

POLITICS

Impeachment Probe Pushes Schiff to Center Stage

Leader of the effort to investigate President Trump has become the prime villain for Republicans and a hero to many Democrats



Adam Schiff was a criminal prosecutor before holding elected office. PHOTO: ALEX WROBLEWSKI/BLOOMBERG NEWS

By Siobhan Hughes

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WASHINGTON—Since last week, President Trump has called him a disgrace, a lying disaster and a fraud, labeling him “Shifty Schiff” and saying he’s not fit to hold a cabinet member’s “blank-strap.” Mr. Trump’s personal lawyer has threatened to sue him. House Republicans are pushing for a vote on a resolution to hold him in contempt.

House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff (D., Calif.) has been a target for Republicans for years, since he led the charge in Congress to probe potential contacts between the Kremlin and the 2016 Trump campaign. But when he touched off an impeachment inquiry last month by successfully fighting for the release of a whistleblower complaint that the Trump administration had withheld from Congress, Mr. Schiff assumed a nationwide profile as the top enemy of Republicans and became a hero to many Democrats.

Mr. Schiff, a criminal prosecutor before holding elected office, was known as a reserved, cerebral lawmaker more given to spending time reading classified documents in a secure facility. He has

now shown an unbending streak and become a fixture on cable news, a habit that has the effect of setting off Mr. Trump, who will frequently sound off with an angry tweet while watching Mr. Schiff on television.

Republicans have now made Mr. Schiff their prime target. As he has moved to build a case, obtaining texts and testimony from the former special envoy to Ukraine, Republicans have attacked him on process, saying that he has been unfair by scheduling closed-door testimony. Mr. Schiff, they say, is a truth stretcher who acted unprofessionally last month when he delivered a parody of Mr. Trump's July 25 call with Ukraine's president, saying during a hearing that it "reads like a classic organized crime shakedown." Mr. Trump is still angry over the incident, saying that it is Mr. Schiff who should be impeached. Mr. Schiff has said that he didn't need to invent dialogue, given that the transcript itself was so incriminating.

After revelations that the whistleblower, before contacting outside counsel who helped him prepare a complaint, had approached an Intelligence Committee staff member to articulate in general terms concerns about the July 25 call, Republicans alleged secret coordination by Mr. Schiff. Mr. Schiff has denied coordination and said he never met the whistleblower. His office has also said that he could have been clearer when answering reporters' questions about whether he had heard from the whistleblower in advance.

"They tried to make Nancy Pelosi a brand, a vilified brand, because she's so effective, and now they're trying to do the same thing with Adam Schiff," said former Rep. Steve Israel (D., N.Y.), who talks to Mr. Schiff nearly every day. "The problem with their strategy is that neither one will allow them under their skin."

Some Democrats initially worried that Mr. Schiff had overplayed his hand when he issued a subpoena on Sept. 13 for a whistleblower complaint whose substance he couldn't describe but that he alleged involved the president or people close to him. The complaint turned out to center on a July call Mr. Trump had with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, whom Mr. Trump asked to investigate former Vice President Joe Biden and his son Hunter. Mr. Trump has defended the call as "perfect."

Mr. Schiff, a close ally of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D., Calif.) whom she handpicked to lead the Intelligence Committee, had been looked to by his colleagues as a bellwether, given that earlier this year he had shared her resistance to opening an impeachment inquiry, saying it would be useless in the absence of graphic evidence of wrongdoing.

Mr. Schiff's initial approach was in contrast to that of House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jerrold Nadler (D., N.Y.), who drew criticism from moderates for pushing ahead with an impeachment inquiry while polls showed that roughly half the country said impeachment

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hearings shouldn't be held. Mrs. Pelosi essentially put Mr. Schiff in charge of House Democrats' impeachment effort last month. Recent surveys show the public is taking a more favorable view of impeachment proceedings as more information about the Trump administration's interactions with Ukraine has emerged.

"What you really have is a committee chairman rooting around to see if they can try to find

anything," said Rep. Andy Biggs (R., Ariz.), who has sponsored a resolution to censure Mr. Schiff that his office says has about 100 co-sponsors, or more than half of the House Republican conference. A spokesman for Mr. Schiff said that he considers the resolution "part of a broader effort coordinated by the White House to distract from the growing body of evidence of the president's serious misconduct."

Some Democrats view the level of vitriol as a measure of Mr. Schiff's effectiveness in building a case—one Democratic aide who was critical of Mr. Schiff's high-profile approach conceded Congress might not have obtained the whistleblower complaint without his aggressive push.

Mr. Schiff, 59 years old, is the son of real-estate agent mother and a father who worked as a clothing salesman before buying a lumber yard that anchored the family in California. Mr. Schiff has represented his wealthy Southern California district since 2001, after he defeated a Republican who had voted to impeach President Bill Clinton and served as one of the House managers during the Senate trial.

Mr. Schiff won his last election with 78% of the vote in a heavily Democratic district full of entertainment-industry professionals in areas like Burbank and West Hollywood. Mr. Schiff fits in with the area's culture; he can recite lines from "The Big Lebowski." Before his work on the Intelligence Committee became consuming, he used to find time to work on writing, such as screenplays, going with Mr. Israel to the members' reading room at the Library of Congress. (Two weeks ago, Mr. Schiff sent Mr. Israel a photo of himself and his wife in the room, with the caption, "Wish you were here.")

Mr. Schiff has said he keeps himself grounded by surrounding himself with friends and family. He has been texting Mr. Israel jokes he sees on social media—frequently the jokes are about Mr. Schiff himself. One of Mr. Schiff's favorites was Mr. Trump's diatribe on Twitter over his right to use an apostrophe to describe Mr. Schiff as "Liddle' Adam Schiff."

"I alternate at times between thinking that this is hilarious, on the one hand," Mr. Schiff said at Northwestern University last week, "and then realizing, 'Oh my God! It's the president! It's the

president!”

—*Dustin Volz contributed to this article.*

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