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POLITICS

Diplomat Says Trump Tied Ukraine Aid to Probes Into Biden, Alleged Election Interference

Bill Taylor, testifying in House impeachment probe, raises concern about possible quid pro quo over investigations seen as aiding Trump



Bill Taylor, a top American diplomat to Ukraine, arrived Tuesday to face questions from lawmakers. PHOTO: SAUL LOEB/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

By Rebecca Ballhaus, Natalie Andrews and Siobhan Hughes

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WASHINGTON—A top U.S. diplomat in Kyiv said President Trump made nearly \$400 million in aid contingent on the Ukrainian president investigating Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden and alleged Ukrainian interference in the 2016 U.S. election, in prepared testimony that shed new light on the central question facing the impeachment inquiry.

Bill Taylor, the acting U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, said Tuesday he grew concerned about dual channels through which the Trump administration was conducting foreign policy toward Kyiv—one through the State Department and the other involving Rudy Giuliani, the president's personal lawyer—and became even more alarmed when the president in July directed aid to Ukraine be put on hold.

Mr. Taylor said he was later told that if Ukraine didn't declare it was opening the two investigations, Mr. Trump would neither release the aid nor agree to a White House meeting with the Ukrainian president, according to his prepared testimony to the closed hearing.

He said he subsequently learned, from the U.S. ambassador to the European Union, Gordon Sondland, that Mr. Trump wanted Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who was elected in April, to announce he was opening two investigations: into Burisma Group, a Ukrainian gas company where Mr. Biden's son Hunter was a board member, and into alleged Ukrainian meddling in the 2016 presidential election.

According to Mr. Taylor's testimony, a copy of which was reviewed by The Wall Street Journal, Mr. Sondland told him that "'everything' was dependent on such an announcement"—both a White House meeting, which Mr. Zelensky had sought for months, and the release of the aid. "He said that President Trump wanted President Zelensky 'in a public box' by making a public statement about ordering such investigations," Mr. Taylor told House committees, according to the testimony.

"Ambassador Sondland tried to explain to me that President Trump is a businessman," Mr. Taylor said in his testimony. "When a businessman is about to sign a check to someone who owes him something, he said, the businessman asks that person to pay up before signing a check."

Mr. Taylor's testimony gets to the heart of the impeachment inquiry, which is probing whether the president abused the power of his office to pressure a foreign leader to undertake investigations that could benefit Mr. Trump's re-election bid.

The 15-page opening statement, which Democratic lawmakers said was based on Mr. Taylor's contemporaneous notes, provided the most detailed account to date of alleged interactions among the president, U.S. diplomats and Ukrainian officials concerning the investigations Mr. Trump wanted Ukraine to undertake and the aid he had ordered held up.

White House press secretary Stephanie Grisham said in a statement: "President Trump has done nothing wrong—this is a coordinated smear campaign from far-left lawmakers and radical unelected bureaucrats waging war on the Constitution. There was no quid pro quo."

Mr. Giuliani has defended his efforts in Ukraine and said he worked in conjunction with the State Department. A lawyer for Mr. Sondland declined to comment.

Mr. Trump has defended his actions regarding Ukraine as "perfect" and has called the inquiry a "hoax." He has repeatedly denied that aid for Ukraine was contingent on Kyiv opening new probes.

Last week, White House acting chief of staff Mick Mulvaney said that Mr. Trump wanted Ukraine to open a new investigation related to the 2016 election, among other demands, in return for the aid. Mr. Mulvaney later reversed himself and said that wasn't the case.

According to Mr. Taylor's statement, Mr. Trump repeatedly told officials that he wasn't seeking a "quid pro quo"—but effectively laid out a trade between the aid and the investigations. In a conversation with Mr. Sondland on Sept. 7, in which Mr. Sondland asked him whether there was a quid pro quo between the two issues, Mr. Trump denied the existence of one—but "did insist that President Zelensky go to a microphone and say he is opening investigations of Biden and 2016 election interference, and that President Zelensky should want to do this himself," according to the testimony.

Mr. Taylor said that conversation between the president and Mr. Sondland was described to him by Tim Morrison, an official on the National Security Council. Mr. Morrison didn't respond to a request for comment.

The next day, according to the testimony, Mr. Sondland told Mr. Taylor that he had spoken with the president and that Mr. Trump was "adamant that President Zelensky, himself, had to 'clear things up and do it in public.'"

Mr. Sondland said he had spoken to Mr. Zelensky and his aide Andriy Yermak and told them that "although this was not a quid pro quo, if President Zelensky did not 'clear things up' in public, we would be at a 'stalemate.'" Mr. Taylor said he understood a "stalemate" to mean the U.S. wouldn't release the military aid to Ukraine.

