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FRANCE - EUROPE3

Justin Fox: France's Farmers Are Actually Pretty Productive	3
Editorial : A 'Bad Bank' Could Be Good for Europe.....	3
Sternberg : Trumping Europe's Taxes.....	4
U.K.'s Hammond to Keep Purse Strings Tight as Brexit Gets Under Way.....	4
Northern Ireland's Main Parties Face Tough Talks After Election.....	5
In Italy, Confusion and Division Over Same-Sex Parenting	5
Economic Divisions Shape German Politics Too	6
In the era of Donald Trump, Germans debate a military buildup (UNE)	6

INTERNATIONAL..... 8

Iraqis Tell of Islamic State Brutality in Mosul	8
Trump Expected to Issue New Travel Ban Excluding Iraq on Monday.....	8
In Israel, Lauding and Lamenting the Era of Trump	9
Closed Afghan-Pakistani Border Is Becoming 'Humanitarian Crisis'	10
Will the US and Russia dance or duel?.....	10
In Transition Year, Politics Drives China's Economic Agenda.....	13

China Eases Foot Off Gas on Military Spending.....	13
Hoping to Lure High-Level Defectors, South Korea Increases Rewards.....	14
North Korea's Launch of Ballistic Missiles Raises New Worries	15
North Korea Fires Four Ballistic Missiles Into Waters Off Coast, South Korea Says (UNE)	15
Editorial : The integrity that roils South Korea's corrupt ..	16
Editorial : China's North Korea Feint.....	16
Russia dismisses sweeping corruption allegations against Medvedev	17
Editorial : Washington Goes Nuts	17
Diehl : How the rest of the world could shape Trump's foreign policy	18
Josh Rogin : Vice President Pence is quietly becoming a foreign policy power player	19
Editorial : Trump's blindness on trade is all too easy to see.....	19
The Case for a Border-Adjusted Tax	20
Nossel : 'America First' puts freedom and leadership last	20
White House wants it both ways on revised travel ban.	21

ÉTATS-UNIS..... 22

Inside Trump's fury: The president rages at leaks, setbacks and accusations (UNE)	22
FBI Asks Justice Department to Rebut Trump's Wiretap Claim (UNE)	23
Comey Asks Justice Dept. to Reject Trump's Wiretapping Claim (UNE)	25
FBI Director Comey asked Justice officials to refute Trump's unproven wiretapping claim (UNE)	25
A Conspiracy Theory's Journey From Talk Radio to Trump's Twitter (UNE)	27
James Comey, D.C. Unicorn, Shoots Down Trump Wiretap Claim	28
Fund : Trump's Wiretap Tweet -- GOP, Caught Unprepared, Needs a Team Leader, Not a Lone Ranger	30
Cillizza : Conspiracy theorist in chief?	30
Dionne : The Trump Experiment may come to an early tipping point	31
Editorial : When One President Smears Another.....	31

Gun sales have dropped since Trump’s election, except among people scared of his administration (UNE)..... 32

Bold Promises Fade to Doubts for a Trump-Linked Data Firm (UNE)33

Leashes Come Off Wall Street, Gun Sellers, Polluters and More (UNE)35

Talmadge : Trump’s Military Budget Minus a Plan36

Editorial : Why Mess With a Nuclear Treaty, Mr. Trump?37

Blow : Pause This Presidency!.....37

Krugman : A Party Not Ready to Govern38

Editorial : The high-risk pool.....38

FRANCE - EUROPE

Bloomberg

Justin Fox: France's Farmers Are Actually Pretty Productive

Justin Fox

The annual Salon International de l'Agriculture in Paris, which closes its doors today after a nine-day run, can be compared to a fair in a very productive agricultural county in the U.S. You just have to multiply the size by about 100, upgrade the food quality substantially, add copious amounts of wine, trade the stage performances by more or less washed-up pop groups for roving brass bands, add a hall full of vendors trying to sell things to farmers (software, drainage systems, robots, loans, notary services), and subtract the rides. Got it?

I decided to go Thursday because I had seen a photo of French presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron in the newspaper that morning, gesticulating before a bored-looking cow. He and rival Francois Fillon both attended the Salon de l'Agriculture on Wednesday. Marine Le Pen was there the day before. "Hard left" candidate Jean-Luc Melenchon declined to attend, saying that he "disapproves of the model of industrialized agriculture," but Socialist Benoit Hamon showed up the same day I did. I didn't see him, though.

I did see a lot of cows, of many different breeds. The multiplicity of

breeds was so striking, in fact, that I began to write the names down. Here's what I saw, in the order I saw them: Rouge de Pres, Limousin, Blonde d'Aquitaine, Bazadaise, Charolais, Montbeliarde, Prim'Holstein, Jersiaise, Normande, Simmental, Rouge Flamande, Brune, Gasconne, Mirandaise, Armoricaine, Parthenaise, Salers, Ferrandaise, Aubrac, Pie Rouge, Bleue du Nord, Blanc-Bleu, Villard de Lans, Abondance, Tarentaise, Herens and Vosgienne.

It went similarly with the sheep, rabbits and pigs. I didn't visit the horse or dog pavilions, but I assume there were many, many kinds of those, too. With dogs, that's normal all over. With livestock, the French seem to be uniquely invested in variety.

They're invested in variety of terrain, too, of course: In the pavilion of "the 13 regions of France and their products," farmers offered seemingly endless different iterations of cheese, meat, wine and other good things, all with specialized regional branding. I stopped at an oyster stand in the Brittany section, and while I consumed my nine excellent oysters and a glass of Muscadet for 13.50 euros (\$14.26), I perused a placemat map that detailed the "12 grands crus" of Breton oysters. The

oyster farmer offered to give me the place mat, but I just asked him to point out on the map where his farm is -- near Kerpenhir Point on the Gulf of Morbihan.

French agriculture may be industrialized ("productivist" is the literal translation of what Melenchon said), but it's industrialized in a different way than that of the U.S. There has long been a focus here on creating differentiated products -- and in many cases maintaining that differentiation through regulation. Sometimes this relative inflexibility, like so much French economic inflexibility, probably stands in the way of innovation and growth. But when it comes to farming, there are clearly rewards.

Here, for example, is agriculture's share of employment in France and several other big, affluent economies:

Still Down on the Farm

Agricultural employment as a share of total employment*

Source: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

This is interesting: The three countries with the highest share of agricultural employment are also the three with the greatest culinary traditions. Maybe a less efficient, more artisanal approach to farming

and better-quality food go hand in hand. Then again, in "productivist" France, farming is actually not inefficient at all:

Valuable Farmers

Agriculture value-added per worker, 2014*

Source: World Bank

By this measure, France's farmers are just about the most productive in the world. Only Slovenia and Singapore -- not exactly major agricultural powers -- have a higher value-added per worker. All that product differentiation, then, seems to be succeeding in driving up the value of French agricultural products.

This hasn't been enough to keep French farmers (like farmers in lots of other places, including the U.S.) from having a really tough time lately. A global bumper crop of wheat and the European Union's dismantling of quotas and price supports for milk and other products have driven prices down and agricultural bankruptcies up. Still, the French approach to agriculture seems like it has a lot going for it.

Bloomberg

Editorial : A 'Bad Bank' Could Be Good for Europe

The Editors

Some European regulators have come up with a viable plan to alleviate the region's chronic financial paralysis. If only European politicians, particularly in Germany, would listen.

QuickTake Zombie Banks

The European Union's leaders have spent much of the past decade debating -- but never fully resolving -- what to do about the huge pile of bad loans that EU banks are sitting on, most recently estimated at more than 1 trillion euros. Nobody knows how large the losses will ultimately be, and this uncertainty spooks investors, inhibits new lending and undermines the European Central Bank's efforts to support economic growth.

Now, a group of officials at the European Banking Authority -- with the support of colleagues at the ECB and the euro area's bailout fund, the European Stability Mechanism -- has put forth a proposal that could help: Create a publicly funded, pan-European "bad bank." Its aim would be to dispel uncertainty by determining the fair value of the soured assets and, with the help of private investors, purchasing a large portion of them.

The plan has several advantages. By forcing banks to recognize losses, it could trigger a much-needed restructuring of Europe's overcrowded banking sector: Unhealthy banks would have to either raise more capital or shut down. By averting a fire sale into illiquid markets, the plan would limit system-wide losses and make the

whole reckoning less painful. The bad bank could even turn a profit for the European governments that provided its capital.

Unfortunately, the EU's largest member, Germany, has withheld support for the plan, apparently on concerns that its contribution would go toward bailing out banks in other countries. To which one can only ask: That's the point, isn't it? Part of the purpose of a pan-European bad bank is to enable the kind of risk-sharing needed to make Europe's banking union and common currency viable. The plan's concession on this score -- if the bad bank can't sell assets for at least the price it paid, it can claw back the difference from the relevant bank or national government -- is a weakness, not a strength.

Germany's intransigence is misguided. The country's officials are rightly skeptical that Europe's new financial supervisory system -- which was centralized under the ECB in 2014 -- will be tough enough to force closures and restructurings. Yet by opposing a European bad bank, they are depriving supervisors of an opportunity to do exactly that.

Granted, a lot depends on execution. The plan shouldn't delay Italy's ongoing effort to shore up its banks, and it should require all banks to raise the equity capital needed to make the whole system more resilient. If that's the goal, then Germany should give it a chance.

To contact the senior editor responsible for Bloomberg View's



Sternberg : Trumping Europe's Taxes

Joseph C. Sternberg

March 2, 2017 7:33 p.m. ET

Donald Trump says many things that alarm Europeans, but one of the bigger fright lines may have come in last week's address to Congress: "Right now, American companies are taxed at one of the highest rates anywhere in the world. My economic team is developing historic tax reform that will reduce the tax rate on our companies so they can compete and thrive anywhere and with anyone."

What's scary here to European ears is not the import-inhibiting border-adjustable tax plan favored by some House Republicans. They'll relish duking that one out at the World Trade Organization. Rather, it's the idea that tax policy is now fair game when it comes to global competitiveness.

It's at least eight years since anyone in Europe had to think that way. One of the biggest political gifts Barack Obama gave European leaders was support for their notion that low tax rates are unfair and that taxpayers who benefit from them are somehow crooked.

Europeans pushed that line among themselves for years, complaining about low Irish corporate rates, for instance. The taboo on tax

competition is central to the political economy of Europe's welfare states, which already are unstable and quickly become unsustainable if revenues fall either from lower rates or greater competition for investment from lower-tax areas.

Mr. Obama resisted cuts to America's 35% top federal corporate rate. He backed global efforts against "base erosion and profit shifting," meaning legal and efficient corporate tax planning. The goal was to obstruct competition among governments by making it harder for companies to avail of legal methods to reduce their effective tax burdens.

And Mr. Obama offered little objection when Brussels launched spurious investigations into the entirely legal tax affairs of U.S. companies in Europe. Those investigations in turn offered Brussels political cover for similar cases targeted at European companies.

Europe during this span didn't entirely eschew tax reform. Some governments, including unlikely suspects such as Belgium, managed the odd modest rate cut, especially on labor taxes. But a high-tax, slow-growth America freed Europe to pursue such reforms at a leisurely pace.

Is Europe ready for an American president who wants to inject a

sense of urgency into tax cutting and competition? At best it's a maybe.

François Fillon, the French presidential candidate most likely to slash that country's top rates—33.3% corporate, 45% personal—is on the verge of collapse owing to a corruption scandal. His nearest sane rival, Emmanuel Macron, has promised a corporate-rate cut to 25%. But the main tax plan of the other major candidate, Marine Le Pen of the National Front—who may well win—is an extra tax on companies employing foreigners.

In Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel's center-right party talks vaguely about rate cuts to redistribute some of the country's fiscal surplus back to the private sector. There's room to cut top corporate and personal rates of nearly 30% and 45%, respectively. But Mrs. Merkel may lose, and her main opponent, Martin Schulz of the center-left Social Democratic Party, steadfastly refuses to contemplate tax cuts at all.

And that's about it. Tax policy is off the ballot in this month's Dutch election, unless you count promises to make the Netherlands less attractive to foreigners as a "tax haven." Taxes aren't under discussion in Italy as it grinds through a constitutional crisis.

Spain, under pressure from Brussels, is abandoning some of its earlier tax-cutting zeal and is hunting for extra revenue.

The question now is how much longer Europe could resist widespread tax reform if Mr. Trump brings in a 20% corporate rate alongside rapid deregulation—or what the consequences will be in terms of social-spending trade-offs to a new round of tax cutting. Dare to dream that Mr. Trump manages to trigger a new debate about competitiveness in Europe.

At least Europe can take comfort in the hope that the political cover Mr. Trump takes away by relegitimizing tax competition might be replaced with a different sort of cover—stronger American growth rippling across the Atlantic, and with it more fiscal and political room for European reformers.

It's a positive, if still somewhat tenuous, thought that the U.S. president whose election is said to empower Europe's fringe may also end up assisting the smarter contingent of the Continent's mainstream.

Mr. Sternberg is editorial page editor of The Wall Street Journal Europe.



U.K.'s Hammond to Keep Purse Strings Tight as Brexit Gets Under Way

Jason Douglas

March 5, 2017 7:31 a.m. ET

LONDON—U.K. Treasury chief Philip Hammond on Sunday signaled that he will keep a tight rein on Britain's public finances when he presents his latest tax-and-spending plans to U.K. lawmakers on Wednesday, despite better-than-expected economic growth that economists say should swell government tax revenue.

In an interview with the British Broadcasting Corp., Mr. Hammond said the U.K. is still borrowing too much even after years of belt-tightening. He said it is sensible to maintain fiscal discipline to ensure the U.K. can weather any economic surprises, especially as it prepares for Brexit.

The chancellor of the exchequer's budget statement to Parliament on Wednesday comes as Prime Minister Theresa May prepares to kick off divorce talks with the European Union that are expected to last two years. The U.K. voted to

leave the EU in a referendum in June and Mrs. May has said she would formally start the withdrawal process before the end of March.

"I regard my job as chancellor as making sure that our economy is resilient, that we have reserves in the tank, so that as we embark on the journey we will be taking over the next couple of years we can be confident that we have enough gas in the tank to see us through that journey," Mr. Hammond said on the BBC's Andrew Marr Show.

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- U.K. Conservative Party Wins Key Local Election

Trudy Harrison won a seat that the center-left Labour Party had held for decades, giving Prime Minister Theresa May a boost before she formally starts the U.K.'s negotiations on leaving the European Union.

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The U.K. economy grew a better-than-expected 1.8% in 2016 after an anticipated slowdown following the Brexit vote failed to materialize. Economists anticipate Mr. Hammond will as a result present more upbeat forecasts for economic growth and the public finances when he addresses lawmakers this week.

John Hawksworth, chief economist in London at business-services firm PwC, in a report Thursday forecast that because of stronger growth and higher tax receipts the government will borrow around £45 billion (\$55.2 billion) less over the fiscal years through to March 2022 than anticipated in November.

Mr. Hammond said Sunday that he won't rush to spend any projected savings given the economic uncertainty around Brexit.

"If your bank increases your credit-card limit you don't feel obliged to go and spend every last penny of it immediately," he said.

The Treasury on Sunday said in a statement that Wednesday's budget

will include measures to boost workers' skills and education, including £500 million a year for technical training colleges. Mr. Hammond will also set aside £20 million to finance a national

memorial to the World War II D-Day landings.

Asked about whether the U.K. would be prepared to pay a bill on leaving the EU that some estimate could be around €40 billion (\$42.5 billion) to

cover unpaid commitments to the bloc's budget, Mr. Hammond said the U.K. may choose to make some payments even after it leaves in order to participate in specific European programs. But he added that he believes such large

estimates are no more than a negotiating gambit by European officials. He said the U.K. is "a nation that honors its obligations" under international law.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Northern Ireland's Main Parties Face Tough Talks After Election

Jason Douglas

March 4, 2017

5:32 a.m. ET

Northern Ireland's two largest parties held on to their positions in the U.K. region's legislative elections, but may struggle to form a government, potentially creating another headache for British and Irish leaders already grappling with Brexit.

Final results Saturday from elections Thursday showed the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin won the most seats in Belfast's 90-seat power-sharing assembly, taking 28 and 27, respectively. The remaining seats were split between a handful of smaller parties.

The elections were held after the region's previous DUP and Sinn Féin administration collapsed in January amid recriminations over a botched renewable-energy scheme. Under the 1997 Good Friday Agreement that ended decades of political violence, the region's administration must include representatives of both the largely Protestant pro-U.K. majority in Northern Ireland and their mostly-Catholic Irish nationalist neighbors. The biggest parties form an executive, splitting the leadership

between a first and deputy first minister and dividing up government departments.

The two parties now have three weeks to agree to form a new administration. But relations between the staunchly pro-U.K. DUP and Sinn Féin, for decades the political wing of the Irish Republican Army, have soured, and analysts say that reaching a deal could be difficult.

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Trudy Harrison won a seat that the center-left Labour Party had held for decades, giving Prime Minister Theresa May a boost before she formally starts the U.K.'s negotiations on leaving the European Union.

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Brexit Coverage

The stalemate comes amid heightened tensions in the region over Brexit, which could have an outsized impact on Northern Ireland's small economy given its close links to Ireland.

Former U.K. Prime Ministers Tony Blair and John Major, among the architects of the Good Friday Agreement, warned before June's referendum on European Union membership that Brexit also risks undermining the region's fragile peace, particularly if it leads to the

reimposition of border controls harmful to trade and anathema to Irish nationalists. Sinn Féin has called for the question of Irish reunification to be put to a public vote.

If the DUP and Sinn Féin can't form a new administration, "then you will have an ongoing political crisis in Northern Ireland in conjunction with uncertainty over Brexit," said Graham Walker, professor of politics at Queen's University Belfast. London's options once the three-week deadline has expired include extending talks, calling yet another election, or suspending the assembly and ruling Northern Ireland directly.

U.K. Prime Minister Theresa May is due this month to formally notify Brussels of the U.K.'s intention to withdraw from the EU, a move that will start the clock ticking on at least two years of divorce talks. London and Dublin have said they want close links between Ireland and Northern Ireland, including the free movement of people across the border, to be preserved as part of any deal.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

In Italy, Confusion and Division Over Same-Sex Parenting

Pietro Lombardi

March 4, 2017

7:00 a.m. ET

ROME—An Italian court's decision to recognize two homosexual men as the fathers of twin children has exposed confusion and a deep divide in the country over parenting rights of same-sex couples.

It was disclosed earlier this week that a court in the northern Italian city of Trento granted the men full rights as parents to their six-year-old twins, who were born in Canada through surrogacy.

The gay community hailed the decision—the first to accord full parental rights to a non-biological father—as historic in a country that last year became one of the last in Europe to approve civil unions for gay couples. But the ruling kicked up controversy right away, with the head of the main group opposing

the civil-unions bill saying it marked a "sad day for Italy."

The ruling also illustrated the chaos surrounding parental rights for same-sex couples in Italy, where courts are stepping in to fill a legislative vacuum left by the new law.

The 2016 legislation approving civil unions stopped short of addressing broader questions of parental rights and other family law issues for same-sex couples. Political opposition was so fierce that lawmakers scotched any reference to adoption or parental rights to get the bill passed. As a result, Italian law today recognizes only the biological parent, and joint adoption by gay couples isn't allowed.

Italian courts have been left to fill that gap in a haphazard way, with some judges approving adoption requests by gay partners of a biological parent and others turning

them down. The result: up to 1,000 children of gay couples are caught in a legal limbo.

For instance, Marilena Grassadonia married her partner Laura Terrasi in Spain in 2009. Ms. Grassadonia gave birth to a son, while Ms. Terrasi had twins. Under Italian law, each woman was the parent only to her biological children. The couple fought in Italian courts for a year until a Rome tribunal approved the respective adoption of each woman's biological children. But around the same time, a judge in Milan rejected a similar adoption request from another lesbian couple with children.

"The rights of homosexual couples and their children hang on court rulings," said Ms. Grassadonia, head of a gay-rights association.

The confusion in Italy reflects the patchwork of family rights for homosexual couples throughout

Europe, a situation exacerbated by the European Union's recognition of the right of any EU citizen to live in any member country. While most EU countries have either marriage equality or some kind of registered partnership, legislation varies widely when it comes to adoption and assisted reproduction, complicating matters as gay couples travel abroad to have children.

Riccardo and Lorenzo, the Trento couple who released only their first names, sought to break new ground. The pair, an entrepreneur and a civil servant in their 50s who have been together for more than 20 years, were married in Canada. Their twins were born in Canada via surrogacy, a practice that is illegal in Italy. Canadian law allowed both men to be listed as the twins' fathers on the birth certificate.

Once back in Italy, the couple sought to have the Italian state recognize the Canadian birth

certificate, seeking a parental status that affords more rights than adoption in Italy. An adoptive parent's relatives have no legal relation with the adopted children, who therefore have no legal status when it comes, for instance, to inheritance from grandparents. The court granted the couple's request, effectively recognizing both men as fathers.

"[We] sought no more than to see our children's legal family rights protected, just as with other families," they said in a statement.

Nichi Vendola, a gay Italian politician and leader in the fight for same-sex rights, hailed the decision.

"When you raise, care for and love a child, you're a father, mother, parent," he said.

In Italy, however, court decisions don't set legal precedent, so the legislative gap remains for parliament to fill. With Italy headed to elections this year or next, there is little political appetite to take up the bruising battle over parenting rights again.

Indeed, the court ruling in Trento rekindled opposition to parental rights for same-sex couples, reflecting how sensitive marriage equality and family issues remain in Italy.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Economic Divisions Shape German Politics Too

Simon Nixon

Updated March 5, 2017 7:16 p.m. ET

BERLIN—This year has already produced more than its share of political excitement in Europe. The French presidential election campaign is wide open just two months before polling day; the Dutch elections could see 13 parties returned to parliament; and Italy's ruling Democratic Party appears to be splintering.

Now it is German politics that looks increasingly up in the air.

The Social Democratic Party's decision to adopt the former European Parliament president, Martin Schulz, as its candidate for chancellor in September's parliamentary elections has transformed the political landscape.

The SPD, as the party is known, has surged in the polls, with some putting it ahead of Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats for the first time in a decade, raising the prospect that her grip on power may finally be weakening after 12 years.

Mr. Schulz's opponents insist that he is simply benefiting from the traditional honeymoon afforded to new political faces. Although a veteran of the Brussels scene, he is relatively unknown domestically.

He isn't tainted by the SPD's inevitable compromises as the junior partner in Ms. Merkel's governing coalition; nor was he complicit in Agenda 2010, the sweeping welfare overhaul introduced by the SPD in the early 2000s.

Those changes transformed

Germany's economic fortunes but cost the SPD a chunk of its traditional working-class voter base, which blames Agenda 2010 for holding down wages.

Those who believe that Mr. Schulz's honeymoon is likely to be short-lived also point to Ms. Merkel's personal approval ratings, which remain well above 50%. That is hardly consistent with a country seething with rebellion.

But is this too complacent? Could the surge in support for the SPD be evidence that Germany is in fact eager for change? After all, Germany shares many of the social and economic conditions that led to political shocks in the U.S. and U.K. and are driving political turbulence in Europe.

Indeed, Germany itself experienced a political shock last year when the right-wing Alternative for Germany, or AfD, performed strongly in regional elections. That was widely seen as a protest vote driven by public anger at Ms. Merkel's alleged mishandling of the migration crisis.

The conventional wisdom was that after a decade of strong growth and falling unemployment, there was little political division over Germany's economic direction; the real political divisions in Germany have been widely assumed to be cultural, reflected in hostility to Muslims.

Yet the reality is that there are deep economic divisions in Germany, as there are in every other developed economy; not everyone has benefited equally from Germany's economic resurgence or from globalization.

"The well-being of children requires a mother and a father," said Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco, head of Italy's bishops conference. "One's wishes, however legitimate, mustn't necessarily become a right."

A survey held during last year's parliamentary debate over civil unions found that 46% of Italians were in favor of the new law and 42% against. But 71% were against allowing surrogacy for gay couples to have children. Italy has also only recently loosened restrictive rules on divorce and assisted reproductive technology.

"In Italy the idea of traditional family, formed by father and mother...with

the latter taking care of the family, is still deeply entrenched," said Gianfranco Pellegrino, professor of political philosophy at LUISS University in Rome. That explains the uproar against the ruling in Trento, he said, while a small number of similar rulings in favor of female couples stirred less controversy.

"The ruling challenges the taboos against two men's ability to raise children," said Alexander Schuster, the Trento couple's lawyer.

Germany is as deeply divided as any society in Europe, according to Marcel Fratzcher, president of DIW Berlin, a respected think tank. Poverty—defined as those living on less than 60% of median income—is higher than the European average.

When the government in 2015 raised the minimum hourly wage to €8.8 (about \$9.35 today)—still about 10% below the minimum wage in France—more than one in ten Germans received a wage increase.

While Germany's exporters have benefited from high productivity and high wages, its large nontradeable sectors, which include the public sector and domestic-service providers, are held back by excessive regulation that restricts competition and innovation, limiting productivity and wage growth, says Mr. Fratzcher.

This has created fertile territory for Mr. Schulz, who appears poised to take his party leftward, even reopening the debate over Agenda 2010. In doing so, he has been able to draw support from the AfD, which has no set position on the economy or any other policy area, being united only in its opposition to immigration.

If he can maintain his current popularity at the expense of the extremes, he stands a real chance of emerging from the elections at the head of a new "grand coalition" with the Christian Democrats, or the leader of a new left-wing coalition that includes the former communist Left party and the Greens.

That would certainly mark Germany out from other European countries, where arguably, it has been the lack of a credible mainstream alternative

to the status quo that has been driving support for populist parties.

It also poses a challenge for Ms. Merkel. Some in her own party want her to commit to an ambitious, conservative reform agenda that would enable Germany to share the benefits of globalization more equally.

Such an Agenda 2025 could include policies to promote desperately needed investment in Germany's crumbling infrastructure, overhauls of the education system to better equip workers for the digital economy, deregulate services and address inter-generation fairness by raising the retirement age to allow for tax cuts for current workers.

Yet there is little evidence that Ms. Merkel wishes to embrace such radical change. That has never been her style over the past 12 years, even as she has exhorted ambitious structural reforms on the rest of Europe.

Ms. Merkel appears ready to bet that contented Germany will opt for the status quo. But the lesson from the rest of Europe is that in 2017 the status quo may no longer be enough.

Corrections & Amplifications

The French minimum hourly wage was raised to €8.8 (\$9.35). The German minimum wage is about 10% below the minimum wage in France. An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated the French minimum hourly wage was €8 and that the German minimum wage was nearly 20% lower. (March 5, 2017)

The Washington Post

In the era of Donald Trump, Germans debate a military buildup (UNE)

<https://www.facebook.com/anthony.faiola>

SESTOKAI, Lithuania — A vermilion-colored locomotive slowed to a halt, its freight cars

obscured in the blinding snow. A German captain ordered his troops to unload the train's cargo. "Jawohl!"

— “Yes, sirl” — a soldier said, before directing out the first of 20 tanks bearing the Iron Cross of the Bundeswehr, Germany’s army.

Evocative of old war films, the scene is nevertheless a sign of new times. Seven and a half decades after the Nazis invaded this Baltic nation, the Germans are back in Lithuania — this time as one of the allies.

As the Trump administration ratchets up the pressure on allied nations to shoulder more of their own defense, no country is more in the crosshairs than Germany. If it meets the goals Washington is pushing for, Germany — the region’s economic powerhouse — would be on the fast track to again become Western Europe’s biggest military power.

Today’s WorldView

What’s most important from where the world meets Washington

Please provide a valid email address.

Any renaissance of German might has long been resisted first and foremost by the Germans — a nation that largely rejected militarism in the aftermath of the Nazi horror. Yet a rethinking of German power is quickly emerging as one of the most significant twists of President Trump’s transatlantic policy.

[Poll: Germans are more concerned about Trump’s policies than Putin’s]

Since the November election in the United States, the Germans — caught between Trump’s America and Vladimir Putin’s Russia — are feeling less and less secure. Coupled with Trump’s push to have allies step up, the Germans are debating a military buildup in a manner rarely witnessed since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Perhaps nowhere is the prospect of a new future playing out more than here in Lithuania — where nearly 500 German troops, including a Bavarian combat battalion, arrived in recent weeks for an open-ended deployment near the Russian frontier. The NATO deployment marks what analysts describe as Germany’s most ambitious military operation near the Russian border since the end of the Cold War. It arrived with a formidable show of German force — including 20 Marder armored infantry fighting vehicles, six Leopard battle tanks and 12 Fuchs and Boxer armored personnel carriers.

“Maybe, with respect to the United States, you need to be careful what you wish for,” said Lt. Col. Torsten Stephan, military spokesman for the German troops in Lithuania. “Mr. Trump says that NATO may be

obsolete, and that we need to be more independent. Well, maybe we will.”

