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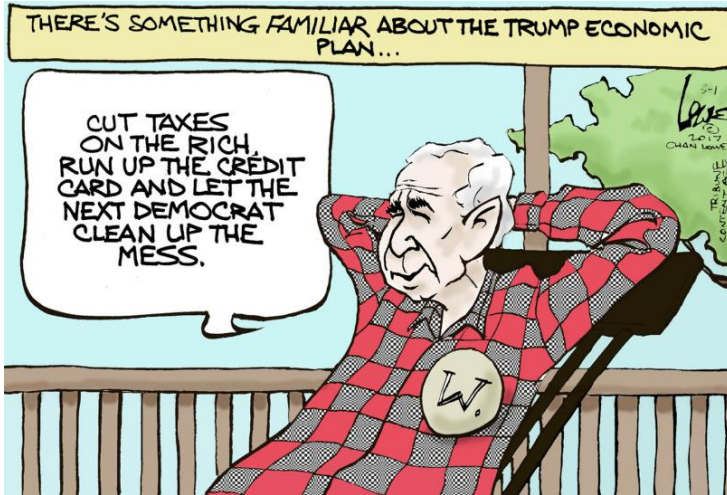
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FRANCE - EUROPE

**THE WALL
STREET
JOURNAL**
COMMENTS

Editorial : France's Disappointing Reformers

March 2, 2017
7:06 p.m. ET 18

French presidential candidate François Fillon bills himself as his country's Margaret Thatcher—ready to bury the statist shibboleths that have punished the French economy. But his chances of implementing a Thatcherite agenda look grim after the Republican nominee faced a preliminary indictment this week over alleged misuse of taxpayer funds. Such a pity.

The French judiciary on Wednesday ordered Mr. Fillon to face allegations that he paid his family members nearly a million euros (\$1.06 million) for doing little or no work for more than two decades. The former Prime Minister has apologized, but he denies wrongdoing and says he is

the victim of a political "assassination" by leftists in the judiciary. Having vowed earlier to resign the center-right Republicans' nomination if he faced a formal indictment, Mr. Fillon now says it is up to voters to decide if he should stay or go.

Yet his calls to slash 500,000 civil-service jobs now elicit accusations of hypocrisy, and a recent poll found that three of four voters want him out of the race, including 53% of Republicans. A senior adviser quit the campaign after the preliminary indictment, and other party allies have said they are suspending support for Mr. Fillon. The Republicans are stuck, not least because few serious candidates would want to take ownership of a bleeding campaign. This is

especially disappointing because none of the other candidates offers a clear pro-growth path out of France's doldrums.

That includes Emmanuel Macron, the former investment banker who is running as an independent. With the Fillon implosion, Mr. Macron is betting he can capture centrist voters alarmed by the hard-left Socialist nominee, Benoît Hamon, and the hard-right politics of Marine Le Pen, the current frontrunner.

For months Mr. Macron held off unveiling his agenda but promised to put France "on the move" and stand up for young voters frustrated by red tape and a corrupt political class. The bright spots of his agenda, detailed last week, are a pledge to cut 120,000 government

jobs and slash the corporate-tax rate to 25% from 33% over five years.

But that's where his reform mojo ends. The full program he unveiled Thursday would maintain the 35-hour workweek and the retirement age of 62. He would create more taxpayer-funded vocational training, expand jobless insurance and hire 5,000 more teachers. The rest is mostly minor bureaucratic tweaks dressed up with the grand rhetoric that is a Macron signature.

If polls are right—and France is lucky—Mr. Macron would defeat Ms. Le Pen by as many as 10 points in a runoff. But hopes that this year's election would offer French voters a real reform alternative are increasingly dim.

**The
New York
Times**

Marine Le Pen Loses Parliamentary Immunity Over Twitter Case

Adam Nossiter

convicted.

PARIS — In a clear show of its disapproval, the European Parliament voted Thursday to lift the parliamentary immunity of Marine Le Pen, the leader of the French far-right National Front, in a criminal case involving graphic photographs she posted on Twitter of acts of violence by the Islamic State.

In December 2015, Ms. Le Pen, a deputy in the European Parliament, posted three images, including one of the decapitated body of an American journalist, James Foley, who was killed by Islamic State militants in 2014.

French prosecutors accused Ms. Le Pen, who is now a candidate in France's presidential election, of the crime of "dissemination of violent images," for which she could face up to three years in prison if tried and

Ms. Le Pen said at the time that she had posted the photographs as a protest against a French television and radio journalist who had likened her far-right party to the Islamic State.

French prosecutors had asked the European Parliament to lift her immunity. As a strident critic of the European Union and the Parliament, she is not regarded warmly by many of its members.

Ms. Le Pen is facing a number of judicial entanglements as she pursues her presidential campaign. But none of them have dented her standing in polls or with her supporters, and she is widely expected to win a first round of voting on April 23.

Of the three major candidates in France's presidential race, two are now deeply embroiled in criminal

investigations: Ms. Le Pen, and the center-right candidate, François Fillon, who on Wednesday angrily announced that he was certain to be formally charged by March 15 in an embezzlement investigation.

Ms. Le Pen is also being investigated in connection with accusations that she paid National Front aides with money from funds provided by the European Union. According to the accusations, she was involved in a phony-jobs scheme in which aides working for her and other National Front deputies at the Parliament were actually carrying out party work.

The lifting of her parliamentary immunity concerns only the case involving the Islamic State photographs and not the more serious accusations of misusing European Union funds.

Her chief of staff was formally charged in the payroll case last

week, and her bodyguard is also being investigated.

After Ms. Le Pen posted the gruesome images on Twitter in 2015, the family of Mr. Foley demanded that she delete the one of his body, saying that she had used it for political purposes. Ms. Le Pen claimed that she had not known it was a photograph of Mr. Foley. "Obviously, I withdrew it immediately," she said at the time.

On Thursday morning, she told the French television network LCP: "I am a deputy. It's my job to denounce Daesh," using an Arabic acronym for the Islamic State that some consider pejorative. She added that she was the victim of a "politicized investigation."

**The
New York
Times**

On Europe's Far Right, Female Leaders Look to Female Voters

Somini Sengupta

Gender is a useful wedge, though, when it comes to highlighting what has become one of their main planks: a critique of immigration, particularly from the Muslim world. The European far right has long seized on the hijab as a symbol of patriarchy; more recently it has said

that attacks on gays and women in Muslim enclaves are evidence of the Islamic threat to European values.

Ms. Le Pen, in an opinion essay published in a French daily, L'Opinion, used the mass sexual attacks in Cologne, Germany, on New Year's Eve in 2015 to call for a referendum on immigration to

France. "I am scared that the migrant crisis signals the beginning of the end of women's rights," she wrote. Ms. Le Pen is also making a bid to woo gay voters, whom her father, the party's founder, once openly berated.

Ruth Wodak, a professor at Lancaster University in Britain,

called Ms. Le Pen's appeals on gender issues "opportunistic."

"They defend 'our' women against harassment by foreigners — strangers, migrants, Muslim men," says Ms. Wodak, the author of "The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean."

"However, they never spoke out against sexual harassment before."

How unusual is it for a woman to lead a nativist party? About as unusual as it is for a woman to head any political party. While some are part of political dynasties, as in the case of Ms. Le Pen, others are self-made.

Ms. Petry, a former chemist and businesswoman, ousted a former Europe-focused leader of the Alternative for Germany and turned it into a squarely nationalist party. Her platform for the national elections scheduled for this fall takes aim at foreigners — and at the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, for embracing them.

Ms. Kjaersgaard, one of the earliest forerunners of the European far right, established the Danish People's Party in 1995 and turned what were once considered fringe, racist ideas about restricting immigration into a potent political force.

Her party has been crucial in supporting a minority government and has shaped policy as a result. Ms. Kjaersgaard is now the speaker of the Danish Parliament, though no longer the party leader.



Raphael : Brexit Opponents Find Their Voice Again

Therese Raphael

Theresa May's defeat in the House of Lords Wednesday doesn't quite compare with the scale of Donald Trump's judicial thrashing over his travel ban. But that's not an entirely ludicrous parallel either.

The Lords voted to force the government to guarantee that the nearly 3 million EU nationals living in Britain can stay. May's position is that she won't make promises until the EU gives her a guarantee that British nationals in EU countries are also welcome. Nonsense, argued the majority in the Lords. To leave so many EU citizens in limbo is practically and morally absurd, an offense to that most British of all traits, fair play. EU nationals are not bargaining chips, they argued.

The slap-down is a reminder that parliament may not be the silent partner in Brexit that May wishes. While the prime minister has defined a hard line on Brexit -- something many leaders in her own party are demanding -- the debate isn't over. And even if May still holds most of the cards, the Lords aren't the only ones pushing back, setting the scene for a potentially bigger end-game battle than the referendum campaign itself.

Ms. Jensen pushed her anti-immigrant Progress Party into a coalition government in Norway for the first time — and snagged for herself an influential cabinet post as finance minister. She describes herself as a free-market conservative in the Thatcherite tradition. But she too has seized on fears of Islam, warning in a widely criticized 2009 speech about the "sneaking Islamization" of European society.

Female leaders in Europe span the ideological spectrum. Two of the Continent's most powerful leaders, Ms. Merkel of Germany and Theresa May of Britain, are on opposite sides of Britain's plan to leave the European Union.

Does the far right draw female voters? Not so much, but they are beginning to.

One study, carried out across 17 countries by Swedish and Dutch scholars and published in late 2015 in an academic journal called *Patterns of Prejudice*, found women less likely than men to vote for what the study called the "populist radical right" — but not because women were against the ideology.

Men are neither more "nativist" nor "authoritarian," compared with women, the study found, nor do

The House of Commons, which her party controls by a narrow majority, has already signed off on the government's bill to trigger Brexit, which May plans to do within two weeks. With its vote, the Lords -- unelected, at times unwieldy with some 800 members, but respected for its collective wisdom -- has told the Commons to reconsider.

In all likelihood, May will use her majority (and the all-important government whip) to ignore the amendment. But there's at least a possibility that a coalition of MPs opposed to the "hard" Brexit -- a clean separation from Europe in which Britain loses its access to the single market and passporting rights for financial services -- could side with the Lords and force the government to comply. Baroness Meacher, a member of the Lords, told the BBC Thursday that up to 30 Tory MPs could rebel against the government and back the amendment. Still, I wouldn't bet on it; May isn't known for her willingness to compromise and government whips are persuasive creatures.

Even if the Brexit-triggering bill passes unamended as expected, the Lords' vote sent an important message. For a while, Remainers

women evince less "discontent" with their governments. Women by and large were deterred from voting for the radical right by other things, including the populist right's "political style, occasional association with historic violence, stigmatization by parts of the elite and the general public" — in other words, their outlier-ness.

That is where the gender of the leader can make a positive difference for the far right, said Cas Mudde, a Dutch scholar of the European far right.

In the media, he argued, male leaders are often cast as power-hungry zealots. "Female politicians are represented as softer," said Mr. Mudde, who teaches at the University of Georgia. "For a radical right politician it can be actually very good."

Sometimes, gender can make a difference in who wins. In Austria late last year, a larger share of women — and a significantly larger share of young, educated women — voted for the leftist party, helping to defeat the nativist candidate for president. Both parties' candidates were men.

Ms. Le Pen's prospects in the French polls this spring will depend significantly on her ability to woo

were silenced by the charge that their opposition was "undemocratic." Now, not so much. The Lords vote follows two prominent speeches by former British prime ministers from opposite sides of the bench, calling on Britons to resist a bad Brexit deal.

On Feb. 16, former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair, speaking at Bloomberg's London headquarters (precisely where David Cameron announced an EU referendum in 2015), urged Britons to "rise up against Brexit." On Feb. 28, former Conservative British Prime Minister John Major delivered his own warning of "overoptimism."

Blair's call was for a new cross-party movement and coordinated communications; he promised to set up an institute to help the cause. Just because a majority voted for Brexit doesn't mean they should not have a chance to reconsider if the facts change, he told the audience in the Q&A session afterwards: "Whether you do it through a referendum or another method, that's a second-order question."

Major's message was that Britons should get real about what they will get out of Brexit:

women, just as the success of far-right parties on the Continent more broadly will rest on their ability to bridge the gender gap.

Consider Nonna Mayer's research on the National Front's record.

In 2002, when it was headed by Ms. Le Pen's firebrand, Holocaust-denying father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, the party won a far larger share of men's votes than women's. In 2012, by the time Ms. Le Pen took over the party, the gender gap had virtually vanished, only to return again in midterm polls since then.

Ms. Mayer, a political scientist, said the gender gap for populist right wing parties could vary from one country to another and from one election to the next. For Ms. Le Pen, she said, "the test will be the coming presidential election."

Correction: March 2, 2017

An earlier version of a picture caption with this article misstated when Marine Le Pen began her presidential campaign in France. It was last month, not this month.

Negotiations are all about 'give' and 'take.' We know what the Brexiters wish to take: yet we hear nothing about what our country may have to give in return. If anyone genuinely believes that Europe will concede all we wish for — and exact no price for doing so — then they are extraordinarily naïve.

To put these speeches into perspective I visited my local MP, Tulip Siddiq, who created a media storm in January when she defied her party's three-line whip and voted against the Brexit bill (and herself out of the shadow government). Given that 75 percent of her constituents voted to remain, she said her position was always clear. "It's the right side of history," the 34-year-old says.

Like Blair and Major, Siddiq isn't beyond accepting the Brexit vote; it's the headlong rush toward an uncompromising hard divorce she's against. "We had amendments on workers' rights, maternity rights, EU nationals. Not a single one of our amendments passed. If any of them had passed, maybe I would have considered voting for the bill," she says.

Her interest is personal, too. Her grandfather was Bangladesh's founding father and first prime

minister -- he was assassinated along with other family members, but her mother secured political asylum in the U.K. Born in London, she has lived in Asia and Europe. She has an eye on the 17,000 EU nationals living in her constituency and said she's been flooded with letters of concern. One of her saddest days door-stopping was meeting a distraught single mother from Spain who didn't know whether she would be allowed to stay in Britain with her 12-year-old British daughter. "Theresa May could sort this out in a minute," Siddiq says.

"There is a lot more cross-party working than is picked up in the media," Siddiq says of the opposition to a hard Brexit. At the moment, though, they seem to lack a clear strategy for getting their views across. Theresa May has promised a vote on the Brexit deals at the end of the two-year negotiating period. That, Siddiq says, is when opponents can make their move.

As Blair noted, the Brexit vote followed years of media criticism of Europe; the ground was prepared. By the same token, the ground for a

softer exit also needs preparation. Even so, it seems a risky strategy to be so far behind in building support so late in the game. And what if Parliament doesn't get a say? Brexit Secretary David Davis said this week that the government should prepare for "the unlikely scenario that no mutually satisfactory agreement can be reached." No deal, no parliamentary vote. A hard Brexit would then become a fait accompli.

In the meantime, Siddiq tried to brace others for the tough fighting ahead. "Those opposed to a hard

Brexit plan will have to rely on extra-parliamentary means to make their case heard," she said. "We have already seen two former prime ministers, one Labour and one Conservative, give landmark speeches warning against the very real consequences we face." So far the government looks set to reject those warnings, whether from former prime ministers, backbench Labour MPs or even the House of Lords.

Bloomberg

Gilbert : Greece Should Be Added to ECB's Bond-Buying List

Mark Gilbert

Greece and its creditors look poised to strike a deal that will allow the nation to draw down aid and avoid defaulting on its debts in July. That sounds good, but it is, in fact, just a fudge. What's needed instead is for the country to regain access to capital markets in its own right. To help make that happen, the European Central Bank should add Greek bonds to the list of securities eligible for purchase under its quantitative easing program.

QuickTake Greece's Financial Odyssey

The deal Greece is about to agree with its European partners and the International Monetary Fund is the latest in a long line of compromises that have failed to address the core issue -- that Greece's debts, now 170 percent of economic output, are so burdensome they are preventing a recovery. The IMF is right to argue that Greece needs additional debt

relief on the 174 billion euros (\$184 billion) it owes to the European Financial Stability Facility and the European Stability Mechanism. With elections looming this year in the Netherlands, France and Germany, however, details about that relief will probably have to wait until next year; voters don't want to hear about Greek bailouts right now. But the ECB can act swiftly to include Greek bonds in its asset purchase program.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has told ECB President Mario Draghi that she's willing to let inclusion in his QE program be used as an incentive to persuade Greece to agree to the new deal, the Greek news service Kathimerini reported on Wednesday, without identifying the source of its information.

Draghi has made a new agreement between Greece and its lenders a condition of adding Greek debt to the 60 billion euros of bonds the

central bank will buy from April, as it scales back the monthly program from 80 billion euros. Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras told lawmakers last week that he's hopeful the latest bailout review can be completed by March 20, when euro-region finance ministers are scheduled to meet in Brussels.

While Greek yields have declined in recent weeks, they remain too high for the country to attempt to tap the markets. Greece's two-year borrowing cost of about 7 percent, for example, compares with just 2 percent for Italy and 1.7 percent for Spain, both of which have benefited from the support of ECB purchases:

The Benefits of ECB Eligibility

Yields on 10-year bonds

Source: Bloomberg

Klaus Regling, the head of the ESM has said he expects Greece to be able to return to the markets "well

before" the bailout program's scheduled end in August 2018. Yiannis Dragasakis, Greece's deputy prime minister, said on Friday that the nation could hold a test bond auction as early as this year, once the current negotiations are complete.

ECB buying would help to drive Greek yields down to levels that would reopen capital markets to the country. The government needs to continue to reform the economy; but inclusion on the ECB's list of eligible securities would mark the start of the country's rehabilitation as a fully functioning member of the euro project rather than a failed state.

This column does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the editorial board or Bloomberg LP and its owners.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Two German Cities Cancel Separate Turkish Rallies

Andrea Thomas

Updated March 2,

2017 3:02 p.m. ET

BERLIN—Two German cities banned political rallies slated to be held by senior Turkish government officials, escalating tensions between the two countries in the wake of Turkey's detention of a prominent German-Turkish journalist.

The planned rallies by Turkey's justice and economics ministers targeted Germany's Turkish diaspora of roughly three million people, many of whom are eligible to vote in Turkey's April referendum to increase the powers of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

"We allow election rallies, but then please [it should be] about German politics on German soil and not by those lobbying here in Germany for nondemocratic policies," said Henk

van Benthem, mayor of a district in Cologne that was expected to host Turkish Economics Minister Nihat Zeybekci on Sunday.

Mr. van Benthem on Thursday said he wouldn't give the rally permit—for a lobby group representing Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party, or AKP—after he learned that it was scheduled to be an election rally rather than a cultural event.

The southwestern city of Gaggenau revoked a permit for an event later on Thursday by the same group hosting Justice Minister Bekir Bozdag, explaining that the expected number of visitors exceeded the available space.

"It is not acceptable that German authorities that speak each time on human rights, democracy, rule of law, freedom of expression, blaming anyone except themselves due to deficiency on this issue, criticizing it, can't put up with a meeting of

Turkish society," Turkey's state-run Anadolu news agency reported Mr. Bozdag as saying.

Mr. Bozdag told reporters on Thursday in Strasbourg, France, that he had canceled a planned meeting with his German counterpart after the cancellation of the Gaggenau rally and will return to Turkey, Anadolu reported.

The agency also reported that Turkey's foreign ministry has summoned Germany's ambassador, Martin Erdmann, over the cancellation of Mr. Bozdag's meeting in Gaggenau.

The decisions to prevent the speeches by senior Turkish government officials come after Monday's detention of Deniz Yucel, a reporter with German daily Die Welt, which has added strains to relations between the two North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies. The German government and the

news media have accused Turkey of attacking the freedom of the press.

Chancellor Angela Merkel has repeatedly called on Turkey to free Mr. Yucel after a Turkish court decided on Monday to detain the journalist pending a trial on allegations of promoting propaganda for a terrorist group and incitement to violence.

The German government has said the decision is "incomprehensible decision" and "completely disproportional."

Mr. Yucel's arrest late Monday came about two weeks after he initially turned himself in to police for questioning in Istanbul. Die Welt hasn't commented on the specific allegations, but made clear the newspaper believes Mr. Yucel did nothing wrong.

The tensions underscore the challenges Ms. Merkel faces as she

tries to hold on to an agreement with Turkey aimed at limiting the flow of Middle Eastern migrants traveling through the country to get to Europe. The agreement includes a promise by the European Union to continue talks with Turkey about the country eventually joining the bloc—

a process that a key conservative ally of Ms. Merkel, Bavarian Premier Horst Seehofer, slammed in a speech on Wednesday.

"We don't want Turkey to become a full member of the European Union," Mr. Seehofer said. "After what has

happened there, we simply have to put the ongoing accession talks on hold so that Mr. Erdogan knows he can't do anything he wants with the free world."

Mr. Yucel is one of dozens of journalists to come under

investigation for their coverage of Turkish politics, but he is believed to be the first German journalist to be detained since the failed coup in July.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

The German Right Believes It's Time to Discard the Country's Historical Guilt (UNE)

Anton Troianovski

March 2, 2017 10:19 a.m. ET

KARLSRUHE, Germany—The draft budget for Baden-Württemberg state set aside \$69,000 this year for educational trips to "memorials of National Socialist injustice."

The Alternative for Germany party submitted a motion to strike the reference to the Nazi Party and instead use the money for visits to "significant German historic sites."

"We strive for a balanced view of history," the motion said. "A one-sided concentration on 12 years of National Socialist injustice is to be rejected."

The upstart Alternative for Germany, known as the AfD, began as a party opposed to the euro and moved on to fighting Germany's refugee influx. Now it is increasingly emphasizing a broader, substantially more provocative goal: changing how Germans see their past.

AfD politicians say an unhealthy obsession with the Nazi crimes of World War II skews Germans' understanding of their country's history, leaves no place for national pride and interferes with government policy. Nazi-era guilt, they say, was behind Chancellor Angela Merkel's decision to let in hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers from the Middle East and Africa.

"The negation of our own national interests is something that has become a political maxim in Germany since World War II," said AfD leader Frauke Petry.

Ms. Merkel said Germany was bound by its constitution and international law to take in refugees, and not doing so could have caused a humanitarian crisis that destabilized the Balkans.

In campaigns across Europe, nationalists and populists are on the march, pushing the credo that the policies of mainstream, pro-European Union politicians stifle the people's interests and their identity.

French presidential candidate Marine Le Pen, regarded as a contender in elections this year, says her countrymen have been

"dispossessed of their patriotism." The successful backers of Brexit in the U.K. campaigned to "take back control." Dutch anti-Islam prime minister hopeful Geert Wilders promises "the preservation of the Netherlands." Elections are set there later this month.

Nowhere do national identity politics carry more taboo-breaking potential than in Germany, which has spent seven decades reckoning with the aftermath of its genocidal nationalist dictatorship.

A commitment to remembering and accepting responsibility for Nazi crimes is core to Germany's modern identity. While fringe nationalists have always contested that approach, it has been accepted for decades by all of the parties represented in the national parliament.

Now, as German elections in September loom, basic questions of national identity and historical responsibility are suddenly center-stage. The AfD, with its attack on official memory, is polling at about 11% public support, an impressive showing for a party only four years old.

AfD politicians accept that the Holocaust happened and describe the Nazis as a criminal regime. Most party leaders avoid rhetoric about racial superiority or ethnic purity. They also say the postwar establishment's focus on atonement has robbed Germans of a positive identity and pushed the country to act against its own interests.

The party wants to reduce the time schools spend teaching children about the Nazis to focus more on German achievements in science and the arts. Some prominent members go further, arguing that the European consensus on World War II history is too anti-German.

"History is a whore of politics," Björn Höcke, one of the party's most radical politicians, said in an interview. "A great people like the German people, which lost two world wars in one century, no longer has a historical narrative of its own."

In an ornate Dresden ballroom in January, local AfD candidate Jens

Maier told the crowd that what he called Western Allies' re-education efforts after World War II led to Germans being convinced "we are bastards, criminals, that we are worth nothing."

As his voice rose, Mr. Maier hollered into his microphone, to applause: "I hereby declare this cult of guilt to be over! To be over, once and for all!"

To a political establishment for which Holocaust remembrance is an integral part of public life, the AfD's break with the consensus is a shocking turn.

Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble works in an imposing office building that is memorialized, in plaques, as the former home of Nazi leader Hermann Göring's Aviation Ministry. Mr. Schäuble recently presented a postage stamp marking the anniversary of a remembrance center next door, built on the site of the onetime Gestapo headquarters.

"That we were brought to deal with our past is among the great advantages that we have in Germany," Mr. Schäuble said. "He who resists dealing with the past is ill-prepared for the future."

The AfD is the most successful party to have arisen to the right of Germany's mainstream conservative bloc, which Ms. Merkel now leads, since World War II. For decades, far-right parties failed to gain a foothold in Germany. Leading conservative politicians made it their stated mission to prevent the rise of nationalist movements.

Interviews with supporters show the party has tapped into something deeper than anti-immigrant sentiment. Many see the embrace of migrants as a symptom of a broader problem: a dearth of German patriotism, a misplaced guilt complex and a misreading of German history.

"I want people to stand up and put their hand on their heart when the German national anthem plays, like they do in the U.S.," said Bernd Tomsen at a monthly gathering of party supporters in a Croatian restaurant in Berlin. "German history is reduced to 12 years of Nazi rule.

People use this to convince others, especially young people, that they are Nazis and must do good in the world."

At the party event in Dresden, the AfD's Mr. Höcke gave a speech that was provocative even by the party's standards. German history "is made ugly and ridiculous," he said, before concluding: "We need nothing other than a 180-degree change in memory policy!"

The next day, Vice Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel, chairman of the Social Democratic junior partners in the governing coalition, published a rebuttal. His father had been an unrepentant Nazi to his death and said Auschwitz was fabricated American propaganda, Mr. Gabriel wrote.

"The fact that we faced our history and that we learned from the past was the prerequisite for Germany being respected around the world," Mr. Gabriel wrote on Facebook. "Björn Höcke scorns the Germany of which I am proud."

The uproar presented a quandary for the AfD. Expelling the young, popular Mr. Höcke could turn off nationalist voters, but refusing to do so could undermine efforts to gain acceptability among more-centrist voters. After weeks of debate, the executive board last month took a procedural step toward expelling Mr. Höcke, who is fighting to keep his post.

