by hours testimony by a Pentagon witness



About two dozen GOP representatives sought to disrupt a closed-door committee session on Wednesday. PHOTO: JIM LO SCALZO/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

By Jesse Naranjo, Lindsay Wise and Siobhan Hughes

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WASHINGTON—Republican lawmakers escalated their complaints about the closed-door nature of the House's impeachment inquiry Wednesday, storming into a secure meeting room over the objections of Democrats and delaying by several hours the testimony of a Pentagon witness.

Three House panels were set to hear Wednesday morning from Laura Cooper, a Pentagon official in charge of Ukraine policy, when roughly two dozen Republican lawmakers, including many not on the investigating committees, marched into the room where the session was being held.

The protesters, led by Rep. Matt Gaetz (R., Fla.), included Rep. Steve Scalise (R., La.), the No. 2 Republican in the House, who said lawmakers were being unfairly denied access and that Democrats were employing “a one-sided set of rules.”

The GOP lawmakers' entry created a chaotic and tense scene, as the Republicans passed by a



Pentagon witness Laura Cooper arrives at the U.S. Capitol on Wednesday. PHOTO: MANDEL NGAN/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

series of cubicles where, for security reasons, lawmakers are required to store cellphones and electronic fitness trackers, shouting and screaming over the two guards standing watch, according to Rep. Gerry Connolly (D., Va.).

Inside the room, Rep. Val Demings (D., Fla.), a former police chief, chastised the Republicans, saying that as writers of laws themselves the Republicans should “think long and hard about putting themselves in that position” of defending allegedly illegal behavior by the president, Mr. Connolly said.

Rep. Mike Conaway of Texas, a senior Republican on the House Intelligence Committee, realized that the lawmakers had brought cellphones inside and began gathering them. “I don’t condone the phones in the room,” he told reporters later. But he said “that was an inadvertent mistake” and defended the rights of Republicans to engage in what he said was an act of civil disobedience.

“This investigation is being run in a manner that frustrates Republican members of the House,” Mr. Conaway said.

The situation remained an unusual stalemate into the afternoon, when pizza was delivered to the protesting Republican lawmakers. At 2:30 p.m., as House votes were concluding, the sergeant at arms raced down a spiral stairwell to the secure compartmented facility. “I’ve had better days,” he said.

The lawmakers finally left the room, and the deposition began after 3 p.m.

Democrats suggested that the Republicans had staged the protest because they were concerned about what the closed-door sessions had unearthed. Rep. Ted Lieu (D., Calif.), a member of the Intelligence Committee, said Republicans are “freaked out, they’re trying to stop this investigation.”

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The GOP protest came a day after what some attendees called the most revelatory testimony so far in the investigation, as Bill Taylor, the top U.S. diplomat in Ukraine, told the three House committees that President Trump made aid to Kyiv contingent on the Ukrainian president investigating Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden and alleged Ukrainian interference in the 2016 U.S. election.

On Wednesday, Republicans in both the House and Senate were mostly uninterested in discussing the substance of Mr. Taylor's allegations. Instead, they focused on the alleged unfairness of the Democratic-led process.

Republicans have complained from the start that the impeachment inquiry shouldn't take testimony behind closed doors, saying the process leaves the public uninformed and results in leaks designed to portray Mr. Trump in a bad light.

Democrats point to previous House investigations that used closed-door depositions, and said they intend to make transcripts of the testimony public.

Rep. Mark Meadows (R., N.C.), a Trump ally, said the president hadn't been told in advance of the protest plans. Capitol Hill Republicans and the White House have been trying to coordinate their impeachment message more closely. Mr. Trump met Tuesday with members of the House Freedom Caucus at the White House to discuss impeachment and other topics, said a person familiar with the meeting.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.) on Tuesday sent GOP senators a series of talking points about the impeachment process, saying Democrats were "trying to undo the 2016 election" and were "trampling on precedent and norms of fairness, just like they did" in last year's Supreme Court nomination hearing of Brett Kavanaugh.

Democrats came out of Mr. Taylor's Tuesday deposition convinced that his testimony drew a direct line between U.S. aid for Ukraine and Mr. Trump's purported demand that Kyiv investigate the Bidens and the 2016 elections, and as such marked a turning point in the impeachment inquiry.

