

## Adam Schiff's Hair Is Not on Fire

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November 13, 2019

WASHINGTON — **Adam Schiff**, the Intelligence committee chairman and leader of the **impeachment** inquiry in Congress, was walking around New York City with a friend when the thing happened. It happens in airports, bookstores, restaurants. Strangers stopped him on the street and said he had to “save the democracy” or “the Constitution is on your shoulders.”

Not long afterward, that same friend of Schiff's, former congressman and author Steve Israel, had a book signing in Florida. When a little old lady in the crowd told Israel where she spent the summers, Israel mentioned his best friend Adam Schiff lived nearby, figuring the Greater Naples Jewish Book Festival was fertile ground for lefty Democrats. “Well, then, I'll move,” she snapped.

Four years ago, the name Adam Schiff meant nothing to most Americans outside of the congressman's southern California district. Schiff was a plodder, a hardworking but obscure lawmaker. He joined the House intelligence committee years ago because the committee had a reputation as a quiet, bipartisan place to legislate.

The Trump era has made Schiff, 59, into one of the leading figures of this hellish period in American history. Democrats revere him, and Republican loathe him. President Trump attacks him — using an old anti-Semitic dog whistle — as “Shifty Adam Schiff.” Before Democrats won back the House, he carved out a reputation as one of the president's most level-headed and persistent critics. As he told me in 2017, “There seems to be a constituency for not having your hair on fire.”

Now, as chairman of the intel committee, Schiff will put his even-keeled approach on display as the ongoing impeachment inquiry enters a public phase. On Wednesday, he will preside over with the first of several public hearings featuring witnesses to Trump's efforts to pressure **Ukraine** into announcing an investigation into the 2016 election and the Bidens.

Schiff's challenge is a daunting one: building the case for impeachment with the American public and winning over those people who haven't made up their minds about the president's conduct. Will the hearings led by Schiff educate and outrage Americans of all ages in the same way the Watergate hearings captivated the nation? Or will they descend into the type of chaos that bewilders and alienates people who don't live and breathe national politics while prompting partisans to further dig in?

Schiff and impeachment have an intertwined history. He first won his seat in Congress in 2000 by defeating Republican Jim Rogan, who was a floor manager for the Clinton impeachment. Wealthy Democratic donors, angry at Rogan's role in Clinton's impeachment, threw their weight behind Schiff, who didn't campaign on impeachment because he didn't need to. “It was like an unspoken element,” Parke Skelton, Schiff's longtime political consultant, once told me. “Rogan was the guy they saw on TV trying to impeach Clinton because he had an affair.”

A decade later, Schiff played a key role in impeachment and removal of a federal judge named Thomas Porteous Jr., who was accused of multiple acts of corruption. The case raised tricky legal questions, including whether Porteous could be impeached for crimes he committed before he was appointed to the bench. In the end, the Senate convicted Porteous on four charges and removed from the federal bench.

Schiff says the Porteous case taught him a valuable lesson. As he wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed last year titled “Don’t Take the Bait on Impeachment,” what matters more than the legal standard of a high crime or misdemeanor necessary in an impeachment case is “the practical and political standard that must be met” to go forward with such a drastic course of action.

What does that standard look like? Schiff published that *Times* op-ed in a different context — the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election and any Trump campaign involvement — but his answer holds up. “Was the president’s conduct so incompatible with the office he holds that Democratic and Republican members of Congress can make the case to their constituents that they were obligated to remove him?” he argued. “If you can’t make that case, there is no impeachment no matter how high the crime or serious the misdemeanor.”

Even among his fellow Democrats, Schiff in public remained an impeachment skeptic until the the intelligence community whistleblower came forward, followed by the partial transcript of Trump’s July 25 with Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky. “That was a line that Adam Schiff and Nancy Pelosi and the Democratic caucus could not turn back from,” Steve Israel says. “My guess is had the president not made that phone call or whistleblower not revealed that phone call, there would not be a full-scale impeachment process as we see it today.”

In past impeachments, the investigative legwork was largely finished by the time members of Congress began considering impeachment articles. Watergate had the Jaworski road map. The Clinton impeachment had the Starr Report. The Porteous impeachment happened after the Judicial Conference of the United States conducted its own investigation and recommended the House of Representatives impeach the judge.

In the case of Ukrainegate, there was no previous investigation. The Intelligence, Foreign Affairs, and Oversight committees had to interview witnesses and request documents. “We’re doing the investigative work that, in the past, would have been done by the Justice Department or a Special Counsel or an independent prosecutor,” Schiff says. “That didn’t happen here because the Bill Barr Justice Department decided there’s nothing to see here.”

Schiff says the interviews were initially conducted behind closed doors to protect against witnesses shading or changing their testimony based on what others said — a common enough practice in a criminal investigation. The Republican hysteria over the closed-door phase of the inquiry, he adds, was nothing more than an effort to appease the president. “The Republicans don’t want to defend the President because they can’t,” he told me the day after a group of Republicans barged into the Intelligence committee’s secure office during one of the impeachment interviews. “The only thing they were left back with is their tried and true Trumpian strategy, which is to attack anyone associated with the investigation.”

On top of his day-to-day work on the impeachment inquiry, Schiff has also become a mentor of sorts to the rookie Democrats who find themselves thrust into a political shitstorm after less than

a year on the job. “If you call, he always calls you back. If you text him, he always replies,” says Rep. Jason Crow (D-Colo.). “He always makes the time. It makes him stick out in Washington.”

Crow says Schiff’s approach with his fellow Democrats isn’t to convince them of his viewpoint but to give them the facts and let them make up their minds. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen him impose his viewpoints on folks,” Crow says. “That’s why Adam has so much credibility in Washington and certainly within the caucus.”

His just-the-facts approach carries over into his public appearances. His opening statements at hearings related to the Intel committee’s Russian interference investigation sounded like the opening statement of a federal prosecutor, which he once was. A rare misfire from Schiff came at a hearing in September when he dramatized the July 25 call between Presidents Trump and Zelensky — and gave his legions of critics the ammunition they needed to attack him. Trump lashed out at Schiff, calling for his resignation and for him to be questioned for treason.

Schiff has long faced criticism from civil libertarians, including some of his colleagues in the House, for being too deferential to the intelligence agencies. He’s also seen by many as the successor to Dianne Feinstein, the 86-year-old California Democrat who led the Senate intelligence committee for many years, and his critics say his aspirations for higher office makes him a less-than-ideal leader of the impeachment inquiry. “The speaker made two errors,” says Pat Eddington, a former CIA analyst who’s now a research fellow at the Cato Institute. “The first one was in not actually bringing a resolution to the floor of the House to create a special committee. The second was putting Adam Schiff in charge of this.”

Mostly, the attacks on Schiff come in the form of histrionic tweets from his Republican colleagues, and the upcoming public impeachment hearings will bring out the contrast between Schiff’s typically understated tone and the sound and fury of the Republicans. And while he recognizes the power of Fox News and the alternative-facts universe of right-wing media, Schiff believes there are people out there who maintain an open mind. That somewhere between the Schiff lovers and Schiff haters are those who can still be persuaded by facts and evidence.

“Those are the people we need to speak to,” he says. “That’s who I try to speak to when I go on television or write op-eds, I’m trying to speak to those that have an open mind. There is still enough of them to make a difference.”