

POLITICS

Democratic Leaders Try to Slow Calls to Impeach Trump

By JONATHAN MARTIN and ALEXANDER BURNS MAY 18, 2017

WASHINGTON — When House Democratic leaders hastily called a news conference Wednesday to demonstrate their outrage at President Trump’s latest dramatics, they took great pains to show they were not seeking to railroad him out of the White House.

“No one ought to, in my view, rush to embrace the most extraordinary remedy that involves the removal of the president from office,” said Representative Adam B. Schiff of California, the sober-minded senior Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee. He warned that Democrats should not let their actions “be perceived as an effort to nullify the election by other means.”

At that very moment, Representative Al Green, Democrat of Texas, was in the well of the House thundering, “The president must be impeached!”

The barrage of reports about Mr. Trump’s chaotic and controversial administration has helped revive Democrats, raising their hopes that they can ride a Trumpian backlash to great success in next year’s elections. But with the cloud over the White House darkening each day, liberal activists are courting a backlash of their own as they demand of their lawmakers nothing short of driving the president from office by any means necessary.

The demands of the radicalized party base are being amplified by growing calls from a series of Democratic candidates for statewide office who, in an effort to outflank

their primary rivals, have started clamoring for Mr. Trump's impeachment.

Democratic members of Congress have for weeks sought to find their own political safe space when it comes to questions about removing Mr. Trump, calling for a special prosecutor and a thorough investigation and airing of all the facts. But the decision Wednesday by the Justice Department to name the former F.B.I. director Robert S. Mueller III as special counsel for the investigation into Russia's interference in last year's election has complicated their position.

The appointment drew praise from many quarters of the party but also statements that it was not enough.

"This latest move by the Trump administration is too little, too late," declared Charles Chamberlain, executive director of the liberal advocacy group Democracy for America. "We cannot afford to have Congress sit back and watch this play out the same way it just did, with Trump and his stooges obstructing another investigation into their corruption and high crimes. Congress needs to act now to impeach Trump."

Such demands, and the deluge of stories detailing what progressives believe amounts to high crimes and misdemeanors, are making it increasingly difficult for lawmakers to maintain a judicious posture.

So far, members of the Congressional Black Caucus are taking the most aggressive tack, a recognition of the boiling anger toward the president in many black communities.

In a speech to the liberal Center for American Progress on Tuesday, Representative Maxine Waters of California drew applause and whistles when she reminded the audience of her insistence that Mr. Trump be driven from office. But even more notably, Ms. Waters, a veteran lawmaker, has also been intensifying pressure on her colleagues to recognize the threat she said is posed by a reckless president.

"I know that there are those who are talking about, 'Well, we're going to get ready for the next election,'" she said, mimicking her more cautious colleagues. "No,

we can't wait that long. We don't need to wait that long. He will have destroyed this country by then."

Liberals are planning a series of nationwide protests on July 2 known as "Impeachment Marches" to increase the pressure.

"We expect them to call for impeachment," said Delia Brown, one of the organizers of the march in Los Angeles. "This is now the zeitgeist, it's the demands of people we're responding to."

MoveOn.org, one of the most influential liberal organizing groups, sent an email alert Wednesday suggesting that activists tell lawmakers: "If news reports are true, this is obstruction of justice, and Congress must impeach."

By day's end, the impeachment drive had spread beyond the activist left: J.B. Pritzker, a prominent Democratic donor and businessman who is running for governor of Illinois, publicly demanded that the House initiate proceedings against Mr. Trump. He said other investigative options were too slow.

"We simply do not have the luxury of time to wait for months or years to determine whether the current president of the United States has committed high crimes and misdemeanors," Mr. Pritzker said, adding: "The House must begin the impeachment process before Donald Trump puts us at risk again."

Most congressional Democrats are still wary about calling for Mr. Trump to be frog-marched out of the West Wing. The expectations of their base, they believe, are outrunning what is feasible as long as Republicans control both chambers of Congress.

The fear, Democratic officials say, is that they will invite the sort of backlash from their base that Republicans got for overpromising about what was possible while President Barack Obama was in office. They argue that methodically building a case — obtaining and revealing any memos or White House recordings, for example — is the soundest approach if they are to bring Republicans along.

Even Senator Bernie Sanders, the liberal Vermont firebrand, counseled patience. "What needs to happen is that we have got to go forward with an absolutely

bipartisan investigation,” Mr. Sanders said. “The public must understand this is not a Democratic issue.”

Senator Richard J. Durbin, the second-ranking Democrat in the Senate, was even more forceful in speaking of the party’s activists.

“They wanted the president gone on November the 10th of last year,” Mr. Durbin said. “I want to make certain that we follow the law, follow the Constitution, do it in an orderly way and not to get into a crazed political crusade at this point.”

But such a measured approach is not sufficient for those progressives who are channeling the fierce urgency of now.

The loudest calls for impeachment on Wednesday came from candidates running on the left in Democratic primary elections: In Virginia and New Jersey, two states holding off-year elections for governor this fall, insurgent primary candidates insisted that Congress must begin a process that could end with Mr. Trump’s removal. In Illinois, one of Mr. Pritzker’s primary challengers, Daniel Biss, a state senator, also called for impeachment proceedings to begin.

Tom Perriello, a former House member from Virginia who is running for governor, said in an interview that he would have joined Mr. Green’s call for impeachment if he were still in Congress. “A lot of Democratic voters and a lot of independents right now want to figure out a constitutional process for impeaching Donald Trump,” he said, adding: “We’re talking about, now, something that makes Watergate look like child’s play.”

Jim Johnson, a former Clinton administration official running on the left in the New Jersey primary, similarly invoked Watergate. “If the findings are such that President Trump obstructed justice, Congress must begin impeachment proceedings,” Mr. Johnson said in a statement.

For the most part, more establishment-aligned Democratic candidates declined to go that far. In New Jersey, for instance, Mr. Johnson’s chief Democratic opponent, Phil Murphy, a former ambassador to Germany, stopped at the appointment of a special prosecutor.

Party strategists fear that Democrats might sacrifice the moral and political high ground by appearing too eager, and some leaders worry that an impeachment drumbeat would drown out Democrats' message to voters on kitchen-table issues like health care and taxes.

At the House news conference, the bind facing the minority was clear: Mr. Trump's possible connections to Russia are central to their opposition and downright irresistible. The lawmakers appeared flanked by a picture of Mr. Trump shaking hands with Sergey V. Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, and two screens projecting the Twitter hashtag "#ProtectOurDemocracy."

Yet even as impeachment rumblings continued to build, the party leaders seemed to warn colleagues against overplaying their hand.

"I'm not afraid of the i-word," Representative Joseph Crowley of New York, chairman of the Democratic caucus, said coyly. "It's independent. Independent commission, independent investigator."

Jonathan Martin reported from Washington and Alexander Burns from New York. Matt Flegenheimer contributed reporting from Washington.

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