

Chairman Schiff Releases Opening Statement for Open Hearing With Ambassador Gordon Sondland

Washington, DC — Today, Chairman Adam Schiff released his opening statement for the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence's open hearing with U.S. Ambassador to the European Union Gordon Sondland as part of the impeachment inquiry into President Donald J. Trump.

Full statement below as prepared:

This morning we will hear from Gordon Sondland, the American Ambassador to the European Union.

We are here today, as part of the House of Representatives' impeachment inquiry, because President Trump sought to condition military aid to Ukraine and an Oval Office meeting with the new Volodymyr Zelensky, in exchange for politically-motivated investigations Trump believed would help his reelection campaign.

The first investigation was of a discredited conspiracy theory that Ukraine —and not Russia — was responsible for interfering in our 2016 election. The second investigation Trump demanded was the one he apparently feared most, Joe Biden.

Trump sought to weaken Biden, and to refute the fact that his own election campaign in 2016 had been helped by a Russian hacking and dumping operation and Russian social media campaign led by Putin to help Trump.

Trump's scheme undermined military and diplomatic support for a key ally and undercut U.S. anticorruption efforts in Ukraine. Trump put his personal and political interests above those of the American people. Ambassador Sondland would later tell career Foreign Service Officer David Holmes immediately after speaking to the President, Trump "did not give a [expletive]" about Ukraine. He cares about himself and his family, like the "Biden investigations" that Rudy Giuliani was pushing.

Ambassador Sondland was a skilled dealmaker, but, in trying to satisfy a directive from the President, found himself increasingly embroiled in an effort to press the new Ukrainian President that was far from the norm, in terms of both policy and process.

In February, Ambassador Sondland traveled to Ukraine on his first official trip to that country. While in Kyiv, he met with then-U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch and found her to be a diplomat with a deep command of Ukrainian internal dynamics.

On April 21, Zelensky was elected President of Ukraine and spoke to President Trump who congratulated him and said that he would "look into" attending Zelensky's inauguration, but pledged to set a "very, very high level."

Between the time of that call and the inaugural on May 20, Trump's attitude towards Ukraine hardened. On May 13, the President ordered Vice-President Mike Pence not to attend Zelensky's inauguration and instead to dispatch the self-dubbed "Three Amigos" — Energy Secretary Rick Perry, Ambassador Sondland, and Ambassador Kurt Volker, the Special Representative for Ukraine Negotiations. At the inauguration, members of the U.S. delegation briefed President Trump on their encouraging first interactions with the new Ukrainian administration. They urged the President to meet with Zelensky. The President's reaction was decidedly hostile. The President's order was clear, however: — "talk with Rudy."

During this meeting Ambassador Sondland first became aware of what Giuliani — and the President — were really interested in. "This whole thing was sort of a continuum" he testified at his deposition on the May 23rd meeting, ending up at the end of the line when the transcript of the call came out. "It was a continuum he would explain, that became more insidious over time."

The Three Amigos were disappointed with Trump's directive to engage Giuliani, but vowed to press ahead. Ambassador Sondland testified: "We could abandon the goal of a White House meeting with Zelensky" which the group deemed "crucial" for U.S.-Ukrainian relations, "or we could do as President Trump directed and talk to Mr. Giuliani to address the President's concerns. We chose the latter."

In the coming weeks, Ambassador Sondland got more clearly involved in Ukraine policymaking, starting with the June 4, U.S. Mission to the E.U. Independence Day event in Brussels (one month before the inauguration). Ambassador Sondland, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Ambassador Perry, Ulrich Brechbuhl, the State Department Counselor, and Sondland met with President Zelensky — whom Sondland had invited personally — on the margins of this event.

On June 10, 2019, Secretary Perry organized a conference call with Sondland, then-National Security Adviser John Bolton, Volker, and others. They reviewed Ukraine strategy with Bolton and Sondland and Volker would "assist Ambassador Bill Taylor" — the new acting Ambassador in Kyiv — on Ukraine, and discussed Trump's desire for Rudy Giuliani to be "somehow involved." At the time, according to Sondland "we all felt very comfortable with the strategy moving forward."

Two weeks later, on June 27, Ambassador Sondland called Taylor to say that "Zelensky needed to make clear to President Trump that he . . . was not standing in the way of investigations."