Mr. Höcke said that though the "content and form" of his speech were politically unwise, his points were in keeping with the party platform. "The current restriction of German memory culture to the National Socialist era," the party program says, should be "broken up to make way for a broader view of history."

Speaking at a castle near the Rhine in October, party leader Ms. Petry alluded to recent historical studies that shift the blame for World War I beyond Berlin, and suggested more to come.

"Just as today the First World War is written about in a nuanced way and not just from the perspective of the victor," Ms. Petry said, "the Second

World War will probably in some decades also need to be discussed in a somewhat more nuanced way than what we experience today." Listeners erupted in applause.

Among them was Stefan Scheil, a historian on the fringes of German academia for his argument that the U.S., U.K. and Soviet Union were largely to blame for the outbreak of World War II. Not since the 1970s, Mr. Scheil said, has Germany had a significant political party willing to entertain his view.

"It is part of the foundation of the AfD to speak about many things that simply were never questioned for many years," he said.

Mr. Höcke said World War II began as a local conflict

in which Hitler understandably sought to reclaim territory lost after World War I. "The big problem is that one presents Hitler as absolutely evil," Mr. Höcke said. "But of course we know that there is no black and no white in history."

Ms. Petry, asked about World War II's causes, wouldn't delve into specifics but said wars typically take place only when multiple parties want them to.

She said the history of the Holocaust is covered comprehensively in German schools, but German suffering, including the bombing of Dresden and Russian and American mistreatment of German prisoners of war, is given short shrift.

The New York Times

Sweden Reinstates Conscription, With an Eye on Russia

Martin Selseo Sorensen

GOTLAND, Sweden — Late last year, Christer Stoltz, chief of contingency planning for Gotland, Sweden's largest island, got an unusual letter from the central government in Stockholm, telling him to get ready for war.

Municipalities around the country should "increase their ability to resist an armed attack against Sweden from a qualified opponent," the letter from the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency said.

The planning was also intended to respond to natural disasters, oil spills or cyberattacks that could disrupt power and water supplies. But there is no doubt that the Swedish authorities are nervous, given Russia's more assertive posture and the mounting uncertainties about the future of Europe's alliance with the United States.

On Thursday, the government announced that mandatory military service — abolished in 2010 — would be introduced starting next year. Four thousand men and women will be drafted into the defense forces.

If not quite returning to a war footing, Sweden is at least reviving a level of preparedness that many thought had gone the way of the Cold War. "For two decades, our contingency planning was low," Mr. Stoltz said in a recent interview. "Now, we need to look at our plans."

In May, Gotland will join all other municipalities in a "Contingency Week," when Swedes will be taught how to hunker down for 72 hours in case of an emergency. Soon, the authorities will begin to dust off public shelters that have not been inspected for two decades.

For Sweden, the new uncertainties about security are even more pressing than they are for most other European countries. Sweden is neutral and not a member of NATO, so to a much larger extent it must rely on its own defense abilities. Mixed signals from the Trump administration toward Europe have made even NATO allies wary.

"The threat of the U.S. no longer wanting to honor its security guarantees is the most important development in the history of the alliance," said Henrik Breitenbauch, the director of the Center for Military Studies in Copenhagen. "It has created high levels of concern all over Europe."

Peter Hultqvist, Sweden's defense minister, said Sweden and other European countries were too quick after the Cold War to dismiss potential threats in the region. "Politicians at the time maybe thought that the future would be more sunny than the reality is today," he said in an interview.

Mr. Hultqvist said: "From my point of view, many mistakes have been made over the years. The security situation and what could come in the future was underestimated."

Now the country is moving quickly to make up ground.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the Baltics seemingly became a region of stability. Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, all of which line the Baltic Sea, joined NATO, and later the European Union. In Sweden, military spending fell to 1.1 percent of G.D.P. in 2015 from 2.6 percent in 1991.

All that changed with Russia's annexation of Crimea three years ago and the Russian support for the insurgency in Ukraine. As of last

Asked whether field trips to concentration camps were appropriate, she said it was "important for students to understand what mankind can do to men." She also added: "One should inform them to the same degree that after World War II the Americans allowed German war prisoners to die of hunger in the camps on the Rhine meadows."

It is far from clear that policies like these will spell national electoral success. The AfD's Baden-Württemberg resolution to cut funds for field trips to Nazi sites was rejected by the other parties. Many Germans are proud of facing the darkest era in their past more directly than other countries have, and remain skeptical of the concept

year, Swedish military spending was up 11 percent.

Even so, Sweden's military is simply not that big, particularly when stacked up against a threat from Russia. So everyone gets involved, including the civilian authorities and civilians themselves.

Announcing the return to conscription on Thursday, Mr. Hultqvist pointed to a "deteriorating security environment."

"The all-volunteer recruitment hasn't provided the armed forces with enough personnel," he said. "The reactivating of conscription is needed for military readiness."

Gotland, which serves as something of a forward defense for the Swedish mainland, 55 miles to the west, was already remilitarized last September.

Strategically located in the Baltic Sea, the island is not far from the heavily militarized Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, which is sandwiched between Lithuania and Poland. "We see a lot of activity in the Baltics and a lot of training, provocative flights and military exercise going on in our neighborhood," said Marinette Radebo, a spokeswoman for the Defense Ministry.

The change has been sudden.

Pfc. Emil Kling, a member of the Wartofta tank company who is now on Gotland, said he had thought he was signing on for something completely different when he joined the armed forces. "If anyone had said three years ago that I'd be in Gotland now, I wouldn't have believed them," he said. "Things have changed fast politically."

A member of a logistics platoon, Private Kling had hoped to serve abroad. February found him

of patriotism. In a 2015 poll, only 38% said they were proud to be German.

AfD supporters, by contrast, often say they are tired of atoning for crimes they didn't commit.

"It's incredibly difficult, in Germany, to say, 'I am truly German,'" said Michael Seher, a salesman for a home builder. "I personally had nothing to do with World War II, and I don't want to keep paying for it."

practicing maneuvers on a shooting field on the frosty shores of the Baltic Sea as fellow soldiers gathered around a bonfire to keep warm.

The regiment is temporarily defending Gotland while a new, permanent battle group is training on the mainland. This summer it is expected to move to a base still under construction.

Visby, Gotland's main town, is no stranger to hostile foreigners. The city walls and towers, dating back 850 years, were erected to protect it from the threat of the Danes on the Western edge of the Baltic Sea.

Just inside the walls' South Gate, Birgitta Stenstrom runs a quiet book cafe. She is not convinced that the tanks south of town are the right answer to the threats against Gotland, and to Sweden.

"Attacks from cyberspace is the real danger," she said. "I'm worried about all the infiltration like the supposed Russian manipulation of the U.S. elections. Even if I don't know if that's true."

The authorities say there may be reason to be concerned. In the last nine months of 2016, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency received 200 reports of cyberattacks on public infrastructure, 60 of them serious incidents leading to technical failures or the installation of viruses.

In the Journal of Strategic Studies, Martin Kragh recently published a study on Russia's "active measures" toward Sweden, meaning the use of forged documents, disinformation, military threats and agents of influence. The study found both good and bad news.

"As regards the use of disinformation, there has been a

number of instances with forged telegrams and disinformation in Russian media that have been circulated and at times caused confusion," he said.

"We can see intent and certain behavioral patterns," he added, "but we cannot say that it's been politically effective."

Mr. Kragh sees the best defense as raising public awareness of the risk

of disinformation, as well as open debate on the issue.

Mr. Hultqvist, the defense minister, said he harbored no illusions.

"I think Russia tries to have an impact on the Swedish debate and

political decisions," he said. "That's what I think."

The
Washington
Post

For Syrian victims, the path to justice runs through Europe

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

BERLIN — After his arrest and torture by the government of Bashar al-Assad, dissident Khaled Rawas slipped out of Syria pledging to continue the fight. On Wednesday, he did just that — joining a landmark legal complaint in Germany seeking something that has long proved elusive for the victims of the Syrian civil war.

Justice.

As dissidents, victims' families and human rights activists begin to lose hope that the Syrian government will ever be toppled — and that international bodies will hold it accountable for alleged war crimes — they are increasingly pursuing their own justice through criminal suits in domestic European courts.

Today's WorldView

What's most important from where the world meets Washington

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By doing so, they are gambling on the notion of universal jurisdiction — arguing that war crimes have no geographic boundaries. They say countries such as Germany — with broad laws covering torture and genocide — are ideal venues to launch such legal attacks. On Thursday, for instance, authorities announced the arrest of a Syrian asylum seeker in Germany on charges including war crimes. The charges stem from the alleged killing of 36 people in Syria while the man was serving as a fighter for the militant group formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra, which is linked to al-Qaeda.

"Our fear is that they're going to get away with it, that the international community is going to look the other way," Rawas said. "I don't want revenge. But for what was done, for what is still being done, we have to have justice."

Now 29 and living as a refugee in Germany, Rawas joined six other plaintiffs, including his wife, in filing the complaint against six senior Assad regime officials who they claim were directly involved in systematic torture. At the very least,

the plaintiffs and the human rights lawyers representing them are seeking international arrest warrants similar to the one that led the British to detain former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet on behalf of a Spanish judge in the 1990s.

Between March 2011 and December 2015, at least 17,723 people died in Syrian government detention, according to Amnesty International, and thousands of other dissidents were brutally tortured. Yet, while there have been international condemnations of the Assad government, there have been virtually no successful international efforts to prosecute it for war crimes.

The International Criminal Court, which has prosecuted war crimes elsewhere, is unable to accept cases from Syria because the country is not a signatory to the treaty that established the court. To investigate, the ICC would need the approval of the U.N. Security Council — a move Russia has blocked with its council veto.

So human rights lawyers, activists and victims have been seeking alternatives — the case filed this week in Germany being the latest example. It is at least the fourth case to be filed in Europe and comes on the heels of similar legal action in Spain, France and Germany.

The case, filed with the aid of the Berlin-based European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), is also somewhat novel. At least one complaint has named Assad himself — something legal scholars see as problematic, given the precedent of legal immunity for heads of state. Other cases have relied on secondhand accounts of war crimes offered by human rights groups.

In contrast, the complaint filed Wednesday involves Syrian refugees living in Germany who claim to have been directly victimized. Rather than go after Assad himself, the complaint names senior intelligence and military officials who may not be covered by international laws granting sovereign immunity to a head of state.

"We are optimistic that this approach is going to get results," said

Wolfgang Kaleck, general secretary of the ECCHR.

Yet the path to justice in domestic courts faces formidable obstacles. In Germany's legal system, a case cannot proceed unless prosecutors deem it worthy of being brought to court. And they have generally been loath to take up crusading cases involving distant lands. Legal experts here say that universal jurisdiction has been successfully invoked to prosecute war crimes in only two recent cases — and in both cases, the suspects were in Germany.

In the arrest Thursday, the Syrian man charged with war crimes was living in Germany.

Perhaps Europe's most advanced case against senior members of the Syrian regime is being considered in Spain. The plaintiff — a woman with Spanish nationality — alleges that her brother in Syria was detained, tortured and executed in 2013 at a government detention center.

The Spanish case emerged after the woman spotted her brother's face among a horrific tableau of more than 50,000 postmortem photographs, which were taken at Syrian military hospitals between 2011 and mid-2013. The images were smuggled out of Syria by a military police photographer later code-named Caesar. Activists working with him had posted the images on Facebook with the aim of creating a database that could aid in legal cases.

Spanish courts have a reputation for reaching far and wide — with the most spectacular case being the 1998 arrest of Pinochet in Britain on a warrant issued by a Spanish judge, Baltasar Garzón. But in 2014, Spanish politicians passed a bill curbing the power of its judges to serve as enforcers of international law.

The fact that the plaintiff in the case is Spanish has offered some hope that the courts may decide to act. The case singles out nine high-ranking members of the Syrian intelligence apparatus as responsible for "state terrorism" and, hence, the death of the Spanish national's brother.

"Our aim is to have the suspects extradited to Spain," said Toby Cadman, a British lawyer involved in

the case. "As soon as an arrest warrant is issued, it will be possible to arrest them anywhere in Europe if they leave Syria."

Although they may remain legal long shots, the accumulating criminal cases in Germany against the Assad government have offered some hope for victims. The process has also proved cathartic for people such as Rawas.

In 2011, he recalled, he was studying mechanical engineering in Damascus when he joined the initial uprising against the Syrian government as a student organizer. After his first arrest in March of that year, he said, he was held for 10 days, severely beaten and sodomized with a pipe.

Things got worse in December, when he was arrested again and taken to the dreaded Branch 215 detention center. Run by Syria's military intelligence agency and known as the "Branch of Death," the center was the source of more than 3,500 of the bodies shown in the Caesar database. Limbs had been beaten and burned. In some cases, prisoners' eyes were gouged out.

Rawas said that rows of agents were lined up along the six flights of stairs leading to the facility, all beating the prisoners as they were led up the stairs. He recalled being beaten in the same room as two other inmates who had it much worse. He was assaulted with a pipe, while spiked sticks were used on the other men.

"They ripped pieces of skin and flesh off of them which each hit," he said. "Even now, I can't get the screams out of my head."

Torture in the detention center is systematic, according to war-crimes investigators. Female prisoners have reported being raped by guards, and cells are so crowded that prisoners stand and sleep in shifts. Rawas said he was kept with 30 other prisoners in a 13-by-6.5-foot cell.

During one of the many beatings, he remembered focusing like the engineer he was on the instrument of his pain.

"The agent was hitting me with a plastic pipe, made of PVC," he said. "He just kept hitting me. He wouldn't stop. So I started thinking about the

material. About its chemistry. Anything. I hope this case succeeds. Anything but the pain."

"You can't understand what these people have done, are still doing," he said. "We need to do something. Noack reported from London. Louisa Loveluck in Istanbul contributed to this report."

INTERNATIONAL

The
Washington
Post

ISIS dumped bodies in a desert sinkhole. It may be years before we know the full scale of the killings. (UNE)

<https://www.facebook.com/lovedaymorris?fref=ts>

ATHBAH, Iraq — The horror stories about the Islamic State's mass killings at a cavernous hole in the desert near Mosul became legendary over the years.

Soon after the group took control of the Iraqi city more than 2½ years ago, the 100-foot-wide sinkhole five miles southwest of the airport became a site for summary executions. Some victims were made to line up at the edge of the hole and were shot before being kicked inside, while others were tossed in alive, residents said. Sometimes bodies were just trucked in for dumping.

Residents of Mosul whispered about the deaths at the sinkhole, or "khasfa," as it is called. But with communications limited and locals too fearful to speak out publicly, it was only after Iraqi forces retook the area last month as they closed in on the city's western side that the scale of the killings at the site began to emerge. Based on anecdotal evidence, Iraqi officials say thousands may have perished there in recent years.

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It may be years more, though, before the mass grave gives up its secrets.

No one knows the depth of the hole under the water at the bottom. The militants have filled it and booby-trapped it with explosives, making excavation particularly complex.

Even before the Islamic State's brutal campaign began, Iraqi authorities were struggling to excavate and identify victims in mass graves dating back to the reign of Saddam Hussein, when as many as 1 million Iraqis

disappeared. Sectarian war following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion brought more large-scale bloodletting.

[Away from Iraq's front lines, the Islamic State is creeping back in]

Meanwhile, authorities are overwhelmed. Members of Iraq's human rights commission, which is tasked with mapping the Islamic State's mass graves, said they could not provide figures on how many have been found so far. Last summer, the Associated Press said it had documented some 72 mass graves from Islamic State atrocities in Iraq and Syria, containing as many as 15,000 bodies, with more expected to be unearthed.

Dozens of mass graves around the Iraqi town of Sinjar, which are thought to contain the remains of hundreds of Yazidis killed execution-style by the Islamic State, have yet to be fully excavated. Mass graves around the city of Tikrit, containing the remains of an estimated 1,700 soldiers from nearby Camp Speicher who were massacred by the militants, are still being discovered two years after the area was retaken by security forces.

The khasfa, though, could be the group's biggest mass grave.

"It's swallowed the lives of thousands," said Muthanna Ahmed. He said he worked near the site for five months and witnessed summary executions. "It was terrifying, very deep and dark."

Ahmed said victims' shoes and dried blood lined its rim, while some decaying bodies that got caught on the sinkhole's rugged edge were still visible. A - gruesome video posted on YouTube in January 2015 shows a similar scene.

The sinkhole was near an Islamic State oil refinery, and the militants regularly rounded up workers and Mosul residents who were buying fuel to watch the execution-style killings. Victims included former

police and army officers, as well as those accused of spying or working with the Iraqi government, witnesses said.

Hussam al-Abar, a provincial council member, said 3,000 to 5,000 corpses might languish in its depths, though he bases that estimate on lists of missing people that he concedes could have been killed and buried somewhere else.

"Given the capacity of the central government and local government, I think it's impossible to take out the bodies," he said. "We'd need international assistance. It would be impossible for Iraqis alone."

[I thought, this is it: One man's escape from an Islamic State mass execution]

Before 2003, the sinkhole was a small tourist attraction, drawing travelers from the main Mosul-Baghdad highway a mile and a half away, Abar said. But as violence gripped Iraq in the wake of the invasion, al-Qaeda began to gain a foothold and the site became a desert grave.

"It was known that whoever wanted to hide a body could drop it in this hole," Abar said.

But it was not until after the Islamic State took control of Mosul in July 2014 that it started being used on an industrial scale.

Jassim Omar, 33, said he witnessed about 10 executions there. The first was about a month after the city fell to the militants. About 25 prisoners from Badush prison in Mosul were brought to the sinkhole and killed, he said.

"If you want to scare someone from Mosul, just mention the khasfa," he said.

The militants killed hundreds of the prison's inmates when they took over the city, according to human rights groups. Most of the victims were Shiites, Yazidis and Christians, all of whom the militants consider to be apostates, while

many Sunni inmates were allowed to go free.

In an execution-style killing in March or April of 2015, Omar recognized his cousin among a dozen detainees brought to the site in the back of a truck, blindfolded and bound. His cousin had worked for Mosul's local council before the militants took over and was accused of collaborating with the government.

"Whenever we went, we expected to see executions," he said. "But we were surprised to see our cousin. We just thought he'd been arrested."

He said he watched as the men were made to kneel and three or four militants shot them, while a few others pushed the bodies into the hole.

The stench could be smelled several miles away, he said.

The smell might have been what led the Islamic State to fill the hole in mid-2015. Residents of Athbah, the nearest village, had complained, and some had even left, said Jawad al-Shammari, a spokesman for the human rights committee, which has not yet sent a team to examine the site.

Residents said the Islamic State pushed dozens of trailers and old cars into the hole before filling it with earth, though some said mass killings at the site continued until as recently as six months ago.

Human Rights Watch, which began monitoring the site by satellite in September 2014, said the hole had been filled by July 2015, though fresh track marks appeared there until November 2016.

"It will take ages for them to decontaminate the site and excavate," said Belkis Wille, senior Iraq researcher for Human Rights Watch. "De-miners are rightly prioritizing decontaminating areas that displaced people are returning to."

With explosives planted in the area around it, the khasfa claimed its latest victims last week. Shifa Gardi,

a 30-year-old reporter for the Kurdish television channel Rudaw, died with a militia commander and

four other soldiers when the group set off a booby trap near the site.

The Washington Post

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

BEIRUT — Syrian government forces recaptured the historic city of Palmyra from the Islamic State on Thursday, aided by Lebanon's Hezbollah, the Russian military and, indirectly, U.S. airstrikes.

The government victory came nearly three months after the Islamic State marched back into the town in a surprise assault that appeared to have taken the Syrian army unawares.

The Syrian army announced in a statement read on state television Thursday evening that its forces were in complete control of Palmyra after a push on the town in recent days that saw Islamic State defenses rapidly collapse.

Today's WorldView

What's most important from where the world meets Washington

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The Islamic State surge into Palmyra in December was the first offensive conducted by the militants in more than 18 months and raised fears that they were on the advance

Hezbollah, Russia and the U.S. help Syria retake Palmyra

again. The relatively swift recapture by government loyalist forces suggested the surge was a temporary aberration, the result more of weakness on the part of a thinly spread Syrian army that has come to rely on foreign allies for its survival.

[Our journey to the front lines in the fight against ISIS]

Footage released by Syria's Central Military Media purportedly shows government forces approaching Palmyra as they attempt to retake the area from Islamic State militants. Syrian government forces enter Palmyra, drive back Islamic State (Reuters)

(Reuters)

The militants are on the retreat in multiple locations along their long, jagged front line with a variety of forces in Iraq and Syria, including in the Iraqi city of Mosul and on the outskirts of their self-proclaimed capital, Raqqa.

The offensive to retake Palmyra was supported by the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah, whose fighters have been instrumental in securing President Bashar al-Assad's survival over the past five years. A video that aired on the Hezbollah television

station Al-Manar showed Hezbollah fighters camping out in the desolate mountains surrounding Palmyra and advancing on the town through the sandy, stony wilderness.

The Syrian offensive was also aided by Russian airstrikes, according to Russian news reports quoting Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu. The Syrian army statement thanked Syria's "friends" for their help in the offensive, singling out Russia. Russian military intervention in 2015 sealed the survival of Assad by adding the muscle of Russian airstrikes to the manpower contributed by Iranian-backed militias on the ground.

The Syrian statement did not mention the role of the United States, which has also stepped up strikes in the Palmyra area in recent weeks. During the last 10 days of February, the U.S. military conducted 23 strikes against Islamic State fighting units, tanks, storage facilities and command centers, according to the daily tally issued by the U.S. Central Command. Altogether in February, U.S. warplanes carried out 45 strikes in Palmyra.

[Russian drone shows extent of the damage to Palmyra's Roman amphitheater]

The U.S. military has denied coordinating strikes directly either with Russia or the Syrian government but has said in the past that it is striking Palmyra to prevent military equipment captured by the Islamic State from being used by the militants in battles elsewhere against U.S.-backed forces.

This was the fourth time Palmyra has changed hands in less than two years, and each time its renowned ruins have been further damaged. Since capturing the city for a second time, the militants have claimed further attacks against its monuments.

It is still too early to tell how extensive the latest damage is. Photographs posted by a Russian news agency and widely shared on social media showed a Syrian soldier standing in the ruins of the Roman amphitheater, where a Russian orchestra played at a victory concert last year. Although part of the facade has crumbled and the theater is strewn with rubble, the amphitheater appears still to be largely intact.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Islamic State Hid Training Camp in Rail Tunnel Near Mosul

Ben Kesling and Awadh Altaie

Updated March 2, 2017 5:54 p.m. ET

MOSUL, Iraq—Islamic State built an obstacle course in an old railway tunnel where raw recruits crawled under barbed wire and scaled walls to begin their reshaping into seasoned fighters, according to Iraqi military officials who uncovered it.

The training camp, nicknamed Palmyra after the Syrian city, stretched more than a mile long in the train tunnel outside this city, once the militants' main Iraqi redoubt. The tunnel underwent extensive renovations, with tracks ripped out to make room for equipment including the obstacle course and a rudimentary shooting range. Islamic State recruits would run the course as instructors poked the ground around them with gunfire, Iraqi soldiers say.

"It's one of the terrorists' biggest camps," said Iraqi military

spokesman Col. Abdul Ameer, who estimated that more than 150 recruits could train there at a time. He said the well-equipped facility is the largest elite camp discovered so far in the offensive to dislodge Islamic State from its last strongholds in Iraq.

"It's obvious this camp was used only for the training of the elite militants and foreigners," Col. Ameer said. "We have seen and discovered camps before but not like this one."

The camp suggests how recruits underwent a brutal blend of physical hardship and indoctrination to become militants committed to defending Islamic State's self-declared caliphate across swaths of Iraq and Syria.

While some basic training is normal for any military or extremist group, this camp stood out for fusing religious belief and warfare, Iraqi officers said.

In a small mosque mid-tunnel, Islamic State self-printed religious

textbooks and copies of the caliphate's printed newspaper were spread across the floor. The publications sought to ensure recruits were exposed only to the group's philosophy, which justified their fight for a caliphate, or religious empire, to the death if necessary.

Along the walls of the converted train tunnel, painted slogans reminded recruits of sayings of Prophet Muhammad and exhortations to rise up against the unbeliever. Also along the walls was the same word painted in huge letters again and again: "baqiya" or remain. That is a main slogan of the militants, expressing their land-based claim to a religious empire.

Islamic State's loss of such a vital link in its security apparatus underlines its inability to hold territory as a U.S.-backed coalition of Iraqi forces and militias push to retake western Mosul. The Iraqi military retook the parts of the city east of the Tigris River from militants in late January. There destroyed infrastructure is being rebuilt, shops

are reopening and residents are trying to return to life as it was before the militants stormed in.

In recent days, Iraqi forces have engaged in street-to-street skirmishes with Islamic State. On Thursday Iraqi troops in western Mosul singled out a house with a sniper's nest and fired three rocket-propelled grenades at it with little success. They then loaded up a recoilless artillery piece and blasted away at the sniper, whose shooting ceased.

On the street below, civilians walked outside, cleaned up debris and chatted with Iraqi troops. The corpses of Islamic State fighters still littered the streets.

One fighter, identified by Iraqi troops as Abu Salim, a local Islamic State leader, lay dead near a courtyard. His leg had been tied up in a tourniquet made of a checkered kaffiyeh scarf, a militant medic's failed attempt to stop the bleeding.

At least some of those involved in Mosul's last stand likely received training at Palmyra, military officials say.

The railway tunnel was sandbagged extensively at each end to prevent damage from potential airstrikes and renovated completely to resemble a military compound more than a railway tunnel. The obstacle course,

**THE WALL
STREET
JOURNAL**

Syria Talks Face Hurdle—U.S. Disengagement

Yaroslav Trofimov

GENEVA—Peace talks between Syria's regime and opposition face a formidable obstacle: Until President Donald Trump's administration decides how to approach the six-year war, it makes little sense for anyone to compromise.

"It's very difficult to reach any political solution if there is not a positive, active and serious role of the U.S.A.," said Nasr Alhariri, head of the opposition delegation to the current round of talks now under way in Geneva.

After all, President Bashar al-Assad's regime holds out hope that Mr. Trump's eagerness to mend fences with Russia will lead Washington to further curtail support for the rebels.

