

Trump Impeachment

Matthew Yglesias and Andrew Prokop | Vox

The story of President Donald Trump and impeachment is difficult to follow: It moves fast and our understanding of the facts changes as witnesses testify. We get it.

To track this important, complicated story, Vox created this explainer to serve as a guide to the saga. We'll update it continually to explain the incremental news of the day, the players, the process, and the larger political context.

How it all started

The Trump-Ukraine scandal began in September 2019 with the revelation that an intelligence officer had filed a whistleblower complaint to the intelligence community inspector general alleging wrongdoing on the part of Trump.

The whistleblower, who we now know was a member of the CIA and detailed to the National Security Council, claimed that a phone call in July 2019 between Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky set off alarm bells in the intelligence community. He writes in the complaint: “The White House officials who told me this information were deeply disturbed by what had transpired in the phone call.” Specifically, he alleges:



“In the course of my official duties, I have received information from multiple U.S. Government officials that the President of the United States is using the power of his office to solicit interference from a foreign country in the 2020 U.S. election. This interference includes, among other things, pressuring a foreign country to investigate one of the President’s main domestic political rivals. The President’s personal lawyer, Mr. Rudolph Giuliani, is a central figure in this effort. Attorney General Barr appears to be involved as well.”



“In the days following the phone call, I learned from multiple U.S. officials that senior White House officials had intervened to “lock down” all records of the phone call, especially the official word-for-word transcript of the call that was produced — as is customary — by the White House Situation Room. This set of actions underscored to me that White House officials understood the gravity of what had transpired in the call.”

The whistleblower had followed the procedure laid out in law for intelligence professionals who believe wrongdoing is taking place. Rather than leaking to the press, intelligence professionals are supposed to file a report with the inspector general. Under the Intelligence Community Whistleblower Protection Act, if the inspector general deems the complaint to be credible and the matter to be of “urgent concern,” he or she is supposed to forward it to the director of national intelligence, who then is required to forward the complaint to Congress within seven days.

But when Director of National Intelligence Joseph Maguire got the complaint, he didn’t forward it to Congress. Instead, he asked the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel what he should do. The office concluded that it was not a matter of urgent concern and that Maguire should therefore sit on the report. The statute does not give the director nor the Office of Legal Counsel discretion over the question of “urgent concern.” The inspector general is given this responsibility and, in this case, that assessment had already been made. Nonetheless, Maguire followed the Office of Legal Counsel’s instructions and did not forward the report.

The existence of the report and the hold-up at the Justice Department came to light in mid-September. By September 19, we learned that the subject of the whistleblower’s report was Trump’s effort to get the government of Ukraine to gin up an investigation into Hunter Biden, the son of Joe Biden, the former vice president and Democratic presidential candidate.

Controversy about this raged for several days, until the White House made an abrupt about-face and allowed both the whistleblower’s report and the official White House record of Trump’s phone call with Zelensky to become public on September 25 and 26.

Since then, Trump and his allies have waged an on-again, off-again campaign to discredit the whistleblower — arguing both that he is biased against Trump and also that he didn’t have first-hand knowledge of the situation he was writing about. Trump has thrown in vague calls to unmask him.

The memo itself, however, has been almost entirely overtaken by subsequent events and corroborated by other sources. The call record appears to show exactly what the memo said it showed (see below). Testimony by senior officials have made it clear that Rudy Giuliani was deeply involved in Ukraine policy despite not holding any government position. And Trump himself in extemporaneous remarks essentially admitted that he wanted Ukraine to investigate Biden.



“I would think that if they were honest about it, they’d start a major investigation into the Bidens. It’s a very simple answer. They should investigate the Bidens ... and by the way, likewise, China should start an investigation into the Bidens. Because what happened to China is just about as bad as what happened with Ukraine.”

What did Trump say?

In a nutshell, the official White House record of the call shows Trump linking American foreign aid to his desire for Ukraine to investigate Hunter Biden and a conspiracy about the 2016 election.



“I would also like to thank you for your great support in the area of defense. We are ready to continue to cooperate for the next steps specifically, we are almost ready to buy more Javelins from the United States for defense purposes.”



“I would like you to do us a favor though because our country has been through a lot and Ukraine knows a lot about it. I would like you to find out what happened with this whole situation with Ukraine, they say Crowdstrike... I guess you have one of your wealthy people... The server, they say Ukraine has it.”



“Good because I heard you had a prosecutor who was very good and he was shut down and that’s really unfair. A lot of people are talking about that, the way they shut your very good prosecutor down and you had some very bad people involved. Mr. Giuliani is a highly respected man. He was the mayor of New York City, a great mayor, and I would like him to call you. I will ask him to call you along with the Attorney General. Rudy very much knows what’s happening and he is a very capable guy.”

What is the House investigating?

A source close to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi described the inquiry to Vox as an attempt to understand the full scope of President Trump’s abuse of power. Still, Democrats say they are aiming for a relatively narrow, focused impeachment inquiry. Rather than tackle the full range of potential Trump misconduct, the inquiry will focus on the events around a phone call in July 2019.

