

Impeachment hearing highlights conflict over US policy in Ukraine

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20 November 2019

Public hearings in the impeachment inquiry against President Trump continued Tuesday, with four witnesses appearing before the House Intelligence Committee in a lengthy session extending into the evening.

The first two witnesses, State Department official Jennifer Williams and Lt. Col Alexander Vindman of the National Security Council, were called by the Democrats, while former Ukraine special envoy Kurt Volker and former NSC official Tim Morrison were called by the Republicans.

All four witnesses expressed concern over the July 25 phone call between Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, which is the focal point of the inquiry. In the call, Trump bullied his Ukrainian counterpart, demanding an investigation into Hunter Biden, son of former vice president Joe Biden, and into alleged operations of the Democratic National Committee in Ukraine during the 2016 election.

Williams, Vindman and Morrison listened in on the July 25 call, Williams as a representative of Vice President Mike Pence, whom she was advising on Eastern European and Russian affairs, and Vindman and Morrison as officials of the NSC. Vindman and Morrison immediately reported the call to the NSC legal counsel, a clear signal of concern. Vindman said he did so because he thought Trump's demand for Ukraine to announce a corruption probe into the Bidens was wrong. Morrison claimed it was because he feared the political blowback if the call became public.

Volker testified that he learned of the content of call only two months later, when it was made public by the White House on September 25. He had previously told the House Intelligence Committee, behind closed doors, that there was no connection between the withholding of US military aid to Ukraine and Trump's

demand for an investigation into Biden. But in the public session, he was not so categorical and he described Trump's reference to the Bidens in the July 25 call as "unacceptable."

The content of the testimony and much of the tedious questioning revolved around the question of whether Trump had sought to condition US military aid to Ukraine and an invitation for the Ukrainian president to visit the White House on Ukraine's agreement to declare it was opening an investigation into Biden and the Democrats.

It is no secret that Trump engages in such transactional bullying on a daily basis, despite Republican efforts to disguise this obvious fact. For their part, the Democrats, frustrated by the evident popular disinterest in the whole proceeding, have resorted to focus groups to test whether "quid pro quo," bribery or extortion is the most effective term to use in pursuing impeachment.

The entire debate over the Trump-Zelensky phone call is a diversion from the central issue in the inquiry. What has moved impeachment to center stage in US politics is the furious reaction within the military-intelligence apparatus to Trump's actions in two key areas of foreign policy, Ukraine and Syria.

In threatening the supply of US military aid to Ukraine—as well as calling into question the US position on Crimea and suggesting he might invite Putin to the G7 summit in the United States next year and accept a Putin invitation to Moscow for the 75th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day—Trump is seen to be undermining one of the most critical operations of American imperialism over the past two decades: the installation of a US puppet regime in Ukraine, the second-largest component of the former Soviet Union. Ukraine is widely regarded as a front-line state in any

future war between NATO and Russia.

While the Democrats profess shock and dismay that Trump would invite “foreign interference” in a US election by seeking political dirt on Biden from Ukraine, the “Maidan revolution” of 2014, celebrated by both parties, was the product of far more blatant foreign interference by the United States in Ukraine. The assistant secretary of state for European affairs under Obama, Victoria Nuland, wife of leading neoconservative and Iraq warmonger Robert Kagan, boasted that the US government spent \$5 billion to help overthrow the elected government of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich.

Democrat after Democrat in the questioning of witnesses on Tuesday invoked the 2014 CIA-backed and fascist-led coup in Ukraine as an historic advance for American foreign policy that was being placed in danger by Russia and by Trump’s alleged accommodation with Moscow. All of them proceeded from the script enunciated by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who has repeatedly declared that with Trump, “all roads lead to Putin.”

In that sense, the impeachment of Trump over Ukraine is an extension of the anti-Russia campaign that was launched by the Democratic Party and the intelligence agencies in July 2016 and continued through the election and for the nearly two years of the Mueller investigation. The top Republican on the Intelligence Committee, Devin Nunes, was able to demonstrate this continuity quite effectively in his opening statement Tuesday, which included citations of media headlines from the past three years promoting the bogus claim that Trump is a Russian agent.

Trump’s relations with the military-intelligence apparatus were further aggravated by his decision last month to pull most US forces out of Syria and abandon the Syrian Kurdish forces that had served as the main ground troops for Washington for the previous four years.

On both issues—withholding aid from Ukraine and pulling out of Syria—Trump’s actions produced a backlash within his own administration, most notably in his firing of National Security Advisor John Bolton. According to one report this weekend, Bolton had a private session with Trump over the Ukraine issue before his dismissal on September 10, which came one day after the complaint by a CIA “whistleblower”

became publicly known and one day before Trump had to reverse himself and release the funds for the Ukraine military.

The reaction within the Pentagon has been similar, particularly over Syria. The tensions underlying civil-military relations in Washington were reflected in a seemingly minor incident. When one Republican congressman referred to Vindman as “Mr. Vindman,” the military officer, dressed in full uniform, snapped that he should be addressed as “lieutenant colonel.”

Much of Tuesday’s hearing was aimed at shaping expectations for the testimony Wednesday morning from Gordon Sondland, the US ambassador to the European Union, who has been depicted as the principal go-between for Trump’s campaign to pressure Ukrainian officials to investigate the Bidens. All four of the witnesses on Tuesday flatly denied that they had played any role in that effort, and claimed to oppose it.

Sondland has already given two diametrically opposed accounts of his role in the Ukraine affair, and his credibility will undoubtedly be attacked Wednesday by one side or the other on the committee, depending on where he comes down on the question of whether Trump explicitly, in discussions with him, linked military aid to an investigation of a potential Democratic opponent in 2020.

In particular, he will be asked about a phone call on July 26, in which he allegedly spoke with Trump from a Kiev restaurant and then told other embassy staffers that Trump did not “give a shit about Ukraine” and was interested only in investigations of the Bidens. Sondland did not reveal that call in his previous closed-door deposition, but David Holmes, a counselor in the US embassy in Kiev, told the committee Saturday that he had overheard the call and then discussed it with Sondland afterwards. Holmes is to give public testimony Thursday.



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