



The Asset – Season 2, Episode 3

PRODUCER:

Previously, on The Asset:

NEWSCASTER:

Two key figures are behind bars tonight. Both happen to be associates of Rudy Giuliani, President Trump's personal lawyer.

NEWSCASTER:

NBC News has just learned that two foreign-born Trump donors who were part of Rudy Giuliani's efforts to investigate Joe Biden have been arrested. They have been charged with campaign-finance violations, and are set to appear in court in Virginia.

MB:

This was the first arrest of the Ukraine investigation: Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman. Both were associates of Rudy Giuliani who had been helping him in his quest to find dirt on the Bidens. But how they became key figures in Trump's extortion of Ukraine, that's something we do know. And their story offers a window into the corruption and chaos of the Trump White House, and how many people stood to benefit from their willingness to shake down the Ukrainian government.

RUDY GIULIANI:

Colluding about Russians, which I don't even know if that's a crime, colluding about Russians.

MB:

On April 21, this happened.

NEWSCASTER:

A Ukrainian comedian Volodymyr Zelensky has won the presidential election with a landslide, securing more than 70 percent of the vote in Ukraine.

MB:

Episode Three: Extortion. On July 25, 2019, Trump had his now-infamous phone call with the newly elected Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky. This call came seven days after the Trump administration had decided to withhold aid to Ukraine. From the White House-released transcript of the call, which may have been altered, it shows Trump essentially extorting Zelensky. Trump is, in effect, trying to collude with Ukraine in the 2020 election. He asks Zelensky to work with Rudy Giuliani, his personal lawyer, and Attorney General Barr to investigate former vice president Joe Biden. Trump was offering a foreign country the resources



of the US Justice Department to investigate his potential 2020 opponent, and suggesting that this investigation was a precondition for the US–Ukraine cooperation that Zelensky desperately sought. Trump started out the call by telling Zelensky that the US has provided a lot of support for Ukraine, and that he's worried that the relationship isn't "reciprocal." He actually used the word "reciprocal," in case anyone had any doubts about the fact that this was clearly going to be a quid pro quo conversation. The president of the United States is acting like a mob boss.

JIM HIMES:

I'm angry that a woman like you would be not just dismissed but humiliated and attacked by the president of the United States. The lifetime of service and sacrifice and excellence might be ignored by the president of the United States, or worse yet, attacked in language that would embarrass a mob boss.

ADAM SCHIFF:

What those notes reflect is a classic mafia-like shakedown of a foreign leader.

CHRIS MATHEWS:

That sounds more like, "I made an offer they couldn't refuse," much more extortion than quid pro quo. It wasn't a deal, it was a threat.

ERIC SWALWELL:

It was a mob shakedown.

MB:

Trump says, "I will say that we do a lot for Ukraine. We spend a lot of effort and a lot of time. Much more than the European countries are doing and they should be helping you more than they are...The United States has been very very good to Ukraine. I wouldn't say that it's reciprocal necessarily because things are happening that are not good but the United States has been very very good to Ukraine."

MOVIE CLIP: VITO CORLEONE:

What have I ever done to make you treat me so disrespectfully?

mb:

Zelensky then thanked Trump, and said that Ukraine would like to buy more weapons from the United States. But Trump responds, "I would like you to do us a favor, though."

MOVIE CLIP: VITO CORLEONE:

I'm going to make him an offer he can't refuse.



MB:

"because our country has been through a lot and Ukraine knows a lot about it. I would like you to find out what happened with this whole situation with Ukraine, they say CrowdStrike ... I guess you have one of your wealthy people... The server, they say Ukraine has it. There are a lot of things that went on, the whole situation. I think you're surrounding yourself with some of the same people. I would like to have the Attorney General call you or your people and I would like you to get to the bottom of it. As you saw yesterday, that whole nonsense ended with a very poor performance by a man named Robert Mueller, an incompetent performance, but they say a lot of it started with Ukraine. Whatever you can do, it's very important that you do it if that's possible."

MOVIE CLIP: *THE GODFATHER*

MICHAEL CORLEONE:

Now, the price of a license is less than \$20,000. Am I right? Now, why would I ever consider paying all of that?

SENATOR GEARY:

Because I intend to squeeze you. I don't like your kind of people.

MB:

Let's break this down for a second. Trump is effectively accusing Ukraine of interfering in the 2016 election against him. He also seems to say, and it's a little confusing because of the ellipses that are in the transcript, meaning we're not sure exactly what he said here, that "one of your wealthy people," which may be a reference to the main oligarch backer of Zelensky, who is actually under investigation in the US by the Department of Justice. So Trump seems to be saying, "I could make your life very difficult, Zelensky." "So whatever you can do," Trump concludes his comments, "it's very important that you do it."

MOVIE CLIP: *THE UNTOUCHABLES*

FRANK NITTI:

"Hey! Nice house! I said, nice house. You live there? Little girl's having a birthday, huh?"

ELIOT NESS:

Yes.



FRANK NITTI:

Nice to have a family.

ELIOT NESS:

Yes, it is.

FRANK NITTI:

A man should take care, see that nothing happens to them.

MB:

So Zelensky now, on this call, has to dance. He doesn't want to get in the middle of interfering in US politics, but Trump is basically accusing Ukraine, of which Zelensky is now in charge of, of interfering in the 2016 election, and, and this has been overlooked, saying that Zelensky is surrounding himself with "the same people." In other words, Trump is saying, "You're kind of looking like my enemy, like my adversary."

MOVIE CLIP: *THE GODFATHER*

MICHAEL CORLEONE:

You have to answer for Santino, Carlo.

CARLO RIZZI:

Mike, you've got it all wrong.

MICHAEL CORLEONE:

You fingered Sonny for the Barzini people. Ah, that little farce you played with my sister, you think that could fool a Corleone?

CARLO RIZZI:

Mike, I'm innocent, I swear on the kids. Please, Mike, don't do this.

MICHAEL CORLEONE:

Sit down.

MB:

Zelensky is now on the back foot, and he says he is "ready to open a new page on cooperation in relations between the United States and Ukraine." So he says, sure, he will meet with Rudy, and "I just want to assure you once again that you have nobody but friends around us. I also want to tell you that we are friends...I guarantee as the President of Ukraine that all the



investigations will be done openly and candidly. That I can assure you." Zelensky is saying, "don't worry, dude, we're cool, we're friends. I'm not your enemy."

MOVIE CLIP: BONASERA:

Be my friend...Godfather?

MB:

But Zelensky's response is also sort of a non-answer. Yeah, I'll meet with Rudy, and I want to be friends, isn't the same thing as, yes, definitely, I'm going to look into this and start an investigation into your political opponents. So Trump isn't finished. He drives home the point: "Good because I heard you had a prosecutor who was very good and he was shut down and that's really unfair. A lot of people are talking about that, the way they shut your very good prosecutor down and you had some very bad people involved."

MOVIE CLIP: MICHAEL CORLEONE:

Only don't tell me you're innocent, because it insults my intelligence. It makes me very angry.

MB:

Trump's now referring to the prosecutor general Lutsenko, who we talked about last episode, who was playing ball with Rudy Giuliani, who was giving interviews to John Solomon, and, as we'll talk about, to *The New York Times*, saying that he's going to investigate Joe Biden. Trump then pivots back to what he wants: "Mr. Giuliani is a highly respected man...I will ask him to call you along with the Attorney General. Rudy very much knows what's happening and he is a very capable guy. If you could speak to him, that would be great...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. Biden went around bragging that he stopped the prosecution so if you can look into it... It sounds horrible to me." So let's remember who Giuliani is. He's Trump's personal lawyer, hired to defend Trump around the Mueller investigation.

MOVIE CLIP: *THE GODFATHER*

JACK WOLTZ:

I know almost every big lawyer in New York. Who the hell are you?

TOM HAGEN:

I have a special practice. I handle one client. Now, you have my number. I'll wait for your call.