The German-led deployment — also involving a smaller number of troops from Belgium, the Netherlands and Norway — is designed to send a muscular message from Europe to Putin: Back off.

Yet on a continent facing the prospect of a new Cold War, the deployment is also offering a window into the risks of renewed German strength — as well as the Russian strategy for repelling it by dwelling on Germany’s dark past. In the 21st-century world of hybrid warfare, the first proverbial salvos have been fired.

Recently, coordinated emails were sent to Lithuanian police, media and top politicians, falsely claiming that the new German troops had gang-raped a local 15-year-old girl. The Lithuanian government quickly disproved the allegations — but not before a few local outlets and social-media users had spread the false accounts. Officials are investigating whether the Russians were behind it.

“But if you ask me personally, I think that yes, that’s the biggest probability,” said Lithuanian Defense Minister Raimundas Karoblis.

Pro-Russian websites, meanwhile, are preying on old stereotypes, harking back to Adolf Hitler and portraying the NATO deployment in Lithuania as a “second invasion” by Germany.

[The rise of Trump has led to an unexpected twist in Germany’s election: A resurgent left]

As Germany grows bolder, outdated imagery is roaring back to life through Russian propaganda. Last week, the Russian Defense Ministry announced the building of a reproduction of the old German Reichstag at a military theme park near Moscow, offering young Russians a chance to reenact the 1945 storming of the structure during the fall of Berlin.

Yet in Lithuania, a former Soviet republic now living in the shadow of Russia’s maw, the Nazi legacy is seen as ancient history. To many here, modern Germany is a bastion of democratic principles and one of the globe’s strongest advocates of human rights, free determination and measured diplomacy. And facing a Russian threat in times of uncertain NATO allegiances, the Lithuanians are clamoring for a more powerful Germany by its side.

“I think U.S. leadership should be maintained, but also, we need leadership in Europe,” Karoblis said. Noting that Britain is in the process

of breaking away from the European Union, he called Germany the most likely new guarantor of regional stability.

“Why not Germany? Why not?” he said.

More dangerous missions

For many Germans, however, there are many reasons — including overspending and fears of sparking a new arms race. According to a poll commissioned by Stern magazine and published this year, 55 percent of Germans are against increasing defense spending in the coming years, while 42 percent are in favor.

The German military has staged several military exercises in Poland and other parts of Eastern Europe, and its pilots form part of the air police deterring Russian planes buzzing the E.U.’s eastern borders. It has also begun to take on more dangerous missions — deploying troops to the Balkans, Afghanistan and, last year, to Mali. The military also has taken on a logistical support role in the allied fight against the Islamic State.

But the Germans are slated to do much more. In 2014, German officials agreed with other NATO nations to spend at least 2 percent of its gross domestic product on defense within 10 years — up from about 1.2 percent in 2016. Until recently, however, many German officials privately acknowledged that such a goal — which would see Germany leapfrog Britain and France in military spending — was politically untenable.

Since Trump’s victory, however, German politicians, pundits and the media have agonized over the issue, with more and louder voices calling for a stronger military. Last month, the Defense Ministry announced plans to increase Germany’s standing military to nearly 200,000 troops by 2024, up from a historical low of 166,500 in June. After 26 years of cuts, defense spending is going up by 8 percent this year.

Chancellor Angela Merkel has called for cool heads, but also for increased military spending. Her defense minister, Ursula von der Leyen, has been more forceful, saying recently that Germany cannot “duck away” from its military responsibility. Although considered a distant possibility, some outlier voices are mentioning the once-inconceivable: the advent of a German nuclear bomb.

“If Trump sticks to his line, America will leave Europe’s defense to the Europeans to an extent that it hasn’t known since 1945,” Berthold Kohler, publisher of Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, wrote in a recent opinion

piece. That could mean “higher defense spending, the revival of the draft, the drawing of red lines and the utterly unthinkable for German brains — the question of one’s own nuclear defense capability.”

[Merkel, Trump agree on at least 1 thing: Germans should spend more on defense]

Germany, along with its regional allies, has begun exploring an increase of military activity through joint European operations — and experts see that, and NATO, as the most likely funnels for German military power. Germany’s deployment in Lithuania, for instance, is part of a broader allied deterrent in Eastern Europe, with the Americans, Canadians and British leading other contingents in Poland, Latvia and Estonia.

In some of Germany’s neighbors — particularly Poland — there remain pockets of opposition to renewed German military might, positions based at least in part on war memories. But old prejudices are dying fast.

Take, for instance, tiny Lithuania — a nation the Nazis overran in 1941, kicking out the occupying Soviets. The Third Reich held on there through 1945, exterminating more than 200,000 Jews. After World War II, Lithuania reverted to Soviet domination before winning independence at the end of the Cold War. Over the past decade, Lithuania hitched its star to the West — joining the E.U. and NATO in 2004, much to the chagrin of the Russians.

Now, Lithuanians’ fear of the bear on their doorstep is surging. Since the de facto invasion of Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, Russian politicians have begun speaking ominously about a key warm-water port that they say was wrongly “gifted” to Lithuania after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Hackers thought to be linked to the Russians have targeted government servers and national television channels.

In the city of Jonava, about six miles from the barracks housing the new NATO troops, the Nazis killed more than 2,000 Jews in the 1940s. Yet in the oral histories, the German occupation is portrayed in a far better light than the Soviet era that followed.

Nadiezda Grickovaitė, 86, the town’s only living resident with vivid memories of the World War II era, said she recalled her mother taking her into the woods “so we didn’t see the shooting of the Jews.” But she said the Soviets were comparatively worse — a history she has passed

down in speeches and talks at local schools.

"I don't feel any bad feelings against the Germans because of the past," she said. "This was history. We can't blame them now."

The new German troops, meanwhile, have received special

sensitivity training about the Nazi legacy in Lithuania and to insist on gentle interactions with locals. Jonava's acting mayor, Eugenijus Sabutis, said the only incident since the troops arrived in late January was an altercation between an American GI and local men over the attentions of a woman.

"I don't feel part of that history — the history of Germans who were here before," said Sebastian, a 27-year-old German private stationed in Lithuania who only gave his first name per the German army's rules for the interview. "What I know is that we are in a kind of new Cold War, and now we are here to help."

Stephanie Kirchner contributed to this report.

INTERNATIONAL

THE WALL
STREET
JOURNAL

Iraqis Tell of Islamic State Brutality in Mosul

Ben Kesling and Awadh Altaie

Updated March 5, 2017 4:25 p.m. ET

MOSUL, Iraq—Ali Muhammad Khalif buried his wife, sister and two nephews recently and left a grave open beside them for his son, whose body was too difficult to retrieve from near the front lines here.

Islamic State had planted a bomb just outside Mr. Khalif's front door in western Mosul to prepare for an expected advance by Iraqi troops. The family saw the extremists set up the booby trap and was forced to live with it, and a few days ago, Mr. Khalif's wife went to milk the family cow and accidentally stepped on the trigger.

A day later, the 76-year-old patriarch and his family crowded into his home to prepare for the burial. They said a mortar fell on the gathering during breakfast, killing the other family members.

"When the fighting started, Daesh wouldn't let anyone leave their houses," said Mr. Khalif, a shepherd from rural Mosul, using an Arabic acronym for the terror group. He said Islamic State forced him and his family to move into the embattled northern city when the Mosul offensive first began in October to serve as a human shields. Mr. Khalif and surviving family members said they had fled to safety elsewhere in Mosul as fighting erupted in the neighborhood.

As Iraqi forces have squeezed the militants into a fast-shrinking patch of territory in the western half of Mosul over the past week, stories of Islamic State's trademark brutality are proliferating. The offensive has already sent tens of thousands of civilians fleeing with tales of the terror they endured.

Fighting resumed Sunday after a short pause during bad weather and Iraqi forces pushed even deeper into the densely populated neighborhoods. Islamic State used at least a dozen car and motorcycle bombs Sunday in their fight against advancing Iraqi troops, according to Iraqi security officials.

As the sun set Sunday, a cloud of smoke rose just inside the city and there was a boom. Minutes later, Iraqi troops brought a gasping soldier to an aid station on the edge of town. His lungs had likely been damaged by that car-bomb blast, medics said.

Last week, Iraqi Kurdish journalists died in an explosion while examining a mass grave on the outskirts of the city. Islamic State had booby trapped the gruesome site.

In western Mosul, Jamal Abu Duha, a 52-year-old car mechanic, sat in the courtyard of the home he has lived in his entire life and pointed to a hole in his front gate big enough to stick a fist through. An Iraqi military helicopter had strafed his yard, targeting and hitting a militant who crawled next door to die, he said.

"For about eight days before the offensive, they cracked down," Mr. Abu Duha said of the Islamic State militants. As the battle approached, 40 people crowded into his small house, where militants used them as human shields.

"They took all the food for themselves," he said of the militants.

They forced Mr. Abu Duha to knock out man-sized holes in the walls of his house so they could connect it to the other houses around it. Several homes are now largely connected in this manner.

Mr. Abu Duha and others said Islamic State demanded residents move their cars from driveways into the street and leave the keys in them. They packed some with explosives, creating a new fleet of car bombs at the ready.

Iraqi officers said militants now park massive car bombs near homes to deter surgical airstrikes against the fighters that could blow up multiple houses and harm civilians.

Though Iraqi forces captured the eastern half of Mosul in late January after months of tough battles, Islamic State continues to terrorize that side of the city as well. For weeks, Islamic State has used commercially available drones to drop bombs on civilians and aid workers.

On Thursday, three rockets containing a chemical were fired at civilians in eastern Mosul, according

to eyewitnesses and people injured in the attack.

A spokeswoman for the International Committee of the Red Cross said injuries from the attack were due at least in part to some sort of chemical.

At a hospital an hour away in the Kurdish city of Erbil, a young boy injured in the attacks lay in a hospital bed with his eyes swollen shut.

"The smoke from the rocket had a very bad smell," said Wisham Rashid, another victim who had fared better in the attack and was standing in one of the hospital hallways. "It was very hot on our hands and on our tongues."

He pointed to small burns on his scalp and his arms as he spoke.

The United Nations said if the use of chemical weapons is confirmed, it would be a serious violation of international humanitarian law and a war crime.

According to the U.N. Refugee Agency, some 30,000 people have fled western Mosul since the new phase of the offensive began a week ago. They trudge along dirt roads to get to aid stations and then on to displaced persons camps.

Over the weekend, it rained, transforming a choking dust into cold mud. The flimsy sandals of some of the displaced got mired in it, leaving them barefoot and soaked.

The
New York
Times

Trump Expected to Issue New Travel Ban Excluding Iraq on Monday

Ron Nixon and Maggie

Haberman

While some provisions in the new order have been relaxed, Mr. Trump and immigration hard-liners in the administration are expected to assert that the new version is no

less strict because it retains a temporary ban on refugees.

The senior administration official said Iraq had been removed from the travel ban after Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson had discussions with the Iraqi government about its vetting

processes. The Iraqi officials insisted that their vetting system was thorough enough on its own.

Some American officials had expressed concern that the restrictions would have affected Iraqis who had worked with the American military as interpreters or

in other roles and sought to come to the United States.

The official said the executive order is expected to be signed on Monday. David Lapan, a spokesman for the Department of Homeland Security, referred all questions

about the new executive order to the White House.

Mr. Trump's previous order — which temporarily barred visitors from Iraq, Syria, Sudan, Iran, Somalia, Libya and Yemen — set off chaos and confusion at airports around the world. The new order retains a temporary travel ban on the six countries other than Iraq.

After the first order was issued in January, passengers, many of them with green cards that allow them to live and work in the United States, were barred from flights into the country. Other people with visas were suddenly unsure if they would be allowed into the United States, and many of those who managed to arrive were stopped at airports.

While the new restrictions are intended to withstand legal scrutiny, they are likely to set off similar court challenges.

The previous executive order was criticized by several former high-ranking diplomatic and security officials, who said there was no national security purpose for the travel ban.

Trump administration officials, including John F. Kelly, the homeland security secretary, defended the previous restrictions, saying they were needed because the countries listed did not have vetting systems in place that could guarantee that immigrants and other travelers from those nations did not pose a threat to the United States.

"I believe that the travel pause from all of those countries will give us time to evaluate those countries and the information they can provide us, which will ultimately lead to safety for the American people," Mr. Kelly told a Senate committee last month.

But an intelligence assessment from Mr. Kelly's own department said

there was little evidence that those travelers posed an unusual threat.

The three-page report found that "country of citizenship is unlikely to be a reliable indicator of potential terrorist activity."

The assessment, first reported by The Associated Press, found that only a small number of people from the seven countries had been involved in terrorism-related activities in the United States since the Syrian civil war began in 2011.

The report also found that in the past six years, the terrorism threat had reached much more widely than the seven countries listed: People from 26 countries had been "inspired" to carry out attacks in the United States, it said.

The new order is the first of several security measures planned for America's borders. Mr. Trump has ordered the Department of

Homeland Security to hire an additional 5,000 Border Patrol agents, and Customs and Border Protection has begun accepting design proposals for a wall along the border with Mexico.

Mr. Kelly said the administration was considering requiring foreign visitors to provide lists of the websites they have visited. This would enable intelligence officials "to get on those websites to see what they're looking at," he told senators last month.

The United States also made changes to the visa waiver program in 2016 that made it harder for travelers to enter the United States from Europe if they had dual citizenship from Iran, Iraq, Sudan or Syria, or had visited one of those countries, or Libya, Somalia or Yemen, since 2011.

The New York Times

In Israel, Lauding and Lamenting the Era of Trump

Ian Fisher

But worry spans left and right, even if they disagree on exactly how much to blame Mr. Trump, who is seen here as growing more confusing by the day. What to make of a president who, on the same day, denounced the anti-Semitic attacks but also suggested — in remarks widely covered here — that they might have been carried out by his own enemies?

There is the Mr. Trump whom Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu described in their meeting in February: "There is no greater supporter of the Jewish people and the Jewish state than President Donald Trump," he said, citing personal ties of decades and agreement on many policies, including the perils of Iran and of Islamic extremism.

There is also the Mr. Trump in the photograph on the front page of Israel's leading newspaper. "Living in Fear in His Country," read the headline in the newspaper, Yediot Aharonot, previewing a six-page special section to Friday's weekend supplement on "the new America" with "swastikas, desecration of tombstones, curses and threats."

Reuven and Negina Abrahamov, grocery owners outside Tel Aviv, are Trump supporters and disturbed by what they see in United States.

"It's a combination of racism and violence, and I'm not sure it's directly related to Trump," said Mr. Abrahamov, 43. "This could be just what America is."

"Of course it's related to Trump," Ms. Abrahamov, 40, answered. "Now that Trump came into power, all he does is support Israel. And I do not think Trump is someone who plays a double game. He just goes with his truth the whole way."

"But in this case, his truth screws over Jews, and it also might screw over Israel," she said.

It is causing a particular quandary for Mr. Netanyahu, who is charged with guiding the relationship, always deep and complicated, with Israel's closest ally.

"The unenviable challenge facing the Israeli government is how to express its visceral horror over the resurgence of anti-Semitism in the U.S. without becoming a pawn in America's partisan debate or jeopardizing its critical working relationship with the administration," said Shalom Lipner, a former Israeli official and now a nonresident senior fellow with the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution.

At a time of weakness for Mr. Netanyahu, amid several corruption investigations, he has found both political renewal and common cause with Mr. Trump. Many who share Mr. Netanyahu's politics thought that, finally, Israel had an American president who was an unconditional friend.

Mr. Trump initially promised to move the American Embassy to Jerusalem, long a dream of many Israelis but opposed by Palestinians as a de facto recognition of Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem after the 1967 war. And Mr. Trump at first

remained conspicuously silent as Mr. Netanyahu announced thousands of new Israeli settler units in the occupied West Bank and pushed through a contentious law granting retroactive legality to thousands of Israeli houses built on Palestinian property.

But the president has distanced himself somewhat since then, raising questions about whether he would ultimately toe a more traditional American line on critical Israeli issues. The embassy move has been postponed at a minimum. At a news conference during their meeting, Mr. Trump publicly asked Mr. Netanyahu to "hold back on the settlements."

At that same news conference, other apparent divisions rose: Mr. Trump pointedly refused to denounce anti-Semitic sentiment among some of his supporters — and the next day he similarly refused, as he berated a religious Jewish reporter who asked a question about it.

In turn, the prime minister faced much criticism here for being reluctant to take his own public stand against anti-Semitism in the United States — apparently not wishing to anger Mr. Trump, or perhaps willing to give a pass, of sorts, to a sympathetic conservative.

Mr. Netanyahu did, however, speak out on Wednesday, after Mr. Trump used the opening of his speech in Congress to denounce the attacks and threats.

"Anti-Semitism certainly has not disappeared. But there is much we can do to fight back," Mr. Netanyahu

said in a videotaped address, praising Mr. Trump and Vice President Mike Pence, who has also spoken out against the attacks.

Still, this has been a jarring time for Israelis of all political beliefs.

Natan Sharansky, the former Soviet dissident and head of the Jewish Agency, said he did not blame Mr. Trump for the attacks, even if, he said, the president is "clearly a reflection" of rising nationalism generally. And while Mr. Sharansky said he was also troubled by the White House's failure to mention Jews in its statement this year on Holocaust Remembrance Day, he repeated his contention that anti-Semitism was not solely a problem of the right.

"We saw a lot of this left-radical, anti-Israeli feelings in the last 15 to 20 years," he said. "And a lot of people were trying to separate it from the anti-Semitism of the right. In fact, this difference is erasing itself."

Joni Catalano-Sherman, 61, moved here nearly 40 years ago from the United States and does not recall anti-Semitism as a problem, she said. Now vandals have toppled graves in the cemetery in St. Louis where her grandparents and many other members of her family are buried.

"It validates that there should be an Israel, if these things can happen in the States," she said.

Otherwise, she described her emotions as "very complicated." She has maintained her American passport and cast her ballot for

Hillary Clinton. Yet she hopes Mr. Trump will fulfill his promises to

broker a deal between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

"However," she added, "I am still shocked by what he says every day."

**The
New York
Times**

Closed Afghan-Pakistani Border Is Becoming 'Humanitarian Crisis'

Mujib Mashal

States.

KABUL, Afghanistan — Pakistan has kept its border crossings with Afghanistan sealed for more than two weeks, with thousands of Afghan visitors stranded in Pakistan and traders unable to move their vegetables and fruit across.

After a suicide bombing at a shrine in Pakistan's Sindh Province on Feb. 16, which killed more than 80 people, the Pakistani military shut its borders with Afghanistan, saying the terrorists behind the attack had sanctuaries in the country. It also carried out shelling into Afghanistan.

Omar Zakhilwal, Afghanistan's ambassador to Pakistan, said Sunday that if the border did not open soon, his government would be forced to airlift its stranded citizens, which could be a new low in the relationship between the neighboring countries.

Their 1,600-mile border has long been a contentious issue. Ever since the fall of the Taliban government in 2001, Afghan and Western officials have said that the Afghan insurgency's leadership maintains havens in Pakistan, particularly in the city of Quetta. The free movement across the border has helped the militants avoid defeat in a 15-year war led by the United

In recent years, the Pakistani authorities have said the leaders of the militant groups waging deadly attacks inside their territory are based across the border in Afghanistan.

Mr. Zakhilwal, the Afghan ambassador, said some leaders of these attacks on Pakistan might be in Afghanistan, but they mostly operate in areas controlled by the Afghan Taliban. He said his government, along with the United States-led coalition, had targeted Pakistani militants in Afghanistan, including the mastermind of a massacre of children in a Pakistani school in 2014.

Imran Khan, an opposition leader in Pakistan, said on Saturday that the border closing was "building into a humanitarian crisis." He called on both governments to resolve the crisis so "those with valid travel documents and perishable goods" could cross.

Afghan officials have protested the closing, saying that Pakistan has used the shrine attack as a pretext to pressure Afghanistan economically.

Mr. Zakhilwal said Pakistan was making a "flawed connection" between the shrine attack and the

border. The assault on the shrine was claimed by the Islamic State, whose regional chapter is largely made up of fighters from the Pakistani tribal areas. Afghan forces in the east have been fighting the group, which has also carried out deadly attacks inside Afghanistan, for nearly two years.

If the reason for blocking the border is to stop the flow of terrorists into Pakistan, Mr. Zakhilwal said it made no sense to prevent the return of the thousands of Afghans stranded in Pakistan, many of whom had traveled there for medical reasons. The long border is porous, and Pakistan is focusing only on the formal crossing points.

In Kabul, the toll of the border closing is evident in the markets, with the price of fruit and vegetables imported from Pakistan more than doubling. But the price for many other goods has been unaffected, because Afghanistan also imports from Iran and some Central Asian nations.

Nasir Ahmad, a shopkeeper at Kabul's vegetable market, said a crate of oranges that used to be \$4 had increased to \$12. A box of bananas, which used to be about \$12, is now about \$25.

Khanjan Alokozay, the deputy chairman of the Afghan chamber of commerce, estimated that traders from both countries were losing about \$4 million a day because of the border closing. Pakistani traders are bearing about 80 percent of those losses, because during the winter Pakistani exports of fruit and vegetables to Afghanistan increase.

Mr. Alokozay said thousands of trucks on both sides of the border had remained stranded, and Afghan businessmen have been urged to find other routes to transport their goods.

Since the closing, Afghan border officials said that Pakistan was allowing only funeral processions to cross over.

Some of those stranded have resorted to paying smugglers and taking dangerous mountain passes to return home.

"Pakistanis are not allowing anyone to cross the border, and they order their forces to shoot anyone who is trying to cross the border," said Haji Iqbal, an Afghan who recently returned from Pakistan with the help of friends who asked Pakistani forces to let him cross through a mountain pass. "I walked for two hours."

Bloomberg

Will the US and Russia dance or duel?

The Christian Science Monitor

March 4, 2017 Paris—Twenty years ago, Russia was a member of the Group of Eight industrialized democracies, a NATO partner, and a fledgling but enthusiastic new recruit to a budding "new world order." Today, Russia has been kicked out of the G8, NATO has suspended all cooperation with Moscow, and Vladimir Putin says his nation is engaged in a "civilizational" battle with the West over "dueling values."

Is a historic reconciliation between Washington and Moscow, which President Trump has hinted at, a real possibility? Recent pushback in Washington against the idea from leading Republicans and others has cast a shadow over the prospect. So, too, has the growing controversy over Trump presidential campaign contacts with Russian officials — including most recently revelations of Attorney General Jeff Sessions's conversations with the Russian

ambassador to the US in 2016. And as President Putin charts a prouder and more assertive course for his vast nation, operations such as Russia's 2014 invasion and annexation of Crimea in neighboring Ukraine point to much broader changes afoot that pose hard questions about the balance of power in the world.

From the Middle East to Latin America, from Ukraine to China, Russia is flexing its diplomatic and military muscles in a manner not witnessed since the cold war. And the world had better get used to it. "Russia is not some regional dwarf," says Andrei Klimov, deputy head of the international affairs committee of the upper house of parliament, "but a world power with its own zone of influence."

That attitude spells trouble for the international system that America has dominated for decades. "Russia has positioned itself as the challenger of the global liberal order the United States has promoted,"

warns Eugene Rumer, head of the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a think tank in Washington. "Russia will continue to poke and prod us."

So the question remains: Will there be a rapprochement between the US and Russia or a dangerous new era of bellicosity and brinkmanship?

• • •

From Moscow's perspective, a more assertive role in the world was inevitable as Russia grew back into its historical identity, defining itself in contrast to the West.

The post-Soviet experiment in free market capitalism, steered by Western advisers, left the jewels of the Russian economy in the hands of a few billionaire oligarchs — and hundreds of millions of Russians in penury. While Russia was weak, the Western military alliance extended itself to include former Soviet republics. Moscow felt threatened,

humiliated, and forced to swallow Western values.

From the Western perspective, Russia has flunked the key test for membership in the club: democracy. And as Moscow has fallen back into its old autocratic ways, it has revealed revanchist territorial instincts and a determination to claw back lost influence in its neighborhood and beyond.

Amid deep mutual distrust and disillusion, Moscow has changed tack. In its 2013 "foreign-policy concept," Russia referred to itself as "an integral, organic part of European civilization." The new version that Putin approved last November drops that phrase and instead talks of "dueling values." It blames "western powers" for "imposing their points of view" on the world and sees "the struggle for dominance in shaping the key principles of the future international system" as "a key trend" in world affairs.

Moscow cast aside one such key principle – nation-states' territorial integrity – when neighboring Ukraine showed signs of aligning itself with the West. In 2014 Russian special forces invaded Crimea, historically a part of Russia but which more recently belonged to Ukraine, and annexed the region.

That move was illegal under international law; it provoked international sanctions that are still in place. But the annexation was massively popular among ordinary Russians, who saw it as a big step toward recovering their nation's lost prestige, status, and authority. Indeed, 87 percent of respondents to one poll approved the move. Putin's popularity rating stands at 86 percent, according to a poll last November.

Russia shows no sign of ambitions to reestablish the Soviet-era worldwide network of allies and client states. Rather, Moscow is concentrating on efforts to stifle any tendency among former Soviet republics to move closer to the West. That appears to be what is behind Moscow's support for separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine, where fighting flared up again in February.

Roman Dyuzhikov, a factory worker, and his family had survived three years of fighting unscathed until early February. Then, suddenly, one evening during a heavy rebel bombardment of their village of Avdiivka, a shell exploded in their kitchen.

Roman's wife, Olga, had just left the room. "My first reaction was fear, fear for my children" who were sleeping, she says. She grabbed them from their beds and took shelter in the bathroom.

Now Roman is trying to fix the gaping hole in the kitchen wall so that they can move back in. "I don't know whether it is safe, but it's our home," says Olga.

Though loyalties are divided between the Ukrainian government and Russian-backed rebels in Avdiivka, Roman says, everyone shares a sense of desperation as the war drags on, claiming more civilian victims. "If you ask someone 'who are you for?,' the only answer you will get is, 'we are for peace,'" he says.

Russia, though, is readying itself for more such conflicts. It is spending \$300 billion to replace 70 percent of its military hardware by 2020, developing a professional army to replace the traditional mass conscript force, and building up rapid deployment forces capable of intervening in neighboring states. Moscow has boosted troop numbers

and military hardware along Russia's western border and in Kaliningrad, its Baltic enclave. NATO has responded by planning to deploy rotating troop units in Poland and Baltic member states Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.

Moscow has also launched more peaceful initiatives to consolidate its influence in countries that were once part of the Soviet Union, but without much success. The Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, a six-member post-Soviet military alliance, has been plagued by a lack of cohesion, and the Eurasian Economic Union, a new free trade bloc of five former Soviet republics, has not yet brought prosperity to any of them.

Two anchors prepare for a broadcast on Current Time, a global Russian-language TV network funded by the US government aimed at providing an alternative to Kremlin-controlled media.

In Western Europe, Putin seems to be applying principles he's learned as a black belt judoka to geopolitics, using his opponents' strengths to his advantage.

Here, say political leaders and intelligence agencies, Russia is using Europe's culture of free speech to spread fake news, rumors, biased reports, and hacked secrets. The idea is to destabilize the European Union and promote far-right, anti-EU populist parties in the run-up to elections in Germany, France, and the Netherlands this year.

In echoes of the leak of Democratic National Committee emails that embarrassed Hillary Clinton, which was blamed by US security agencies on the Russian government, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has told a Russian newspaper he has "interesting" emails concerning French center-left presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron. Mr. Macron is a leading contender for a place in the presidential runoff next May against National Front candidate Marine Le Pen.

RT, the official Russian TV station broadcasting internationally, has speculated that America was behind the Ebola virus epidemic. Sputnik, a news agency with ties to the Kremlin, made no secret of its editorial support for Britain's withdrawal from the EU. A fake news website in Russian-controlled eastern Ukraine spread a false story about NATO preparations for war with Russia that ended up in a mainstream Swedish newspaper, among other places.

"The aim of this sort of outlet seems not to be to convince Western audiences but to confuse them," says NATO spokeswoman Oana Lungescu. "Propaganda and disinformation can be part of a bigger project with political and military goals. If you poison the well with half-truths and fabrications ... you make it harder for people to make informed decisions."

"The overriding objective is to show that the West is in chaos and decline," adds Paul Stronski, a Russia expert at the Carnegie Endowment in Washington.

So Russian news outlets harp on Europe's problems, its migrant crisis, terrorist attacks, and social problems, depicting it as a place that has lost its moral moorings. The goal, says Stefan Meister, a Russia-watcher at the German Council on Foreign Relations in Berlin, is "to undermine the West as the global values center."

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has worried publicly about Russian interference in Germany's elections next September through cyberattack "bots." Votes in Dutch parliamentary elections in March will be counted by hand amid fears the electronic system could be hacked. "No shadow of doubt can be permitted," said Interior Minister Ronald Plasterk.

