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DC Wrap: Johnson, Murphy send letters on Ukraine visit; Pence visits Marinette

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Welcome to our weekly DC Wrap, where we write about Wisconsin's congressional delegation. Sign up here to receive the newsletter directly.

Note: There will be no DC Wrap product next week. Happy Thanksgiving!

Quotes of the week

"If you talk to these folks, they frequently would even prefer the work center, and it offends me that anybody would say we should shut down the work center with all these happy, productive people because we arrogantly know what will make them happier."
– U.S. Rep. Glenn Grothman testifying before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights on the 14(c) provision, which permits subminimum wages for employees who are disabled.

"As they've gotten more sophisticated in trying to bend the rules to their favor, we know that we need to empower our Department of Commerce to crack down."
– U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin discussing her proposed legislation to reduce unfair trade practices from China and other trade partners.

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This week's news

— Senate Foreign Relations Committee members U.S. Sens. Ron Johnson and Chris Murphy this week sent dueling letters to House investigators recounting their September visit to Ukraine.

The Oshkosh Republican in a Monday letter to two House Republicans questioned the motives of a key impeachment witness and suggested there is an ongoing effort by some in the Trump administration to undermine the president. Then Murphy, D-Conn., in a Tuesday letter to leading House Dems said he wanted to provide "additional information and important context."

Johnson recounted in the 10-page missive to House Republicans Jim Jordan, of Ohio, and Devin Nunes, of California, his recollections of conversations with both the president and Ukrainian leaders about U.S. military aid that had been put on hold. The allegation that the president wanted Ukraine to investigate Joe Biden's son before the money is released is one of the key issues in the ongoing impeachment proceedings.

Johnson wrote the letter after Jordan and Nunes asked him to recount what he knows of the events between Ukraine and the U.S. Johnson wrote President Donald Trump told him "I would never do that" when asked if there was "some kind of special arrangement" where Ukraine would take action and the hold would be lifted.

When the president asked him where he'd heard that suggestion, Johnson said it was Gordon Sondland, the U.S. ambassador to the European Union. The president responded he "barely knew him."

Johnson added there were no indications from Ukrainian President Zelensky or other country officials that they felt pressured to open an investigation into the Bidens in exchange for the aid being lifted.

But Murphy offered a different interpretation in his letter to House Intelligence Chairman Adam Schiff, D-Calif., and House Oversight acting Chairwoman Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y.

"I interpreted Zelensky's answer to my question as a concession of the premise of my question — that he was receiving improper overtures from (Trump's personal attorney Rudy) Giuliani to interfere in the 2020 election," Murphy wrote. "He did not

contradict the facts I laid out in my question… To me, this was confirmation that Zelensky was indeed feeling the pressure I described."

Johnson also suggested Army Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, who works for the National Security Council, was part of a group of bureaucrats who resent the president's "unorthodox style and his intrusion onto their 'turf,'"Johnson wrote.

Vindman, who has been a key witness in the impeachment proceedings, may "fit the profile" of those looking to undercut Trump, Johnson suggested.

It is wrong for administration staff to believe they set U.S. foreign policy, rather than the president, Johnson wrote.

"It also would be wrong for those individuals to step outside of their chain of command — or established whistleblower procedures — to undermine the president's policy," Johnson wrote. "If those working for the president don't feel they can implement the president's policies in good conscience, they should follow Gen. James Mattis' example and resign."

But Murphy defended Vindman, writing there was no evidence to support Johnson's characterization that State Department officials wanted to "sabotage" Trump's foreign policy agenda.

"In all my years working on Ukraine policy, I have never witnessed any Administration officials actively working to undermine the policy of the President," Murphy said in his letter.

The letter included Johnson's recollection of a conversation with Trump as he tried to persuade the president to release the aide to Ukraine. Johnson wrote that Trump wasn't prepared to lift the hold on the aid and complained the country was "thoroughly corrupt" and Europe didn't do its fair share of providing military aid. The president then recounted a conversation with German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

"Ron, I talk to Angela and asked her, 'Why don't you fund these things,' and she tells me, 'Because we know you will.' We're schmucks, Ron. We're schmucks," Johnson wrote.

State Democratic Party spokeswoman Courtney Beyer knocked Johnson's letter.

"Ron Johnson has once again put party over country — instead of giving his candid accounting of events, Ron Johnson used this letter to attack the integrity of career civil servants, go on irrelevant partisan rants, and selectively recall the conversations he had related to Ukraine," she said.

Read the Johnson letter:
https://www.wispolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/191118Johnson.pdf

Read the Murphy letter:
https://www.wispolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/191119-Murphy-Ukraine.pdf

— Vice President Mike Pence in Marinette touted the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement trade deal as "a win for Wisconsin workers and a win for American jobs."