On July 10th, Ambassador Sondland and other U.S. officials met at the White House with a group of U.S. and Ukrainian officials. Participants in the meeting have told us that Ambassador Sondland, White House Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney and said that the White House meeting sought by the Ukrainian President with Trump would happen only if Ukraine undertook certain investigations. In the end, Advisor Bolton abruptly ended the meeting upon hearing this.

Undeterred, Sondland brought the Ukrainian delegation downstairs to another part of the White House and was more explicit, according to witnesses: Ukraine needed to investigate the Bidens' election interference if they were to get a meeting at all.

Following this meeting in July, Bolton said that he would not be "part of whatever drug deal Sondland and Mulvaney are cooking up on this."

Sondland continued to press for a meeting, but he and others were willing to settle for a phone call as an intermediate step. On July 21, Taylor texted Sondland that "President Zelensky is serious and is being taken seriously, not merely as an instrument in Washington domestic reelection politics." Sondland responded, "Absolutely. But we need to get the conversation started and the relationship established," so that Zelensky and Trump could meet and "all of this will be fixed."

On July 25th, the day of the Trump — Zelensky call, Volker had lunch in Kyiv with a senior aide to Ukrainian President Zelensky and later texted the aide to say that he had "heard from White House that President Z convinces Trump he will investigate / "get to the bottom of what happened" in 2016, we will nail down date for visit to Washington. Good luck!"

Ambassador Sondland spoke to President Trump a few minutes before the call was placed, but was not on the call.

During that now infamous phone call with Zelensky, Trump responded to the Ukrainian's expression of appreciation for U.S. defense support and request to buy more Javelin anti-tank missiles by saying "I like you to do us a favor, though."

Trump asked Zelensky to investigate the discredited 2016 conspiracy theory, and even more ominously, look into the Bidens. Neither had been part of the official preparatory material for the call. It was Donald Trump's personal interest, and in the interests of his re-election campaign. And the Ukrainian president knew about both in advance, in part because of Ambassador Volker and Ambassador Sondland's efforts to make him aware of what the President was demanding.

Around this time Ambassador Sondland became aware of the suspension of security assistance to Ukraine, which had been announced on a secure interagency videoconference on July 18, that was "extremely odd" that nobody involved in making and implementing policy towards Ukraine knew why the aid had been put on hold.

During August, Sondland participated in conference calls and text messages with Volker and Giuliani, and said that the "the gist of every call was what was going to go in the press statement."

In an August 9 text exchange with Volker, Sondland stated, "I think potus really wants the deliverable," which was, according to Sondland "a deliverable public statement that President Trump would announce before a White House meeting could occur."

On September 1, Ambassador Sondland participated in Vice-President Pence's bilateral meeting with Zelensky in Warsaw on September 1, during which Zelensky raised the suspended security assistance. Following that meeting, Sondland, approached a senior Ukrainian official to tell him that he believed that "what could help them move the aid was if the [Ukrainian] prosecutor general would to announce that he was opening the Burisma investigation."

Sondland told Taylor that he had "made a mistake" by telling the Ukrainians that an Oval Office meeting "was dependent on a public announcement of investigations. In fact, everything was dependent on a public announcement, including security assistance."

But even the announcement by the Prosecutor-General would not satisfy the President.

On September 7, Sondland spoke to the President and told Tim Morrison and Bill Taylor about the call shortly thereafter. The President said although this was "not a quid pro quo", if President Zelensky did things up in public, we would be at a stalemate. Moreover, an announcement by the Prosecutor-General would not be enough; President Zelensky must announce personally that he would open the investigations.

Sondland told Taylor that "President Trump is a businessman. When a businessman is about to sign a check to someone who owes him something, he said, the businessman asks that person to sign the check." The "check" referred to here was the United States' military assistance to Ukraine. And Ukraine had to "pay up" with investigations.

Throughout early September, Volker and Sondland sought to close the deal on an agreement that Zelensky would announce investigations. After Taylor texted Sondland on September 9, 2019, that he was "crazy to withhold security assistance for help with a political campaign."

Sixteen days later, the transcript of the July 25 call was made public and the American people learned the truth of how our President, tried to take advantage of a vulnerable ally.

Now, it is up to Congress, as the people's representatives to determine what response is appropriate. If the President abused his power and invited foreign interference in our elections, if he so coerced, extorted, or bribed an ally into conducting investigations to aid his reelection campaign and did so by withholding official acts — a White House meeting or hundreds of millions of dollars of aid, it will be up to us to decide, whether those acts are compatible with the office of the Presidency.

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