



# A “Genuine Badass”: How Marie Yovanovitch Reclaimed Her Narrative and Reputation

by Chitra Ragavan · 20 Jul 2022 · 13 min read

*—A Viral Insights Column on Super-Survivors By Chitra Ragavan*

It’s been [noted](#) during the recent United States House Select Committee hearings on the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol that, often, it’s been female Trump administration officials who have been courageous enough to stand up first and speak the truth about the events that led to January 6 and the role then-President Donald Trump played in instigating and sustaining the deadly attacks.

This was highlighted after the fearless testimony last month of [Cassidy Hutchinson](#), a former White House aide to President Trump’s Chief of Staff, Mark Meadows.

On Thursday, former White House Deputy Press Secretary, [Sarah Matthews](#)—one of a wave of Trump officials who resigned after the riots—is expected to testify during prime

time in what's been billed as the [Select Committee](#)'s final summer hearing of reckoning for the former president.

As we wait for new bombshells to explode, it's a good time to step back and give credit to another woman—Marie Yovanovitch, a former career diplomat who was appointed by President Barack Obama as U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine in 2016 and retained by his successor, Donald Trump, before being abruptly ousted from her post. Ambassador Yovanovitch fearlessly shed light on then-President Trump's machinations to manipulate the outcome of the 2020 U.S. presidential elections via Ukraine, a foreign power.



An early-warning signal from former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine, Marie Yovanovitch

Yovanovitch agreed to testify under oath at Trump's first impeachment hearing. The story she told was key to his first of two impeachments and became an early-warning signal about his continued intentions to throw the 2020 race in his favor.

Yovanovitch, who had a distinguished thirty-three-year career in the U.S. Foreign Service, was abruptly recalled from her post in 2019 as envoy to Ukraine after a relentless, yearlong, conspiracy-driven smear campaign against her, orchestrated by Trump, his personal attorney Rudy Giuliani, and their unsavory assortment of co-conspirators both in the U.S. and Ukraine, as a means to justify the ambassador's removal from office.

One of Trump's key goals in recalling the high-integrity U.S. envoy back to DC was to leverage the sudden vacuum in oversight from her removal to pressure a foreign power—the newly-minted Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky—to investigate Hunter Biden, Joe Biden's son, who had questionable ties to Ukraine, as a way to tarnish the then-leading democratic contender for the U.S. presidency.

**“And I think that what happened was that when the Senate failed to convict then- President Trump in 2020, I think he was emboldened to feel that he could do whatever he wanted. And as the January 6 committee is making clear, he certainly went to extraordinary lengths to try to overturn the legitimate election results here in the United States.” —Marie Yovanovitch on When It Mattered**

In its hearing, the committee is expected to examine Trump's actions or lack thereof during those 187 minutes on January 6, from when the riots started to when he reluctantly told people to go home—a gap during which Trump ignored the grave physical threat to his own vice president, Mike Pence, and Pence's family, to the scores of U.S. Capitol police officers, to the congressmen, senators, and their staff, and during which he ignored all entreaties by staff, lawyers, family, and friends to do something,

anything, to stop the violent insurrection.



Marie Yovanovitch publicly testifying under oath on November 15, 2019

## All Shapes and Stripes

Toxic bosses come in all shapes and stripes. Marie Yovanovitch's boss, Trump, took the cake when, on April 24, 2019, in the dead of night, she was told she had to immediately leave Ukraine, with no explanation whatsoever—just as Zelensky took office as president, at a critical moment in our relations with that country.

It was a devastating period in Yovanovitch's life, when she saw all she had worked so hard to accomplish—both on her own behalf as one of the first female diplomats to serve proudly in the U.S. foreign service and on behalf of her country—destroyed in a heartbeat, at the height of her career.

And after she returned home, as Yovanovitch learned more and more about the slurs that had been leveraged against her by Trump, Giuliani, and their associates, she found herself at a crossroads: on the one hand, loyalty to the State Department that had been her home for more than three decades; on the other hand, allegiance to the Constitution. It was clear she had to make a choice.

## **Catastrophe, Epiphany, Resurgence**

Over the past few months, I've been exploring the idea of super-survivors here in my [column](#) and on my [When It Mattered](#) leadership podcast, where it first emerged as a running theme, a thread that binds many of the interviews.

