

Senators were briefed on Russian campaign to blame Ukraine for 2016 election meddling in the fall

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The latest on the Trump impeachment inquiry

By Meg Wagner, Zoe Sottile, Fernando Alfonso III and Veronica Rocha, CNN

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- **Scheduled public hearings are over:** The last scheduled public hearing in the impeachment inquiry was yesterday. Overall, lawmakers heard from 12 witnesses over five days.
- **What happens next:** The House Intelligence Committee and two other panels are working on a report that could be the basis of articles of impeachment. Democratic sources say the House could possibly vote to impeach President Trump by Christmas.
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In a classified briefing this fall, US intelligence officials told senators and their aides that Russia has engaged in a years-long campaign to shift the blame away from Russia and onto Ukraine for interfering in the 2016 American presidential campaign, according to two US officials.

That briefing aligns closely with Thursday's testimony from Fiona Hill, President Trump's former top Russia expert. The message conveyed by US intelligence officials to lawmakers also takes on new relevance as many of those conspiracy theories have been increasingly repeated by Republican lawmakers.

Senators were told that the Russian disinformation operation focused on a handful of Ukrainians who openly criticized or sought to damage Trump's candidacy — efforts that were significantly less organized than the multi-faceted election interference push ordered by Russian President Vladimir Putin, one US official said, confirming details first reported by the New York Times.

US intelligence officials also told lawmakers that Russia used intelligence operatives to spread now debunked conspiracies, along with established facts, to frame Ukraine for the interference in the 2016 campaign, the official said.

Russian intelligence officers conveyed that information to prominent Russians and Ukrainians, including oligarchs, to pass along to US political figures and some journalists who likely were unaware of where it came from, according to the same official.

The Office of the Director of National Intelligence, which primarily oversees efforts to counter foreign election interference, declined to comment.



Democratic presidential candidate, former vice President Joe Biden speaks to the audience during a town hall on November 21, 2019. Sean Rayford/Getty Images

Former Vice President and 2020 presidential candidate Joe Biden addressed Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham's role in the ongoing impeachment inquiry in an interview with CNN's Don Lemon in South Carolina today.

"They're asking Lindsey Graham, they have him under their thumb right now," Biden said. "They know he knows that if he comes out against Trump, he's got a real tough road for re-election."

Graham, the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, has been a vocal critic of the impeachment inquiry and recently asked the State Department for documents related to the Biden and his son Hunter's work in Ukraine. There is no evidence of wrongdoing by either of the Bidens.

Biden said that he is "disappointed" and "angered" by Graham's push to investigate him and his son.

““He knows me. He knows my son. He knows there is nothing to this. Trump is now essentially holding power over him that even Ukrainians would not yield to," Biden said." Asked what he would say to Graham if he could, Biden replied, "I say Lindsey, I, just I'm just embarrassed by what you're doing for you. I mean, my Lord."

Some background: Biden and Graham have historically had a friendly relationship, with Graham once calling Biden "the nicest person he's ever met."

Watch here:

President Trump is tweeting his gratitude to the two GOP leaders in the Senate and the House, respectively, as the House impeachment inquiry begins to wrap up and a potential trial is set to begin in the Senate.

More on this: This week, the House Intelligence Committee wrapped up public hearings in the impeachment inquiry. The intelligence committee and two other House panels are now working on a report that could be the basis of articles of impeachment. Democratic sources say the House could possibly vote to impeach President Trump by Christmas. If that vote passes, it would setup a possible impeachment trial in the Senate.



House Speaker Nancy Pelosi speaks to the media during her weekly press conference on November 21, 2019. Alex Edelman/Getty Images

Democrats are "moving quickly" to impeach President Trump before Christmas, according to CNN's congressional correspondent Phil Mattingly.

Here are the next steps for Democrats:

1. **The report:** "At this moment and through the course of next week, Thanksgiving week, House Intelligence Committee staff are drafting a report of their findings based on the depositions, based on the public hearings we've seen to this point," Mattingly said.
2. **The articles of impeachment:** The House Intelligence Committee will then send the report to the House Judiciary Committee, which will draft articles of impeachment, Mattingly said, adding that that committee could have public hearings of their own.
3. **The vote:** There could be a committee markup of articles of impeachment in the second week of December. A vote on the House floor to impeach President Trump could come before Christmas.

“ “ "And it's very clear they are moving quickly," Mattingly said. "One thing is certain at this time: Impeachment is happening.""

He also pointed out that several key witnesses, like White House acting chief of staff Mick Mulvaney and former National Security Adviser John Bolton, have refused to testify.

While "there could be some movement on court cases related to someone like John Bolton sometime in the first or second week of December," Mattingly said that "Democrats have made clear they are not waiting on the courts."

"They are moving forward, and that means likely before the end of the year, likely before Christmas, the House Democrats will vote to impeach President Trump," he said.



President Donald Trump speaks to the media before departing from the White House on November 20, 2019. Mark Wilson/Getty Images

President Trump didn't answer questions on whether the whistleblower should be fired or whether he supported his lawyer Rudy Giuliani during an event today recognizing NCAA athletes.

