

Trump aide Hope Hicks declines to answer some questions in Russia probe

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump's longtime aide Hope Hicks is declining to answer questions about her time in the White House in a closed-door interview Tuesday with the House intelligence committee.

The panel is investigating Russian interference in the 2016 election and any contacts between Trump's campaign and Russia. As one of Trump's closest aides, Hicks is a key eyewitness to his actions over the past several years. She was his spokeswoman during the 2016 presidential campaign and is now White House communications director.

As the interview went into the afternoon, several members of the committee said during breaks that Hicks was declining to answer any questions from her time in the White House. Others who have worked in the White House, including former strategist Steve Bannon, have also declined to talk about that time in interviews with the committee.

"There are some questions that she's not going to answer," said Republican Rep. Chris Stewart of Utah.

Democratic Rep. Mike Quigley of Illinois, another member of the panel, said Hicks and her lawyer were "following the orders of the White House not to answer certain questions."

Another person familiar with Hicks' testimony said her lawyer is responding to questions about that time period by saying the White House has advised her not to answer and by saying she will take some questions "under advisement." The person declined to be identified because the committee meetings are behind closed doors.

At the beginning of the day, Hicks was also declining to answer questions about the transition period between the election and the inauguration. But as the interview came close to its eighth hour, a Republican lawmaker said that Hicks

had started to answer some questions from that time.

“They actually opened up some questions on the transition, so that’s good,” said Florida Rep. Tom Rooney as he left the meeting. He said she has answered “everything” they have asked about the time period during the campaign.

It’s unclear whether the committee will subpoena Hicks for answers. The panel subpoenaed Bannon last month after he refused to answer questions, but he has yet to cooperate. The House is now considering whether to hold Bannon in contempt.

Hicks arrived shortly after 10 a.m. through a rear entrance to the committee’s interview space and did not answer shouted questions from reporters. This is the second interview she has done as part of the congressional Russia probes — she was also interviewed by the Senate intelligence committee several months ago, according to a person familiar with that interview. The person declined to be named because the Senate does not publicly disclose who has been interviewed.

In the hours before Hicks’ arrival, Trump tweeted several times, quoting cable news commentators who said they hadn’t seen evidence of collusion between Trump and Russia. One tweet encouraged investigations of his Democratic presidential rival, Hillary Clinton. And a last tweet simply said “WITCH HUNT!”

Asked about Hicks’ refusal to answer some questions, White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said Tuesday that “we are cooperating because as the president has said repeatedly there is no collusion, and we’re going to continue to cooperate, and hopefully they’ll wrap this up soon.”

Hicks has also been interviewed by special counsel Robert Mueller, according to published reports, along with other White House officials. Mueller is investigating matters related to the Russian meddling and potential obstruction of an ongoing federal inquiry.

One area of Mueller’s interest has been the White House response to news reports of a 2016 meeting that members of Trump’s campaign team held with Russians in Trump Tower. The White House has said the president was involved in drafting an early statement saying the meeting primarily concerned a Russian adoption program, but emails released later showed that Trump’s eldest son, Donald Trump Jr., enthusiastically agreed to the sit-down with a Russian lawyer

and others after he was promised dirt on Clinton. Hicks was with the president on Air Force One while they were writing the initial statement.

Lawmakers were expected to ask Hicks about the statement.

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