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FRANCE – EUROPE



French prosecutor charges three in thwarted terror attack

By Associated Press

PARIS — Paris' prosecutor's office says that three suspects in a thwarted attack last week in the southern French city of Montpellier have been handed

preliminary terrorism charges.

Authorities gave on the suspects' first names. A teenage girl, Sara, and a man called Thomas were charged with terrorist association and possessing explosives Tuesday night. Another man, Malik, was also charged with justifying terrorism.

Last week, anti-terrorism forces uncovered a makeshift laboratory for fabricating a bomb. France's top security official Friday said the raid thwarted an "imminent attack."

A police official said the teenage girl — among several arrested — had pledged loyalty to the Islamic State group in a recent video.

France is still under a state of emergency after several deadly attacks in 2015 and 2016.



Hollande Requests Cybersecurity Briefing on French Election

by

Helene Fouquet

15 février 2017 à 06:14 UTC-5

French President Francois Hollande requested a full briefing on what is being done to fend off cyber interference in the 2017 presidential race.

"The defense council studied the level of threat," Hollande's office said in a statement after the security committee's weekly meeting Wednesday. "The president asked to be shown in the next meeting the

specific protective measures and the heightened attention being given for the electoral campaign, including in the cyber sector," Hollande's office said.

Hollande's request comes after independent candidate Emmanuel Macron reported repeated cyber-attacks on his campaign and blaming Russian interference. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov denied Russia had any involvement in hacking the campaign in a conference call on Tuesday. He said there is no possibility that the Russian government had any

connection to the attacks and that the accusations were "absurd."

Still, the Macron campaign hasn't backed down and has called for action on the part of the French state.

"Let's not let Russia destabilize France's presidential election!" Macron's campaign chief, Richard Ferrand, wrote in a column in *Le Monde* newspaper dated Wednesday. "What we want to do is to dedicate ourselves to our campaign and our program within

the calm assured by the rules of our democracy."

An official at cyber defense unit of France's national security agency would neither confirm nor deny the Russians were behind the attacks when contacted on Monday. An official at President Francois Hollande's office said the government is increasingly concerned about cyber security during the election cycle and said the administration's vigilance was prompted by what happened during the U.S. presidential election last year.



Centrist Upends French Presidential Race in Era of Extremes (online)

The Associated Press

PARIS — France's presidential race this year is upending every political assumption that has governed the country for decades.

And now Emmanuel Macron, a 39-year-old former economy minister who is running an independent, centrist campaign, has a real chance to become France's next president in the country's two-round April-May vote.

Among the startling events: an incumbent president is not running. His prime minister did not win the Socialist primary. The far right is surging. The conservative front-runner who vowed to slash government spending has seen his chances plummet after giving his wife and children well-paid jobs for years.

Jealous rivals call Macron a guru with no substance. Macron, who plans to present a budget for the five-year presidential term next week and a platform later, mostly

promises the French a better future — and that may be enough.

"Some people think we are a sect. Welcome," Macron joked in front of hundreds of supporters at the Bobino theater in Paris.

Recent polls show Macron could be among the two top contenders to emerge from the April 23 ballot and advance to the presidential runoff on May 7, where he would be in a good position to win against his expected opponent, Marine Le Pen of the far-right National Front.

A former investment banker with impressive academic credentials, Macron is young, outspoken and sometimes theatrical. He speaks fluent English and is very familiar with social media. Macron backs free-market, pro-European policies and litters his speeches with references to mythology, philosophy or literature.

Macron became Socialist President Francois Hollande's economic adviser in 2012 and two years later, his economy minister. Last year he

launched his own centrist political movement *En Marche* ("In Motion").

Conservative rival Francois Fillon and far-right politician Florian Philippot of the National Front recently compared Macron to a "guru."

Fillon, the former favorite, has seen his popularity sink following revelations about well-paid — and possibly fake — political jobs that he gave his wife, son and daughter. Fillon admits the practice was legal at the time but is "unacceptable" now. Prosecutors are investigating.

Fillon has criticized Macron's "political adventure without a program" but Macron told the *Journal du Dimanche* that politics are "mystical."

"It's an error to think the program is at the core of a campaign," he said.

Macron has proposed to cut taxes for businesses, wants to reduce by half the number of pupils per class in poor neighborhoods. He traveled to Algeria, a former French colony,

this week to boost his international stature. He has also visited the United States, Germany and Lebanon in the last few months and will hold a rally in London next week.

In a video on Twitter, Macron urged researchers, entrepreneurs and engineers working on climate change in the U.S. to leave for France.

"You are welcome ... we like innovation, we want innovative people!" he said in English, in a bid to capitalize on U.S. President Donald Trump's doubts about global warming.

Macron has also laughed at rumors about his sexuality. He said having a gay affair while also being married would come as news to his wife, Brigitte.

"Since she shares my life from morning to night, her only question is how, physically, I would manage," he joked at the Bobino theater.

Brigitte Macron-Trognoux, who was his secondary school theater

teacher, is 24 years older than her husband. While French politicians traditionally keep their private lives private, she acts more like an American political spouse, attending her husband's rallies and public events. The couple appears hand-in-hand on the front page of celebrity magazine Paris Match for the fourth time.

"You'll be hearing the worst things about me. It's unpleasant, it's discourteous and sometimes it's hurtful," Macron told his supporters.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Sam Schechner and Matthew Dalton

Feb. 14, 2017 3:28 p.m. ET

PARIS—In the wake of alleged Russian interference in the U.S. presidential election, a front-runner in France's presidential race is accusing Moscow of doing it again.

The campaign of candidate Emmanuel Macron said Tuesday in an email to supporters that the Russian government is trying to destabilize his candidacy by using state-funded media outlets to spread smears about his character.

Mr. Macron's political party En Marche, or On the Move, has also been the target of about 4,000 attempts over the last month to disable or break into its computer servers, many from an unidentified hacker group partly using computer systems in Ukraine, said Mounir Mahjoubi, the campaign's digital director.

The accusations raise the specter of Moscow persisting with what American and European officials describe as an effort to delegitimize Western democracies and alliances through hacking and misinformation. U.S. intelligence agencies say Kremlin-backed hackers breached email accounts of Democratic Party officials and leaked their contents in an effort to tilt the election for President Donald Trump.

"I am who I am. I've never had something to hide."

The polling institute Ifof says Macron tends to be popular among educated people from the upper and middle-class — and unpopular in the working class.

This illustrates the dividing line between the winners and the losers of globalization, wrote Jerome Fourquet of Ifof.

"By designating each other as their main rival, Marine Le Pen and

Emmanuel Macron pursue a common interest: substitute the traditional confrontation between the left and the right by this new division," Fourquet wrote.

Macron calls the divide "progressives against conservatives" while Le Pen "the pro-globalization against the patriots," he said.

Political scientist Thomas Guenole says Macron's rising popularity has been aided by the media. Last year, the proportion of articles about him

in French newspapers was oversized compared to his relatively low profile, Guenole told The Associated Press.

"Nobody can detail his program ... yet people have sympathy for him," he said, adding that what he called Macron's "doped" popularity is likely to lead to real results in the presidential election.

French Candidate Emmanuel Macron Says Russia Is Out to Torpedo His Campaign

The threat of Russian interference has French security services on high alert, said an official in the French president's office. The services regularly detect cyberattacks directed at France that are suspected of coming from Russia, but they have yet to uncover evidence of attacks ordered by the Kremlin, according to the official.

"It's a threat we're taking seriously," the official said.

The Kremlin on Tuesday rejected the Macron campaign's allegations, much as it has denied involvement in hacking during the U.S. election. "Any allegations of official Moscow possibly having anything to do with them [hacking] are absurd," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Russian news agencies Tuesday.

Most worrying for Mr. Macron's campaign was an article published Feb. 4 on Sputnik, a news agency funded by the Russian government, claiming the candidate has a "very wealthy gay lobby behind him" and that "controversial details of his personal life" would soon become public.

Sputnik, which is controlled by the Russian state, denied spreading false information. "Sputnik always covers events as they are," a spokeswoman for the agency said. "While some may find it disturbing, these are facts and leaving them without attention would constitute a

violation of the fundamental principle of the freedom of speech."

Sputnik has also run some stories critical of Mr. Macron's top rivals, Marine Le Pen of the anti-immigrant National Front and François Fillon of the conservative Les Républicains party.

But analysts say Moscow has more incentive to interfere with Mr. Macron.

"Macron is the candidate who doesn't have support from Russia, for very simple reasons," said Thomas Gornat, president of the French Institute of International Relations. "He is pro-Europe, pro-German, and he believes that the euro is a good thing."

Ms. Le Pen has vowed to pull France out of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union, alliances Mr. Putin sees as threats to the Russian sphere of influence. Mr. Fillon has also pledged to mend relations with Moscow. Both he and Ms. Le Pen oppose existing EU sanctions on Russia for the annexation of Crimea and its support of rebels in eastern Ukraine.

On Tuesday an Opinionway poll showed Mr. Macron garnering 22% of the first-round vote in April, second behind Ms. Le Pen with 27%. If the two went to the second-round runoff, the polls said, Mr. Macron would beat Ms. Le Pen 64% to 36%.

Sputnik's report constitutes "an extremely dangerous threat," said Mr. Mahjoubi, the digital campaign director. Some French newspapers interpreted the agency's article—based on an interview with a conservative French lawmaker—as an attempt to bolster a rumor making the rounds: That the candidate, who is married to a woman, was having an affair with the male chief executive of Radio France.

On Feb. 6, Mr. Macron addressed the rumor, joking that any affair would have to be with his hologram, because "that couldn't be me."

France's National Agency for the Security of Information Systems, which is charged with protecting government entities and essential infrastructure from cyberattacks, said it briefed political parties in late October about the hacking threat, advising them to hire private security firms. Mr. Macron's team met with the agency in January for a similar briefing.

A spokeswoman for ANSSI said the agency has no active role in protecting electoral campaigns, because they are private organizations.

—Olga Razumovskaya in Moscow contributed to this article.

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Fillon Grapples With Party Rebels in Tightening French Election

- Le Pen holds large lead for first round, would lose in second
- Republican candidate to meet former President Nicolas Sarkozy

French presidential contender Francois Fillon is grappling with resistance to his candidacy within

his own Republican party even as polls show a tight race with Emmanuel Macron to reach the second round of voting with National Front leader Marine Le Pen.

One month after a scandal broke about Fillon's employment of his wife and children as parliamentary aides, Republicans in cities such as Limoges and Clermont-Ferrand in

central France have proved reluctant to set up campaign events for their party's candidate, Le Figaro reported Tuesday. Following a meeting late Monday in which Fillon told top Republicans that his withdrawal would create a "major crisis," lawmaker Georges Fenech said the party is in a "disastrous situation."

@HeleneFouquet More stories by Helene Fouquet

by and

14 février 2017 à 12:01 UTC-5 14 février 2017 à 21:00 UTC-5

With just over two months to go until the first round of voting, anti-immigrant, anti-euro candidate Le Pen remains well ahead in the polls for the initial ballot, though not the run-off. Fillon, who started the year as the front-runner, is still within about two percentage points of independent Macron, according to daily tracking polls by both Ifo and OpinionWay. Such a gap is equivalent to the margin of error, meaning it's difficult to predict which of those two will make it to the run-off with Le Pen.

"The political balance of power is far from being settled," said Yves-Marie Cann, a pollster at Elabe in Paris. "The strong volatility of voting intention over the past two weeks demonstrates that."

About 27 percent of voters currently plan to back Le Pen in the first round of voting, compared with 22 percent for Macron and 20 percent for Fillon, according to OpinionWay. Macron's lead over Fillon has shrunk to one point in the Ifo poll from 3.5 points Feb. 2, with the rivals on 19.5 percent and 18.5 percent respectively.

The renewed criticism from within the party ranks is complicating Fillon's efforts to draw a line under

the scandal over reports that his wife never really worked while claiming a public salary. On Tuesday night, the satirical newspaper *Le Canard Enchaîné*, which revealed the details of Fillon's wife's job, said that one of the candidate's top aides is under investigation by the Nanterre prosecution office over potential tax fraud.

Hurdle Ahead

So far, all opinion surveys show Le Pen would lose the run-off against either Fillon or Macron. To be able to be elected she would probably need to triple the number votes she won in the 2012 first round.

Fillon will lunch with former President Nicolas Sarkozy Wednesday before holding a political meeting in Compiègne, north of Paris. He will give a press conference in the capital Thursday. Le Pen traveled Monday to the French-Italian border to discuss illegal immigration.

With fears about immigration and public security topping lists of voter concerns, Le Pen started an online petition to support the police as her aides condemned protesters and unrest that has plagued rough Paris

suburbs in recent days. Some satellite towns around the capital have seen violence almost every night since Feb. 5, when four policemen were charged with attacking a young black man in Aulnay-sous-Bois, close to where riots erupted 12 years ago.

"The real poverty is in farmland, and I don't seem them burning cars," Marion Marechal-Le Pen, the candidate's niece, said on France 2 Tuesday as she sought to dismiss those committing violent acts in the distressed suburbs across the country. Nicolas Bay, one of Le Pen's campaign spokesmen, said on the RMC radio the same morning that "all the terrorists are immigrants," causing debate and prompting *Le Monde* newspaper to publish a fact-check to prove him wrong.

Cyber Attacks

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The 39-year-old Macron, meanwhile, has been reporting repeated cyber-attacks on his campaign as well as becoming the object of fake news reports, blaming

Russian interference for both. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov denied Russia had any involvement in hacking the campaign in a conference call on Tuesday. He said there is no possibility that the Russian government had any connection to the attacks and that the accusations were "absurd."

Still, the Macron campaign hasn't backed down and has called for action on the part of the French state. President Francois Hollande's office confirmed that cybersecurity and the impact on the presidential race will be on its weekly defense council agenda.

"Let's not let Russia destabilize France's presidential election!" Macron's campaign chief, Richard Ferrand, wrote in a column in *Le Monde* newspaper dated Wednesday. "What we want to do is to dedicate ourselves to our campaign and our program within the calm assured by the rules of our democracy."

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New York Magazine : Will the French Presidential Race Be a Replay of the U.S. Election?

Jonah Shepp

/international intrigue February 15, 2017 02/15/2017 4:54 a.m.

Emmanuel Macron acknowledges the crowd at a campaign event in Lyon, France, on February 4, 2017. *Photo: Chesnot/Getty Images*

At first glance, France's upcoming presidential election looks a bit like an arty reenactment of the one we just lived through in the U.S. The leading candidate is a reactionary white nationalist bent on dismantling international institutions and cracking down sharply on immigration, especially by Muslims. An embattled member of the political Establishment is fighting to overcome a nepotism scandal as a center-left party searches for a positive message. On the left, a socialist is proposing a radical agenda to fix inequality and protect the rights and interests of the working class. A talented woman who worked her way to the top of her party in spite of a loudmouth male relative is now vying for the title of first female president, but many feminists doubt that a win for her would be one for all women.

In certain respects, France is actually having the race the U.S. wishes it could have, but never

could, owing to the two-party system and the dominance of baby boomers in our politics, among other issues. If the U.S. election were a contest between mainstream conservatism (Jeb!), center-left liberalism (Clinton), right-wing nationalism (Trump), and democratic socialism (Sanders), France's is much the same, except in the French version of the film the characters are younger, better looking, and more compelling. The election is shaking up the political Establishment, with fresh faces outperforming career politicians and traditional parties being forced to reckon with new political realities. Yes, far-right National Front candidate Marine Le Pen is currently leading in the polls, but it's only with about 25 percent in a four-way race. And whereas our system enabled Trump to win on a technicality with a minority of the vote, the structure of the French election makes it harder (though by no means impossible) for a divisive candidate like Le Pen to take the presidency.

To say that the characters in this story are more compelling is, first of all, to note that Marine Le Pen is much smarter than Donald Trump, and a genuine ideologue rather than a shouty manifestation of white, male boomer resentment. Like

Trump, she has benefited from worker displacement, terrorism, and the backlash against "political correctness"; indeed, her populist crusade against globalization and Islamism is essentially Trumpism with a higher-than-seventh-grade reading level. Of course, her greater competence makes her that much more dangerous if she wins: Le Pen has pledged to pull France out of NATO and the E.U., to abolish the euro and reintroduce the franc, among other radical and potentially destabilizing ideas. She, too, is buddies with Russian President Vladimir Putin (naturally). A Le Pen victory in May could well precipitate the collapse of the European project.

If Bill Clinton was a liability for Hillary last year, Jean-Marie Le Pen — Marine's father and the founder of the National Front — is an even bigger albatross around his daughter's neck. On Monday, the elder Le Pen was charged with inciting religious hatred over an alleged anti-Semitic pun — and it was far from his first offense. Coming just days after Marine Le Pen stoked outrage among French Jews by saying that she would force Franco-Israelis to give up one of their nationalities, the indictment may remind voters of the ugly

antecedents of her reactionary nationalism.

Marine Le Pen delivers a speech in Lyon, France, on February 5, 2017. *Photo: Aurelien Morissard/Getty Images*

On the other side of the political spectrum, France's Socialist Party has shifted leftward, just like America's Democrats seem to be in the process of doing. Benoît Hamon, who defeated former prime minister Manuel Valls in the second round of the party's primary, has been described as the Bernie Sanders of France, but the 49-year-old's platform is much more in tune with the newest, boldest, and most innovative ideas of the left: The guy wants to tax robots to fund a universal basic income, invest massive sums in renewable energy, legalize pot, and *reduce* the workweek to 35 hours even as mainstream politicians insist it must increase. Hamon's candidacy got an infusion of star power on Saturday when the left-wing economist Thomas Piketty, author of *Capital in the 21st Century* and a leading critic of inequality, joined his campaign team.

Unfortunately for the Socialists, Hamon still looks likely to come in fourth in the first round on April 23,

meaning he probably won't be president — but he has ousted the "neoliberals" from the Socialist Party, reoriented its platform, and gets to preach basic income and radical green politics in a general election, which is a hell of a lot further than the American left got last year.

Until recently Le Pen's likeliest rival in the second round, which takes place on May 7, was François Fillon, the nominee of the center-right Republicans (a rebranding of former president Nicolas Sarkozy's party). Fillon is a Mitt Romney type: A paternally handsome former prime minister who thinks gay marriage and abortion are unseemly but won't bother trying to re-outlaw them as president because he'll be too busy cutting taxes on the wealthy, raising the retirement age, and firing civil servants. Polls show Fillon beating

Le Pen in a head-to-head matchup roughly 60-40.

Alas, Fillon's future was thrown into doubt a few weeks ago when state financial prosecutors revealed that they were investigating him for possible misuse of public funds after a newspaper published claims that his wife, Penelope, was paid half a million euros of government money for a job she never did. Fillon has apologized for hiring his family members but he maintains that the job his wife was hired to do was real and has refused to drop out of the race.

The new star of the film is 39-year-old Emmanuel Macron, an investment banker turned senior adviser and later economy minister under the incumbent Socialist president François Hollande. A political outsider who has never held elected office, Macron eschewed the

Establishment parties and launched his own movement with a youthful and energetic brand (*En Marche!*, or Let's Go!). A defender of both market capitalism and the welfare state, Macron has narrowly eclipsed Fillon in the polls in recent weeks and is now looking like the most likely challenger to Le Pen in round two, where head-to-head polls show him beating her by a slightly wider margin than Fillon. He is the Obama-like character America didn't get this time around: the good-natured left-liberal wunderkind who believes good government is possible and is eager to roll up his sleeves and start solving problems.

Though polls show Le Pen ultimately losing, they also suggested Brexit wouldn't pass and that Hillary Clinton would become the leader of the free world. Such a rapidly escalating series of

implausible outcomes — first Brexit, then Trump — invites a narrative that suggests Le Pen's inevitability. The polls could be wrong again. A successful attack by terrorists on Paris like the one authorities foiled just days ago could refocus the race on security and make Le Pen's "France first" ideology more palatable to the electorate. The great and terrible thing about democracy, however, is that no outcome is inevitable: When Election Day comes, the French have a choice.

Tags:

international intriguepoliticsfrance French Presidential Race Is Like a U.S. Election Replay

Townhall : Rachel Marsden - French Presidential Elections Unlikely to Launch a Trump-Style Revolution

Rachel Marsden

Posted: Feb 15, 2017 12:01 AM

PARIS -- First there was Brexit, then Donald Trump, and now it's France's turn to elect National Front leader Marine Le Pen as French president this spring and take France back from establishment elites. That's the general sentiment expressed by conservatives on this side of the Atlantic. If only it were that simple.

France remains besieged by cultural Marxism. A recent visit to Marseille, for example, left me struggling to find anything quintessentially French short of the architecture. Last week in Bobigny, a northeastern suburb of Paris with a large immigrant population, rioters smashed windows, ransacked stores and set cars on fire under the pretext of alleged police misconduct. The nation is in a perpetual state of high alert for terrorist attacks, with soldiers patrolling even suburban streets with rifles. When the French government recently announced that the base of the Eiffel Tower will soon be enclosed by a bulletproof glass wall for security purposes, it was a symbolic admission that things have changed for the worse.

There are two major issues that matter in France in this election cycle: culture and economy. Cultural Marxism is a problem in France, but so is actual Marxism. French

entrepreneurs are taxed about half of their profits for social security and a health care system with poor disbursements. Salaries in France are low because little is left by the time the union mafias get their cut and the company has paid hefty taxes to the government on each salary. According to the most recent data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, France is second only to Finland in government spending as a percentage of GDP among the 35 OECD member countries

That heads haven't yet rolled here over these fiscal facts is astounding. France is in dire need of economic modernization and a true capitalist revolution. Unfortunately, when you talk about capitalism in France, it evokes in people's minds the sort of crony corporatism practiced by the establishment elites. And when you talk about revolution, you're told that the French aren't adventurers. But the French might finally be fed up with the establishment and its harm to the average citizen, including deference to European interests over national sovereignty.

"The French people have been conditioned over several decades not to be proud of their country," a French friend who supports Le Pen told me. I asked him what he figured to be the justification for that erosion. He replied, "Because to

create Europe, you have to erode national pride."

The National Front scapegoats the European Union for the country's economic woes. While the EU's imposition of effective borderlessness and an economic straightjacket generates valid criticism, the French economy independent of the EU is still a socialist Matryoshka doll. Remove France from the EU, and the country still has its own economic socialism to fix.

On paper, the free-market policies of presidential candidate and former Prime Minister Francois Fillon of the French Republican Party are appealing, except for his proposal to raise the value-added tax by another 2 percent so the government can redistribute that money. (Old habits die hard, I guess.) But Fillon has sunk in the polls after allegations of payments to his wife and children totaling nearly a million euros in public funds. It's precisely such scandals that reinforce the negative feelings the French have toward capitalism.

Independent candidate Emmanuel Macron, a former investment banker and former minister of economy, industry and digital affairs, is hitting the right notes on economic freedom, but he supports an open-door immigration policy, and his

campaign rhetoric strikes too many globalist and establishment notes.

And yes, there's a Socialist candidate in the mix as well, Benoit Hamon, but he's campaigning on giving everyone a universal income of about 750 euros a month, and he is receiving only about 15 percent support in the polls.

So it doesn't look as if there's a French presidential candidate who'll both foster true capitalism and eradicate cultural Marxism. Citizens are still going to have to choose one. Not even the choice is expressed in a straightforward manner. Short of the unlikely event that one candidate gets over 50 percent of the vote in the first round of voting, the race will go to a second round two weeks later. The outcome of the second round is largely decided by people forced to hold their noses and choose a candidate for whom they didn't cast a ballot in the first round.

Polling suggests that if the French were able, they'd take an alternative, non-establishment, free-market version of Fillon fused with Le Pen's patriotic, cultural conservatism and defense of the working class. It's too bad that neither candidate is giving them everything that they want in one package.

Breitbart : Le Pen Blasts French Govt 'Paralysis' over Paris Riots

French presidential candidate and anti-mass migration Front National leader Marine Le Pen has slammed

the French government claiming it has become "paralysed".

The Paris riots, which began over a week ago, have left a wave of destruction on the streets of Paris with cars burned and local shops

smashed by gangs in the heavily migrant-populated suburbs of the Seine-Saint-Denis region. The continued rioting has earned the ire

of the Front National leader who has accused the government of silence and inaction in the face of the violence in a statement.

"The forces of order are targeted by bands of scoundrels," Le Pen said and noted that nothing has so far dissuaded the roaming gangs from continuing to commit acts of violence. Calling the situation "a shame for France" on the international stage, Le Pen said, "The government is silent. A silence that reflects both its cowardice and its impotence."

The presidential candidate asked why the demonstration for the

alleged victim of police abuse, a 22-year-old black youth worker Theo who was allegedly sodomised with a truncheon, was allowed to go on Sunday evening despite clear evidence the protest may turn violent. The protest did indeed turn violent that evening with several vehicles torched and protesters throwing stones at police.

Earlier this week, a busload of Korean tourists were also attacked in the area by the mob who robbed them and tried to set fire to their vehicle. The attack led the South Korean government to warn tourists

against visiting Paris due to the violence.

LePen slammed Interior Minister Bruno Le Roux saying he "obviously runs away from his responsibilities". She did not spare the conservative Republicans, whose current presidential candidate François Fillon is embroiled in scandal, saying they were responsible for the reduction in numbers of police and gendarmerie.

"We recall that our country is in a state of emergency," the Front National leader noted. "What good is it if the government refuses to use

the means at its disposal to maintain public order and enforce the authority of the state?"

Le Pen concluded by saying, "Security is not a privilege but a fundamental right that must be restored for all French people".

As the French presidential elections approach, Le Pen has taken the lead in polls in the first round of voting in April. Due to the scandal involving Fillon and his wife, Emmanuel Macron has emerged as the likely opponent for Le Pen in the second round.

The Street : As France's Le Pen leads polls, traders prepare for 'Frexit' rout

Bradley Keoun

First there was Brexit. Then Trump.

Is it time to start getting ready for Frexit?

Investors are preparing for the possibility -- if remote -- that France ditches the euro as its home currency and brings back the franc. There's also a chance -- even more remote -- that France might exit the European Union altogether.

It seems almost unthinkable that the second-biggest economy among euro-based countries would choose to depart, but the rise of nationalism among voters around the world has given traders cause to fear surprising election outcomes. The dynamic emerged last June when Britain voted to leave the EU and was underscored by U.S. President Donald Trump's November victory on pledges to "Make America Great Again."

France will hold its first round of presidential elections on April 23, and Marine Le Pen, a far-right candidate with the National Front party who has pledged to restore the national currency and push for a referendum on exiting the EU, is leading the polls. While most candidates say she's likely to lose in the second round of voting, an unexpected victory would roil global markets.

Risks could include a steep plunge in European bank securities, a selloff of U.S. stocks and corporate bonds and a steep drop in Treasury yields, as investors seek safety in U.S. government debt. France, which currently boasts a AA credit rating from Standard & Poor's, could default if Le Pen succeeds in her push to redenominate the

government's euro-based debt into francs.

"People are concerned that what should happen according to script might not happen according to script," said Scott MacDonald, chief global economist for Smith's Research and Gratings in White Plains, N.Y.

Last year's script was anything but predictable, as voters in the U.K. and U.S. latched onto campaigns tied to anti-globalization sentiment.

Le Pen stands in that camp, with her planks of exiting the euro and ending automatic citizenship for people born in the country. And, in an echo of Trump's pronouncements, she would seek to improve relations with Russia.

The Frexit risk adds to a growing roster of international trouble spots for investors, from China's slowing economy to potential trade disputes with Japan and Mexico. There's also the risk of escalated military conflict; North Korea said Monday that it had successfully tested a nuclear-capable missile over the weekend.

According to MacDonald, Le Pen garnered 25% in a Feb. 10 poll of voters' first-round election preferences. Second with 21% was Emmanuel Macron, a former investment banker who's considered socially liberal but economically pragmatic. Francois Fillon of the Republicans party, who has espoused a fiscally conservative approach, was an early favorite but has slipped to just 20% in the poll due to the fallout from revelations that he paid his wife hundreds of thousands of euros as his supposed parliamentary assistant.

Benoit Hamon, the candidate for sitting French President Francois Hollande's Socialist Party, is polling 16%; he has pledged to legalize marijuana and tax the use of robots.

So the Frexit warnings are beginning to trickle out.

Bank of America analysts wrote in a report last week that a French exit from the euro could have "far-reaching systemic implications for the global financial system." Moody's Investor Service said Feb. 3 that "financial markets do not appear to be pricing in acute fragmentation risks, suggesting that the impact of any such shock could be severe."

If France insisted on repaying its euro-denominated debt in francs, the country would be declared in default, Moritz Kraemer, S&P's head of sovereign ratings, wrote in a letter published in *The Economist* earlier this month, according to *Reuters*.

Markets have already started to price in a higher risk of deterioration in France's credit standing. The yield on 10-year French government bonds has climbed to 1.04%, from 0.69% at the start of the year. It's now 0.74 percentage point over yields on comparable German bonds -- the highest gap in four years.

A Le Pen victory could bring a stock-market rout for large U.S. banks, MacDonald said, given their exposure to France and the rest of the European Union; firms such as **JPMorgan Chase (JPM)**, **Citigroup (C)** and **Goldman Sachs (GS)** already are grappling with whether and how to relocate their London-based trading hubs following the Brexit vote.

"If there is turmoil in markets because of the French elections, it'll come through U.S. banks," MacDonald said. "We're talking big banks. They're international, and they have exposure around the planet."

For example, in its most-recent annual report, JPMorgan, the biggest U.S. bank, listed \$26.2 billion of lending, trading and investing exposures to France -- the third-most after the U.K. (\$46.7 billion) and Germany (\$30.7 billion.)

French, German and Swiss banks would obviously also come under severe pressure, MacDonald said.

The smartest and easiest thing right now for investors worried about Frexit would be to reduce exposure to peripheral European countries such as Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece, he said.

MacDonald estimates that Le Pen has, at most, a 35% chance of victory in the second round of elections. A terror attack in France before the elections could sway the vote in her favor. If elected, she'd likely face resistance to a euro exit from within the French parliament, he said.

"There's a long way between here and there," he said. "But people have looked out here at the political scenario, and if it's like the U.S., we'll end up with a 'neofascist' sitting in the Elysee Palace."

EXCLUSIVE LOOK INSIDE: *Citigroup is a holding in Jim Cramer's Action Alerts PLUS charitable trust portfolio. Want to be alerted before Cramer and the AAP team buy or sell the stock? Learn more now.*

CNBC : Le Pen is on course to be France's next president, fund manager says from AI analysis

Everett Rosenfeld, Nyshka Chandran

Marine Le Pen is on course to be the next president of France, according to one fund manager's big-data analysis.

Arun Kant, chief executive and chief investment officer at Singapore-based investing firm Leonie Hill Capital, told CNBC he expected the right-wing populist to prevail thanks to his firm's proprietary artificial intelligence (AI) system's analysis of troves of data.

His analysis — which he said incorporates inputs such as social and traditional media discussions, polling, economics and demographics — predicts that Le Pen will "walk over" her opponents in the first electoral test and then prove most forecasters wrong and steal the lead in the second ballot, Kant said.

Pascal Le Segretain | Getty Images

Marine Le Pen

The French vote is split into two phases, with the top two candidates from the April 23 round due to face each other in a second run-off on May 7. In the running alongside 48-year old Le Pen are former economy minister and independent candidate Emmanuel Macron, conservative ex-prime minister Francois Fillon and socialist Benoit Hamon.

Kant's AI program predicts that Le Pen would take 28 percent of the vote in the first round, he said, which would best 16.4 percent for Fillon, and 19 to 20 percent for Macron.

Current inputs are pointing to a Macron victory in the second round — 52.3 percent to 47.7 for Le Pen — Kant said, but he added that he expects the right-wing politician to gain considerable ground after a first round victory.

"If she wins the first round, this dynamic will change," he said, noting the similarities between the

populist appeal of Le Pen and President Donald Trump.

And with this predicted momentum, Le Pen will likely win the presidency, Kant said.

An IFOP poll published on Feb. 14 placed Le Pen in the lead for the April 23 ballot, with around 25.5 percent of the vote. Most election-watchers expect, however, that Le Pen would lose the second round of voting to Macron.

In fact, Kant said his AI analysis predicted that the only way Macron could win is if some unexpected factor were to pull undecided voters in his favor.

Le Pen, a former attorney, is leader of the French National Front (FN), a right-wing political party founded by her father Jean-Marie Le Pen. And this isn't the first time she's run for the country's top job. In the 2012 election, she won 17.9 percent of the vote in the first round, a record result for the FN, but failed to enter the second round.

Her policies mirror those of Trump's—she is a fierce critic of open borders and free trade. Like the White House chief, she also believes in nationalism and economic protectionism, having vowed to pull France out of the European Union.

Announcing her candidacy for the French presidency in a strident speech earlier this month in Lyon, Le Pen told supporters that European "borders have been erased and our countries have become station concourses."

"What is at stake in this election ... is whether France can still be a free nation," Le Pen said at that rally, according to Reuters. "The divide is not between the left and right any more but between patriots and globalists."

Kant declined to share his investing plans around his Le Pen projection,

but he did explain that he expected her victory to mean the beginning of the end of the European Union. And with that, he said, currencies around the world will see massive fluctuations and "it may lead to a financial crisis much sooner than anyone thinks."

Still, Kant's prediction of a Le Pen victory is definitely not the consensus call.

As of Tuesday, betting markets implied about a 30 percent chance of Le Pen winning the presidency.

The bulk of strategists said they believe she can reach the second round, but will struggle to cross the 50 percent threshold needed to become president. Given the sheer unpredictability of recent political events like Brexit and Trump's rise to power, however, several experts told CNBC that anything was possible.

There is a chance she could win the presidency, said Simon Baptist, global chief economist at the Economist Intelligence Unit.

"Le Pen has taken care to present herself as a candidate with reasonable views, which has helped her to push the National Front from the fringes to the mainstream. Recent events, such as the refugee crisis, terrorist attacks, and the rise of populist leaders elsewhere, have also played into her hands."

A poll by French newspaper Le Figaro indicated the French were more pessimistic about globalization than other countries — sentiments that may play into Le Pen's hands.

"The day before the U.S. election, pollsters gave Trump a 1.6 percent chance of victory, so while I wouldn't consider a Le Pen victory a baseline scenario, I wouldn't count her out," said Tony Nash, managing partner and chief economist of Complete Intelligence.

While Le Pen's controversial views have only appealed to a minority of voters thus far, many have warned that her popularity could swell if rival parties fall prey to more scandals. Allegations emerged last month that Fillon's wife was paid for a fake job; the 62-year old candidate has so far rejected the claims.

Markets, analysts said, are acknowledging the chances of a victory for the French right-wing.

"I think the market is telling us a clear message that investors are finally waking up to the risk of a Le Pen win," Callum Henderson, head of global markets research for the Eurasia Group, told CNBC in an email. He pointed to the the Bund-OAT spread's beginning to "widen out sharply," and France's CAC 40 index "significantly" underperforming Germany's DAX index.

And then there are others who adamantly rule out the prospect of a Le Pen presidency.

"Based on all the polls, as well as the polarization in France, she has virtually no chance," warned Cas Mudde, associate professor at the University of Georgia. "People argue she can win because they doubt the polls after Brexit and Trump. However, in both cases the margins were much smaller than between Le Pen and Macron or Fillon."

If Le Pen were to win, Henderson said, "markets would riot" because of her comments on France leaving the European Union. Still, he added, her rhetoric might not accurately reflect what would happen in the country.

"It is highly questionable whether she would be able to (initiate a French exit from the EU or the euro) if she did win because parliament would not likely pass much ideas, but the initial market reaction would be very volatile and very negative," Henderson said.

The American Conservative : Making France Great Again

By James P. Pinkerton • February 15, 2017

It's nice be remembered fondly 375 years after you've died. That's the case for Armand Jean du Plessis, Cardinal-Duke of Richelieu and of Fronsac, known to history as Cardinal Richelieu.

Richelieu's name is easy to find in France; it's on statues and plaques, street signs and postage stamps. And here's the newest remembrance: France's National Front, the nationalist political party led by Marine Le Pen, has announced its campaign platform for

the 2017 presidential balloting, scheduled for April and May. A plank in Le Pen's platform calls for a substantial increase in defense spending, including the construction of a new aircraft carrier, to be named, yes, *Richelieu*.

Richelieu might be best known to Americans as the scheming villain in Alexandre Dumas' swashbuckling historical novel of 17th-century France, *The Three Musketeers*, which has been made into a movie at least two dozen times.

Of course, to be a proper villain, one must have power. Richelieu had

plenty of power, and he used it to change France. And so even if Dumas chose to depict Richelieu as a villain, many in France think of him as a hero.