Europe is fighting back. The EU has set up a "mythbuster" task force that debunks fake news, putting out a weekly compilation on its website in both English and Russian. NATO recently created a "Setting the Record Straight" website to counter Russian propaganda about its actions and intentions. Facebook, Google, and the French newspaper Le Monde are teaming up in a project called Crosscheck, designed to filter out fake news. The Czech government set up a special unit in January to monitor security threats, including disinformation campaigns.

Some analysts suggest that Moscow's use of information to boost Western populist parties sympathetic to the Russian government could have been foreseen. Back in 2013 the military chief of general staff, Gen. Valery Gerasimov, wrote an article arguing that 21st-century rules of war make use of "nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals" such as "political, economic, informational" and other measures "applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population." In many cases, he wrote, "they have exceeded the power of the force of weapons."

Other observers see less sinister motives behind Russian "mischief" on the internet, as veteran Russia

analyst Dmitri Simes describes it. "For many years the US and the EU have been very active in trying to influence Russian domestic politics" through nongovernmental organizations and other means, he points out. "I think the Russian actions are part of an effort to demonstrate that both sides can play this game."

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It was no game in Aleppo, the Syrian city where Russia has shown off its military capabilities most dramatically. Russian airstrikes in support of Syrian ground troops, who captured the city at the end of last year, tilted the war in favor of President Bashar al-Assad.

Mahmoud Azza, a physiotherapist working in Aleppo's rebel-held hospitals, witnessed the brutality of the bombardments firsthand. "It makes a lot of changes," says Mr. Azza of Russia's role in the war. "Russian airstrikes make more damage, and more fear and more death and more bodies and more everything."

The assault on Aleppo was bloody and controversial, as Syrian and Russian planes strafed hospitals and other civilian targets. By the end of last year, Azza was working in Al Qods hospital, the last one left in a rebel-held area of the city. "It was unbelievable," he recalls now from the safety of a Turkish city where he took refuge after Syrian government troops captured Aleppo. "The patients were all over ... in corridors, on the floor, without any kind of heat or feeding. It was bad days in Aleppo."

Brutal though it was, Russia's intervention decisively tipped the war against the rebels and made Moscow a key player in the conflict, an indispensable partner in any search for peace in Syria.

While Putin may have muscled his way to the table and increased Moscow's leverage in the region, he hasn't been so successful at using diplomacy: Syrian peace talks that Russia sponsored last January in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, made no more progress than earlier US-led efforts.

"The primary purpose of [Russia] asserting military might in the region – projecting itself as a global power that is key to resolving the conflict – has been achieved," says Julien Barnes-Dacey, a Middle East analyst with the European Council on Foreign Relations in Brussels. "But it's easier to inject yourself militarily into a conflict. It's much harder to juggle the competing interests needed to force a settlement."

On the ground, Russia has secured itself new 49-year leases on an expanded Mediterranean naval base in the Syrian port of Tartus, and on an airbase at Latakia – hard-power assets that Moscow could use as a springboard for future operations elsewhere in the Middle East. On the diplomatic front, Russia has grown closer to regional superpowers Turkey and Iran, and is building economic ties with some Gulf states.

But Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq, not to mention US allies Turkey and Israel, all look to Washington to secure the region's security. That is unlikely to change anytime soon.

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For the first time in nearly three decades, Moscow and Washington are engaged in proxy wars – backing opposite sides both in Syria and in eastern Ukraine. At the same time, they share a common interest in defeating the so-called Islamic State (IS) jihadist movement. Just how the new US administration will handle Russia is still unclear and subject to continued debate.

Mr. Trump has signaled that he could be ready for a strategic realignment with Russia, making a deal to fight IS together and reorder international relations. But the new president is vague about what this might mean in practice, none of Trump's aides has yet clarified the administration's goals, and the White House's ties to Moscow have become the most controversial aspect of its nascent foreign policy.

Indeed, some top officials appear to see Russia as a threatening adversary, not a potential friend. At his Senate confirmation hearing, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson called Russia a "danger." Defense Secretary James Mattis put Moscow atop the list of "principal threats" to the US.

Observers in Washington are divided in the advice they are giving Trump. "As long as Putin is in charge in Russia, Russia cannot be a credible partner for the US," says Luke Coffey, director of foreign-policy studies at the conservative Heritage Foundation.

"What we're dealing with is an imperial Russia; this is how Russia behaved during the time of the czar," he adds, reflecting a widespread view that Putin is an authoritarian who crushes human rights at home and has blood on his hands in Syria.

Others say it is possible to work with Putin and make headway on issues of importance to the West – but only if Western powers, especially the US, treat Moscow as an equal. "Putin wants a relationship with the

United States, but for him it must be on the basis of major power to major power," says Mr. Simes, president of the Center for the National Interest in Washington. "When dealing with another major power you have to ask what is in it for them and what is their perspective, but I would say it's been a while since the US has approached Russia in that way."

Trump could start by reassuring Putin that the West does not seek to be the sole "global political arbiter," says Simes. But it may be too late for that.

"Russia has grown disillusioned with the West and its values through bitter experience," complains Sergei Markov, an adviser to Putin. "What the West does is contrary to what it says."

Members of a Hungarian opposition party protest a visit by Mr. Putin to Budapest, Hungary.

To counter US clout, Moscow has turned east toward a former rival, China – another nonbeliever in Western values and a lucrative market for Russian gas.

The governments of the largest country in the world, Russia, and the most populous, China, find many affinities. They share an authoritarian political system, a traditional social outlook, great power ambitions, resentment of the West's dominance, and complementary economies. Russia was further encouraged by Beijing's refusal to take a stance on the crisis in Ukraine.

"Western countries wished China would join in the sanctions against Russia, but China didn't and instead strengthened economic cooperation," says Li Xing, professor of international relations at Beijing Normal University.

"The strategic nature of the relationship has been fortified," agrees Alexander Gabuev, who researches Russia-China ties at the Carnegie Moscow Center. "There are fewer barriers to cooperation in the long term than there were pre-Ukraine crisis."

That is evident on the military front, as the two Asian giants step up efforts to offset US influence in the region. Last September their two navies held eight days of maneuvers in the South China Sea, the largest joint operation between the two countries.

At the same time, Russia has brushed aside an old taboo against selling advanced weapons systems to China, doing \$8 billion worth of business, including sales of surface-

to-air missiles and the latest-generation fighter jets. In 2014 Russia and China signed a 30-year \$400 billion gas deal, the biggest Russia has sealed since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

"Russia's changing orientation is mainly due to objective factors ... not the deterioration of relations ... with the West," argues Dmitry Orlov, head of an international affairs think tank in Moscow. "Russia sees Asia as the most significant and fastest-growing market; political reasons are not as important as economic ones."

Whatever the motivations, predicts Mr. Markov, "our pivot to the East is permanent."

• • •

Russia is expanding its footprint in Latin America, too, both as a way of boosting its strategic interests and evaluating what the US response might be.

"Russia, and China to a certain degree, use Latin America as a kind of place where they can test each other and test the US to see exactly what game the other side is playing," says Hannah Thoburn, a Russia expert at the Hudson Institute in Washington.

Russia sold \$4.5 billion in weapons to Latin American countries between 2005 and 2015, with most of it going to longtime Washington irritant Venezuela. But the Russian presence involves more than missiles and MIGs. Moscow has also been involved in antidrug efforts, such as in Peru, and in trying to pitch itself as an alternative to the "decadent" West – for example, sending the Russian Orthodox Church patriarch on a two-week visit to the region.

"The Kremlin's new line is that Russia is a bastion of conservative values in a world overcome by liberalism and homosexuality and all the things you'll hear [that] Russia disdains," says Ms. Thoburn.

In the end, Russia's moves around the world – its military adventurism in Syria, its cyber-troublemaking in Europe, and the common front it is forging with China – bespeak a country no longer willing to cede the role of global sheriff to the US.

The world awaits, with considerable trepidation, what Putin and Trump will do next.

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**THE WALL
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In Transition Year, Politics Drives China's Economic Agenda

Mark Magnier

Updated March 6,

2017 5:54 a.m. ET

BEIJING—China is embracing tried-and-true economic-growth drivers, betting it can contain rising financial risks without making painful overhauls in what is shaping up to be a sensitive political year.

Premier Li Keqiang on Sunday laid out next year's blueprint for the Chinese economy to the National People's Congress, acknowledging the downward slope for growth—the “new normal” that has been the leadership's slogan for years. A small calibration of the growth target set it at “about 6.5%” rather than last year's range of 6.5% to 7%.

Mr. Li made clear even one notch below 6.5% would be a disappointment and that the rate should be higher, if possible.

The Communist Party has made growth a priority over economic and financial restructuring in advance of a party congress at the end of the year that will name China's leaders for the next five years—and there is little tolerance for instability that could disrupt President Xi Jinping's second-term mandate.

Mr. Li's policy address on Sunday mentioned Mr. Xi eight times, a commendation for a serving leader in this carefully scripted political culture that was only surpassed one time, 40 years ago, when the policy speech contained 17 mentions of Mao Zedong.

The looming shuffle, which sees hundreds of top officials transferred in and around the congress, has put a premium on avoiding risk. Party insiders have said Mr. Li may be moved out of the premier's position during the leadership changeover this year to make way for an official closer to Mr. Xi.

The government's information office

**THE WALL
STREET
JOURNAL.**

China Eases Foot Off Gas on Military Spending

Jeremy Page and Chun Han Wong

Updated March 4, 2017 11:22 p.m. ET

also been involved in antidrug efforts, such as in Peru, and in trying to pitch itself as an alternative to the “decadent” West — for example, sending the Russian Orthodox Church patriarch on a two-week visit to the region.

“The Kremlin's new line is that Russia is a bastion of conservative

has declined to answer questions about personnel changes or alleged differences between the two men.

To keep a floor under growth, Beijing is turning to traditional sectors such as real estate and infrastructure. Its stated goal is to shift the economy toward services and high-tech industry that are growing but lack the heft to replace older and increasingly less effective engines of growth.

Mr. Li offered a two-prong effort to wring more expansion from the property sector. It accounts for an estimated 15% of China's economy, but has seen distortions such as smaller cities struggling for several years with many unsold apartments, while in megacities, speculation has driven prices out of reach for ordinary people.

Housing, the premier told the rubber-stamp legislature, “is for people to live in.”

Mr. Li said the central government plans to release more land for residential development in such cities as Beijing and Shanghai, and to help spur demand in smaller cities. He didn't elaborate. Past efforts have included mortgage incentives and looser residency requirements.

The 2017 fiscal-deficit target of 3% of economic output suggested China would continue rolling out public-works projects to prop up growth.

Last year, China spent more than \$400 billion on rail, highway, aviation and waterway projects. Economists say infrastructure spending is delivering increasingly less growth after years of high spending, given government inefficiency and a reduced pool of good projects.

While the target matched last year's, the actual deficit in 2016 reached 3.8% of output and economists

BEIJING—China's defense budget will expand by about 7% this year, the slowest pace this decade, but a senior Chinese official said it was still enough for Beijing to prevent

values in a world overcome by liberalism and homosexuality and all the things you'll hear [that] Russia disdains,” says Ms. Thoburn.

In the end, Russia's moves around the world — its military adventurism in Syria, its cyber-troublemaking in Europe, and the common front it is forging with China — bespeak a

expect it will overshoot the target again.

Annual growth targets are generally met in China, the world's second-largest economy, a one-party state that sees these more as political mandates than a projection of market forces.

The World Bank and others have long criticized China for lofty growth targets that push up debt levels. Mr. Li said in his annual speech to the legislature that China has many “innovative tools and policy options” and assured the 3,000 lawmakers in Beijing's Great Hall of the People that the target is realistic.

He played down potential economic and financial concerns, including companies' debt burden, which now stands at 160% of gross domestic product, saying China has the “confidence, the ability, and the means to forestall systemic risks.” He set a target for credit growth this year of 12%.

On Sunday, Beijing announced several hundred billion dollars of additional highway and railway projects.

Mr. Li alluded in his speech to the pain of restructuring, though he also promised to follow through on paring bloated state-owned industries.

Raising the bar for China's much-criticized overproduction of steel, he set capacity cuts of 50 million tons. China accounts for half the world's production and still has some 30% more production capacity than needed, according to industry estimates. He also pledged to close dozens of polluting coal-power plants and stop some new construction, in the process trimming capacity by an amount bigger than South Africa's entire annual power capacity.

Such measures have been slowed by concerns over layoffs. At the same time, China needs to reduce

country no longer willing to cede the role of global sheriff to the US.

The world awaits, with considerable trepidation, what Putin and Trump will do next.

its use of coal to fulfill its carbon-cutting promises to the United Nations.

China's labor minister pledged last week to cut another 500,000 workers from the steel and coal industries this year, compared with 726,000 workers last year. Many of these workers have been offered low-paying forestry and agriculture jobs.

Mr. Li didn't mention U.S. President Donald Trump, who has threatened to battle China over its trade practices, but his shadow loomed when the premier cited challenges from rising global protectionism. China has long been accused of protectionism and multinational companies in China say they are facing growing headwinds in accessing local markets.

In January, the Trump administration pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, all but killing the trade pact that had excluded China.

Beijing's goal, amid uncertainties about the direction of other major economies, Mr. Li said, is to push ahead with regional trade agreements. He called for rapid progress on a narrower, Beijing-backed trade agreement, the 16-member Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership of Southeast Asian nations and India, China, Australia, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand.

Mr. Xi's own second term is all but guaranteed. Some analysts said that as his power expands, he will also be left more exposed.

“In China, the more powerful you become, the more risk you take,” said National University of Singapore politics professor Huang Jing. “If something goes wrong now, he gets the blame.”

recent years, said Fu Ying, a spokeswoman for the national legislature, at a news conference Saturday.

Ms. Fu didn't provide other details on this year's defense expenditure.

For the first time in several years, the exact figure wasn't included in an overall budget report Sunday, the opening day of an annual meeting of the legislature, known as the National People's Congress.

Premier Li Keqiang said in a speech to the opening session that the government would deepen military reforms, with a focus on areas including border controls, maritime and air defense, international peacekeeping and counter-terrorism.

The increase in spending flagged by Ms. Fu still gives China the world's second biggest defense budget after the U.S. It continues a robust modernization program that over the past quarter-century has transformed the Chinese military into a formidable regional power and burgeoning global one, with outlays going to build naval, air force and other capabilities that allow Beijing to project power far from the Chinese mainland.

By lowering the rate of growth, however, President Xi Jinping is keeping military spending roughly in step with the overall economy and avoiding a costly arms race with the U.S. following President Donald Trump's proposal last month to do away with previous spending limits and increase the Pentagon budget by about 2% from current levels.

Ms. Fu, speaking to reporters, dismissed concerns voiced by the U.S. and other foreign governments about China's military spending and operations, saying Beijing isn't responsible for recent conflicts in the

world and wants a peaceful settlement of its territorial disputes in the region.

"At the same time, we need the ability to safeguard our sovereignty, and our rights and interests," Ms. Fu said. "In particular, we need to guard against outside forces intervening in these disputes."

While she didn't name the outsiders, Beijing often accuses the U.S. of interfering in the maritime disputes China has in the East China Sea with Japan and in the South China Sea with Vietnam, the Philippines and others.

Tensions in the South China Sea have been particularly acute in the past three years, as China has built seven artificial islands the U.S. and its allies fear could be used to enforce Beijing's extensive maritime claims in the area.

Ms. Fu said recent talks with China's neighbors had eased those tensions, a position Beijing has repeated often in recent weeks as Mr. Trump has suggested he will take a tougher approach toward Beijing on trade and territorial issues.

An American aircraft carrier, the USS Carl Vinson, has been patrolling in the South China Sea for much of the past two weeks. Some U.S. officials are pushing for the Navy to send ships and aircraft to conduct regular "freedom of navigation" operations near China's artificial islands.

"As to how the situation develops in the future, that depends on U.S.

intentions," Ms. Fu said. "American actions in the South China Sea have a definite significance as an indicator of how the wind is blowing."

She stopped short of criticizing Mr. Trump's proposal for raising U.S. military spending, saying only that the Pentagon budget was already huge. She noted North Atlantic Treaty Organization members were being urged to spend 2% of GDP on defense—a higher level than China.

After increasing military spending at double-digit rates for most of the past 25 years, the Chinese government began slowing the pace in recent years as the economy began downshifting. In 2016, its defense expenditure was projected to expand by 7.6 % to about \$146.6 billion.

Still, the growth in spending is faster than the overall economy, reflecting Mr. Xi's determination to continue the military modernization program, according to experts.

Lt. Gen. Chen Zaifang, a National People's Congress delegate, on Sunday termed a roughly 7% rise in China's defense budget as appropriate.

"The defense budget should be commensurate with the country's development level and the military's needs," said Lt. Gen. Chen, a former deputy director of the Science and Technology Commission of China's Central Military Commission. "I think it's suitable when you consider these two factors."

Many experts estimate China's actual military spending is significantly higher than the published budgeted figures, which aren't thought to include big ticket items such as weapons purchases.

China's real military spending will almost double between 2010 and 2020, reaching \$233 billion a year by the end of the decade, according to a report in December by IHS Jane's, a provider of defense information and analysis.

The official defense budget includes significant items such as salaries and the cost of a plan unveiled by Mr. Xi in 2015 to cut the armed forces by 300,000 troops and overhaul its Soviet-modeled command structures, experts said.

With troop numbers declining, the 7% increase suggested "funding is still being channeled towards investment in new equipment and the wider process of modernizing" the Chinese military, said Craig Caffrey, an expert on defense budgets at IHS Jane's.

Mr. Caffrey said the increase was likely to more than match growth in military spending in all other Asia Pacific countries combined in 2017.

"China continues the consistent multidecade investment that has already given it what is undisputedly the second-largest defense budget in the world," said Andrew Erickson, an expert on China's military at the U.S. Naval War College.

The New York Times Hoping to Lure High-Level Defectors, South Korea Increases Rewards

Choe Sang-Hun

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea said on Sunday that it would quadruple the cash reward it provides for North Korean defectors arriving with important information to 1 billion won, or \$860,000, in an effort to encourage more elite members from the North to flee.

Since famine hit the North in the mid-1990s, more than 30,000 North Koreans have defected to the South. The South Korean government helps them resettle by providing job training, rent and other subsidies.

But it has also offered extra cash rewards for those who defected with information on the North Korean military or the inner workings of the secretive North Korean government, as well as for those who fled with military planes or other weapons.

On Sunday, the Unification Ministry, a South Korean government agency in charge of North Korea policies, said that it planned to increase the

cash bonus for a defector with such information to \$860,000 from \$217,000.

Defectors who flee with a warship or a military fighter jet will also get \$860,000, instead of the current \$130,000.

Those who arrive with lesser weapons, like a tank or a machine gun, can expect rewards ranging from \$43,000 to \$260,000.

The new cash awards will take effect in April, the ministry said.

South Korea said the drastic increases reflected the effects of inflation over the 20 years since the rewards were last adjusted.

They come at a time when South Korean officials say that more elite members from North Korea, deeply disappointed with their leader, Kim Jong-un, and fearful of his "reign of terror," are trying to defect to the South.

Those fears can hardly have been eased by recent reports that North Korea had executed five security officials by anti-aircraft fire, possibly because they had failed to prevent United States cyberattacks that disrupted several missile tests.

Last summer, Thae Yong-ho, the No. 2 diplomat at the North Korean Embassy in London, arrived in the South with his family, saying he wanted to escape the threat of execution and to give his two sons a better future in South Korea.

In 1983, a North Korean military pilot named Lee Woong-pyung fled to the South with his MiG-19 fighter jet, breaching the heavily guarded border between the two Koreas.

Today, almost all defectors from the totalitarian North flee through its border with China, though Mr. Kim has taken steps to tighten that border in the five years since he took power.

The number of North Korean defectors arriving in the South, which peaked with 2,914 in 2009, dropped to 1,418 last year.

Their trip can be costly, running into the thousands of dollars.

As it became more risky to cross the border into China, North Korean border guards demanded bigger bribes in return for letting people slip through, according to human rights activists who help defectors.

Once in China, defectors have to pay smugglers to take them to countries like Laos and Thailand, where they can seek asylum in the South Korean Embassy.

If they are caught in China and repatriated, they could face a long stretch in a prison camp or worse.

Many spend months and even years in China as illegal migrants to raise the cash they need to make the trip to the South.

More than 70 percent of the defectors who make it to the South are women. They are often forced to work in the sex industry in China, or sold to rural Chinese men who

cannot find wives, before they escape to the South, human rights groups say.

Defectors who have settled in the South often pay smugglers to help bring their relatives from the North.

Some smugglers also collect their fees after the defectors arrive in the South and start earning wages.

The New York Times

North Korea's Launch of Ballistic Missiles Raises New Worries

Choe Sang-Hun

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korea launched four ballistic missiles from its long-range rocket launch site on Monday morning, the South Korean military said. The launch prompted South Korean security officials to call for the early deployment of an advanced American missile defense system that has provoked China.

The missiles took off from Tongchang-ri, in northwest North Korea, and flew an average of 620 miles before falling into the sea between North Korea and Japan, said Noh Jae-chon, a South Korean military spokesman. The type of missile fired was not immediately clear, but Mr. Noh said it was unlikely that they were intercontinental ballistic missiles, which the North had recently threatened to test launch.

During a meeting of the National Security Council, Hwang Kyo-ahn, the acting president of South Korea, called for the early deployment of the American missile defense system known as Thaad, or Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense.

The United States and South Korea have agreed to complete the Thaad deployment within the year. They say it is meant to protect South

Korea and American military sites there from North Korean missiles. But China says Thaad would undermine its own nuclear deterrent and has hinted at economic retaliation against South Korea.

Mr. Hwang also called on his government to look aggressively for “ways to effectively strengthen the United States’ extended deterrence” for South Korea, referring to Washington’s ability to deter attacks on its allies with the help of its nuclear forces. Mr. Hwang did not elaborate, but his comment came days after The New York Times reported that President Trump’s national security deputies recently discussed various options against North Korea, including the possibility of reintroducing nuclear weapons to South Korea as a bold warning.

“If North Korea gets a hold of nuclear weapons, its consequences are too horrible to think about,” Mr. Hwang said.

In his New Year’s Day speech, the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, said his country was in the “final stage” of preparing for its first ICBM test. In February, the North launched a ballistic missile that the United States Strategic Command determined was not a threat to the United States, but North Korea has said it is ready to test launch an ICBM.

The North’s missile launching came as the United States and South Korea were conducting their annual joint military exercise. North Korea calls such drills a rehearsal for invasion and has often responded by conducting missile tests.

On Thursday, the North Korean military called the joint exercise a drill for “nuclear war” and vowed to take unspecified strong measures. The next day, the North’s main state-run newspaper, Rodong Sinmun, hinted at more missile tests, saying, “New strategic weapons of our own style will soar into the sky.”

North Korea has boasted of an ability to strike the continental United States with a nuclear-tipped missile. It has never tested a missile capable of flying across the Pacific, although it has displayed what outside analysts said were ICBMs during military parades in recent years. Strong doubt also remains over the North’s claim that it can manufacture a nuclear warhead small enough to be fitted onto such a missile.

But its test on Feb. 12 demonstrated its advancing ballistic missile technology. The test involved Pukguksong-2, a new intermediate-range ballistic missile that the North said can carry a nuclear warhead.

The multiple missile launchings illustrated the frustration of the United Nations Security Council over its inability to halt or contain North Korea’s nuclear ambitions with punitive economic sanctions.

An investigative report released a week ago by a panel of experts concluded that the country’s leaders had developed an international smuggling network to foil the sanctions and outmaneuver enforcement measures. The report described a matrix of North Korean companies with bogus identities used to accrue cash, technologies and materials for the government’s weapons development.

In remarks to reporters on Monday morning, Yoshihide Suga, the chief cabinet secretary to Japan’s prime minister, Shinzo Abe, said the missiles appeared to have fallen into the sea in an exclusive economic zone around Japan. Mr. Suga called the missile launch a “serious threat to our security” as well as “extremely problematic behavior from the viewpoint of security of aircraft and ships.” He said the government had protested to North Korea.

“We just cannot accept such repeated provocations,” he said.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

North Korea Fires Four Ballistic Missiles Into Waters Off Coast, South Korea Says (UNE)

Jonathan Cheng and Kwanwoo Jun

Updated March 6, 2017 1:07 a.m. ET

SEOUL—North Korea fired four ballistic missiles into the waters off its east coast Monday morning, South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff said, the latest sign of Pyongyang’s determination to push ahead with its missile program despite increasing pressure against it.

The Joint Chiefs said the projectiles were launched from Tongchang-ri in North Korea’s northwestern North Pyongan Province, at 7:36 a.m. Seoul time on Monday. North Korea has a launch site for longer-range rockets northwest of the capital Pyongyang.

They said the projectiles flew about 620 miles and that the South Korean authorities were analyzing exactly

what type of projectiles were fired. There were no immediate signs of any damage.

A Japanese government spokesman on Monday said North Korea launched four missiles, and that three had landed inside Japan’s Exclusive Economic Zone, an area extending about 230 miles out to sea from its coastline.

South Korea’s acting president, Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn, convened a meeting of the Standing Committee of the National Security Council in response on Monday morning. Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said he would hold a meeting of its National Security Council to discuss the missile launches.

South Korea’s national-security adviser, Kim Kwan-jin, also spoke by phone with his U.S. counterpart,

Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, a spokesman for the South Korean president’s office said. During the meeting, Mr. Hwang called the missile launch “an act of outright defiance to the international community, and a serious provocation.”

The U.S. State Department condemned the launches on Sunday night, while reaffirming its commitment to defending allies including south Korea and Japan.

“The [Democratic People’s Republic of Korea]’s provocations only serve to increase the international community’s resolve to counter the DPRK’s prohibited weapons of mass destruction programs,” said Mark Toner, acting State Department spokesman.

South Korea’s semiofficial Yonhap News Agency reported that the

projectiles may have included an intercontinental ballistic missile, citing an unnamed official at the defense ministry.

An ICBM test would signal dramatic progress by the North toward being able to threaten the continental U.S. It would also likely ratchet up tensions among North Korea, its neighbors and the U.S.

South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff said there is “a low probability” that North Korea may have tested an ICBM. A South Korean defense ministry official said the flight paths of four projectiles—including the flight distance and the maximum height of about 160 miles—indicate they weren’t ICBMs.

“The North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) determined the missile launch from North Korea did not pose a threat to

North America," said Cmdr. Gary Ross, a Pentagon spokesman.

In his New Year address in January, North Korea leader Kim Jong Un warned that the country was completing preparations for a test launch of an ICBM.

A day later, U.S. President Donald Trump tweeted in response: "It won't happen!" Mr. Trump didn't elaborate.

The White House is undergoing a policy review on North Korea, and is considering a wide range of options, including diplomacy and possible military action to force regime change.

The North has yet to test an ICBM, though in 2006, it fired a missile that was later used as a space launcher.

As with its launch in February, which came while Mr. Trump was meeting with Mr. Abe in West Palm Beach, Fla., analysts and experts struggled to identify details of the exact launch. In that case, analysts initially identified the missile as an intermediate-range missile it had previously fired.

But the missile was actually a modified version of a submarine-launched missile that Pyongyang called the Polaris-2, boasting new capabilities that some experts hadn't yet expected North Korea to have developed.

In this case, South Korea's Joint Chiefs initially identified one missile launch from Tongchang-ri site, but then modified their assessment to include three more missiles, though it remains unclear whether those missiles were also fired from the same site.

"This is an unusual launch because of its number and location. If it was this number in a different location or just one launch from this location, it would make sense," said Scott LaFoy, a satellite-imagery and ballistic-missile analyst based in Washington. "North Korea is getting very good at switching up their tests. They keep changing the variables analysts watch for, so it is harder to quickly assess what any one event was."

The North's missile launch took place as the U.S. and South Korea

were conducting annual joint military exercises, strongly opposed by Pyongyang. The North regularly rails against the military drills in its state media, saying the drills are preparations for a possible invasion of the country—allegations the U.S. and South Korea dismiss.

Jeffrey Lewis, an arms-control expert at the California-based Middlebury Institute of International Studies, said that it was normal for the North launch a salvo of missiles during big U.S. exercises, to signal that they can "practice nuking the forces we are practicing with to invade them."

He added that "they are conveying that their plan, early on, is to use nuclear-armed missiles at our forces in the region to repel an attack."

The launch also comes as North Korea faces diplomatic challenges from friendly countries like China, which said in February that it would cut off coal imports from North Korea in line with international sanctions efforts against Pyongyang, as well as Malaysia, which ordered the expulsion of

North Korea's ambassador over the weekend.

