

Six Key Moments From the First Day of Public Impeachment Hearings

Who's in charge of the Trump administration's policy on Ukraine and the president's focus on the business dealings there of former Vice President Joe Biden's son were main topics of two veteran foreign service officers' testimony Wednesday before the House committee pursuing impeachment.

Offering sworn testimony as lead-off witnesses in House Democrats' first public hearings on the matter were George Kent, deputy assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian Affairs, and acting U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine William Taylor.

President Donald Trump's July 25 phone conversation with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and what led up to it, was the official subject of the hearing held by the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. A [second hearing](#) is set for Friday.

Chairman Adam Schiff, D-Calif., tangled at times over procedure with the committee's ranking member, Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Calif., and other Republican members.

Here are six key moments from the first day of the public impeachment hearings.

1. Bidens and Burisma

Hunter Biden's role as a well-paid board member for the Ukrainian energy company Burisma was a subject that House Democrats' counsel, Daniel Goldman, sought to dispose of early.

Joe Biden, his father, delivered a 2018 speech in which he boasted about threatening – when he was vice president – to cancel \$1 billion in U.S. aid to Ukraine if it didn't fire a prosecutor some thought to be investigating Burisma. That prosecutor lost his job.

"Are you familiar with these allegations related to Vice President Biden?" Goldman asked Kent.

Kent said he was, and identified when and where Biden made those remarks in 2018.

Goldman: "To your knowledge, is there any factual basis to support those allegations?"

Kent: "None whatsoever."

Goldman: "When Vice President Biden acted in Ukraine, did he act in accordance with official U.S. policy?"

Kent: "He did."

But Kent expanded on the subject when House Republicans' counsel, Steve Castor, drilled down on the matter of Burisma.

"I became aware, I believe in 2016, that ... part of the USAID [U.S. Agency for International Development] mission that works on economics and governance, including energy, had sponsored some kind of contest for young Ukrainians to come up with a theme and there was a prize. I believe it may have been a camera," Kent said. "They had co-sponsored it, with a public-private partnership being a buzzword, having a co-sponsorship with Burisma."

"Given the past history in our interest in recovering stolen assets from [Burisma owner Mykola] Zlochevsky, it was my view that it was inappropriate for the [U.S.] embassy to be co-sponsoring a contest with Burisma. I raised that with the mission director at the embassy. She agreed, and the USAID mission kept the contest but dropped the public-private

sponsorship.”

Kent also spoke about Burisma as part of the “pervasive and longstanding corruption in Ukraine.”

“The primary concern of the U.S. government since 2014 was Burisma’s owner, Mykola Zlochevsky, whose frozen assets abroad we had attempted to recover on Ukraine’s behalf. In early 2015, I raised questions with the deputy prosecutor general [of Ukraine] about why the investigation of Mr. Zlochevsky had been terminated. Based on our belief that prosecutors had accepted bribes,” Kent said.

“Later, I became aware that Hunter Biden was on the board of Burisma. Soon after that, in a briefing call with the national security staff of the vice president in February of 2015, I raised my concern that Hunter Biden’s status as a board member could create the perception of a conflict of interest,” he testified.

However, he said, the vice president continued to be involved in Ukrainian relations and his son continued to serve on the energy company’s board.

Castor later asked: “Was Hunter Biden a corporate governance expert?”

Kent: “I have no idea what Hunter Biden studied at a university or what his CV says.”

Castor: “So you don’t know whether he’s had any business experience in Ukraine prior to joining Burisma’s board.”

Kent: “I’ve heard nothing about prior experience.”

Castor: “Do you know if he speaks Ukranian?”

Kent: “I do not.”

Castor: “Do you know if he possessed any other elements other

than he is the son of the—at the time—the sitting vice president?”

Kent: “I do not.”

Castor then asked Taylor, the acting U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, “Do you know whether Hunter Biden offers anything other than his dad is the former vice president?”

Taylor responded, “I don’t. I have no knowledge of Hunter Biden.”

2. Staffer: ‘Trump Cares More About Investigations’

Kent and Taylor both previously testified to the House Intelligence Committee behind closed doors. However, Taylor introduced new information that wasn’t part of the transcript of his earlier testimony.

Both diplomats testified that Trump wanted the U.S. ambassador to the European Union, Gordon Sondland, to handle most of his Ukraine policy, along with the president’s personal lawyer, former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, and Energy Secretary Rick Perry, the former governor of Texas.

Taylor said one of his staffers was with Sondland on July 26, one day after Trump’s now famous phone call with Zelenskyy, the new Ukrainian president, in which Democrats allege the president pressured his counterpart to investigate Burisma and the Biden ties with the company.

“In the presence of my staff in the restaurant, Ambassador Sondland called President Trump and told him of his meetings in Kyiv,” Taylor said. “The member of my staff could hear President Trump on the phone asking Ambassador Sondland about the investigations. Ambassador Sondland told the president they [the Ukrainians] were ready to move forward.”

“Following the call with President Trump, the member of my staff asked Ambassador Sondland what President Trump thought about Ukraine,” Taylor testified. “Ambassador Sondland responded [that] President Trump cares more about the investigations of Biden, which Giuliani was pressing for. At the time I gave my deposition on Oct. 22, I was not aware of this information.”