In fact, admiration for Richelieu is especially strong on the right; for instance, Éric Zemmour, the anti-PC author of the Le Pen-esque best-seller *Le Suicide Français* and many other works, is an ardent fan of Richelieu. And from the grave, the cardinal seems to admire the author right back: Zemmour is a laureate of the coveted *Prix Richelieu*.

Richelieu was no saint, to be sure, and yet, warts and all, he is remembered in his country as an effective champion of French power and national unity—more on that in a moment.

Le Pen's National Front, of course, is the right-of-center party that combines a desire to control France's national borders with a desire to control France's international destiny—that is, to leave the European Union (EU). And while the National Front has its own warts, its unabashed nationalism is newly relevant—in fact, it's now leading in the polls. Why, one could

even say that the Front's goal is to "Make France Great Again."

Indeed, nationalist hostility to the EU is the force that propelled the United Kingdom toward "Brexit" last year. And so the National Front proudly takes its place among the many political parties in Europe that are opposing the EU, including the UK Independence Party and the Alternative for Germany Party.

It was the same nationalist spirit that animated Americans to elect Donald Trump. Indeed, in January, Le Pen and three of her colleagues were spotted having coffee at a café in Trump Tower in Manhattan. (It's not known whom within Team Trump, if anyone, she might have met with.)

Okay, so who was Richelieu? And why is he important to French nationalists? Born to minor nobility in Paris in 1585, at the tender age of 21 he was consecrated as a bishop in the Catholic Church. (In those days, it was standard for younger sons—Richelieu was the youngest of three—to be fast-tracked into the clergy.)

Proving himself to be a talented administrator, Richelieu moved up fast; as he said, "Carry on any enterprise as if all future success depended on it." In 1616, he was named secretary of state to King Louis XIII, and in 1624 he became, in effect, the prime minister. He served in that position until his death in 1642.

Without rehashing all the ins and outs of French politics during the era of the Bourbon kings, we can sum up Richelieu's accomplishments in two specific points: first, an emphasis on national unity, and second, a practical determination to achieve national greatness in the international arena.

With the hindsight of history, not all of Richelieu's works will sit well with American readers—or with any modern audience—and yet, nevertheless, they are worth knowing. Why? Because Americans have now come to realize that their country faces severe challenges; indeed, on close inspection, one can see that the U.S. in the 21st century faces some of the same challenges that France faced in the 17th century, notably, challenges to national unity and to national greatness.

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So let's look briefly at how Richelieu responded to and mastered these challenges:

First, an emphasis on national unity. At the beginning of Richelieu's career, it wasn't obvious that France was, or ever would be, a unitary nation-state with its capital in Paris.

In those days, the aristocracy was strong; each nobleman had his regional domain and his own ideas about power and governance. To put that another way, the nobility viewed France as just a collection of duchies, each with its own army or militia, each with its own special powers of taxation and trade, and many with only a tenuous loyalty to France itself.

From the point of view of local autonomy—that is, local autonomy as controlled by an unelected duke—such an arrangement was fine, but from the point of national power, it was disastrous. And in fact, a decentralized France was riven by bloody feuds, rebellions, even civil wars.

Of course, the reference to "civil war" reminds us of our own Civil War, from 1861 to 1865. The many debates over that conflict will never be resolved, but this much we should know for sure: if the Confederacy had not been defeated—if the Union had not prevailed—the resulting political fragments of North America would never have been able to survive against the emerging world superpowers of Britain, Germany, Russia, Japan, and, yes, France. So we can see a hard imperative of geopolitics: get big or get eaten. It's the law of the global jungle: the strong swallow the weak. As Richelieu knew, national strength is a matter of sticking together for the sake of survival; it's hard to think of a higher patriotic value than that.

We might also pause here to note that in our time, it will take a strong central government to put a stop to the foolishness of "sanctuary cities" and even "sanctuary states." If California, for example, is allowed to keep open its border with Mexico—and through Mexico, with the whole wide world—then that's a reckless policy that will imperil, too, the other 49 states. So we can see: if we are to be a secure and confident United States, as opposed to an insecure collection of endangered states, then we need a strong national policy. Four centuries ago, Richelieu thought the same thing.

Back in his day, on behalf of French unity, Richelieu never hesitated to take strong action. Through cajolery when possible and force when necessary, he squelched the independence of the nobility.

In addition, and much less pleasantly, he squelched the political power of the Protestants, known in France as Huguenots. The Huguenots were a threat to French unity, Richelieu believed, because they were naturally allied with the Protestant states of Europe, notably, France's traditional arch-rival, England. As we all remember from

school days, in the previous century, the German Martin Luther, a onetime Catholic priest, had launched the Reformation; in the resulting schismatic war within Christendom, most of Northern Europe broke away from Catholicism, embracing Protestantism. And in Richelieu's time, too, the Catholic-Protestant split was the bloodiest politico-military dividing line in Europe.

From Richelieu's perspective in France, the choice for his country was clear: Since the vast majority of Frenchmen were Catholic, the best course for national unity was Catholicism. We might note, with a sigh of lament, that the idea of individual freedom of conscience—choosing one's own faith—was only just beginning to come into existence. One might even hope that a Richelieu of today would be more tolerant, even if still, in his steely way, determined.

Yet back in the day, if the Huguenots didn't like the idea of having only limited religious freedom under Catholic hegemony, well, they had to either leave the country or be persecuted, even killed. Once again, by modern standards, such harshness is hard to comprehend, let alone justify, and yet it must be said, by way of explanation, if not defense, that such enforced religious unanimity was the general rule back then, on both sides of the Catholic-Protestant divide.

Ironically, even though he was a champion of Catholic power—he was himself, after all, a Catholic cleric—Richelieu was no Catholic zealot. Indeed, some contemporaries wondered if he believed in God at all.

Interestingly, in that era, it was hard to be a devout Catholic and a national political leader at the same time, because as far as the Roman Church was concerned, true devotion to Catholicism meant submitting to the political will of the pope, and few leaders were willing to do that—and certainly not Richelieu. The greatness of France was Richelieu's true faith. And so, just as with the Huguenots, the once-powerful Catholic hierarchy would have to bow down to the national interest. Paris before Rome.

So yes, the cardinal wanted Catholics to dominate France, but at the same time, he wanted France to dominate Catholics. And as a practical matter, that meant that the French king, embodying the nation as a whole, would make all the decisions—with Richelieu, of course, helping out.

Indeed, as we look at Richelieu's wily politicking, we can see beginnings of the idea of

"nationalism," even if the word itself wasn't coined until the 19th century. (In France, by the way.)

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Thus we're starting to see why Richelieu, flaws and all, is relevant to today: in his time, he saw himself as the upholder of united French sovereignty against multinationalism—the multinationalism of both the Protestants and the Catholics. And now, four centuries later, Marine Le Pen is similarly seeking to uphold French sovereignty against the multinational EU, as well as, more broadly, the myriad powers of globalism.

Meanwhile, here in the U.S., champions of American sovereignty—now led, of course, by President Trump—find themselves in a tough struggle against international combines. That is, American nationalists must defend their country's uniqueness against the encroachments of, for instance, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the North American Free Trade Agreement, the Paris Climate Change Agreement, and the United Nations.

So despite all the differences between then and now, Richelieu can be seen as an early champion not only of French nationalism, but also of *all* nationalism, in every country. Yes, wherever a leader believes that the basic unit of decision-making ought to be the nation-state, there, also, is the spirit of Richelieu.

Second, a determination to achieve national greatness in the international arena. Richelieu's France found itself in a dangerous neighborhood—that is to say, Europe. The greatest power of that era was the House of Hapsburg, which, at that time, controlled ruled much of Central Europe and Italy. And a different branch of the the Hapsburg family reigned over Spain and also, for a time, Portugal, as well as all their overseas possessions, including the fabulous gold mines of Mexico and the silver mines of Peru. And oh yes, present-day Belgium and Holland, too.

So if we look at a map, we can see not only that the Hapsburgs, writ large, were preeminent in power and wealth, but that, in addition, they had France surrounded. And the fact that the Hapsburgs were Catholic, same as the French, meant nothing; the Hapsburgs were as eager to gain control over Catholic Paris as they were to regain authority over Protestant Berlin.

So what to do? How to keep France from being crushed? Richelieu had

a simple but shrewd idea: *Realpolitik*. That is, he would step across the religious divide and work with the Protestant powers to check the might of the Hapsburgs. It was not high-toned "moral clarity" that inspired Richelieu; it was bottom-line practicality. That worked a lot better.

In 1618, the many religious tensions in Europe once again erupted into open conflict, in what came to be known as the Thirty Years' War. During that fighting, Richelieu's France didn't just make alliances with Protestant countries such as England, Prussia, and Sweden; it also paid them subsidies to keep their armies in the field—that is, fighting the Hapsburgs. The warfare was savage; the main battlefield was Germany, and it's been estimated that the population of that ravaged land fell by a third during those three horrible decades. And yet, in the end, the French-led coalition emerged victorious.

From the perspective of nearly four centuries, it's understandable that most people today might not care about all this history, and yet it's easy to understand why the French *do* care. And that's why Le Pen's National Front wants to build a new warship and name it after a man who died in 1642.

Okay, so now: What are the implications of Richelieu's career for the United States? What's the takeaway for us? We might draw three key lessons:

First, American unity can no longer be taken for granted, and so we must develop a positive strategy for reinstilling nationalistic togetherness. That is, a half-century of unchecked immigration and government-subsidized multiculturalism have taken their toll on our collective solidarity. So even after we regain control of our border, we'd also better find a way to restore the idea of "patriotic assimilation" and policies appropriate for the furtherance of that goal. That is, we can be multi-ethnic, but we must not be multicultural, and down that road is ... chaos. We need to be one nation again.

Obviously, the specific tactics that Richelieu used for national consolidation are not applicable anymore, although, of course, the same can be said for many once-accepted elements of life, then compared to now.

Yet still, Richelieu's larger nationalistic vision is enduringly essential, and that's what Le Pen is

choosing to enshrine. As the Bible said before Richelieu, and as Lincoln said after Richelieu, a house divided against itself cannot stand. And today, as we all know, our own house is tottering—and so we'd better get serious about fixing it. And studying history is a good way to learn about possible repair tools.

Second, America must be realistically practical, as opposed to unrealistically ideological, in pursuit of its national objectives. If, for example, our main goal is to defeat and eliminate Islamic terrorism, then *of course* we should be working with other countries that share the same goal.

And as we discovered in Afghanistan and Iraq, we can't do it by ourselves. In both of those forlorn wars, the U.S. and a few half-hearted allies faced not only the active hostility of the insurgents, but also the quiet hostility of many of the major powers in Asia, notably Russia, China, Iran, and Pakistan. To put the matter bluntly, in those wars we suffered from a bad case of too many enemies and not enough allies. As Richelieu understood, the goal of diplomacy is to divide one's enemies, not to unite them.

So if we want to win in the future, we need to "flip" some countries from foes to friends. That's what we did in World War II, when both Russia and China were on our side in the fight against fascism. Today, some nations, such as Iran, may be hopeless enemies, but other powers could be allies, because they too are confronting the threat of Islamism. Thus Richelieu, who was willing to work with anybody to achieve his national objectives, could be a valuable historical guide.

Third, countries tend to be remember their great leaders—and properly so. And that's why, four centuries later, France still honors Richelieu.

In the meantime, the United States of America is not even three centuries old, and so most current judgments about our history must be regarded, in the long eye of history, as merely tentative. And yet it's safe to say that a special place in our pantheon will be reserved for those leaders who have kept our country together.

James P. Pinkerton is a contributor to the Fox News Channel.

F Car Tie-Up Between French PSA And GM's Opel/Vauxhall Could Cut Costs And Jobs In Shake-Up

Marcel Michelson

In this Feb.24, 2016 file photo, PSA Peugeot Citroen Chief Executive Carlos Tavares attends the presentation of the company's financial results at Peugeot headquarters in Paris. France's PSA Group, maker of Peugeot and Citroen cars, says it's exploring a "potential acquisition" of Opel, the money-losing European business of General Motors Co. (AP Photo/Jacques Brinon)

French carmaker PSA Peugeot Citroën on Tuesday confirmed it was in talks with General Motors about a possible acquisition of Opel/Vauxhall, as part of an alliance between the two groups dating from 2012.

At that time, the French group was facing strong financial headwinds. In

2014, the French state and China's Dongfeng agreed a capital tie up and put a new chief executive, Carlos Tavares, in place.

Now, its 2016 results due on February 23 are likely to show an improvement but it seems a bit too early for a capitalistic adventure.

Marrying Opel/Vauxhall and PSA would put several brands under one roof in a company that is used to running different brands. Opel has 10 plants, including two in Britain. PSA has also 10 plants, including Argentina and Brazil, and has another dozen joint ventures or outsourced factories with partners such as Mitsubishi.

This Japanese carmaker has become part of the alliance of Renault-Nissan.

There is an overlap in models in the ranges of PSA and Opel/Vauxhall

and a deal would not improve PSA's regional spread, especially its presence in growth markets.

But a deal would be an important step in the further consolidation of the European car industry and will allow PSA to cut costs and find production efficiencies. That will probably include the closure of some plants, and job losses.

PSA itself had closed its plant in Ryton, near Coventry, in 2006 and the Vauxhall plants are in constant competition with their German counterparts. Post Brexit, the future of the British plants in Luton and Ellesmere Port may be at risk.

PSA acquired the European activities of Chrysler in 1978 and ran a Talbot range until 1987 for passenger cars and 1992 for commercial vehicles.

GM wants to get rid of the ailing European activities to focus on its core.

A combination would be able to amortize R&D and investments in new engines and technologies over a larger number of cars.

But it remains a defensive deal and the group needs to be able to manage an integration, without burning the capital provided by the Chinese and the French state. Not to mention the funds of the founding Peugeot family.

Tavares is a skilled manager and was in line to succeed Carlos Ghosn at Renault-Nissan but lost his job there when his personal ambitions became too apparent for Ghosn to tolerate. Ghosn now runs a global group with brands including Mitsubishi, Lada and Dacia. Whether Tavares is capable to pull off a similar feat remains to be seen.



Mark Gilbert : Greece's Euro Membership Looks Vulnerable Again

Mark Gilbert

Greece is caught in a spat between its major creditors. On one side is the International Monetary Fund,

which says "significant debt relief" is needed. On the other are the euro zone institutions, insisting on a primary budget surplus of 3.5 percent of gross domestic product

and no further relief. Something's got to give -- and it could be Greece's euro membership.

Two deadlines -- one hard, one soft -- are looming. The soft deadline is the Feb. 20 meeting of euro region finance minister in Brussels; the hard deadline comes in July, when

Greece's monthly debt repayments increase to about 8 billion euros (\$8.5 billion).

QuickTake Greece's Financial Odyssey

With next month's Dutch election to be followed by French and German votes, it's clear that the longer the tussle drags on, the less political appetite there'll be to resolve the situation. But with both sides in fundamental disagreement, it's hard to see how a compromise can be engineered. The European Commission said on Tuesday that there's no date set for talks to continue. In short, Greece remains in limbo.

Here's what the IMF said in its latest assessment of the Greek economy, published last week:

Debt relief alone is also not sufficient to address Greece's policy challenges. This is why a two-pronged approach is required for Greece to return to sustainable growth and prosperity: ambitious policies on the part of the Greek authorities and ambitious debt relief

on the part of Greece's European partners.

German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schaueble, though, is adamant that additional debt relief isn't on the menu. Here's what he told German broadcaster ARD on Wednesday:

We can't undertake a debt haircut for a member of the European single currency; it's ruled out by the Lisbon Treaty. For that, Greece would have to exit the currency area. The pressure on Greece to undertake reforms must be maintained so that it becomes competitive, otherwise they can't remain in the currency area."

While the point about debt forgiveness being forbidden is strictly true, it's also true that the euro zone is capable of finding plenty of wiggle room in the treaties when it suits. Moreover, the IMF is talking about extending repayment terms, rather than an outright debt haircut where principal payment is reduced. Schaueble, who has a habit of mentioning the prospect of Greece leaving the euro at every available opportunity, glosses over those elements of the IMF's case.

Klaus Regling, the head of the European Stability Mechanism, chose to ignore Schaeuble's grumbling when he argued in the Financial Times last week that the euro zone is united on Greece:

In May 2016, Greece's euro zone partners pledged additional debt relief at the end of the ESM program in mid-2018, should there be a need for it. And in the long term, they have committed to even more help, provided that Greece sticks to its side of the bargain. It is hard to overestimate the significance of this pledge, made by the finance ministers of the euro zone. Solidarity with Greece will continue.

If that sounds unconvincing, the solidarity Regling claims that Greece enjoys will be in even shorter supply in election season. And while the crisis drags on, the Greek economy is suffering with figures released on Tuesday showing gross domestic product shrank by 0.4 percent in the fourth quarter of 2016, compared with economists' expectations for an expansion of 0.4 percent.

I've argued before that Greece should have left the euro already.

The country's euro partners, preparing for Brexit negotiations and a series of potentially destabilizing elections, are unlikely to risk further turmoil now by trying to boot Greece out. Nor does Greece want to leave.

But Europe's election season will soon be upon us, as will that hard deadline of July's debt payment. A Greek default would almost certainly be incompatible with continued euro membership. The IMF and the EU institutions need to resolve their differences swiftly, hopefully with an agreement to further ease the nation's debt burden. Otherwise, the risks of Greece leaving the euro are rising.

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INTERNATIONAL

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Trump Puts NATO Allies in the Crosshairs Over Military Spending

Julian E. Barnes in Brussels and Anton Troianovski in Berlin

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Last month, Germany began deploying an army battle group to Lithuania, the first of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization troops to arrive to bolster the defenses on the alliance's eastern border with Russia.

It isn't an overwhelming display of force. The initial German contingent is 460 troops, supplemented by a few hundred soldiers from Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Norway.

Some current and former American officials derided the unit as a "Frankenbattalion," calling it an example of Germany's failure to shoulder its fair share of the NATO burden. While Germany defended its plan and the U.S. has dropped its official complaints, it illustrates the tensions coursing through the alliance as the Trump administration

prepares to push Europe for more defense spending.

"We have been complaining since 1949 that European allies aren't doing enough," said Jim Townsend, who served in the Pentagon during the Obama administration. "But for Germany it has been particularly problematic in the last 10 years."

NATO is at a crossroads. Having helped keep the peace in Europe for more than 70 years, the 28-nation alliance is being sharply challenged by Russian aggression in Ukraine, and by President Donald Trump, who has called the organization obsolete and argued it should focus on counterterrorism.

This week, top officials from the new U.S. administration come to Europe for a NATO meeting in Brussels and a security conference in Munich where questions of the group's missions and finances will be on sharp display. How member countries resolve their differences will go a long way toward determining NATO's future and usefulness.

Mr. Trump has signaled he will put new muscle behind America's long-standing demand that Europe spend more on defense. "We only ask that all of the NATO members make their full and proper financial contributions to the NATO Alliance, which many of them have not been doing," Mr. Trump said in a speech last week at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa.

On Tuesday, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg announced that NATO allies in Europe and Canada raised their defense spending by \$10 billion last year, a 3.8% increase that is bigger than allied officials initially expected.

The U.S. spends \$664 billion annually on its military, or 3.61% of GDP, tops in both categories of any NATO country. Spending by other NATO members ranges from nothing, by Iceland, to \$60.3 billion by the U.K.

Germany, the economic powerhouse of Europe, spends around \$40 billion, or 1.2% of its gross domestic product, on

defense. The U.S. has been pushing for Germany to hit 2% of its GDP on defense spending for more than a decade.

More recently, Chancellor Angela Merkel has been trying to push her pacifist-minded country to close the gap. In November, the German Parliament made the biggest increase in military spending in more than a decade, raising the defense budget 8% to €37 billion (\$39 billion), and German government officials say they will push for more increases in the coming years. Alliance officials note if Germany was to meet NATO's 2% of GDP goal, it would require tens of billions of dollars in extra spending each year.

Administration officials, including Vice President Mike Pence and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, will come to Europe this week to deliver a message of reassurance, but also to note that defense spending must rise.

German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen—perhaps the

German politician most supportive of increased military spending—visited Washington on Friday to detail her country's defense work and called demands for a larger defense budget appropriate.

"It's a fair demand," she said during her trip to Washington. "If we want to jointly master the crises in the world, namely the fight against terrorism, and also put the alliance on solid footing, then everyone has to pay their share."

Some German policy makers say the U.S. appears to be overly focused on the 2% number, given Germany's engagement on the ground from Afghanistan and Iraq to Mali and Kosovo.

U.S. officials said they aren't worried about spending for spending's sake but see a real military gap—in personnel and materiel.

Core to Europe's defense is the U.S. contribution. The U.S. has 35,000 military personnel in Europe, mostly in Germany, including two Army infantry brigades. The U.S. has bolstered its force with a heavy tank brigade with 3,500 troops and 87 tanks. It also maintains tanks and artillery at sites around western Europe.

That said, NATO plans for the defense of Europe rely heavily on Germany, which will be required to have six heavy infantry brigades ready to reinforce Poland or the Baltic states in the event of a conflict with Russia, according to Western officials briefed on requirements. NATO is pressing for more tanks, long-range artillery, ground-based air defense systems, aerial refueling planes and other equipment from Germany, officials said.

Some German lawmakers have questioned if the alliance is mistakenly preparing for yesterday's battles.

"I do believe that we need to do more in terms of equipment for the army," said Rainer Arnold, the top defense-policy expert in parliament for the center-left Social Democrats. "But we must be careful about believing that Europe will be defended in a great tank battle—that doesn't conform with today's military technology."

Mr. Arnold said the 2% goal is "a utopia," because Germany would struggle to spend such a large sum, and many of its neighbors would react warily if Berlin dramatically increased defense spending.

NATO officials say the new requirements are a necessary calibration to respond to the threat from Russia. Alliance officials say they are making investments in drones and cyberdefenses, but the Russian military buildup must be immediately countered with the kind of heavy military equipment that will ensure Moscow realizes any incursion would ultimately fail.

To a certain extent, all of NATO's European allies have been caught by surprise as the threat has moved from counterinsurgency and low-intensity combat to preparing to defend against Russia. For years NATO urged European allies to tailor their forces to the kind of peacekeeping missions they were conducting in Kosovo or the kind of fighting and training missions they conducted in Afghanistan.

Germany had more than 2,000 Leopard 2 battle tanks in its arsenal during the Cold War and 800,000 military and civilian personnel in its armed forces after the Berlin Wall came down. Successive rounds of cuts whittled the military down to 177,000 service members, a maximum of 56,000 civilians, and a goal of just 225 Leopard 2 tanks.

NATO pushed European countries to model their forces on the British, de-emphasizing tanks and focusing

on light deployable forces. Now the alliance has shifted gears demanding the country once more build up its heavy forces. Germany has already started to follow suit, moving last year to add thousands of new military positions and refurbish scores of decommissioned tanks.

The U.S. military's focus on Germany as the potential game-changer is in part because of the size of its economy, but it is also because of the quality of its equipment.

U.S. military officers often speak with unhidden jealousy about German Panzerhaubitze 2000, viewed as perhaps the most advanced artillery system of its kind.

The problem: Germany has only about 90 of the artillery in service, having sold off 16 to Croatia and 21 to Lithuania. According to U.S. officials, German troops must share large artillery pieces for training, because they don't have enough to go around.

German officials said artillery pieces are sometimes unavailable because of maintenance needs and that the military is now expanding its stock, with 12 new Panzerhaubitze 2000s slated to be delivered this year.

The U.S., by contrast has 5,923 artillery pieces, including 969 of its most advanced system, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies. This year the U.S. will be moving a part of that arsenal, a brigade worth of artillery, to storage bunkers in Europe.

The small number of troops deployed to Lithuania raised questions among some U.S. officials about whether the German military is large enough.

Lithuanian officials said they aren't worried and pointed to the swiftness of the German deployment, which arrived ahead of the British and

Canadian forces headed to Estonia and Latvia.

German officials argue a multinational battalion is a better deterrent: Russia would know it would cross not one ally but many if it made a move in Lithuania. Allied ambassadors backed the German plans, and the U.S. stopped pushing the issue, saying it was settled.

Officials are hoping for a change in Germany's pacific public attitude about military action, shaped by the shadow of World War II. Polls show growing concern about Germany's security in the wake of the Ukraine crisis and high-profile terror attacks. The German military's Center for Military History and Social Science found half of Germans in a poll last year wanted the defense budget to be increased, compared with just 19% in 2013.

In November, the German military premiered a \$7 million, 82-episode reality show on YouTube called "The Recruits," which follows the exploits of a group of 12 trainees as they navigate basic training on the Parow Naval base on the Baltic Sea.

The slickly produced show doesn't obscure the challenge for Germany. In one episode, Petty Officer Second Class Carl Scholwin, who has spent 10 years in the military, laments that service members in his country "don't get the recognition that they really should get."

Asked later by The Journal about what it is like to return from a mission abroad, he said: "In Germany, you get left by the roadside. You're not really noticed."

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This Is How NATO Ends

Jeremy Shapiro | 35 mins ago

SEPTEMBER 2020 — NATO began gloriously 71 years ago with the signing of the Washington Treaty by the august representatives of 12 nations committed to defend each other in perpetuity. It ended ignominiously last Thursday with the padlocking of the gate at NATO's Brussels headquarters by a Flemish security guard named Karel van Aachen.

Technically, the organization still exists. The treaty is still in force; the 28 members of the alliance are still pledged, in theory, to defend each

other against aggression; think tank conferences continue to endlessly debate "whither NATO" in ornate assembly halls; Georgia still publicly holds to its ambition of joining the alliance in some distant future.

But long before NATO Secretary-General Gerhard Schröder abandoned his nearly empty HQ last month, it was clear to all observers that, over the course of just a few years, NATO had gone from the strongest and most successful alliance in history to an empty shell and an irrelevance. It was destroyed not by Russian armies but by a lack of interest from its members. The story of NATO's

demise demonstrates that sometimes alliances end not with a bang but with a whimper.

The long whimper

In NATO's case, the long whimper of its demise began with the inauguration of U.S. President Donald Trump in January 2017. Throughout the endless 2016 presidential campaign, Trump had railed against American allies that he felt did not carry the burden of their own defense. He hinted darkly that as president he would not defend allies that did not pay their share. His praise of Russian President Vladimir Putin further

stoked fears in Eastern Europe that he would abandon them to Russia's tender mercies.

Once he became president, Trump's attitude toward Europe and NATO became just as erratic as his ramshackle presidential campaign. He appointed cabinet secretaries who praised NATO in their confirmation hearings. He allowed visiting British Prime Minister Theresa May to assert that he "supported NATO 100 percent." Then, just as suddenly, he would veer back toward bashing allies, calling NATO obsolete, or attacking the EU as a German plot.

Each new tirade would be followed by a new round of tumult in the press and hand-wringing on the part of Europeans. And yet little changed on the ground. U.S. forces remained in Europe, U.S. planes took part in patrolling the skies over the Baltics, and U.S. soldiers still participated in NATO military exercises. Beneath the headlines, NATO quietly remained, on paper, the most powerful military alliance in the world.

At first, far from breaking the alliance, Trump's threats even appeared to motivate Europeans in a way that the blandishments of previous presidents had not managed. European defense spending crept up toward their commitment of 2 percent of GDP, and Europeans established new mechanisms for defense cooperation within the post-Brexit EU. At Trump's insistence, NATO proclaimed that counterterrorism was its primary mission and embarked on multiple studies to explore how NATO might fulfill its new purpose.

In the end, NATO's new mission did not shift much in the way of resources; the alliance simply stopped talking about its previous core mission of defending Europe from Russian aggression. But these cosmetic changes allowed President Trump to claim that he had succeeded in adapting the alliance to his "America First" philosophy. In a famous speech delivered in front of the Las Vegas facsimile of the Eiffel Tower, he proclaimed that "now, instead of America working for NATO, NATO works for America." Trump no longer thought that NATO was obsolete. To the contrary, it became for him a symbol of how he could restructure American alliances to serve American purposes.

Rotten to the corps

But beyond the symbolism, it was not really clear that NATO worked for anyone anymore.

When Russia stepped up its proxy war in Ukraine in mid-2017, NATO debated a response, but with U.S. energies focused on building a wall on the country's southern border, it failed to find any consensus for new sanctions or for reinforcing existing deployments in the east. Poland, France, and Germany decided that the EU's new Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) mechanism

for defense was more fit for this purpose. Along with most of their European partners, they began using it to supply weapons and training to the Ukrainian government. Officially, NATO declared its neutrality. Russian propaganda pivoted away from denouncing the United States and NATO and toward excoriating Germany and the EU.

In early 2018, the Egyptian economy went into free-fall, and the government collapsed. As disorder reigned in Cairo, hundreds of thousands of refugees began appearing on the shores of Greece and Italy. Once again, NATO considered action — in this case, a naval mission to intercept and return the refugee boats, seen as both a humanitarian and protective measure, similar to the missions it conducted in the Mediterranean in 2016. But this time, Eastern European members, stung by NATO's neutrality in Ukraine, opposed the alliance's participation in the effort. The United States, embroiled in a scandal over Roger Ailes's purchase of the *New York Times* at an IRS tax auction, did not take a side, and in the end NATO did nothing.

Then, in January 2019, in response to the U.S. decision to search Iranian shipping boats in the Persian Gulf for weapons shipments, Tehran staged a coup in Baghdad. The Iranian puppet regime ordered U.S. forces out of Iraq while combined Iraqi-Iranian forces attacked Turkish forces in Iraqi Kurdistan and began arming the Kurdish insurgency in southeastern Turkey. Turkey, supported by the Trump administration, asked NATO to invoke its sacred Article V — that is, to declare Iran's actions as aggression against a NATO member and come to Turkey's aid.

Most of the European members of NATO, including France, Germany, Poland, and Italy, flatly refused. Interestingly, these countries had met their 2 percent defense commitment and even endorsed the NATO turn to counterterrorism. But they refused to use their newfound defense muscle to oppose what the United States and Turkey saw as Iranian "terrorism" in northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey.

NATO's refusal to respond to an Article V request triggered the

resignation of NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg.

In his resignation letter, Stoltenberg noted that there was little reason to continue running an organization that could not or would not respond to its members' needs.

In his resignation letter, Stoltenberg noted that there was little reason to continue running an organization that could not or would not respond to its members' needs.

Many in Europe agreed that NATO's time had passed, but the United States and Britain were not ready to give up. With support from Germany's Social Democratic-led grand coalition government, they found in former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder a compromise candidate for secretary-general to take up the challenge of redefining NATO for a new age, though just what that meant was left unclear. The Russians welcomed his appointment and declared that they no longer opposed NATO membership for Montenegro and even Serbia. They further said they would consider joining the alliance eventually, an announcement that the Trump administration publicly praised.

Russian support, however, did not help Schröder reverse the decline. Most European members, outraged by NATO's good relationship with their enemy in Ukraine, sent their scarce staff officers to EU commands. U.S. attention was absorbed by Eric Trump's trial on charges of insider trading and the Turkish-Iranian war. U.S. officials often didn't show up to NATO meetings, and large-scale NATO military exercises just stopped happening. Most countries quietly ceased to even contribute to NATO's common budget, diverting the funds to their unilateral immigration patrols in the Mediterranean or military training in Ukraine.

Struggling even to keep the lights on, Schröder got U.S. and Russian support in 2020 to relocate NATO HQ to a former military base in Bulgaria in what he hoped would eventually be the geographic center of the alliance. Europeans did not object, but most of NATO's staff did not even bother to follow him there.

It's the solidarity, stupid

In retrospect, it is clear why NATO faded away. For decades, NATO

members had focused on what divided them. They had argued mightily over burden sharing and how to respond to Russian aggression or to disorder in North Africa. These were immensely important issues, but the disputes distracted attention from what made NATO special: the deep commitment of its members to each other's security. Of course, NATO members did not always agree on what the organization's priorities should be, but NATO as a whole took seriously the threats that each individual member saw to their national security.

As a result, in most of its 70 years, NATO, far from being obsolete, had been the tool that U.S. and European policymakers turned to in crisis after crisis. In the Cold War, in the Balkans, in Afghanistan, in Libya, and elsewhere, U.S. presidents and European leaders had found that NATO provided not just military capacity but also a mechanism for rallying allies and securing broader legitimacy for their own defense priorities. NATO worked because its members believed that their partners had their back. Solidarity was at its heart.

It is easy to see now that President Trump solved NATO's burden-sharing dilemma — by destroying its solidarity. In putting America first, and failing to pay attention to their problems, he got his allies to pay more, but he also guaranteed that they would care less. A NATO that was built to work primarily for America no longer worked at all. And so America's European allies are not with it in its current struggle with Iran, just as America is not with them in Ukraine.

Looking back at NATO's years of achievements, this seems a shame. But absorbed as we are with the new world disorder, nobody seems to care. Van Aachen, the security guard who closed NATO headquarters, was asked recently what he did with the key to the formerly glorious building. "I think it's at home in my top drawer," he admitted. "Nobody asked me for it."

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**The
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Russia Deploys Missile, Violating Treaty and Challenging Trump

Michael R. Gordon

missile that American officials say violates a landmark arms control treaty, posing a major test for President Trump as his

administration is facing a crisis over its ties to Moscow.

The new Russian missile deployment also comes as the

Trump administration is struggling to fill key policy positions at the State Department and the Pentagon — and to settle on a permanent replacement for Michael T. Flynn,

WASHINGTON — Russia has secretly deployed a new cruise

the national security adviser who resigned late Monday. Mr. Flynn stepped down after it was revealed that he had misled the vice president and other officials over conversations with Moscow's ambassador to Washington.

The ground-launched cruise missile at the center of American concerns is one that the Obama administration said in 2014 had been tested in violation of a 1987 treaty that bans American and Russian intermediate-range missiles based on land.

The Obama administration had sought to persuade the Russians to correct the violation while the missile was still in the test phase. Instead, the Russians have moved ahead with the system, deploying a fully operational unit.

Administration officials said the Russians now have two battalions of the prohibited cruise missile. One is still located at Russia's missile test site at Kapustin Yar in southern Russia near Volgograd. The other was shifted in December from that test site to an operational base elsewhere in the country, according to a senior official who did not provide further details and requested anonymity to discuss recent intelligence reports about the missile.

American officials had called the cruise missile the SSC-X-8. But the "X" has been removed from intelligence reports, indicating that American intelligence officials consider the missile to be operational and no longer a system in development.

The missile program has been a major concern for the Pentagon, which has developed options for how to respond, including deploying additional missile defenses in Europe or developing air-based or sea-based cruise missiles.

Russia's actions are politically significant, as well.

It is very unlikely that the Senate, which is already skeptical of President Vladimir V. Putin's intentions, would agree to ratify a new strategic arms control accord unless the alleged violation of the intermediate-range treaty is corrected. Mr. Trump has said the United States should "strengthen and expand its nuclear capability." But at the same time, he has talked

of reaching a new arms agreement with Moscow that would reduce arms "very substantially."

The deployment of the system could also substantially increase the military threat to NATO nations, depending on where the highly mobile system is based and how many more batteries are deployed in the future. Jim Mattis, the United States defense secretary, is scheduled to meet with allied defense ministers in Brussels on Wednesday.

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Before he left his post last year as the NATO commander and retired from the military, Gen. Philip M. Breedlove warned that deployment of the cruise missile would be a militarily significant development that "can't go unanswered."

Coming up with an arms control solution would not be easy. Each missile battalion is believed to have four mobile launchers with about half a dozen nuclear-tipped missiles allocated to each of the launchers. The mobile launcher for the cruise missile, however, closely resembles the mobile launcher used for the Iskander, a nuclear-tipped short-range system that is permitted under treaties.

"This will make location and verification really tough," General Breedlove said in an interview.

While senior Trump administration officials have not said where the new unit is based, there has been speculation in press reports that a missile system with similar characteristics is deployed in central Russia.

American and Russian relations were on a better footing in December 1987 when President Ronald Reagan and Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the Soviet leader, signed an arms accord, formally known as the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and commonly called the I.N.F. treaty.

As a result of the agreement, Russia and the United States destroyed 2,692 missiles. The missiles the Russians destroyed included the SS-20. The Americans destroyed their Pershing II ballistic

missiles and ground-launched cruise missiles, which were based in Western Europe.

"We can only hope that this history-making agreement will not be an end in itself but the beginning of a working relationship that will enable us to tackle the other urgent issues before us," Mr. Reagan said at the time.

But the Russians developed buyer's remorse. During the George W. Bush administration, Sergei B. Ivanov, the Russian defense minister, suggested that the treaty be dropped because Russia still faced threats from nations on its periphery, including China.

The Bush administration, however, was reluctant to terminate a treaty that NATO nations valued and whose abrogation would have enabled Russia to build up forces that could potentially be directed at the United States' allies in Asia, as well.

In June 2013, Mr. Putin complained that "nearly all of our neighbors are developing these kinds of weapons systems" and described the Soviet Union's decision to conclude the I.N.F. treaty as "debatable to say the least."