The mostly Sunni opposition, meanwhile, counts on Mr. Trump's desire to roll back Iran, Mr. Assad's key backer that has flooded the country with Shiite militias from Lebanon, Iraq and beyond and that also backs Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Amid conflicting signals from Washington on what the actual policy toward Syria will be and when it will be formulated, both sides are for now united in wooing Mr. Trump.

"Personally I was very glad about the victory of Mr. Trump and the Republicans," said Mohammed Aloush, chief of the Islamist rebel group Army of Islam. "I believe they have the ability to bring change. Mr. Trump has stated

more than a half-mile long, has a climbing rope, a zip-line and pull-up bars for basic physical training. It also includes a mock-up of a small house where militants were taught urban-combat basics. At the end of the course, a sign pointed the way to the AK-47 shooting range inside the tunnel.

that he will limit the role of Iran and the Syrian revolution is the largest test for limiting Iran and for pushing it back to its own borders, away from Beirut, away from San'a and away from Damascus."

Mr. Assad, meanwhile, told Yahoo News last month that he would welcome American participation in the fight against terrorism in Syria if it is done in coordination with his government. He even appeared to support Mr. Trump's controversial travel ban on citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries including Syria.

While former President Barack Obama's administration micromanaged the largely fruitless Syrian peace process, with Secretary of State John Kerry personally engaging in the minutiae of negotiations, the Trump administration has so far stayed aloof. It sent only the U.S. ambassador in Kazakhstan to talks in Astana in late January. The U.S. special envoy for Syria Michael Ratney attended the first days of the Geneva talks as an observer, and the American role here so far has been largely limited to taking notes—leaving the playing field to the Russians, diplomats say.

A review of the U.S. campaign against Islamic State ordered by the White House is expected to bring more clarity about the overall American approach to Syria in coming weeks. "The U.S. remains committed to any process that can result in a political resolution to the Syrian crisis, which can bring about

Near a heavily sandbagged exit to the tunnel, the militants set up shower stalls and a medical clinic. "Please, brothers," read a typewritten note taped to the wall, imploring recruits not to linger when they should be training. "It is forbidden to sit inside the clinic."

Corrections & Amplifications
The Iraqi military found an Islamic

State training camp hidden in the tunnel near Mosul. An earlier version of this article bore a headline incorrectly stating that it was an Iraqi State training camp. (March 2, 2017)

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a more representative, peaceful, and united Syria, free of terrorism and violent extremism," a State Department official said. Meanwhile, the fact that Russia has turned into the principal power broker of the Syrian conflict has become largely accepted by the Syrian opposition. Rebel negotiators say they have detected a new desire by Moscow to find a political resolution now that the regime's strategic objective of seizing the rebel-held half of Aleppo, the country's biggest city, has been achieved.

"We know that Iran is our enemy and that the Shiite militias that try to change the demographics of Syria are our enemy. I don't think that Russia is OK with that and, at the end of the day, the Russians are not sectarian and want to end the war at the negotiating table," said Hind Kabawat, a member of the opposition delegation in Geneva. "If the Russians can force the regime to sit down and talk transition of power, then why not have the Russians as our partners?"

The question, however, is to what extent can Moscow actually control the behavior of the Assad regime—especially if the U.S. remains disengaged. Immediately after the Astana talks, Syrian opposition leaders and commanders were enthusiastic about local cease-fire deals negotiated with Moscow. Since then, however, many of these agreements collapsed, often because Iranian-

backed Shiite militias refused to honor them.

"The Russians have a lack of ability to deliver because the regime has a lack of ability to rein in these militias," said Free Syrian Army Maj. Issam el-Reyes, a military commander in southern Syria and an adviser to the opposition's Geneva delegation.

That's why even Moscow is troubled by the low level of American involvement in the Syrian peace process.

"The influence of Russia is not limitless on either side of the conflict, be it the government or the opposition," said Yelena Suponina, Middle East specialist at the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies, a state-run think tank in Moscow. "To achieve anything, we need to cooperate with the Americans, and I think, on their part, they could have gotten up to speed a bit faster. We have heard good rhetoric from Trump, but so far have seen no concrete actions."

Bassma Kodmani, a member of the opposition's negotiating team, put it differently.

"Bashar, backed by Iran, is resisting Russian pressures. And the Russians alone cannot fight the Iranians because they have roughly the same strength," she explained. "That's where the absence of America becomes very problematic."

**THE WALL
STREET
JOURNAL**

Syrian Troops Retake Palmyra From Islamic State

Noam Raydan and Raja Abdulrahim in Beirut and Nour Alakraa in Berlin

Updated March 2, 2017 4:36 p.m. ET

Russian-backed Syrian government troops on Thursday recaptured the historic city of Palmyra from Islamic State for the second time, the Syrian army said in a statement.

Islamic State fighters planted mines and explosives—a common tactic used by the extremist group as it is

pushed back in its Syrian and Iraqi strongholds—as they fled the advance, according to the army and the U.K.-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an opposition monitoring group. The troops were supported by Russian warplanes, they said.

The loss of Palmyra, a Unesco World Heritage site home to some of the region's oldest and most venerated historic sites, is the latest military setback for Islamic State. It has lost a number of key battles since 2015 and is now fighting for

control of Mosul, its remaining urban stronghold in Iraq. Turkish-backed rebels last month also captured the northern Syrian city of al-Bab from the group.

Islamic State had retaken Palmyra in December 2016, in what was seen as a resounding embarrassment for President Bashar al-Assad's forces and their Russian ally, after having driven the militants from the city that March.

The regime's second loss of Palmyra came in December as its forces, aided by foreign Shiite

Muslim militias, had been slowly regaining control of the city of Aleppo after months of intense fighting.

Even bolstered by domestic militias and thousands of foreign fighters, it has struggled to maintain a force capable of battling opposition rebels and Islamic State on multiple fronts.

Thursday's victory carries military and symbolic significance for the regime and key ally Moscow, both of whom have claimed to be fighting terrorism in Syria.

"The liberation of Palmyra is a powerful symbol of Syria's liberation from the infection of terrorism," Konstantin Kosachyov, head of the upper house of the Russian parliament's committee on foreign affairs, told the country's Interfax news agency.

Russia began backing Syrian forces in October 2015, with the stated goal of defeating terrorist groups in Syria. It has since been accused, including by Western officials, of using air power mainly to attack the more moderate rebel groups seeking to overthrow Mr. Assad.

Recapturing Palmyra "proves that the Syrian Arab Army in cooperation with [its] friends is the only effective

**THE WALL
STREET
JOURNAL.**

Yousef Al Otaiba

March 2, 2017 6:57 p.m. ET

When the Iranian nuclear deal took effect more than a year ago, there were high hopes that it would set Tehran on a new course of responsible engagement in world affairs. Instead, the country has chosen increased conflict and aggression. The Trump administration's early move to impose new sanctions on Iran was a measured reaction—long overdue and welcomed by all of America's friends in the region.

Iran's hostile behavior is only growing worse. There have been multiple interceptions of illicit Iranian weapons destined for Houthi rebels in Yemen. On New Year's Day, Iranian-backed militants in Bahrain organized a prison break of convicted terrorists. Later in January, Tehran tested a nuclear-capable ballistic missile, at least its 12th violation of a U.N. Security Council resolution barring such tests. Meanwhile, Iran has steadily escalated its support for the Houthis, prolonging a war that has had horrible humanitarian consequences and distracted from the fight against al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, one of the world's most dangerous terrorist franchises.

As Defense Secretary James Mattis said at his confirmation hearings, Iran is "the biggest destabilizing force in the Middle East." Last month he called the regime "the single biggest

force capable of countering and eradicating terrorism," the Syrian army said in its statement.

Syria's army "will continue to fight terrorism, specifically Daesh," said Talal al-Barazi, the governor of Homs province, where Palmyra is located.

The seizure of the historic site caused global outrage and concern about the fate of the ruins, including many statues and temples which Islamic State militants believe are forbidden by their extreme interpretation of Islam.

Islamic State first seized Palmyra in May 2015.

Al Otaiba : The Gulf States Are Ready for Peaceful Coexistence—if Iran Is

state sponsor of terrorism in the world." Last year Mr. Mattis said Iran had used the rise of Islamic State as an excuse "to continue its mischief."

Tehran promises more of the same. Gen. Hossein Salami, deputy commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, praised Iran's "great missile power" last month, saying: "We are adding to our numbers of missiles, warships, and rocket launchers every day."

What exactly does Iran want? Its constitution calls for exporting its Islamic-inspired revolution to the rest of the world. Its leaders talk of "Greater Persia"—a sphere of influence encompassing much of the Middle East. And "Death to America" remains a favorite rallying cry in Tehran.

Checking Iranian aggression will not be easy, but the stability of the region depends upon it. Holding the country to its commitments would be an important first step. Rebuilding America's ties to its traditional partners in the region would be another. So too would be directly confronting Iranian interference in places like Yemen.

Along with the U.S., the United Arab Emirates believes that the nuclear deal should be strictly enforced. The same is true for U.N. resolutions barring Iranian arms transfers and ballistic-missile tests. Violations ought to be exposed immediately and countered with additional economic sanctions.

Before the Syrian army's first recapture of the city, the militants had blown up parts of its historic landscape and destroyed the more than 2,000-year-old Temple of Bel, one of the region's most revered historic sites.

The destruction continued in their second hold on Palmyra. In January, they destroyed the Tetracylon, a cubic-shaped ancient Roman monument, and parts of the revered Roman Theater, according to Palmyra Monitor, a group of independent activists based in Turkey.

Islamic State's territorial foothold in Syria still includes large parts of the provinces of Raqqa—its de facto

capital—and the oil-rich eastern province of Deir Ezzour, where it is besieging the Syrian army. Deir Ezzour abuts Iraq and is a bridge between Islamic State's areas of control in the two countries.

The army and its allies will likely next move toward breaking the siege in Deir Ezzour, Mr. al-Barazi said, though he didn't give a time frame.

—Thomas Grove in Moscow contributed to this article.

Revitalizing security cooperation between the U.S. and the Arab Gulf states would have an immediate effect in Yemen. Increased American support for the Arab coalition would help combat the Houthis, who overthrew the legitimate government. It would help counter the thousands of Iranian-supplied missiles and rockets launched by the Houthis into Saudi Arabia. It would also help protect shipping in the Red Sea, a vital international waterway leading to the Suez Canal.

The effort in Yemen demonstrates that the U.A.E. and other Arab Gulf states are taking the lead to protect not only our own interests, but also American ones. Support from the U.S. is as vital as ever, but that does not necessarily mean we are seeking boots on the ground. It is more about determined leaders in Washington providing clear intentions and consistent policies.

When the U.S. is disengaged, conflicts like those in Syria, Libya and Yemen are prolonged and intensified. Aggressors like Iran, Islamic State and al Qaeda become more powerful and dangerous.

Further violence can be avoided. Iran could suspend its missile tests and its support for violent proxies like Hezbollah, Hamas and Al Hashd al Shaabi, Shiite militias in Iraq. It could end its sectarianism and its destabilizing actions in the Arab World. Tehran's leaders must ask themselves: Do we want to be part

of the solution or remain the region's biggest problem?

The U.A.E. and the other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council believe that engagement can achieve a long-term solution. In January the council proposed a direct strategic dialogue with Iran, resting on three principles: noninterference in other countries' domestic affairs, a halt to exporting the revolution, and a commitment to reducing Sunni-Shiite sectarianism.

We will persist in trying to convince Iranian leaders that peaceful coexistence is possible. The upside would be immense—greater trade and economic opportunities, expanded cultural exchanges, and an Iran that can assume its rightful place in the global community. The nuclear deal could have been a first step toward this future.

But Iran clearly has different ideas. With Washington now alert to the growing threat, we are making plans too. Among them is a renewed security partnership with the U.S., which would provide the basis for a collective and firm response to the Islamic Republic's provocations. It is an urgent and necessary effort to defend our shared interests and make us all safer and more secure.

Mr. Otaiba is the United Arab Emirates' ambassador to the U.S.

**THE WALL
STREET
JOURNAL.**

4:16 p.m. ET

Wave of U.S. Airstrikes Target al Qaeda Sites in Yemen

Gordon Lubold
March 2, 2017

WASHINGTON—The Pentagon conducted a series of airstrikes against al Qaeda operatives in Yemen overnight, in a sign of the U.S. military's growing interest in combating extremists there.

U.S. military officials said American forces carried out more than 20 "precision strikes" in Yemen against al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, targeting the group known as AQAP, early Thursday in Yemen.

The strikes, conducted by both drones and manned jet fighters, targeted AQAP militants, equipment and infrastructure as well as heavy weapons systems and AQAP fighting positions in the Abyan, al-

Bayda and Shabwah provinces, according to U.S. military officials.

The strikes were coordinated with the government of Yemen and President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, according to Capt. Jeff Davis, a spokesman for the Pentagon.

Yemen has been mired in instability for more than two years. The country's Shiite Houthis rebels took over the capital, San'a, in 2014, and are fighting a Saudi-led military coalition of mostly Sunni countries supporting Mr. Hadi.

AQAP and local branches of Islamic State have expanded amid the war, although the coalition evicted AQAP from its base in the southern city of Al Mukalla last year.

The U.S. military and Yemeni officials said they are still assessing the outcome of the strikes. Four al

Qaeda members were killed in one suspected American airstrike in Abyan province, according to local residents and officials.

The operation comes after a controversial military raid Jan. 29 in which a Navy SEAL, Chief Petty Officer William "Ryan" Owens, was killed, along with a number of civilians on the ground. The military also lost a \$70 million aircraft after it crash-landed and had to be destroyed so it didn't fall into the hands of militants.

After that raid, officials in Mr. Hadi's internationally recognized government complained that they hadn't been consulted and demanded greater coordination concerning activities on Yemeni soil.

U.S. military officials have said the Jan. 29 operation was not meant to target high-value militants, but was

aimed at gathering intelligence as part of an attempt by the U.S. military to get "back into the game in Yemen," according to one official, after U.S. special operations forces were removed from Yemen in 2015.

Intelligence gathered in the operation was expected to lead to other operations against the militant group. But U.S. military officials concede many things went wrong. Its critics, including Sen. John McCain (R., Ariz.), have said that it is hard to call it a success, clashing with the White House.

Military officials said the latest strikes in Yemen did not necessarily result from any intelligence gained on Jan. 29.

"This is part of a continuing series of strikes and raids against al Qaeda in the Arabian peninsula to help us understand how they operate," said

another senior military official. The official said previous operations have helped the U.S. military to "round out our understanding" of the AQAP network.

The strikes aimed to degrade the militant group's ability to conduct attacks outside the region and to use territory that it has seized from the government of Yemen "as a safe space for terror plotting," according to Capt. Davis.

The Pentagon said that AQAP has used ungoverned spaces inside Yemen to "plot, direct and inspire terror attacks" against the U.S. and its allies.

— Saleh al-Batati in Aden, Yemen, contributed to this article.

**The
Washington
Post**

Accelerating Yemen campaign, U.S. conducts flurry of strikes targeting al-Qaeda

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

The United States conducted a series of airstrikes on al-Qaeda targets in Yemen on Thursday, the Pentagon said, in another sign of the Trump administration's expanding counterterrorism campaign there.

Navy Capt. Jeff Davis, a Pentagon spokesman, said in a statement that the air attacks targeted "militants, equipment and infrastructure" associated with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in three Yemeni governorates: Abyan, Bayda and Shabwah.

A defense official, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss information that has not officially been made public, said there was a total of 25 strikes by manned and unmanned aircraft, far more attacks in a single night than the United States has conducted in recent history.

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While Pentagon officials denied Yemeni reports that the U.S. military conducted a ground raid in conjunction with the strikes, U.S. forces were on the ground in the same period, another possible indication of an accelerated offensive in Yemen. Those forces, however, did not conduct any raids, U.S. officials said.

"We have U.S. Special Operations forces that go in and out of Yemen to assist our partner forces in fighting al-Qaeda," Davis said. He declined to comment on specific activities overnight.

The flurry of activity, following a Jan. 29 raid by U.S. Special Operations forces, comes as the United States seeks to step up its approach to counteracting militancy in Yemen. The country is mired in a lengthy civil conflict that has pushed it to the brink of famine and enabled AQAP militants to expand their domain.

[A raid in remote Yemen and a SEAL's death still reverberate for Trump]

U.S. officials see AQAP, which has already tried to attack the United States directly, as one of the most dangerous militant threats they face. For months, the U.S. military has been eager to secure approval for steps that would restore an on-the-ground intelligence and a counterterrorism program that was largely shut down amid mounting instability in 2015.

Already, President Trump has shown himself willing to approve sensitive operations in Yemen, with the Jan. 29 raid that resulted in the death of a Navy SEAL, Chief Special Warfare Officer William "Ryan" Owens and, according to local reports, scores of civilians.

The military has also been seeking other authorities for operations in Yemen, including the ability to conduct sustained airstrikes in parts of Yemen and to take part in raids with elite forces from the United

Arab Emirates that are assigned to Yemen.

The defense official said that the military had been granted temporary authority to conduct intensified air operations against AQAP in some areas of Yemen. The granting of that authority for what is known in government jargon as an "area of active hostility" typically enables the military to launch strikes without a more lengthy approval process managed by the White House. It is similar to the authority the U.S. military was granted for the Libyan city of Sirte, where it conducted a multi-month air campaign against the Islamic State last year.

The official declined to say how long that temporary authority would last. If granted for an extended period, it could permit more-intensive strikes, such as those that occurred Thursday, over a sustained period.

Although the United States has conducted periodic strikes against AQAP in Yemen, they have mostly occurred in small numbers.

Military officials said it was not immediately clear how many people were injured or killed in Thursday's airstrikes, but local news media reported that "hundreds" of militants were slain.

Ramzi al-Fadhli, head of the government's special forces media office in Aden, described a multi-pronged air assault, which he said involved not only aircraft but also attacks from U.S. ships off Yemen's coast. In one instance, a car was struck near an area of Abyan province called Mowjan, killing all five passengers, he said. Senior

AQAP figures were thought to be among the dead.

[In deadly Yemen raid, a lesson for Trump's national security team]

Fadhli also said that Yemeni officials thought foreign soldiers, believed to be Americans, had conducted operations on the ground in Mowjan, which has been known as an AQAP stronghold. "Footprints from soldiers and police dogs have been seen in the area of Mowjan. . . . We are also looking into the purpose behind the American soldiers' landing in the area and what their mission was," he said.

Salem al-Marqashi, a tribal leader from the Mowjan area, said that helicopters brought forces from offshore locations early Thursday to an area called al-Nukhaila. "We believe that the soldiers were American because they came from the battleships, and it is known to the fishermen and locals in the area that the battleships in that area are American," Marqashi said. "The locals saw them from a distance of about one kilometer [0.6 miles] away."

He said locals did not detect any gunfire in the area and said the foreign forces left by helicopter "around dawn."

According to Saleh Abu Awdal, editor in chief of the Yemeni news website al-Yawm al-Thamen, residents of Mowjan reported the foreign troops to be from the UAE because of materials they left behind and said they departed shortly after arriving.

The United States partners closely in Yemen with UAE forces, as it did

in the raid in January that was the Trump's administration's first major counterterrorism operation and has generated criticism over the death of Owens as well as reported civilian deaths and a series of other mishaps.

The defense official said the airstrikes were not a result of intelligence

**The
New York
Times**

and Eric Schmitt

It could also leave the Pentagon to take the blame when things go wrong. But one Defense Department official pointed to comments by President Trump about the Yemen raid as a sign that military commanders would be held responsible for botched operations whether the president signed off on them or not.

Mr. Trump and Defense Department officials have maintained that the January raid — the first such operation approved by the new president — was successful, saying that valuable intelligence was collected. Military officials have been advocating an increase in raids in Yemen in particular.

On Thursday, the United States resumed its air attacks on targets in Yemen, conducting strikes against several suspected Qaeda sites across the south-central part of the country.

The coordinated series of attacks occurred in three Yemeni provinces — Abyan, Shabwa and Baydha — that have been linked to terrorist activity, according to the Pentagon. The strikes were conducted against targets that had been developed before the January raid, a senior official said.

On Monday, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis presented the White House, under Mr. Trump's directive, with a series of options for accelerating the fight against the Islamic State. Pentagon officials say that while much of the proposal would continue what the United States was doing under President Barack Obama, Mr. Mattis and senior military commanders want to target not just the

gleaned from that raid, which targeted an AQAP compound in central Yemen. The Jan. 29 operation was described as an intelligence-gathering raid. He said it yielded "terabytes of data," SIM cards, cellphones and other materials providing officials the names and telephone numbers of

Islamic State, but also Al Qaeda and other extremist organizations in the Middle East.

The proposal on counterterrorism raids, first reported by the Daily Beast, is the latest step in Mr. Trump's increased reliance on military commanders to run American national security policy. Mr. Trump has become increasingly reliant on Mr. Mattis, a retired Marine general, upon whom he consistently lavishes praise. He has also appointed Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster as his national security adviser, to replace a retired general, Michael T. Flynn. His Homeland Security secretary is yet another retired general, John F. Kelly.

"We're at a point now in our nation where general officers have an outside role in the direction of the country," said Andrew Exum, a retired Army Ranger and a Defense Department official in the Obama administration.

Still, Mr. Trump has already shown himself willing to blame the generals when things go wrong. On Tuesday, he told Fox News that the Jan. 29 Yemen mission that led to the death of the Navy SEAL team member, Senior Chief Petty Officer William Owens, known as Ryan, "was a mission that was started before I got here." He added that "my generals are the most respected that we've had in many decades, I believe, and they lost Ryan."

Jon B. Alterman, the director of the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said that the administration faced a delicate calculation over how much authority to cede to the generals.

"One extreme," he said, is "giving 20-somethings in the White House

hundreds of contacts inside and outside of Yemen.

"We consider it to be a very valuable take," the official said. Officials continue to mine that material for information they can use against AQAP.

veto power over generals in the field." That should be avoided, he said. "At the same time," he added, "if you're going to target and kill someone, there needs to be some kind of process to ensure that it serves a strategic purpose. We shouldn't be comfortable with the other extreme, essentially handing out death sentences without much deliberation."

Capt. Jeff Davis, a Pentagon spokesman, said that the strikes on Thursday in Yemen, which numbered more than 20, were "conducted in partnership with the government of Yemen and were coordinated" with President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Captain Davis said the attacks had targeted Qaeda militants, equipment and infrastructure.

After the January raid, Mr. Hadi's government had withdrawn permission for the United States to conduct Special Operations ground missions, a decision prompted by anger at the civilian casualties incurred in the raid.

Computers and cellphones seized during that raid offered clues about attacks that Al Qaeda might be planning, including insights into new types of hidden explosives that the group is making and new training tactics, American officials said.

But it is still unclear how much the information advances the military's knowledge of the plans of Al Qaeda's branch in Yemen, and some intelligence and congressional officials have questioned how significant the information analyzed so far really is.

"There are obvious contradictions about the relative value of intelligence," said Senator Kamala D. Harris, a California Democrat on

But other officials remain skeptical about the significance of the material recovered.

Sudarsan Raghavan in Cairo contributed to this report. Mujahed reported from Sanaa, Yemen.

the Intelligence Committee, who added in an interview this week that she would be seeking more explanations from intelligence officials.

According to a Yemeni military official, the airstrikes on Thursday in the Abyan mountains began around 3:30 a.m. local time.

The local news media reported that at least three people suspected of being Qaeda members were killed in Shabwa Province. Residents near the scene in the Saeid region said an airstrike had destroyed a house used by Qaeda operatives.

The death of Chief Owens came after a chain of miscues and misjudgments that plunged the elite forces into a ferocious 50-minute firefight with Qaeda militants in a mountainous village in central Yemen. Three other Americans were wounded, and a \$75 million aircraft was deliberately destroyed.

A month later, the mission remains under intense scrutiny, with questions unabated over the casualties, how Mr. Trump and his aides approved the raid over a dinner meeting at the White House five days into his presidency, and the value of the information collected from the raid.

"It is reasonable for the White House to determine which decisions they need to be part of and which ones they are comfortable deferring to the Pentagon," said Derek Chollet, an assistant secretary of defense in the Obama administration. "But a president has to think very carefully about this, because he may choose to delegate authority, but he cannot absolve himself of responsibility."

**The
New York
Times**

Chris Buckley

Mr. Xi's immediate goal appears to be opening the way to retaining Wang Qishan, who has led his signature anticorruption drive and become one of the most powerful and feared officials in China, those people and other observers said. Mr. Wang, who is 68, could be

Xi Jinping, Seeking to Extend Power, May Bend Retirement Rules (UNE)

Chris Buckley

forced to step down this year if the informal age ceiling holds.

But keeping Mr. Wang in place would also create an example that Mr. Xi could follow to stay in power after his two terms as president end in 2023. Already, news that Mr. Xi may delay choosing his successor

has fanned speculation that he wants to prolong his hold on power.

Mr. Wang's fate has become one of the most intensely followed parts of the secretive maneuvering ahead of a Communist Party leadership shake-up late this year and is likely to be a topic of back-room speculation when the national

legislature convenes here on Sunday.

Mr. Wang's staying on is a strong possibility, though not a certainty, said a retired Chinese official who knows several leaders, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss elite political deliberations. He said that Mr. Xi said that the age

rule was not absolute, which was understood by officials to mean that he wanted Mr. Wang to be considered for the next term.

The blunt and combative Mr. Wang is an old friend of Mr. Xi's. Since 2012, Mr. Wang has led the Communist Party's discipline commission, overseeing the anticorruption campaign that has been a crowning feat of Mr. Xi's tenure. Mr. Wang also expanded the commission's role in policing loyalty to the party leader, making him a top political enforcer for Mr. Xi.

Along with his allegiance to Mr. Xi, Mr. Wang's diverse achievements — including as deputy prime minister, mayor of Beijing and one of the government's top financial firefighters — have fueled talk that Mr. Xi may want to install him as prime minister, shunting aside Li Keqiang, who was not Mr. Xi's pick for the job.

A party congress this fall will almost certainly reappoint Mr. Xi as party general secretary for five more years and appoint a new team to serve under him. Five of seven members of the Politburo Standing Committee must retire then under the current age limits, including Mr. Wang.

