

POLITICS

Mulvaney Says Holdup of Ukraine Aid Was Tied to Trump's Demand for DNC Server

White House official later revises comments, says there was no link between aid and investigations

By Rebecca Ballhaus, Michael C. Bender and Vivian Salama

Updated Oct. 17, 2019 9:50 pm ET

WASHINGTON—A top White House official for the first time linked President Trump's decision to hold up aid to Ukraine to his desire for Kyiv to probe a Democratic National Committee server related to the 2016 election, then hours later issued a statement contradicting his own remarks.

The initial comments at a White House briefing by acting chief of staff Mick Mulvaney caused alarm among senior White House aides and the president's legal team. Mr. Trump has repeatedly denied there was any quid pro quo related to the aid. Late Thursday afternoon, Mr. Mulvaney issued a statement, reviewed by Mr. Trump, reversing his remarks and saying there was no connection.

In his briefing with reporters earlier Thursday, Mr. Mulvaney said that Mr. Trump's concerns about corruption in Ukraine—including an unfounded suspicion expressed by the president that a hacked DNC 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.

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, issues that Mr. Mulvaney repeated on Thursday. In addition to those concerns, Mr. Mulvaney said, "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."

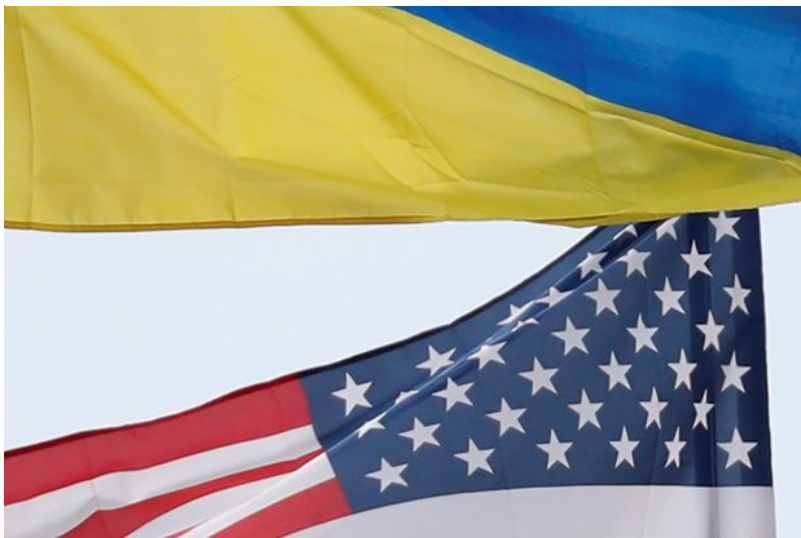
Mr. Mulvaney said that Mr. Trump's desire for Ukraine to investigate former Vice President Joe Biden, a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination, and his son Hunter Biden—which the GOP president brought up in a July 25 phone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky—wasn't related to the hold on aid. That phone call 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."

A senior Justice Department official said the department wasn't aware of any effort to hold up aid in return for better cooperation by Kyiv in its review. If the White House was withholding aid for that reason, "that is news to us," the official said. The official declined to say whether the DNC's computer server is a focus of the review.

Rep. Adam Schiff (D., Calif.), the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee and one of the leaders of the impeachment inquiry, said Mr. Mulvaney's comments on Thursday indicated that "things have gone from very, very bad to much, much worse."

Trump and Ukraine: A Guide to the Key Players



VALENTYN OGIRENKO/REUTERS

At the White House, some senior aides said they had never heard Mr. Mulvaney describe Mr. Trump's decision to suspend military aid as conditioned on new investigations by Kyiv. Mr. Mulvaney had been tasked by Mr. Trump with halting that aid. The hold on the aid to Ukraine was lifted in mid-September amid growing pressure from Congress.

The president's personal legal team also distanced itself from Mr. Mulvaney's remarks. Jay Sekulow, a lawyer for Mr. Trump,

said: "The president's legal counsel was not involved in acting chief of staff Mick Mulvaney's press briefing."

In his revision of his comments, Mr. Mulvaney issued a statement declaring there was "absolutely no quid pro quo" between aid and any investigations, comments that were at odds with what he said earlier. "There was never any condition on the flow of aid related to the matter of the DNC server," he said.

Mr. Trump agreed on the need for Mr. Mulvaney to walk back his comments and personally approved his chief's statement, a White House official said. But Mr. Trump blamed the media's

handling of the press briefing, not Mr. Mulvaney, the official said. The president called his chief a “good man” later Thursday.