Russia began testing the cruise missile as early as 2008. Rose Gottemoeller, who was the State Department's top arms control official during the Obama administration and is now the deputy secretary general of NATO, first raised the alleged violation with Russian officials in 2013.

After years of frustration, the United States convened a November 2016 meeting in Geneva of a special verification commission established under the treaty to deal with compliance issues. It was the first meeting in 13 years of the commission, whose members include the United States, Russia and three former Soviet republics that are also party to the accord: Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine.

But Russia denied it had breached the treaty and responded with its own allegations of American violations, which the Americans asserted were spurious.

The Obama administration argued that it was in the United States' interest to preserve the treaty. Having failed to persuade the Russians to fix the alleged violation,

some military experts say, the United States needs to ratchet up the pressure by announcing plans to expand missile defenses in Europe and deploy sea-based or air-based nuclear missiles.

"We have strong tools like missile defense and counterstrike, and we should not take any of them off the table," General Breedlove said.

Franklin C. Miller, a longtime Pentagon official who served on the National Security Council under Mr. Bush, said the Russian military may see the cruise missile as a way to expand its target coverage in Europe and China so it can free its strategic nuclear forces to concentrate on targets in the United States.

"Clearly, the Russian military thinks this system is very important, important enough to break the treaty," Mr. Miller said.

But he cautioned against responding in kind by seeking to deploy new American intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe.

"The last thing NATO needs is a bruising debate as we had in the late '70s and early '80s about new missile deployments in Europe," Mr. Miller added. "The United States should build up its missile defense in Europe. But if the United States wants to deploy a military response, it should be sea-based."

Jon Wolfsthal, who served as a nuclear weapons expert on the National Security Council during the Obama administration, said the United States, its NATO allies, Japan and South Korea needed to work together to put pressure on Russia to correct the violation. The response, he wrote on Twitter, should be taken by the "alliance as a whole."

The Trump administration is in the beginning stages of reviewing nuclear policy and has not said how it plans to respond.

"We do not comment on intelligence matters," Mark Toner, the acting State Department spokesman, said. "We have made very clear our concerns about Russia's violation, the risks it poses to European and Asian security, and our strong interest in returning Russia to compliance with the treaty."

**The
New York
Times**

With Michael Flynn Gone, Russia Sees a Different Trump

Neil MacFarquhar

to celebrate the victory of Donald J. Trump have gone a bit flat.

MOSCOW — The champagne toasts that some Russian officials quaffed just a few short months ago

Euphoria was already starting to cede to caution before Michael T. Flynn, President Trump's national

security adviser and a perceived friend of Russia, resigned. That cemented the uneasy mood.

The departure of Mr. Flynn on Monday over his contacts with the

Russian ambassador to Washington was the latest in a series of mixed signals from Mr. Trump and his advisers on a host of issues

important to Russia, particularly the lifting of economic sanctions.

Now, many prominent political figures are wondering whether hopes for change were premature, and whether Moscow will inevitably remain Washington's main boogeyman. On Tuesday, the Pentagon was confrontational, accusing Moscow of secretly deploying a cruise missile system that violates a 1987 treaty on intermediate-range missiles based on land.

Vladimir R. Soloviev, the host of a noisy Sunday night talk show on state-run television viewed as reflecting Kremlin policy, this week issued one of the most negative public assessments yet of Mr. Trump. "Don't be charmed by Trump," he said in a message he addressed to all politicians and experts. "Don't think that Trump is a pro-Russian politician. Don't hope that Trump, in the interests of Russia, will in any way go against the basic, rooted interests of America."

How things have changed since November, when the Russian Parliament greeted Mr. Trump's election with a round of applause and a prominent political leader — albeit one famous for his antics — toasted the victory with champagne on national television. In January, Mr. Trump garnered more mentions than President Vladimir V. Putin in the Russian news media, knocking the Russian leader from the top spot for the first time since 2011.

Only one man, Mr. Putin, really sets Russia's foreign policy course, however. And he was never publicly celebratory, although his animosity toward Hillary Clinton, whom he blamed for the angry demonstrations that greeted his return to the presidency in 2012, was well known.

In recent years, Mr. Putin's main foreign policy goal has been to resurrect the time when the United States and the Soviet Union, as the two great nuclear superpowers, were the main arbiters of the global order. Lacking the might of the Soviet Union, Mr. Putin has tried to punch above his weight by shocking the world with unexpected tactics like seizing Crimea, destabilizing Ukraine and deploying

his military in Syria to shore up President Bashar al-Assad.

President Barack Obama responded by referring to Russia as a declining regional power. The two men had a poisonous personal relationship.

Mr. Trump seemed to presage a different era with all the praise he heaped on Russia and Mr. Putin. He described him as a strong, smart leader and said that Moscow seemed to be blamed for everything. And he called for better relations with Moscow to fight the Islamic State and other terrorist groups, echoing a longstanding Putin pitch.

Some voices in Moscow cautioned that Mrs. Clinton, as a calmer hand on the tiller, would be the kind of predictable leader that the Kremlin preferred, albeit a hostile one. Now, there is a sense that the Kremlin might be unsettled by the president of a far more powerful country deploying Mr. Putin's favorite tactic: unpredictability.

"Trump will be tamed and act more presidential, eventually, but he also has a penchant for unpredictability that works against the Kremlin," said Konstantin von Eggert, a political commentator for TV Rain, Russia's only independent channel. "This creates a situation in which a stronger player with the same style of unpredictability as a strategy comes on the stage. Putin did not anticipate that."

There has been a certain amount of policy whiplash on issues important to Russia. First, Mr. Trump said that NATO was obsolete, then that it had America's solid backing. He seemed to indicate he would lift economic sanctions imposed over the Ukraine crisis, and appointed as secretary of state Rex W. Tillerson, who as head of Exxon Mobil cut enormous oil deals with Russia and spoke out publicly against sanctions.

Then the new United States ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki R. Haley, sharply criticized Russia over Ukraine, suggesting that sanctions were hinged to a peace deal there. Mr. Tillerson echoed that line.

Finally, Mr. Trump started to mix geopolitical apples and oranges,

crossing issues in a way that Moscow deplores. He said maybe sanctions could be lifted in exchange for a better deal on nuclear arms. The Trump administration seemed to want the Kremlin to distance itself from Iran, its ally in Syria, and from China.

"There is a cautious feeling about how Trump and his advisers designated the possible ways of improving relations with Russia," said Vladimir Frolov, an international affairs analyst. "This has frightened the Kremlin because it does not correspond to Russia's interests."

Articles have just begun to appear in the Russian news media questioning the need for improved ties with Washington.

Sergei A. Karaganov, a prominent political scientist perceived as close to the Kremlin, wrote that Russia's foreign policy was a success and that it should stay the course. He did not even mention Mr. Trump. Fyodor Lukyanov, another establishment voice, wrote that Moscow risked alienating a host of new important friends if it drew too close to Washington.

On Monday, one of the first op-ed articles depicting Mr. Trump as erratic appeared in *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, a popular tabloid. Mr. Trump provoked an immediate constitutional crisis, the piece said, so who could guarantee that his policy toward Russia would be consistent?

Of course, Mr. Trump still attracts defenders.

Margarita Simonyan, the head of satellite channel RT, the international propaganda arm of the Kremlin, said that Western elites hate Mr. Trump because he considers Russia a normal country. "Anybody who says aloud that Russia is normal is either an idiot or a provocateur or both," she wrote on her blog.

The idea that Mr. Flynn was forced to resign over contacts with the Russian ambassador, Sergey I. Kislyak, fed the suspicion that relations with Moscow were the main target and that Russophobia was again stalking Washington. Accusations that Russia interfered in the American elections have

generally been dismissed on these grounds.

Since Mr. Trump's victory there has also been a quiet drumbeat in Moscow, where conspiracy theories are never far below the surface, that the American establishment would overthrow him.

"Either Trump has not found the necessary independence and has been driven into a corner," wrote Konstantin Kosachev, the head of the international affairs committee in the upper house of Parliament. "Or Russophobia has permeated the new administration from top to bottom."

Alexei Pushkov, another lawmaker, said on Twitter that after Mr. Flynn, Mr. Trump himself might be the next target.

Dmitry S. Peskov, the spokesman for Mr. Putin, declined to comment on Tuesday about the resignation, calling it an internal American affair. Just last Friday, in an evident attempt to help Mr. Flynn, Mr. Peskov had denied that the American official and the Russian ambassador had discussed sanctions. In resigning, Mr. Flynn conceded that they had.

Mr. Peskov called it premature to predict the course of Russian-American relations.

The first face-to-face meeting between two senior officials could come this Thursday when Mr. Tillerson might meet with his Russian counterpart, Sergey V. Lavrov, on the sidelines of a meeting of foreign ministers from the G-20 countries in Bonn, Germany.

Mr. Trump and Mr. Putin spoke by telephone in late January, but no meeting is anticipated before this summer.

The Kremlin is expected to spend the coming months trying to tamp down the exaggerated public expectations already focused on that first summit, said Mr. von Eggert, the political commentator.

"In these circumstances," he said, "I think what remains for the Kremlin is to sit and wait."

The New York Times

In Eastern Mosul, Liberated From ISIS, Battle Rages 'Day and Night'

David Zucchino

MOSUL, Iraq —

Any sense of normalcy on Saturday afternoon was shredded, again, when Iraqi soldiers began opening fire, their rifle barrels aimed at a white object in the bright blue sky.

"*Tayara musairal!*" someone shouted — a drone! Residents of eastern Mosul sprinted home, terrified by the latest attack by the Islamic State, and demoralized by the certainty that more would be coming.

Three weeks after Iraq declared the eastern half of this city liberated from the group, parts of the east bank of the Tigris River remain under siege. Residents say they are repeatedly targeted by Islamic State snipers, mortars and grenade-

dropping drones that buzz overhead several times a day.

For the tattered Rashidiya neighborhood here, the recent battle never ended. It just shifted course along the river. Rashidiya was the last district in eastern Mosul

declared liberated in late January, but army officers say Islamic State sleeper cells remain entrenched.

And those are not the only troubles here. Even as American-backed Iraqi forces prepare an offensive against the Islamic State stronghold in western Mosul, people in Rashidiya are scratching out a primitive existence, deprived of electricity, running water and other essential city services.

Their ordeal stands as a stark reminder that even though major inroads have been made toward ending Islamic State rule in this city, a complete victory for the Iraqi government is still a ways off. Security, services, public support — none of these are sure yet, even in eastern Mosul.

“Everyone’s afraid — there’s fighting day and night. And when the drones come, everyone disappears,” Yassir Hashim, 20, a butcher, said shortly after the hovering drone scattered customers he had hoped would buy beef from a cow he had just butchered.

Rashidiya is menaced on another front, as well. Around the nearby district of Quabba, on the east bank, Islamic State fighters remain entrenched in a stubborn pocket of resistance just outside the city limits. They battle Iraqi security forces dug in at Quabba’s outskirts.

With bridges over the Tigris destroyed by coalition aircraft to cut Islamic State supply lines, the fighters use small boats to ferry men and supplies from western Mosul, residents said.

“There’s fighting in Quabba constantly — it’s the front line,” said Capt. Ibrahim Sabah, an Iraqi Army officer who commands a checkpoint he said was 600 yards from the Tigris and about two miles from Quabba’s edge.

Soldiers and civilians in eastern Mosul’s Rashidiya neighborhood, the last district in eastern Mosul declared liberated in late January. Army officers say Islamic State sleeper cells remain entrenched here. David Zucchino for The New York Times

The captain said three of his soldiers had been killed by an Islamic State booby trap in Rashidiya two weeks ago. He and his men now travel in civilian vehicles because the unit’s six Humvees were knocked out of action during the fight for eastern

Mosul.

Captain Sabah’s men displayed a crumpled white drone, complete with a grenade, which they said they had shot down this month. A message was scrawled in blue Arabic script on the aircraft: “Thank you for your patience and resistance.”

Residents said several civilians had been killed or wounded by drones, which the United Nations said had also slightly injured some aid workers. The commercial drones have been adapted to arm and release grenades by hovering and shaking, soldiers said.

In other Iraqi cities, residents fled as security forces battled to dislodge the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL. In Mosul, Iraq’s second-largest city, the United Nations said 550,000 people remained as militants took over in 2014, urged by government leaflets to shelter in place. About 190,000 residents fled, with 46,000 returning recently.

Eastern Mosul was spared the wholesale destruction inflicted on other Iraqi cities, and humanitarian groups did not have to cope with hundreds of thousands of displaced people. Relief groups have praised Iraqi forces for protecting civilians during a 100-day battle that officially ended Jan. 24, when Iraq declared “total liberation” in eastern Mosul.

Of 860 structures destroyed here since August, 90 percent are in eastern Mosul, the United Nations said. But life has returned to a semblance of normalcy in many areas, particularly in districts on this city’s eastern edge.

For those in Rashidiya, though, a frayed sense of promise was shattered on Friday when a suicide bomber struck a popular restaurant that had recently reopened, and a second suicide attack killed a soldier at a checkpoint. The Islamic State claimed responsibility.

The next day, residents emerged from their homes, tentative and wary. On a main highway, the corpses of two militants lay on the pavement, shot dead more than a week ago, soldiers said.

Ahmed Hikmat, 28, carefully stacked cellphones for sale outside his darkened storefront overlooking pulverized buildings at Mosul University. Business was slow.

“Everyone’s afraid,” he said. “They say we have been liberated, but no one can feel safe.”

There are reminders everywhere of the militants’ two-and-a-half-year rule. Many residents still use the Islamic State-imposed term “jinod al-dawla,” or “soldiers of the state.” The militants forbade residents to use the term Daesh, an Arabic acronym for the Islamic State that some consider pejorative.

Bold green highway signs put up by militants are still in use, renaming Mosul as part of the caliphate claimed by the group. Islamic State graffiti also remains, with such messages as “house of the caliphate” visible across the city.

In Rashidiya, Iraqi forces discovered an Islamic State weapons factory inside a technical institute along the river. Homemade mortars were stacked in neat rows, some awaiting fuses and others primed for explosion. Many were designed for suicide vehicles, Sgt. Oras Assad said as he rummaged through a box of land mine components.

Maxine Khalil, 20, a vegetable vendor in the relatively stable far eastern part of eastern Mosul, said he was afraid to reopen until about a week ago for fear of attacks by Islamic State sleeper cells. David Zucchino for The New York Times

Capt. Wissam Khalil said some residents assist Islamic State sleeper cells. He pointed to small knots of young men on a narrow street, one of many roads the army had sealed off with wrecked vehicles.

“Some of them, their brothers and fathers, are with Daesh,” Captain Khalil said.

Many Rashidiya residents said they welcomed the army, but blamed provincial and national governments for degenerating living conditions. With water and sewer pipes damaged, residents must buy bottled water or dig private wells. The United Nations said it trucks in 2.3 million liters of drinking water daily.

The electrical grid is defunct in eastern Mosul because the main power plant is in western Mosul, said Zaidan Khalaf of the city power department. Entrepreneurs have set up diesel generators and charge monthly hookup fees. Residents say they get only a few hours of power per day because of limited fuel supplies.

The Nineveh provincial governor, Nawfal Hamadi al-Sultan, has been accused by rivals of bungling and deliberately delaying United Nations repair projects for weeks. In an interview, Khodayda Khalaf, a Nineveh councilman, called the governor incompetent and untrustworthy.

Councilman Ali al-Jiburi described a “rupture” between the governor and the United Nations. Another councilman, Abdul Rahman al-Waga, said the governor had stonewalled the council. “We don’t know what is going on between the local government and the United Nations,” he said.

Mr. Sultan denied the accusations, blaming poor coordination by the United Nations and a lack of aid from Baghdad for the delays. “We have raised a number of obstacles and challenges” with officials in the capital, he said.

Lise Grande, the United Nations deputy special representative in Iraq, said 25 projects had been approved in recent days.

In Rashidiya, residents are consumed by subsistence concerns. Nimsha Hussein, 54, a widow with eight children, was wary of drones as she hurried home, clutching a white United Nations relief box packed with soap, toothpaste and other items. “Everyone here is suffering, men and women, old and young,” she said.

Kerosene and cooking oil are in short supply. Unemployed residents said they could not afford expensive fruit and vegetables driven in from safer districts.

Mahmoud Yunis, 33, said he had been trying to get his police officer’s job back since being jailed and beaten by militants for his government service. He complained of high food prices as he struggled to dig a well next to his home.

Hamza Hassoun, 54, earns a few dinars a day by selling a paltry assortment of candy and snacks on a rickety bench to pay for food and bottled water. He said about \$7 a month goes to a local man for a generator hookup that supplies six hours of power a day.

Mr. Hassoun scanned the sky for drones, then shrugged and said, “No one can say when life in Mosul will ever be normal again.”



Editorial : Winning the hearts of Islamic State’s potential recruits

The Christian February 14, 2017 —As it began to lose more territory last year in Iraq and Syria, Islamic State (IS) posted a 55-page document online that aims to entice Muslims to operate on its behalf — as “media

operatives" – in spreading its radical and violent message in the digital universe. "Media weapons [can] actually be more potent than atomic bombs," one passage states.

After translating the document, researchers at King's College London issued a report this week that offers an important recommendation: To counter the group's attempt to deputize Muslims as propagandists will take more than showing the negative aspects of IS, such as the dismal life for its jihadi fighters or its misguided ideology. "[R]efuting the Islamic State's claims to

legitimacy is not enough – and will never be enough – to degrade its brand," the report says. Rather, potential recruits, who may be young Muslims looking for a life purpose in a chat room or on social media, must be offered positive messages that meet their needs and prevent their radicalization.

Governments, in fact, "should learn from the way in which the Islamic State galvanizes and sustains voluntary activism in its name," write the researchers at the International Center for the Study of Radicalization at King's College.

The IS document is a media strategy that spells out how to tell a rosy narrative about IS – despite its losses of land and fighters – in what is fast becoming its new front line: an information war.

The document also tells how to use the news industry's desire for "clicks" and ratings to recycle the group's point of view, its videos of terrorist attacks, and other messages, or what is called "media projectiles."

Online tech giants such as Facebook and Google have been assisting Western governments in

taking down the group's propaganda. And the United States and its European partners produce online content to tear down IS. While that has helped stem recruitment by IS, the militant group hopes to keep alive its cause by enlisting an army of online messengers. The best defense should indeed be counternarratives that offer constructive ways for Muslims to build peaceful and free societies.

POLITICO 'An Absolutely Crazy Time to Hold a Meeting with the President of the United States'

By Susan B. Glasser

Getty

THE GLOBAL POLITICO

Dan Shapiro, who was in the room for every painful meeting between Netanyahu and Obama, sizes up the new U.S.-Israel relationship.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu flew into Washington Monday night expecting to kick off a new, better era of U.S. relations after his rocky dealings with President Barack Obama, a relationship so troubled the two leaders were barely on speaking terms by the end of Obama's

presidency.

Instead, he landed right in the middle of the meltdown of President Donald Trump's White House, just as Trump's national security adviser, retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, was being forced to resign after less than a month in the job. In an interview for our new podcast, The Global Politico, longtime U.S. ambassador Dan Shapiro, who served as Obama's top Israel adviser throughout his presidency and sat in on all of his meetings with Netanyahu, takes us inside the mess on the eve of Trump's first White House sit-down with the Israeli.

Story Continued Below

It is, Shapiro says, "an absolutely crazy time to hold a meeting with the president of the United States." According to Shapiro, Flynn had been helping lead planning for the meeting with Netanyahu and had met at least three times with the head of Israel's top spy agency, the Mossad, and Netanyahu's national security advisory council in advance of Wednesday's session with the two leaders. "All that preparation is now out the window."

For Netanyahu, the timing couldn't be worse. The relationship with the United States is far and away the country's most important, and ever

since Trump's upset victory in November, the entire political class of Israel has been expecting in Trump the kind of hawkish partner Obama never was. In recent weeks those expectations had given way to some confusion and uncertainty, as Trump pulled back from campaign-trail vows that he was going to move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem and issued cryptic public statements essentially reaffirming that the U.S. does not view further Israeli settlements on the West Bank as conducive to a peace deal with the Palestinians. "The idea that there is going to be this massive sea change of U.S. policy," Shapiro said, "is very much called into question."

The Washington Post

U.S. official: Trump will not press 'two-state' peace track in first talks with Israel's Netanyahu

<https://www.facebook.com/anne.gearan>

President Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will formally inaugurate their partnership Wednesday in talks that could shape a new approach by Washington that does not emphasize on a two-state peace framework for the region.

Such a move, outlined by a U.S. official before the meetings, would mark a sharp contrast to Obama administration policies that strongly supported the two-state formula as the best option for potential peace deals between Israel and Palestinians.

Many Palestinians also would view the shift as a virtual abandonment of the principle adopted by preceding administrations, both Republican and Democrat.

Checkpoint newsletter

Military, defense and security at home and abroad.

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On the U.S. side, the Trump administration seeks a clean break from President Obama's Middle East policies and try for bold stroke for Israeli-Palestinian peace — what the businessman-turned-president calls "the ultimate deal."

A White House official told reporters that the United States will not insist on two states as the only outcome for peace.

"Maybe, maybe not. It's something the two sides have to agree to. It's not for us to impose that vision," the official said. "A two-state solution that doesn't bring peace is not our goal," said the official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the potential U.S. policy change.

While the previous administration did not insist on a two-state solution, it was presented as the best approach. That approach, however, is increasingly out of favor with the Israeli government.

In the West Bank city of Jericho, Saeb Erekat, a top Palestinian official and former peace negotiator, called any possible attempts to undermine support for the two-state solution as a "disaster and a tragedy for Israelis and Palestinians."

"To those who think the current system today is acceptable, having one state with two systems, which is apartheid, I don't think they can sustain it, not in the 21st century," said Erekat, a veteran of seven U.S.-brokered peace talks with Israel.

On the Israeli side, Netanyahu is counting on the Trump administration's aggressive and skeptical U.S. approach to Iran and the nuclear deal, as well as nearly unqualified support for policies toward the Palestinians that have brought international condemnation. And to his political right at home, an increasingly powerful Israeli political constituency wants carte blanche from the new U.S. administration to turn away from the once-shared

U.S.-Israeli goal of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel.

"As the president has made clear, his administration will work to achieve comprehensive agreement that would end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict so that Israelis and Palestinians can live in peace and security," White House press secretary Sean Spicer said Tuesday. "The way forward toward that goal will also be discussed."

Spicer avoided any mention of Palestinian sovereignty or direct negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians as peers. That subtle change in the public U.S. stance cheers Israeli hard-liners. But Trump has also sent recent signals that Israel should be cautious about settlement building in the West Bank, a likely point of future conflict with Washington.

"There is going to have to be some tough love," said David Makovsky, a former senior U.S. envoy during the most recent, failed peace push in 2013 and 2014.

As he headed to Washington, Netanyahu characterized his meeting with Trump as “very important” and said he believed the relationship between Israel and the U.S. was “about to get even stronger.”

The longtime Israeli prime minister has made clear that he hopes to focus much of the meeting on Iran, which he considers a threat to Israel’s existence and an increasingly emboldened menace in Syria and elsewhere across the Middle East.

“President Trump and I see eye to eye on the dangers emanating from the region but also on the opportunities,” Netanyahu said as he boarded his flight to Washington. “And we’ll talk about both, as well as upgrading the relations between Israel and the United States in many, many fields.”

Netanyahu will also see Vice President Pence, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and members of Congress. He and Trump are scheduled to hold a joint news conference following their meeting Wednesday.

The visit takes place in the unexpected shadow of Michael Flynn’s resignation as Trump’s national security adviser. The resignation occurred Monday night as Netanyahu flew to Washington.

Despite the upheaval and potential scandal surrounding the resignation just three weeks into the Trump administration, Flynn’s absence is unlikely to affect the agenda or U.S. positions. His hawkish voice on Iran reflects Trump’s views, and he was not expected to be a main player in any White House push for a peace agreement.

“For both sides, the primary objective of this meeting is to change the political theater of the relationship,” said former U.S. undersecretary of defense for policy Michèle Flournoy. “To change the vibe, the feeling, the perception,” of deep divisions between Israel and its most important ally.

For now, she and other observers said, the inevitable differences will be mentioned as little as possible. “It’s all kumbaya,” Flournoy said.

In the short term, the veteran Israeli leader must show he can deliver on the expectations of firm U.S. support for standing against Iran, the issue that caused the biggest breach with the Obama administration and left Netanyahu looking weak. The Israeli leader tried and failed to stop the international nuclear agreement Obama instigated, going so far as to defy the White House by speaking against the deal in an extraordinary direct address to Congress.

Former U.S. peace negotiator Dennis A. Ross said the Israelis know that Trump will not tear up the Iran nuclear pact, even though he campaigned by calling it “a terrible deal.”

Netanyahu wants an understanding that the United States will act to deter Iran, Ross said, a declaration that any Iranian move toward a nuclear weapon “will produce a military response and not a sanctions response.”

In the future, Netanyahu will need to show that he is not being steamrollered in any peace effort driven by Trump and his close adviser, son-in-law Jared Kushner. Trump has already named Kushner as his chief envoy and signaled that he is looking to Arab states to help

push the Palestinians toward an accommodation.

Although Trump has nominated settlement supporter David M. Friedman as his ambassador to Israel, he is also on record twice warning Netanyahu against expanding Jewish home-building in the West Bank.

“No deal is a good deal if it isn’t good for all sides,” Trump said in an interview last week with Israel Hayom — a widely circulated free newspaper owned by a Netanyahu patron, the Las Vegas casino magnate and GOP mega-donor Sheldon Adelson.

“We are currently in a process that has been going on for a long time. Decades. A lot of people think that it can’t be done. And a lot of smart people around me claim that you can’t reach an agreement. I don’t agree. I think we can reach an agreement and that we need to reach an agreement.”

In the same interview, Trump suggested he is slowing down a campaign promise to move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, whose future status the United States has long insisted must be negotiated between Israel and the Palestinians.

Hours before Netanyahu’s departure, Israeli media published leaked information from a discussion that took place Sunday inside the security cabinet. According to the reports, Trump told Netanyahu, when the two spoke for the first time on Jan. 22, that he is determined to pursue a peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians.

Netanyahu responded that he still supports the two-state solution but stressed it was the Palestinians who

are unwilling at this time to reach a peace deal.

“We have to make every effort to avoid a confrontation with him,” Netanyahu reportedly told his ministers on Sunday. “Trump believes in a deal and in running peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. We should be careful and not do things that will cause everything to break down. We mustn’t get into a confrontation with him.”

Trump’s swaggering “new sheriff” posture in defense of Israel on the world stage has “raised a lot of hopes in Israel,” said Yoaz Hendel, an Israeli military historian who chairs the Institute for Zionist Strategies.

“Maybe the Messiah is there and they are going to change everything,” Hendel joked as he characterized the pro-settler view that the American president might reverse years of Republican and Democratic policy by greenlighting a West Bank building boom.

“There is also fear that maybe Trump will wake up one day and decide he wants the Nobel” Peace Prize, Hendel said. “Say to Netanyahu, ‘Make Israel Great Again, let’s cut a deal. What’s so hard?’”

That would put Netanyahu on the spot, as his critics at home well know.

Naftali Bennett, Israel’s education minister and leader of the pro-settler Jewish Home party, called the coming White House session “the test of Netanyahu’s life.”

William Booth in Jerusalem contributed to this report.



On Israel, Trump takes a conspicuously cautious approach

The Christian Science Monitor

February 15, 2017 —President Obama’s relationship with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was icy. But the former president also made some of the strongest commitments ever by the United States to Israel’s security.

As Mr. Netanyahu prepares to visit President Trump at the White House Wednesday, both sides will be looking to change the first part of that equation while leaving the second untouched.

In other words, don’t expect Netanyahu to lecture Mr. Trump about Israel’s security in front of the press, as he did to Mr. Obama at the White House in 2011. At the same time, don’t wait for Trump to

shift dramatically from the positions set by the Obama administration, whether on the Iran nuclear deal or the controversial idea of moving the US embassy to Jerusalem.

“I would say for both sides, the primary objective of this meeting is to change the political theater of the relationship,” says Michele Flournoy, a former under secretary of Defense for policy and now the head of the Center for a New American Security in Washington. “To the extent there are differences, those will be downplayed or subordinated [because] this is really about cementing a feel-good political relationship between these two leaders.”

Trump’s measured tone on Israel so far contrasts with the more aggressive approach he’s taken on

some domestic issues, particularly immigration. But it fits into a broader trend of Trump moderating his fiery rhetoric on foreign policy. From China to NATO, the president has so far moved more cautiously than his campaign pronouncements suggested he might.

Tone matters

On Israel, candidate Trump blasted the Iran nuclear deal and said he would “tear it up” once in office. He sounded like he would not object to construction of new settlements on Palestinian lands in the West Bank. And he vowed to quickly move the US embassy in Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

But, for now at least, the Trump White House is more closely toeing the line of traditional US policy

toward Israel, and that does not yet signal an abrupt break with the Obama years.

“Trump wants to signal a tonal shift that says he’s something different, but I don’t expect that to be substantive in the sense of policy announcements at this early stage,” says David Makovsky, director for the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. “He’ll be more in the listening mode.”

On the Iran nuclear deal? No tearing it up in Netanyahu’s presence. “In this debate over whether you scrap or enforce the nuclear deal, it’s clear the US is in the enforcement school,” says Mr. Makovsky, who adds that, after a recent visit to Israel, “That’s the

view of Israeli national security officials, too.”

On settlements? Trump surprised Israel's pro-settler right wing with recent statements suggesting the US would not grant Israel free rein on settlement construction. Specifically, he said construction of new settlements deeper into the West Bank is unhelpful and not “a good thing for peace.”

On moving the US embassy to Jerusalem? Trump has gone silent on something he earlier declared would be one of his first acts as president. “The enthusiasm of the early days has been replaced by a desire to say, ‘Let’s not move on this until we have some consultations’ ” with Jordan and other Arab neighbors, says Makovsky.

Yet even the goal of establishing new warmth between the US and Israel could have important effects

down the road. If that warmth translates to closer ties, it could factor into Trump administration policy.

“For Netanyahu, it’s important that he’s coming early, before policies are set in concrete,” Makovsky says. The objective is to “try to influence thinking here before there are these policy reviews.”

Netanyahu's No. 1 topic

And whether the venue is his scheduled meeting Tuesday with Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, his meetings on the Hill with congressional leaders, or the main event with Trump, Netanyahu will hone in on one topic over and over again, analysts say.

“The prime minister will be coming with an agenda heavily focused on Iran,” says Dennis Ross, an adviser on Middle East issues to both Democratic and Republican administrations and a co-founder of

the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. “What he wants” and what he’ll emphasize “is that more needs to be done to deter Iran.”

Netanyahu won’t bother demanding that the US ditch the nuclear deal, because he knows he won’t get that, Ambassador Ross says. But he will press Trump not just to firmly enforce the agreement, but to seek to renegotiate it to address one of Israel’s key worries – the lifting of restrictions on Iran’s nuclear program after 15 years.

The Syrian conflict is expected to be another key point of discussion, experts say, and there, too, Netanyahu’s goal will be to avoid empowering Iran. Any US cooperation with Russia on Syria should drive a wedge between Russia and Iran, Netanyahu might argue. And Iran-backed Hezbollah fighters should be kept away from the Israeli-Syrian border.

The two leaders might announce something like a joint working group on Iran “just as a symbol of how we’re working together on this,” Ross says.

But at this stage, he expects more words than action. For example, “some tough statement on Iran by Trump in the presence of the prime minister – something like, ‘We’ll be looking very hard at everything the Iranians do.’ ”

That eye on Iran could include bringing in Sunni Arab nations such as Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Emirates in a more explicit way.

Up to now, the Israelis and Sunni Arabs have kept their contacts over confronting Iran or battling the Islamic State “pretty much under the radar,” Makovsky says. The question, he adds, will be “how to convert that to more overt, over-the-table cooperation.”

**The
New York
Times**

Thomas Friedman : President Trump, Will You Save the Jews?

Dear President Trump:

These are the moments that make or break a presidency.

First you were tested by a rival — Russia — and utterly failed to appreciate the corrosive impact on our democracy of your indulgence of Russia’s hacking our election. And on Wednesday you’re going to be tested by a friend — Israel — and its prime minister, Bibi Netanyahu. Can you appreciate the corrosive impact on Israel’s democracy of what it’s now doing in the West Bank? I ask because you may be the last man standing between Israel and a complete, self-inflicted disaster for the Jewish state and the Jewish people.

Let me explain it in terms you’ll appreciate: golf.

Did you happen to follow the story involving Barack Obama and Woodmont Country Club? Woodmont is the mostly Jewish golf club in Maryland, just outside D.C., where Obama played as a guest several times during his presidency. Near the end of his term it was rumored that Obama would seek membership there.

Then he clashed with Netanyahu over Obama’s refusal to veto a U.N. Security Council resolution condemning Israel’s relentless expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Shortly thereafter, The Washington Post reported that a Woodmont member, Faith Goldstein, had sent a private email

to the club’s president declaring that Obama “is not welcome at Woodmont” because of his U.N. vote.

It was appalling to think that Jews, who for so many years were themselves excluded from joining certain country clubs, would consider excluding our first black president, especially for his acting on the basis of what half of Israel believes — that continued expansion of Jewish settlements into Palestinian-populated zones of the West Bank will eventually make the separation of Israelis and Palestinians in a two-state solution impossible, and thereby threaten Israel’s character as a Jewish and democratic state.

Fortunately, in the end, the decent members of Woodmont prevailed. As The Washington Post reported, the club’s president, Barry Forman, invited the Obamas to join, declaring that “it is all the more important that Woodmont be a place where people of varying views and beliefs can enjoy fellowship.”

Why am I telling you this story? Because Israel is getting closer every day to wiping out any possibility of a two-state solution. Just last week, Netanyahu’s government pushed through the Knesset a shameful new law declaring that wildcat Jewish settlers who had illegally set up caravans on private West Bank Palestinian land, and erected their own settlement there, will have their settlements legalized, although the

Palestinian landowners have to be compensated.

Hopefully Israel’s Supreme Court will strike down the law, but, in the meantime, Israel’s president, Reuven Rivlin, did not mince words. He reportedly warned at a private meeting that Israel can’t just “apply and enforce its laws on territories that are not under its sovereignty. If it does so, it is a legal cacophony. It will cause Israel to be seen as an apartheid state, which it is not.” *Seen as an apartheid state!*

And that is why Jewish history has its eyes on you, Mr. Trump.

As long as the two-state solution was on the table, the debate among Jews on Israel was “right versus left” and “more security versus less security.” Some thought the border should be here; others thought it should be there. But we could mostly all agree that for Israel to remain a Jewish democratic state, it had to securely separate from most of the 2.7 million West Bank Palestinians. That debate could and did go on in every synagogue, Jewish institution and Jewish country club, without tearing them apart.

But if Netanyahu’s weak leadership and the overreach of the settlers in his party end up erasing the two-state solution, the debate within the Jewish community will move from “left versus right” to “right versus wrong.” That debate will not be about which are the best borders to defend the state of Israel, said the Hebrew University philosopher

Moshe Halbertal, “but whether the state is worth defending in moral terms.”

I don’t expect Israel to just up and leave the West Bank without a Palestinian partner for a secure peace, which Israel doesn’t now have. But legalizing this land grab by settlers deep in Palestinian areas is not an act of security — it will actually create security problems. It is an act of moral turpitude that will make it even harder to ever find that Palestinian partner and will undermine the moral foundations of the state. *This is about right versus wrong.*

And if that is where the debate goes, what happened at Woodmont golf club will happen everywhere. That debate will tear apart virtually every synagogue, Jewish organization and Jewish group on every campus in America, and around the world. Israel will divide world Jewry.

There is only one person who can now stop this disaster — you. Bibi & Co. used the G.O.P. to outflank Obama. But if you, with your party, make clear that there must be absolutely no Jewish settlements beyond the blocks already designated for a two-state solution, you could make a huge difference. This is on your watch.

President Trump, you may not be interested in Jewish history, but Jewish history is now interested in you.

Yishai Fleisher : A Settler's View of Israel's Future

Yishai Fleisher

HEBRON, West Bank — Last week, Israel's Parliament passed a controversial bill that allows the government to retroactively authorize contested West Bank Jewish communities by compensating previous Palestinian land claimants. Opposition parties warn that this law could open Israel to prosecution at The Hague, and the chief Palestinian negotiator, Saeb Erekat, said, "Israel's Parliament has just approved a law to legalize theft of Palestinian land." This theme has been echoed recently at the Paris peace conference, in a United Nations Security Council resolution and by a major policy speech by then Secretary of State John Kerry, which all condemned settlements.