But the rule, known as “seven up, eight down,” is not codified in any public documents. It says members of the Politburo Standing Committee who are 68 or older when the party congress meets every five years will retire, while officials 67 or younger remain in contention for the next term.

The retirement age has been changed for political ends before. In 1997, President Jiang Zemin imposed a ceiling of 70 to dispense with one rival, and five years later reduced it to 68 to push out another. (He made an exception for himself, staying on as party leader until he was 76.)

“The rules for succession are all unwritten and largely up for negotiation,” said Kerry Brown, a professor of Chinese studies at King's College, London. “All Xi has

to do is play the ‘exceptional times need exceptional remedies’ card.”

But while Mr. Xi is formidable, he may have to make trade-offs. Mr. Wang's chances of staying on may not survive the bartering among the party elite who choose the new lineup.

In particular, Mr. Xi may face suspicions that he wants to use Mr. Wang as a stalking horse for keeping power beyond the usual two terms as top leader. That, too, is an informal rule that has developed since the 1990s, when Deng Xiaoping sought to prevent another dictator-for-life like Mao.

By law, Mr. Xi can serve only two terms as president, but no law prevents him from retaining the more powerful post of party leader or some other position. Mr. Xi will turn 69 in 2022 when his second term as party general secretary ends.

Neither Mr. Xi nor Mr. Wang has said anything publicly about his plans. That would be nearly unthinkable hubris in the shadow play of Chinese politics, where ambition and power plays come cloaked in high-minded rhetoric and rules.

But the talk about Mr. Wang took off last October, when a party official, Deng Maosheng, told foreign reporters in Beijing that the age rule was not set in stone.

“The strict boundaries of ‘seven up, eight down’ don't exist,” he said, according to Bloomberg. “This is something from folklore.”

At the time, it was unclear whether Mr. Deng was echoing the views at the top of the party. His comments were not reported in Chinese media.

But before Mr. Deng's public remarks, Mr. Xi had said behind closed doors that the age rule was “not absolute,” said the former official who knows several members of the party leadership.

His account was corroborated by a former American official with extensive high-level contacts in China. He spoke on condition of

anonymity to protect those contacts. He said two people who meet with senior leaders had told him that Mr. Xi had played down the “seven up, eight down” rule.

Both unnamed sources said that, as far as they knew, Mr. Xi had not yet expressly demanded that Mr. Wang be kept on. Instead, by raising the age issue, Mr. Xi has signaled that Mr. Wang should be considered in discussions over coming months.

The bond between Mr. Xi and Mr. Wang goes back about five decades to Mao's turbulent Cultural Revolution, when they were both sent from Beijing to work in the dusty, poor hill country of northwestern China. Mr. Wang worked on a commune 50 miles from Mr. Xi, who has recalled visiting Mr. Wang for a night and giving him a book on economics.

After Deng Xiaoping began to free up the economy in the late 1970s, Mr. Wang abandoned a nascent career as a historian and became an expert on economic reforms. In the 1990s and early 2000s he took a series of government jobs cleaning up financial messes.

As deputy prime minister from 2008 to 2013, he was a crucial player in economic talks with the United States. After the global financial crisis erupted, he led a group of officials assigned to design China's response.

“You were my teacher,” Mr. Wang told Henry M. Paulson Jr., a Treasury secretary under President George W. Bush, Mr. Paulson wrote in a book on dealing with China. “We aren't sure we should be learning from you anymore.”

Mr. Wang also displays a deep red streak of faith in authoritarian one-party rule not so far from Mr. Xi's convictions.

“Wang is pragmatic and cleareyed,” said Trey McArver, the director of China research for TS Lombard, an investment research company. “But it's a mistake to see him as a liberal free-marketeteer. Rather, he is a reformer in the Chinese sense of the word. He will seek to increase the

efficiency of the state-controlled system.”

Some in Beijing say they believe that with China's economy slowing and straining under debt, and President Trump threatening to curb Chinese exports, Mr. Xi could make a case for making Mr. Wang prime minister.

“It seems clear to me that Xi would trust Wang more than Li and, as we know, Li was not Xi's choice,” said Tony Saich, a professor at Harvard who specializes in Chinese politics. “The replacement of Li by Wang might provide a chance to kick-start stalled reforms after the next congress.”

Most insiders consider the move unlikely, however. Mr. Wang would be reluctant to take the job unless Mr. Xi gave him a bigger say over the economy, said Deng Yuwen, a commentator in Beijing who formerly edited a party newspaper. Mr. Xi might be unwilling to share that power.

“The reason Li can't get much done is that everyone knows where the real power is,” Mr. Deng said. “Wang Qishan would certainly want to be more like a traditional premier, with more power over the major economic decisions.”

The retired official said that Mr. Wang had told friends that he was ready to retire at the end of the year. But Mr. Wang has also said he never expected to become the head of the party's anticorruption agency, and has warned officials always to be prepared for unexpected tasks.

“Look it up, before the 18th Party Congress, nobody expected it, inside and outside the party, here and abroad, when Wang Qishan became the central discipline inspection commission secretary,” Mr. Wang told officials in a video that leaked online last year. “What's the Communist Party about? You do whatever the party tells you.”

thousands of jobs, as well as heat and electrical power.

Already the blockaders have forced a mine and a steel plant in the separatist region to shut down. And economists say half a million jobs and a total of \$3.5 billion in revenue from steel exports depend on the coal trains. Some of that money ends up in the coffers of the breakaway regions.

The New York Times Ukraine ‘Blockaders’ Try to Cut Off Rail Traffic From Rebel Areas

Andrew Kramer

E.

but also is a major source of income for the Russian-backed eastern republics.

The idea, which has animated Ukrainian nationalist circles, is to force the financing of the breakaway regions and their three million or so inhabitants onto Russia's already weak economy by breaking ties with Ukraine's industrial base.

“Putin wants us to finance the war he started,” Volodymyr Parasiuk, a member of Parliament and one of the movement's leaders, said in a telephone interview, referring to the Russian president, Vladimir V. Putin. “He wants the republics to finance themselves, by selling coal.”

The government in Kiev says that the country — western as well as eastern parts — depends on the coal trade for hundreds of

The blockaders, as they call themselves, are a relatively new movement but are already becoming relevant to the delicate politics of peace in Ukraine, seemingly a focus of the Trump administration as it seeks to establish warmer ties with Russia. Their primary goal is to cut off the trains carrying coal from the east that powers industry in the west

The blockaders say the club-wielding men in the video were thugs hired by the coal industry. Three people were wounded, including one man who suffered a broken leg. Ukrainian government police arrested 37 people, mostly the hired thugs.

It is unclear how many people are involved in the blockade effort. The groups of mostly war veterans are not formally affiliated with any political parties or the government. For a month now, usually armed with hunting rifles and clubs, they have blocked railroad tracks that cross the de facto border into the pro-Russian areas, warming themselves by campfires and shooing away the police.

In their camps along the railway tracks, they wear smudged camouflage and tattered winter coats, like hobos with a geopolitical agenda. At one spot, the men have welded the wheels of a coal train to the tracks, locking it in place and, naturally, preventing other trains

from passing.

In a remarkable example of big business emerging unscathed from the war, the companies of Rinat Akhmetov, a coal and steel tycoon who is Ukraine's richest man, have managed to move goods over the border in both directions, without interference from either army. Bloomberg recently estimated Mr. Akhmetov's net worth at \$3.6 billion.

A spokesman for Mr. Akhmetov emphasized the trade was legal and kept people on both sides employed. "We believe that private property is sovereign," Mr. Akhmetov's company, SCM Group, said in a statement Thursday.

Reintegrating the separatist regions economically is a requirement of the peace process, known as the Minsk accords, that were signed in February 2015 but never carried out. The agreement also requires that Russia withdraw its unacknowledged military force in Ukraine, referred to diplomatically as the "foreign" force in the region.

On Wednesday, the Ukrainian cabinet tried to defuse the crisis with a decree limiting trade with the enemy to food, medicine and other humanitarian goods, but also coal, recognizing that it is essential for Ukrainian industry.

The interior minister, Arsen Avakov, has condemned the blockade as illegal. But there is little the government can do short of confronting the armed war veterans on the railroad tracks. That is something the government is deeply reluctant to do: Some of the men involved, including Mr. Parasiuk, are still recognized by the public as heroes of the 2014 street fighting that brought down the government of President Viktor F. Yanukovich.

And the movement seems to be picking up political support in Kiev. Aliona I. Shkrum, a member of Parliament with the opposition Fatherland party, said the blockade does not violate international law, in contrast to sieges enforced by the Syrian government against rebel areas there, so long as food and

medicine are allowed through, as they are now.

Many of these activists already rue the compromises that the government of President Petro O. Poroshenko, who replaced Mr. Yanukovich, agreed to with Moscow in earlier peace deals, particularly what they see as a commitment to reintegrate the region politically and economically and stage elections before Russian troops leave.

Any potential peace deal with the Trump administration seen as favoring Russia will only aggravate these tensions, inciting more rebellion among a hardened group of protesters.

"Ukrainians have an idealistic idea of resistance," said Mr. Parasiuk, the member of Parliament who is supporting the blockaders.



Schrad: Russia Heats Up Its Infowar With the West

Mark Lawrence
Schrad

If you think last year was bad, there's worse to come as Moscow's new 'information operations' military unit gets rolling.

When it comes to Russian propaganda, we haven't seen anything yet.

Over the past several months, Americans have become acutely aware of a phenomenon that Europeans were already all too familiar with: the pervasive, corrosive nature of Russian propaganda. Russia's purported attempts to meddle in the U.S. presidential election remain a major topic of national debate—one that could, even now, lead to fresh Congressional investigations and a political showdown between Capitol Hill and the new White House.

Yet the scope of Russia's propaganda machine is still poorly understood by most Americans. Many may by now be familiar with Moscow's highest profile media outlets, like television channel RT (which the Russian government funds to the tune of some \$250 million annually) and the flashy Sputnik "news" multimedia website (which is likewise lavishly bankrolled by the Kremlin). But the full range of Russia's information operations are still truly appreciated only by the small cadre of foreign policy and national security professionals who have been forced to grapple with their far-reaching and negative effects.

That effort is enormous, encompassing billions of dollars and dozens of domestic and international media outlets in an architecture that dwarfs the disinformation offensive marshaled against the West by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Its objective is clear and unequivocal: to obscure objective facts through a veritable "firehose of falsehood," thereby creating doubt in Western governments, undermining trust in democratic institutions, and garnering greater sympathy for the Russian government (or, at least, greater freedom of action) for its actions abroad.

Last month, in a presentation before the Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu formally unveiled the establishment of a new military unit designed to conduct "information operations" against the country's adversaries. The goal of the new initiative, according to Vladimir Shamanov, head of the Duma's defense committee, is to "protect the national defense interests and engage in information warfare."

Not much is known about the newly formed corps, at least so far. In his presentation, Shoigu did not elaborate on the mandate of the new unit, or its size. (The overall number of active duty Russian information operation troops has been estimated at around 1,000, with a budget of approximately \$300 million annually). Nevertheless, the announcement is significant for at least two reasons.

First, it marks the culmination of a steady militarization of Russian propaganda. Once seen largely as a political strategy designed to shape foreign perceptions about Soviet (and later Russian) conduct abroad, disinformation (*dezinformatsiya* in Russian) has progressively taken on a distinctly martial character.

In 2013, Russia's Defense Ministry reportedly established a dedicated "scientific company" with the mandate to train soldiers in information operations. Since that time, the Russian military has waded into the informational space with a vengeance, taking on an extensive—and aggressive—role in molding foreign opinion and perceptions. Today, in keeping with the country's 2014 Defense Doctrine, the manipulation of "information" has become a critical element of Russian military strategy.

This *dezinformatsiya* has been used to great effect in Ukraine, with which Russia precipitated a conflict in 2014 and where Moscow continues to support pro-Russian separatists in their attempt to destabilize the state. Throughout that time, Moscow has used media manipulation to obscure the full extent of its involvement in the crisis, and to complicate the West's response to it. In Syria, too, the Russian military has taken on an extensive role in molding perceptions regarding the conflict via social media and other news methods. By doing so, the Kremlin has largely succeeded in capturing the popular narrative regarding what, exactly, it is doing on the Syrian battlefield. Both of

these efforts, and others, can now be expected to intensify.

But Moscow's new military propaganda unit is significant for another reason as well. It foreshadows an intensification of Russia's "infowar" against the West. In recent years, Russian propaganda has become a pervasive problem throughout Europe, where Kremlin-owned and—sponsored media outlets have attempted to empower fringe political parties, discredit pro-Western politicians, and promote Moscow's vision of world events (PDF). They have also, through "fake news" stories and political mischaracterization, repeatedly sought to drive a wedge among members of the NATO alliance, which Moscow sees as a real threat to its geopolitical ambitions.

Now, this informational offensive is poised to enter a new phase. "Propaganda should be smart, competent, and effective," Shoigu emphasized while inaugurating the country's new informational shock troops. Clearly, Russian officials believe that their new military propaganda force is a step in that direction. Just as clearly, the United States and its NATO allies should consider themselves to have officially been put on notice.



Vladimir Putin Isn't a Supervillain

Paul McLeary |
29 mins ago

America's hysteria over Russian President Vladimir Putin is mounting, and there's no reason to think the fever will break anytime soon. At this point it's only tangentially related to the accusations that Putin has made President Donald Trump his "puppet" or that Trump — or Attorney General Jeff Sessions, or any number of other administration officials — is in cahoots with Russian oligarchs.

Perhaps you've heard about the sudden death of Russia's U.N. ambassador, Vitaly Churkin? It's all nefarious Kremlin intrigues — or so we're told. In fact, a lot of Russian diplomats have died recently — isn't that suspicious? And don't look now, but while you were fixated on Russia's subversion of American society through psychological warfare, you may have missed that Russia's expanding its influence in Syria. And provoking Japan. And meddling with Britain. And it's sowing "chaos" in the Balkans. And the Baltics. And Ukraine. And may invade Belarus. And Finland. And if that weren't enough, Putin has a "master plan" for overthrowing the entire European and world democratic order. We might as well give up: Russia "runs the world now."

With such bombast dominating American political discourse, citizens and pundits rightly worry about the potential for geopolitical competition from Russia. But is Putin's regime really as threatening and omnipresent as it is cracked up to be?

Western commentary on the Kremlin's foreign-policy ambitions tends to fall into two opposing camps, each with different starting points: One begins with Russia's foreign policy, the other with Russian domestic politics. Both are prone to hyperbole in their appraisals and conclusions, albeit in different directions. And neither is useful for understanding, or responding to, the reality of Russian ambitions.

I call the first camp "Putler," a mashup of Putin and Adolf Hitler, the two leaders whom Western commentators seem most fond of pairing. Largely a result of Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and intervention in the Donbass, this lens portrays Russia as the foremost threat to liberal democracy: a scary, aggressive, expansionist, revanchist reincarnation of the Soviet Union, equating Putin with the worst

excesses of authoritarianism. Rooted in 20th-century historical analogies, specifically World War II, this camp implicitly prescribes military confrontation: Anything less, including economic sanctions, is weak-kneed, Chamberlainesque appeasement, to evoke the Hitlerite comparison.

Another favored historical analogy for Putler adherents is the Cold War. For many observers, it is a given that we are already grappling in a life-and-death "Cold War 2.0" (just without, they neglect to mention, the ideology of communism, the nuclear arms race, realist power balancing, global competition for proxies, or any of the other elements that defined the original Cold War). House Speaker Paul Ryan's recent reference to Russia as a "global menace led by a man who is menacing" falls squarely within this school of thinking, along with his rejoinder that President Barack Obama's sanctions followed "too much of an appeasement policy."

Turning from geopolitical ambitions to Russian domestic policy, the Putler worldview tends to highlight Putin's consolidation of autocratic control, fraudulent elections, his harassment and murder of opposition journalists, curtailing of civil liberties, and his use of disinformation through state-run media to disorient and control the public. It is a portrait of Putin as an unrestrained totalitarian, intent on weaponizing "absurdity and unreality." Such appraisals often border on the hysterical, but one imagines they draw a lot of internet traffic.

At the other end of the spectrum from the Putler worldview is the "Dying Bear" camp. This approach is dismissive of Russia as a threat; its adherents instead presage stagnation, corruption, and decline. The term originated with demographers, discouraged by Russia's dim health prospects, but could reasonably include its political, social, and economic limitations as well. To be sure, Russia's health and demographic statistics lag far behind those of Western Europe and the United States, with relatively high mortality rates, relatively low fertility rates, and average life expectancy on par with impoverished African countries. In the medium and long term, that means demographic decline: Fewer Russians means fewer taxpayers, fewer conscripts, and fewer state resources; all exert downward pressure on Russia's growth potential. There are a bevy of other limitations on Russia's potential for future economic growth: an

undiversified economy cursed with an overreliance on resource extraction; a lumbering, systematically corrupt, and growing state bureaucracy that impedes entrepreneurship; technological backwardness; and a kleptocratic political system that rewards cronyism and penalizes development. Without economic diversification and freedom, we're told, Russia's economy has hit "rock bottom." Groaning under the weight of Western sanctions and low global oil prices, Russia's own Economic Development Ministry is forecasting no real improvement in living standards until 2035.

For some in the Dying Bear camp, Russia's foreign-policy aggression — including its incursions into Ukraine and Syria — is just Putin's attempt to distract patriotic Russians from the misery of their own existence and have them rally around the flag of patriotism, since he can't deliver the performance legitimacy associated with the economic growth of the early 2000s, driven by sky-high global oil prices. While the Putler perspective calls for confrontation, Dying Bear prescribes management or marginalization, if not disengagement: Why bother taking Russia seriously if it's doomed anyway?

President Obama's dismissive public statements about Russia being at best a "regional power," or a "weaker country" that doesn't produce anything worth buying "except oil and gas and arms," and that its international interventions are borne "not out of strength but out of weakness" are all reflective of the Dying Bear position.

The reality, of course, is somewhere between these extremes.

Russia is not nearly the global menace that many fear, nor is it doomed to collapse.

Russia is not nearly the global menace that many fear, nor is it doomed to collapse. Russia's geopolitical strength is indeed constrained by its demographic, economic, social, and political weaknesses, but those aren't as catastrophic as they're often made to be. Russians today are healthier and living longer than they ever have. Though having ever fewer women of childbearing age presages long-term demographic decline, with births outpacing deaths, Russia's population has recently registered natural growth for the first time since the collapse of communism.

Economically, the ruble has stabilized following the collapse of

late 2014, and the recession of 2014-2015 is statistically over. However, Russia isn't out of the woods, with low oil prices leading to dwindling state revenue, and little private investment for the foreseeable future, which will inevitably mean stagnation and low growth. Russia's economic performance is so intimately tied to public spending that any curtailment of spending despite dwindling oil receipts would reverberate throughout the economy. And the economy ultimately constrains its political options. Although Putin's geopolitical gambits in Ukraine and Syria can boost his approval ratings, they come at the expense of increasing poverty and unpaid wages, which are fueling a notable rise in labor protests nationwide. While presently manageable, the Kremlin will need to address these socio-economic issues in order to maintain domestic tranquility, limiting its resources for foreign adventurism in Syria, Ukraine, and beyond, to say nothing of investments in health care, education, science, and infrastructure. Russia can't have it all.

So, despite its high-level meddling in American affairs, for the foreseeable future, Russia is poised to continue to muddle through, with economic and demographic stagnation constraining its lofty geopolitical ambitions. Unsurprisingly, the Russia of 2020 will look more like the Russia of 2012 or 2016, rather than the expansionist Soviet Union of 1944 or the collapsing Soviet Union of 1991. Accordingly, American foreign policy toward Russia should not be given to the militarization and conflict of the Putler camp, nor to the marginalization of the Dying Bear view, but rather a respectful engagement, recognizing the interconnectedness of Russia's varied strategic interests, which may conflict with Washington's own.

The problem, though, is that stasis isn't a particularly sexy prognosis, which means it is not a frequently made one. There are two reasons for this. First is a lack of nuanced understanding of Russian governance. Most experts know what liberal democracy looks like and — if we believe democratization scholarship (and there is good reason for skepticism, especially in the Trump era) — that once "consolidated," democracies are robust and durable. We also understand that autocracies can be reasonably stable, too: just look at the longevity of Fidel Castro's reign in Cuba or the Kim dynasty in North

Korea. But we have a harder time understanding a polity like present-day Russia, which is neither fully democratic nor fully autocratic. For a long time, democratization theorists have struggled to understand this sort of neither/nor “illiberal democracy” or “competitive authoritarian” regimes like Russia that combine democratic and nondemocratic elements. If liberal democracy is understood to be the optimal endpoint, then it is understandable to assume that

Russia is just “stuck” in transition, rather than having achieved something of a stable equilibrium in its own right.

Second, still haunted by Kremlinologists’ fabled inability to foresee one of the most significant geopolitical events of the 20th century — the collapse of communism and the Soviet Union — Russia watchers now appear to be hypersensitive to any economic or social clue that may portend trouble

for the Putin regime. When the global financial crisis rocked Russia in 2008, we were told it was “the end of the Putin era.” When popular protests opposed his re-election in 2011-2012, experts called it “the beginning of the end of Putin.” The Euromaidan revolution in next-door Ukraine likewise allegedly portended “the end of Vladimir Putin.” As it turns out, competitive authoritarian regimes in general, and Putin’s Russia in particular, tend to be surprisingly durable.

With Russia’s new prominence in American political discourse, it is necessary to have a sober assessment of the country’s capabilities and limitations. Russia is neither the juggernaut nor basket case it is variously made out to be. A well-reasoned Russia policy begins by quelling one’s hysteria long enough to recognize this and then engaging it accordingly.



Max Boot: Putin's best-laid plans are failing

I recently asked some Chinese officials what they thought of Vladimir Putin’s intervention in the 2016 U.S. election. Was this a smart thing to do? Will other countries — like China — emulate Russia’s example? After some hemming and hawing, and obligatory disavowals that there is no proof of Russian complicity, they said something pretty interesting: that Russia made a mistake. They have learned, they told me, that American politics is like a seesaw — if you tip one end, the other goes up in the air. The Russians have leaned hard on the executive branch, and as a result of that Congress is turning more anti-Russian. It is much wiser, they suggested, to follow a policy of non-interference in other nations’ internal affairs.

A cynic could easily point out that in years past, China sponsored communist insurgencies in places such as Malaysia, Vietnam and Korea, which hardly hewed to the principle of non-intervention. A realist could also note that the Chinese, coming from a country that continues to grow in wealth and power, can afford to take the long view, whereas Putin presides over a declining state and so must maximize its influence while he can. But there is a good deal of wisdom in the Chinese reaction because Putin’s intervention does seem to be backfiring, even if it’s far from a total loss.

A few months ago, it was reasonable to fear that a pro-Putin president would be presiding over a pro-Putin team — including national security adviser Michael Flynn, who accepted \$40,000 to attend a banquet in Moscow with Putin, and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who was once awarded an Order of Friendship by Putin — and that together they’d lift sanctions on Russia, dismantle NATO and let Russia have its way with Eastern Europe. It is not clear why this hasn’t happened, but surely part of the reason is that the Kremlingate scandal has made it impossible for Trump to make “good deals” with Putin, as he has said he’d love to do.

If Trump were to lift sanctions under the current circumstances, there is a good chance Congress would reimpose them; indeed a bipartisan group of senators has already introduced legislation that would take away presidential discretion in this matter. More than that: If Trump were to lift sanctions after the daily drumbeat of Kremlingate disclosures (including Wednesday’s news that Attorney General Jeff Sessions was not being truthful in denying he had any meetings with Russian representatives), the president would be at serious risk of impeachment — if not now, then if and when Democrats regain control of Congress.

Trump for the time being is continuing the policy of punishing

Russia for its invasion of Ukraine. He is also surrounding himself with appointees such as Defense Secretary James Mattis and new national security adviser H.R. McMaster, who take a much less benign view of Putin than the president does. The National Security Council has just hired as its top Russia hand Fiona Hill, a well-respected scholar at the Brookings Institution who has a hard-line view on Putin.

This, surely, is not what the Russian president bargained for. On the other hand, the situation is not all bad from his vantage point. No doubt Putin’s first preference would be to have a U.S. president who implements a pro-Russian agenda. But he is also happy to avoid one who is, in his perception at least, anti-Russian — and that is how he viewed Hillary Clinton. Moreover, Putin benefits from an incompetent U.S. president whose administration is plagued by turmoil and uncertainty, and he certainly has that at the moment.

After six weeks in office, Trump is already on his second national security adviser, and he has not filled any of the key posts at the Departments of State and Defense beneath the Cabinet level. Indeed, there’s pretty much no one home throughout the government — of 549 confirmable positions in the administration, Trump has nominated only 33 people, leaving 94% unfilled. *Atlantic* reporter Julia

loffé visited the State Department and found it “adrift and listless,” with career employees not knowing what they are supposed to do. That makes it difficult for the U.S. government to respond to moves such as Russia’s continuing aggression in Ukraine or its suspected attempts to manipulate elections in France, Holland and Germany.

POLICING THE USA: A look at race, justice, media

Trump has also been weakened by his high unpopularity ratings — his poll numbers have turned negative faster than any previous president — and by Kremlingate, which has already cost him his first national security adviser and might yet cost him his attorney general. A weak America led by a disorganized president is a godsend for anti-American states such as Russia.

Putin’s intervention arguably helped install that president. Just because it hasn’t worked as well as PУtin might have hoped doesn’t make it any less dangerous. It was an assault on American democracy, and we must get to the bottom of the whole affair. Sessions’ decision to recuse himself from all investigations involving presidential campaigns was a good start. Now we need a special counsel to lead a credible inquiry.



Editorial : Jeff Sessions – Russia Controversy

Congressional Democrats, including Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer, are calling on Attorney General Jeff Sessions to resign following reports that he was in touch with Russia’s ambassador twice during last year’s presidential campaign. Pointing to Sessions’s failure to disclose these contacts during his recent confirmation hearings, House minority leader Nancy Pelosi, among others, is accusing him of lying under oath.

The available facts suggest otherwise. According to the Justice Department, the former Alabama senator met briefly with a group of ambassadors following his address at an event sponsored by the Heritage Foundation in July, amid the Republican National Convention. In a press conference on Thursday afternoon, Sessions acknowledged also meeting with Russian ambassador Sergei Kislyak privately last September. Sessions maintains that he met Kislyak in his capacity

as a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and that some of his senior aides were present. Meetings between senators and diplomatic officials are, of course, common: Missouri senator Clare McCaskill, who attacked Sessions on Twitter for the sit-down, has in the past publicized multiple visits of her own with the Russian ambassador.

