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Fast-Moving Impeachment Probe has Speaker Pelosi Closely Monitoring Public Perception

Lindsey Graham calls inquiry a "nothing burger"



Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky, left, with President Trump at the United Nations.

PHOTO: UKRAINE PRESIDENTIAL PRESS SERVI/SHUTTERSTOCK

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Updated Sept. 30, 2019 11:47 am ET

WASHINGTON—After resisting a formal impeachment process for months, the mounting pressure from moderate lawmakers and others in favor of moving forward became too much for House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. She announced a formal inquiry into impeachment proceedings last Tuesday evening, sparking a flurry of activity that set the process in motion.

The precipitating news event that tipped the scales was the disclosure that during a July 25 call, President Trump pressured Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky to investigate the activities of 2020 Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden and his son Hunter.



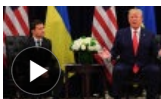
Hunter Biden held a board position with a Ukrainian natural gas extraction company, Burisma Holdings Ltd., during the period the former vice president led the U.S. efforts to root out bureaucratic corruption and support the fragile Ukrainian government after a Russian-backed invasion. Some anticorruption advocates feared Hunter's position would undermine the elder Mr. Biden's work (Burisma Holdings was under investigation). The White House said at the time there was nothing wrong with Hunter Biden's work, and that it didn't create a conflict of interest since he was a private person. Mr. Trump suggested that Joe Biden pushed for the firing of Ukraine's general prosecutor, Viktor Shokin, in March 2016 to stop an investigation into Burisma.

Ukrainian officials and U.S. Intelligence have said that several entities, including the IMF, G-7 and EBRD, were calling for the ouster of Mr. Shokin, due to corruption and incompetency, with Mr. Biden acting as its champion for political, not personal reasons.

A week before his call with Mr. Zelensky, Mr. Trump directed his acting chief of staff, Mick Mulvaney, to put a hold on nearly \$400 million in aid to Ukraine. Lawmakers are continuing to investigate whether there was a link between the request that Ukraine investigate Mr. Biden, and the administration's decision to put a hold on the funds.

Ukrainian leader Mr. Zelensky has said he felt no pressure to investigate Mr. Biden.

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The fast-moving developments surrounding the proceedings, have both sides scrambling to defend their positions.

After Mr. Trump released a transcript of the phone call, Republican lawmakers, pointed out that the conversation lacked the explicit quid pro quo that Democrats had asserted, since there was no mention of aid or withholding it.



“This whole issue is a nothing burger,” said Lindsey Graham (R-SC), Chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee. “The Democrats have been unsuccessfully investigating President Trump since he won the election, and this latest effort will backfire on them too.”

Graham and others believe the conversation between Mr. Trump and his Ukrainian counterpart falls within the acceptable parameters of confidential diplomatic communication between the president and a foreign leader. Democrats disagree. Rep. Adam Schiff (D., Calif.), the House Intelligence Committee chairman, compared the call to a mob-style shakedown. While addressing the press and referring to a copy of the transcript, Schiff paraphrased the contents of the call, leading to criticism that he was intentionally releasing misleading information. He later told reporters that he was using parody to indicate how things might have gone down.






For her part, Speaker Pelosi is likely to continue to be a modulator on the impeachment process, closely watching what the public might perceive as a rush to judgment. Mrs. Pelosi saw this process played out in the 1990s when Republicans impeached Mr. Clinton in the House. Democrats stopped the former president from being convicted, but the public saw the whole process as being too political. In the end, House Speaker Newt Gingrich, a Republican who pushed for impeachment, lost his job, and Mr. Clinton finished his term and went out on a high note of popularity. Speaker Pelosi knows the risks, but the pressure to move down this uncertain path, simply became too much to ignore. “The President must be held accountable,” she said. “No one is above the law.”

The number of House lawmakers publicly supporting an impeachment probe increased to 218, the figure needed for a House vote on the investigation. A vote on the matter could take place by late October or early November, though Mrs. Pelosi broke with precedent from previous impeachment proceedings by not calling for a vote before the formal announcement. She's indicated that a vote is not necessary, and has reclassified the six current House probes as falling under the umbrella of the impeachment inquiry.

“It’s really sad to think a president would perform an impeachable offense,” she said. “It’s hard.”

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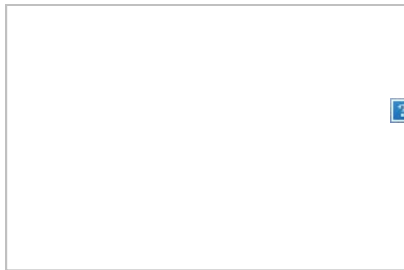
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The whistleblower at the center of the impeachment probe is set to testify in the House, once his attorneys receive the appropriate security clearance. The whistleblower, whose identify has not been made public, works for the Central Intelligence Agency, The Wall Street Journal confirmed last week.

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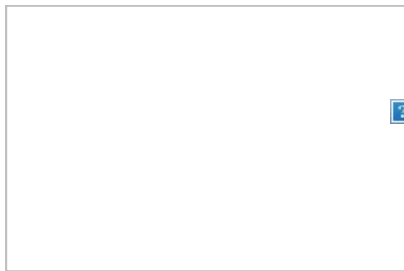
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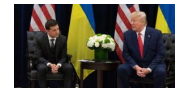
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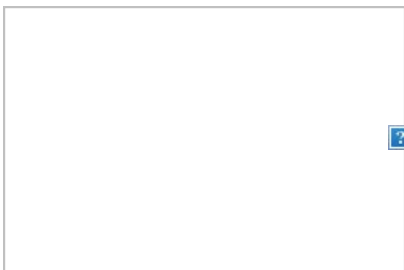
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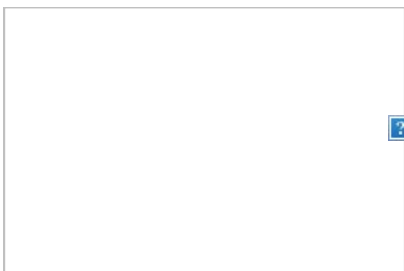
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