In a wide-ranging address at Marinette Marine on Wednesday, Pence portrayed the Trump administration as a booster of the shipbuilder and noted the president aimed to expand the U.S. naval fleet to 350 ships.

"And you're going to build a lot of it right here in Marinette," he said.

He also praised President Trump's work to "revive the American economy," highlighting strong unemployment numbers and the administration's focus on vocational training.

The 36-minute speech centered on trade. The former Indiana governor and congressman said the administration has consistently "fought for free and fair trade."

He contrasted the USMCA with the North American Free Trade Agreement, a deal negotiated by former GOP President George H.W. Bush and ratified under former Dem President Bill Clinton. Pence said NAFTA meant that "tens of thousands of factories close(d) in this country and jobs open(ed) south of the border."

Unlike NAFTA, Pence said, USMCA would be a win for Wisconsin's manufacturing and dairy economies, claiming the state "would increase its exports of milk and cheese by 68,000 tons" if the trade deal become law.

Dennis Delie, the treasurer for the Wisconsin chapter of AFL-CIO and a United Steelworker, countered the agreement “falls woefully short of labor law reform, environmental protections and most importantly of all enforcement provisions.”

“The agreement can say whatever it wants, but if there aren’t effective enforcement provisions in that agreement, it’s nothing more than a piece of paper that isn’t going to create a whole lot of change, ” he said at a state Dem Party-organized news conference in Green Bay shortly before Pence touched down in Wisconsin.

Beyond those criticisms, Delie slammed the proposal as a handout to prescription drug makers, saying the agreement “has essentially been hijacked by the big pharmaceutical companies.”

“That didn’t need to be part of this agreement, but this again is a payback to big pharma,” he said. “So much for Donald Trump’s promise to lower drug prices.”

Still, Pence chided House Dems and Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif. He said they “spend all their time on endless investigations” and “a partisan impeachment” while refusing to bring the trade deal to the floor for ratification.

“The truth is if they bring it to the floor of the Congress, it’s going to pass and it’s going to be a win for Wisconsin and a win for American workers,” he said. “I came here today to say the time has come for Democrats in Congress to put politics aside, put America first and pass the USMCA.”

He praised U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Oshkosh, for “leading the charge for the USMCA in the United States Senate” and said other Republican members of Wisconsin’s congressional delegation are “standing with the president every single day on the USMCA and everything else.”

But Pence warned that with a presidential election looming on the horizon, “the clock is ticking” to ratify the deal.

“If you think Congress has a hard time getting anything done when it’s not an election year, just wait for an election year to come,” he said.

He urged the assembled crowd and the “literally tens of Americans that might be watching this on CSPAN” to call U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin, D-Madison, and U.S. Rep. Ron Kind and express support for the trade deal.

“Tell them Wisconsin and America need the USMCA and we needed this year,” Pence said. “You call, it’ll make a difference.”

— U.S. Reps. Gwen Moore and Mark Pocan slammed the Trump administration after Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced the United States no longer considers Israeli settlements on the West Bank to be a violation of international law.

Pompeo’s announcement, in which he said opposition to settlements “hasn’t advanced the cause of peace,” received strong pushback with many Dems arguing that the reversal of the decades-old U.S. policy will promote instability in the region. It also comes at a time when Israelis are struggling to form a government after a close election.

In response to the announcement, both Moore and Pocan released statements urging the administration to maintain opposition to the settlements.

“I am troubled by the State Department’s decision, which moves the U.S. further away from being seen as an honest broker, takes the Israeli and Palestinian people further away from achieving a two-state solution and turns decades of U.S. foreign policy on its head,” Moore said in her release.

Pocan, D-Town of Vermont, called for the passage of legislation that would formally reaffirm opposition to the West Bank settlements. The bill would also endorse a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

“This announcement is one in a series of destabilizing decisions made by this administration—from cutting congressionally approved humanitarian funding to Gaza and the West Bank to moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem—these actions don’t bring us any closer to peace,” Pocan said in his statement.

Republican members of Wisconsin’s congressional delegation have not yet released public comments on Pompeo’s announcement.

See Moore’s statement:
https://gwenmoore.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=4401

See Pocan’s statement:

https://pocan.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/pocan-opposes-pompeo-reversing-policy-on-west-bank-settlements

— U.S. Rep. Mike Gallagher introduced legislation to address barriers for women entering the trucking industry, saying the bill would explore why women have been "greatly underrepresented" in the industry.

The Green Bay Republican noted that women represent under 10 percent of truck drivers and said his bill would develop formal education, training and mentorship programs for women seeking employment in the truck industry.

The bill would create a Women of Trucking Advisory Board tasked with implementing these programs.

