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FRANCE - EUROPE

French Candidates Ready Debate With Macron as Target

by

Gregory Viscusi

and

Mark Deen

France's presidential candidates assemble for another TV debate Tuesday with Francois Fillon desperate to revive his campaign, Jean-Luc Melenchon looking to maintain his recent momentum and everyone taking aim at front-runner Emmanuel Macron.

For more than a month, polls have shown Macron and the National Front's Marine Le Pen taking the top two spots in the first round on April 23. That would qualify them for the runoff two weeks later where Macron is expected to win easily in his first ever political campaign.

Dig a little deeper into the numbers though, and the chances of another twist in the most open election in recent French history look somewhat greater. Polls show that Le Pen's supporters are committed, whereas Macron's are more driven by dissatisfaction with the other offerings and less certain to back him. About a third of the electorate has told pollsters they could still change their vote.

"Macron is the favorite right now, so of course everyone is attacking him," said Yves-Marie Cann, a pollster at Elabe. "The main thing to keep in mind is that the lines can still move."

The debate will last three-and-a-half hours from 8:40 p.m. Paris time and cover three themes: how to create jobs, how to protect the French, and how to implement each candidate's vision of France's social model.

Melenchon's Surge

Le Pen and Macron have been running in a virtual tie for the first round since the last debate on March 20, and both were at about 26 percent late on Monday with Fillon lagging behind at 17 percent in the Bloomberg composite of polls. The main change is further down, where Melenchon has leapfrogged Socialist Party nominee Benoit Hamon. Melenchon has jumped to 15 from 11 percent, while Hamon has sunk to 10 from 13 percent after a pale debate performance.

Fillon had been the front-runner before January, when the first reports emerged that he'd handed his wife a public salary for a fictional job as a parliamentary aide. Despite being charged with embezzlement earlier this month, Fillon has refused to step down, insisting on his innocence and accusing Socialist President Francois Hollande of orchestrating a plot against him.

Fillon attacked Macron repeatedly at rallies across France over the weekend, calling him "Emmanuel Hollande" because his past ties to the president and "the prince of ambiguity" due to his borrowing of ideas from across the spectrum.

"Fillon is still in the game," Elabe's Cann said. "His base is very solid and he can still hope to qualify for the second round by taking a chunk of the vote away from either Marine Le Pen or Emmanuel Macron."

Le Pen's Chances

Macron said the other candidates are wrong to focus on him while ignoring the risk that Le Pen could win and follow through with her promise to take France out of the euro.

"Those who say that Marine Le Pen cannot get past the second round are the same as those who said that Trump could never win," Macron said in an interview Tuesday with Le Monde. "If she is far ahead in the first round, anything can happen. So Benoit Hamon and Francois Fillon are confused in making me the main target of their attacks."

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Unlike the March 20 debate, Tuesday's event will feature all 11 candidates on the ballot and not just the top five as last time. The remaining six candidates are Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, who sees himself as a Gaullist; Nathalie Arthaud of the Workers Party; the New Anti-Capitalist Party's Philippe Poutou; anti-finance candidate Jacques Cheminade; Francois Asselineau, who pushes to exit the euro and NATO; and Jean Lassalle, a farmer with no political party. Dupont-Aignan is at about 4 percent in the polls, the others are at about 1 percent or less.

"Obviously with 11 people it's harder to make one's voice heard but Francois Fillon is very good at making his voice heard," his campaign manager Vincent Chriqui told reporters in Paris Monday.

About 10 million people watched the first debate, or almost a quarter of France's 44.8 million registered voters. Another debate is tentatively scheduled for April 20 but some candidates have said they won't take part because it's too close to the election.

With Brexit looming, millions wonder whether they can stay in Britain

By Karla Adam

LONDON — Twenty-one years ago, Patrizia Mayall moved to Britain after falling in love with a young Englishman serving in the Royal Air Force. She studied linguistics before taking time out of the workplace to raise their British children. She places huge value on politeness and tolerance and insists she enjoys queuing and the stand-right, walk-left rule on escalators.

For all appearances, she is British.

Only she's not. She is an Italian national living in Britain, her future thrown into doubt following Britain's decision to leave the European Union.

