

Trump's Accomplices Confirm the Quid Pro Quo

The Trump administration has given up on trying to pretend Trump's extortion of Ukraine didn't happen. Yesterday, two administration officials—Ambassador to the E.U. Gordon Sondland and Office of Management and Budget Director and Acting Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney—explicitly confirmed that Trump dangled a White House meeting and military aid to Ukraine as leverage to strong-arm Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to investigate Trump's political opponent and a long-debunked conspiracy theory about the 2016 election.

Mulvaney's confirmation occurred in the White House briefing room. Asked why Trump had chosen to withhold military aid from Ukraine, Mulvaney not only [said](#) the goal was to pressure Ukraine to investigate Trump's conspiracy theories about the 2016 election but also explicitly [confirmed](#) that it was a quid pro quo, adding, "We do that all the time." He only [denied](#) that Trump demanded an investigation into Biden as well—even though the White House's own notes from Trump's call with Zelensky clearly show he did. (Mulvaney has since tried to [walk back his comments](#), claiming he was being misinterpreted despite multiple chances to clarify in the press conference.)

Sondland's confirmation occurred behind closed doors. In his [opening statement](#) to the House impeachment inquiry, Sondland explicitly confirmed that Trump and his lawyer Rudy Giuliani were using a White House meeting as leverage to strong-arm Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to investigate a company tied to one of Trump's political opponents and a conspiracy theory about 2016 election interference.

The rest of Sondland's testimony appears to be a straight "know-nothing" defense. He claimed to not recall events six times in his opening statement. He also claimed he didn't know that Burisma was connected to Biden, despite multiple *New York Times* stories about Rudy Giuliani's efforts to generate investigations by the Ukrainian government into Biden and the 2016 election. He also claims to have not known that military assistance was part of the bargain, even though Senator Ron Johnson [claims](#) Sondland called him in July to discuss that aspect of the extortion scheme, a claim Sondland has not denied as of the date of this publication.

Sondland spelled out the quid pro quo (p. 13).

As I stated earlier, I understood from President Trump, at the May 23, 2019 White House debriefing, that he wanted the Inaugural Delegation to talk with Mr. Giuliani concerning our efforts to arrange a White House meeting for President Zelensky. Taking direction from the President, as I must, I spoke with Mr. Giuliani for that limited purpose. In these short conversations, Mr. Giuliani emphasized that the President wanted a public statement from President Zelensky committing Ukraine to look into anticorruption issues. Mr. Giuliani specifically mentioned the 2016 election (including the DNC server) and Burisma as two anti-corruption investigatory topics of importance for the President.

Sondland makes it clear that Trump and Giuliani wanted a “public statement from President Zelensky” committing to look into “anticorruption issues” before Trump would meet with him. Sondland also confirms that, by “anti-corruption issues,” Giuliani meant investigating Burisma, a company Giuliani has [explicitly linked to Trump’s political opponent](#), and a conspiracy theory that Ukraine intervened in the 2016 election, which Trump could use to defend himself from the fallout of the Mueller investigation.

Sondland also confirmed that Trump directed him and other U.S. officials to work through Rudy Giuliani on Ukraine (p. 7-8)

On May 23, 2019, three days after the Zelensky inauguration, we in the U.S. delegation debriefed President Trump and key aides at the White House. We emphasized the strategic importance of Ukraine and the strengthening relationship with President Zelensky, a reformer who received a strong mandate from the Ukrainian people to fight corruption and pursue greater economic prosperity. We asked the White House to arrange a working phone call from President Trump and a working Oval Office visit. However, President Trump was skeptical that Ukraine was serious about reforms and anti-corruption, and he directed those of us present at the meeting to talk to Mr. Giuliani, his personal attorney, about his concerns. It was apparent to all of us that the key to changing the President’s mind on Ukraine was Mr. Giuliani. It is my understanding that Energy Secretary Perry and Special Envoy Volker took the lead on reaching out to Mr. Giuliani, as the President had directed.

Sondland confirmed that Trump directed him and other officials to circumvent established foreign policy channels, including the State Department and the National Security Council (p. 8).

Indeed, Secretary Perry, Ambassador Volker, and I were disappointed by our May 23, 2019 White House debriefing. We strongly believed that a call and White House meeting between Presidents Trump and Zelensky was important and that these should be scheduled promptly and without any pre-conditions. We were also disappointed by the President's direction that we involve Mr. Giuliani. Our view was that the men and women of the State Department, not the President's personal lawyer, should take responsibility for all aspects of U.S. foreign policy towards Ukraine. However, based on the President's direction, we were faced with a choice: We could abandon the goal of a White House meeting for President Zelensky, which we all believed was crucial to strengthening U.S.-Ukrainian ties and furthering long-held U.S. foreign policy goals in the region; or we could do as President Trump directed and talk to Mr. Giuliani to address the President's concerns.

Sondland claimed he wasn't aware of the links between Biden and Burisma at the time. This conveniently fails to acknowledge that, on May 1 and May 9, weeks before Zelensky's inauguration, *The New York Times* ran lengthy stories in which Giuliani explicitly [linked the prospect of investigating Burisma](#) to the Bidens and confirmed he was [pursuing the investigation](#) because "that information will be very, very helpful to" Trump, who he identified as "my only client."

Finally, Sondland testified that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was in on it, too (p. 3).

I understand that all my actions involving Ukraine had the blessing of Secretary Pompeo as my work was consistent with long-standing U.S. foreign policy objectives. Indeed, very recently, Secretary Pompeo sent me a congratulatory note that I was doing great work, and he encouraged me to keep banging away.

Sondland's testimony and Mulvaney's press conference, despite his subsequent denial, confirm what has been clear all along: Trump abused his power as president to extort the Ukrainian government into acting for his personal political benefit.