

ANALYSIS: Why did Trump release Ukraine aid?

The answer is simple

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Why did President Trump release aid to Ukraine on Sept. 11 after holding it up for 55 days? Democrats and Republicans have been fighting over the answer throughout the impeachment debate.

Democrats and their allies in the media contend Trump freed up the aid only after the White House learned that a whistleblower had filed a complaint against the president. "The reason the aid was produced was that the whistleblower had come forward at that point," CNN's Jeffrey Toobin said Tuesday. "Basically, the Trump administration was busted. They got caught, and that's the reason they released the money."

"They got caught," the Democratic impeachment leader, Rep. Adam Schiff, said Thursday. "That's the reason aid was finally lifted."

Republicans offered an entirely different explanation. Rep. Jim Jordan, a leader of GOP impeachment pushback, said the aid was released after Trump heard positive assessments of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky from Vice President Mike Pence, Sen. Ron Johnson, then-national security adviser John Bolton, and others.

"They all became convinced of the same thing," Jordan said last week. "Hey, Mr. President, this guy is real. Go ahead and release the dollars." Jordan also noted that the new Ukrainian parliament was working on anti-corruption reform measures at the time.



Trump's true reason for releasing the aid matters to the Democratic impeachment scheme. If he released the money after learning about the whistleblower — after he realized the jig was up — then that, at least to Democrats, suggests guilt. If he released it after gaining confidence in Zelensky, that does not suggest guilt.

But the evidence suggests that neither explanation is correct, that there is a much simpler reason for Trump's decision to release the aid. On the day he OK'd the aid, Trump learned that Congress was going to force his hand and spend the money anyway. He could either go along or get run over.

On Sept. 11, the White House received a draft of a continuing resolution, produced by House Democrats, that would extend funding for the federal government. Among other provisions, the bill would push the Ukraine money out the door, whether in the final days of fiscal year 2019 or in 2020, regardless of what the president did.

"The draft continuing resolution ... would on September 30 immediately free up the remainder of the \$250 million appropriated for the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative in the fiscal 2019 Defense spending law and extend its availability for another year," Roll Call [reported](#) a little after noon on Sept. 11.

According to knowledgeable sources, the Office of Management and Budget received the draft on the morning of Sept. 11. OMB Director Russell Vought informed the president around midday. There was no doubt the Democratic-controlled House would pass the measure, which was needed to avoid a government shutdown. Later that afternoon, Trump — who must have already known that the Republican-controlled Senate would also support the bill — had the point emphasized to him when he received a call from Republican Sen. Rob Portman.

Portman, along with Democratic Sen. Richard Durbin, co-chairs the Senate Ukraine Caucus. Portman and several other senators [wrote](#) to the White House on Sept. 3, imploring the president to release the aid. On Sept. 11, Portman felt the need to talk again, with the same message — only this time with the backdrop of the House preparing to pass a bill that would force Trump's hand.

At that point, the president knew he could not maintain the hold on aid in the face of bipartisan congressional action. So he gave in. By early evening on Sept. 11, the hold was lifted.

It was an entirely unremarkable end to the story. President tries to do something. Congress opposes. President sees he has no support and backs down. It has happened many, many times with many, many presidents.

In the end, the release of the aid is not dramatic proof of anything in the Trump-Ukraine matter. The facts do not support the Democratic notion that the president "got caught," knew he was guilty, and gave in. It is not a smoking gun. It is a story of a president and Congress bumping up against each other on spending, and, as often happens, Congress won.



