

A disastrous day for Trump

Stunning testimony by US's EU envoy links the president to abuse of power

Gordon Sondland wrote his name in history and triggered a turning point in the House impeachment inquiry with stunning testimony implicating the President in an abuse of power.

In effect, one of President Donald Trump's political appointees confirmed the core allegation of the entire scandal: that he conditioned aid and recognition for Ukraine on personal favors that could help him in his 2020 reelection campaign.

This was no "Never Trumper" bureaucrat perpetrating what some of the president's conservative backers have called a coup. He was a glad-handing businessman who paid \$1 million to Trump's inaugural committee and ended up with a plum job.

Sondland destroyed once and for all the earliest presidential talking point that there was no quid pro quo with Ukraine. He explicitly said



the prospect of a White House visit for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was conditional on Ukraine announcing an investigation against Trump's possible 2020 rival Joe Biden. "I know that members of this committee frequently frame these complicated issues in the form of a simple question: was there a quid pro quo?" Sondland said.

"As I testified previously ... the answer is yes."

And Sondland broadened the scope of the conspiracy -- testifying that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Energy Secretary Rick Perry, Vice President Mike Pence and acting White House Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney all knew what was going on.

"Everyone was in the loop," said Sondland.

On the face of it, this was a disastrous day for Trump. Yet the president declared total victory in the

face of a factual defeat.

Conservative media and Trump's Republican allies seized on the inconsistencies in Sondland's testimony. Their reactions made Wednesday's revelations seem unlikely to shatter Trump's political base, which is almost certain to prevent GOP senators deserting him.

The president seized on a comment by Sondland in which he said Trump told him he didn't want a quid pro quo with Ukraine, despite a pattern of backdoor diplomacy that appeared to be demanding just such a concession.

"I want nothing, I want nothing, I want no quid pro quo. Tell Zelensky to do the right thing," Sondland quoted Trump as saying in the conversation.

White House press secretary Stephanie Grisham provided the updated White House version of the President's relationship with Ukraine.

"Ambassador Sondland's

testimony made clear that The president 'wanted nothing' from Ukraine and repeated 'no quid pro quo over and over again.' In fact, no quid pro quo ever occurred. The US aid to Ukraine flowed, no investigation was launched, and President Trump has met and spoken with President Zelensky. Democrats keep chasing ghosts," Grisham said.

But her statement contained inconsistencies in itself.

Evidence suggests that while Trump told Sondland that he didn't want a quid pro quo, such a statement is not the same as not demanding one. Threatening to withhold aid for political favors can be an abuse of power in itself. And the military aid only started flowing on September 11

when it was clear that Democrats were investigating why it had been held up following a whistleblower's report.

Trump's own call with Zelensky on July 25 actually shows him asking his counterpart in Kiev for a "favor" immediately following a discussion of US military hardware that Ukraine hopes to acquire.

And Sondland's testimony caused an immediate headache for officials such as Pence and Pompeo -- who are getting more and more dragged into the Ukraine mess.

The vice president on Wednesday tried to put out the fire in an interview with a local television station in Wisconsin saying he didn't "recall" a conversation with Sondland in Poland on September 1.



Greta Thunberg awarded Int'l children's peace prize

Swedish teen activist Greta Thunberg was awarded an international children's peace prize on Wednesday, for her work in the struggle against climate change which has resonated with schoolchildren across the world. Cameroonian peace activist Divina Maloum, aged 15, also received the International Children's Peace Prize, awarded by the Dutch KidsRight organisation, which has been handing out the prize since 2005. Thunberg rose to international prominence last year when she founded the "school strikes for the climate" movement. Tens of thousands of children around the world have now got involved.

China demand threatens world donkey population

China's demand for donkey skins to make a traditional medicine could wipe out more than half the world's donkey population in the next five years, researchers said yesterday. Nearly five million skins are used every year to make ejiao, a gel believed in China to be a remedy for troubles ranging from colds to ageing, putting enormous strain on donkey populations around the world. Britain-based animal welfare group Donkey Sanctuary said in a report. Ejiao was once the preserve of emperors but is now highly sought after by a burgeoning middle class, with production growing 20 percent each year between 2013 and 2016, it said. There are currently around 45.8 million donkeys in the world.

