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How Trump's attacks on protesting athletes have prompted an impeachment gambit

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Rep. Al Green (D-Tex.) was enjoying a cup of tea in his Washington living room Friday night, watching TV coverage of President Trump's Alabama rally when the subject turned to the scattered protests that professional athletes have engaged in during the national anthem.

"Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, 'Get that son of a b---- off the field right now?'" Trump said.

For much of the political world, it was typical Trumpian bombast, an opening salvo in a culturally divisive battle that would only endear the president to his strongest supporters. To Green, however, it was the final insult to be tolerated after months of them.

Green said Tuesday that he plans to introduce articles of impeachment next week and use special House procedures to bring them to a rapid floor vote, marking the first time that Trump would be subjected to an impeachment vote in Congress.

The gambit is not expected to succeed, or even attract more than token support from Green's colleagues. Democratic leaders have sought to tamp down impeachment efforts pending the outcome of various congressional and criminal investigations into the Trump campaign's dealings.

But in an extended interview Tuesday, Green said he could wait no longer to speak out against what he considers to be Trump's excesses and abuses.

"This is not just another person," the congressman said. "This is the president of the United States of America stifling free speech, and he does it in such a crass, rude, crude and unrefined way. To label a person who is peacefully protesting, label this person the son of a dog? . . . No way."

Green was among the first Democrats to call for Trump's impeachment, in May, after Trump fired FBI Director James B. Comey. But Green never filed an actual impeachment resolution, though another Democrat — Rep. Brad Sherman of California — ultimately did.

Now Green said the time has come for impeachment articles of his own — which he plans to file as a "privileged resolution," forcing a floor vote within days. Typically, such motions are quickly

killed, but the vote on tabling the measure would still represent the first congressional vote on ending Trump's presidency.

Sitting in his office Tuesday, Green showed a reporter a dog-eared copy of "The Case for Impeachment," a polemic published in April by American University history professor Allan Lichtman, and handed out a copy of a Cato Institute article explaining why no actual crime need be committed to prompt impeachment proceedings.

Green declined to share a copy of his impeachment resolution, which has yet to be completed, but he said it was about much more than Trump's attacks on athletes who have protested during the national anthem. He cited Trump's false claim that former president Barack Obama had tapped his phones in the run-up to the 2016 election and his refusal to release his tax returns, among other alleged misdeeds.

"There were many, many things that could have been the straw," he said. "But these comments about free speech, which is something I cherish, they have caused me to conclude that now is the time to let the world know that there is at least one person in the Congress who believes that the president has gone too far."

The impeachment push comes at an unusual time for Green, whose district was among those subject to serious flooding after Hurricane Harvey last month. He has routinely joined with Republican colleagues in urging the Trump administration to deliver aid to his embattled constituents.

But Green rejected the notion that his attack on Trump might clash with his ability to deliver assistance to his constituents.

"When I vote, I vote for the people of the United States of America, and as a United States congressman, the Constitution accords me and 434 others the right and ability to bring articles of impeachment," he said. "I really didn't come to Congress to do this. . . . But I love my country. And if you love your country, you don't want to see your country demeaned, belittled, denigrated."

Green declined to speculate on whether Trump's comment at the Alabama rally and his subsequent tweets on the subject of athlete protests were prompted by disrespect for athletes, racial animus or simply cynical politics.

"Whether something is done by accident or design, it's the effect that matters greatly," he said. "Whether it's being done with malice, aforethought or no thought at all, the harm still persists."

Green said he has not spoken to any of his colleagues to build support for his gambit, and he says no one from the House Democratic leadership has been in touch to discourage him. But House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) has repeatedly dismissed attempts to begin impeachment proceedings as premature.

Green said he's prepared to be a "majority of one."

“History will vindicate me,” he said. “It’s not unusual for persons to be part of the avant-garde, to be the first to take an action. . . . I wrestled with my conscience about this, and my conscience compels me to do it.”