"I've lived here most of my adult life. I feel more British than Italian," said Mayall, 45, a bubbly brunette who says she hasn't had a proper night's sleep since last summer's Brexit vote.

Mayall is able to live in the United Kingdom because it is a member of the European Union, a bloc of 28 countries that share freedom-of-movement rules. For decades, this has been the way of life in Europe: People can up and move to another country at a moment's notice. Some decide to plant roots in their new homeland, acquiring families, jobs, pets and mortgages along the way. Aside from voting, the E.U. citizens who live here enjoy most of the same benefits as Britons.

But with Brexit looming, the future for millions now hangs in the balance. Figuring out what happens to an estimated3.2 million E.U. citizens living in the U.K. — and the 1.2 million Brits living in Europe — will be the most high-profile aspect of early Brexit talks as the two-year exit process gets underway.

British Prime Minister Theresa May insists that she wants a quick solution — alongside a reciprocal arrangement for Brits on the continent — but no one knows what that will look like.

Analysts say the vast majority of E.U. citizens living here will have their right to residency confirmed, but it's likely there will be some who fall on the wrong side of the line. How will those who live here go about proving their right to live and work in the U.K., thus differentiating themselves from newly arrived E.U. citizens, who may not have the same rights? What will the cutoff date be? What will happen to welfare and pension rights, or the ability to bring over family members?

"After Brexit, our phones went off the hooks," said Barbara Drozdowicz, director of the Eastern European Advice Center in London. "People phone in and ask, 'Can I go home for Easter break? Will they still let me back in?' "

In a sign of how anxious many are feeling, E.U. citizens have created an advocacy group, called the 3 Million, to lobby for their rights.

"I think there is a legitimate sense of worry," said Jonathan Portes, professor of economics and public policy at King's College London.

"The government isn't going to deport 3 million people, or even 1 million," he said. "But equally, it's not going to give a blanket guarantee. It's not going to simply

say to everyone who has an E.U. passport who is here today, 'That's it, that's all you need, here's your right to permanent residency and citizenship.' "

Britain is still a member of the E.U. — exit negotiations started Wednesday and are expected to last two years — and as such, freedom-of-movement rules still apply.

But some nervous Europeans are applying now for permanent residency, a necessary steppingstone on the path to citizenship. The hope for many is that the residency card will make it easier to grant them status post-Brexit.Although it isn't mandatory — the card effectively acknowledges rights they already have — the number of E.U. citizens applying has doubled in the past year.

Applying is not easy. The form runs 85 pages — in Germany, a similar form is two pages. Extensive evidence, including pay slips, employment contracts and travel documentation, must be submitted. In the last half of 2016, more than a quarter of applicants who applied for permanent residency were rejected.

It's not known what system the government will use in the post-Brexit settlement of E.U. citizens. If it were to use the current criteria for granting permanent residency, there would be an enormous backlog, and some of the people who have lived for decades in the U.K. wouldn't qualify.

Last fall, Oxford University's Migration Observatory calculated that it would take 140 years to process all of the E.U. nationals in the U.K. if the Home Office continued to churn through applications at its current rate.

There are also groups of residents who wouldn't qualify under the current system. For instance, an estimated 470,000 people would need to show that they had "comprehensive sickness insurance," or CSI. E.U. citizens residing in the U.K. are entitled to use the National Health Service, but if they are students or economically inactive, they also need to purchase insurance — a little-known requirement.

"This requirement was not known to anyone I know," said Sabine von Toerne, a midwife who moved to London 13 years ago from Berlin. Speaking at the end of a busy day delivering babies as part of her work in Britain's National Health Service, she said: "No one ever asked. Even when I enrolled into university for my midwifery degree, no one ever asked me, 'Do you have CSI?' "

The 43-year-old, who has an 8-year-old British son, doesn't think the authorities will deport her, but she worries that E.U. nationals could be treated as second-class citizens.

"I don't think anyone will knock on my door and ask me to leave, that's completely bonkers," said Von Toerne. "What I could imagine is that there will be restrictions on health-care benefits and social security things."

Mayall also had never heard of sickness insurance until after the Brexit vote, when she started looking into applying for permanent residency. She also didn't save pay slips from her jobs in the late 1990s and early 2000s; at the time, she didn't see any reason to keep them.

