

POLITICS

State Department Official Raised Concerns in 2015 Over Hunter Biden

George Kent this week told lawmakers he was concerned about appearance of a conflict in Ukraine



Joe Biden and his son Hunter Biden at a basketball game in 2010. PHOTO: JONATHAN ERNST/REUTERS

By Dustin Volz

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WASHINGTON—A career State Department official told congressional investigators this week that he raised concerns in 2015 with a senior official at the White House about then-Vice President Joe Biden’s son being on the board of a Ukrainian natural-gas company because of concerns about the potential optics of a conflict of interest, a person familiar with the matter said.

The State Department official, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State George Kent, told lawmakers behind closed doors on Tuesday that he raised the issue in January 2015 and expressed reservations about Hunter Biden’s position at Burisma Holdings because it could add to the challenges to convey to Ukraine the importance of cleaning up corruption and avoiding even potential conflicts of interest, this person said.

“Regardless of whether anything is wrong, it looks terrible,” Mr. Kent told lawmakers that he told the official who worked in Mr. Biden’s office at the time, the person said. Mr. Kent was informed that the vice president at the time didn’t have the “bandwidth” to deal with the matter in part

because his other son, Beau, was under treatment for cancer that later in the year would take his life, the person said. The Washington Post earlier reported on Mr. Kent's concerns.

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Mr. Kent, described by people who witnessed his testimony this week as a straightforward diplomat who gave precise details, told lawmakers he worried that officials in Kyiv would possibly consider the younger Mr. Biden as someone who could curry influence with his father, the person said.

Mr. Kent's testimony this week was part of the congressional impeachment inquiry focused on President Trump's actions with Ukraine as he pressed for investigations into Joe Biden, who is seeking the Democratic presidential nomination, and Hunter Biden. The revelation that Mr. Kent had expressed concern in 2015 is likely to put the Bidens' dealings in Ukraine back into the spotlight.

Mr. Trump and his personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani have argued, without evidence, that Mr. Biden's anticorruption push in Ukraine was designed to head off any investigation of Burisma Holdings. Both Bidens have denied wrongdoing and said they never discussed Hunter's business in Ukraine.

"On Joe Biden's watch, the U.S. made eradicating corruption a centerpiece of our policies toward Ukraine, including achieving the removal of an inept prosecutor who shielded wrongdoers from accountability," Andrew Bates, a spokesman for the Biden campaign, said in a statement Friday.

Burisma paid Hunter Biden \$50,000 a month to sit on the board at a time when his father, President Obama's vice president, was pushing anticorruption efforts in Ukraine. Hunter Biden said earlier this week in an interview with ABC News that he had showed "poor judgment" in taking the board position because it provided ammunition to his father's political adversaries, including Mr. Trump.

"I gave a hook to some very unethical people to act in illegal ways to try to do some harm to my father," Hunter Biden said, "That's where I made my mistake."

The elder Mr. Biden pledged this week that if elected president no one in his family would possess any business relationship with a foreign corporation or country. In a thinly veiled statement that didn't mention the Trump family by name, Mr. Biden also said that "no one in my family will have an office in the White House, will sit in meetings as if they're a cabinet member."

Mr. Trump's daughter Ivanka Trump and son-in-law Jared Kushner both work in the White House, regularly traveling overseas on official business, while sons Eric Trump and Donald Trump Jr. run the family real-estate business, the Trump Organization. That business's extensive overseas holdings, and payments from foreign visitors to U.S. and overseas hotels, have drawn

scrutiny from congressional Democrats because of a provision of the Constitution that bars officeholders from receiving payments from foreign governments.

As previously reported, Mr. Kent told lawmakers on Tuesday that he grew concerned he had been sidelined this year from a separate process for dealing with Ukraine that circumvented normal diplomatic channels, according to a Democratic lawmaker who heard his testimony. Democrats are probing whether Mr. Trump's political motivations were guiding U.S. policy toward Ukraine as well as the decision to hold up aid to the country.

House committees conducting the impeachment inquiry are set to hear from several more officials behind closed doors next week. A person familiar with the House schedule said that William Taylor, the top U.S. diplomat in Kyiv who in released text messages is seen raising concern that there appeared to be a link between the aid delay and Mr. Trump's political interests, is due to testify Tuesday.

A day later, next Wednesday, Philip Reeker, a career ambassador serving as the acting assistant secretary of European and Eurasian affairs, and Michael Duffey, associate director of national-security programs in the White House budget office, are due to testify. Mr. Duffey was given authority for continuing to keep the Ukraine aid on hold after staffers began raising concerns, according to the people familiar with the matter.

Laura Cooper, the deputy assistant secretary of defense overseeing Ukraine, and Alexander Vindman, the director for European Affairs at the National Security Council, are due to testify next Thursday.

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