Mr. Mulvaney was pressed on the matter multiple times during his press briefing and declined at the time to clarify his comments. When a reporter said that what Mr. Mulvaney had described sounded like a quid pro quo between halting aid and probing the DNC server, Mr. Mulvaney responded: “We do that all the time with foreign policy.” He spent the second half of his briefing discussing Ukraine, during which he referenced investigations or a DNC server nearly a half-dozen times.

Mr. Mulvaney’s assertion that the held aid was explicitly linked to investigations came in stark contrast to Mr. Trump’s repeated denials of any quid pro quo—a central focus of the House impeachment inquiry. In recent days, several U.S. diplomats have testified to House committees that they believed it was necessary for Ukraine to commit to certain investigations before Mr. Trump would agree to meet with Ukraine’s president.

Mr. Mulvaney’s news conference, which came at Mr. Trump’s direction, was designed to make public the decision to hold next year’s G-7 at the Trump property in Doral, Fla., and answer a few questions about the administration’s dealings with Ukraine. On that issue, White House officials had expected Mr. Mulvaney to repeat the administration’s message that the House inquiry has been unfair to Mr. Trump and that there was no quid pro quo in his conversation with the Ukrainian president.

In addition to denying the existence of a quid pro quo publicly, Mr. Trump also did so in at least two private conversations. He told Sen. Ron Johnson (R., Wis.) in August that there was no link between the hold on aid and new probes by Kyiv regarding U.S. elections, Mr. Johnson told The Wall Street Journal. Mr. Johnson said Mr. Trump told him: “No way. I would never do that. Who told you that?”

Mr. Trump also told Gordon Sondland, the U.S. ambassador to the European Union, that there was no link between investigations and aid, Mr. Sondland told House committees Thursday. He said he asked the president: “What do you want from Ukraine?” Mr. Trump responded, “Nothing. There is no quid pro quo,” Mr. Sondland said.

Mr. Mulvaney said that quid pro quos and political considerations are a standard practice in foreign policy. “I have news for everybody: Get over it,” he added. “There is going to be political influence in foreign policy.”

Mr. Mulvaney’s claim about the DNC server—which Mr. Trump asked Mr. Zelensky to investigate in their July call—relates to an unsubstantiated conspiracy theory that proposes it was Ukraine, not Russia, that hacked Democratic networks during the 2016 election. There is no evidence to support the claim that any Democratic server wound up in Ukraine.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

Do you think that quid pro quos and political considerations are a standard practice in foreign policy? Join the conversation below.

The U.S.-based cybersecurity firm CrowdStrike concluded the hack was carried out by Russian intelligence officers, a finding corroborated by U.S. intelligence agencies and Mr. Mueller. But Mr. Trump has repeatedly cast doubt on the conclusion of Russian involvement in the Democratic hacks, and said in an April 2017 interview that CrowdStrike's findings may not be credible because the company is "Ukrainian-based," which is false.

The efforts by Mr. Trump and his lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, to push Ukraine to investigate matters related to the 2016 election and the Bidens has been the subject of almost daily testimony in front of House lawmakers by present and former Trump administration officials.

House Democrats charge that Mr. Trump's request for Ukraine to investigate the Bidens was an attempt to use the power of the White House to undercut a political rival. Mr. Trump has called the probe a witch hunt and denied wrongdoing.

In his remarks to reporters Thursday, Mr. Mulvaney said he was "100% comfortable" with Mr. Giuliani's role as Mr. Trump's outside adviser on Ukraine and also his personal lawyer.

Mr. Mulvaney also defended the administration's right to discuss the president's political opponents with foreign leaders, and said that the White House in no way tried to cover up Mr. Trump's July phone call with Ukraine's president.

The call had been stored on a top secret server, in a break with standard protocol for calls that don't pertain to military operations or other highly sensitive matters. A rough transcript of the call was released by the White House the day after the House announced its impeachment inquiry, which was set off by a whistleblower complaint that mentioned the call with Ukraine.

Mr. Mulvaney pushed back on suggestions that keeping the call transcript on the top secret server implied a "coverup." He asked, "If we wanted to cover this up, would we have released it to the public?"

Several U.S. diplomats in testimony before House committees have raised concerns about Mr. Giuliani's efforts to conduct "shadow diplomacy" and cut out the State Department, National Security Council and the Department of Defense in dealing with Ukraine.

Mr. Mulvaney said the president is free to appoint anyone he wants to conduct foreign policy. He noted that Mr. Trump never asked him personally to work with Mr. Giuliani, but confirmed that the president asked Energy Secretary Rick Perry to work with Mr. Giuliani.

—Dustin Volz, Sadie Gurman and Jesse Naranjo contributed to this article.

Write to Rebecca Ballhaus at Rebecca.Ballhaus@wsj.com, Michael C. Bender at Mike.Bender@wsj.com and Vivian Salama at vivian.salama@wsj.com

Copyright © 2019 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.