

Seeking Favors, Trump Asked Ukraine President to Investigate Biden

By [Reuters](#)

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AP / TASS

President Donald Trump pressed Ukraine's leader to investigate Democratic presidential frontrunner Joe Biden, in coordination with the U.S. attorney general and Trump's personal lawyer, according to a summary of a telephone call released by the Trump administration on Wednesday.

The official account of the half-hour July call with President Volodymyr Zelenskiy laid bare an astonishing exchange of requests, pledges and ingratiation, including some unrelated to Biden.

The summary was released a day after U.S. House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi said the Democratic-led chamber was launching an official impeachment inquiry, setting up a political showdown that threatens Trump's presidency as he campaigns for re-election in 2020.

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A Pelosi aide said that in two meetings with Democratic leaders on Wednesday, the speaker suggested the possibility of making the inquiry narrowly focused on Trump and his dealings with Ukraine, after months of House committee hearings on a range of other activities by the president. No final decisions were made, the aide said.

The Washington Post first reported that possible strategy earlier on Wednesday.

The inquiry could lead to articles of impeachment in the House that could trigger a trial in the Senate on whether to remove Trump from office.

The details of the July 25 call drew furious reactions from Democrats, who accused Trump of soliciting Ukraine's help to smear Biden, who has led in polls among Democratic candidates seeking to challenge the Republican president in the November 2020 election.

The call occurred after Trump had ordered a freeze of nearly \$400 million in American aid to Ukraine, which the administration only later released.

"What those notes reflect is a classic Mafia-like shakedown of a foreign leader," said Democrat Adam Schiff, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee.

ABC News reported that an adviser to Zelenskiy, Serhiy Leshchenko, contended that any telephone conversation between Trump and the newly elected leader of Ukraine came with a U.S. precondition that the Biden case would be discussed.

Republicans said the summary of the call showed Democrats were wrong to move forward with impeachment. "There was no quid pro quo and nothing to justify the clamor House Democrats caused," said U.S. Representative Doug Collins of Georgia, the top Republican on the House Judiciary Committee.

Trump and Zelenskiy appeared side by side in New York on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly and denied impropriety in their call, with Ukraine's president telling reporters: "Nobody pushed me."

At a news conference closing out three days of meetings in New York around the United Nations General Assembly, Trump accused Democrats of launching the impeachment inquiry "because they can't beat us at the ballot."

In a statement, Biden said Trump put personal politics above his oath of office and that Congress must hold him to account for "his abuse of power."

The controversy arose after a whistleblower from within the U.S. intelligence community brought a complaint relating to Trump's conversation with Zelenskiy.

Members of the House and Senate Intelligence committees were allowed to see the complaint on Wednesday, the day before acting U.S. director of national intelligence, Joseph Maguire, testifies at a House intelligence panel hearing.

Democratic lawmakers said the allegations were credible and deeply disturbing, while

Republicans largely downplayed the complaint.

'A lot of talk'

According to the summary, Trump told Zelenskiy that Attorney General William Barr, the top U.S. law enforcement official, and Trump personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani would speak to him about reopening a Ukrainian investigation into a Ukrainian gas company for which Biden's son Hunter had served as director.

"The other thing, there's a lot of talk about Biden's son, that Biden stopped the prosecution and a lot of people want to find out about that, so whatever you can do with the Attorney General would be great," Trump said, referring to Barr.

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Trump has repeatedly suggested wrongdoing by Biden and his son but has offered no evidence to back up the assertion.

In the summary, Trump never explicitly told Zelenskiy that U.S. aid was contingent on him investigating Biden, but Trump emphasized the importance of American support before pressing him for action on Biden.

"I will say that we do a lot for Ukraine," Trump said. Trump then said German Chancellor Angela Merkel "doesn't do anything" for Ukraine but that "the United States has been very, very good to Ukraine."

According to the summary, Zelenskiy responds that Trump is "1,000%" right, thanks Trump for "your great support in the area of defense" and said he planned to buy more Javelins, anti-tank missiles developed by the U.S. military that are now produced by Raytheon and Lockheed Martin.

In raising the Biden issue, Trump told Zelenskiy: "I heard you had a prosecutor who was very good and he was shut down and that's really unfair." Trump said he would have Giuliani — a political ally with no formal role in the U.S. government — and Barr call him.

"Biden went around bragging that he stopped the prosecution so if you can look into it. It sounds horrible to me," Trump said.

There has been no evidence that Biden, who served as U.S. vice president from 2009 to 2017, used his position to help his son in the Ukraine matter.

Zelenskiy assured Trump that his next prosecutor general "will be 100% my person" and "will look into the situation."

Zelenskiy, a former comedian, then volunteered that the last time he visited New York, he stayed at Trump Tower. He told Ukrainian media later that he thought only Trump's side of their phone call would be published.

"I also want to ensure you that we will be very serious about the case and will work on the investigation," Zelenskiy added.

After Zelenskiy's promise, Trump invites him to visit the White House.

Barr's role

Trump never actually asked Barr to contact Ukraine, Justice Department spokeswoman Kerri Kupec said, and Barr has not communicated with Ukraine about a possible investigation or any other subject. Barr, a Trump appointee, first found out about the conversation several weeks after it took place, Kupec said.

Pelosi said the notes on the call confirmed that Trump engaged in behavior that undermined the integrity of U.S. elections, the dignity of the presidency and national security.

"The president has tried to make lawlessness a virtue in America and now is exporting it abroad," Pelosi said.

The summary, not a verbatim transcript, was developed with assistance from voice-recognition software along with note-takers and experts listening, a White House official said.

Trump has withstood repeated scandals since taking office in 2017. House Democrats had considered, but never moved ahead with, pursuing articles of impeachment over Trump's actions relating to Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. election aimed at boosting his candidacy.

Under the U.S. Constitution, the House has the power to impeach a president for "high crimes and misdemeanors." No president has ever been removed from office through impeachment. Democrats control the House and Trump's fellow Republicans control the Senate.

Justice Department officials concluded last week that Trump's conduct on the call did not amount to a criminal violation of campaign finance law because what he was asking for – an investigation of a political rival – was not a quantifiable "thing of value," said a senior Justice Department official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The United States, European countries and others had pushed for the ouster of the Ukrainian prosecutor investigating the energy company because he was not pursuing it aggressively enough. The prosecutor who replaced him, Yuriy Lutsenko, told Reuters on Friday that no wrongdoing was found on the part of Biden's son in his relationship with the energy firm.

Ukrainian officials have not said publicly that they would open any investigation of Biden or his son.

Many Republicans came to Trump's defense and said the absence of a quid pro quo — a Latin phrase meaning a favor for a favor — in the call showed that the concerns of Democrats were overblown. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell denounced what he called the Democratic "impeachment obsession."

Senator Pat Toomey said Trump's conversation about Biden was inappropriate but not an impeachable offense. But fellow Republican Senator Mitt Romney said he had read the memo and "it remains troubling in the extreme."

The United States has been giving military aid to Ukraine since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. The \$391.5 million in aid at issue in the current controversy was approved by Congress to help Ukraine deal with an insurgency by Russian-backed separatists in the eastern part of the country.

The whistleblower was concerned that Trump was pressuring a foreign leader to take an official action that would help his 2020 re-election, according to a legal memo released by the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel.

The Inspector General's office found "some indication of an arguable political bias" by the whistleblower in favor of a rival political candidate," but determined that the allegation appeared credible, according to the office.

The Justice Department said Barr would not recuse himself from Ukraine-related investigations despite Democratic demands.

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