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FRANCE - EUROPE

THE WALL
STREET
JOURNAL
COMMENTS

Editorial : The Kremlin's Woman in Paris

March 26, 2017
3:46 p.m. ET 66

Marine Le Pen made a surprise visit to the Kremlin Friday, and Vladimir Putin's warm reception left little doubt about Moscow's choice to win the French Presidential election in a month.

The French National Front leader was looking for at least a de facto Kremlin endorsement a month from the first round of voting, and she received it with news footage that showed the Russian strongman smiling next to her.

"We do not want to influence events in any way," Mr. Putin said, and how would anyone get that idea? Pro-

Kremlin news sites merely published reports that the Kremlin had pledged to "help" Ms. Le Pen's cash-strapped campaign before correcting the stories and deleting the tweets. In 2014 the National Front received a \$10 million loan from a Kremlin-linked bank.

Ms. Le Pen returned the public admiration, saying Mr. Putin represents a "new vision" of conservative nationalism and sovereignty along with Donald Trump and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. That's an insult to Messrs. Trump and Modi, who have won fair elections. She also called on Paris and Moscow to join forces to combat "globalization and Islamic fundamentalism."

Ms. Le Pen made clear that she'd pursue a policy of appeasement toward Russian aggression against the countries that live in Moscow's shadow. Sovereignty is sacred to her—unless you're Georgian or Ukrainian. "I was one of the few politicians in France who were defending their own point of view on Ukraine that coincided with that of Russia," she said at the Russian Parliament.

She went on to denounce Ukraine's elected government using rhetoric that would make the producers at Russia Today blush: "We are forced to deal with a government that came to power illegally, as a result of the Maidan revolution, and now bombs the population in Donetsk and Luhansk. This is a war crime." She

vowed to fight European sanctions imposed in response to Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and proxy invasion of eastern Ukraine.

Ms. Le Pen has long been a Putin apologist, but the difference is that now she has a plausible path to the Élysée Palace. Being open to negotiations with Mr. Putin is one thing, excusing and endorsing Russian imperialism another. If she's elected, Mr. Putin will have an overt fifth columnist in the heart of NATO.

The
Washington
Post

France's Le Pen predicts E.U. 'will die,' globalists will be defeated

By Michaela
Cabrera

By Michaela Cabrera March 26 at
5:19 PM

LILLE, France — The European Union will disappear, French presidential candidate Marine Le Pen said at a rally on Sunday, promising to shield France from globalization as she sought to fire up her supporters in the final four weeks before voting gets underway.

Buoyed by the unexpected election of Donald Trump in the United States and by Britain's vote to leave the E.U., the leader of the Euroskeptic and anti-immigrant National Front party said in Lille that the French election would be the next step in what she called a global rebellion of the people.

"The European Union will die because the people do not want it anymore ... arrogant and hegemonic empires are destined to perish," Le Pen said to cheers and applause.

"The time has come to defeat globalists," she said, accusing her main rivals, centrist Emmanuel Macron and conservative François Fillon, of "treason" for their pro-E.U., pro-market policies.

Opinion polls forecast that Le Pen will do well in the first round of the presidential election on April 23, only to lose the runoff to Macron on May 7.

But the high number of undecided voters means the outcome remains unpredictable, and motivating people to go to the polls will be key for the top candidates.

Its opposition to the E.U. and the euro currency underlines an anti-establishment stance that pleases the National Front's grass-roots supporters and attracts voters angry with globalization. But it is also likely to be an obstacle to power in a country where a majority oppose a return to the franc.

Le Pen has over the past few months tried to tackle this by

criticizing the unpopular E.U. while telling voters that she would not abruptly pull France out of the bloc or the euro zone but instead hold a referendum after six months of renegotiating the terms of France's E.U. membership.

On Sunday, she was careful to say she would seek to replace the E.U. with "another Europe," which she called "the Europe of the people," based on a loose cooperative of nations.

"It must be done in a rational, well-prepared way," she told the *Le Parisien* daily. "I don't want chaos. Within the negotiation calendar I want to carry out ... the euro would be the last step because I want to wait for the outcome of elections in Germany in the autumn before renegotiating it."

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Reacting to Le Pen's comments, France's ambassador to the United States, Gérard Araud, tweeted: "That'll be the real significance of the French elections: the survival or the demise of the EU. A quasi-referendum."

About 72 percent of French voters want to keep the euro, an Ifop poll published in *Le Figaro* newspaper showed.

But unlike voters overall, a large majority of National Front voters back a euro exit, the poll showed.

"I'm convinced it will explode anyway, so she is right to anticipate it and prepare for an intelligent and organized exit from the euro before we head for even more of a disaster than we are in now," bank employee Marie-Dominique Rossignol, 56, said after the rally.

FP
Foreign Policy

Eric Jaros : Pessimism Is Europe's Only Hope

It's not supposed to be fun to spoil a party. But as the European Union prepares to mark its 60th year this weekend, let me simply say that this hardly seems like the time to be celebrating.

In facing a number of existential threats, Europe is once again engaging in one of its grandest traditions: searching for itself. And in light of Brexit, right-wing populist movements at home, and an "America First" ethos across the Atlantic, it's not liking much of what

it's been finding. Crisis, it has seemed of late, has become the continent's true common currency.

At the same time, the often-bracing self-criticism and urgency that the last few years have spawned represent, perhaps, the last best hope for Europe's future. Likewise,

to briefly look back to the period of the EU's origin story, today's palpable sense of concern in Brussels or Berlin seems closely intertwined with postwar Europe's tangled intellectual roots.

Though certainly not the stuff of EU legend or lore, not long before

negotiators were hammering out the Treaty of Rome, which would form the basis for European unification, other more dour deliberations were quietly taking place in Frankfurt, Germany, between two of Europe's leading thinkers.

Over a few weeks in the spring of 1956, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, key figures in what has come to be known as the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, were laying out their own vision of the future and, as any philosophers working within a Marxist tradition are wont to do, struggling with the question of theory and praxis.

Singularly unsurprising to anyone familiar with their work, things were not looking good. The characteristically dim view marking their discussions is the same that often finds expression in one of their favorite forms: the brief and pithy, yet often highly enigmatic, philosophical aphorism, or "thought-image." Many have since become, to use a term he would surely reject, Adorno's greatest hits: "The splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass," for instance. Or, "The whole is the untrue."

Enacting arguments as much as making them, it is arguably the aphorism's diminutive, ephemeral, and fragmentary form that has led to its longevity. (And have in large part inspired my own far more pedestrian and ironic efforts on Twitter, perhaps the perfect platform for making a daily Faustian bargain between medium and message, philosophy and the one-liner.)

Europe. A Greek start-up bought by Germany. Then sold to Google.

— Nein. (@NeinQuarterly) May 6, 2015

To return to Frankfurt, however, records of Adorno and Horkheimer's talks on the eve of the EU's founding (published by Verso in 2011 as *Towards a New Manifesto*) show little sign of their otherwise polished and performative interpretive panache.

Rather, we see them at work, live, with Adorno's wife, Gretel, taking notes as they ponder their stance toward the United States (undecided) and European unity (similarly uncertain), while assessing the potential of

translating their ongoing critique of modern capitalism into transformative political practice (highly doubtful and perhaps, one gathers, just as undesirable). While the political and economic architecture of postwar Europe was taking shape in Rome, they could probably already see it burning.

Europe without Greece. Like Schäuble without a heart.

— Nein. (@NeinQuarterly) July 11, 2015

As Adorno and Horkheimer had put it a decade earlier in the opening lines of their most famous work, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, such grand projects had "always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity." The central argument connecting enlightenment to myth and liberation to domination was, and largely remains, convincing.

But it was not enough to understand the world. The lesson they'd learned from Karl Marx was to change it. The lesson they'd learned for themselves was that this might well be impossible. And whatever lesson they had to impart, especially in the early years of the postwar period, would remain to be seen.

1. Understand world.
2. Change world.
3. Try hitting undo.
4. Blame the poets.

— Nein. (@NeinQuarterly) March 20, 2017

Keenly skeptical of the politically programmatic, intensely critical of ideology, and well aware of intellectuals' complicity in the structures they criticize, the most they saw their mode of negative critique offering was an analysis of what is wrong with the world — first and foremost the sacrifice of human imagination and intellect to the workings of modern capitalism — not a utopian vision of what it might still become.

In contrast with the more hopeful tone of a later generation of Frankfurt School thinkers, primarily Jürgen Habermas, who went on to champion European unity, the dimmer prospects the two surmise

are unsurprising. At most, Adorno and Horkheimer's larger project was to provide hints that a better vision for the West might be possible. This was more a matter of reflection than hope. Or, better, the capacity for reflection was really the only hope — even if, as Franz Kafka said, there wasn't any for us.

And so, perhaps predictably, their formulation of what they thought might serve as a contemporary version of *The Communist Manifesto* was to remain spectral. Yet critical theory continues to haunt the continent. What's more, we're told, it is enjoying a resurgence internationally.

Critical Theory: Made in Germany. Unmade in France. Big on Twitter.

— Nein. (@NeinQuarterly) September 28, 2016

As a headline in *The New Yorker* recently announced: "The Frankfurt School Knew Trump Was Coming." Or as a somewhat more inglorious heralding in the *Guardian* put it: "Why a forgotten 1930s critique of capitalism is back in fashion." One might add the negative publicity gained by the attacks on "cultural Marxism" that have recently been emerging from the depths of the Breitbartian underground to which they were once confined.

It's wise, however, to be skeptical of changes in intellectual fashion. The quotes by Walter Benjamin, another key Frankfurt School thinker, that are reportedly gracing the "mood boards" of major fashion houses from New York to Milan hardly portend the revolution. And as Stuart Jeffries, author of a new book on the Frankfurt School (*Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of the Frankfurt School*), has rightly observed: "In our age, to be sure, anyone reviving critical theory needs a sense of irony."

However, if you'll allow me a fleeting moment of optimism, the Frankfurt School's supposed return might be coming at a particularly good time. Precisely because times are so bad.

A gentle reminder that repeating our past isn't the problem. It's repeating our present.

— Nein. (@NeinQuarterly) September 24, 2013

With nations throughout the world, not least in Europe, facing major threats to core principles of democracy, Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of authoritarianism is, sadly, more directly relevant than it's been in years. Likewise, their classic denunciation of the "culture industry" and trenchant analysis of the aestheticization of the political have assumed new urgency with the even further melding of politics and entertainment.

One thing they will surely not provide, however, is easy answers. As deeply flawed as Europe (and the United States) might have been in their eyes, back in 1956 we also see them acknowledging that they represent a high point in modern civilization's potential for prosperity and justice. The ongoing challenge would be to preserve these gains while transforming the structures supporting them.

But how? One exchange is perhaps particularly instructive for the present.

Horkheimer: "That can be achieved only if we remain ruthlessly critical of this civilization."

Adorno: "We cannot call for the defence of the Western world."

Horkheimer: "We cannot do so because that would destroy it."

This sense of the necessity and urgency of critique and self-critique — with little to no assurance of making any difference, and during times that seem to demand immediate action — is perhaps what the Frankfurt School can best offer Europe 60 years on.

Indeed, one is tempted to close on a hopeful, though often woefully self-serving, note about the redemptive potential of thought and self-critique in times of despair. But in times that seem to call so urgently for action, this is clearly a risk.

As high as the stakes may be, as Adorno remarks to Horkheimer, there is something even worse than living in a horrible world: namely, "to live in a world in which we can no longer imagine a better one."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Simon Nixon
March 26, 2017 2:26 p.m. ET

Last week's funeral of Martin McGuinness provided the clearest evidence of the extraordinary success of the Northern Ireland peace process. What was most

Brexit Threatens to Stir Old Political Currents in Northern Ireland

remarkable wasn't just that Arlene Foster, the leader of the hard-line Democratic Unionist Party, came to pay her respects to the former IRA commander turned Sinn Féin peacemaker, but that her arrival was greeted with applause.

Such scenes would have been unthinkable 20 years ago.

Yet beneath the symbolism, the strains in Northern Irish politics today are as great as at any time since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement—and the greatest threat

to the constitutional balance is Brexit.

The U.K.'s decision to quit the EU has opened up new divisions within Northern Ireland, where a majority in fact voted against Brexit, and between Northern Ireland and the

Irish Republic, which will remain in the EU. The challenges facing the whole island are so worrying that the European Commission's chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, last week said that finding a swift solution was one of his three top priorities for the divorce talks.

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Brexit Coverage



After Terrorist Attack, a British City Linked to Jihadis Winces and Asks Why (UNE)

Katrin Bennhold and Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura

As if to further punctuate the connection, the police announced Sunday that they had arrested an unidentified man in Birmingham as part of the investigation of Mr. Masood.

Members of Birmingham's Muslim communities acknowledged the linkage between their city and Islamist extremism, which many attribute to poverty and drug abuse that make youths vulnerable to jihadist recruiters who operate like gangs. But Muslims in Birmingham also deeply resent what they see as a grossly unfair reputation, countering that most residents are proud and law-abiding.

Many also see their neighborhoods as reassuring refuges from the backlash of anti-Islam bigotry roiling Europe and elsewhere.

The issue is primarily one of borders. It is often unappreciated just how important a role the EU played in facilitating peace as the U.K. and Ireland's joint membership of the EU's single market and customs union removed any economic need for a hard border with the Irish Republic, leaving only a security border to be dismantled as an impediment to peace.

Since that border was removed, the economies of north and south have become increasingly integrated. Many businesses now have operations, supply chains and workforces straddling the border.

No one wants the reintroduction of a hard border, not least because any infrastructure could become a target for attack.

Yet the U.K.'s decision to quit both the EU's customs union and single market makes the reintroduction of some form of border inevitable. Even if the U.K. succeeds in negotiating tariff-free access to EU markets, goods crossing the border will still need to be checked to see that they comply with rules of origin.

Similar concerns apply to the movement of people: Both London and Dublin want to maintain the Common Travel Area which has existed since 1923. But this doesn't extend rights of free movement to other EU or non-EU citizens, raising the prospect of passport checks somewhere.

Yet any solution risks undermining the fragile constitutional settlement put in place by the Good Friday Agreement. An obvious answer is to

put any new borders around the whole island, effectively allowing Northern Ireland to remain in the EU customs union and single market.

This is the delicate path down which the Irish government has been venturing over the past nine months through a determined diplomatic effort both in Ireland and across the EU.

It has established an all-Ireland civic dialogue designed to build confidence on both sides of the border. It argues that special treatment for Ireland is warranted because its circumstances are unique: all Northern Irish citizens are entitled to Irish citizenship and the people of Northern Ireland have the right under the Good Friday Agreement to vote to reunite with the Irish Republic—and thereby become part of an EU member state.

But this attempt at an all-Ireland solution is viscerally opposed by hard-line unionists who are suspicious of any moves to make Northern Ireland more Irish.

It is also opposed by the British government which fears that any special status established for Northern Ireland could create a precedent that would be used by Scottish nationalists to advance their secessionist claims.

Theresa May is also reluctant to antagonize the Brexit-supporting DUP whose parliamentary votes she may need to call upon to bolster her wafer-thin majority. Instead, the U.K. hopes to use the risks to the Northern Ireland peace process as a

bargaining chip to secure its goal of a frictionless trade deal for the whole U.K., thereby minimizing border issues.

Meanwhile, Dublin's efforts took a major knock earlier this month following snap elections for Northern Ireland's regional assembly which led to a significant polarization of local politics. The trigger for those elections was a local scandal but Brexit concerns helped drive a surge in support for Sinn Féin, which came within a whisker of overtaking the DUP as the largest party. Sinn Féin and the DUP now remain deadlocked ahead of a Monday deadline to form a coalition government, as required under the Good Friday Agreement, with differences over a common Brexit platform a complicating factor.

Failure to reach a power-sharing deal would lead to fresh elections, with the risk of further polarization, or worse, a return to direct rule by London, raising doubts about the viability of the constitutional settlement.

The message from Mr. McGuinness's funeral was that no one in Northern Ireland has any appetite for a return to the violence of the past.

Yet there are growing fears on both sides of the border that Brexit has stirred up political forces that they hoped had long been laid to rest.

The bigotry has often focused on Birmingham. A few years ago, a Fox News terrorism commentator had to apologize for describing Birmingham as a "Muslim-only city" where non-Muslims "don't go."

Nonetheless, Birmingham, Britain's second-biggest city behind London, has produced a disproportionate number of convicted Islamist militants, including some linked to the Sept. 11 attacks, and to last year's bombings in Brussels.

So many Islamist militants have been born in Birmingham — or have passed through — that the Birmingham Mail newspaper once lamented that the city had the dubious distinction of "Terror Central."

"The extremist schools of thought seem to have become more embedded in Birmingham than in other parts of the country," said

Nazir Afzal, the former chief crown prosecutor for northwest England, who is from Birmingham.

Mr. Masood, who converted to Islam in his late 30s, was born and raised in an affluent village in southeast England. He spent much of his adulthood in and around London, interrupted by jail time and two yearlong relocations to Saudi Arabia. But Birmingham was his last residence.

Birmingham was the birthplace of Britain's first suicide bomber, the residence of a financier of the Sept. 11 attacks, and the place where Al Qaeda hatched a plot to blow up a commercial airliner in 2006. When a masked member of the Shabab, the Somali extremist group, celebrated the murder of the soldier Lee Rigby in a 2013 video, he listed Birmingham as the first source of its fighters.

The man who is believed to have recruited the militant known as Jihadi John, the Islamic State executioner with the King's English accent, was from Birmingham, as was his closest associate. Other prominent militants who have come through the city's underground networks include Abdelhamid Abaaoud, organizer of the 2015 Paris attacks, and Mohamed Abrini, a Belgian national who helped plot the 2016 Brussels attacks.

In 2014, Birmingham was at the center of a so-called Trojan Horse plot in which, it was alleged, a group of Islamist extremists had sought to infiltrate and take over two dozen state schools. A recent report by the Henry Jackson Society, a politically conservative research organization, found that one in 10 convicted Islamist militants in Britain come from five Birmingham neighborhoods.

David Videcette, a former senior counterterrorism official, said that Birmingham had a better established extremist network than London — a city of seven million — which helped to explain why, in his view, many investigations lead “back to Birmingham.”

Part of Birmingham’s allure to prospective militants is its diverse sprawl of Muslim neighborhoods where they can blend in easily, local activists said.

“It’s a hiding place or a passing place to do what they want to do, and keep a low profile,” said Mohammed Ashfaq, director of Kikit, a community organization that helps young people who are drawn to drugs and extremist ideology.

If a militant were to hide, for example, in Birmingham’s Muslim neighborhood of Sparkbrook, Mr. Ashfaq said, “no one looks at them twice.”

Birmingham is also much poorer than London, providing a more exploitable population for extremists, Mr. Ashfaq said, recalling how his organization dissuaded two youngsters from joining the Islamic State. Both were drug addicts.

“A lot of kids are on drugs, or from single-parent families, or who experience domestic violence,” Mr. Ashfaq said.

In the neighborhoods of Sparkbrook, Washwood Heath and Alum Rock, where many of Birmingham’s Muslims live, mosques dot the cityscape, some offering Shariah councils for family matters. After-school madrassas serve a growing demand for parents who want their children to study the Quran. Even state-funded schools often accommodate religious demands,

allowing for lunchtime prayer, shortened days during Ramadan and optional head scarfs.

To many outsiders, the segregation is striking. But Muslim residents, particularly women, speak of their neighborhoods as safe havens from an increasingly hostile society.

“There is safety in numbers,” said Sara Begum, 20, shopping on Coventry Road, a bustling area where eateries advertise halal meat from Kashmir and Syrian cuisine. Ms. Begum, who wears a face-covering niqab, rarely leaves her neighborhood for fear of being insulted or worse. She said a friend’s head scarf had been ripped away by far-right youths near Birmingham’s downtown train station.

“I feel safe around here because a lot of other women dress like I do,” she said. “Other people look at this neighborhood, they see a lot of brown people and a lot of Muslims and they worry about security.”

Within hours of last week’s attack, Muslim women in Birmingham received text messages warning about the far-right English Defense League mobilizing, and urged them to stay inside after dark.

Small Heath Park, where girls in head scarves play soccer and men in Muslim garb huddle to share a picnic, feels like a different world than the city center, a 10-minute drive away.

There are recently arrived Somalis, third-generation Bangladeshis and European converts, like Alicia Fierens, who moved here with her Chinese husband, also a convert, six years ago because Belgium had become too anti-Muslim, she said. “We were having our first child and

we didn’t want him to grow up with that,” she said. Birmingham is friendlier, “as long as you stay in the area.”

One problem, said Nicola Benyahia, who runs Families for Life, an independent organization that helps parents detect radicalization in their children, is the mistrust between Muslim communities and the authorities.

“It doesn’t help when the community feels on the defensive,” she said, sitting in a sparsely furnished first-floor office.

Residents were angered and appalled when the government in 2008 secretly placed hundreds of close-circuit television cameras in predominantly Muslim neighborhoods. “It didn’t feel like it was for our security,” Ms. Benyahia said.

But she readily acknowledged that recruiters prey on Muslim youths. Her son Rasheed, then 19, abruptly left for Syria in May 2015 and was killed six months later, which prompted her to start her charity to help other parents avoid the same fate.

Ms. Benyahia, a Welsh convert married to an Algerian, said she believed someone in Birmingham had radicalized her son. When her daughter once asked him, Ms. Benyahia said, he recoiled and responded, “Don’t ruin it for anyone else.”

Birmingham’s Green Lane Mosque, a red brick building with a clock tower that was formerly a public library, once had a reputation as an “incubator” of militants, Khalid Mahmood, a local lawmaker, said. Now the mosque seeks to counter them.

Last week the mosque quickly condemned the attack in Westminster, saying it would “only strengthen our ongoing work in exposing deviant extremist ideologies, to ensure that we safeguard vulnerable individuals susceptible to radicalization.”

