

In aftermath of Ukraine crisis, a climate of mistrust and threats

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By Greg Miller and Greg Jaffe

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The CIA analyst who triggered the impeachment inquiry continues to work on issues relating to Russia and Ukraine, but when threats against him spike — often seemingly spurred by presidential tweets — he is driven to and from work by armed security officers.

Having been impeached by the House, Trump faces trial in the Senate on charges that he abused the power of his office and sought to obstruct Congress. But the jarring developments over the past three months have also exposed the extent to which the national security establishment, and the values that have traditionally guided American foreign policy, are facing an extraordinary trial of their own under Trump's presidency.

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An entire roster of public servants has been disparaged, bullied and in some cases banished for standing in Trump's path as he sought to pressure Ukraine for political favors, or for testifying about his conduct afterward.

Many who came forward were convinced that Trump's actions were a violation of American principles, if not the law, and they clung to a misplaced faith that matters of national security would transcend partisan politics. Instead, the impeachment saga has hardened political divisions and cast doubt on the United States' commitment to ideals it has long professed.

This story is based on interviews with more than 20 current and former officials, most of whom spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss their role in the administration or the impeachment inquiry.

Trump was the catalyst of his own impeachment, withholding military aid and a White House meeting from the leader of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, whom he was pressuring to pursue investigations designed to politically wound former vice president Joe Biden.

But the fallout of the impeachment battle extends far beyond Trump's political survival in a Senate trial. Tensions, exposed by impeachment, have fed Trump's belief that he is surrounded by disloyal subordinates and have fueled animosity among congressional Republicans toward the supposed "deep state." Today, the idea that a cadre of nonpartisan

civil servants can loyally serve presidents of either party in pursuit of shared national interests — a bedrock principle of the country's approach to foreign policy since World War II — is under attack.

Some of the responsibility for the mounting collateral damage falls on career officials and political appointees who took jobs in the administration despite deep objections to the president's view. These officials hoped they could steer the unconventional president, who has an affinity for autocrats and an aversion to traditional allies, toward more-conventional views and policies.

Others came to see themselves as doing damage control, taking advantage of Trump's short attention span to advance their preferred objectives and counter what they regarded as his destructive impulses.

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Their actions have fed the view among some Republicans that impeachment is not just an isolated fight about Trump's actions toward Ukraine, but also is an extension of a broader, unfinished conflict.

"We're fighting for the country here," said Stephen K. Bannon, who called for the "deconstruction of the administrative state" while advising Trump in the early months of his presidency. "This all started in the transition," Bannon said in an interview, adding that the attacks on those who "actively worked against [Trump's] policies on Ukraine" or defied his wishes on Ukraine should serve as "a warning that if you go against the president, there is going to be a price to be paid."

Enemies list

The impeachment-related damage is extensive.

The acting U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, William B. Taylor Jr., returned to Kyiv after his Nov. 14 testimony only to watch Trump's lawyer, Rudolph W. Giuliani, arrive weeks later to resume his quest for dirt on Joe Biden and his son Hunter. Giuliani's sojourn while filming a documentary for a right-wing television network made clear to officials in Ukraine that Taylor and the U.S. Embassy had no standing with the U.S. president.

Taylor has since announced that he will step down by Jan. 2, clearing out of the Ukrainian capital on an accelerated schedule in part to spare Secretary of State Mike Pompeo — scheduled to visit Kyiv next month — from having to appear in pictures alongside a diplomat Trump branded as disloyal.

The ambassador had taken the job only after Pompeo promised him that U.S. policy would remain firmly grounded in fighting Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine, an assurance that now seems uncertain at best.

Veterans of the Foreign Service are bewildered. “These attacks — I’ve not seen anything like this since I joined the Foreign Service,” said John Heffern, a former senior State Department official who entered the department when Ronald Reagan was president. “Our work is promoting international universal values — freedom of the press and rule of law. Considering what’s happened in the United States, it undermines our ability to project that message to our foreign counterparts.”

Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, the top adviser on Ukraine at the National Security Council, has continued to work at the White House since testifying that he was so disturbed by Trump’s July 25 call with Zelensky that he reported his concerns to White House lawyers.

But Vindman — who was born in Ukraine, moved to the United States with his family at age 3 and earned a Purple Heart in the war in Iraq — has been taunted by Trump, cast as disloyal by the president’s allies and falsely accused of plotting with the whistleblower to undermine the president.