MB:

Trump is saying to Zelensky, you really need to meet with my personal lawyer, and, and this has also often been lost, the US attorney general to investigate Biden and his son, his political



opponent. And so Zelensky agrees. He says, I get it. He says his new prosecutor general "will look into the situation, specifically to the company that you mentioned in this issue. The issue of the investigation of the case is actually the issue of making sure to restore the honesty so we will...work on the investigation of the case," Zelensky says. In other words, Zelensky is saying, yes, the extortion is working. But Trump doesn't want there to be any confusion about what Zelensky needs to do, and he says, "I will have Mr. Giuliani give you a call and I am also going to have Attorney General Barr call and we will get to the bottom of it."

MOVIE CLIP:

I wasn't asking, I was telling.

MB:

Giuliani and Barr, Trump's personal lawyer, and his attorney general, his Roy Cohn, the guy he appointed to protect him, are going to give Zelensky a call. Zelensky agrees to take their call, but Trump is still not done. Almost offhand, he mentions that this is really all Zelensky needs to do for Trump to give him what he wants, this White House meeting, the stamp of White House approval, of American approval. Trump says, "I will tell Rudy and Attorney General Barr to call. Thank you. Whenever you would like to come to the White House, feel free to call. Give us a date and we'll work that out. I look forward to seeing you." Trump, right here, was dangling the meeting that Zelensky's team had been desperate to get. And Trump says, "They'll call you, and then you'll get your meeting."

NEWSCASTER:

"Where's my Roy Cohn?" That's the question President Trump reportedly asked in anger after learning that his then-attorney general Jeff Sessions had recused himself from the Russia investigation in 2017. President Trump wanted an attorney general who would protect him, somebody like Roy Cohn, the controversial lawyer that did represent Trump in his non-political career. As the DOJ finds itself now at the center of the whistleblower scandal, some are accusing them of protecting the president.

MB:

The thing about a presidential phone call, though, is that they are not private. Other members of the national security team listen in.

TV CLIP: *THE WIRE*

STRINGER BELL:

Is you taking notes on a criminal conspiracy?

mb:



And it would be a bit of an understatement to say that most of the people listening on this call freaked out. Trump was using the power of the presidency to strong-arm, to extort a foreign country to help himself politically. He was once again trying to collude with a foreign country, and this time he was caught in the act. And it was so brazen that Trump's own people, people who volunteered to work for him in the White House, who supported him, thought it crossed a line, thought it was too much, and thought something needed to be done to stop him. Perhaps Trump, after Mueller's feeble performance, thought he was home free. But much like how Trump's firing of Comey led to the appointment of Robert Mueller, Trump's call prompted a whistleblower complaint, which ended up breaking the scandal wide open. So much in the Russia investigation and the Ukraine scandal has been incredibly complicated. But what led up to this call, and what follows, is a clear and straightforward sequence of events of a corrupt man and his corrupt team doing whatever it takes to help themselves, even if it meant abusing their power, breaking the law, and extorting a partner of the United States. I'm Max Bergmann, and this is The Asset.

In 2015, Ukrainians tuned into a new TV show, *Servant of the People*.

TV CLIP: *SERVANT OF THE PEOPLE*:

VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY:

[Speaking in Ukrainian]

MB:

It was a comedy about a schoolteacher who became president of Ukraine after a video of him ranting about government corruption went viral. It was a funny show, and it was a hit. Who wouldn't love to watch a TV show about someone other than a politician becoming president? The star of the show was a man named Volodymyr Zelensky. He immediately shot to stardom, and in 2018, his production team started their own political party, and called it "Servant of the People," just like the show. They aimed high, putting Zelensky up for president, just like on the show, and his platform focused on corruption, just like on the show. A lot of people didn't quite know what to make of him, including most foreign policy analysts in most government around the world.

NEWSCASTER:

Volodymyr Zelensky is both the Ryan Seacrest and the Julia Louis-Dreyfuss of Ukraine. His TV talent show *League of Laughter* regularly gets some of the highest ratings in the country.

VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY:

[Speaking in Ukrainian]

NEWSCASTER:



He's also been playing a sitcom version of the Ukrainian president for three seasons.

MB:

People even compared him to, you guessed it, Donald Trump. And his campaign wasn't your typical political campaign. Instead of the usual rallies or speeches, the president would use digital platforms like Instagram. He currently had 8.7 million followers. Zelensky capitalized on his image from the TV show. Just like his character, he was an outsider, running to change the system that was corrupt, and the message was resonating.

NEWSCASTER:

Ukraine's comic actor Volodymyr Zelensky owes his success in the first round of the presidential election to TV fame and a protest vote by young people frustrated by corruption and the slow pace of reform in one of Europe's poorest countries.

VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY:

[Translated] The people are more important for me, more than political act or ambition. The people are both everything, the Ukrainian people are waiting for us.

NEWSCASTER:

In a debate that looked more like a rock concert, he promised to overturn a system that's long been run by rich oligarchs.

VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY:

[Translated] I am not a politician. I am not a politician at all. I'm just a person, an ordinary person who has come to break the system.

MB:

If you've been listening to this season so far, that probably won't surprise you. There's a pretty clear through-line from what we talked about in episodes one and two, about Ukraine's corruption problems. The multiple revolutions that Ukrainians have experienced over the last 10 years had failed to deliver the changes they were hoping for, had failed to uproot corruption, and this led to Zelensky's rise. Here's *Vice* just two weeks before the election connecting the dots.

NEWSCASTER:

Hundreds of thousands took part in the Maidan Revolution in 2014. Back then, protestors had high hopes: ending endemic corruption and transforming the economy. But that was five years ago. Nothing's really improved, and Ukraine is still in a war with Russia that's seen 13,000 casualties. Thirty-eight candidates are running for president, although only three are serious contenders. Current president and former chocolate oligarch Petro Poroshenko and two-time



presidential runner-up Yulia Tymoshenko are well-known to voters, in part for the numerous allegations of corruption made against them both. Somehow, Zelensky is the most plausible fresh face.

MB:

However, there were also questions about Zelensky that emerged right away. Backing his campaign was the oligarch who owned the TV station that hosted his show, Igor Kholomoisky. Kholomoisky has been accused of embezzling billions of dollars using his Ukrainian bank that the Ukrainian government later privatized. Kholomoisky denies all of this, but he's the kind of guy who reportedly kept a huge pet shark in his office that he fed during meetings. That's not intimidating at all. So Kholomoisky has exactly the kind of track record that Zelensky was running against, so people weren't exactly sure if Zelensky would deliver, if he would actually tackle corruption. And then, on April 21, 2019, life imitated art. Ukrainians went to the polls and:

NEWSCASTER:

The 41-year-old television comedian with no political experience is now the leader of a country at war with Russia.

VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY:

[Translate] We did it together. Thanks to everyone. Now there will be no pathetic speeches. I just want to say thank you.

MB:

Zelensky didn't just win. He beat the incumbent Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko with 73 percent of the vote. He was coming to office with potentially a massive mandate, and that was a mandate to tackle corruption. And suddenly, all of the work that Rudy Giuliani on behalf of Donald Trump had been doing to cultivate people inside the Poroshenko government was in jeopardy. Zelensky was a giant wrench in all the scheming that we talked about in the last episode. Would he get with the program? Would he help dig up dirt on Trump's political opponents? Would he be on board for the natural-gas scheme those guys Parnas and Fruman were pushing? That meant Marie Yovanovitch, the US ambassador to Ukraine, who was pushing the Ukrainian government to fight corruption, to remove the corrupt prosecutor general Yuri Lutsenko who was working with Giuliani, and who wasn't fighting corruption, and she was opposing the scheming of Ukraine's energy sector, she was an obstacle. And so, she had to go. Yovanovitch, who was representing the United States of America, was even told by Ukrainian officials that she had to "watch her back" because the Ukrainians knew that Rudy Giuliani and Parnas and Fruman were angling to get her fired.

ANDRE CARSON:



So ultimately that smear campaign pushed President Trump to remove her. Correct, sir?

GEORGE KENT:

I cannot judge that. What I can say is that Rudy Giuliani's smear campaign was ubiquitous in the spring of 2019 on Fox News and on the internet and twittersphere.

