

Former Trump adviser undercuts GOP impeachment defenses

Impeachment witnesses say Giuliani pursued political probes in Ukraine

By LISA MASCARO, MARY CLARE JALONICK AND ERIC TUCKER
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A former White House official said Thursday that President Donald Trump’s top European envoy was sent on a “domestic political errand” seeking investigations of Democrats, stunning testimony that dismantled a main line of the president’s defense in the impeachment inquiry.

In a riveting appearance on Capitol Hill, Fiona Hill also implored Republican lawmakers — and implicitly Trump himself — to stop peddling a “fictional narrative” at the center of the impeachment probe. She said baseless suggestions that Ukraine interfered in the 2016 election bolster Russia as it seeks to sow political divisions in the United States.

Testimony from Hill and David Holmes, a State Department adviser in Kyiv, capped an intense week in the historic inquiry and reinforced the central complaint: that Trump used his leverage over Ukraine, a young Eastern European democracy facing Russian aggression, to pursue political investiga-



Former White House national security aide Fiona Hill, and David Holmes, a U.S. diplomat in Ukraine, back right, walk to their seats to testify before the House Intelligence Committee on Capitol Hill in Washington on Thursday during a public impeachment hearing of President Donald Trump’s efforts to tie U.S. aid for Ukraine to investigations of his political opponents.

tions. His alleged actions set off alarms across the U.S. national security and foreign policy apparatus.

Hill had a front row seat to some of Trump’s pursuits with Ukraine during her tenure at the White House. She testified in detail about her interactions with Gordon Sondland, saying she initially suspected the U.S. ambassador to the European Union was overstating his authority to push Ukraine to launch investigations into Democrats. But she says she now understands he was acting on instructions Trump sent through his personal attorney

Rudy Giuliani.

“He was being involved in a domestic political errand, and we were being involved in national security foreign policy,” she testified in a day-long encounter with lawmakers. “And those two things had just diverged.”

It was just one instance in which Hill, as well as Holmes, undercut the arguments being made by Republicans and the White House. Both told House investigators it was abundantly clear Giuliani was seeking political investigations of Democrats and Joe Biden in Ukraine, knocking down assertions from ear-

lier witnesses who said they didn’t realize the purpose of the lawyer’s pursuits. Trump has also said he was simply focused on rooting out corruption in Ukraine.

Giuliani “was clearly pushing forward issues and ideas that would, you know, probably come back to haunt us and in fact,” Hill testified, “I think that’s where we are today.” Hill also defended Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, the Army officer who testified earlier and whom Trump’s allies tried to discredit. A previous witness said Hill raised concerns about Vindman, but

she said those worries centered only on whether he had the “political antenna” for the situation at the White House.

The landmark House impeachment inquiry was sparked by a July 25 phone call, in which Trump asked Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskiy for investigations into Biden and the Democratic National Committee. A still-anonymous whistleblower’s official government complaint about that call led the House to launch the current probe.

After two weeks of public testimony, many Democrats believe they have enough evidence to begin writing articles of impeachment. Working under the assumption that Trump will be impeached by the House, White House officials and a small group of GOP senators met Thursday to discuss the possibility of a two week Senate trial.

There still remain questions about whether there will be additional House testimony, either in public session or behind closed doors, including from high-profile officials, such as former Trump national security adviser John Bolton.

In what was seen as a nudge to Bolton, her former boss, Hill said those with information have a “moral obligation to provide it.”

She recounted one vivid incident at the White House where Bolton told her he didn’t want to be involved in any “drug deal” that Sondland and Trump’s acting White House chief of staff

Mick Mulvaney were cooking up over the Ukrainian investigations Trump wanted. Hill said she conveyed similar concerns directly to Sondland.

“And I did say to him, ‘Ambassador Sondland, Gordon, I think this is all going to blow up,’” she said. “And here we are.”

Hill and Holmes both filled in gaps in previous testimony and poked holes in the accounts of other witnesses. They were particularly adamant that efforts by Trump and Giuliani to investigate the Burisma gas company were well-known by officials working on Ukraine to be the equivalent of probing the Bidens. That runs counter to earlier testimony from Sondland and Kurt Volker, the former Ukraine special envoy, who insisted they had no idea there was a connection.

Holmes, a late addition to the schedule, also undercut some of Sondland’s recollections about an extraordinary phone call between the ambassador and Trump on July 26, the day after the president’s call with Ukraine. Holmes was having lunch with Sondland in Kyiv and said he could overhear Trump ask about “investigations” during a “colorful” conversation.

After the phone call, Holmes said Sondland told him Trump didn’t care about Ukraine but rather about “big stuff,” meaning the “Biden investigation.” Sondland said he didn’t recall raising the Bidens.



Riot police fire tear gas while protesters set fires during clashes between Iraqi security forces and anti-Government protesters in Baghdad, Iraq, on Thursday.