In the case of Malaysia, the decision to expel the North Korean ambassador, Kang Chol, came weeks after the daylight killing of Kim Jong Nam, the half brother of Kim Jong Un, in Kuala Lumpur International Airport, which South Korean intelligence has described as an assassination ordered by Pyongyang. Malaysian authorities said the killing involved the use of VX, a deadly nerve agent that is one of the world's most lethal chemicals.

South Korea's Foreign Ministry on Monday lashed out at the North for launching more missiles "while the international community is shocked and angry about North Korea's inhuman killing of Kim Jong Nam using chemical weapon VX."

The ministry said the launch "clearly reveals North Korea's ruthlessness in continuing to develop its nuclear and missile programs, disregarding the unified warnings of the international community."



The Christian Science Monitor

March 5, 2017 —The integrity that roils South Korea's corrupt

Clean prosecutors who honor equality before the law have been key to a probe of high-level corruption from the presidency to Samsung. A stronger democracy is South Korea's core defense.

By the Monitor's Editorial Board

For the past three decades, while North Korea's dictators were building nuclear weapons, South Korea has been building something far more potent. It has steadily — if at times fitfully — restored its democracy, uniting citizens around such principles as equality before the law. In recent months, that particular principle has been on full display. The president, Park Geun-hye, has been impeached. And 30 of the nation's most powerful people

Editorial : The integrity that roils South Korea's corrupt

The Christian

have been indicted in a corruption probe, including billionaire Lee Jae-yong, the de facto head of Samsung.

This ongoing sweep of South Korea's politics and its largest conglomerate would not have been possible without a public demand, reflected in candlelight vigils by protesters, for integrity in the investigations. Until last fall, however, most prosecutors were not in high standing. Last year, for example, two of them were arrested for peddling their influence. "The honor of the prosecution has ... fallen to the floor," admitted the nation's chief prosecutor, Kim So-nam.

But then, as allegations of corruption have grown against the president, a special prosecutor was appointed. Park Young-soo, who was respected for his past roles in putting powerful businessmen in jail, was given a three-month mandate

by parliament to probe the widening scandal. He assembled a team of more than 100 professionals to "uncover the whole truth," as he put it.

Mr. Park, who likes to blog about the teachings of Confucius, describes himself as an "uncompromising" person who seeks to "build a just society." He started his career putting low-level criminals behind bars. He eventually challenged the country's giant businesses, known as chaebols, that are the backbone of the economy but closely tied to politicians. At one point, Park said he would not even spare Prosecutor General Kim if the facts led him to that.

His latest probe has ended for now. Koreans await a ruling by the Constitutional Court on whether the impeachment trial of the president can take place. Common people have honored his work by leaving flowers outside his office. When

asked in a recent radio interview why he took on this task, Park replied, "Whenever there was a request to investigate wrongdoings, I could not refuse. That would go against the principles I have lived by."

His work reflects a widening embrace among South Koreans for the idea of treating all people equally before the law, a principle that remains a source of strength unmatched in North Korea.

The normal drama of South Korean politics will continue. The trial of a top Samsung leader may help erode the power of the chaebols. And an election for new president is due this year. But the country has moved closer to understanding an innate right of all citizens, one that helps promote clean governance.



ET 30 COMMENTS

Is China greeting the Trump era by getting tough on North Korea? That may be the impression Beijing has tried to convey by announcing a suspension of coal imports from the nuclear-armed state. But there is less here than meets the eye.

Editorial : China's North Korea Feint

Updated March 5, 2017 6:34 p.m.

As is often the case regarding Beijing's ties to Pyongyang, the details of the coal cutoff are murky. In the most generous telling, China has decided to squeeze North Korea's key source of hard currency to punish it for acting in destabilizing ways—testing missiles, assassinating overseas enemies with VX nerve agent and the like. By this logic, Beijing is signalling a desire to work with the new U.S.

Administration on the shared goal of denuclearizing the Kim regime. North Korean state media have pushed this line, slamming China for "dancing to the tune of the U.S."

Yet Beijing has said that it had to cut off coal imports to comply with United Nations sanctions passed in November. According to the Foreign Ministry, Chinese imports in 2017 have already approached the U.N.'s

annual value limit of \$400 million. Beijing would hardly deserve applause for buying its full quota and then stopping to meet its legal obligations.

A year ago the Chinese also promised to comply with an earlier round of U.N. sanctions on North Korean mineral exports. But Beijing made sure those sanctions included a loophole exempting transactions

for undefined "livelihood purposes." It then proceeded to rack up record purchases of North Korean coal.

After November's sanctions moved to nullify the "livelihood" loophole with hard caps, Beijing promised a cutoff—yet still imported more North Korean coal in December than in any previous month of the year. Its total coal imports for 2016, a year in which it twice voted for sanctions on such purchases, rose 14.5% from 2015 and totaled more than \$1 billion.

**The
Washington
Post**

<https://www.facebook.com/david.filipov>

MOSCOW — Anyone following the uproar in Washington over allegations of inappropriate ties to Russia within the Trump administration might be interested in Moscow's reaction to sweeping corruption charges the country's most recognizable Kremlin opponent has leveled against Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev.

Crickets, pretty much.

Alexei Navalny, who has said he will run for president in 2018, released last week a report and a 50-minute video detailing allegations that Medvedev has funneled more than \$1 billion in bribes through companies and charities run by his associates to acquire vineyards, luxury yachts and lavish mansions. The Russian government quickly dismissed the accusations as an attention-grabbing stunt by a self-proclaimed presidential candidate with no chance of winning.

Today's WorldView

What's most important from where the world meets Washington

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That came out on Thursday, the same day Attorney General Jeff Sessions recused himself from any investigation into possible Kremlin interference in the U.S. presidential election after The Washington Post's report that he had met with Russia's ambassador to the United States despite telling senators at his confirmation hearing that he had not met with Russian officials during the campaign.

**THE WALL
STREET
JOURNAL.**

Russia dismisses sweeping corruption allegations against Medvedev

Official Moscow quickly characterized the Sessions affair as a witch hunt motivated by anti-Russian hysteria, and the Internet was peppered with tweets poking fun at the furor and pictures of Americans real and imaginary who have met Ambassador Sergei Kislyak.

[Moscow blames anti-Russian hysteria for Sessions's plight]

Online Russia has been far less dismissive of Navalny's video, which has more than 5 million views on YouTube, and more than 400 comments, many of which appear to have been written by Russians who support its conclusions. The allegations, which Navalny said were put together relying on publicly available documents, were also reported by online news portals and a few influential newspapers.

But they were ignored or dismissed by government-controlled television and most major print publications, following the lead of Medvedev's spokeswoman, Natalya Timakova, who said there was no point in commenting on "propaganda insinuations," and President Vladimir Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, who backed Timakova's remarks, referring to Navalny as a "notorious convicted citizen."

And that highlights a major difference between the political state of affairs for dissidents in Russia and the United States at the moment.

Navalny, who emerged as an anti-corruption whistleblower and took a leading role in the street protests that accompanied Putin's 2012 return to the presidency, has been the target of fraud and embezzlement probes he calls politically motivated. In 2013, he was convicted of siphoning money off a lumber sale, a verdict that the

China's unofficial economic sanctions on South Korea merely for wishing to defend itself against North Korean nuclear missiles by installing advanced U.S.-made antimissile defenses.

Beijing is clearly exploring its options in the Trump era, which is no doubt why it dispatched foreign-policy chief Yang Jiechi to Washington this week to meet the President and some of his senior aides. The coal gambit may have been a gift of sorts to Mr. Trump

after he reaffirmed traditional U.S. policy toward Taiwan.

Whatever Beijing intends, it is clear that Pyongyang's nuclear and missile capabilities pose a direct and increasingly intolerable threat to U.S. security, and that the threat will end only when the Kim dynasty is deposed. If Beijing won't cut its economic lifelines to the North, the Trump Administration should use financial sanctions on Chinese entities to force the issue.

European Court of Human Rights declared "prejudicial," saying that Navalny and his co-defendant were denied the right to a fair trial.

In November, Russia's Supreme Court declared a retrial, and Navalny was convicted of embezzlement and handed a five-year suspended sentence in February, which by Russian law would prevent him from running for president.

Navalny's conviction is one of a long line of misfortunes that befall vocal opponents of Putin. Boris Nemtsov, a charismatic former deputy prime minister and opposition leader, was gunned down in sight of the Kremlin walls in 2015. Vladimir Kara-Murza, another opposition activist, was in a medical coma in the hospital last month after a suspected poisoning, the second since 2015. Others have been discredited by hidden camera videos aired on state television.

The Kremlin denies involvement in any of this, and it would seem unnecessary for Putin to worry about his opponents when his popularity rating, according to one polling center, hasn't dipped below 80 percent in three years.

[How to understand Putin's jaw-droppingly high popularity rating]

That same pollster, the Levada Center, in February reported that 47 percent of 1,600 Russians surveyed had heard of Navalny, but only 10 percent said they might vote for the 40-year-old whistleblower.

Asked Friday whether the Russian parliament would look into the report, pro-Kremlin legislator Vyacheslav Nikonov dismissed it as a desperate attempt to get attention by an unpopular candidate. He also poured scorn on the way Navalny built his case against Medvedev, which relies on connections to the

premier's former classmates, Instagram photos that appear to place Medvedev on one of the yachts or at one of the estates, and garishly colored sneakers and shirts that were sent to one of the companies and were identical to ones worn by Medvedev in pictures and videos shown in the video.

Piecing together the evidence, Navalny concluded that without a doubt, Medvedev, who has frequently spoken of the need to fight official corruption, is "one of the richest people in the country and one of the most corrupt bureaucrats."

One former classmate linked to companies and charities mentioned in the scheme denied any connection, and Nikonov countered that Navalny's accusations boiled down to the fact that "Medvedev wears pink sneakers."

In an interview on Ekho Moskvy radio, Ilya Shumanov, a deputy head of the Russian branch of Transparency International, agreed that Navalny has failed to make an irrefutable case that Medvedev benefited financially from his acquaintances.

Navalny decried what he called public indifference to corruption in Russia.

"I try to do things in a way they should be done in a normal world," Navalny told the station. "In Russia we see an absurd situation in which we publish on the Internet that someone received 70 billion [rubles] in bribes, and everybody's reaction is like, 'yeah, nothing interesting here.'"

Editorial : Washington Goes Nuts

Updated March 5, 2017 6:17 p.m. ET 388 COMMENTS

The political brawl over Russia, the Trump campaign and U.S.

intelligence has reached the point where basic questions about U.S.

institutions and trust in government are at stake. Democrats are trying to capitalize on anonymous leaks based on U.S. intelligence collection to destroy the Trump Presidency, and the President is responding with a fusillade of unproven accusations. To adapt Benjamin Franklin's comment about the Constitution, you have a banana republic, if you can keep it.

Pardon the gallows humor, but what a spectacle. Democratic leaders and the media wildly overreacted to last week's news, based on a leak, that Attorney General Jeff Sessions met with Russia's ambassador to the U.S. in the not-so-secret lair of his Senate office. Resign. Special prosecutor. Watergate.

Then the President, with his familiar self-restraint, replied with a Saturday morning Twitter barrage alleging that former President "Obama had my 'wires tapped' in Trump Tower just before the victory. Nothing found. This is McCarthyism!" Mr. Trump offered no evidence for his claims, which may have been based on a report by a radio talk-show host.

The political upshot is that, in this supposedly mature democracy, the current President is accusing his

predecessor of trying to subvert his victory, while the former President's party accuses Mr. Trump of colluding with the enemy in the Kremlin. Forget "Wag the Dog" or "The Manchurian Candidate." Hollywood couldn't make this up.

What the country desperately needs are some grown-ups to intervene, discover the facts, and then lay them out to the American people. This should include contacts between the Russians and the Trump campaign as well as any efforts during the Obama Administration to monitor Trump advisers.

The latter is important no matter the provenance of Mr. Trump's Twitter rampage. We've been writing for weeks that the circumstances of the leaks against former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn suggested that U.S. intelligence was listening to his conversations with the Russian ambassador. Was there an order to do so from the U.S. Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, and what was the justification?

That question has become more urgent as we've learned the extent of the Obama Administration's efforts to share raw intelligence

about the Trump campaign far and wide. In January the White House changed its rules to let the National Security Agency share this intelligence with other agencies without privacy protections. The timing is suspicious to say the least.

The worst option for investigating all this is to appoint a special counsel in the Justice Department. The country doesn't need another Inspector Javert spending months in secret looking for someone to indict. The country needs to know what happened.

The second worst idea is a joint House-Senate special committee. That would have to start from scratch and you can bet it would be filled with partisans. Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer—who may eventually call for everyone in the Trump Administration to resign—would use it as a political weapon.

A last resort option would be a commission of nonelected graybeards like the Robb-Silberman effort that in 2004-2005 investigated the intelligence errors over weapons of mass destruction before the Iraq war. But that would also have to start de novo and take months or years.

Before going to that extreme, the better immediate options are the House and Senate intelligence committees that have been investigating Russia's election meddling for months. These may be the last two committees in Congress that operate in bipartisan fashion, at least most of the time.

The two Republican Chairmen, Rep. Devin Nunes and Sen. Richard Burr, have said from the outset that they take Russian meddling seriously. The ranking Senate Democrat, Mark Warner, said Sunday on CBS's "Face the Nation" that "I have confidence that we are going to get to the bottom of this" and "Richard Burr and I are going to get this done." Mr. Warner and his House colleague, Adam Schiff, will be under pressure from the left to portray the probes as a whitewash, but we don't want to prejudice their motives or behavior.

Political collusion with a foreign power and the abuse of intelligence collection to smear an opponent threaten the integrity of democratic institutions. Let's hope the intelligence committees rise above their putative party leaders and tell America what really happened.

The Washington Post

Diehl : How the rest of the world could shape Trump's foreign policy

Governments around the world are fixated on the apparent struggle in Washington over President Trump's foreign policy: Will the ethno-nationalism of Stephen K. Bannon dominate, or the traditional muscular conservatism of Vice President Pence? Evidence for each side could easily be found in Trump's address to Congress last week, which echoed Pence's praise of NATO while proclaiming, Bannonic-like, that "my job is not to represent the world."

America may indeed be first in Trump's world — but what the world is beginning to realize is that this Beltway battle won't be confined to Washington. U.S. allies and adversaries may do as much to shape Trump's eventual direction as debates in the White House situation room.

To begin with, targets of Bannon's would-be civilizational war are showing they have the means to push back. Take Iraq, which last week appeared to have succeeded in getting an exemption from the new draft of Trump's ban on visitors from select Muslim-majority nations. Following the issuance of the first ban — a pure Bannonic production — the Iraqi parliament voted to impose a similar kibosh on Americans, while Iran's proxies pushed for the

expulsion of U.S. troops fighting the Islamic State.

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No doubt Defense Secretary Jim Mattis made the case to Trump, contra Bannon, that to lump Iraq with Yemen, Somalia and Sudan would be to hamstring the war against the Islamic State and hand an easy victory to Iran. But the Iraqi government's own words and actions surely helped tip the balance. With its removal, the rationale for a U.S. policy based on Bannon's showdown between "Judeo-Christian" America and "radical Islam" took a significant hit.

Next comes Mexico, which in the radical version of America-firstism becomes a perpetual whipping boy for economic grievances and a dumping ground for unwanted aliens. Only, as Mexican officials have since made clear to Trump's envoys, they too have the means to fight back. The government of Enrique Peña Nieto could refuse to accept deportees without proof of their Mexican citizenship — something that could tie up U.S. immigration courts for years and

slow transfers to a crawl. Or it could cease cooperation in stopping the flow across its southern border of Central Americans — who make up much of the current illegal alien traffic. To avoid a surge of alien arrivals and a choking off of deportations, Trump may have to curtail Bannon's "economic nationalism" and its assault on the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Not only allies will have an influence. Bannon's vision of a new world where nationalist regimes strike bilateral deals assumes that such partnerships can be forged with countries outside of the traditional Western alliances — starting with Vladimir Putin's Russia. But what if Putin proves unable to deliver on the much-discussed alliance against "radical Islam"? To join with Trump in Syria or Iraq, Putin would have to break with Iran, the enemy that all in Trumpland agree on. But it is Iran's Shiite militias that are defending Russia's Syrian bases, and Iran that is purchasing billions of dollars' worth of Russian weapons. Putin can't and won't turn on Tehran — and without a Russian partnership, another piece of Bannon's new global alignment crumbles to dust.

The tipping point in U.S. policy — and maybe in the history of the West

— will likely come in a string of elections this year in Western Europe: the Netherlands, France, Germany and possibly Italy. Bannon's nationalist allies will be on the ballots, advocating bans on immigration and the dismantlement of the European Union. If one or more of them wins, the Bannon world could be upon us.

For now, though, the odds are that none will. Geert Wilders has faded to second in polls of the Dutch election next week, and few believe he will be able to form a government even if he prevails. Marine Le Pen might win the first round of the French presidential vote on April 23, but a poll last week showed that she, too, had fallen to second behind Emmanuel Macron, a self-described "radical centrist" and supporter of the European Union and NATO. Even before that flip, a statistical analysis by the Economist put Le Pen's chances to win the May runoff at under 5 percent.

As for Germany, if staunchly pro-European Union Chancellor Angela Merkel loses the fall election, it will be to Social Democrat Martin Schulz, who has adopted the explicitly anti-Trump slogan "make Europe great again."

By autumn, Trump may find himself in a world with a strengthened and

confirmed European Union, an uncooperative Russia and a continuing, irregular war with the Islamic State that requires more

cooperation than ever with Iraq and the other Muslim-majority nations on his travel-ban list. That would be a world in which only a Pence foreign

policy could succeed — though in the chaos presidency of Donald Trump, it doesn't mean Bannon will lose out.

The
Washington
Post

Josh Rogin : Vice President Pence is quietly becoming a foreign policy power player

The role and influence of the vice president, not enshrined in any law, is determined in any administration by three things: his direct relationship with the president, his building of a personal portfolio of issues, and the effectiveness of his team. When it comes to foreign policy, Vice President Pence is quietly succeeding on all three fronts.

Inside an administration that is characterized by several power centers, Pence must navigate complex internal politics while serving a president who has an unconventional view of foreign policy and the United States' role in the world. Pence, a traditional hawk influenced heavily by his Christian faith, is carefully and deliberately assuming a stance that fits within the president's agenda while respecting the prerogatives of other senior White House aides who also want to play large foreign policy roles, according to White House officials, lawmakers and experts.

But Pence's growing influence on foreign policy is increasingly evident. The vice president was deployed to Europe last month to reassure allies that the United States will stay committed to alliances such as NATO, despite President Trump's calls for Europeans to pay more for common defense. During Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's recent visit, Trump announced that Pence and his Japanese counterpart would lead a new dialogue on U.S.-Japan economic cooperation.

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"The vice president seems to be building on his foreign affairs experience, finding a niche in that arena," said House Homeland Security Committee Chairman Michael McCaul (R-Tex.), who served with Pence in Congress. "He brings a level-headed steady hand to the foreign policy of the administration. He's also building up his own team."

Inside the White House, Pence is in the room during most of the president's interactions with world leaders. He receives the presidential daily brief. As head of the transition, he was instrumental in bringing several traditionally hawkish Republicans into the top levels of the administration's national security team, including Director of National Intelligence-designate Dan Coats, CIA Director Mike Pompeo and U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley.

Trump and Pence met with Haley last week just before the United States decided to confront Russia and the Syrian regime at the U.N. Security Council about Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons. The move seems to run counter to the White House's drive to warm relations with Moscow, but Trump decided, with Pence's support, that it was

important and necessary, officials said.

Pence's national security team is also in place and humming. Just days after the inauguration, Pence announced that he had brought on Andrea Thompson as his national security adviser. A former military intelligence officer with extensive combat zone experience, she also worked for the House Homeland Security and Foreign Affairs committees. Most recently, she worked for the firm run by retired Gen. Stanley McChrystal.

"I wouldn't say there's an ideological bent to her, she's a professional, an excellent briefer with command of the intelligence world," said McCaul.

Thompson's deputy is Joan O'Hara, former general counsel for McCaul's committee. They lead a team of senior advisers who manage issue areas delineated by region or function, similar in organization to the National Security Council staff but on a smaller scale. Pence's national security team is mostly professionals detailed from other agencies.

Pence is seen by many in Washington as a figure who might stand up for the traditionally hawkish views he espoused while in Congress, a proxy of sorts for the GOP national security establishment. But those close to Pence say his stance is more nuanced. Pence is committed to advocating Trump's foreign policy objectives, not his own, and

endeavors to stay above the fray of most internal disputes.

"He definitely brings a different perspective, but he's nuanced and subtle in how he engages," one White House official said. "He's adapted somewhat, at least in terms of not putting his views above those of the president."

Pence preserves his credibility with the president so it can be most effective when deployed. The chief example was when Pence personally spoke to Trump about removing national security adviser Michael Flynn, who had lied to him about conversations with Russian officials during the transition.

"When Flynn was in the NSA role, there was no center of gravity where traditional Republicans could come together on policy," said Bruce Jones, vice president at the Brookings Institution. "In the days since Flynn exited, Pence has occupied more of that space."

It's a tricky balancing act, but if Pence can keep the president's trust, stay above the internal politics and build out his portfolio, he will be able to continue to increase his influence on foreign policy inside the White House and on the world stage.

Read more from Josh Rogin's archive, follow him on Twitter or subscribe to his updates on Facebook.

The
Washington
Post

Editorial : Trump's blindness on trade is all too easy to see

PRESIDENT TRUMP'S international economic team is still a work in progress, though based on two early top nominations — Robert Lighthizer as U.S. trade representative and Peter Navarro to head a new National Trade Council — he fully intends to keep the protectionist promises of the campaign trail. Certainly a newly released administration document, "The President's 2017 Trade Policy Agenda," reflects the influence of Mr. Lighthizer and Mr. Navarro. The six-page statement rehearses once again their critique of U.S. trade policy since the Cold War's end: Multilateral trade agreements and

institutions such as the North American Free Trade Agreement and World Trade Organization have sacrificed American sovereignty, to the ultimate cost of U.S. jobs, especially manufacturing jobs.

Familiar and, indeed, shared by many of Mr. Trump's Democratic opponents though it may be, this narrative is far from an accurate diagnosis. It is true, as the new Trump agenda notes, that manufacturing employment declined, in absolute numbers, between 2000 (the last year before the United States approved China's entry to the WTO) and 2016, from 17.2 million to 12.3 million. Whether this decline is 100 percent the fault

of the WTO, NAFTA or any other multilateral trade deal, as opposed to automation and other long-term factors not unique to the United States, is another question.

As a new analysis by economic historian Bradford DeLong of the University of California at Berkeley shows, the past two decades of job losses in manufacturing are part of a trend that began after the Korean War. Factory work went from 32 percent of non-farm employment in 1953 to 16 percent in 1990: long before NAFTA or China. For comparison's sake, Mr. DeLong notes that Germany — held out by many U.S. trade critics as a paragon of manufacturing employment

preservation — shed half of its factory jobs between 1970 and 2015.

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Obviously, these numbers don't salve the pain, material and psychic, of those who lost out from these sweeping historical processes. They do, however, suggest there's little to be gained by trying to renegotiate existing trade institutions, or to opt out of them selectively, when, say, a WTO ruling does not comport with U.S. interests — as the new Trump

agenda suggests. To the contrary, DeLong calculates that China's accession to the WTO and NAFTA combined cost the U.S. 500,000 net manufacturing jobs, in a workforce of more than 150 million people.

Again, we don't dispute the impact — especially on the light industries such as shoes or furniture hardest

hit by imports. Nor do we quarrel with the Trump agenda's assertion that trade with China has largely failed to induce greater abiding of the law and transparency by that one-party state. Yet the best way to counteract China's mercantilism would seem to be by precisely the sort of U.S.-led multilateral cooperation that the Trump

administration has rejected, in the form of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. The Trump agenda blames past policymakers for "turn[ing] a blind eye to unfair trade practices" in the pursuit of "putative geopolitical advantage." Geopolitics, though, is just another word for shaping the world to serve all U.S. interests, with a minimum of conflict.

And the real blindness consists in unilaterally asserting "sovereignty" and "protection" without regard to the legitimate interests of other nations, or their capacity for retaliation.

The New York Times **The Case for a Border-Adjusted Tax**

Alan Auerbach
and Michael

Devereux

The American corporate tax system is broken. Faced with one of the highest tax rates in the world, many multinational corporations in the United States move their operations and reported profits offshore or undertake "inversions" to relinquish their American tax nationality. Elaborate regulatory and enforcement measures have been unable to stop this. Vilifying companies for their behavior hasn't worked, either.

Fortunately, bipartisan support for corporate tax reform has been growing in Washington. In place of the old system, Republicans in the House of Representatives have proposed adopting a tax — the destination-based cash-flow tax — that would be levied on the domestic cash flows of all businesses operating or selling here. (Your domestic cash flow is your revenues in the United States minus the wages, salaries and purchases you pay for in the United States.) This would mean introducing "border adjustments" to the current system — exempting exports from tax, but taxing imports.

This reform should appeal broadly, to Democrats and Republicans alike. The border adjustments would strongly discourage the shifting of profits and

activities offshore and eliminate incentives for corporate inversions. (The proposal would also eliminate incentives for companies to borrow excessively and strengthen the tax benefits for investing in plants and equipment.) But there remains much misplaced criticism of the reform and its potential, and much misunderstanding about who the winners and losers will be if it is adopted.

Some critics, including President Trump at one time, have claimed that the new system would be too complicated. On the contrary, the tax would be much simpler than our current arrangement. By basing a company's tax liability exclusively on its domestic cash flows, the new system would replace the much more complex calculation of a company's income that takes place now, which must also account for offshore and cross-border transactions. And because the tax would eliminate incentives for companies to shift operations and profits offshore, it could dispose of the raft of complex tax and regulatory measures developed over the years to discourage such tactics.

Other critics, particularly those on the political left, have expressed concern that the tax isn't progressive enough. But it promises to be more progressive than the current United States corporate tax system: Its burdens would fall

squarely on the owners of corporate capital rather than — as happens to some extent now — on American workers, whose wages suffer from the flight of productive investment capital to lower-tax countries.

Importers have also criticized the tax, arguing that the border adjustments would lead to a major redistribution of income away from sectors of the economy based on import shares and toward those based on export shares. This is the biggest misconception about the tax. In truth, importing industries should expect on the whole to experience a shift in the composition of their costs rather than an overall increase in their costs. The reason is that under the new tax system, the dollar should appreciate relative to the currencies of our trading partners (in response to the changing incentives for American firms to export and import). A stronger dollar would make imports cheaper, offsetting the increase in taxes paid.

Of course, corporate tax reform would result in winners and losers. But the gains and losses would derive mostly from the increased profitability of American operations and the lost opportunities to avoid paying United States taxes.

Free-market critics of the tax have suggested that border adjustments are tariffs and would thus erect trade barriers. This is also untrue. The border adjustments would merely

shift taxation from where products are made to where they are sold. This, again, would encourage companies to locate their productive activities and profits in the United States. (Countries around the world use such border adjustments every day as components of value-added taxes that are collected at the location of purchases rather than production.)

For the United States corporate tax to be a viable source of revenue, it must be reinvented. Intense tax competition for profits, production and jobs, in the form of other countries' sharply declining corporate tax rates and a host of favorable tax provisions, has been little hindered by international efforts to slow the process.

The United States faces a choice: to mark time as our competitive position worsens, to join this race to the bottom or to take forceful action that replaces our corporate tax system with one that aligns with the national interest. Our decision should be clear. We need to adjust to new ideas like a destination-based cash-flow tax. In the end, the short-run economic adjustments required would be a small price to pay for an enduring, fair and rational tax system.



Nossel : 'America First' puts freedom and leadership last

Suzanne Nossel is executive director of PEN America. She was formerly executive director of Amnesty International USA and deputy assistant secretary of state for International Organizations at the State Department. The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of the author.

(CNN)In his joint address to Congress, President Donald Trump began to elaborate his vision of an "America First" foreign policy. Some of his foreign policy pronouncements were familiar and reassuring: He spoke of the importance of alliances, global stability and learning from mistakes.

But upon close reading, Trump's brief treatment of international affairs in the speech revealed a blinkered conception of US self-interest that will alienate the world and ultimately render it more threatening to US security.

was: "My job is not to represent the world. My job is to represent the United States of America." His formulation does not come as a surprise. Trump has never intended to lead the free world, and nor would the free world put him in charge. But as Trump's predecessors have learned, there is no keeping America safe or prosperous when the world is not. As a global

businessman with interests on all continents, Trump's blindness to the interconnectedness entrenched by technology, the global economy, travel, trade and media is willful and worrying.

On a broader level, this willful ignorance spotlights three ways in which Trump's remarks on foreign policy were alarming. First, he displayed a propensity to view the US role in international affairs almost entirely through a military lens. He has already appointed military generals to head not only the Department of Defense but also his National Security Council (twice over, including the deposed Michael Flynn and now H.R. McMaster) and

the Department of Homeland Security.