During his confirmation hearings, Sessions was grilled by Minnesota senator Al Franken. Citing recent

reports that “there was a continuing exchange of information during the campaign between Trump surrogates and intermediaries for the Russian government,” Franken asked Sessions: “If there is any evidence that anyone affiliated with the Trump campaign communicated with the Russian government in the course of this campaign, what will you do?” Sessions responded: “I’m not aware of any of those activities. I have been called a surrogate at a time or two in that campaign and I

did not have communications with the Russians, and I'm unable to comment on it." In a follow-up questionnaire, Vermont senator Patrick Leahy asked, "Have you been in contact with anyone connected to any part of the Russian government about the 2016 election, either before or after election day?" Sessions answered: "No."

It's clear now that Sessions's response to Franken was inaccurate, and the whole episode could have been avoided had Sessions been clearer up front. But the context makes it fairly clear that Sessions was denying coordination with the Russians about the presidential election. There is no indication that Sessions willfully misled the Congress; based on what

we know so far, Democrats' perjury accusations are fantasy.

Nonetheless, the cloud now around Sessions is unlikely to dissipate quickly. Given an ongoing FBI probe into various Trump associates with apparent links to the Russian government (former campaign manager Paul Manafort and former advisers Carter Page and Roger Stone), and Michael Flynn's recent departure from the administration after he misled White House officials about his own contacts with Kislyak, there is reason to take seriously concerns about Russia's attempts to influence last year's election and the new administration.

That is why a thorough congressional investigation is in order. As we've said before, the

House and Senate Intelligence Committees, which have extensive oversight powers, ought to conduct a fair, transparent, and expeditious inquiry into the allegations against the White House, and also into the source of the illicit leaks that are responsible for many of those allegations. Sessions's contacts with the Russian ambassador ought to be a part of this probe. This is a political matter, and it is incumbent upon the people's representatives to investigate.

In the meantime, Sessions has rightly recused himself from any Justice Department investigations into the Trump team's links to Moscow. Government officials ought to avoid even the appearance of impropriety. Given that that standard has been honored mainly in the

breach over the past eight years — especially in the Justice Department — Sessions's decision is a marked improvement on the conduct of his most recent predecessors.

Since his nomination to serve as attorney general, Jeff Sessions has been subjected to a deluge of partisan attacks, almost all of which have been meritless. There is little reason to think that this one will prove different. But Congress should do its job, and find out more about this episode and especially the larger Russian controversy.



Kayem : Don't expect 'smoking gun' in Russia investigation

CNN national security analyst Juliette Kayem is the author of "Security Mom: An Unclassified Guide to Protecting Our Homeland and Your Home." She is a professor at Harvard's Kennedy School, a former assistant secretary of Homeland Security in the Obama administration and founder of Kayem Solutions, a security consulting firm. The opinions expressed in this commentary are hers.

(CNN)There is no political pivot away from the Russia story.

Indeed, even as the suddenly "presidential" Donald Trump was basking in acclaim Wednesday for his uncharacteristically measured speech Tuesday night before the joint session of Congress, "Russiagate" was gearing up again.

And by Thursday, under intense political pressure over his meeting with Russia's ambassador, Attorney General Jeff Sessions agreed to recuse himself from any investigation related to the Trump campaign's relationship with Russia in the 2016 election.

The Trump administration has for too long believed that by not talking about the Russia issue, by ducking and pivoting, they could make it go away. But investigations are going forward. The media won't let this go, the public won't let this go, and if the Trump administration insists that it did not collude with Russia to affect the election outcome, it too will not want to let this go until the truth has been brought thoroughly into the light and the American public reassured.

Allow me to catch you up.

Only a few weeks after former National Security Adviser Michael

Flynn resigned amid revelations about his conversations with the Russian ambassador to the United States, Sergey Kislyak, leaks from an inquiry related to Russia's disruption of the election -- and confirmed by the Justice Department -- revealed that Sessions had misinformed (or possibly lied to) senators during his confirmation hearing about meetings he had had with Kislyak.

Democratic leaders demanded Sessions resign and many Republicans wanted him to at least recuse himself from any oversight of investigations related to Russia's interference.

Sessions, meanwhile, finally admitted to the meetings but insisted that nothing related to the campaign was discussed -- and Russia,

for its part,

claimed it was all "fake news."

The White House? It has tried to distance itself from the rancor and drama involving yet another senior campaign adviser (and cabinet member) obfuscating about conversations with Russia. Trump says he knew nothing of Sessions' conversations and backed his AG, saying he didn't think Sessions needed to resign.

And now, new reports indicate contacts in December between other Trump advisers -- including his son-in-law and senior adviser Jared Kushner -- with the Russian ambassador. On Thursday night, Trump turned to Twitter, where he called it all a "total witch hunt."

Head spinning? Yes. But as far as national security investigations go, not unexpected in its twists and stutter-stop momentum.

In fact, with the stakes as high as they are, it's essential to understand how these investigations advance. They will not unfold like a television show. There will likely not be some moment of reckoning -- some smoking gun -- an email that makes it all clear, a "eureka" occasion. National security investigations are rarely that simple.

Instead of a single piece of evidence, a case like this involves foreign wiretaps, spies and counterspies, signal intelligence, telephone wiretaps and cyber-footprints. It's complicated mostly because the crime is so much more sophisticated. There may not be a smoking gun, but there is a lot of evidence and counter-evidence that will swing the pendulum back and forth until it lands at the truth.

In other words, think of this investigation as a search for the most plausible answer -- across a spectrum -- to the question: Why did Russia involve itself so aggressively in our election? The "what" is already known:

Every intelligence agency

has confirmed that Russia engaged in a cyber-attack on America's democratic process, aimed at negatively impacting the Hillary Clinton campaign.

But the "why" is more complicated, and that is why there are number of investigations -- some at the FBI, some on Capitol Hill -- occurring simultaneously.

The possible theories to answer this exist on that spectrum. At one end is the possibility that Russia acted entirely alone to disrupt our democracy and undermine Clinton, believing she would otherwise win.

Move further along the spectrum and other explanations arise: Russia did it alone to help Trump, as they believed he would be a more cooperative President; Russia acted in partnership with a loose group of Trump affiliates who did not speak to or work for the campaign; Russia worked directly with the campaign leadership. And, finally, at other end of the spectrum, the most consequential theory: Russia colluded with the direct knowledge of the President.

Every disclosure and action is a piece of evidence that cuts one way or another across this spectrum of potential explanations. For example, the decision by Flynn to not disclose his contacts with Russia to Vice President Mike Pence suggests that senior members of the campaign were not transparent in their dealings -- even with one another.

It's another piece of evidence: no smoking gun, but not entirely a benign piece of information either.

Even as these pieces keep piling up, the Trump administration seems unable to recognize that until it embraces a thorough and impartial review, the pieces will be viewed in the light least favorable to them.

It is, from any evidentiary perspective, difficult to say that the accumulation of all this information -- including

another important story

in the New York Times reporting that European surveillance picked up communications between Russia and the Trump team -- points toward the idea that Russia acted entirely alone.

Determining where the pendulum stops is why these investigations must move forward. No one, maybe

not even the investigators, can know right now where this ends. No smoking gun, perhaps. Only a lot of

pieces of a puzzle that need to put together to come up with a better

picture of why our democracy was undermined.



The Trump administration's deepening Russia problem

The Christian Science Monitor

March 2, 2017 —[**Update:** At a late afternoon press conference Attorney General Sessions agreed to recuse himself from any investigation into Russian involvement in the 2016 US presidential election.]

Russia is becoming the scandal the Trump administration just can't shake.

A steady drip of revelations regarding the Trump team's communications with Russian officials is dismaying congressional Republicans as well as Democrats, leading to calls for a more intensive investigation into the circumstances and substance of these connections.

In particular, many lawmakers were surprised on Wednesday night by a report in The Washington Post that Attorney General Jeff Sessions had twice spoken with the Russian ambassador during the presidential campaign. In sworn testimony during his confirmation hearing, Mr. Sessions had appeared to say that no such conversations took place.

Some GOP members are now joining Democratic members in calling for Sessions to step aside from an investigation into Russian interference in the election, or even appoint a special prosecutor for an independent effort. Such a probe could distract and dispirit the White House for months, as Benghazi and Iran-Contra investigations did for other administrations in different times and circumstances.

"I think it'd be easier" for Sessions to step back from titular oversight of the Russia investigations, House majority leader Kevin McCarthy (R) of California said on Thursday, before walking the remarks back a short time later.

The congressional GOP is not backing away from support of Sessions en masse. As of Thursday afternoon, Rep. Jason Chaffetz (R) of Utah, chairman of the House Oversight Committee, is the top-ranking House member calling for recusal. At least two GOP senators — Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and Rob Portman of Ohio — were taking that position as well.

But others may follow. Perhaps as notable as those speaking up were those staying silent. There seemed little overt support for Sessions, though House Speaker Paul Ryan said that the attorney general should not step down unless he himself was the focus of the executive branch Russia investigations.

The stream of news reports may be taking its toll on the GOP, the bulwark of Trump's support on Capitol Hill. The Post's story about Sessions was not even the only big story on the subject released Wednesday: The New York Times reported that, in their last days in office, some Obama officials scrambled to ensure that intelligence regarding contacts between Trump team members and Russian officials was preserved and spread throughout the government,

so as to be easier for investigators to find.

No one in Congress wants to take a stand on the Russia question, then be disproved by later events. After all, former national security adviser Michael Flynn initially denied contacts with the Russian ambassador prior to the election. That turned out to be untrue and he was forced to resign.

As to Sessions' situation, "I think he should recuse himself. More importantly, he needs to explain the context those meetings [with the Russian ambassador] took place in," says James Kirchick, a fellow with the Foreign Policy Initiative and author of the forthcoming book "The End of Europe: Dictators, Demagogues, and the Coming Dark Age."

Calls for Sessions' resignation are a bit overblown, according to Mr. Kirchick, but an independent prosecutor might be appropriate for the situation. That's something the Trump administration has vehemently opposed. But as long as they do, there may be suspicions about their actions and motives, given the amount of smoke in the air on the subject.

Sessions was a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee at the time of his meetings with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak. They were brief and their contents might well have seemed innocuous. But Ambassador Kislyak's intentions might have been

more nuanced. He could well have been simply cultivating someone who promised to be an entrance into a Trump campaign whose ideological inclinations seemed promising to the Kremlin.

"That's part of a broader story — this is a culmination of a longtime Russian strategy of cultivating [nationalist] right movements around the world. It's the opposite of the cold war, when they cultivated the left. Now Russia is more a reactionary power," says Kirchick.

For Trump administration officials, their deepening Russia problems are a frustration at best. Many of their attempts to get past the controversy end up feeding it — witness their attempt to enlist the FBI to knock down a previous New York Times story about administration/Russia connections. That only produced more headlines on the subject.

In that context, an independent prosecutor could turn the probe into something analogous to Benghazi — much more difficult for the subject of the investigation to limit in time or subject. Remember that the Benghazi inquiry, ostensibly about a 2012 tragedy at a US outpost in Libya, turned up evidence that then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton conducted government business on a private email service.



The Trump presidency can't seem to escape Russia's shadow

Russian officials to discuss the issues of the campaign."

So for the second time, President Trump was in the position of vouching for one of his top appointees who has been caught not telling the full truth about conversations with Moscow's top man in Washington.

The first led to the resignation of his national security adviser two weeks ago; the second, to Sessions's awkward announcement Thursday that he has decided to recuse himself from existing or future investigation of "any matter" relating to the 2016 campaign.

That satisfied the demands of many Republicans on Capitol Hill, but a growing chorus of Democrats are calling for Sessions to resign.

(Video: Sarah Parnass/The Washington Post; Photo: Melina Mara/The Washington Post)

Attorney General Jeff Sessions told reporters at the Justice Department, March 2, that he was recusing himself from any investigation having to do with President Trump's 2016 campaign. Here are key moments from that news conference. Attorney General Jeff Sessions is recusing himself from any investigation having to do with President Trump's 2016 campaign (Photo: Melina Mara/Video: Sarah Parnass/The Washington Post; Photo: Melina Mara/The Washington Post)

[Sessions recuses himself from Trump campaign investigations]

The bigger problem for Trump and his team politically has been their

inability to shake dark suppositions about his and his associates' relationship with a hostile power, amid evidence that Russia had tried to influence the U.S. election.

"What do the Russians have on him?" House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) asked at a news conference on Thursday.

Trump's difficulties have been compounded by some of his own tendencies — among them, his inclination to personalize issues that potentially have much broader implications.

Thus, he sees questions about Russian influence in the U.S. electoral system as a challenge to his own legitimacy as president.

"The Democrats had to come up with a story as to why they lost the

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Karen-Tumulty/1410916925870676>

One of the iron rules of politics is this: If you're parsing, it's a sure sign you're losing.

The latest confirmation of that principle comes from Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who in his confirmation hearings flatly claimed under oath that he did not "have communications with the Russians" while acting as one of President Trump's top surrogates and closest advisers during the 2016 presidential race. Then, when confronted with a Washington Post report of two meetings with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak, Sessions reverse-engineered that sentence to, "I never met with any

election, and so badly (306), so they made up a story — RUSSIA. Fake news!” Trump tweeted on Feb. 16, referring to the number of electoral votes he won in November.

That same day, his instinct was to bristle and reply it was “not a fair question” when a reporter for an Orthodox Jewish weekly magazine asked him about rising incidents of anti-Semitism.

More recently, the president has denounced recent vandalism of Jewish cemeteries and community centers. But he has also suggested that those incidents might actually have been orchestrated as an effort to “make people look bad,” implying that they were actually “false flag” hoaxes meant to impugn his own supporters, a small fraction of whom have expressed anti-Semitic sentiments on social media and elsewhere.

Nor does Trump have many in his closest circle who are experienced at handling and getting ahead of a mounting political crisis outside a campaign environment, where the first move in the playbook is usually to punch back at the accusers and their motives.

Sessions’s predicament, for instance, was an unforced error.

“First of all, the attorney general should have proactively brought up his Russian contacts at the [confirmation] hearing,” said Ari Fleischer, who was George W. Bush’s White House press secretary. “It could have been and should have been a big nothing.”

The New York Times

Sergey Kislyak, Russian Envoy, Cultivated Powerful Network in U.S. (UNE)

Neil MacFarquhar and Peter Baker

Sergey I. Kislyak, the longtime Russian ambassador to the United States, hosted a dazzling dinner in his three-story, Beaux-Arts mansion four blocks north of the White House to toast Michael A. McFaul just weeks before he took up his post as the American envoy to Russia.

It was, Mr. McFaul recalled, an “over-the-top, extraordinary dinner,” including five courses of Russian fusion cuisine for 50 seated guests who shared one main characteristic: They were government officials intimately involved in formulating Russia policy for the Obama administration, including senior figures from the Defense and State Departments.

“I admired the fact that he was trying to reach deep into our government to cultivate relations with all kinds of people,” Mr. McFaul said of the dinner in late 2011. “I was

assuming that Sessions is telling the truth that his conversations with the ambassador did not delve into the subject of the election.

“In Washington, you know that when you’re in the middle of a red-hot situation, you’ve got to get it all out on the table, and say it now,” Fleischer added.

[Has Trump become the ‘don’t blame me’ president?]

Ultimately, however, the real answer is for Trump to change the subject of the conversation in Washington to his policies, some Republicans argue.

“It would be helpful to him if he would shut up and govern,” said Republican strategist and Capitol Hill veteran John Feehery. “If he spent more of his time knocking heads on Obamacare and knocking heads on tax reform, this [controversy over Russian contacts with those close to Trump] would be put in its proper place.”

Trump appears, at least for now, to agree with that approach.

On Thursday, the president traveled to Newport News, Va., and boarded the USS Gerald R. Ford to make a pitch for his proposed \$54 billion increase in the Pentagon budget.

He stuck to that theme, unlike he has often done at moments of stress in the past. It was a contrast, for instance, from an appearance at Gettysburg, Pa., during the campaign, where he was supposed to highlight his policies but veered off into denunciations of women who

impressed by the way he went about that kind of socializing, the way he went about entertaining, but always with a political objective.”

Mr. Kislyak’s networking success has landed him at the center of a sprawling controversy and made him the most prominent, if politically radioactive, ambassador in Washington. Two advisers to President Trump have run into trouble for not being more candid about contacts with Mr. Kislyak: Michael T. Flynn, who was forced to resign as national security adviser, and now Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who admitted two previously undisclosed conversations. Mr. Kislyak also met during the transition with Mr. Trump’s son-in-law and adviser, Jared Kushner.

A career diplomat raised in the Soviet era, Mr. Kislyak, 66, (pronounced kees-LYACK) may

had accused him of sexual misconduct.

Trump’s answers to a hail of questions from the reporters traveling with him were brief and supportive of Sessions.

Sessions’s recusal, however, is not likely to quiet the questions, particularly the larger ones being asked by lawmakers of both parties about the extent of Russian actions, the possibility of more security breaches in the future and how the United States should respond.

The challenge is not to Trump’s leadership alone. Washington is now so deeply divided and dysfunctional that many of its traditional mechanisms do not appear to be up to the task of handling a multilayered challenge where many political agendas are at work.

[The Fix: Jeff Sessions’s puzzling press conference]

Indeed, Trump’s election was a testament to how disaffected and mistrustful many Americans feel toward the capital and its institutions.

Congressional intelligence panels are promising their own inquiries, and there is also some sentiment for the appointment of a select committee to handle the issue. However, the atmosphere in Congress is so politically charged that it is unlikely that any finding produced there would be accepted by all sides as definitive.

Today’s WorldView

What’s most important from where the world meets Washington

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Presidents before Trump have often sought to get out in front of controversies, particularly ones that focus on their own management, by appointing an outside commission, with bipartisan leadership.

That, for instance, was what Ronald Reagan did as the Iran-contra scandal was brewing in 1986. After initial resistance, Bush signed legislation creating a commission that examined the lapses that made it possible for terrorists to attack the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001, and to come up with proposals to prevent such a catastrophe in the future.

Still others, including Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.), are saying that a special prosecutor may be warranted, if there is any indication that criminal activity may have occurred.

Fleischer, however, said the existing systems should be given an opportunity to work.

“I still have faith in the Congress and the FBI to get to the bottom of Russian interference in the election,” he said. “It should be rare and extraordinary and beyond a shadow of a doubt when you convene a special committee or you call in a special investigation.”

after his arrival in Washington and regularly invited him to events at his center. “But we gradually came to develop a grudging respect for him as someone who was really representing the positions of his country.”

Mr. Simes introduced Mr. Kislyak to Mr. Trump in a receiving line last April at a foreign policy speech hosted by his center at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington. Mr. Kislyak was one of four ambassadors who sat in the front row for Mr. Trump’s speech at the invitation of the center. Mr. Simes noted that Mr. Sessions, then a senator from Alabama, was there, but he did not notice whether he and the ambassador spoke at that time.

The Russian Embassy did not respond to an email on Thursday, but Mr. Kislyak defended engagements with American officials last November, when he was asked

during a speech at Stanford University about allegations of Russian meddling in the elections. Mr. Kislyak echoed his government's line that it was not involved in hacking. He said it was natural for diplomats to attend events such as political conventions and foreign policy speeches by candidates.

"It is normal diplomatic work that we have been doing: It is our job to understand, to know people, both on the side of the Republicans and Democrats," he said. "I personally have been working in the United States for so long that I know almost everybody."

Even some critics of Russian policy said it was hardly surprising that Mr. Kislyak would meet people around Mr. Trump. "That was part of his job," said Steven Pifer, a former ambassador to Ukraine who is now at the Brookings Institution. "I don't see anything nefarious in that per se, and I don't think it was out of the box for Senator Sessions to talk with Kislyak."

An expert on arms control negotiations with a degree from the Moscow Engineering Physics Institute, Mr. Kislyak first served in the Washington embassy from 1985 to 1989 during the late Soviet period. He became the first Russian representative to NATO and was ambassador to Belgium from 1998 to 2003. He returned to Moscow, where he spent five years as a deputy foreign minister.

What was Jeff Sessions, the new attorney general, doing meeting with the Russian ambassador two

months before Election Day?

He was appointed ambassador to Washington in 2008.

"He is a brilliant, highly professional diplomat — affable, pleasant, unbelievably good at arms control and Russian-American relations for decades," said Sergei A. Karaganov, a periodic Kremlin adviser on foreign policy.

Some Russian foreign policy experts compared him to Anatoly F. Dobrynin, the Soviet ambassador to Washington from 1962 to 1986 and a political player in both capitals. Until recently, at least, Mr. Kislyak played a more discreet, quiet role in Washington and was even less visible in Moscow.

"I would describe him as Russia's top authority on the United States," said Vladimir Frolov, a foreign policy analyst.

The questions about contacts between Mr. Trump's circle and Russian officials have revealed what both sides presumably knew, that American intelligence agencies closely track Mr. Kislyak's movements and tap his phone calls. Russian officials on Thursday expressed anger that their ambassador's actions were being questioned and that some news reports suggested he might be an intelligence operative.

Maria Zakharova, the spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Ministry, delivered an extended diatribe during her weekly briefing against what she called the low professional standards of the American news media.

"I will reveal a military secret to you: Diplomats work, and their work consists of carrying out contacts in the country where they are present," she said. "This is on record everywhere. If they do not carry out these contacts, do not participate in negotiations, then they are not diplomats."

Until Vladimir V. Putin returned to the Russian presidency in 2012 and tensions between Washington and Moscow rose again, Mr. Kislyak was a popular host, especially for weekend events at the estate at Pioneer Point in Maryland, which the Obama administration ordered closed last December over the hacking allegations. He invited the Americans who negotiated the New Start nuclear arms treaty and their families to a party at the estate. Russian security guards took the children of his guests tubing on the ambassador's boat.

During the treaty negotiations, Mr. McFaul remembered, Mr. Kislyak frequently telephoned the secretary of defense or others involved, thwarting the American desire to limit his channels of communication. "He was actively pushing to try to find fissures and disagreements among us," Mr. McFaul said.

"He is very smart, very experienced, always well prepared," said R. Nicholas Burns, a former under secretary of state who negotiated three Iran sanctions resolutions at the United Nations with Mr. Kislyak. "But he could be cynical, obstreperous and inflexible, and had a Soviet mentality. He was very aggressive toward the United States."

Some of that aggression was on display at the Stanford event last fall, which was moderated by Mr. McFaul. Saying that he had been sent to Washington to improve relations, Mr. Kislyak named areas of possible cooperation, but then went through a long list of grievances, accusing the United States of meddling around the globe.

When an audience member asked about Russian mistakes, he demurred. He said the most serious problem with the United States is that it believes it is exceptional. "The difference between your exceptionalism and ours is that we are not trying to impose on you ours, but you do not hesitate to impose on us yours," he said. "That is something we do not appreciate."

He has told associates that he will leave Washington soon, likely to be replaced by a hard-line general. His name recently surfaced at the United Nations as a candidate for a new post responsible for counterterrorism, diplomats there said. Vitaly I. Churkin, the Russian ambassador to the United Nations, died last month and that post remains vacant.

For Mr. Kislyak, Washington is no longer the place it once was. It has become lonely, and he has told associates that he is surprised how people who once sought his company were now trying to stay away.



Editorial : An early test of Trump's 'America First' at the UN

The Christian Science Monitor

March 2, 2017 —When President Trump first proclaimed an "America First" approach to foreign affairs, it was not clear if he meant the American *people* or American *values*. But after his first confrontation with Russia at the United Nations, the meaning may be a bit more clear.

On Feb. 28, the US ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, put forth a resolution in the Security Council to punish Syria for its latest use of chemical weapons on civilians in a war that has lasted nearly six years. The Trump administration, along with Western allies, was alarmed at

a new UN report that found Syrian helicopters had dropped internationally banned chlorine bombs in residential areas last year, resulting in hundreds of civilian casualties.

"The continued use of chlorine by Syrian forces evinces a blatant disregard for international legal obligations, and also amounts to the war crime of indiscriminate attacks against a civilian population," the UN report stated.

Russia and China vetoed the measure, which would have imposed a travel ban and asset freeze on 11 Syrian military commanders and officials. The veto then evoked this response from Ms.

Haley: "It is a sad day on the Security Council when members start making excuses for other member states killing their own people."

The resolution, along with the ambassador's words, were a clear assertion of an international norm designed to avoid the use of mass weapons that can easily cause indiscriminate killing of civilians. The norm applies especially to chemical and biological weapons. In 1925, after the chemical attacks of World War I, much of the world began to endorse protocols against the use and stockpiling of such weapons. The latest protocol, the 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention, has been endorsed by 192 nations.

The United States has long been a champion of humanitarian rules for the protection of innocent people from indiscriminate harm in war. Its security forces, such as the remote pilots of predatory drones, are trained to honor this value. And any erosion of the international taboo has brought instinctive responses by previous US presidents.

The Trump administration seems to have joined this chorus, standing up for values not only American but widely shared by other nations. If that's putting America first, bring it on.



Wilkinson : Trump Could Undermine Democracy Outside the U.S.

Francis Wilkinson

President Donald Trump's approach to democracy, conflicted at best, is settling into a familiar groove.

Attacks on the news media, the scapegoating of vulnerable minorities and periodic assaults on

the concept of truth, as well as on specific facts, have become hallmarks of his administration.

At the same time, democracy has gotten a few licks in as well. Trump obediently retreated from his Muslim ban at the direction of the courts, and his White House has been leaky, a boon to the free flow of information.

But it remains unclear whether the Republican Congress and other key U.S. institutions have the resiliency and will to repel Trump's attacks, including the continuing stonewalling on we-don't-know-what-exactly regarding Russia. (Trump's sudden aura of competence after his speech to Congress was undermined a day later by a well-timed leak on how Attorney General Jeff Sessions appeared to mislead the Senate under oath about his Russia contacts.)

The effect of Trump on societies with weaker democratic institutions is also unknown. But the very existence of a would-be authoritarian thrashing around the American government, forever threatening to break free of institutional constraints, sends a jarring message around the world.

