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By Patrick Martin

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Democrats begin impeachment hearings with denunciations of Russia

The first day of public, televised hearings on the possible impeachment of President Trump was dominated by denunciations of Russia by House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff and the first two witnesses, current State Department officials George Kent and William Taylor.

These pronouncements underscore the real nature of the impeachment drive: the Democrats are targeting Trump not for his crimes against immigrants, his attacks on democratic rights or his efforts to build up a racist and fascist movement in America. Instead, they are acting as the representatives and political attorneys for a powerful faction of the national security apparatus that is strongly opposed to Trump on foreign policy issues relating to Russia, Ukraine and the Middle East.



House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff speaks to reporters after the House Intelligence Committee ended on Wednesday (AP Photo/Susan Walsh)

Schiff attacked what he termed the Russian “invasion” of Ukraine, which he said was part of President Vladimir Putin’s effort to “reconstitute a Russian empire.” He made no mention of the 2014 US-backed coup in Ukraine, spearheaded by fascistic elements and financed by the CIA, which triggered the Russian response in Crimea and the revolt by the predominately Russian-speaking population in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine.

This theme was taken up in the opening statements of both witnesses.

Deputy Assistant Secretary of State George Kent presented the official State Department version of the events of 2014 in Ukraine, giving the ultra-right coup in Kiev the title of “popular revolution for dignity.” He made a series of obscene comparisons between the overthrow of an elected Ukrainian president by the CIA and the American Revolution. According to his account, fascist paramilitaries like the Right Sector, Svoboda and the Azov Battalion are the modern-day equivalent of the Minutemen of 1776; the US role in Ukraine is like that of France aiding the army of George Washington; US military trainers in Ukraine are like Lafayette, Von Steuben, and Pulaski.

Acting US Ambassador to Ukraine William Taylor was more matter-of-fact, declaring that Ukraine “is on the front line of the conflict with a newly aggressive Russia.” He said that it was in the national interest of the United States to “deter Russian aggression.” He condemned the Russian takeover of Crimea (ratified by popular referendum), and what he called the “invasion” of eastern Ukraine. Any restriction on US military aid to Ukraine

was undesirable, and to do so for domestic political considerations in the United States was “crazy.”

Both the Democratic majority on the House Intelligence Committee and the two witnesses maintain that Trump put pressure on the Ukrainian government, particularly in a July 25 telephone call to Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky, and withheld military aid already approved by Congress in order to serve his own personal political needs, at the expense of US foreign policy requirements.

In his usual bullying manner, Trump demanded that Zelensky do him a “favor” by reopening a Ukrainian investigation into Hunter Biden, son of former Vice President Joe Biden, a leading contender for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2020. He also sought Ukrainian assistance in pursuing claims that the Democratic National Committee obtained aid from Ukraine for the Clinton presidential campaign in 2016.

The two State Department witnesses also complained about the creation of an “irregular” channel of White House communication with and pressure on the Ukrainian government, involving Trump’s personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani, assisted by the US ambassador to the European Union, Gordon Sondland, and the US special envoy to Ukraine, Kurt Volker. Under Giuliani’s direction, these officials were explicitly demanding that Ukraine investigate the Bidens and the DNC as a condition for unblocking the flow of military aid and obtaining a visit to the White House for President Zelensky.

After the opening statements, the hearing unfolded with completely predictable, and virtually scripted, attacks and counter-attacks.

The ranking Republican on the House Intelligence Committee, Devin Nunes, called the impeachment inquiry a carefully orchestrated smear campaign, begun after the failure of the lengthy media-driven campaign portraying Trump as an agent of Russia, which culminated in the investigation led by former FBI Director Robert Mueller.

He raised three demands on behalf of the Republican minority: that the CIA “whistleblower” whose complaint was the starting point for the impeachment inquiry be called to testify, particularly about his contacts with the Democrats before he filed the complaint with the inspector general of the intelligence community; that the committee hear evidence about alleged Ukrainian interference in the 2016 election to help Hillary Clinton; and that Hunter Biden be called to testify about what he did for four years in return for a \$50,000-a-month payment from the big Ukrainian gas company Burisma.

At the end of the day, the committee tabled a Republican resolution to call the whistleblower as a witness, by a 13-9 party-line vote.

Nunes and several other Republican questioners pointed out that the Trump administration had provided more lethal military aid to Ukraine than the previous administration of Democrat Barack Obama, including selling Javelin anti-tank missiles. In effect, the two parties were vying for the “credit” of being the most fervent promoter of war between Ukraine and Russia.

The Republicans repeatedly declared that Kent and Taylor—and other witnesses to follow them—could offer only “hearsay” testimony about what the president did and what his motivations were. They conveniently ignored the role of the White House in blocking any testimony by witnesses with first-hand knowledge, such as acting White House Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney and fired National Security Advisor John Bolton.

The repeated questions about Hunter Biden elicited damaging testimony from Kent—already made in his closed-door deposition. The State Department official reported that he had complained in 2015 that the role of the vice president’s son in Ukraine, working for the company that was the first major target of a US-backed anti-corruption campaign, raised at least the appearance of a conflict of interest. Vice President Biden’s office had never responded to his objections, Kent said.

Only one actual new “fact” was revealed in the entire five-hour hearing and this came at the end of Taylor’s opening statement. He claimed to have just learned that a member of his staff had overheard a phone call from President Trump to Gordon Sondland while Sondland and the aide were sitting at a restaurant in Kiev on July 26.

“Following the call with President Trump, the member of my staff asked Ambassador Sondland what President Trump thought about Ukraine,” Taylor said. “Ambassador Sondland responded that President Trump cares more about the investigations of Biden, which Giuliani was pressing for.”

While the anti-Trump section of the corporate media treated this as a “blockbuster” revelation, the timing is more than a little suspicious. Taylor claimed that he learned of this only after he gave his deposition testimony on October 22. That would suggest that his aide—now scheduled to give closed-door testimony Friday—sat on this information for three months, and for an entire month *after* the beginning of an impeachment inquiry focused on Trump’s role in Ukraine.

The public hearings before the House Intelligence Committee continue Friday with State Department official Marie Yovanovitch, who was removed as ambassador to Ukraine because she was considered an obstacle by Giuliani. Witnesses next week will include Alexander Vindman, Tim Morrison and Fiona Hill, all of the National Security Council, State Department officials Sondland, Volker, David Hale and Jennifer Williams (assigned to work with Vice President Mike Pence) and Pentagon official Laura Cooper. All are testifying under subpoena in defiance of Trump's orders not to cooperate with the inquiry.

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