

# The New York Times

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Impeachment

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## *In Hungary, a Freewheeling Trump Ambassador Undermines U.S. Diplomats*

He brokered a White House meeting for Hungary's prime minister. He spends \$320,000 on parties and takes positions at odds with American policy. He says he knows what President Trump wants.

By **Matt Apuzzo and Benjamin Novak**

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BUDAPEST — The annual Independence Day celebration at the United States Embassy in Budapest is usually a modest garden party, a chance for the ambassador to celebrate American freedom, democracy and the rule of law.

This year, the ambassador, David B. Cornstein, spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on a blowout gala for 800 guests. He flew in the singer Paul Anka from California. The guest of honor was Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary, who has curtailed the very freedoms the event was meant to highlight.

Standing at a lectern, Mr. Cornstein declared Mr. Orbán “the perfect partner” and “a very, very strong and good leader.” Mr. Anka serenaded the Hungarian leader with a personalized rendition of “My Way.”

For many in the room, it was a bewildering spectacle: an American ambassador lavishing praise on a far-right leader whose party has methodically eroded Hungarian democracy and pushed anti-Semitic tropes. But it was just another demonstration of Mr. Cornstein's pattern of emboldening Mr. Orbán.

Since becoming ambassador in June 2018, Mr. Cornstein has assiduously courted Mr. Orbán, giving the Hungarian leader unexpected influence in the Trump administration. Mr. Cornstein used his decades-long friendship with President Trump to help broker a coveted Oval Office meeting for Mr. Orbán last May — a meeting now under scrutiny by impeachment investigators in Washington.

At the time, some White House officials tried to stop the meeting, citing Mr. Orbán's anti-democratic record in Hungary and his growing closeness to Russia. The meeting went ahead, and Mr. Orbán is said to have used it to fuel the president's suspicions about Ukraine.

As yet, Mr. Cornstein's role in that meeting does not appear to be part of the impeachment inquiry. But his freewheeling diplomacy and courtship of Mr. Orbán have alarmed career civil servants and contributed to broader criticism, even among Republicans, that some members of the president's foreign policy team are dangerously unprepared for the job.

During the past year, Mr. Cornstein, an 81-year-old jewelry magnate, has developed unusually close relationships with Mr. Orbán and his advisers, according to several American and Western officials. He exchanges text messages with them, occasionally from personal devices, and boasts about his contacts — even as American security officials warn that Mr. Orbán is trying to manipulate him.

He has undermined efforts by career diplomats to deliver messages to Washington about corruption and democratic backsliding in Hungary. And he has privately acted as a broker for Mr. Orbán's point of view, taking positions contrary to United States policy, according to interviews with roughly two dozen current and former American and foreign officials as well as others who have worked with Mr. Cornstein.

He has also adopted some of Mr. Orbán's talking points on Ukraine, contradicting the policy of the United States and its NATO allies.

Some embassy officials were so taken aback that, according to two American officials, they confided to a recent congressional delegation that Washington's top man in Hungary acted more like Mr. Orbán's top man in the Trump administration.

In two interviews, Mr. Cornstein played down concerns about Hungarian corruption, anti-Semitism and the erosion of democracy. He defended his approach as good for the United States, and said that his outreach to Mr. Orbán was exactly what Mr. Trump wanted.

“Hopefully there are one or two people who think I'm doing a good job,” he said.

Mr. Trump seems pleased. Although the Obama administration sought to isolate Mr. Orbán as punishment for his authoritarian tendencies, the Trump administration has engaged him uncritically, a strategy intended to keep the Hungarian leader from drifting toward China and Russia.

But Thomas Carothers, who studies democracies for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said Mr. Cornstein's public praise for Mr. Orbán had gone too far. “The ambassador has crossed the line, both in openly endorsing bad things and mocking serious issues,” he said.

Privately, Mr. Cornstein has gone even farther.

In April, a group of congressional staff members visited Budapest on a trip sponsored by the Hungarian government. Realizing that Hungarian officials would present a rosy picture, American diplomats squeezed in a 45-minute briefing about corruption and the erosion of democracy.

Mr. Cornstein arrived unannounced and commandeered the meeting, saying he saw no evidence of corruption, according to several people in attendance.

“Before I could start, Cornstein interrupted,” said Miklos Ligeti, a former official at the Hungarian Ministry of Justice who was asked to discuss corruption on behalf of Transparency International. “He came in and hijacked the meeting.”

