



WHITE HOUSE

Pence aide denies 'alleged discussion' between VP and Sondland on Ukraine aid

The vice president has been trying to avoid getting dragged into the impeachment scandal while remaining loyal to Trump.



Vice President Mike Pence. | Drew Angerer/Getty Images

By **NAHAL TOOSI** and **GABBY ORR**

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Vice President Mike Pence is distancing himself from “the Gordon problem.”

As Gordon Sondland, the U.S. ambassador to the European Union, testified on Wednesday in the impeachment inquiry against President Donald Trump, an aide to Pence sought to minimize his past interactions with the donor-diplomat.

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Sondland told lawmakers that on Sept. 1, he spoke with the vice president ahead of Pence's meeting with Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky in Poland.

He said he mentioned “investigations” Trump wanted Ukraine to pursue into former vice president Joe Biden, a political rival, and Burisma, a Ukrainian firm with ties to Biden’s son Hunter.

“I mentioned to Vice President Pence before the meetings with the Ukrainians that I had concerns that the delay in [U.S. military aid to Ukraine] had become tied to the issue of investigations,” Sondland said. “I recall mentioning that before the Zelensky meeting.”

Asked by Democrats how the vice president responded, however, Sondland recalled only that Pence acknowledged his words.

"I don't know exactly what I said to him," Sondland said. "This was a briefing attended by many people and I was invited at the very last minute — I wasn't scheduled to be there. But I think I spoke up at some point late in the meeting and said it looks like everything is being held up until these statements get made and that's my, you know, personal belief."

"And Vice President Pence just nodded his head?" Democratic counsel Dan Goldman asked.

"Again, I don't recall any exchange or where he asked me any questions. I think he — it was sort of a duly noted," Sondland said.

Pence's chief of staff, Marc Short, dismissed the very basis of Sondland's comments.



Gordon Sondland testifies. | Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

“The vice president never had a conversation with Gordon Sondland about investigating the Bidens, Burisma, or the conditional release of financial aid to Ukraine based upon potential investigations,” Short said in a statement. “Ambassador Gordon Sondland was never alone with Vice President Pence on the September 1 trip to Poland. This alleged discussion recalled by Ambassador Sondland never happened.”

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Short added: “Multiple witnesses have testified under oath that Vice President Pence never raised Hunter Biden, former Vice President Joe Biden, CrowdStrike, Burisma, or investigations in any conversation with Ukrainians or President Zelensky before, during, or after the September 1 meeting in Poland.”

According to an aide to the vice president, Short witnessed a conversation in a secure setting between the vice president and Sondland with a small group of others, but the exchange did not take place as Sondland described it.

"We believe very strongly that this never happened," the aide said.

Pence has sought to avoid getting dragged into the impeachment scandal while publicly remaining loyal to Trump. But Sondland's testimony puts him back in the sights of House investigators.

Sondland played an unusual but expansive role in shaping Ukraine policy, even though Ukraine is not a member of the European Union. His role annoyed several other foreign policy officials, some of whom dubbed it “the Gordon problem.”

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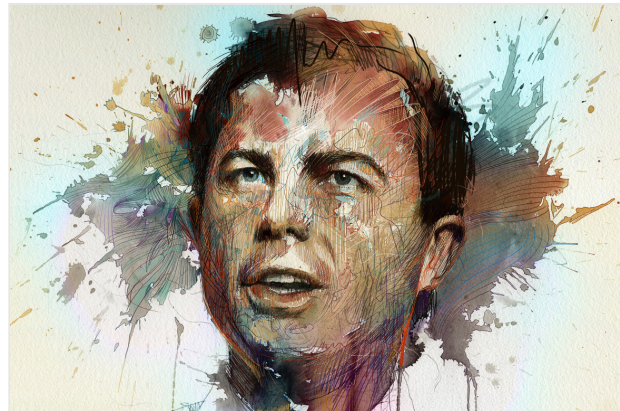
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