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Democracy Dies in Darkness

How a CIA analyst, alarmed by Trump's shadow foreign policy, triggered an impeachment inquiry

By **Greg Miller**, **Greg Jaffe** and **Paul Sonne**

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The lights are often on late into the evening at CIA headquarters, where a team of elite analysts works on classified reports that influence how the country responds to global crises.

In early August, one of those analysts was staying after hours on a project with even higher stakes. For two weeks, he pored over notes of alarming conversations with White House officials, reviewed details from interagency memos on the U.S. relationship with Ukraine and scanned public statements by President Trump.

He wove this material into a nine-page memo outlining evidence that Trump had abused the powers of his office to try to coerce Ukraine into helping him get reelected. Then, on Aug. 12, the analyst hit “send.”

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Keep up with the **impeachment inquiry**



His decision to report what he had learned to the U.S. intelligence community's inspector general has transformed the political landscape of the United States, triggering a rapidly moving impeachment inquiry that now imperils Trump's presidency.

Over the past three months, the allegations made in that document have been overwhelmingly substantiated — by the sworn testimony of administration officials, the inadvertent admissions of Trump's acting chief of staff and, most important, the president's own words, as captured on a record of his July 25 call with the leader of Ukraine.

As the impeachment inquiry entered a new phase of public hearings on Wednesday, the outlines of the case have been thoroughly established: the president, his personal lawyer Rudolph W. Giuliani and two diplomats are alleged to have collaborated to pressure Ukraine to pursue investigations to bolster Trump's conspiracy theories about the 2016 election and damage the prospects of a potential opponent in next year's election, former vice president Joe Biden.

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To advance this hidden agenda, Trump and his allies orchestrated the ouster of a

U.S. ambassador, the withholding of an Oval Office meeting from Ukraine's new president and the suspension of hundreds of millions of dollars in U.S. aid.

But beyond that familiar fact pattern, the revelations reflect a country in political crisis.

The United States has embarked on an impeachment proceeding against a president for only the fourth time in its history. The voluminous testimony so far has revealed a government at war with itself over how to respond to Trump's frequent conflation of the country's interests with his own. After casting itself as a force against corruption, condemning politically driven prosecutions in other countries, the United States now appears to have sought to coerce such actions from a partner nation.

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It is not clear whether any of this would have come to light were it not for the actions of a relatively junior CIA employee, who is now the target of almost daily attacks by Trump and right-wing efforts to make his identity widely public.

Dozens of senior officials — including the national security adviser, the secretary of

state and the acting White House chief of staff — were either aware of or involved in the Ukraine scheme and failed to expose or stop it. More than a half-dozen lower-ranking officials made futile attempts to intervene.

Ultimately, it came down to a lone analyst, in a cubicle miles from the White House, drafting an unprecedented document in the detached manner he had learned in his CIA training.

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“In the course of my official duties,” he wrote, “I have received information from multiple U.S. government officials that the President of the United States is using the power of his office to solicit interference from a foreign country in the 2020 U.S. election.”

This article is based on interviews with dozens of U.S. and Ukrainian officials, the whistleblower report, the White House call record and thousands of pages of impeachment hearing transcripts. Many officials and others spoke on the condition of anonymity, citing the sensitivity of the issue and fear of retaliation.

The CIA declined to comment on all matters related to the whistleblower, including

whether he is employed at the agency. The whistleblower's lawyers also declined to comment.

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THE IMPEACHMENT HEARINGS

'The center of our investigation'

Attempts to discredit the whistleblower have depicted him as driven by ideology or political grievance, secretly determined to unseat the president. The inspector general did note “an arguable political bias” on the part of the whistleblower but found his complaint “credible.”

Current and former officials familiar with the analyst's actions said that he was daunted by the implications of his decision, both for the country and his career, and that he never contemplated becoming a whistleblower until learning about the nature of Trump's July 25 call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

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The rough transcript of that call, which was released by the White House after the analyst's concerns became public, shows Trump opening with congratulations on Ukraine's recent parliamentary elections and then transitioning swiftly into applying pressure.

