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Trump bid to stop impeachment witnesses testifying collapses as officials choose to speak out

One by one, career diplomats and senior officials are offering revelations

Трампа намагався зупинити імпичмент, але свідчення чиновників ведуть до краху

Спроби президента США Дональда Трампа зупинити розслідування імпичменту під керівництвом демократів, руйнуються. Один за одним кар'єрні дипломати та вищі посадові особи пропонують каскад викриттів. Останні розкриття відбулися, коли колишній головний помічник держсекретаря Майк Помпео розповів про те, що був деморалізований Державний департамент, де кар'єрних дипломатів було звільнено та на інших чинили тиск, щоб просувати на місцях політичні цілі.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/diplomats-officials-impeachment-inquiry-donald-trump-kangaroo-court-a9159626.html>

The White House's trenchant declaration to House impeachment investigators last week was unequivocal: no more witnesses or documents for a "totally compromised kangaroo court".

But just a week later, it has become clear that Donald Trump's attempts to stonewall the Democrat-led inquiry that has imperilled his presidency and ensnared much of his inner circle are crumbling.

One by one, a parade of Trump administration career diplomats and senior officials has offered a cascade of revelations.

Those accounts have corroborated and expanded upon key aspects of the whistleblower complaint that spawned the impeachment inquiry into whether the president abused his power to enlist Ukraine to help him in the 2020 presidential election.

The latest disclosures came on Wednesday, when a former top aide to secretary of state Mike Pompeo offered an inside account of what he said was a demoralised State Department, where career diplomats were sidelined and others apparently were pressed to use their posts "to advance domestic political objectives".

In six hours of voluntary testimony, the former aide, Michael McKinley, told impeachment investigators that he quit his post as Mr Pompeo's senior adviser amid mounting frustrations over the Trump administration's treatment of diplomats and its failure to support them in the face of the impeachment inquiry, according to a copy of his opening remarks.

On Thursday, Democrats are set to hear from Gordon D Sondland, the US ambassador to the European Union, a central figure in the president's pressure campaign on Ukraine.

He is expected to testify that he learned that Mr Trump did not intend to invite Volodymyr Zelenskiy to a meeting in the Oval Office until the Ukrainian president pledged to open an investigation that could benefit Mr Trump's political fortunes — bolstering a central allegation in the inquiry that the president steered foreign policy for political gain.

And Democratic lawmakers have directed William B Taylor Jr, one of the top American diplomats in Ukraine, to appear before their committees next Tuesday, according to an official familiar with the investigation.

Text messages produced as part of the inquiry suggest that Mr Taylor was deeply uneasy about what he saw as an effort by Trump aides to use a \$391m (£305m) package of security assistance as leverage over Ukraine for political favours, calling the notion “crazy”.

All three are examples of what can happen when congress secures cooperation from government witnesses in a rapidly moving investigation aimed at the president.

The White House has had more success blocking the release of documents tied to the case. But the president and his lawyers had hoped to use the power of his office to muzzle current and former diplomats and White House aides, arguing in presidential tweets and a lengthy letter to Democratic lawmakers on 8 October that their subpoenas are invalid and unenforceable.

“President Trump cannot permit his administration to participate in this partisan inquiry under these circumstances,” wrote Pat Cipollone, the White House counsel.

And yet the president has been unable to prevent it.

Just since Mr Trump declared war on the impeachment effort, three current and former senior State Department officials and a former top White House aide have testified for nearly 36 total hours, delivering to lawmakers a consistent narrative of how they were effectively pushed aside by allies of the president operating outside America’s usual foreign policy channels.

“It’s partly because this shadow foreign policy that the president was running was so deeply offensive to people in his own administration who took pride in overseeing a professionally run and arguably exemplary policy in support of Ukraine,” said congressman Tom Malinowski, a former State Department official involved in the inquiry.

Referring to the president’s personal lawyer, he added: “And then to see the official policy undermined by this clownishly corrupt effort led by Rudy Giuliani on behalf of the president was just more than many people apparently could bear.”

Republicans who control the Senate view the fast-building case as serious enough to begin preparing for the trial in their chamber that would follow impeachment by the House.

Senator Mitch McConnell, the majority leader, briefed fellow lawmakers over lunch Wednesday about how a trial would work, expressing his hope of conducting it speedily and completing it by the end of the year, people familiar with his remarks said.

Facing accusations of secrecy from Republicans, congressman Adam B Schiff, chairman of the Intelligence Committee, informed colleagues on Wednesday that he planned to open the inquiry to the public soon.

He wrote that he planned to release transcripts of all the interviews as the investigation proceeded and pledged to soon hold public hearings “so that the full Congress and the American people can hear their testimony firsthand”.

For Mr Trump, who is famous for demanding fierce loyalty from those around him, the daily — or even hourly — crush of damaging headlines is an infuriating departure from previous successes in controlling disclosures to congress from people in his orbit.

During the congressional investigation into Russia’s election meddling, the US president blocked a deposition of Donald F McGahn II, his former White House counsel, and dramatically limited testimony from some of his closest aides, including Hope Hicks, the former White House communications director, and Corey Lewandowski, his former campaign manager.

But this is different. Many administration officials targeted for depositions by Democrats are diplomatic veterans who have expressed anger and frustration about what they described as the hijacking of US foreign policy. They have no particular loyalty to mr Trump nor are they subject to the same presidential powers to block them from testifying.

So they have turned up at the secure suite of the House Intelligence Committee on Capitol Hill, disappearing behind doors with a red “RESTRICTED AREA” sign to tell their stories.

Under alternating hour-long question-and-answer sessions by Democratic and Republican staff lawyers, Marie Yovanovitch, the former ambassador to Ukraine, said she had been ousted at Mr Trump's direction on the basis of "unfounded and false claims".

Fiona Hill, a former National Security Council aide, said John Bolton, then the national security adviser, was so alarmed by the activities of Mr Giuliani, Mr Sondland and others that he instructed her to alert White House lawyers.

She said she reported Mr Sondland to intelligence officials as a possible national security risk as well.

Mr McKinley told investigators on Wednesday that State Department officials were discouraging people from testifying and were not supporting diplomats who had received subpoenas and requests to appear before the House, according to a person familiar with his testimony.

Mr Trump's allies on Capitol Hill expressed frustration this week about the depositions, saying White House lawyers should be present and accusing Democrats of selectively leaking from the testimony. Others were simply baffled by the cooperation of the witnesses.

"I really don't understand it," said congressman Chris Stewart, a member of the Intelligence Committee. "I can't wrap my head around why some and why not others."

Mr Trump's lawyers have had more success in blocking access to emails, text messages, memos and other documents in the government's possession.

The administration has rejected Democratic subpoenas or requests for documents at the Office of Management and Budget, the State Department, the Defence Department and the office of vice president Mike Pence.

Mr Giuliani has also said he will ignore a subpoena for his records, citing the White House's stance.

Democrats have said the refusal to hand over documents will be considered obstruction of congress and may be added to the impeachment charges brought against the president.

The New York Times