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By Patrick Martin

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White House appears increasingly isolated in impeachment crisis

The impeachment crisis in the US capital is intensifying, with the House Intelligence Committee announcing that it will begin public, televised hearings next Wednesday, November 13.

The first three scheduled witnesses are all current State Department officials: acting Ambassador to Ukraine William Taylor, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State George Kent, and former Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch.

All three report to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and, through him, work under the direction of President Trump. Yet all three have already defied orders from the White House and State Department and testified before the committee behind closed doors. Now they are being summoned as the lead witnesses in public hearings that could well end in the drafting of articles of impeachment against Trump.

The conflict pits the Trump administration against powerful factions of the political establishment and the military and intelligence agencies. The White House appears increasingly isolated in its fight against impeachment, with officials of the State Department, the Pentagon and the National Security Council cooperating with the House Intelligence Committee inquiry despite orders not to do so from the “commander-in-chief.”

Even Attorney General William Barr, hand-picked by Trump as a loyalist who would uphold presidential authority against any challenge, has reportedly been unwilling to enlist unreservedly in the anti-impeachment effort.

The *Washington Post* reported in its Thursday edition that Trump had asked Barr to appear at a press conference and declare that the president had not violated any law in the July 25 phone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, in which he pressed Zelensky to reopen investigations into the actions of former Vice President Joe Biden and his son Hunter in Ukraine. The younger Biden collected \$50,000 a month for sitting on the board of the large Ukrainian gas company Burisma while his father was in charge of Ukraine policy for the Obama administration.

According to the *Post* report, Trump made the request around September 25, one day after House Speaker Nancy Pelosi announced that the Democrats were moving forward with an impeachment inquiry.

Barr reportedly declined to hold the news conference. The attorney general has previously stated that he never engaged in any discussions with officials in Ukraine despite Trump's statement in the July 25 call that he would have both Barr and his personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani follow up on the question of investigating the Bidens. Barr also, through a spokeswoman, denied any discussions on Ukraine with Giuliani.

Trump denounced the *Post* report in a series of tweets Thursday morning, calling it "totally untrue." Referring to the newspaper as the "Amazon *Washington Post*," because it is owned by Amazon billionaire Jeff Bezos, Trump labeled the report "just another FAKE NEWS story with anonymous sources that don't exist."

On Wednesday night, Trump gave the latest in a series of fascistic speeches to a campaign rally in northern Louisiana, this one to boost the fortunes of the Republican candidate in a runoff gubernatorial election November 16. Trump denounced the Democratic Party impeachment drive, claiming the Democrats were "trying to overthrow American democracy to impose their socialist agenda."

There was another report of opposition to Trump within the national security apparatus, this time within the CIA itself. NBC News, citing unnamed CIA officials and several named former officials, reported that CIA Director Gina Haspel was under mounting pressure to publicly defend the so-called whistleblower, the CIA analyst whose complaint to Intelligence Community Inspector General Michael Atkinson became the pretext for the Democrats to launch the impeachment inquiry.

The NBC report quoted Marc Polymeropoulos, described as “a recently retired CIA officer who oversaw operations in Europe and Russia,” as calling on Haspel to “protect the whistleblower—and, by extension, the organization—moving forward.” It also quoted other former CIA officials, including former Director John Brennan, who now draws a lucrative paycheck from NBC, defending the CIA agent.

The agent has been identified in right-wing publications as Eric Ciaramella, a CIA analyst who worked at the National Security Council as Ukraine desk officer under both Obama and Trump, and who now works at the National Intelligence Council and reports to acting Director of National Intelligence Joseph Maguire.

Trump has not named Ciaramella, nor have congressional Republicans, in part because of concerns that this could lead to legal charges, and also, in Trump’s case, because any statement by Haspel in response to such an “outing” of the whistleblower could reinforce the impeachment drive.

These events only underscore the utterly reactionary character of both camps in the Washington conflict. On one side is President Trump, seeking to mobilize a racist and fascist movement and consolidate an authoritarian presidency. On the other side is the national security establishment, with its front men (and women) in the Democratic Party, seeking to consolidate the grip of the military-intelligence apparatus, particularly in the foreign policy towards Russia and Syria.

A further sign of crisis in the Trump anti-impeachment effort came with the appearance before the Intelligence Committee Wednesday by David Hale, the third-ranking State Department official. Since the deputy secretary of state is about to leave Washington to serve as US ambassador to Russia, Hale’s appearance means that only Pompeo and his personal aides, out of all the State Department, have complied with the White House instruction not to testify before the impeachment inquiry.

Even more alarming, from the standpoint of the White House, was the testimony Thursday of Jennifer Williams, a career State Department official who has been assigned to work as an adviser to Vice President Mike Pence. She listened to the July 25 phone call as Pence’s representative and reportedly told the committee it was “not normal” because Trump and Zelensky had discussed domestic politics rather than diplomatic issues.

There is no suggestion that the testimony of Williams could implicate Pence in the alleged impeachable offenses, but her decision to comply with the subpoena from the Intelligence Committee was an indication that the White House ban on cooperation with the probe has

become a dead letter, except for Trump's closest aides and loyalists in the White House itself.

The decision to begin public hearings next week suggests a decision by the House Democratic leadership to move rapidly towards articles of impeachment against Trump, perhaps as early as this month, with a full House vote on impeachment in December. There have been repeated statements by leading Democrats that they want an impeachment vote and a Senate trial completed before the first president primary votes are cast in Iowa on February 3.

Reinforcing the likelihood of such a schedule was the decision of the House Intelligence Committee not to issue a subpoena to former National Security Adviser John Bolton, and to drop the subpoena for the testimony of his deputy, Charles Kupperman.

Kupperman's attorney filed suit in federal court to obtain a judicial determination whether the congressional subpoena overrode the White House order not to appear. After a federal judge set a hearing date for December 10, the Democrats dropped the subpoena and issued a statement declaring they "will not countenance... further efforts by witnesses or the White House to delay or otherwise obstruct the committees' vital investigatory work."

When it appeared that Bolton would adopt the same approach as Kupperman—they share the same lawyer—the Democrats decided not to issue a subpoena at all. Bolton did not appear voluntarily on Thursday morning to testify, the date requested by the committee.

What the first three witnesses will tell the Intelligence Committee as the cameras roll is already known, since the transcripts of their deposition testimony have been released this week. Taylor and Kent will describe in detail the effort by Trump, acting through his emissary and personal attorney Rudy Giuliani, to bully Ukrainian President Zelensky into publicly reopening an investigation into the Bidens. Both have supported the principal contention of the impeachment drive: that Trump ordered military aid to Ukraine held up as a means of pressuring Kiev to do his bidding on investigating the Democrats.

Yovanovitch will testify two days later, on Friday, November 15, mainly about the campaign by Ukrainian associates of Giuliani to obtain her recall to Washington, which was carried out at the orders of Trump and Pompeo in April 2019. She was reportedly viewed as an obstacle to Giuliani's efforts to revive the anti-Biden investigation.

By beginning the public phase of the impeachment inquiry in this way, the Democrats are demonstrating its real character as an effort by the national security apparatus to strike

back at Trump over foreign policy differences, particularly over policy towards Russia, which have been exacerbated by Trump's decision on an abrupt pullback of US military forces from northeast Syria, leaving Kurdish forces previously allied with the CIA and Pentagon at the mercy of a Turkish military invasion.

As the *Post* put it: "The Democrats' decision to call Yovanovitch, Taylor and Kent as their first public witnesses demonstrates a preference for career Foreign Service officers with deep expertise in Ukraine and experience working under both Republican and Democratic presidents."

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