Israel never seems to have a good answer to accusations against the settlement enterprise. Whenever the claim that Israel stole Palestinian lands is heard, Israel's answers inevitably are: "We invented the cellphone," "We have gay rights," "We fly to help Haiti after an earthquake." Obvious obfuscation. And when pushed to explain why the much-promised two-state solution is perennially stuck, the response is always to blame Arab obstructionism.

This inability to give a straight answer is a result of 30 years of bad policy that has pressed Israel to create a Palestinian state in the historic Jewish heartland of Judea and Samaria, which the world calls the West Bank. This policy has worked to legitimize the idea that the territory of Judea and Samaria is Arab land and that Israel is an intractable occupier. Today, as Israel is beginning to walk back the two-state solution, it is not easy to admit we were wrong; and many people's careers are on the line. This is why Israel mouths the old party line, yet takes no steps toward making a Palestinian state a reality.

But for us settlers, the truth is clear: The two-state solution was misconceived, and will never come to pass, because Judea and Samaria belong to the Jewish people. Our right to this land is derived from our history, religion, international decisions and defensive wars. Jews have lived here for 3,700 years, despite repeated massacres, expulsions and occupations — by the Romans, Arabs, Crusaders and Ottomans.

And the world recognized the Jewish people's indigenous existence in this land in the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and the San Remo Accords of 1920.

When Israel declared independence in 1948, Jordan, along with five other Arab states, attacked Israel, occupied Judea, Samaria and eastern Jerusalem, and drove out Jewish residents. Again, in 1967, Jordan attempted to wipe out the Jewish State, but this time, Israel forced the Jordanian army back across the Jordan River. While the government of Israel was ambivalent about whether to retain the newly emancipated areas, the settler movement was not. We set about holding and developing the land, just like the pioneers of the Kibbutz movement.

Today, the estimated number of Arabs living in Judea and Samaria is 2.7 million, though some researchers dispute the data and argue that the figure is far lower. Yet the presence of these Arab residents alone does not warrant a new country. Arabs can live in Israel, as other minorities do, with personal rights, not national rights. But many Arabs reject that option because they do not recognize the legitimacy of a Jewish State, with or without settlements.

This pervasive intolerance was laid bare in the aftermath of Israel's 2005 withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, when Hamas seized control in 2007 and turned the territory into a forward base for jihad, starting three wars in seven years. As a result, most Israelis, however pragmatic, no longer believe in a policy of forfeiting land in hopes of getting peace in return. While a Hamas-controlled Gaza is now a reality, no Israeli wants an Islamic State of Palestine looking down at them from the strategic heights of Judea and Samaria.

Therefore, most settlers say without ambivalence that the two-state solution is dead, and the time has come for a discussion of new options by which Israel would hold onto the West Bank and eventually assert Israel sovereignty there, just as we did with the Golan Heights and eastern Jerusalem. Yes, Israel will have to grapple with questions of the Arab population's rights, and the issues of the country's security and Jewish character, but we believe those questions can be worked out through the democratic

process. At least five credible plans are on the table already.

An Israeli settlement in front of an Arab village in Amona, West Bank. Chris Mcgrath/Getty Images

The first option, proposed by former members of Israel's Parliament Aryeh Eldad and Benny Alon, is known as "Jordan is Palestine," a fair name given that Jordan's population is generally reckoned to be majority Palestinian. Under their plan, Israel would assert Israeli law in Judea and Samaria while Arabs living there would have Israeli residency and Jordanian citizenship. Those Arabs would exercise their democratic rights in Jordan, but live as expats with civil rights in Israel.

A second alternative, suggested by Israel's education minister, Naftali Bennett, proposes annexation of only Area C — the territory in the West Bank as defined by the Oslo Accords (about 60 percent by area), where a majority of the 400,000 settlers live — while offering Israeli citizenship to the relatively few Arabs there. But Arabs living in Areas A and B — the main Palestinian population centers — would have self-rule.

A third option, which dovetails with Mr. Bennett's, is promoted by Prof. Mordechai Kedar of Bar-Ilan University, near Tel Aviv. His premise is that the most stable Arab entity in the Middle East is the Gulf Emirates, which are based on a consolidated traditional group or tribe. The Palestinian Arabs are not a cohesive nation, he argues, but are comprised of separate city-based clans. So he proposes Palestinian autonomy for seven non-contiguous emirates in major Arab cities, as well as Gaza, which he considers already an emirate. Israel would annex the rest of the West Bank and offer Israeli citizenship to Arab villagers outside those cities.

The fourth proposal is the most straightforward. Caroline Glick, a Jerusalem Post journalist, wrote in her 2014 book, "The Israeli Solution: A One State Plan for Peace in the Middle East," that, contrary to prevailing opinion, Jews are not in danger of losing a demographic majority in an Israel that includes Judea and Samaria. New demographic research shows that thanks to falling Palestinian birth rates and emigration,

combined with opposite trends among Jews, a stable Jewish majority of above 60 percent exists between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean (excluding Gaza); and this is projected to grow to about 70 percent by 2059.

Ms. Glick thus concludes that the Jewish State is secure: Israel should assert Israeli law in the West Bank and offer Israeli citizenship to its entire Arab population without fear of being outvoted. This very week, Israel's president, Reuven Rivlin, announced his backing for the idea in principle. "If we extend sovereignty," he said, "the law must apply equally to all."

Israel's deputy foreign minister, Tzipi Hotovely, similarly advocates for annexation and giving the Palestinians residency rights — with a pathway to citizenship for those who pledge allegiance to the Jewish State. Others prefer an arrangement more like that of Puerto Rico, a United States territory whose residents cannot vote in federal elections. Some Palestinians, like the Jabari clan in Hebron, want Israeli residency and oppose the Palestinian Authority, which they view as illegitimate and corrupt.

Finally, there is a fifth alternative, which comes from the head of the new Zehut party, Moshe Feiglin, and Martin Sherman of the Israel Institute for Strategic Studies. They do not see a resolution of conflicting national aspirations in one land and instead propose an exchange of populations with Arab countries, which effectively expelled about 800,000 Jews around the time of Israeli independence. In contrast, however, Palestinians in Judea and Samaria would be offered generous compensation to emigrate voluntarily.

None of these options is a panacea. Every formula has some potentially repugnant element or tricky trade-off. But Israeli policy is at last on the move, as the passing of the bill on settlements indicates.

Mr. Kerry's mantra that "there really is no viable alternative" to the two-state solution is contradicted by its manifest failure. With a new American administration in power, there is a historic opportunity to have an open discussion of real alternatives, unhampered by the shibboleths of the past.

Donald Trump ran for president pledging to throw off political correctness and tell bold truths. That's something to keep in mind this week. On Wednesday Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will visit the White House. Thursday will bring Senate confirmation hearings for David Friedman, Mr. Trump's nominee for ambassador to the Jewish state. Both events offer an opportunity for the fearless truth-telling that Mr. Trump promised.

The U.S. has long favored Israel, even during the relative chill of the Obama administration. Washington has nevertheless parroted or passively accepted the conventional falsehoods about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. If Mr. Trump wants to advance the possibility of peace, he should begin by challenging the five big untruths that sustain the anti-Israel consensus:

- *Israel occupies "Palestinian territory."* This is nonsensical: There never has been a Palestinian government that could hold any territory, meaning Israel could not have taken "Palestinian land." Quite possibly large parts of the West Bank should *become* Palestinian territory, but that is a different claim.

The Trump administration should always describe the West Bank as "disputed" land and speak against the phrase "Palestinian territory"—except when used in the future tense. It should also recognize that Israel came to the territory it holds not only during a defensive war but also through historical and legal claims, including the 1922 League of Nations mandate to establish a Jewish homeland.

- *Millions of Palestinian "refugees" have a "right of return" to Israel.* The standard international view is that

Israel has prevented five million Palestinians, many living in "refugee camps," from returning to their homes. But practically none of these people are refugees as normally defined; rather they are the descendants of refugees. The Arab world has kept them in misery for three generations to preserve their plight as a weapon against Israel.

The U.S. has failed to challenge this false narrative. It is the principal financial supporter of Unrwa—the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East—whose sole purpose is to provide for the basic needs of these perpetual "refugees."

Privately, American diplomats understand that the normal description of Palestinian "refugees" is a fraud and that these descendants have no legal "right of return." A first step to peace, then, would be to end the charade and begin to dismantle Unrwa. The Trump administration might also mention the estimated 800,000 Jewish refugees who, in the late 1940s and early '50s, were thrown out of the Arab countries where they had been living for millennia. Most of them settled in an impoverished, newborn Israel without international assistance.

- *Israelis and Palestinians have comparable claims to Jerusalem.* This is the best example of the false "evenhandedness" that has long characterized American policy—saying, for instance, that "Jerusalem is sacred to both religions." Although the city's Al Aqsa mosque is significant in Islam, Jerusalem itself has essentially no religious importance. It is not mentioned in the Quran or in Muslim prayers. It was never the capital of any Islamic empire.

Peace requires recognizing three things: that Jerusalem must remain the capital of Israel; that the city's religious sites must be protected and free, as they have been only under the Jewish state; and that any provision for a Palestinian capital must not threaten the city's peaceful unity. A bold truth-teller would also move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, despite the threats of a violent response, and would allow the passports of American citizens born in the capital to record that they were born in Israel.

- *There was no ancient Jewish presence in Israel.* Palestinian leaders insist that this is true, and that the historical Jewish temples were not actually located on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. This feeds their claim that the Jews came to Israel as foreign colonialists imposed by the Europeans after the Holocaust.

This falsehood can be sustained only because it is politely tolerated by the U.S. and Europe—and sometimes supported by U.N. agencies like Unesco. It works against the possibility of peace by denying the Palestinians a moral basis for negotiating with Israel. The Trump administration should contradict these absurd denials of history so often that Palestinian leaders begin to look foolish to their own people.

- *The Palestinians are ready to accept a "two-state solution" to end the conflict.* The U.S. has a tendency to assume that Palestinian leaders are ready to accept Israel if suitable concessions are offered. The Trump administration ought to ask: What is the evidence for this? When did the Palestinians give up their long-term commitment to destroy Israel, and which leaders

backed such a dramatic change? Undoubtedly, many Palestinians are willing and even eager for peace. Yet it is still taboo in Palestinian debate to publicly suggest accepting Israel's legitimacy or renouncing the claims of the "refugees."

Washington is practiced at superficial evenhandedness, always issuing parallel-seeming statements about both sides. What the Trump administration can bring is genuine evenhandedness: respecting each side's truths and rejecting each side's falsehoods, even when this leads to a position that seems "unbalanced."

Israel, too, should move toward a strategy of truth-telling and stop appeasing the false international consensus. It ought to make its case defiantly to the world. Israel can be ready and willing to make concessions for peace without pretending that today there are any terms on which the Palestinians are willing to agree. The Israelis should continue to help the Palestinian economy but not refrain from publicizing the ways that Palestinians sabotage the effort and undermine their own welfare.

Even in a conflict as fraught as this one, there remain underlying truths—and American policy in the Middle East will benefit from telling more of them.

Mr. Singer, a founder of the Hudson Institute, is a senior fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University in Israel.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Nigerian President's Absence Intensifies Tensions in Africa's Most-Populous Nation

Joe Parkinson and Gbenga Akinbule

ABUJA, Nigeria—Roiled by antigovernment protests, revived insurgencies and its worst recession in three decades, Africa's most populous nation is now fretting about the health of its president.

Muhammadu Buhari, the 74-year-old who won the 2015 elections in Nigeria's first democratic transition of power, this month extended what had been billed as a 10-day vacation to London for undisclosed medical reasons. The former military ruler, deposed in a 1985 coup before entering civilian politics, has yet to comment or offer details on his health.

His office has insisted the president is " hale and hearty" and has released pictures of him watching television and meeting advisers. His wife, Aisha Muhammadu Buhari, returned to Nigeria over the weekend. Newspapers and television talk shows fill the airwaves with speculation about his condition.

"The president will soon return to Nigeria and there's no cause to worry," said Garba Shehu, a spokesman for Mr. Buhari, on local television on Tuesday, a day after the Nigerian presidency said Mr. Buhari discussed by telephone a possible new arms deal with U.S. President Donald Trump as part of terrorism-fighting efforts.

The questions about Mr. Buhari—and concern over a potential power struggle—come as Africa's top oil producer is gripped by a political crisis. The collapse in the price of oil—which contributes some 95% of Nigeria's export revenue—has sparked a foreign-exchange shortage that has in turn choked business activity. A revived insurgency in the oil-producing Niger Delta region has exacerbated the crisis.

Last week, protesters gathered in Abuja and the commercial capital Lagos to demand changes in economic policy. Some carried placards saying Mr. Buhari had "gone AWOL" from the presidency. A larger protest backed by Nigerian

celebrities was canceled amid government concerns over security.

The country that spawned a global social-media campaign to #bringbackourgirls after Islamist militants kidnapped more than 200 teenage students in 2014 is now seeing #bringbackourpresident trend on Twitter.

"While the seriousness of the president's health condition is difficult to determine, the speculation could nevertheless begin to raise questions over his ability to govern when (and if) he returns," said Manji Cheto, Nigeria analyst at Teneo Intelligence, a New York-based research consultancy.

Government ministers say the worst of the economic crisis is over and that efforts to diminish the country's dependence on oil—including boosts to domestic production in agriculture and industry—are starting to bear fruit.

"2016 was clearly a tough year. But we want 2017 to be a year of recovery and delivery and we expect to start seeing results," Trade and Investment Minister Okechukwu Enelamah said.

The speculation over the president's health has an added potency for many Nigerians, many of whom recall the 2010 death of President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua.

In November 2009, the 58-year-old Mr. Yar'Adua—like Mr. Buhari, a Muslim from Nigeria's northern states—left for Saudi Arabia for medical treatment and returned months later on a life-support machine, dying shortly after. The power struggle during his illness

elevated to the presidency Goodluck Jonathan, a zoologist from the Christian south with a reputation for deal making.

The power vacuum caused by Mr. Yar'Adua's illness—and its coverup by his advisers—paralyzed government while the jihadist Boko Haram insurgency began to take hold across Nigeria's northeast.

President Buhari's greatest success has been in rallying a demoralized army and chasing Boko Haram back into its forest hideout; working with neighboring Chad, Niger and Cameroon to reclaim territory that once sprawled the size of Belgium.

Mr. Buhari in January played a pivotal role in persuading former Gambian President Yahya Jammeh to respect his election defeat, deploying a Nigerian warship off Gambia's coast.

But his economic inheritance has been less fortuitous than that of Mr. Jonathan, who governed during an

oil boom that underpinned the rapid expansion of a Nigerian middle class in tandem with rampant corruption. Critics argue Mr. Buhari's economic policy—interventionist and mistrustful of markets, and ridiculed by critics as "Buharimomics"—has worsened the country's malaise.

Nigerian commentators say there are important distinctions between the optics of Mr. Yar'Adua's illness and Mr. Buhari's, with the latter disclosing he was having medical tests and promptly transferring legislative powers to his deputy, Yemi Osinbajo. Mr. Osinbajo canceled meeting and an appearance at the Davos World Economic Forum in January after news broke of Mr. Buhari's extended convalescence. On Friday, he arrived in the Niger Delta to begin negotiations with militants on a truce that would halt the sabotage of oil pipelines and boost production.

"I think that the health status of Mr. President is an issue that only Mr. President would discuss at the appropriate time," Mr. Osinbajo said this month.

For now, much of the country is awash with speculation about when—and if—the president will return. In the northern states that are strongholds for Mr. Buhari, imams at 350 mosques led Friday prayers for his speedy recovery. In the markets of the capital on Friday, vendors called for clarity.

"All we hear is that the president is hail and hearty, but we still haven't heard him speak," said Chilo Nnammani, who sells soft drinks and imported wine. "The presidency should know that the president's health is no longer a personal affair."

Write to Joe Parkinson at joe.parkinson@wsj.com



N. Korean leader's half brother killed in Malaysia in possible poison attack, police say

<https://www.facebook.com/annafield>

(Reuters)

Kim Jong Nam, half brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, has been killed in Malaysia, according to South Korean government sources. North Korean leader's brother reported killed in Malaysia (Reuters)

TOKYO — The target: the estranged half brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. The setting: an airport in Malaysia. And the possible suspect: a woman carrying a cloth treated with lethal liquid.

It adds up to a case that seems ripped straight from the pages of a spy novel.

Even by the standards of sensational news from North Korea, the details that emerged Tuesday were astounding.

World News Alerts

Breaking news from around the world.

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Malaysian police confirmed that Kim Jong Nam — who was thought to be 45 and living outside North Korea for more than a decade — was killed at Kuala Lumpur International Airport early Monday while waiting for a flight to Macau, a center of gambling and nightlife that was among his haunts.

"A woman came from behind and covered his face with a cloth laced with a liquid," Police Chief Fadzil Ahmat told Bernama, the Malaysian state news agency.

(Jason Aldag/The Washington Post)

Kim Jong Un has tested nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles at an unprecedented rate since he came into power. Yet, the country is under some of the toughest sanctions ever. This is how the regime is able to funnel billions of dollars into its nuclear program. Economy of deceit: How North Korea funds its nuclear weapons program—Part 1 | Loopholes (Video: Jason Aldag/Photo: Linda Davidson/The Washington Post)

The man was seen struggling for help and sought assistance from airport staff, he said. He was sent to a hospital in an ambulance but died on the way, Fadzil said.

"I have conveyed the matter to the North Korean Embassy," he said, adding that an autopsy was planned to determine the cause of death.

His statement came after South Korean news outlets reported an even more outlandish version of events: that Kim was pricked with poisoned needles by two female agents who then escaped by taxi.

Police have since announced the arrest of a female suspect carrying Vietnamese travel documents, according to news agencies.

[Defying skeptics, Kim Jong Un marks five years at the helm of North Korea]

North Korea, with its secretive and idiosyncratic leadership, is often the subject of dramatic tales that turn out to be exaggerated or flat-out wrong.

But the Malaysian police chief's confirmation suggests that at least part of this story is true. What is likely to take much longer to determine is whether the plot was orchestrated directly by Kim Jong Un, who recently celebrated five years at the helm of North Korea and is now locked in a showdown with the international community over his nuclear ambitions.

Regardless, it underscores the transience of power in North Korea.

Just three years ago, Kim Jong Un had his uncle — and Kim Jong Nam's mentor — executed on suspicion of building an alternate power base. Meanwhile, a slew of high-profile defections have raised questions about the stability of the regime.

"Kim Jong Nam was involved in some funny business," said Michael Madden, editor of North Korea Leadership Watch, a specialist website devoted to the ruling Kim family. He was rumored to have worked in computing in North Korea — now notorious for cyberattacks — and money laundering throughout Southeast Asia.

Analysts had long considered Kim Jong Nam, as the eldest son of second-generation leader Kim Jong II, to be the natural heir to the family dynasty.

But this assumption was thrown into doubt in 2001 when Kim Jong Nam was caught at Narita International Airport in Tokyo, trying to enter Japan with his wife and son on fake Dominican Republic passports. Kim Jong Nam's bore the name Pang Xiong — "fat bear" in Mandarin Chinese. He told the authorities that they wanted to go to Tokyo Disneyland.

It was later revealed that he had never been in the running to be leader. Kim Jong Un's aunt told The Washington Post last year that the current leader was chosen as successor in the early 1990s, when he was only 8 years old.

In 2010, with Kim Jong II's health steadily worsening, Kim Jong Un was officially declared heir apparent.

Both before and after the announcement, the usually reclusive Kim Jong Nam said in interviews with Japanese media that he opposed hereditary succession, something that not even Mao Zedong had done in China. "But I presume there were internal reasons. We should abide by such reasons if there are any," he told TV Asahi.

[The secret life of Kim Jong Un's aunt, who has lived in the U.S. since 1998]

Kim Jong Nam was born in 1971, the son of leader Kim Jong Il and his consort, an actress named Song Hye Rim. But he grew up largely in secret, the result of founding president Kim Il Sung's disapproval of his son's relationship with Song.

He left North Korea to live with his grandmother in Moscow in 1979, according to North Korea Leadership Watch. He spent his childhood at international schools in Russia and Switzerland before returning to North Korea in 1988, the site says.

But the embarrassing incident in Japan was a tipping point, and Kim appears to have never lived in North Korea again. He reportedly lived for a period in Macau, a Chinese region. But in recent years he seems to have had homes — and

families — in Beijing and Singapore as well.

He was occasionally sighted in sushi restaurants in Singapore and swanky hotel bars in Beijing but otherwise kept a low profile.

Kim did, however, return to North Korea at least one time after his younger half brother assumed the leadership — for their father's funeral at the end of 2011.

[Ex-diplomat: 'I've known that there was no future for North Korea for a long time']

Madden of North Korea Leadership Watch said Kim Jong Nam could have been involved in financing for the regime and could have run into problems as a result. But at the same time, Madden noted that Kim

had publicly said he would do anything to help the new leader.

Their relationship probably took a turn for the worse in 2013, when the young North Korean leader ordered the execution of their uncle, Jang Song Thaek. Jang had been close to Kim Jong Nam and had reportedly backed him as successor.

Since then, analysts had suspected that China was keeping Kim Jong Nam in reserve as a potential replacement for Kim Jong Un, who has had strained relations with the Chinese leadership — and as a way to keep North Korea stable but make it friendlier to Beijing.

Ken Gause, a North Korea leadership expert at CNA, a research company in Arlington, Va.,

said there were at least three possible reasons Kim Jong Un would want to get rid of his half brother.

It could be that Kim Jong Un, who is only 33, is in the end stages of consolidating his leadership. "And when the consolidation phase comes to an end in totalitarian regimes, patronage systems can be targets for purges," Gause said.

It could be a signal to China that Beijing doesn't call the shots in North Korea. Or it could be a sign of an internal power struggle in Pyongyang.

"I think all of these are very possible," Gause said.



Kathleen Parker : America, meet the nuclear 'football'

<https://www.facebook.com/kathleenparker>

By now a few million Americans have met "Rick," the aide-de-camp who carries the nuclear "football" for President Trump, and Richard DeAgazio, a Mar-a-Lago Club member who posted a selfie of the two on his Facebook page.

The entire Saturday evening in Palm Beach, Fla., where Trump hosted Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on the Mar-a-Lago terrace among assorted high-dollar patrons, felt like touring comedy director Adam McKay's imagination. World leaders huddling over documents, reading by the light of an aide's cellphone; a Hugh Hefneresque character played by the president receiving news about a North Korean missile launch; and a Palm Beach fat cat snapping a picture of the nuclear satchel and posing with Rick.

Love the trailer; when's the movie?

Read These Comments

The best conversations on The Washington Post

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Kidding aside, we who worry, worry. Shouldn't the football be sitting quietly in a discreet corner, minding its own business? Things have gotten so wacky in Week Four of the Reality Presidency, even Vladimir Putin must be wondering: Is anybody in charge over there?

To calm my nerves, I called a former nuclear-football minder, now a happily anonymous civilian family man, about the photo and other concerns.

(Bastien Inzaurrealde/The Washington Post)

The Post's David A. Fahrenthold looks at how President Trump's approach to national security compares with his campaign rhetoric. The Post's David A. Fahrenthold looks at how President Trump's approach to national security compares with his campaign rhetoric. (Bastien Inzaurrealde/The Washington Post)

"Jack," I'll call him, is beyond careful with his words. Ever faithful to mission, he's a patriot who follows the rules and stays in his own lane. He's so cautious, every other answer is "I can't tell you that." But he did tell me enough to ease my mind, so I thought I'd share.

First, Jack says he wouldn't have posed for the photograph but doesn't think it was a breach of any sort, nor did it pose a security risk. Jack still doesn't have a Facebook account, as it was a firing offense when he was "in." Everything on the nonpolitical side of things in Washington is governed by rules, and there is zero tolerance for mistakes. The president may goof around, but the people in charge of keeping him alive and the continuity on course are dead serious.

The satchel also has strict rules. It must always be within a specified

number of feet of the president. It is essentially a portable command center, not a nuclear launchpad per se. When the president activates the satchel, he is sending a message to the Pentagon rather than firing off missiles at his whim, as some would have you believe.

The case, as others have described it, contains a book of retaliatory options, another of classified site locations, a manila folder containing procedures for the Emergency Alert System and, of course, the essential 3-by-5-inch card with the authentication codes. Yes, it's a little chilling to imagine Trump trying to read the codes with a flashlight app while the Palm Beach set posts videos to Instagram.

One may find comfort, however, in being reminded that the military aide holding the bag, so to speak, isn't the only one with eyes on the suitcase. "There are a million things going on behind the scenes that people don't understand," Jack says, reassuringly. Standing close by are at least two others locked, loaded and poised to act to protect the football if necessary.

"The point always is continuity of the presidency," says Jack. "The country should never be without the ability to use the nuclear arsenal for more than a minute."

Continuity was interrupted once when President Bill Clinton misplaced his "biscuit," his personal identifier code, as related in the autobiography of Gen. Hugh Shelton, chair of the Joint Chiefs of

Staff during Clinton's second term. The vice president has the same satchel and biscuit, by the way, but they're inoperable until and unless the president is confirmed dead or is otherwise unable to perform his duties. This would include being under sedation during surgery. The transfer of power and the making operable of those alternate instruments are executed immediately.

Those worried that Trump might get his nose out of joint and start Armageddon should probably relax. There's no red "launch" button in the bag. Once the president sorts through his options and decides on a course of action, he launches a process — have you ever loved that word more? — including discussions with key military and civilian advisers, who may talk him out of the attack.

In the end, the president has sole authority and the Pentagon has to follow orders. But "there are checks and balances everywhere, and they're extremely classified," says Jack. "The most important thing is for you to make people feel safe and stop with the frickin'..." He stops himself and just says, "I'm not fretful."

If Jack's not worried, I'm not worried. Sort of. Not. Worried.

Read more from Kathleen Parker's archive, follow her on Twitter or find her on Facebook.



Holman Jenkins : Dieselgate Is a Political Disaster

Holman W. Jenkins, Jr. Feb. 14, 2017 6:56 p.m. ET

Contrary to usual practice, we'll begin with the punch-line: less than 4/1,000ths of a degree Celsius.

That's how much warming might be spared half a century from now thanks to Europe's decision, starting

after the Kyoto treaty in the late 1990s, to switch more than 50% of its passenger cars to diesel.

For this negligible result, Europe got significantly dirtier air. Paris, on some days, suffers worse smog than Beijing. Though his methodology may be questionable, a U.K. government scientist estimates that thousands of citizens die each year because of increased nitrogen oxide and soot emissions.

The word "microcosm" was invented for Europe's diesel snafu—a microcosm of the governance failures that are breeding political revolt in much of the advanced industrial world. Europe has gone overnight from pushing and subsidizing citizens to adopt diesel vehicles, to punishing them with taxes and excluding them from downtown areas. Britain is contemplating a scheme to pay owners to scrap their diesel cars.

Europe's entire auto industry was led down the primrose lane of adopting a technology that now appears to be a commercial and regulatory dead-end. More than 70% of BMW and Daimler cars made for the European market last year were diesel. When honestly tested, one study shows the latest "Euro 6 Standard" vehicles miss

their pollution targets by a whopping 400%.

Virtually everyone agrees Europe's "dash for diesel" was a monstrous policy error, not to mention the proximate cause of the emissions-cheating scandal that has engulfed Volkswagen and other auto makers. Yet the overarching imperative today is to vilify the car companies and insist they do better at achieving meaningless reductions in CO₂ emissions, now by forcing them to build electric cars that customers must be bribed and pressured into buying. Not to be questioned, though, is the green agenda or the competence of Europe's political class.

When a government conceit goes pop in such a disastrous way, we usually get reform. That won't be the case here.

But at least, in this maelstrom, Volkswagen's outside shareholders and German corporate-governance reformers saw a chance to solve one real problem—the excessive influence of government and labor appointees on Volkswagen's supervisory board, where they work together to inflate employment. It takes VW twice as many workers to build a car as it does Toyota.

And VW reformers looked set to prevail at this past summer's annual

meeting until, at the last minute, the company's ruling families, the Porsches and the Piëchs, caved to a jiggled-up rescue of the status quo.

In place of depoliticizing the company and improving efficiency, Volkswagen adopted a set of faddish promises to invest in electric cars, ride-sharing and the new "mobility economy." All this was cover for the real agenda—a big pay hike and fresh promises of job security for unionized workers despite the \$25 billion (and growing) cost of the diesel cheating scandal.

As a lengthy Reuters report frankly summarized, Volkswagen's new "strategy" is chiefly a political kludge designed to create a simulacrum of change so real change doesn't have to happen.

We have here an emblem of the Western world's infirmity. Multiple irrationality loops have taken over. Climate policy is the primary example—a pure traffic in costly gestures that create no real benefits for the public. In the U.S., the totality of Obama climate policies—his fuel mileage targets, his coal regulations, his wind and solar subsidies—would not make a detectable difference in the earth's climate even if given a century to

work their nonmagic. Yet the cost will be hundreds of billions.

The alleged chaos in America that Donald Trump has wrought, we should remember, was deliberately sought by millions of American voters. Maybe this is why.

In the business world, it's widely understood that the essence of "job satisfaction," even more than pay or benefits, is a belief that the people at the top are making good decisions. Think of Trumpism not as a bundle of policy solutions but a scream of frustration from an electorate that knows America hasn't been making good decisions lately. Next up are German, French and Dutch elections this year where similar dissatisfactions are roiling.

Congrats to those who can discern at this early moment whether the populist upsurge is a symptom of our further unraveling or the start of a turnaround. Much may depend on our reviled elites. The Trump cabinet is full of them. So is the Democratic opposition that is taking an increasingly unreasoning and rejectionist stance toward Trumpism. As a class, these experienced operators unavoidably will be needed to lend a hand to correct the failures that their own class has so much contributed to.

ETATS-UNIS

The New York Times Intelligence (UNE) Trump Campaign Aides Had Repeated Contacts With Russian

Michael S. Schmidt, Mark Mazzetti and Matt Apuzzo

WASHINGTON — Phone records and intercepted calls show that members of Donald J. Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and other Trump associates had repeated contacts with senior Russian intelligence officials in the year before the election, according to four current and former American officials.

American law enforcement and intelligence agencies intercepted the communications around the same time they were discovering evidence that Russia was trying to disrupt the presidential election by hacking into the Democratic National Committee, three of the officials said. The intelligence agencies then sought to learn whether the Trump campaign was colluding with the Russians on the

hacking or other efforts to influence the election.

The officials interviewed in recent weeks said that, so far, they had seen no evidence of such cooperation.

But the intercepts alarmed American intelligence and law enforcement agencies, in part because of the amount of contact that was occurring while Mr. Trump was speaking glowingly about the Russian president, Vladimir V. Putin. At one point last summer, Mr. Trump said at a campaign event that he hoped Russian intelligence services had stolen Hillary Clinton's emails and would make them public.

The officials said that one of the advisers picked up on the calls was Paul Manafort, who was Mr. Trump's campaign chairman for

several months last year and had worked as a political consultant in Ukraine. The officials declined to identify the other Trump associates on the calls.

The call logs and intercepted communications are part of a larger trove of information that the F.B.I. is sifting through as it investigates the links between Mr. Trump's associates and the Russian government, as well as the hacking of the D.N.C., according to federal law enforcement officials. As part of its inquiry, the F.B.I. has obtained banking and travel records and conducted interviews, the officials said.

Mr. Manafort, who has not been charged with any crimes, dismissed the officials' accounts in a telephone interview on Tuesday. "This is absurd," he said. "I have no idea what this is referring to. I have

never knowingly spoken to Russian intelligence officers, and I have never been involved with anything to do with the Russian government or the Putin administration or any other issues under investigation today."

He added, "It's not like these people wear badges that say, 'I'm a Russian intelligence officer.'"

Several of Mr. Trump's associates, like Mr. Manafort, have done business in Russia. And it is not unusual for American businessmen to come in contact with foreign intelligence officials, sometimes unwittingly, in countries like Russia and Ukraine, where the spy services are deeply embedded in society. Law enforcement officials did not say to what extent the contacts might have been about business.

The officials would not disclose many details, including what was discussed on the calls, the identity of the Russian intelligence officials who participated, and how many of Mr. Trump's advisers were talking to the Russians. It is also unclear whether the conversations had anything to do with Mr. Trump himself.

A report from American intelligence agencies that was made public in January concluded that the Russian government had intervened in the election in part to help Mr. Trump, but did not address whether any members of the Trump campaign had participated in the effort.

The intercepted calls are different from the wiretapped conversations last year between Michael T. Flynn, Mr. Trump's former national security adviser, and Sergey I. Kislyak, Russia's ambassador to the United States. In those calls, which led to Mr. Flynn's resignation on Monday night, the two men discussed sanctions that the Obama administration imposed on Russia in December.

Russia Reacts to Flynn Resignation

Leonid Slutsky, the Foreign Relations Committee chairman in the Russian State Duma, said Tuesday that he sees the accusations surrounding Michael T. Flynn's resignation as an attack on Russia and that relations with the United States continue to be on thin ice.

By ELSA BUTLER on February 14, 2017. Photo by Hilary Swift for The New York Times. Watch in Times Video »

But the cases are part of American intelligence and law enforcement agencies' routine electronic surveillance of the communications of foreign officials.



Mike Flynn Was Probed by FBI Over Calls With Russian Official (UNE)

Devlin Barrett and Carol E. Lee

Updated Feb. 15, 2017 7:52 a.m. ET

WASHINGTON—Federal agents questioned then-National Security Adviser Mike Flynn in January, shortly after the White House denied he had talked about sanctions with a Russian official, according to people familiar with the matter.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation interview, which raises the legal stakes for Mr. Flynn and adds to the political pressure on the White House, came after the president's

The F.B.I. declined to comment. The White House also declined to comment Tuesday night, but earlier in the day, the press secretary, Sean Spicer, stood by Mr. Trump's previous comments that nobody from his campaign had contact with Russian officials before the election.

"There's nothing that would conclude me that anything different has changed with respect to that time period," Mr. Spicer said in response to a question.

Two days after the election in November, Sergei A. Ryabkov, the deputy Russian foreign minister, said "there were contacts" during the campaign between Russian officials and Mr. Trump's team.

Paul D. Manafort, Mr. Trump's former campaign chairman, at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland in July. Sam Hodgson for The New York Times

"Obviously, we know most of the people from his entourage," Mr. Ryabkov told Russia's Interfax news agency.

The Trump transition team denied Mr. Ryabkov's statement. "This is not accurate," Hope Hicks, a spokeswoman for Mr. Trump, said at the time.

The National Security Agency, which monitors the communications of foreign intelligence services, initially captured the calls between Mr. Trump's associates and the Russians as part of routine foreign surveillance. After that, the F.B.I. asked the N.S.A. to collect as much information as possible about the Russian operatives on the phone calls, and to search through troves of previous intercepted communications that had not been analyzed.

The F.B.I. has closely examined at least three other people close to Mr. Trump, although it is unclear if their calls were intercepted. They are

spokesman Sean Spicer, at a Jan. 23 news briefing, said Mr. Flynn didn't discuss U.S. sanctions with Sergey Kislyak, Russia's ambassador to the U.S.

At that point, U.S. intelligence officials had already intercepted conversations between the two men in which they discussed the sanctions, according to people familiar with the matter.

Mr. Flynn's departure generated more questions Tuesday about what Mr. Trump knew about Mr. Flynn's activities and why it took weeks for Mr. Trump to push him out.

Carter Page, a businessman and former foreign policy adviser to the campaign; Roger Stone, a longtime Republican operative; and Mr. Flynn.

All of the men have strongly denied that they had any improper contacts with Russian officials.

As part of the inquiry, the F.B.I. is also trying to assess the credibility of the information contained in a dossier that was given to the bureau last year by a former British intelligence operative. The dossier contained a raft of allegations of a broad conspiracy between Mr. Trump, his associates and the Russian government. It also included unsubstantiated claims that the Russians had embarrassing videos that could be used to blackmail Mr. Trump.

The F.B.I. has spent several months investigating the leads in the dossier, but has yet to confirm any of its most explosive claims.

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Senior F.B.I. officials believe that the former British intelligence officer who compiled the dossier, Christopher Steele, has a credible track record, and he briefed investigators last year about how he obtained the information. One American law enforcement official said that F.B.I. agents had made contact with some of Mr. Steele's sources.

The agency's investigation of Mr. Manafort began last spring as an outgrowth of a criminal investigation into his work for a pro-Russian political party in Ukraine and for the country's former president, Viktor F. Yanukovich. It has focused on why he was in such close contact with

Mr. Spicer said the president was informed about the contents of Mr. Flynn's conversations with the Russian ambassador in late January, and White House officials spent a "few weeks" looking into the matter.

Vice President Mike Pence, who had vouched publicly for Mr. Flynn, didn't learn until Feb. 9 about the discussion of sanctions, said his spokesman, Marc Lotter. Mr. Lotter didn't explain the lag in the vice president's knowledge.