Super-survivors are remarkable individuals who have undergone some kind of catastrophe, which has given them superpowers of sorts, not only to survive the trauma or tragedy but then to have the resilience—often bolstered by an epiphany—to undergo a resurgence that helps them not only overcome their terrible adversity but often also create transformative change in society.

## **Political Super-Survivor**

Marie Yovanovitch is a political super-survivor, who not only fought back against the attempt by none other than the president of the United States himself to destroy her career and reputation but then ensured that he would be held accountable for his attempt to subvert democracy.

In order to justify her removal, Trump and his cronies portrayed her in their smear campaign in the U.S. and in Ukraine as someone who had urged Ukrainian leaders to turn a blind eye to corruption, when in fact, the opposite was true.

Fighting corruption had long been a hallmark of Yovanovitch's stellar career in the foreign service in hotspots all over the world, including in her final posting in Ukraine. Wherever she went, the diplomat worked unstintingly to promote American values in U.S. foreign policy, as she recounts in vivid detail both in her memoir, *Lessons from the Edge*, and in her recent [podcast](#) interview with me.

Therein lay the problem. In addition to their Hunter Biden agenda, as the impeachment hearings revealed, Giuliani and his cohorts wanted to remove the anti-corruption crusader Yovanovitch from office so they could engage in corrupt dealmaking in Ukraine to secure lucrative energy and other contracts that were of interest to Trump's powerful donors and connections both in Florida and in Ukraine. Last but not least, it was seen as a powerplay by Giuliani to remove the envoy to show his Ukrainian cronies that he had clout at the White House to facilitate their various nefarious objectives.

At first, Ambassador Yovanovitch was shredded by what she learned about how she had become a target of presidential hubris, rage, and vendetta, a tool in Trump's weaponizing of a foreign power to thwart democratically held U.S. elections.

Yovanovitch could have succumbed to the enormous pressure from her superiors at the State Department not to testify at Trump's first impeachment hearing. She could have crumbled under the unrelenting drumbeat of the yearlong smear campaign against her. She could have cowered under the barely veiled threats from Trump in that by-now-notorious July 25, 2019 call, in which Trump baldly stated to President Zelensky, the head of a foreign power, that "the former ambassador from the United States, the woman, was bad news and the people she was dealing with in Ukraine were bad news..." and then even added, "Well, she's going to go through some things. [...]"

What did Trump mean by that chilling phrase, "Well, she's going to go through some things," Yovanovitch had wondered nervously at the time, as she told me during our interview.

**“He'd already fired me. What more was I going to go through? And if I testified, would there be reprisals? None of us knew. But I think all of us made the decision that our greater loyalty was to the Constitution.”**

**—Marie Yovanovitch on When It Mattered**

For a veteran diplomat like Yovanovitch, speaking out against her boss was the last thing she had ever imagined doing.

She told me that, at first, she hoped the State Department would come to her defense, back her unstintingly, remind the world of her stellar record and integrity. But instead, she says she was told to sign what amounted to a “loyalty oath,” to the president and to the Constitution.

“And thank God they said the Constitution, because, you know, we are Americans and we do not pledge loyalty to individuals,” Yovanovitch said, “We ended that, as you know, with the revolution.”

## **No Cavalry to the Rescue**

That was the moment of epiphany, when Yovanovitch says she realized the cavalry was not about to come to her rescue. She was on her own. She would have to find her voice, fight back, seize her narrative, and in the process, do everything she could to defend the Constitution of the United States.

**“It was very difficult because, you know, I'm not a rock-the-boat type of person. Yes, we have policy debates. But, you know, once a decision is made by higher-ups, I implement it. And so, you know, this was kind of the same, where I was specifically told, and then my lawyers were told, that I and other witnesses shouldn't participate in the impeachment inquiry. But**

**if Congress wanted to hear from me, I felt that I had to do my duty and agree to do it. But it was difficult because, as you said, I'm kind of a disciplined rules follower.” —Marie Yovanovitch on When It Mattered**

## **The Power to Get Away with It**

A common trait of toxic bosses is that they are often emboldened by their perceived power to get away with wrongdoing. But if Trump, Giuliani, and their minions thought their clumsy recall of Yovanovitch from her post would escape Congressional and media scrutiny, events have long since shown that they were dead wrong.

And they would soon learn that they had massively underestimated the spunky diplomat, who had, after all, volunteered to be posted to one of the most dangerous cities and countries in the world—Mogadishu, Somalia—for her first role as a U.S. envoy.

