

As second week of public hearings begins

Pelosi doubles down on anti-Russia politics of impeachment inquiry

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Interviewed on the “Face the Nation” television program Sunday, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi reiterated the right-wing basis on which the Democrats are conducting their impeachment inquiry of President Donald Trump.

Speaking on the eve of the second week of public hearings before the House Intelligence Committee, Pelosi once again defined as the sole issue in the Democrats’ case for impeachment the charge that Trump endangered US “national security” and strengthened Russia by withholding military aid from the right-wing nationalist government in Ukraine.

The claim is that Trump engaged in either “bribery” or abuse of power by subordinating support for the regime the US helped install in a fascist-led putsch in 2014 to his personal political interests.

At the center of the impeachment drive is a July 25 telephone call in which Trump sought to shake down Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky by indicating that \$391 million in frozen military aid would be released only if his government announced a corruption investigation into Democratic presidential aspirant and former Vice President Joe Biden and his son Hunter. The latter secured a lucrative position on the board of a large Ukrainian natural gas company during the period when his father was the point man for the Obama administration’s Ukraine policy.

The dominant factions of the US intelligence, military and foreign policy establishment consider the Ukrainian regime, which is locked in a war against pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, a “front-line” state in the drive to isolate Russia and remove it as an obstacle to US hegemony in the Middle East and Eurasia. They are the driving force behind the Democrats’ effort to either remove Trump from power or force him to adopt a more aggressive policy against Russia.

In the interview, Pelosi said Trump’s posture toward Ukraine “undermines our national security.” Asked to assess the first week of public hearings, in which three currently serving State Department officials attacked Russia as a lawless and aggressive state and denounced the Trump administration’s maneuvers with Kiev, Pelosi said, “I think patriotism has had a good week.”

Repeating the recurring charge that in considering Trump’s actions, “All roads lead to Putin,” she said: “Whether it’s giving them a stronger foothold in the Middle East by what [Trump] did with Turkey and Syria. Well, by what [he] did by withholding a grant—withholding aid to military assistance voted by Congress to Ukraine to the benefit of Putin... And with his disparaging remarks about NATO and questioning our commitment to NATO. That’s to Putin’s advantage.”

But even as she all but called Trump a traitor and Russian agent, she reiterated the Democrats’ readiness to collaborate with the White House in implementing a right-wing, anti-working class domestic agenda. Raising the hope of finding “common ground,” she said, “I thought maybe we could work on infrastructure. And I’m still hopeful. I thought we could [work] on reducing the cost of prescription drugs. And I’m still hopeful.”

She also restated the claim, made at a press conference last Thursday, that “What the president did was so much worse than even what Richard Nixon did...”

From the standpoint of democratic rights, this is absurd. The Watergate crisis and impeachment drive against Nixon arose out of the growth of popular sentiment against the Vietnam War and Nixon’s illegal and unconstitutional efforts to suppress it. There were definite democratic issues involved in the effort to remove him from office.

This impeachment is a sordid conflict over US imperialist policy between two right-wing, pro-war factions of the ruling class and the state. Dominant factions within the foreign policy and intelligence establishment consider Trump’s pullback from the belligerent anti-Russia policy of the Obama administration a threat to the global hegemonic aims of the United States, including its preparations for an all-out struggle, potentially including war, with China.

All of the real attacks by Trump on democratic rights—the persecution and mass incarceration of immigrants, the defiance of congressional and judicial oversight and arrogation of quasi-dictatorial powers, the glorification of police violence and the encouragement of fascistic and racist forces—are excluded from the Democrats’ operation.

It is hardly surprising that impeachment hearings held on such a basis have not evoked broad or deep public interest. The television ratings company Nielsen reported that 13.8 million people watched the first hearing, held last Wednesday, which took testimony from Deputy Assistant Secretary of State George Kent and the top diplomat in Ukraine, William Taylor. This was across 10 broadcast and cable networks, which massively promoted the hearing, suspended all regular programming, and covered the event gavel to gavel.

By comparison, the Senate Watergate hearings in 1973 drew tens of millions of viewers. It is estimated that more than 80 percent of Americans watched at least part of the Watergate hearings.

The impeachment hearing last week did not even attract as large a viewership as the July 2017 hearing for fired FBI Director James Comey or the September 2018 hearings for then-Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh and his accuser Christine Blasey Ford (each of which drew about 20 million). It failed even to garner the audience that tuned in to watch Michael Cohen testify (16 million) in February 2019.

It did draw a somewhat larger viewership than the July 2019 hearing in which Special Counsel Robert Mueller testified on his investigation of alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 US elections and collusion by the Trump campaign with Moscow (13 million), another episode in the anti-Russia witch hunt led by the Democrats.

On the eve of the new round of hearings, CNN is reporting that White House aides are exploring removing from their White House posts impeachment witnesses who have testified against Trump, such as Alexander Vindman, and shifting them back to their home departments.

NBC is reporting as well that Trump has bitterly reproached Secretary of State Mike Pompeo for the damaging testimony given by State Department officials such as George Kent and William Taylor. The latter replaced Marie Yovanovitch as the top US diplomat in Kiev after Yovanovitch was removed from her post as ambassador by Trump last April. In her testimony on Friday, Yovanovitch denounced Pompeo, without naming him, for failing to defend State Department staff.

This week's public hearings will be held Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, with a total of nine witnesses. It is believed that the House Intelligence Committee, which is conducting the hearings, will likely wrap up the public phase of its investigation at that point, underscoring the pro forma character of the operation.

The committee will then draw up a report on its findings, which will be forwarded to the House Judiciary Committee and also released to the public. The Judiciary Committee will hold its own hearings, draw up articles of impeachment and send them to the House membership for a floor vote. While it is expected that the House will approve impeachment on a party-line vote, it is doubtful that the Democrats will be able to secure the 20 Republican votes in the Senate needed to convict and

remove Trump from office.

The hearings set for this week are:

Tuesday morning: Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, the top Ukraine expert on the National Security Council (NSC), and Jennifer Williams, a State Department official and aide to Vice President Mike Pence. Both listened in on the July 25 telephone call and both have testified in closed-door sessions to having been disturbed by the withholding of military aid and Trump's suggestion of a release of the aid in return for an announcement of investigations into Biden and the Democrats.

Tuesday afternoon: Kurt Volker, former US special envoy to Ukraine, and Timothy Morrison, a Europe and Russia expert for the NSC. These two were both requested to appear by the Republicans on the House Intelligence Committee.

Wednesday morning: Gordon Sondland, US ambassador to the European Union, who played a key role, along with Volker and Trump's personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani, in the effort to pressure Ukraine to announce a probe of the Bidens.

Wednesday afternoon: Laura Cooper, deputy assistant secretary of defense for Russian, Ukrainian and Eurasian affairs and David Hale, under secretary of state for political affairs.

Thursday: Fiona Hill, the NSC's former senior director for Europe and Russia, and David Holmes, a State Department staffer and aide to William Taylor at the US embassy in Kiev.

Vindman, Morrison and Hill were closely linked to John Bolton, whom Trump fired from his post as national security adviser on September 10. According to the transcript of Morrison's earlier closed-door testimony to impeachment investigators that was released by the Democrats on Saturday, Bolton met privately with Trump last August in an unsuccessful attempt to convince the president to release the military aid to Ukraine.

On Monday, amid tweets denouncing officials who have defied White House orders not to cooperate with the impeachment inquiry and given damaging testimony, Trump said he would "strongly consider" Pelosi's suggestion that he submit written testimony to the inquiry.



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