

Intelligencer

Democrats Should Stop Making ‘Ukraine-gate’ About Ukraine

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On Tuesday morning, Lieutenant Colonel Alexander S. Vindman strolled out of Aaron Sorkin’s imagination and into the chambers of the House Intelligence Committee.

No *West Wing* writer nor Democratic consultant could dream up a better “star witness” for the House’s impeachment inquiry. A top National Security Council adviser on Eastern Europe, Vindman is a Ukrainian-American immigrant whose gratitude for the nation that offered his family refuge from Soviet oppression is so great, he dedicated his entire adult life to its defense (and has the Purple Heart to prove it). He’s that rare breed of neo-cold warrior, whose faith in the U.S. as a guarantor of global freedom and disdain for the Kremlin as the mother of all tyrannies, is rooted in personal experience, not Tom Clancy novels. So Vindman can, with incontrovertible sincerity, end his opening statement by reassuring his immigrant father, “Do not worry, I will be fine for telling the truth.”

And he is also a firsthand witness to Donald Trump’s illicit efforts to coerce the Ukrainian government into investigating Joe Biden and the Democratic Party.

Republicans deployed a wide array of tactics to discredit Vindman and mitigate the impact of his testimony, from insinuating that he is actually a Ukrainian double agent to parsing the distinctions between a “bribe” and a “quid pro quo.” And yet, amid their blizzard of baseless conspiracy theories and non sequiturs, conservatives mustered something approaching a point: that Vindman appears to believe the national security bureaucracy’s account of America’s national interests should be immune from civilian challenge. Or, in the hysterical (and fundamentally misleading) phrasing of Daily Caller deputy editor J. Arthur Bloom, “This impeachment stuff is textbook imperial liberalism: the president is accused of thwarting U.S. foreign policy, because they think foreign policy should not be subject to political control.”

Now, there are a few problems with the claim, “Donald Trump is being impeached for nothing more than challenging the national security Establishment’s policy preferences.” The biggest, perhaps, being that Trump has actually done very little to challenge those preferences. The president does not have a principled commitment to drawing down U.S. forces in the Middle East or respecting Russia’s sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. As Republicans are wont to tell you, this administration has actually pursued a more belligerent policy toward Russia than Obama’s did. And its agenda in Ukraine is no exception: Although Trump did withhold military

aid to Kiev, he did not oppose Congress's initial appropriation of such funds, as his Democratic predecessor had.

Trump's sin isn't being an "anti-imperialist"; it's being a lawless, self-serving nihilist. The reason why the president's withholding of aid to Ukraine is an impeachable offense has nothing to do with the wisdom of U.S. policy in that region. Trump's withholding of aid is impeachable because it was an unlawful subversion of congressional authority that aimed to undermine free and fair elections in the United States. Which is to say, the president violated the sovereignty of one coequal branch of government, so as to undermine the sovereignty of the American people (by abusing the authorities of his office to entrench his own grip on power). His illicit diplomacy was, first and foremost, an attack on our democracy, not the deep state's preferred foreign policy.

Unfortunately, in his testimony, Vindman suggested the opposite. In explaining why he found Trump's requests of Zelensky alarming enough to merit reporting, Vindman said:

It is improper for the President of the United States to demand a foreign government investigate a U.S. citizen and political opponent. **It was also clear that if Ukraine pursued an investigation into the 2016 election, the Bidens, and Burisma, it would be interpreted as a partisan play. This would undoubtedly result in Ukraine losing bipartisan support, undermine U.S. national security, and advance Russia's strategic objectives in the region.** [my emphasis]

Vindman's analysis here is tendentious in several respects. For one, his assertion that an investigation of Biden would "undoubtedly" result in the Democratic Party adopting a dovish posture toward Russia is mere punditry (and given the many partisan reasons Democrats have for adopting a hawkish policy toward Vladimir Putin's regime, it's not even very good punditry). More critically, Vindman's statement suggests that one of his objectives, as an active military officer, was to safeguard "bipartisan support" for existing U.S. policy in Ukraine. Which is to say: He felt an obligation to prevent partisan conflict from producing a change in the orders he received from civilian leadership. That sentiment is genuinely anti-democratic. It's a forthright assertion that U.S. policy in the region should not be subject to democratic dispute.