ANDRE CARSON:

So Ambassador Taylor and Mr. Kent, in all of your combined decades at the State Department, have you ever before seen an instance where an ambassador was forced out by the president following a smear campaign of misinformation orchestrated by the president's allies?

GEORGE KENT:

I have not.

mB:

And then, in late April, the director general of the foreign service called her. First she called at 10 p.m., and, according to Yovanovitch's deposition in the House impeachment inquiry, she said, "Things were going wrong, kind of off the track, and she wanted to give me a heads up. She didn't know what was happening, but there was a lot of nervousness on the seventh floor and up the street." In other words, the seventh floor, the top floor of the State Department, where Secretary Pompeo has his office, was getting nervous, and up the street from Foggy Bottom is the White House. And then, Yovanovitch got another call, this time at one in the morning. According to Yovanovitch, "she said that there was a lot of concern for me, that I needed to be on the next plane to Washington. And I was like, 'What? What happened?' And she said, 'I don't know, but this is about your security. You need to come home immediately. You need to come home on the next plane.'" Yovanovitch was getting recalled back to the US, and she couldn't even get a clear reason why. She met with the deputy secretary of state, the number two officials in the State Department, where she was told she didn't do anything wrong. According to Yovanovitch, "So the deputy secretary said that, you know, he was sorry this was all happening, that the president had lost confidence, and I would need to depart my post. I said, 'What have I done wrong?' And he said, 'You've done nothing wrong.' And he said that he had had to speak with ambassadors who had been recalled for cause before, and this was not that. I was upset, and I, you know, I wanted an explanation, because this is rather unusual. But he could not offer one, beyond the fact that the president had made a decision, and it is the president's to make, as we know." In other words, Trump had her removed. On May 7, the US government formally announced that it was recalling Marie Yovanovitch.

RAJA KRISHNAMOORTHY:



The one-month gap between the time you left and when Ambassador Taylor arrived provided the perfect opportunity for another group of people to basically take over Ukraine policy. Isn't that right?

MARIE YOVANOVITCH:

Yeah.

MB:

Parnas and Fruman, the schemers we talked about in the last episode, were, according to their indictment from the Southern District of New York, pressing for her removal for the past year. And now, she was gone. And a few months later, on that July 25 call with Zelensky, Trump would tell Zelensky that Yovanovitch was "gonna go through some things." When Yovanovitch was asked about this by the House Intelligence Committee, "What did you think of that statement when it became public?" She said, "I didn't know what it meant. I was very concerned. I still am." The questioner asked, "Did you feel threatened?" "Yes." In the White House, in the national security council, there was also a stunned reaction. Fiona Hill was the senior director, the top White House official responsible for Europe and Russia. She was clear-eyed about Russia, and she had written an excellent book about Putin while she was at the Brookings Institution in 2015. She was one of the few Republican foreign policy hands that decided to serve in this administration. But when Yovanovitch was recalled, she was stunned. She told the House impeachment inquiry that "there was a period before the ousting of our ambassador, and there was a period after this. The dismissal of Ambassador Yovanovitch was a real turning point for us." There was no basis for her removal. The accusation against her had no merit whatsoever. To Hill, the only plausible explanation for her removal "seemed to be business dealings of individuals who wanted to improve their investment positions inside of Ukraine itself, and to deflect away from the findings of not just the Mueller report on Russian interference, but also the Senate Intelligence Committee reports." Concerned, Hill discussed Ambassador Yovanovitch's removal with the national security adviser, John Bolton, who, according to Hill, "directly said, 'Rudy Giuliani is a hand grenade that is going to blow everybody up.'"

After Poroshenko lost the election, Giuliani wasted no time. This was a desperate period for Trump and Giuliani. The Mueller report had just come out. The White House had just deployed its dubious strategy of stonewalling and not providing witnesses to Congress. And so Giuliani worked to get a story placed with *The New York Times*. On May 1, 2019, a story broke in *The New York Times* about top 2020 candidate and former Vice President Joe Biden's connections to Ukraine, with the headline "Biden Faces Conflict-of-Interest Questions That Are Being Promoted By Trump and Allies." We've talked about the origins of this Biden conspiracy theory in the previous episode, and until now the mainstream media hadn't bitten, hadn't written stories about it, hadn't covered it. But now, *The New York Times*, the paper of record bit, and



they bit hard. The first nine paragraphs in the story were about Joe Biden's efforts to fire the prosecutor general of Ukraine, as well as Hunter Biden's position on the board of the Ukrainian gas company Burisma. The only real news hook in this story was that "a decision this year by the current Ukrainian prosecutor general to reverse himself and reopen an investigation into Burisma have pushed the issue back into the spotlight just as the senior Mr. Biden is beginning his 2020 presidential campaign." In other words, the news was the prosecutor general was opening an investigation into Biden, which he had been pressured to do so by Giuliani. But here's the thing: It's not even clear that this is true, that the prosecutor general Lutsenko had actually ever reopened any case into Joe Biden. So the lede of the *New York Times* story is based on a fairly shaky premise based on the word of this corrupt prosecutor general we talked about in the last episode, who had lied to John Solomon saying that Marie Yovanovitch had given him a do-not-prosecute list. This was what the lede of the *New York Times* story was about. But what was accurate about the story, what *The New York Times* waited to mention until the story's 10th paragraph, was that members of Trumpworld, led by Rudy Giuliani, had seized on the story and were pushing the Ukrainian government to investigate Biden. The story read that "Allies of Mr. Trump have been eager to publicize and even encourage the investigation, as well as other Ukrainian inquiries that served Mr. Trump's political ends. Mr. Giuliani's involvement raises questions about whether Mr. Trump is endorsing an effort to push a foreign government to proceed with a case that could hurt a political opponent at home." The story outlined Giuliani's scheming, his meetings with both the prosecutor general Lutsenko and the former prosecutor general Shokin, who Biden got fired. And it even said that "Mr. Giuliani called Mr. Trump excitedly to brief him on his findings, according to people familiar with the conversations." Giuliani, according to the story, "acknowledged that he has discussed the matter with the president on multiple occasions."

DONALD TRUMP:

So, when you look at what's going on, and then you see all of this horrible stuff, and then you hear about Ukraine, and you've been hearing about it, I heard Clinton was involved, I heard they got somebody who wrote the fake dossier, was it out of Ukraine? All of the things that happened, and I assume that the attorney general, I would like the attorney general to find out what's going on.

MB:

According to the *Times* story, "Mr. Giuliani said he got involved because he was seeking to counter the Mueller investigation with evidence that Democrats conspired with sympathetic Ukrainians to help initiate what became the special counsel's inquiry." Giuliani, there, in May, says he was doing all of this to help Trump politically. Giuliani is quoted in the story saying, "I can assure you this all started with an allegation about possible Ukrainian involvement in the investigation of Russian meddling and not Biden. The Biden piece is collateral to the bigger story, but must still be investigated, but without the prejudgments that infected the collusion



