

US impeachment inquiry: State Department official testifies in defiance of Trump ban

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State Department official Marie L. Yovanovitch, the former US ambassador to Ukraine, testified for 10 hours Friday before the House Intelligence Committee, which is heading up the House impeachment inquiry against President Donald Trump. She is the first Trump administration official to appear before the committee since the White House declared in a letter last Tuesday that it would not cooperate in any way with the inquiry.

The letter from White House Counsel Pat Cipollone to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and three House committee chairmen declared, “President Trump and his Administration cannot participate in your partisan and unconstitutional inquiry.” It was portrayed as a blanket ban on any form of cooperation, including both the production of documents and the appearance of witnesses, with the inquiry against Trump over his efforts to induce the Ukrainian government to provide political dirt on one of his likely Democratic opponents, former Vice President Joe Biden.

But only three days later, Yovanovitch spent an entire day in closed-door testimony to the House Intelligence Committee. The *New York Times* noted the significance of her appearance, writing that her “defiance of the administration’s directive against appearing before the impeachment proceeding raises the possibility that other government officials will follow suit.”

There were press reports that at least three other witnesses from the national security establishment will testify next week, including Gordon Sondland, ambassador to the European Union, George Kent, an assistant secretary of state, and Fiona Hill, former Russia policy chief for the National Security Council.

Sondland had agreed to appear voluntarily before the committee last Tuesday, only to be pulled out at the last minute by the White House, which then sent Cipollone’s letter to the House Democrats. Now he is expected to appear in response to a subpoena from the committee, issued the same day as Cipollone’s letter. His lawyer noted that he was under legal compulsion to appear, “notwithstanding the State Department’s current direction to not testify.”

Washington Post, which along with the *Times* has been spearheading the campaign for impeachment, gloated in an editorial Sunday headlined, “The stone wall is cracking.” It cited both Yovanovitch’s appearance and the likely testimony from Sondland and Hill, adding, “That offers a good example for other State Department officials enmeshed in the Ukraine affair, including the current charge d’affaires in Kiev, William Taylor. It’s evident, in other words, that the House investigation can amass abundant evidence of Mr. Trump’s abuse of power without his cooperation.”

Nonetheless, the editorial urged Pelosi “to hold a vote by the full House to formally authorize the impeachment inquiry.” It continued: “And the White House should be offered, in return for its cooperation, privileges that were granted to Mr. Clinton, such as allowing his counsel to participate in hearings and rebut charges.”

The editorial proposed that this could become the basis of further charges in the impeachment inquiry: “If, in spite of a full House vote and procedural concessions, Mr. Trump persists in his refusal to comply with congressional subpoenas for documents and seeks to prevent testimony by individuals, the merit of an impeachment charge for obstruction of Congress will be made manifest.”

Yovanovitch testified one day after the arrest of two Soviet-born associates of former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, Trump’s personal attorney, on charges of making illegal campaign contributions to Trump and other Republican candidates in the 2016 elections. The two, Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman, were arrested at Dulles Airport outside Washington as they attempted to board flights to Europe with one-way tickets. Fruman and Parnas have been subpoenaed by the House Intelligence Committee as well.

On Thursday night, the State Department ordered Yovanovitch not to appear the next day. But the Intelligence Committee issued a subpoena Friday morning to compel her to testify, declaring that “the illegitimate order from the Trump Administration not to cooperate has no force.” The *Post* noted, “With a subpoena in hand, officials who are

otherwise willing to testify can circumvent the White House's stated prohibition on cooperation with the impeachment probe."

The *Post* also reported that Sondland's testimony was not likely to be as favorable to Trump as the White House had previously claimed. Sondland received several text messages from the interim ambassador who replaced Yovanovitch in Kiev, William Taylor, indicating his opposition to any effort to condition US arms shipments to Ukraine on Ukrainian cooperation in an anti-Biden campaign.

Sondland ended the exchange of messages with Taylor by telling him explicitly that there was "no quid pro quo" of arms for political dirt. According to the *Post*, Sondland will tell Congress that Trump told him this directly in a phone call, but that "he has no knowledge of whether the president was telling him the truth at that moment."

"Sondland will hold out the possibility that Trump wasn't truthful in his denial of a quid pro quo," the newspaper reported, as well as the possibility that a different quid pro quo was intended: an agreement by Trump to have Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky visit the White House in return for a public statement that Ukraine was investigating Burisma Holdings, the gas company where Hunter Biden, the son of the former vice president, held a lucrative position on the board of directors, but without mentioning Biden by name.

Sondland is expected to be questioned at length about the activities of Giuliani, who worked for months to pressure the Ukrainian government to relaunch its investigation into Burisma and the Bidens in an effort to torpedo one of Trump's main Democratic opponents. Giuliani bombarded Sondland and other officials with messages, including one in which he referred to the "deliverable" sought by Trump, relating to the Burisma probe.

In a further sign of the discontent within the State Department directed against Trump, Michael McKinley, a career diplomat and senior adviser to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, resigned his position. McKinley had worked as ambassador to Afghanistan, Colombia, Peru and Brazil before taking a position as an adviser to Pompeo on issues including Afghanistan, Venezuela and Mexico.

It is evident from both the aggressiveness with which the Democrats have taken up the impeachment inquiry and the response of officials like Yovanovitch that the Democratic leadership and powerful sections of the national-security establishment are cooperating in the impeachment campaign against Trump. This campaign is aimed at either ousting Trump entirely or forcing him to shift his foreign policy in a more anti-Russian direction.

The Democratic leadership wants to avoid at all costs raising any broader political issues, such as Trump's crimes

against immigrants and refugees, his violation of constitutional limits on executive power, or his encouragement of white supremacist and fascist forces. In a conference call Saturday with the House Democratic caucus, Pelosi reiterated her commitment to an impeachment inquiry focused narrowly on the Ukraine allegations, rejecting suggestions by several Democrats that the probe be expanded to other areas.

The cochair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, Representative Pramila Jayapal (D-WA), endorsed this stance, claiming that the caucus must "stay focused on what is easiest to explain," although she said some additional issues could be raised. "We want to stay focused in on a simple message, and there might be one or two places where it's actually bolstering the case of Ukraine to talk about the other situations," she said.

There were further indications of crisis in both of the two ruling-class camps engaged in the frenzied factional conflict over impeachment. It was reported in the press that Attorney General William Barr met privately last Wednesday night with Rupert Murdoch, the billionaire who owns Fox News and many other media properties. Two days later, the lead news anchor at Fox, Shepard Smith, announced his resignation. He had long been under fire from Trump apologists at the network and from Trump himself for his more critical view of the president.

On the Democratic side, the continual media references to Hunter Biden's role at Burisma, where he received as much as \$50,000 a month for "work" that consisted largely of being the son of the US vice president, has done considerable damage to Joe Biden's campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. On Sunday, the younger Biden's lawyer issued a carefully crafted statement in which Hunter Biden in effect promised to stop engaging in influence peddling overseas if his father was elected president.

The statement declared, "Under a Biden Administration, Hunter will readily comply with any and all guidelines or standards a President Biden may issue to address purported conflicts of interest, or the appearance of such conflicts, including any restrictions related to overseas business interests... In any event, Hunter will agree not to serve on boards of, or work on behalf of, foreign-owned companies."



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