The New York Times published a story on Wednesday about "anti-Soros" forces in Europe being emboldened by Trump's election. Substitute the word "democracy" for

the name of the financier and open-society enthusiast George Soros, and the story still holds.

In Soros's native Hungary, the Trumpian prime minister, Viktor Orban, has for years been undermining democratic norms and institutions, badgering opponents and bludgeoning the independence of the news media. He is using this hour of authoritarian ascendance to step up his attacks on groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch as "foreign agents financed by foreign money."

Last week in Hungary, an Amnesty spokesman told EUObserver, "The government accused Amnesty of producing fake reports and of inciting migrants to break laws."

"Fake" reports and law-breaking immigrants. There's something vaguely familiar about those themes, isn't there? In a speech earlier this week, Orban said Hungary's economic success depends on the nation's "ethnic homogeneity."

Hungary's tide of "illiberal democracy" long preceded Trump's election. Orban's most recent reign atop Hungarian politics -- he's been there before -- began in 2010. "What we've seen is a weakening of

democratic institutions around that part of the world for maybe a decade now," said Jan Surotchak, Europe director of the International Republican Institute, a Washington-based NGO that promotes democracy worldwide.

Kenneth Wollack, president of the National Democratic Institute, a kind of Washington doppelganger of Surotchak's IRI, has been in the business of promoting democracy worldwide for more than three decades. He isn't convinced that this U.S. president represents a democratic departure. "I think it's way too early for people to be making judgments," Wollack said in a telephone interview.

Wollack points out that concerns about President George W. Bush's commitment to global democracy movements -- as a candidate Bush had disparaged "nation-building" -- were quickly rendered moot after Bush launched full-scale wars under the banner of democracy.

Trump's evolution could similarly surprise. Democracy promotion, Wollack said, is now deeply woven into the fabric of international relations, especially for the U.S. "Every U.S. embassy around the world has democracy as part of its agenda," he said.

Incubating and sustaining democratic institutions is a tough task, however. Democracy doesn't always take. And it doesn't always thrive even when it does take. Hungary is one of many examples of democratic backsliding. Certainly the regime of Russia's Vladimir Putin qualifies.

Nowhere is democracy so firmly rooted as in the U.S., which has been a wellspring for democratic impulses around the world. Perhaps the confidence of Wollack and others is well-founded. But Trump represents a concussive break from a democratic pattern that has not only flourished in the U.S. but reverberated, to the benefit of Americans and others, around the world.

U.S. commitment to foreign engagement can vary with the demands and resources of the era. But questions about the U.S.'s commitment to its own democracy are something strange and new. Democrats around the world can't help but take note that the pillar of democracy has gone wobbly. Aspiring dictators have no doubt noticed, too.

ETATS-UNIS

POLITICO Sessions could face legal ordeal over testimony

By Josh Gerstein

Even if Attorney General Jeff Sessions didn't commit perjury during his confirmation hearing, Sessions could still be in other kinds of legal trouble for failing to tell his Senate colleagues that he met the Russian ambassador on two occasions during the heat of the presidential campaign.

"It is, at best, very misleading testimony," said Richard Painter, formerly the top ethics lawyer in President George W. Bush's White House. "I don't go so far as to say that it's perjury, but there is a lesser charge of failing to provide accurate information to Congress."

Story Continued Below

"A nominee at a confirmation hearing has an obligation to provide full and complete information to Congress," Painter continued. "Conduct that might be just short of perjury in a deposition in a typical

civil case is entirely inappropriate in front of Congress."

However, such misdemeanor charges are usually only rolled out as part of a plea deal after prosecutors obtain or threaten more serious felony perjury charges. Some lawyers say those would be a stretch in Sessions' case.

"Perjury is very hard to prove," said former House Counsel Stan Brand, who worked for the Democrats. "You have to prove two elements that are very difficult in the Congressional context: one is intent and two is an absolutely clear and unambiguous question."

How Sessions' statements fit into the typical rubric is somewhat unclear. While Sen. Al Franken's question to Sessions was fairly clear, it was also a query about his future plans, and therefore almost incapable of generating a direct

answer that would amount to perjury.

Sessions' arguably erroneous statement was the kind of rhetorical detour counsel often tells their clients not to take when testifying: a gratuitous response that wasn't really called for by the question.

After a wind-up about breaking press reports on alleged contacts between the Trump campaign and Russian agents, Franken asked: "if there is any evidence that anyone affiliated with the Trump campaign communicated with the Russian government in the course of this campaign, what will you do?"

Sessions replied: "Senator Franken, I'm not aware of any of those activities. I have been called a surrogate at a time or two in that campaign and I didn't have — did not have communications with the Russians, and I'm unable to comment on it."

Senator Patrick Leahy followed up with a written question asking Sessions if had "been in contact with anyone connected to any part of the Russian government about the 2016 election, either before or after election day?"

Sessions replied, simply: "No."

During a press conference at the Justice Department Thursday, the attorney general insisted he had no intention to deceive the committee.

"My reply to the question of Sen. Franken was honest and correct as I understood it at the time. I appreciate that some have taken the view that this was a false comment. That is not my intent. That is not correct," the attorney general declared.

However, later in the exchange with reporters, Sessions said he could not rule out the possibility that he discussed election-related matters during his September meeting with

the Russian diplomat, Sergey Kislyak.

"I don't recall, but most of these ambassadors are pretty gossipy, and...this was in the campaign season, but I don't recall any specific political discussions," the attorney general said.

Sessions' initial denial could be legally problematic if it is contradicted by staffers at the meeting or by other evidence, such as intercepts of Russian reports on what was said, attorneys said.

One unpleasant parallel for Sessions comes from the prolonged confirmation hearings of Attorney General Richard Kleindienst in 1972.

During those hearings, Kleindienst denied that he'd received instructions from anyone at the White House about how to handle a high-profile antitrust investigation into ITT Corp.

"I was not interfered with by anybody at the White House," he said repeatedly.

A year later, tapes emerged of President Richard Nixon himself instructing Kleindienst to drop the case.

Kleindienst resigned less than a year into his tenure as attorney general. Prosecutors considered indicting him on multiple perjury counts, but he ultimately pled guilty to a misdemeanor charge of

contempt of Congress for refusing to answer a question — a charge some considered a poor fit.

"It's a bastardized version of a false statement charge," Brand said.

Other prominent government officials have also pled guilty to the same charge, including former CIA Director Richard Helms in 1977 for testimony about CIA operations in Chile and State Department aide Elliott Abrams in 1991 for testimony obscuring aspects of the Iran-Contra affair.

Other officials have gotten a pass for their misleading testimony, including former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper for denying that the government was engaged in widespread surveillance of Americans.

"Does the [National Security Agency] collect any type of data at all on millions or hundreds of millions of Americans?" committee member Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) asked Clapper during a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing.

"No, sir," Clapper replied. "There are cases where they could inadvertently perhaps collect [intelligence on Americans], but not wittingly."

Revelations from NSA leaker Edward Snowden just a few months later made clear that the NSA was sweeping up data on billions and billions of phone calls made by Americans.

Clapper said he misunderstood the question, which he thought referred to surveillance beyond collecting metadata on phone calls.

"My response was clearly erroneous," he wrote in an apology letter to Congress.

Clapper was repeatedly questioned by lawmakers and the media about his misstatement, but he never faced criminal charges. He stayed in his job until Obama's final day in office.

When Congressional witnesses face attention-grabbing perjury charges, prosecutors sometimes end up with egg on their faces. In 2010, Major League Baseball pitcher Roger Clemens was indicted for lying in 2008 Congressional testimony where he denied any involvement with steroids.

At a trial in Washington in 2012, jurors acquitted Clemens on all counts.

Veteran defense attorneys said that whatever the chances are that Sessions faces charges over his testimony, they increase if a special prosecutor — especially one from outside the department — is appointed to examine the attorney general's statements as well as other matters related to alleged Russian influence in the election.

"As a defense attorney, I'd rather have a U.S. attorney," Brand said.

When Sessions recused himself Thursday from investigations related to the 2016 presidential campaign, he apparently also surrendered any role in deciding whether a special prosecutor takes over that probe and any inquiry into Sessions testimony.

For the moment, acting Deputy Attorney General Dana Boente will oversee those matters. However, the ultimate decision could be made by the man Trump has nominated to hold that No. 2 job on a permanent basis, Rod Rosenstein.

Rosenstein faces a Senate confirmation hearing Tuesday where Sessions' testimony and the potential for a special prosecutor are now expected to take center stage.

Some legal experts say the independent counsel probe that could spell the most trouble for Sessions is the only appropriate course now that his conduct is in question.

"Sessions recused himself. But his subordinates cannot conduct the investigation of their boss," said New York University law professor Stephen Gillers, a legal ethics specialist. "They are not independent. A special prosecutor, who cannot be removed except for cause, is needed."

The Washington Post Attorney General Jeff Sessions will recuse himself from any probe related to 2016 presidential campaign (UNE)

<http://www.facebook.com/matt.zapo.tosky>

Attorney General Jeff Sessions said Thursday that he will recuse himself from investigations related to the 2016 presidential campaign, which would include any Russian interference in the electoral process.

Speaking at a hastily called news conference at the Justice Department, Sessions said he was following the recommendation of department ethics officials after an evaluation of the rules and cases in which he might have a conflict.

"They said that since I had involvement with the campaign, I should not be involved in any campaign investigation," Sessions said. He added that he concurred with their assessment and would thus recuse himself from any existing or future investigation involving President Trump's 2016 campaign.

[The transcript of Jeff Sessions's recusal news conference, annotated]

The announcement comes a day after The Washington Post revealed that Sessions twice met with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak during the campaign and did not disclose that to the Senate Judiciary Committee during his confirmation hearing in January.

(Zoeann Murphy/The Washington Post)

The Washington Post's Karoun Demirjian brings us up to speed on Jeff Sessions's decision to recuse himself from all investigations into the 2016 presidential campaign. The Washington Post's Karoun Demirjian brings us up to speed on Jeff Sessions's decision to recuse himself from all investigations into the 2016 presidential campaign. (Zoeann Murphy/The Washington Post)

It also represents a departure from Sessions's previous statements,

including one on Monday, when he declined to say whether he would recuse himself. "I would recuse myself on anything I should recuse myself on," Sessions said then. "That's all I can tell you."

Democrats have been calling for him to do so for weeks; on Thursday, after publication of The Post's article, some high-level Republicans joined them. At his news conference, Sessions offered a new explanation: that discussions about his recusal had begun before the revelation of his meetings with Kislyak, that he and ethics officials had agreed on Monday to meet for a final time Thursday, and that at that final meeting he had accepted their recommendation.

The responsibility to oversee the FBI's Russia investigation will now be handled by Sessions's deputy attorney general, the department's second-highest-ranking official. The acting deputy attorney general is Dana Boente, a longtime federal prosecutor and former U.S. attorney

for the Eastern District of Virginia, who stepped in when Trump fired Sally Yates in January.

Trump's nominee for deputy attorney general, Rod J. Rosenstein, is scheduled to appear before the Senate Judiciary Committee for his confirmation hearing on March 7. Rosenstein, the former U.S. attorney in Baltimore and the longest-serving U.S. attorney, was the sole holdover from the George W. Bush administration.

The revelations about Sessions's meetings with Kislyak brought new scrutiny to the attorney general's confirmation hearing in January, when he was asked by Sen. Al Franken (D-Minn.) what he would do if he learned of any evidence that anyone affiliated with the Trump campaign had communicated with the Russian government in the course of the 2016 campaign. He replied: "I have been called a surrogate at a time or two in that campaign, and I did not

have communications with the Russians.”

On Thursday, Sessions defended those remarks as “honest and correct as I understood it at the time,” though he also said he would “write the Judiciary Committee soon — today or tomorrow — to explain this testimony for the record.” His explanation, he said, was that he was “taken aback” by Franken’s question, which referred to a breaking news story at the time about contacts between Trump surrogates and Russians.

“It struck me very hard, and that’s what I focused my answer on,” he said. “In retrospect, I should have slowed down and said I did meet one Russian official a couple times, and that would be the ambassador.”

(The Washington Post)

Sergey Kislyak’s contacts with Trump advisers roiled the new administration and led to one resignation and calls for another. Among D.C. insiders, Russia’s long-serving ambassador to the United States is known for trying to develop relationships with top U.S. officials. Here’s what you need to know about Russia’s ambassador to the U.S. (The Washington Post)

Later, in an interview on Fox News, Sessions notably declined to say that he thought Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Russian government favored Trump over Hillary Clinton in the presidential campaign. A declassified report from U.S. intelligence agencies released in January concluded just that, saying, “Putin and the Russian government aspired to help President-elect Trump’s election chances when possible by discrediting Secretary Clinton and publicly contrasting her unfavorably to him.”

“Did the campaign believe that the Russian government, the Putin government, favored Trump over Clinton in this race?” Fox News host Tucker Carlson asked.

“I have never been told that,” Sessions responded.

“Do you think they did?” Carlson said.

“I don’t have any idea, Tucker, you’d have to ask them,” Sessions said.

In a statement issued Wednesday night, Sessions said he “never met with any Russian officials to discuss issues of the campaign. I have no idea what this allegation is about. It is false.” A spokeswoman confirmed his meetings with Kislyak but said there was nothing misleading about what Sessions said to Congress.

The spokeswoman, Sarah Isgur Flores, said Sessions did not meet with Kislyak as a Trump supporter but, rather, in his capacity as a member of the Armed Services Committee. One meeting was in September; the other in July, when Sessions was approached after an event on the sidelines of the Republican National Convention.

A Justice Department official said Wednesday of the September meeting: “There’s just not strong recollection of what was said.”

On Thursday, though, Sessions outlined fairly extensive details of the encounter, which included two senior Sessions staffers. He said he talked with the ambassador about a trip he made to Russia in 1991, terrorism and Ukraine — a major policy issue, given Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the imposition of U.S. and European Union sanctions on Russia for its actions.

At one point, Sessions said, “it got to be a little bit of a testy conversation.” He said the ambassador invited him to lunch, but he did not accept.

“Most of these ambassadors are pretty gossipy, and they like to — this was in the campaign season, but I don’t recall any specific political discussions,” Sessions said.

[Read the statement on the recusal of Attorney General Jeff Sessions]

Earlier Thursday, Trump said that he had “total” confidence in Sessions. Speaking aboard the aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford in Newport News, Va., Trump told reporters that he was not aware of Sessions’s contact with the Russian ambassador. Trump also said that Sessions “probably” testified truthfully during his confirmation hearing in January before the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Asked whether Sessions should recuse himself, Trump added: “I don’t think so.”

Trump issued a statement later Thursday as well: “Jeff Sessions is an honest man. He did not say anything wrong. He could have stated his response more accurately, but it was clearly not intentional.” Trump added that Democrats are “overplaying their hand” by criticizing Sessions, and he called their attacks a “total witch hunt!”

Several Republican lawmakers had already called on Sessions to recuse himself — and some of them applauded him after he did so. Sen. Ben. Sasse (R-Neb.) called it the “right decision.”

Democrats, however, were less complimentary. Several of them had begun the day demanding Sessions’s resignation and accusing him of lying under oath during the confirmation hearing. After his announcement that he would recuse himself, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) declared the decision “totally inadequate.” Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) said: “Attorney General Sessions is right to recuse himself, but the fact is that he should have done so the moment he was sworn in.”

The episode marks the second time in Trump’s nascent administration when the truthfulness of one of its top officials has come under scrutiny. In February, Trump fired his national security adviser, Michael Flynn, after The Post reported he had not fully disclosed his contacts with Russian officials.

Sessions’s meetings with Kislyak occurred during the height of concerns about Russian interference in the U.S. election and at a time when Sessions was a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, as well as a top Trump surrogate and adviser.

The swift response among some Republicans, although more muted than Democrats, signaled increasing concern about the potential political fallout.

House Oversight and Government Reform Committee Chairman Jason Chaffetz (R-Utah) tweeted early Thursday that “AG Sessions should clarify his testimony and recuse himself.”

Chaffetz later told reporters: “Let’s let him clarify his statement, and I do think he should recuse himself.” Asked whether his committee would investigate the matter, he said, “There are things we are looking at.”

[Sessions met with Russian envoy twice last year, encounters he later did not disclose]

[Trump’s hard-line actions have an intellectual godfather: Jeff Sessions]

House Speaker Paul D. Ryan (R-Wis.) defended Sessions, noting that ongoing investigations have found no evidence that “an American or a person in the Trump campaign was involved or working with the Russians.”

House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) shared conflicting views on Sessions during back-to-back television interviews Thursday. Asked whether Sessions should recuse himself, he told MSNBC’s “Morning Joe,” “I think the trust of the American people — you

recuse yourself in these situations, yes.”

But McCarthy later told Fox News: “I’m not calling on him to recuse himself. I was asked on ‘Morning Joe’ if he needs to recuse himself as going forward. As you just heard, Attorney General Sessions said he would recuse himself going forward — appropriate, and that’s all my answer was.”

Sessions has focused his response to the allegations on the substance of his conversations with Kislyak, which he said did not include talk about the campaign.

Many Democrats considered that a direct contradiction of Sessions’s testimony in January, when he told Franken that he had not spoken to Russian officials.

But Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.), who considers Sessions a close friend, said, “I don’t think Jeff Sessions is a liar” and argued that Sessions had not misled the Judiciary Committee “because all of the questions were about campaign contacts.”

But Sessions “does owe it, quite frankly, to all of us to tell us what he talked about” with Kislyak, Graham said.

Fallout from Sessions’s statements came as FBI Director James B. Comey made a previously scheduled visit to Capitol Hill to meet with the House Intelligence Committee. But Comey was once again unwilling to confirm whether the FBI is exploring ties between Trump campaign officials and the Russian government, according to Rep. Adam B. Schiff (D-Calif.), the committee’s top Democrat.

“We can’t do a complete job unless the director is willing to discuss anything that they are investigating,” Schiff said. “At this point we know less than a fraction of what the FBI knows.”

But Rep. Devin Nunes (R-Calif.), the committee’s chairman, said Comey was “very upfront” with lawmakers.

“There’s a lot more information ... the FBI and intelligence agencies need to provide to our committees” to aid ongoing congressional investigations, Nunes said. He added that he had “no reason to believe that any information” would be withheld from his committee.

Senators who deal regularly with defense, foreign affairs or intelligence matters often meet with foreign officials. But as a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Sessions was less likely to meet with foreign ambassadors than foreign military leaders. The

Post has spoken to all senators who served on the armed services panel in 2016. None of them other than Sessions met with Kislyak one-on-one last year, they said.

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**THE WALL
STREET
JOURNAL.**

Aruna Viswanatha,
Carol E. Lee and Natalie Andrews

Updated March 2, 2017 7:50 p.m. ET

WASHINGTON—Attorney General Jeff Sessions said Thursday he will remove himself from involvement in any investigation related to the 2016 presidential race, following the disclosure that he had conversations with a Russian official while advising the Trump campaign.

Lawmakers from both parties had called on Mr. Sessions to recuse himself after reports that he met with the Russian ambassador to the U.S. last year, even though he had testified in Senate confirmation hearings that he had no contact with Russian officials during the campaign.

Thursday's announcement created another furor for the young Trump administration, removing its chief law-enforcement official from a major issue less than a month after he took office. Mr. Sessions is the second top Trump official found to have provided information on his Russia contacts that was incomplete. The other, former National Security Director Michael Flynn, was forced to resign.

Mr. Sessions announced his recusal just hours after President Donald Trump said he had total confidence in Mr. Sessions and that he didn't think the attorney general should recuse himself. On Thursday night, President Trump, in a series of tweets, reiterated his support for the attorney general, saying that he is "an honest man," that "the Democrats are overplaying their hand," and that it is a "witch hunt."

- Russian Ambassador Sergei Kislyak Was Avid Networker in D.C.

Sergei Kislyak, the Russian official at the center of the furor around the Trump administration, was active in the Washington political circuit.

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- Jeff Sessions Used Political Funds for

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker (R-Tenn.) said he met with Kislyak in 2016, but in the earlier part of the year before the presidential campaign intensified.

Schumer said that the Justice Department's inspector general should investigate whether Sessions made any attempts to thwart any ongoing Russia-related investigations.

Republican Convention Expenses

Campaign-finance records show attorney general used campaign account, not official funds, for expenses to Cleveland, where he met Russia's ambassador at an event.

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- Trump Jr. Was Likely Paid at Least \$50,000 to Speak to Pro-Russia Group

President Donald Trump's eldest son Donald Trump Jr. was likely paid at least \$50,000 for an appearance late last year before a French think tank whose founder and wife are allies of the Russian government in efforts to end the war in Syria.

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- In Short Supply in Trump's Cabinet: Lawyers

President Trump's preference for business and military leaders has marginalized a group long at the capital's levers of power: lawyers. Just three of his 16 cabinet picks have law degrees, a sharp drop from the four previous administrations.

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- Senate Democrats Raise Concerns About Labor Department Data Under Trump

As a candidate, president questioned the reliability of statistics and called jobless rate 'phony numbers.'

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TRUMP'S FIRST 100 DAYS

In a brief press conference, Mr. Sessions denied he had misled lawmakers during his confirmation hearing, saying he had been asked only if he engaged in a continuing

exchange of information with Russian officials. He said it is "totally false" to say he did so, and that his answer to the Judiciary Committee was "honest and correct as I understood it at the time."

Mr. Sessions also said he would write to the Senate Judiciary Committee to correct the record and explain the discrepancy. "Let me be clear, I never had meetings with Russian operatives, or Russian intermediaries about the Trump campaign," he said.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation has been examining possible ties between Russia and people close to Mr. Trump, according to people familiar with the investigation. Much of that inquiry has arisen from the bureau's tracking of foreign intelligence officials.

Mr. Sessions said in the news conference Thursday he had spoken with Sergei Kislyak, Russia's ambassador to the U.S., during an event on the sidelines of the Republican National Convention in Cleveland in July, and he met with Mr. Kislyak in his Senate office in September.

He said that during his meeting with Mr. Kislyak in his office, they talked about terrorism, Ukraine and other topics. He said he didn't remember discussing the campaign, but that it may have come up in passing. "Most of these ambassadors are pretty gossipy," Mr. Sessions said.

Several Republican lawmakers praised Thursday's announcement. But many Democrats, arguing he should resign for lying to Congress, said his withdrawal was insufficient.

"Attorney General Sessions' narrow recusal and his sorry attempt to explain away his perjury are totally inadequate," said House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D., Calif.).

With Mr. Sessions removing himself, any decision relating to the investigation of Russia's suspected attempts to influence the election now falls to the deputy attorney general, a job held on a temporary basis by Dana Boente. Mr. Trump has nominated Rod Rosenstein, the

Abby Phillip, Mike DeBonis, Adam Entous and Ellen Nakashima contributed to this report.

U.S. attorney for Maryland, to be deputy attorney general for the long term.

Mr. Rosenstein's confirmation hearing is scheduled for next week, and that event now may be dominated by questions about Mr. Sessions, his recusal and the Russia investigation. Russia has denied involvement in the U.S. election.

Many Democrats are pushing for the appointment of a special prosecutor—someone from outside the Justice Department's chain of command—to oversee the probe. The decision on whether to appoint such a prosecutor will now also be made by the deputy attorney general.

At his confirmation hearing, Mr. Sessions was asked what he would do if evidence emerged of contact between the Trump campaign and Russian government. In his response, he said, "I'm not aware of any of those activities. I have been called a surrogate at a time or two in that campaign and I didn't have—did not have communications with the Russians."

Mr. Sessions subsequently was asked if he "had been in contact with anyone connected to any part of the Russian government about the 2016 election, either before or after election day." He responded, "No."

Mr. Sessions said Thursday that at the hearing, he had been taken aback by the notion that he might have served as a conduit between the campaign and the Russians, and that explained his denial. Still, he said, "in retrospect, I should have slowed down and said, 'But I did meet one Russian official a couple of times—that would be the Russian ambassador.'"

For much of the day Thursday, Republicans had called on him to recuse himself. He also faced bipartisan pressure to clarify his Senate testimony.

"I think the attorney general should further clarify his testimony and I do think he should recuse himself,"

Rep. Jason Chaffetz (R., Utah), chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, said earlier Thursday.

House Speaker Paul Ryan (R., Wis.), had been more guarded, saying Mr. Sessions should recuse himself if he was being investigated. "If he himself is the subject of an investigation, of course he would. But if he's not, I don't see any purpose or reason to do any of this," Mr. Ryan said.

Mr. Sessions's recusal might buy him some breathing room, at least when it comes to members of his

own party, some of whom had played down the news of his meetings with the ambassador. "The best I can tell, there's no real revelation," said Sen. Roy Blunt (R., Mo.).

Democrats said that at a minimum a special prosecutor was needed to conduct an impartial investigation.

"The attorney general is in no position to oversee any investigation or prosecution involving any of the counterintelligence issues concerning Russia," said Rep. Adam Schiff of California, the top

Democrat on the Intelligence Committee. "I am now convinced that an independent prosecutor is necessary."

Some Democrats described Mr. Sessions's statements to Congress as perjury. But prosecutors face a high bar in bringing criminal cases for lying to Congress.

"You need to prove the testimony wasn't just false, but that a person testifying deliberately lied or tried to mislead" lawmakers, said Justin Shur, who used to prosecute such cases for the Justice Department's

public integrity section and is now a lawyer at the firm MoloLamken LLP.

Russian officials said there was nothing unusual about the contacts between the two men. "If our diplomats are meeting with U.S. officials, it means they are working," said foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova.

—Siobhan Hughes, Byron Tau and Thomas Grove contributed to this article.

The New York Times Editorial : Jeff Sessions Had No Choice

It's no great credit to Attorney General Jeff Sessions that he finally recused himself from all Justice Department investigations relating to the 2016 presidential campaign — and specifically from all current or future inquiries into Russian attempts to influence the election. Short of tendering his resignation, he had no other real choice.

Mr. Sessions, who was President Trump's first and most ardent supporter in the Senate, as well as a top national security adviser to the Trump campaign, was never in a position to serve as an impartial arbiter of any investigation involving Mr. Trump or his campaign. But until Thursday he refused to cede control over Justice Department investigations into contacts between the campaign and the Russian government.