story." In other words, this is all about the Mueller investigation. Giuliani is trying to create a counternarrative for Trump, and he's telling that to *The New York Times*. He's literally admitting to what he's being accused of now in the impeachment inquiry, and he did so back in May. And the lesson here is, how you construct a story matters. And by leading with Biden, they put the attention on Biden, not on the scheming of Giuliani and Trump, which was actually the criminal act, actually the abuse of power, and actually the story that could bring down a presidency. But as Dan Pfeiffer, a former senior adviser to President Obama, later put it on Twitter, "*The New York Times* reporter had all the information needed for a Watergate-style scoop about Trump, and was so hell-bent on fitting the information into a predetermined anti-Biden narrative that he fumbled the ball." And if you listened to the first season of *The Asset*, *The New York Times* fumbling a major story should not come as a surprise, because, on October 31, 2016, they basically did the same thing, just a week before the election, with the headline "Investigating Donald Trump, F.B.I. Sees No Clear Link to Russia." In mid-May 2019, Giuliani had even planned a trip to Ukraine. He told *The New York Times* in a follow-on story, "'We're not meddling in an election. We're meddling in an investigation, which we have the right to do. There's nothing illegal about it,' he said. 'Somebody could say it's improper, and this isn't foreign policy. I'm asking them to do an investigation that they're doing already, and that other people are telling them to stop, and I'm going to give them reasons why they shouldn't stop it, because that information will be very, very helpful to my client, and may turn out to be helpful to my government.'" Rudy again admits to the extortion in *The New York Times*, in the paper of record, on May 9, 2019. To White House officials, Trump's attitude toward Ukraine was inexplicably negative. Senior administration officials who worked on Ukraine just couldn't explain it. It was inexplicable. Well, part of the reason it was probably inexplicable to them is that they didn't listen to Season One of *The Asset*, because if you had listened to it, it's pretty damn explicable. The podcast is called "The Asset" for a reason. And throughout the spring and summer of 2019, from when Zelensky took office to the now-infamous July 25 phone call with Trump, one of Trump's top advisers and his aide were bombarding him with negative messages about Ukraine, telling him he needed to take a more aggressive stance toward Ukraine and should not think highly of Zelensky. The problem is, those advisers weren't Americans. They weren't White House officials or State Department officials, or even US government officials. It was Russian President Vladimir Putin and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban. According to a story in *The Washington Post*, between Zelensky's election in April and his inauguration in May, Trump talked with Putin over the phone and actually met with Viktor Orban in the White House. In the two months after Zelensky's inauguration, Trump talked with Putin at least two more times, first at the G20 conference in June, where they palled around for the cameras...

DONALD TRUMP:

We've had great meetings, we've had very very good relationship, we look forward to spending some time together. Lot of very positive things going to come out of the relationship. So Vladimir, thank you very much.



MB:

...and laughed off Russian interference in 2016...

REPORTER:

Mr. President, will you tell Russia not to meddle in the 2020 election?

DONALD TRUMP:

Of course. Don't meddle in the election. Don't meddle in the election.

mb:

And bonded over their hatred of the free press.

DONALD TRUMP:

Fake news. You don't have this problem in Russia, but we have. You might have it a little, too.

VLADIMIR PUTIN:

We have, it's the same.

MB:

And then again, Trump talked to Putin on the phone in July. According to *The Washington Post*, on Trump's May 3 call with Putin, Trump actually asked Putin what he thought of Zelensky. *The Washington Post* reported that Putin, who, remember, was fighting a war against Ukraine, according to US officials, "did what he always does: He sought to undermine the US relationship with Ukraine." And Putin called Ukraine "just a den of corruption." He even "derided Zelensky as a comedian." The Orban visit to the White House was also controversial. Orban basically represents the worst of Europe's so-called populist wave. He and his party are anti-democratic, anti-EU. Orban since he's been in office has effectively squeezed the life out of Hungarian democracy. The former president of the European Commission even called him his "dictator."

JEAN-CLAUDE JUNCKER:

The dictator is coming. Hello, dictator.

NEWSCASTER:

Not the usual greeting you would expect to hear at an EU get-together, but "dictator" was the word chosen by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker as he welcomed Viktor Orban in Latvia.

MB:



He was also the only European leader to endorse Trump in 2016. And here's how his visit to the White House was covered.

NEWSCASTER:

It was Viktor Orban's first visit to the White House in 20 years. And he found a like-minded leader in President Trump.

DONALD TRUMP:

Probably like me a little bit controversial, but that's ok. That's ok. You've done a good job and you've kept your country safe.

MB:

Orban has also played footsie with Russia, engaging in dubious infrastructure projects and, according to reports, looking the other way as Russia uses Budapest as its intelligence hub within the European Union. As *Politico* noted back in 2017, Putin has visited Hungary several times since Orban took office, and Hungary was the first European country Putin visited after his 2014 invasion of Crimea. Russia also regularly boosts Orban and his government on its state-run propaganda networks like RT and Sputnik. It's therefore not especially surprising that Trump would invite someone like Orban to the Oval Office. But administration officials were against this meeting. They didn't want it to take place. According to *The Washington Post*, Trump's advisers tried to stop Trump from meeting with Orban because they knew Trump would listen to him over his own cabinet. According to one former White House official, "Basically everyone agreed: no Orban meeting, because we knew there was a good chance that Trump and Orban would bond and get along." We don't know exactly what Trump and Orban talked about, because, in something of a trend with Trump, there were no official notetakers at what was an hour-long meeting. What we do know is that one official said that the meeting "solidified" Trump's negative views about Zelensky, "an example of the president himself under malign influence, being steered by it." This is from someone serving in government, who thinks that the president is under the malign influence of Putin. In May, according to another *Washington Post* story, Mick Mulvaney, the acting chief of staff and head of OMB, decided to "take Ukraine policy out of the traditional channels and put, according to their term, the "Three Amigos" on top of it.

MOVIE CLIP: *THREE AMIGOS*

One for each other, and all for one
Three brave amigos are we

MB:

There was former governor of Texas and current US Energy Secretary Rick Perry.



RICK PERRY:

Oops.

MB:

There was Gordon Sondland, a long-time GOP donor who made his fortune in the hotel industry and has been serving as the US ambassador to the European Union. The fact that he was involved in Ukraine policy at all should've raised big red flags, because Ukraine isn't in the European Union. There's also Kurt Volker, and we mentioned him last episode, because he worked at a consulting firm that Ukraine's last president Petro Poroshenko had hired to help set up a relationship with Trump, and he has been serving as US Special Envoy to Ukraine. But Volker was not some hack. He was an experienced foreign policy hand, had served in the Bush administration, and, during his tenure, was one of those administration appointees that wasn't a Trump acolyte, but was a Republican, and had been waiting for years to serve again in a Republican administration, and was one of the rare breed that was willing to do that even under Trump. To the State Department officials who normally would've been involved in Ukraine issues were told to lay low so that the "Three Amigos," as they called themselves, could get to work.

MOVIE CLIP: *THREE AMIGOS*

Amigos!

And amigos forever we'll be!

MB:

On May 20, Zelensky was inaugurated.

NEWSCASTER:

Volodymyr Zelensky arrived to his inauguration on foot, crowds delighted with the man they've known for years as a comic touch on their TV screens. He stopped for selfies and high fives, jumping to kiss members of the public, true man-of-the-people style stuff, crowds chanting "Zelensky" as he took to the red carpet and strode with panache through the parliament.

MB:

Zelensky was elected with a huge majority, but how he would approach Russia, and how the US would approach the new Ukrainian government, was of the utmost importance. Ukraine was still fighting an active war with Russia, and he had been elected on an anti-corruption platform. Demonstrating he had US backing was critical for Zelensky, both to show his people, especially those who didn't vote for him because they questioned how he would handle the war, and to show Russia that nothing had changed. Publicly he needed a White House meeting with Trump, that classic handshake photo in the Oval Office that said, "Hey, I have the United States of America behind me." He also needed the US to continue to support Ukraine.



GEORGE KENT:

The possibility of a White House meeting was being held contingent to an announcement.

DANIEL GOLDMAN:

How important to President Zelensky was a White House meeting?

GEORGE KENT:

New leaders, particularly countries that are trying to have good footing in the international arena, see a meeting with the US president in the Oval Office at the White House as the ultimate sign of endorsement and support from the United States.

DANIEL GOLDMAN:

President Zelensky was a relatively new president. Is that right?

GEORGE KENT:

That's correct. He was elected on April 21, and his government was formed after parliamentary elections in July.

DANIEL GOLDMAN:

Would a White House meeting for Zelensky boost his legitimacy as a new president in Ukraine?

GEORGE KENT:

It would primarily boost his leverage to negotiate with Vladimir Putin about the Russian occupation of 70 percent of Ukrainian territory.