It is unclear what Mr. Flynn told the FBI agents, or whether his account during the interview was contradicted by intelligence

Russian and Ukrainian intelligence officials.

The bureau did not have enough evidence to obtain a warrant for a wiretap of Mr. Manafort's communications, but it had the N.S.A. scrutinize the communications of Ukrainian officials he had met.

The F.B.I. investigation is proceeding at the same time that separate investigations into Russian interference in the election are gaining momentum on Capitol Hill. Those investigations, by the House and Senate Intelligence Committees, are examining not only the Russian hacking but also any contacts that Mr. Trump's team had with Russian officials during the campaign.

On Tuesday, top Republican lawmakers said that Mr. Flynn should be one focus of the investigation, and that he should be called to testify before Congress. Senator Mark Warner of Virginia, the top Democrat on the Intelligence Committee, said the news about Mr. Flynn underscored "how many questions still remain unanswered to the American people more than three months after Election Day, including who was aware of what, and when."

Mr. Warner said Mr. Flynn's resignation would not stop the committee "from continuing to investigate General Flynn, or any other campaign official who may have had inappropriate and improper contacts with Russian officials prior to the election."

Correction: February 14, 2017

An earlier version of this article misstated the number of people (in addition to Paul Manafort) whom the F.B.I. has examined. It is at least three, not at least four.

intercepts. But the very act of undergoing an interview is potentially significant for Mr. Flynn because it is a crime to lie to the FBI; charges have been filed against senior officials in previous administrations for lying to investigators.

Mr. Flynn couldn't be reached for comment.

The FBI interview underscores that one of the most senior officials in the White House had fallen under investigative scrutiny less than a week into Mr. Trump's presidency.

Mike Flynn resigned Monday as he was under increasing fire over his

conflicting statements about his contacts with Russian officials before the inauguration.

The White House is exploring a new tactic to discourage China from undervaluing its currency to boost exports, part of an evolving Trump administration strategy to challenge the practices of the U.S.'s largest trading partner while stepping back from direct confrontation.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu began meetings in Washington ahead of a critical summit with President Donald Trump that officials in both countries hope will clarify the new U.S. administration's policies in the Middle East.

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- Steven Mnuchin Is Confirmed as Treasury Secretary

The Senate confirmed financier Steven Mnuchin as the next Treasury secretary, placing him in a leading position to advance President Donald Trump's plans to revamp financial regulation and the U.S. tax code.

Gary Cohn is emerging as President Donald Trump's most powerful economic policy maker during the early days of the administration, capitalizing on a vacuum created while other top posts sit vacant.

Wilbur Ross Jr. plans to keep millions of dollars invested in offshore entities whose values could be affected by policies that he implements as commerce secretary.

Trump is facing calls for a show of strength toward North Korea after Pyongyang's weekend launch of a ballistic missile.

Mr. Flynn's contacts with the Russian envoy is one of a number of U.S. counterintelligence investigations into Russian government contacts with people close to Mr. Trump.

Democrats called for congressional hearings to take sworn statements from Mr. Flynn to get to the bottom of what the president knew and when. Republicans began to back some of those calls on Tuesday.

"The [Senate] Intelligence Committee is already looking at Russian involvement in our election," Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.) said Tuesday. "It's highly likely they'd want to take a look at this episode as well. They have the broad jurisdiction."

Rep. Adam Schiff of California, the ranking Democrat on the House intelligence committee, said Tuesday his chief concern was that "the White House evidently knew for some weeks that the country had been misled and they were OK with that. They were willing to labor under this falsehood."

White House officials defended their handling of Mr. Flynn Tuesday, saying the president moved to push out Mr. Flynn when it became clear that significant questions about his trustworthiness had surfaced.

Mr. Spicer said the president's eroding level of trust in Mr. Flynn was a result of his contact with the Russian ambassador and a "series of other questionable instances." Asked Tuesday night to describe the other instances, Mr. Spicer declined to do so.

The sequence of events leading up to Mr. Flynn's ouster Monday night began on Dec. 29, when the then-President Barack Obama's administration made public punitive measures against Russia for alleged hacking aimed at meddling with the U.S. presidential election to favor Mr. Trump. The U.S. said it was ejecting 35 suspected Russian intelligence operatives from the country and imposing sanctions on Russia's two leading intelligence services.

That same day, Mr. Flynn repeatedly reached out to the Russian ambassador, according to people familiar with Russian intercepts. In a call, Mr. Flynn sought to persuade the ambassador not to "overreact" to the measures, suggesting Mr. Trump administration's would soon be able to be more friendly to Russia, these people said.

Word of the contact between the two men first surfaced in mid-January. On Jan. 15, Mr. Pence told CBS that Mr. Flynn never discussed sanctions with the Russian ambassador.

That statement alarmed U.S. intelligence officials, who knew of intercepts showing the two had, in fact, discussed the sanctions, according to people familiar with the discussions. At that point, acting Attorney General Sally Yates, a holdover from Mr. Obama's administration, discussed the issue with other officials, including FBI Director James Comey, who convinced her to wait a bit longer before alerting the White House, so that their investigation could develop more information, these people said.

A week after Mr. Pence's statement, The Wall Street Journal reported that U.S. intelligence agencies were investigating communications between Mr. Flynn and Mr. Kislyak. In comments on Jan. 23, Mr. Spicer said the two had discussed four other topics, including a planned phone call between the presidents of the two countries, but not the issue of sanctions.

Some U.S. intelligence officials grew uneasy at the possibility that Russian authorities could, in theory, blackmail Mr. Flynn at some future time by threatening to reveal the true nature of the discussions, these people said. After Mr. Spicer's public comments about Mr. Flynn on Jan. 23, FBI agents interviewed Mr. Flynn directly about his contacts with the Russian ambassador, these people said.

The FBI interview cleared the way for Ms. Yates to then raise the issue with the White House, officials said. On Jan. 26, she approached Donald McGahn, the White House counsel, about the issue. She warned Mr. McGahn that intercepted communications contradicted Mr. Flynn's account of the discussions, and that White House officials had conveyed those misstatements to the public.

According to Mr. Spicer, Mr. McGahn quickly took the new information to the president.

After Ms. Yates relayed the concerns, some intelligence officials waited for White House officials to issue a new statement—to correct the public record in some way about Mr. Flynn's contacts with the ambassador, according to people familiar with the matter. As time went on, it seemed to Justice Department officials that the White House didn't plan to do so, these people said.

Mr. Trump fired Ms. Yates the Monday after she contacted the White House because she had declined to defend an executive order on refugees and visitors to the U.S.

In a briefing on Tuesday, Mr. Spicer said the president asked for the resignation of Mr. Flynn late Monday because he had lost his trust and confidence after conflicting statements about his communications with Russia's ambassador to the U.S. Mr. Trump had been evaluating Mr. Flynn's status ever since the Justice Department informed White House officials that the adviser was misleading them about the content and duration of his contacts, Mr. Spicer said.

Mr. Spicer said that Mr. Trump grew increasingly concerned that Mr. Flynn had misled top administration officials.

"This was an act of trust, whether or not he misled the vice president was the issue," Mr. Spicer said. He said White House counsel determined during that time frame that Mr. Flynn didn't violate the law.

Mr. Flynn, a confidant of Mr. Trump's since his presidential campaign, resigned Monday night, writing that he had "inadvertently briefed" Mr. Pence and other officials "with incomplete information."

Shortly before his resignation, Mr. Flynn was quoted in the conservative news website The Daily Caller saying his conversation with Mr. Kislyak "wasn't about sanctions. It was about the 35 guys who were thrown out... It was basically, 'Look, I know this happened. We'll review everything.' I never said anything such as 'We're going to review sanctions,' or anything like that."

With Mr. Flynn's resignation, the White House named Keith Kellogg, the chief of staff at the National Security Council who advised Mr. Trump during the campaign, as acting national security adviser.

—Shane Harris, Byron Tau, Siobhan Hughes contributed to this article.

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Flynn's swift downfall: From a phone call in the Dominican Republic to a forced resignation at the White House (UNE)

<https://www.facebook.com/ellenakashimapost/>

Michael Flynn was at a beachside resort in the Dominican Republic, a stretch of sand and sun that he and

his wife had visited for years, when he took a few moments out of their post-election vacation for a call with

the Russian ambassador to the United States.

As a veteran intelligence officer, Flynn must have known that a call with a Russian official in Washington would be intercepted by the U.S. government, pored over by FBI analysts and possibly even shared with the White House.

But six weeks later, Flynn was forced out of his job as national security adviser to President Trump over what was said in that conversation and Flynn's inability to be truthful about it with then-Vice President-elect Mike Pence and other officials now in senior positions at the White House.

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White House press secretary Sean Spicer said Tuesday that "the level of trust between the president and General Flynn had eroded to the point where he felt he had to make a change."

But Flynn's removal was also the culmination of swirling forces and resentment unleashed by the 2016 election. He embodied the bitterly partisan nature of the contest, leading "Lock her up" chants directed at Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton during the Republican National Convention. His unusual association with Russia — and the discovery of his secret communications with the Russian ambassador to the United States, Sergey Kislyak — fanned suspicion among senior Obama administration officials of a more sinister aspect to Russia's interference in the election. And ultimately, Flynn's misleading statements about the Kislyak calls added to broader concerns about the Trump administration's regard for the truth.

(Jason Aldag/The Washington Post)

The resignation of national security adviser Michael Flynn comes on the heels of reports that he discussed U.S. sanctions with the Russian ambassador while a civilian, before President Trump took office. What led to Mike Flynn's undoing? (Jason Aldag/The Washington Post)

The sequence connecting Flynn's call and his dismissal came to involve two presidents warily passing power, the leaders of national security agencies including the FBI and CIA, and incoming and outgoing transition officials who regarded one another with significant distrust.

Senior Obama administration officials said they felt so uncertain about the nature of the Flynn-

Kislyak relationship that they took it upon themselves to scale back what they told Flynn and others on his incoming national security team, particularly on sensitive matters related to Russia. Officials emphasized, however, that there was no formal decision to limit information sharing with the Trump transition team.

"We did decide to not share with them certain things about Russia," a former senior Obama administration official said. "We just thought, who knew? Would that information be safe?"

A flurry of communications

Flynn's rising profile in the Trump campaign appears to have coincided with a resumption of his contacts with Kislyak. The two first met in 2013, when Flynn, then the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, met with military intelligence officials in Moscow on a trip that the Russian diplomat helped to arrange and coordinate.

As Moscow's lead envoy in Washington, Kislyak's communications were routinely monitored by the FBI, including diplomatic reports he filed with Moscow in which he documented his interactions with Flynn, according to current and former U.S. officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss intelligence matters.

At the same time, Russian intelligence services were carrying out an assault on the election, delivering troves of emails stolen from Democratic Party servers to the WikiLeaks Web site, according to U.S. officials. U.S. intelligence agencies later concluded that the effort was designed to destabilize U.S. democracy, damage Clinton's prospects and help elect Trump.

No evidence has surfaced to suggest that Flynn's contacts with Kislyak were in any way tied to the Russian operation. Nevertheless, by mid-December, senior officials in the Obama White House began to hear about Flynn's contacts with Kislyak, both from intelligence reports and other sources.

Obama administration officials weren't sure what to make of the communications. To some, they appeared to be consistent with the kind of diplomatic outreach expected of any incoming administration. To others, already alarmed by the scale of the Russian interference in the U.S. election, the frequency of the contacts seemed excessive and the lack of any effort by Flynn to coordinate his calls with the State Department was regarded with growing suspicion.

Susan E. Rice, President Barack Obama's national security adviser, did not give Flynn advance notice of the sanctions that the White House planned to impose on Russia over its meddling in the election. Instead, Denis McDonough, who at the time was Obama's chief of staff, waited until the sanctions were announced to inform his Trump counterpart, a former administration official said.

The measures that Obama announced on Dec. 29 included the expulsion of 35 suspected Russian intelligence officers from the United States, and the forced closure of Russian-owned compound in Maryland and New York used as resortlike retreats for that country's spies and diplomats.

Flynn had a flurry of communications with Kislyak in the days leading up to that announcement, including, by his account, an exchange of holiday greetings via text message on Dec. 25. The two also traded phone calls that Flynn said were limited to condolences over the assassination of Russia's ambassador to Turkey and the downing of a Russian aircraft, as well as a preliminary conversation about setting up a phone call between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Trump.

By that time, Flynn and his wife were in the Dominican Republic for a beachside respite before he moved into one of the most demanding jobs in the White House. It was there, at a resort on the eastern tip of the country, that Flynn fielded a Kislyak call as sanctions were announced.

"He got a hold of me," Flynn said in the Post interview, "I was on vacation, actually, with my wife."

The digital packets streaming between their phones were intercepted by the FBI, using capabilities provided by the National Security Agency, as part of its routine surveillance of Kislyak. An FBI agent prepared a brief intelligence report summing up the contents of the conversation, officials said.

The report was not widely circulated and might have attracted only scant attention were it not for a Putin move that baffled Washington. Rather than retaliate against the United States with comparable sanctions — standard practice during the Cold War, and afterward — Putin seemed to greet Obama's punitive measures with an indifferent shrug.

Putin's reaction — praised by Trump in a tweet saying "I always knew he was very smart" — sent officials at the White House, State Department and U.S. intelligence

agencies scrambling for clues. What they began to focus on, in early January, were Flynn's calls with Kislyak.

Telling the Trump team

On Jan. 5, FBI Director James B. Comey, CIA Director John Brennan and Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper Jr. briefed Obama and a small group of his top White House advisers on the contents of a classified intelligence report showing that Russia intervened in the 2016 election to help Trump. That's when White House officials learned that the FBI was investigating the Flynn-Kislyak calls. "The Flynn-Kislyak relationship was highlighted," a former senior U.S. official said, adding that the bureau made clear "that there was an actual investigation" underway.

The Obama administration at times seemed almost paralyzed about how to respond to Russia's unprecedented attack on the U.S. election system, even as officials watched it unfold. It wasn't until weeks after the election that the Obama administration sought to punish Russia.

The Obama team was similarly slow in its deliberations over whether and how to confront the fledgling Trump administration over what it had uncovered in Flynn's conversations with Kislyak.

The issue was forced out into the open on Jan. 12 in an op-ed by Washington Post columnist David Ignatius. The piece revealed Flynn's calls with Kislyak and called for an explanation from the White House on whether the two men had discussed sanctions.

Pence and other members of the Trump transition team, still a week away from assuming power, checked with Flynn before they publicly denied that sanctions had been discussed during the call with Kislyak.

Sally Q. Yates, then the deputy attorney general, Clapper and Brennan wanted to inform the Trump White House that Flynn had misled Pence and other officials. They were concerned that Moscow could use the lie to blackmail Flynn and didn't feel comfortable leaving Pence in the dark about being misled.

On Obama's last full day in office, Jan. 19, Clapper and Brennan made the case to Comey for informing the Trump team about Flynn. The FBI director pushed back primarily on the grounds that notifying the new administration could complicate the agency's investigation. The bureau, Comey also insisted, shouldn't be "the truth

police,” according to an official familiar with his thinking at the time. “In other words, if there’s not a violation of law here, it’s not our job to go and tell the vice president that he’s been lied to.”

In the days following Trump’s inauguration, FBI agents interviewed Flynn about his calls with Kislyak. That removed the basis for Comey’s earlier objection to notifying the White House, current and former officials said. It is unclear whether Flynn gave the agents an accurate account of his calls with Kislyak. If not, officials said he could find himself in serious legal jeopardy. The FBI interview with Flynn was first reported by the New York Times.

On Jan. 26, Yates notified White

The New York Times **‘Unbelievable Turmoil’: Trump’s First Month Leaves Washington Reeling (UNE)**

Michael D. Shear

WASHINGTON — The resignation of Michael T. Flynn as national security adviser caps a remarkably tumultuous first month for President Trump’s White House that has burdened the early days of his presidency with scandal, legal challenges, personnel drama and questions about his temperament during interactions with world leaders.

Mr. Flynn, a retired Army lieutenant general, lasted only 24 days before his tenure was cut short by an admission that he had misled the vice president and other White House colleagues about the contents of a phone call with the Russian ambassador to the United States.

The resignation on Monday night and the continuing turmoil inside the National Security Council have deeply rattled the Washington establishment.

Senator John McCain, Republican of Arizona, railed against the administration on Tuesday, decrying the “dysfunction” of the country’s national security apparatus and accusing the White House of being a place where “nobody knows who’s in charge and nobody knows who’s setting policy.”

In record time, the 45th president has set off global outrage with a ban on travelers from Muslim-majority countries, fired his acting attorney general for refusing to defend the ban and watched as federal courts swiftly moved to block the policy, calling it an unconstitutional use of executive power.

The president angrily provoked the cancellation of a summit meeting

House counsel Donald McGahn about the concerns that she and the former intelligence chiefs had about Flynn’s misrepresentations to Pence and others. McGahn, in turn, informed Trump, leading to a review of whether Flynn had violated any laws. White House lawyers quickly concluded that no laws had been broken, according to Spicer.

In his letter of resignation, Flynn said that he had “inadvertently briefed the Vice President Elect and others with incomplete information regarding my phone calls with the Russian ambassador,” and that he had merely sought “to facilitate a smooth transition and begin to build the necessary relationships” for Trump with foreign leaders.

with the Mexican president, hung up on Australia’s prime minister, authorized a commando raid that resulted in the death of a Navy SEAL member, repeatedly lied about the existence of millions of fraudulent votes cast in the 2016 election and engaged in Twitter wars with senators, a sports team owner, a Hollywood actor and a major department store chain. His words and actions have generated almost daily protests around the country.

“I’ve never been so nervous in my lifetime about what may or may not happen in Washington,” said Leon Panetta, a Democrat who served as chief of staff, secretary of defense and C.I.A. director during a 50-year career that spanned nine presidents from both parties. “I don’t know whether this White House is capable of responding in a thoughtful or careful way should a crisis erupt,” he said in an interview on Tuesday. “You can do hit-and-miss stuff over a period of time. But at some point, I don’t give a damn what your particular sense of change is all about, you cannot afford to have change become chaos.”

Mr. Trump’s allies note that the president has moved forward in areas that are more typical of the early days of a first-term administration. Mr. Trump nominated a Supreme Court justice 12 days into his tenure, and has issued a dozen executive orders, including ones to limit the influence of lobbyists, reduce regulations, pare the Affordable Care Act, move forward on pipeline construction, end trade deals and speed up deportations.

Current and former U.S. officials described that assertion as implausible, noting that sanctions were such a prominent subject of Flynn’s conversation with Kislyak that it seems unlikely he could have forgotten.

Spicer also suggested that Flynn’s false account of the sanctions discussion was part of a troubling pattern, saying that a “series of issues and series of statements and pronouncements” had damaged Flynn’s standing beyond repair.

Flynn’s version of events finally started to crumble on Feb. 7, when he was informed that The Post was preparing to publish an article about his discussion of sanctions with Kislyak, citing nine current and former U.S. officials. Flynn, at first,

Those accomplishments are catnip for the president’s most fervent supporters across the country, said Sarah Fagen, who served as a senior aide and political director for former President George W. Bush. The perspective on the White House is very different far outside the interstate freeway that rings Washington, she said.

“If you’re someone inside the Beltway, you think it’s been really rocky,” she said. “If you are outside the Beltway, you think, ‘That’s why we sent him there.’ There has been a lot of chaos and a lot of growing pains, but they have gotten a lot done.”

Still, half of the president’s cabinet has yet to be confirmed by the Republican-controlled Senate, and several other key White House aides have become lightning rods for daily mockery by late-night comedians.

It all has official Washington reeling and exhausted as it tries to make sense of — and keep up with — the nearly constant tornado of activity swirling around the president and his advisers.

Michael T. Flynn, center, lasted only 24 days as national security adviser. Hilary Swift for The New York Times

“If you had no-drama Obama, you’ve got all-drama, all-the-time Trump,” said John Feehery, a veteran Republican strategist, who compared the last several weeks to the chaotic start to Newt Gingrich’s tenure as speaker of the House in 1995.

“Newt never settled down. It was always one crisis after another,” Mr. Feehery recalled. “This might be the

stood by his denials. Then, one day later, he acknowledged through a spokesman that he might have discussed sanctions but couldn’t recall.

Pence finally learned from The Post — two weeks after McGahn — that Flynn had misled him. It would appear that neither McGahn nor Trump had informed him of the false statements.

After Flynn apologized to Pence, the vice president seemed open to allowing Flynn to remain in place, according to a senior administration official. But Reince Priebus, Trump’s chief of staff who had also come to Flynn’s defense in January, “didn’t want to let it go,” the official added.

new normal. People will start getting used to the new normal, but will also be exhausted by it.”

As a candidate, Mr. Trump promised to move quickly to stop illegal immigration, bring jobs back, end trade deals and reduce crime. Central to his campaign agenda was his pledge to be a disruptive force in Washington — and he has certainly done that.

Since winning the election, Mr. Trump and his closest aides have embraced the turmoil, viewing it as evidence of their aggressive efforts to fundamentally reorient the government.

The West Wing also uses the chaos as a tactical weapon, believing that the flurry of early-morning presidential tweets, controversial statements during the afternoon briefing and surprise executive actions work to keep their adversaries, the media and others off balance.

On Tuesday, Sean Spicer, the White House press secretary, happily kept reporters waiting while he did “a quick recap of the president’s activity,” proceeding to offer a long list of meetings and phone calls with foreign leaders, female entrepreneurs, local officials and educators.

Yet the disruptions have come at a cost: the president has so far made little progress on legislation that would repeal President Barack Obama’s signature health care law. The White House has not proposed a promised infrastructure bill to repair deteriorating roads, bridges and tunnels. And the president’s aides have not yet drawn up plans for an overhaul of the nation’s tax code.

"It's pretty predictable," Mr. Feehery said. "This guy has never been in government before and he promised to be disruptive."

It may also have consequences for Mr. Trump's ability to help Republicans win in the 2018 midterm elections. And Republican campaign experts acknowledge that his chances for winning re-election

may hinge on his ability to contain the White House frenzy.

"You are processing so much information in a day now. This stuff would have doomed anyone else, just one or two of them," said Thomas M. Davis, a former Republican member of Congress from Virginia. "They have got to produce something. If all you've got

is a bunch of executive orders and a Twitter feed, you don't want to go into an election like that."

Kevin Madden, who served as a senior adviser to Mitt Romney during both of his presidential campaigns, said Mr. Trump's voters in 2016 wanted him to overhaul an establishment in Washington, which

they view as long on promises, long on process but short on action.

"Voters certainly asked for change. They certainly wanted to see disruption," Mr. Madden said. "But if change begins to look like confusion and disruption morphs into disorder, you risk losing a certain level of confidence with voters."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Rebecca Ballhaus

Updated Feb. 14, 2017 8:58 p.m. ET

WASHINGTON—Dining at his oceanside resort in Florida on Friday, President Donald Trump was surprised to learn that national security adviser Mike Flynn was sitting at a nearby table, a person familiar with the event said.

"What is he doing here?" the president said, describing the man who was once at the center of his political orbit as "very controversial."

The moment epitomizes how quickly fortunes can change amid the chaos that has defined the opening act of Mr. Trump's presidency. In just a few weeks, the nascent administration is being weighed down from within, sidetracked by dishonesty and potential ethical lapses as well as attacks from his own supporters and fellow Republicans.

Mr. Flynn on Monday became the first casualty of that chaos, resigning as head of the National Security Council after he lost the president's trust by failing to fully disclose his conversations with Russian officials to senior White House officials, including Vice President Mike Pence.

"It's a dysfunctional White House, and nobody knows who's in charge," Sen. John McCain (R., Ariz.) told reporters on Tuesday.

Several congressional committees are investigating the possible role that Russia played in the 2016 elections. In addition, the Republican-run House Oversight Committee has begun examining issues related to conflicts of interest and protection of classified information in the new White House.

The administration's senior ranks are creating headlines of their own as they jockey for power and influence with the president.

Kellyanne Conway, a senior adviser, faces calls for an ethics investigation and possible disciplinary action. The Office of

Mike Flynn Is First Casualty of Turmoil in Trump Administration

Michael C. Bender and

Government Ethics wrote to the White House on Tuesday that there was "strong reason" to believe Ms. Conway violated ethics rules for endorsing the product line of Mr. Trump's daughter during a television interview.

Ms. Conway also appeared to be out of the loop, going on television Monday to declare that the president had "full confidence" in Mr. Flynn only to be contradicted within the hour by press secretary Sean Spicer, who said the president was still evaluating the national security adviser's status.

Chief of Staff Reince Priebus also found himself with unwanted attention when Newsmax Chief Executive Christopher Ruddy, one of the president's friends and a member of the Mar-a-lago oceanside resort, on Sunday talk shows expressed frustration with Mr. Priebus's performance. Messrs. Priebus and Jared Kushner, the president's son-in-law and top adviser, later called Mr. Ruddy and briefed him on plans to improve communications going forward. The media executive now has reversed his opinion of the White House team.

Still, Mr. Priebus has other detractors.

"Reince Priebus walked Mike Flynn to the gallows," Roger Stone, a former political adviser for Mr. Trump, said on Tuesday, calling it a "Pearl Harbor moment" for Trump supporters. "Trump loyalists are fed up with Reince Priebus and Sean Spicer whose loyalties are to the Republican National Committee, and not to the president."

But even for a White House that has been in nearly constant damage control, Mr. Flynn was a consistent flashpoint.

Two days before Mr. Trump's inauguration, Mr. Kushner and senior adviser Steve Bannon took a red-eye flight from New York to Washington to ease concerns about Mr. Flynn from incoming cabinet members, including eventual Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis.

The administration later installed Keith Kellogg as Mr. Flynn's staff chief and elevated the role of homeland security adviser, Tom Bossert, to give him equal sway inside the White House as Mr. Flynn.

On Tuesday, Mr. Kellogg, who was named interim national security adviser following Mr. Flynn's resignation, led an all-hands meeting of National Security Council staff. The message was direct and simple, said one attendee: Keep working hard, and please, don't quit.

Mr. Flynn's resignation surprised Japanese officials, who said the adviser was key in orchestrating the Trump administration's fledgling relationship with Tokyo. Mr. Flynn had attended "nearly all of the events" during Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to Washington and Florida last week, officials said.

He sat in on the meeting between Messrs. Trump and Abe at the White House on Friday, and, at Mar-a-Lago, was involved in drafting statements to condemn North Korea's launching of a ballistic missile into the Sea of Japan over the weekend.

Mr. Flynn loomed large in the country's bilateral interactions with Japan, due in part to the fact that Mr. Tillerson hadn't yet been confirmed, officials said. Mr. Flynn visited Tokyo and was the only attendee at Mr. Trump's November meeting with Mr. Abe at Trump Tower, after an initial greeting session with a bigger group.

"We tried to help him succeed," one senior administration official said. "It was absolute dysfunction."

The intrigue is likely to continue.

Senior White House advisers have suggested to cabinet secretaries or nominees that they need to be consulted on all personnel and policy decisions, creating friction between the agencies and the White House officials who have been permanently stationed inside their buildings.

Many of the U.S. ambassadorships remain unfilled, a result of a

standoff between Mr. Tillerson and Mr. Priebus, the chief of staff, said people familiar with the process.

Mr. Trump had told Mr. Tillerson he would have a say in appointing some key ambassadorships, including Canada and Switzerland, those people said. Mr. Priebus subsequently got the president to approve names for those positions—including several top donors to the RNC—without consulting the secretary of state, which angered Mr. Tillerson.

Spokesmen for the State Department and Mr. Priebus didn't respond to requests for comment.

The infighting has sown growing insecurity among Mr. Priebus and his top aides.

When Mr. Trump called Mr. Bossert, the homeland security adviser, into his office earlier this month, deputy chief of staff Katie Walsh spotted him entering the Oval Office and sprinted down the hallway to alert her boss, Mr. Priebus, according to a person familiar with the events. Mr. Priebus subsequently dashed into the office, where he reprimanded Mr. Bossert—in front of Mr. Trump—for trying to meet with the president without him.

"Reince is doing a great job," Mr. Trump told reporters at the White House on Monday. "Not a good job. A great job."

Mr. Trump avoided questions about Mr. Flynn Monday during a news conference with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Consequently, reporters lined up and spent three hours waiting outside Mr. Spicer's office to get an update.

When Mr. Trump walked by on his way to the Oval Office, they shouted questions about him about his national security adviser.

Mr. Trump ignored them, and turned to a picture on the wall of the audience that witnessed his inaugural speech on Jan. 20. Mr. Trump ignited the first controversy of his presidency by ordering Mr. Spicer to push back on widely reported data that showed that the crowd witnessing his inauguration

was smaller than his predecessor's audience.

"Where did all these people come from? Ohhh," Mr. Trump said, feigning surprise as he leaned over



David Ignatius : Michael Flynn's star burns out

<https://www.facebook.com/davidignatiusbooks>

the picture and pointed to individual people in the crowd.

—Peter Nicholas, Damian Paletta, Yuka Hayashi, Shane Harris and

Richard Rubin contributed to this article.

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After first reporting the telephone contact between then national security advisor Michael Flynn and Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak, The Washington Post's David Ignatius highlights the questions that still remain surrounding his resignation. The Washington Post's David Ignatius highlights the questions that still remain surrounding former national security advisor Michael Flynn's resignation. (Adriana Usero/The Washington Post)

(Adriana Usero/The Washington Post)

A strange and circuitous path led retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn toward his fateful telephone contact in late December with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak and the flameout of what had been a distinguished military career.

Military and intelligence colleagues who served with Flynn describe him as a brilliant tactician whose work in the shadowy Joint Special Operations Command a decade ago didn't prepare him for broader challenges as head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, from which he was removed in 2014, and national security adviser, the post from which he resigned Monday night.

"In the JSOC world, you think you're Superman," said a former Pentagon superior of Flynn's. After the disappointment at DIA, he said, "Flynn wanted recognition from anyone who would give it to him." The Russians paid attention, and he reciprocated.



Jill Lawrence : The Michael Flynn problem starts at the top

Jill Lawrence , USA TODAY

Beach, Fla.(Photo: Jim Watson, AFP/Getty Images)

How far up did it go with Trump-Russia con...

Fresh off White House National Security Advisor Michael Flynn's resignation, questions are swirling, with democratic lawmakers calling for an investigation. Nathan Rousseau Smith (@fantasticmrnate) has the story. Buzz60

President-elect Donald Trump and National Security Adviser designate Michael Flynn, Dec. 21, 2016, Palm

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A four-star general who served closely with Flynn sees a painful lesson: "Flynn's is an advisory tale to naive military officers. Swim with the sharks and you're sometimes the chum."

Flynn made his name perfecting the "find, fix, finish" tactics employed by JSOC against al-Qaeda in Iraq. The intelligence haul from one night's raid would be processed in a few hours, and the leads from cellphones and laptops would drive the next night's raids.

Those inside JSOC's super-secret operations felt "we're conquering the world," recalled one colleague. Flynn continued to shine as intelligence chief at U.S. Central Command, then at the Joint Staff at the Pentagon and finally in Afghanistan, where I met him. His appointment to head the DIA in 2012 was the culmination of what had been a charmed rise to the top.

Then bad things began to happen, some involving Russia, and Flynn's path began to veer toward Monday's catastrophe.

The DIA, a messy agency of nearly 20,000, mostly civilians, was famously the underachiever in the intelligence community. Flynn tried to fix everything at once. He had an ambitious but unrealistic plan for fusing the agency into mission centers. His superiors said no; Flynn went ahead anyway. Employees complained of shouting

matches, bad leadership and a demoralized agency.

Along the way, Flynn became enthusiastic about improving liaison with Russia, which he saw as a natural counterterrorism partner. He visited the Russian military-intelligence agency, the GRU, in 2013, and came back advocating greater cooperation in monitoring Syrian chemical weapons. Even after Russia invaded Crimea in 2014, Flynn proposed inviting the intelligence chiefs of its various theater commands to Washington for discussions. His superiors rejected what they saw as a supremely ill-timed proposal.

After Flynn was forced out in 2014, he complained that his ouster reflected disagreements about Middle East strategy. Colleagues at the time say it was simply a story of management failure — a good officer in the wrong job.

An embittered Flynn continued to advocate closer cooperation with Russia — and began issuing strident denunciations of the Obama administration. He told Al Jazeera television in August 2015 that the rise of the Islamic State was a "willful Washington decision." He told the German magazine Der Spiegel in November 2015 that U.S. military operations in Iraq and Libya had been a "mistake" and a "strategic failure." These became major themes for Donald Trump, whose campaign Flynn informally began advising in late 2015.

Flynn did something in December 2015 that has haunted him ever since. He gave a paid speech in Moscow at the 10th-anniversary celebration of Russia Today, a

global cable network described by U.S. intelligence as "the Kremlin's principal international propaganda outlet." The RT interviewer pushed him to say positive things about U.S.-Russian cooperation, and Flynn complied.

"Stop being like two bullies in the playground!" Flynn said in Moscow. "It's a marriage, whether we like it or not, and that marriage is very, very rocky right now," he said. In a separate RT interview in Moscow, he urged that the two countries share intelligence and operations centers against Islamic terrorism. Flynn sat next to President Vladimir Putin at a celebratory dinner on that 2015 trip.

Friendly relations continued. During 2016, even as the Russians were mounting what U.S. intelligence described as a covert attack on the presidential election, Flynn had several contacts with Kislyak. The fateful one came in late December, when the two men discussed U.S. sanctions against Russia, even as the Obama administration was expelling 35 diplomats.

Flynn's fall is a painful story, with many unanswered questions. Perhaps the biggest is why a retired general, schooled in the chain of command, would have talked with Kislyak without consulting his boss, Trump. That's the White House line, but this investigation of Russiagate is just beginning.

Read more from David Ignatius's archive, follow him on Twitter or subscribe to his updates on Facebook.

administration. Because you might say President Trump is his role model.

If the tone is set from the top, Flynn may have thought he was doing exactly as Trump wanted. And it may not just be a tone. Who knows what Trump explicitly instructed or witnessed.

It was not exactly shocking that events unfolded this way. Flynn was after all the guy who took money from Russia Today, the Russian propaganda outlet, for a speaking engagement. Who yelled "lock her up" about Hillary Clinton at the

Republican convention. Who spread rumors of sex crimes with children online and spread lies, or at least untrue or partial information, about whether his son had a security clearance and whether he discussed Obama-era sanctions with Russia (both cases in which Vice President Pence got burned).

Also this is the guy whose son not only promoted the certifiably hallucinatory "news" about a Hillary Clinton-run child sex slave ring at the Comet Ping Pong pizza joint in my neighborhood, he also gloated about the #MuslimBan on Twitter.

Most other conservatives knew enough not to advertise Trump's executive order barring refugees and visitors from seven majority-Muslim countries in a way that seemed patently unconstitutional. That's when young Flynn finally shut down his Twitter account (although he revived it briefly Tuesday to defend his dad).

The father and son clearly never made the transition from campaign mode to governing mode. Remind you of anyone?

Is the Flynn exit a sign that Trump is getting serious? That his executive orders will be less like press releases and his tweets will be more tethered to reality, and that the awesome responsibility of the presidency is finally dawning on him? That he'll fire or marginalize Stephen Bannon, who seems to be itching for showdowns with immigrants and minorities, as well as Iran and China?

Dream on.

The same day he fired Flynn, the president held a press conference

**The
New York
Times**

Franck Bruni : Flynn Is Exactly What Trump Deserves

Frank Bruni

Donald Trump's zeal for extreme vetting has one glaring exception, one gaping blind spot: his own administration.

If you're a bedraggled sixth grader from a beleaguered country where the Quran is a popular text, he will stop you at our border. If you're a retired lieutenant general who hallucinates an Islamic terrorist behind every last garden shrub in America, he will welcome you to the White House.

Michael Flynn's fall was foreordained, predictable by anyone with the time, patience and fundamental seriousness to take an unblinking look at his past, brimming as it was with accusations of shoddy stewardship and instances of rashness.

This is a man who once claimed that Arabic signs along the Mexican border pointed terrorists toward the United States — and who never provided any corroboration of that. I learned of this particular bit of hysteria when it was being discussed one night on Anderson Cooper's show on CNN. The Trump apologist Kayleigh McEnany was asked for her reaction. She said that no one could prove that there weren't such signs.

Trump sold himself to Americans the way almost everyone who tries to make the transition from the private sector to public service

that never addressed the raging issue of Flynn's future — because he only called on two reporters, both of them from right-leaning news outlets. And he formulated his response to the North Korea missile test at the Winter Situation Room, aka the terrace at Mar-a-Lago, amid tables of people eating dinner.

Now that Flynn is gone, a top candidate for national security adviser is David Petraeus. It's apparently of little or no concern that the retired general and former CIA director passed classified information to his biographer, with whom he was having an affair. It may in fact be a feature rather than a bug. This administration is noteworthy so far for a pile-up of personal foibles and an astonishing flood of damaging leaks.