"Small businesses across Northeast Wisconsin rely on a healthy trucking industry to ship their goods, and as trucking companies struggle to find and retain workers, it's critical we learn why women have been greatly underrepresented in this industry," Gallagher said in a release.

U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin joined U.S. Sen. Jerry Moran, R-Kan., in introducing companion legislation in the Senate.

"I'm proud to lead this bipartisan effort with Senator Moran because more job opportunities for Wisconsin women will lead to more economic security for working families," Baldwin said in a release.

See Gallagher's release:
https://gallagher.house.gov/media/press-releases/gallagher-introduces-bill-support-women-trucking

See Baldwin's release:
https://www.baldwin.senate.gov/press-releases/promoting-women-in-trucking-workforce-act

— U.S. Rep. Jim Sensenbrenner introduced legislation that would provide law enforcement officials $40 million in grants for sensor networks that

notify law enforcement when and where a gunshot is detected

“Gunfire detection technology has proven to be successful in many cities across the U.S., including in my home state of Wisconsin. It’s time we empower law enforcement officers in other locations to implement this technology so they may better protect their communities,” Sensenbrenner said in a release.

The City of Milwaukee has utilized a gunfire detection system called ShotSpotter since 2010, and in 2014 received a $175,000 grant to expand upon the technology.

“Public safety is my top priority and ShotSpotter is a proven effective tool in our crime-fighting efforts,” Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett said following the grant allocation.

According to Sensenbrenner’s office, the city of Milwaukee has seen a 38 percent decrease in the amount of gunshots fired in areas where the technology was used from 2017 to 2018.

Sensenbrenner is joined on the bill by U.S. Rep. Robin Kelly, D-Ill.

“This bipartisan bill will help bring modern solutions to some of the longstanding challenges facing violence-plagued areas, and I’m grateful to Congresswoman Kelly for her leadership and cooperation on this effort,” Sensenbrenner said.

See Sensenbrenner’s release:
https://sensenbrenner.house.gov/press-releases-statements?ID=7485F966-CEE7-42A4-8F95-AE6D8EA7C7DA

See Barrett’s 2014 statement:
https://city.milwaukee.gov/Directory/mayor/News/2014-News/011614-ShotSpotter.htm#.XdVrDzJKhbU

— U.S. Rep. Ron Kind urged House leaders to vote on a bill that would fund maintenance and repairs for parks and public lands.

Joined by his co-chair of the National Parks Caucus, U.S. Rep. Will Hurd, R-Texas, Kind’s proposed bipartisan legislation would allocate $6.5 billion to restorative efforts in national parks and lands.

“Like many Americans, some of my favorite memories center around trips my family and I have taken to our national parks,” Kind said in a release. “National parks carry a unique natural, historic, and economic importance to our country, and without congressional action to address the needs of our national parks, these lands will suffer and repairs will become more costly.”

The La Crosse Dem said aging infrastructure and inconsistent maintenance funding for public lands have placed greater necessity on the proposed legislation.

“The Restore Our Parks and Public Lands Act is a bipartisan and fiscally sensible solution that will fix the backlog of maintenance, address staffing needs, and increase accessibility so that future generations are able to continue to enjoy our national treasures,” Kind said.

See the release:
https://kind.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/reps-kind-and-hurd-request-house-leadership-bring-restore-our-parks-and

Posts of the week

> The Special Olympics is a fantastic organization that enriches the lives of not only the athletes, but everyone involved. I was happy to support their 15th annual holiday cookie and candy sale in #Oshkosh. pic.twitter.com/x0qsLPUkno
>
> — Rep. Glenn Grothman (@RepGrothman) November 16, 2019

> Walked in the cold rain to the Lincoln Memorial last night. The view of the Washington Monument is beautiful at night. pic.twitter.com/wwYvFMEewz
>
> — Bryan Steil (@RepBryanSteil) November 19, 2019

If you're looking for a great cheeseburger in Wisconsin visit Mickey-Lu Bar-B-Q! Thank you for letting @RepGallagher and me stop by for lunch, we loved meeting everyone! pic.twitter.com/0vn94y7KVK

— Vice President Mike Pence Archived (@VP45) November 21, 2019

Cheeseburgers are always the right call in Wisconsin. Thanks for dinner @VP! https://t.co/XXHKo5PywM

— Rep. Gallagher Press Office (@RepGallagher) November 20, 2019

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Congressman's donations tied to industries he oversees
Glenn Grothman On Capping Payday Loan Interest Rates
Rep. Pocan emphasizes progressive caucus's commitment to Palestine
'He's in Deeper Water Than Most': G.O.P. Senator at Center of Impeachment Inquiry
GOP Congressman says 'serial rapists' have more rights than Trump in impeachment inquiry