"I would like you to do us a favor though," Trump says, urging Zelensky to order investigations into a baseless claim that Kyiv is hiding computer equipment that would supposedly prove it was Ukraine, and not Russia, that hacked the Democratic National Committee's network in 2016; and into a Ukrainian energy company, Burisma Holdings, that had employed Biden's son Hunter to serve on its board of directors for up to \$100,000 a month.

In their 30-minute conversation, there was no mention of the two nations' shared goals of repelling Russian aggression, no expression of broader concern about corruption, no reference to Ukraine's desire for a closer relationship with the West.

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The call is at the heart of the impeachment inquiry in the House of Representatives,

rising above all other allegations or evidence in significance, according to senior officials involved in the probe.

“The call itself shows what we believe to be a misuse of power of the office of the presidency for personal gain,” said a senior Democratic official. “It quickly became the center of our investigation.”

Still, the official said, “We wanted to expand outward before and after the call. What was the impetus? Why was Trump asking about these investigations? Who was involved and who knew about it?”

The timing of Trump’s attempt to pressure Zelensky made it all the more extraordinary. One day earlier, former special counsel Robert S. Mueller III had, in halting testimony before Congress, essentially ended any prospect that Trump would face impeachment for his campaign’s ties to Russia in 2016 or alleged efforts to obstruct the investigation into election interference that followed.

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The Russia “cloud” that Trump has so frequently railed against had finally been

lifted. And yet, within hours, he was exposing himself to new allegations of collusion, this time not with Russia, but with neighboring Ukraine.

On the call, however, Trump makes clear that he sees the two threats to his presidency as inextricably linked, and his attempt to pressure Ukraine appears driven by his refusal to accept the reality of Moscow's interference and the stain he believes that left on his surprising win.

Midway through the call, Trump appears to gloat about the collapse of the Russia investigation. "That whole nonsense ended with a very poor performance by a man named Robert Mueller, an incompetent performance," Trump said. "But they say a lot of it started with Ukraine."

BEFORE THE CALL

The 'irregular' channel

Several witnesses in the impeachment inquiry have said that Trump bears significant hostility toward Ukraine, stemming in part from the country's role in exposing the financial corruption of his 2016 campaign chairman, Paul Manafort.

Trump began airing conspiratorial claims about Ukraine as early as April 2017. That month, he made a baseless allegation he has since repeated frequently: that Democratic Party officials had refused to let computers hacked by Russia be examined by the FBI and instead "brought in another company that I hear is Ukraine-based."

The president, who derided Russia allegations against him as a "hoax," was advancing one of his own.

The "blame Ukraine" idea gained additional traction after Trump hired Giuliani as

his lawyer. The former New York mayor began scavenging the factionalized and often conspiratorial world of Kyiv politics for material that might be used to construct an alternate scenario of what happened in 2016 and help blunt the Mueller probe.

Early this year, as the Russia investigation neared its conclusion, Giuliani began meeting with Ukrainian officials, including the country's top prosecutor, Yuri Lutsenko, who were eager to gain an ally in the White House.

In the ensuing months, Giuliani appears to have functioned as a conduit for specious claims that made their way to Trump and right-wing media outlets. Among them were allegations that the U.S. ambassador in Kyiv was actively undermining Trump's agenda and that Biden had used his power as vice president to derail a Ukraine corruption investigation into the company that had hired his son.

The allegations had important qualities in common: They were distortions, if not outright fabrications, and they were easier to spread than to disprove.

Giuliani's activities became a source of concern to wary officials at the White House and the State Department in the early months of 2019, worries that intensified in May when U.S. Ambassador Marie Yovanovitch was forced out of her position in Kyiv over baseless allegations against her and Giuliani seized on her ouster to declare that he would be pushing a new agenda in the U.S. relationship with Ukraine.

In a May interview with the New York Times, Giuliani declared that he would be

traveling to Ukraine for meetings aimed at advancing investigations that “will be very, very helpful to my client.” He added: “We’re not meddling in an election, we’re meddling in an investigation.” Giuliani later scrapped the trip, telling Fox News that he wasn’t going because Zelensky was surrounded by enemies of the U.S. president — a statement that unnerved Zelensky’s team in Kyiv and sent them scrambling for advice about what to do.

