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Trump Ordered Ukraine Ambassador Removed After Complaints From Giuliani, Others

Marie Yovanovitch dismissed after Trump allies said she was blocking Biden probe and bad-mouthing president, people familiar with the matter say



Then-U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch in Kyiv in November 2018. PHOTO: MAXYM MARUSENKO/NURPHOTO/ZUMA PRESS

By Rebecca Ballhaus, Michael C. Bender and Vivian Salama

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WASHINGTON—President Trump ordered the removal of the ambassador to Ukraine after months of complaints from allies outside the administration, including his personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani, that she was undermining him abroad and obstructing efforts to persuade Kyiv to investigate former Vice President Joe Biden, according to people familiar with the matter.

The recall of Marie Yovanovitch in the spring has become a key point of interest in the House impeachment inquiry. A whistleblower complaint by a CIA officer alleges the president solicited foreign interference in the 2020 elections by pressuring Ukraine's president in a July 25 call to

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The complaint cites Ms. Yovanovitch's ouster as one of a series of events that paved the way for what the whistleblower alleges was an abuse of power by the president. Mr. Trump has described the call with his Ukrainian counterpart as "perfect" and the House inquiry as a "hoax."



Rudy Giuliani, President Trump's personal lawyer, speaking in New York last month. PHOTO: ANGELA WEISS/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

State Department officials were told this spring that Ms. Yovanovitch's removal was a priority for the president, a person familiar with the matter said. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo supported the move, an administration official said. Ms. Yovanovitch was told by State Department officials that they couldn't shield her from attacks by the president and his allies, according to people close to her.

In an interview, Mr. Giuliani told The Wall Street Journal that in the lead-up to Ms. Yovanovitch's removal, he reminded the president of complaints percolating among Trump supporters that she had displayed an anti-Trump bias in private conversations. In Mr. Giuliani's view, she also had been an obstacle to efforts to push Ukraine to investigate Mr. Biden and his son Hunter.

As vice president, Mr. Biden spearheaded an international anticorruption reform push in Ukraine, which included calling for the dismissal of a prosecutor the U.S. and its allies saw as soft on corruption. He had once investigated the Ukrainian gas company where Hunter Biden served on the board at a salary of \$50,000 a month, according to one official with ties to the company. Mr. Trump has accused the Bidens of corruption.

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When Ms. Yovanovitch left her post in May, the State Department said she was concluding her assignment “as planned,” and that her departure date aligned with the start of a new administration in Ukraine. She was recalled at least three months before the end of the customary three-year diplomatic tenure.

Mr. Giuliani told the Journal that when he mentioned the ambassador to the president this spring, Mr. Trump “remembered he had a problem with her earlier and thought she had been dismissed.” Mr. Giuliani said he subsequently received a call from a White House official—whom he declined to identify—asking him to list his concerns about the ambassador again.

Mr. Giuliani said he gave Mr. Pompeo a nine-page document dated March 28 that included a detailed timeline of the Bidens’ dealings in Ukraine and allegations of impropriety against Ms. Yovanovitch, including that she was “very close” to Mr. Biden.

“He called me back and he said they were going to investigate,” Mr. Giuliani said of the secretary of state, saying Mr. Pompeo asked for additional documents to back up the allegations. “The reason I gave the information to the secretary was I believed that he should know that the president’s orders to fire her were being blocked by the State Department.”

Neither the State Department nor the White House responded to requests for comment.

Andrew Bates, a Biden campaign spokesman, said Mr. Biden has professional respect for Ms. Yovanovitch but that the two aren’t close. “She became our ambassador during the final 6 months of the administration,” he said. “This is standard Rudy Giuliani: noun, verb, lie about Joe Biden.”

When asked about Ms. Yovanovitch’s removal Thursday, Mr. Trump told reporters: “I don’t know if I recalled her or somebody recalled her but I heard very, very bad things about her for a long period of time. Not good.”

Ms. Yovanovitch couldn’t be reached for comment. She is set to testify before House lawmakers on Oct. 11 as part of the impeachment inquiry. People close to her disputed that she did anything wrong and defended her work.

“She was doing everything by the book,” said a senior Ukraine government official who interacted with her. “Everything was blessed by State Department.”