“Vindictive Vindman is the ‘whistleblower’s’ handler,” Sen. Marsha Blackburn (R-Tenn.) said in a Nov. 22 tweet. The baseless charge was a sign of how Trump has influenced his party’s tactics and illustrated the intense pressure on Republicans to back the president.

In 2017, Blackburn chastised Trump for his fixation on score-settling and petty insults, writing on Facebook that “civility in all our interactions — both personal and digital — is not only proper but fundamental to a respectful and prosperous society.”

Fiona Hill, the former top Russia adviser at the White House, has endured obscene phone calls to her home phone, according to people familiar with the matter, and vicious assaults from far-right media. Alex Jones, the conspiracy monger who operates the Infowars website, devoted much of his Nov. 22 broadcast to smears against Hill. “I want her ass indicted,” Jones said. “I want her indicted for perjury. Today. Indict that whore.”

For Hill, the attacks were a continuation of an astonishing level of hostility she witnessed during the two years she served in the White House. Trump loyalists drafted internal “enemies” lists, co-workers were purged, and NSC security teams logged hundreds of external threats against Hill and other officials, all fueled by a steady stream of far-right smears.

Hill, a former U.S. intelligence official and co-author of a biography of Russian President Vladimir Putin, was little known outside foreign policy circles when she joined the White House. Within weeks of joining the administration, she faced a wave of internal and external efforts to discredit or neutralize her.

A former Republican congressman, Connie Mack IV of Florida, approached aides of Vice President Pence's, warning that Hill was tainted by her prior work for an organization funded by George Soros. A billionaire financier and Holocaust survivor, Soros has used his fortune to fight the spread of authoritarianism and bigotry. He has also become associated with a "globalist" agenda opposed by many on the right, and his name is frequently invoked in anti-Semitic slurs.

At the time, Mack was working as a paid lobbyist for Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, an autocratic leader seeking to shut down a Soros-funded international university in Hungary. Orban was concerned that Hill might use her position at the White House to object.

In an interview, Mack insisted that he was merely trying to call officials' attention to what he believed was a conflict of interest for Hill, not instigate her removal or incite right-wing attacks. But the attacks came anyway.

"My entire first year of my tenure at the National Security Council was filled with hateful calls, conspiracy theories, which has started again" amid impeachment, she testified in October. For months, Hill arrived at work nearly each day to find venomous messages left on her work phone by a caller from Florida. The same woman called Hill at home several times, frightening her young daughter, according to two people familiar with the matter.

For Hill, ever the Russia analyst, the ruthless nature of the harassment harked back to the Bolshevik purges of revolutionary Russia. Bannon has all but touted this connection, comparing his destructive agenda to that of Vladimir Lenin's.

In 2017, Bannon and his allies compiled a list of about 50 people they wanted exiled from the National Security Council. Most of their targets drew suspicion because they had worked as civil servants in the Obama White House. Bannon's team also scoured the targets' social media profiles for signs of disloyalty to the Trump administration.

Officials involved in the effort said they were driven by a missionary zeal to rid the administration of any of the foreign policy elite they blamed for miring the country in costly wars and locking it into burdensome alliances that undermined Trump's "America First" agenda.

Nothing wrong

Key players in those 2017 purges, and several of their targets, have resurfaced in the impeachment fight.

Among the first to confront Hill when she joined the White House that year was Derek Harvey, who went to the NSC after working for Rep. Devin Nunes (R-Calif.) on the House Intelligence Committee. On one of Hill's first days on the job, Harvey told her he could not understand why Trump had allowed her into the fold, according to officials who witnessed the exchange.

Harvey, who was active in generating the enemies list, returned to Nunes's staff after being ousted by then-national security adviser H.R. McMaster in July 2017. When Hill testified behind closed doors before the committee, Harvey could be seen passing notes to members, officials said. He also approached Hill at one point, telling her that the "trolls are out again." The gesture, intended to communicate sympathy, ignored the fact that Hill and others viewed him as contributing to the poisonous climate.

Harvey declined to comment for this story.

Bannon said the whistleblower was at the top of the list he and his allies created in 2017. Former White House officials said it also included a State Department official now serving as a top aide to Rep. Adam B. Schiff (D-Calif.), the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee.

Another early target of Trump loyalists was Stephanie Holmes, a career State Department employee assigned to the NSC who was falsely accused of leaking details of Trump's Oval Office conversation with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

Holmes came under such intense internal pressure that she hired a lawyer, former colleagues said. She subsequently left her NSC job to take a post that seemingly should have shielded her from the bloodletting, moving with her husband, David, also a diplomat, to the U.S. Embassy in Ukraine.