Mayall, who has a 12-year-old son and a 7-year-old daughter, recently saw an immigration lawyer who told her that her chances of securing permanent residency were weak.

"I'm too scared to fill out the application now. What if I'm rejected?" she said.

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Her husband, James, 45, a veteran of the Royal Air Force, said he feels let down by the country that he served in various war zones. He even thought about giving back his medals. "I know it's a sort of pointless gesture, but it's how I thought," he said.

He said that it's "more than likely" the British government will come to an agreement about E.U. citizens, but at the moment he doesn't have that reassurance. Under the current rules, he can't sponsor his wife's path to residency — British citizens can, however, sponsor spouses from non-E.U. countries like the United States.

"The worry is that the government will say, people who have lawfully lived in the country for 'x' amount of years can stay in the country. But if they use the word 'lawfully,' what does that mean for people like my wife who didn't know about this insurance?"

"I find the whole situation deeply frustrating," he said. "The British government thinks it's perfectly acceptable to mess with people's lives."

The New York Times

Beating of Asylum Seeker in London Is Said to Be Hate Crime

Dan Bilefsky

LONDON — The Kurdish-Iranian teenager was waiting with friends at a bus stop in south London when a gang of men and women in their 20s cornered him and asked him in aggressive tones where he was from.

When he replied that he was an asylum seeker, the police and news reports said, they chased him through the streets and finally caught him, throwing him to the ground and repeatedly punching and kicking him in the head, even as he screamed for help.

At the sound of police sirens, the attackers fled, leaving the teenager unconscious, with a fractured skull and a blood clot in his brain. As many as 20 people may have participated in the Friday night attack, which the police are treating as a suspected hate crime.

On Monday, the frenzied assault on the 17-year-old, described by the police as "brutal," was reverberating across Britain amid growing concerns that the country's decision to leave the European Union, or "Brexit," had spawned an anti-immigrant backlash.

For some, the attack in the South London area of Croydon recalled another racially charged attack at a bus stop in the capital: the murder of Stephen Lawrence, an 18-year-old black man who was stabbed in 1993 in an unprovoked attack by a gang of white youths.

Scotland Yard said on Monday that 10 people had been arrested after the beating of the Kurdish-Iranian teenager, with five people, ages 20 to 24, charged in the attack. Four of them were charged with violent disorder, and the fifth with violent disorder and causing racially aggravated grievous bodily harm. The police said that the victim, who has not been identified publicly and who news reports said had arrived in Britain only a few months ago, was in serious but stable condition in the hospital.

The investigating police officer, Detective Sgt. Kris Blamires, said the teenager had sustained "serious head and facial injuries as a result of this attack, which included repeated blows to the head by a large group of attackers." He said that "a number of people came to the aid of the victim as he lay unconscious and injured following the assault."

While the investigation is continuing, politicians across the political spectrum condemned the assault, which some critics attributed, fairly or not, to a toxic political environment and a rise in nationalist sentiment that was being directed at immigrants.

Gavin Barwell, a minister for housing in the Conservative government and a member of Parliament for Croydon, described the attackers on Twitter as "scum."

"I think most people in Croydon will be as appalled as I am that what appears to have happened is a young man who came to this country seeking sanctuary has apparently been targeted because of his ethnic background," he said to the BBC. "It's an appalling crime, and I hope the people responsible are caught quickly and receive the full force of British justice."

Diane Abbott, who speaks on home affairs for the opposition Labour Party, said in a statement that the attack was part of a "sustained increase in hate crimes." She said the government was not doing enough to stop such crimes.

"With right-wing politicians across the world scapegoating migrants, refugees and others for their economic problems, we are seeing a deeply worrying rise in the politics of hate," the statement from Ms. Abbott said. "We must make clear that there is no place for anti-foreigner myths, racism and hate in our society."

During the referendum on whether to leave the European Union, the campaign supporting a withdrawal was bolstered by anti-immigrant sentiment, stoked in part by the right-wing U.K. Independence Party. Concerns about immigration have also been heightened by fears of terrorism.