CNN's Pamela Brown asked the President if the intelligence community whistleblower who filed the complaint at the center of the ongoing impeachment inquiry should be fired.

“What whistleblower?” Trump responded. “I don’t think there is (one). I consider it to be a fake whistleblower cause what he wrote didn’t correspond to what I said in any way.”

Earlier in the event, Trump also said it’s been a “tremendous week with the hoax.”

“You know, they call it the impeachment hoax and that’s really worked out incredibly well and we have tremendous support,” Trump said. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen support in the Republican Party like we do right now.”

The President also wouldn’t answer a question on whether he supported everything Giuliani did in Ukraine.

John Bolton, President Trump's former national security adviser, is back on Twitter today and just tweeted that he has "liberated" his account.

Bolton added that his account was "previously suppressed unfairly in the aftermath of my resignation as National Security Advisor."

He ended the tweet with a cryptic message: "More to come....."

This follows an earlier tweet today — his first in more than two months — where Bolton said: "Glad to be back on Twitter after more than two months. For the backstory, stay tuned....."

Here's his second tweet of the day:

Some more background: Earlier this month, Bolton's lawyer said the former adviser has "personal knowledge" of relevant meetings and conversations "that have not yet been discussed in testimonies thus far" as part of the impeachment inquiry into President Trump.

However, the lawyer added that Bolton is refusing to testify until a federal judge rules in an ongoing legal fight between House committees and the White House, according to his lawyer.

Rep. Brad Sherman said that the impeachment hearings are holding President Trump accountable — but also added that it wouldn't hurt for the Democrats to get more information in the ongoing impeachment inquiry.

"The question is, how many crimes would the President have committed beyond what he has done if he thought he was invincible?" the congressman asked on CNN's Newsroom with Poppy Harlow this morning. "It's a necessary protection that we do everything possible to restrain a president with clear criminal tendencies."

He went on to say the Democrats should not move slowly and wait for more evidence and people to testify but that "it wouldn't hurt for us to get a bit more information."

"The point I'm making is we shouldn't wait," Sherman said. "What we should do is move forward when we have the proof that he committed a particular high crime and misdemeanor. I think we have reached that point, but it wouldn't hurt for us to get a bit more information."

Some context: Despite speaking with 17 witnesses behind closed doors, including 12 witnesses in just a week of public testimony, Democrats have not obtained crucial documents or spoken with several key officials because the White House and State Department have refused to comply with subpoenas.

That has left top Democrats with a choice: They could fight in court to obtain potential smoking-gun documents and testimony from acting White House chief of staff Mick Mulvaney, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and former national security adviser John Bolton. Or Democrats could move forward with the evidence they have.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has chosen the latter.

Yesterday, the House Intelligence Committee wrapped up its scheduled public hearings in the impeachment inquiry.

In total, 12 witnesses spoke publicly. Nine of those were this week.

Here are the key takeaways from each witness who testified in this packed week of hearings.

- **Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman:** Vindman, the National Security Council's Ukraine expert, described a July 10 meeting in which there was a demand in the White House of a direct quid pro quo by Ambassador to the European Union Gordon Sondland. He said that, "It is improper for the President of the United States to demand a foreign government investigate a US citizen and political opponent," he said in his opening statement.
- **Jennifer Williams:** Williams, a high level national security aide at Vice President Mike Pence's office, testified that President Trump's call with the Ukrainian president was "unusual." Williams was on the call at the time.
- **Kurt Volker:** Volker, former US Special Envoy to Ukraine, admitted that he was wrong to draw a "sharp distinction" between Burisma and former Vice President Joe Biden.
- **Tim Morrison:** Morrison, the former top Russia and Europe adviser on the National Security Council, said he never asked his Ukrainian counterparts to investigate the Bidens because "it was not a policy objective."
- **Laura Cooper:** Top Pentagon official Cooper testified that Ukrainian officials knew as early as July 25 that there was an issue with US aid to the country. This undercut a key Republican rebuttal — in their defense of Trump, Republicans have alleged that no bribery could exist if the Ukrainians weren't aware the aid was being held.
- **David Hale:** Undersecretary of State David Hale defended ousted Ukraine ambassador Marie Yovanovitch, saying that she served "with dignity and grace" while Rudy Giuliani and other Republicans accused her of interfering with President Trump's plans in Ukraine.
- **Gordon Sondland:** Sondland, the US Ambassador to the European Union, testified there was a quid pro quo for Ukraine to announce investigations into President Trump's political opponents that came from the President's personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani at the "express direction of the President." He also implicated Mike Pompeo, Mike Pence, and Mick Mulvaney.
- **David Holmes:** Holmes, a top US official in Ukraine, undercut the GOP's defense that there was no pressure on Ukraine. He testified that the Ukrainians felt pressure to move ahead with probes and that they want to keep White House happy because "they still need us now."
- **Fiona Hill:** Hill, the former White House Russia expert, delivered a rebuttal to the "fictional narrative" pushed by Trump and his GOP allies, including during the impeachment inquiry hearings, that Ukraine interfered in the 2016 election. And she implicated her former boss John Bolton, who has refused to testify in the investigation.



John Bolton, President Trump's former national security adviser, is back on Twitter.

Here's his first tweet after more than two months:

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