

Roll Call

Trump, Schiff go to war as president's call for unity fades quickly

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Even by Donald Trump's standards, that escalated quickly. His State of the Union call for comity between Republicans and Democrats to end Washington's era of gridlock and bad blood lasted all of about 16 hours.

This was the president on Tuesday night during his State of the Union address: "This is the time to rekindle the bonds of love and loyalty and memory that link us together as citizens, as neighbors, as patriots. ... No matter the trials we face, no matter the challenges to come, we must go forward together."

But this was Trump early Wednesday afternoon when asked about House Intelligence Chairman Adam Schiff announcement of a sweeping probe into his campaign's possible coordination with Russia and his personal finances: "He's just a political hack. He's trying to build a name for himself."

That was not all the commander in chief had to say about Schiff, a man whom he has previously slapped with a derisive moniker that sounds like an expletive referring to feces.

"Never heard of him," a smirking Trump said of the Intelligence chairman at an unrelated event in the Roosevelt Room. Only he clearly has — and appeared ready and eager to try chipping away at the credibility of Schiff's investigation.

"Under what basis would he do that? He has no basis to do that," he said. "But there would be no reason to do that. No other politician has to go through that. It's called presidential harassment. And it's unfortunate. And it really does hurt our country."

But Schiff and Democrats often say the same about Trump and his brash antics — as well as what they suggest are potentially nefarious and even criminal ties to Moscow. What is clear just hours after the president's uncharacteristic comity call is he is now at war with House Democrats as they look into all aspects of his adult life.

Schiff announced the soup-to-nuts investigation after the panel voted to release all transcripts from its 2017 and 2018 Russia investigation to special counsel Robert Mueller — and eventually, the documents will be released to the public. The committee voted on the step to release the transcripts Wednesday at its organizational meeting, where it announced it will relaunch the probe and focus on five key areas of interest.

The Schiff-Trump tit-for-tat essentially ensured Trump's State of the Union unity message hit its expiration date faster than even most Washington cynics would have predicted. One political analyst suggested Trump's unity address didn't have to happen at all, a view underscored by his Wednesday war of words with a newly powerful Schiff.

"The Constitution just requires the president to give Congress 'information of the State of the Union.' It doesn't say he has to give it in person," said Gene Healy, vice president of the nonpartisan CATO Institute. "And it definitely doesn't mandate what the modern SOTU has become: an imperial spectacle that's short on 'information,' long on pomp and circumstance and larded with exorbitant demands on the public purse."

"President Trump should have done the country a favor by delivering the speech in writing and letting the public performance in the House chamber go the way of the White House Correspondents' Dinner," he added, referring to the annual press dinner that Trump has twice skipped.

The president appeared eager Tuesday night to try setting a trap for the Democrats seated opposite him inside the ornate chamber by casting himself as ready to deal on several issues they in the past have supported. The call for cross-party unity was as much a dare to the opposition party to continue resisting his agenda as it was an olive branch for cooperation.

"We must choose between greatness or gridlock, results or resistance, vision or vengeance, incredible progress or pointless destruction," he said. "Tonight, I ask you to choose greatness."

Trump had a few memorable moments and shared smiles with the House Democratic women as he saluted their record-breaking freshman class and jobs data showing strong gains for female workers. And he at several points lauded what the two parties could accomplish together — even though he has issued almost daily broadsides against the Democratic Party and some of its leaders and members in messages that collectively run counter to his Tuesday pleas for unity.

For all of Trump's rhetorical flourishes Tuesday night in calling for greater bipartisan cooperation, there were an equal amount of moments in which he morphed back into the "America first" candidate who espoused populist and hard-line rhetoric at campaign stop after campaign stop during the 2016 campaign — and since then at numerous rallies.

As it was during his 2016 campaign and the 2018 midterms, by his own design, illegal immigration clearly will be a major focal point of the 2020 re-election fight. But the president on Tuesday trotted out a new tack likely to be part of his 2020 stump remarks.

The president made clear during his State of the Union address that he is poised to use House Democrats' new breed and their views on "Medicare for All" and other progressive matters against them on the 2020 campaign trail. And while he did not name her, Trump appeared to take a shot at New York Democratic Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America organization.

"Here, in the United States, we are alarmed by new calls to adopt socialism in our country. America was founded on liberty and independence — not government coercion, domination, and control. We are born free, and we will stay free. Tonight, we renew our resolve that America will never be a socialist country," Trump said, as the freshman lawmaker known colloquially as "AOC" sat not that far away and smiled.

On Wednesday, several White House and administration officials were deployed to cable news to defend Trump's address — and continue the pivot toward the re-election fight. One senior official continued Trump's red-meat-tossing toward his conservative base.

\ “The U.S. economy is doing terrific,” Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin told CNBC. “And as the president talked about last night, his economic plan is working. We're not going back to socialism. We're going on an economic plan for America that works.”

“We don't believe in a centralized planned economy where the government puts restraints on it,” he added.

Meanwhile, Trump has cast doubt on whether a House-Senate conference committee can come up with a funding package he could support by a Feb. 15 deadline to avert another partial government shutdown. With the ball in the court of that special panel's leaders, the president and his top aides are trying to avoid torpedoing any possible deal on border issues — so far, at least.

“We're letting Congress do their work,” Mercedes Schlapp, the president's strategic communications director, told reporters outside the White House. “Let's see what deal they come up with.”