

Trump's Demand to Unmask Whistle-Blower Roils Impeachment Inquiry

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President Donald Trump and his Republican allies are dialing up pressure to unmask the Ukraine whistleblower in a breathtaking departure from how allegations of corruption and waste have been handled by both parties for years.

The push to identify the anonymous intelligence official risks deterring future whistleblowers from coming forward -- particularly in the House Democrats' current impeachment inquiry -- even as lawyers for the official are negotiating with House and Senate committees over an appearance for closed-door interviews.

The whistleblower's complaint is central to the House Democrats' current impeachment inquiry, with the potential to lead to other witnesses with first-hand knowledge of Trump's July 25 phone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

But the whistleblower's identity could also help Trump's allies identify other officials in the White House who gave the person information about the telephone conversation and efforts to "lock down" the records of the call.

Trump referred to the whistleblower as a "spy" in a closed-door meeting last week and has said several times that he deserves to know the whistleblower's identity.

"Like every American, I deserve to meet my accuser, especially when this accuser, the so-called 'whistleblower,' represented a perfect conversation with a foreign leader in a totally inaccurate and fraudulent way," he tweeted Sunday.

Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, one of Trump's closest allies in Congress, echoed the sentiment of other Republicans in a tweet: "It's imperative we find out which officials supplied the whistleblower with information to file a complaint. Who are they? What was their agenda?"

Experts say it will be difficult in this atmosphere to keep the whistleblower's identity under wraps.

"I'm not aware of a circumstance in which" a whistleblower from the intelligence community "has made allegations of this magnitude and managed to remain anonymous," said Patrick Eddington, a former CIA employee who revealed U.S. soldiers' exposure to toxins during the 1991 Gulf war. He is now a research fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think-tank.

One of the whistleblower's lawyers, Andrew Bakaj, alerted lawmakers that a \$50,000 "bounty" has been offered for information about his client's identity and warned that could make it more dangerous for others to come forward.

"The Intel Community whistleblower is entitled to anonymity," Bakaj tweeted. "Law and policy support this and the individual is not to be retaliated against. Doing so is a violation of federal law."

Senate Intelligence Vice Chairman Mark Warner, a Virginia Democrat, on Monday tweeted, "We are going to get to the bottom of the whistleblower's allegations, but we cannot lose sight of how truly dangerous the president's response to these allegations has been."

Some Republicans, including Senate Judiciary Committee member Chuck Grassley of Iowa, have long depicted themselves as vigilant protectors of whistleblowers.

Those stances are being tested now.

Earlier this year, Grassley introduced a resolution designating July 30 as National whistleblower Appreciation Day, as he has done in past years. Grassley also wrote an op-ed in late July entitled: "We need whistleblowers for good government."

He issued a statement last week saying that "it's important to respect the law and the whistleblower's confidentiality while we gather the facts of the case." But he has also attacked the whistleblower's reliance on second-hand information.

Whistleblowers are supposed to be protected from retaliation by superiors, and the law outlines the procedures. The processes in the intelligence community has some variations from those for the rest of the federal government. Their scope also depend on whether the whistleblower is a government employee, contractor or in the military.

The intelligence community's inspector general on Monday reiterated that the whistleblower complaint "appeared credible." He also rebutted allegations in conservative media outlets -- and echoed by Trump and some Republicans -- that the process had been recently changed to allow complaints based on second-hand information.

Inspector General Michael Atkinson said in a statement that the whistleblower followed correct procedures in submitting forms to lodge his or her complaint.

"The Disclosure of Urgent Concern form the complainant submitted on Aug. 12, 2019, is the same form the ICIG has had in place since May 24, 2018," Atkinson said in the statement. References to first-hand knowledge on previous versions of the whistleblower forms were removed because they "could be read - incorrectly - as suggesting that whistleblowers must possess first-hand information in order to file an urgent concern complaint with the congressional intelligence committees."

Still, in this matter, Atkinson added, "the whistleblower stated on the form that he or she possessed both firsthand and other information."

Samuel Everett Dewey, a former congressional lawyer who led investigations for House and Senate committees said that even if most people take the view that the whistleblower has legitimate protections under the law -- questions remain over safeguards for people who spoke to him or her.

"Did the people who had this information follow the whistleblower law? Did they have clearance to share the information? It's one thing if you have the information first-hand," he said. "But you should not be telling a friend about it who does not have a need to know. Shouldn't you be filing your own whistleblower complaint?"

Dewey and Eddington said they expect that congressional investigators will try to talk to each and every one of the whistleblower's sources, to get the information the whistleblower purports to have, first-hand -- even if the memo of the Trump's telephone call with the Ukraine president did mostly bear out how the whistleblower described it.

There also may be a long court battle ahead if the White House invokes executive privilege to prevent testimony from officials who work in the Executive Office of the President.

"That's when thing will get really interesting," says Eddington. And with this deeper investigation and potential long legal battles ahead, it unlikely the whistleblower's own identity can be kept under wraps.

"This is of course a unique case," said Eddington. "Usually, the allegation is aimed at people inside the whistleblower's own organization. In this case, the allegations are aimed at the president of the United States."

Based on that, he said, "Unless this person is under actual official cover -- and no claim to that effect has surfaced so far -- I think it will be impossible for this person to remain anonymous."