MB:

But who shows up at inauguration for a world leader sends a big signal, and Zelensky needed a strong American showing. At first, Vice President Pence was supposed to come, which would've sent a strong message that the US backed Zelensky. Then, suddenly, Pence backed out. This wasn't due to some scheduling issue. *The Washington Post* reported that Trump actually instructed Pence not to attend the inauguration. The delegation that did end up showing was much, much weaker. It was led by US Energy Secretary Rick Perry. Ambassador to the EU Sondland and Special Envoy Volker also attended. While he was there, Rick Perry also got a meeting with Zelensky, and there, as the head of the US delegation, Perry pushed Zelensky to change the Naftogaz board. He wanted Zelensky to replace members of the board with people who were more Trump-friendly. Now, remember, Parnas and Fruman, when they were in Houston in March at an energy conference, were also pushing to change the Naftogaz board, and here was Perry, just a few weeks after Yovanovitch was removed, something that Parnas and Fruman were also pushing for, here he was pressuring the Ukrainian president to change



the board of Naftogaz. A lot still remains murky here, but what's clear is that Rick Perry refused to cooperate with the impeachment hearings. Now, if there was nothing untoward done by Rick Perry, then what does he have to hide? Why isn't he cooperating? And, just over the weekend, we learned that Perry met with Zelensky without anyone there from the embassy. He cut out the notetakers. Fiona Hill, the White House senior director, explained in her deposition to the House impeachment inquiry that during this period she had met with a US member of the Naftogaz board who the Trump administration had actually appointed. She says, "It had come to his attention that there was a lot of pressure being put on the officials of Naftogaz, who had also reached out to talk to me and my colleagues at the national security council, to have other board members put in place, and this seemed to be at the direction of Giuliani. Now Hill, who was running Russia and Ukraine policy on the national security council, was also like, what is this hotel guy Sondland doing dealing with Ukraine? Firstly, he deals with the EU, and Ukraine is not a member of the EU. But secondly, he is a donor ambassador. There are generally three types of ambassadors. There are career foreign-service officers, then there are political appointees that are experts or those with experience, like former governor of Utah John Huntsman, who was ambassador to Russia. And then there are the donors. Every administration has used ambassador postings to reward their political backers, their donors, and Sondland had given \$1 million to the Trump inaugural to become ambassador. The thing about the donor ambassadors is that they often don't know what they're doing. They are out of their depth. They have no experience. Yet they tend to be a little bit arrogant, and they cause a ton of headaches. And Sondland was a total headache, according to Hill. So Hill asked Sondland on whose authority is he working on Ukraine, and he said, "The president." This wasn't how things were supposed to go. These channels weren't normal. In his testimony before Congress, Ambassador Taylor made that pretty clear.

BILL TAYLOR:

I found a confusing and unusual arrangement for making US policy towards Ukraine. There appeared to be two channels of US policymaking and implementation, one regular and one highly irregular. As the acting ambassador, I had authority over the regular, formal diplomatic processes, including the bulk of the US effort to support Ukraine against Russian invasion and to help it defeat corruption. My colleague, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State George Kent, and our colleagues at the national security council were my main points of contact in Washington in this regular channel. This channel is formally responsible for formulating and overseeing the implementation of US foreign policy with respect to Ukraine, a policy that has consistently enjoyed strong bipartisan support, both in Congress and in all administrations since Ukraine's independence from Russia in 1991. At the same time, however, I encountered an irregular, informal channel of US policymaking with respect to Ukraine, unaccountable to Congress, a channel that included then-Special Envoy Kurt Volker, US Ambassador to the European Union Gordon Sondland, Secretary of Energy Rick Perry, White House Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney, and, as I subsequently learned, Mr. Giuliani.



MB:

On July 10, these two channels converged. Two Zelensky advisers traveled to Washington, D.C., to visit the White House. They stayed at, where else, the Trump Hotel down the street, and made sure their American guests knew about it. They were there to lock in US support for their new government, and to finally secure a White House meeting for Zelensky. The two Ukrainians went to the White House and met with Trump's national security adviser John Bolton, as well as Sondland, Volker, Perry, and Fiona Hill. It was actually Hill's last few weeks on the job. The meeting was going fine. Bolton was careful not to promise a White House meeting, but that's when Gordon Sondland, according to Hill, "blurted out, 'well, we have an agreement with the chief of staff for a meeting, if these investigations in the energy sector start.'" According to Hill, Bolton stiffened up and immediately ended the meeting. As the meeting was breaking up, Sondland instructed the Ukrainians and Perry and Volker to follow him into another room. It was the post-meeting meeting to talk about the next steps of the meeting. Got it? Basically, Sondland is working around the White House national security adviser. Bolton could see them going into this other room, and he told Hill to go find out what was going on. Hill goes down the hallway, walks into the room, and according to her, "Ambassador Sondland, in front of the Ukrainians, as I came in, was talking about how he had an agreement with chief of staff Mulvaney for a meeting with the Ukrainians if they were going to go forward with the investigations." Hill says her director that covered Ukraine, Lt. Col. Vindman, "was looking completely alarmed," and she said the Ukrainians "looked very alarmed as well. He didn't look like he knew what was going on." Hill said she interrupted and said, "We can't discuss this here," and, according to Hill, "Ambassador Sondland cut me off, and he said, 'We have an agreement. They'll have a meeting.'" The Ukrainians leave, and Hill and Sondland have words, and Sondland tells her he had discussions with the chief of staff and Giuliani. Hill goes back to Bolton and tells him what happened, and Bolton tells her to go talk to John Eisenberg, the White House counsel, because, according to Hill, Bolton said, "You go and tell Eisenberg that I am not part of whatever drug deal Sondland and Mulvaney are cooking up on this."

NEWSCASTER:

This is the new testimony, that Bolton apparently said, "I'm not part of whatever drug deal Sondland and Mulvaney are cooking up." This is not *Breaking Bad*, this is real life. Mr. Bolton, a very accomplished lawyer, in addition to his other training, knew what was going on. He had a view of it. He wanted to warn the White House in no uncertain terms he viewed this as criminal, and as a lawyer speaking to lawyers and non-lawyers, he called it a drug deal so he couldn't be misinterpreted, couldn't be misheard. And that's not all. We're learning from this new witness that Mr. Bolton also warned "Giuliani is a hand grenade who is going to blow everybody up." Bolton reportedly told the witness to report her concerns to, not just anybody, but to a top lawyer at the national security council, which she reportedly did.



MB:

To put this in context for a second, this is John Bolton. He is probably the most radical right-wing conservative national security adviser ever in American history.

JOHN BOLTON:

This was the best speech of the Trump presidency, in my view. I think he was as clear and direct as it's possible to be.

MB:

During the Bush administration, he was too extreme for the Republican-controlled Senate, who wouldn't confirm him to be UN Ambassador, and he was strongly pro-Trump. Just eight days after this meeting, on July 18, 2019, Trump ordered his chief of staff, who is also director of the Office of Management and Budget, Mick Mulvaney, to put a hold on \$250 million in vital military aid to Ukraine. This was aid that Congress had already approved, aid that the Pentagon had already certified that Ukraine was supposed to receive, aid that was going to Ukraine to help them fight a war against Russia. The announcement came at a run-of-the-mill NSC coordination meeting, with fairly mid-level officials from all over the government. This wasn't supposed to be a news-making meeting. But when the OMB official at the meeting said they were putting a hold on Ukraine security assistance, people were stunned. No explanation was given why they were putting a hold on this funding. Nor would there ever be an explanation for why the hold was in place. No one knew what the hell was going on. The following day, on July 19, Volker connected Giuliani with top Zelensky aide Andriy Yermak, and suggested that the two men speak. Sondland told Taylor and Volker that he spoke to Zelensky and "gave him a full briefing. He's got it." Volker said it was "most important for Zelensky to publicly announce that he would 'help the investigation.'" Having Zelensky make a public announcement is key to the whole extortion scheme. Trump didn't just want Zelensky to quietly reopen the investigation into Burisma and to find out if there was anything there, and if there was, then maybe prosecute it. He wanted Zelensky to make a show out of it. He wanted a press conference. He wanted the public, the American public, to know there was an investigation that could potentially implicate the Bidens. This was a public PR stunt. If this sounds familiar, it should. It follows the same pattern that Trump had pushed with Clinton emails, with the scandal over Uranium One, with Devin Nunes claiming there was a whistleblower and jumping out of an Uber, with Trump claiming his wires were tapped. They were constantly looking for other scandals that they could put on their political opponents. And it's clear that Zelensky understood what was happening. A few days later, Taylor indicated to Sondland and Volker that Zelensky was worried about being seen as a pawn in domestic US politics, saying, "Zelensky is sensitive about Ukraine being taken seriously, not merely as an instrument in Washington domestic reelection politics." This text from Taylor is critical. It confirms that Zelensky understood investigating Biden was a matter of domestic US politics, about manufacturing damaging news about Trump's opponent and not actually about corruption in Ukraine. In other