Mr. Videcette, the former counterterrorism official, said extremist networks are run “like the mafia” and include bookshops that sell extremist literature. They also organize tours and talks involving hate preachers, he said, and use some mosques to raise funds.

“It’s a business for them,” he said. “When we say terrorism, people tend to think it’s about religion. It’s not. This is always about money.”

One man in Britain who blurred the boundary between religion and violent extremism is Anjem Choudary, a founder of Al Muhajiroun, which is classified as a terror organization.

Mr. Choudary, who is now in prison after he was convicted last year of encouraging support for the Islamic State, had preached in Birmingham several times in recent years. His entourage would arrive in big vans on Coventry Road, an area associated with conservative Islam, preaching and distributing leaflets.

“They turned religion into a gang-type thing, with thugs around him saying, ‘Come join our gang,’” said Mr. Ashfaq, the director of Kikit. Their message, he said, was “you can be cool, you can become a gangster jihadi.”

The New York Times Election Angela Merkel’s Re-election Bid Is Buoyed by Widely Watched State

Alison Smale

One outcome that had been in play in Saarland was a governing partnership between the center-left Social Democrats and the far-left Left party, in what would have been the first such coalition in a western German state. But the Left party won only around 13 percent of the vote, and it is likely that the Social Democrats will again be a junior partner in Saarland in a coalition with the Christian Democrats.

“It was a clear ‘No’ to a Left government,” Ms. Kramp-Karrenbauer said.

Another ally of Ms. Merkel, her chief of staff, Peter Altmaier, who is from Saarland, said the result showed

that “straightforward good government” was a winner with German voters.

The far-right Alternative for Germany, which has advanced on an anti-migrant, anti-Muslim platform, got 6.2 percent of the vote, clearing the 5 percent hurdle to get seats. It will now sit in 12 of Germany’s 16 state legislatures.

Mr. Schulz acknowledged disappointment in his party’s performance, but encouraged his supporters not to waver in the monthslong campaign for the national election.

Although Mr. Schulz has lifted his party’s flagging fortunes, most polls show that Ms. Merkel, who has

almost 12 years’ experience of international leadership and crisis management, is still the preferred chancellor.

But Sunday’s projected victory for her party by no means guarantees that she will retain power in September.

In the Sueddeutsche Zeitung, a leading German newspaper, the commentator Nico Fried compared Ms. Merkel’s situation to that of a janitor sweeping sidewalks during a snowstorm: “As soon as he has cleared one patch, he can start all over again.”

Mr. Fried pointed out that even if Ms. Merkel’s party keeps power in Saarland, there are two other state

elections looming where he called her chances of victory slim or hopeless. That appears particularly true in North-Rhine Westphalia, a state that is home to almost 18 million people and votes on May 14, just a week after the crucial second round in France’s presidential elections.

Ms. Merkel, who at times lately has seemed weary, traveled to Saarland on Thursday to plead with Christian Democrats to turn out for the election and persuade others to do the same.

The national election is still months away, and will probably be decided in the final weeks of campaigning. But in the meantime, as Mr. Fried noted, Ms. Merkel must keep her

fractious center-right bloc not just together, but in a positive mood.

Some Christian Democrats have grown impatient with what they see as a lack of a clear response by Ms. Merkel to the surge in popularity of the center left. Months of disagreement between Ms. Merkel and the Christian Democrats' sister party in Bavaria over the management of hundreds of thousands of refugees has gnawed at the unity that her bloc will need to win in September.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

26, 2017 12:41 p.m. ET

BERLIN—German Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservative party scored a clear victory Sunday in the small state of Saarland, dashing hopes among her center-left contenders that the election would signal a change of political sentiment ahead of a national vote in September.

Preliminary results showed the first of three state elections ahead of the Sept. 24 ballot was likely to return the outgoing government, a conservative-led alliance with the left-of-center Social Democratic Party as a junior partner.

Such a government mirrors the setup in Berlin, where Ms. Merkel, now more than a decade in power, rules with her main rivals in a junior position.

"This is an encouraging result for [Ms. Merkel's] Christian Democratic Union because we can witness that pragmatic and honest governing pays off," Peter Altmaier, the

Mr. Schulz, the first leader of his party to be chosen unanimously, responded on Sunday to complaints that he has offered few policy specifics by outlining some goals in an interview with Bild, the country's best-selling newspaper.

Mr. Schulz is making a clear play for female voters. He promised in the interview that if he becomes chancellor, at least half his cabinet ministers will be women. Ms. Merkel's tenure as chancellor has helped other women pursue careers in politics, but she has rarely acted

directly to advance women, though she backed measures encouraging men to take parental leave.

Talking to Bild, Mr. Schulz said he would aim for universal free kindergarten, which would benefit many working women. He also said that university education and Germany's vaunted skilled-labor training programs should be free for students.

In the best traditions of the center left, he suggested, without making a firm commitment, that his party

would rather spend less on weapons than on social causes.

That could set up a clash with Washington, which has urged Germany to do more to meet the goal set for NATO members of military spending equal to 2 percent of annual gross domestic product. President Trump has even suggested Germany owes the United States "vast sums" for America's past defense of the country.

Germany's Christian Democrats on PACE to Win Vote in Saarland

Andrea Thomas

Updated March

chancellor's chief of staff, said as the results came through.

Ms. Merkel's CDU, which has ruled Saarland, the sparsely populated state that borders both France and Luxembourg, for 18 years, came in at 40.4%. That dealt a blow to the Social Democrats, who finished with 30.4% of the vote, preliminary results showed.

Many opinion polls ahead of Sunday's vote had predicted a neck-and-neck race between the two mainstream parties.

The Social Democrats had hoped the nomination of Martin Schulz, a former European Parliament president, as their new chairman and lead candidate for the general election would give their party a boost in the small, conservative state.

Since Mr. Schulz's nomination earlier this year, the party's long anemic ratings have shot up in national opinion polls—even topping those of the CDU in some surveys.

"This is not a good evening," said Mr. Schulz. "But this doesn't mean

we won't achieve our goal. Our goal remains to bring about a change in government in Germany."

Some pollsters said voters in Saarland might have been put off by fears a victorious SPD there would seek a ruling alliance with the smaller, more radical, Left Party, which has been traditionally strong in the state. It scored 12.4% of the votes on Sunday.

"There are still strong reservations among some voters" against such an alliance, Manfred Güllner, head of Forsa polling institute, said.

CDU Secretary-General Peter Tauber said voters had "opted for stability and trustworthiness... The CDU is the only force that has made clear it wouldn't work with either left- or right-wing populists."

Saarland's elections don't normally register on Berlin's political seismograph, and some pollsters warned it wasn't a good gauge of the broader political mood.

A national poll by Infratest Dimap published Friday showed that 45% of voters would favor Mr. Schulz to

become chancellor, with 36% supporting Ms. Merkel. The same poll showed 44% would prefer the Social Democrats to lead the country against 33% for the Christian Democrats. The institute polled 1,023 people between March 20-22 with a margin of error of 1.4 to 3.1 percentage points.

"There is a certain Merkel fatigue within the population. Ms. Merkel appears to be a bit worn out," said Frank Decker, professor for political science at the Bonn university. "People seem to want somebody else leading the country after these nearly 12 years."

Despite the CDU's good showing in Saarland, pollsters say Ms. Merkel is at her most vulnerable in years. Her decision to let in hundreds of thousands of migrants in 2015 has alienated broad swaths of her conservative electorate while "Merkel fatigue" is spreading to some centrist voters.

The New York Times

Bulgaria's Ex-Premier Nears Return to Power in a Key Election for Europe

Boryana Dzhambazova

SOFIA, Bulgaria — The former prime minister of Bulgaria verged on retaking power Sunday as his center-right party held a narrow lead in a contested election, a sign that Bulgarians still see their future lying with the European Union.

While official results were not expected until Monday, it appeared that the former leader, Boiko Borisov, would form a new government in Bulgaria, the European Union's poorest member, probably in a coalition with an alliance of smaller right-wing nationalist parties.

The Socialists, who had advocated stronger ties with Russia and had

vowed to block a renewal of European Union sanctions against the Kremlin, could not convince enough voters that they were the better alternative and conceded defeat.

The result appeared to be a disappointment for President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia, who has sought to exploit divisions in the European Union to strengthen Russia's influence — particularly in a country like Bulgaria, which was one of the Soviet Union's closest allies.

Mr. Borisov, 57, a burly former firefighter and bodyguard of the country's former Communist leader, has been a leading figure in Bulgarian politics for over a decade.

While many Bulgarians are unhappy about the country's endemic corruption, they nonetheless saw Mr. Borisov and his party, the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria, known by its acronym, Gerb, as preferable for leading the country.

"Bulgarians chose to play it safe and bring Gerb back to power, betting on their future in the European Union," said Genoveva Petrova, the executive director of Alpha Research, a Sofia-based pollster. "The Socialists failed to convince people that they could be an agent of change."

The election was held at a particularly challenging time for Bulgaria, a nation of 7.2 million that

has been a European Union member for 10 years and a NATO member for 13 years but still maintains close cultural ties with Russia in a balancing act of East and West.

Europe's fractures over the migrant crisis and the impending departure of Britain from the European Union have complicated Bulgaria's balancing act. The election of President Trump, who has criticized the European Union and NATO and expressed admiration of Mr. Putin — further emboldening the Russian leader — have made the challenge tougher.

"I want to thank Bulgarians for their support of our policies and their reassuring that we ought to continue

governing the country," Mr. Borisov told reporters in Sofia shortly after polls had closed.

He pledged to quickly start talks to create a coalition government, but did not elaborate about the potential partners before the official election results.

Still, it was widely expected they would be members of the United Patriots, an alliance of three right-wing nationalist parties that finished third in the voting after Mr. Borisov's party and the Socialists.

The United Patriots ran their campaign on a strong anti-migrant and pro-populist ticket. How smoothly such a coalition would work remains unclear.

Mr. Borisov's previous government resigned after his party lost the November presidential election to the Socialist-backed candidate Rumen Radev, a former air force commander, who also vowed to improve relations with Moscow.

Emboldened, the Socialists, successors to the former Communists, were hopeful they could emerge as winners again in the snap election held on Sunday. At the end of the campaign, however, they hardened their Moscow-friendly message, a move that some analysts suggested might have cost them.

Kornelia Ninova, the Socialists' leader, had promised to block the

European Union's economic sanctions imposed on Russia after its annexation of Crimea in 2014. The Socialists also pledged to revive the Russia-backed Belene project for the construction of a second nuclear power plant. The deal has been canceled and Bulgaria owes a \$446 million penalty to Russia.

The Socialists also opposed a free-trade agreement between Canada and the European Union. Mrs. Ninova went as far as calling Bulgarian members of the European Parliament who voted to approve that agreement "traitors."

"The party's pro-Russian message intensified as the campaign progressed, which scared away

some undecided voters," Mrs. Petrova said.

Some voters saw Mr. Borisov as a stabilizing influence who would not alienate Russia, even though, as a supporter of Bulgaria's membership in both the European Union and NATO, his previous government backed sanctions against the Kremlin.

But during the campaign, Mr. Borisov expressed support for more "pragmatic" ties with Moscow to benefit both countries. He also repeatedly opposed a NATO-led fleet in the Black Sea, fearing it might antagonize Russia.

INTERNATIONAL

The
Washington
Post

Trump administration weighs deeper involvement in Yemen war (UNE)

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Defense Secretary Jim Mattis has asked the White House to lift Obama-era restrictions on U.S. military support for Persian Gulf states engaged in a protracted civil war against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen, according to senior Trump administration officials.

In a memo this month to national security adviser H.R. McMaster, Mattis said that "limited support" for Yemen operations being conducted by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates — including a planned Emirati offensive to retake a key Red Sea port — would help combat a "common threat."

Approval of the request would mark a significant policy shift. U.S. military activity in Yemen until now has been confined mainly to counterterrorism operations against al-Qaeda's affiliate there, with limited indirect backing for gulf state efforts in a two-year-old war that has yielded significant civilian casualties.

It would also be a clear signal of the administration's intention to move more aggressively against Iran. The Trump White House, in far stronger terms than its predecessor, has echoed Saudi and Emirati charges that Iran is training, arming and directing the Shiite Houthis in a proxy war to increase its regional clout against the Gulf's Sunni monarchies.

The administration is in the midst of a larger review of overall Yemen policy that is not expected to be completed until next month.

But the immediate question, addressed by Mattis's memo and tentatively slated to come before the principals committee of senior national security aides this week, is whether to provide support for a proposed UAE-led operation to push the Houthis from the port of Hodeida, through which humanitarian aid and rebel supplies pass.

The Pentagon memo does not recommend agreeing to every element of the Emirati request. A proposal to provide American Special Operations forces on the ground on the Red Sea coast "was not part of the request [Mattis] is making," said a senior administration official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss planning and the review.

This official and several others said that Mattis and his advisers have asked for removal of President Barack Obama's prohibitions, which would enable the military to support Emirati operations against the Houthis with surveillance and intelligence, refueling, and operational planning assistance without asking for case-by-case White House approval.

A similar Emirati proposal for help in attacking Hodeida was rejected late last year by the Obama administration, on the grounds that Emirati ships and warplanes, U.S.

Special Operations forces and Yemeni government troops were unlikely to succeed in dislodging the entrenched, well-armed rebels and could worsen the humanitarian situation. The effort was seen as sure to escalate a war that the United States and the United Nations have been trying to stop.

[Hundreds of thousands of Yemeni children are nearing starvation]

Some advisers to President Trump share those same concerns, the senior official said. "There has been no decision yet as to whether [the restrictions] will be lifted. There is certainly broad disagreement across our government."

While acknowledging that some might see ending the limits as "a green light for direct involvement in a major war. . . . We can't judge yet what the [review] results will be," the official said, adding that the limits could be modified, removed or left in place.

Advisers are considering whether direct support for the anti-Houthi coalition would take too many resources away from the counterterrorism fight against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and a nascent Islamic State organization in Yemen, the U.S. priority there.

At the same time, what is described as a bare-bones UAE plan has given rise to worry that the Emiratis may not be capable of such a large operation, including holding and stabilizing any reclaimed area, without sucking in U.S. forces.

Without knowing whether the Houthis will give in or fight back — including with Iranian-supplied missiles — there is also concern among U.S. officials that the offensive would further undermine stalemated efforts to negotiate an end to the war and make an already dire humanitarian situation worse.

Yemen's population centers have been decimated by the conflict, in which indiscriminate Saudi airstrikes and fighting on the ground have killed an estimated 10,000 civilians. Both the Houthis, who hold the capital, Sanaa, Hodeida and other cities, and Saudi Arabia, which controls the sea perimeter around Hodeida, have restricted delivery of aid and other goods flowing through the port to other population centers.

On Wednesday, U.N. humanitarian officials said that millions of Yemenis were on the verge of starvation. Yves Daccord, director general of the International Committee of the Red Cross, warned that an extended battle for the port city would "put even more pressure on the population" and could tip the country into greater humanitarian crisis.

While the warring parties have taken part in U.N.-brokered peace talks, negotiations are stalled and all parties remain in practice most interested in battlefield victory, Daccord said in an interview. "That's the problem in Yemen," he said. "They all still think they can win militarily."

Gulf nations see Hodeida as a vital asset for the Houthis and a lifeline to their backers in Iran.

A plan developed by the U.S. Central Command to assist the operation includes other elements that are not part of Mattis's request, officials said. While Marine Corps ships have been off the coast of Yemen for about a year, it was not clear what support role they might play.

The Obama administration's reluctance to take part in the Yemen war was part of Trump's campaign indictment of his predecessor as "weak" on dealing with Iran, and it led to tensions between the United States and Persian Gulf states.

Obama provided limited support for the Saudi and Emirati operations, selling them weapons and refueling their aircraft. But dismay over reports of Saudi pilots' repeated strikes on hospitals, schools and other soft targets prompted his administration to distance itself from the Houthi campaign and impose restrictions. Administration lawyers also raised concerns about U.S. legal responsibility for acts committed by the Saudi-led gulf coalition.

[Trump administration looks to resume Saudi arms sale criticized as endangering civilians in Yemen]

Late last year, in response to a particularly gruesome strike, the Obama administration further scaled back support to the air campaign and froze the sale of certain munitions to Riyadh.

For their part, gulf leaders complained that Obama was pushing them to wrap up the war quickly while withholding support they saw as crucial to pushing the Houthis to the negotiating table.

Trump shares the Sunni gulf states' antipathy for Obama's Iran nuclear deal, along with their belief that Tehran is the principal driver in the Yemen war, and he has signaled a new approach. In a statement last month condemning Iranian ballistic missile tests, Michael Flynn, then Trump's national security adviser, spoke at length about the Iran-Houthi threat and said the administration was "putting Iran on notice."

A senior administration official said at the time that "we assess Iran seeks to leverage this relationship with the Houthis to build a long-term presence in Yemen" and that "we are going to take appropriate action. We are considering a whole range of options."

Early this month, the State Department approved a resumption of sales of precision-guided munitions to Saudi Arabia. A White House spokesman would not comment on whether Trump had signed off on the sales, saying only that the requisite congressional notification had not yet been made.

For the administration, the response to the Emirati proposal is partly rooted in a desire to act against a troubling threat off Yemen's western coast, where officials say Houthi missile attacks have endangered freedom of navigation in a key commercial waterway. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait provides a narrow entry into the Red Sea between the Arabian Peninsula and the African continent.

In a rare direct attack on Houthi interests, the United States in October struck Houthi-controlled coastal radar sites with Tomahawk cruise missiles, in retaliation for an assault on U.S. and allied ships. One of the Houthi missiles launched

at the USS Mason, a guided-missile destroyer, was fired from Hodeida, officials said at the time.

Restrictions on some intelligence-sharing have already been lifted, allowing the United States to reveal more detailed information on the location of Houthi missile sites. The United States is expected to take other steps to counter that threat, including positioning additional ships in the area.

Some former officials believe stepped-up action is overdue. "One of our bedrock interests in the Middle East is freedom of navigation in and around the Arabian Peninsula, and while I understand why no one wanted to get further enmeshed in the Houthi conflict, we came dangerously close to dropping the ball on protecting our interests toward the end of the administration," said Andrew Exum, who was a senior Pentagon official under Obama. "We were too hesitant to respond forcefully."

[U.S. plan to help Yemenis obtain humanitarian aid falters]

With Trump's selection of Mattis to lead the Pentagon and other Iran hawks at the White House, gulf officials see an opportunity to act jointly against their regional rival.

Saudi Maj. Gen. Ahmed Asiri, a spokesman for the gulf coalition, said in a phone interview that "at least now we understand that the government of the United States sees the reality on the ground... and that there is a country in the area that wants to use militias and spoil the situation."

"Now the U.S., Saudis and the UAE are back on the same page," said Yousef al-Otaiba, the UAE ambassador to Washington. "We're getting the support we need."

Full consideration of Mattis's proposal, and the overall Yemen review, have been delayed by other national security issues, including a major meeting last week in Washington of the 68-member U.S. coalition against the Islamic State.

But if decisions are not made soon, the senior administration official said, "we're afraid the situation" in Yemen may escalate, "and our partners may take action regardless. And we won't have visibility, and we won't be in a position to understand what it does to our counterterrorism operations."

Regional experts expressed varying opinions about U.S. support for the Hodeida operation,

Checkpoint newsletter

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"My own view is that we should be encouraging the government and the coalition not to undertake offensive actions with the single exception if they can get Hodeida" to relieve the humanitarian crisis, said Gerald Feierstein, a former U.S. ambassador to Yemen.

But April Longley Alley, a senior analyst with the International Crisis Group, warned that the offensive could intensify Yemenis' suffering and prolong the negotiations stalemate.

"It's a tragic situation for Yemen, and one that could backfire on the coalition," Alley said.

Thomas Gibbons-Neff contributed to this report.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Iraq Military Contradicts Claim U.S.-Led Coalition Airstrike Killed Civilians, Blames Islamic State

Tamer El-Ghobashy and Ali A. Nabhan

Updated March 26, 2017 8:58 p.m. ET

HAMAM AL-ALIL, Iraq—The Iraqi military said Sunday a blast that killed scores of civilians in western Mosul was triggered by an Islamic State booby trap, contradicting local officials and residents who claimed a U.S.-led coalition airstrike caused the deaths.

The Iraqi military statement, based on an initial assessment, came a day after the U.S.-led coalition acknowledged it carried out an airstrike on March 17 at the request of Iraqi security forces against

Islamic State fighters in western Mosul. The location corresponded to allegations of mass casualties.

The coalition, which is backing Iraqi troops that are engaged in fierce fighting to retake the entire city from Islamic State, said it is investigating to determine if the strike caused several houses to collapse, trapping what local officials said could be up to 200 people.

It wasn't possible to independently verify the cause of the blast.

On Sunday, an official with Iraq's civil-defense authority said it had recovered 172 victims so far from a cluster of collapsed homes in the

Mosul al-Jadeeda neighborhood that is at the center of the blast probe.

The blast, and the possible U.S.-led coalition role in it, has brought into focus the extreme dangers the latest push to root out Islamic State from Mosul poses to an estimated half million people believed to be trapped by the combat. Civilians face increasingly harrowing conditions—with dwindling food, clean water and fuel supplies—and those who flee often dodge crossfire between Islamic State and Iraqi forces.

After reaching a muddy field designated as a receiving center outside Mosul, Ahmed Khadim, from the Wadi Hajar district, spoke of

hunger and the constant blasts that ruined his hearing.

"We were running out of food supplies day after day," said the 33-year-old motorcycle mechanic. "The whole family at some point shared just one loaf of bread."

Some 201,000 people have managed to escape western Mosul, according to the Iraqi government. Many have emerged with stories of leaving behind relatives buried under rubble from blasts—whether militant bombs or mortars or government-allied strikes.

