

Gordon Sondland, Debate, Google: Your Wednesday Evening Briefing

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Highlight: Here's what you need to know at the end of the day.

Body

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Good evening. Here's the latest.

1. Pivotal testimony in the impeachment hearings.

Ambassador Gordon Sondland, one of the “three amigos” pursuing President Trump’s Ukraine policy, tied Vice President Mike Pence, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and other top officials to the pressure campaign on Ukraine.

“Everyone,” he said, “was in the loop.” And he affirmed that there was a quid pro quo over shows of U.S. support.

But Mr. Sondland also said that Mr. Trump “never told me directly” that military aid for Ukraine was conditioned on investigations into Democratic rivals, and that when he asked the president what he wanted from Ukraine, Mr. Trump answered, “I want nothing. I want nothing. I want no quid pro quo. Tell Zelensky to do the right thing.”

Mr. Trump has seized on the first part of his comment — made after the White House learned of the whistle-blower complaint — as exoneration.

The hearings resume on Thursday at 9 a.m. Eastern, with Fiona Hill, a former National Security Council official, and David Holmes, a Ukraine-based State Department official.

2. The fifth Democratic presidential debate is underway (if you didn't already spend your TV allotment on the impeachment hearing).

Democratic candidates grappled with the impact of the impeachment inquiry at the start of the debate; Bernie Sanders warned that Democrats should not be “consumed” by President Trump. We're streaming the event with live analysis from our reporters.

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The top contenders, who own the center of the stage, are Joe Biden, Elizabeth Warren, Mr. Sanders and a surging Pete Buttigieg. Watch for sharp elbows — especially as Amy Klobuchar and Kamala Harris try to break into the top tier.

More than 1,000 readers wrote in about the issues they want the candidates to address. Climate led.

And the stage will have more women than ever before, with four as candidates and four as moderators: MSNBC's Rachel Maddow, NBC's Andrea Mitchell, NBC's Kristen Welker and Ashley Parker of The Washington Post.

3. Israel's political chaos entered a new phase.

After Benny Gantz, the leader of the Blue and White party, said he was unable to form a government, above, the task fell for the first time to Parliament.

Lawmakers now have 21 days to come up with a candidate — any candidate, including Mr. Gantz or his rival, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu — who could command a majority of seats in the 120-seat Parliament.

And if that doesn't work, Israel would have to face a third election — possibly just as divided as the first two — most likely in the spring.

4. China's Communist government warned that it would use its authority to overrule Hong Kong's judiciary.

The warning struck at the heart of what has fueled months of unrest: concerns about Beijing's encroachment on Hong Kong's civil liberties and rule of law. Above, supporters escorted those charged with rioting from a court in Hong Kong under cover of umbrellas on Wednesday.

"It represents a new stage in Hong Kong's protest movement," said a political analyst in Beijing. "It has reached the stage of a very direct conflict over sovereignty."

Separately, a Beijing gallery canceled a pending show by a prominent Chinese-American artist, Hung Liu, in the latest sign that hard-nosed authoritarianism is creeping into China's civil society.

5. Google has hired a consulting firm known for its anti-union efforts — a move employees discovered by digging through entries in an internal calendar.

The hiring of IRI Consultants is a surprising turn for one of Silicon Valley's giants, which tend to be known for good pay and perks. But Google has been challenged by activist workers for nearly two years, including over the handling of sexual abuse accusations last year, above. And it has been taking steps to block internal dissent, employees say.

And we tracked a gig worker revolt at Rev, a start-up offering online transcriptions, after the company slashed pay rates for contractors. "This felt good," said the revolt's leader. "It felt like I was finally saying, 'I have been doing this and it has sucked a lot.'"

6. G.M. v. Fiat Chrysler.

General Motors filed a racketeering lawsuit, accusing its rival Fiat Chrysler of bribing United Auto Workers officials during contract negotiations in 2011 and 2015. Above, Fiat's headquarters in Turin, Italy.

Fresh from a 40-day U.A.W. strike, G.M. did not sue the union.

Fiat Chrysler, headquartered above in Turin, Italy, said it was "astonished" by the lawsuit, which it called "meritless," and suggested the legal filing was meant to disrupt its proposed merger with the maker of Peugeot and Citroën cars.

7. One of our most-read stories today is a follow-up on the mass shooting at an El Paso Walmart that left 22 people dead and many others injured.

That tally includes Luis Calvillo, who was shot five times in the parking lot as the girls' soccer team he coaches was holding a fund-raiser. Mr. Calvillo, a veteran who served in Iraq with the Army's 101st Airborne Division, insisted on coaching the team from his sick bed as he recuperated.

He took us on his journey to recovery.

"I just think I got a second chance at life," Mr. Calvillo said. "I can't change things. I got to just keep on going."

8. Say goodbye to your plastic Hamburglar: Fast-food chains are attempting to scale back their distribution of free toys, a bid to address environmental concerns about single-use plastics.

Burger King is melting down hundreds of thousands of toys, which will be turned into playground equipment and reusable table trays. Next year, McDonald's will offer British children the choice between a toy or a book with their Happy Meals.

Environmental experts say it's not evident that these efforts would make a meaningful impact.

Oxford Dictionaries has named "climate emergency" as its 2019 Word of the Year, choosing it from an all-environmental shortlist that also included "climate action," "climate denial," "eco-anxiety," "extinction" and "flight shame."

9. Lizzo, Billie Eilish and Lil Nas X dominated the list of Grammy nominations.

That continues a growing trend: recognition for young, diverse artists reflective of the forefront of pop.

The charismatic pop and R&B star Lizzo, above at the Hollywood Palladium in October, is up for eight awards, including the four major categories: album, record and song of the year, and best new artist.

Among the major snubs and surprises: Taylor Swift received three nominations for her album "Lover," but none in the major categories. The awards ceremony will be held on Jan. 26 in Los Angeles.

10. And finally, did you know ...

That the Pilgrims who came to the American continent starting in 1620 never called themselves that?

They were separatists, according to James Loewen, a sociologist and the author of "Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong." It was more than two centuries before "Pilgrims" began to be used to describe them.

Oh, and there's more, if you want food for thought along with your feast next week.

Have a thankful evening.

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