In August, Arkadiusz Jozwik, 40, a Polish-born meat factory worker in Harlow, a working-class town northeast of London, was repeatedly pummeled and kicked by a group of boys and girls. Mr. Jozwik, his brother said, had been overheard speaking Polish outside a takeout pizza restaurant. He died from his injuries.

Rights groups say there has also been a recent increase in attacks against native Britons who are Muslim or who have Asian or African roots. In August, a 34-year-old pregnant Muslim woman in Milton Keynes, about 50 miles north of

London, was kicked in the stomach by a man who the police said had yelled racist remarks. She later suffered a miscarriage.

According to the National Police Chiefs' Council, the number of reported hate crimes in England, Wales and Northern Ireland jumped 46 percent, to 1,831, in the week after the June 23 referendum on European Union membership, compared with the same week a year earlier. The police cautioned, however, that the increase could be attributed to increased awareness and reporting of hate crimes.

If Germany Goes Nuclear, Blame Trump Before Putin

M. Terhalle

Donald Trump has put Germany's security at risk. His campaign trail claim that NATO was "obsolete" eroded the alliance's most important resource — its credibility. But his repetition of the same comments as U.S. president has been a five-alarm fire for German strategists and for anyone else who cares about the future of Europe.

NATO is not just the world's most powerful and long-standing military alliance, which has successfully deterred the potential enemies of its members for seven decades. It is a guarantor of Germany's national security and a precondition of its continued existence as a politically independent state in Europe. And nobody disputes that NATO's backbone is the United States' superior and vast military capacities. They protected Germany against Soviet aggression during the Cold War and have deterred revisionist Russia's repeated demonstrations of force over the last decade. And at the core of this deterrent are nuclear weapons, many of them stationed in Germany itself.

That leaves Germany with a very serious debate ahead: whether to continue relying on a United States that is now committed to signaling its unreliability or to begin pursuing its own nuclear deterrent — either on its own or as part of a new European security structure. Rudolph Herzog's recent Foreign Policy article presented a simple view of this argument, where proponents of the idea, such as myself, were represented as adventurous cowboys blind to the lessons of history. But the debate is far more complicated, and more critical, than Herzog portrayed. This is a debate triggered not by indulgent fantasies but by the potential of a strategic vacuum at the heart of the continent.

The withdrawal of this security guarantee, as repeatedly suggested by Trump (to the delight, or perhaps at the prompting, of Vladimir Putin), would expose Germany and its neighbors to an increasingly revisionist and aggressive Russia, intent to redress the collapse of the Soviet Union that cost Russia its imperial possessions in Eastern Europe. We can't be blind to the signs of Russian aggression. Look at the fate of Crimea in 2014, annexed by Russia in a fit of pique at Ukraine's refusal to be a vassal state, or the Russian nuclear weapons in the exclave of Kaliningrad (the former Königsberg) now pointing at German targets.

Russia is unlikely to invade Germany itself. But if the power balance swings in favor of Russia and against Western Europe, that leaves small states like the Baltics in danger from Putin's revanchist ambitions. With the whip hand in Eastern Europe, Putin would be able to pressure or frighten Western Europe into accepting his authoritarian view of the world. Smaller states would swing toward the Russian side, leaving Germany dangerously exposed. For both moral and realist reasons, Germany needs to shield Eastern Europe against Trump — and nuclear weapons are the only way to guarantee its neighbors independence.

Putin is one tweetstorm by Trump away from having the conventional and strategic military upper hand in Europe

Putin is one tweetstorm by Trump away from having the conventional and strategic military upper hand in Europe. German Chancellor Angela Merkel cannot sustain her sanctions regime, backed by the EU, if the United States retreats from Europe, precisely because Putin knows that her very effective use of economic power ultimately rests on American military power standing at the ready in the background. But if NATO goes, the weakness of German and European diplomacy, faced with a revisionist great power, becomes conspicuously clear.

If this really were to happen, German nuclear weapons would be the most powerful way to compensate for the American withdrawal and the best means to even out the military imbalance that Trump would have created in Russia's favor.

If this really were to happen, German nuclear weapons would be the most powerful way to compensate for the American withdrawal and the best means to even out the military imbalance that Trump would have created in Russia's favor. The inherent terror of nuclear weapons means even a relatively small German program could be a mighty deterrent against Russia's 7,000 nuclear warheads.

