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Chairman Schiff Releases Opening Statement for Open Hearing With Lt. Col. Vindman and Jennifer Williams

Washington, DC — Today, Chairman Adam Schiff released his opening statement for the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence’s open hearing with Lt. Col. Vindman and Jennifer Williams as part of the impeachment inquiry into President Donald J. Trump.

Full statement below as prepared:

Last week, we heard from three experienced diplomats who testified about President Trump’s scheme to condition official acts — a White House meeting and hundreds of millions of dollars of U.S. military aid to fight the Russians — on a “deliverable” by the new Ukrainian President Zelensky, two politically-motivated investigations Trump believed would help his reelection campaign.

One of those investigations involved the Bidens and the other involved a discredited conspiracy theory that Ukraine and not Russia was responsible for interfering in our 2016 election.

As Ambassador Sondland would later tell career Foreign Service Officer David Holmes immediately after speaking to the President, Trump “did not give a” – he then used an expletive – about Ukraine. He cares about “‘big stuff’” that benefits the President “like the ‘Biden investigation’ that Giuliani was pushing.”

To press a foreign leader to announce an investigation into his political rival, President Trump put his own personal and political interests above those of the nation. He undermined our military and diplomatic support for a key ally, and undercut U.S. anticorruption efforts in Ukraine. How could our diplomats urge Ukraine to refrain from political investigations of its own citizens, if the President of the United States was urging Ukraine to engage in precisely the same kind of corrupt and political investigation of one of our own citizens?

At the White House, career professionals became concerned that President Trump, through an irregular channel that involved his acting Chief of Staff, Mick Mulvaney, EU Ambassador Gordon Sondland and Rudy Giuliani, was pushing a policy towards Ukraine at odds with the national interest.

This morning we hear from two of the national security professionals who became aware of these efforts.

Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Vindman, whose family fled oppression in the Soviet Union when he was a toddler, is a career Army officer, an Iraq War veteran who was awarded a Purple Heart, and an expert in Russia and Ukraine who has worked at the highest levels of the Pentagon. In July 2018, he was detailed to the White House, in part to coordinate policy on Ukraine.

Jennifer Williams is a career Foreign Service Officer who is currently detailed to the Office of the Vice-President and responsible for Europe and Eurasia issues.

Following his initial and congratulatory phone call with Ukrainian President Zelensky on April 21, Trump asked Vice-President Pence to represent him at Zelensky's upcoming inauguration. Ms. Williams was working on logistics for the trip. Pence would be a coveted attendee, second in significance only to the President, and it would have sent an important signal of support to the new Ukrainian President.

In early May, however, Rudy Giuliani had been planning to go to Ukraine to pursue the President's interest in having the Bidens investigated, but had to call off the trip after it became public. Among others, Giuliani blamed people around Zelensky for having to cancel, and claimed they were antagonistic to Trump. Three days later, the President called off the Vice President's attendance at Zelensky's inauguration.

Instead, a lower level delegation was named: Energy Secretary Rick Perry, Ambassador Sondland, and Ambassador Kurt Volker — the Three Amigos. Senator Ron Johnson and Lt. Col. Vindman would also attend.

After returning from the inauguration, several members of the delegation briefed President Trump on their encouraging first interactions with Zelensky. They urged Trump to meet with the Ukrainian President. But Trump instead criticized Ukraine and instructed them to “work with Rudy.”

A few weeks later, on July 10th, Ambassador Sondland met at the White House with a group of U.S. and Ukrainian officials, including Col. Vindman, and informed the group that according to

Chief of Staff Mulvaney, the White House meeting sought by the Ukrainian President with Trump would happen *if* Ukraine undertook certain investigations.

National Security Advisor Bolton abruptly ended the meeting and said afterwards that he would not be “part of whatever drug deal Sondland and Mulvaney are cooking up on this.”

Undeterred, Sondland brought the Ukrainian delegation downstairs to another part of the White House and was more explicit, according to witnesses: Ukraine needed to investigate the Bidens or Burisma, if they were to get a White House meeting with Trump. After this discussion, which Vindman witnessed, he went to the National Security Council’s top lawyer to report the matter. Vindman was told to return in the future with any further concerns, and he would soon find the need to do so.

A week later, on July 18, a representative from the Office of Management and Budget announced on a video conference call that Mulvaney, at Trump’s direction, was freezing nearly \$400 million in military assistance to Ukraine which was appropriated by Congress and enjoyed the support of the entirety of the U.S. national security establishment.

And one week after that, Trump would have the now infamous July 25th phone call with Zelensky. During that call, Trump complained that the U.S. relationship with Ukraine had not been “reciprocal.” Later, Zelensky thanks Trump for his support “in the area of defense,” and says that Ukraine was ready to purchase more Javelins, an antitank weapon that was among the most important deterrents of further Russian military action. Trump’s immediate response: “I would like you to do us a favor, though.”

Trump then requested that Zelensky investigate the discredited 2016 conspiracy theory, and even more ominously, look into the Bidens. Neither was part of the official preparatory material for the call, but they were in Donald Trump’s personal interest, and in the interests of his 2020 re-election campaign. And the Ukrainian President knew about both in advance — because Sondland and others had been pressing Ukraine for weeks about investigations into the 2016 election, Burisma and the Bidens.

Both Col. Vindman and Ms. Williams were on the July 25th call. Vindman testified that due to the unequal bargaining position of the two leaders and Ukraine’s dependency on the U.S., the favor Trump asked of Zelensky was really a demand. After the call, multiple individuals, including Vindman, were concerned enough to report it to the National Security Council’s top lawyer. It was the second time in two weeks that Vindman had raised concerns with the NSC lawyers.

For her part, Williams also believed that asking Zelensky to undertake these political investigations was inappropriate, and that it might explain something else she had become aware of — the otherwise inexplicable hold on U.S. military assistance to Ukraine.

Both Col. Vindman and Ms. Williams also took note of the explicit use of the word Burisma by Zelensky, a fact conspicuously left out of the record of the call, now locked away on an ultra-secure server. Col. Vindman believed that Zelensky must have been prepped for the call, to be able to make the connection between Biden and Burisma, a fact that other witnesses have now confirmed.

In the weeks that followed the July 25th call, Col. Vindman continued to push for a release of the military aid to Ukraine, and struggled to learn why it was being withheld. More disturbing, word of the hold had reached Ukrainian officials prior to it becoming public. By mid-August, the Ukrainian Deputy Ambassador asked Vindman why the United States was withholding the aid. Although Vindman didn't have an answer, Sondland made it explicit to the Ukrainians at a meeting in Warsaw: They needed to publicly commit to these two investigations if they hoped to get the aid.

Ms. Williams, we all saw the President's tweet about you on Sunday afternoon and the insults he hurled at Ambassador Yovanovitch last Friday. You are here today, and the American people are grateful. Col. Vindman, we have seen far more scurrilous attacks on your character, and watched as certain personalities on Fox have questioned your loyalty. I note that you have shed blood for America, and we owe you an immense debt of gratitude.

Today's witnesses, like those who testified last week, are here because they were subpoenaed to appear, not because they are for or against impeachment.

That question is for Congress, not the fact witnesses. If the President abused his power and invited foreign interference in our elections, if he sought to condition, coerce, extort, or bribe an ally into conducting investigations to aid his reelection campaign and did so by withholding official acts — a White House meeting or hundreds of millions of dollars of needed military aid — it will be up to us to decide, whether those acts are compatible with the office of the Presidency.

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