

Ousted Ambassador Tells Impeachment Panel She Felt Threatened When Trump Denounced Her

November 15, 2019 **by Dan McCue**



Former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch appeared before the House impeachment panel Friday. (Photo by Dan McCue)

WASHINGTON – The former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, Marie Yovanovitch, told a House impeachment panel Friday that abruptly being ousted from her post was a heartbreaking experience that was compounded weeks later when she learned President Donald Trump had bad-mouthed her during a phone call to Ukraine's president.

Yovanovitch told the members of the House Select Committee on Intelligence over the course of five hours of testimony that she

found it impossible to feel anything but threatened when Trump vilified her as “bad news” and said she was “going to go through some things.”

The former ambassador, who spoke in a low, confident voice up to that point in the hearing, appeared to choke up momentarily as she recalled learning of Trump’s July 25 comments to Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky.

“I was shocked and devastated that I would feature in a phone call between two heads of state in such a manner, where President Trump said that I was bad news to another world leader, and that I would be going through some things,” she said. “So I was — it was a terrible moment. A person who saw me actually reading the transcript said that the color drained from my face. I think I even had a physical reaction.”

Asked about the potential effect of similar comments aimed at other U.S. officials and potential witnesses in the impeachment inquiry, Yovanovitch said “it’s very intimidating.”

The investigation centers on whether Trump’s push for Ukrainian officials to investigate his political rivals amounted to an abuse of power, a charge he and Republicans deny.

Friday’s hearing was a bit different from the opening public session of the impeachment inquiry two days ago.

On Wednesday, the president’s GOP allies seemed almost cordial as witnesses Bill Taylor, the acting U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, and George Kent, the deputy assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian Affairs, spoke in detail about what they saw as a rogue channel of foreign policy taking shape under the president’s personal attorney Rudy Giuliani.

On Friday, perhaps chastened by the sorry reviews they got in the media, the committee's Republican minority got off to a pugnacious start, a number of them asking to be recognized at once, most raising questions on parliamentary procedure.

Chairman Adam Schiff, D-Calif., quickly gaveled the commotion to a close, but the stage was set for something unusual to happen.

It finally occurred after Yovanovitch discussed the president's criticism of her.

"Ambassador Yovanovitch, as we sit here testifying, the president is attacking you on Twitter," Schiff said.

In fact, Trump had just **tweeted**, "Everywhere Marie Yovanovitch went turned bad. She started off in Somalia, how did that go? Then fast forward to Ukraine, where the new Ukrainian President spoke unfavorably about her in my second phone call with him. It is a U.S. President's absolute right to appoint ambassadors."

Schiff asked Yovanovitch, who is now a State Department fellow at Georgetown University, whether the president was still trying to intimidate her.

"I can't speak to what the president is trying to do, but I think the effect is to be intimidated," she said.

Said Schiff, "Well, I want to let you know, Ambassador, that some of us here take witness intimidation very, very seriously."

Asked about his tweet later, Trump said he wasn't trying to intimidate anybody.

Of impeachment, he said, "it's a political process, it's not a legal process."

"I'm allowed to speak up," he added.

White House spokeswoman Stephanie Grisham later said Trump did nothing wrong by tweeting his criticism.

She said in a statement that the tweets were “simply the President’s opinion, which he is entitled to.”

She’s also criticized the hearing as a “partisan political process” and “totally illegitimate, charade stacked against the President.”

The tweet controversy led to an unexpectedly light moment Friday afternoon.

It came after Republican lawyer Steve Castor cited a 2016 op-ed in The Hill newspaper. It was written by Yovanovitch’s predecessor in the Ukraine, and criticized Trump for comments that appeared to suggest Russia’s annexation of Crimea was valid. Ukraine strongly opposes the annexation.

Castor said the op-ed showed that Ukrainian officials supported Hillary Clinton in the 2016 campaign, adding that the previous ambassador “said some nasty things” about Trump in the op-ed and on Twitter.

Yovanovitch replied, “Sometimes that happens on social media.”

“I’m shocked,” Castor said.

In her testimony, Yovanovitch described Ukraine as a “battleground for great power competition, with a hot war for the control of territory and a hybrid war to control Ukraine’s leadership.”

She noted that the Trump administration has approved providing Ukraine with Javelin anti-tank missiles and said “supporting Ukraine is the right thing to do.”

“It is also the smart thing to do. If Russia prevails and Ukraine falls to Russia dominion, we can expect to see other attempts by Russia to expand its territory and influence,” she said.

But Yovanovitch soon turned to other events in the Ukraine that clearly continue to fill her with unease.

She described herself as the victim of a smear campaign conducted by Giuliani, and others, including the president’s son, Donald Trump Jr., before her removal from Ukraine.

“Even now, words fail me,” she said.

But the worst of it wasn’t what happened to her personally. She said she fears the efforts overseen by Giuliani have undermined the credibility of U.S. foreign policy around the world.

Others with bad intentions have now seen “how little it takes to remove an American ambassador who does not give them what they want.”

Schiff tried to hammer that point home, opining that Yovanovitch’s “principled stance made her enemies.”

The daughter of immigrants who fled the former Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, Yovanovitch opened her testimony by describing her three decade-plus career.

There is a perception that diplomats lead a comfortable life throwing dinner parties in fancy homes,” she said. “let me tell you about some of my reality. It has not always been easy. I have moved 13 times and served in seven different countries, five of them hardship posts.”

She arrived in Ukraine in August and remained there until her ouster in May 2019.

While there, she said, “I worked to advance U.S. policy — fully embraced by Democrats and Republicans — to help Ukraine become a stable and independent democratic state, with a market economy integrated into Europe.”

She went on to refute allegations made against her during the “smear campaign” as pure fabrications. She also pointedly and repeatedly rejected the assertion that Ukraine tried to interfere in the 2016 election, a prominent claim of Trump and his supporters.

“Our U.S. intelligence agencies concluded it was Russia that was guilty of the election interference.”

Rep. Devin Nunes, the ranking Republican on the panel continued to maintain, as he had on Wednesday, that House Democrats were relying on hearsay testimony from witnesses who only know of Trump’s actions second-hand, and have no clue about his motivations.

Republicans noted during questioning that Yovanovitch had left her position before the July phone call that is at the center of the impeachment inquiry.

“These hearings should not be occurring at all,” he said.

Later Friday in a closed-door session, the panel was scheduled to hear from David Holmes, a political adviser in Kyiv, who overheard Trump asking about the investigations the day after the July conversation with Zelensky. Holmes was at dinner with Gordon Sondland when the Ambassador to the European Union called Trump on his cellphone.

Taylor and Kent said Wednesday that conversation was apparently loud enough to be heard by Holmes, whom they did not identify by name.

The House Intelligence Committee will hear from eight more impeachment witnesses during public sessions scheduled for Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday of next week.