It was only because the Holmes were in Kyiv that David Holmes was in position to witness Trump's phone call with U.S. Ambassador to the European Union Gordon Sondland at an outdoor cafe. Holmes testified last month that he could overhear Trump asking about the investigations he wanted Ukraine to conduct into the Bidens, and that Sondland confided to Holmes afterward that the president did not "give a shit" about Ukraine.

Trump has intentionally fostered internal friction, sowing tension among subordinates as a management tactic, current and former White House officials said. But he also inadvertently hired advisers who are repelled by his crude behavior and isolationist instincts.

McMaster, former chief of staff John F. Kelly, former secretary of state Rex Tillerson and others all fought Trump on major aspects of his foreign policy — his disdain for the NATO alliance, his desire on a moment's notice to pull U.S. troops out of war zones, and his aversion to imposing sanctions on Russia. They, in turn, often hired subordinates who were similarly scornful of Trump's positions.

The impeachment hearings exposed how these officials coped with Trump, and at times sought to counter his agenda, if only in the context of Ukraine.

The most senior officials, such as Pompeo, and John Bolton when he was national security adviser, often relied on underlings to sound alarms or subvert Trump's efforts to pressure Zelensky, without putting their own standing with the president at risk. Taylor, Hill and Vindman repeatedly raised objections to aspects of the shadow policy they perceived but had no meaningful power to stop it.

Former U.S. special envoy to Ukraine Kurt Volker walked a treacherous tightrope, working to secure a commitment from Ukraine to pursue the investigations to clear impediments to what he regarded as the real policy: bolstering Ukraine in its war with Russian-backed separatists.

He hid his alarm at Trump's baseless conspiracy theories about the 2016 election and the president's loathing for the Ukrainians. Volker saw himself as facing a choice: He could accept Trump's view of Ukraine or try to fix it.

"I tried to fix it," he testified. Volker's career was derailed as a result. He resigned from his diplomatic post after his role in the Ukraine episode was exposed. He was also forced to step down as executive director of the McCain Institute, a think tank whose stated mission is to advance "character-driven leadership."

Career diplomats and civil servants routinely suppress private views to execute policies set by presidents. The impeachment hearings forced a parade of witnesses to reveal their feelings about Trump on a stage with an international audience.

"People were forced to testify about things they believe . . . how they felt about what the president was doing," one of the impeachment witnesses said in an interview. The stark airing of these differences "caused the president to think they are biased against him," the official said.

Trump responded by railing against witnesses he dismissed as "Never Trumpers," a reference to the hundreds of national security experts who came out publicly against Trump in 2016.

In reality, none of those who testified had ever publicly opposed Trump, and many had made conscious decisions — despite misgivings — to return to government to work for him.

Some did so at considerable personal or professional cost. Hill was cautioned by friends and colleagues in the close-knit foreign policy community to reject the NSC job. One long-standing peer has refused to speak with her since learning she had gone to work for Trump, according to people familiar with the matter.

Three years into Trump's presidency, the list of perceived enemies continues to expand, and now is composed of officials Trump or his own subordinates hired. The hostility they face comes not only from Trump loyalists — whether inside the administration or launching attacks from right-wing media sites — but a substantial swath of the Republican Party.

For decades, the GOP cast itself as the champion of the FBI, CIA, Pentagon and other national security institutions. But over the past three years, Republicans have repeatedly turned on those agencies when necessary to protect Trump's presidency.

In their final report on the impeachment hearings, Republicans on the House Intelligence Committee focused on "unelected bureaucrats" as the true villains of the impeachment scandal. These officials made "accusations and assumptions" about the president, were "discomforted at Trump's call," and they "chafed at the president's outside the beltway approach to diplomacy."

Ultimately, they were to blame.

In the recent interview, Bannon marveled at how rapidly GOP lawmakers have lined up behind Trump against impeachment. Early in the scandal, Bannon said, it would have been difficult to find more than a few GOP members willing to back Trump's assertion that his call with Zelensky was "perfect." Though the core facts have never been in question, Bannon said that "because of the information put forth by the president and his advocates," it was impossible to find a GOP member prepared to dispute Trump's depiction.

"Today, look at House Judiciary, a hundred percent say it is a perfect call," Bannon said. "A hundred percent say there's nothing wrong."