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On Politics

How to Manage Trump, According to a Diplomat He Fired in Anger

Gordon Sondland's memoir is a textured look at the trick of wrangling a man who refuses to be wrangled.

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Gordon Sondland, the former U.S. ambassador to the European Union, says he won't back Donald Trump, his onetime boss, if he runs in 2024. Stephanie Keith for The New York Times

By **Blake Hounshell**

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When Gordon Sondland met Donald Trump for the first time, at the 1988 Republican convention in New Orleans, the Manhattan real estate tycoon blew him off — in favor, Trump confessed to him later, of somebody more important: Gov. John Sununu of New Hampshire.

Nearly three decades later, Sondland reminded Trump that he had been a real jerk back then, using another word that cannot be repeated in a family newsletter.

“He says, ‘Are we over it?’” Sondland recounted in a recent interview. “And I said, ‘Well, I’m here, aren’t I?’ He goes, ‘Good point.’”

Sondland's reminder was the kind of bracing candor that Trump, who famously demands total fealty from his underlings, has rarely experienced. By the second time they met, Sondland had somewhat miraculously become Trump's ambassador to the European Union, and he had learned a few tricks about dealing with his mercurial new boss. Among them: Treat him like a peer and he'll take you more seriously.

It was a position for which Sondland, a wealthy Portland, Ore.-based hotelier and the self-made son of a Jewish couple who escaped the Holocaust by fleeing Germany, had no obvious credentials. The job would thrust him into the center of a slapdash scheme orchestrated by Rudolph Giuliani, the president's personal lawyer, and would earn him a starring role in the Ukraine impeachment drama of 2019.

To the chagrin of Trump and his inner circle, Sondland [testified to Congress](#) that there was indeed a “quid pro quo” linking a U.S. demand that the Ukrainian government investigate Hunter Biden to an official meeting between Trump and Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky. Sondland was [summarily fired](#) months later.

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His improbable political appointment had come about even after Sondland, a longtime Republican donor who had initially backed Jeb Bush for president, denounced [Trump's belittlement of Khizr Khan](#), the father of a Muslim U.S. soldier who died in Iraq. Sondland reversed course after Trump's victory in 2016 and donated \$1 million to his inaugural committee, thus securing a cherished dream: becoming an ambassador

Sondland is now promoting one of the most intriguing memoirs of the Trump era, a book that is at times self-abasing and at others self-aggrandizing and that serves as a how-to manual for upwardly managing the most unruly of employers. The book, “The Envoy: Mastering the Art of Diplomacy with Trump and the World,” written with a ghostwriter’s help, comes out next month.

At a restaurant in New York, Sondland and I spoke about his rags-to-riches story, his assessment of Trump and his tumultuous tenure as the president’s man in Europe.

He wrote the book, he said, to correct the impression “that I was just a rich donor who wrote a big check about an ambassadorship and then went to Europe and basically stumbled about.”

The common characterization of Sondland as a bumbling “doofus,” as he put it, irks him, and he rattled off his proudest achievements: pushing European countries to rally behind Ukraine, persuading them to support the [Abraham Accords](#) between Israel and several Arab countries and warning of the dangers of Huawei, the Chinese tech company.

The actions that got Sondland slapped with a congressional subpoena, he said, were in the service of U.S. foreign policy goals that went all the way to the top. He bristled at criticism from former colleagues that he was running a “rogue foreign policy,” since he was taking orders, he said, from the secretary of state and the president.

‘You have to feed that ego’

The book is most compelling, though, when Sondland details how he sought to win Trump’s ear. It’s a perhaps unintentionally revealing look at why so many people agreed to work for someone unlike any other president in American history — a mix of overconfidence, rationalization and, in some cases, patriotism.

The book is replete with tales. In one, Sondland walks into the Oval Office to find the president obsessing over which country music song to play at his rallies (“Never mind,” Sondland writes, “that the Oval Office sounds like a country western bar, and we’re supposed to be prepping for a visit with a foreign leader”). In another, he yells at Trump for not sharing the Tic Tacs the president routinely scarfed down (“When you call him out on not acting like a normal person, it catches him off guard, and then he kind of likes it. People do it too infrequently”).

At one point, Sondland compares working for Trump to staying at an all-inclusive resort. “You’re thrilled when you arrive, but things start to go downhill fast,” he writes. “And eventually, you begin to wonder why you agreed to the deal in the first place.”

Where Sondland’s book differs from other Trump-era tell-alls is the evident delight he takes in how he played on the vanity and insecurities of the most powerful man in the world, treating Trump as a management puzzle to be unlocked.

Sondland rips several Republican politicians with 2024 ambitions — namely, Senators Josh Hawley and Ted Cruz — as “sycophants” who merely told Trump what he wanted to hear, not what he needed to hear.

“To deal with a bully, you have to stand up to him,” he writes. “To deal with an egomaniac, you have to feed that ego. To deal with a decision maker who sees black and white and not shades of gray in every decision, you have to give him two options and paint one of them — the one you want — as obviously far more attractive.”

Scoring a ride in Trump’s limo

Perhaps the best example of Sondland’s maneuvering in action is that second encounter with Trump, at the outset of a 2018 NATO summit meeting in Belgium.

Waiting to greet the 45th president on the tarmac in Brussels, Sondland ignored the admonishment of a White House advance official as he sought to finagle a ride in “the Beast,” the armored presidential limo.

From what Sondland had seen of Trump, he knew that the president liked “irreverence, success, attitude” in his employees.

“Another off-the-shelf greeting would get me nowhere,” he explains in the book. “I need a hook, something to grab his attention.”

So when Trump reached the end of the receiving line, Sondland seized the moment by telling the president that his genitals were “sore” because his European interlocutors had been “kicking” them since he arrived.

“Mission accomplished,” Sondland writes as he describes Trump, duly hooked, ordering him into his limo for a chat. “I have just

accomplished the first objective that would help me get my job done: access.”

That access, of course, proved perilous when the novice diplomat was dragged into the Ukraine mess — or what John Bolton, Trump’s national security adviser and one of Sondland’s chief critics, derisively called a “drug deal.”



Sondland testifying during the House impeachment hearings against Trump in 2019. [Doug Mills/The New York Times](#)

Regrets: He’s got a few ...

... yet they are fewer than you might think.

“I would have even been more insistent on the president meeting with President Zelensky without any preconditions,” Sondland said. “But I would have been even more insistent that he not involve Rudy Giuliani in the process.”

And even though Sondland was fired because Trump, he thinks, “didn’t want the stories to just keep perpetuating themselves,” he insists he bears no ill will toward him. Sondland is suing the State Department to recoup the legal fees he incurred when he was compelled to testify.

“I told the truth, and it wasn’t just the truth the way I saw it,” Sondland said. “It was the truth based on what really happened, to the best of my recollection.”

Sondland is now looking for a horse to back in 2024 — and it’s not Trump. Far from being humbled by his cameo in a historic impeachment battle, he would be open to another ambassadorial post if the right opportunity came along.

Despite fully backing the former president’s policies, which he called “amazing,” he said, “I don’t think Trump is the person to take those policies forward right now.”