Iraqi troops have been battling Islamic State in western Mosul since mid-February, after wresting back

eastern Mosul from the extremist group in late January. The overall campaign to recapture Mosul began in mid-October.

Iraq's government has refused to release casualty figures, but statistics compiled by independent groups have shown the battle for western Mosul has been far deadlier for civilians than in eastern Mosul. The Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights said since February 19, 3,864 civilians have been killed in the west, compared with 2,190 killed in the three months of fighting in the east.

Iraqi politicians have raised questions over the military tactics Iraq's security forces and their U.S.-led coalition advisers have employed in the heavily populated city. Iraq's speaker of parliament said the Mosul al-Jadeeda incident would be the subject of a special session this week. Iraq's defense ministry said it had launched a probe.

According to a U.S. military news release from March 17, the coalition conducted four strikes in Mosul targeting numerous Islamic State positions, weapons systems, vehicles and a car bomb.

The coalition's Saturday statement didn't specify which of those strikes was found to have taken place in Mosul al-Jadeeda. Local residents and officials said

the civilian deaths were clustered in four homes, but the level of destruction made it difficult to determine which house was apparently targeted.

If confirmed that the strike killed the civilians, it would represent the largest death toll by a U.S.-led coalition airstrike since its air campaign against Islamic State began in August 2014.

The allegations come just days after the U.S. said it was investigating two recent reports of mass civilian casualties caused by U.S.-led coalition airstrikes in Syria targeting Islamic State and al Qaeda.

The U.S. military's pace of operations has increased considerably in both countries, raising questions about the effects.

Faster approvals for coalition airstrikes have sped up attacks against the extremist group, but also raised concerns about risk to civilians.

Two senior Iraqi officers from two separate branches of the security forces overseeing the fight in western Mosul said their American advisers have loosened the rules of engagement on airstrikes since President Donald Trump took office.

"The coalition has been merciless," said one of the officers, a senior commander in the Federal Police,

praising the change. The officer said his requests for airstrikes have been approved by a major on a company level, eliminating a review period that required strike requests to go through a command center outside Mosul.

The second officer, a commander with the Counterterrorism Service, said the higher tempo of strikes became noticeable in late February, when the operation to expel Islamic State from western Mosul was launched.

"The coordination with this American administration has been better," the officer said.

U.S. Army Col. Joseph Scrocca, a coalition spokesman, said there had been "no recent changes" in operational procedures for approving airstrikes.

He said by email that in December, as Iraqi forces fought to liberate eastern Mosul from Islamic State, the coalition "delegated approval authority for certain strikes to battlefield commanders to provide better responsiveness to the Iraqi Security Forces when and where they needed it on the battlefield."

He added that "all strikes were still subject to the same due diligence and had to be approved by both a Coalition commander and an Iraqi commander."

An Iraqi officer directly involved in the coordination of airstrikes said while the pace of strikes has quickened, there is still priority given to minimizing risk to civilians.

"Any military operation in the world in this type of environment, there's going to be casualties," the officer said. "With this type of enemy, that risk goes up dramatically."

Iraq's military denied Sunday an airstrike caused the carnage in Mosul al-Jadeeda. In a statement, it said there had been one airstrike requested by Iraqi forces that day but in a district abutting Mosul al-Jadeeda. It said Islamic State had booby trapped the houses, causing them to collapse.

Militants had herded residents into basements, then used the homes as firing positions before blowing them up along with a car bomb as Iraqi forces closed in, the Iraqi military said.

It said a team of experts inspected the site and found evidence of explosives in the rubble and a car bomb detonator, but no damage consistent with an airstrike.

Local officials and residents have said that the area was subjected to several days of airstrikes and shelling before the deadly collapse.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Islamic State Dam Warning Sparks Chaos in Raqqa

Maria Abi-Habib and Nour Alakraa

March 26, 2017 6:18 p.m. ET

Panic swept Islamic State's de facto capital in Syria on Sunday after extremists warned a nearby dam would collapse from U.S.-led airstrikes, prompting hundreds of fearful residents to try to escape the tightly-guarded city of Raqqa.

Families packed into cars and onto motorcycles as they zipped through the streets trying to flee, causing several traffic accidents, according to two residents inside Raqqa. Footage provided by activist groups online showed residents blaring car horns while speeding through intersections.

"People are in the streets running and crying," said a resident, who asked not to be named because of security concerns. "They seem almost drunk."

The exodus followed an Islamic State warning on Sunday morning that Tabqa Dam was under threat "due to American airstrikes and a

great increase in water levels," according to a message distributed via Telegram, an encrypted messaging application.

The ensuing mayhem marked a striking contrast to the strict order Islamic State has typically imposed on the city, which has been sealed off from the world for the past few years. Islamic State controlled a swath of territory that was the size of Belgium at its peak in 2014, but that territory has shrunk dramatically under pressure from the U.S.-backed coalition in both Iraq and Syria. The terror group's austere and brutal rule is now showing signs of crumbling.

A spokesman for the U.S.-led coalition said allied forces were advancing on Tabqa city, its airport and its dam in an attempt to isolate nearby Raqqa.

"We're taking every precaution to preserve the dam's integrity," said U.S. Army Col. Joseph Scrocca, a coalition spokesman.

"We don't assess the dam to be in any imminent danger unless Islamic

State plans to destroy it," Col. Scrocca added, citing coalition surveillance conducted Sunday that showed the dam's structural stability.

American officials have long said Islamic State was planning to weaponize the dams under its control and could load them with explosives to flood nearby cities and towns while preventing the U.S.-led coalition from advancing.

On Sunday, militants drove through Raqqa with loudspeakers initially warning residents that the dam may collapse while some officials urged residents to flee, while others later backtracked and advised them to stay, residents said, reflecting a confusion not usually seen within Islamic State's ranks.

Islamic State fighters themselves have been part of the exodus from Raqqa, with senior officials and valued military equipment moving out of the city late last year ahead of the U.S.-led offensive on Raqqa. Many have headed to Deir Ezzour province in the east, where the

extremists are expected to make their last stand.

As the coalition has closed in, Islamic State has tried to stoke anti-coalition sentiment by playing up the civilian casualties in the battle to retake the Iraqi city of Mosul, where up to 200 civilians were killed last week. The Iraqi military said Sunday an Islamic State booby trap caused the blast, rather than what local officials and residents said was a U.S.-led coalition airstrike. The U.S. said it is investigating the incident.

In spurring civilians to flee a potential collapse of the Tabqa Dam, Islamic State risks losing the human shields it hides behind, who can slow down and complicate the coalition's advances. But a Syrian activist said Islamic State may have also been trying to move some of its own commanders or their families out of Raqqa in the confusion and panic of the civilian exodus.

—Raja Abdulrahim and Noam Raydan contributed to this article.

Rescue workers find 101 bodies in Mosul building destroyed in alleged U.S.-led strike

By Loveday Morris and Mustafa Salim

IRBIL, Iraq — Rescue workers said Sunday they had finished extracting more than 100 bodies from the ruins of a house in Mosul where the U.S.-led coalition is alleged to have carried out an airstrike.

The remains of 101 people had been recovered from the rubble by the end of the day, said Col. Safaa Saadi, a civil defense official on the scene. Families may have also removed “a few” bodies from the wrecked building themselves without registering them, he said.

The civil defense teams are still working to clear other houses in the decimated neighborhood, where residents say some families were wiped out during a heavy bombardment involving coalition airstrikes and artillery as Iraqi forces advanced.

The U.S.-led coalition has acknowledged that it carried out an airstrike against Islamic State fighters at the location corresponding to the allegations of civilian casualties, but it is still investigating the incident. The militants positioned snipers on rooftops and forced civilians to stay in the area as they battled advancing forces, residents said.

Local officials have accused both the coalition and the Iraqi forces they are backing of acting with recklessness as they advance on the western side of the city, which is

densely inhabited. Police forces have been using heavy artillery, and accusations of civilian casualties in U.S.-strikes since President Trump took office have raised questions about whether the new administration is fulfilling his pledge to ramp up the campaign against the Islamic State at the expense of civilians.

“We request that when they do an airstrike they presume that there are civilians in these houses,” said Hussam al-Abar, a provincial council member. “They can’t just drop a half-ton bomb to kill a sniper when there may be a family inside.”

Basma Baseem, the head of Mosul’s local council, said that “senior security leaders” had issued an order banning her from entering western Mosul after she showed “the real image of the destruction caused by the international coalition.”

She compared the devastation in the neighborhood to that of Kobane in Syria, which was left in ruins after Kurdish forces backed by coalition airstrikes retook the town in 2015.

Iraq’s joint operations command offered an alternative account of events Sunday, as security forces barred Baseem and journalists from entering the area after publicizing the strike.

In its statement, the command said that the damage to the house was caused by Islamic State fighters who had booby-trapped it after moving

civilians inside. It said military experts had inspected the house.

“There doesn’t seem to be hole or indication that it was subjected to an airstrike,” the statement said.

However, Mosul’s civil defense chief, Brig. Gen. Mohammed Mahmoud, insisted that the damage was consistent with an airstrike. A burned room at the back where the bodies of several women were found was probably where the missile hit, he said.

Iraqi military commanders had initially said that the damage was caused when a missile hit a car bomb. The house is down a side street, and there is no crater in the road consistent with a car bomb.

Residents said there was a car bomb that day, but on the main thoroughfare of the market.

It is unclear if all the 101 bodies recovered from the building are civilians, or if militants are among them. Saadi said that one found wearing an ammunition belt was not included in the count, but it is difficult to ascertain if other male bodies belonged to militants or civilians. He said women and children had been pulled from the wreckage, but he didn’t have a breakdown for those killed.

The area was one with a high militant presence and an Islamic State headquarters nearby. A neighboring house belonging to an Islamic State fighter who was killed

along with his wife and two children was also destroyed, Saadi said. Weapons were also found in the wreckage, he added.

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Residents said most of the families sheltering in the house had moved there from other neighborhoods and that it was one of the few in the area with a basement.

Iraqi commanders say that the militants are increasingly using civilians as human shields, packing them into buildings that they are using as weapons storage facilities or as headquarters.

Col. Joseph Scrocca, a spokesman for the U.S. military in Baghdad, said the coalition does all it can to reduce civilian casualties but that it would not abandon its commitment to Iraq even as Islamic State militants are using human shields and fighting from civilian neighborhoods.

Civilian casualties “have taken away from the joy of victory for Mosul,” said the province’s governor, Nawfal al-Agoub. “What we want from the coalition is for them not to repeat their mistakes and to be more cautious and accurate.”

Ahmad : ‘We Were Never Brothers’: Iraq’s Divisions May Be Irreconcilable

Aziz Ahmad

March 26, 2017 4:11 p.m. ET

Erbil, Iraq

“I swear by God we are not brothers,” the Sunni Arab sheik shouted from the audience in response to a conservative Shiite lawmaker’s plea for brotherhood. The occasion was a conference last summer at the American University of Kurdistan, in Duhok. It was the two men’s first encounter since the fall of Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city, to Islamic State in June 2014.

Conference organizers had hoped for reconciliation, but there was little sign of it. “We were never brothers,” the sheik said. “We’ve always been afraid of each other.” His candor drew nods from the Sunni men seated in front rows. The speakers and audience members condemned

one another as failures and exchanged blame for the army’s flight, for embracing Islamic State, and for perpetrating massacres.

Sectarian distrust—a problem that has plagued Iraq for much of its modern history and has been amplified since Saddam Hussein’s fall in 2003—was laid bare that day. A country that should have been brought together under the adversity of Islamic State’s rampage seemed to be further apart than ever, with divisions extending far beyond Mosul.

Almost a year later, a fragile coalition of Kurdish, Arab and American forces is slowly advancing in Islamic State’s primary stronghold in Mosul. But retaking the city will not unify Iraq. The current Shiite-led political discourse in Baghdad is synonymous with the denial of rights

to minorities, including Kurds. Conversely, in Mosul a Sunni Arab majority marginalizes minorities, who in turn accuse Sunnis of supporting ISIS.

Sinjar, west of Mosul, is a case in point. When I visited last year I saw no sign of peaceful coexistence. The local security chief, a Yazidi, told me that Sunni Arabs from his village, Kojo, had joined ISIS’s brutal terror against the Yazidis, a religious minority. Men from the al-Metuta tribe helped kill “hundreds,” he said, including 68 members of his own family. “Of course I remember them,” he said. “Those Arab men had a hand in the honor of our women. It’s not possible to live together again.”

In meetings with Iraqi officials and community leaders, I’ve seen how Islamic State’s campaign has

aggravated animosity across tribal, ethnic and religious lines. Without a political track to address tensions between Sunnis and Shites or Kurds and Arabs, the day-after scenario remains perilous.

Addressing the problems begins by restoring trust. For Mosul, Baghdad is already on the wrong foot. The offensive against ISIS includes a coalition of Shiite militias, despite strong protests from Mosul’s predominantly Sunni provincial council. The new formula must tackle minorities’ fears of marginalization by granting local autonomy, including to Christians persecuted by ISIS militants, and by implementing laws already in place to give Sunnis a stake and isolate extremists.

We Kurds can help. We make up a third of the province’s population.

For over a year, our Peshmerga fighters were poised for an assault on Mosul, but our persistent calls for a political agreement were ignored. An agreement during the military campaign is still necessary to prevent intercommunal conflict.

Such an agreement should outline a path toward governance and offer more than a Shiite-centric alternative. In parallel, there must be an effort to demobilize Shiite militias formed in the aftermath of the war by engaging the Iraqi Shiite spiritual leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, for a religious decree. It should also call for the groups' withdrawal from areas liberated by the Peshmerga.

Baghdad should not impose solutions. It

should instead lead talks with Turkey and Iran to defuse regional tensions that intersect in Mosul. Iraq's problem with Turkey can be solved by ending Baghdad's payments to the anti-Ankara Kurdistan Workers' Party, known as PKK, in Sinjar and demanding the group's withdrawal, in line with calls from local officials and the provincial council.

More broadly, once the fight is over, there needs to be a political reckoning by Kurds and Arabs about how the Iraqi state can go forward. It's too late to salvage the post-2003 project; the country has segregated itself into armed enclaves. The Kurdish people suffered a litany of abuses, including genocide, under successive Sunni regimes. More recently, despite a shared history,

the Shiite-led government reneged on promises for partnership and revenue sharing. It suspended Kurdistan's budget and prevents us still from buying weapons. Given that experience, Kurdish loyalty to an Iraqi identity remains nonexistent.

For us, complete separation is the only alternative. Our pursuit of independence is about charting a better course from Iraq's conceptual failure. The path forward should begin from a simple truth: Iraq has already fallen apart, and the country will be better off realigned on the parties' own terms.

A central goal for the U.S. should be to empower the Kurdistan Region. We are a stable, longstanding U.S. ally amid a sea of unrest. We've

proved to be a valuable partner in the war on terrorism and share common values and a commitment to democracy.

The advance on Mosul represents the turn of a chapter that transcends Iraq's three-year war. It represents a moment of reckoning and an opportunity to consolidate the Kurdistan Region on terms that will de-escalate conflict and safeguard its peoples.

Mr. Ahmad is an assistant to the chancellor of the Kurdistan Region Security Council.

The
Washington
Post

Point-blank killing of senior Hamas operative deepens tensions between Israel, Gaza

By Ruth Eglash and Hazem Balousha

JERUSALEM — Hamas closed its only civilian border crossing with Israel on Sunday, and Israeli troops were on high alert as tensions between the two enemies continued to rise two days after a senior Hamas operative was mysteriously shot at point-blank range in the garage of his home.

Hamas has accused Israel of being behind the killing of Mazen Fuqaha, 38, a senior commander in the militant Islamist movement's military wing. He spent nine years in an Israeli prison for his part in planning suicide bombings that killed dozens of Israeli civilians during the second intifada, or uprising, in the early 2000s.

Fuqaha was one of more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners released in 2011 in exchange for Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. Upon his release, Fuqaha was barred from returning to his childhood village in the West Bank and expelled to the Gaza Strip. From there, he managed Hamas's military operations in the West Bank.

His death has brought tensions between Israel and Hamas to their highest level since 2014, when the two sides fought a 50-day war that killed about 74 Israelis and more than 2,100 Palestinians.

[WorldViews: Here's what really happened in the Gaza war (according to the Israelis)]

This is the first time Hamas has closed the Erez crossing, a checkpoint most frequently used by Gazans seeking health care in Israel and the West Bank. Erez is also used by aid workers and foreign journalists seeking to enter Gaza. Gaza also has a crossing into Egypt, but that is almost permanently closed.

Hamas, which Israel and the United States consider a terrorist organization, set up checkpoints across Gaza in pursuit of those who might have been involved in Fuqaha's killing.

"We say it clearly that the crime was planned and conducted by the Zionist enemy. And the enemy will be responsible for the crime consequences," Hamas's military wing, the Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades, said in a statement.

Israel has not commented on Fuqaha's death.

Israel has carried out assassinations of Hamas leaders in the Gaza Strip in the past, but the attacks were launched from the air. Such an up-close killing — Gaza's Health Ministry said Fuqaha was shot at close range with a silencer-fitted pistol — would be almost impossible for Israel to achieve without having people on the inside. Such an attack has not occurred in the coastal enclave since Israel withdrew from the territory in 2005.

Fuqaha's wife, Nahed Asida, said in an interview with Al Jazeera that the

family had just returned from a day out. Her husband went to park the car in their basement garage, she said, and when he did not return for more than half an hour, she thought he had gone to see neighbors. She learned of her husband's death only when a friend came to tell her.

"I couldn't believe it at all. It was a shock," she said. "He received death threats all the time since his release in 2011, but he never paid any attention to it."

No one has asserted responsibility for the attack, but Israeli media reported Sunday that it was similar in style to the killing of Hamas drone engineer Mohammed al-Zawari on Dec. 15, outside his house in Tunisia. That operation was attributed to the Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency.

Additionally, Fuqaha's father told Palestinian media that officers from Shin Bet, Israel's security agency, had visited him several times, threatening that if his son did not halt attacks on Israel, they would get hold of him. During one such visit, the elder Fuqaha said, he put the agents on the phone with his son.

"He was listed by the Israeli security bodies, and his name was mentioned many times before, but what is surprising is the way the assassination was conducted. It is the first time that Israel has operated in such a way in the Gaza Strip," said Ibrahim Madhoun, a columnist

at the Hamas-affiliated newspaper al-Resalah.

Until now, Israel has used missiles and jets to kill Hamas leaders, he said.

Madhoun said that what might have raised Hamas's suspicions that Israel was behind the attack is that Fuqaha is not well known in Gaza but is responsible for Hamas's activities in the West Bank. That would make him a target for Israel.

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Israel is bracing for a reprisal. Troops and communities in southern Israel were put on alert throughout the weekend.

Amos Yadlin, former director of military intelligence, said in a public forum Saturday that Fuqaha's killing could quickly spiral into renewed clashes between Israel and Hamas.

"Hamas could decide that Fuqaha was assassinated by Israel and retaliate, and then we will retaliate to the retaliation, and we could be in another clash very quickly," he said.

Balousha reported from Gaza City.

THE WALL
STREET
JOURNAL

Iran Slaps Sanctions on 15 U.S. Companies as Animosity Grows

Asa Fitch

9:11 a.m. ET

March 26, 2017

DUBAI—Iran on Sunday sanctioned 15 American companies in retaliation for restrictions that the

Trump administration imposed on companies and people allegedly

connected with its ballistic-missile program.

Iran had vowed reciprocal action soon after the Trump administration's move last month, one of several escalations between Iran and the U.S. since President Donald Trump took office in January.

The new strains could hamper regional peacemaking efforts, roll back the Obama administration's nuclear diplomacy with Iran, and even lead the countries into more direct confrontation.

Iran is deeply involved in the six-year Syrian civil war, and is a key player along with the U.S. in international talks toward a political solution. During Mr. Obama's administration, Iran reached a nuclear deal with six world powers including the U.S. that edged toward repairing a long-frayed relationship.

Mr. Trump, however, promised to rip up the nuclear deal during his

campaign. Last month, he tweeted that Iran was "on notice" over its ballistic-missile program. Iran was also among the Muslim-majority countries whose citizens were barred from entering the U.S. under two executive orders that the Trump administration said aimed to keep terrorists out. Those orders have been stayed by federal judges.

Iran's sanctions on Sunday mainly targeted American defense companies, including the Massachusetts-based defense giant Raytheon Co., the Minnesota-based firearms manufacturer Magnum Research Inc., and Illinois firearms manufacturer Lewis Machine and Tool Co., singling them out for allegedly helping Israel and contributing to regional instability, according to the official Islamic Republic News Agency, citing a Foreign Ministry statement.

Other companies sanctioned included Denver-based real-estate giant Re/Max Holdings Inc., which

the ministry said had a role in Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories. Re/Max and the other companies didn't immediately respond to requests for comment.

Dealings with the named companies were prohibited, the ministry said, and their assets in the Islamic Republic were frozen. Representatives for the companies wouldn't be given visas, it said.

It wasn't clear if any of the companies had any ongoing business with the country or assets that could be frozen.

Tehran called the Trump administration's sanctions in February an affront to its right to self-defense and a violation of 2015's nuclear deal. Under that deal—a foreign-policy priority for the Obama administration—the U.S., European Union and United Nations lifted many sanctions against Iran in exchange for curbs on its disputed nuclear program.

"The imposition of new sanctions by the U.S. is based on fabricated and illegitimate pretexts and amounts to an action against international regulations as well as the word and spirit of the [nuclear deal]," Iran's Foreign Ministry said, according to IRNA.

A U.N. Security Council resolution endorsing the nuclear deal called upon Iran not to develop ballistic missiles designed to be capable of carrying nuclear warheads. Iran has continued to conduct ballistic missile tests since the deal, insisting that the weapons are for self-defense and aren't designed to carry such warheads.

Trump administration officials have said Iran's tests, including one in January, were violations of the U.N. resolution.