Mr. Cornstein also spoke glowingly of Mr. Orban’s unchecked power.

“He’s got the executive. He’s got the legislature. And he’s got the judges,” Marta Pardavi, a lawyer with the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, a human rights group, recalled the ambassador as saying. “He actually said it. And he said it so we would hear it.”

Mr. Ligeti said he was never able to deliver his corruption briefing.

“Cornstein is the worst, most detrimental of diplomats — not just of the United States, but of all the countries,” Mr. Ligeti said. “He is actively working against the voices of anticorruption.”

In interviews, Mr. Cornstein said he did not recall the meeting but played down corruption concerns.

“Is there corruption in Hungary? I’m sure there is,” Mr. Cornstein said. “Is there corruption in New York City and Chicago? I’m sure there is.” He said he had seen no evidence of an effect on American businesses.

State Department and private analysts, however, say that corruption is persistent in Hungary. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has pledged to increase support for anti-corruption efforts in Hungary.

## **A Dispute with Ukraine**

It may not seem obvious how, or why, a Hungarian prime minister would influence the views of an American president toward Ukraine, an American ally.

But Mr. Orban has been locked in a dispute with Ukrainian officials over a language law that he says is discriminatory to ethnic Hungarians in Ukraine. The dispute has become a key security issue for the United States because Mr. Orban has blocked Ukrainian engagement with NATO. The United States is adamant that such disagreements should have no bearing on NATO security matters.

The White House meeting gave Mr. Orban the opportunity to press his case directly to Mr. Trump. Asked on Tuesday what Mr. Orban told the president about Ukraine, Mr. Cornstein replied, “It was between two men, and neither person discussed the subject with me.”

But Mr. Cornstein’s statements on the topic have recently drifted toward Mr. Orban’s point of view. Asked about Ukraine in an interview, he raised the language law unprompted.

“The language law that was passed, which was not favorable to the 175,000 Ukrainian, former Hungarian people that are living in that part of the country, was something that I didn’t agree with,” Mr. Cornstein said.

Mr. Cornstein also took Mr. Orbán’s side over the fate of Central European University, an accredited institution that Mr. Orbán forced from the country. The Hungarian-born philanthropist George Soros founded the school after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in part to educate a new generation on the principles of human rights and the rule of law. As he eroded democratic norms, Mr. Orbán attacked Mr. Soros, portraying him as part of a global conspiracy against the prime minister.

Publicly, Mr. Cornstein declared that saving the school was a top priority. But privately, he helped broker the university’s exit, according to the school’s president, Michael Ignatieff.

Mr. Ignatieff said that Mr. Cornstein had proposed that the school move its American degree program to Vienna and keep a smaller, Hungarian-only program in Budapest.

“What do you care where your degrees are issued?” Mr. Ignatieff recalled Mr. Cornstein as saying.

“David, that’s not a compromise,” Mr. Ignatieff replied. “You’re kicking a U.S. institution out of Hungary.”

“I don’t see it that way at all,” Mr. Cornstein said.

The university soon lost its authority to issue American degrees and moved to Vienna — the very outcome Mr. Cornstein had mentioned. The United States Embassy said in a statement that the government was “disappointed.”

## **A Strongman Inside the European Union**

The university’s expulsion was another example of Mr. Orbán’s vast influence over Hungarian political life. His party, Fidesz, has cemented control of the media, curtailed religious freedom, endorsed racial and cultural purity and used anti-Semitic stereotypes to attack the European Union. (State Department reports have cited Mr. Orbán’s utilization of anti-Semitism.)

Mr. Cornstein, who is Jewish, often says that Hungary’s biggest problem is public relations and that Jews in Hungary have little to worry about.

“They’re content. They’re happy and they’re safe,” he said. “I can’t say that about New York City.”

Other American presidents have been accused of supporting strongmen. But Mr. Trump has broken with a half-century of bipartisan consensus that supporting freedom was a moral imperative and a security goal, said Larry Diamond of the Hoover Institution, a conservative research group.

“Orban has quietly and skillfully, with velvet gloves, strangled the life out of democracy,” Mr. Diamond said. “To embrace and normalize and look away from these transgressions in a country that is in the heart of the liberal democratic project of the world is not only disturbing. It’s alarming.”

