

POLITICS

Mulvaney Digs In on Ukraine Defense

White House chief of staff continues to distance himself from his remarks Thursday suggesting a link between Ukraine aid and an investigation of the 2016 election



'That's what people are saying that I said, but I didn't say that,' Mick Mulvaney said Sunday. Mr. Mulvaney is shown at a press briefing on Thursday. PHOTO: JIM WATSON/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

By Timothy Puko

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WASHINGTON—Acting White House chief of staff Mick Mulvaney on Sunday continued trying to back away from remarks he made last week that for the first time linked President Trump's decision to hold up aid to Ukraine to his desire for Kyiv to do investigations related to the 2016 election.

Mr. Mulvaney had said on Thursday afternoon that Mr. Trump's concerns about corruption in Ukraine—including a suspicion, unsupported by evidence, expressed by the president that a hacked Democratic National Committee server has since been hidden in Ukraine—were partly responsible for Mr. Trump's order to withhold nearly \$400 million in aid to Ukraine in July.

By late Thursday afternoon, Mr. Mulvaney issued a statement, reviewed by Mr. Trump, reversing his remarks and saying there was no connection. He continued on that course on Sunday, repeating Mr. Trump's frequent claim that there was no quid pro quo and saying the aid was tied only to requests that the Ukrainians continue anticorruption efforts.

“Go back to what actually happened in the real world,” Mr. Mulvaney said during an interview on “Fox News Sunday.” “What should put this issue to bed is that the money flowed without any connection whatsoever to the DNC server.”

Mr. Trump has repeatedly said that the driving forces behind his decision to hold up the aid were concerns about corruption and his feeling that European nations weren’t doing enough to help Ukraine. In addition to those concerns, Mr. Mulvaney had said on Thursday, “Did [the president] also mention to me in the past the corruption related to the DNC server? Absolutely. No question about that. That’s it, and that’s why we held up the money.”

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Mr. Mulvaney had said Thursday that Mr. Trump’s desire for Ukraine to investigate former Vice President Joe Biden, a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination, and his son Hunter Biden—which the GOP president brought up

in a July 25 phone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky —wasn’t related to the hold on aid. That phone call had prompted House Democrats to begin an impeachment inquiry last month.

Mr. Mulvaney also tied the hold in aid to Ukraine’s cooperation in a Justice Department review of the origins of the investigation of Russian interference in the 2016 election, a probe that was later taken over by special counsel Robert Mueller. “The look back to what happened in 2016 certainly was part of the thing that he was worried about in corruption with that nation,” Mr. Mulvaney said. “And that is absolutely appropriate.”

Those comments at a White House briefing Thursday caused alarm among senior White House aides and the president’s legal team. On Sunday, Mr. Mulvaney said it was a misunderstanding to interpret that statement as suggesting a quid pro quo was in place.

“That’s what people are saying that I said, but I didn’t say that,” Mulvaney said in the Fox interview. He acknowledged Mr. Trump had mentioned concern regarding Ukraine and the DNC server, then added, “but it wasn’t connected to the aid.”

Appearing on ABC’s “This Week” on Sunday, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said he never saw any sign of a quid pro quo between the Ukraine aid and political considerations.

“The conversation was always around what were the strategic implications,” Mr. Pompeo said.
“Would that money get to the right place or would there be corruption in Ukraine and the money wouldn’t flow to the mission that it was intended for.”

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