



The inauguration of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in May, with the American delegation. From left: Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, Joseph Pennington, Kurt Volker, Ukrainian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Olena Zerkal, Zelinsky, Rick Perry, Gordon Sondland, Ukrainian first lady Olena Zelenska, and Sen. Ron Johnson (U.S. Government/Rick Perry)



by Michael Sean Winters

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@michaelswinters](#)

Join the Conversation

November 22, 2019

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

"Et tu, Brute?" Ever since these words were [first uttered](#) on a London stage on Sept. 21, 1599, they quickly became the most famous Latin words in the English language. Lately, in a different kind of drama, they have been joined at the top of famous Latin words by these: quid pro quo.

On Wednesday, Nov. 20, in Ambassador Gordon Sondland's testimony to the House Committee considering the impeachment of President Donald Trump, the two Latin phrases came together. [In his opening testimony](#), Sondland said: "Was there a quid pro quo? The answer is yes." And he went further, saying, "Everyone was in the loop. It was no secret." He might have added: Last one to the lawyer for the committee is going to spend a long time in jail.



Ambassador Gordon Sondland (U.S. Department of State)

The testimony directly contradicted the president's many assertions that there was no quid pro quo. And it contradicted the claims of others, like Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, that whatever Rudy Giuliani said or did not say to Ukrainian officials, they knew of no quid pro quo.

It did more than that. Sondland can scarcely be dismissed by Fox News anchors Sean Hannity and Laura Ingraham as part of the "deep state" out to get Trump. A

businessman from Washington state, not D.C., [Sondland donated \\$1 million](#) to the Trump inauguration committee. Trump, and nobody else, appointed him to the prestigious post of ambassador to the European Union, a post that comes with tony digs in Brussels, digs he has made even more posh with a taxpayer-funded renovation that [included adding a Jacuzzi and a chef's kitchen](#), the kind of real estate improvements Trump can wrap his head around.

Sondland's testimony, therefore, must be seen by Trump as a betrayal, a stab in the back. When Sondland first emerged as a key figure in the effort to get the president of Ukraine to announce an investigation into a company for which Hunter Biden was a board member, the president said, "[I hardly know the gentleman](#)." On Wednesday, he continued to try to distance himself from Sondland: "[I don't know him very well](#)."

This is the president's usual modus operandi: When a member of his team gets jammed up, instead of standing by them, he distances himself from them. [He did it with Paul Manafort](#), his former campaign chairman. He did it with his longtime lawyer Michael Cohen. Loyalty is a one-way street with Trump. Can't say I have much sympathy for people who expected anything different from the narcissist in chief.

The president likes to flail. He tweets insults and attacks at anyone he perceives as a threat. He demeans whole classes of people — immigrants, blacks, women, the handicapped — when he feels the need to rile up his base or stroke his own ego. He is belligerent, unprincipled, indecent. This we know. Yet, he remains enormously popular with the base of the Republican Party, a fact that lends a double meaning to the use of the word "base" in this context.

Advertisement

So there is something delicious in the prospect of Trump being felled by one of his own. President Barack Obama did not appoint Sondland to his high post. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi did not call him at a restaurant to strategize. Congressman Adam Schiff did not explain that there would be no meeting at the White House for the Ukrainian president until he made an announcement that he had opened an investigation into the Bidens. Et tu, Gordon?

And in this sequel to "Julius Caesar," there is no Mark Antony.

I spent most of Wednesday afternoon and evening watching Fox News. Former Independent Counsel Ken Starr [tried to split some hairs](#) to create an exculpatory explanation of events. Hosts Bill Hemmer and Sandra Smith did their best to second Starr's suspicions. God bless Chris Wallace for reminding his colleagues what was glaringly obvious: The headline of the day was Sondland confirming there was a quid pro quo. It was laughable watching the rest of the Fox News crew try to explain that the sun doesn't rise in the east, or something like that.

It was not laughable watching the Fox News commentators try to demean men and women who have served this country well, men like Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman and former Ambassador Marie Yovanovitch. The [smear against Vindman on Laura Ingraham's show](#), that he was guilty of espionage, was only the ugliest of the ugly.

Vindman's and Yovanovitch's testimony showed them to be the kind of people any country would be lucky to have working on its behalf. It is not every day you hear applause in a committee hearing, but both of these patriots spoke so eloquently, they provoked such applause during and after their testimony respectively, [here](#) and [here](#).

I predict that in the days ahead, and on the advice of counsel, more and more administration officials will come clean and tell the truth. Who would go to jail for Donald Trump? More and more congressional Republicans will make guarded statements, at least until the date to file a primary challenge has passed. And Fox News hosts will squirm and twist in the wind.

Here, we see justice. I do not pretend to understand how the president's mind works, but of all the people to blame for his current predicament besides his own mobster-like approach to the conduct of foreign affairs, it is the geniuses at Fox News who have brought the president to this conundrum. They broadcast these bizarre conspiracy theories again and again. The president saw an opportunity and his famous indifference to the truth offered no caution about embracing this nuttiness. That is how he came to this point. It is sweet justice to see the president and his Fox News cronies hoisted on their own petulance.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

Editor's note: Don't miss out on Michael Sean Winters' latest. [Sign up](#) and we'll let you know when he publishes new [Distinctly Catholic](#) columns.