Giuliani’s brazenness also caused confusion and alarm in the White House. Fiona Hill, who until July served as Trump’s top adviser on Russia and Ukraine, found herself tuning in to television coverage in a search for answers about Giuliani’s activities that she couldn’t get at work.

“I would have to go home in the evening and try to look on the news to see what Giuliani was doing,” Hill testified, “because people were constantly saying to me: ‘My God, have you seen what Giuliani is saying now?’ ”

National security adviser John Bolton also took to turning up the volume on the television set in his office whenever Giuliani appeared on-screen, an effort to get a sense of what the president’s personal lawyer was planting in Trump’s ear in their off-the-books conversations on Trump’s personal cellphone.

The ouster of Yovanovitch and the private calls between Trump and Giuliani marked the activation of a rogue front in the relationship with Ukraine that was at odds with established policy.

By month’s end, the division would crack open further as Giuliani acquired reinforcements.

In May, Trump blocked a plan to send Vice President Pence to Zelensky’s

inauguration and instead dispatched a delegation that included Energy Secretary Rick Perry, U.S. special envoy Kurt Volker and Gordon Sondland, a Trump megadonor with no diplomatic experience who had been named ambassador to the European Union.

On May 23, the trio, who dubbed themselves “the three amigos,” met with Trump in the Oval Office, eager to share their favorable impression of Zelensky as an anti-corruption reformer. “He didn’t want to hear about it,” Sondland said of Trump.

Instead, Trump railed that the Ukrainians were “horrible, corrupt people” and ordered the three men to “talk to Rudy.”

Trump’s grievances were so ingrained and irrational that the three officials decided, according to the testimony of Sondland and Volker, that they had no choice but to do as the president directed and hope that Giuliani could help them broker a meeting between Trump and Zelensky that might reset the American president’s views.

The three convinced themselves that they were serving the interests of Ukraine and the United States, even as they were drawn into a furtive scheme that Democrats say appeared to have elements of bribery: There would be no Oval Office meeting for Zelensky until he committed to Trump-specified, politically motivated investigations.

With a White House visit a distant goal, Sondland and Volker set their sights on an intermediate objective — a Trump-Zelensky phone call. As they pursued that, Hill and others at the White House chafed at the emergence of a new, seemingly unauthorized diplomatic channel.

On June 18, Hill had what she described as a “blow up” with Sondland after she

challenged him to explain why the E.U. ambassador was meddling in the affairs of a country that is not part of his portfolio.

“Who has put you in charge of it?” Hill asked, according to her testimony. Sondland shot back: “The president.”

At the same time, a new obstacle for the three amigos emerged in Kyiv: William B. Taylor Jr., a veteran diplomat, had arrived as acting ambassador, armed with what he thought were rock-solid assurances that there would be no diminution in U.S. support for Ukraine.

But within weeks of his arrival, Taylor also began to sense the presence of what he would later call an “irregular” U.S.-Ukraine channel. On June 27, Sondland told Taylor by phone that hopes for a Trump-Zelensky meeting hinged on the Ukrainian leader making it clear that he did not stand in the way of “investigations.”

A day later, as Taylor, Sondland, Volker and Perry spoke by phone to prepare for a conference call with Zelensky, Sondland ordered State Department support staff off the line, saying he “wanted to make sure no one was transcribing” what they were about to say.

Volker then said he planned to meet with Zelensky in Toronto on July 2 to secure his commitment to “get to the bottom of things,” a cryptic reference that Taylor sensed was tied to the hidden agendas of Giuliani and Trump. Sondland told Volker to ask that Zelensky use the words “no stone unturned.”

Two weeks later, the irregular and regular channels collided in spectacular fashion in the White House. On July 10, two of Zelensky’s top advisers, Oleksandr Danylyuk and Andriy Yermak, were escorted into the West Wing for a meeting with Bolton.