This is a contemptible notion in the abstract. And it's even more so in this particular context. After all, the idea that the United States has a "national security" interest in preventing Russian hegemony in the Donbass region is not obvious, to say the least. American media paints Russia as the unambiguous aggressor in the Ukraine conflict. But as the Cato Institute's Ted Galen Carpenter has written, the truth of the matter is far more complicated:

Washington's roster of provocations is long and damaging. With strong U.S. encouragement, NATO's membership has crept inexorably eastward, reaching the western border of the Russian Federation and even incorporating the three Baltic republics, which had been constituent parts of both Czarist Russia and the Soviet Union. Beginning with George W. Bush's administration, Washington has pressed NATO to expand still farther and offer membership to both Georgia and Ukraine. The United States and its allies have greatly increased the number and scope of their military deployments and war games in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea. Barack Obama's administration interfered blatantly in Ukraine's internal political affairs to unseat a

democratically elected, pro-Russian government and replace it with a pro-Western regime in 2014. Since then, Washington has made Ukraine a de facto military ally, training and conducting joint military exercises with Ukrainian forces and concluding two significant arms sales to Kiev.

In this context of persistent Western interference in its border regions, John Mearsheimer argues that Putin's annexation of Crimea is best understood as a defensive maneuver:

Since the mid-1990s, Russian leaders have adamantly opposed NATO enlargement, and in recent years, they have made it clear that they would not stand by while their strategically important neighbor turned into a Western bastion. For Putin, the illegal overthrow of Ukraine's democratically elected and pro-Russian president — which he rightly labeled a “coup” — was the final straw. He responded by taking Crimea, a peninsula he feared would host a NATO naval base, and working to destabilize Ukraine until it abandoned its efforts to join the West.

One can argue that it was in the interests of both the American and Ukrainian people for the U.S. to aid in the removal of Ukraine's inarguably corrupt (if also inarguably democratically elected) president in 2014. And one can further insist that America has a moral obligation to spare the people of Eastern Europe from oppression at the hands of Putin's kleptocratic regime.

But then, one can also argue that America has no significant security or economic interests in who governs a relatively small, poor country on Russia's border. Or that intervening against Russia in Ukraine's civil war — when our country will never be willing to invest as much blood and treasure into that conflict as Moscow will — is only going to prolong the fighting and get more innocent people killed. Or that the U.S. government's finite resources would be better spent on more classrooms for American children than anti-tank missiles for Ukrainian soldiers.

In his statement, Vindman suggests that he does not want Americans to have that argument. He posits a Western-aligned Ukraine as self-evidently critical to our national security, and the maintenance of bipartisan support for that premise a duty of a uniformed officer.

And Democrats have tacitly affirmed his analysis. From the very beginning of its impeachment inquiry, Nancy Pelosi's caucus has framed Trump's malfeasance in Ukraine as, above all, an affront to America's “national security.” This emphasis is likely dictated by Democrats' desire to attach impeachment to a maximally nonpartisan cause. For the bulk of elected Democrats' lifetimes, countering Russian aggression has been the transpartisan national purpose par excellence. Further, the national security officials willing to blow the whistle on Trump tend to be more comfortable denouncing the president's activities on Ukraine's behalf than on Joe Biden's. Like Vindman, acting Ukraine ambassador Bill Taylor framed his objections to Trump's “quid pro quo” around the needs of the Ukrainian military, rather than the constitutional authorities of the U.S. Congress.

But Democrats should not let their witnesses (or vestigial attachment to Cold War politics) lead them astray. The notion that America has a clear national security interest in arming Ukraine is dubious on the merits. And premising the case for Trump's impeachment on that notion is politically misguided. It allows Republicans to distract from Trump's abuses of power — and paint the Democrats as hyperpartisan hypocrites — by ceaselessly noting that Barack Obama did

far less to aid the Ukrainian cause than his successor has. And it helps conservative talking heads paint Trump as the victim of sabotage from deep state actors who believe their policy objectives should not be contingent on the whims of civilian leadership.

Democrats must make clear that “Ukraine-gate” is not about Ukraine. Donald Trump’s impeachable offense was not jeopardizing the Ukrainian people’s right to self-determination; it was trying to deny us our own.