words, Zelensky understood he was being extorted. On July 25, before Trump's call with Zelensky, Volker texted a Zelensky aide, saying, "Heard from White House. Assuming President Z convinces Trump he will investigate/get to the bottom of what happened in 2016, we will nail down date for visit to Washington. Good luck." Saying that agreeing to investigate Trump's conspiracy theories about Ukraine, this text message spells it all out. It says that agreeing to investigate Trump's conspiracy theories about Ukraine is a precondition for Trump meeting with Zelensky, and that the fact that one was needed to get the other came straight from the White House. And just a little while later that day, Trump called Zelensky. After the call, all hell broke loose. The whistleblower complaint that was sparked after the call highlights how pretty much everyone listening in heard the call and thought to themselves, that sounds like an abuse of power. That sounds corrupt. The complaint says the call "deeply disturbed" White House officials, and it explains how White House lawyers scrambled to figure out how to deal with the "likelihood that they had witnessed the president of the United States abuse his office for personal gain." It also goes through the details of how, immediately after the call ended, the White House scrambled to cover it up. In a section of the complaint literally titled "efforts to restrict access to records related to the call," the whistleblower breaks down for us how the White House tried to lock down records of the call, and how White House lawyers directed officials to put the transcript in a classified network that is the most tightly controlled of four different networks that the national security council staff uses. It's so secretive that even top White House national security aides don't have regular access. The system can only be accessed by individuals who have "code-word access" to specific programs that the intelligence is related to. According to the whistleblower, "one White House official described this act as an abuse of this electronic system, because the call did not contain anything remotely sensitive from a national security perspective." That's right: It didn't have anything sensitive for national security, just sensitive for Trump politically.

KELLY MAGSAMEN:

It's really important for the American people to understand that the rules of classification, and the systems to protect that classification, serve only to protect the national security interests of the United States. They are not there to protect the president from embarrassing information, politically embarrassing information, and certainly they are not there to protect criminal wrongdoing. So the way this call was handled to me was raising a ton of alarm bells. So first of all, these calls are normally classified at levels no more than secret, I think, is really what most foreign calls are classified at, and certainly not at the code-word top secret level, which is a system and level of classification for our most, most secret intelligence programs. So it tells me that it was clear that the national security council or the national security adviser, maybe the White House lawyers, decided that this call's content was sensitive enough and didn't want it to get out that they tried to bury it on this separate server.

MB:



And just to put a finer point on how bonkers this is, the reason to have a presidential call with another president of a foreign country is because foreign policy is set on that call. Well, who needs to know what US foreign policy is? I don't know, how about the people implementing foreign policy? That would be the people in the State Department, the people that work on Ukraine policy, the ambassador in Ukraine. But when you put a call with a foreign leader on a secret, code-word classified computer system in which they don't have access, guess what: You're not setting US foreign policy. So any claims that Trump was just concerned about corruption, and this was a perfect call, well, then why aren't you distributing it to the people that are supposed to express your concerns to the foreign leader? What this demonstrates is the call was not perfect. The call revealed a crime, and the White House then sought to cover it up. Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, the Ukraine director, was one person who heard the call, and he went immediately to White House lawyer John Eisenberg. That's the same lawyer that Fiona Hill went to on instruction from John Bolton after that Sondland meeting. Vindman expressed his concerns to Eisenberg, and Eisenberg's response was basically: "Don't tell anyone about it." Vindman has also told the House impeachment inquiry that the transcript released by the White House was incomplete. According to *The New York Times*, Vindman told congressional investigators that the White House transcript "omitted crucial words and phrases, and that his attempts to include them failed." These words and phrases contain things like, according to Vindman, Trump talking about there being tapes of Biden. In other words, the actual transcript of the call that we have seen is not fully complete. It may have been scrubbed. Certain damaging things may have been left out. Hence, there are these weird ellipses throughout the call. Nevertheless, the Ukrainians heard the call, and they heard Trump loud and clear. They were getting the message, and were intimating they were going to play ball. But before they played ball, they wanted to lock down the meeting first. Zelensky's aide texted Volker, "Phone call went well," and then tossed out some possible dates for the meeting. After all, on the call, they had essentially agreed to do the investigations, and Zelensky was amenable to meeting with Barr and Giuliani. Just a few days later, Giuliani went to Madrid to meet with a Zelensky aide, where he hammered the message home: investigate the Bidens. In Ambassador Taylor's public testimony before Congress, a new bombshell was also revealed. The day after the call, on July 26, Sondland called Trump and told him about his meetings with a top Ukrainian aide.

BILL TAYLOR:

Following that meeting, in the presence of my staff, at a restaurant, Ambassador Sondland called President Trump and told him of his meetings in Kyiv. A member of my staff could hear President Trump on the phone asking Ambassador Sondland about the investigations. Ambassador Sondland told President Trump the Ukrainians were ready to move forward. Following the call with President Trump, the member of my staff asked Ambassador Sondland what President Trump thought about Ukraine. Ambassador Sondland responded that President Trump cares more about the investigations of Biden, which Giuliani was pressing for.



KARI ODERMANN:

Hi, and welcome to the program. My name is Kari Odermann. On July 25, President Trump called his colleague Volodymyr Zelensky and congratulated him on a parliamentary landslide. Zelensky's party, Servant of the People, is the first party in post-independence Ukraine to have an absolute majority. Here to discuss that today with me is US Ambassador to the EU Gordon Sondland. He's going to talk with me about how often he visits Kyiv, what he likes to do here, and who he spoke with today. Thank you so much for joining us.

GORDON SONDLAND:

Hi Kari, how are you?

KARI ODERMANN:

I'm good, thank you. Tell me about how your day was.

GORDON SONDLAND:

Well, had a great lunch with my team, but before that, I had a wonderful hour-long meeting with President Zelensky that followed on the heels of his telephone call yesterday with President Trump.

KARI ODERMANN:

Did he give you insight on what they spoke about?

GORDON SONDLAND:

Absolutely. I actually spoke with President Trump just a few minutes before he placed the call, and not only did the president call to congratulate President Zelensky, but also to begin the collaboration of charting the pathway forward with the US's support of Ukraine, and a White House visit that's upcoming for President Zelensky.

KARI ODERMANN:

That's great news, because we're all curious about this. There hasn't been a date set for this. Some time in late summer?

MB:

One important thing to remember through this whole story is that it was happening while there was already an investigation ongoing into Trump for colluding with a foreign government to steal an election. Special Counsel Robert Mueller literally testified to Congress the day before Trump's call with Zelensky, and in that testimony, he gave a warning: Election interference was going to happen again.

ROBERT MUELLER:



Many more countries are developing a capability to replicate what the Russians had done.

WILL HURD:

In this, in your investigation, did you think that this was a single attempt by the Russians to get involved in our election, or did you find evidence to suggest they'll try to do this again?

ROBERT MUELLER:

Oh, it wasn't a single attempt. They're doing it as we sit here. And they expect to do it during the next campaign.

MB:

The House of Representatives were holding hearings on the Mueller report, on the Mueller investigation. And on August 8, Jerry Nadler, the chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, clarified that what they were doing was effectively an impeachment investigation.

JERRY NADLER:

This is formal impeachment proceedings. We are investigating all the evidence, we are gathering all the evidence, and we will, at the conclusion of this, hopefully by the end of the year, vote to, vote articles of impeachment to the House floor, or we won't. That's a decision that we'll have to make. But that's exactly the process we're in right now.