Rouhani to visit Putin in Moscow as Iran and Russia move closer

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

ISTANBUL — As U.S. influence wanes across the Middle East, Iran and Russia have joined forces to expand their power in the region, strengthening political and diplomatic ties and stepping up joint military operations in Syria.

In a sign of the closer relations, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani is slated to travel Monday to Moscow to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin. It is expected to be Rouhani's last major trip before he faces reelection in May.

Together, the two countries have fought Syrian rebels, sidelined the United States from regional diplomacy and embraced each other as bulwarks against the West.

In a meeting Tuesday, Putin and Rouhani are scheduled officially to discuss projects in areas such as energy, infrastructure and technology. Unofficially, however, the talks are likely to be dominated by their tacit alliance in the Middle East.

"The visit shows the importance that Russia has in Iranian foreign policy. For Russia, Iran is one of their most important political allies," said Mohsen Milani, executive director of the Center for Strategic and Diplomatic Studies at the University of South Florida.

Iran is "playing a key role in Putin's longer-term strategy to become a

major player in the Middle East," said Milani, who is also the author of "The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution: From Monarchy to Islamic Republic."

But Iran and Russia, which compete with each other in global energy markets and have publicly sparred over stalled weapons deals, were never traditional allies. For decades, they have been wary of the other's intentions, and leaders on both sides remain cautious of the growing ties.

Still, the level and scale of the cooperation — including Russia's use of an Iranian air base for Syrian operations last fall — has been unprecedented, analysts say. The partnership has been driven by the two countries' shared goals in Syria, where a rebellion has threatened Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, an ally of both Iran and Russia.

"Since the Russians got more heavily involved in Syria, the relationship between Moscow and Tehran has entered a new phase," said Ellie Geranmayeh, a senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations.

When Syria's revolt began in 2011, the country was host to Russia's only military base in the Middle East. And for Iran, Syria provided a stable land corridor through which to send arms and cash to the Lebanese Hezbollah.

As the Obama administration weighed intervention to support Syria's rebels, Iran and Russia stepped up with weapons and manpower to back the regime.

Russia provided air cover for Iranian military advisers and proxy forces on the ground. The coordination ended up defeating the rebels in Aleppo — empowering Iran and Russia, along with Turkey, to set up parallel peace talks that cut out the United States.

"If you look at Syria and the way that Syria has evolved, it has become the crucible of cooperation between Tehran and Moscow," said Geranmayeh, whose work focuses on Iranian foreign policy, "and pushed their political links to a new level of military cooperation."

Various power factions in Iran had long pushed for closer relations with Russia, Geranmayeh said. But Rouhani's moderate government insisted on a more balanced foreign policy, eventually securing a nuclear deal under which U.N. and other sanctions were lifted.

But that outreach to the West has not proved as fruitful as expected, and Rouhani is under fire at home for failing to deliver economic progress.

Ahead of the election in Iran, "Rouhani is trying to solidify his position and demonstrate that while he has been willing to negotiate with the West and the United States, he is equally willing to solidify Iran's relationship with Russia," Milani said.

Beyond the potential ramifications at home, Iran is also worried that Putin will normalize ties with what appears to be a more Russia-friendly Trump administration. On Iran, President Trump has taken a much more hawkish stance than his

predecessor, putting the Tehran government "on notice" within the first two weeks of his presidency.

"There's a big concern in Tehran that Moscow will use it as a bargaining chip for better relations with Washington," said Maxim A. Suchkov, the Moscow-based editor of Russia-Mideast coverage at Al-Monitor, an online news portal focused on the region.

This is an issue on which "Rouhani may need if not solid guarantees then at least some confidence" that Putin will not undercut Iran, Suchkov said.

There are similar worries among Iranian leaders over Russia's relationship with Israel, which has carried out strikes on Hezbollah targets and Iranian ground forces in Syria.

Rouhani will want to persuade Putin to refrain from aiding Israel to counter Iran "or share sensitive intelligence information" that could hurt Iranian positions in Syria, Suchkov said.

But Geranmayeh said that while the Israel factor limits Iran-Russia relations, it is unlikely Moscow would "even entertain the notion of marginalizing Iran in Syria, especially when they are proving to be quite an effective partner on the ground."

Today's WorldView

What's most important from where the world meets Washington

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"Russia legitimately sees itself as a global player and sees Iran as an important regional player to consider," she said. "Iran won't necessarily override other important regional players like Israel."

Some in the Trump administration believe that "it would be possible for the U.S. to get much tougher on Iran and also maintain a good relationship with Russia in Syria," Milani said.

"You would have to be exceptionally talented with some sort of divine protection to pull off that kind of diplomatic coup d'état," he said.

Not only is their cooperation effective on the ground, "but the

relationship between Iran and Russia is much more comprehensive than the future of Assad or the future of Syria," Milani said.

The Washington Post

Russian police arrest anti-corruption leader Navalny, hundreds more in nationwide rallies

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

MOSCOW — A wave of unsanctioned rallies swept across Russia on Sunday to protest corruption in the government of President Vladimir Putin, in a nationwide show of defiance not seen in years, one the Kremlin had tried in vain to prevent with bans and warnings.

Too angry to be cowed, they poured into the street, fed up with their country's wide-reaching corruption and a government unwilling, or unable, to stop it. Police responded with barricades, tear gas and mass arrests in cities across Russia.

By Sunday evening, riot police in body armor and helmets had hauled in more than 700 demonstrators in central Moscow, as the crowd, numbering in the tens of thousands, cheered, whistled and chanted, "Shame! Shame!"

As twilight approached, protesters in the city clashed with police, and at least one officer was hospitalized with head trauma, the Meduza news agency reported.

One of the first detained in Moscow was the chief architect of the rallies, Alexei Navalny, who called on people to protest in the wake of his allegations that Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev has amassed vineyards, luxury yachts and lavish mansions worth more than \$1 billion.

The Post's Moscow bureau chief, David Filipov, recorded cellphone videos of the atmosphere in Russia's capital on March 26 as tens of thousands of protesters rally against corruption. The Post's Moscow bureau chief, David Filipov, recorded cellphone videos of the atmosphere in Russia's capital on March 26 as tens of thousands of protesters rally against corruption. (David Filipov, The Washington Post)

(David Filipov, The Washington Post)

One of Navalny's associates tweeted that he was told he could face charges of extremism for broadcasting the rally illegally. If that is the case, a lot of people are going to be in trouble: Thousands of

iPhones recorded as police closed off central Moscow's Pushkin Square, lined major streets and hauled anyone carrying signs into large buses. Also among the detained was American Alec Luhn, an accredited reporter for the Guardian; he was later released.

A man with a sign that read "We Found Your Money" and depicted drawings of the luxury boats and estates mentioned in Navalny's report was carried off by police seconds after he took the sign out.

"This is all about corruption. Everyone here knows that all of our leaders are thieves," said Vitaly Kerzunov, a protester who had come to Moscow from Belgorod, about 400 miles to the south. He wanted to take out his own poster, wrapped in a black plastic bag, but he feared arrest.

Fear was one thing authorities were counting on to keep people away. On Friday, senior Russian police official Alexander Gorovoi warned that authorities would "bear no responsibility for any possible negative consequences" for people who did show up. Putin's spokesman said that even telling people to come to the rallies was "illegal."

[Despite Kremlin's warning, defiant Putin critic Navalny to hold 'illegal' rally]

Instead, the demonstrations appear to amount to the largest coordinated protests in Russia since the street rallies that broke out in 2011 and 2012 after a parliamentary election that opposition leaders decried as fraudulent. Back then, Putin accused Hillary Clinton, secretary of state at the time, of inciting the protests.

On Sunday night, the State Department condemned the detentions, saying in a statement that "detaining peaceful protesters, human rights observers, and journalists is an affront to core democratic values." It added that "the United States will monitor this situation, and we call on the government of Russia to immediately release all peaceful protesters."

State-run Russian television was silent on the matter. But

images posted on social media sites such as Twitter suggested that sizable

rallies were underway across the country, and unofficial news agencies such as the Riga-based Meduza carried extensive updates.

The privately owned Interfax news agency reported on rallies across Siberia and in Russia's Far East, where it said two dozen protesters had been detained. The agency cited police as saying that about 7,000 protesters gathered in Moscow, but the crowd, which lined Moscow's main artery, Tverskaya Street, on both sidewalks for more than a mile and crammed the spacious Pushkin Square, appeared to be much larger than that.

For some time, the protesters blocked the street until Interior Ministry troops in combat gear pushed them off. An irritant gas similar to tear gas was discharged; police later reported that someone in the crowd discharged it. For about an hour after the rally began, a voice on a loudspeaker asked protesters who came out "on this spring Sunday" to go "express their will as citizens" at a park away from the city center. Later, as scores of riot police filled the square, the message became more strident.

"You are participants in an unsanctioned demonstration," the voice intoned. "Consider the consequences."

Protesters responded by the thousands in the 21st-century way: They bombarded officers with selfies and videos. One grim-faced lieutenant in urban camouflage cracked a grin as he told The Washington Post, "I must have been photographed 1,000 times today. No, wait; much more than that." Then he posed for another.

The Moscow protest presented an odd juxtaposition of anger and an outdoor party. High school-age young people danced and laughed at the long lines of police as the crowd cheered, then led everyone in a chant: "You can't jail us all!" When a young man held up a pair of yellow rubber ducks — a reference to a detail in Navalny's report that ducks have their own house at one of the lavish estates allegedly

owned by Medvedev — he was immediately dragged off.

"Shame, shame!" screamed the young people. "Shame!" a small group of pensioners chimed in.

Official Moscow has dismissed Navalny, who has said he will run for president in 2018, as a widely reviled nuisance whose allegations are an attention-grabbing stunt. Putin, who almost certainly will run for reelection, is hoping for a landslide to validate his past six years of authoritarian rule, a time in which the Russian economy has slid but the country has asserted itself militarily in Syria and Ukraine.

[Here are 10 critics of Vladimir Putin who died violently or in suspicious ways]

One of the slogans for Sunday's rallies is "No one showed up," a reference to the dismissal by authorities of Navalny's popular support.

A young Moscow couple, who gave only their first names, Alexei and Olga, had brought their 1-year-old daughter, Agata.

Today's WorldView

What's most important from where the world meets Washington

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"We wanted the leaders to see that we're here," Alexei said. "And we had no one to leave her with."

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 says are politically motivated. In 2013, he was convicted of siphoning money off a lumber sale, a verdict that the 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.

Andrew Roth in Moscow and Carol Morello in Washington contributed to this report.

The New York Times **Aleksei Navalny, Top Putin Critic, Arrested as Protests Flare in Russia (UNE)**

Andrew Higgins

But while less heavy-handed than in Belarus, whose Soviet-style president is often referred to as "Europe's last dictator," the police crackdown in Moscow could still complicate efforts by President Trump to deliver on pledges to "get along" with Mr. Putin.

In a statement on Sunday that reflected widespread wariness of the Russian leader in Washington, Senator Ben Sasse, Republican of Nebraska, said: "Putin's thugocracy is on full display. The United States government cannot be silent about Russia's crackdown on peaceful protesters. Free speech is what we're all about and Americans expect our leaders to call out thugs who trample the basic human rights of speech, press, assembly and protest."

Shortly after the senator's statement, Mark Toner, the acting spokesman for the State Department in Washington, said the United States "strongly condemns the detention of hundreds of peaceful protesters throughout Russia on Sunday" and called for their immediate release. "Detaining peaceful protesters, human rights observers, and journalists is an affront to core democratic values," he added.

The protests in Russia on Sunday — nominally against corruption but also a rare show of public defiance against Mr. Putin, who has found a fierce and enduring critic in Mr. Navalny — were the largest coordinated display of public dissatisfaction since anti-Kremlin demonstrations in 2011 and 2012, after an election that was tainted by fraud.

Protesters tried to prevent a police van from taking Mr. Navalny away and chanted: "This is our city. This is our city." Others shouted, "Russia without Putin," and held up pieces of paper denouncing

the Russian president and his allies as thieves.

In a Twitter post, Mr. Navalny urged his followers to continue with the demonstration after he was grabbed by police officers as he tried to join the crowds along Tverskaya Street in the center of Moscow.

"Guys, I'm O.K.," he wrote in a message in Russian. "No need to fight to get me out. Walk along Tverskaya. Our topic of the day is the fight against corruption."

The Moscow Police Department said on its website that "around 500" people had been arrested in the city for taking part in an "unapproved public event." OVD-info, a group that monitors arrests, said the number of arrests in Moscow was at least 1,000.

Instead of waving big banners with antigovernment slogans as in previous protests, most of those who joined Sunday's walk on Tverskaya Street displayed their feelings discreetly. Some waved Russian flags, cloaking their opposition in the same patriotism that Mr. Putin has used so successfully to boost his popularity.

Others carried easily hidden signs featuring pictures of ducks, a reference to a claim by Mr. Navalny that corrupt officials even build houses for their ducks. Among those arrested in Moscow were Russian and foreign journalists, the leader of a small opposition party, Nikolai Lyaskin — who said he was hit around the head by police officers and taken to a hospital — and a British student, Gregory Hill, 17.

Demoralized and divided since the post-2011 election protests, which fizzled amid a wave of arrests, Russia's opposition has struggled to make its voice heard over a din of pro-government sentiment on state-controlled television, which invariably presents opponents of Mr.

Putin as traitors in cahoots with the West.

But Mr. Navalny, a charismatic anti-corruption campaigner who helped lead the 2011-12 protests, has shown a knack for turning repressive action against him and his followers to his own advantage. When an assailant doused him in a green liquid in Siberia last week, he exulted that his face made him look like a superhero.

Instead of directly attacking Mr. Putin, who is hugely popular outside more liberal-leaning cities like Moscow, Mr. Navalny has focused on rallying support by exposing corruption, an issue that alarms even many of Mr. Putin's supporters.

Mr. Putin, who is widely expected to seek another term as president in elections next year, has ruled Russia as president or prime minister since the former president, Boris N. Yeltsin, resigned on Dec. 31, 1999. He faces no credible opposition other than that mobilized by Mr. Navalny, the founder and leader of the Foundation for Fighting Corruption.

The opposition leader has declared his intention to run in the 2018 presidential race, despite a criminal conviction in February on fraud charges that made him ineligible to compete but was widely viewed as a political ploy to keep him out of the race.

Even if Mr. Navalny manages to compete for the presidency, he has little chance of winning. But his presence on the ballot would end what since 2000 have been a series of tightly choreographed presidential contests that resembled coronations.

Dmitri Charishnikov, a 36-year-old web designer who answered Mr. Navalny's call to walk up and down Tverskaya Street, said protests would change nothing as most

Russians "believe what they see on television" and strongly support Mr. Putin. But he added that he still wanted to show that "another Russia still exists."

Nearby, a police officer shouted through a bullhorn that all those walking in the area were "participants in an unsanctioned gathering" and must immediately disperse or risk prosecution.

State television, the main source of news for most Russians, responded to the protests by ignoring them.

In a report published this month, Mr. Navalny detailed how Prime Minister Dmitri A. Medvedev, a close ally of Mr. Putin's, had built a lavish empire of mansions, country estates, luxury yachts, an Italian vineyard and an 18th-century palace near St. Petersburg.

Mr. Navalny called for the protests after Russia's Parliament, which is dominated by United Russia — a political party loyal to Mr. Putin — ignored demands for an investigation into accusations of corruption by senior government officials.

By dusk on Sunday, the protests in Moscow had wound down after sporadic scuffles between the police and protesters.

Russian news media reported at least one police officer was taken to a hospital in Moscow with head injuries. A spokesman for the interior ministry in St. Petersburg denied reports one of its officers had died after being beaten by protesters.

Correction: March 26, 2017

An earlier version of this article, and the accompanying headline, misstated the number of places in Russia where organizers said protests took place. They were in 99 cities and towns, not 100.

The Washington Post **Applebaum : The critical questions on Russia**

There is nothing new about a Russian government seeking to exert influence in Western countries. For many decades, the Soviet Union supported Western communist parties and ran disinformation campaigns (Operation Infektion, the campaign to convince the world that the United States invented AIDS,

was one of the most famous). The KGB slipped money and guns into the hands of terrorists and extremists, the Red Army Faction and the Irish Republican Army among them.

After the demise of the Soviet Union, these games stopped. The KGB was in disarray; more

important, a large part of the Russian establishment then wanted to join the West, not undermine it. But now we live in a different era. Russia is run not by "reformers" but by very rich men who believe that Western institutions, and Western democratic ideals, threaten their power and their stolen money. They

have returned to their old tactics — but with some new twists.

We already know that social media makes it much easier for the Russian state to spread disinformation. Less attention has been paid to the Russian private businessmen who make it much easier for the Russian state to win

friends and buy influence than their Soviet counterparts did. Most "independent" Russian oligarchs are nothing of the sort: Their money came originally from the Russian state, through manipulated "privatizations" and money laundering. They depend upon the state in order to keep it, and if asked they will use it to do the state's bidding. Yet much of what they do on the state's behalf looks like ordinary business: buying and selling companies, investing in property, hiring consultants.

Act Four newsletter

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That context helps explain the career of Paul Manafort, President Trump's former campaign manager and longtime affiliate. According to the Associated Press, Oleg Deripaska, a Russian billionaire,

hired Manafort in 2005, both to help his company and to "influence politics, business dealings and news coverage inside the United States, Europe and former Soviet republics to benefit President Vladimir Putin's government." Manafort does not deny working for Deripaska, who hired him legally. But he says he did not work on behalf of the Russian state. Technically, he is right. In practice there is no difference.

In practice, Manafort was working for the Russian state in at least one other capacity as well. From about 2007 to 2012, Trump's future campaign manager served as an adviser to Viktor Yanukovich, the pro-Russian politician who in 2010 was elected president of Ukraine. Once in power, Yanukovich worked to preserve the corrupt relationships between Russian and Ukrainian oligarchs. He also stole billions of dollars, weakened the Ukrainian state, undermined the constitution and unleashed his security forces on protesters before fleeing in disgrace.

Technically, Manafort would be correct to say, again, that his work for Yanukovich was not done on behalf of the Russian state. But in practice, again, there was no difference.

Russian private money has also played a role in Trump's career. Though Trump has said repeatedly that he has never invested in Russia, Russia has invested in him. Famously, Donald Trump Jr. declared in 2008 that Russian money made up a "pretty disproportionate cross-section of a lot of our assets." More recently, a Reuters investigation showed that holders of Russian passports invested at least \$98 million into seven Trump properties in Florida alone, a number that doesn't include any investors who hid their names behind anonymous shell companies.

Technically, none of this money had anything to do with the Russian state. But in practice, it likely won goodwill and influence for Russia. Over many years, and long before

he became president, Trump repeatedly praised Russia and its president. In 2007, he declared that Putin is "doing a great job." In 2015, he described the Russian president as a "man so highly respected within his own country and beyond."

Just like Deripaska's payments to Manafort, the "disproportionate" Russian investments in Trump's businesses, which Trump still owns, weren't bribes. They didn't involve the KGB, and they probably didn't include any secret payments either. The question now is whether our political system is capable of grappling with this particular form of modern Russian corruption at all. Congress cannot simply ask the question "was this all legal," because it probably was. Congress, or an independent investigator, needs to find a way to ask, "was this moral," because it surely wasn't, and "does it constitute undue influence," which it surely does.



Will the Senate Save the Russia Probe?

Tim Mak

As the House intel probe

descends into chaos, the Senate prepares for its own open hearings this week on Russian interference in U.S. elections.

Amid all the scandal and drama surrounding the House Intelligence Committee's investigation into Russia, the Congressional body that comes out looking best is the silent Senate.

The Senate Intelligence Committee will have its time in the spotlight this week as it holds its first open hearings on prior Russian "active measures" and influence operations in the world. The panel has been essentially quiet on the progress of its investigation since it was announced in January.

The investigation has remained bipartisan, with members of both parties continuing to support the ongoing probe, and without any of the bickering that has characterized the House's efforts.

"This is the most important thing that I've ever done in my public life," said Sen. Mark Warner, the top Democrat on the panel, on NBC's *Meet the Press* Sunday. "We know that the Russians massively interfered in our elections... And we

have the series of people that are very closely affiliated with the president who've had extensive ties with Russia."

In response to a tweet about the need for an independent commission to investigate Russian interference in the U.S. elections, Republican Sen. John Cornyn, a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, pledged that his panel would fill that need.

"The Senate Intelligence Committee is conducting a bipartisan investigation that will earn the country's confidence," Cornyn wrote.

On Thursday the committee will hear testimony from two panels, which include former NSA Director Gen. Keith Alexander and other experts on Russian influence campaigns.

Meanwhile, the House Intelligence Committee investigation continues to reel after its independence and credibility were badly undercut last week.

A divisive hearing with the FBI director led to the revelation that the bureau was undertaking an ongoing investigation into ties between Trump associates and Russia. Committee Chairman, Republican Devin Nunes, held a shocking press conference in which he announced

that Trump transition officials were "incidentally" surveilled, and then briefed the White House before his own committee.

"This committee was doing its best work when Nunes and [top Democrat Rep. Adam] Schiff were working together and giving joint press conferences," Rep. Eric Swalwell, a Democratic member of the committee, told *The Daily Beast*. "Mr. Nunes took an off-ramp from this investigation to conduct his own intelligence service... and without giving it to the committee, took it over to the president... Mr. Nunes needs to find an on-ramp back to this investigation."

Trey Gowdy, a Republican on the committee, said that he thought the health of the committee was "fine," but that he preferred that the probe continue in private, rather than in open hearings.

"I want you and your viewers to ask themselves, 'Why are we satisfied with every other facet of culture having serious investigations done confidentially?' The grand jury. Judges meeting with attorneys. Police officers interviewing suspects," Gowdy said on CBS' *Face the Nation*. "All of that is done confidentially and we are more than satisfied with those investigations. And yet when it comes to Congress,

we think we ought to have a public hearing. One hundred times, those two witnesses [the FBI and NSA directors who testified last Monday] said they could not answer the question in that setting. Why in the hell would we go back to that setting if the witnesses can't answer the questions?"

