



TO: Reporters and Editors
FROM: Kate Bedingfield, Deputy Campaign Manager and Communications Director
Tony Blinken, Senior Advisor
RE: The Imperative for Honest Coverage of Trump's Ukraine Conspiracy Theory
DATE: January 20, 2020

Donald Trump is the only American president to have weaponized foreign and national security policy in an attempt to coerce a foreign country into lying about a rival presidential candidate.

This effort by President Trump is the reason he is now the third U.S. president to be impeached. His objective was to pressure the Ukrainian government into spreading a malicious and conclusively debunked conspiracy theory: that Vice President Biden engaged in wrongdoing when he executed official United States policy to remove a corrupt prosecutor from office. This theory, which The New Yorker has [explained](#) originated from disgraced "journalist" John Solomon, with the help of Breitbart editor Peter Schweizer, alleges that Biden was in fact trying to stop the investigation of Burisma, a Ukrainian natural gas company on whose board his son served.

According to the White House's [memorandum](#) of President Trump's call with President Zelensky, Trump urged his counterpart: "There's a lot talk about Biden's son, that Biden stopped the prosecution and a lot of people want to find out about that so whatever you can do with the Attorney General would be great. Biden went around bragging that he stopped the prosecution so if you can look into it ... It sounds horrible to me."

Virtually every major media organization has definitively debunked this accusation. As The Wall Street Journal [wrote](#): "On the call, Mr. Trump raised a discredited claim: that as vice president, Mr. Biden called for the ouster of Ukraine's prosecutor general to protect his son, who sat on the board of a Ukrainian company whose owner the prosecutor had investigated. The prosecutor was the target of widespread criticism from the U.S. and other countries and had in fact hampered the investigation into the company, Burisma Group."

Since Trump was exposed debasing his office in an unprecedented way, his defenders have attempted to distract from his malfeasance and smear Biden by repeating this now comprehensively-debunked conspiracy theory.

Republicans will play this broken record over and over again during the Senate trial. Based on the immense volume of independent sources that have refuted these claims, we believe that, for the purpose of not misinforming readers and viewers and not engaging in partisan propaganda, any media organization referencing, reporting on, or repeating these claims must state clearly and unambiguously that they have been discredited and debunked by authoritative sources -- including America's European allies, the IMF, leading figures of Ukraine's anti-corruption community and even Republican members of the House and Senate and Trump Administration officials testifying under oath.

It is not sufficient to say the allegations are “unsubstantiated” or that “no evidence has emerged to support them.” Not only is there “no evidence” for Republicans’ main argument against the Vice President -- there is a mountain of evidence that actively debunks it. And it is malpractice to ignore that truth.

Over the past year, both before and after President Trump's attempt to force President Zelensky to act as a disingenuous extension of his re-election campaign was publicized, investigative reporting, interviews with experts, and sworn testimony have debunked the wild-eyed accusations that Trump, Rudy Giuliani, and their allies have levelled at Vice President Biden.

Fact checkers across the mainstream media have had a field day with this conspiracy theory.

For example, as The New York Times's fact checking team [writes](#), Biden's "actions were in line with United States foreign policy as well as the stated positions of Senate Republicans, European Union leaders and the International Monetary Fund, all of whom were calling for the ouster of the prosecutor general."

According to the [Associated Press](#), it's "incorrect to say that Biden, now a 2020 Democratic presidential candidate, pressed to have the prosecutor fired while the prosecutor was investigating Burisma, the energy company in Ukraine where Biden's son Hunter sat on the board of directors. In fact, by the time Biden came out against the prosecutor, the investigation into the company was dormant. Biden, among other international officials, was pressing for a more aggressive investigation of corruption in Ukraine, not a softer one."

The Washington Post's Fact Checker has also [weighed in](#) on this many times: "The prosecutor general, Viktor Shokin, let that investigation and others go dormant, and the United States and its allies decided he was not effective in his job and in fact let corruption flourish."

In a deep dive, the Los Angeles Times [found](#), "Current and former U.S. and Ukrainian officials say Burisma had been under scrutiny for alleged improper acquisition of licenses, a probe unrelated to Hunter Biden's position on the board. The investigation went dormant, they said, before Biden and a group of U.S. allies pushed for Shokin's ouster in 2015, arguing he was turning a blind eye to corruption."

NBC News even [labelled](#) the notion that “Biden acted corruptly as vice president to benefit his son” one of the biggest false claims Trump made in 2019.

As former U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul, who was himself the target of Kremlin-run smear campaigns, has [said](#): “Former vice president Joe Biden was not freelancing on behalf of his son when implementing U.S. government policy — supported by the International Monetary Fund, the European Union, Republican senators, and the Ukrainian anti-corruption nongovernmental-organization community — to seek the ouster of corrupt Prosecutor General Viktor Shokin.” McFaul went on to warn that “Neutral reporting on false claims amplifies disinformation” and to advocate that “lies...be treated as such.”

As demonstrated above, the charge at the heart of President Trump’s, Rudy Giuliani’s, and other Republicans’ attacks against the Vice President in the context of impeachment has been debunked by thorough examinations conducted by the independent press, by the Ukrainian anti-corruption community, and by current and former government officials in the United States and elsewhere.

In fact, in one of the most dramatic moments of the House impeachment proceedings, Kurt Volker, who President Trump appointed to be his lead envoy to Ukraine and was requested as a witness by Republicans, [told](#) Congress, “The allegations against Vice President Biden are self-serving and non-credible.” He also called them out for what they are: “conspiracy theories.”

It is not “Democrats” or “the Bidens” who say the GOP’s claims in this regard are wrong - it is everyone who isn’t gaslighting for Donald Trump. Not only is there no evidence for the GOP’s malicious attacks on the Vice President, those attacks have been actively debunked. To omit that from reporting is handing Republicans a partisan propaganda windfall that does a disservice to the purpose of independent, fact-driven reporting.

No political entity - not the the Republican Party nor the Democratic Party, not the Biden campaign nor the Trump campaign - can ever be allowed to act as your editors

But to fail to make clear that the conspiracy theory and false accusations about Joe Biden have been comprehensively disproven, to artificially prop-up these egregious lies based on the “principle” that if partisans make accusations, they have to be treated as legitimate regardless of the facts, is to make you an enabler of misinformation.

The truth must drive the way that information is reported to the public -- especially in this era of gaslighting, rampant lies and disinformation. Now more than ever, the American people rely on the media to sort fact from fiction and truth from lies.