MB:

And so on August 9, the day after Nadler described the investigation as formal impeachment proceedings, Sondland texted Volker about Tim Morrison, who had recently replaced Fiona Hill as the top White House official on Russia. Sondland told Volker that Morrison was "ready to get dates as soon as Yermak confirms." Volker seemed surprised at this, and wanted to know how Sondland convinced Morrison to jump on board with their scheming. Sondland replied, "Not sure I did. I think POTUS really wants the deliverable." This raises questions about what Trump said to Bolton or Morrison about wanting to get a meeting with Zelensky on the books. And let me just say something quickly about Tim Morrison. He is a Bolton acolyte. He is a Russia hawk and hates all things nuclear arms control. And when he was a Republican congressional staffer on the Hill, he was a huge pain in the butt for the Obama administration. And so we have a Russia hawk working for a Russian asset. This is why the White House foreign policy is so dysfunctional. And so there was this awkward dance of who would go first. There was a standoff. No one wanted to be the first mover. What this shows is that there was a total lack of trust between Zelensky's people and Trump's people. No one trusted each other to go first. Sondland said that to "avoid misunderstandings," they should ask Ukraine for a draft of their statement to review. In a later call between Volker, Sondland, and Giuliani, Giuliani made it clear that the statement needed to specifically name Burisma. So for Zelensky and the Ukrainians, it was pretty clear what was going on. Make a public statement saying you're



investigating Burisma and Joe Biden, and you'll get your meeting with Trump. We don't need to speculate about this. Yermak, the Zelensky aide, texted Volker to confirm that's what the Trump team wanted, saying, "I think it's possible to make this declaration and mention all these things which we discussed yesterday. But it will be logic to do after we receive confirmation about date. Inform about date of visit and about our expectations and our guarantees for future visit. Let's discuss it." He's essentially saying we can do this, but give us the date first, confirm it, and then we'll do it. Volker said, "I agree with your approach. Let's iron out statement and use that to get date, and then President Zelensky can go forward with it." And Yermak replied, "Once we have a date, we'll call for press briefing announcing upcoming visit and outlining vision for the reboot of US–Ukraine relationship, including, among other things, Burisma and election meddling in investigations." Later texts between Volker and Sondland even show the two men basically writing out a draft of what they wanted Zelensky to say, including investigations into Burisma and the 2016 elections. This is straight-up extortion. They're telling Zelensky, they're telling Ukraine, "investigate our political opponents, and we'll give you what you want: a White House meeting." Getting to the final handoff, to completing the "drug deal," as John Bolton called it—investigations for a meeting—proved to be a little more difficult than the men anticipated. As with any criminal deal, neither side wanted to go first.

MOVIE CLIP: *MIDNIGHT RUN*:

JACK WALSH:

Listen Jack, you got those disks, or did you lose them like you lost your job?

JIMMY SERRANO:

Give him the disk, Walsh.

JACK WALSH:

Well I see you, but I don't see the Duke.

DENNIS FARINA:

We'll worry about him in a minute.

JACK WALSH:

No, we gotta worry about him now. Let me tell you something, Jimmy. This isn't a reunion. If I don't see the Duke in about five seconds, I'm walking.

MB:

And the Trump team was looking for a way to force Ukraine's hand. And they had a way. Remember when they held Ukraine's security assistance? Well, on August 28, *Politico* published an article citing a senior administration official announcing that the Trump administration was



withholding \$250 million in military aid to Ukraine. They made it official, in *Politico*. Ukraine knew that they were now at risk of losing \$250 million in military aid. We now know that the decision had been brewing for a long time. *The New York Times* got its hands on documents showing that the Pentagon told top Ukrainian officials in early August that the White House had decided to withhold aid, and that if they wanted to know what was going on, they should reach out to Mick Mulvaney, President Trump's chief of staff. So the Ukrainians knew what was happening in August, and they were willing to do the statement, they were willing to go along. But they wanted assurances from the White House that they would get their meeting, that the aid would be released. Given that context, the *Politico* article looks like it was just another way of connecting the dots. This wasn't just about a meeting with Trump and some sham investigations. Ukraine's military aid was really at risk, and Ukraine panicked. Yermak, Zelensky's aide, texted Volker, "Need to talk with you," and pasted the article link into a text. And Volker played it cool. "Hi Andriy, absolutely. When is good for you?" Trump had been due to meet with Zelensky in Warsaw, Poland, on September 1, but he had cancelled that visit because of Hurricane Dorian, at least according to reports, and so Vice President Pence went instead. Prior to the meeting, Ambassador Taylor had cabled to Mike Pompeo and the rest of the State Department expressing his concerns about how the Ukrainians were being treated, and about the hold on the security assistance. At the Zelensky–Pence meeting, Zelensky immediately brought up security cooperation. Vice President Pence didn't respond substantively. What he said was that he would talk to President Trump, but he wanted the Europeans to do more, and he wanted the Ukrainians to do more to fight corruption. If this was too vague for the Ukrainians, which it probably wasn't, Sondland was there to make it clear. He had another backchannel meeting, also in Warsaw, where told a senior aide to Zelensky that they would only get the aid if they announced an investigation into Burisma. The link between US security assistance and investigating the Bidens was now made clear, and it was Vice President Pence who was helping to deliver this message. And let's be clear about this: US security assistance, the \$400 million, is our money. It's US taxpayer dollars. It's what you and I and everyone else who's listening to this podcast pays in taxes that goes to the US government that the American people have committed to you. This is clear extortion, and it's Pence at this meeting that's driving it home to Zelensky, direct from the White House. Ambassador Taylor was clearly very disturbed by all this, and he sent Ambassador Sondland a text message asking if "we are now saying that security assistance and a White House meeting are conditioned on investigation." Ambassador Sondland responded, asking Taylor to call him, which he did, and Sondland told Taylor that President Trump had told him he wants Zelensky to state publicly that Ukraine will investigate Burisma and alleged Ukrainian interference in the 2016 election. Sondland told Taylor that President Trump wanted Zelensky "in a public box." In other words, he wanted Zelensky to come forward publicly so then Zelensky couldn't backtrack. He needed Zelensky to make that commitment, and he needed it public. If there's any doubt that Pence knew what was going on, let's remember one of his close aides was listening in on the July 25 call. Pence would've been briefed extensively before his meeting with Zelensky. He knew what



investigations meant. But the Three Amigos were still at it, texting back and forth in early September. On September 7, Taylor had a conversation with Tim Morrison at the White House in which Morrison described to Taylor that he had a "sinking feeling." On September 9, Taylor decides to spell it out over text. He wrote to Volker and Sondland, "I think it's crazy to withhold security assistance for help with a political campaign."

DANIEL GOLDMAN:

Ambassador Taylor, in your decades of military service and diplomatic service representing the United States around the world, have you ever seen another example of foreign aid conditioned on the personal or political interests of the president of the United States?

BILL TAYLOR:

No, Mr. Goldman, I have not.

MB:

Nearly five hours later, and after calling Trump to consult with him, Sondland responds, in an effort to clean up the record, "The president has been crystal clear: No quid pro quos of any kind." He then said, "If you still have concerns, I recommend you give S a call to discuss them directly." "S" is State Department speak for Mike Pompeo, Secretary of State. Sondland is telling Taylor, if he's got a problem with what's going on, talk to the Secretary of State. So Mike Pompeo also knows what's going on. And another point is that simply saying you're not committing a crime doesn't make it so, and what you see is Trump on multiple occasions telling White House officials, telling Sondland, that he's not asking for a quid pro quo, and then the next line out of his mouth or the next thing that's implied is, well, Ukraine has to do this thing in order for me to provide them what they want. I.e., a quid pro quo. Trump is just saying he's not doing the thing that he's actually doing. But Trump and his Three Amigos were starting to have a problem. People were talking. It was starting to come to light what they were actually doing. And on September 5, the *Washington Post* editorial board took the unusual step of breaking news in an editorial about Trump's decision to withhold aid to Ukraine. It wrote, "Some suspect Mr. Trump is once again catering to Mr. Putin, who is dedicated to undermining Ukrainian democracy and independence. But we're reliably told that the president has a second and more venal agenda: He is attempting to force Mr. Zelensky to intervene in the 2020 US presidential election by launching an investigation of the leading Democratic candidate, Joe Biden. Mr. Trump is not just soliciting Ukraine's help with his presidential campaign; he is using US military aid the country desperately needs in an attempt to extort it." Whoever told *The Washington Post* this was right, and helped to reveal for the public what would become this enormous scandal. Taylor meanwhile was putting this all together. He texted Volker and Sondland on September 8, writing, "The nightmare is they give the interview and don't get the security assistance, the Russians love it," and then in parentheses he says, "(and I quit)." Taylor's



threatening to resign. He's threatening to quit, and saying what the Trump administration is doing is beneficial to Russia, bad for Ukraine, and he's not going to stand for it.