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The House committee appears to be tilting toward that view. Nunes said late last week that his panel was indefinitely postponing a previously agreed-upon public hearing with national security officials, in favor of a closed hearing with the FBI and NSA directors.

"Perhaps that is something the White House didn't want to see," Schiff said Sunday on CBS. "I can't otherwise account for why we would have this abrupt cancellation of a hearing that both the chair and I had committed to doing."

In a role reversal, this week the House probe will meet behind closed doors, while the Senate probe will have its time in the sun.



O'Grady : Assange and Ecuador's Election

Mary Anastasia O'Grady

Depending on how things go in the April 2 presidential runoff election in Ecuador, WikiLeaks founder Julian

Assange may soon be looking for a new home.

In 2012 Mr. Assange was granted asylum at Ecuador's London embassy, where he went to avoid

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deportation. He is wanted in Sweden for questioning on sexual-assault charges but might eventually be sent to the U.S., where he could face severe penalties for posting classified material on the WikiLeaks website.

If former banker and political outsider Guillermo Lasso of the opposition party CREO wins, he has promised to evict Mr. Assange. Should Lenin Moreno—President Rafael Correa's handpicked candidate—prevail, Mr. Assange's asylum lodgings are likely safe.

The Assange question may be what brings developed-world interest to this election in a small, struggling Andean nation of 16.5 million people. Yet there are more important reasons to pay attention. Ecuadoreans have a chance to throw off the yoke of populist authoritarianism that Mr. Correa and his PAIS Alliance party have imposed since he took office in 2007. The outcome will have implications for the wider struggle against tyranny in the region.

In Brazil, Argentina and Peru, where democratic institutions have held up, antidemocratic demagogues have been turned out of office in recent years. But it's too late for Venezuela and Bolivia, both of which are now full-blown dictatorships.

Colombia has lost its proud republican tradition of institutional checks on the executive. Last year President Juan Manuel Santos dismissed the results of a national plebiscite, declared amnesty for drug-trafficking FARC terrorists, and gave them seats in Congress.

Now is Ecuador's moment of truth.

Mr. Correa has a thirst for power, an affinity for Twitter and a bullying manner. He was an acolyte of Venezuelan strongman Hugo Chávez, who died in 2013. During Mr. Correa's decade in power, civil liberties and the rule of law have disintegrated in Ecuador.

In 2015 Mr. Correa changed the constitution to allow indefinite re-election of a president after 2017. This change ought to have required a national referendum. But since he didn't have popular backing, he used his control of Congress to get it rubber-stamped. It doesn't take much speculation to conclude that Mr. Correa is hoping to add his name to a growing list of Latin American dictators: Peron, Castro, Chávez, Ortega, Morales.

Mr. Moreno is Mr. Correa's proxy in this election. A Moreno triumph is important if Mr. Correa is to be protected from the wide array of

corruption investigations that his opponents are demanding.

Mr. Moreno would also act as a placeholder for Mr. Correa until the 2021 election, as Dmitry Medvedev was for Vladimir Putin from 2008-12. Legalized indefinite re-election would take care of the rest.

Mr. Moreno is an underwhelming candidate. Despite his stint as Mr. Correa's vice president from 2007-13, he is a charismatically challenged politician. Yet his biggest problem may be the poor handling of the economy by Mr. Correa, who has a doctorate in economics from the University of Illinois.

Mr. Correa has ruled with an iron fist but has been constrained by Ecuador's dollarization in 2000, which remains wildly popular. It keeps him from printing money, forcing him to finance a lax fiscal policy with debt. This has been an expensive strategy because Mr. Correa's government borrows at steep rates with short maturities.

Most of the debt issued in 2015 and 2016 costs upward of 10% annually to service. And budget shortfalls mean that debt continues to swell. Billions of dollars in loans from China are not transparent and not part of official debt. But they are serviced with Ecuadorean oil

shipments, putting further strain on the fisc.

The economy did not grow in 2015, and last year it contracted by 2.3%. The International Monetary Fund forecasts that it will shrink another 2.7% this year and will not grow again until 2021. Given Mr. Correa's many violations of the constitution, it is clear that if he wanted to run, he would find a way. But he is smart enough to hand this mess over to someone else.

In a fair contest Mr. Lasso would win easily. Mr. Correa is going to extremes to make sure that doesn't happen. It took him three days to admit his candidate did not get the 40% of the vote he needed to win outright in the first round on Feb. 19. He finally gave in, probably because the army general charged with securing the vote made a stink about government shenanigans with ballot boxes. Mr. Correa fired the general on March 5.

The president is using the resources of the Ecuadorean state, including its large media holdings, in a dirty campaign. If he gets away with it, he will be set up to join the unholy pantheon of Latin dictators—and WikiLeaks will survive.

ETATS-UNIS



Editorial : Trump's new health care opportunity

President Trump says he has a new strategy to address problems with the Affordable Care Act. He is going to wait "to let Obamacare explode" and then wait some more to let the Democrats "come to us" so we can "make one beautiful deal for the people."

But that is not a new strategy. It is waiting that created Friday's legislative disaster in which Trump and House Speaker Paul Ryan poured all their political capital into a failed effort to repeal the 7-year-old law, only to have to abort the mission at the last minute.

When Democrats united to pass the Affordable Care Act in 2010, Republicans united in opposition but did not rush to come up with a plan of their own. Since taking control of the House 2011 and Senate in 2014, they have voted to repeal,

weaken or delay the ACA dozens of times. But still they did not rush to come up with an alternative plan. When Trump rallied voters to win the presidency last year, he united them with vows to "repeal and replace" Obamacare. And neither he nor his transition team rushed to come up with an alternative. Trump and Ryan's American Health Care Act was 18 days old when House Republicans killed it.

"The beauty," Trump says of waiting for an explosion, "is that (the Democrats) own Obamacare." Except it is Republicans who now own the federal government — the House of Representatives and the Senate and the White House — while they ask the American public to wait yet again for Republicans to come up with something, anything, that they are actually for.

There is an alternative: Reach out to Democrats now. Drop the repeal-

and-replace rhetoric. Try repair and rebrand instead.

Some of President Trump's rhetoric presaged just this approach, particularly his promises to get terrific health care for everybody and his vow to leave nobody worse off. He now has a ready-made opportunity to swoop in and "save" Obamacare. He should start working on that now.

He will have plenty of allies. The House Freedom Caucus, an all-or-nothing, my-way-or-the-highway group that has been a force for disruption since the birth of the Tea Party movement, got most of the ink and pixels during the GOP's march to doom. But one of the most welcome revelations was the size and clout of the House forces of moderation. This group has the potential to grow in districts in which conservative voters have seen or experienced the value of insurance

coverage made possible by the Affordable Care Act.

Democrats are no more eager than Republicans to see insurers quit markets and leave people in the lurch, or raise premiums and deductibles so high people can't afford them. It would be nice if Republicans were equally enthused to expand coverage. Short of that, they should at least be interested in making sure existing coverage doesn't erode. How best to achieve that?

There is plenty for Republicans and Democrats to discuss if both parties can focus on repair.

For a start, Congress could restore some of the protections the ACA initially provided and Republicans have challenged, such as money meant to help people cope with high deductibles ("cost sharing reductions"). It also means more states expanding Medicaid, which leads to lower rates for private

plans. It could mean more states creating reinsurance pools, which lower premiums by saving insurance companies money. It could mean finding a way to lower prescription drug prices and requiring transparent pricing of medical services. It does not mean repealing the tax increases and decimating Medicaid in order to cut

taxes for wealthy Americans.

Insurance companies and the country at large will be looking for signals from Trump, Ryan and Tom Price, the secretary of Health and Human Services. Will they stand by and wait for Obamacare to explode? Will they intervene and make sure it does? Or will they work with a structure that is serving

millions well and could be fixed for those it is hurting? A structure that originated with the conservative Heritage Foundation, came to fruition under Republican Gov. Mitt Romney in Massachusetts, and was so successful that Democrats used it as a model for national coverage?

Only option 3 will serve the country well. The sooner Trump stops

waiting and starts working with Democrats and Republican moderates, the healthier the insurance markets — and Americans — will be.

NATIONAL REVIEW ONLINE

Bauer : Republicans & Health-Care Reform -- Possible Next Moves

The death of the American Health Care Act has been greatly exaggerated — not because it is likely to be revived (at least in its current form) but because it might never have really been alive in the first place.

Many of the provisions of the bill were unlikely to survive contact with the Senate, and there was a very strong chance that the bill that was released from a House–Senate conference would radically differ from the AHCA. Perhaps realizing the limits of the AHCA, some defenders of the AHCA supported the measure principally as a way of getting to conference. However, there is no reason to believe that the tensions that pulled down the AHCA on Friday would not similarly undo the resulting House–Senate conference bill. Some Republicans would still be upset that the conference bill was not a full repeal of the Affordable Care Act, and moderates (along with some populists) would be pulled into a tug-of-war with budget-cutters over the size of Medicaid cuts.

Matthew Continetti has observed that the American Health Care Act allowed procedure to dictate policy. Because the bill was designed to be passed through reconciliation, it focused on the government financing of health care. When at the eleventh hour Utah senator Mike Lee suggested that the Senate parliamentarian might allow certain regulations to be changed, regulatory changes were quickly added to the bill. But that was all too late and too fast. Moreover, the fact that the AHCA was essentially a tax- and entitlement-reform bill caused it to accentuate tensions between populists and other factions of the GOP.

There is no inherent reason, though, why the main Republican effort at health-care reform has to be done through reconciliation. In fact, there are some ways in which trying to pass health-care reform through reconciliation is worse in terms of policy and political outcomes. A reconciliation-centric strategy nearly guarantees that the GOP health-care effort will be passed on a party-line vote, which

means that Republicans will own all the warts of the resulting health-care system. Moreover, because reconciliation is mostly limited to finance-related pieces of legislation, the reconciliation process gives Republicans less room to promote an expansive reform effort, which would allow for more far-reaching reforms to the medical system. The fact that a reconciliation-oriented bill does not include these important reforms makes it more likely that there will be more policy warts for Republicans to be the lucky owners of. The policy limitations of a reconciliation effort compound the political dangers.

Republicans do not need to return to health-care reform immediately. There are many other issues, from infrastructure to immigration, that would more closely align with the animating issues of the Trump campaign and where important reforms are needed. However, there could be a political risk in not making some attempt at health-care reform. Republicans have had significant electoral victories over the past few cycles in part because of public frustration with the many shortcomings of the Affordable Care Act, and the U.S. medical system is in need of reform. If Republicans do return to health care, they could simply seek an outright repeal of the Affordable Care Act. They could also try to pass a slightly different bill through reconciliation or offer a more comprehensive health-care bill that does not need to go through reconciliation. Or they could use some combination of these strategies. But whatever approach they take, Republicans might be wise to develop an affirmative vision for health-care policy.

Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry has argued that conservatives should do the following policy two-step: “Slash regulations. And then subsidize health care.” There’s a certain logic to this process. It would allow Republicans to focus on health-care efforts that might be more popular (market-oriented reforms) while avoiding parts that might be more divisive (such as cutting Medicaid for the poor and working class). Rather than “repeal and replace,” it could instead be called “reform and retain.” Medical regulations could be

reformed (including many of the new regulations in the ACA), but many subsidies for low-income Americans would be retained. Reform and retain might end up repealing many elements of the ACA, but the focus would be on improving the American health-care system — not simply eliminating the ACA. (Of course, the Affordable Care Act has inflicted damage on the health-care system, and any effort at reform would have to confront those injuries.)

Republicans do not need to return to health-care reform immediately. However, there could be a political risk in not doing so eventually.

A way of promoting reform and retain might be to design a moderate health-care bill that prioritizes reforming the insurance system (by expanding insurance options, for instance) and the medical-delivery system. It might include allowing insurance to be sold across state lines, increasing the number of medical residencies, or devising mechanisms to encourage more-diverse forms of licensing. This measure might include some tax incentives to help purchase medical insurance, and it might repeal or revise certain taxes (such as the medical-device tax). But the main goal would be to promote policies that would make the medical industry more competitive, more nimble, and more responsive to consumers. Over the long term, these efforts would hopefully reduce the cost of medical care.

Along with these reforms, many health-care subsidies for the poor and working class might be retained, though the precise financing mechanisms might be changed. A health-care bill that keeps subsidies in place would certainly not please everyone in the Republican coalition. Members of the House Freedom Caucus might be upset about the continued government spending on Medicaid, and market-oriented reforms might irritate some corporate lobbyists. But this approach would have the advantage of advancing the principles of innovation while

protecting Republicans from accusations that they are indifferent to the poor. Members of the Freedom Caucus might accept a bill that continues some government subsidies while also reforming the health-care system in order to reduce the demand for even more subsidies.

Moreover, a reform-and-retain bill could put some Democrats in a tough spot. It would make the political battle not about how much to cut Medicaid but instead about how much to expand the diversity of insurance products and medical-delivery institutions. Austerity politics are often a loser in American life, but market-oriented reforms have a stronger track record.

Senate Democrats might intend to use the filibuster to block any significant piece of legislation, hoping that political paralysis will replenish their congressional majorities in 2018. But that strategy runs into trouble if Republicans offer moderate measures with broadly popular policy centerpieces. Then, Democrats risk looking out of touch and partisan. That risk for Democrats is especially great on health care: Republicans can say that they are trying to remedy the defects of the Affordable Care Act but Democrats are blocking these middle-of-the-road reforms.

A swing-state Democratic senator like Bob Casey (Pa.) could fairly easily justify voting against a Republican health-care-reform bill that cuts Medicaid. He’d have a much harder time opposing a bill that keeps Medicaid subsidies in place, offers some tweaks to the financing of health care, and makes significant reforms to the health-care market. Swing-state Democrats may decide that going along with these centrist, market-oriented reforms would be politically safer than trying to block them. And if Democrats do block that kind of reform, Republicans could use that to hammer them in the 2018 midterms. For conservatives, good policy and good political outcomes could follow.

Beltway hysterics to the contrary, the failure of the American Health

Care Act on Friday was not an extinction-level event for Republicans; in fact, the grave political risks associated with

passing the AHCA helped deny it a majority in the House. Still, this failure might teach Republicans that more work still has to be done in

developing conservative policies that address current problems and that can win popular support.

— Fred Bauer is a writer from New England. He blogs at A Certain Enthusiasm.

Bloomberg

El-Erian : Market Impact of Republicans' Insurance Debacle Far From Clear

Mohamed A. El-Erian

Having stiff-armed political risk for quite a while, market participants now have to think a lot more about the issue in general -- and specifically, about how much the Trump administration's legislative agenda will suffer on account of Republicans' last-minute decision on Friday to pull their health-care bill from an imminent vote on the floor of the House of Representatives. Some may be inclined to predict other failures that would impact forthcoming economic bills, given the erosion of Republicans' political capital and the Washington blame game that's sure to play out. But the situation on the ground is a lot more complicated than that.

The derailment of a legislative effort strongly pushed by the president and House Speaker Paul Ryan raises questions about the credibility and influence of the most important members of the Republican Party. This matters to investors, if only because stock markets have already been materially boosted by the view that Republican control of the White

House and both chambers of Congress opened the way for the passage of pro-economic-growth and pro-corporate-earnings legislation. Washington now finds itself in a massive political storm whose possible implications go well beyond health care and political theater.

Because of that, there's a temptation to extrapolate from the messy health-care debacle that future legislative efforts to reform the tax regime and increase infrastructure spending (and accommodate that in a pro-growth budget framework) face a higher risk of difficulties. It's a view that highlights the Republican Party's fractiousness and the inability of the president to force unity on an issue that was central to GOP campaigns in every election since 2010.

That is certainly possible, but it's far from the only potential outcome -- if only because of the complexity of the health-care issue itself. The process also had its slippages -- from unfortunate sequencing and seemingly partial preparation to messy consultative rounds and what appears to have been an

unbalanced stick-and-carrot process.

In assessing implications for economic legislation, an alternative view is that this week's debacle may end up acting as a catalyst for strengthening party unity in the context of a better-structured two-track approach. It builds on the view that the failure reflected, in Ryan's words, the "growing pains" of going from an opposition party to a party in power, and those pains would be overcome in other areas where already there is more agreement. Indeed, the president has already stated that he intends to pivot immediately to tax reform, a signal that some Republican lawmakers are amplifying.

In this scenario, the first track -- that of health care -- would now move at a much slower pace, spreading the party's desired "repeal and reform" effort over several bills. The other track, involving tax reform and infrastructure, would be accelerated while avoiding some of the procedural slippages already experienced by the first track. This second interpretation has the added advantage for markets of lowering

the risk of disruptive trade protectionism.

I do not have enough of a feel or detailed-enough analysis right now in order to speak with conviction as to the probabilities of these two possible scenarios. Indeed, there could even be other outcomes. But what should be crystal-clear is that the implications for stock markets are very different depending on which prevails over the next few weeks. As such, market participants need to step up their analysis of political risk factors whose relevance extends well beyond the United States. In the first instance, this should be reflected in an increase in what, until now, has been a prolonged period of notably repressed price volatility.

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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

White House Opens Door to Democrats in Wake of Health-Bill Failure (UNE)

Siohan Hughes

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WASHINGTON—The White House sent a warning shot to congressional Republicans that it may increase its outreach to Democrats if it can't get the support of hard-line conservatives, a potential shift in legislative strategy that could affect drug prices, the future of a tax overhaul and budgetary priorities.

Days after the House GOP health bill collapsed due to a lack of support from Republicans, White House Chief of Staff Reince Priebus brought up the idea of working with Democrats multiple times, leaving little doubt that the White House intended to send a message to the hard-line Republican flank.

"This president is not going to be a partisan president," Mr. Priebus said on "Fox News Sunday." He said that while "I think it's time for our folks to

come together, I also think it's time to potentially get a few moderate Democrats on board as well."

President Donald Trump could face hurdles in enacting his agenda if he can't broaden his coalition, even though Republicans control both chambers of Congress. Markets have rallied since his election on the prospects that he would drive through tax cuts, boost infrastructure spending and cut regulations, giving a jolt to the economy.

The unraveling of the health bill last week calls into question how easily that broader agenda will be achieved, and could lead some investors to moderate their enthusiasm. The health bill was pulled from the House floor shortly before the markets closed on Friday, meaning that Monday will provide a more complete picture of investor sentiment.

On Friday, Mr. Trump repeatedly said he was willing to work with

Democrats on a new health bill. Earlier this month, he met with House Democrats and told them he wanted to work with them on legislation to allow the government to negotiate for lower drug prices. Mr. Trump has also repeatedly talked about a large infrastructure project to rebuild the nation's roads and bridges—a measure that also could bring both sides to the table.

Whether the Trump administration can work with Democrats remains an open question, but Mr. Trump will have two opportunities in coming months to shift his legislative strategy.

The first comes over a spending bill that will need to be passed to replace a current measure that runs through April 28. Congress and the White House will have to sort through divides over whether to increase military spending at the expense of domestic programs, a perennial fight.

The White House and Republicans have also made an overhaul of the tax code their next big legislative priority, a matter that is particularly fraught.

If Mr. Trump produces a middle-class tax cut, there could be Democratic support. But his campaign plans featured significant rate cuts for high-income households, including a repeal of the estate tax. Tax policies along those lines wouldn't find much favor among Democrats.

"I don't think they're headed in the right direction," Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D., N.Y.) said on ABC's "This Week." "They're going to repeat the same mistake they made on Trumpcare with tax reform."

Mr. Trump has also flashed signs of ambivalence about working with Democrats. On Saturday, he said that unified Democratic opposition was the reason the health bill was pulled, and he has also called Mr.

Schumer the Democrats' "head clown."

But the president and Mr. Schumer have known each other for years, and Mr. Trump has met with Senate Democrats such as Sens. Joe Manchin (D., W.Va.) and Heidi Heitkamp (D., N.D.).

The opening of the door to potential collaboration between Mr. Trump and Democrats took place against a backdrop of Republican infighting over whom to blame for the collapse of the health bill and where to go next.

The president on Sunday took to Twitter to criticize hard-line conservatives—known as the House Freedom Caucus—who had worked to topple the GOP health plan.

"Democrats are smiling in D.C. that the Freedom Caucus, with the help of Club for Growth and Heritage, have saved Planned Parenthood & Ocare!" Mr. Trump wrote.

While hard-line conservatives said that legislation didn't go far enough

to dismantle the Affordable Care Act, some middle-of-the-road Republicans said that the White House had them driven away by making too many concessions to conservatives. The main concession offered last week was to strike a requirement that insurers offer plans that cover 10 essential health benefits, including maternity and mental-health services.

"A lot of the concessions that the White House was making at the end of this process were to try to appease and placate the hard right," Rep. Charlie Dent (R., Pa.) said on "Meet the Press."

Hard-line conservatives are defending their role in bringing down the House GOP health plan last week. Rep. Jim Jordan (R., Ohio), a former chairman of the House Freedom Caucus, said on "Fox News Sunday" that his group of 30 to 40 lawmakers had done the right thing because the House GOP plan fell short of party ideals.

"Instead of doing the blame game, let's get to work," Mr. Jordan said.

Mr. Ryan also ended up in the middle of the burgeoning controversy over who is to blame. On Saturday, Mr. Trump told his followers to "watch @JudgeJeanine on @FoxNews tonight at 9:00 P.M." On that show, host Jeanine Pirro started her segment by saying that "Paul Ryan needs to step down as Speaker of the House" because he didn't deliver the votes to pass the health legislation and had sold Mr. Trump "a bill of goods."

White House officials said that Mr. Trump harbored no bad feelings toward Mr. Ryan and had promoted the show simply to help out the host.