Danylyuk, Ukraine’s national security adviser, had been coached by Sondland to

press Bolton for a date for Zelensky and Trump to meet. But that advice proved misguided. Bolton was at that point against a meeting, in part because of concerns about Giuliani's influence and Trump's motives.

As Bolton resisted being pinned down, Sondland tried to intercede, telling the Ukrainians that an agreement was already in place and that Ukraine needed to commit to unspecified "investigations," according to Hill, who witnessed the event.

Bolton, who had previously told subordinates that he worried Giuliani was a "hand grenade," suddenly "stiffened and ended the meeting," Hill testified.

Sondland, seemingly unperturbed, instructed the Ukrainians to follow him into a meeting room in the West Wing basement.

Bolton dispatched Hill to follow the group. When she reported back that Sondland had gone even further in the follow-up session by specifically mentioning Burisma, Bolton ordered her to report what she had heard to John Eisenberg, the National Security Council's senior lawyer.

"Tell Eisenberg that I am not part of this drug deal that Sondland and Mulvaney are cooking up," he told her, referring to acting White House chief of staff Mick Mulvaney, whom Sondland had depicted as an ally of his efforts on Ukraine.

Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, a senior Ukraine specialist on Bolton's staff, witnessed both meetings and also sought out Eisenberg. Vindman testified that it was in those sessions that he realized that Trump was using a White House meeting as leverage on investigations with Zelensky.

If Zelensky were to do as Trump asked and launch such probes, Vindman testified, it would damage Ukraine's standing, weaken its ability to fight off Russian aggression and "this would all undermine U.S. national security."

At the same time as the volatile meetings in the West Wing, Zelensky's team was

learning that even a phone call with Trump might have a price. Zelensky's chief of staff was warned through backchannel communications that Giuliani, who was growing frustrated with a perceived lack of access and cooperation from Kyiv, would oppose even a call with Trump, according to Taylor and a person familiar with the message.

Eight days after the White House meeting, Taylor learned about a troubling new aspect of the effort to pressure Ukraine. In a July 18 video conference call with National Security Council officials, the acting ambassador "sat in astonishment" as an aide representing the Office of Management and Budget informed the others that \$391 million in security aid to Ukraine was being put on hold. She offered no explanation, except to say that the order had "come from the president."

"In an instant, I realized that one of the key pillars of our strong support for Ukraine was threatened," Taylor testified. "The irregular policy channel was running contrary to the goals of long-standing U.S. policy."

It was seven days before the Trump-Zelensky call.

THE CALL: JULY 25

On a collision course

When Trump was elected, there was wishful thinking in Washington that his unconventional behavior as a candidate would be curbed by the responsibilities of the office — that he would gradually absorb the wisdom of foreign policy experts and welcome the advice of Cabinet officials.

The Ukraine story shows the extent to which the opposite has happened: Trump has outlasted virtually all of those who fought to check his impulses, including former defense secretary Jim Mattis and former chief of staff John F. Kelly. Their absence has bolstered his ability to bend institutions to his will.

When the White House operator patched Trump through to Zelensky on the

morning of July 25, it was despite attempts by Bolton to head off a call he worried would be a “disaster.” Bolton had sought to coach Trump earlier that morning, only to learn later that Sondland had secretly arranged a follow-up conversation and gotten the final word.

The amigos had also coached Zelensky before the conversation, with Volker telling a top adviser to the Ukrainian president hours earlier that Zelensky should specifically pledge that he will “get to the bottom of what happened” in 2016.

Trump, who rarely arrives at his office before 11 a.m., was still in the residence when he got on the line. Several floors below, a handful of national security officials were following protocol and monitoring the conversation from the Situation Room.

Notably missing were Bolton, Pence and Hill, who had left her White House job days earlier. The only high-ranking official on the line was Secretary of State Mike Pompeo — a fact he concealed for a week after the record of the call was disclosed.

Almost immediately, Vindman noticed an edge in the president’s voice, his misplaced grievances about Ukraine coming through. He brought up U.S. aid and said the country’s generosity was not reciprocated. He disparaged Yovanovitch, saying: “She’s going to go through some things.”