US-China trade war could spark real war: Kissinger



Former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger yesterday warned that an armed conflict could break out between the United States and China if they fail to resolve their trade war. The sober remarks from Kissinger, who was instrumental in normalising diplomatic relations between Washington and Beijing, came at a conference in Beijing on the future of the two economic giants. China and the US have been caught in a trade dispute for 18 months, with the two sides struggling to reach an agreement despite a series of negotiations. Tensions have also been running high on the diplomatic front. Beijing has lashed out at Washington over US naval operations in the disputed South China Sea, US criticism of China's mass detention of ethnic Uighurs and US Congress support for pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong.

Trump to release 'financial statement' before 2020 polls

REUTERS, Washington

President Donald Trump, facing lawsuits and political demands to release his US tax returns and other financial information, yesterday said he will release a statement on his finances before the presidential election, and asserted that it was his call on providing the information.

"I'm clean, and when I release my financial statement (my decision) sometime prior to election, it will only show one thing - that I am much richer than people even thought - And that is a good thing," Trump said in a post on Twitter, providing no details on his claims of wealth.

Mueller "went over all of my financials, & my taxes, and found nothing. Now the Witch Hunt continues with local New York Democrat prosecutors going over every financial deal I have ever done. This has never happened to President before. What they are doing is not legal," Trump wrote.

Trump, an international hotelier and former reality TV star, is the first major-party presidential candidate since Gerald Ford in 1976 not to release his tax returns.

'It's time for real change'

UK's Labour unveils 'radical' plan for UK, takes aim at 'bankers, billionaires and establishment'

REUTERS, Birmingham

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn unveiled his party's election manifesto yesterday, setting out radical plans to transform Britain with public sector pay rises, higher taxes on companies and a sweeping nationalisation of infrastructure.

Voters face a stark choice at the country's Dec 12 election: opposition leader Corbyn's socialist vision, including widespread nationalisation and free public services, or Prime Minister Boris Johnson's drive to deliver Brexit within months and build a "dynamic market economy".

Speaking in the central English city of Birmingham, Corbyn set out his crowd-pleasing plans, offering something for almost everyone in Britain - from help to parents with young children to free university education and more money for elderly care.

In a speech punctuated by applause and standing ovations from supporters, he promised to stand up for ordinary people



against the "bankers, billionaires and the establishment" who was fighting to keep a system that was "rigged in their favour".

"Labour's manifesto is a manifesto for hope, that is what this document is - a manifesto that will bring real change," Corbyn said, describing his plan as the most "radical and ambitious plan" in decades.

"A manifesto full of popular policies that the political establishment has blocked for a generation."

The manifesto showed an extra 82.9 billion pounds of spending, matched by 82.9 billion pounds of revenue-raising measures.

ISRAEL CRISIS

President asks parliament to find PM

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's President Reuven Rivlin yesterday tasked parliament with finding a new prime minister, as he sought to avoid new elections after incumbent Benjamin Netanyahu and rival Benny Gantz each failed to form a government.

"Starting today and for 21 days the decision of who to task with forming the government is in the hands of the members of the Knesset (parliament)," Rivlin said, a day after Gantz admitted he would be unable to build a governing coalition.

Parliament will now have until December 11 to find a candidate who can command the support of the majority of the country's 120 MPs or a new general election will be called for early 2020. It would be the third



PHOTO: AFP



A woman holds an injured girl by Wednesday night's Syrian regime bombardment on a makeshift camp in the village of Qah near the Turkish border in the northwestern Idlib province, yesterday. Inset, Civilians gather next to a fragment of a ground-to-ground missile fired by Syrian regime forces that hit a makeshift camp in the village of Qah. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the missile killed 15 civilians, including six children, and wounded around 40 others.