"I've never seen the president, for a second, try to blame Paul Ryan for this," Office of Management and Budget Director Mick Mulvaney said on "Meet the Press."

AshLee Strong, a spokeswoman for Mr. Ryan, said that he and the president had spoken on Sunday. "The president was clear his tweet had nothing to do with the speaker,"

she said. "They are both eager to get back to work on the agenda."

The Trump administration on Sunday provided a reminder for Democrats about why they have opposed his presidency. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt told ABC's "This Week" that on Tuesday, Mr. Trump is expected to sign an executive order to undo President Barack Obama's plan to curb global warming.

"If anything, Democrats are feeling greater pressure from their activist base, which has tasted victory on health care and is even more convinced now in the wisdom of an outright resistance strategy," said Brian Fallon, a longtime Democratic aide who is now the senior adviser to Priorities USA, a Democratic super PAC.

—Richard Rubin, Brent Kendall and Janet Hook contributed to this article.



With AHCA defeat, some Democrats see chance to push for universal coverage

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

COVENTRY, R.I. — At their first town meeting since the Republicans' surprise surrender on the Affordable Care Act, progressives in blue America celebrated — then asked for more. Rhode Island's two Democratic senators, joined by Rep. Jim Langevin, told several hundred happy constituents that the next step in health reform had to mean expanded coverage, provided by the government.

"We have to look harder at a single-payer system," said Langevin (D-R.I.), using a term for universal coverage.

"I'm old enough to have voted for a single-payer system in the House," said Sen. Jack Reed, Rhode Island's senior senator.

"The very best market-based solution is to have a public option," Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse said.

Progressives, emboldened by Republicans' health-care failure, are trying to shift the political debate even further to the left, toward a long-standing goal that Democrats told them was unrealistic. They see in President Trump a less ideological Republican who has also promised universal coverage, and they see a base of Trump

voters who might very well embrace the idea.

The weekend after the implosion of the GOP's American Health Care Act brought that into the open. In several TV interviews, Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) promised to reintroduce a "Medicare for All" bill when the Senate returns to work. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) held a town hall in her San Francisco district where she happily egged on protesters demanding a plan like Sanders's.

"I supported single payer since before you were born," said Pelosi, who has argued since the passage of the Affordable Care Act that it could be a bridge to European-style universal coverage. (The House passed a bill with the "public option" jargon to describe a Medicare-style national plan that could work as a competitor against private insurers.)

In the glow of victory, Democrats spent the weekend thanking activists who showed up at Republican town halls, worked congressional phone lines and made the AHCA politically untenable for many Republicans — especially moderates. Activists also had succeeded in getting most Senate Democrats on the record against Supreme Court nominee Neil Gorsuch.

[Who is to blame for the failure of the health-care overhaul? The finger-pointing begins.]

In Rhode Island, where Democrats hold every major office, activists have been pushing the local party to the left. Sanders won the state's 2016 primary, and the Working Families Party, which endorsed him, has held weekly organizing meetings to find targets for activists. Gov. Gina Raimondo (D-R.I.), a former venture capitalist, has pitched a version of the free public college tuition plan Sanders ran on. Whitehouse, who emerged in the Gorsuch hearings as a key critic, was even protested after he'd voted for several Trump Cabinet nominees.

"That was key," said David Segal, a former Rhode Island legislator and executive director of the progressive group Demand Progress. "Fifteen hundred people showed up to demand that a senator who's generally seen as progressive be more progressive."

But health care was the issue with the most apparent running room for the left. Since January, Democrats and activists had held events that promoted the Affordable Care Act — which for the first six years since its passage had been a loser in polls — by presenting people who'd been helped by the law. In the three weeks that the American Health Care Act was debated in public,

even some conservative allies of the president argued that it had become politically impossible to scale back health coverage.

The victory of a Republican candidate who promised "insurance for everybody," and who once favored universal insurance, made some Democrats ask if an idea once dismissed as socialism might have some bipartisan openings in the post-ideological era of Trump.

"Donald Trump staked out the high moral ground by calling for a feasible system of universal healthcare to replace Obamacare," wrote Newsmax publisher Christopher Ruddy, a Trump friend, 11 days before AHCA crashed to earth. "He shouldn't retreat from that no matter how much the establishment GOP dislikes it."

In response, elected Democrats have felt freer to make health-care demands, despite controlling no branch of government. The windup often suggests that Republicans are right, and that the health-care system must be tweaked.

"We have ideas, they have ideas, to try to improve Obamacare," Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) said in a Sunday interview with ABC News. "We never said it was perfect. We always said we'd work with them to improve it."

On the details, Democrats now argue that Trump should move to the left. Asked where Democrats might work with the president to fix health care, Rep. Frank Pallone Jr. (D-N.J.) suggested "expanding Medicaid in states that haven't expanded it yet" — anathema to Republicans and conservative groups that fought against it. (Medicaid expansion is optional-only because of the 2012 *National Federation of Independent Business v. Sebelius* decision, which was argued by conservatives and struck down small parts of the ACA.) Sanders, who couldn't get all of his colleagues in the Democratic caucus to endorse a prescription drugs importation bill, said he believes that this Republican president might.

"President Trump said a whole lot of stuff on the campaign trail," Sanders said on CNN's "State of the Union" on Sunday. "One of the things he talked about was lowering the cost of prescription drugs. There is wonderful legislation right now in the Senate to do that. President Trump, come on board. Let's work together."

Some Democrats remain skittish about the threat of being tarred by ideological conservatives in tough elections. Saving the Affordable Care Act from repeal united Democrats and healed divisions between the party's base and its politicians. The next health-care

debate might not do that. The only Democrats facing elections soon are candidates for open House seats in deep-red districts, and few have endorsed single payer.

Instead, they've cautiously discussed fixes that might be worked out between the parties. Jim Thompson, a candidate for an open seat in Kansas, said after the AHCA's collapse that parties should "sit down and find a plan that expands coverage, lowers costs, and brings us together." Jon Ossoff, whose bid for an open seat in Georgia has become surprisingly competitive, has run TV ads saying he opposes repeal but favors tweaks to the law. "Both parties should sit down and deliver more affordable health care choices," he said after Friday's debacle.

That approach reflects how, despite Friday's setback, Republicans have long benefited from attacking a "government takeover" of health care. And most special-election Democrats aren't ready to test whether the landscape has changed.

"Obamacare's ongoing collapse is a case study in what occurs with a top-down, government centered approach to healthcare," said National Republican Congressional Committee spokesman Jesse Hunt. "Candidates who advocate for a Bernie-style single payer system do so at their own peril."

That hasn't stopped the Democrats' base, just as Republicans demanded years of fealty to a repeal message, from seeking more on health care. The Coventry town hall, which filled most of the city's largest high school auditorium, was a target-rich environment for local groups trying to get signatures to support expanded health care. J. Mark Ryan, 49, who led the local chapter of Physicians for a National Health Program, walked from row to row with cards that people could sign if they wanted the state to pass a single-payer bill.

"Any Republicans who are interested in being re-elected should be interested in this, too," he said.

Michael Fuchs, 55, got Whitehouse to sign a different card, for a campaign simply to get Rhode Island to endorse the "essential health benefits" that were negotiated away in the final version of the AHCA. Doing so, he pointed out, would protect the state's customers even if Republicans made a successful run at the law. But in the long run, he, too, wanted national health insurance.

"We could at least lower the buy-in age for Medicare to 55," he said.

Over more than two friendly hours, the elected Democrats got the most applause when they swerved left on health care.

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"The very best market-based solution is to have a public option," Whitehouse said. Paraphrasing Benjamin Franklin, he said that a government-managed insurer would reveal what games private insurers had been playing. "The best way to show that a stick is crooked is to put a straight stick next to it. If you do that, the private sector can't manipulate the market by withdrawing."

But as the town hall went on, activists demanded to know if Whitehouse could go further. After several rounds of questions about the need to investigate Russia's involvement in the 2016 election, and the need to filibuster Gorsuch, Ryan, with the physician group, asked the senator if he could get behind universal coverage.

"Why not endorse it this year?" Ryan asked.

In the spirit of the weekend, Whitehouse didn't rule it out. "We already do it for the people we care the most about — our veterans and our seniors," he said.

The New York Times Democrats, Buoyed by G.O.P. Health Defeat, See No Need to Offer Hand (UNE)

Jonathan Martin

And while his electoral success in states represented by Democrats in Congress had been thought to put such lawmakers in a vise between their party and their president, Mr. Trump demonstrated no ability to pick off centrist Democrats in his first significant legislative push. Democrats — red-state moderates and blue-state liberals alike — formed an unbroken front of opposition to the repeal-and-replace campaign.

"We're not going to sacrifice our values for the sake of compromise," said Senator Chuck Schumer of New York, the Democratic leader. "You think people from red states are going to be for tax reform with 98 percent of tax breaks going to the top 1 percent?"

For Democrats, the task of remaining unified was made easier when Republicans decided to go it alone and hastily draft a bill that turned out to be deeply unpopular. But the health care skirmish was also more broadly instructive for a

party still finding its footing now that it has lost both the White House and Congress: Being the "party of no," it turns out, can pay dividends.

"The unity we had internally, combined with the outside mobilization, really made this success possible," said Representative Nancy Pelosi of California, the top House Democrat.

Both Mr. Schumer and Ms. Pelosi insist that they are open to working with Mr. Trump if he shifts to the middle and abandons Republican hard-liners. But while Democrats are loath to hold up Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, a fierce and calculating opponent, as a role model, his strategy as the Republican leader in denying Mr. Obama bipartisan support is plainly more alluring now.

"You certainly saw the power of united Democratic resistance to the Trump agenda on Friday," said Senator Christopher S. Murphy, Democrat of Connecticut. "There's no way you can explain the failure of that bill without the story of a

united Democratic and progressive resistance."

Of course, much of the story revolves around the inability of the fractured Republican majority to reach a consensus. But while many Republican lawmakers were under pressure to oppose the health bill, Democratic members of Congress also felt the heat thanks to the new wave of activism in response to Mr. Trump.

Though the ability of Democrats to do much more than say no remains limited, their success in helping to thwart Mr. Trump will not only embolden them to confront him again — it will also inspire activists to push them to do whatever it takes to block his path.

"Having tasted victory, the resistance forces will feel even more empowered to insist that Democrats continue withholding any cooperation and not granting Trump any victories when he is so wounded," said Brian Fallon, a Democratic strategist.

Still, this rising energy could create internal turbulence for Democrats if activists turn their attention to the next major showdown in Washington: the Supreme Court nomination of Judge Neil M. Gorsuch. The court battle has not yet engendered the same intensity among activists as the health care bill or Mr. Trump's executive orders on immigration. Some Democratic senators are uneasy about rejecting Judge Gorsuch, preferring to save any fight for an opportunity by Mr. Trump to fill a seat now held by a liberal justice.

But the party's senators may now be pressed to take a more aggressive posture against Mr. Gorsuch, opposition that may not halt his confirmation but would force Senate Republicans to eliminate the filibuster for such nominations.

An infrastructure plan may be a safer harbor for Mr. Trump — a measure many in Washington are mystified that he did not try to pursue at the outset of his administration. But Mr. Schumer suggested that the president would

find Democratic votes only if he defied his party and embraced a huge spending bill, rather than just offering tax incentives for companies to build roads, bridges and railways.

"If he's only for tax breaks, it will just be a repeat of the health care debate," Mr. Schumer said.

To many Democrats and some Republicans, the resistance on health care was reminiscent of the 2005 clash over Social Security. President George W. Bush sought to overhaul a program covering millions of Americans but suffered a crippling loss when Democrats put up uniform opposition and Republicans backed away in fear of enduring political consequences.

There is one major difference, though. "President Bush was at 58 percent," noted Ms. Pelosi, adding

that Mr. Trump starts "in a very different place."

But while Mr. Trump's weakness has Democrats hopeful of making electoral gains in the House, next year's Senate map offers few opportunities and many hazards. In the House, Democrats need 24 seats to take back the chamber. That deficit could fall to 23 — coincidentally, the number of Republican-held seats in districts that Hillary Clinton carried — if Democrats win a special election in Georgia.

The vote to fill the suburban Atlanta seat vacated by the new health secretary, Tom Price, will take place on April 18, and the Republicans running are as splintered over how best to confront the Affordable Care Act as their counterparts are in Washington. With Democrats

rallying around a well-funded candidate, Jon Ossoff, and the large field of Republicans splitting the vote, some Republican strategists are concerned that Mr. Ossoff may avoid a runoff by winning 50 percent of the vote.

House Democrats, hoping to continue their momentum, are planning to pour in more money as part of an effort to drive up Democratic turnout, according to an official with the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.

If the anger toward Mr. Trump is enough for them to gain a House seat in a fast-growing Southern suburb, it may be enough to deliver a wave across a broader area of the country next year in the midterm elections, which often yield gains to

the more energized of the two parties.

"There's a storm that's going to hit Republicans in 2018," said Representative Joaquin Castro, a Texas Democrat. "The only question is if it is going to be Category 2 or Category 5."

For now, though, Democrats stand to gain simply by standing back and abiding by the maxim of not getting in the way of an opponent who is damaging himself.

"Our best shot at stopping the Republicans has always been to let them cannibalize themselves, and this proved that," Caitlin Legacki, a Democratic strategist, said of the health care fight.

**The
Washington
Post**

Trump shifts blame for health-care collapse to far right (UNE)

<https://www.facebook.com/amber.j.phillips>

President Trump cast blame Sunday for the collapse of his effort to overhaul the health-care system on conservative interest groups and far-right Republican lawmakers, shifting culpability to his own party after initially faulting Democratic intransigence.

His attack — starting with a tweet that singled out the House Freedom Caucus as well as the influential Club for Growth and Heritage Action for America — marked a new turn in the increasingly troubled relationship between the White House and a divided GOP still adjusting to its unorthodox standard-bearer.

And the tweet served as a warning shot, with battles still to come on issues such as taxes and infrastructure that threaten to further expose Republican fractures, that Trump will not hesitate to apply public pressure on those in his party he views as standing in the way.

In a sign Sunday of the ripple effects on the GOP's conservative flank, one high-profile member of the Freedom Caucus, Rep. Ted Poe (R-Tex.), resigned from the group and took a swipe at its opposition to the Trump-backed health-care bill.

"Saying no is easy; leading is hard," he said.

The rising tensions followed a flurry of finger-pointing after Friday's decision by Trump and House Speaker Paul D. Ryan (R-Wis.) to pull the health-care measure,

effectively ending for now the GOP's years-long quest to repeal President Barack Obama's signature domestic policy achievement.

Not long ago, many Republican leaders, even as they were wary of Trump's background and style, had considered his presidency a chance to unify the party around passing a long-sought policy agenda.

But now, in the health-care bill's raw aftermath, Republican leaders are learning that the Trump presidency is doing little, if anything, to heal their party.

"We've been here before," said Rep. Charlie Dent (R-Pa.), the co-chairman of the centrist Tuesday Group. "The only difference is now we have a Republican president, and some people thought the fever might break a little bit. But apparently not."

Trump's attack Sunday had the look of a coordinated effort.

His tweet appeared at 8:21 a.m. as official Washington prepared to tune into Sunday news shows: "Democrats are smiling in D.C. that the Freedom Caucus, with the help of Club For Growth and Heritage, have saved Planned Parenthood & Ocare!"

Less than an hour later, White House Chief of Staff Reince Priebus appeared on television to echo his boss's sentiments, saying his missive hit "the bull's eye."

As if to rub salt in the GOP's wound, Priebus hinted that Trump may simply start looking past the Republican majority and try forging more consensus with moderate

Democrats in future legislative battles. Priebus pointed to the Freedom Caucus and the Tuesday Group for heavily resisting the health-care bill.

"We can't be chasing the perfect all the time," Priebus said during an appearance on "Fox News Sunday." "I mean, sometimes you have to take the good and put it in your pocket and take the win."

Although Trump targeted conservative opponents of the bill Sunday, he has also shown signs of frustration with its moderate critics. On NBC's "Meet the Press," Dent acknowledged that Trump told him in a private meeting that he was "destroying the Republican Party" and that he "was going to take down tax reform," as first reported by the New York Times magazine.

Trump's tweet came a day after a strange episode that prompted speculation that he was seeking to undermine Ryan's standing.

Trump encouraged his Twitter followers Saturday to watch Jeanine Pirro, one of his favorite Fox News Channel hosts, that night.

On her program, Pirro said that Ryan should resign as speaker, adding that despite his "swagger and experience," he presided over a failed effort that allowed "our president in his first 100 days to come out of the box like that."

Priebus, in his Sunday appearance, dismissed the episode as a coincidence, and Trump has said in recent days that he has a good relationship with Ryan.

"He doesn't blame Paul Ryan," Priebus said on Fox News. "In fact,

he thought Paul Ryan worked really hard. He enjoys his relationship with Paul Ryan, thinks that Paul Ryan is a great speaker of the House."

Nonetheless, the episode served to highlight the challenges ahead for Ryan in attempting to regain control over the House GOP and maintain a working rapport with the White House.

Doug Heye, a GOP strategist and former congressional aide, said Republicans' inability to forge consensus on health care shook the party to the core.

"It's hard to see where we can be successful, and it leads to a lot of questions as to whether Republicans can govern, even with a Republican in the White House," he said.

White House budget director Mick Mulvaney, a Republican former congressman who helped found the Freedom Caucus, was at a loss Sunday to explain why so many of those members were not prepared to vote for the health-care bill.

Speaking on "Meet the Press," Mulvaney said that conservatives were not the only ones to blame, saying, "It was a bizarre combination of who was against this bill, some folks in the Freedom Caucus and then moderates on the other end of our spectrum."

Rep. Mark Meadows (R-N.C.), who heads the Freedom Caucus, responded to the tweet without any animosity toward the president.

"I mean, if [Democrats are] applauding, they shouldn't, because I can tell you that conversations over the last 48 hours are really

about how we come together in the Republican Conference and try to get this over the finish line," he said on ABC's "This Week with George Stephanopoulos."

A spokeswoman for the Freedom Caucus did not comment on Trump's tweet or Poe's departure. It was unclear whether Trump's statement had a direct effect on Poe's decision to leave the caucus.

The tweet directed at the Freedom Caucus was "a reminder that nothing goes without notice," said one Trump associate with direct knowledge of White House strategy.

The Trump associate, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he is not authorized to speak for the White House, said that Trump was disappointed in Meadows and others in the caucus and wanted to remind them that he can use his powers to make their lives more difficult if they are not with him in the future.

The Club for Growth and Heritage Action for America, which is an affiliate of the Heritage Foundation, a longtime conservative think tank, are known for staking out positions that are often at odds with those of GOP leaders.

Heritage Action on Sunday defended the House Freedom Caucus's decision not to support the health-care legislation while striking a conciliatory tone with the president.

The bill "had no natural constituency and was widely criticized by conservative health-care experts because it left premium-increasing provisions of Obamacare in place," said Dan Holler, a spokesman for Heritage Action. "We now have the opportunity to reset the debate, and conservatives are eager to work with the administration and congressional leadership as things move forward."

The Club for Growth did not respond to requests for comment.

The House GOP bill would have repealed and replaced key parts of the Affordable Care Act. It came under consistent criticism from both ends of the political spectrum. Ryan and Trump pulled the bill Friday afternoon after deciding it could not pass — after weeks of negotiations with conservative and centrist Republican members of the sizable GOP House majority.

Although Ryan's job doesn't appear to be in jeopardy, his ability to

shepherd the rest of the Republican agenda through his chamber is in doubt.

Some Freedom Caucus members are wary of efforts that would add to the federal deficit. But in a sign that Meadows may be willing to compromise on tax reform, he said that tax cuts don't necessarily have to be paired with spending cuts or revenue increases.

"Does it have to be fully offset? My personal response is no," he said on ABC.

Since Friday, Trump aides have been talking increasingly about reaching out to moderate Democrats for help not only on another health-care bill but also on other priorities. But prospects for such cooperation remain difficult.

There has been virtually no outreach to Democrats about a tax package. Although Democrats like the idea of infrastructure spending, the parties have different visions of how it should be paid for.

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"If he aims a proposal aimed at the middle class and the poor people ... we could work with them. But I don't think they're headed in that direction, and they're going repeat the same mistake" they made with the health-care bill, Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) predicted of tax reform on "This Week."

Aides and advisers to Trump say it's clear that he will need support from some Democrats, particularly in the Senate, to move parts of his agenda forward beyond tax reform.

Michael Steel, who was a senior aide to then-Speaker John A. Boehner (R-Ohio), said Trump is at a crossroads as he takes up tax reform.

"The president is going to have a choice: to reach out to moderate Democrats and work in a bipartisan fashion; or to reach out to recalcitrant Republicans in his own party that he wasn't able to get this time," Steel said.

POLITICO White House blame game intensifies as Trump agenda stalls

By Alex Isenstadt

With President Donald Trump's sweeping agenda hitting the rocks as he edges toward the 100-day mark, top aides, political allies and donors are embroiled in a furious round of finger-pointing over who is at fault.

The recriminations extend far beyond the implosion of the GOP's Obamacare repeal on Friday. Senior aides are lashing each other over their inability to stem a never-ending tide of negative stories about the president. There is second-guessing of the Republican National Committee's efforts to mobilize Trump's electoral coalition on behalf of his legislative priorities. At the Environmental Protection Agency, a top official quit recently amid accusations the department is failing to advance the president's campaign promises. And one of Trump's most generous benefactors, Rebekah Mercer, has expressed frustration over the direction of the administration.

Story Continued Below

This account of White House infighting is based on interviews with more than two dozen Trump aides, confidants and others close to his administration, all of whom spoke on the condition of anonymity. They described a

distracting and toxic atmosphere, with warring power centers blaming one another for an ever-growing list of setbacks. The dysfunction has further paralyzed an administration struggling to deliver on its blunt promises of wholesale change.