Friends say that Mr. Cornstein, an affable grandfather, is a Rockefeller Republican, not an ideologue. He has donated not only to the presidential campaigns of Mitt Romney and John McCain, but also to Democrats like Chuck Schumer and Cory Booker.

He did not give money to Mr. Trump’s campaign, but the friendship between the two men goes back decades. Mr. Cornstein attended Mr. Trump’s wedding and ran New York City’s off-track-gambling operation in the mayoral administration of Rudolph W. Giuliani, who is now Mr. Trump’s personal lawyer.

Mr. Cornstein made his fortune operating jewelry counters inside department stores, and he often recounts stories of hard-won wisdom from his business career. Running an embassy is a lot like running a jewelry counter, he says: You can’t forget you’re in someone else’s store.

Some American officials and Western diplomats say that Mr. Cornstein is falling for a Hungarian campaign to undermine veteran foreign policy officials. At the White House, for example, Mr. Orban told Mr. Trump that the embassy in Budapest — staffed by career civil servants — was full of Obama administration holdovers, according to Mr. Cornstein and other American officials.

Mr. Trump responded by asking why Mr. Cornstein had not fired them. (In an interview, Mr. Cornstein said he had confidence in his staff.)

Mr. Cornstein is open about his closeness to Mr. Orban. He tells how, on the flight back to Budapest after the White House meeting, the two men — exhausted from a long day — stripped to their underwear and napped and chatted on couches in the back of Mr. Orban’s plane.

When Mr. Cornstein learned recently that Radio Free Europe, the pro-democracy American news outlet, was preparing to return to Hungary, he sought assurances that it would not criticize Mr. Orban’s government. In an interview, he said he simply wanted to ensure that the government viewpoint would be included.

It is hardly unusual for diplomats to seek ties with foreign leaders, but Mr. Cornstein has eschewed both the rigorous prep sessions that normally precede high-level contacts and the detailed briefings that follow. State Department officials say they often do not know what messages are exchanged.

Mr. Cornstein acknowledged that he rarely speaks to officials in Washington. He conceded that he has used personal devices to contact Mr. Orban and his advisers, but said he had done so a half-dozen times at most, and only to set up meetings.

“I was told this before I got to the post: ‘This is your show. You run it,’” he said. “I know what the president’s philosophy is and what his foreign policy is.”

Mr. Cornstein has delivered mixed results, at best. He regards as an achievement negotiations that are underway, but not finalized, for Hungary to buy more than \$1 billion in American weaponry.

Yet Mr. Orban has also allowed an obscure Russian financial institution, the International Investment Bank, to open in Budapest with sweeping diplomatic immunity — a move that Western security officials say enables Russian spying and money laundering.

After a Drug Enforcement Administration sting captured two men thought to be Russian arms dealers, Hungarian officials extradited them to Russia, where they were set free. Hungary has also snubbed Washington by saying that it sees no evidence that the Chinese telecom giant Huawei is a security threat.

Mr. Cornstein said that building bridges was a process, one that will help the United States. He denied honoring Mr. Orban at the Independence Day gala.

“My motivation was to really show what a great party can be,” he said, “and have people walk out and say, ‘Man, America really did that terrific.’”

He said the party cost about \$320,000, financed mostly by American businesses. An additional \$7,000 came from an embassy account used to establish local contacts.

During the interview, Mr. Cornstein appeared to nudge American policy in another new direction. He said he had vehemently opposed the Russian bank’s relocation but that Mr. Orban had made private promises that have allayed his concerns.

“I am comfortable with where we are now,” Mr. Cornstein said. Pressed on whether that was the official view of the United States government, he replied: “You’ve got to ask Washington. I’m comfortable.”

The embassy quickly clarified his remarks, saying the ambassador considered the bank a threat as long as it remained in Hungary.

## Common Questions About Impeachment

- **What is impeachment?**

Impeachment is charging a holder of public office with misconduct.

- **Why is the impeachment process happening now?**

A whistle-blower complaint filed in August said that White House officials believed they had witnessed Mr. Trump abuse his power for political gain.

- **Can you explain what President Trump is accused of doing?**

President Trump is accused of breaking the law by pressuring the president of Ukraine to look into former Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr., a potential Democratic opponent in the 2020 election.

- **What did the President say to the president of Ukraine?**

Here is a [reconstructed transcript](#) of Mr. Trump's call to President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine, released by The White House.

- **What is the impeachment process like?**

Here are answers to [seven key questions](#) about the process.

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