

Anatomy of an Extortion Plot

The release of Trump Ukraine Envoy Kurt Volker’s text messages on Ukraine reveal what appears to have been an elaborate extortion plot on the part of the Trump administration. Trump wanted the new Ukrainian government to interfere in the U.S. electoral process by opening investigations designed to damage a political opponent and to create a counter-narrative to rebut the Mueller-Russia investigation. This apparent plot unfolded over months and was designed to turn the screws on Ukraine’s new President Volodymyr Zelensky, who was resisting interfering in U.S. politics.

Trump knew that Zelensky wanted two key deliverables: a White House meeting and military aid. The stakes were high for Zelensky. He [wanted](#) the meeting with Trump to signal to the Kremlin that his new administration was backed by the United States. U.S. security assistance was also vital to the war in eastern Ukraine. The Trump administration used both the meeting and aid as leverage, with Rudy Giuliani and U.S. Ambassador to the EU Gordon Sondland acting as the heavies.

Here’s how the plot appears to have unfolded based on the [text messages](#).

- First, the White House used a presidential meeting to extort Ukraine.
- Then, after Ukraine balked, they used the hold on security assistance to apply additional pressure.

The Trump administration pushes Ukraine to launch the investigations: On July 19th, a day after the White House put a [hold](#) on security assistance to Ukraine, Volker connects Giuliani with a Zelensky aide. Sondland briefs Zelensky and says, about Zelensky, “He’s got it.” Volker stresses that Zelensky has to say he “will help investigation.”

[7/19/19, 6:50:29 PM] Gordon Sondland: Looks like Potus call tomorrow. I spike [sic] directly to Zelensky and gave him a full briefing. He’s got it.

[7/19/19, 6:52:57 PM] Gordon Sondland: Sure!

[7/19/19, 7:01:22 PM] Kurt Volker: Good. Had breakfast with Rudy this morning—teeing up call w Yermak Monday. Must have helped. Most imp’t is for Zelensky to say that he will help investigation—and address any specific personnel issues—if there are any

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Then, Ukraine has misgivings. They share them with a career official, Bill Taylor, but Sondland brushes them aside and communicates a subtle threat:

[7/21/19, 1:45:54 AM] Bill Taylor: Gordon, one thing Kurt and I talked about yesterday was Sasha Danyliuk's point that President Zelenskyy is sensitive about Ukraine being taken seriously, not merely as an instrument in Washington domestic, reelection politics.

[7/21/19, 4:45:44 AM] Gordon Sondland: Absolutely, but we need to get the conversation started and the relationship built, irrespective of the pretext. I am worried about the alternative.

The White House says that if Zelensky will initiate the investigations, he'll get a visit to Washington.

[7/25/19, 8:36:45 AM] Kurt Volker: Good lunch - thanks. Heard from White House—assuming 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! See you tomorrow- kurt

Zelensky has a call with Trump, where Trump makes clear what he wants and offers the desired meeting: Trump mentions Biden, his son, Giuliani, and Attorney General Barr numerous times [during the call](#) [screenshots of the call transcript below].

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. If you could speak to him that would be great. The former ambassador from the United States, the woman, was bad news and the people she was dealing with in the Ukraine were bad news so I just want to let you know that. The other thing, There's a lot of talk about Biden's son, that Biden stopped the prosecution and a lot of people want to find out about that so whatever you can do with the Attorney General would be great. Biden went around bragging that he stopped the prosecution so if you can look into it... It sounds horrible to me.

(S/NP) The President: Well, she's going to go through some things. I will have Mr. Giuliani give you a call and I am also going to have Attorney General Barr call and we will get to the bottom of it. I'm sure you will figure it out. I heard the

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A few weeks later, Trump officials discuss that Trump “really wants the deliverable” (the investigations).

[8/9/19, 5: 47:34 PM] Gordon Sondland: Not sure i did. I think potus really wants the deliverable

Ukraine is worried about the deal, and says they will not announce the investigations until they have confirmation of the meeting with Trump. Volker responds that this is fine, but they need to work out a statement about launching the investigations in exchange for the meeting.

[8/10/19, 4:56:15 PM] Andrey Yermak: Hi Kurt. Please let me know when you can talk. I think it’s possible to make this declaration and mention all these things. Which we discussed yesterday. But it will be logic to do after we receive a confirmation of date. We inform about date of visit and about our expectations and our guarantees for future visit. Let discuss it

[8/10/19, 5:02:18 PM] Kurt Volker: I agree with your approach. Let’s iron out statement and use that to get date and then PreZ can go forward with it?

[8/10/19, 5:26:17 PM] Andrey Yermak: Ok

[8/10/19, 5:38:43 PM] Kurt Volker: Great. Gordon is available to join as well

[8/10/19, 5:41:45 PM] Andrey Yermak: Excellent

[8/10/ 19, 5:42:10 PM] Andrey Yermak: Once we have a date, will call for a press briefing, announcing upcoming visit and outlining vision for the reboot of US-UKRAINE relationship, including among other things Burisma and election meddling in investigations

Trump officials share drafts of the statement they want Ukraine to issue.