The environment, many Trump aides are convinced, has been created by the president himself — a larger-than-life figure famously loath to admit error. As Trump's health care plan ran into problems, he found ways to divert blame — sometimes turning on his own staff.

After Gary Cohn, the chief White House economic adviser, went on Fox News Sunday this month to talk about the reform push, the media-obsessed president complained bitterly about the appearance, venting that Cohn failed to clearly sell the merits of the plan, according to three people familiar with the matter. (A White House spokeswoman, Hope Hicks, denied that Trump had expressed unhappiness and said he had been "complimentary of Gary's appearance.")

For the new White House, nothing has been more frustrating than health care. Repealing and replacing Obamacare was one of Trump's signature campaign promises. But the discussions surrounding the rocky weeks

leading to its collapse generated an outpouring of ill will in the West Wing. Steve Bannon, Trump's populist-minded chief strategist, privately singled out the more moderate Cohn for criticism, charging that he was too willing to make concessions to mainstream Republicans that repelled the hard-line House Freedom Caucus.

Others say the fault lies with chief of staff Reince Priebus. The former RNC chairman was elevated to his current role because he was seen as a savvy Washington operator whose Capitol Hill relationships, particularly with House Speaker Paul Ryan, would help the newcomer Trump. The health care talks, these people say, reveal the limits of his reach.

Still others pinned blame on Jared Kushner, Trump's politically moderate son-in-law and senior adviser. As White House staffers struggled to galvanize support for the flagging health care bill, some became convinced that Kushner was working to defeat the repeal effort. Suspicions increased when Kushner invited Obamacare architect Ezekiel Emanuel to address staffers at a meeting on Monday — a gathering that left some staffers rolling their eyes.

Then, with the legislation teetering, Kushner left town for a two-day ski trip to Aspen.

"It was noticed," one senior administration official said of the Colorado jaunt.

The recriminations, however, were not limited to the health care fiasco. For weeks, many staffers have expressed profound unhappiness with a communications office that has struggled to accomplish what it had set out to do: To inoculate a president who is preoccupied with his public image.

"We've done a disservice because we haven't handled things well," one White House aide said of the press team's performance.

Many Trump loyalists criticize former RNC employees now working in the communications office. Among the complaints: That RNC veterans mobilize with force when reporters are working on critical stories about Priebus, the former party chairman, but sometimes lack the same urgency when responding to articles about Trump.

It has spurred allegations that communications officials, many of whom worked for Priebus at the committee and followed him to the

White House, are loyal to the chief of staff above all else.

The ever-present focus on Priebus was on full display during a communications office meeting last month. Press secretary Sean Spicer, a Priebus lieutenant, became so visibly upset over a story about the chief of staff that some were startled by his reaction, according to a person familiar with the matter. (Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the White House spokeswoman, denied that happened, and dismissed the notion that the press office had taken extra steps to protect Priebus.)

There are also growing complaints being directed at the Trump's political operation, which senior Republicans had hoped would marshal support for the president's agenda. The efforts, however, have been described as halting and ill-planned.

Among the objections: That the RNC erred when it declined to give jobs to a trio of Trump loyalists, Michael Biundo, Christie-Lee McNally and Stephanie Milligan, all of whom had applied for jobs in the political department. Instead, the positions were awarded to a group of Republican operatives who did not work on Trump's campaign.

The Trump loyalists' deep knowledge of the president's political network could have been an asset, some argue. Adding to the hurt feelings, the three did not receive phone calls informing them that they did not get the positions before the hires were publicly announced.

"If you have people that don't believe in the president, I don't think they're going to be that forceful in protecting the White House," said one former Trump campaign staffer. "There's nothing there to push through the agenda, to push through the Supreme Court justice, there's nothing there to help him with."

RNC officials insist they've taken steps to include Trump veterans. The committee recently hired Brad Parscale, who was Trump's digital director, as an outside consultant.

The White House office of political affairs is another target of grousing. On March 15, Trump visited Michigan, a traditionally Democratic state that he won, to talk about his efforts to revitalize the automobile industry. Yet the Michigan Republican Party was not made aware that the event would be occurring until it was publicly announced, hampering its ability to organize and rally Trump boosters to the appearance in Ypsilanti.

Then there's Trump's official campaign, which on Monday organized a Trump event in Kentucky. The visit was designed to sell the health care bill and to put pressure on GOP Sen. Rand Paul, who had been an outspoken opponent. Some of Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's allies had hoped that McConnell, an outsized figure in Kentucky politics who has a large following in the state, would introduce Trump and make a forceful sell for the legislation.

But in the end, after some back-and-forth between the two sides, it was decided that McConnell would speak at the event but not introduce the president, instead taking the stage about 15 minutes before Trump. While some McConnell aides said it was all much ado about nothing, others close to the senator were surprised by the decision and thought it was a mistake.

"What was the purpose of this event?" said one McConnell ally. "If it were me, I would have had him out there."

"We're two months into the presidency, and it's kind of a cluster," said one state Republican Party official. "It's not that they're bad people. It's just that they don't know what they're doing."

Sniping over Trump's early troubles is occurring at federal agencies, too.

Revitalizing the beleaguered coal industry and loosening restrictions on emissions was a cornerstone of Trump's pitch to blue collar voters. Yet, two months into his presidency, Trump loyalists are accusing EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt of moving too slowly to push the president's priorities.

Earlier this month, David Schnare, a Trump appointee who worked on the transition team, abruptly quit. According to two people familiar with the matter, among Schnare's complaints was that Pruitt had yet to overturn the EPA's endangerment finding, which empowers the agency to regulate greenhouse gas emissions as a public health threat.

Schnare's departure was described as stormy, and those who've spoken with him say his anger at Pruitt runs deep.

"The backstory to my resignation is extremely complex," he told E&E News, an energy industry trade publication. "I will be writing about it myself. It is a story not about me, but about a much more interesting set of events involving misuse of federal funds, failure to honor oaths of office, and a lack of loyalty to the president."

Other Trump loyalists at EPA complain they've been shut out of meetings with higher-ups and are convinced that Pruitt is pursuing his own agenda instead of the president's. Some suspect that he is trying to position himself for an eventual Senate campaign. (EPA spokespersons did not respond to requests for comment.)

The president's biggest donors are pointing fingers, too. Mercer, a philanthropist who has bankrolled the "alt-right" movement that formed the underpinnings of Trump's campaign, had hoped the new White House would adopt an anti-establishment mindset.

Yet in recent weeks, Mercer, who pushed for Bannon to be chief of staff but was overruled, has complained that too many Beltway

Republicans were being hired, said one person who has spoken to her. She partly faults Priebus, saying he has used his position to bring a number of establishment allies into the administration.

The White House is also moving to soothe megadonor Sheldon Adelson. The Las Vegas casino mogul has been pleased with many of Trump's early moves, including his decision to tap David Friedman as ambassador to Israel. Yet people close to Adelson say he was alarmed by the administration's decision to retain State Department official Michael Ratney, an appointee of former President Barack Obama who is viewed with suspicion by those in the pro-Israel community. Kushner, who is overseeing Trump's push for a Middle East peace accord, has discussed the matter with Adelson.

As the dust cleared over the weekend from the health care failure, Trump aides dismissed talk of a possible staff shakeup. While they described the president as disappointed, they also said he was ready to move on. After all the pushback the bill had gotten, he'd come to realize that it might not be the right piece of legislation after all.

Yet the blame game is taking a toll on an exhausted White House. At the highest levels of the West Wing, the mood has grown so tense that staffers have begun calling up reporters inquiring whether other senior aides are leaking damaging information about them.

"The various warring fiefdoms and camps within the White House are constantly changing and are so vast and complicated in their nature," said one former Trump campaign aide, "that there is no amount of reporting that could accurately describe the subterfuge, animosity and finger-pointing that is currently happening within the ranks of the senior staff."



Hiatt : The health-care debacle isn't Trump's biggest failure

When it comes to political malpractice, failing on repeal-and-replace is not Exhibit A. For weeks there has been a more obvious question for Stephen K. Bannon and President Trump: Why are they driving Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer into the arms of the implacable opposition?

Wouldn't the smart play be to coerce, or induce, or at least leave a tiny bit of room for Schumer (D-N.Y.) to cooperate? Wouldn't the

natural first move for Trump have been to assemble, from both parties, a populist majority in Congress?

Last week two of my Post colleagues, conservative commentators Marc Thiessen and Ed Rogers, argued that Schumer is sinking his party's 2018 prospects by joining the irreconcilable resistance instead of working with the president where possible. By leading a filibuster against Supreme Court nominee Judge Neil Gorsuch, voting even against Transportation

Secretary Elaine Chao (wife of Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell [R-Ky.]) and generally refusing to play ball, Schumer is showing that he didn't get the 2016 message from middle America, they opined.

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Thiessen and Rogers may be right that uncompromising resistance will

not help Democrats win independent voters in 2018.

But their analysis overlooks two points: Trump's behavior from Inauguration Day on left Schumer no choice. More important, what's bad for Democrats isn't necessarily optimal for Trump — especially if his and Bannon's goal was to blow up both parties and forge a new working-class, nationalist majority that can carry Trump to triumphant reelection in 2020.

To be clear: I think that's the wrong goal for our country. But if Trump had begun his administration by seeking a bipartisan infrastructure bill, Schumer would have had no choice but to cooperate, and might well have welcomed the chance. Half the unions that normally support Democrats would have been on Trump's side and pressing both parties to get on board.

Instead, Trump opened his presidency with a dark and one-sided address that gave no credit to his predecessor and opened no doors to cooperation. He followed that address with bizarre misstatements about crowd size and tweets mocking the protesters who marched in vast numbers the next day. "Why didn't these people vote?" Trump taunted.

"These people" were Schumer's base. Only days into the administration, thousands of liberals were demonstrating outside the Brooklyn apartment building where the senator lives.



Bloomberg : Stop Blaming. Start Governing.

Michael R. Bloomberg

Who's to blame for the failure of the Republican bill to repeal and replace Obamacare? Who cares? What matters now is that Democrats stop gloating, Republicans stop sulking, and each party come to the table to improve a health-care system that both parties agree needs work.

After the bill collapsed on Friday afternoon, President Donald Trump accused the Democrats of obstruction, Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer accused the president of incompetence, Speaker Paul Ryan said health care was done, and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi bragged that it was a great day. No one had the courage to pick up the pieces and point the way forward.



Krugman : How to Build on Obamacare

Paul Krugman

"Nobody knew that health care could be so complicated." So declared Donald Trump three weeks before wimping out on his promise to repeal Obamacare. Up next: "Nobody knew that tax reform could be so complicated." Then, perhaps: "Nobody knew that international trade policy could be so complicated." And so on.

Actually, though, health care isn't all that complicated. Basically, you need to induce people who don't currently need medical treatment to

"Grow a spine, Chuck!" they demanded. "Filibuster everything!"

Even then, you might have made a case that for the good of his party, and the country, Schumer should stand up to his left wing. But he would have had to make common cause with a president who was belittling him as "head clown" and "Fake Tears Chuck Schumer."

Even more difficult, he would have had to make cause with a president who selected as his first objective the erasure of President Barack Obama's principal accomplishment. No Democratic leader could be in any way accomplice to that goal and expect to survive. No Democratic leader would want to.

Imagine if Trump instead had told House Speaker Paul D. Ryan (R-Wis.) that repeal-and-replace, and even tax cuts, had to wait. Imagine if Bannon had insisted that Congress first take up his trillion-dollar infrastructure plan.

The Affordable Care Act has provided health-care coverage to millions more Americans, but there are still some 30 million with no insurance. Premiums are too high. The individual mandate isn't encouraging enough people to buy into the system. Some of its regulations and taxes make little sense. Insurance markets are too thin, providing consumers too little choice. Health-care savings accounts do too little to encourage savings.

Republicans have viable ideas to address these issues, including high-risk insurance pools and capping the tax exclusion that companies get for providing employees with health insurance. It's regrettable that none of these ideas were seriously considered in the rush to repeal Obamacare.

pay the bills for those who do, with the promise that the favor will be returned if necessary.

Unfortunately, Republicans have spent eight years angrily denying that simple proposition. And that refusal to think seriously about how health care works is the fundamental reason Mr. Trump and his allies in Congress now look like such losers.

But put politics aside for a minute, and ask, what could be done to make health care work better going forward?

There would have been some grousing from deficit hawks. But we've seen often enough that the one place Democrats and Republicans can find common ground is on measures that worsen the deficit.

There would have been disagreements, too, on the structure of the plan — how to pay for at least some of it, how to balance spending on roads with spending on mass transit, how radically to gut environmental protections on behalf of speed of execution.

But the pressure on Democrats to cut a deal would have been enormous. Would it have split the party? All the better, from Trump's point of view. And if it split the Republicans, too, wouldn't that have advanced the grand Bannon plan for world domination?

Which leads to an interesting question: Why *didn't* Trump start with infrastructure and cooperation?

Equally regrettable is that Republicans appear to be giving up and moving on to other issues. If they can't get everything they want, they seem to have concluded, they'll take nothing. It's a bad strategy. As Senator John McCain said Saturday, Republicans need Democrats to reform health care. The art of governing is compromise — and not just within the majority party. The sooner Ryan accepts the fact that Democrats can be a cudgel to use against the Freedom Caucus, the more successful he and Congress will be.

Ronald Reagan was known to say that he would happily take 70 or 80 percent of what he wanted and come back for the rest later. Yet instead of living by Reagan's rule, Republicans are hung up on the Hastert Rule, named for Dennis Hastert, the former (and now disgraced) House speaker:

One possibility is that he didn't because he couldn't, temperamentally. He couldn't control his jeers and insults, and Bannon couldn't control them either, so before the administration could even choose its first priority, the decision was essentially made for it: Democrats had been alienated and Trump had to start with initiatives that he thought could pass with only Republican support. The simultaneously gathering cloud regarding Russia only made it more certain that no Democrats could be seen advancing a Trump initiative.

Another possibility is that the more conventional Republicans inside the administration — Chief of Staff Reince Priebus, Vice President Pence — argued for more conventional Republican goals and won.

Whatever the case, Trump missed an opportunity to reshape politics that may not present itself again.

Generally speaking, only bills that can get through without Democratic votes are brought to the floor. This led the party to produce a deeply flawed health-care bill that, ultimately, did not win strong support from the Republicans' moderate or Tea Party wings.

At the same time, Democrats steadfastly refused to reach across the aisle to produce a bipartisan alternative. Gloating only makes that more difficult.

On Friday, Schumer said that Democrats are ready to work with Republicans to improve the Affordable Care Act on one condition: that Republicans take repeal off the table. This is not an auspicious step. Democrats ought to allow Republicans to call a new bill whatever they want. The details are what matters, not the label.

combination of regulations and subsidies to keep policies affordable. This has worked well in some places. For example, in California, which has tried hard to make health reform work, the number of people with health insurance has soared, while premiums are still well below expectations.

Overall, however, too few healthy people have purchased insurance, despite the penalty for failing to sign up; this is partly because many of the policies offered have high deductibles, making them less

attractive. As a result, some companies have pulled out of the market. And this has left some areas, especially rural counties in small states, with few or no insurers.

No, it's not a "death spiral" — subsidies keep insurance affordable for most people even if premiums rise sharply, and the Congressional Budget Office believes that markets will remain stable. But the system could and should be improved. How?

One important answer would be to spend a bit more money. Obamacare has turned out to be remarkably cheap; the Congressional Budget Office now projects its cost to be about a third lower than it originally expected, around 0.7 percent of G.D.P. In fact, it's probably too cheap. A report from the nonpartisan Urban Institute

argues that the A.C.A. is "essentially underfunded," and would work much better — in particular, it could offer policies with much lower deductibles — if it provided somewhat more generous subsidies. The report's recommendations would cost around 0.2 percent of G.D.P.; or to put it another way, would be around half as expensive as the tax cuts for the wealthy Republicans just tried and failed to ram through as part of Trumpcare.

What about the problem of inadequate insurance industry competition? Better subsidies would help enrollments, which in turn would probably bring in more insurers. But just in case, why not revive the idea of a public option — insurance sold directly by the government, for those who choose it? At the very least, there ought to

be public plans available in areas no private insurer wants to serve.

There are other more technical things we should do too, like extending reinsurance: compensation for insurers whose risk pool turned out worse than expected. Some analysts also argue that there would be big gains from moving "off-exchange" plans onto the government-administered marketplaces.

So if Mr. Trump really wanted to honor his campaign promises about improving health coverage, if he were willing to face up to the reality that Obamacare is here to stay, there's a lot he could do, through incremental changes, to make it work better. And he would get plenty of cooperation from Democrats along the way.

Needless to say, I don't expect to see that happen. Improving

Obamacare requires doing more, not less, moving left, not right. That's not what Republicans want to hear.

And the tweeter-in-chief's initial reaction to health care humiliation was, predictably, vindictive. He blamed Democrats, whom he never consulted, for Trumpcare's political failure, predicted that "ObamaCare will explode," and that when it does Democrats will "own it." Since his own administration is responsible for administering the law, that sounds a lot like a promise to sabotage Americans' health care and blame other people for the disaster.

The point, however, is that building on Obamacare wouldn't be hard, and wouldn't even be all that complicated.



Editorial : Trump and the question of truth

The Christian Science Monitor

March 26, 2017 —Just three months after Time magazine chose Donald Trump as 2016 Person of the Year, it has published a cover story — with the headline "Is Truth Dead?" — that charges the president is a "strategic misleader." The article details many of Mr. Trump's unproven accusations but then concludes his strategy will decline. Why? Because Americans will gather "their own data on his habits and tactics, and what they yield."

Truth, in other words, is not dead after all. Citizens are still quite able to sift fact from falsehood amid the tweets, soundbites, and campaign ads of politicians in order to sustain democracy.

In open societies, the ability of adults to discern truth has always been present. "Although only a few may originate a policy, we are all

able to judge it," said Pericles of Athens around 430 BC. In the modern digital age with its democratization of data, civic literacy is easier than ever. Finding the truth has become more networked and participatory. With a few thumb swipes on a smartphone, individuals are empowered to judge the truth from a vast universe of sources. And in recent decades, nearly 100 countries have passed laws requiring freedom of information about government.

In less-free societies, the powerful fear this truth-seeking and are trying to control the borderless world of cyber-information. They distrust the wisdom of the crowd, ban social media, and jail journalists.

President Trump is not the only target of a new, heightened demand for honesty in leadership. News outlets now fact-check other media. Fox watches MSNBC, and vice versa. Congress has opened a

probe of Russia's alleged role in planting fake news during the American presidential campaign. And more grass-roots activists are organizing to bird-dog the statements of prominent leaders.

As traditional media fade in popularity, citizens know they are on the frontlines of truth-telling and finding credible sources. A poll in December by Pew Research Center found three-quarters of Americans say news organizations favor one side of an issue even if reporters are still seen as necessary to keep political leaders in check.

Citizens resent being depicted as dupes, gullible to political ads or false statements about topics before the public. A core premise of democracy is that individuals are capable of intelligent engagement with issues. In the justice system, ignorance of the law is no defense. In civic life, too, citizens are presumed to be self-informed even

if many choose to listen only to others within an ideological bubble.

To help citizens discern the truth, they need the protection of free speech, which allows a competition of information and ideas. Fortunately, this constitutional right is not lost on young people. In a poll last year of high school students by the Knight Foundation, 91 percent said it was important to be able to express "unpopular opinion," an increase from 83 percent in 2004.

Each individual is responsible for the duties of citizenship, from voting to serving on a jury to, as the Time article states, gathering data on a politician's words and deeds. To restore trust in our leaders first requires restoring trust in our ability to know the truth.



Obeidallah : Is Trump already a lame duck president?

Dean Obeidallah, a former attorney, is the host of SiriusXM radio's daily program "The Dean Obeidallah Show" and a columnist for The Daily Beast. Follow him @deanofcomedy. The opinions expressed in this commentary are his.

(CNN)Donald Trump may just have achieved another first -- but this isn't one he will like. He may be on the verge of becoming the first president to be considered a "lame

duck" within the first two months of his presidency.

If you define a "lame duck" president as someone who lacks the political capital to turn his ideas into policy, you might want to stick a fork in Trump because he's done -- at least for now.

In fact, what we saw Friday with Trump's healthcare failure is possibly just the tip of the lame-duck iceberg. Think about this for a moment: Trump and the Republicans for years have

repeated, "Repeal and replace Obamacare," over and over to the point it was more than a mantra. It sounded like Hodor from "Game of Thrones," who was capable of only saying his own name.

Yet here's Trump just two months into his first term, failing to pass a piece of legislation that was one of the signature parts of his campaign despite his own party controlling Congress. Why? It's not a mystery.

Congressional Republicans see exactly what the rest of us see, and

they will not stick their necks out politically for an unpopular President who is embroiled in scandal.

First off, Trump's approval ratings are awful. A Quinnipiac poll found on Wednesday that Trump has only a

37%

approval rating. And as the poll notes, Trump's now beginning to lose support among Republicans.

Second, on Monday FBI director

James Comey confirmed

that US intelligence agencies are investigating possible ties between "individuals associated with the Trump campaign and the Russian government" in connection to Russia's efforts to influence the 2016 election and "hurt our democracy." Who knows at this point where this scandal might lead?

If that wasn't bad enough, a GOP civil war may be breaking out, with Trump trying to remove Paul Ryan from his role as House Speaker. On Saturday Trump

tweeted

, "Watch @JudgeJeanine on @FoxNews tonight at 9:00 P.M." So what bombshell did Jeanine Pirro deliver Saturday on her show? She

called on

Ryan to step down.

On Sunday morning Trump's chief of Staff Reince Priebus claimed Trump's tweet was a "

coincidence

," denying Trump wants Ryan to step down. But Trump himself has been uncharacteristically silent. And Trump-loving Breitbart.com

is reporting that

discussions are under way to remove Ryan.

Yes, of course, Trump has time to change things for the better. But can Trump turn things around?