That stance became untenable on Wednesday night, after The Washington Post reported that, while testifying at his confirmation hearings in January, Mr. Sessions had failed to disclose two meetings he had with the Russian ambassador, Sergey Kislyak, during the campaign. In

response to a question about connections between Russia and the Trump team, from Senator Al Franken of Minnesota, Mr. Sessions said under oath that he was "not aware of any of those activities." Then, without prompting, he volunteered, "I have been called a surrogate at a time or two in that campaign and I did not have communications with the Russians."

As it turns out, Mr. Sessions met twice with Mr. Kislyak, once at the Republican National Convention in July, and again in his Senate office in September — around the time that Russian efforts to meddle in the election on behalf of Mr. Trump reached their peak. Still, meeting an ambassador is no crime in itself, which makes Mr. Sessions's denial even more inexplicable. On Thursday, he said he "never had meetings with Russian operatives or Russian intermediaries" about the campaign. Yet a Trump administration official told CNBC's John Harwood that Mr. Sessions had talked about the election with the ambassador, if only in "superficial" terms.

Mr. Sessions is the latest administration official to be caught

between his words and the truth on Russia. Just a few weeks ago, the president fired Michael Flynn, his national security adviser, for misleading Vice President Mike Pence about his contacts with the Russian ambassador.

Mr. Sessions's recusal is only a first necessary step. The second must be the appointment of a special counsel — an independent, nonpartisan actor who can both investigate and prosecute any criminal acts in relation to Russian interference, whether by Mr. Sessions or anyone else. That's the only way an investigation can have credibility with the public. Simply shifting investigative authority to one of Mr. Sessions's deputies, who report to him on all other matters, would do nothing to cure the underlying conflict.

Republican leaders in Congress also need to establish a bipartisan select committee to investigate whether the Trump campaign had a role in Russia's election interference. Intelligence committees in both houses of Congress have said they will begin their own investigations, but those are run by the likes of Devin Nunes,

chairman of the House Intelligence Committee. Mr. Nunes has dismissed concerns about the issue, and was one of several top Republicans dispatched by the White House to talk with reporters to challenge news reports tying Russia to the Trump campaign.

One person who said recusal wasn't necessary was President Trump. Only hours before Mr. Sessions's announcement, Mr. Trump expressed "total" confidence in his attorney general, even though he said he had not known about his communications with the ambassador. In other words, Mr. Trump appears to be saying that he has no problem with being kept in the dark.

It's hard to decide what is more disturbing: that so many top officials in Donald Trump's presidential campaign and administration were in contact with the Russian government during and after the campaign, or that they keep neglecting to tell the truth.

The New York Times Jeff Sessions Recuses Himself From Russia Inquiry (UNE)

Mark Landler and Eric Lichtblau

The latest disclosures — and the Trump administration's contradictory accounts of them — have deepened the questions about Russia's role in the election and its aftermath. The affair has fueled calls for congressional and independent investigations, and toppled another close Trump aide, Michael T. Flynn, who resigned as national security adviser last month after admitting he had misled the administration over his contacts with Mr. Kislyak.

On Thursday, the White House confirmed that Mr. Flynn had his own previously undisclosed meeting

with the ambassador in December to "establish a line of communication" between the incoming administration and the Russian government. Jared Kushner, Mr. Trump's son-in-law and now a senior adviser, also participated in the meeting at Trump Tower.

The extent and frequency of the Flynn-Kislyak contacts remain unclear. But news of the meeting added to the emerging picture of how the relationship between Mr. Trump's team and Moscow evolved to include some of Mr. Trump's most trusted advisers.

Two other Trump campaign advisers also reportedly spoke with

Mr. Kislyak last year at an event on the sidelines of the Republican National Convention.

Carter Page, a businessman and early Trump foreign policy adviser, told MSNBC on Thursday, "I'm not going to deny that I talked to him," but said in an earlier statement that he would not comment about the event, which was off the record. Additionally, J. D. Gordon, a retired naval officer who advised Mr. Trump on national security, told USA Today that he had had an "informal conversation" with Mr. Kislyak, and played down its importance.

Mr. Sessions's decision to recuse himself exposed a rift between the

White House and the Justice Department, not only over whether he should do so — Mr. Trump said he did not think Mr. Sessions needed to — but over the president's public statements. A Justice Department official confessed puzzlement about why the White House regularly asserted that no one from the Trump campaign had any contact with the Russian government.

With Mr. Sessions's recusal, any Justice Department investigation would be overseen by the deputy attorney general. Dana J. Boente is currently serving in an acting capacity from his role as the chief federal prosecutor for the Eastern

District of Virginia. A Senate hearing is scheduled for Tuesday for the nomination of Rod J. Rosenstein as deputy attorney general; he would oversee the issue if he is confirmed, and his hearing is now likely to be dominated by questions about the Russia issue.

It is not clear if the Justice Department is investigating Russian meddling in the 2016 election, although the F.B.I. is known to have examined possible contacts between Russia and Trump advisers. The House Intelligence Committee has also opened an inquiry into whether Russia tried to influence the election.

Mr. Trump said that he “wasn’t aware” that Mr. Sessions had spoken to the ambassador, but that he believed that the attorney general had testified truthfully during his confirmation hearing.

“I think he probably did,” Mr. Trump told reporters, while touring the Gerald R. Ford, the newest American aircraft carrier, in Newport News, Va. Asked whether Mr. Sessions should recuse himself from the investigations, the president said, “I don’t think so.”

Within Mr. Trump’s inner circle, Mr. Flynn appears to have been the primary interlocutor with the Russian envoy. The two were in contact during the campaign and the transition, Mr. Kislyak and current and former American officials have said. But Mr. Sessions served as the chairman of Mr. Trump’s national security committee — a post Democrats said would

have made him a much sought-after figure for officials from many foreign countries.

There is nothing unusual about meetings between presidential campaigns and foreign diplomats. Mr. Kislyak was one of several envoys at the Republican National Convention, where his first meeting with Mr. Sessions, according to the attorney general, was a brief encounter after a panel organized by the Heritage Foundation. Ambassadors also attended the Democratic convention, though it was not clear whether Mr. Kislyak was among them.

“Active embassies here consider it as their assignment to stretch out feelers to presidential hopefuls,” said Peter Wittig, the German ambassador, who met most of the Republican candidates, though not Mr. Trump. “I don’t consider it as something unusual or problematic.”

The trouble in Mr. Sessions’s case is that his meeting came as the nation’s intelligence agencies were concluding that Russia had tried to destabilize the election and help Mr. Trump. Mr. Sessions’s initial lack of disclosure of the meetings with Mr. Kislyak fed suspicions that it was more than run-of-the-mill diplomacy.

The disclosure, first reported by The Washington Post, contradicted forceful and repeated denials from the White House that anyone from the Trump campaign had discussions with the Russians. “I have nothing to do with Russia,” Mr. Trump said at a news conference on Feb. 20. “To the best of my

knowledge, no person that I deal with does.”

Asked at the news conference on Thursday whether he and the ambassador had discussed Mr. Trump or the election, Mr. Sessions said, “I don’t recall.” Ambassadors are “pretty gossipy,” he said, and “this was in campaign season, but I don’t recall any specific political discussions.”

Mr. Sessions noted that he was joined by two retired Army colonels on his staff, as well as perhaps a younger staff member. He said they opened with small talk about Mr. Sessions’s visit to Russia with a church group in 1991.

“He said he was not a believer himself, but he was glad to have church people come there,” Mr. Sessions recalled.

That meeting came during the waning months of the campaign. But the meeting two months later of Mr. Kushner, Mr. Flynn and Mr. Kislyak came at an arguably more crucial time, with Mr. Trump as the president-elect and the Obama White House preparing to impose sanctions on Russia and publicly make its case that Moscow had interfered with the election.

What is becoming clear is that the incoming Trump administration was simultaneously striking a conciliatory pose toward Moscow in a series of meetings and calls involving Mr. Kislyak.

“They generally discussed the relationship, and it made sense to establish a line of communication,”

said Hope Hicks, a White House spokeswoman. “Jared has had meetings with many other foreign countries and representatives — as many as two dozen other foreign countries’ leaders and representatives.”

The Trump Tower meeting lasted 20 minutes, and Mr. Kushner has not met since with Mr. Kislyak, Ms. Hicks said.

At Mr. Sessions’s confirmation hearing, Mr. Franken asked him about a CNN report that after the election, intelligence briefers had told President Barack Obama and Mr. Trump that Russian operatives claimed to have compromising information about Mr. Trump.

Mr. Franken also noted that the report indicated that surrogates for Mr. Trump and intermediaries for the Russian government continued to exchange information during the campaign. He asked Mr. Sessions what he would do if that report proved true.

Mr. Sessions replied that he was “not aware of any of those activities.” He added, “I have been called a surrogate at a time or two in that campaign, and I didn’t have — did not have communications with the Russians, and I’m unable to comment on it.”

On Thursday, Mr. Sessions said he did not view Mr. Kislyak’s visit as tied to his campaign role, but he acknowledged, “I can’t speak for what the Russian ambassador may have had in his mind.”

The Washington Post Editorial : Sessions’s recusal can’t be the end of the story

“I DID not have communications with the Russians.” At the least, Attorney General Jeff Sessions misled Congress when he said this in his January confirmation hearings. The Post reported Wednesday night that Mr. Sessions had contact with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak on at least two occasions — once after he spoke at a Heritage Foundation event at the Republican National Convention last July, and again in Mr. Sessions’s Senate office in September.

At a Thursday afternoon news conference, Mr. Sessions began by reading a prepared statement arguing that his declaration was “honest and correct as I understood it at the time.” That, he claimed, was because he was referring to his role as Trump campaign surrogate, not his position as a senator who regularly meets ambassadors. In

fact, his extemporaneous response to a question was more fitting: “In retrospect, I should have slowed down and said, ‘but I did meet one Russian official a couple of times.’” Yes: If not at that time, then at least following the hearing, when Mr. Sessions and aides should have reviewed the testimony he had just given — under oath — and noticed that his statement was deeply misleading. Imagine Republicans’ reaction if Hillary Clinton had attempted to spin her way out of a dubious statement in such a hair-splitting way.

The Post reached out to the other 26 Senate Armed Services Committee members, where Mr. Sessions served, and all 20 who responded, including Chairman John McCain (R-Ariz.), said they did not meet with the Russian ambassador last year. Even so, as Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) said in a

Thursday morning news conference, there are a variety of plausible and appropriate reasons Mr. Sessions may have met with Mr. Kislyak. The damning issue is that Mr. Sessions misled senior government officials and the public about his contacts. This was the same lapse that brought down former national security adviser Michael Flynn, and it underlines broader questions about the opaque relationship between Mr. Trump and the regime of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Those questions remain unanswered.

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Mr. Sessions at least announced Thursday that he would recuse himself from “any existing or future investigations of any matter relating in any way to the campaigns for president of the United States.” He should have taken this step weeks ago — and it should extend to any

probe of after-the-election conversations between Mr. Kislyak and Mr. Flynn. Mr. Sessions should appoint a special counsel capable of conducting a thorough and unbiased inquiry into all of the contacts between Mr. Trump and his associates and Russia — including Mr. Sessions’s.

The attorney general promised to provide the Senate Judiciary Committee with a full explanation of his misleading testimony. The integrity of the committee’s work is now at stake, and its members owe themselves and the public nothing less than a thorough probe. Beyond that, what is still needed is a broader investigation into Russia’s attempted interference in the election. If ongoing investigations by congressional intelligence committees are stymied by partisanship, an independent commission should be empaneled.

Editorial : The Jim Carrey Cover-Up

March 2, 2017
7:10 p.m. ET 627

The story about the connection between Russia and the Donald Trump presidential campaign is either the most elaborate cover-up of all time, or the dumbest. More evidence for the dumb theory arrives with the news that during his confirmation hearings Attorney General Jeff Sessions didn't tell Senators about two 2016 meetings with Russia's ambassador to the U.S.

The Washington Post reported late Wednesday that Mr. Sessions had two conversations with Sergei Kislyak last year, one a brief chat amid a gaggle of other ambassadors at a public event at the GOP convention in July, another in September at the then-Senator's office.

Yet at his Jan. 10 confirmation hearing, Democrat Al Franken asked Mr. Sessions what he would do if he learned that anyone affiliated with the Trump campaign had communicated with the Russian government. "I'm not aware of any of those activities," Mr. Sessions replied, adding that "I have been called a surrogate at a time or two in that campaign and I did not have communications with the Russians."

In a written question, Democrat Pat Leahy asked, "Have you been in contact with anyone connected to any part of the Russian government about the 2016 election, either before or after election day?" Mr. Sessions replied: "No."

Democrats are calling this perjury and demanding that Mr. Sessions resign, but his only certain offense is ineptitude. A spokesman for Mr. Sessions late Wednesday defended the AG by saying, "He was asked during the hearing about communications between Russia and the Trump campaign—not about meetings he took as a senator and a member of the Armed Services Committee."

Mr. Sessions added at a press conference Thursday that he would recuse himself from any FBI investigation of the Trump campaign or Russian interference in 2016, adding that his answers in the Senate were "honest and correct as I understood the questions at the time."

This may be technically true, but it won't wash politically amid a Beltway feeding frenzy. Mr. Sessions knew Democrats were hunting for any Russian-Trump campaign ties, and meeting with the Russian ambassador is no offense for a Senator or campaign adviser. So why not admit the meetings up front? Give Democrats and the media nowhere to go.

If Mr. Sessions was trying to cover up some dark Russian secret, he's the Jim Carrey of cover-up artists. Surely he knew someone would discover a meeting in his Senate office, which isn't exactly a drop-site in the Virginia suburbs, and the meeting in Cleveland had multiple witnesses. Like former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn not telling Vice President Mike Pence

about his meeting with the ambassador, this is a case of dumb and dumber.

The most important fact so far about the larger Trump-Russia collusion story is that there are so few salient facts. The Russian hacks of the Democratic National Committee and Clinton campaign chair John Podesta were embarrassing but had little bearing on the election. The dossier of supposed contacts between Trumpians and Russians published by BuzzFeed has never been corroborated.

Democrats on the House and Senate intelligence committees investigating the ties have reported nothing of substance. What we have on the evidence so far is a hapless cover-up without an underlying scandal.

Meanwhile, news emerged Thursday that Obama Administration officials ran a government intel operation on the Trump campaign. The New York Times reports that political appointees signed off on surveillance of "associates" of the Trump campaign, though "the nature of these contacts remains unknown." The officials then spread this raw intelligence throughout the government and to foreign counterparts, ensuring they'd be widely read and supposedly to prevent their Trump successors from covering up the truth.

Only days before the inauguration, President Obama also signed an executive order that allows the National Security Agency to share

raw intercepts and data with the 16 other agencies in the intelligence community. NSA analysts used to filter out irrelevant information and minimize references to Americans. Now such material is being leaked anonymously.

This is far more troubling than a meeting with an ambassador, though Mr. Sessions acted properly Thursday in recusing himself. Democrats are also demanding a special prosecutor, but what the country needs to know is what happened, not another Patrick Fitzgerald on the political make. The intelligence committees need to finish their probes as soon as possible, and they should err on the side of making as much information available to the public without damaging innocent reputations.

President Trump could help by denouncing Russia's election meddling and admitting that the Kremlin is acting against U.S. interests. He has already gone on record denying any personal campaign ties to Russia. If there really is nothing there, then the smart play isn't to spar with the media and Democrats but to disarm them with transparency. A penchant for denial and obfuscation helped ruin Hillary Clinton, and we'd have thought that the people who defeated her would have figured that out.

Krugman : Goodbye Spin, Hello Raw Dishonesty

Paul Krugman

At this point it's easier to list the Trump officials who haven't been caught lying under oath than those who have. This is not an accident.

Critics of our political culture used to complain, with justification, about politicians' addiction to spin — their inveterate habit of downplaying awkward facts and presenting their actions in a much better light than they deserved. But all indications are that the age of spin is over. It has been replaced by an era of raw, shameless dishonesty.

In part, of course, the pervasiveness of lies reflects the character of the man at the top: No president, or for that matter major U.S. political figure of any kind, has ever lied as freely and frequently as Donald Trump. But this isn't just a Trump story. His ability to get away

with it, at least so far, requires the support of many enablers: almost all of his party's elected officials, a large bloc of voters and, all too often, much of the news media.

It's important not to indulge in an easy cynicism, to say that politicians have always lied and always will. What we're getting from Mr. Trump is simply on a different plane from anything we've seen before.

For one thing, politicians used to limit their outright lies to matters not easily checked — hidden affairs, under the table deals, and so on. But now we have the man who ran the Miss Universe competition in Moscow three years ago, and who declared just last year that "I know Russia well," then last month said, "I haven't called Russia in 10 years."

On matters of policy, politicians used to limit their

misrepresentations of facts and impacts to relatively hard-to-verify assertions. When George W. Bush insisted that his tax cuts mainly went to the middle class, this wasn't true, but it took some number-crunching to show that. Mr. Trump, however, makes claims like his assertion that the murder rate — which ticked up in 2015 but is still barely half what it was in 1990 — is at a 45-year high. Furthermore, he just keeps repeating such claims after they've been debunked.

And the question is, who's going to stop him?

The moral vacuity of Republicans in Congress, and the unlikelihood that they'll act as any check on the president, becomes clearer with each passing day. Even the real possibility that we're facing subversion by agents of a foreign power, and that top officials are part

of the story, doesn't seem to faze them as long as they can get tax cuts for the rich and benefit cuts for the poor.

Meanwhile, Republican primary election voters, who are the real arbiters when polarized and/or gerrymandered districts make the general election irrelevant for many politicians, live in a Fox News bubble into which awkward truths never penetrate.

And what about the Fourth Estate? Will it let us down, too?

To be fair, the first weeks of the Trump administration have in important ways been glory days for journalism; one must honor the professionalism and courage of the reporters who have been ferreting out the secrets this authoritarian-minded clique is so determined to keep.

But then you watch something like the way much of the news media responded to Mr. Trump's congressional address, and you feel despair. It was a speech filled with

falsehoods and vile policy proposals, but read calmly off the teleprompter — and suddenly everyone was declaring the liar in chief “presidential.”

The point is that if that's all it takes to exonerate the most dishonest man ever to hold high office in America, we're doomed. Let's hope it doesn't happen again.

The New York Times

Brooks : Trumpism at Its Best, Straight Up

David Brooks

Finally, there used to be fiscal hawks who worried about the national debt. Trump demolished these people, too, vowing a long list of spending programs and preservation of entitlement programs.

The Republicans who applauded Trump on Tuesday were applauding their own repudiation. They did it because partisanship is stronger than philosophy, but also because Reagan conservatism no longer applies to current reality.

The second thing we saw was how Trump's ethnic nationalism emerges from the wreckage of the old G.O.P. Healthy American political philosophies balance individualism and collectivism, personal freedom and communal cohesion.

The old Reagan conservatism was economic individualism restrained by social and religious traditionalism. Conservatives could embrace the creative destruction of the free market because they believed that the communal order could be held together by traditional morals and the collective attachments of family, church and local organizations.

But in the 1990s conservatism devolved from a flexible balance to a crude anti-government philosophy, the Leave Us Alone coalition. Republicans talked as if Americans' problem was they were burdened by too many restraints and the solution was to get government off their backs.

That may have been true of the businessmen who make up the G.O.P. donor class, but regular voters felt adrift and uprooted, untethered and exposed. Regular Republicans didn't want more freedom and more risk in their lives. They wanted more protection and security. They wanted a father figure government that would protect them from the disruptions of technological change and globalization.

Donald Trump came along and offered them exactly that kind of strong government. He is not offering compassionate government, the way a Democrat might, but he is offering forceful government.

Trump would use big government to crack down on enemies foreign and domestic. He'd use government to create millions of jobs for infrastructure projects. He'd use

government to force or bribe corporations to locate plants here — the guarded order of national corporatism over the wide-open riskiness of free-market capitalism.

The third thing we learned is that much of Trump's policy agenda contradicts his core philosophy. Trumpism is all about protection, security and order. But many of Trump's policies would introduce more risk into people's lives, not less.

Trump's health care plan — tax credits and health saving accounts — would increase choice, instability and risk for individual health care consumers. His school-choice ideas might make for more competitive education markets, but they would also increase risk and insecurity for individual consumers.

It's likely that Republican voters will simply reject these proposals. They've got enough risk in their lives. It's quite likely that large elements of the Trump agenda will go down in flames because they go against what the country wants and even against his own core brand.

Fourth, Trump's speech on Tuesday offered those of us who want to replace him an occasion to ask the

big question: How in the 21st century should government unleash initiative and dynamism while also preserving order? Trump's answer: Nationalize intimidation but privatize compassion. Don't look to government to offer a warm hand; look to it to confront your enemies with a hard fist.

Human development research offers a different formula: All of life is a series of daring adventures from a secure base. If government can create a framework in which people grow up amid healthy families, nurturing schools, thick communities and a secure safety net, then they will have the resources and audacity to thrive in a free global economy and a diversifying skills economy.

This is a response that is open to welfare state policies from the left and trade and macroeconomic policies from the free-market right — a single-payer health care system married to the flat tax.

The last thing Trump showed was this: We're in a state of radical flux. Political parties can turn on a dime. At least that means it's a time to think anew.

The Washington Post

The nearly indestructible bond between Jeff Sessions and Donald Trump (UNE)

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

President John F. Kennedy picked his younger brother to be attorney general. President Trump might have picked the next closest thing.

Jeff Sessions was the first senator to endorse Trump at a time when few Republican lawmakers supported the candidate. His early and fierce loyalty — and his ability to translate Trump's nationalist instincts into policy — helped him forge a bond with the president, and he now enjoys access whenever he wants it, a privilege that few get, an official said.

Two of Sessions's former Senate advisers — Stephen Miller and Rick Dearborn — hold key White House roles, and one official said Sessions still talks to them regularly. The attorney general also is friendly with Stephen K. Bannon, Trump's chief strategist and a powerful player in

the administration who promoted Sessions for years on the Breitbart website.

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On Thursday, not long before Sessions recused himself from any investigations related to the Trump campaign, the president proclaimed that he had “total” confidence in his attorney general. Later, Trump issued a statement calling Sessions “an honest man” who “did not say anything wrong. He could have stated his response more accurately, but it was clearly not intentional.”

Trump also derided the “whole narrative” as “a way of face saving for Democrats losing an election that everyone thought they were supposed to win,” and he pointed — as he has in the past — to leaks of classified information as the “real story.”

(Zoeann Murphy/The Washington Post)

The Washington Post's Karoun Demirjian brings us up to speed on Jeff Sessions's decision to recuse himself from all investigations into the 2016 presidential campaign. The Washington Post's Karoun Demirjian brings us up to speed on Jeff Sessions's decision to recuse himself from all investigations into the 2016 presidential campaign. (Zoeann Murphy/The Washington Post)

“It is a total witch hunt!” Trump said.

The remarks — which came as pressure mounted for Sessions to step aside from any investigations of Trump associates and Russia, or to resign altogether — demonstrate the high standing Sessions has in Trump's Cabinet, and the critical role he will play in carrying out the president's vision.

[Sessions spoke twice with Russian ambassador during Trump's campaign]

Already, the administration has moved swiftly to implement policies that correspond with the worldview shared by Trump and Sessions. In his inaugural address, Trump spoke of rising crime and vowed to end the “American carnage.” His attorney general, in his first speech, laid out how he plans to do that: a task force, a crackdown on drugs and an increased respect for police, who he suggested might see less aggressive scrutiny than they did under his predecessor. “I do not believe that this pop in crime — this increase in crime — is necessarily an aberration, a one-time blip,” Sessions told the National Association of Attorneys General.

On immigration, an issue that has consumed much of Sessions's career, the ideological influence in Trump's policies is vivid and clear,

and his Justice Department will be tasked with implementing — and defending — the president's plans.

In the Senate, Sessions was a crusader for a hard-line stance on immigration, arguing that even legal immigration to the United States should be moderated. Trump has essentially implemented Sessions's ideas by executive action — calling for the hiring of more Customs and Border Protection agents, expanding the pool of those who are prioritized for removal, and temporarily barring refugees and citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the United States.

That last order has since been frozen by the courts, and Sessions's Justice Department, which has forcefully defended it, has been involved in crafting a new one.

Sessions also has taken steps to undo the previous Justice Department's policy toward transgender children, changed its position on a Texas voting rights law the department had been fighting for years and reversed the previous administration's policy on the use of private prisons. His views on those topics match those of the president, who has cast himself a champion of private industry and alleged, without evidence, that massive voter fraud affected the election. During an internal White House debate over the transgender policy, Trump sided with Sessions over Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, according to the New York Times.

[Trump's hard-line actions have an intellectual godfather: Jeff Sessions]

The attorney general holds a unique role in any presidential Cabinet — requiring the person in the job to implement the president's policy

goals on one hand, while faithfully enforcing laws on the other. Sessions is not the first attorney general to enjoy a close relationship with the president. Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr., whose worldview was similar to President Barack Obama's, enjoyed status as the former president's favorite Cabinet member.

Like Sessions, Holder came to know Obama before he ran for office and then joined him as a close adviser on the campaign trail. On issues such as same-sex marriage and the reform of a criminal justice system, which they both saw as deeply unfair to young black men, the two worked hand in hand as Holder executed policies that they both supported.

Sessions and Trump met in 2005, when Sessions invited him to Washington to testify at a Senate subcommittee hearing about his criticism of a U.N. project. Sessions was taken with the billionaire developer and later said it was the best congressional testimony he had ever heard.

Two years ago, in June 2015, Trump and Sessions held a conference call on immigration policy. After that, Trump began trying to persuade Sessions to endorse him for president, and by January 2016 had, in essence, lent his top aide, Miller, to the Trump campaign.

In February of last year at a rally in Alabama, Trump told the crowd that Sessions supported him, and Sessions donned a red "Make America Great Again" hat as he praised Trump, months after Sessions teased the possibility at a summer rally in Mobile. Observers on the campaign trail noted how different the two seemed. Trump is

from the North, Sessions from the South. Trump is brash, while Sessions is soft-spoken. Sessions has been in politics for nearly 20 years; Trump is a businessman who had never before held elected office.

But they bonded over their views on issues like immigration and law and order, with Trump's view of those issues influenced by his father, Fred, and his early years in business in New York, and how he saw global competition threaten the U.S. economy. Miller, a former Sessions aide, is the author of many of Trump's executive orders, and Dearborn, Sessions's longtime chief of staff, works to turn Trump's goals into law.

