

**POLITICS**

House Republicans complain about limited access to closed-door House impeachment investigation sessions

Deirdre Shesgreen and Bart Jansen USA TODAY

Published 12:46 p.m. ET Oct. 16, 2019 | Updated 5:59 p.m. ET Oct. 16, 2019

WASHINGTON – A half-dozen Republican lawmakers sought access Wednesday to a closed-door deposition with a former State Department official that is part of the House impeachment inquiry, but they were blocked in an escalation of the partisan dispute over the investigation of President Donald Trump.

Three House committees – Foreign Affairs, Intelligence and Oversight and Reform – have been meeting privately for weeks with current and former administration officials to gather information about how Trump urged Ukraine to investigate Joe Biden, a political rival. The latest session Wednesday was with Michael McKinley, a former senior adviser to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. A previous witness, Kurt Volker, a former special envoy to Ukraine, appeared Wednesday to review the transcript from his session Oct. 3.

Republicans have complained that the meetings should be public and transcripts should be released. Access has been limited to members of the three panels, which prevented one Republican from attending Monday and the half-dozen Wednesday. Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff, D-Calif., said private sessions are needed to prevent witnesses from hearing each other, the same protocol used by prosecutors in criminal investigations.

Leading the confrontation was House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., who called Schiff a liar and a partisan leading a witch hunt – language that echoes Trump’s terminology. McCarthy cited Schiff’s opening statement Sept. 26 in a public hearing with the acting director of national intelligence, Joseph Maguire, which characterized Trump’s phone call to his Ukrainian counterpart July 25 as a mafia shakedown.

“I can’t even go down there and read the transcript,” McCarthy said.

McCarthy alleged that Republicans have not been allowed to cross-examine the witnesses, which is not accurate. Staff attorneys led the questioning, and the time was evenly divided between Democratic and Republican aides.

“They designed a process to pick and choose who to come,” McCarthy said. “This is a closed system. This is a system designed to already try to find an outcome.”

The confrontation Wednesday followed a similar incident Monday, when Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla., a member of the Judiciary Committee, was blocked from attending the private deposition with Fiona Hill, a former National Security Council senior director for Europe and Asia.

Schiff said Tuesday that transcripts would be released and public hearings held. But he said it was important not to have witnesses hear each other’s testimony “either to hide the truth or color the truth or know just how much they can give and how much they can conceal.”

Schiff noted that the special counsel or independent counsel investigations of Presidents Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton were held behind closed doors before public hearings. The committees conduct their own inquiry, for lack of a Justice Department investigation. Schiff said all members of the three committees have been allowed to attend the depositions.

“They have been very professionally done,” Schiff said. “All those members, too, asked questions. And we go until the questions are exhausted, so they get to ask whatever questions they want in a process in which they have every bit as much opportunity as the majority to ask questions.”

Schiff said the committees keep the sessions closed because some witnesses may lie like Michael Cohen, Trump’s former personal lawyer, who was convicted of lying to Congress.

“Now, we do anticipate a time when we’ll be releasing transcripts, and we do anticipate there will be a time when we will hold back some of these witnesses for open session, and we may call witnesses in open session that we haven’t called in closed session. But we will do so giving the GOP members every opportunity to ask questions,” Schiff said. “We want to make sure that we get to the truth, and this is the process, I think, early in an investigation that makes the most sense.”

Members of the Judiciary Committee, which traditionally handles impeachment inquiries, argued Wednesday that they deserve access to the depositions and transcripts of sessions.

Rep. Louie Gohmert, R-Texas, said he was told by the impeachment panel's staff that he could not read the transcripts of interviews or attend McKinley's private session.

"That is garbage," Gohmert said. "This is an insane asylum, and it's clear the inmates are running it, because the elected people ... said we want you to participate."

Rep. Debbie Lesko, R-Ariz., accused Democrats of selectively leaking testimony that would cast Trump in the worst light.

"This is a political hit job on President Trump," she said. "We're talking about the impeachment of the president of the United States."

Rep. Andy Biggs, R-Ariz., compared the sessions to Soviet secret hearings. He proposed a resolution on the House floor Wednesday to condemn and censure Schiff, which McCarthy supported.

"What's going on here is absolutely intolerable," Biggs said.

The top Republican on the Foreign Affairs Committee, Rep. Michael McCaul of Texas, who is allowed to attend the sessions, said McKinley said nothing "inside those closed doors in that secret room" that couldn't have been said at a public hearing. Republicans should have subpoena power to call their own witnesses and White House lawyers should be allowed to attend, McCaul said.

Another lawmaker who could attend, Rep. Mark Meadows, R-N.C., a member of the Oversight and Reform Committee, derided Schiff for comparing this to a special prosecutor's investigation.

"Four hundred and thirty-five members will have to make a decision" if Democrats move forward with articles of impeachment, Meadows said. "Yet you have less than three dozen members who are getting to hear the actual witnesses."

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., defended the impeachment inquiry Tuesday in stark terms, listing allegations that Trump undermined national security by withholding military aid for Ukraine and by asking for the investigation of former Vice President Biden, a Democratic front-runner in the 2020 presidential campaign.

"We are here to find the truth and uphold the Constitution of the United States," Pelosi said.
"This is not a game for us. This is deadly serious."