Obviously other presidents have had low approval ratings like Trump's and rebounded. But none of them were being investigated by the FBI for possibly colluding with Russia while facing a possible civil war within their own political party.

And there's one other big difference. Those other presidents had terrible approval numbers because they were presiding over a bad economy. For example, Ronald Reagan's l

owest approval rating

was 35% in January 1982, when the economy was struggling and unemployment was at its

highest levels of his presidency

at 10.4%. But as the economy improved, so did Reagan's approval numbers, ultimately climbing to a high of 68% in May 1986.

Same for Bill Clinton. He had a very Trump-like

37% approval rating

in June 1993 when we were in the throes of a recession. Unemployment then was

over 7%

, the highest of his administration. Flash forward to December 1998. Unemployment was down to 4.4% and in turn Clinton's approval rating hit 73%, his highest ever -- and that was with an impeachment threat looming.

Trump, however, inherited an economy that is in good shape. Unemployment is at only 4.7%, the stock market is breaking records and

consumer confidence

is at a 15-year high. Sure, wages could be higher, as could the labor participation rate, but Trump certainly isn't in the same boat as Reagan or Clinton were when they were this unpopular.

Trump should read his unpopularity as a cautionary tale, as both Clinton and Reagan

lost dozens of seats in the midterm elections

that took place when they had approval ratings close to where

Trump's is today. In 1982, the GOP lost 26 House seats. In 1994, the Republicans took control of the House with a whopping gain of 54 seats. For context, in 2018 Democrats only need to win 24 seats to regain the House.

Technically, Trump could turn things around, but I doubt he will. Why? Simple. Trump

told Time magazine

this week that he has no plans to change, boasting that he follows his instincts and they are usually right. Trump then

added in typical Trump fashion

, "I guess I can't be doing so badly, because I'm President, and you're not."

Trump is correct, he is the President. But here's what Trump left out: He's a rare, orange-feathered lame duck President whose most significant achievement may turn out to be his unintentional rebuilding of the Democratic Party.



Trump taps Kushner to lead a SWAT team to fix government with business ideas (UNE)

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

President Trump plans to unveil a new White House office on Monday with sweeping authority to overhaul the federal bureaucracy and fulfill key campaign promises — such as reforming care for veterans and fighting opioid addiction — by harvesting ideas from the business world and, potentially, privatizing some government functions.

The White House Office of American Innovation, to be led by Jared Kushner, the president's son-in-law and senior adviser, will operate as its own nimble power center within the West Wing and will report directly to Trump. Viewed internally as a SWAT team of strategic consultants, the office will be staffed by former business executives and is designed to infuse fresh thinking into Washington, float above the daily political grind and create a lasting legacy for a president still searching for signature achievements.

"All Americans, regardless of their political views, can recognize that government stagnation has hindered our ability to properly

function, often creating widespread congestion and leading to cost overruns and delays," Trump said in a statement to The Washington Post. "I promised the American people I would produce results, and apply my 'ahead of schedule, under budget' mentality to the government."

In a White House riven at times by disorder and competing factions, the innovation office represents an expansion of Kushner's already far-reaching influence. The 36-year-old former real estate and media executive will continue to wear many hats, driving foreign and domestic policy as well as decisions on presidential personnel. He also is a shadow diplomat, serving as Trump's lead adviser on relations with China, Mexico, Canada and the Middle East.

[Jared Kushner proves to be a shadow diplomat on U.S.-Mexico talks]

The work of White House chief strategist Stephen K. Bannon has drawn considerable attention, especially after his call for the "deconstruction of the administrative state." But Bannon will have no formal role in the innovation office,

which Trump advisers described as an incubator of sleek transformation as opposed to deconstruction.

The announcement of the new office comes at a humbling moment for the president, following Friday's collapse of his first major legislative push — an overhaul of the health-care system, which Trump had championed as a candidate.

Kushner is positioning the new office as "an offensive team" — an aggressive, nonideological ideas factory capable of attracting top talent from both inside and outside of government, and serving as a conduit with the business, philanthropic and academic communities.

"We should have excellence in government," Kushner said Sunday in an interview in his West Wing office. "The government should be run like a great American company. Our hope is that we can achieve successes and efficiencies for our customers, who are the citizens."

The innovation office has a particular focus on technology and data, and it is working with such titans as Apple chief executive Tim Cook, Microsoft founder Bill Gates, Salesforce chief executive Marc

Benioff and Tesla founder and chief executive Elon Musk. The group has already hosted sessions with more than 100 such leaders and government officials.

"There is a need to figure out what policies are adding friction to the system without accompanying it with significant benefits," said Stephen A. Schwarzman, chief executive of the investment firm Blackstone Group. "It's easy for the private sector to at least see where the friction is, and to do that very quickly and succinctly."

Some of the executives involved have criticized some of Trump's policies, such as his travel ban, but said they are eager to help the administration address chronic problems.

"Obviously it has to be done with corresponding values and principles. We don't agree on everything," said Benioff, a Silicon Valley billionaire who raised money for Democrat Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign.

But, Benioff added, "I'm hopeful that Jared will be collaborative with our industry in moving this forward. When I talk to him, he does remind me of a lot of the young, scrappy

entrepreneurs that I invest in in their 30s."

Kushner's ambitions for what the new office can achieve are grand. At least to start, the team plans to focus its attention on reimagining Veterans Affairs; modernizing the technology and data infrastructure of every federal department and agency; remodeling workforce-training programs; and developing "transformative projects" under the banner of Trump's \$1 trillion infrastructure plan, such as providing broadband Internet service to every American.

In some cases, the office could direct that government functions be privatized, or that existing contracts be awarded to new bidders.

The office will also focus on combating opioid abuse, a regular emphasis for Trump on the campaign trail. The president later this week plans to announce an official drug commission devoted to the problem that will be chaired by New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie (R). He has been working informally on the issue for several weeks with Kushner, despite reported tension between the two.

Under President Barack Obama, Trump advisers said scornfully, some business leaders privately dismissed their White House interactions as "NATO" meetings — "No action, talk only" — in which they were "lectured," without much follow-up.

Andrew Liveris, chairman and chief executive of Dow Chemical, who has had meetings with the two previous administrations, said the environment under Trump is markedly different.

After he left a recent meeting of manufacturing chief executives with Trump, Liveris said, "Rather than entering a vacuum, I'm getting emails from the president's team, if

not every day, then every other day — 'Here's what we're working on.' 'We need another meeting.' 'Can you get us more input on this?'"

[Inside Trump's fury: The president rages at leaks, setbacks and accusations]

Kushner proudly notes that most of the members of his team have little-to-no political experience, hailing instead from the world of business. They include Gary Cohn, director of the National Economic Council; Chris Liddell, assistant to the president for strategic initiatives; Reed Cordish, assistant to the president for intergovernmental and technology initiatives; Dina Powell, senior counselor to the president for economic initiatives and deputy national security adviser; and Andrew Bremberg, director of the Domestic Policy Council.

Ivanka Trump, the president's elder daughter and Kushner's wife, who now does her advocacy work from a West Wing office, will collaborate with the innovation office on issues such as workforce development but will not have an official role, aides said.

Powell, a former Goldman Sachs executive who spent a decade at the firm managing public-private job creation programs, also boasts a government pedigree as a veteran of George W. Bush's White House and State Department. Bremberg also worked in the Bush administration. But others are political neophytes.

Liddell, who speaks with an accent from his native New Zealand, served as chief financial officer for General Motors, Microsoft and International Paper, as well as in Hollywood for William Morris Endeavor.

"We are part of the White House team, connected with everyone here, but we are not subject to the

day-to-day issues, so we can take a more strategic approach to projects," Liddell said.

Like Kushner, Cordish is the scion of a real estate family — a Baltimore-based conglomerate known for developing casinos and shopping malls. And Cohn, a Democrat who has recently amassed significant clout in the White House, is the hard-charging former president of Goldman Sachs.

Trump's White House is closely scrutinized for its always-evolving power matrix, and the innovation office represents a victory for Wall Street figures such as Cohn who have sought to moderate Trump's agenda and project a friendly front to businesses, sometimes in conflict with the more hard-line conservatism championed by Bannon and Chief of Staff Reince Priebus.

[Inside Trump's White House, New York moderates spark infighting and suspicion]

The innovation group has been meeting twice a week in Kushner's office, just a few feet from the Oval Office, largely barren but for a black-and-white photo of his paternal grandparents — both Holocaust survivors — and a marked-up whiteboard more typical of tech start-ups. Kushner takes projects and decisions directly to the president for sign-off, though Trump also directly suggests areas of personal interest.

There could be friction as the group interacts with myriad federal agencies, though the advisers said they did not see themselves as an imperious force dictating changes but rather as a "service organization" offering solutions.

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Kushner's team is being formalized just as the Trump administration is proposing sweeping budget cuts across many departments, and members said they would help find efficiencies.

"The president's doing what is necessary to have a prudent budget, and that makes an office like this even more vital as we need to get more out of less dollars by doing things smarter, doing things better, and by leaning on the private sector," Cordish said.

Ginni Rometty, the chairman and chief executive of IBM, said she is encouraged: "Jared is reaching out and listening to leaders from across the business community — not just on day-to-day issues, but on long-term challenges like how to train a modern workforce and how to apply the latest innovations to government operations."

Trump sees the innovation office as a way to institutionalize what he sometimes did in business, such as helping New York City's government renovate the floundering Wollman Rink in Central Park, said Hope Hicks, the president's longtime spokeswoman.

"He recognized where the government has struggled with certain projects and he was someone in the private sector who was able to come in and bring the resources and creativity needed and ultimately execute in an efficient, cost-effective way," Hicks said. "In some respects, this is an extension of some of the highlights of the president's career."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Hatch : Gorsuch's Foes Embarrass the Senate

Orrin G. Hatch
March 26, 2017

4:12 p.m. ET

During last week's confirmation hearing for Judge Neil Gorsuch, some of my Senate colleagues heard from teachers who were using the occasion as an educational tool. Indeed, Supreme Court confirmation hearings can be a civics lesson for the nation. They offer unparalleled insight into the Constitution and the proper role of judges in our system of government.

I have participated in 14 of these hearings during my four decades on

the Senate Judiciary Committee. The nominees are typically highly talented lawyers and judges. The Senate's role is to probe their qualifications and judicial philosophies. At its best, the process is removed from the pettiness of partisan politics.

I take this duty seriously. Although I am a committed conservative, I have voted for the Supreme Court nominees of both parties—even those I might not have chosen myself—as long as I have been assured of their fitness for office. I helped shepherd through President Clinton's nominees, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Stephen Breyer. Both had shown themselves to be

honorable, capable jurists with reputations for careful, nonideological work on federal appeals courts.

What sort of civics lesson were the American people treated to last week? Judge Gorsuch's performance was outstanding. Enduring more than 20 hours of questioning over two days, he displayed an impressive command of the law and an intellect befitting someone with his stellar credentials. He showed that he understands the proper role of a judge in our system: to apply, not make, the law. Throughout, his demeanor was serious, thoughtful and humble. These qualities have defined his

judicial service for the past decade and will serve him well on the Supreme Court.

In stark contrast was the astonishing treatment Judge Gorsuch received from many of my Democratic colleagues. Whatever their motivation—be it the outcome of President Obama's lame-duck nomination during last year's election, an unwillingness to accept the November results, or the desire for judges to push a liberal political agenda—they have apparently decided to wage a desperate, scorched-earth campaign to derail this nomination, no matter the damage they inflict along the way. We are now watching the

confirmation process through the funhouse mirror.

Consider the Democrats' demand that Judge Gorsuch answer politically charged hypotheticals about future cases. For decades, Supreme Court nominees of both parties have rightly refused to comply with such demands. To offer an advisory opinion is inconsistent with the Constitution, which gives judges the authority to make a decision only within the legal and factual context of an actual case. Judges should be neutral arbiters, and asking them to prejudice themselves raises serious due-process concerns for future litigants, who deserve the opportunity to make their arguments in full.

When Judge Gorsuch politely explained his inability to answer such questions—often while giving an extensive rationale for

demurring—he was lambasted by some of my Democratic colleagues. Yet these senators have gladly embraced the very same answer from nominees in the past. It is hard not to interpret their attacks as hypocrisy.

Consider also the way some of my colleagues misrepresented Judge Gorsuch's record. Their attempts were so formulaic that they read like a recipe: First, cherry-pick one of the judge's opinions in which a sympathetic victim lost. Next, gloss over the legal issues that informed his decision in the case. Then fail to mention that his opinions were often joined by colleagues appointed by Presidents Clinton and Obama. After that, ignore the many times that Judge Gorsuch ruled in favor of similar litigants. End with a wild assertion about how Judge Gorsuch

must be biased against "the little guy."

We should call these phony attacks what they are: intentional attempts to mischaracterize Judge Gorsuch's record. Any fair analysis can lead only to the conclusion that he reaches the result commanded by the best reading of the law, free from any political agenda. As Judge Gorsuch rightfully put it, quoting Justice Antonin Scalia: "If you're going to be a good and faithful judge, you have to resign yourself to the fact that you're not always going to like the conclusions you reach. If you like them all the time, you're probably doing something wrong."

In Judge Gorsuch, the country has a Supreme Court nominee as fine as I could ever imagine. But instead of the best traditions of the advice-and-consent process, which many of us have tried to live up to, what

does he get? Hypocritical attacks on the very judicial independence Democrats claim to prize, misleading characterizations of his record, and now a promise to filibuster his nomination.

In essence, Judge Gorsuch gets the kind of treatment that leads him to regret putting his family through what ought to be a dignified process. This madness needs to stop. End the dishonest attacks and scorched-earth tactics. Instead, we should have a debate worthy of "the world's greatest deliberative body," and confirm this outstanding nominee.

Mr. Hatch, a Utah Republican, is president pro tempore of the U.S. Senate and a member of the Judiciary Committee.

**THE WALL
STREET
JOURNAL.**
COMMENTS

Editorial : The Tax Reform Damage

March 26, 2017
4:18 p.m. ET 203

Republicans are consoling themselves that after their health-care failure they can move on to tax reform, and they have little choice. The large complication is that the Freedom Caucus's ObamaCare preservation act has also made a tax bill much harder politically even as it makes reform more essential to salvaging the Trump Presidency and GOP majorities in 2018.

President Trump campaigned on breaking Washington gridlock, increasing economic growth and lifting American incomes. The health collapse undermines those pledges. The legislative failure is obvious, but less appreciated is that House Speaker Paul Ryan's reform included a pro-growth tax cut and major improvements in work incentives. The 3.8-percentage-point cut in taxes on capital income would have been a substantial increase in after-tax return on investment, nearly half of the eight-point cut in the capital-gains tax rate that helped propel growth after 1997.

Now that's dead, and so is the replacement for the especially high marginal-tax-rate cliff built into

ObamaCare's subsidies. These steep tax cliffs as subsidies phase out are a major hindrance to work, as University of Chicago economist Casey Mulligan has shown. The Ryan bill would have been a significant boost to economic growth and labor participation. The critique that it would not have helped "Trump voters" was willfully false coming from the left and uninformed on the right.

This lost opportunity now makes tax reform even more important as a growth driver, but the health-reform failure also hurt tax reform in another major way. The Ryan bill would have reduced the budget baseline for tax reform by some \$1 trillion over 10 years. This means that suddenly Republicans will have to find \$1 trillion more in loopholes to close or taxes to raise if they want their reduction in tax rates to be budget neutral.

That means picking more fights with industries that fear they'll be tax-reform losers. Take the irony of Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas. He trashed the House health bill far and wide, but he also represents Wal-Mart, which hates the House GOP's border-adjustment tax proposal that would raise some \$1 trillion in revenue to pay for lower

tax rates. By helping to kill the Ryan health bill, Mr. Cotton has now killed \$1 trillion in tax and spending cuts that would have made it easier to pass a tax reform without the border-adjustment fee. We look forward to seeing the Senator's revenue substitute.

Some Republicans think the health failure will concentrate GOP minds on taxes as a political necessity, but then they said the same about repealing ObamaCare after seven years of promising to do so. They flopped even though it's unheard of for a new President to lose on his top priority so early in his term. That's when his political capital is highest and his own party has the most incentive to deliver on its promises.

The risk now is that the health failure will make the GOP Congress even less cohesive and less likely to follow its leaders. Freedom Caucus Members sit in safe seats and don't need achievements to win re-election. They are almost happier in the minority where they can more easily vote no on everything.

But 23 Republicans hold seats in districts that Hillary Clinton carried, another 10 where she narrowly lost, and that's where the GOP majority is vulnerable. Those Members will

want some record of accomplishment in 2018, but they also won't want Wal-Mart or industries protecting tax preferences to spend millions for their Democratic opponents. They will now take fewer risks than if they had been able to point to a health-care victory.

The other big risk is that Republicans will now settle for a modest tax cut without a fundamental reform that clears out special-interest favors. That is better than nothing but would diminish the effect on economic growth and incomes. Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin is already saying that he wants only a token cut in the tax rate on individual wages and salaries, and some in the White House are tempted by Democratic income-redistribution schemes.

Mr. Trump lacks the political base of most Presidents, so he is hostage more than most to performance. Above all that means presiding over faster growth, which is the only real way to help Trump voters. If the GOP can't deliver on tax reform, the Freedom Caucus will have done far more harm than saving ObamaCare.

**The
New York
Times**

Dealt a Defeat, Republicans Set Their Sights on Major Tax Cuts (UNE)

Alan Rappeport

Eliminating the \$1 trillion of Affordable Care Act taxes and the federal spending associated with that law would have made this easier. Because they failed, Republicans will struggle to reach their goal of cutting corporate tax

rates without piling on debt. Speaker Paul D. Ryan acknowledged on Friday, "This does make tax reform more difficult."

Under pressure to get something done, some Republican deficit hawks appear ready to abandon the fiscal rectitude that they embraced

during the Obama administration to help salvage Mr. Trump's agenda.

In a rare shift, Representative Mark Meadows of North Carolina, whose House Freedom Caucus effectively torpedoed the health legislation, said Sunday on ABC's "This Week" that he would not protest if tax cuts

were not offset by new spending cuts or new streams of revenue, such as an import tax.

"I think there's a lot of flexibility in terms of some of my contacts and conservatives in terms of not making it totally offset," he said.

"Does it have to be fully offset? My personal response is no."

The health care failure also makes the tax overhaul more politically complex as the fissures within the Republican Party have been laid bare. Mr. Trump followed Mr. Ryan's lead and lost, making it more likely that the White House will try to steer the direction of tax legislation.

"I would be surprised given the health law debacle if the Trump administration sits back and lets Congress fashion the legislation without weighing in on the substance," said Michael J. Graetz, a tax law professor at Columbia University. "That is one of the lessons that the administration will take from the failure of the health bill."

It remains unclear whether Mr. Trump and Mr. Ryan are in agreement on taxes.

Since last summer, Mr. Ryan and Representative Kevin Brady of Texas, the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, have been aggressively pitching a reform blueprint that includes a "border adjustment tax." It would be a 20 percent tax on imports that, by making imports more expensive, would spur domestic production, they say. They think the plan would

raise \$1 trillion to compensate for the lower revenue that much lower tax rates would probably bring in.

Mr. Ryan and Mr. Brady are unlikely to simply hand over tax policy to the White House. Mr. Brady said on Sunday that getting rid of the contentious border tax provision would have "severe consequences" and that he hoped to produce a bill based on the House plan this spring that would be passed later this year.

Mr. Brady's tax-writing committee is expected to convene a meeting about an overhaul on Tuesday.

"We have so much in common with the Trump administration, it wouldn't make sense to have a separate tax bill from Secretary Mnuchin, a separate one from Gary Cohn, a third from whomever," Mr. Brady said on Fox News, referring to the Treasury secretary, Steven T. Mnuchin, and to one of Mr. Trump's top economic advisers. "Why not take the basis of the House plan?"

Changing the tax code affects every person and industry. Lobbyists are already hoping to shape tax legislation. As plans become more concrete, business groups will be ready to pick them apart.

Mr. Trump has at times expressed admiration for some form of border tax as a way to give an advantage to American producers. However,

facing a backlash from retailers, energy companies and conservative think tanks that warn that consumer prices will soar under the House Republican plan, Mr. Trump and Mr. Mnuchin have sounded cool to the idea.

Many Senate Republicans are also skeptical, raising the prospect that Mr. Ryan's tax vision could suffer the same fate as his health plan, toppling under the weight of divisions within his party.

If Mr. Trump does try to go his own way, he could propose a tax cut plan that disregards deficits and assumes that robust economic growth will make up for lost revenue. Another idea would be reforming taxes in pieces, with a focus on reducing business tax rates first and then addressing tax rates for individuals later. Or, as Mr. Moore advises, he could try to make a grand bargain with Democrats that combines a tax overhaul with a plan for more infrastructure spending.

Mr. Trump is under added pressure not to again fail supporters who he promised would "get sick of all the winning."

"They need to cut taxes, cut spending, and build the wall," said Judson Phillips, the founder of the conservative group Tea Party

Nation. "If they will do that, the base will be forever in love with them." He said he did not want Mr. Trump to get bogged down in Mr. Ryan's complicated tax agenda.

But after consuming the first two months of his presidency focused on health care, it is unclear how prepared Mr. Trump and his administration are to tackle taxes. The administration said last month that its tax plan was just weeks away, but nothing materialized. And the Treasury Department, which will take a leading role in crafting a plan, remains understaffed, with crucial policy positions unfilled and most of its leadership still awaiting Senate confirmation.

Mr. Mnuchin said last week that he was ready to get going, predicting that a tax overhaul would be simpler than health care. The fact that no one has seriously tackled tax reform since 1986 suggests otherwise.

"It's like asking whether climbing Kilimanjaro or another mountain of equal height is harder," said Mr. Graetz, who was a Treasury Department official in the early 1990s. "They are both very hard, very exhausting and seem to occur once in a generation."