US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 2019

Democrat debate exposes divides

AFP, Atlanta

Divides between Democrats vying to challenge President Donald Trump in the 2020 election were laid bare in a combative debate Wednesday, as the campaign's rising star Pete Buttigieg acknowledged he faced challenges in attracting black voters.

Buttigieg, the contest's youngest candidate who occupies the same moderate lane as frontrunner Joe Biden, offered a unifying message as a way to bring Democrats and Republicans toward a broad political middle.

Democrats can seize a majority on issues like immigration and guns "if we can galvanize, not polarize that majority," Buttigieg told the debate in Georgia.

But after an opening phase dominated by talk of impeachment of Trump, participants in the fifth Democratic debate locked horns over the costly universal health care program supported by liberal senators Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders.

Buttigieg and former vice president Biden also took aim at the trillion-dollar reform, saying it would be wiser to build on existing Obamacare and provide a public option.

Biden leads in national polling, followed by Warren and Sanders. But Buttigieg has cracked into the top tier in the past month, and now tops the polls in Iowa which stages the first nomination contest in February.

Google, FB business models threat to rights: Amnesty

AFP, San Francisco

The data-collection business model fueling Facebook and Google represents a threat to human rights around the world, Amnesty International said in a report Wednesday.

The organization argued that offering people free online services and then using information about them to target money-making ads imperils a gamut of rights including freedom of opinion and expression.

"Despite the real value of the services they provide, Google and Facebook's platforms come at a systemic cost," Amnesty said in its report, "Surveillance Giants."

"The companies' surveillance-based business model forces people to make a Faustian bargain, whereby they are only able to enjoy their human rights online by submitting to a system predicated on human rights abuse."

With ubiquitous surveillance, the two online giants are able to collect massive amounts of data which may be used against their customers, according to the London-

based human rights group. The business model is "inherently incompatible with the right to privacy," Amnesty contended.

The report maintained that the two Silicon Valley firms have established "near-total dominance over the primary channels through which people connect and engage with the online world," giving them unprecedented power over people's lives.

"Google and Facebook dominate our modern lives -- amassing unparalleled power over the digital world by harvesting and monetizing the personal data of billions of people," said Kumi Naidoo, Amnesty International's secretary general.

"Their insidious control of our digital lives undermines the very essence of privacy and is one of the defining human rights challenges of our era."

The report called for governments to implement policies that ensure access to online services while protecting user privacy.

POLICY SHIFT ON ISRAELI SETTLEMENTS

US faces strong opposition at UN

REUTERS, United Nations

The United States on Wednesday defended itself at the United Nations against strong opposition from the European Union and other world powers to the Trump administration's declaration that it no longer considers Israeli settlements to be in violation of international law.

Monday's announcement by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reversed a four-decade-old US position on Jewish settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories. The move was welcomed by Israel but drew condemnation from Palestinians and Arab leaders.

At the United Nations, the US policy shift came under fire from the EU and an array of Security Council members, including Russia and China.

"All settlement activity is illegal under international law and it erodes the viability of the two-state solution and the prospects for a lasting peace," British Ambassador to the UN Karen Pierce told reporters before the meeting. She spoke on behalf of Germany, France, Poland, Belgium and Britain, the EU's current Security Council members.

Deputy US Ambassador to the UN Cherith Norman Chalet reiterated the new American position on Israeli settlements in the West Bank, saying they are "not, per se, inconsistent with international law." The shift has been widely interpreted as a green light for Israeli settlement building in the occupied West Bank, which the Palestinians want as part of their future state.

The US move could also undermine efforts by President Donald Trump to resolve the conflict through a peace plan that has been in the works for more than two years but has drawn widespread skepticism even before its release. Chalet said the US "remains committed to the cause of peace, and Monday's announcement doesn't alter that."

The chief Palestinian delegate at the UN, Riyad Mansour, said:

"The US administration once again makes another illegal announcement on Israeli settlements in order to sabotage any chance to achieve peace, security and stability."

Israel's settlements are one of the most heated issues in the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Most of the international community sees the settlements as illegal, a view Israel has long disputed.