POLICING THE USA: A look at race, justice, media

Ulysses S. Grant grew up in a town with a newspaper called The Castigator. My husband passed on that nugget while he was reading a Grant biography, and I can't get it out of my head. For two years now,

does. Supposedly, he knew how to manage in a way that government bureaucrats don't, because he was from a realm of ultimate accountability.

But I can't imagine any levelheaded chief executive having the most delicate of conversations about his enterprise out in the open, as Trump did at Mar-a-Lago on Saturday night, discussing North Korea's missile launch.

And the cornerstone of management is the assembling of a team that's competent and trustworthy. Trump put his together in a cavalier fashion, enchanted by people who were high on energy even if they were low on sanity, decency, discretion, humility or some combination of the above.

And so we got Flynn, Stephen Miller and others whose stridency makes for a good show — Trump relishes a good show — but is a recipe for precisely the kind of recklessness that did in Flynn, who played footsie with the Russians and then lied about it.

With this president there's a surfeit of provocation and a dearth of due diligence.

Where was the vetting, extreme or otherwise, of Mick Mulvaney, the congressman tapped for the Office of Management and Budget? Oops: He had a nanny for whom he'd failed to pay more than \$15,000 in taxes.

covering Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump and the politicians with less obvious flaws who failed to stop them or even to run, investigative reporters and opinion journalists might as well have been in a TV series called The Castigators.

So let me say a few nice things about Republicans. When the Obama sisters left the White House, they received a kind and wonderful letter from Barbara Bush and Jenna Bush Hager about how to move on with the rest of their lives. Rep. Jason Chaffetz, in the first indication he might actually do his job as head of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, asked the Office of Government Ethics to investigate White House senior counselor Kellyanne Conway for plugging Ivanka Trump's clothing line on TV. Sen. John McCain has been stalwart in his attempts to steer Trump's Russia policy in a different direction.

And Donald Trump (yes that Donald Trump) has not only named solid, trustworthy military men to run Defense and Homeland Security, he

Where was the vetting, extreme or otherwise, of Steve Mnuchin, just confirmed as Treasury secretary? Oops: He had all this offshore wealth and nearly \$100 million worth of real-estate assets that he initially failed to mention in financial disclosure forms.

Where was the vetting — or, more to the point, the preparation — of Betsy DeVos, our new education secretary, who waltzed into her confirmation hearing and theorized that the greatest pedagogical threat to America's schoolchildren was toothy, furry and fond of salmon.

There have been so many embarrassments with so many nominees that a few who'd be in the foreground of the news otherwise have been spared the derision they deserve.

Andrew Puzder, for instance. He's up for labor secretary, and his confirmation hearing has been delayed four times as he deals with a tangle of financial interests that are only the half of it.

Puzder runs the fast-food chains Hardee's and Carl's Jr. and has spoken dreamily of how much he'd like to install robots in place of human workers — you know, the kind the Labor Department is supposed to protect. In a memo to Hardee's managers, he once wrote, "No more people behind the counter unless they have all their teeth."

made a stunningly excellent choice for Veterans Affairs secretary — Obama holdover David Shulkin, a doctor and administrator with a stellar reputation who was running VA hospitals after having led several private medical facilities. The Senate confirmed him 100-0 Monday night.

The glass, then, is a couple of inches full. But the rest remains empty. That is because the real problem is at the top.

Jill Lawrence is the commentary editor of USA TODAY.

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He's cuddly, this one. Randy, too. He took great pride in a Carl's Jr. ad campaign in which models in bikinis wrapped their lips around fleshy, gooey cheeseburgers, giving a whole new meaning to the phrase "food porn." One ad had a woman whose bare breasts were obscured by melons. Oh, the wit!

Say what you will about DeVos, she never suggested that geometry be taught by Chippendales dancers doing things with protractors that Pythagoras could never have envisioned. Nor did she spout anything along the lines of Puzder's response when he was asked about the prospect of joining Trump's cabinet. He speculated that it would be "the most fun you could have with your clothes on."

I like to think that years from now, we'll be so far past this messy and terrifying moment that we'll look back wistfully at the parlor games it gave us, chief among them Who's Your Nightmare Nominee?

I've been in groups that passed many apocalyptic hours this way, though the conversation did grow redundant: Flynn, DeVos, Rick Perry, Flynn, Ben Carson, Flynn, Flynn, Flynn.

Well, the Flynn nightmare is over. It lasted all of 24 days. It wouldn't have lasted one if our president cared about the most important kinds of vetting.

João Fazenda

President Trump may have thought the departure of his national security adviser, Michael Flynn, would end the controversy over his administration's involvement with Russia, but the damning revelations keep coming. The whole fiasco underscores the dysfunction and dishonesty of his White House and how ill prepared it is to protect the nation.

It's unlikely that Mr. Flynn would have been pushed out absent a revelation on Monday by The Washington Post: that the Justice Department told the White House in January that Mr. Flynn had misled senior officials about a phone call with the Russian ambassador. Justice told the White House that, contrary to his claims, Mr. Flynn had discussed American sanctions against Russia with the ambassador. The discrepancy between what Mr. Flynn had said publicly and what the Russians (and American intelligence officials) knew made Mr. Flynn vulnerable to Russian blackmail. But the White House evidently didn't feel the need to act on that danger as long as it was concealed from the public.

On Tuesday, the White House admitted that Mr. Trump was told more than two weeks ago about Mr. Flynn's deception, even though the president told reporters on Friday

that he was unaware of a news report to that effect. Mr. Flynn, a hothead and an ideologue, was not fit to be national security adviser in the first place. That Mr. Trump clung to such a compromised person in such a sensitive position is at best an abysmal failure of judgment. As late as Monday, Mr. Flynn was in security briefings and had access to the president.

In his resignation letter, Mr. Flynn said he had given senior officials "incomplete information" about the phone call. F.B.I. agents interviewed Mr. Flynn days after the inauguration on that same subject, The Times reported on Tuesday. That means he could be exposed to a felony charge if he lied to them as well. The Times also reported Tuesday that current and former American officials said other Trump associates and campaign officials had had repeated contacts with senior Russian intelligence officials in the year before the election.

Mr. Flynn and Sergey Kislyak, the Russian ambassador, had been in touch during the campaign and after President Barack Obama imposed sanctions on Russia on Dec. 29 for hacking the Democrats' campaign computers, allegedly to benefit Mr. Trump in the election, according to intelligence reports and official sources cited by The Post. Mr. Kislyak's communications had been monitored by the F.B.I., revealing his contacts with Mr. Flynn.

Sally Yates, the acting attorney general, judged an intercepted call "highly significant" and "potentially illegal" under the Logan Act, which bars private citizens from interfering in diplomatic disputes with other countries. When word of the Flynn-Kislyak call leaked on Jan. 12, a Trump official denied that sanctions were discussed. The White House spokesman, Sean Spicer, gave a similar answer on Jan. 13, as did Vice President Mike Pence on Jan. 15. After Mr. Trump's inauguration, Mr. Spicer said on Jan. 23 that Mr. Flynn again assured him that sanctions had not been discussed. Shortly afterward, Ms. Yates, with agreement from James Comey, the F.B.I. director, informed Donald McGahn, the White House counsel, about what really happened.

There are many unanswered questions. Did anyone in the White House authorize Mr. Flynn's contacts? Why has Mr. Trump not condemned him for discussing sanctions with the Russians when he was not yet in office?

All of this puts more pressure on Congress to act. Although some top Republican senators have pledged to deepen their investigation of Russian involvement in the election, the party's response over all has been irresponsible. "I think that situation has taken care of itself," Jason Chaffetz, chairman of the House Oversight Committee, said on Tuesday about Mr. Flynn. Devin Nunes, chairman of the House

Intelligence Committee, was equally dismissive: "It just seems like there's a lot of nothing there." Then there was Senator Rand Paul, who put partisanship ahead of national security by declaring "it makes no sense" for Republicans to investigate Republicans.

Of course, Republicans pilloried Hillary Clinton for nearly two years for using a private email server, a bad decision, but one that didn't endanger the nation. And they conducted eight futile investigations into Mrs. Clinton's role as secretary of state during the 2012 Benghazi attack.

Now the same Republicans seem intent on helping Mr. Trump hide the truth by refusing to investigate Russia's hacking and other attempts to influence the 2016 election, as well as Mr. Trump's connections to Russia and affinity for President Vladimir Putin.

Mr. Trump has no more urgent task now than putting in place an experienced national security adviser who is beyond reproach. With the world in turmoil, his three-week-old administration is consumed by a self-inflicted crisis, marked by a pattern of recurrent lying and incompetence, and perhaps worse.

Editorial : Michael Flynn is gone. Here's where the National Security Council should go next.

<https://www.facebook.com/washingtonpostopinions>

THE RESIGNATION of Michael Flynn as national security adviser offers President Trump an opportunity to right what has been a dysfunctional policymaking apparatus. Having previously been dismissed from a post at the Defense Intelligence Agency for erratic management, Mr. Flynn failed to prepare Mr. Trump for conversations with foreign leaders, inadequately vetted executive orders and staffed key positions with military cronies even before he lied to the media and vice president about the content of his conversations with the Russian ambassador. His self-destruction in a post that demands the steadiest of hands was widely anticipated; the only surprise was that it took just 24 days.

It's not unusual for an incoming national security adviser to speak

with foreign ambassadors, and it's not entirely clear that what Mr. Flynn said to Russian envoy Sergey Kislyak in late December was improper. But Mr. Flynn clearly misled The Post, Vice President Pence and other senior officials when he said he did not discuss U.S. sanctions against Russia with Mr. Kislyak. He did so in the context of as-yet-unresolved questions about Russia's interference in the presidential election and other possible contacts between the regime of Vladimir Putin and the Trump campaign. The affair underlines the urgency of an impartial investigation into those matters by the Justice Department, Congress or an independent commission and the full disclosure of the results to the public.

The White House's handling of Mr. Flynn's deception also raises concerns. According to The Post, the acting attorney general told the

White House counsel late last month about Mr. Flynn's false statements and warned they could expose him to Russian blackmail. White House press secretary Sean Spicer said Tuesday that Mr. Trump was informed "immediately" afterward, but the White House did not correct the false public statements about the Flynn-Kislyak call, and Mr. Trump told reporters last Friday that he was unaware of the issue. At a minimum, the episode further undermines the credibility of an administration that has repeatedly disseminated untruths.

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Mr. Trump could begin to undo the damage by appointing a new

national security adviser prepared for the job's most essential work, which is serving as an honest broker in internal debates over questions of war, foreign policy and intelligence. The National Security Council chief should ensure that the unschooled Mr. Trump is fully briefed for encounters with foreign leaders and that policy steps — whether a response to a North Korean missile launch or a new strategy for fighting the Islamic State — are fully studied and discussed in an orderly way before a presidential decision is made.

The past two weeks have seen some welcome corrections by Mr. Trump to what looked like potentially rash departures from previous U.S. policies. He calmed Asian leaders by accepting the one-China principle and strongly backing the U.S. alliance with Japan, and he retreated from suggestions that the U.S. Embassy in Israel would be

swiftly relocated to Jerusalem. His U.N. envoy affirmed that sanctions on Russia for its invasion of Crimea

would remain in place.

However, Mr. Trump still has some fixes to make — above all in U.S. relations with NATO allies, where

signals from Cabinet secretaries and the White House have been conflicting, and in his dangerously appeasing stance toward Mr. Putin. A competent national security

operation may not correct the president's mistaken convictions, but it should, at least, provide him with better intelligence and options.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

After Mike Flynn, Donald Trump's White House Is at a Crossroads

Gerald F. Seib

Updated Feb. 14, 2017 12:13 p.m. ET

It's not clear that an administration can reach a crossroads in just 25 days, but the new Trump administration may have arrived at precisely that.

The resignation of national security adviser Mike Flynn Monday night capped one of the most tumultuous opening chapters for a White House in recent times. Whether his dramatic late-night departure leads toward something calmer and more orderly, or ushers in a prolonged stretch of more of the same, is impossible to know at this point.

Two key factors will determine the answer. The first is how much more is revealed about the subject that brought about Mr. Flynn's downfall, the connections between Russia and the Trump team. The second is whether someone can step forward to steer the administration toward calmer waters; the key figures in that effort may well be Vice President Mike Pence and White House chief of staff Reince Priebus.

For now, the biggest problem for President Donald Trump is that the quest to learn more of his team's relationship with Russia and Russians isn't ending. It's probably only beginning.

Mr. Flynn's resignation stemmed from conversations he had during the transition with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak, and indications that in those conversations he discussed the economic sanctions the Obama

administration had just imposed on Russia over its alleged interference in the 2016 election. Any promise that the new administration would unwind those sanctions could have represented a violation of the Logan Act, which prohibits a private citizen from undercutting foreign-policy initiatives of the U.S. government.

Mr. Flynn at first denied that sanctions were discussed, then backtracked, and in his resignation letter said he "inadvertently" provided "incomplete information" about his phone communications. The key to his downfall was misleading Mr. Pence, who proceeded to convey misleading accounts on national television.

Democrats in Congress will demand to know more about those conversations now, and especially what Mr. Trump knew of them. But that may not even be the administration's biggest headache. The issue that has always been looming just behind the Flynn controversy is the more explosive question of whether there were covert contacts between the Trump team and Russian representatives in an attempt to influence the presidential campaign.

Both Democrats and Republicans in Congress have pledged to investigate the Russian activity, and that inquiry may include a look into a lengthy dossier compiled by a former British intelligence agent alleging both that the Russian government holds compromising information on Mr. Trump and that Trump allies aided the Russians in hacking into Democratic email accounts during the campaign.

The inquiry can intensify in several ways in the weeks ahead. Democrats are pressing for a joint House-Senate intelligence committee inquiry, or the formation of a select committee specifically charged with investigating the question of Russian interference in the election. Either route would significantly increase the profile and resources devoted to getting to the bottom of Russia's role, and, by extension, any connection to the Trump campaign.

If Republicans balk at going those routes—and signals so far suggest they would—then Democrats will try to increase pressure publicly. In that effort, they may find friends in the intelligence community. It's clear that the president has made enemies within the intelligence world, who appear willing to leak what they are finding on the Russia connection if there isn't an official route by which it can surface.

Meanwhile, the Trump White House faces the challenge of bringing more discipline to an organization that seems to be veering off onto multiple and sometimes colliding tracks, and sending off mixed signals along the way. The president's approach to communicating with the world all on his own generates its own disorienting overlay.

There are multiple power centers within the White House, but it may be that Mr. Pence will emerge from the Flynn episode as a particularly important one. Mr. Pence seemed irritated enough at being misled by Mr. Flynn to have acted on the irritation, rather than letting it pass.

As the top Trump official with the deepest experience in Washington, where he spent a decade rising to the top of the Republican ranks in Congress, Mr. Pence has always had the potential to emerge as a dominant player, internally and externally. In the Flynn matter, he may have done that.

The second figure at this turning point is Mr. Priebus. Like Mr. Pence, he is a solid but low-key Midwesterner, standing in striking contrast with the more outspoken and confrontational characters in the Trump inner circle. A White House chief of staff, as the person sitting at the edge of the Oval Office with his hands on paperwork and schedules, usually is in the best position in the long run to emerge as a dominant figure.

That hasn't been the case so far with Mr. Priebus, in part because Mr. Trump reportedly has only recently indicated that he wants him to exert that kind of control. If more choppy waters lie ahead, the president may discover he needs a firmer hand from his chief of staff, and Mr. Priebus's challenge will be to step up to meet that need.

One advantage Mr. Trump enjoys is that he is only now getting his full A team on the field: Rex Tillerson, Jim Mattis and Steven Mnuchin have, finally, all been confirmed and sworn in as secretaries of state, defense and Treasury, respectively. With them in, and Mr. Flynn out, a new dynamic is about to form in the Trump world, and perhaps at a time when that is what the president needs and wants.

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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Former Navy SEAL Bob Harward Is Top Contender to Replace Michael Flynn

Paul Sonne and Shane Harris

Updated Feb. 14, 2017 8:18 p.m. ET

The front-runner to succeed Michael Flynn as White House national security adviser is a former Navy SEAL and retired three-star admiral who became one of Defense Secretary Jim Mattis's most-trusted colleagues while leading troops in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Retired Vice Admiral Bob Harward, who served as Mr. Mattis's deputy

at U.S. Central Command during the secretary's career as a Marine Corps general, is at the top of the list for the influential White House post, according to a U.S. official and another person familiar with the matter.

Adm. Harward retired from the Navy in 2013 and is currently chief executive of Lockheed Martin Corp.'s operation in the U.A.E.

He is being considered alongside Keith Kellogg, the retired three-star Army general who took over as

acting national security adviser late Monday, and former Central Intelligence Agency Director David Petraeus, a retired four-star Army general, according to administration officials.

The deliberations mean that the high-level national security post is all but certain to stay in the hands of a former military officer, continuing President Donald Trump's reliance on retired top-level brass for his national security apparatus.

If Adm. Harward is chosen, his selection stands to increase Mr. Mattis's political influence within the Trump administration. The secretary of defense has been trying to place Adm. Harward in a White House job since last month, according to the U.S. official and the person familiar with the staffing decisions, who both said the Pentagon chief wanted his longtime protégé as "eyes and ears" in the White House.

Adm. Harward was recently at the White House interviewing for a senior staff position on the National

Security Council and had been on a list of candidates to serve as undersecretary of defense for intelligence, the U.S. official said.

The departure of Mr. Flynn opens up a more influential job. It also provides an opportunity for Mr. Mattis to make inroads in a White House that so far has been dominated by campaign-trail aides who have personal relationships with Mr. Trump.

Adm. Harward served on the National Security Council in 2005 as part of a military tour under President George W. Bush.

Former Deputy national security adviser Fran Townsend, who worked with Adm. Harward in the White House, called him the right leader for the right moment. She said he brought an important voice to the table at the National Security Council because of his experience in special operations, which is at the heart of the counterterrorism fight.

"He has faced down and defeated the world's most ruthless and deadly enemies," Ms. Townsend said. "And he has done all that by Mattis' side."

The son of a U.S. Navy sailor, Adm. Harward grew up in Iran in the years before the 1979 revolution, attending the Tehran American School, while his father served there. He learned Persian, according to officers who served with him.

Adm. Harward didn't respond to requests for comment on this article.

When he ended up at Kandahar airport commanding troops in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks, it was familiar terrain: He had hitched rides in his youth across Afghanistan in the 1970s as a young tourist, one officer who

served with him recalled.

He graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1979, a few months after the Iranian Revolution, and went on to serve in traditional postings before becoming a Navy SEAL.

It wasn't until the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 that Adm. Harward began years of close partnership with Mr. Mattis. Having met before, the two ran into each other again at a military base in the Gulf, as the U.S. military was preparing to go to war with the Taliban.

Then a captain, Adm. Harward was commanding Task Force K-Bar, a coalition force of thousands that included Navy SEALs and Army Green Berets, as well as special operators from Canada, Norway, Denmark, Germany, Australia, New Zealand and Turkey. Mr. Mattis, then a one-star general, was leading Task Force 58, inserting thousands of U.S. Marines into Afghanistan.

The two military leaders formed a symbiotic relationship: Adm. Harward needed communications assets, helicopters and quick-reaction support for his special operators, while Mr. Mattis needed strategic reconnaissance from the ground before inserting his Marines. They swept into Afghanistan, according to one officer, "joined at the hip."

When Mr. Bush awarded the Presidential Unit Citation to Task Force K-Bar, the Navy said that during its six-month existence, K-Bar established an 100-percent success rate on extremely high-risk missions that included destroying al Qaeda training camps and underground cave complexes, conducting search-and-rescue operations and apprehending targets.

"Its primary mission was to destroy, degrade, and neutralize the Taliban and al Qaeda leadership and military," the Navy said, citing the task force for its heroic efforts.

Adm. Harward later worked with Mr. Mattis in a similar tag-team manner during the invasion of Iraq. This time, he was commanding a unit of only Navy SEALs, which supported Mr. Mattis's Marines with snipers and advanced reconnaissance in the drive to seize Baghdad, according to an officer who served there. When Mr. Mattis rose to become commander of Joint Forces Command and later U.S. Central Command, he took Adm. Harward with him as a No. 2.

In between, from 2009 to 2011, Adm. Harward returned to Afghanistan to oversee detention operations and revamp the notorious prison at Bagram Air Base, while training Afghan forces on treatment of detainees.

While in charge of detention operations, Adm. Harward, who practices yoga, considered for a time a proposal to introduce yoga to Taliban prisoners and their guards.

His experience leading allied special forces and overhauling detention in Afghanistan will ally him with Mr. Mattis in advocating against torture and for stronger alliances, according to people who know him.

During stints in Afghanistan, Adm. Harward's Persian linguistic skills, as well as his proclivity to engage with people outside the perimeters of fortified military bases, endeared him to his Afghan peers. He became something of a fixture on the Kabul social scene.

"He was very down to earth. He was not afraid to get out and engage with people. That is one reason he was so liked," said Saad Mohseni, a Dubai-based media executive and a

friend of Mr. Harward from his days in Kabul. "He is the only [military officer] I can remember who would walk out in his uniform and stop to say hello to people on the way."

After leading Central Command, Adm. Harward and Mr. Mattis retired the same year.

Mr. Mattis and retired Adm. William McRaven attended Adm. Harward's ceremony in Coronado, where dozens of people gathered to celebrate the Navy SEAL commander's nearly four decades of military service. Adm. Harward arrived by parachute, landing on the beach alongside the U.S. Navy Leap Frogs parachute team, his Navy SEAL and three-star admiral flags flapping in the wind.

Since retiring, Adm. Harward has expressed some of the same concerns voiced by Mr. Flynn, a former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, about problems with the U.S. approach to intelligence. In 2014, Adm. Harward said the U.S. suffered a "significant intelligence failure" when Islamic State's sweep across Syria and Iraq took Washington by surprise.

Last year, at an event in Abu Dhabi, he reiterated the point, saying the intelligence apparatus grew dramatically after Sept. 11, 2001. "And yet we missed this Islamic State threat. So did the money we put into that get us the return we wanted? I would say not."

—Margherita Stancati and Dion Nissenbaum contributed to this article.

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Russian lawmakers rush to the defense of Trump's ex-national security adviser

<https://www.facebook.com/roth.andrew?fref=ts>

MOSCOW — Leading Russian lawmakers rushed to defend President Trump's former national security adviser Tuesday after he resigned amid furor over his misleading statements to senior White House officials, including Vice President Pence, about his contacts with Russia.

The heads of the foreign-affairs committees in Russia's upper and lower houses of parliament chalked up Michael Flynn's resignation to a dark campaign of Russophobia in

Washington, and said it would undermine relations between the White House and the Kremlin.

Flynn was accused of holding discussions on the U.S. sanctions regime against Russia with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak before Trump was sworn in as president last month.

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Flynn stepped down amid mounting pressure on the Trump administration to account for its false statements about his conduct.

The Washington Post reported Monday that the Justice Department had warned the White House last month that Flynn had so mischaracterized his communications with the Russian diplomat that he might be vulnerable to blackmail by Moscow.

(Reuters)

President Trump's national security adviser, Michael Flynn, resigned Feb. 13 and Kremlin spokesman

Dmitry Peskov responded to the resignation Feb. 14, saying it is an internal matter for the United States. President Trump's national security adviser, Michael Flynn, resigned Feb. 13 and Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov responded to the resignation Feb. 14, saying it is an internal matter for the United States. (Reuters)

[Justice Department warned White House that Flynn could be vulnerable to Russian blackmail, officials say]

"Flynn was 'pushed out' not because of his mistake, but

because of the unfolding campaign of aggression. 'Russian for the Exit!' shout the newspapers. Paranoia and a witch hunt," tweeted Russian senator Alexei Pushkov, referring to a New York Daily News headline.

In a separate tweet, he wrote, "The mission isn't Flynn, it's relations with Russia."

**The
Washington
Post**

Flynn episode 'darkens the cloud' of Russia that hangs over Trump administration

<https://www.facebook.com/tom.hamburger>

Once again, Donald Trump is embroiled in controversy related to Russia.

The ouster of Trump's national security adviser, Michael Flynn, caught by intelligence agencies speaking with the Russian ambassador about U.S. sanctions and then misleading administration officials about the interactions, marked the latest chapter in a months-long saga in which Trump has been unable to break free from the shadow of the United States' longtime rival.

Two advisers left the campaign amid questions about their ties to Moscow and the oligarchs that hold sway there. The FBI is probing ties between Trump associates and Russia, as is the Senate Intelligence Committee. The president himself has repeatedly praised Russia's authoritarian leader, Vladimir Putin, while he has long expressed a desire to build a Trump Tower in Moscow and boasted of how the Trump brand holds special appeal for Russian investors.

All of this coincided with Russia's role in last year's U.S. election, in which the Kremlin is accused by U.S. intelligence agencies of orchestrating hacks that targeted Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton and her top aides to weaken her campaign. FBI Director James B. Comey also last month briefed Trump on accusations that the Russians hold compromising material about him, an unverified claim found in a dossier written by a former British spy hired by Trump's political opponents. Trump has rejected the claim as "fake news."

Now the foreign power that allegedly hoped to help Trump gain power is in a position to undermine his grip on it, with Flynn's departure lending new gravity and intensity to long-simmering questions about Trump and Russia.

The resignation of national security adviser Michael Flynn comes on the heels of reports that he discussed

"It is kind of a negative signal for normalizing the Russian-American dialogue," the head of the lower house's foreign-affairs committee, Leonid Slutsky, said in remarks released by his press office.

[10 unanswered questions after Michael Flynn's resignation]

U.S. sanctions with the Russian ambassador while a civilian, before President Trump took office. What led to Mike Flynn's undoing? (Jason Aldag/The Washington Post)

(Jason Aldag/The Washington Post)

[Inside Trump's financial ties to Russia and his unusual flattery of Vladimir Putin]

Democratic lawmakers and a handful of Republicans escalated calls Tuesday for a thorough and independent investigation into the possible connections between Trump and Russia. The line of inquiry could result in uncomfortable questions for the White House, including demands by Democrats that lawmakers seek to make public Trump's tax returns.

"There was already a cloud hanging over the administration when it comes to Russia, and this darkens the cloud," said Eliot Cohen, who served as an adviser to the George W. Bush administration and has been a Trump critic. "This is serious."

Sen. Roy Blunt (Mo.), a member of the Senate Republican leadership, told a Missouri radio station Tuesday that the Senate Intelligence Committee should look into Trump's Russia connections "exhaustively so that at the end of this process, nobody wonders whether there was a stone left unturned, and shouldn't reach conclusions before you have the information that you need to have to make those conclusions."

"For all of us, finding out if there's a problem or not, and sooner rather than later, is the right thing to do," he said.

Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), who had raised initial questions about Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's past good relations with Putin during his time as ExxonMobil's CEO, told reporters this week that senators will "go wherever the truth leads us" in the Russia inquiry.

Trump aides stressed Tuesday that the Flynn controversy was entirely about internal dynamics in the White House — and not about any

Earlier, Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov confirmed that Flynn had "some conversations and communications" with Kislyak but said reports that he had discussed the U.S. sanctions regime before Trump's inauguration were "incorrect."

larger issues related to Russia. Press secretary Sean Spicer told reporters that Flynn resigned because of misleading information he gave to Vice President Pence and others, rather than the nature of his contact with the Russians. "Pure and simple, it was a matter of trust," Spicer said.

President Trump's national security adviser Michael Flynn resigned Feb. 13 after revelations that he had discussed sanctions on Russia with the Russian ambassador to the U.S. prior to Trump taking office. Here's what you need to know. President Trump's national security adviser Michael Flynn resigned Feb. 13. Here's what you need to know. (Deirdra O'Regan/The Washington Post)

(Deirdra O'Regan/The Washington Post)

Spicer, meanwhile, sought to portray Trump as a hawk when it comes to dealing with the Kremlin. "The irony of this entire situation is that the president has been incredibly tough on Russia," Spicer said, citing comments from Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley, who has issued recent condemnations of recent Russian military action in Ukraine.

Trump, however, has done little in his public appearances as a businessman, a candidate or as president to suggest a hard line on Russia.

For years before entering politics, Trump appeared to hold Putin in an especially high regard.

"By the way, I really like Vladimir Putin," Trump told the Russian-language magazine *Chayka* in 2008 as he debuted a new Trump-branded New York City condo project that was catering in part to Russian buyers. "I respect him. He does his job well. Much better than our Bush."

Trump continued to praise the Russian leader after President Bush left office, repeatedly citing Putin as a stronger leader than President Obama.

Peskov said Flynn's resignation was an internal matter for the United States and declined to comment further on it during a call with journalists Tuesday.

In 2014, a year after Trump hosted the Miss Universe pageant in Moscow, he tweeted that Putin had become a "big hero" in Russia who would "rebuild the Russian empire," even as Obama's popularity sagged.

Trump's positive words about the Russian leader during last year's campaign surprised some Republicans, considering that most GOP leaders said Putin's rise was a threat to U.S. allies and interests around the world.

In December 2015, before any ballots were cast in the primary election, Trump declared that praise he had received from Putin was a "great honor" and rejected allegations that Putin had killed journalists and other political opponents. "He's always denied it," Trump told ABC's "This Week" on Dec. 20, 2015, adding, "I think our country does plenty of killing also."

Trump also seemed to embrace some aspects of Russia's foreign policy agenda. He spoke of partnering with Moscow to fight the Islamic State and other radical Islamic terrorist groups, while, during the Republican National Convention, his campaign sought a tweak to the GOP platform softening a call for the United States to provide Ukraine with "lethal defensive weapons" in its ongoing fight with Russian-backed separatists.

After WikiLeaks first posted hacked emails from the Democratic National Committee, Trump refused to criticize — instead inviting Russia to hack his Democratic opponent.

"Russia, if you're listening, I hope you're able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing," he said in July, referring to emails Hillary Clinton had deleted as personal while secretary of state.

Later, after WikiLeaks posted thousands of emails from Clinton campaign chief John D. Podesta, Trump resisted findings by U.S. intelligence of Russian interference.

Only in January did he say he concurred with the professionals'

assessment that Russia was behind the cyberhacks that plagued his opposition.

"As far as hacking, I think it was Russia," he said, before quickly adding. "But I think we also get hacked by other countries and other people."

Trump has also surrounded himself with aides who had expressed similar views on Russia.

Flynn, who Trump considered naming vice president, had been particularly vocal about the potential for Russia to be a stronger ally against terrorism.

Flynn was also a frequent commentator on RT, the Russian-government funded news network and had been paid to attend a gala for the network in 2015 where he was seated near Putin.

Another top Trump aide, Paul Manafort, had financial ties with business and political leaders linked to Putin, including time spent advising the Putin-backed president of Ukraine. Manafort was named Trump's campaign manager in June but resigned in August, after Ukrainian anti-corruption investigators announced they

discovered a "black ledger" showing \$12.7 million designated for Manafort between 2007 and 2012 by a political party associated with the former president of Ukraine. Manafort denied any wrongdoing and rejected the suggestion that he received "off the books" funds from his work in Ukraine.

Another Trump campaign foreign policy adviser, Carter Page, delivered a speech critical of the U.S. role in promoting democracy while visiting Moscow in July. An energy consultant who worked in Moscow for Merrill Lynch a decade ago, Page had been little known in Washington policy circles until Trump named him publicly as an adviser in March.

After reports of his speech in Moscow surfaced last summer, campaign spokeswoman Hope Hicks said Page was an "informal foreign policy adviser" who "does not speak for Mr. Trump or the campaign." In September, as criticism continued, Page took a leave from the campaign.

Sensing vulnerability, Democrats pressed Tuesday for more investigation into whether Trump

has business ties in Russia that could explain his attitudes.

Trump has said he has done no deals there. But over 30 years, he has repeatedly visited Moscow and promised to one day build a tower bearing his name there.

He has also bragged about selling a mansion in Florida to a Russian oligarch for nearly \$100 million, and Russian investors were key to the success of several Trump-branded buildings, particularly in Florida following the 2008 crash of the U.S. housing market.

"Russians make up a pretty disproportionate cross-section of a lot of our assets," Trump's son, Donald Jr., told a real estate conference in 2008, according to an account posted on the website of eTurboNews, a trade publication. "We see a lot of money pouring in from Russia."

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Trump's aides have been unequivocal that his campaign did not coordinate with Russians who meddled in the campaign.

Two days after Trump was elected, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov told a reporter in Moscow that "there were contacts" between Russian officials and the Trump campaign. "Obviously, we know most of the people from his entourage," Ryabkov told the Interfax news agency.

Russian officials later described those contacts as standard diplomatic interactions — but at the time, they were vigorously denied by Trump's transition team, with Hicks saying there had been "no contact with Russian officials."

In fact, Ambassador Sergey Kislyak recently confirmed to The Washington Post that he had spoken with Flynn prior to Election Day.

Asked again Tuesday whether anyone from the campaign had contact with Russians before the election, Spicer told reporters he knew nothing to suggest anything had "changed with respect to that time period."

**The
Washington
Post**

In the early weeks of the new administration, the humbling of a president (UNE)

<https://www.facebook.com/danbalzwapo>

The presidential campaign was a heady experience for Donald Trump: months of triumph and, better yet, disproving all the so-called experts who said he never had a chance of winning. The early weeks of the new administration have been the opposite: the public humbling of a new president.

Trump's campaign was never entirely smooth, but instincts that served him so well then appear to be less helpful now that he is in office. As president, Trump's early moves — with some exceptions — have been marked by poor judgment, botched execution, hubris among some advisers, and a climate of fear and disorder all around.

The complexities of governing have quickly caught up with a politician determined to shake up Washington as quickly as possible. The president gets credit from many Americans for keeping his campaign promises, but government by chaos is not a known recipe for success. The result is an administration that begins its second month weakened and on the defensive. What Trump takes away from all this will

determine the future of his tumultuous presidency.

Monday's resignation of retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn as national security adviser is certainly the biggest embarrassment, probably setting some sort of record for an early exit by a top official in a new administration. Flynn was Trump's hand-picked choice, a fierce loyalist whose baggage nonetheless was there for all to see. Trump overlooked that and is now paying a price. Flynn's decision to lie to Vice President Pence about the nature of his conversations with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak ultimately led to his downfall, but there is more to know than that.

The resignation removes a controversial adviser from the White House but hardly resolves the larger issue of the Russia connection. Questions about Flynn's — and possibly other Trump team members' — communications with the Russians, during the campaign and transition, remain unanswered. The swift elevation of a new national security adviser won't make this go away. The Russia issue will continue to dog Trump's presidency until more answers are forthcoming.

(Deirdra O'Regan/The Washington Post)

President Trump's national security adviser Michael Flynn resigned Feb. 13 after revelations that he had discussed sanctions on Russia with the Russian ambassador to the U.S. prior to Trump taking office. Here's what you need to know. President Trump's national security adviser Michael Flynn resigned Feb. 13. Here's what you need to know. (Deirdra O'Regan/The Washington Post)

The fact that the Justice Department warned the White House weeks ago that Flynn had left himself susceptible to blackmail by the Russians, as The Post reported Monday night, makes it even more urgent for the president to explain what he and others knew and when, as well as what orders he might have conveyed to Flynn about signals he wanted sent before he took the oath of office.

[Disorder is the order of the day at the White House]

For Trump, nothing has proved as easy as it might have looked on the campaign trail, despite the flurry of executive orders and actions that flowed from his desk in the first days after the inauguration. He has signaled a radically different direction for the country, but only that. Senior policy adviser Stephen

Miller's claim that Trump has accomplished more in a few weeks than most presidents do in their entire administrations should be seen as the fanciful boast that it is. The record is only beginning to be written.

The powers of the president are vast, but they are not unlimited. Trump has come face to face with the checks and balances built into the Constitution and with the difficulty of commanding a huge bureaucracy of federal workers who value their role as public servants. He has seen anew the power of a free press to dig and report and hold those in power accountable. He has felt the power and sting of leaks from inside the government. There's nothing new about any of this. It has been true for past presidents. Trump is learning the lesson painfully.

Things inevitably move slowly and not always to a president's liking. Trump ordered a travel ban on refugees and on citizens from seven majority-Muslim nations, but it was hastily and poorly drafted, not subjected to the kind of thorough vetting such a measure requires, and its implementation was poorly done. Challenged in court, Trump could not force the judiciary to bow

down and bless the order without independent review.

Trump can order the construction of a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border, but its completion is years away — and at a price to taxpayers that has caused some cost-conscious congressional Republicans to balk. Put aside how Trump will make good on his ultimate promise of getting the Mexican government to pay for it.