In his words

, "To those allies who wonder what kind of friend America will be, look no further than the heroes who wear our uniform."

By putting a military face on American solidarity around the world, Trump confirmed the serious concerns of diplomats and top military officials alike who have expressed worries about Trump's announcement of budget proposals that would effect a \$54 billion increase in defense spending partly through drastic cuts in the budget of the State Department. More than

120 retired generals and admirals have signed a

mention of economic ties or global concerns like climate change and human rights. His worldview is a more extreme version of the approach taken during the first term of the George W. Bush administration when singular emphasis on military force, or "hard power," drew the United States into draining wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, squandered the global goodwill engendered by the 9/11 attacks, caused anti-Americanism to spike and frayed American alliances. Despite an obsession with his own personal brand, Trump seems oblivious toward the brand value of what Joseph Nye has called the "

soft power

" that comes from projecting appealing aspects of American society and character abroad. He is also indifferent to my own concept of "

smart power

," or the imperative to engage a broad range of tools of statecraft, from diplomacy to aid to private sector engagement to military intervention. Trump's tunnel-vision foreign policy, centered on the military, will leave other elements of the US foreign policy toolbox idle while incurring significant expense and risk for troops pressured to become the solution to all of America's foreign policy challenges.

The second jarring aspect of Trump's foreign policy vision was the absence of any conception of the United States as a standard-bearer for freedom worldwide. While the United States has been at best an imperfect exemplar of freedom, often contradicting its own professed ideals, its self-conception as an inspiration and lifeline to democrats and dissidents around the world dates back to the Second World War at least.

that "free nations are the best vehicle for expressing the will of the people," Trump immediately added that "America respects the right of all nations to chart their own path." Therein lies a stark contradiction. In the

2017 edition of its Freedom in the World index

, Freedom House named populism and authoritarianism as the "dual threat to global democracy." The index charted setbacks in political and civil rights more than a dozen countries still rated free. Overall, of the 195 countries assessed 55% were rated less than "Free."

In a large and growing number of countries the will of the people is not expressed through strong democratic institutions and processes. While the United States has limited influence globally and indeed must never try to dictate how other nations govern themselves, it

has strived to be an ally and champion of those struggling to defend and promote freedom and democratic reforms. The support of new and emerging democracies in Eastern Europe, Africa, Latin America and Myanmar are among some of the United States' proudest achievements in recent decades. Trump's none-of-my-business pledge to let all nations plot their own course, coupled with the proposals he made earlier to dramatically reduce US foreign aid, offers nothing to those around the world who long for freedom and lack it.

, of a "city on a hill" where, "if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here." Music to the ears of Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping and authoritarian leaders, Trump's hands-off approach to people caught beneath the yoke of repressive societies contrasts even more sharply with John F. Kennedy's

appeal in his inaugural address

: "To those peoples in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required -- not because the communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right. If a free society

cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich."

Relying on Cabinet appointments, tax cuts and corporate subsidies to help the wealthy, Trump made clear his vision of diplomacy is not beholden to a practical, a political nor least a moral compulsion to uphold many decades of US leadership worldwide as an exemplar and defender of freedom.

Trump has been told -- but refuses to believe -- that American global leadership is not a public service to the rest of the world but rather an insurance policy for our own people, one that has kept war, plague and economic devastation mostly off-shore for many decades. Trump's disdain for the burdens and benefits of US global leadership -- so clearly articulated in his declaration that his job "is not to represent the world" -- won't simply leave a gap. The space created by the United States' withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, its equivocations on the Paris Climate pact and its insults toward the United Nations is already being filled by China, Russia and others.

By ceding the United States' global leadership role, Trump may ensure his successors cannot claim it back.

POLITICO White House wants it both ways on revised travel ban

By Josh Gerstein, Josh Dawsey and

Tara Palmeri

The White House has spent more than a month retooling President Donald Trump's suspended executive order barring travel and immigration from Muslim countries, all along promising the public that the revised version would be substantially the same as the original—while telling courts just the opposite.

In rolling out version 2.0—which could come this week—Trump and his team face a crucial test of their willingness to compromise in order to see their policy goals realized, at least in part.

Story Continued Below

About two dozen lawsuits were filed against Trump's first ban, resulting in a series of court orders blocking the key parts of the directive. The broadest block on Trump's initial travel ban order came from Seattle-based federal judge James Robart on Feb. 3. The Justice Department asked the 9th Circuit Court of

Appeals to reverse Robart's order, at least temporarily, but a three-judge panel chose to leave the injunction in place.

Attorneys representing several states, the American Civil Liberties Union and other immigrants' rights groups are poised to return to court as soon as Monday to challenge whatever new order Trump issues.

Robart on Friday highlighted one of the challenges the administration will face in defending the new order: statements of White House officials indulging Trump's reluctance to cave in under fire are in tension with Justice Department lawyers' promises that the new directive will be "substantially revised."

"Fundamentally, you're going to have the same basic policy outcome for the country," one of the architects of the both the old and new orders, Trump adviser Stephen Miller said on Fox News last month.

In a scheduling order, Robart said Justice Department lawyers did not appear to be on the same page as the president and his aides. "The

court understands Plaintiffs' frustrations concerning statements emanating from President Trump's administration that seemingly contradict representations of the federal government's lawyers in this and other litigation before the court," the judge wrote.

The White House has invested heavily in preparation for the revised order, including consultation with senior officials at the Justice Department, State Department and the Department of Homeland Security.

Trump had dinner Saturday at his Mar-a-Lago resort with top staff and appointees involved in revising the order, including Miller, strategist Steve Bannon, Department of Homeland Security head John Kelly, and Attorney General Jeff Sessions. White House Counsel Don McGahn also attended.

McGahn has also been involved in exchanges with lawyers at other agencies about the new order, officials said. Some congressional leaders have also been briefed on

the new plan, according to a top administration official.

"Everyone will know this time," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

One of the most significant changes expected in the new order: removing Iraq from the list of seven countries targeted for limits on travel to the U.S. Iraq's inclusion on the original list prompted anger among Iraqi officials at a time when U.S. and Iraqi troops are engaged in delicate operations against the Islamic State terror group.

Iraqi officials agreed to new cooperation with the U.S. that will allow for better screening of travelers and refugees from that country, a senior administration official told POLITICO.

However, blocking the arrival of refugees who had served as translators for American troops generated significant blowback from U.S. lawmakers, including Republicans sympathetic to other aspects of Trump's anti-terror agenda.

A State Department memo obtained by POLITICO reported that an Iraqi official called the ban “both surprising and insulting to Iraqis,” while stating that the Iraqi government was willing to pull the plug on GE’s expansion into the region in the health, transportation, and aviation sectors.

Aside from Iraq, the original order listed Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen.

That order prompted protests at airports around the country, led to delays for some travelers and others being turned around and put on flights out of the country.

Nevertheless, Trump claimed publicly that roll-out of the earlier ban was “perfect.”

Trump first suggested a new order was in the works back on Feb. 10, indicating it would emerge within a few days. Timing of an announcement was repeatedly pushed back for a couple of weeks, undercutting Trump’s claims that the order was initially rushed because of concerns about national security.

The most advanced planning for a roll-out came last week, as aides prepared for a signing of the new order at the Justice Department on

Wednesday, the day after Trump’s prime-time address to Congress.

However, White House aides scuttled the executive order signing event late Tuesday night after positive reviews for Trump’s speech began to roll in. Administration officials told reporters that they wanted to allow Trump to bask in the rare positive publicity rather than immediately confront another round of critical travel ban coverage.

It’s unclear whether courts will be more inclined to give the Trump team credit for taking a more deliberate approach the second time around or whether judges’

skepticism will be fueled even further by indications that public relations concerns played a key role in the timing of an order the administration insists was prompted by urgent national security concerns.

If the order is “tailored” to previous court rulings, as Trump has pledged, it could fare better in the courts. Still, the legal gauntlet could prove challenging for the administration. Any of the variety of judges handling the cases scattered across the country could block aspects of the new directive.

ETATS-UNIS

The
Washington
Post

Inside Trump’s fury: The president rages at leaks, setbacks and accusations (UNE)

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

(Bastien Inzaurrealde/The Washington Post)

President Trump spent the weekend at “the winter White House,” Mar-a-Lago, the secluded Florida castle where he is king. The sun sparkles off the glistening lawn and warms the russet clay Spanish tiles, and the steaks are cooked just how he likes them (well done). His daughter Ivanka and son-in-law Jared Kushner — celebrated as calming influences on the tempestuous president — joined him. But they were helpless to contain his fury.

Trump was mad — steaming, raging mad.

Trump’s young presidency has existed in a perpetual state of chaos. The issue of Russia has distracted from what was meant to be his most triumphant moment: his address last Tuesday to a joint session of Congress. And now his latest unfounded accusation — that Barack Obama tapped Trump’s phones during last fall’s campaign — had been denied by the former president and doubted by both allies and fellow Republicans.

When Trump ran into Christopher Ruddy on the golf course and later at dinner Saturday, he vented to his friend. “This will be investigated,” Ruddy recalled Trump telling him. “It will all come out. I will be proven right.”

“He was pissed,” said Ruddy, the chief executive of Newsmax, a conservative media company. “I haven’t seen him this angry.”

Former director of national intelligence James R. Clapper Jr. on March 5 denied that President Trump’s 2016 campaign was wiretapped while senators of both parties weighed in on the allegations. Former director of national intelligence James R. Clapper Jr. denies that President Trump’s 2016 campaign was wiretapped. (Bastien Inzaurrealde/The Washington Post)

Trump enters week seven of his presidency the same as the six before it: enmeshed in controversy while struggling to make good on his campaign promises. At a time when White House staffers had sought to ride the momentum from Trump’s speech to Congress and begin advancing its agenda on Capitol Hill, the administration finds itself beset yet again by disorder and suspicion.

[Trump accuses Obama of ‘Nixon/Watergate’ wiretap — but offers no evidence]

At the center of the turmoil is an impatient president increasingly frustrated by his administration’s inability to erase the impression that his campaign was engaged with Russia, to stem leaks about both national security matters and internal discord and to implement any signature achievements.

This account of the administration’s tumultuous recent days is based on interviews with 17 top White House officials, members of Congress and

friends of the president, many of whom requested anonymity to speak candidly.

Gnawing at Trump, according to one of his advisers, is the comparison between his early track record and that of Obama in 2009, when amid the Great Recession he enacted an economic stimulus bill and other big-ticket items.

Trump’s team is trying again to reboot this week, with the president expected to sign a new executive order Monday implementing an entry ban for some countries after the initial one was blocked in federal court. The administration also intends to introduce a legislative plan later in the week to repeal and replace Obama’s health-care law, officials said.

The rest of Trump’s legislative plan, from tax reform to infrastructure spending, is effectively on hold until Congress first tackles the Affordable Care Act.

White House legislative staffers concluded late last week that the administration was spinning in circles on the health-care plan, amid mounting criticism from conservatives that the administration was fumbling.

With Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price on the road with Vice President Pence, a decision was made: Mick Mulvaney, director of the Office of Management and Budget, would become the point person, though officials insisted Price had not been sidelined.

[From order to disorder: How Trump’s immigration directive exposed GOP rifts]

On Friday, Mulvaney convened a meeting at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building with top administration officials and senior staff of House and Senate leaders to hammer out the final details of the proposal to replace the Affordable Care Act.

“Mulvaney has been essential in helping us get health care over the finish line,” said Marc Short, the White House legislative affairs director.

On Capitol Hill, Price is seen by some Republicans as more knowledgeable about health-care policy than Mulvaney, given his experience as a physician and his time as chairman of the House Budget Committee. But Mulvaney benefits from the close relationships he has forged with Trump’s top advisers and with the House’s conservative wing.

Trump, meanwhile, has been feeling besieged, believing that his presidency is being tormented in ways known and unknown by a group of Obama-aligned critics, federal bureaucrats and intelligence figures — not to mention the media, which he has called “the enemy of the American people.”

That angst over what many in the White House call the “deep state” is fomenting daily, fueled by rumors and tidbits picked up by Trump allies within the intelligence community and by unconfirmed

allegations that have been made by right-wing commentators. The “deep state” is a phrase popular on the right for describing entrenched networks hostile to Trump.

Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-Calif.), an advocate of improved relations between the United States and Russia, said he has told friends in the administration that Trump is being punished for clashing with the hawkish approach toward Russia that is shared by most Democrats and Republicans.

“Remember what Dwight Eisenhower told us: There is a military-industrial complex. That complex still exists and has a lot of power,” he said. “It’s everywhere, and it doesn’t like how Trump is handling Russia. Over and over again, in article after article, it rears its head.”

[Bannon vows a daily fight for ‘deconstruction of the administrative state’]

The president has been seething as he watches round-the-clock cable news coverage. Trump recently vented to an associate that Carter Page, a onetime Trump campaign adviser, keeps appearing on television even though he and Trump have no significant relationship.

Stories from Breitbart News, the incendiary conservative website, have been circulated at the White House’s highest levels in recent days, including one story where talk-radio host Mark Levin accused the Obama administration of mounting a “silent coup,” according to several officials.

Stephen K. Bannon, the White House chief strategist who once ran Breitbart, has spoken with Trump at length about his view that the “deep state” is a direct threat to his presidency.

Advisers pointed to Bannon’s frequent closed-door guidance on the topic and Trump’s agreement as a fundamental way of understanding the president’s behavior and his willingness to confront the intelligence community — and said that when Bannon

spoke recently about the “deconstruction of the administrative state,” he was also alluding to his aim of rupturing the intelligence community and its influence on the U.S. national security and foreign policy consensus.

Bannon’s view is shared by some top Republicans.

“It’s not paranoia at all when it’s actually happening. It’s leak after leak after leak from the bureaucrats in the [intelligence community] and former Obama administration officials — and it’s very real,” said Rep. Devin Nunes (R-Calif.), the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee. “The White House is absolutely concerned and is trying to figure out a systemic way to address what’s happening.”

The mood at the White House on Tuesday night was different altogether — jubilant. Trump returned from the Capitol shortly before midnight to find his staff assembled in the residence cheering him. Finally, they all thought, they had seized control. The president had even laid off Twitter outbursts — a small victory for a staff often unable to drive a disciplined message.

“He nailed it, and he knew it,” said Kellyanne Conway, counselor to the president.

[Trump gives his hard-line campaign promises a more moderate tone in address to Congress]

The merriment came to a sudden end on Wednesday night, when The Washington Post first reported that Attorney General Jeff Sessions met with the Russian ambassador despite having said under oath at his Senate confirmation hearing that he had no contact with the Russians.

Inside the West Wing, Trump’s top aides were furious with the defenses of Sessions offered by the Justice Department’s public affairs division and felt blindsided that Sessions’s aides had not consulted the White House earlier in the process, according to one senior White House official.

The next morning, Trump exploded, according to White House officials. He headed to Newport News, Va., on Thursday for a splashy commander-in-chief moment. The president would trumpet his plan to grow military spending aboard the Navy’s sophisticated new aircraft carrier. But as Trump, sporting a bomber jacket and Navy cap, rallied sailors and shipbuilders, his message was overshadowed by Sessions.

Then, a few hours after Trump had publicly defended his attorney general and said he should not recuse himself from the Russia probe, Sessions called a news conference to announce just that — amounting to a public rebuke of the president.

Back at the White House on Friday morning, Trump summoned his senior aides into the Oval Office, where he simmered with rage, according to several White House officials. He upbraided them over Sessions’s decision to recuse himself, believing that Sessions had succumbed to pressure from the media and other critics instead of fighting with the full defenses of the White House.

In a huff, Trump departed for Mar-a-Lago, taking with him from his inner circle only his daughter and Kushner, who is a White House senior adviser. His top two aides, Chief of Staff Reince Priebus and Bannon, stayed behind in Washington.

[Upheaval is now standard operating procedure inside the White House]

As reporters began to hear about the Oval Office meeting, Priebus interrupted his Friday afternoon schedule to dedicate more than an hour to calling reporters off the record to deny that the outburst had actually happened, according to a senior White House official.

“Every time there’s a palace intrigue story or negative story about Reince, the whole West Wing shuts down,” the official said.

Ultimately, Priebus was unable to kill the story. He simply delayed the

bad news, as reports of Trump dressing down his staff were published by numerous outlets Saturday.

Trouble for Trump continued to spiral over the weekend. Early Saturday, he surprised his staff by firing off four tweets accusing Obama of a “Nixon/Watergate” plot to tap his Trump Tower phones in the run-up to last fall’s election. Trump cited no evidence, and Obama’s spokesman denied any such wiretap was ordered.

That night at Mar-a-Lago, Trump had dinner with Sessions, Bannon, Homeland Security Secretary John F. Kelly and White House senior policy adviser Stephen Miller, among others. They tried to put Trump in a better mood by going over their implementation plans for the travel ban, according to a White House official.

The Daily 202 newsletter

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Trump was brighter Sunday morning as he read several newspapers, pleased that his allegations against Obama were the dominant story, the official said.

But he found reason to be mad again: Few Republicans were defending him on the Sunday political talk shows. Some Trump advisers and allies were especially disappointed in Sen. Marco Rubio (Fla.), who two days earlier had hitched a ride down to Florida with Trump on Air Force One.

Pressed by NBC’s Chuck Todd to explain Trump’s wiretapping claim, Rubio demurred.

“Look, I didn’t make the allegation,” he said. “I’m not the person that went out there and said it.”

Damian Paletta contributed to this report.

**THE WALL
STREET
JOURNAL**

Ted Mann

Updated March 5, 2017 10:55 p.m. ET

The Federal Bureau of Investigation has asked the Justice Department to publicly rebut President Donald Trump’s accusation that he was wiretapped by his predecessor,

FBI Asks Justice Department to Rebut Trump’s Wiretap Claim (UNE)

Aruna Viswanatha and

people familiar with the matter said, raising the specter of a clash within the administration over probes into the Trump campaign and Russia.

The FBI’s unusual request came as the White House on Sunday pressed to back Mr. Trump’s suggestions, made in earlier tweets and without evidence, that former President Barack Obama had tapped his phones at Trump Tower,

where Mr. Trump lived and worked during last year’s presidential campaign. A president can’t legally order a wiretap, and Mr. Obama’s office flatly denied the allegation.

The FBI, which would likely handle any such wiretaps, didn’t publicly comment on the tweets. It instead asked officials at the Justice Department, of which it is a part, to explain that no such wiretaps

existed, the people familiar with the matter said. The department as of late Sunday hadn’t issued any such statement. News of the FBI request was first reported by the New York Times.

The charges by Mr. Trump came days after Attorney General Jeff Sessions recused himself from investigations related to the 2016 election. Mr. Sessions’s move was

prompted by reports he'd been in contact with a Russian official while advising Mr. Trump's campaign, which appeared at odds with his Senate testimony.

- Trump Faces Growing Furor Over His Claims Obama Wiretapped Him in October

President Donald Trump called together top advisers, including Attorney General Jeff Sessions and strategist Steve Bannon, as the White House faced a furor over the president's claims he had been wiretapped by his predecessor.

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

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TRUMP'S FIRST 100 DAYS

Because Mr. Sessions stepped away from the probe, any decision about issuing a statement would fall to Deputy Attorney General Dana Boente, who is in the job in an acting capacity.

Mr. Trump triggered the furor with a series of tweets Saturday alleging that phones at his Trump Tower skyscraper in New York had been tapped by Mr. Obama. The White House said the congressional intelligence committees should investigate and that it wouldn't comment further until that happened.

White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders said on ABC that Mr. Trump wanted the allegations examined because if true, "this is the greatest overreach, and the greatest abuse of power, that I think we have ever seen." That was a change from Mr. Trump's unequivocal allegation Saturday that his phones had been tapped.

The president's fellow Republicans appeared unsure what to make of his assertions. Sen. Marco Rubio (R., Fla.), a senior member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said the panel would work in a bipartisan way to determine the facts.

"If it's true, we'll find out very quickly," Mr. Rubio said on CNN. "And if it's not true, obviously he'll have to explain what he meant by that."

Democrats reacted more strongly, and were especially critical of a reference by Mr. Trump to Mr. Obama as "sick." House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D., Calif.) said the wiretapping allegation was an attempt by Mr. Trump to distract from his campaign's alleged connections to Russia.

"It's just ridiculous for President Trump to say President Obama would ever order any wiretapping of any American citizen anywhere," Mrs. Pelosi said on CNN.

In the initial tweet, at 6:35 a.m. Saturday, Mr. Trump wrote, "Terrible! Just found out that Obama had my 'wires tapped' in Trump Tower just before the victory. Nothing found. This is McCarthyism!" He referred to Mr. Obama as a "bad (or sick) guy," compared the alleged tapping to the

Watergate scandal and suggested that "a good lawyer could make a great case" of the matter.

The White House didn't provide clarification on what information Mr. Trump was relying. A recent article on the Breitbart website, whose former chairman, Steve Bannon, is Mr. Trump's political strategist, made similar allegations about the Obama administration.

Reports have occasionally suggested that federal investigators sought court permission for surveillance at Trump Tower as part of a probe into possible connections between Russia and the Trump campaign. U.S. intelligence agencies say Russia mounted a campaign to influence the American election in Mr. Trump's favor, which Mr. Trump long expressed skepticism about before ultimately agreeing with the agencies' findings.

On Sunday, James Clapper, the director of national intelligence under Mr. Obama, rejected Mr. Trump's assertion.

"There was no such wiretap activity mounted against the president—president-elect at the time—as a candidate, or against his campaign," Mr. Clapper said on NBC. There was no court surveillance order regarding Trump Tower, Mr. Clapper said, adding, "I can deny it."

Mr. Trump's tweets, and the FBI's request, appear to put the Justice Department in delicate situation. If the agency issues a statement, it would directly clash with the White House. If it refrained from doing so, it would risk appearing to lack independence and appear to condone statements that its investigators acted illegally.

The tweets also are likely to complicate a confirmation hearing for Mr. Trump's nominee to be deputy attorney general, Rod Rosenstein, which is scheduled for Tuesday. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, a Democrat from Connecticut, who is on the Judiciary Committee considering the nomination, said on Twitter on Sunday that he would "use every possible tool" to block Mr. Rostenstein's confirmation unless he committed to appointing an "independent special prosecutor" to investigate Russian interference in 2016 election.

The back-and-forth also means Republicans are heading into a potentially pivotal week facing another distraction.

GOP leaders plan to tackle the repeal of the Affordable Care Act in earnest this week, with two House committees beginning to produce legislation. The White House intends to issue a revised executive

order on visas and refugees, hoping to regain the initiative on immigration. And two Justice Department nominees face confirmation hearings.

Those actions could now be overshadowed by questions about Mr. Trump's statements and language. This continues a pattern in which GOP leaders, hoping to deploy their newfound control of government to advance long-sought goals, find themselves instead answering questions about unsubstantiated statements by Mr. Trump on issues such as election fraud and inauguration crowd size.

"It would probably be helpful if he gave more information, but it also might be helpful if he just didn't comment further and allowed us to do our work," Sen. Susan Collins (R., Maine) said on CBS. A thorough investigation is important, she added, "so that we can get on with the business of this country."

The president's unpredictable tweets have thrown Republicans off-balance, prompting Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.) to say in an interview last month, "It would be, I think, easier for us to succeed were there fewer daily tweets."

Christopher Ruddy, a friend of Mr. Trump's, said he spoke to him twice on Saturday about the wiretap accusation. Asked by Mr. Trump at his Mar-a-Lago club how he believed the story was playing out, Mr. Ruddy said he replied that he had heard denials that Mr. Obama was behind any tapping of the phones at Trump Tower.

Mr. Trump replied that, "When they investigate it, they'll find out it's true," recalled Mr. Ruddy, chief executive of Newsmax Media, a conservative outlet.

U.S. law prevents a president from personally ordering a wiretap, in order to guard against potential abuses of power.

To obtain a wiretap, federal investigators conducting a national-security probe must persuade a judge there is probable cause that a target of surveillance is an agent of foreign intelligence and that the main purpose of the surveillance is to obtain foreign intelligence information. Investigators sometimes face a higher bar if the target is an American citizen.

In a criminal probe, investigators must show probable cause that a crime has been committed.

The conservative media outlet Breitbart published an article Friday based on the allegations of a right-wing radio host that intelligence agencies were conducting a "silent

coup" against Mr. Trump. The host, Mark Levin, and the Breitbart article assert that the Obama administration received authorization to conduct surveillance on the Trump campaign.

The U.S. has occasionally faced incidents of illegal wiretapping. An FBI program in the 1960s, called Cointelpro—for Counter Intelligence

Program—used electronic surveillance on political activists, including anti-Vietnam War protesters and civil rights organizers, most notably Martin Luther King Jr. A 1975 investigation by a Senate committee chaired by Sen. Frank Church (D., Idaho) branded the practices illegal.

In 1972, operatives working for President Richard Nixon's re-

election effort broke into the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee and tapped the phones; when the wiretaps malfunctioned, they returned and were captured, setting off the Watergate scandal that ultimately forced Mr. Nixon's resignation.

In part to guard against such abuses, Congress established the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance

Act court in 1978. The court considers investigators' requests for permission to conduct electronic surveillance, physical search, and other investigative actions for foreign intelligence purposes.

—Bob Davis, Amy Harder and Peter Nicholas contributed to this article.

**The
New York
Times**

Comey Asks Justice Dept. to Reject Trump's Wiretapping Claim (UNE)

Michael S. Schmidt and

Michael D. Shear

The White House showed no indication that it would back down from Mr. Trump's claims. On Sunday, the president demanded a congressional inquiry into whether Mr. Obama had abused the power of federal law enforcement agencies before the 2016 presidential election. In a statement from his spokesman, Mr. Trump called "reports" about the wiretapping "very troubling" and said Congress should examine them as part of its investigations into Russia's meddling in the election.

In addition to being concerned about potential attacks on the bureau's credibility, senior F.B.I. officials are said to be worried that the notion of a court-approved wiretap will raise the public's expectations that the federal authorities have significant evidence implicating the Trump campaign in colluding with Russia's efforts to disrupt the presidential election.

Mr. Comey has not been dealing directly with Attorney General Jeff Sessions on the matter, as Mr. Sessions announced on Thursday that he would recuse himself from any investigation of Russia's efforts to influence the election. It had been revealed on Wednesday that Mr. Sessions had misled Congress about his meetings with the Russian ambassador during the campaign.

Mr. Comey's behind-the-scenes maneuvering is certain to invite contrasts to his actions last year, when he spoke publicly about the Hillary Clinton email case and disregarded Justice Department

entreaties not to.

It is not clear why Mr. Comey did not issue a statement himself. He is the most senior law enforcement official who was kept on the job as the Obama administration gave way to the Trump administration. And while the Justice Department applies for intelligence-gathering warrants, the F.B.I. keeps its own records and is in a position to know whether Mr. Trump's claims are true. While intelligence officials do not normally discuss the existence or nonexistence of surveillance warrants, no law prevents Mr. Comey from issuing the statement.

In his demand for a congressional inquiry, the president, through his press secretary, Sean Spicer, issued a statement on Sunday that said, "President Donald J. Trump is requesting that as part of their investigation into Russian activity, the congressional intelligence committees exercise their oversight authority to determine whether executive branch investigative powers were abused in 2016."

Mr. Spicer, who repeated the entire statement in a series of Twitter posts, added that "neither the White House nor the president will comment further until such oversight is conducted."

A spokesman for Mr. Obama and his former aides have called the accusation by Mr. Trump completely false, saying that Mr. Obama never ordered any wiretapping of a United States citizen.

"A cardinal rule of the Obama administration was that no White House official ever interfered with any independent investigation led by the Department of Justice,"

Kevin Lewis, Mr. Obama's spokesman, said in a statement on Saturday.

Mr. Trump's demand for a congressional investigation appears to be based, at least in part, on unproven claims by Breitbart News and conservative talk radio hosts that secret warrants were issued authorizing the tapping of the phones of Mr. Trump and his aides at Trump Tower in New York.

In a series of Twitter posts on Saturday, the president seemed to be convinced that those claims were true. In one post, Mr. Trump said, "I'd bet a good lawyer could make a great case out of the fact that President Obama was tapping my phones in October, just prior to Election!"

On Sunday, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the deputy White House press secretary, said the president was determined to find out what had really happened, calling it potentially the "greatest abuse of power" that the country had seen.

"Look, I think he's going off of information that he's seen that has led him to believe that this is a very real potential," Ms. Sanders said on ABC's "This Week." "And if it is, this is the greatest overreach and the greatest abuse of power that I think we have ever seen and a huge attack on democracy itself. And the American people have a right to know if this took place."