In his piece, Herzog argues that nuclear weapons go against Germany's post-World War II efforts to act as a global moral leader. But Germany's European neighbors don't want lecturing but a more engaged and militarily active Germany. The Baltic states openly demanded German panzer battalions during the Crimean crisis. Even the powerful conservative Polish politician Jaroslaw Kaczynski, formerly an outspoken Germanophobe, publicly welcomed the idea of a German-driven "European nuclear superpower" in February.

World War II has no real political weight in today's relations between Germany and its eastern (and western) neighbors anymore. Rather, today's perception of the Russian-driven security dilemma in Eastern Europe determines the views of the Eastern European countries whose courage helped bring down Soviet oppression in the late 1980s. Central and Eastern Europe share this perception of threat from Russia, and, as Kaczynski indicated, this means nuclear power projection on the part of Berlin would be accepted as legitimate.

We might ask why the Germans don't figure something out with the British and the French, both of whom already own nuclear weapons. But the U.K.'s and France's nuclear stockpiles are partly outdated, too small, and largely tactical (i.e., short-range). And, critically, would the two countries really step in and shield Germany and Eastern Europe against a Russian attack? Extended deterrence is a fine thing — as long as it works when push comes to shove. The question that the U.K. and France would most likely ask themselves in such a scenario is why not stay out and make peace with Russia, rather than risk war for the sake of interests in Eastern Europe that they see as distant from their own concerns. Such a self-protective reaction would be understandable (and predictable). But it also underlines Germany's need to acquire nuclear weapons that provide it the ability to independently protect itself and its neighbors to the east.

It's true that Germany is a signatory to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. This tremendously important international treaty requires all "have-nots" of nuclear weapons to refrain from acquiring them while the "haves," in turn, make sure that no one else gets them. That is a valid statement, as long as the foundations that made it unnecessary for Germany to even consider nuclear weapons and sign the treaty still exist. But with NATO becoming "obsolete," the times are rapidly and drastically changing. If the power conditions that made Germany's position as a "have-not" justifiable are removed, the country cannot be obliged to remain unprotected in the face of a heavily nuclear-armed Russia. Other countries, like Japan, may remain shielded by the United States — but if Europe is abandoned, a responsible, and deeply realistic, government can't afford this degree of self-denial.

All this talk of a Berlin deterrent has another purpose, which outsiders — even the Economist — have not fully appreciated. Proponents of a German nuclear deterrent are fully aware that despite the U.S. president's final executive power, making NATO "obsolete" would require the more explicit approval of the administration's top echelons. Starting the debate has been a reminder to the more cautious or wiser elements in the U.S. government of the stark consequences of abandoning NATO. The United States doesn't want Germany to have nuclear weapons, and preventing Bonn — and eventually Berlin — from getting them has been one of the side benefits of NATO.

This is not to say that the nuclear proposal was critical in taming Trump's wild talk for the moment. Other factors may have pushed and pulled the administration much more strongly to cautiously re-appreciate the strategic value of NATO. Still, with Merkel having to deny any such nuclear plans in public early this year, it is not unlikely that the debate was noted in the United States. Certainly this was the case at NATO itself when its (American) deputy secretary-general, Rose Gottemoeller, rejected the idea and instead reassured the European public that the new U.S. president was aware of his long-standing obligations and the benefits for international stability.

Nuclear weapons are expensive, contentious, potentially contagious, and dangerous. Germany is in no rush to get them. But if the shelter of the U.S. nuclear umbrella is

removed while Russian weapons are still pointed at Berlin, it will have no choice.

INTERNATIONAL

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Jared Kushner Flies to Iraq for Briefing on Anti-ISIS Strategy

Gordon Lubold

Updated April 3, 2017 5:10 p.m. ET

BAGHDAD—President Donald Trump's senior adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner paid a surprise visit to Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and other officials here Monday, receiving military briefings on the fight against Islamic State.

Mr. Kushner is the first member of the president's inner circle to visit Iraq, a key ally in the fight against Islamic State, since Mr. Trump took office. He was invited here by the chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Joe Dunford, who is on a routine visit to meet with U.S. and Iraqi commanders and troops.