3. Visit and Aid Tied to Investigation

As he understood it, Taylor testified, “President Trump did insist that President Zelenskyy go to a microphone and say he is opening investigations of Biden and 2016 election interference [by Ukraine].”

Taylor said he initially thought that only a White House meeting between Trump and Zelenskyy was contingent on Ukraine’s investigating the “corruption” cited by Trump. But, he said, Sondland later told him otherwise.

“It was not just the White House meeting that was dependent on the investigations,” Taylor told the committee. “He said it was now everything. It included the security assistance.”

The Trump administration held up nearly \$400 million of congressionally approved aid to Ukraine over the president’s reported concerns about the new Zelenskyy government’s commitment to rooting out corruption.

However, later in the hearing, Taylor said, “President Zelenskyy, to my knowledge, had no idea” that the U.S. aid was being delayed.

This remark buttressed a Republican talking point that the Ukraine leader couldn’t be blackmailed or coerced by the American president without knowing about it.

In different forums, Zelenskyy repeatedly has said he did not feel pressured by Trump to open investigations.

GOP lawmakers also said during the hearing that there was no Ukraine investigation, or announcement of one, into the Bidens, and the U.S. aid – called “security assistance” – still flowed.

Taylor testified that he “asked Sondland to push back” on Trump’s demand for a probe by the Ukrainians.

The ambassador to Ukraine said he was told that Zelenskyy was going to announce such an investigation in an interview with CNN.

“So, when there was some indication that there might be a plan for the CNN interview in New York, which was upcoming at the United Nations General Assembly meeting, I wanted to make sure that didn’t happen,” Taylor said. “So, I addressed it with Zelenskyy’s staff.”

In opening the hearing, Schiff said the facts were not in dispute.

“The questions presented by this impeachment inquiry are whether President Trump sought to exploit that ally’s vulnerability and invite Ukraine’s interference in our elections, whether President Trump sought to condition official acts, such as a White House meeting or U.S. military assistance, on Ukraine’s willingness to assist with two political investigations that would help his reelection campaign,” Schiff said. “And if President Trump did either, whether such an abuse of his power is compatible with the office of the presidency.”

4. ‘What I Heard Them Tell Me’

Both Kent and Taylor affirmed several times they were not among those listening in on the call between Trump and

Zelenskyy. Chiefly, they testified, they relied on information from Sondland and others.

Taylor at one point said to the Democrats' counsel: "Mr. Goldman, what I can do for you here today is to tell you what I heard from people. In this case, what I heard from Ambassador Sondland."

Rep. Mike Turner, R-Ohio, a lawyer, later told the two witnesses: "We're not in a court, gentlemen. But, if we were, the Sixth Amendment would apply and so would rules on hearsay and opinion. Most of your two testimonies would not be admissible whatsoever."

In an exchange with Taylor, Turner asked: "Is it possible that the things that you heard were not true, that some of the beliefs and understandings that you had were not accurate?"

Taylor replied: "Mr. Turner, I am here to tell you what I know. I'm not going to tell you anything I don't know. I'm going to tell you what I do know. That's exactly why I'm here."

Turner pressed: "But since you learned it from others, you could be wrong. Correct?"

Taylor: "I am telling you what I heard them tell me."

Turner: "Or they could be wrong, or they could be mistaken, or they could have heard it incorrectly. Right, Ambassador Taylor?"

Taylor: "People make mistakes."

5. 'Pleased' With Trump's Ukraine Policy

Taylor testified at one point that the Trump administration's policy toward Ukraine has been an improvement over that of the

Obama administration.

“During the 2014 to 2016 period, I was serving outside of government and joined two other former ambassadors to Ukraine in urging Obama administration officials at the State Department, Defense Department, and other agencies to provide lethal defensive weapons to Ukraine in order to deter further Russian aggression,” Taylor said. “I also supported much stronger sanctions on Russia. I was pleased when the Trump administration provided Javelin anti-tank missiles and enacted stronger sanctions.”

During opening remarks, Nunes, the ranking member of the committee, made a similar remark.

“Despite all of their dissatisfaction with the president’s Ukraine policy, the president approved the supply of weapons to Ukraine,” Nunes said. “Unlike the previous administration, which provided blankets as defense against invading Russians.”

Nunes then threw in State Department officials with FBI and intelligence officials that he said have targeted Trump since his election.

“By undermining the president who they are supposed to be serving, the elements of the FBI, the Department of Justice, and now the State Department have lost the confidence of millions of Americans who believe their vote should count for something,” Nunes said.

“It will take years if not decades to restore faith in these institutions,” he said. “This spectacle is doing great damage to our country. It’s nothing more than an impeachment process in search of a crime.”

6. What Trump Had to Say

Speaking to reporters at the White House alongside Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Trump again said that on

Thursday he would release a transcript of the first of two phone calls between himself and Zelenskyy.

Otherwise, the president was largely dismissive of the House hearing, saying he didn't even bother to watch.

"I'm too busy to watch it. It's a witch hunt. It's a hoax," Trump said. "I'm too busy to watch it. So, I'm sure I'll get a report."

Although the president said he wasn't watching, he was aware that part of the hearing involved counsel asking questions of the foreign service veterans, largely instead of committee members doing so.

"I see they're using lawyers that are television lawyers," Trump said, then referred to the committee's chairman. "They took some guys off television, you know. I'm not surprised to see it, because Schiff can't do his own questions."

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