[Hill Republicans find it harder to defend Trump amid stumbles]

(Sarah Parnass/The Washington Post)

Less than 24 hours after former national security adviser Michael Flynn resigned, some Republicans were calling for Americans to "move on," while at least one senator still had questions. Less than a day after Michael Flynn resigned, some Republicans were calling for Americans to "move on," while at least one senator still had questions. (Video: Sarah Parnass/Photo: Getty/The Washington Post)

Trump promised as a candidate that he would repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act in his first days in office. His party has had years to come up with an alternative and still struggles to find substantive or political consensus. He promised the imminent release of a health-care plan, but that is yet to be seen. Republicans already can feel blowback from angry citizens worried about what a repeal would mean for them.

At times, Trump appears a different person in office than he was on the campaign trail. This is more than the issue of being "presidential." Spontaneity, one of the currencies that branded him as a candidate, has all but disappeared. He is scripted carefully and constantly, reading even mundane statements from prepared texts. He cannot be happy with what has happened around him, and it shows.

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"Let Trump be Trump" was the cry during the campaign. Some transformation from the freewheeling style he exhibited as a candidate is required, but this president doesn't appear to have found his comfort zone in his new role. Nor is he communicating effectively with the public.

His White House lacks structure and order. Who has real influence? Vice President Pence? Chief of Staff Reince Priebus? Chief strategist Stephen K. Bannon? Senior adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner? Counselor Kellyanne Conway? Press secretary Sean Spicer? Policy adviser Miller? More important, who's really in charge?

Trump hasn't established lines of authority, and so, amid the confusion and chaos, his advisers must try to work together while watching their backs. Meanwhile, Trump's executive branch remains hollowed out at the top. Many sub-Cabinet positions have not been filled. The confusion and distractions of the early weeks have slowed what in the best of

presidencies is a laborious process of populating the executive branch.

The country is divided over Trump's presidency, but a majority of Americans say they consider him a strong and decisive leader. There are no signs in public opinion or anecdotally that his base is souring on his presidency, a valuable asset amid all the turbulence. Trump nation is standing behind him. The same is true, at least on the surface, for Republican elected officials, although their tolerance for mistakes and turmoil will be limited.

When Trump is challenged, his combative instincts call for him to plow ahead. He can argue that that has served him well, in business and in the campaign. He is likely to remain in perpetual motion. But inevitably he and his senior team will have to absorb the effects of what they have been through in the first weeks of his presidency and take some corrective action — as others before him have been forced to do.



Michael D'Antonio: For a 'winner,' Trump is doing a lot of losing

By Michael D'Antonio

basketball legends. But winning? Not so much.

Updated 10:53 PM ET, Tue February 14, 2017

Source: CNN

Michael Flynn out as national security adviser 02:49

Story highlights

- Michael D'Antonio: Flynn's fall is one of a series of embarrassing snafus that make Trump administration look like amateur hour
- He says Trump is known for prizing "yes men and women" above competence and leaving failure in his wake. Expect to see more of this.

Michael D'Antonio is the author of "Never Enough: Donald Trump and the Pursuit of Success" (St. Martin's Press). The opinions expressed in this commentary are his.

(CNN)Remember when Donald Trump promised to be the Harlem Globetrotters of politics? "We're gonna win at everything we do!" said Trump. "We're gonna win, win, win. You people, you're gonna be sick and tired of winning." Now he's president of the United States, and Trump has indeed given us tricks and deceptions worthy of the

With flourishes meant to create the image of a commander rapidly transforming Washington, Trump has instead notched one failure after another. Consider this list a lowlights reel:

- Top national security aide Michael Flynn, caught in a lie, forced to resign.
- Federal courts block Trump's executive order banning travelers from seven Muslim-majority countries.
- Trump's plan to immediately "repeal and replace" Obamacare is frozen by the reality that he never had actually had a health care plan to substitute.
- Mexico's president, insulted by Trump, cancels his state visit.
- A contentious call with the Prime Minister of Australia (an American ally) concludes when Trump abruptly ends the call.
- A tail-between-the-legs acceptance of America's longstanding "one China" policy, which he'd threatened to upend.
- An embarrassing display in which he discusses a surprise missile launch by North Korea in the public setting of his Mar-a-Lago club.
- Lies about voter fraud and a "massacre" that never happened

have made the administration a laughingstock.

The debacles have been so numerous that Trump's aides, including counselor to the president Kellyanne Conway, press secretary Sean Spicer and senior adviser Stephen Miller, must perform round-the-clock media duties where, deprived of serious facts and policy, they deliver distortions and deceptions.

Paul Ryan: Trump right to ask Flynn to resign 00:56

A stammering Spicer defends Trump's outrageous claims of voter fraud with the statement that the President "believes what he believes." In discussing the travel ban, Conway repeats an old reference to a "massacre" that never happened. Miller offers a dictator's defense of his boss, saying "that the powers of the president to protect our country are very substantial and will not be questioned."

Outrages obscured

Like a building on fire at midnight, the Trump presidency has been such a riveting spectacle that the light and smoke have obscured problems that would have damaged any other new administration. Trump's pick for education secretary, Betsy DeVos, looked like a student who hadn't done her homework as she stumbled through a confirmation hearing, unable to

offer coherent answers about students with disabilities or about testing students for their mastery of a subject or their progress with it.

Trump nominated a labor secretary who employed an undocumented worker in his home and a budget chief who failed to pay taxes due on payments made to a nanny.

Steven Mnuchin, nominated to be secretary of the treasury, apparently misled senators who asked him about the aggressive foreclosure activity at a bank he owned.

It should be noted that Mnuchin, who formerly worked as an investment banker, is just one of many wealthy financiers Trump has brought into his administration. After ranting against Wall Street and excoriating his opponent Hillary Clinton for her connections to the financial industry, Trump has abandoned the populism of his campaign and staffed up with a small army of bankers.

Flynn downfall proves that the normal rules of politics apply -- even to Trump

He has also moved to dismantle the rules put in place to protect the economy -- and consumers -- from the excesses of the financial industry, which were central to the collapse of markets and the Great Recession that was a legacy of the George W. Bush administration. All this from a president who, at his inauguration, complained of an

"establishment (that) protected itself, but not the citizens of our country."

Had any other president abandoned his campaign commitments or nominated such ill-qualified people to serve in the Cabinet, he (or dare I say "she") would have been pilloried in the press for these moves and blocked by Congress. However, Congress is in the hands of Trump's party and thus, remains mostly silent. The press, like the American public, has been so overwhelmed by the Trump frenzy that it has been forced to apply a new standard. Sins that were once regarded as mortal are overlooked because so many bigger outrages require attention.

This is not a surprise

If it seems like it's amateur hour in Washington, that's because it is. Trump's main argument for his candidacy was that he had so little contact with Washington that he represented a

radical change. The lies he delivered on the stump were excused as a salesman's exaggerations, not a sign that he suffered from severe character flaws. And besides, most experts didn't give him a real shot at winning. Like the second-rate comic who warms up the audience before a headliner, Trump was entertaining in a crude and unsophisticated way but he wasn't expected to succeed.

Now we have a crude and unsophisticated president whose management skills, which were always hyped beyond reality, are inadequate to the task of running the country. He tried to substitute attitude for aptitude, confidence for competence, and failed time and again.

Ironically, Trump's record was apparent all along, and should have been enough to disqualify him. A real estate deal-maker and TV celebrity, Trump failed repeatedly at the job of running businesses that

required his focused attention and he displayed no real concern for the damage he did to investors and contractors. In his public statements about prominent business figures, national leaders, his ex-wives and even his daughter, he spoke with no regard for the effect of his words.

"[Trump has] tried to substitute attitude for aptitude, confidence for competence, and failed time and again."

As an entrepreneur who controlled privately held companies, Trump indulged his own impulses in ways that revealed profound character flaws. He protected himself by hiring mainly on the basis of loyalty. As he told me, he wasn't much interested in a man or woman's record of achievement. He was looking, instead, for "talent" and commitment. Other qualifications were secondary. If an executive seemed energetic, aggressive, ambitious, and ruthless in the Trump mold, he or she got the job.

The President's past hiring practices help to explain why he has surrounded himself with so many people with no previous experience in government but an abundance of loyalty and nerve. When he built skyscrapers, he didn't require that his executives know how the buildings were constructed, but he wanted them to be so loyal that if he ordered them to climb to the roof and jump off, they just might do it.

We now have a government filled with Trump hires whose flaws seem consistent with the President's own. Gen. Flynn practiced a classic Trump move when he placed calls to Russian officials during the transition and then offered deflections and deceptions when questioned about it. Yesterday he became the first administration official to jump from the roof and sacrifice his reputation and his career. We should expect to see more bodies flying past the windows.

NATIONAL REVIEW ONLINE

Michelle Malkin : Bumps in the Road: Trump vs. Obama

The resignation of National Security Advisor Michael Flynn has the anti-Trump media declaring the new administration a "mess," in "turmoil," and thrown into "chaos." Funny, these same Chicken Littles barely shrugged their shoulders during the turmoil-laden first 100 days of Barack Obama's first term. Some perspective is in order.

Remember the withdrawal of Obama's pick for National Intelligence Council chairman, Charles Freeman, in March 2009? Obama had tapped the former U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia for the sensitive post despite abundant conflicts of interests. Freeman had served for four years on the board of the China National Offshore Oil Corporation, a company owned by the Chinese Communist government. The state-owned firm has invested in Sudan and Iran. Freeman also led the Middle East Policy Council, a Washington, D.C.-based group funded by the Saudi government. And he chaired Projects International, a consulting firm that had worked with foreign companies and governments.

Obama knew all that and looked the other way at Freeman's role as a de facto lobbyist for Saudi royalty. Even worse, he ignored Freeman's Jew-bashing and tyrant-coddling record with a Blame America axe to grind. Freeman carped that our country exhibited "an ugly mood of chauvinism" after the 9/11 attacks and condemned his fellow countrymen for connecting the dots

of Islam and Saudi-funded jihad: "Before Americans call on others to examine themselves," he fumed with Jeremiah Wright-style bombast, "we should examine ourselves."

In fine form, Freeman inveighed against the "Israel Lobby" in his resignation letter.

The screed said less about Freeman than it did about the Obama administration's AWOL vetting system. Where were the watchdogs to guard against terror-friendly conspiracy-minded kooks slipping into sensitive intelligence positions?

The Freeman withdrawal came after a series of Obama nominee withdrawals that the amnesia-suffering Beltway media has now conveniently forgotten in its haste to declare Trump's transition the worst disaster ever.

By this time in Obama's first term, former Democratic New Mexico governor Bill Richardson had withdrawn as Commerce Secretary nominee after both liberals and conservatives protested his long record of corruption and incompetence. His political horse-trading with private businesses — campaign donations for infrastructure projects, patronage jobs, and board appointments — was so notorious it had earned him the moniker "Dollar Bill."

At the time Obama tapped him to lead the Commerce Department, Richardson was the subject of a

high-profile probe and ongoing grand-jury investigation into whether he traded New Mexico government contracts for campaign contributions. The White House transition team knew about the pay-to-play scandal involving a California company, CDR Financial Products. They knew that the FBI and federal prosecutors had launched a probe of CDR's activities in New Mexico in the summer of 2008. They knew CDR was tied to a doomed bond deal in Alabama, which threatened to cause the biggest municipal bankruptcy in U.S. history. They knew CDR had raked in nearly \$1.5 million in fees from a New Mexico state financial agency after donating more than \$100,000 to Richardson's efforts to register Hispanic and American Indian voters and to pay for expenses at the 2004 Democratic National Convention.

It took 33 days before Team Obama threw Richardson and his ethical baggage off the bus. Richardson's replacement, former GOP senator Judd Gregg, accepted and then quickly withdrew after disagreements over Obama's massive federal stimulus proposal and Democrats' politicization of the Census.

Another Beltway barnacle, former Democratic South Dakota senator Tom Daschle, was also forced to withdraw from his nomination as Obama's Health and Human Services secretary amid a storm of ethical scandal, conflicts of interest,

and tax avoidance. That was compounded by Treasury Secretary Geithner's admission of "tax goofs" involving his failure to pay \$43,000 in federal self-employment taxes for four separate years (until, that is, he was tapped for his Obama post). At least five other Treasury staff picks withdrew before the Obama administration had reached the 100-day mark over tax problems, conflicts of interest, bad judgment, and records of lax oversight of industry.

By the end of his first 100 days, Obama had set a turnover record for an incoming cabinet with four major withdrawals. And by the hallowed 100-day mark, Obama had announced less than half of the total Senate-confirmed Cabinet department positions he needed to fill, with only ten approved — even though the Democrats had an overwhelming majority in the Senate at the time. Yes, there will be significant bumps in the road and some tough lumps to take as President Trump builds his team. But a dishonest media and preening political establishment pretending there's something "unprecedented" about such stumbles only discredit themselves.

— Michelle Malkin is the host of "Michelle Malkin Investigates" on CRTV.com. Her e-mail address is writemalkin@gmail.com. Copyright © 2017 Creators.com



Probes Into Russia to Continue After Michael Flynn's Exit

Eileen Sullivan / AP

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. intelligence agencies and Congress will continue to investigate Russia's involvement in the 2016 presidential election, even after President Donald Trump fired his national security adviser for providing inaccurate accounts of his contacts with the Russian ambassador last year.

Democrats said an independent investigation was the best way to answer questions about the Trump administration's ties to Russia. But Republican leaders continue to refuse to consider that option and said three congressional investigations underway were enough.

Trump's national security adviser, Michael Flynn, was fired late Monday. The White House said he misled Vice President Mike Pence about his contacts with the Russian ambassador.

This isn't the first time Trump has distanced himself from an adviser in light of relationships with Moscow. In late August, Paul Manafort resigned as Trump's campaign chairman after disclosures by The Associated Press about his firm's covert lobbying on behalf of Ukraine's former pro-Russia governing political party. Trump has long held a friendly posture toward the long-time U.S. adversary and has been reluctant to criticize Russian President Vladimir Putin, even for Putin's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region in 2014.

"This isn't simply about a change in policy toward Russia, as the administration would like to portray. It's what's behind that change in policy," said California Rep. Adam Schiff, the top Democrat on the House intelligence committee, one of the congressional bodies investigating.

Under the Obama administration, U.S. intelligence agencies said Russia interfered in the 2016 election with the goal of electing Trump. Trump has acknowledged that Russia hacked Democratic emails but denies it was to help him win.

The New York Times reported late Tuesday that members of Trump's campaign, including Manafort, had repeated contacts with Russian intelligence officials during the year before the election. The U.S. knew about these contacts through phone records and intercepted calls, the Times said.

Reached late Tuesday, Manafort told The Associated Press he has not been interviewed by the FBI about these alleged contacts.

"I have never knowingly spoken to Russian intelligence officers and I have never been involved with anything to do with the Russian government or the Putin administration or any other issues under investigation today," Manafort said.

Officials who spoke with the Times anonymously said they had not yet seen any evidence of the Trump campaign cooperating with the

Russians on hacking or other attempts to influence the election.

The investigations and the unusual firing of the national security adviser just 24 days into his job have put Republicans in the awkward position of investigating the leader of their party. The congressional probes are ultimately in the hands of the Republican committee chairmen, and the executive branch's investigation is now overseen by Trump appointees.

Republican leaders focused on the idea that Flynn misled Pence about the nature of his contacts with the Russian ambassador — not on any questioning of the relationship between Flynn and the ambassador. Democrats said a key issue is whether Flynn broke diplomatic protocol and potentially the law by discussing U.S. sanctions with Moscow before Trump's inauguration. Virginia Sen. Mark Warner, the top Democrat on the Senate intelligence committee, said the committee had not yet seen the transcripts of Flynn's calls.

The Justice Department had warned the White House late last month that Flynn could be at risk for blackmail because of contradictions between his public depictions of the calls with the Russian ambassador and what intelligence officials knew about the conversations.

"You cannot have a national security adviser misleading the vice president and others," said Republican House Speaker Paul Ryan of Wisconsin.

California Rep. Devin Nunes, chairman of the House intelligence committee, said he was concerned Flynn's rights were violated in the interception of his conversations with the Russian ambassador.

"I'm just shocked that nobody's covering the real crime here," Nunes said. "You have an American citizen who had his phone call recorded and then leaked to the media."

The FBI has wide legal authority to eavesdrop on the conversations of foreign intelligence targets, including diplomats, inside the U.S.

Flynn did not concede any wrongdoing in his resignation letter, saying merely that he "inadvertently briefed the vice president elect and others with incomplete information regarding my phone calls with the Russian ambassador."

While North Carolina Sen. Richard Burr, chairman of the Senate intelligence committee, said much of the panel's investigation will occur behind closed doors, Oregon Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden said he planned to push to make the findings and hearings public.

White House spokesman Sean Spicer said Trump did not direct Flynn to discuss U.S. sanctions with the Russians. "No, absolutely not," Spicer said.

Associated Press writers Eric Tucker, Erica Werner, Richard Lardner, Chad Day and Deb Riechmann contributed to this report.



Michael Daly: The Two Words Donald Trump Hates Most: 'You're Fired'

02.15.17 1:15 AM ET

Win McNamee

Yes, Really

He may have been famous for saying it on *The Apprentice*, but the president actually hates to fire people on his team—which may explain why it took so long for Michael Flynn to go.

Reality TV routinely diverged even further from reality when Donald Trump zestfully delivered his iconic line on *The Apprentice*.

"You're fired!"

As he had demonstrated in the building of the iconic tower where *The Apprentice* was shot, Trump has tremendous difficulty firing people in real life, most particularly if he has personally hired them.

"It's admitting he made a bad decision," Barbara Res, who was the top construction engineer on Trump Tower, told The Daily Beast on Monday. "He always said he has the best people. He brags about that. Even when he doesn't have the best people, he says he does. Everybody around him has to be the absolute best, because he's the best. He's better than the best."

Res allows that Trump can be quick to say "You're fired" when angered by people whose services he has retained without embracing them as employees and blessing them with his personal imprimatur.

"He can fire people he gets mad at, lawyers and architects," Res says. "He can just get rid of them."

But that all changes if the person is a member of Team Trump and therefore a reflection of him. Trump

then seems pained even by the prospect of acknowledging that one of his chosen ones has proven lacking.

"He feels bad," Res says. "Which is kind of a human side. And he is very much not a human."

Res describes in her book *All Alone on the 68th Floor* what she terms a "hiring mistake" when Trump employed a building superintendent for his tower.

"He was German, and as with most nationalities, Donald had a sense of the value of Germans and he believed it was in building management because they were very clean and thorough to a fault," Res wrote of the man Trump chose to be super to the stars. "Only this guy was very useless. He knew zero about construction."

Res added, "He had zero personality. He might have been perfect for a building in Brooklyn, but not Trump Tower."

Res and another supervisor gave the man two weeks, but finally went to Trump "to tell him he had to go."

"OK, fire him," Trump said by her recollection.

The other supervisor did the deed.

"Nicely, but firmly," the book reports. "Next thing we know, the guy marches across the street to Donald's office and gets himself rehired. I went nuts. Donald said we didn't really give the guy a chance. It took two more firings for it to stick."

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Res writes: "Maybe Donald can unceremoniously say, 'You're fired,' to actors on a TV show, but in real life, he hated to do it. When someone had to be fired, Donald laid the job off on an underling."

In recent days, a variation on the tale of the German super to the stars has seemed to be playing out on a huge scale with the retired general Trump had chosen to be his national security adviser, Michael Flynn.

On Dec. 29, three weeks before Trump became president, Flynn had a phone chat with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak.

The inauguration was still five days away when Vice President Mike Pence was asked on the Jan. 15 Sunday news shows if Flynn had discussed with the ambassador the sanctions that President Obama had imposed on Russia.

Pence told Fox News, "I talked to General Flynn yesterday, and the conversations that took place at that time were not in any way related to the new U.S. sanctions against Russia or the expulsion of diplomats."

Pence told CBS News, "They did not discuss anything having to do with the United States' decision to expel diplomats or impose censure against Russia."

As you would think someone with Flynn's extensive experience would expect, his conversation with the ambassador had been recorded by U.S. intelligence. Perhaps Flynn did not think that alternate facts were a

big deal. He also may not have anticipated that Pence's denial would prompt acting Attorney General Sally Yates to notify the White House counsel of the discrepancy.

That was on Jan. 26, Trump's sixth day in office. White House press secretary Sean Spicer says the president was informed "immediately."

To be fair, Trump must have become a touch distracted, as he issued his tumultuous travel ban two days later. Yates came to play a prominent role in this controversy as well.

On Jan. 30, Yates determined that the immigration order was unlawful and instructed the Justice Department not to enforce it. She was immediately fired, as quickly as if she had been a New York shyster who provoked The Donald's ire, though he never actually announced, "You're fired!" in person or even on the phone. The deed was done with a hand-delivered letter.

But when it came to somebody as close to him as Flynn, Trump the president seemed not so different from Trump the builder. Flynn was still on the job the night of Feb. 9, when a *Washington Post* report caused Pence to belatedly realize that he had been misled. Pence is said to have been considerably more upset that Flynn lied to him than he has appeared to be on occasions when the Trump administration lied to the entire nation. Pence may have also wondered why Trump had failed to tell him the truth despite having learned it 11 days before.

Last weekend, Flynn flew down to Mar-a-Lago with Trump and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Flynn helped brief Trump on a ballistic missile launch by North Korea, and there were no obvious signs of trouble between the national security adviser and the president.

At 5 p.m. on Monday, White House spokeswoman Kellyanne Conway insisted, "Gen. Flynn does enjoy the full confidence of the president." Spicer was not so sure when he addressed reporters not an hour afterward.

"The president is evaluating the situation," Spicer said.

Then came a development that a New York guy such as Trump should have foreseen when he violated the old rule "keep your friends close, but your enemies closer" by firing Yates—she being a person with whom he had no personal connection and certainly would not be mistaken as a Trumpster. Word of her "heads up" to the White House counsel about Flynn's chat with the Russian ambassador reached *The Washington Post*, which posted the story around 8 p.m. Monday.

By 11 p.m., Flynn was out. His departure may have been further accelerated by word that the Russians had deployed a ground-based cruise missile in contravention of a long-standing arms-control agreement. And reporters at *The New York Times* were hearing that a number of Trump aides had been in contact with Russian intelligence last year during the campaign.

Conway and Spicer managed to contradict each other a second time about a situation where the national security adviser had lied and might even face criminal charges if he had failed to tell the entire truth when the FBI interviewed him.

Conway said Flynn's resignation had been voluntary. She told TV news, "Mike Flynn had decided that it was best to resign. He knew he'd become a lightning rod, and he made that decision... and of course the president accepted that resignation."

Spicer told a different story at the White House press briefing on Tuesday afternoon. Spicer said, "The evolving and eroding level of trust as a result of this situation and a series of other questionable instances is what led the president to ask for General Flynn's resignation."

In other words, Spicer was saying, Trump had fired Flynn. There remained the mystery of why the president had waited 17 days after the White House learned the truth.

"Maybe Donald didn't think he had to fire him," Res told *The Daily Beast*. "Or maybe he thought somebody else could do it for him. That's why it took him so long. He really doesn't like to fire people."

Perhaps Trump learned something about the difference between reality TV and reality, between being a rich kid New York builder and being the president of the United States. Perhaps he will keep learning.

Or not.



Pence remains above the fray, but is he outside the inner circle? (UNE)

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/costar-ports>

Washington Post, according to Marc Lotter, a spokesman for the vice president.

Quayle. "That's what everybody is trying to figure out."

(The Washington Post)

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) told members of the media that the Senate Intelligence Committee will likely include former national security adviser Michael Flynn's contact with Russian officials as part of a probe into Russian interference in the 2016 election, on Feb. 14 at the Capitol. Senate Republicans: Intelligence Committee will investigate Flynn contact with Russia (The Washington Post)

Pence's decision to try to stay out of the cliques that have plagued the White House has allowed him, so far, to maintain his standing as a neutral player committed to forwarding Trump's agenda on Capitol Hill. But it also appears to

have left him at times outside of Trump's brain trust.

Aides to both the president and vice president say the two men speak on the phone or in person multiple times a day. Yet in spite of their frequent communication, the president never told his No. 2 that he was possibly misled by Flynn — and that in defending him on the Sunday shows had put himself in a publicly compromising and embarrassing situation.

"The vice president became aware of incomplete information that he had received on Feb. 9, last Thursday night, based on media accounts," Lotter told reporters Tuesday. "He did an inquiry based on those media accounts."

Several people close to him were more blunt, saying he was "blindsided" and "frustrated."

For nearly two full weeks, nobody told Vice President Pence that he had been misled by national security adviser Michael Flynn.

After privately being assured by Flynn that he had never had any discussions about Russian sanctions with that country's ambassador, Pence went on TV in mid-January and publicly parroted Flynn's denial. But on Jan. 26, President Trump and a small group of senior aides learned that the Justice Department had evidence that Flynn had, in fact, discussed sanctions and misled the vice president.

Yet it would take almost a fortnight for Pence to learn the truth — and only then because of a report in *The*

Throughout the campaign and now in office, Pence has largely managed to avoid the infighting and warring factions of the young White House by keeping his head down and soldiering loyally forward. But the incident with Flynn reveals both the benefits and risks of his approach — he has emerged largely unharmed by the scandal that led to Flynn's resignation, but his influence within the West Wing has come increasingly into question given how little he knew about his own situation.

"Does this episode strengthen Pence or weaken Pence?" asked William Kristol, editor at large of the *Weekly Standard*, a conservative magazine and who served as chief of staff to Vice President Dan

But even as Flynn flailed, Pence did not urge Trump to fire him, or lash out against him. Instead, said two officials familiar with the situation, Pence was disappointed and suggested that Flynn could publicly apologize. Others within the White House, however, thought what Flynn had done was egregious and unacceptable.

"The vice president is a very forgiving man," said one White House official.

Last Friday, Pence, chief of staff Reince Priebus and White House counsel Don McGahn held a conference call with Flynn — who had originally denied any improper communications with the Russian envoy — to go over his story again, according to two officials familiar with the call. Flynn was at Mar-a-Lago, Trump's private club in Palm Beach, Fla., during the call, while the other three men were in Washington.

Pence left the conversation troubled, as did Priebus, who expressed dismay both with Flynn's answers and the dawning reality that Flynn had deceived Pence.

By Monday, Pence was in full agreement with Priebus and others that it would be best for Flynn to go and remained involved in all top-level talks that day.

Asked how the vice president could be kept in the dark about the Flynn controversy for so long, two White House officials said it was a result of the muddled and uncertain way events unfolded rather than an intentional desire to keep him out of the loop.

On Jan. 26, when acting attorney general Sally Yates contacted McGahn about discrepancies of Flynn's account of his conversations with the Russian ambassador to the United States, McGahn took the information directly to Trump in the Oval Office that day. Trump quickly brought in chief strategist Stephen K. Bannon and Priebus to join the discussion with McGahn, said two White House officials, who were not authorized to speak publicly.

McGahn then conferred with Yates again the following day to try to glean more information about what Yates knew and to probe the matter further.

But McGahn, who has been friends with Pence since the vice president was a House member, did not share the information beyond that group because he had already informed the president and his top two advisers, with the expectation that anyone else who needed to know would be informed by those principals.

Several other people within the White House described the situation as "unfortunate" and "unintended," saying that Trump and McGahn did not mean to exclude Pence but were reacting to Yates — whose information was initially viewed with some skepticism — and trying to keep the information about Flynn within a tight group. At that point, Flynn was still maintaining that he had disclosed nothing improper with the Russian ambassador.

Nonetheless, the two-week lag between when Trump, Bannon and Priebus learned of Flynn's misdirection and when Pence himself found out through news

reports has raised speculation as to Pence's true clout — or lack thereof — within the White House.

In 2010, when Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, President Barack Obama's military chief in Afghanistan, made disparaging remarks about some of Obama's senior civilian advisers, including Vice President Joe Biden, Obama's response was swift and decisive. Within 40 hours, he called McChrystal back to Washington and fired him.

Pence is not the type to demand that sort of response. Those who know him said he is thinking ahead, believing that as vice president, he is likely to outlast advisers whose positions may be more tenuous.

"Pence is trying to play a long game, keeping his head down and keeping his powder dry, assuming some of the more flamboyant types will blow up or blow out and he will be there as a trusted counselor a year or so from now," Kristol said. But, he added, "the long game can mislead you. If you end up keeping your powder dry and never using it, you end up being just another guy in the White House."

A Republican who works closely with Hill lawmakers said that Pence has repeatedly gone to the Capitol to assuage fears, only to have his reassuring words upended by a tweet from Trump and upheaval within the West Wing.

The question that legislators are trying to figure out, that Republican said, is if Pence — like most everyone else — is simply a victim to a rash and erratic president, or if

he is deliberately being shut out by senior White House advisers.

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The latest incident with Flynn, he added, further undermines the vice president. "This is hurtful to Pence," he said, speaking anonymously to offer a candid insight. "It's another example of him not being totally in the loop."

Pence, however, is still well-liked by lawmakers, many of whom view him as their most direct line into the White House and their best hope for enacting a conservative, Republican agenda. And they remain hopefully optimistic that he is a pivotal West Wing player.

"I think Pence has a lot of respect by the president and by a lot of us who have known him," said Sen. Richard C. Shelby (R-Ala.). "He's solid, he's measured, and he fits the job beautifully."

Sen. Roy Blunt (R-Mo.) said that Pence's influence within the White House was evident simply from Flynn's downfall. "As it turned out, misleading the vice president doesn't look like it was a very good thing to do."

Jenna Johnson, Abby Phillip and Sean Sullivan contributed to this report.



Ryan faces major test in selling Obamacare repeal and replacement

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House Speaker Paul D. Ryan (R-Wis.) spent Tuesday on a door-to-door tour of the Capitol in hopes of salvaging his plan to repeal and largely replace the Affordable Care Act by spring.

The day-long blitz comes as Republicans in Congress have made virtually no visible progress in recent weeks on overhauling the health-care system, according to interviews with several senior GOP aides.

That is largely because the party remains sharply divided over how much of the ACA should be repealed and how much — if any of it — should be replaced. The stalemate has lawmakers questioning whether the law known as Obamacare can be effectively

gutted by Ryan's self-imposed deadline of the end of March.

"I don't think you can fully repeal and replace it in that amount of time," said Rep. Tom Cole (R-Okla.). "It took months to write Obamacare, the original bill, and years to phase it in. It is going to take time to rewrite it and replace it with something else."

Ryan's efforts are being stymied by a host of factors, including a familiar revolt from his most conservative members, who want to keep their promises to eliminate Obamacare regardless of the pace of a replacement measure. Meanwhile, Senate Republicans are not ready to act on any kind of repeal without a consensus replacement plan. The Washington infighting is playing out against a backdrop of rowdy GOP town halls across the country showcasing people worried about

the impact on their lives of potentially losing their health insurance.

For Ryan, the stakes could not be higher. While trying to satisfy his right flank, the speaker also must consider the potentially explosive impact of the health-care debate on his quest to maintain and grow the GOP majority in the 2018 midterm elections. Further confusing things is President Trump, who has both vowed to repeal and replace the ACA immediately, and said that such a process would take until 2018.

Dozens of GOP members attended an afternoon briefing Tuesday on Medicaid. The issue is one of the biggest sticking points among Republicans, opening divides between lawmakers in states who have accepted the program's expansion under Obamacare and

those who have opted out, forgoing hundreds of millions of federal dollars a year in protest against the law.

Inside the closed-door sessions, senior lawmakers walked through a variety of options for replacement — including a radical reorientation of the Medicaid program, an open-ended insurance entitlement and a fixed "block grant" that would let states decide how to apportion health-care dollars for the needy. They also considered an indefinite extension of the ACA Medicaid expansion that would allow those now covered to remain so.

"They got to see a lot of the details of the plans that we're working on," said House Majority Whip Steve Scalise (R-La.), who hosted the session. He added, "There's a lot of work left to be done."

Republican senators who represent states that expanded Medicaid — including Bill Cassidy (La.), Bob Portman (Ohio) and Lisa Murkowski (Alaska) — huddled last week to discuss concerns that a House GOP repeal bill could leave millions of their constituents without insurance. While no consensus emerged, many lawmakers said they could not support an aggressive repeal bill that could harm so many of their constituents.

"We've added 27,000-some-odd Alaskans to the covered rolls," Murkowski said Tuesday. "I want to make sure whatever we do post-ACA, we don't leave these good folks hanging."

The debate is playing out against a backdrop in which the proportion of Americans without health insurance through most of last year remained at the same low level as in 2015, according to survey data released Tuesday by the National Center for Health Statistics. The data, covering January through September 2016, showed that 8.8 percent of people of all ages were uninsured compared to the 9.1 percent uninsured through 2015, according to the U.S. Census's most recent annual report on health insurance rates.

It is unclear how much of that improvement is the result of an

improving economy and how much was brought about by the ACA's impact. Meanwhile, the insurer Humana announced it would stop selling individual plans under the ACA after this year.

On Capitol Hill, Republicans are locked in a battle for control over the repeal process. Conservatives are seeking to reassert their influence after several weeks where more-moderate lawmakers — and Trump himself — have seemingly argued for a more deliberate process.

Members of the hard-right House Freedom Caucus and conservative Republican Study Committee are insisting that a repeal bill should go at least as far as a measure they approved in 2015. That bill ended with a veto from President Obama, but GOP leaders touted it as a test run for what could be possible with a Republican president.

"What we're trying to do is really create some urgency," said Rep. Mark Walker (R-N.C.), chairman of the Republican Study Committee. "We're okay with talking through that and hearing what they [House leaders] have for us, but ultimately, we've promised to the American people that we're going to get this thing off the books as quick as possible. That's what we're asking the leadership to do."

Leaders are using a quirk in the budget process to repeal Obamacare without the threat of a blockade by Senate Democrats.

Budget legislation is considered under special rules in the Senate that allow a simple majority of 50 senators to support passage rather than the normal 60 needed for almost everything else. While there are 52 Republicans in the Senate, some of them are unlikely to support a rapid repeal without a replacement in place.

Ryan set out Tuesday to rally the GOP to consensus, starting the day by launching several policy sessions to offer rank-and-file members some details of what could be included in the replacement plan. He outlined several common ideas that unite the GOP, such as expanding health savings accounts and allowing insurers to sell plans across state lines. He also announced plans for a Thursday meeting where members will be briefed on further details just before they leave for a week-long recess where many plan to hold events with constituents.

Ryan told reporters after the meeting that the plan for a "step-by-step" process to replace ACA was still on track.

"We have to stop the collapse, and we have better ideas that have been time-tested that will make sure that we give the American people the kind of relief they deserve," Ryan said.

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He then headed to a closed-door lunch in the Senate where he pitched the outlines of his vision for replacement.

But Republicans largely left the meetings unable to identify any specific proposals that go beyond a small number of general ideas. "There was a lack of specificity," Cassidy said after the meeting. "Ideas are bubbling together."

The conversation was not as specific as would be expected at this point in a major policy negotiation, according to several GOP aides. One aide described the talks as remaining in "the very beginning stages."

Carolyn Y. Johnson contributed to this report.

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William Galston : Donald Trump's Medicaid Promise

William A. Galston

Feb. 14, 2017 6:57 p.m. ET

In the midst of the tumult that now grips Washington, it is easy to forget that President Trump has yet to send Congress either a budget or a single piece of legislation. When he does, some longstanding tensions within the Republican coalition are likely to occupy center stage.

Take Medicaid, a core element of both the Affordable Care Act and GOP efforts to rein in federal spending. According to the Department of Health and Human Services, of the roughly 20 million people who have gained health-care coverage since the enactment of ObamaCare, more than half have done so through the expansion in the Medicaid program rather than the individual insurance market.

Last year, congressional Republicans made clear what they would do with the program if they had a cooperative president. Led by Speaker Paul Ryan, the House Republicans' "Better Way" declared that "the status quo of today's Medicaid program is unsustainable." They objected to its open-ended

character, and they criticized the current funding formula, which requires the federal government to pay a larger share of the program's costs in poorer states. They proposed, instead, giving states a choice between a per capita allotment or a block grant.

Led by Rep. Tom Price—who now heads the Department of Health and Human Services—Republicans on the House Budget Committee provided specifics. They would repeal *all* of ObamaCare, including the Medicaid expansion. In place of Medicaid, they proposed "State Flexibility Funds" that would nullify "intrusive federal dictates." Relative to the current budget baseline, the House budget would reduce Medicaid spending by roughly \$1 trillion—around 20%—over the next decade. Because the cuts build over time, the reduction in 2026 would be even greater, about 25%.

It is hard to find anyone who believes that states could manage funding cuts of this magnitude without reducing the numbers of beneficiaries, the scope of benefits, or both. This would make many people unhappy, including—apparently—the president.

During a 2015 interview with the Heritage Foundation's Daily Signal, the soon-to-declare candidate offered some blunt and bracing remarks on the topic of entitlements. "I'm not going to cut Social Security like every other Republican and I'm not going to cut Medicare or Medicaid," he declared. Although White House counselor Kellyanne Conway said shortly after Mr. Trump's inauguration that his health plan would include Medicaid block grants, he has not said so publicly. The president's recent statement that a full plan could be delayed until the end of the year suggests that the matter remains unsettled.