Adam Schiff, the House Intelligence Committee chair who is essentially leading the impeachment inquiry, has named four questions he plans to investigate:

1. Did Trump once again solicit foreign help in an election?
2. Did the Trump White House agree to a meeting with Ukraine on the condition that Ukraine launch investigations on behalf of Trump?
3. Did Ukraine have reason to believe military aid was being withheld on condition of launching Trump’s investigations?
4. Has there been a cover-up of the basic facts of Trump’s conduct?

What is Trump’s reaction to the investigation?

Trump’s public response to all this has been animated, even for him. He’s denied any involvement in the Ukraine plan and accused his political opponents — primarily Schiff — of treason. He and his administration maintain he’s done nothing wrong.



No quid pro quo

— Donald J. Trump (President)



Get over it

— Mick Mulvaney (Chief of Staff)



Partisan hit job

— Stephen Miller (Senior Adviser)



Here are arguments that the administration regurgitates:

- Officials and Republican allies assure that there was no quid pro quo
- Administration declare that this uproar is driven by a “deep state” that is against the president
- White House Chief of Staff suggests that it is normal in US foreign policy for America to incentivize another country to give it what Washington wants
- They claim that they were worried about corruption, and wanted to get to the bottom of that happening with the Bidens
- The phone call was a perfect call overall, and there was absolutely nothing wrong

Key Characters Involved



President Donald Trump is facing potential impeachment for pressuring the Ukrainian government to investigate his possible 2020 rival, Joe Biden



Trump’s personal lawyer holds no government job but has been at the center of Trump’s effort to pressure Ukrainian officials to launch those investigations



Mike Pompeo, the Secretary of State: His State Department was heavily involved in discussions with Ukraine over all these matters, though Pompeo’s personal role remains opaque



Mick Mulvaney carried out an instruction from Trump to freeze military aid to Ukraine — which Congress is investigating as a potential quid pro quo



Bill Barr: Trump told the Ukrainian president during a July phone call to get in touch with Barr to discuss investigations into Biden and the 2016 elections. Barr has denied any knowledge of this



Former Vice President Joe Biden took a large role in Ukraine policy during the Obama administration — and pressed the country to get rid of a prosecutor general who was widely viewed as corrupt and ineffective. Now, he’s the frontrunner for the Democratic nomination to face Trump in 2020, and Trump’s allies have attempted to twist his Ukraine work into something scandalous

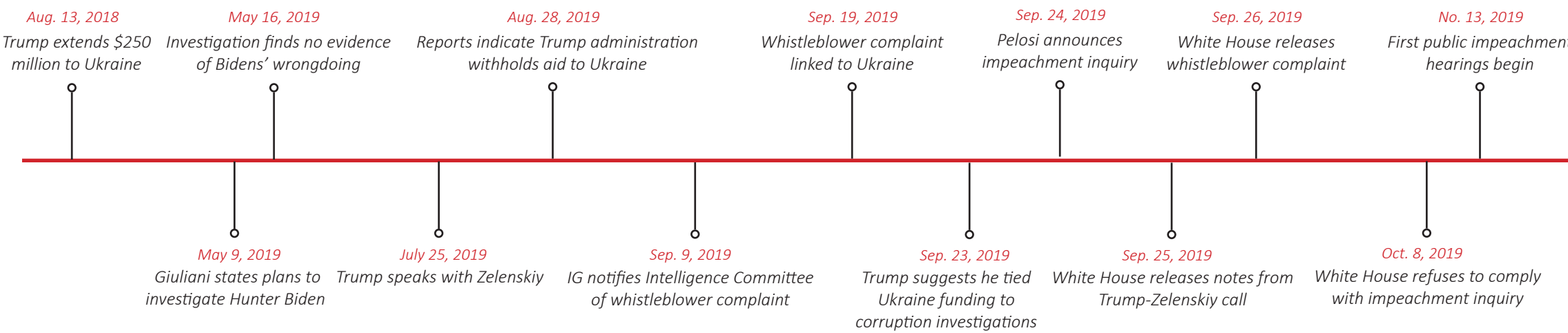


Hunter Biden is the ne’er-do-well son of the former vice president, whose questionable ethical choices have been the subject of media scrutiny for decades. Hunter has accepted large payments from several foreign sources, and he was well compensated for serving on the board of a scandal-plagued Ukrainian natural gas company called Burisma, despite having no evident qualifications for the post. Trump has claimed that Joe Biden intervened in Ukraine policy to help his son, but there’s no evidence that that’s true



Volodymyr Zelensky was a television sitcom star who became an unlikely candidate for the Ukrainian presidency and won the office in a landslide in April 2019. He ran as an outsider and on an anti-corruption platform — but he quickly came under pressure by President Trump to launch politicized investigations that Trump wanted

Timeline



Timeline courtesy of nbcnews.com