[8/13/19, 10:26:44 AM] Kurt Volker: Special attention should be paid to the problem of interference in the political processes of the United States especially with the alleged involvement of some Ukrainian politicians. I want to declare that this is unacceptable. We intend to initiate and complete a transparent and unbiased investigation of all available facts and episodes, including those involving Burisma and the 2016 U.S. elections, which in turn will prevent the recurrence of this problem in the future.

It's clear that no one wants to go first. The Trump team doesn't want to commit to a meeting without a public commitment to the investigations, and Ukraine doesn't want to announce the investigations without a meeting. The Trump team is looking for a way to force Ukraine's hand.

[8/17/19, 3:06:19 PM] Gordon Sondland: Do we still want Ze to give us an unequivocal draft with 2016 and Boresma?

[8/17/19, 4:34:21 PM] Kurt Volker: That's the clear message so far ...

[8/17/19, 4:34:39 PM] Kurt Volker: I'm hoping we can put something out there that causes him to respond with that

[8/17/19, 4:41:09 PM] Gordon Sondland: Unless you think otherwise I will return Andreys call tomorrow and suggest they send us a clean draft.

The Trump team forces Ukraine's hand. Eleven days later, *Politico* publishes this article citing a "senior administration official":

Trump holds up Ukraine military aid meant to confront Russia

By CAITLIN EMMA and CONNOR O'BRIEN | 08/28/2019 06:11 PM EDT | Updated 08/29/2019 03:40 PM EDT

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The Trump administration is slow-walking \$250 million in military assistance to Ukraine, annoying lawmakers and advocates who argue the funding is critical to keeping Russia at bay.

President Donald Trump asked his national security team to review the funding program, known as the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, in order to ensure the money is being used in the best interest of the United States, a senior administration official told POLITICO on Wednesday.

Ukraine panics:

[8/29/19, 2:28:19 AM] Andrey Yermak: Need to talk with you

[8/29/19, 3:06:14 AM] Andrey Yermak:

<https://www.politico.com/story/2019/08/28/trump-ukraine-military-aid-russia-1689531>

[8/29/19, 6:55:04 AM] Kurt Volker: Hi Andrey – absolutely. When is good for you?

Other officials are starting to notice the quid pro quo. Trump's own diplomat in Ukraine recognizes it:

[9/1/19, 12:08:57 PM] Bill Taylor: Are we now saying that security assistance and WH meeting are conditioned on investigations?

[9/1/19, 12:42:29 PM] Gordon Sondland: Call me

Pence [meets](#) with Zelensky to shake him down.

- Pence [meets](#) with Zelensky in Warsaw on September 2 after Trump canceled his trip there. Pence tells Zelensky about the hold on the aid and reportedly emphasizes that it was due to corruption (Pence denies all wrongdoing).

“I think it’s crazy to withhold security assistance for help with a political campaign.” Trump’s top diplomat in Ukraine, Bill Taylor, spells it all out for us. Nearly five hours later, Sondland responds in an effort to clean up the record. But it’s too late.

[9/9/19, 12:31:06 AM] Bill Taylor: The message to the Ukrainians (and Russians) we send with the decision on security assistance is key. With the hold, we have already shaken their faith in us. Thus my nightmare scenario.

[9/9/19, 12:34:44 AM] Bill Taylor: Counting on you to be right about this interview, Gordon.

[9/9/19, 12:37:16 AM] Gordon Sondland: Bill, I never said I was “right”. I said we are where we are and believe we have identified the best pathway forward. Lets hope it works.

[9/9/19, 12:47:11 AM] Bill Taylor: As I said on the phone, I think it’s crazy to withhold security assistance for help with a political campaign.

[9/9/19, 5:19:35 AM] Gordon Sondland: Bill, I believe you are incorrect about President Trump’s intentions. The President has been crystal clear no quid pro quo’s of any kind. The President is trying to evaluate whether Ukraine is truly going to adopt the transparency and reforms that President Zelensky promised during his campaign I suggest we stop the back and forth by text If you still have concerns I recommend you give Lisa Kenna or S a call to discuss them directly. Thanks.



Bottom Line

The Trump administration used Giuliani, and his direct line to Trump as his personal lawyer, to deliver the message to Ukraine about which investigations the Trump administration wanted them to open (Giuliani and Trump have denied all wrongdoing).

The extortion appears to have started with a refusal to announce a date for a meeting between Zelensky and Trump without a signed statement saying that Ukraine would investigate Trump's political rival and a conspiracy that Trump has been pushing about the 2016 election. When that wasn't producing results fast enough, the Trump administration made it clear that they would withhold military aid to Ukraine until the investigations were announced.

Ultimately, the Volker texts are the latest exhibits to show what appears to be an extensive plot to extort the Ukrainian government for Trump's political benefit. This is impeachable conduct.