

Ambassador Sondland now recalls communicating a quid pro quo to Ukraine

By **MOLLY YOUNG**
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The Oregonian

In an unexpected move, Gordon Sondland, the U.S. ambassador to the European Union, revised and at times contradicted his initial testimony to Capitol Hill investigators leading the impeachment inquiry into President Donald Trump.

Sondland essentially asked a Congressional impeachment panel for a do-over Tuesday, submitting three new pages of testimony. The Portland real estate investor now remembers that he had, in fact, told a Ukrainian government official that the country risked losing American military aid if it did not publicly commit to the investigation President Trump was pushing for.

Sondland submitted his newly restored memories to House investigators the day before they were set to release the transcript of his initial Oct. 17 testimony. At the time, he said Trump insisted on no “quid pro quo” with Ukraine.

But now, Sondland said he recalls a brief Sept. 1 conversation in Warsaw with a top Ukrainian adviser, Andriy Yermak, in which he made it clear that U.S. aid was tied to a statement from the Ukrainians. Sondland described no such meeting during his original deposition.

“I now recall speaking individually with Mr. Yermak, where I said that resumption of U.S. aid would likely not occur until Ukraine provided the public anti-corruption statement that we had been discussing for many weeks.”

In his new testimony, Sondland wrote that by the time the meeting occurred, he came to presume that U.S. aid was linked to the statement, but did not know, “when, why or by whom the aid was suspended.”

In recent weeks, as a series of other witnesses contradicted key details of Sondland’s original testimony, some politicians and pundits have speculated whether Sondland had perjured himself. Jim McDermott, Sondland’s Portland lawyer, said his client’s intention with updating his testimony was simply intended to make the record clear and accurate.

“Ambassador Sondland’s sole objective is to assist Congress by telling the truth to the best of his knowledge,” McDermott said.

As for the contradictions between Sondland and other witnesses’ testimony, McDermott said it’s a routine phenomenon in the U.S. justice system.

“It’s just an evolving, complex series of events with multiple witnesses,” the lawyer said. “To me it’s no surprise there are significant differences in people’s memory. It happens in dozens of jury trials across America every day.”

Aid tied to announcement

In his new testimony, Sondland said that his Sept. 1 conversation with Yermak followed a “larger meeting involving Vice President Pence and President Zelensky, in which President Zelensky had raised the issue of the suspension of U.S. aid to Ukraine directly with Vice President Pence.”

“Soon thereafter, I came

to understand that, in fact, the public statement would need to come directly from President Zelensky himself,” he wrote.

“I do not specifically recall how I learned this, but I believe that the information may have come either from Mr. Giuliani or from Ambassador Volker, who may have discussed this with Mr. Giuliani. In a later conversation with Ambassador Taylor, I told him that I had been mistaken about whether a public statement could come from the Prosecutor General; I had come to understand that the public statement would have to come from President Zelensky himself.”

News that the Ukrainian aid had been suspended became public days earlier, on Aug. 28. The next day, Yermak sent a link to a Politico story that broke the news to diplomat Kurt Volker and asked to speak with him.

During Sondland’s original Oct. 17 deposition, a questioner asked him whether he remembered being part of the conversations around the aid being frozen around that time.

“I don’t recall having any,” Sondland said. “I’m not saying it didn’t occur, but I don’t recall having any. I think Volker was handling those conversations.”

Later, he was pressed directly if he spoke with the Ukrainians about the freeze.

“I won’t swear to it, but I don’t recall,” he said, “I honestly don’t.”

Yermak’s name came up more than 70 times during the deposition, but never the Sept. 1 meeting that Sondland now remembers.

Sondland told investigators that Pence and a whole



President Donald Trump, right, greets U.S. ambassador to the European Union Gordon Sondland.

cast of people attended the Warsaw meeting. But he said he did not remember any talks about linking a White House visit to a public anti-corruption statement.

Also on Sept. 1, diplomat William Taylor raised concerns about tying aid to a corruption investigation. “Are we now saying that security assistance and White House meeting are conditioned on investigations?” he wrote in a text message chain that included Sondland.

“I said, ‘Call me.’ I didn’t want to do this by text. I wanted to have a conversation.”

Contradictory testimony

Sondland was known in Portland as a savvy, sharp-elbowed real estate investor whose talent for spotting opportunity built him a huge fortune.

Yet over the past few months, he has found himself at the center of President Trump’s impeachment scandal. He earned the disdain of professional diplomats as a starstruck amateur. During his deposition, he said he didn’t know how many of the 29 countries he worked with received U.S.

aid, because those countries also had specific ambassadors assigned to them.

At times, he insisted he was ignorant about key aspects of the Trump controversy. When asked whether he ever researched Burisma, the Ukrainian energy firm at the center of the anti-corruption talks, he said no. When asked if he assigned the job to one of his 150 staffers, he again said no.

He testified that he didn’t know of the firm’s connection to Hunter Biden, who sat on the Burisma board, until after he had started to set up a meeting between Trump and Zelensky.

“I didn’t even know who Hunter Biden was until I started reading about him in the media,” he said.

By the time he testified on Oct. 17, White House adviser Fiona Hill had recounted a contentious meeting over Ukraine that happened in July, long before Sondland claims to have known about any political ties to the anti-corruption

tion statement in Ukraine.

Sondland contradicted Hill’s account, describing the meeting as great. He said he called Rick Perry, then the energy secretary, the day before he testified to ensure his memory of events was correct.

“And did you think it was appropriate to call Secretary Perry, who’s obviously another potential witness, the day before your testimony to, quote, ‘refresh your recollection,’” he was asked.

“I didn’t think it was inappropriate,” he said.

Sondland insisted to lawmakers that throughout the summer, diplomatic conversations focused on “vanilla corruption,” and he did not become aware that Trump’s political rivals may be a target of the corruption investigation for months.

“It kept getting more insidious as timeline went on,” he said, “and back in July, it was all about just corruption.”

“I don’t recall.”

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