The claims about wiretapping appear similar in some ways to the unfounded voter fraud charges that Mr. Trump made during his first days in the Oval Office. Just after Inauguration Day, he reiterated in a series of Twitter posts his belief that

millions of voters had cast ballots illegally — claims that also appeared to be based on conspiracy theories from right-wing websites.

As with his demand for a wiretapping inquiry, Mr. Trump called for a "major investigation" into voter fraud, saying on Twitter that "depending on results, we will strengthen up voting procedures!" No investigation has been started.

Senior law enforcement and intelligence officials who worked in the Obama administration have said that there were no secret intelligence warrants regarding Mr. Trump. Asked whether such a warrant existed, James R. Clapper Jr., a former director of national intelligence, said on NBC's "Meet the Press," "Not to my knowledge, no."

"There was no such wiretap activity mounted against the president-elect at the time, as a candidate or against his campaign," Mr. Clapper added.

Mr. Trump's demands for a congressional investigation were initially met with skepticism by lawmakers, including Republicans. Appearing on CNN's "State of the Union" on Sunday, Senator Marco Rubio, Republican of Florida, said he was "not sure what it is that he is talking about."

"I'm not sure what the genesis of that statement was," Mr. Rubio said.

Pressed to elaborate on "Meet the Press," Mr. Rubio said, "I'm not going to be a part of a witch hunt, but I'm also not going to be a part of a cover-up."

**The
Washington
Post**

FBI Director Comey asked Justice officials to refute Trump's unproven wiretapping claim (UNE)

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President Trump accused former president Barack Obama of wiretapping his calls in Trump

Tower. Here's a timeline of their relationship since inauguration. (Thomas Johnson, Claritza Jimenez, Monica Akhtar/The Washington Post)

President Trump accused former president Barack Obama of wiretapping his calls in Trump Tower. Here's a timeline of their relationship since inauguration. President Trump accused former president Barack Obama of

wiretapping his calls in Trump Tower. Here's a timeline of their relationship since inauguration. (Video: Thomas Johnson, Claritza Jimenez, Monica Akhtar/Photo: Jonathan Newton/The Washington Post)

FBI Director James B. Comey asked the Justice Department this weekend to issue a statement refuting President Trump's claim that President Barack Obama ordered a wiretap of Trump's phones before the election, according to U.S. officials, but the department did not do so.

Comey made the request Saturday after Trump accused Obama on Twitter of having his "wires tapped" in Trump Tower." The White House expanded on Trump's comments Sunday with a call for a congressional probe of his allegations.

The revelation, first reported by the New York Times, underscores the fraught nature of the FBI's high-profile investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 election. A key question fueling that inquiry is whether Trump associates colluded with Russian officials to help Trump win.

Neither Justice nor the FBI would comment Sunday.

The development came as Trump's charge against Obama — leveled without any evidence — was being rebuffed both inside and outside of the executive branch. It drew a blunt, on-the-record denial by a top intelligence official who served in the Obama administration.

Speaking on NBC News on Sunday morning, former director of national intelligence James R. Clapper Jr. denied that a Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) wiretap was authorized against Trump or the campaign during his tenure.

"There was no such wiretap activity mounted against the president-elect at the time as a candidate or against his campaign," Clapper said on "Meet the Press," adding that he would "absolutely" have been informed if the FBI had received a FISA warrant against either.

"I can deny it," Clapper said emphatically.

In his claims early Saturday morning, the president tweeted that he "just found out" that Obama had "my 'wires tapped' in Trump Tower" before the election. Trump compared the alleged action to "McCarthyism."

"Is it legal for a sitting President to be 'wire tapping' a race for president prior to an election?" Trump asked in another tweet. "Turned down by court earlier. A NEW LOW!"

By Sunday morning, the White House doubled down on Trump's explosive tweet storm and called for the congressional probe.

[Trump, citing no evidence, accuses Obama of 'Nixon/Watergate' plot to wiretap Trump Tower]

Current and former government officials said such surveillance would not have been approved by any senior Justice official in the Obama administration. And Trump's allegation raised hackles in the FBI leadership, implying as it did that the bureau may have acted illegally to wiretap a presidential candidate without probable cause that he was an "agent of a foreign power," as the foreign intelligence surveillance law requires.

"This is Nixon/Watergate," Trump tweeted Saturday.

A spokesman for Obama countered several hours later that the former president never authorized a wiretap of Trump or any other American citizen. "Any suggestion otherwise is simply false," the spokesman said.

White House press secretary Sean Spicer on Sunday cited "reports" of "potentially politically motivated investigations" during the 2016 campaign, calling them "troubling." But none of the media reports cited by the White House provides evidence of a politically motivated surveillance effort against Trump.

"President Donald J. Trump is requesting that as part of their investigation into Russian activity, the congressional intelligence committees exercise their oversight authority to determine whether executive branch investigative powers were abused in 2016," Spicer said. "Neither the White House nor the President will comment further until such oversight is conducted," the statement added.

Former director of national intelligence James R. Clapper Jr. on March 5 denied that President Trump's 2016 campaign was wiretapped while senators of both parties weighed in on the allegations. (Bastien Inzaurrealde/The Washington Post)

Former director of national intelligence James R. Clapper Jr. on March 5 denied that President Trump's 2016 campaign was wiretapped while senators of both parties weighed in on the allegations. Former director of national intelligence James R. Clapper Jr. denies that President Trump's 2016 campaign was wiretapped. (Bastien Inzaurrealde/The Washington Post)

Congressional committees in both the House and the Senate are probing not just suspected Russian efforts to undermine the 2016 election but any contacts between

Russian officials and the Trump campaign.

Comey's request is sure to raise eyebrows in light of his actions last year in the bureau's investigation into Hillary Clinton's email server.

In July he held a news conference — without telling the Justice Department what he would say — to announce that the bureau had concluded Clinton did not commit a prosecutable offense. Then, 11 days before the election, Comey wrote Congress despite warnings from senior Justice officials that doing so would violate department policy and said the FBI was examining new emails that had come to light. Nothing came of the bureau's additional review, but Comey took heat for his actions, which Democrats say influenced the outcome of the election.

It is not clear why Comey, who is the senior-most law enforcement officer who has been overseeing the FBI investigation from its inception in the Obama administration, did not himself issue a statement to refute Trump's claims. Nor is it clear to whom he made his request. Attorney General Jeff Sessions recused himself last week from all investigative matters related to the Trump campaign and any potential Russia links. The acting deputy attorney general, Dana Boente, a career federal prosecutor in the Eastern District of Virginia, is now overseeing the probe.

Trump's tweets early Saturday may have been prompted by the comments of a conservative radio host, which were summarized in an article on the conservative website Breitbart. The Breitbart story circulated among Trump's senior aides on Friday.

[How hard is it to get an intelligence wiretap? Pretty hard.]

The White House's escalation of Trump's claims were kept at arm's length by congressional Republicans appearing on Sunday morning news broadcasts.

When asked about Trump's allegations, Senate Intelligence Committee member Tom Cotton (R-Ark.) declined to comment on the tweets but said he has "seen no evidence of the allegations."

"Whether that's a FISA court application or denial of that application or a re-submission of that application, that doesn't mean that none of these things happened. It just means we haven't seen that yet," Cotton added, speaking on "Fox News Sunday."

Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) said he is not aware of evidence to back up the president's claim. "I have no

insight into exactly what he's referring to," he said on "Meet the Press." "The president put that out there, and now the White House will have to answer for exactly what he was referring to."

Obama's allies were more blunt, denying flatly that the former president had ordered a wiretap of Trump's campaign.

"This may come as a surprise to the current occupant of the Oval Office, but the president of the United States does not have the authority to unilaterally order the wiretapping of American citizens," said former Obama White House press secretary Josh Earnest.

Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) told "Meet the Press" that Trump is "in trouble" and acting "beneath the dignity of the presidency."

"The president's in trouble if he falsely spread this kind of information," Schumer said. "It shows this president doesn't know how to conduct himself."

Earnest added that Trump was attempting to distract from the controversy involving contacts between his campaign aides, including now-Attorney General Jeff Sessions, and Russian officials.

"We know exactly why president Trump tweeted what he tweeted," Earnest added. "Because there is one page in the Trump White House crisis management playbook, and that is simply to tweet or say something outrageous to distract from a scandal. And the bigger the scandal, the more outrageous the tweet."

[The one big question Jeff Sessions still hasn't answered]

But appearing on ABC's "This Week," White House deputy press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders repeatedly said that the president's allegation was worth looking into.

"He's asking that we get down to the bottom of this, let's get the truth here, let's find out," Huckabee Sanders said. "I think the bigger story isn't who reported it, but is it true. And I think the American people have a right to know if this happened, because if it did, again, this is the largest abuse of power that, I think, we have ever seen."

Asked whether Trump truly believes Obama wiretapped him, Huckabee Sanders deflected.

"I would say that his tweet speaks for itself there," she said.

Clapper's comments referred only to whether Trump campaign officials had been wiretapped. But their conversations could also have been

captured by routine surveillance of Russian diplomats or intelligence operatives.

U.S. monitoring of Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak, for example, caught his conversations with Trump adviser Michael Flynn during the campaign. Flynn went on to become Trump's national security adviser, but he was forced to resign last month after admitting that he had misled other senior Trump officials about the nature of those conversations.

The FBI and the National Security Agency also have obtained intercepted communications among Russians officials in which they

refer to conversations with members of the Trump team, current and former U.S. officials have said.

On the broader question of apparent Russian interference in the 2016 election, Clapper urged congressional investigators to attempt to settle the issue, which he said has become a "distraction" in the political sphere.

The intelligence community found no evidence of collusion between the Trump campaign and the Russian government — at least until the end of the Obama administration, he said Sunday.

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"We had no evidence of such collusion," he said on "Meet the Press." But Clapper added a caveat: "This could have unfolded or become available in the time since I left government."

Whether there was any collusion is a key question fueling a wide-ranging federal probe into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential campaign.

On Jan. 6, the U.S. spy agencies collectively released a report concluding that Russia carried out

cyberhacks and other "active measures" with an intent to help Trump and harm the campaign and potential presidency of Hillary Clinton. The report, Clapper pointed out, included "no evidence" of collusion with the Trump campaign.

But the investigation by the FBI, the NSA and the CIA continues. The Senate and House intelligence committees also are conducting investigations.

Aaron Blake, Greg Jaffe, Robert Costa, Sari Horwitz, Greg Miller and Matt Zapotosky contributed to this report.

The New York Times A Conspiracy Theory's Journey From Talk Radio to Trump's Twitter (UNE)

Peter Baker and Maggie Haberman

But in shifting the story, Mr. Trump also kept the Russia investigation front and center, rather than his initiatives on health care, taxes or jobs. His first address to Congress, which won him plaudits for being presidential, was last week but now feels ages ago. Even some Republicans pointed out that if an eavesdropping warrant had been approved, it would mean that a judge was convinced that someone in Mr. Trump's circle might have committed a crime or acted as a foreign agent.

"I'm very worried that our president is suggesting that the former president has done something illegally," Senator Lindsey Graham, Republican of South Carolina, told the audience at a town hall-style meeting in his home state over the weekend. At the same time, he said, "I would be very worried if, in fact, the Obama administration was able to obtain a warrant lawfully about Trump campaign activity with a foreign government."

This was hardly the first time Mr. Trump made a shocking accusation without evidence. He claimed that more than three million people voted against him illegally in November, giving Hillary Clinton a victory in the popular vote. Republican and Democratic officials alike said there was no indication of any such thing, and Mr. Trump's promised investigation has so far led nowhere.

Nor was it the first time Mr. Trump leveled astonishing allegations against Mr. Obama. He spent years promoting the false claim that Mr. Obama was not born in the United States, promising an investigation to uncover the truth and backing down only last year, during his campaign.

And last summer, he asserted that Mr. Obama was "the founder of ISIS."

The White House remained firm on Sunday even after Mr. Obama's office denied ordering a wiretap and James R. Clapper Jr., the former director of national intelligence, said on NBC's "Meet the Press" that there had been no wiretapping of Mr. Trump or his campaign. James B. Comey, the F.B.I. director, privately asked the Justice Department to issue a statement that Mr. Trump's claim was false, senior officials said, but the department had not done so as of Sunday evening.

"Everybody acts like President Trump is the one that came up with this idea and just threw it out there," Sarah Huckabee Sanders, a White House spokeswoman, said on "This Week" on ABC News. "There are multiple news outlets that have reported this. And all we're asking is that we get the same level of look into the Obama administration and the potential that they had for a complete abuse of power that they've been claiming that we have done over the last six months."

Ms. Sanders pointed to reports in "multiple outlets," including The New York Times, as the foundation for the allegation. Mr. Levin, the radio host, likewise read from a series of mainstream news reports during an appearance on "Fox & Friends" on Sunday.

"The evidence is overwhelming," he said. "This is not about President Trump's tweeting. This is about the Obama administration's spying, and the question isn't whether it spied." He added, "The question is who they did spy on, the extent of the spying — that is, the Trump

campaign, the Trump transition, Trump surrogates."

But the news organizations he and Ms. Sanders cited have not reported that Mr. Obama tapped Mr. Trump's phones, as the president claimed on Twitter. The Times has reported that several of Mr. Trump's associates are being investigated for their connections with Russians and that law enforcement agencies have examined intercepted communications. It has not reported that those associates themselves have necessarily been wiretapped, but it has reported surveillance of Russians, which is commonplace.

News outlets have noted that a phone call between Michael T. Flynn, Mr. Trump's first national security adviser, and Russia's ambassador to the United States, Sergey I. Kislyak, was monitored, leading to Mr. Flynn's resignation because his account of the conversation did not match the intercept. It is common for the United States to monitor the communications of Russia's ambassador.

The Times also reported that before leaving office, Obama officials tried to spread information about Russian meddling in the election and possible links between Russia and Trump associates, in order to leave a trail for government investigators.

Some Republicans suggested that Mr. Trump might have extrapolated that into an unfounded assertion. "I think the president was not correct, certainly, in saying that President Obama ordered a tap on a server in Trump Tower," former Attorney General Michael B. Mukasey said on "This Week." "However, I think he's right in that there was surveillance and that it was conducted at the behest of the

attorney — of the Justice Department," through the special court that authorizes eavesdropping on suspected foreign agents inside the United States.

Conservative radio hosts like Mr. Levin and Rush Limbaugh have focused on Mr. Obama's "tactics" for a while. But it was not until Breitbart published its story that the specific claims crossed Mr. Trump's desk.

Mr. Trump's aides — including Mr. Bannon, an anti-establishment figure who has long questioned the motives of parts of the extensive intelligence bureaucracy — have believed for a long time that the Obama administration colluded with federal investigators who were searching for activity between Russian officials and the Trump campaign surrounding the hacking of Democratic National Committee emails.

They have never offered evidence, but Mr. Trump has long dabbled in conspiracy theories. So when Mr. Trump became aware of the claims in the Breitbart article, aides said, they were appealing to him. It was not immediately clear if someone printed the article out for him or if it was part of a collection of Twitter posts and news articles that his aides present to him each day. But it resonated.

Aides say Mr. Trump went into Friday in a foul mood. He had not known ahead of time that Mr. Sessions planned to recuse himself and never thought he should, even after Mr. Sessions acknowledged that he had talked to Mr. Kislyak despite suggesting otherwise in his Senate confirmation hearing.

Mr. Trump told some advisers that he thought Mr. Sessions had fumbled his answer at that hearing.

But on Friday morning in an angry session in the Oval Office, the president railed at aides about the refusal, singling out the White House counsel's office and the communications staff in a tirade visible through the window to a nearby television camera.

Still upset after arriving at Mar-a-Lago, his estate in Palm Beach, Fla., Mr. Trump woke up Saturday morning and began posting on Twitter at 6:26 a.m. In a burst of six messages, he tried to turn the tables by noting that members of

the Obama administration also met with Russia's ambassador. Without citing a source, he asserted that Mr. Obama had tapped his phones, and compared it to Watergate. "Bad (or sick) guy," the president wrote.

While the political world erupted over the allegation, Mr. Trump was adamant in conversations throughout the day that he was on to something. His chief strategist, Mr. Bannon, the former Breitbart chairman, flew down to Florida with Donald F. McGahn II, the White House counsel, on Saturday.

Late Saturday morning, Mr. Trump's aides spoke about how to get him to stop posting on Twitter, to avoid opening himself up to further problems. He golfed a little, then returned to the club and began working the phones. At dinner, he roamed the patio, telling a friend, Chris Ruddy, the chief executive of Newsmax Media, that his claims about Mr. Obama would prove true. By Sunday, advisers said, he was fuming that more people were not defending him.

And so he doubled down, calling for a congressional investigation.

"Reports concerning potentially politically motivated investigations immediately ahead of the 2016 election are very troubling," Mr. Trump's press secretary, Sean Spicer, said on Twitter. Until then, he said, the president will not comment further.



James Comey, D.C. Unicorn, Shoots Down Trump Wiretap Claim

Michael Daly

The FBI director—a rare man in the capital who does what he thinks is right—asked the Justice Department to publicly dismiss the president's claim that Obama tapped his phones.

James Comey is a unicorn.

So says a longtime senior law enforcement official who describes the FBI director as a rarer than rare creature in the nation's capital. Comey, the official tells *The Daily Beast*, is a person who says and does exactly what he believes is right even if it is to his political disadvantage.

"That is the FBI director's big problem," the official figures. "In a town where almost nothing is on the level, no one knows what to make of a straight shooter."

The official—who offered *The Daily Beast* his opinions in writing and in an interview and prefers not to be named—adds: "This is why Comey has almost always been misread in Washington. People have wasted enormous amounts of time trying to determine his hidden motives. It is because they so rarely see the man whose only motive is anything but hidden: To do the right thing. And no wonder they have trouble understanding it. It is Washington, where they have rarely, if ever, seen it before."

Most recently, this unicorn asked the Justice Department to publicly dismiss President Trump's claim that his phones were tapped on orders from President Obama.

In making the accusation, Trump was in effect accusing FBI agents as well as Obama of a felony.

In asking for the Justice Department to reject the charge, Comey was in effect calling Trump a liar, albeit not publicly—yet, anyway.

The longtime law enforcement official suggests that Comey's sole

calculation is, "What are my obligations as an FBI director?"

The official adds, "Agenda; he does not have one. Never has."

The official notes that Comey has worked for Republicans in the Bush administration and for Democrats in the Obama administration, and remained a unicorn with both.

"Because he has always ignored politics when it comes to the law, he has annoyed his masters in both parties," the official says.

Just consider what followed in 2003, after folks in the Bush administration leaked that Valerie Plame had been an undercover CIA case officer. The Bush people had apparently been seeking to punish her husband through her and muffle his talk about bad intelligence on the supposed WMDs that were used to justify going into Iraq.

Just as our present attorney general, Jeff Sessions, has recused himself from the investigation into the Russians and the Trump campaign, then-Attorney General John Ashcroft recused himself from the Plame investigation.

That left Ashcroft's then deputy attorney general, Comey, in charge. Comey decided the matter would be best handled by a special prosecutor, which might have been fine with the Bush people if he had appointed one of the politically connected lawyers who are usually named in such circumstances.

Comey instead chose the Midwest equivalent of a unicorn, the incorruptible, apolitical, and unrelentingly determined Chicago U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald. The result was that Vice President Dick Cheney's deputy chief of staff, Scooter Libby, was convicted of perjury and obstruction of justice.

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In 2004, the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel came to question the legality of a warrantless wiretapping program called Stellar Wind that Bush had instituted after 9/11. Ashcroft had made his legal reservations known shortly before the attorney general suddenly fell ill and was rushed to George Washington Hospital for surgery. Comey became the acting attorney general, and the White House sought to get him to approve the program as a deadline for recertification neared. He declined.

On the eve of the deadline, Comey was driving home with his security detail when he got a phone call from Ashcroft's chief of staff, David Ayres. Ashcroft's wife had just called Ayres to say a delegation from the White House was heading for the hospital.

Comey had the detail wheel about and head for the hospital with lights and sirens. He arrived soon after and, rather than wait for an elevator, hit the stairs.

"I was concerned that, given how ill I knew the attorney general was, that there might be an effort to ask him to overrule me when he was in no condition to do that," Comey would testify before Congress.

A White House delegation that included Bush chief of staff Andrew Card arrived minutes later and sought to get Ashcroft to sign the necessary papers.

"I was angry," Comey would testify. "I thought I just witnessed an effort to take advantage of a very sick man, who did not have the powers of the attorney general because they had been transferred to me."

Ashcroft then roused himself.

"He lifted his head off the pillow and in very strong terms expressed his view of the matter, rich in both substance and fact, which stunned me," Comey testified.

By Comey's account, Ashcroft added, "But that doesn't matter, because I'm not the attorney general. There is the attorney general."

Ashcroft pointed to Comey, who was then told by Card that he was expected to attend a meeting at the White House later that night. Comey said he would come only if he could bring along then-Solicitor General Theodore Olson.

"After the conduct I had just witnessed, I would not meet with [Card] without a witness present," Comey testified. "He replied, 'What conduct? We were just there to wish [Ashcroft] well.'"

The following day, terrorists bombed commuter trains in Madrid, killing more than 200 innocents. The White House went ahead with the warrantless wiretapping absent Justice Department approval. Comey prepared a letter of resignation.

"I couldn't stay if the administration was going to engage in conduct that the Department of Justice had said had no legal basis," he later said. "I just simply couldn't stay."

Ayres asked Comey to hold off until Ashcroft was well enough to resign with him. Comey agreed. Bush met with Comey and with then-FBI Director Robert Mueller, who can be pretty unicorn-ish himself. Comey and Mueller agreed that they would both resign unless Bush consented to having all such surveillance approved by a panel of judges from the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court. Bush blinked.

In the summer of 2005, the unicorn left Washington.

"Comedy's choice of a pitbull, Fitzgerald, to investigate the White House leaks on Plame, then taking on the White House's signature post-9/11 surveillance program, caused Comey to be looked on by some in Bush's inner circle as one who was too much of a straight arrow to be trusted in brittle political

situations," the longtime law enforcement official says.

In 2013, Comey was appointed to succeed Mueller as FBI director. The Obama administration figured this was one nomination it could get through the Senate without much trouble. The Republicans liked that Comey had previously been a Bush appointee. The Democrats liked that he had stood up to the Bush folks at the hospital that night.

Then came the 2016 election.

"Even people who understand [Comey's] history are confounded by the events surrounding the election," the longtime law enforcement official says. "Most of the confusion comes from trying to sort out all the various ulterior motives ascribed to Comey. The reason those calculations never add up correctly is because Comey's history tells us his motives have never been ulterior. Looking at Comey analytically, the most controversial things he's done, when viewed politically, are so often against his own interests."

The official adds, "For Comey, that has simply been the price of playing by the rules in a town where a major pastime is playing with the rules. That leads us to the Clinton matter."

At the insistence of Republicans in Congress, the FBI investigated whether former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had broken the law when she used her personal email to conduct government business that sometimes involved classified material. Comey found that Clinton had been reprehensively reckless, but he could discern no criminal intent.

"To career prosecutors at the Justice Department and to the FBI director, it did not appear that Clinton's email practices would sustain a criminal conviction of either Hillary Clinton or any of her aides," the longtime law enforcement official says.

The official also says, "He knows the case is a loser."

Days before Comey was going to refer the results of the investigation to the Justice Department, planes bearing Attorney General Loretta Lynch and former President Bill Clinton both happened to be at the Phoenix airport. Clinton strode across the tarmac and boarded Lynch's plane for a little chat.

"I did see President Clinton at the Phoenix airport as he was leaving and spoke to myself and my husband on the plane," Lynch said afterward. "Our conversation was a great deal about grandchildren, it was primarily social about our

travels, and he mentioned golf he played in Phoenix."

Lynch recused herself, but Comey was still in what he viewed as an untenable position.

"Any announcement from Lynch's Department of Justice was going to look, well, political," the longtime senior law enforcement official says.

The official figures that Comey had two choices.

"Between catastrophic and really, really bad," the official says.

The usual protocol called for Comey to refer his findings to the Justice Department and let it make the prosecutorial determination. Comey decided that circumstances required him to go public. He proceeded to do so.

"Without asking anybody," notes the longtime law enforcement official.

Comey announced that he was referring the case with a recommendation that no criminal charges were warranted.

"He didn't have to do that, but he felt that with all the political spin, people might have more confidence in a judgment by the independent FBI than they might in Obama's Justice Department," the longtime law enforcement official says. "Once again, Comey was willing to take the heat for doing what he believed was the right thing."

Even some veteran FBI agents who had been among Comey's greatest admirers since his days as a junior prosecutor in New York felt he had made a mistake in deciding not to charge Hillary Clinton. Republicans in Congress demanded that he come in and explain himself.

Usually, Congress is not empowered to query law enforcement officials about criminal investigations. The exception is when national security might be at stake. Comey briefed the intelligence oversight committees in the House and the Senate.

"Comey repeated for Congress his rationale to close the case," the longtime law enforcement official says. "The last thing Congress demanded of Comey was that if there was any change in the Clinton matter, that they be notified."

A change nobody could have foreseen came when the NYPD began investigating former New York congressman Anthony Weiner for allegedly engaging in inappropriate conduct online with an underage girl.

When examining the contents of Weiner's laptop, the FBI discovered

that his wife, Huma Abedin, had also used the computer and that it contained thousands of emails involving Clinton.

"The FBI had to review the new emails to determine if they contained new evidence that would change their original judgment on the Clinton case," the longtime law enforcement official says. "In ordering this investigation to go forward, Comey had to know he would face more criticism for reopening a case that had already become an investigative Pandora's box."

The longtime law enforcement official figures that Comey now faced three choices, all of them bad:

"Reopen the case and take even more heat, leave the matter alone, because the case was closed, or a third choice some Democratic critics of Comey have suggested: Wait until after the election," the official says.

The official goes on: "One must ask, what would have happened if Clinton had been elected and the FBI then reopened a criminal investigation? What would have happened if that investigation resulted in a prosecution targeting the sitting president of the United States? Especially when the FBI had access to that evidence before the election? Comey would certainly, and rightly so, be accused of covering up evidence before the election that then resulted in a constitutional crisis."

The official says Comey's next move should not have been a surprise.

"Comey did what anyone who studied him could have told you he would do," the official says. "Of the bad options he had to choose from, he picked the one that would cause himself the most discomfort in every place but his conscience."

Comey reopened the case. And he felt obligated to make good on his parting pledge to the congressional committees to let them know if anything changed.

"He didn't announce it," the longtime law enforcement official says. "He had testified under oath to Democrats and Republicans on the congressional intelligence committee that the Clinton matter was closed. Comey felt an obligation to tell them that new, potentially relevant material had surfaced. He wrote a sparsely worded letter to the committee chairs indicating that more emails had been found and the FBI had to be review them. The politicians

leaked it, and then yelled at Comey for the leaks."

FBI agents worked around the clock to make a determination before the election.

"They found nothing that changed the opinion of career prosecutors at the Department of Justice or FBI director's original conclusion," the longtime law enforcement official says.

Democrats had praised Comey when he initially closed the case, just as Republicans had condemned him. Republicans now praised him for reopening it, just as Democrats now condemned him.

"During the months the Clinton case took, Comey had been accused of having Jekyll and Hyde-like political motives that were so in conflict with each other, anyone without a dog in the fight could tell his motives were anything but political," the longtime law enforcement official says.

The official goes on, "Remember, Comey was the one who would not benefit from either outcome of the election. Comey is the FBI director. He was three years into a 10-year term. He had seven years left no matter who got elected."

As if that were all not enough, Comey now had to pursue a major investigation into what seems to have been a Russian effort to influence the election.

For a third time, Comey has a case that triggered a recusal by the attorney general.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions's decision to do so is said to have sent Trump into a rage. Trump then flew off to Florida, and, in an early morning hour when he was apparently left unattended, he repeatedly tweeted accusations that he had been wiretapped during the lead-up to the election on orders from Obama.

Trump was intimating that both Obama and the FBI were guilty of a crime. And illegal wiretapping was what Comey and Mueller and Ashcroft had been prepared to resign over during the Bush years.

Comey responded just as a unicorn might. Trump responded just as Trump might, calling for an investigation into the supposed Obama wiretapping.

If Trump will continue to be Trump in the days ahead, then at least we can be sure that Comey will continue to be exactly Comey, our nation's capital's only unicorn.

Fund : Trump's Wiretap Tweet -- GOP, Caught Unprepared, Needs a Team Leader, Not a Lone Ranger

Donald Trump's accusation that the Obama administration conducted an investigation, including wiretapping, against his campaign has reignited the debate about his, ahem, unorthodox way of counterpunching against opponents.

Liberals are convinced that Trump is acting like a sinister Darth Vader character by using distraction to cover up a huge scandal involving Team Trump's ties to Russia. Mainstream media types view Trump as an impulsive Inspector Clouseau-type character, improvising stories as he goes along. Jake Tapper of CNN tweeted a criticism of Trump's behavior: "POTUS makes wild accusation w/zero evidence... WH tells Congress to find evidence/no further comment."

