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Trump Impeachment Acquittal Leaves Diplomats Bracing for Impact

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President Donald Trump mostly stifled his fury toward the impeachment witnesses who detailed, over hundreds of hours of testimony, the turmoil wrought by his handling of Ukraine policy. Now that he's been acquitted of two impeachment charges, they're bracing for payback.

It's not just the witnesses -- such as Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Vindman, a National Security Council analyst -- who could face retribution for speaking out. The deeper anxiety among many career national security officials is that Trump, feeling vindicated by the Senate's acquittal, will act on long-harbored suspicions that bureaucrats at the State Department and the NSC are out to undermine his agenda.

Unburdened by impeachment, they fear that Trump could unleash on the foreign policy establishment he's long equated with what some of his advisers and supporters call the "Deep State."

The retaliation could come in any number of forms, according to numerous State Department staff who discussed their concerns about what comes next on condition of anonymity: firings or transfers, or the slashing of staff or budgets. Some fret that Secretary of State Michael Pompeo -- who throughout the impeachment process repeatedly declined to defend beleaguered department officials publicly -- won't shield them.

"Active-duty officers are scared of word getting out and then facing retribution, not just from the president but also from political ambassadors," said Lewis Lukens, the former deputy envoy in London who was removed last year by Trump's choice to lead the embassy there, New York Jets owner Woody Johnson. "The president's acquittal will reinforce in his mind that he can get rid of career people, not just at State, who he thinks are blocking or slow-rolling his agenda."

One of the most compelling narratives of the impeachment saga focused on the career officials who felt duty-bound to answer congressional subpoenas to testify at House hearings despite the State Department ordering them not to. Those officials detailed their shock at how the president and his personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, ran a parallel foreign policy centered on Trump's domestic political needs.

None of those witnesses were called before the Senate, and little about the president's attitude toward Ukraine seems to have changed.

The president says he's convinced that Ukraine, not Russia, sought to undermine the 2016 election and did so to help Democrat Hillary Clinton, not him. He still believes that Joe Biden sought to quash an investigation into his son, Hunter. And he continues to shower praise on Giuliani, who the witnesses portrayed as an interloper who disrupted policy.

“It was evil, it was corrupt, it was dirty cops, it was leakers and liars,” Trump said of his critics Thursday in a “celebration” televised from the White House. “This should never happen to another president ever.”

The result is that the disjointed policy style diplomats decried in their testimony continues. When Pompeo was in Ukraine last week, he affirmed U.S. support while declining to offer President Volodymyr Zelenskiy the invitation to visit the White House that he has long sought. Meanwhile, advisers like Giuliani continue to seek an investigation of the Bidens.

‘Severe Disconnect’

“It’s completely broken,” Kenneth Pollack, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and former National Security Council director, said of policy making under Trump. “You have this very severe disconnect between the Oval Office and the principals and the rest of the bureaucracy.”

One of the first post-trial victims of Trump’s wrath could be Vindman, who raised concerns to the top lawyer at the National Security Council over what he viewed as the president’s inappropriate demand that Ukraine investigate former Vice President Joe Biden, a Democratic rival, during a July 25 call with Zelenskiy.

The White House is weighing a plan to dismiss Vindman and would position the move as part of a broader effort to shrink the foreign policy bureaucracy, two people familiar with the matter said.

Particularly dispiriting for State Department officials during Trump’s Senate trial was the degree to which their testimony was ignored. Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, who ensured that no witnesses would be called, dismissed it as a “nonsense impeachment.” Republican Senator Lisa Murkowski said the president’s behavior was “shameful and wrong” but argued for acquittal because the Democrats’ case was built on a “rotted foundation.”

Trump’s defense team argued for an expansive view of presidential power and a vastly reduced role for civil servants, even in cases where Trump’s actions may have been inappropriate.

“Our system is somewhat unique in the very broad powers that are assigned to the Executive,” Philbin said. Career staff, he argued, “have no accountability and they have no legitimacy or authority that comes from an election by the people.”

Down to Pompeo

The question of retaliation could ultimately come down to Pompeo, the top U.S. diplomat who championed the return of “swagger” to the State Department but whose reputation took a hit during the impeachment saga.

So far the fallout from impeachment has been relatively muted. Gordon Sondland, the hotelier and U.S. ambassador to the European Union -- who testified there was a “quid pro quo” in Trump’s Ukraine dealings that everybody knew -- continues his work in Brussels. His Twitter feed is stuffed with pictures from his meetings with Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue, European parliamentarians and Venezuelan opposition leaders.

Others are also getting on with it. David Hale, the undersecretary of state for political affairs, played a crucial role lifting a block on more than \$100 million in aid to Lebanon. Philip Reeker, the acting assistant secretary for Europe, is in Europe for a conference.

Others have been less fortunate. Marie Yovanovitch, the former ambassador to Ukraine at the center of so much of the saga, retired last week. Former Pompeo adviser Michael McKinley resigned as the impeachment drama began, partly in protest of how Yovanovitch was treated. The U.S. special envoy to Ukraine, Kurt Volker, departed, and no replacement has been named. Yovanovitch's successor, acting Ambassador William Taylor, was handpicked by Pompeo but sent home days ahead of the secretary's planned visit in early January.

"If impeachment has shown us anything, it's that it will chill anyone's willingness to come forward," said Emma Ashford, a research fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington. "If they keep their heads down, maybe they'll survive. But if they stick their heads above the parapet, it could end really badly."