

TRUMP SPECIFICALLY ENSURED REPUBLICANS WOULDN'T KNOW ABOUT HIS EXTORTION

Kurt Volker's prepared testimony from yesterday has been released. It is very unconvincing in several places, particularly read in conjunction with his texts that makes it clear there was a quid pro quo tied to security assistance and aid. Most charitably, it reads like the narrative of someone whose intentions were good, but in denial about his actions in service of an ultimate outcome – the continued provision of aid to Ukraine.

As is well documented, I had long supported lifting the ban on lethal defensive assistance to Ukraine, advocated for the supply of javelin anti-tank systems, advocated for an increase in U.S. assistance, and urged other nations to provide more assistance as well.

The issue of a hold placed on security assistance to Ukraine also came up during this same time I was connecting Mr. Yermak and Mayor Giuliani. I did not perceive these issues to be linked in any way.

On July 18, I was informed that at an interagency (sub-PCC) meeting, OMB had said that there was a hold being placed on Congressional Notifications about security assistance to Ukraine. No reason was given.

A higher level interagency meeting (PCC) was then scheduled to take place to discuss the issue on July 23. I met in advance with the individual who would represent the State Department at that meeting, Assistant Secretary of State

for Pol-Mil Affairs, R. Clarke Cooper. I stressed how important it was to keep the security assistance moving – for Ukraine’s self-defense, deterrence of further Russian aggression, as a symbol of our bilateral support for Ukraine, and as part of having a strong position going into any negotiations with Russia. He fully agreed and intended to represent that position at the PCC meeting. I also had separate conversations with the Pentagon and NSC staff to reiterate the same position.

I was told later that there was no outcome from the PCC meeting. That said, I was not overly concerned about the development because I believed the decision would ultimately be reversed. Everything from the force of law to the unanimous position of the House, Senate, Pentagon, State Department, and NSC staff argued for going forward, and I knew it would just be a matter of time.

As well, Volker avoids admitting this was partly about inventing dirt on Joe Biden by treating the possibility of election interference as credible, without any basis (and it’s clear he conducted this projection repeatedly in real time).

Concerning the allegations, I stressed that no one in the new team governing Ukraine had anything to do with anything that may have happened in 2016 or before – they were making TV shows at the time. Mr. Lutsenko, however, would remain in place until a new government was seated in a month or more. It was important to reach out and provide strong U.S. support for President-elect Zelenskyy.

I also said at that July 19 meeting that it is not credible to me that former Vice President Biden would have been influenced in anyway by financial or

personal motives in carrying out his duties as Vice President. A different issue is whether some individual Ukrainians may have attempted to influence the 2016 election or thought they could buy influence: that is at least plausible, given Ukraine's reputation for corruption. But the accusation that Vice President Biden acted inappropriately did not seem at all credible to me.

But the key new detail in Volker's statement, beyond what we already knew, is confirmation that not only did OMB freeze assistance to Ukraine, but it also froze notifications about security assistance to Congress, effectively hiding the fact that Trump was using the aid authorized by Congress to extort election assistance from Ukraine.

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Withholding the aid is something Republicans were on the record opposing. Indeed, Mitch McConnell claims (credibly or not) that even he was not informed that Trump was withholding the aid to extort campaign assistance.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) said he was not provided an explanation for why the Trump administration held up aid to Ukraine when he pressed senior officials on the matter over the summer.

"I was not given an explanation," McConnell told reporters Tuesday as the congressional furor grew over President Trump's interactions with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

McConnell said he spoke to Secretary of Defense Mark Esper and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo twice about the matter without receiving clarification for the delay in \$391 million in aid to Ukraine.

“I was very actively involved in advocating [for] the aid. I talked to the secretary of Defense, the secretary of State once,” he said.

“The good news was it finally happened,” he added, noting the administration finally released the aid. “I have no idea what precipitated the delay.”

Whatever other story Republicans want to tell to excuse this behavior (and, as I said, McConnell’s claim here reads like CYA), Republicans should be furious that, first, Trump ignored the stated will of Congress on something they all claimed to care about and, second, that Trump’s OMB very specifically froze them out of notice they were entitled to have, as Congress.

Again, this scandal is not just about Trump demanding that other countries help him get reelected. It’s also about Trump defying the will of Congress to obtain leverage to extort that aid. Now we know that he even deliberately kept Congress in the dark about what he was doing.

Republicans surely will continue to excuse this behavior. But by doing so, they are utterly emasculating the prerogatives of Congress to do so.

Update: Multiple sources suggest that by August 31, Ron Johnson knew why aid was being held up, and by September 12, McConnell and James Inhofe did too.