Trump supporters have fallen back on speculating that the president is like Columbo, the seemingly disorganized TV detective who always traps his quarry at the last minute. Christopher Ruddy, CEO of *Newsmax*, wrote a column on Sunday, describing his recent conversation with Trump:

I spoke with the president twice yesterday about the wiretap story. I haven't seen him this pissed off in a long time. When I mentioned Obama "denials" about the wiretaps, he shot back: "This will be investigated, it will all come out. I will be proven right."

So which character does Trump most resemble? I'm not sure, but I do know that Trump isn't acting like a team leader. By tweeting out his explosive charge early on Saturday morning, he left supporters and allies scratching their heads to figure out what he was talking about. As *Politico* reported:

According to GOP sources, the White House gave no advance notice to congressional Republicans that Trump would be raising the issue of wiretaps this weekend, leaving both sides scrambling to figure out what Trump was referring to and how to respond publicly.

When a Trump aide did surface on Sunday morning, she was so woefully unprepared that it was painful to watch. Trump baldly stated in his tweet that President Obama had had Trump's "wires tapped in Trump Tower just before the victory." When asked about this, White House spokesperson Sarah Huckabee Sanders repeatedly suggested on ABC's *This Week* that Trump's accusation was something that required investigation: "Let's look into this. If this happened, if this is accurate, this is the biggest overreach and the biggest scandal." When further challenged, Huckabee Sanders retreated, saying, "I will let the president speak for himself." At that point, an exasperated Martha Raddatz retorted, "You're his spokesperson!"

It fell to Michael Mukasey, the former attorney general under

George W. Bush, to provide a coherent explanation for Trump's contention. Mukasey started his appearance on *This Week* with an understatement, noting that he doesn't tweet because Twitter isn't the "ideal medium in which to get an idea across." He went on to say that Trump was probably correct that there was surveillance on Trump Tower for intelligence purposes, but incorrect in accusing former president Barack Obama of directly ordering the wiretapping.

Regardless of who is right, wrong, or merely confused on the issue of Trump, Obama, and Russia, the president's behavior is a recipe for exasperation and mistrust among his allies.

"I think he's right in that there was surveillance and that it was conducted at the behest of the attorney general — at the Justice Department," Mukasey said. Such surveillance would have been ordered based on arguments made by the Obama Justice Department to a special panel of federal judges that hear foreign-intelligence cases.

There, finally, was a simple, clear explanation of what Trump was probably talking about and what House Intelligence chairman Devin Nunes, a California Republican, says his panel will be looking into. In a press release Sunday, Nunes said that in addition to examining possible links between Trump

officials and Russia, the House Intelligence Committee will "make inquiries into whether the government was conducting surveillance activities on any political party's campaign officials or surrogates."

None of this explains why President Trump decided to roil official Washington on a weekend with allegations that none of his allies had been given any background on. The White House's silence for over a day certainly added to the chaos.

Regardless of who is right, wrong, or merely confused on the issue of Trump, Obama, and Russia, the president's behavior is a recipe for exasperation and mistrust among his allies. "How in the world can we go out on a limb for a guy who won't tell us in advance that it won't be sawed off," one GOP congressman who was an early backer of Trump told me. "If you head a team, you have to lead it."

If Donald Trump is playing the role of a canny Columbo in checkmating his adversaries, it's not obvious. With his impulsive tweeting, he more closely resembles a high-tech version of stumbling Inspector Clouseau.

— *John Fund is NRO's foreign-affairs correspondent.*

The
Washington
Post

Cillizza : Conspiracy theorist in chief?

Donald Trump's political career was born amid the fever swamps of the far right. He seized on a favorite conspiracy theory bubbling there — that then-President Barack Obama was not, in fact, born in the United States and, therefore, was an illegitimate president — to boost his profile in national politics.

That boost eventually led to his 2016 candidacy. That candidacy led to President Trump. But what never changed is Trump's willingness to actively engage the world of conspiracy theorists.

The latest example came Saturday morning when Trump took to Twitter — where else! — to allege that he was the target of a wiretapping campaign authorized by Obama during the 2016 race.

Typed Trump: "Terrible! Just found out that Obama had my 'wires tapped' in Trump Tower just before

the victory. Nothing found. This is McCarthyism!"

How did he know this, you might ask. When and what government agency told him about the wiretapping, you might ask.

(Bastien Inzaurrealde/The Washington Post)

Former director of national intelligence James R. Clapper Jr. on March 5 denied that President Trump's 2016 campaign was wiretapped while senators of both parties weighed in on the allegations. Former director of national intelligence James R. Clapper Jr. denies that President Trump's 2016 campaign was wiretapped. (Bastien Inzaurrealde/The Washington Post)

The answer appears to be that Trump made the allegations after reading a Breitbart News article on Friday. That article, based heavily

on conservative talk radio host Mark Levin's views, suggested that the Obama administration had conducted a "silent coup" to keep Trump from the presidency. Here's the key paragraph:

"In summary: the Obama administration sought, and eventually obtained, authorization to eavesdrop on the Trump campaign; continued monitoring the Trump team even when no evidence of wrongdoing was found; then relaxed the NSA rules to allow evidence to be shared widely within the government, virtually ensuring that the information, including the conversations of private citizens, would be leaked to the media."

[Fact Checker: Trump's 'evidence' for Obama wiretap claims relies on sketchy, anonymously sourced]

That's not to say that these events couldn't be related somehow. But it is to say that zero factual evidence

has been offered that ties them together.

The White House didn't offer that proof on Sunday, demanding instead that Congress add a search for it to its ongoing investigations into Russia's apparent meddling in the 2016 election. "Reports concerning potentially politically motivated investigations immediately ahead of the 2016 election are very troubling," White House press secretary Sean Spicer said.

The problem for Trump and his White House is that while they were dodging direct requests for proof of his allegations, people in a position to know were flatly denying the claims.

"A cardinal rule of the Obama administration was that no White House official ever interfered with any independent investigation led by the Department of Justice," said

Kevin Lewis, a spokesman for Obama. "As part of that practice, neither President Obama nor any White House official ever ordered surveillance on any U.S. citizen. Any suggestion otherwise is simply false."

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**The
Washington
Post**

President Trump's astonishing and reckless accusation that he was wiretapped on orders from President Barack Obama should finally be the tipping point in how the country views him and his presidency.

Obama, through a spokesman, said the charges were "simply false." On Sunday afternoon, the New York Times reported that FBI Director James Comey had asked the Justice Department to publicly reject Trump's claim. It appears that Trump issued his wild tweet storm Saturday morning largely on the basis of reports in conspiracy-minded right-wing media.

He signaled his lack of evidence first by reportedly pushing his White House staff to ransack sensitive intelligence information to find support for his claim. Then on Sunday, White House press secretary Sean Spicer said Trump wanted Congress to look into the matter and that the administration would offer no further comment.

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Trump has a problem either way. If he was not wiretapped, he invented a spectacularly false charge. And if a court ordered some sort of

address.

[How hard is it to get an intelligence wiretap? Pretty hard.]

Former director of national intelligence James R. Clapper Jr. told NBC's Chuck Todd on Sunday that "there was no such wiretap activity mounted against the president-elect at the time as a candidate or against his campaign," adding that he would "absolutely" have been aware if there had been.

surveillance of him, on what grounds did it do so?

Every time the issue of the relationship between Trump's apparatus and Moscow comes up, he is moved to unleash unhinged counterattacks. This only underscores how urgent it is to get to the bottom of this story quickly.

We need to understand why those in Trump's orbit who engaged with Moscow stick with lies and misdirection until the moment their falsehoods are publicly revealed. The truth has to be dragged out of them by the media, working in concert with those in government (a.k.a. "leakers") who refuse to sit by while the system they serve is endangered.

No wonder Trump hates leakers and the press. With so many Republicans in Congress prepared to abandon everything they said about accountability before Jan. 20, 2017, the main lines of defense against executive abuses have to come from journalists, those who supply them with information, and courageous judges.

The Post's revelation last week that Attorney General Jeff Sessions misled the Senate about his two meetings with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak came after Michael Flynn, Trump's first national security adviser, lied about the nature of his own Russian contacts. Flynn stuck to false claims about his conversations with Kislyak until The

Here's the thing: If you are going to say there is a grand conspiracy that only you and a handful of others see, you need to offer a step-by-step explanation to the broader public to show why you're right.

And that goes double when you have shown a penchant for embracing conspiracy theories — Obama wasn't born in the United States, Sen. Ted Cruz's father was involved in the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Muslims were

Post and other media blew them out of the water. Flynn had to resign.

Sessions's convenient memory lapse ("I didn't have — did not have communications with the Russians") was especially jarring because it came after an inquiry from Sen. Al Franken in which the Minnesota Democrat *did not even ask Sessions whether he met with Russians*.

Franken's query ended this way: "... 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?"

Why did Sessions think he had to respond to a question that wasn't even posed?

And during his news conference announcing his recusal from investigations into the Russia connection — Trump, by the way, was enraged because he didn't want Sessions to pull back — the attorney general remembered many things Kislyak had said, but used the phrase "I don't recall" five times about various other aspects of the encounters.

The Sessions moment was followed by the confirmation of previously undisclosed meetings with Kislyak, one involving Flynn and Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, another with campaign advisers Carter Page and J.D. Gordon.

The crucial issue is how all this affects our national security. But this

cheering on rooftops in New Jersey after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, and so on and so forth.

The ball is in Trump's court. Short of convincing evidence to back up the wiretapping claims, the conspiracy-theory candidate will have transformed into the conspiracy-theory president.

saga also reminds us that a crowd claiming to place "America First" does not really believe its own slogan. They place only about half of America first, the part that opposed Obama and supported Trump. When it comes to the other half, they feel only contempt.

This is why Russian interference in our democracy appears to matter far less to Trump than saving his own skin. It's also why he could compare Obama unfavorably to a foreign autocrat during the 2016 campaign. He said Vladimir Putin had been "a better leader than Obama because Obama's not a leader" and ominously praised Putin for having "very strong control over a country." What do such statements have to do with American patriotism as we have traditionally understood it? And now Trump has accused Obama of violating the law.

Trump seems to assume that the truth doesn't matter anymore, that a leader just needs enough voters to believe the "alternative facts" his side invents.

If there is any good news here, it's this: Alternative facts can take you only so far. A president can't just make up charges against his predecessor, call him a "bad (or sick) guy," and then get away with it.

Can he?

**The
New York
Times**

Let's begin with what the public can know for certain. President Trump had no evidence on Saturday morning when he smeared his predecessor, President Barack Obama, accusing him of ordering that Trump Tower phones be tapped during the 2016 campaign. Otherwise, the White House would not be scrambling to find out if what he said is true.

Editorial : When One President Smears Another

Just contemplate the recklessness — the sheer indifference to truth and the moral authority of the American presidency — revealed here: one president baselessly charging criminality by another, all in a childish Twitter rampage.

The Times reported on Sunday that the F.B.I. director, James Comey, was so alarmed by Mr. Trump's fact-free claim — which implicitly accused the F.B.I. of breaking the

law by wiretapping an American citizen at a president's behest — that he was asking the Justice Department to publicly call it false. In other words, the F.B.I. director was demanding that Justice officially declare the president to be misleading the public.

This is a dangerous moment, which requires Congress and members of this administration to look beyond

partisan maneuvering and tend to the health of the democracy itself.

In four tweets, capped by one about Arnold Schwarzenegger's "pathetic" ratings on *Celebrity Apprentice*, Mr. Trump declared as fact a theory he apparently encountered on alt-right websites: "How low has President Obama gone to tapp [sic] my phones during the very sacred election process. This is

Nixon/Watergate. Bad (or sick) guy!"

Mr. Obama issued a statement saying that neither he "nor any White House official ever ordered surveillance on any U.S. citizen." James Clapper, the former director of national intelligence, denied on Sunday that the government had wiretapped Trump Tower before the election, and said he had no knowledge of any effort to do so before Mr. Obama left office.

The background for Mr. Trump's outburst is, of course, the F.B.I.'s investigation of his inner circle's contacts with Russian intelligence. It would be highly unusual for a president to be privy to details of a

law enforcement investigation targeting his associates, let alone targeting him. If the inquiry is primarily a counterespionage investigation, however, he might properly have been briefed on it. Not much is known about this inquiry. The mere fact that a new administration is being investigated for potentially colluding with Moscow is uncharted territory.

Mr. Trump is now trying to bootstrap his claims into a congressional investigation of the Obama administration. On Sunday Sean Spicer, his press secretary, issued a statement demanding that congressional intelligence committees, led by Republicans friendly toward Mr. Trump,

"determine whether executive branch investigative powers were abused in 2016." Representative Devin Nunes, chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and a member of Mr. Trump's transition team, quickly made clear he intended to do the president's bidding.

Congressional leaders need to act more forthrightly than that to safeguard public confidence in government. By alleging potential criminality in the nation's highest office, Mr. Trump has tweeted himself into a corner. His accusation is so sensational — so explosive if it turned out to have some basis in fact and so corrosive if not — that

Congress has no credible option but to convene a bipartisan select committee to investigate all questions related to Russian interference in the election. And if Mr. Trump has confidence in his claim, he should have no reluctance about the appointment of an independent counsel to get to the bottom of the Russia affair.

As for those senior officials of this administration who have integrity: It is past time for them to begin asking themselves if they can continue lending their names and exposing their reputations to a president with so little regard for democratic institutions, and for the truth.

**The
Washington
Post**

Gun sales have dropped since Trump's election, except among people scared of his administration (UNE)

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

BOSSIER CITY, La. — Sales of guns and ammunition in the United States have dropped precipitously since Election Day, according to FBI statistics, trade groups, gun shop owners and corporate reports, what many say is the result of electing a president who has vowed to protect gun rights.

But that overall decline has been accompanied by some unusual growth: Gun clubs and shops that cater to black and LGBT clients say there has been an uptick in interest in firearms since November among those who fear that racial and gender-based violence could increase during Donald Trump's presidency.

The slowdown in gun purchases, which came at the end of a record sales year, is due in part to promises that Trump and the Republican Congress made to expand gun rights. Firearms enthusiasts and salesmen said Trump's victory removed the sense of urgency to buy that some felt under President Barack Obama, who tried to ban the sale of assault-style weapons.

[Senior ATF official proposes loosening gun regulations]

At Ron's Guns here, along the Red River in the northwest corner of Louisiana, owner Gene Mock stocked up on inventory, anticipating that Democrat Hillary Clinton would win the presidency and continue the push for an assault weapons ban. Sales the week before the election were among the most brisk the shop had ever seen.

But now that Trump, who has the full backing of the National Rifle Association, is president, fewer customers are buying, and there is a glut of product.

"There will be a lot of deals to be had in the near future," Mock said.

But Philip Smith, president of the National African American Gun Association, said his group has seen a recent surge that appears to be driven by fear that the nation's divisive politics could spiral into violence.

"Trump is some of that reason, and rhetoric from other groups that have been on the fringe," Smith said. "It's like being racist is cool now."

Smith said the group has added more than 7,000 members since Election Day and new chapters are popping up all over the country. They include one in Bowie, Md., that started last month and already has 55 members.

"People are scared and rightfully so," said Stephen Yorkman, who founded the Maryland chapter. "They feel better if they at least learn how to shoot a firearm or own one."

Nationwide, overall gun sales are trending downward after record highs during the Obama administration. According to the FBI, background checks, which are conducted at the request of licensed firearm dealers and retailers when they make sales, dropped from 3.3 million in December 2015 to 2.8 million in December 2016. In January 2017, there were 2 million background checks performed, compared with 2.5 million in January 2016.

[Gun silencers are hard to buy. Donald Trump Jr. and silencer makers want to change that]

Gun manufacturer stocks also have dipped, with shares of Sturm, Ruger & Co., tumbling nearly 24 percent since Nov. 8, and American Outdoor Brand — the renamed Smith & Wesson — dropping 32 percent. Vista Outdoors, which includes Savage firearms and two ammunition lines, saw its share price sink by 50 percent since January, according to Rommel Dionisio, a managing director for the private equity firm Wunderlich.

Sales of the semiautomatic sporting rifles that Obama and Clinton wanted to ban have slowed the most since the election, said Larry Keane, senior vice president and general counsel of the Shooting Sports Foundation, which represents gun manufacturers.

In an earnings call last month, Christopher Killoy, the president and chief operating officer of Sturm, Ruger & Co., said sales of these guns peaked before the election, leading retailers to stock products "which likely would've been in stronger demand if the election had turned out differently." Now the surplus and decreased customer demand "has made for a more challenging sell-through environment," he said.

Keane said the industry is used to seeing spikes in demand based on political rhetoric, both nationally and on the state level. Slowdowns typically occur after the holidays, he said, and sales were so brisk in 2016 that the industry did not think they were sustainable.

"Yes, we're coming off the peaks in demand, but the valley floor is higher," he said.

Trump, who once praised Obama's appeal for gun control in the wake of the Newtown, Conn., school massacre in 2012 and supported a ban on assault weapons, has rapidly transformed into a pro-gun advocate.

Trump has a concealed carry permit in New York and during the campaign called for making the permits applicable nationwide. He also has suggested abolishing gun and magazine bans and vowed to appoint pro-gun justices to the U.S. Supreme Court, calling the Second Amendment "under absolute siege." In February he repealed an Obama-era measure to bar gun sales to certain mentally ill people.

At the TargetMaster gun store and shooting range in Garland, Tex., shop owner Tom Mannewitz stood behind wood-framed glass counters displaying handguns. A wooden plaque reading "GOD BLESS TEXAS" and trophy animals adorned the walls.

Mannewitz is glad Obama is out of office but acknowledges that the Democrat was great for business: The store recorded 8 percent growth last year and sold record amounts of AR-15s during his presidency. The numbers bear his perceptions out: In October 2008, the month before Obama's election, the FBI processed 1.2 million background checks. In November, the FBI performed 2.6 million background checks.

Ahead of a possible Clinton win and an expected "panic buy" wave, Mannewitz prepared for customers rushing to stores and emptying shelves for items that had the potential to fall under a possible ban: AR-15s, high-capacity magazines and large quantities of

ammunition. It never came, and the extra six-month supply of ammunition that he had amassed — hoping to sell it all in 60 days — is still sitting on his shelves.

Mannewitz, who has sold firearms since 1979, has ridden out dips in the gun market before and thinks that demand will soften but not stop.

"In bad times, when people are fearful of their safety, they buy guns," he said. "In good times, they buy nicer guns."

In Cleveland, gun dealer Kevin Jones is seeing the opposite: Trump has been better for sales than Obama, an increase driven by people who want to protect themselves from potential violence.

"A lot of people are afraid of this administration and afraid of what this kind of started," he said. "Whether it's perceived or true, a lot of people feel that there's a lot more racially oriented violence out there right now."

Jones said that after the election he got into a racially charged altercation for the first time in years. He was driving and had to move to another lane when another driver did the same. Jones said the other driver, an older white man, leaned out of his car and started shouting racial epithets. He followed Jones for about a mile, shouting the n-word.

The men got out of their cars and Jones drew his firearm, keeping it by his side. The situation de-escalated, but Jones felt safer carrying a gun.

"To be honest, at that point I was thankful that I did have my firearm with me," he said.

Jan Morgan tapped her hot pink nails on the black holster carrying her 9mm Heckler & Koch sidearm and said she also thinks Trump will be good for business, but for a very different reason.

Morgan owns a shooting range in Hot Springs, Ark., and believes her private firearms instructions classes are packed every weekend because Americans are concerned about the possibility of terrorist attacks on home soil. Morgan is particularly suspicious of criminally minded refugees. She declared her shooting range a "Muslim-free zone" a few years ago, which made her a viral sensation on conservative websites and also brought her to the attention of the FBI's counterterrorism unit, which said she had been declared a "target of opportunity" by the Islamic State.

[Let's check in with the 'Muslim-free' gun range in Arkansas]

For Gwendolyn Patton, Trump's victory has her caught in the middle: Some members of her LGBT shooting organization, the Pink

Pistols, are thrilled to have a gun-friendly president. But many new members are terrified that Trump will roll back gay rights and feel they must learn how to defend themselves.

"Suddenly they're buying guns," she said. "The rhetoric has flipped."

Patton said her organization saw an uptick in membership last year after a gunman killed 49 people in an Orlando gay nightclub. Interest also boomed after the election, and new chapters are opening.

"One side didn't perceive despotism under Obama and they do under Trump," Patton said, noting that there is "this new contingent of LGBT people who have decided that they have been mugged by the election."

Yorkman and Brown said they have seen the biggest rise in interest from black women. According to a 2014 survey from the Pew Research Center, 19 percent of black households surveyed said they have a gun, rifle or pistol in their home, compared with 15 percent the year before.

But some black gun owners are concerned about the safety of owning a gun, pointing to the death of Philando Castile. Castile, who was licensed to carry a gun, was shot and killed during a traffic stop in Minnesota last year despite

telling the officer he had the proper permitting. The killing was broadcast on Facebook Live, and the officer who shot Castile was charged with manslaughter.

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[He didn't die for no reason: Philando Castile's sister recalls conversation before death]

Yorkman said he wants to change the stigma that people have when they see black people carrying guns. He also wants to let his community know that they have the right to defend themselves, particularly in this political climate.

"They have a concern with what's going on nationally when they see certain groups feeling more energized now to spew hate," he said. "You have young mothers with their kids who want to be comfortable with any environment that they're in."

Shapiro reported from Texas, Louisiana and Arkansas. Zezima reported from Washington. Ann E. Marimow in Washington contributed to this report.

The New York Times

Danny Hakim

Bold Promises Fade to Doubts for a Trump-Linked Data Firm (UNE)

Nicholas Confessore and

Cambridge Analytica's rise has rattled some of President Trump's critics and privacy advocates, who warn of a blizzard of high-tech, Facebook-optimized propaganda aimed at the American public, controlled by the people behind the alt-right hub Breitbart News. Cambridge is principally owned by the billionaire Robert Mercer, a Trump backer and investor in Breitbart. Stephen K. Bannon, the former Breitbart chairman who is Mr. Trump's senior White House counselor, served until last summer as vice president of Cambridge's board.

But a dozen Republican consultants and former Trump campaign aides, along with current and former Cambridge employees, say the company's ability to exploit personality profiles — "our secret sauce," Mr. Nix once called it — is exaggerated.

Cambridge executives now concede that the company never used psychographics in the Trump campaign. The technology —

prominently featured in the firm's sales materials and in media reports that cast Cambridge as a master of the dark campaign arts — remains unproved, according to former employees and Republicans familiar with the firm's work.

"They've got a lot of really smart people," said Brent Seaborn, managing partner of TargetPoint, a rival business that also provided voter data to the Trump campaign. "But it's not as easy as it looks to transition from being excellent at one thing and bringing it into politics. I think there's a big question about whether we think psychographic profiling even works."

At stake are not merely bragging rights, but also an emerging science that many believe could reshape American politics and commerce. Big data companies already know your age, income, favorite cereal and when you last voted. But the company that can perfect psychological targeting could offer far more potent tools: the ability to manipulate behavior by understanding how someone thinks and what he or she fears.

A voter deemed neurotic might be shown a gun-rights commercial featuring burglars breaking into a home, rather than a defense of the Second Amendment; political ads warning of the dangers posed by the Islamic State could be targeted directly at voters prone to anxiety, rather than wasted on those identified as optimistic.

"You can do things that you would not have dreamt of before," said Alexander Polonsky, chief data scientist at Bloom, a consulting firm that offers "emotion analysis" of social networks and has worked with the center-right Republican Party in France.

"It goes beyond sharing information," he added. "It's sharing the thinking and the feeling behind this information, and that's extremely powerful."

Both conservatives and liberals are eager to harness that power. In Washington, some Democratic operatives are scrambling to develop personality-profiling capabilities of their own. But even as Cambridge seeks to expand its business among conservative groups, questions about its

performance have soured many Republicans in Mr. Trump's orbit.

Cambridge is no longer in contention to work for Mr. Trump at the Republican National Committee, a company spokesman confirmed, nor is it working for America First Policies, a new nonprofit formed to help advance the president's agenda.

In recent months, the value of Cambridge's technology has been debated by technology experts and in some media accounts. But Cambridge officials, in recent interviews, defended the company's record during the 2016 election, saying its data analysis helped Mr. Trump energize critical support in the Rust Belt. Mr. Nix said the firm had conducted tens of thousands of polls for Mr. Trump, helping guide his message and identify issues that mattered to voters.

But when asked to name a single race where the firm's flagship product had been critical to victory, Mr. Nix declined.

"We bake a cake, it's got 10 ingredients in it. Psychographics is one of them," he said. "It's very

difficult to isolate exactly what the impact of that ingredient is.”

Drawn to America

Cambridge's parent company, the London-based Strategic Communication Laboratories Group, has a long record of trying to understand and influence behavior. Founded in 1993 by a former British adman, the firm has worked for companies and candidates around the world, as well as for government and military clients. SCL has studied Pakistani jihadists for the British government and provided intelligence assessments for American defense contractors in Iran, Libya and Syria, according to company documents obtained by The New York Times.

“Their approach was seen as serious and focused,” said Mark Laity, chief of strategic communications at NATO's military headquarters in Europe, who has taken part in NATO-affiliated conferences where SCL has made presentations.

In recent years, the company has moved to exploit the revolution in big data to predict human behavior more precisely, working with scientists from the Cambridge University Psychometrics Center. The United States represented a critical new market. Europe has strict privacy protections that limit the use of personal information, but America is more lightly regulated, allowing the sale of huge troves of consumer data to any company or candidate who can afford them.

In 2013, Cambridge Analytica was created as SCL's American operation, and the two companies today share many of their roughly 200 employees, several top executives, and offices in New York and Washington.

To develop its profiling system, Cambridge conducts detailed psychological surveys — by phone and online — of tens of thousands of people, differentiating them by five traits, a model widely used by behavioral researchers.

Uniquely, the company claims to be able to extrapolate those findings to millions of other people it has not surveyed, assigning them one of 32 distinct personality types. Cambridge then blends those profiles with commercial data and voting histories, revealing “hidden voter trends and behavioral triggers,” according to a 2016 company brochure.

Those profiles, in turn, would allow campaigns to customize advertising, direct-mail slogans and door-knocking scripts, each calibrated to prod the targeted voter

toward — or away from — a candidate.

The promise of psychometrics appealed to Mr. Mercer, a computer scientist who made a fortune helping to lead Renaissance Technologies, a Long Island-based hedge fund. Mr. Mercer and his daughter Rebekah presided over a growing political empire that included millions of dollars in contributions to conservative groups and a stake in Breitbart, whose nationalist and racially antagonistic content prefigured Mr. Trump's presidential campaign.

Mr. Mercer became Cambridge's principal investor, according to two former employees. (Like several others interviewed for this article, they spoke on the condition of anonymity, citing nondisclosure agreements and the threat of lawsuits.) Mr. Bannon, the family's political guru, also advised the company and served as vice president of its board, according to Delaware public records.

Mr. Mercer has never spoken publicly about his policy views in depth, but his giving is eclectic: He has financed anti-Clinton documentaries, right-wing media watchdogs, libertarian think tanks and both Senator Ted Cruz, a religious conservative, and Mr. Trump, a thrice-married nationalist.

“The genius here is Bob, and the billionaire in this is Bob, and the person with the extreme views of how the world should be is Bob,” said David Magerman, a Renaissance research scientist who was recently suspended after criticizing his boss's support for Mr. Trump.

In the run-up to the 2014 elections, Breitbart, under Mr. Bannon, set up a London office and made common cause with populist conservatives in Europe. But back in the United States, Cambridge was at first slow to land big accounts. It was rebuffed by the political network overseen by the billionaire conservative brothers Charles G. and David H. Koch, to which the Mercers were major donors. Federal Election Commission records show that the firm had nine clients in House and Senate races that year, among them three “super PACs” partly financed by Mr. Mercer.

As the 2016 presidential campaign began, however, Cambridge landed a marquee political client: Mr. Cruz, the Texas senator. Mr. Mercer seeded a super PAC with \$11 million to support him.

Cambridge had a talented salesman in Mr. Nix, an Eton-educated SCL director chosen to lead the American effort. Among colleagues,

his skills at cajoling clients are legendary. At an office party at a London dog track in the summer of 2015, one young employee offered an affectionate toast.

“He is so smooth he'll rub shoulders with politicians and their campaigns,” the employee joked, according to a video of the event posted on YouTube, “and, in their face, tell them he's going to rip them off.”

‘Not About Tricking People’

But Cambridge's psychographic models proved unreliable in the Cruz presidential campaign, according to Rick Tyler, a former Cruz aide, and another consultant involved in the campaign. In one early test, more than half the Oklahoma voters whom Cambridge had identified as Cruz supporters actually favored other candidates. The campaign stopped using Cambridge's data entirely after the South Carolina primary.