Mr. Trump has good reason to proceed cautiously. Of the 30 states he carried last November, 13 have accepted the ObamaCare option of expanding their Medicaid programs. Of these 13 states, nine have Republican governors, and 12 have legislatures controlled by Republicans. And all of them have benefited from participating.

Over the past four years, the three states with the largest reductions in their uninsured populations have been Kentucky, Arkansas and West Virginia, each of which expanded

Medicaid. They gave Mr. Trump margins of victory between 27 and 42 points. The 13 Trump states that chose to participate reduced their uninsured rates by 50%, compared with only 28% for the 17 states that opted out.

The people who have gotten medical coverage under Medicaid, many of whom never before had access to health care, include large numbers of working-class Trump supporters. Many of them do not know that the Obama-era Medicaid expansion is what made this possible. They will certainly find out if the plug is pulled.

Elected officials from these states already know. West Virginia's Republican senator, Shelley Moore Capito, recently remarked that "there's talk of just totally excluding . . . Medicaid expansion [from the Republican replacement for ObamaCare]. That's 184,000 people in my state." She added, laconically, "That's problematic." It sure is.

Mr. Trump is not Paul Ryan. He did not campaign on a platform of balancing the budget by slashing entitlements. If he had, he would not be president today. The people he

mobilized into the electorate benefit disproportionately from the programs conservatives regard as the principal obstacles to their vision of limited government. They know it,

and so does Mr. Trump.

Ultimately, the success of the Trump administration's legislative program depends on the president's

ability to bend conservatives to his will, and so does the political viability of the expanded coalition he created.

**The
Washington
Post**

Dana Milbank : Trump's toxicity has Republicans running away from their constituents

<https://www.facebook.com/danamilbank>

Republican Rep. Peter Roskam of Illinois has a safe seat in Congress. So what's he running from?

First, supporters of the Affordable Care Act showed up at his office for a previously scheduled meeting with his staff. But the 16 of them were turned away when Roskam staffers discovered they were accompanied by a reporter, the Chicago Tribune reported.

Next, Roskam went to the Palatine Township Republican Organization's monthly meeting, billed as open to all. But organizers shut out the general public because of intense interest. With hundreds of protesters massed outside, Roskam left through a back door. Some people chased on foot after his fleeing car.

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Then, Roskam announced he would hold a "telephone town hall meeting" instead of the real thing. "I have no plans to have one of these big, sort of circus meetings," he said, informing WGN's Rick Pearson that he's always thought "those larger meetings are just not productive."

They certainly aren't productive for Roskam and his fellow Republicans — not now, anyway. An early backlash against the Trump presidency has led to many verbal confrontations between Republican lawmakers and the citizenry. President Trump's face plant since

the inauguration — most recently the resignation of national security adviser Michael Flynn over dealings with Russia — is only making matters worse.

(Jenny Starrs/The Washington Post)

Rep. Jason Chaffetz (R-Utah) got a frosty reception in his home state on Feb. 9, at a town hall. Angry constituents packed a high school auditorium, grilled the high-ranking congressman with questions and peppered him with boos and chants while protesters amassed outside. Angry constituents packed an auditorium, grilled the congressman with questions and peppered him with boos and chants while protesters amassed outside. (Jenny Starrs/The Washington Post)

As recent town-hall meetings of GOP Reps. Jason Chaffetz (Utah), Tom McClintock (Calif.), Gus Bilirakis (Fla.), Diane Black (Tenn.) and others turn into well-publicized tongue lashings, their colleagues are ducking and running.

Rep. Lee Zeldin (R-N.Y.) canceled a constituent event in Southampton Village scheduled for April; his office told the Southampton Press they feared he would be harassed again by those who rallied at his recent appearance at a Rotary Club.

Rep. Mike Coffman (R-Colo.) was caught on video slipping out of his own community event last month before its scheduled ending time. Coffman's office told KUSA that the congressman had planned to have a series of one-on-one meetings, not a town-hall event. The result: Scores were still waiting for Coffman in the lobby when he left via an unmarked exit.

In California, McClintock left his town-hall meeting with a police escort. "It's the first time I've ever had a police department have to extract me from a town hall, and I've done well over 100 of them," he told the Los Angeles Times.

The scene is reminiscent of the tea party summer of 2009, but the energy is on the other side this time. Now, as then, the victims say the perpetrators are outsiders — Chaffetz said those who protested him included "paid" people from out of state, an echo of Nancy Pelosi's claim of "astroturfing" — but now, as then, the anger is real.

Trump has become increasingly toxic, with Flynn's resignation and other Russia revelations, the travel ban struck down in court, chaos involving Obamacare, attacks on the federal judiciary and a series of bizarre pronouncements on everything from Ivanka Trump's fashion line to Frederick Douglass. The Post's Sean Sullivan and Ed O'Keefe found Republican members of Congress increasingly wary of defending Trump. "You can't make it up," Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) said after Trump was seen in Facebook photos making sensitive national security decisions in his Mar-a-Lago Club's main dining area.

Trump canceled an event in Milwaukee because his would-be host, Harley-Davidson, feared protests. The White House just canceled a visit to Ohio that had been scheduled for Thursday; no reason was given, but protests had been planned.

Even congressional aides have felt demonstrators' wrath. Staffers for Sens. Johnny Isakson and David

Perdue and Rep. Jody Hice, all Georgia Republicans, were met by hundreds of protesters last week in Greensboro, Ga., for what was supposed to be a "mobile office hours" event to help constituents with bureaucratic matters.

In Florida, after one of Bilirakis's "listening session" went badly, the local GOP tried to fight back, urging party faithful to attend the next session. Some did — but they were still overwhelmed by protesters.

And so others are retreating. A Feb. 21 "town hall" scheduled with Rep. Marsha Blackburn (R-Tenn.) at the Fairview City Hall was removed from the host's website. Fairview's mayor told CNN the session would instead be a "low-key" gathering.

Rep. Chris Collins (R-N.Y.), in response to a question from WGRZ television, declared that he wouldn't have a town-hall meeting, because of "demonstrators who come and shout you down and heckle you."

Then there's Rep. Pat Tiberi (R-Ohio), whose office this week edited his Wikipedia entry to remove a recently added line claiming Tiberi "has steadfastly refused to hold a townhall meeting to discuss healthcare reform with his constituents."

His office, confirming its role in the Wikipedia editing, said Tiberi is instead offering to meet with the protesters in small groups — and in private.

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**THE WALL
STREET
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Virginia Judge's Immigration Ruling Increases Pressure on White House

Aruna Viswanatha and Brent Kendall

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A Virginia judge's sharply worded ruling against President Donald Trump's executive order on immigration this week, which focused on the question of religious discrimination, is increasing pressure on the White House as it

seeks to rewrite the order or find another legal path forward.

In a 22-page ruling late Monday, U.S. District Judge Leonie Brinkema said Mr. Trump's executive order likely violated constitutional protections against religious discrimination, and she barred enforcement of part of the order in Virginia while the case continues.

The White House has said it is working toward rewriting the executive order to make it more legally palatable, and the Virginia decision adds another layer of complexity to the effort. That decision follows one last week from the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco, which said Mr. Trump's temporary travel ban on people arriving from seven

Muslim-majority countries should remain on hold nationwide.

The White House has said the ban is necessary to thwart terrorist attacks. The Justice Department declined to comment on whether it would appeal the Virginia judge's ruling.

The Ninth Circuit ruling, however, followed different reasoning than the Virginia judge, saying the White

House order appeared to violate constitutional due process protections.

That leaves the administration with at least two major legal challenges to address in any new order, as well as uncertainty as to whether the more than 20 existing court cases against the ban will stand if a new order is issued.

The White House faces political pressure to move quickly on a new order to show it is on the offensive after the court defeats. That could conflict with a typical legal strategy, which counsels a slower, more deliberate approach.

The Ninth Circuit's focus on due process gave the Trump administration a road map to write a narrower order that might withstand legal scrutiny. It could perhaps take aim at restricting the travel of individuals who previously haven't been cleared to enter the U.S., as opposed to green card holders and those who already have received visas for work, travel or education.

"The further they get from people who have applied to or been granted admission to the country, the easier it gets" for the government to argue that the order is constitutional, said Timothy Heaphy, a former U.S. Attorney in Virginia who represented a visa-holder initially affected by the travel ban.

The Virginia ruling potentially presents a thornier problem, because Judge Brinkema found that

the executive order improperly targeted Muslims without any evidence of a national security threat that might justify a travel ban.

The executive order also suspended the U.S. refugee program for four months and indefinitely blocked entry by Syrian refugees. Those sections of the order were covered by the Ninth Circuit ruling, but not by Judge Brinkema's decision.

None of the court rulings so far have considered the underlying legality of the executive order, but have weighed whether it should be suspended while the arguments on its fundamental legality make their way through the courts. In suspending the order, the judges have found that the underlying legal challenges are likely to succeed.

The Trump administration vigorously denies that the order was a Muslim ban and argued that the president has a clear right to make decisions regarding national security and immigration that shouldn't be second-guessed by the court.

Judge Brinkema, in questioning those denials, cited previous statements from Mr. Trump and his aides about seeking to bar Muslims from entering the U.S., linking those statements to the executive order.

"The specific sequence of events leading to the adoption" of the executive order supports the claim that the order "was not motivated by

rational national security concerns," she wrote.

Mr. Heaphy said Judge Brinkema's ruling could make it more difficult for the administration to issue a new order "because she found as fact (that) the president wants to ban Muslims." That issue is likely to be hotly litigated even if a new and narrower executive order is put in place, he said.

Vikram Amar, dean of the University of Illinois College of Law, said Judge Brinkema's ruling raises important legal questions that are likely to get a further look by the courts, such as how much judges should be able to look beyond the text of an executive order to outside evidence that could shed light on the president's intent.

Mr. Amar said there also is a question about whether courts should be examining comments Mr. Trump made before he won the White House, "particularly in such informal venues such as Twitter or in campaign statements." It's not clear that a majority on the Supreme Court "would want judges going down that road," he said.

The trajectory of the current court cases on the travel ban will depend heavily on what any new Trump administration order says, and whether the White House wants to continue its defense of the existing executive order.

If Mr. Trump simply modifies the current order without withdrawing it, "then the current cases stay alive,"

with judges taking into account the changes to the order, said Boston College law professor Kari Hong.

If the White House fully withdraws the Jan. 27 order, however, the batch of cases pending could become moot, with any challenges starting anew against the rewritten directive.

If the government seeks a stay of Judge Brinkema's injunction, that request would go to the Fourth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Richmond, meaning another federal appeals court would weigh in on the order.

So far, the Ninth Circuit in San Francisco is the only appeals court to consider a travel-ban case. The federal appeals courts are one step below the U.S. Supreme Court and are the final word on many legal matters, as the high court only accepts about 70 cases a year.

The likelihood of near-term Supreme Court action in this case may be even slimmer, because the court has had eight members since the death of Justice Antonin Scalia. If the justices divide 4-4, the appeals court decisions would stand, which could create confusion if those decisions are in conflict.

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Yellen says March rate hike is on the table, effects from Trump policies remain unclear

<https://www.facebook.com/anaclaireswanson>

Federal Reserve Chair Janet L. Yellen declined to say whether the central bank would raise interest rates at its meeting in March in testimony before Congress on Tuesday, although she also said it would be "unwise" to wait too long to hike rates.

In her semiannual report to the Senate Banking Committee, Yellen indicated that the Fed would be carefully watching to see whether inflation accelerates in the months to come, as well as how the planned tax cuts, infrastructure spending and other measures promised by the Trump administration would affect American workers and the economy.

"We don't want to base current policy on speculation about what may come down the line. We will wait to gain greater clarity on policy changes," Yellen said, describing the administration's policy actions as "one of many factors" that could affect the central bank's decisions on when to raise interest rates.

Yellen said that the U.S. labor market continues to strengthen, but she urged the government to focus on improving the long-run productivity of the economy. She also broadly defended the Dodd-Frank financial reforms passed in the wake of the financial crisis, which have been under fire from the Trump administration, as making the banking system safer for households and businesses.

[Congress could limit the Fed's independence — and hurt the U.S. economy]

Markets expect the Fed to increase interest rates two or three times this year, as strengthening economic growth translates into rising wages and prices. As of midday Tuesday, futures markets put the chance of a rate hike in March at about 18 percent, with more investors confident of a rate increase in May or June.

In her testimony, Yellen said that the economy had added nearly 16 million jobs since employment hit a trough in early 2010, and that the unemployment rate had fallen by more than half from its peak in 2010 to January. Business sentiment has continued to improve in recent months while inflation has risen, as the effects of earlier declines in

energy and import prices have diminished, Yellen said.

Yet economic growth has remained somewhat lethargic, with the gross domestic product expanding just 1.6 percent last year, the slowest growth since 2011.

On Tuesday, Yellen called the growth rate "disappointing." She blamed the sluggishness on the country's aging labor force, as well as slower gains in the productive capacity of the economy.

[Fed leaves interest rate unchanged amid uncertainty over Trump policies]

In its meeting this month, the Federal Reserve choose to leave its key interest rate unchanged, although it suggested that the environment for rate increases is improving and measures of consumer and business sentiment

continue to strengthen. In December the Fed raised interest rates for the second time in nearly a decade, to a range of between 0.5 percent and 0.75 percent.

The committee probed Yellen on when the central bank would begin paring down its \$4.5 trillion balance sheet of mortgage-backed and Treasury securities, which it acquired in an effort to ease lending and stimulate the economy after the financial crisis. Some critics think that the Fed's massive balance sheet is distorting market interest rates and have urged the central bank to move more quickly to unwind it.

Yellen emphasized that the central bank wants to be well on its way into the process of raising interest rates before it allows these assets to gradually mature and run off the balance sheet. That way, the Federal Reserve could have the scope to cut interest rates if attempts to reduce its balance sheet were to disrupt economic growth.

[It's gonna continue big league: Strong jobs report spurs stocks, has Trump claiming credit]

"We want to wait to start this process until the process of normalization is well underway," Yellen said.

Expectations for more spending and tax cuts under the Trump administration have driven up stock markets in recent weeks. U.S. stock indexes opened slightly lower Tuesday morning before climbing to record highs.

Yet Yellen suggested the Federal Reserve does not unanimously agree that the new administration's policies will boost growth or inflation in coming months. In previous comments, Yellen indicated that about half of the committee that decides interest rates had taken the effect of fiscal measures on the economy into account in their interest rate projections.

Senators questioned Yellen about a wide range of economic issues,

including wage increases, racial wealth inequality, immigration, climate change and capital requirements for community banks, as well as the lack of diversity among the officials at the Federal Reserve.

In her testimony, Yellen also appeared to counter recent claims by President Trump that Dodd-Frank regulations are preventing banks from lending to businesses. She cited a survey by the National Federation of Independent Businesses, which indicated that only 4 percent of respondents said they were unable to get all the loans they needed.

[Trump's claim that friends 'can't borrow money' because of Dodd-Frank]

"U.S. banks are generally considered quite strong relative to their counterparts," Yellen said, when asked about the ability of U.S. banks to compete globally. At a separate point in the testimony, she acknowledged that regulations were holding back some institutions, such as community banks.

On Feb. 3, Trump signed an executive order asking the Treasury Department to carry out a review of all financial regulations, to judge whether regulations are acting to support certain "core principles." The act was widely seen as an effort to repeal the curbs put in place after the financial crisis by the Dodd-Frank Act.

In her comments, Yellen said she agreed with the core principles and looked forward to working with the new treasury secretary to uphold them.

Trump will have the opportunity to significantly shape the actions of the central bank in years to come by appointing three new governors to the Board of Governors, the body that helps to set interest rate policy.

On Friday, Federal Reserve Governor Daniel Tarullo, who served as the point person for financial regulation under President

Barack Obama, announced that he would step down from his post nearly five years before the end of his term. Yellen's term is set to expire Feb. 3, 2018. On Tuesday, she reiterated that she intended to serve out her full term as chair.

During his campaign and after his election, Trump accused Yellen of keeping interest rates low to politically benefit the Obama administration. In September, he told CNBC that Yellen should be "ashamed" of herself.

[Fed's Tarullo to step down nearly 5 years early, strengthening Trump's hand to shape bank policy]

Yellen and other Fed bankers have fervently denied the accusations. "I can say emphatically," she said during a September news conference, "that partisan politics plays no role in our decisions about the appropriate stance of monetary policy."

"There could be a lot of turnover on the Fed in the next couple of years, but I would say that the Trump administration needs to think really carefully about the people they put up as nominees," said Stephen Oliner, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. "They need to be people who the market finds credible and respected. Because nothing will be worse for his plans for the economy if the financial markets don't trust the Fed."

Others in Congress have called for abolishing or reining in the power of the central bank, notably with the campaign to "Audit the Fed." Critics say such actions could compromise the central bank's independence from the political process.

At the end of last month, Rep. Patrick T. McHenry (R-N.C.), the vice chairman of the House Financial Services Committee, sent a scathing letter to Yellen criticizing the Federal Reserve for "negotiating international regulatory standards for financial institutions among global bureaucrats in foreign lands without transparency,

accountability, or the authority to do so. This is unacceptable."

[President Trump probably isn't going to like what the Fed will do next]

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"[T]he Federal Reserve must cease all attempts to negotiate binding standards burdening American business until President Trump has had an opportunity to nominate and appoint officials that prioritize America's best interests," the letter said.

Stephen G. Cecchetti, a professor at Brandeis International Business School and a former adviser at the Bank for International Settlements in Basel, Switzerland, criticized the letter in a blog post, saying that U.S. regulators have played a major role in shaping international financial regulations in past decades, to the benefit of American consumers and businesses. U.S. regulators are not required to implement international standards, but rather choose to do so because they think they are appropriate, he said.

"It would isolate the U.S. financial system," said Cecchetti. "The nature of New York as a financial center would be put at risk."

Other proposals by Congress have suggested tying the Fed's monetary policy decisions to a mathematical formula. On Tuesday, Yellen said that one suggested formula, called the Taylor rule, would stipulate an interest rate of between 3.5 and 4 percent, far higher than the Fed's current interest rates, and that choice would substantially slow the economy.

"I believe we would have a much weaker economy if ... we had followed the dictates of that rule," she said.



Editorial : How the new treasury secretary can prove he's serious about the job

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THE TREASURY DEPARTMENT has a new secretary, now that the Senate, voting along partisan lines, has confirmed Steve Mnuchin, albeit 18 days later than it voted yes on Timothy F. Geithner in 2009 — the last time a first-term president's choice was under consideration. Mr. Mnuchin's relatively tardy installation reflects Democratic

resistance to all of President Trump's choices, but in this case that resistance cannot be dismissed as pure partisanship. There were genuine concerns surrounding Mr. Mnuchin's nomination, including his lack of public-sector experience and his belated disclosure to senators of some \$100 million in personal wealth. Democrats were not wrong to ask whether Treasury is the best fit for a career financier who made a fortune engineering a controversial

federally backed bailout of the failed IndyMac bank during the height of the foreclosure crisis.

To be sure, Mr. Mnuchin's testimony at his confirmation hearing revealed him to be not only an expert on finance, but also well-versed in the federal policy issues, especially those involving housing, over which he will share responsibility. His challenge nevertheless will be to show that he

can put that expertise and knowledge to work on behalf of the not-so-rich Americans whose interests Mr. Trump promised to protect. With respect to tax reform, likely a major focus of Mr. Mnuchin's tenure, we're skeptical. After the election, he said any tax reductions for the rich would be offset by "less deductions," while there would "be a big tax cut for the middle class." At his hearing, Mr. Mnuchin added that tax reform

won't add to the deficit. How all of those conditions are to be fulfilled simultaneously in practice, he has never said. That's a problem, especially because the tax plan Mr. Trump laid out during the campaign bestowed huge cuts on the wealthy and corporate America, charged to the national credit card.

We're somewhat more hopeful that Mr. Mnuchin might be able to work with Congress on a permanent fix to the housing finance system, still dominated by the unsustainably

semi-nationalized giants Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. The good news is that both houses of Congress and the Treasury Department under Mr. Geithner thoroughly reviewed the plausible options for a new system that — unlike the old one — does not encourage excessive private-sector risk-taking, with taxpayers on the hook for losses. There is thus no need for Mr. Mnuchin to reinvent the wheel; rather, what's called for is the orchestration of consensus on

the Hill, and between the executive and legislative branches, possibly along the same bipartisan lines that almost produced a bill in 2014.

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Undoubtedly, the political environment is even more toxic now, but if there's any issue on

which the parties should be able to put their differences aside, rebooting this vital sector — there's real estate in every congressional district! — would seem to be it. Being a part of the solution would be a worthy top priority for the Mnuchin Treasury Department. Indeed, we can't think of a better way for the new secretary to prove he's serious about putting his financial smarts to work in the public interest.



Dodd-Frank Repeal Also Targets Corruption-Fighting Measure

Shelley Goldberg

President Donald Trump is taking aim at federal rules and regulations that he and his Republican allies claim place undue burdens on business. One of his first acts will be to sign an order to unravel the 2010 Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act. This sweeping law, enacted during the Barack Obama administration, created a consumer protection agency and reined in risky aspects of derivatives and mortgage lending in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis.

In June 2016 the Securities and Exchange Commission finalized an additional bipartisan provision, "Disclosure of Payments by Resource Extraction Issuers," which required U.S.-traded companies to disclose payments at or above \$100,000 made to foreign governments for rights to commercial development of oil, natural gas or minerals. The regulation, requiring compliance by 2018, was approved along with measures for tougher standards for coal mining.

Payments include taxes, royalties, dividends, fees, licenses, infrastructure improvements, and community and social responsibility outlays, on a per-project basis. Oil companies have used many of these payments to distribute bribes to resource-rich, corruption-prone foreign nations and their oligarchs from Africa to Latin America.

At the heart of the debate is transparency. The order to repeal the act, introduced by a Michigan Republican, Representative Bill

Huizenga, is being spearheaded in the Senate by Jim Inhofe an Oklahoma Republican.

The order to repeal falls under the Congressional Review Act, which allows Congress to review and revoke rules issued by the executive branch within 60 legislative days of their finalization. Such measures pass with a majority vote in the Senate rather than the typical 60 needed to overcome a filibuster. A "substantially similar" rule cannot be issued unless Congress passes new legislation.

CRA was enacted in 1996, though it has been used successfully just once since then, in 2001. The House, Senate and White House are rarely controlled by the same party, a situation that offers the most favorable conditions for reaching agreement to kill a previous administration's rules.

Rolling back Dodd-Frank is a mistake on many levels. First, the rule deters bribery and curbs corruption, poverty and instability, by making companies disclose payments to foreign governments. With greater transparency, citizens of these resource-rich and often impoverished countries will be able to track foreign payments and better ensure that funds are reinvested in public works and infrastructure as opposed to being hidden in offshore accounts or siphoned by government officials. The lack of disclosure serves to impede economic development and upsets political stability in regions that are already fragile.

Second, the law is good for shareholders, as it provides clarity

and insight into a company's operations and business practices. After all, the SEC requires all public companies to share material information with shareholders, defined as data that could influence investors' decisions to buy or sell a stock.

Energy companies argue that having to disclose "commercially sensitive" information gives their non-U.S. competitors an unfair advantage. Yet similar rules have been instated elsewhere. Due in part to American leadership, reporting is already underway in the U.K., France, Norway and Canada, resulting in billions of dollars of payments to governments in over 100 countries. As George Soros pointed out, "the commission will be setting the rules for much of the world."

The rule affects all traded publicly companies in the U.S., not just U.S.-based companies, meaning Exxon Mobil Corp. and Chevron Corp. would have to report, as would China's CNOOC and Brazil's Petrobras.

The argument that the law gives private companies an unfair advantage ignores the fact that going public provides significant access to the capital markets in return for complying with a set of rules and standards -- the backbone of our financial system.

As money pours into sustainable funds, indexes and ETFs, businesses that do not disclose their source of income will not make institutional investors' list of companies that eventually become positions in their portfolios.

The resolution is tied in with members of the Trump administration. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, as the former chief executive officer of Exxon Mobil, lobbied against the provision, and now faces questions over his ties to Russia.

The repeal order directs the Treasury secretary to submit recommendations within 120 days for changes to the regulations, and will likely reach Trump's desk by early spring. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, who was confirmed this week, said his priority on the regulations was to roll back parts of Dodd-Frank. Mnuchin, a longtime Goldman Sachs banker, said his private-sector experience showed him the law's flaws.

Even if Trump cannot unravel all of Dodd-Frank, he can chip away at it. If he succeeds, U.S. energy stocks should initially rally, but those gains will be short lived, as frustrated analysts, investors and particularly portfolio managers with a sustainability focus, turn elsewhere or go short.

This column does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the editorial board or Bloomberg LP and its owners.

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It's Boom Time Again for America's Largest Banks (UNE)

Liz Hoffman and Christina Rexrode

Shares in America's banks are booming again, with Goldman Sachs Group Inc., J.P. Morgan Chase & Co. and Bank of America Corp. hitting fresh trading milestones Tuesday that seemed

unreachable during the crucible of the financial crisis.

Investor expectations of higher interest rates, lower taxes, lighter regulation and faster economic growth under the Trump

administration have added \$280 billion in combined market value to the nation's six largest banks since Nov. 8.

On Tuesday, shares of Goldman hit a record high, passing a bar first set

Feb. 14, 2017 6:58 p.m. ET

in 2007 before the financial crisis. J.P. Morgan also hit an all-time closing high.

Meanwhile, Bank of America traded in line with its net worth—or the difference between its assets and liabilities—for the first time since late 2008. The bank had been trading as low as 15% of this level in March 2009.

Bank stocks overall have outperformed broader stock markets since the election. The roughly 27% gain since Nov. 8 for the KBW Nasdaq Bank Index is around three times that of the S&P 500. Markets rose further Tuesday; the Dow Jones Industrial Average climbed 92.25 points, or 0.45%, to close at 20504.41.

One reason for such investor optimism: After years of hacking away at expenses—shedding businesses, cutting staff and investing in technology that can be ramped up and down cheaply—expenses are near all-time lows across Wall Street. That means that if revenue does grow as many investors expect, the payoff could be especially big.

Essentially, all the belt-tightening at banks means each extra dollar of revenue should be more profitable than the last. “They’ve come out of this thing lean and mean,” said Ed Wachenheim of Greenhaven Associates, a \$6 billion investment firm that counts Goldman, Citigroup Inc. and J.P. Morgan as its three biggest holdings. Once revenue starts increasing, “there’s a ton of upside,” he said.

Hopes for such positive “operating leverage”—when revenue grows at a faster pace than expenses—were in evidence during the bank-earnings season that wrapped up last month. The phrase was mentioned 11 times on Bank of America’s call with analysts, nine times on Goldman’s and six times on Citigroup’s.

Indeed, expenses at the six biggest U.S. banks in 2016 are down 13% from 2013, while revenue is roughly flat. Savings are coming from all corners of the financial firms.

Last year, the six biggest U.S. banks booked a combined 23 cents of every dollar of revenue as profit, up from 15 cents five years ago.

Employees at Morgan Stanley are taking a nickel less out of each revenue dollar than they did in 2010. Bank of America cut the equivalent of 15 Empire State Buildings from its real-estate footprint over five years. J.P. Morgan stopped paying for employees’ BlackBerrys.

At Goldman, noncompensation expenses are their lowest since 2007. “This represented a lot of work,” Goldman Chief Executive Lloyd Blankfein said at an industry conference last week. “We’ve taken a lot of costs out—not to hunker down, but to give ourselves a lot of operating leverage, frankly.”

Investors hope profits will gain even further if revenue growth materializes. Bank of America shares, for instance, are up more than 41% since the election, the most of any big, U.S. bank.

That is partly a function of its focus on U.S. consumers and its large pool of rate-sensitive mortgage securities. These tie its fortunes more closely to potential increases in U.S. interest rates than many peers.

The share-price gains led Bank of America’s stock to trade at book value, or the firm’s intrinsic worth, for the first time since October 2008. The shares were valued below this level as the bank was sucked into the financial crisis and then as it struggled with legal fines, credit losses and lackluster returns since then.

Despite the stock’s higher valuation, the share price is still less than half of its precrisis peak of \$54.90. And the bank’s return on equity, a closely watched measure of profitability, is still below the 10% level investors typically demand.

Citigroup is now the only one of the big, U.S. banks to trade at a discount to book value, at about 81% of this level, according to FactSet data. Even so, it, too, hit a milestone Tuesday: Stock options granted to executives in 2011 expired on Tuesday “in the money,” that is, exercisable at a gain, the first time that has happened since August 2007.

Goldman shares, meanwhile, closed at an all-time high of \$249.46, beating by more than a dollar a share the previous record set on Halloween 2007. Shares are up 37% since the election.

Its fuel is different than Bank of America’s. Goldman, with few

consumer-facing businesses and a smaller portfolio of loans, won’t get the same boost from higher interest rates.

Rather, investors are betting on Goldman’s once-mighty trading desk, which has been hurt by postcrisis regulations and quieter markets. Volatility has returned, helped by diverging interest rates around the world, swings in stock-market sectors and the occasional presidential tweet.

President Donald Trump has promised to trim trading regulations that ban some lucrative trading activities and require banks to hold extra capital. A Goldman alumnus, Gary Cohn, is the face of the administration’s deregulation push.

But higher revenue at Goldman and its rivals still depends on factors that have yet to emerge. Mr. Trump has said he supports tax cuts and a rollback of the 2010 Dodd-Frank financial law but has offered few details. And most major changes require action in Congress, where Democrats may prove an obstacle.

“There’s a lot of stuff the administration has talked about doing, but there’s still many things they have to do,” said Jason Goldberg, an analyst at Barclays PLC.

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Democrats bracing for town hall protests directed at them ask Bernie Sanders for help

<https://www.facebook.com/daveweigel?fref=ts>

Senior Democratic lawmakers on Tuesday sought to stave off town hall protests from their own party, asking Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) to reach out and urge activists to redirect their anger at Republicans instead of at moderate Democratic lawmakers.

The request came in a weekly meeting of top Democratic senators, according to a senator in attendance, ahead of a congressional recess next week when lawmakers in both parties are expected to face large crowds stirred in recent weeks by President Trump’s early executive actions and ongoing Republican attempts to revamp the Affordable Care Act.

Over the past two weeks, crowds — and conflict-hungry media crews — have swarmed town halls and

protested at congressional offices. Republicans have gotten the brunt of it, with several members escorted by police through lines of shouting protesters, and some caught scrapping or rescheduling public events or leaving out back doors to dodge angry activists.

But protesters have also gathered in blue states, marching to Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer’s home in Brooklyn to demand the obstruction of Trump nominees, and showing up at the offices of safe-seat Democrats to demand that they filibuster Trump’s Supreme Court nominee, Neil Gorsuch.

Such episodes spurred Democrats to ask Sanders for help, according to Sen. Joe Manchin III (D-W.Va.), who attended the meeting on Tuesday.

“They basically explained to Bernie, it looks like you could be the person that could calm down and make sure their energy and all this enthusiasm is directed in all the right proper channels,” Manchin said. “Bernie has a voice, and if [protesters] want to be active, then direct them to where the problem may be or where they anticipate a problem.”

[Democrats’ gift and challenge: A restive, active and angry base]

The intraparty drama puts top party leaders like Schumer (D-N.Y.) in a tricky political position. He can either fully embrace the far left and its rejuvenated activism — and risk alienating moderate lawmakers and voters — or push back too hard against the new activity and anger the party’s base of support.

The request to Sanders came during a meeting with Schumer and

a leadership team that stretches the ideological spectrum of his caucus. In addition to Sanders, a self-described socialist, and the moderate Manchin, the group included Sens. Richard J. Durbin (D-Ill.), Patty Murray (D-Wash.), Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.), Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) and Mark R. Warner (D-Va.), among others.

Manchin is among the most imperiled Democrats facing reelection next year — one of five senators from states that Trump won in last year’s presidential election. In total, 25 Democrats face reelection in 2018.

Manchin insisted on Tuesday that the Democratic caucus is “unified in not wanting to repeal the Affordable Care Act. It’s unified! So why would [protesters] spend any energy on any member who’s already committed to that? They might not

like those of us who come from other parts of the country that doesn't adhere to everything they say or want done, but on the big items, put your energy somewhere else. Bernie can deliver that message better than anybody else."

In a statement, Sanders made no mention of the Democrats' request and did not deny that it happened, but he also said that he would keep lobbying for a measure that would make it easier to reimport cheaper prescription drugs from Canada — an issue that has divided Democrats. Last month, when 12 members of the Senate Democratic caucus broke with Sanders, they took a larger-than-expected amount of friendly fire from progressive activists.

"The good news is that during the budget debate, 34 Democrats voted with 12 Republicans to substantially lower the cost of prescription drugs through reimportation," said Sanders. "During the last several weeks, my office has been working hard with those Democrats who voted against this amendment to write a strong bill that they could support. We also will be working with Republicans who voted against the amendment."

For the most part, Sanders has been working on projects to unite Democrats and progressives against Trump. Over the weekend, Sanders and Schumer announced a series of rallies against repeal of the Affordable Care Act, to be held on Feb. 25. Sanders's highest-profile speech during the coming recess will be in Kansas, which progressives have characterized as a model of Republican misrule.

And Our Revolution, the group founded by Sanders in the wake of

his 2016 presidential campaign, has not messaged against incumbent Democrats; its latest request for members, sent Tuesday morning, asked them to protest the upcoming meeting between Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, saying that both men were "shamefully advancing bigoted agendas in Palestine and in the United States that are antithetical to peace, equality, justice, freedom, and all the values we stand for."

On the broader left, Democrats have been fair game for activists and organizations trying to channel their anger with Trump. Organizers of "Resist Trump Tuesdays," a weekly effort loosely organized by the progressive Working Families Party, have appeared at Democrats' offices, demanded town hall meetings, and protested Democrats who have voted for Trump's Cabinet nominees.

[Swarming crowds, angry questions are the new normal at GOP town halls]

On Tuesday, a group of protesters in Maryland delivered "valentines" to the office of Sen. Benjamin Cardin (D-Md.), who is up for reelection in 2018, with questions about why he was agreeing to meet with Gorsuch, after many Republicans refused to meet with blocked Obama nominee Merrick Garland. They handed out candy hearts with slogans like "Filibuster Me" and "Be My Accountable Democrat," and a sign that read "Roses are red, violets are blue, supporting Trump's cabinet makes you guilty too."

After Monday night's vote to confirm Steve Mnuchin as treasury secretary, the Progressive Change Campaign Committee urged its members to complain to Manchin,

the one Democrat who supported Trump's nominee.

"He voted with Wall Street and against working families. Can you call him right now to express disapproval of this vote?" PCCC asked in the email blast. "Sen. Manchin needs to hear from constituents that voting with Wall Street is the opposite of being 'independent.' It's favoring the big guys against the little guy. That's the opposite of what West Virginians need."

Manchin said on Tuesday that he isn't worried about confronting progressive activists back home. "I'm not concerned about it at all. It is what it is. I love people to come and voice their thoughts," he said.

But he urged progressives to be selective about when and where to speak out.

"If they're coming to disrupt, make sure they're going to the people who are opposing what they're for," he said.

"I think it's great. It's going to help us," Schumer said of the far left's renewed activism in a recent Washington Post interview. But he cautioned Democrats that the diverse political makeup of his caucus — "from Bernie to Joe," as Schumer described it — will sometimes require some Democrats to seek accord with Republicans, including Trump.

"There should not be any animus to the people who are voting the other way because their states or conscience dictates it," Schumer said. "And that's what I've tried to make clear to our caucus."

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Republicans, meanwhile, are increasingly describing the town hall disruptions as fabricated. Rep. Jason Lewis (R-Minn.), a freshman whom Democrats have put near the top of their 2018 target list, recalled a conversation with a constituent who got him on the phone and demanded a town hall — even after he answered her question.

"You know that joke, 'I went to a fight and a hockey game broke out?' It's like, 'I went to a riot and a town hall broke out,'" said Lewis. "A lot of this is being organized by a number of outside groups. There's real concern in the district — this is a big deal — but there's a lot of astroturfing, too."

At a meeting on Tuesday with reporters organized by the Heritage Foundation, Rep. Scott Perry (R-Pa.) said that he'd seen ads on Facebook offering cash to people who showed up to protest Republicans. But Rep. Raúl R. Labrador (R-Idaho) argued that the tea party movement's push into Republican districts — activism that helped defeat several Republican members of the House and Senate in their primaries — gave it credibility that the Democratic "resistance" so far lacks.

"This was not some organic movement that went against Obama," said Labrador. "This was people who wanted their party to represent them. Democrats should want the same thing."

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