He leaned on Zelensky to hunt for the supposedly missing Democratic computer equipment, even though his top advisers had been warning him for years that the claim was baseless. Trump zeroed in on the former vice president and urged Zelensky to coordinate with Giuliani and U.S. Attorney General William P. Barr.

“Biden went around bragging that he stopped the prosecution,” Trump said, mischaracterizing Biden’s statements and intentions. “So if you can look into it. . . . It sounds horrible to me.”

The call ended at 9:33 a.m. Over the next 24 hours, a climate of fear and suspicion

descended on the White House, as Vindman and others who had either listened to the call or learned about it indirectly raised alarms with lawyers and senior officials, including Bolton, as well as with peers from the State Department and the CIA.

Though neither side grasped it at the time, the regular and irregular channels were now on a collision course — each taking steps that ensured the inevitability of an impeachment inquiry. Neither side appears to have had any clue that the trigger would be a CIA analyst, who kept his plans secret to all but a trusted few.

The warnings from Vindman and others failed to prompt any kind of mobilization in the senior ranks of the White House, such as an emergency meeting of National Security Council officials or a direct intervention with the president. Instead, officials sought to contain the fallout from the call, even as Trump's allies escalated their pressure campaign in Ukraine.

Eisenberg, the top National Security Council lawyer, responded by moving to restrict access to the transcript of the call, which was placed on a computer system normally reserved for highly classified intelligence programs. It took weeks for the administration to enlist Justice Department officials to review the call record, an exercise that narrowly concluded that there were no campaign finance crimes in a call that included references to Barr.

In Kyiv, the reaction to the call was mixed. Zelensky seemed pleased that the conversation had occurred as scheduled and that his relationship with Trump might finally move forward, according to an official in the room with Ukraine's leader. But others were either confused or concerned about the content and the failure to agree upon a date for a face-to-face meeting.

Some on Zelensky's team worried that Trump would send a tweet claiming a

commitment from Ukraine to investigate Biden and the 2016 election, dragging the country into American politics.

AUGUST 2019

A nightmare scenario

In the ensuing days, the pressure campaign only intensified.

On July 26, Trump spoke by phone with Sondland, who was in Kyiv, and asked whether Zelensky would “do the investigation” he had raised in their conversation the previous day, according to the testimony of a U.S. Embassy staffer in Kyiv, David Holmes, who witnessed the Trump-Sondland call.

Sondland had met with Zelensky earlier in the day and had called Trump to provide an update.

Sondland replied: “He’s gonna do it,” adding that Zelensky will “do anything you ask him to,” Holmes testified. Holmes said that he asked Sondland about Trump’s views toward Ukraine and that the ambassador told him that Trump did not “give a s--- about Ukraine.”

The disclosure provides new evidence of Trump’s direct hand in the Ukraine matter. The conversation was overheard by U.S. Embassy officials accompanying Sondland. It may also have been monitored by Russian intelligence. Sondland had called Trump by cellphone from a restaurant. Russian spy services have substantial surveillance capabilities in Kyiv.

On Aug. 2, Giuliani traveled to Madrid to meet with Yermak. Giuliani wanted

Zelensky to issue a public statement confirming that the Ukrainian government would undertake the investigations. Sondland and Volker spent much of that month trading text messages with Yermak over the preferred language, making it clear that the statement was now a prerequisite to an Oval Office meeting.

The gesture had outsize importance to Zelensky, who regarded a White House meeting as the clearest way to send a signal of U.S.-Ukraine solidarity to Moscow, which is still waging a proxy war in Ukraine's eastern territory that has claimed 13,000 lives.

Members of Zelensky's inner circle say they didn't learn until the end of August about the suspension of U.S. aid meant to help Ukrainian forces, when it was revealed in a Politico story. One Ukrainian official said it appeared earlier in internal Ukrainian government reports that may not have reached Zelensky.

The disclosure created a new rupture in the relationship on the eve of what was supposed to be the first encounter between Trump and Zelensky at a gathering of world leaders on Sept. 1 in Warsaw. The prospect of that meeting evaporated when a hurricane bearing down on Florida prompted Trump to send Pence to the event, a World War II commemoration, in his stead.