The visit comes as the Trump administration is assessing the U.S. strategy to combat Islamic State in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere.

According to a statement from Mr. Abadi's office, the two sides discussed the battle in Mosul, international support for Iraq, as well as training and equipment issues.

The U.S. delegation also met with Irfan al-Hayali, the defense minister, and Gen. Othman al-Ghanimi, the chief of staff of the Iraqi forces.

They were joined in those meetings by Tom Bossert, a former administration official under President George W. Bush, now serving as Mr. Trump's homeland security adviser. The men arrived midafternoon and proceeded to a number of back-to-back meetings with Iraqi and U.S. officials, including Lt. Gen. Stephen Townsend, who is the commander of the coalition effort against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

"As well as receiving briefings and updates, Mr. Kushner is traveling on behalf of the president to express the president's support and commitment to the government of Iraq and U.S. personnel currently engaged in the campaign," said Capt. Greg Hicks, a spokesman for Gen. Dunford.

Later in the evening, Messrs. Kushner, Bossert and Gen. Dunford dined with U.S. Ambassador Douglas Silliman at the sprawling U.S. embassy compound in Baghdad.

Mr. Kushner, 36, a newcomer to foreign-policy issues, has taken an active role as an adviser to Mr. Trump on national security and foreign policy.

Last month, Mr. Kushner made, for a White House official, a rare appearance at the Pentagon, where he met Saudi Arabia's Deputy Crown Prince and Minister of Defense Mohammed bin Salman during his meeting with Defense Secretary Jim Mattis.

He has also been influential with his father-in-law on issues pertaining to Mexico and other countries, and he has been given broad authority by his father-in-law to attempt to broker a peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians.

Mr. Kushner, a multimillionaire businessman and developer interested in how technology can reform organizations, launched an innovation office for the White House last week that intends to help reform government.

Mr. Kushner didn't speak with reporters on the trip to Iraq, his first ever here, which was preceded by an overnight stay at a U.S. military base in Germany.

Mr. Mattis and Gen. Dunford are completing a review of the strategy to fight the group. Mr. Trump signaled during the campaign and since assuming office that he had a plan to accelerate the fight against Islamic State, offering no details about what it might be.

No plan has emerged, and it now falls to Mr. Mattis and Gen. Dunford to come up with a new strategy. Gen. Dunford declined to discuss what the new strategy would look like. But, according to numerous U.S. officials, the strategy may largely resemble the old one, initiated under President Barack Obama, with tweaks and additions in the margins, U.S. officials said.

Gen. Dunford said he invited Messrs. Kushner and Bossert to join him on the trip some weeks ago so they could see the work troops are doing here, since they will be part of the decision on strategy.

"I think anyone who's involved in the discussion on where we go strategically—having good situational awareness about what's happening tactically and hear it first hand and unfiltered, how our advisers assess the Iraqi security forces, both the opportunities and the challenges—will feed into somebody's strategic view," Gen. Dunford told reporters traveling with him on a military jet.

The new strategy, or a refinement of it, may include additional U.S. troops for both Iraq and Syria, possible changes that could put American soldiers closer to the front lines, and an accelerated airstrike campaign.

Under Mr. Obama last fall, the U.S. military had already been given additional authorities which essentially delegated decision making closer to the battlefield.

The visit comes as American and Iraqi troops fight to evict Islamic State militants from the northern Iraqi city of Mosul and prepare for a fight against the group in Raqqa, its self-declared de facto capital in Syria.

Meanwhile, the U.S. military is investigating a series of airstrikes in recent weeks that officials believe may be partly responsible for the deaths of scores of civilians in both Iraq and Syria. There was no new assessment from those investigations, Gen. Dunford said Sunday.

—Ghassan Adnan in Baghdad contributed to this article.

The Washington Post

Ambassador to the U.N. says U.S. leverage for Mideast peace not harmed by support for Israel

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

UNITED NATIONS — The United States is "exploring everything" to broker a Middle East peace settlement, and her own forceful defense of Israel at the United Nations does not undermine American leverage, the U.S. ambassador to the world body said Monday.

