

POLITICS

Trump Pressed for Ukraine Envoy's Removal, She Tells Lawmakers

Marie Yovanovitch cites 'concerted campaign' in testimony before closed-door session



Marie Yovanovitch, center, arriving at the Capitol on Friday to speak to House committees. PHOTO: SHAWN THEW/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

By Byron Tau, Warren P. Strobel and Siobhan Hughes

Updated Oct. 11, 2019 9:16 pm ET

WASHINGTON—President Trump for more than a year had pressured the State Department to remove the former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, the envoy told lawmakers in more than nine hours of closed-door testimony that Democrats demanded as part of their rapidly expanding impeachment inquiry.

Marie Yovanovitch, a career diplomat whom Mr. Trump recalled from her post in May, said in a statement that she had experienced what she called a “concerted campaign” against her.

She said she didn’t know why she was targeted by Trump allies outside the administration, including by his personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani. But she drew a link to the two Giuliani associates who were arrested this week on campaign-finance charges in the U.S., saying she suspected the men stood to benefit financially by sidetracking an ambassador who had spoken out against corruption in Ukraine.

Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff (D., Calif.), who has been given the lead on the impeachment inquiry, took no questions after the deposition. “I think she has been a model diplomat and deserved better than the shabby treatment she received from this president and from the secretary of state,” he told reporters, adding that Ms. Yovanovitch showed respect for the rule of law in both Ukraine and the U.S.

Rep. Sean Patrick Maloney (D., N.Y.) said Ms. Yovanovitch was overcome with emotion at times and had to leave the room.

“There’s more work to do, I think it is important to stress though, that we already know some very damaging facts, actually devastating facts, about the conduct of the president of the United States and with each additional day, it looks worse,” Mr. Maloney said.

Republicans complained that the interrogations were happening behind closed doors and said the process should be more transparent.

“It’s unfair, it’s partisan,” said Ohio Rep. Jim Jordan, the top Republican on the House Oversight committee. “We’re talking about the impeachment of the president of the United States, 13 months before an election, by an anonymous whistleblower with no firsthand knowledge.”

“This process is a joke, and the consequences are huge” said Rep. Lee Zeldin (R., N.Y.).

Mr. Jordan also said that the president was entitled to have the ambassador he wanted in Ukraine.

With the White House stepping up its rhetoric against the impeachment query this week, calling it illegitimate and vowing not to cooperate in any way, Democrats hope the testimony of the ambassador could help draw a clearer connection to the pressure campaign by Mr. Trump to get Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to investigate Democratic presidential contender Joe Biden. In a July 25 phone call with Mr. Zelensky that has become a centerpiece of the impeachment drive, Mr. Trump called Ms. Yovanovitch “bad news” and told his Ukrainian counterpart that “she’s going to go through some things,” according to a rough transcript released by the White House.

The call led to a whistleblower complaint by a Central Intelligence Agency officer and in turn sparked the impeachment query.

Rep. Denny Heck (D., Wash.) said the long day of testimony “went like a New York second. It was that amazing, that powerful, that impactful.” He didn’t offer specifics about what Ms. Yovanovitch said.

The White House didn’t reply to a request for comment.

Ms. Yovanovitch had been ordered by the State Department, at the direction of the White House, not to testify voluntarily, Democratic lawmakers said, which necessitated a subpoena by the three Democratic-led committees in the House of Representatives. Ms. Yovanovitch complied with the subpoena, testifying for hours behind closed doors before lawmakers from both parties with the House Intelligence, Oversight and Foreign Affairs committees.

A second diplomat, Gordon Sondland, agreed to appear next week in response to a subpoena issued by the House after the State Department this week blocked Mr. Sondland from testifying voluntarily. Mr. Sondland, a Republican donor and former hotel executive who is the U.S. ambassador to the European Union, was expected to be questioned on the role that he and other officials played in crafting an unreleased August statement in which Ukraine would commit to looking into Mr. Biden in exchange for a White House meeting between Mr. Trump and Mr. Zelensky.

The House impeachment inquiry has ramped up beyond that, with committees demanding documents of the White House, Energy Secretary Rick Perry, the Office of Management and Budget, the Defense Department and the State Department.

Fiona Hill, formerly Mr. Trump's top adviser on Russia, as well as State Department officials George Kent and T. Ulrich Brechbuhl have also agreed to testify.

In her testimony Friday, Ms. Yovanovitch recounted a conversation with the State Department's No. 2 official, John Sullivan, who told her Mr. Trump "had lost confidence in me and no longer wished me to serve as his ambassador. He added that there had been a concerted campaign against me, and that the Department had been under pressure from the president to remove me since the Summer of 2018," Ms. Yovanovitch added.