Pence was either woefully unprepared or unwilling to provide straight answers to anxious Ukrainian officials. At a large, formal meeting, Zelensky immediately pressed the vice president about the frozen aid. Pence professed not to know the cause of the holdup, speaking vaguely about corruption concerns and promising to raise the issue with Trump.

The Ukrainians were flummoxed by Pence's evasion. "You're the only country providing us military assistance," one of Zelensky's aides told him. "You're punishing us."

Sondland, who had also traveled to Poland, used a side conversation in a hotel with

one of Zelensky's advisers to fill in the blanks. He laid out the transaction in the starkest terms to date: To get the funding and a White House meeting, Zelensky had to commit publicly to investigating Burisma in an interview with CNN that would be seen in the United States.

When word of this encounter made its way back to Taylor, the acting ambassador was outraged. That same day, Sept. 1, Taylor confronted Sondland via text: "Are we now saying that security assistance and Wh meeting are conditioned on investigations?"

Sondland refused to answer in writing, saying: "Call me."

The development led to skirmishes between Taylor and Sondland. A week later, Taylor threatened to resign over what he warned would be a "nightmare" scenario. "The nightmare is they give the interview and don't get the assistance," Taylor said by text, voicing concern that Trump would betray Zelensky even if he announced Burisma investigations. "The Russians love it. (And I quit.)"

The next day, Sept. 9, Taylor texted Sondland after another tense call. "As I said on the phone, I think it's crazy to withhold security assistance for help with a political campaign."

Sondland didn't reply until the following day. That evening, he called the White House and was patched through to Trump. The next morning, he delivered a scripted reply to the wary ambassador.

"Bill, I believe you are incorrect about President Trump's intentions," Sondland wrote. "The president has been crystal clear no quid pro quo's of any kind."

BLOWING THE WHISTLE

Crazy and frightening

Two days later, on Sept. 11, the White House removed the ban on aid to Ukraine,

capitulating to rising pressure from Congress, the Pentagon and the State Department after the existence of the whistleblower report was known. The restoration of the flow of money was seen by Sondland, Taylor and others as a sign that the crisis had abated.

They were oblivious to events unfolding in Washington that would expose the Ukraine scheme. The “regular” channel, as Taylor called it, was about to reassert itself.

The day after Trump’s conversation with Zelensky, the CIA analyst spoke by phone with a highly agitated official at the White House. The official was “shaken by what had transpired and seemed keen to inform a trusted colleague,” the analyst noted in a memo he wrote to record the conversation.

The White House official described the Trump call as “crazy,” “frightening” and “completely lacking in substance related to national security.” The official said he had already raised the matter with White House lawyers, convinced that Trump had “clearly committed a criminal act.”

The analyst does not identify the official in his July 26 memo, which was obtained by congressional investigators in the impeachment inquiry. But Vindman, in his testimony, disclosed that he had spoken to officials outside the White House within days of the Trump-Zelensky call.

The analyst appears to have concluded almost immediately that he was obligated to act but seemed unsure about how.

His first step was to approach an official in the office of the CIA general counsel to raise concerns about the Trump call, according to people familiar with the whistleblower’s actions.

Days later, the analyst learned that the CIA’s top lawyer, Courtney Simmons

Elwood, had notified the White House and became concerned that the matter would be stifled. He then sought out an official on the House Intelligence Committee, conveying his concern only in the broadest terms before the official urged him to say no more and consult a lawyer.

The analyst next turned to a friend who is an attorney and an expert on national security law. The two chatted briefly at a coffee shop before the lawyer, recognizing the magnitude of the matter, also stopped the analyst before any details were broached.

The friend referred the analyst to another attorney, Andrew Bakaj, who had more expertise on whistleblower procedure and law. After parting ways, the friend pulled out his iPhone and deleted a calendar item he had created for their meeting that included the whistleblower's name.

The analyst had served on the National Security Council during the Trump administration and had been in the presence of the president. After returning to the CIA, his job required him to continue to participate in National Security Council meetings.