Mr. Zelensky subsequently agreed to make a public statement in a CNN interview, Mr. Sondland told Mr. Taylor, according to his testimony. Mr. Zelensky didn't ultimately make such a statement.

Days later, Mr. Taylor learned the hold had been lifted amid growing questions on Capitol Hill over why the aid had been held up. He gave no indication in his prepared remarks that he ever spoke to Mr. Trump directly about the Ukraine matter.

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Mr. Trump and Mr. Giuliani have contended, without presenting evidence, that Mr. Biden's

anticorruption push in Ukraine while vice president was designed to head off any investigation of

his son's role at Burisma Group. Both Bidens have denied wrongdoing and said they never discussed the younger Mr. Biden's business in Ukraine.

Mr. Trump has also called for Ukraine to investigate a Democratic National Committee computer server that he has claimed is now in Ukraine. That call relates to an unsubstantiated theory that it was Ukraine, not Russia, that hacked Democratic networks during the 2016 election, a theory that contradicts findings by U.S. intelligence agencies and former special counsel Robert Mueller. There is no evidence to support the claim that any Democratic server wound up in Ukraine.

Mr. Taylor's testimony was of particular interest to the House committees because previously released text messages showed he had raised concerns with other U.S. diplomats over a possible quid pro quo. In his testimony, referring to a text message in which he said it would be "crazy" to hold up aid to a country in exchange for help with a political campaign, Mr. Taylor said: "I believed that then, and I still believe that."

Democratic lawmakers who listened to Mr. Taylor on Tuesday said they found him credible and were deeply troubled by his testimony.

"It was real explosive testimony—the No. 1 witness we've heard from so far," said Rep. Adriano Espaillat (D., N.Y.). Rep. Harley Rouda (D., Calif.) said Mr. Taylor's opening statement produced "a lot of sighs and gasps" in the hearing room.

Republicans, meanwhile, played down Mr. Taylor's testimony. "Nothing new here," said Rep. Mark Meadows (R., N.C.), a top ally of Mr. Trump on Capitol Hill. He added that he hadn't seen any witness so far suggest that there was a quid pro quo involving U.S. aid to Ukraine.

Mr. Taylor is the latest in a series of diplomats and other officials who have testified in closed sessions before House committees as part of the impeachment inquiry into interactions between Mr. Trump, Mr. Giuliani and Ukraine.

Mr. Taylor told House committees that his concern about how the Trump administration was conducting foreign policy toward Ukraine began immediately upon his arrival there. "There appeared to be two channels of U.S. policy-making and implementation, one regular and one highly irregular," he said.

The irregular channel, he said, included Kurt Volker, then the U.S. special envoy for Ukraine negotiations; Mr. Sondland; Energy Secretary Rick Perry; and Mr. Giuliani. That group, Mr. Taylor said, operated largely outside of official State Department channels but would sometimes loop him in.

Mr. Taylor said his understanding of what leverage the Trump administration was using to pressure Ukraine to undertake investigations evolved over the summer. Early on, he understood

that a White House meeting between the Ukraine president and Mr. Trump was contingent on the announcement of those investigations; he later understood that the aid would be contingent, too, he said.

In a June 18 call with Messrs. Volker, Sondland and Perry, and other officials, Mr. Taylor said it was “clear” that a meeting between the two presidents was a shared goal.

In subsequent conversations with Messrs. Volker and Sondland, he learned that Mr. Trump “wanted to hear from Zelensky” before scheduling an Oval Office meeting. On June 27, Mr. Sondland told him that Mr. Zelensky “needed to make clear to President Trump that he, President Zelensky, was not standing in the way of ‘investigations.’”

Mr. Taylor began to grow concerned the next day. “I sensed something odd when Ambassador Sondland told me on June 28 that he didn’t wish to include most of the regular interagency participants” in a call planned with Mr. Zelensky, he said.

Before Mr. Zelensky joined the call—in which they would discuss energy and a Ukrainian bridge—Mr. Volker told U.S. participants that he planned to tell Mr. Zelensky in a July 2 meeting that to get a White House meeting, he should emphasize his willingness to cooperate on investigations.

The Wall Street Journal reported Tuesday that Mr. Volker told Mr. Zelensky he needed to make his commitment to investigating corruption and alleged interference clear to Mr. Trump.

By mid-July, Mr. Taylor said it was becoming plain that the White House meeting Mr. Zelensky wanted was dependent on the two investigations, into the Bidens and election interference. Mr. Taylor said it was also clear that those conditions were driven by Mr. Giuliani. Mr. Giuliani didn’t respond to a request for comment.

On July 18, Mr. Taylor was told that Mr. Trump had ordered the nearly \$400 million in aid to Ukraine held. It wasn’t until about five weeks later that he said he understood that hold to be linked to the investigations Mr. Trump wanted Ukraine to pursue.