Nikki Haley, President Trump's tough-talking envoy, also denied any tension among Trump's national security team over who calls the shots. She praised Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who has adopted a much lower profile than her own, and confirmed that she originally had interviewed for that higher-ranking position. Tillerson will join her at the United Nations later this month for a special session on North Korea's ballistic missile and nuclear programs, she said.

"The original call that I received to go to Trump Tower was to discuss secretary of state. No, he did not offer it," Haley said at a news conference timed to the start of U.S. leadership of the U.N. Security Council this month.

Trump interviewed numerous candidates to lead the State Department during the weeks following his election in November, finally settling on the dark-horse Tillerson, then head of the oil giant ExxonMobil.

"I see Secretary Tillerson as a great partner," Haley said. "We work very well together," along with Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, national security adviser H.R. McMaster and others, Haley said.

The power and autonomy of many of those traditionally strong Cabinet and White House jobs are complicated in the Trump administration by the power and proximity of Trump's son-in-law and adviser-at-large Jared Kushner. His large and growing portfolio includes

the search for Middle East peace, which Trump has called "the ultimate deal."

Kushner turned up in Iraq Monday; Tillerson has not yet visited that nation at the heart of the U.S. effort to defeat the Islamic State. Mattis visited in February.

"We all know that we each have a place in terms of this administration, but more importantly we know that we're working as a team," Haley said. "There are not any dynamics that would portray anything other than that."

Tillerson will join other foreign ministers at the United Nations on April 28 for the North Korea session, she said. On that issue and others, she pledged firm U.S. leadership under Trump that she acknowledged can come across as "aggressive."

"I think the United States has seen China, for 25-plus years, say that they're concerned about North Korea. But we haven't seen them act like they're concerned about North Korea. So I think this administration wants to see them act, and I think they're going to pressure them," Haley said.

The president is hosting Chinese President Xi Jinping this week at Trump's Florida estate. North Korea is the U.S. priority for the visit, Haley said. She will not attend.

"At the end of the day, the only one that North Korea is really going to respond to is China," Haley said.

Checkpoint newsletter

Military, defense and security at home and abroad.

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China, one of the permanent, veto-holding members of the Security Council, is North Korea's traditional defender and economic lifeline.

The United States will focus on reforming U.N. peacekeeping missions and the world body's handling of human rights issues during the one-month presidency, Haley said. That is likely to include U.S. criticism of what Haley calls an unproductive and unfair U.N. focus on Israeli treatment of Palestinians.

She said she is not concerned that her strongly worded support for Israel creates the impression that the United States has a finger on the scale in any future negotiation.

"I've been honest. That's all I've done, is tell the truth," she said.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Clemmons : Why Is J Street Calling Israel an 'Occupier'?

Alan Clemmons

April 3, 2017 7:15 p.m. ET

At a recent conference at the United Nations on strategies to defeat the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement, J Street—a Jewish, progressive advocacy group that claims to reject BDS—sent some of its constituents to stir up controversy. J Street members wore T-shirts reading "anti-BDS & anti-occupation" and when invited to ask questions, referred to Israel as an "illegal occupier."

The former Soviet dissident Natan Sharansky was also in attendance. His "3D" test has become the standard used by the U.S. State Department and other institutions to determine when criticism of Israel crosses the line into anti-Semitism. Mr. Sharansky's three Ds are delegitimization, demonization and double standards. Measured this way, J Street is itself anti-Semitic.

Using the term "occupier" is a polite way of demonizing Israel as a thief. It suggests that Jewish invaders colonized territory rightfully belonging to the Arabs. Talk about a double standard. To suggest that Jews are occupiers in a region known for more than 3,000 years as Judea is as ridiculous as suggesting that Arabs currently living in Arabia are occupiers.

"Occupier" is a legal term that does not apply to Israel. Israel's legal title and rights to its present territory were established in the San Remo resolution, an agreement adopted by victorious Allied Powers after World War I, confirmed by the League of Nations, and incorporated into the U.N. charter. None of the Jewish people's rights to live, emigrate to and settle the land of Israel have ever been revoked, nullified or superseded by a subsequent act of international law.

Calling Israel an "occupier" has become essential to anti-Israel forces, as they persist in efforts to delegitimize the Jewish state. A U.N. resolution passed in December demands that "Israel immediately and completely cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory."