That’s where she first understood just how much of a man’s world the State Department was, what an anomaly she was in that world, how hard she would have to work to become accepted, to belong, and then transform that world, or she had to get out and do something else.

“I didn't particularly have supportive supervisors. I was one of two women at the embassy, and we had a huge embassy because the embassy was a platform for not just the State Department but the military and other agencies,” Yovanovitch told me.

In fact, Yovanovitch says those were such rough times that she put in a bid to move to London at the end of her stint in Somalia, so she could find a job outside the government.

But instead, at the U.S. Embassy in London, Yovanovitch found herself supported by not one but three great male ambassadors who gave her and other female officials at the embassy, every opportunity to thrive and build the foundation for a successful career.

She remembers how the late-Ambassador Henry Catto, when he first arrived to his post in London, refused to address an all-male club on economic events, traditionally a “must-do event” for incoming ambassadors.

**“The economic counselor was a woman. And so, when we submitted who would be going with the ambassador, the club said, ‘No, we’re sorry, we’re an all-male club and she can’t come. And so, you know, I think a lot of ambassadors would have said, ‘Okay.’ But Ambassador Catto looked at me and he said, ‘Well, tell them I can’t come, then.’ And that club made a different decision. And I think that’s what it takes to make the change. It takes not only women fighting for their rights and their right to be at the table, it takes men to support them.” —Marie Yovanovitch on When It Mattered**



## From "The Woman" to "Genuine Badass"

After Yovanovitch publicly testified on November 19, 2019, she was pilloried by right-wing media. But she also got a hundreds of fan mail from around the world.

In her book, Yovanovitch writes how she received the gift of an afghan from a total stranger and a leather flight jacket from a U.S. Air Force veteran. He told her he had worn it on "missions all over the world" as he "sought to support and defend the Constitution," just as he believed she had done, so he wanted her to have the jacket.

One of her favorite gifts: a custom-printed card with the message, "Thanks for being a genuine Badass." She says she loved that card so much that she ordered several boxes.

Among other accolades, a fan named a puppy after Yovanovitch's Russian nickname, “Masha,” and she even had the offer to name a dolphin after her. She received a standing ovation from random strangers at a musical event, which got tweeted out and was viewed by a million people. Yovanovitch was even featured in a *Saturday Night Live* [skit](#) with a soap-opera spin called, “Days of Our Impeachment,” a clear sign that she had entered the cultural lexicon of the nation.

## Her New Narrative

Bolstered by the compliments, including being called a “badass,” and all the writing and speaking offers, Yovanovitch decided to pen her best-selling, critically acclaimed memoir, [Lessons from the Edge](#). And, on January 31, 2020, she retired from public service, filled with these new opportunities. Most importantly, she says she was ready to hang up her hat, because it would be on her terms, no one else's.

As she now watches the January 6 hearings and sees other courageous men and women come forward, the biggest lesson of all, says Yovanovitch, is the importance of holding leaders accountable. The Trump saga with Ukraine and Zelensky made that clear.

**“If using the office of the presidency for personal and political gain, which is what he did when he asked a foreign president to investigate a domestic political rival and held back the offer of a meeting with the president of the United States—held back, supplying javelins, again, using his office for his own political gain—if that isn't worthy of an impeachment conviction, it's not clear to me what is.” —Marie Yovanovitch on [When It Mattered](#)**

As Yovanovitch notes, that again is something she never would have said as a sitting ambassador. But now that she has retired, she can. After all, she's no longer, in Trump's parlance, "the woman."

Instead, the world has deemed her a "badass."

Perhaps nothing symbolizes the badass Marie Yovanovitch more than this gesture: in a move most uncharacteristic of this once-buttoned-down diplomat, Yovanovitch is even [reported](#) to have bulk-ordered coffee mugs emblazoned with the words, "F\*\*\* You Putin," and uses them for her morning coffee.

She says the coffee tastes much better since she made the switch.

I hope that if you have an opportunity as you wait for the final summer hearing of the January 6 Select Committee, you'll take a moment to listen to my full interview with the amazing Marie Yovanovitch on my podcast, [When It Mattered](#). You can find it on my new [YouTube](#) channel or tune in on your favorite podcast platform [here](#).

Do subscribe to my YouTube channel, leave a review, and give the episode a big 