FAREED ZAKHARIA:

The New York Times has reported that a public announcement was set to be made on my CNN program. So I think I owe viewers my best understanding of what actually happened. As we now know, for months, the Trump White House had been mounting an intense campaign to force him to publicly announce those investigations. He had tried to resist and put them off in various ways, but ultimately decided he would have to give in, according to *The Times*. His team apparently concluded that, since he was planning an interview with me anyway, that would be the forum in which he would make the announcement. Just imagine Zelensky's dilemma: By the time I met with him in Kyiv, he knew the aid had been released, but the backstory had not yet broken into public view. Ukrainian officials I spoke to about the release of the aid at the time were delighted but a little surprised, and unsure as to what had happened. Zelensky and his team were probably still trying to figure out whether they should still do the interview. A few days later, on September 18 and 19, *The Washington Post* broke the story wide open. The interview was called off.

mb:

But meanwhile, another brave individuals within the White House, the whistleblower, a national security staffer, had filed their official complaint on August 12, almost a month earlier.

NEWSCASTER:

This morning, we're learning a phone call between President Trump and another world leader prompted a whistleblower complaint at the center of a growing scandal in Washington.

NEWSCASTER:

President Trump's communications with a foreign leader were concerning enough to prompt a whistleblower complaint. That's according to *The Washington Post*.

NEWSCASTER:

President Trump now defiant and dismissive of that explosive whistleblower complaint against him.

DONALD TRUMP:

It's a ridiculous story. It's a partisan whistleblower. Shouldn't even have information.

MB:

According to *The New York Times*, in the process, they also brought their concerns to an aide on the House Intel Committee, who told them to get a lawyer and file a complaint. Through



September, a behind-the-scenes battle had been going on to release the complaint to the House Intelligence Committee, as is required, with Schiff going against the acting Director of National Intelligence, demanding that the complaint get released. But the White House was sitting on the complaint. The Department of Justice, Bill Barr's Department of Justice, was not allowing for it to be released. And so we had a standoff. And then, as attention was growing over the whistleblower complaint, over this dispute, without a lot of clarity about what it was about, and then, as attention was growing, after *The Washington Post* had already reported on the hold of US security assistance and the reasons for it, and as there was this growing fight between Congress and the White House over the release of this whistleblower complaint, Trump then decides to just release the hold. Nothing to see here, folks, totally normal, just the Ukraine security assistance is finally out the door, nothing to do with anything. Just two days later, on September 13, Schiff had had enough, and subpoenaed the the acting Director of National Intelligence, demanding that the whistleblower complaint be handed over to the House Intelligence Committee. Pretty soon, news started to trickle out about the complaint. First we learned it had to do with a conversation between Trump and a foreign leader sometime that summer. That helped narrow it down. Zelensky was on the list, but so were Putin, Kim Jong-Un, and leaders from Pakistan, the Netherlands, and Qatar. Next, we learned it was about more than just one phone call. The complaint was about a pattern of behavior leading up to a promise between Trump and the foreign leader, a promise the whistleblower found so troubling that they felt they had no choice but to file a complaint. It wasn't until September 19 that we learned that the complaint was about Ukraine. The pieces started to fall into place. As *The Washington Post* had reported two weeks earlier, Trump had withheld aid from Ukraine, demanding that Zelensky publicly announce an investigation into his election opponents. Trump was abusing the power of his office to extort a foreign government into interfering in the 2020 presidential election. And then, later that night, on September 19, Rudy just admitted to it.

RUDY GIULIANI:

I asked the Ukraine to investigate the allegations that there was interference in the election of 2016 by the Ukrainians for the benefit of Hillary Clinton, for which there already is a court finding—

CHRIS CUOMO:

You never asked anything about Hunter Biden, you never asked anything about Joe Biden and his role with the prosecutor?

RUDY GIULIANI:

The only thing I asked about Joe Biden is to get to the bottom of how it was that Lutsenko, who was appointed—



CHRIS CUOMO:

Right.

RUDY GIULIANI:

–dismissed the case against AntAC–

CHRIS CUOMO:

So you did ask Ukraine to look into Joe Biden.

RUDY GIULIANI:

Of course I did!

CHRIS CUOMO:

You just said you didn't!

mb:

A month earlier, House Judiciary Chairman Jerry Nadler announced the House Judiciary Committee was going to open impeachment proceedings, but it was unclear how much of the Democratic caucus was behind him. A lot of people just wanted to move on, forget about the Russia investigation. And there was one person in particular who seemed particularly uncertain: The Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, who had long been opposed to moving forward on impeachment. On September 24, after long resisting moving toward impeachment, Pelosi made it official:

NANCY PELOSI:

I'm announcing the House of Representatives moving forward with an official impeachment inquiry. I'm directing our six committees to proceed with their investigations under that umbrella of impeachment inquiry. The president must be held accountable. No one is above the law.

MB:

There was now no turning back. Trump had allegedly extorted a foreign leader for his personal political gain, so the House was moving to impeach him. And Republicans were going to have to take a vote. Do they condone what the president did, or do they condemn it? And the next day, Trump did the unthinkable: He confessed.

DONALD TRUMP:

The conversation I had was largely congratulatory, was largely corruption, all of the corruption taking place, was largely the fact that we don't want our people like Vice President Biden and his son creating to the corruption already in the Ukraine.



MB:

Next week on The Asset, we wrap up the series and tell you how this whole impeachment process ends. We look into the future, and, um, well, no, we can't actually look into the future, so what we're going to do is kick the can. Ok, here's what we have planned. Next week, we will do a special episode reviewing the last two weeks of the impeachment hearings. This will be available to all our listeners and will prepare you for the mental combat that is Thanksgiving dinner. While you are enjoying your turkey and carbo-loading on sides with a yellowish tint, we will be hard at work, working over Thanksgiving, just kidding mom, to deliver our long-promised and somewhat delayed special episode that will follow the trail of dead Russians. Yes, it's coming, finally. That first week of December, and it's going to be great. Now, the full episode will only be available to our Patreon subscribers. And if that makes you kind of sad, and if you feel left out, well, there's an easy way not to be sad: Go sign up today at www.patreon.com/assetpodcast. There's also other great content that we are continuously posting. Sign up today and support the work of The Asset. We will then conclude the podcast with our final episode of the season the second week of December, breaking down the White House cover up, Trump's other efforts at collusion, and we'll chart how all roads lead to Russia.

PRODUCER:

The Asset is a production of the Center for American Progress Action Fund, Protect the Investigation, and District Productive. Paul "Woody" Woodhull, Max Bergmann, executive producers, and Peter Ogburn, senior producer. The Asset is written by Max Bergmann and the good people at the Moscow Project, Jeremy Venook, Talia Dessel, and Siena Cicarelli, and the team at Protect the Investigation, and Paul "Woody" Woodhull and his cohort at District Productive. To learn more about Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, go to themoscowproject.org and protecttheinvestigation.org. Please subscribe to the podcast on Apple Podcasts or your favorite podcast app, and please leave a rating and a review. Thank you.

DONALD TRUMP:

An absolutely perfect phone call. It was a perfect conversation, absolutely perfect.