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Mr. Taylor’s testimony also confirmed previous accounts given to House committees of a contentious July 10 meeting between Ukrainian officials, Mr. Sondland, then-national security adviser John Bolton and then-NSC Russia adviser Fiona Hill. According to the testimony, Mr. Taylor learned from Ms. Hill that in the meeting, Mr. Sondland had linked investigations to an

Oval Office meeting with Mr. Zelensky—a move that “so irritated Ambassador Bolton that he abruptly ended the meeting” and directed Ms. Hill to “brief the lawyers.” Mr. Bolton also referred to the discussion as a “drug deal” and would later oppose the call between the two leaders, concerned it “would be a disaster,” Mr. Taylor said.

A spokeswoman for Mr. Bolton didn’t respond to a request for comment.

On July 20, Mr. Sondland told Mr. Taylor that he had recommended Mr. Zelensky use the phrase “I will leave no stone unturned” with regard to investigations when he spoke with Mr. Trump days later.

After the Trump-Zelensky call took place on July 25, Mr. Taylor said he “strangely” received no readout of the call from the White House. He didn’t learn any details of the call until three days later, when Mr. Morrison told him the call “could have been better” and that Mr. Trump had suggested Mr. Zelensky meet with Mr. Giuliani and Attorney General William Barr.

Mr. Taylor describes growing increasingly alarmed as the hold on aid stretched into its second month. In late August, he told Mr. Bolton about his “serious concern” about the matter, and Mr. Bolton recommended he send a cable to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Mr. Taylor said he did so on Aug. 29. He said he didn’t receive a response. At this point, he wasn’t aware that the aid was linked to investigations.

Days later, Mr. Morrison told Mr. Taylor that Mr. Sondland had told an aide to Mr. Zelensky that U.S. aid “would not come until President Zelensky committed to pursue the Burisma investigation.” That information was what prompted Mr. Taylor to send Mr. Sondland a text message asking if “we [are] now saying that security assistance and [a] WH meeting are conditioned on investigations?”

Mr. Sondland replied that the president had told him he wanted Mr. Zelensky to publicly say Ukraine would investigate Burisma Group and election interference, according to Mr. Taylor’s testimony. He also said he “now recognized that he had made a mistake” by telling Ukrainian officials that a White House meeting was dependent on an announcement of investigations.

Mr. Taylor said he urged Mr. Sondland to “push back” on the president’s demands, and said Mr. Sondland pledged to try. About a week later, Mr. Sondland said he had spoken with Mr. Trump and had been “incorrect about President Trump’s intentions” and that Mr. Trump “has been crystal clear no quid pro quo of any kind.”

Mr. Sondland testified to House committees last week that he couldn’t independently corroborate the president’s assertions about aid because he wasn’t involved in the hold, according to a person familiar with his testimony.

—Jesse Naranjo

and Andrew Duehren contributed to this article.

THE UKRAINE WITNESSES

- Oct. 3: Kurt Volker, former U.S. special representative for Ukraine negotiations, **testifies and hands over** text messages with other State Department officials that showed officials attempting to use a potential meeting between Mr. Trump and his Ukrainian counterpart as leverage to press Kyiv to investigate Joe Biden.
- Oct. 11: Marie Yovanovitch, former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, **testifies that Mr. Trump sought** for over a year to remove her and that his allies, including Rudy Giuliani, Mr. Trump's personal lawyer, targeted her in a "concerted campaign."
- Oct. 14: Fiona Hill, President Trump's former top Russia adviser, **testifies that she and other** White House officials grew so alarmed by the administration's efforts to push Ukraine to open certain investigations that they raised objections with a White House lawyer.
- Oct. 15: George Kent, deputy assistant secretary of state, **testifies that he had grown concerned** that he had been sidelined from Ukraine diplomacy and that he raised concerns in 2015 about Joe Biden's son serving on the board of a Ukrainian gas company.
- Oct. 16: Michael McKinley, former top aide to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, **testifies that he left his post over frustration** with Mr. Pompeo regarding the treatment of Ms. Yovanovitch.
- Oct. 17: Gordon Sondland, U.S. ambassador to the European Union, **criticizes President Trump over his efforts to enlist Ukraine** in investigating a political rival and says he and other U.S. officials were "disappointed" by the president's directive to work with Mr. Giuliani on Ukraine matters.
- Oct. 22: William Taylor, chargé d'affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv, testified that President Trump made nearly \$400 million in aid to Ukraine contingent on the Ukrainian president investigating two matters related to U.S. politics.

Scheduled to Testify:

- Oct. 23: Laura Cooper, Defense Department official overseeing Ukraine
- Oct. 26: Philip Reeker, acting assistant secretary of European and Eurasian affairs

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