Ms. Yovanovitch remains an employee of the State Department and is a senior State Department fellow at Georgetown University.

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Prior to Ms. Yovanovitch's recall from Kyiv, her relations with some senior Ukrainian officials were fraught. Ms. Yovanovitch openly criticized the office of Mr. Lutsenko, then the prosecutor general, for its poor anticorruption record. "Lutsenko hated her because she pushed for reforms, especially in the judiciary sector," said a former Western diplomat in Ukraine.

Presidents have the authority to nominate and remove ambassadors. But some senior officials at the White House and State Department say they had been unaware of the president's displeasure with Ms. Yovanovitch and surprised by her removal.

Mr. Giuliani's role in pressing for the ambassador's ouster is unusual given that he holds no formal government role. The president's critics contend that, in his capacity representing the president's personal interests as his attorney, he has exercised undue influence over administration policy and personnel.

Mr. Giuliani isn't the only figure outside the administration to have expressed concerns about the ambassador. As early as the spring of 2018, Pete Sessions, at the time a GOP congressman from Texas, sent a letter to Mr. Pompeo asking for her removal, saying he had been told Ms. Yovanovitch was displaying a bias against the president in private conversations.

Mr. Sessions told the Journal he didn't follow up on the matter and didn't hear until months later about Mr. Trump's interest in replacing her. He declined to say where his information about the ambassador came from but said his letter was in line with a broader concern among members of Congress that the administration wasn't moving swiftly enough to put new ambassadors in place.

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In a March 2019 interview with a columnist at The Hill, Mr. Lutsenko complained that the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv was obstructing corruption investigations, including by providing a "do not prosecute" list and restricting Ukrainian access to the U.S. Mr. Lutsenko's claim is mentioned in the whistleblower complaint.

The U.S. State Department at the time called the untouchables list claim an "outright fabrication."

Mr. Lutsenko later retracted the allegation about the list and said had no evidence of Biden wrongdoing. He was dismissed in August.

In early 2019, Mr. Lutsenko met twice with Mr. Giuliani, who around the same time stepped up his

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Mr. Lutsenko couldn't be reached for comment. Mr. Giuliani said he brought concerns about the ambassador to the president in the weeks following his meetings with Mr. Lutsenko. "It would have been a dereliction of my duty if I didn't," he said. He accused Ms. Yovanovitch of blocking his efforts to push Ukraine to investigate the Bidens: "I think she covered it up."

The president's supporters kept up criticism of Ms. Yovanovitch. In a March 22 interview on Fox News, Joe diGenova, a lawyer close to the president, accused Ms. Yovanovitch, without providing evidence, of having "bad-mouthed" Mr. Trump to Ukrainian officials and having told them "not to listen or worry about Trump policy because he's going to be impeached."

Mr. diGenova declined to comment. In the Fox interview, Mr. diGenova added: "The president has ordered her dismissal from her post." The same month, Donald Trump Jr., the president's son, referred to the ambassador in a Twitter message as a "joker."

After Volodymyr Zelensky won the Ukrainian presidency on April 21, State Department officials told their Ukrainian counterparts that they favored continuity at the embassy in Kyiv, rather than inserting a new ambassador, according to people familiar with the matter.

Instead, Ms. Yovanovitch was recalled about two weeks after the election. The State Department hasn't named a successor.

In the July 25 call, Mr. Trump described Ms. Yovanovitch to Mr. Zelensky as "bad news." Mr. Zelensky responded: "It was great that you were the first one who told me that she was a bad ambassador because I agree with you 100%."

In early May, a packet of materials was received by Mr. Pompeo's office at the State Department, according to an account given Wednesday to House and Senate committee members by the State Department inspector general and later described by Democratic lawmakers. The inspector general told Congress he had information relevant to the impeachment investigation. The inspector general didn't respond to requests for comment.

It contained several folders marked "Trump Hotel" containing notes and newspaper clippings Democratic lawmakers said were designed to smear Ms. Yovanovitch, packaged in an envelope marked "White House," according to documents viewed by the Journal.

"It is a package of propaganda and disinformation and conspiracy theories," said Rep. Jamie Raskin (D., Md.).

The nine-page document Mr. Giuliani said he gave to Mr. Pompeo dated March 28 was part of that

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