Republicans leaving the same deposition were silent, skipping their usual routine of speaking in front of the reporters and cameras gathered there.

Sen. John Thune (R., S.D.) told reporters Wednesday that if Mr. Taylor’s testimony were true, it was “very concerning.” But by afternoon, after cable news and Twitter broadcast his words, Mr. Thune had toned down his language and shifted gears to focus, like other Republicans, on slamming the Democrats’ impeachment process.

“I just think for this to pass the smell test for the American people there’s going to have to be more of a transparent process, and I think it really, it really delegitimizes whatever they’re doing,” Mr. Thune said when asked by reporters to explain his concerns about what Mr. Taylor had said.

Rep. Tom Cole (R., Okla.) said Mr. Taylor was credible based on his reputation and should be taken seriously based on his “distinguished service to the country,” but that it would take more than what he had heard so far to convince him there was a quid pro quo for the U.S. aid.

A reporter asked what it would take.

“At a minimum it’s murky, and right now, I haven’t seen enough evidence to convince me,” he said.

Mr. Conaway, who was in the room for Mr. Taylor’s deposition, said his testimony wasn’t a game-changer because the top U.S. official in Ukraine didn’t witness any wrongdoing firsthand, and because he likely filtered the information he received through his own biases.

Anything Mr. Taylor said in the deposition was tainted by the process, said Sen. Lindsey Graham (R., S.C.). Mr. Graham said he intends to introduce a resolution calling on Democrats to open up the House impeachment inquiry.

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“I really, really think this process in the House is dangerous to the country,” he said. “And we’ll have a resolution, urging them to do what we’ve done in the past.”

But Mr. Graham initially said he was not a fan of the House GOP protest

tactic.

“They’re making a run on the SCIF!” Mr. Graham said incredulously, referring to the secure room. “That’s not the way to do it. That’s nuts.”

Late Wednesday afternoon, Mr. Graham tweeted a “correction” to his negative comments

“Apparently it was a peaceful protest. Big difference,” he wrote. “I understand their frustration and they have good reason to be upset.”

Asked about the GOP raid on the room, Sen. John Cornyn (R., Texas), paused for several seconds.

“This place just gets more like a circus every day,” he said.

—*Natalie Andrews*

and Catherine Lucey contributed to this article.



What Taylor's Testimony Means for Impeachment



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THE UKRAINE WITNESSES

- Oct. 3: Kurt Volker, former U.S. special representative for Ukraine negotiations, **testifies and hands over** text messages with other State Department officials that showed officials attempting to use a potential meeting between Mr. Trump and his Ukrainian counterpart as leverage to press Kyiv to investigate Joe Biden.
- Oct. 11: Marie Yovanovitch, former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, **testifies that Mr. Trump sought** for over a year to remove her and that his allies, including Rudy Giuliani, Mr. Trump's personal lawyer, targeted her in a "concerted campaign."
- Oct. 14: Fiona Hill, President Trump's former top Russia adviser, **testifies that she and other** White House officials grew so alarmed by the administration's efforts to push Ukraine to open certain investigations that they raised objections with a White House lawyer.
- Oct. 15: George Kent, deputy assistant secretary of state, **testifies that he had grown concerned that he had been sidelined** from Ukraine diplomacy and that he raised concerns in 2015 about Joe Biden's son serving on the board of a Ukrainian gas company.
- Oct. 16: Michael McKinley, former top aide to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, **testifies that he left his post over frustration** with Mr. Pompeo regarding the treatment of Ms. Yovanovitch.
- Oct. 17: Gordon Sondland, U.S. ambassador to the European Union, **criticizes President Trump over his efforts to enlist Ukraine** in investigating a political rival and says he and other U.S. officials were "disappointed" by the president's directive to work with Mr. Giuliani on Ukraine matters.
- Oct. 22: Bill Taylor, chargé d'affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv, **testified that President Trump made nearly \$400 million in aid to Ukraine contingent on the Ukrainian president investigating two matters related to U.S. politics.**

Scheduled to Testify:

- Oct. 23: Laura Cooper, Defense Department official overseeing Ukraine
- Oct. 26: Philip Reeker, acting assistant secretary of European and Eurasian affairs