The Wall Street Journal has reported that Mr. Trump ordered Ms. Yovanovitch's removal after months of complaints from allies outside the administration, including Mr. Giuliani, that she was obstructing efforts to persuade Kyiv to investigate Mr. Biden and his son Hunter Biden.

Former colleagues describe Ms. Yovanovitch, a senior fellow at Georgetown University, as an accomplished and nonpartisan career diplomat who would have resisted any attempt to use U.S. foreign policy to advance the president's personal political agenda, which is the essence of Democrats' accusations against Mr. Trump.

Ms. Yovanovitch, who has served under presidents from both parties, said Friday that any notion she was working against Mr. Trump was "fictitious." She also said the Obama administration had never asked her to help Democrat Hillary Clinton's campaign in 2016 or to harm Mr. Trump's and that she wouldn't have done so if asked.

The two Giuliani associates who Ms. Yovanovitch said were working against her are Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman, both U.S. citizens born in former Soviet republics, who are facing campaign-finance charges in the U.S. Prosecutors allege the men were trying to funnel foreign money into U.S. elections on behalf of at least one unnamed Ukrainian politician. The House committees have also subpoenaed Messrs. Fruman and Parnas.

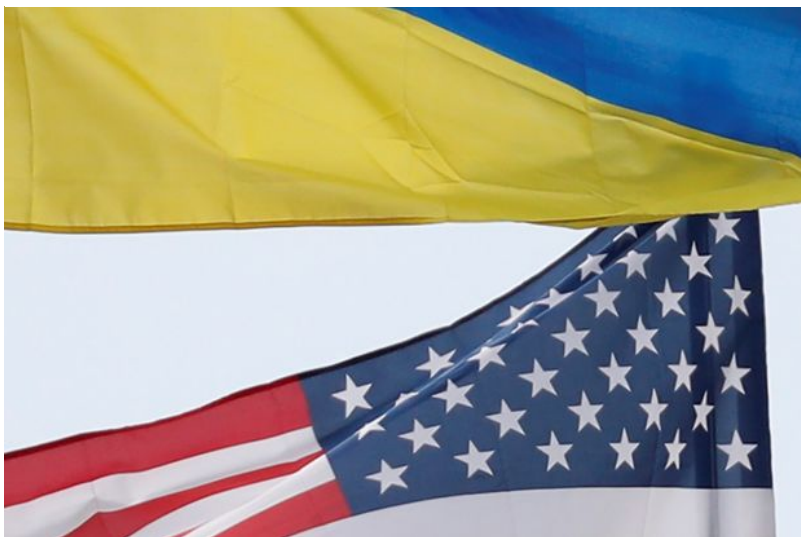
Former Republican Rep. Pete Sessions of Texas, who received campaign contributions from the two men, met with them last year about seeking Ms. Yovanovitch's removal. Mr. Sessions wrote Mr. Trump, saying the ambassador was badmouthing him abroad, the Journal has reported.

Mr. Sondland's deposition is scheduled for next Thursday, when he is expected to be asked about his role in the Trump administration's Ukraine dealings. His text messages during the summer on Ukraine—particularly ones relating to a potential trade of U.S. aid for help investigating Mr. Biden and his son—have made him a key figure of interest.

"Ambassador Sondland will honor the Committees' subpoena, and he looks forward to testifying on Thursday. Ambassador Sondland has at all times acted with integrity and in the interests of the United States. He has no agenda apart from answering the Committees' questions fully and truthfully," Mr. Sondland's lawyers said in a statement.

Mr. Sondland was nominated as ambassador in May 2018. In February, weeks after Russia seized a Ukrainian navy ship, he unofficially added Ukraine—which isn't an EU member—to his portfolio.

Trump and Ukraine: A Guide to the Key Players



VALENTYN OGIRENKO/REUTERS

Meanwhile, a top aide to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has resigned, a move that comes amid growing concern at the State Department over the treatment of career staff amid the Ukraine inquiry.

Michael McKinley, a former ambassador to Brazil, Afghanistan and Colombia, was a senior adviser to Mr. Pompeo and seen as a bridge between career foreign-service officers and political appointees. Mr.

McKinley's area of expertise was the Latin American region and Afghanistan, including efforts to broker an agreement to withdraw troops with the Taliban.

Mr. McKinley didn't respond to a request for comment.

—*Jessica Donati, Jesse Naranjo and Natalie Andrews contributed to this article.*

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