“When they were hired, from the outset it didn't strike me that they had a wide breadth of experience in the American political landscape,” Mr. Tyler said.

Ms. Mercer and Mr. Bannon were aggressive advocates for Cambridge. When the campaign disputed a \$2.5 million invoice, they lit into Mr. Cruz's senior campaign team during a conference call, according to the consultant. Cambridge Analytica, Ms. Mercer and Mr. Bannon claimed, was the only thing keeping Mr. Cruz afloat. (The company declined to comment on the exchange, as did a personal spokeswoman for Mr. Bannon and the Mercers.)

After the Cruz campaign flamed out, Mr. Nix persuaded Mr. Trump's digital director, Brad Parscale, to try out the firm. Its data products were considered for Mr. Trump's critical get-out-the-vote operation. But tests showed Cambridge's data and models were slightly less effective than the existing Republican National Committee system, according to three former Trump campaign aides.

Mr. Bannon at one point agreed to expand the company's role, according to the aides, authorizing Cambridge to oversee a \$5 million purchase of television ads. But after some of them appeared on cable channels in Washington, D.C. — hardly an election battleground — Cambridge's involvement in television targeting ended.

In postelection conversations with potential clients, Cambridge has promoted itself as the brains behind Mr. Trump's upset victory. One brochure circulated to clients this year, which details Cambridge's

expertise in behavioral targeting, also calls the company's “pivotal role” in electing Mr. Trump its “biggest success politically in the United States.”

Trump aides, though, said Cambridge had played a relatively modest role, providing personnel who worked alongside other analytics vendors on some early digital advertising and using conventional microtargeting techniques. Later in the campaign, Cambridge also helped set up Mr. Trump's polling operation and build turnout models used to guide the candidate's spending and travel schedule. None of those efforts involved psychographics.

In some recent public settings, Cambridge executives have acknowledged that. “I don't want to break your heart; we actually didn't do any psychographics with the Trump campaign,” Matt Oczkowski, Cambridge's head of product, said at a postelection panel hosted by Google in December.

The firm's claims about its client base have also shifted. As recently as October, the firm said it had 50 clients in the 2016 elections. But a company spokesman said federal elections records showing just a dozen were correct.

The spokesman also said neither Cambridge nor SCL had done any work, paid or unpaid, with the pro-“Brexit” Leave.eu campaign last year, although Mr. Nix once claimed that Cambridge had helped “supercharge” Leave.eu's social media campaign. British authorities are now investigating the company's exact role with Leave.eu and whether Cambridge's techniques violated British and European privacy laws.

At a conference in Munich last month, Alexander Tayler, Cambridge's chief data officer, dodged a question about whether Cambridge would work with far-right parties in European elections this year. He also played down the role of psychological profiling in the company's work, much of which, Mr. Tayler suggested, is still based on traditional data analytics and marketing.

“It's not about being sinister,” Mr. Tayler said. “It's not about tricking people into voting for a candidate who they wouldn't otherwise support. It's just about making marketing more efficient.”

Looking to Expand

Even before the election, according to one former employee, Cambridge employees attended sessions about soliciting government business in the United States — where Mr. Trump now oversees the federal

bureaucracy and Mr. Bannon is arguably the White House's most powerful staff member. According to documents obtained by The Times, SCL is pursuing work for at least a dozen federal agencies, including the Commerce Department and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Mr. Bannon's spokeswoman said he stepped down from the Cambridge board in August, when he joined the Trump campaign, and "has no financial involvement" with the firm currently. She declined to say whether Mr. Bannon previously held equity in the firm.

Late last month, SCL executives met with Pentagon officials who advise the Joint Chiefs of Staff on information warfare. A reference document submitted in advance of

that meeting indicates that the company has worked as a subcontractor on roughly a dozen Pentagon projects, many of them "counter-radicalization" assessments in Pakistan and Yemen.

Such intelligence work is the bread and butter of SCL's government contracting in other countries. And the firm's experience in trying to influence Muslim sentiment abroad dovetails with Mr. Trump and Mr. Bannon's focus on combating the Islamic State.

The Washington Post reported last month that SCL had secured a contract for a similar program at the State Department and was seeking military and Homeland Security work.

**The
New York
Times**

Appelbaum

The emerging effort — dozens more rules could be eliminated in the coming weeks — is one of the most significant shifts in regulatory policy in recent decades. It is the leading edge of what Stephen K. Bannon, Mr. Trump's chief strategist, described late last month as "the deconstruction of the administrative state."

In many cases, records show that the changes came after appeals by corporate lobbyists and trade association executives, who see a potentially historic opportunity to lower compliance costs and drive up profits. Slashing regulations, they argue, will unleash economic growth.

On a near daily basis, regulated industries are now sending in specific requests to the Trump administration for more rollbacks, including recent appeals from 17 automakers to rescind an agreement to increase mileage standards for their fleets, and another from pharmaceutical industry figures to reverse a new rule that tightens scrutiny over the marketing of prescription drugs for unapproved uses. As of late Friday, word had leaked that the automakers' request for a rollback was about to be granted, too.

"After a relentless, eight-year regulatory onslaught that loaded unprecedented burdens on businesses and the economy, relief is finally on the way," Thomas J. Donohue, the president of the United States Chamber of Commerce, wrote in a memo last week.

Leashes Come Off Wall Street, Gun Sellers, Polluters and More (UNE)

Eric Lipton and
Binyamin

But dozens of public interest groups — environmentalists, labor unions, consumer watchdogs — have weighed in on the potential threat to Americans' well-being. "Americans did not vote to be exposed to more health, safety, environmental and financial dangers," said one letter, signed by leaders of 137 nonprofit groups to the White House last week.

In other cases, the Obama-era rules under attack have drawn objections even from some liberal groups that called them examples of overreach, like the American Civil Liberties Union's protest of a system to block mentally ill people from buying guns.

The regulatory retrenchment is unfolding on multiple fronts.

Congress, with Mr. Trump's approval, has erased three Obama-era rules in the last month, lifting regulations related to coal mining and oil and gas exploration, as well as the sale of guns to the mentally ill. More than 25 more rules could also be erased in the coming weeks; the House has already voted to eliminate nearly half.

Mr. Trump has separately signed executive orders directing agencies to pursue the reversal of other rules, including a requirement that financial advisers act in the interest of their clients, and a rule aimed at protecting drinking water from pollution.

New White House appointees at agencies including the Federal Communications Commission, the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Interior Department and the Environmental Protection Agency have also personally intervened in recent weeks to block, delay or start the

In an email, a Joint Chiefs spokesman confirmed that the Pentagon meeting, first reported by BuzzFeed, had occurred, but said he could not elaborate on the discussions "in order to avoid any undue influence or unintended consequences."

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At the moment, according to former employees, Cambridge has relatively few well-known corporate clients in the United States. Among them are ECI New York, a clothing company, and Goldline, which sells gold coins and markets heavily to listeners of conservative talk radio.

A spokesman for MasterCard declined to say if it would do business with Cambridge. The Yankees did not sign on.

But Mr. Nix appears to have bigger ambitions. "I think we're on the cusp of something enormous," he said.

Data science is about to reshape marketing, Mr. Nix maintained, and the big advertising conglomerates would survive only by developing their own targeting technology — or acquiring companies like Cambridge.

"Those agencies that don't adapt will die," Mr. Nix said.

process to nullify other rules, such as a requirement that corporations publish tallies comparing chief executive pay with average employee wages.

The Trump administration has also imposed a broad regulatory freeze, instructing agencies to delay the adoption of any rules not already in effect, and to consider whether those rules should be targeted for elimination.

And it has set up barriers to enact any new regulations — such as a requirement that for each new rule, at least two others must be identified for repeal — and ordered every federal agency to create a team of employees to look for more rules that can be eliminated.

"By any empirical measure, it is a level of activity that has never been seen," said Curtis W. Copeland, who spent decades studying federal regulatory policy on behalf of Congress while at the Congressional Research Service and the Government Accountability Office. "It is unprecedented."

Mr. Trump, in his address to Congress last week, called it "a historic effort to massively reduce job-crushing regulations," a line that drew thunderous applause from Republicans.

Presidents wield considerable influence over the rule-making process. They set the agenda and appoint the rule-makers, and, since the Reagan administration, a White House office has reviewed every major regulation to try to ensure that benefits to society exceeded compliance costs. It is not uncommon for new presidents to make quick changes in regulatory policy or try to reverse certain last-

minute rules their predecessors enacted.

Barack Obama, shortly after being elected president, pressed the E.P.A. to let the State of California set more stringent limits on auto emissions, a proposal that the Bush administration had rejected.

But the courts have generally held that new administrations need to justify such reversals. The Reagan administration tried to rescind a rule requiring airbags in passenger vehicles. The courts found the move unjustified.

"It is not a relevant or adequate defense to say that the president told us to do it," said Michael Eric Herz, a professor at the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law in New York.

The Trump administration could face a host of similar challenges — the requirement that agencies must find two regulations to eliminate before enacting any new rules is already being challenged in federal court.

In addition, Democratic attorneys general from New York, Hawaii, Massachusetts, Oregon and Vermont have threatened in recent days to sue the Trump administration to try to block some of the regulatory rollbacks.

It is a radical role reversal for state attorneys general — their Republican colleagues spent the last eight years suing the federal government to block the enactment of many Obama-era rules. Now the Democrats are planning to try to prevent many of these same rules from being revoked.

"Demolish the administrative state? I don't even know what that means,"

Attorney General Maura Healey of Massachusetts said during a visit to Washington last week, where she and other state attorneys general met with Mr. Trump at the White House.

The pushback has hardly deterred industry executives. The Business Roundtable, which represents some of the nation's largest corporations and is led by Jamie Dimon, chief executive of JPMorgan Chase, in mid-February gave Mr. Trump a wish list of 16 rules it wanted killed, including the mandatory disclosure of how much chief executives are paid compared with other employees, and a rule intended to curb the trade in minerals that might benefit militant groups in parts of Africa. Efforts to repeal at least 10 of those measures are underway.

"The majority of these regulations directly and negatively impact economic growth," the executives said in their letter, adding that they were convinced that rules could be repealed "without undermining critical protections for consumer health, safety and the environment."

The reversals by federal regulators are happening, at times, at an extraordinary speed. Lawyers representing the National Mining Association, the American Petroleum Institute and other fossil fuel trade groups and companies asked the Interior Department on Feb. 17 to suspend a new rule changing the way these companies pay royalties for oil, gas or coal extracted from federal lands.

While the lawyers called the requirement "impractical and in some cases impossible," environmentalists and conservative nonprofit groups like Taxpayers for Common Sense praised the effort, saying that for decades energy companies had been underpaying the federal government. The new

standard was expected to push up federal revenue by as much as \$85 million annually.

The Interior Department wrote the industry lawyers back five days later, telling them that the agency, after three years of backing the rule, would suspend enforcement of the new standards. "We agree you have raised serious questions," the agency's letter said.

This shift in federal regulatory policy is already having implications for tens of thousands of citizens nationwide.

Nearly two years ago, the Social Security Administration first moved to set up a new system that would automatically turn over to the Justice Department information it collects on Americans who are receiving federal benefits based on a disabling mental illness for inclusion in a database used for gun background checks.

This would effectively prevent these individuals — an estimated 75,000 a year — from buying guns unless they sought a Justice Department waiver after being rejected, given the longstanding federal limitation on the sale of firearms to individuals with known mental illnesses.

Groups like the National Rifle Association, the A.C.L.U. and the National Alliance on Mental Illness objected to the provision, which had been scheduled to go into effect in January. They argued that it unfairly presumed a tendency toward violence by a wide range of people with mental disabilities, including conditions like bulimia and obsessive compulsive disorder.

Mr. Trump signed legislation on Tuesday revoking that rule under the Congressional Review Act, which gives Congress a limited window to overturn the decisions of regulatory agencies.

A total of 46 such Congressional Review Act resolutions are now pending in Congress, on topics including air pollution, unemployment compensation, endangered species listings, debit card fees and oil and gas drilling on federal lands as well as the Arctic Outer Continental Shelf.

The act, first adopted in 1996, had been used only once before to nullify a regulation, at the start of the Bush administration in 2001, when a Clinton-era rule was revoked.

Rules not subject to congressional review may still be at risk. The most radical shift has perhaps come at the Federal Communications Commission, which voted on Wednesday to halt new government rules related to data security from taking effect this week, after objections were raised by companies including Comcast, Verizon and AT&T.

Ajit Pai, a Republican whom Mr. Trump recently named as the F.C.C. chairman, has also made clear that he intends to push to roll back or abandon several other major rules, including the landmark net neutrality regulation intended to ensure equal access to content on the internet, as well as efforts to keep prison phone rates down and a proposal to break open the cable box market.

The efforts have been praised by telecommunications giants, like Comcast, but condemned by consumer advocates.

The administration started its campaign against regulation on the afternoon of Inauguration Day, with a memo from Reince Priebus, Mr. Trump's chief of staff, instructing agencies to halt work on new regulations and to delay putting completed regulations into effect.

So far, the effective dates of at least 75 rules have been delayed as a result of this order, based on an analysis of the Federal Register. That includes a measure intended to prevent potentially toxic formaldehyde exposure in homes caused by certain furniture products — an effort that has been underway since victims of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 were moved into contaminated government-issued trailers.

Such delays are not uncommon with new presidents — both George W. Bush and Mr. Obama did the same, to differing degrees. And certain measures are still going into effect as the Trump administration gets underway, including one that prohibits smoking in public housing nationwide as of Feb. 3.

Still, the general Trump administration freeze has drawn broad opposition, some of it surprising. The Department of Agriculture has delayed a rule that would make it easier for chicken farmers to sue chicken processors. Business groups, including the National Federation of Independent Business, want to kill the rule.

But small-scale chicken farmers are fighting back.

Mike Weaver, a West Virginia farmer who said he had voted for Mr. Trump and was pleased with most of what he had seen so far, said he wished Mr. Trump would meet with farmers.

"I'd love to have a visit with the president about this, to tell him that these are federal regulations, yes, but these are good regulations," said Mr. Weaver, the president of a small-farm group called the Organization for Competitive Markets. "These are regulations that we want implemented."

The New York Times Talmadge : Trump's Military Budget Minus a Plan

Caitlin Talmadge

Last week President Trump again called to revitalize the United States military, most notably with a 10 percent increase in the defense budget. Such proposals make for a snappy sound bite and enable the president to bask in the reflected glow of the armed forces, which happen to be more popular than he is. Yet in the absence of a coherent national strategy, arbitrary increases in the defense budget will do little to make America safer, and could make the world more dangerous.

There is no doubt that the United States faces serious security threats. The Defense Department is

dealing with genuine readiness and modernization challenges, and reasonable people can disagree about whether targeted budget increases are a necessary remedy. Some experts see rising threats from North Korea and Russia and have called for augmenting the United States' ground warfare capabilities after long campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. Others call for increasing funding for the Navy, which is slated to shoulder the cost of a new ballistic missile submarine — the backbone of the nation's future nuclear force — even though this effort may squeeze out the service's traditional shipbuilding.

Ideally, a coherent defense budget process would reflect these types of

debates, prioritizing some threats over others and determining how best to combat them. In the real world, the defense budget is complex, politicized and hard to wrangle even when incoming administrations attempt to link their budgets to a vision. But they usually try.

For example, President John F. Kennedy's defense secretary, Robert McNamara, proposed reducing funding for the Air Force because Kennedy had promised to move away from President Dwight D. Eisenhower's emphasis on the service's nuclear capabilities. Similarly, President George W. Bush's first defense secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, focused his early

efforts to reshape the budget on defense "transformation" to reduce each service's legacy force structure while investing in information, stealth and precision technology. Neither president got exactly what he wanted, but each made a vigorous effort to link proposed changes to strategic priorities.

President Trump's call for an increase in military spending doesn't have even the veneer of this sort of guidance. Instead, the administration has delivered a bundle of simplistic national security slogans rife with contradictions and gaps.

The Islamic State is said to be a top priority, for example, but the administration has gone out of its way to needle Iran, which might otherwise be America's de facto ally in that fight. The administration professes worry about North Korea's threatening behavior, but instead of solidifying United States leadership in Asia and strengthening the relationship with China, the administration has axed participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership and been erratic in its dealings with Beijing. In Europe, the administration's surrogates claim the United States is committed to NATO, but the president's disturbing affinity for President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia and thinly veiled disdain for longstanding allies have plunged the trans-Atlantic relationship into crisis.

Unless a larger defense budget can buy rational presidential leadership, these problems won't go away. What a larger defense budget would buy in the absence of such leadership also remains unclear.

Most troubling is the fact that the Trump administration apparently intends to fund increases in the defense budget by slashing components of the federal budget that contribute significantly to national security, including the State Department. The armed forces are a vital component of the national security tool kit, but so are diplomacy, economic engagement and post-conflict reconstruction. The use of military force should always be a last resort, and the balanced application of other, less costly tools of national power helps

prevent wars and crises from arising in the first place.

By contrast, the president's approach promises the militarization of American foreign policy, which is likely to strain and overextend the military in the long run. Excessive long-term military spending and costly foreign adventures have been the downfall of many a great power, including the Soviet Union. In the Cold War, in fact, the United States' victory stemmed partly from its relative overall restraint in military spending and long-term commitment to nonmilitary tools of foreign policy — a lesson the president would do well to remember today.

The United States already has the best-funded military in the world, accounting for roughly 40 percent of all money spent globally on

defense. It devotes more dollars to defense than the next 12 largest military spenders combined, and most of those big spenders are allies. It is true that China and Russia are engaged in military modernization, but both countries' annual estimated combined military spending amounts to about a third of what the United States spends.

The good news is that presidential budget proposals are always the opening gambit in a negotiation process, and there are already signs that the president's approach will face pushback from fellow Republicans in Congress. That's comforting, though it isn't a substitute for the president providing a sensible and consistent approach to national security.

**The
New York
Times**

Editorial : Why Mess With a Nuclear Treaty, Mr. Trump?

Some of President Trump's most irresponsible statements have involved, of all things, nuclear weapons, where there is no room for irresponsibility or error. His latest shocker was a comment denigrating the New Start Treaty, a pact that he said gave Russia an advantage and penalized the United States.

Mr. Trump doesn't seem to understand much about the vast and apocalyptically lethal nuclear arsenal he commands. Reuters reported early last month that during a telephone call in which President Vladimir Putin of Russia raised the possibility of extending the treaty, Mr. Trump paused and asked aides what it was. Once enlightened, he reportedly denounced the treaty to Mr. Putin, and then, in an interview with Reuters two weeks later, called it "just another bad deal." He's wrong.

Negotiated by President Barack Obama and in effect since February 2011, New Start limits the United

States and Russia each to no more than 1,550 deployed nuclear warheads on more than 700 deployed intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles and nuclear bombers. The deadline for complying is February 2018. The United States is down to 1,367 deployed nuclear warheads, but that number will edge up when the process is completed; Russia is at 1,796. Each is expected to end up at 1,550.

The treaty also has important verification requirements, like semi-annual data exchanges on the two nations' weapons systems. Both agreed to notify each other of certain nuclear-related actions, and can conduct up to 18 inspections annually of the other's strategic forces. Mr. Obama knew how essential the treaty was, as did the Senate, which ratified it 71 to 26. It also had the unanimous support of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and seven former military commanders who had controlled the strategic nuclear forces.

If Mr. Trump is foolish enough to leave the treaty, the United States and Russia will be free to build up arsenals that have declined by thousands of weapons since the late 1960s. That would set off a costly, destabilizing arms race. And by eliminating verification and transparency requirements, America would lose insight into Russia's program.

Mr. Trump not only seems inclined to undermine New Start limits; he has said he wants to ensure that America's arsenal is at the "top of the pack." It is already ahead of the pack with more than enough nuclear weapons, backed by advanced conventional weapons, to keep the country safe.

When stockpiled warheads are factored in, the United States and Russia have roughly 4,500 warheads each, and both are engaged in modernization programs. The next-largest arsenals are France's, at 300 warheads, and China's, at 260. A 2013 Pentagon study said America could maintain a

strong and credible deterrent with 1,000 warheads.

After refusing to engage in new nuclear negotiations with the Obama administration, the Russians are signaling a willingness to extend New Start when it expires in 2021. Some Republicans are opposed, either because they have an ideological aversion to any restraints on the military or because they want to block an extension in retaliation for Moscow's deploying a new nuclear-capable cruise missile, a deployment that violates a different treaty.

That missile issue can be worked out separately while Mr. Trump focuses on negotiating a New Start extension and then considers deeper reductions. There is nothing to be gained from a new nuclear arms race or from glib and ignorant talk about who is at the "top of the pack."

**The
New York
Times**

Blow : Pause This Presidency!

Charles M. Blow
America deserves to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that our president is legitimate before he issues a single new disruptive executive order.

America deserves to know that he is legitimate before he pursues a program to dismantle Obamacare.

America deserves to know that he is legitimate before he pushes through a budget that obscenely expands military spending while making dramatic cuts in other areas.

America deserves to know that he is legitimate before the Senate moves forward with confirmation hearings for his Supreme Court nominee.

Republicans pitched a fit when President Obama nominated Merrick Garland to fill the seat made open by the death of Antonin Scalia, falsely arguing that a president should not be allowed to fill a vacancy during the last year of his term. Well, it is not at all clear to me that this will not be the last year of Donald Trump's term, should these investigations reveal something

untoward between his regime and Russia.

We have known for some time that the Russians interfered in our election in an effort to favor Trump. What we are learning in recent weeks are the number of Trump advisers and administrative officials who had contact with the Russian ambassador before the election, the frequency of those contacts, and the attempts, at least by some, to conceal those contacts.

But we now know, according to reporting by The Washington Post,

that Attorney General Jeff Sessions also met at least twice with the ambassador during the campaign — once at the Republican National Convention — and then lied about those contacts under oath during his confirmation hearings.

Then this weekend in a series of tweets Trump made a scandalous and completely unsubstantiated allegation that President Obama had "my 'wires tapped' in Trump Tower" in October of 2016. He said of his baseless charge, "This is McCarthysm!" and "This is

Nixon/Watergate” and called Obama a “Bad (or sick) guy!”

This is absolutely outrageous. One of three things is true here: Obama, during the waning months of an eight-year term free of personal scandal, decided to maliciously and illegally tap the phones of the candidate all the polls at the time predicted would lose; a law enforcement agency was able to present evidence and convince a federal judge that someone or some group of people in Trump Tower were engaged in illegal activity; or this “president,” who has proven himself a pathological liar, is once

again chasing conspiratorial windmills and seeking to detract and deflect from legitimate scandal. Any of these scenarios has the profoundest of consequences.

There is a helluva lot of smoke here for there to be no fire. Maybe all of these contacts with the Russians have some benign and believable explanation that escapes me at the moment. Maybe this is just the culmination of an extraordinary series of coincidences. Maybe.

I actually hope that’s true. The alternative explanation is nearly

unfathomable in its ability to injure our democracy.

Whatever the case, we need answers before we simply pretend that there is some sort of political inertia pulling us forward and that the Trump agenda is an inevitable consequence of a suspect election.

No!

An NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll released last month found that a majority of Americans believe “Congress should investigate whether Donald Trump’s presidential campaign had contact

with the Russian government in 2016.”

That’s important, but not enough. Until that investigation is completed, that same majority of Americans must put elected officials on notice that there will be a price to pay if they aid and abet Trump’s agenda before the truth is known.

We must all demand without equivocation: Pause this presidency!



Krugman : A Party Not Ready to Govern

Paul Krugman

The story of Obamacare repeal would be funny if the health care — and, in many cases, the lives — of millions of Americans weren’t at stake.

First we had seven — seven! — years during which Republicans kept promising to offer an alternative to Obamacare any day now, but never did. Then came the months after the election, with more promises of details just around the corner.

Now there’s apparently a plan hidden somewhere in the Capitol basement. Why the secrecy? Because the Republicans have belatedly discovered what some of us tried to tell them all along: The only way to maintain coverage for the 20 million people who gained insurance thanks to Obamacare is with a plan that, surprise, looks a lot like Obamacare.

Sure enough, the new plan reportedly does look like a sort of half-baked version of the Affordable

Care Act. Politically, it seems to embody the worst of both worlds: It’s enough like Obamacare to infuriate hard-line conservatives, but it weakens key aspects of the law enough to deprive millions of Americans — many of them white working-class voters who backed Donald Trump — of essential health care.

The idea, apparently, is to deal with these problems by passing the plan before anyone gets a chance to really see or think about what’s in it. Good luck with that.

Then there’s corporate tax reform — an issue where the plan being advanced by Paul Ryan, the House speaker, is actually not too bad, at least in principle. Even some Democratic-leaning economists support a shift to a “destination-based cash flow tax,” which is best thought of as a sales tax plus a payroll subsidy. (Trust me.)

But Mr. Ryan has failed spectacularly to make his case either to colleagues or to powerful

interest groups. Why? As best I can tell, it’s because he himself doesn’t understand the point of the reform.

The case for the cash flow tax is quite technical; among other things, it would remove the incentives the current tax system creates for corporations to load up on debt and to engage in certain kinds of tax avoidance. But that’s not the kind of thing Republicans talk about — if anything, they’re in favor of tax avoidance, hence the Trump proposal to slash funding for the I.R.S.

No, in G.O.P. world, tax ideas always have to be presented as ways to remove the shackles from oppressed job creators. So Mr. Ryan has framed his proposal, basically falsely, as a measure to make American industry more competitive, focusing on the “border tax adjustment” which is part of the sales-tax component of the reform.

This misrepresentation seems, however, to be backfiring: it sounds like a Trumpist tariff, and has both

conservatives and retailers like WalMart up in arms.

At this point, then, major Republican initiatives are bogged down for reasons that have nothing to do with the personality flaws of the tweeter in chief, and everything to do with the broader, more fundamental fecklessness of his party.

Does this mean that nothing substantive will happen on the policy front? Not necessarily. Republicans may decide to ram through a health plan that causes mass suffering, and hope to blame it on Mr. Obama. They may give up on anything resembling a principled tax reform, and just throw a few trillion dollars at rich people instead.

But whatever the eventual outcome, what we’re witnessing is what happens when a party that gave up hard thinking in favor of empty sloganeering ends up in charge of actual policy. And it’s not a pretty sight.



Editorial : The high-risk pool

Say what you will about

Obamacare, the law has been a godsend for people with serious medical conditions who had been unable to find or afford coverage in the individual market.

If the Affordable Care Act is repealed and replaced, as congressional Republicans hope to do in the next month or so, what happens to people with pre-existing conditions?

Ask GOP leaders this question, and “high-risk pools” are likely to come up. Both House Speaker Paul Ryan and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell have invoked these words in recent weeks in connection with Obamacare replacement plans.

Do high-risk pools — state-run, federally subsidized places to get health coverage — solve the problem of those who are difficult and expensive to insure? In a word, no.

Such pools have no real purpose unless insurance companies are once again given the right to deny people coverage based on their health histories. And doing that would once again turn sick people into second-class citizens.

It’s one thing to put bad drivers into “assigned risk” pools for auto insurance. It’s quite another to discriminate against people who are ill through no fault of their own.

High-risk pools like those mentioned by Ryan and

McConnell got their start in states, before Obamacare guaranteed individuals the right to buy insurance regardless of pre-existing conditions. Since the passage of the act, the pools have largely been phased out.

The record of high-risk pools in the pre-Obamacare days was not particularly inspiring. Premiums in these pools ranged from two-and-a-quarter to three times as much as those in other pools, though their plans often had significant restrictions, such as caps on annual or lifetime payouts. Even with the high premiums, most states limited enrollment to hold down their costs.

Obamacare is based on a fundamental trade-off: Insurance companies have to cover everyone,

regardless of pre-existing conditions. In return, everyone is required to buy insurance (or pay a penalty), giving the insurers millions of new customers.

As several states discovered before Obamacare was enacted, if you require coverage of pre-existing conditions without an individual mandate, people wait until they get sick to enroll, costs soar, and insurers stop offering policies. The market goes into a death spiral.

Obamacare is far from perfect. Not enough young, healthy people have been signing up for coverage. But the law can be repaired without having to go back to high-risk pools.

By offering these pools now, Republicans are trying to relieve low-cost policy holders of the burden of paying for high-cost ones. Those high-cost patients would be segregated out and forced to fend for themselves. The high-risk pools they'd be placed into, and the paltry subsidies offered to them, would be more fig leaf than support.

A 2015 repeal-and-replace measure, for instance, would have provided \$2.5 billion annually for 10 years. For a nation that spends \$3.2 *trillion* annually on health care, \$2.5 billion is a pittance.

It's time to treat high-risk pools as what they are: subterfuge for uninsuring many of the 20 million people who have gained insurance thanks to Obamacare.