Iraqi officials: 8 protesters dead in day of violent clashes

By SAMYA KULLAB AND MURTADA FARAJ
Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Eight people died and at least 90 were wounded on Thursday in renewed clashes in central Baghdad, in the most violent clashes between anti-government protesters and security forces in recent days, Iraqi officials said.

Separately, one policeman was killed and six others wounded when an IED exploded in northeast Baghdad, security officials said.

One person was killed when security forces hurled sound bombs at crowds of protesters on the strategic Sinak bridge late Thursday, security and hospital officials said.

Earlier clashes had erupted on Baghdad’s Rasheed Street, a cultural center known for its old crumbling buildings, and on the Ahrar bridge. Security forces fired live ammunition, tear gas and sound bombs to disperse dozens of protesters, causing the fatalities.

Protesters have been occupying parts of Baghdad’s three main bridges — Sinak and Ahrar and Jumhuriya — leading to the heavily fortified Green Zone, the seat of Iraq’s government. Security forces are deployed on the other side to repel them from entering the area, which houses government buildings and various foreign embassies, including the United States.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity in line with regulations.

Two protesters were killed when tear gas canisters struck them and one was killed by live ammunition during the clashes in Rasheed street.

Four protesters were killed in fighting near Ahrar and Sinak bridges early Thursday.

Fighting also resumed overnight in the Shiite holy city of Karbala, south of Baghdad, between protesters and security forces.

Tents have been set up under the bridges and also on central Tahrir Square, the epicenter of the protest movement, where first-aid volunteers treat those wounded by pieces of exploded tear gas canisters and live fire.

“Around 1:30 a.m., the shooting started with live ammunition, tear gas and sound grenades,” said one volunteer, speaking on condition of anonymity for fear of government reprisal. The volunteer said there were deaths and several injured people with bullet wounds

and breathing difficulties.

In Karbala, protesters threw crudely made fire bombs, also known as Molotov cocktails, at security forces while anti-riot police responded by throwing stones at protesters.

Dozens of demonstrators had attacked the Iranian consulate in this city earlier in November, scaling concrete barriers and saying they rejected the influence of the neighboring country in Iraqi affairs.

At least 320 protesters have been killed and thousands have been wounded since the unrest began on Oct. 1, when demonstrators took to the streets in Baghdad and across Iraq’s mainly Shiite south to decry rampant government corruption and lack of basic services despite Iraq’s oil wealth.

The leaderless movement seeks to dismantle the sectarian system and unseat the government, including Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi.

Teen used ‘ghost gun’ in Southern California high school shooting

By STEFANIE DAZIO
Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — The 16-year-old boy who fatally shot two fellow students and wounded three others last week at a Southern California high school used an unregistered, untraceable “ghost gun,” Los Angeles County Sheriff Alex Villanueva said Thursday.

Villanueva told media outlets that Nathaniel Berhow’s .45 caliber, 1911-model replica semi-automatic pistol was assembled from gun parts and did not have a serial number.

Such weapons are a growing problem for law enforcement around the country because the parts are easy to obtain and the guns take limited expertise to build. In Southern California, federal authorities say one-third of all the firearms seized are ghost guns.

California has among the strictest gun laws in the country, but they are based on traditional firearms that are made by manufacturers and labeled so ownership can be traced.

“Congress and state legislatures enact all these crimes about gun registration but now the gun industry is creating a way to just bypass the entire thing by creating a mechanism to manufacture weapons yourself,” Villanueva said.

It’s legal to purchase gun kits and assemble them at home. That method allows the purchaser, sometimes a minor or other person prohib-

ited from owning firearms, to avoid background checks required to purchase ready-made guns from licensed dealers.

Thomas Groneman, a detective sergeant with the Suffolk County Police Department in New York, said his agency built their own Glock-replica handgun from parts they ordered online as an experiment earlier this year.

“It was ridiculously easy to do it,” he said. “It’s scary because anybody — convicted felons, people with psychological issues — can order it online.”

Several high-profile crimes in recent years have involved ghost guns. For instance, a Northern California gunman built his own rifles — despite a court order prohibiting him from having guns — and killed his wife and four others in a 2017 rampage.

While hobbyists have long been able to use spare parts to create a firearm, modern technology has made it far easier to build a deadly weapon.

Adam Winkler, a gun policy expert and professor at

the University of California, Los Angeles, said that means more criminals will use them and it will be more difficult for police to solve crimes.

“Anytime you can trace a gun, you have a little bit more information,” he said. “How did this gun get here? Who sold it, who was the gunmaker, who was the first person they sold it to and what happened?”

Police don’t yet know where and when Berhow got the handgun he used to shoot students at Saugus High School in the Los Angeles suburb of Santa Clarita. As the school day was starting on Nov. 14, he pulled the gun from his backpack in an open-air quad and in 16 seconds shot five students at random, police said.

Berhow counted his rounds, saving the last bullet for himself, investigators said. He died from a head wound the next day.

Anne Muehlberger, 15, and Dominic Blackwell, 14, were killed. The other three students were hospitalized and the last of them went home earlier this week.

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