In Trump's orbit, of course, support can evaporate in an instant, and it is hard to assess who is truly in power — aside from Trump himself. White House counselor Kellyanne Conway said national security adviser Michael Flynn had the "full confidence" of the president, and on the same day, Flynn resigned amid revelations that he had misled Vice President Pence about his conversations with the Russian ambassador.

Yet Sessions so far has largely weathered the storm. He confirmed Thursday that he met twice with Russian ambassador Sergey Kislyak, a fact he had omitted at his Senate confirmation hearing to become attorney general.

At that hearing, Sessions was asked by Sen. Al Franken (D-Minn.) what he would do if he learned of any evidence that anyone affiliated with the Trump campaign communicated with the Russian government in the course of the 2016 campaign, and said, "I have been called a surrogate at a time or

two in that campaign and I did not have communications with the Russians."

Sessions said at a Justice Department news conference Thursday that he would provide the Judiciary Committee a written explanation for his testimony in the next day or two, while still insisting it was "honest and correct as I understood it at the time." His explanation is that he was flustered by Franken's question — which referenced a breaking news story about contacts between Trump surrogates and Russians.

"It struck me very hard, and that's what I focused my answer on," he said. "In retrospect, I should have slowed down and said I did meet one Russian official a couple times. That would be the ambassador."

Sessions said he would now recuse himself from any investigations having to do with the Trump campaign and insisted he had been talking with Justice Department ethics officials about doing so even before news broke of his meetings with Kislyak.

Not long before, Trump himself had said he did not believe Sessions needed to do so. White House press secretary Sean Spicer had also said: "There's nothing to recuse himself" and said those criticizing Sessions were "choosing to play partisan politics."

Sessions said he told the White House counsel what he planned to do Thursday afternoon, but they perhaps didn't know or understand the rules as he did.

"I should not be involved investigating a campaign I had a role in," Sessions said.



Editorial : The GOP's wrong answers on health care

"WE'RE GOING to have insurance for everybody," President Trump told The Post in January. "There was a philosophy in some circles that if you can't pay for it, you don't get it. That's not going to happen with us." Yet that is exactly the direction Republicans appear to be heading.

In his first speech to a joint session of Congress, Mr. Trump stressed providing "access" to coverage rather than re-articulating the goal of insuring everyone, embracing rhetoric Republicans have used to defend policies that would likely reduce the number of Americans with decent health-care coverage. The president then seemed to endorse the broad outlines of the

sorts of repeal-and-replace schemes that mainstream Republicans such as House Speaker Paul D. Ryan (Wis.) have backed.

It may still be too early to say what Mr. Trump really favors. The White House says he will release a proposal within the next few weeks. Yet the president's thinking on health care has long been scattered. During and after the campaign Mr. Trump condemned both high deductibles and high premiums, seemingly promising to lower both. In fact, these two figures generally move in opposite directions, and only spending massive amounts of federal money would change that. Tuesday night, he called for a fantasy plan that

would "expand choice, increase access, lower cost, and at the same time provide better health care."

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Certainly, Republicans have not proposed any such magical plan. A fair reading of every major Republican replacement plan so far — including the one the president's Health and Human Services secretary authored and the one that Mr. Ryan proposed last summer — would reduce access to decent coverage.

The latest example is a draft bill circulated among lawmakers in

February and leaked at the end of last week. Though a new draft is apparently under discussion, the February plan tracks with earlier Republican proposals, which is to say that it adjusts benefits toward healthier and wealthier people, even at the risk of leaving low-income Americans out of the system.

Though the bill contains some attractive provisions, such as limiting irrational tax breaks for employer-sponsored health insurance, it makes several cardinal errors. Obamacare linked the federal subsidies that health-care consumers get to people's incomes. The GOP would break this link, showering benefits on wealthy insurance-buyers who do not need them and shortchanging poorer

people who may well find themselves unable to afford adequate coverage.

The bill would double down on this problem by stressing tax-advantaged health savings accounts to fill coverage gaps, but these accounts would be useless to

those without spare income with which to fill them. To catch those who fall through the cracks, the bill would provide states “innovation grants” to set up high-risk pools, create reinsurance programs or other such things. Yet high-risk pools serially failed to serve as

adequate backstops in the pre-Obamacare years.

As Mr. Trump belatedly noted the other day, health-care policy is complex. But the essential questions facing Republicans remain simple. Will as many or more people be covered under an

Obamacare replacement plan? Can the GOP make such a commitment without severely degrading coverage quality? So far, Republicans have the wrong answers.



Conservative groups and lawmakers demanding ‘full repeal’ could derail Obamacare rollback (UNE)

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

An array of conservative lawmakers, organizations and activists are demanding a swifter and more aggressive remake of the Affordable Care Act than many Republicans are comfortable with, raising questions about whether President Trump and the GOP are headed toward gridlock as they try to fulfill their promise to repeal the health-care law.

Three conservative senators known for bucking GOP leadership during Barack Obama’s presidency — Ted Cruz (Tex.), Rand Paul (Ky.) and Mike Lee (Utah) — are raising the possibility of doing the same under Trump.

And outside Congress, three prominent groups — FreedomWorks, Americans for Prosperity and Heritage Action for America — plan to increase pressure on lawmakers to repeal the law fully or risk retribution from the conservative grass roots.

If they hold together in the Senate, where Republicans have just 52 seats, the three senators alone could sink a Republican bill.

The current proposal, floated privately this week by House Republicans, repeals portions of the ACA but, because of pressure from constituents who depend on the law, leaves some elements intact that conservatives are not happy about. Few details of the proposal have emerged publicly.

(The Washington Post)

Vice President Pence spoke, March 2, about health care at a business that sells American-made frames in Cincinnati. Vice President Pence spoke, March 2, about health care at a business that sells American-made frames in Cincinnati. (The Washington Post)

“The repeal bill ought to be a repeal,” Paul said Thursday, decrying a replacement plan House Republicans presented to GOP senators at a closed-door meeting the previous afternoon. He also raised the possibility that Cruz and Lee might join him in voting against

it. “Talk to the two people that tweeted out with me,” he said.

[House leaders forge ahead with health bills, hoping to bulldoze internal strife]

Cruz and Lee used similar language in tweets this week. With reporters, Cruz has been more circumspect, but he has left open the possibility of opposing the Republican plan. “There’s agreement and disagreement between the two chambers, but at the end of the day, I believe we will repeal Obamacare,” he said.

In addition to starting a game of chicken with Republican leaders on the Hill and the Trump administration, opponents of anything less than full repeal have also created uncertainty for millions of Americans who receive coverage through the ACA.

The strife came as House Speaker Paul D. Ryan (R-Wis.) laid out a three-week timeline for the passage of health-care legislation in a closed-door meeting with fellow Republicans Thursday, according to numerous attendees.

For the many Republicans who were elected during Obama’s presidency with a mandate to block his agenda, obstruction comes much more naturally than governance. The effort to repeal the ACA is the first major test of whether they can harness the energy they used to oppose the law to actually undo it — or whether ideological divisions will sink the effort.

The coordinated resistance has raised the specter of a resurgent ideological right wing, which has appeared at least publicly to be in retreat since Trump’s victory. Many of the president’s positions, including his desire to protect insurance coverage for Americans, run counter to conservative orthodoxy and leave room for a revolt.

(The Washington Post)

The Washington Post sat down with Ezekiel J. Emanuel, one of the main architects of the Affordable Care Act, to discuss the difficulties that the Trump administration may run

into trying to repeal and replace the law. The Washington Post sat down with Ezekiel J. Emanuel, one of the main architects of the Affordable Care Act, to discuss the difficulties that the Trump administration may run into trying to repeal and replace the law. (The Washington Post)

But Trump’s continued popularity on the right puts these conservatives in a tough spot. Should the president more fully embrace the emerging House plan. They risk alienating Trump’s loyal base — a prospect many lawmakers do not take lightly.

“I don’t want to draw a line and say that I’m against this proposal and I will put a ‘no’ vote up,” said Rep. Steve King (R-Iowa), who prefers full repeal.

The House plan calls for a refundable tax credit to help Americans afford insurance premiums, but conservatives in the House and the Senate think it amounts to an expensive new federal entitlement.

Key House committees are set to take up legislation as soon as next week. The first steps involve parallel action by the Ways and Means Committee and the Energy and Commerce Committee.

The following week, the House Budget Committee is scheduled to combine the bills into a “reconciliation” package eligible for Senate debate, with votes on the House floor expected the week after that.

No legislative text has been released by Ryan’s office or by the relevant committees. One part of the legislation, handled by the Energy and Commerce Committee, has been made available to members of that panel — but only for inspection behind closed doors.

Paul complained Thursday that House GOP leaders were being too secretive. Democrats voiced similar complaints.

“We’re here today because I’d like to read the Obamacare bill,” Paul said near the room where the bill was being reviewed. “If you’d recall, when Obamacare was passed in 2009 and 2010, Nancy Pelosi said, ‘You’ll know what’s in it after you

pass it.’ The Republican Party shouldn’t act in the same way.”

Paul, Cruz and Lee are not the only ones who oppose some details of the House plan. Some House conservatives, including King, don’t like what they have seen and have embraced alternative ideas.

[Trump’s words stir up intraparty feud over tax credits for health-care costs]

Conservative Republicans have long opposed refundable tax credits because Americans with lower incomes, who pay less in taxes, receive the full credit even if it exceeds their tax bill. Nonrefundable credits can be used only to offset actual tax liability — but would also mean less money in the pockets of Americans who need help paying for health insurance.

As a result of that dispute and others, conservatives have slowly built support for a “full repeal” plan since the start of the year. Paul provided the only Republican “no” vote on January’s nonbinding budget reconciliation instructions, saying that it would add too much to the national debt; at the time, Lee and Cruz co-signed a letter saying they would oppose a later bill if it did not repeal the ACA.

Conservatives hailed the apparent unity of Paul, Lee and Cruz on pushing for a full repeal — a model based on legislation that passed Congress in 2015 only to be vetoed by Obama.

“If people don’t credibly think there are 51 votes for a plan, then the plan doesn’t go forward,” said Michael Needham, chief executive of Heritage Action for America, speaking of the Senate. “It’s very helpful to have this bloc in the Senate, and in the House, saying they’re not going to take less than they got in 2015.”

At a Heritage Foundation-sponsored roundtable event with House Freedom Caucus members, Lee said that a repeal bill “should not be anything less aggressive than what we were able to pass in 2015.”

To many Republicans, the current conflict triggers the feeling of déjà

vu. The House Freedom Caucus had issued threats to oppose Republican budgets and to unseat John A. Boehner (R-Ohio) as House speaker; Cruz had floated the idea of a government shutdown over Planned Parenthood funding and then backed off.

In interviews, opponents of the current House proposal, which they call "Obamacare-lite," argued that this fight is different. "This has been baking for seven years," said Rep. Mark Sanford (R-S.C.), a Freedom Caucus member. Fights in previous years "didn't have the political urgency that repeal does."

Cruz held forth with reporters outside the Senate chamber for 10 minutes earlier this week, seeming to relish in the chance to criticize the House leadership's guidelines and pitch an alternative.

"If we fail to honor our commitment to repeal Obamacare, I believe the consequences would be quite rightly catastrophic," Cruz warned in the same apocalyptic tone he often he used as a presidential candidate.

Cheered by that kind of rhetoric, and planning their own push for full repeal, conservative groups have promised to wage a public campaign against Republicans who buckle and save parts of the ACA.

"We're going to be more strongly reminding Republicans of their promises made over the last eight years on the issue of stopping — or at least rolling back, anyway — government-run health care," said Tim Phillips, the president of Americans for Prosperity. "We're telling them to keep their promises — and they've promised an unequivocal repeal of Obamacare."

Founded by the billionaire donor David Koch, Americans for Prosperity has become an effective grass-roots organization, stopping Republican legislators in Florida, Tennessee and Virginia from expanding Medicaid under the provision of the ACA or building health insurance exchanges. The group, Phillips said, would demand that lawmakers pass full repeal "both in Washington in a very vocal way" and "also back home in their

districts." He declined to be more specific.

Adam Brandon, the president of FreedomWorks, said the group is organizing a "day of action" on March 15, with activists flooding Capitol Hill to "put the heat" on Republicans who don't support full repeal. They take it as a given that the Cruz-Lee-Paul troika will be with them.

"They're damn serious," he said. "It's completely possible that the Ryan-Trump plan, when there is a plan, gets dropped. My jaw kind of hits the floor when I think that we're even having a conversation about this."

On the other hand, some Republicans think they can whittle down the conservative opposition as the chance of repealing the ACA, in part or entirely, becomes more real. Sen. Bill Cassidy (La.), the sponsor of a bill that would allow states to keep most of the ACA if they want to, told reporters this week that Republicans could fulfill

their promises if they repealed the most controversial parts of the law.

Cassidy said the mission of Republicans in Congress is not to pitch their ideal plans but to get right with what the president ran on.

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"The American people voted for his vision," he said. "More than any other single person in our country right now, he is in sync with the national mood. If folks want to go their own way, maybe they should run for president."

As the reporters assembled around, Cassidy began to laugh.

"Maybe they did," he said.

Kelsey Snell contributed to this report.

The New York Times **Top Trump Advisers Are Split on Paris Agreement on Climate Change (UNE)**

Coral Davenport

While the president cannot, as Mr. Trump suggested, unilaterally undo a 194-nation accord that has already been legally ratified, he could initiate the four-year process to withdraw the world's largest economy and second-largest climate polluter from the first worldwide deal to tackle global warming. Such a move would rend a global deal that has been hailed as historic, throwing into question the fate of global climate policy and, diplomats say, the credibility of the United States.

But it would also demonstrate to his supporters that Mr. Trump is a man of his word, putting American coal interests ahead of a global deal forged by Mr. Obama.

On one side of that debate is Mr. Bannon, who as a former chief executive of Breitbart News published countless articles denouncing climate change as a hoax, and who has vowed to push Mr. Trump to transform all his major campaign promises into policy actions.

On the other side are Ms. Trump, Mr. Tillerson, and a slew of foreign policy advisers and career diplomats who argue that the fallout of withdrawing from the accord could be severe, undercutting the United States' credibility on their

foreign policy issues and damaging relations with key allies.

Although Ms. Trump has not spoken out publicly for action to combat climate change, proponents and opponents of such action see her as an ally. Former Vice President Al Gore met with her during the Trump transition, and was ushered in by the "first daughter" to see the president-elect. The actor and activist Leonardo DiCaprio even slipped her a DVD copy of his climate-change documentary.

"President Trump Must Not Wobble on Climate Change — No Matter What Ivanka Says ...," blared a Breitbart post on Monday written by James Delingpole, who is close to Mr. Bannon and who leads the website's coverage of climate-change policy.

Mr. Trump wants to make a decision by next week, say people familiar with the White House's debate on the climate pact, in order to announce his executive order to undo Mr. Obama's climate regulations in conjunction with his plans for the Paris deal.

According to leaked budget documents, the president will also propose killing off nearly two dozen E.P.A. programs, including the Obama-era Clean Power Program, climate partnership programs with local governments, Energy Star grants to encourage efficiency

research in consumer products and climate-change research. Those would be part of a broader budget submission that would cut the E.P.A.'s funding by 25 percent, to around \$6.1 billion from \$8.2 billion, and its staff by 20 percent.

"If the goal is to fulfill the president's campaign promises and implement his agenda, there is no value in staying in Paris," said Thomas J. Pyle, an adviser to the Trump transition and the president of the Institute for Energy Research, an organization partly funded by the billionaire brothers Charles G. and David H. Koch, who have worked for years to undermine climate-change policies.

Mr. Trump has cited Mr. Pyle's group as being influential in shaping his energy and climate proposals, including his campaign pledge to withdraw from the Paris deal.

"The two greatest obstacles to a Clexit (climate exit from U.N. Paris agreement) are probably Ivanka and Tillerson," wrote Marc Morano, a former Republican Senate staff member who now runs Climate Depot, a fossil-fuel-industry-funded website that promotes the denial of climate science, in an email. "Tillerson with his 'seat at the table' views could be biggest proponent of not withdrawing the U.S. from the agreement."

Mr. Tillerson is a former chief executive of Exxon Mobil, which, like many major global corporations, endorsed the Paris agreement. While his former company once denied human-caused climate change, it has more recently publicly acknowledged the threat posed by burning oil and supported proposals to tax carbon dioxide pollution.

Asked during his Senate confirmation hearing about the Paris accord, Mr. Tillerson said, "It's important that the U.S. maintains its seat at the table about how to address the threat of climate change, which does require a global response."

Under the Paris agreement, every nation has formally submitted plans detailing how it expects to lower its planet-warming pollution. The Obama administration pledged that the United States would reduce its carbon pollution about 26 percent from 2005 levels by 2025. However, that pledge depends on enactment of Mr. Obama's E.P.A. regulations on coal-fired power plants, which Mr. Trump and Mr. Pruitt intend to substantially weaken or eliminate.

But under the Paris deal, those numerical targets are not legally binding, and there are no sanctions for failing to meet them. The only legal requirements of the deal are that countries publicly put forth their

emissions reductions targets, and later put forth reports verifying how they are meeting the targets. It would be possible for the Trump administration to stay in the deal and submit a less ambitious target.

Even senior Republican voices in the foreign policy debate have said it may be wiser to stay in but keep a low profile.

"There's really no obligation," Senator Bob Corker, Republican of Tennessee and chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, said in an interview. "It doesn't require us to do anything. I think they may take a little time to assess whether pulling out makes sense now."

Foreign policy experts say withdrawing from Paris would have far greater diplomatic consequences than President George W. Bush's withdrawal from the world's first global climate-change accord, the 1997 Kyoto

Protocol.

"I think it would be a major mistake, even a historic mistake, to disavow the Paris deal," said R. Nicholas Burns, a retired career diplomat and under secretary of state under Mr. Bush.

"In international politics, trust, reliability and keeping your commitments — that's a big part of how other countries view our country," Mr. Burns said. "I can't think of an issue, except perhaps NATO, where if the U.S. simply walks away, it would have such a major negative impact on how we are seen."

The Paris deal is more consequential than Kyoto. Unlike that pact, which required action only from developed economies, the Paris agreement includes commitments from every nation, rich and poor, to cut emissions, including China and India, the

world's largest and third-largest polluters. Also, the science of climate change has become far more certain and the impact more visible in the 20 years since Kyoto. Each of the last three years has surpassed the previous one as the hottest on record.

Some of the United States' closest allies are urging the Trump administration not to pull out. In a letter to Mr. Trump after he won the election, Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany wrote, "Partnership with the United States is and will remain a keystone of German foreign policy, especially so that we can tackle the great challenges of our time." They include, she wrote, "working to develop farsighted climate policy."

As Mr. Trump and his advisers weigh their Paris options, one proposal is gaining traction, according to participants in the debate: Mr. Trump could declare

that the Paris agreement is a treaty that requires ratification by the Senate. The pact was designed not to have the legal force of a treaty specifically so that it would not have to go before the United States Senate, which would have assuredly failed to ratify it.

"If there are camps forming in the White House, then let the people decide, the elected representatives," Mr. Pyle said. "Let's put the question to them."

Proponents of that idea say it could shift some of the weight of the decision from Mr. Trump to Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the majority leader, at least in the eyes of some foreign diplomats, and of the president's daughter.



Hackers accessed a private email account Pence used for official business as Indiana governor

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Vice President Mike Pence's office confirmed March 2 that he used private email to conduct public business as governor of Indiana. During this time his personal AOL account was hacked. (Reuters)

Vice President Mike Pence's office confirmed March 2 that he used private email to conduct public business as governor of Indiana. During this time his personal AOL account was hacked. Vice President Mike Pence's office confirmed March 2 that he used private email to conduct public business as governor of Indiana. (Reuters)

Vice President Pence used a private email account that was later compromised while he served as governor of Indiana, his office confirmed Thursday.

The existence of the account was first reported by the Indy Star, which obtained copies of Pence's emails through a Freedom of Information request.

The paper reported that Pence used the account to conduct government business, including corresponding about potentially sensitive issues. In

one exchange, Pence communicated with his chief of staff and his top homeland security adviser, who conveyed an update about terror-related FBI arrests in the state. However, the information in those emails was reported widely in the media at the time.

In a statement, Pence press secretary Marc Lotter said that his use of a personal and government email account was consistent with previous governors.

"As then-Governor Pence concluded his time in office, he directed outside counsel to review all of his communications to ensure that state-related emails are being transferred and properly archived by the state, in accordance with the law, which outside counsel has done and is continuing to do," Lotter said. "Government emails involving his state and personal accounts are being archived by the state and are being managed according to Indiana's Access to Public Records Act."

Pence had used the AOL account since the mid-1990s and continued to use it throughout his time as governor until early 2016, when the account was compromised by a hack. Hackers leveraged his

contacts to launch a phishing attack against his contact lists, sending an email claiming that Pence and his wife were stranded in the Philippines and needed financial help.

After the account was hacked, it was shut down and Pence began using a second AOL account, an aide said.

The use of a private email account is not prohibited by law in Indiana. However, public officials cannot use state accounts for political business.

Security experts noted to the Indy Star that some of Pence's emails were apparently confidential and sensitive enough that they could not be turned over in response to public records requests.

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"The fact that these emails are stored in a private AOL account is crazy to me," Justin Cappos, a computer security professor at New York University's Tandon School of Engineering, told the Indy Star.

"This account was used to handle these messages that are so sensitive they can't be turned over in a records request."

According to an aide, additional security measures were taken to protect Pence's accounts after he was chosen as Trump's vice president. Emails in both accounts were preserved and are expected to be managed according to Indiana's public records laws, the aide added.

Pence was a vocal critic of Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server as secretary of state and often criticized her for it during the presidential campaign.

Lotter rejected the comparison between the two cases, arguing that Pence's use of a private email server was not unusual and that he did not communicate about classified information.

Pence was also embroiled in a public records dispute over the release of an email that he is seeking to keep private. The email is related to Pence's decision to join a lawsuit seeking to block refugees from being resettled in Indiana.



Lane : Trump's infrastructure plan could run into a big problem: Democracy

By Charles Lane

The American people support more federal spending on infrastructure

such as roads, buildings and waterways — 75 percent are in favor, according to a year-old

Gallup poll. And so President Trump's call for a 10-year, \$1 trillion "national rebuilding" plan was one of

the few parts of his address to Congress on Tuesday that might have been the same if Hillary

Clinton or Bernie Sanders had won in November.

Depending on the details, many Democrats will support a Trump-backed infrastructure bill, in the name of boosting short-term job creation and long-term economic productivity.

There's just one catch: Many of the same people who tell pollsters they want to unleash the bulldozers will sing a different tune when those machines approach their communities. And America's responsive, democratic political system, with its decentralized institutions and multiple "veto points," will heed the cry of "NIMBY" — not in my back yard.

Politics newsletter

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Two consecutive California governors, Republican Arnold Schwarzenegger and Democrat Jerry Brown, have dreamed of a high-speed rail system like Japan's, paid for partly by state borrowing. Nearly a decade after voters approved the California bond issue, the project has barely started. Residents of Silicon Valley in the north and the San Joaquin Valley in California's central agricultural region filed lawsuits. Property owners along the route have refused to sell land. San Fernando, a small city in Los Angeles County, balks at being sliced in two by the tracks.

To be sure, California's high-speed rail is brand-new infrastructure and, as such, inherently more disruptive. Maybe Americans will be less wary of merely upgrading existing installations, as Trump — with his tales of trucks damaged by potholed interstates or tiles raining down from the Midtown Tunnel's ceiling — seems to intend?

Well, a \$120 billion federal plan to improve the ancient but vital Northeast Corridor rail line, thus slicing Amtrak travel times between New York and Boston, faces resistance from the 7,500 denizens of Old Lyme, Conn. It would mean tunneling under their downtown. Connecticut's Democratic elected officials, state and federal, support the resisters of Old Lyme.

Even much-needed repairs to Rock Creek Park's thoroughfare, Beach Drive, a mere 6½ miles long, took years to get going, due to negotiations between the feds and local D.C. authorities over stormwater drainage.

It's fashionable and, to some extent, merited to denounce NIMBYism. We don't want a few selfish holdouts to block manifestly urgent and beneficial projects.

On the other hand, it's hard to prove, really prove, the necessity and utility of any given bridge or highway. A just-completed \$1.6 billion expansion of Los Angeles's 405 freeway accomplished next to nothing in terms of its stated goal — reducing traffic congestion — according to the New York Times. Anybody else notice that Trump hasn't identified a *specific* new road or hospital that the nation absolutely, undeniably must have?

Yes, the jewel of American infrastructure — the interstate highway system — knit this great land together. In the process, it tore through many an old downtown or established neighborhood (often inhabited by relatively powerless minority groups).

In fact, backlash against the interstates is one reason that we have environmental-impact statements today, and the pesky delays that come with them. Prompted in part by widespread "freeway revolts," Congress passed the National Environmental Policy Act; President Richard Nixon signed it on New Year's Day 1970.

Few recall that history now, but it puts into perspective a lot of today's simplistic thinking about infrastructure.

The United States' failure to enact a "massive" program to repair our "crumbling" infrastructure reflects not stupidity, or weak national will, but a genuine, inescapable collective-action problem. Infrastructure's benefits are diffuse, long term and, to some degree, speculative; its costs are focused, immediate and palpable.

Approaches to this conundrum vary around the world. In China, a one-party state shoves whole villages aside to make way for dams and airports.

As that extreme example demonstrates, there is always a tension between grand schemes of "national rebuilding" and, well, democracy. Or, if you prefer, there's a rather striking compatibility between such schemes and authoritarianism.

By all means, the United States should try to mitigate NIMBYism. We should streamline the rules and regulations that have accumulated since 1970. We should spend what it takes to keep our far-flung ports, national parks and roads in good repair.

We should also reflect on the real reasons it's so difficult to take billions in infrastructure money, and "throw it up against the wall and see if it sticks," as Trump adviser Stephen K. Bannon has recommended.

Under our system, the government has to consult with the people — multiple times and in multiple forums — before irreversibly damming our rivers or excavating our towns.

This can be maddening as heck, but also, when you think about it, one of the things that makes America great.