His White House contacts became conduits of concern about Trump's behavior toward Ukraine, though the analyst appears not to have told any of those officials — on the advice of Bakaj — about his plan to submit an official whistleblower complaint to the U.S. intelligence community inspector general.

The report he submitted reveals aspects of how he went about assembling this file. Though triggered by the July 25 call, he made clear that it drew on information that had been shared with him “over the past four months” from “more than half a dozen U.S. officials.”

The file was heavily focused on what Trump had said to Zelensky in their half-hour

conversation, but it also contained details about what had happened in the aftermath, including the move to “lock down” the call record and follow-up efforts by Sondland and Volker to help Zelensky “navigate” Trump’s demands.

It described Giuliani’s meetings with Ukrainian prosecutors seen by the U.S. government as corrupt and seeking to settle scores with their perceived adversaries. It outlined the smear campaign to oust Yovanovitch and his own discovery in mid-July — long before officials in Kyiv knew — that U.S. aid to Ukraine had been suspended.

When the report was submitted on Aug. 12, it triggered a constitutional clash. White House officials fought for weeks to block the acting director of national intelligence from turning the complaint over to relevant committees in Congress, as required by law.

But the administration relented under mounting pressure, including demands by House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam B. Schiff (D-Calif.) and press reports including a Sept. 18 story in The Washington Post revealing that the focus of the complaint was a call that Trump had with a foreign leader.

On Sept. 25, the administration released the rough transcript of the call in a futile attempt to head off the formation of a House impeachment inquiry. Then, on Sept. 26, the administration declassified the whistleblower complaint itself.

None of its core contentions has been substantially discredited in the seven weeks since, though Trump has continued to insist that his conversation with Zelensky was “perfect” and that the public should “read the transcript.”

His former advisers have characterized the call more harshly and voiced concern

that Trump's political machinations represent an assault on American values that has eroded the country's standing and played into Russia's hands. In her testimony last month, Hill delivered an impassioned warning that the United States' faltering resistance to conspiracy theories and corruption represents a self-inflicted crisis and renders the country vulnerable to its enemies.

"The Russians, you know, can't basically exploit cleavages if there are not cleavages," she said. "The Russians can't exploit corruption if there's not corruption. They can't exploit alternative narratives if those alternative narratives are not out there and getting credence. What the Russians do is they exploit things that already exist."

Trump has waged a campaign to impugn the motives of the whistleblower, attacking him more than 50 times on Twitter and demanding that his identity be exposed.

Congressional allies and right-wing media sites have attempted to follow suit. Only minutes after the first public impeachment hearing got underway Wednesday — with Taylor and George Kent, a deputy assistant secretary at the State Department overseeing European and Eurasian affairs, as witnesses — Republican lawmakers sought to halt the proceedings and force the whistleblower to appear.

But the events he set in motion, and the evidence now driving them, have moved beyond the complaint he submitted three months ago. The CIA has taken security measures to protect the analyst, who has continued to work at agency headquarters on Russia and Ukraine issues.

Sonne reported from Kyiv. Julie Tate and David L. Stern in Kyiv contributed to this report.

Impeachment: What you need to read

updated December 30, 2019

Here's what you need to know to understand the impeachment of President Trump.

What's happening now: Trump is now the third U.S. president to be impeached, after the House of Representatives adopted both articles of impeachment against him.

What happens next: Impeachment does not mean that the president has been removed from office. The Senate must hold a trial to make that determination. A trial is expected to take place in January. Here's more on what happens next.

How we got here: A whistleblower complaint led Pelosi to announce the beginning of an official impeachment inquiry on Sept. 24. Closed-door hearings and subpoenaed documents related to the president's July 25 phone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky followed. After two weeks of public hearings in November, the House Intelligence Committee wrote a report that was sent to the House Judiciary Committee, which held its own hearings. Pelosi and House Democrats announced the articles of impeachment against Trump on Dec. 10. The Judiciary Committee approved two articles of impeachment against Trump: abuse of power and obstruction of Congress.

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