Tarring Israel with the "occupier" label also gives its violent enemies grounds upon which to portray terrorism as resistance to occupation. When an Israeli killed a Palestinian who was attempting to stab an Israeli soldier in 2015, the Palestinian Authority claimed that the occurrence "exposes the ugly face of the occupation" and "its crimes against the helpless Palestinian people."

The terms "occupier" and "occupation" have infiltrated the media, academia and government bodies around the world. Mostly their use has been confined to non-Jewish organizations. Now, however, Jewish groups like J Street have taken to slandering Israel as an occupier, thus engaging in anti-Semitic speech and lending material support to Israel's enemies.

Israel passed a law in March prohibiting foreigners who participate in BDS from entering the country. J Street responded by claiming that the bill will "further isolate" the Jewish state and "validate Israel's critics."

J Street doesn't have to shed its support for a two-state solution or abandon the work it does to ensure the well-being of Palestinian Arabs. But it must reject the lie that Israel is an occupier. Until then, J Street can't claim to have good intentions toward Israel.

Mr. Clemmons, a Republican, is a member of the South Carolina House.

The New York Times

Enabling Egypt's President Sisi, an Enemy of Human Rights

American presidents must sometimes deal with unsavory foreign leaders in pursuit of America's national interest. But that doesn't require inviting them to the White House and lavishing them with praise and promises of unconditional support.

Yet that's what President Trump did on Monday in not just welcoming but celebrating one of the most authoritarian leaders in the Middle East, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt, a man responsible for killing hundreds of Egyptians, jailing thousands of others and, in the process, running his country and its reputation into the ground.

The expressions of mutual admiration that permeated the Oval Office were borderline unctuous. Mr. Trump praised Mr. Sisi for doing a "fantastic job" and assured him he has a "great friend and ally in the United States and in me." In return, Mr. Sisi, who had been barred from the White House during the Obama administration, and who craved the respect such a visit would afford, expressed his "deep appreciation and admiration" for Mr. Trump's "unique personality."

Mr. Trump acknowledged that the two countries "have a few things" they don't agree on, but he pointedly did not mention the abysmal human rights record of Mr. Sisi's government, which the State Department and human rights groups have accused of gross abuses, including torture and unlawful killings.

Nor, apparently, did Mr. Trump raise the case of Aya Hijazi, an American citizen who works with street children. She was arrested in May 2014 on specious human trafficking charges and imprisoned for 33 months in violation of Egyptian law. Her case has been a cause célèbre among human rights groups, though she is but one of 40,000 people who have been detained, most for purely political reasons.

Egypt is one of America's closest allies in the Middle East and receives some $1.3 billion in annual military aid, but years of tumult have strained relations. President Hosni Mubarak was overthrown in 2011, and after a brief period of democratic rule that brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power, a military coup in 2013 engineered by Mr. Sisi overthrew the Brotherhood and led to more repression.

Mr. Sisi first cracked down on the Islamists, including a 2013 massacre that killed more than 800 people, then turned his sights on secular opponents and nongovernmental groups. The United States suspended delivery of a modest amount of military aid and asked for improvements in human rights and democracy, which never happened.

Mr. Trump has now made it transparently clear that human rights and democracy are not his big concerns and that he places more value on Egypt as a partner in the fight against the Islamic State. What he does not grasp is that, while Egypt is an important country, it cannot be a force for regional

stability nor the partner Mr. Trump imagines on counterterrorism or anything else if Mr. Sisi does not radically change his ways. Mr. Sisi's repression against enemies real and imagined, his management of the economy and inability to train, educate and create jobs for his nation's youth can only fuel more anger and unrest.

Mr. Sisi's task is to undertake economic and political reforms that benefit all Egyptians, not just the military. The White House spectacle might have been worth it if Mr. Trump had tried to make these points to his guest.

The Washington Post

Trump welcomes Egypt's Sissi to White House in reversal of U.S. policy

U.S. President Donald Trump expresses his support for Egyptian President al-Sisi telling him during a meeting in the Oval Office, "you have a great friend and an ally in the United States and in me." President Trump: U.S. 'very much behind' Egyptian President Abdel Fatah al-Sissi (Reuters)

President Trump on Monday welcomed the leader of Egypt to the White House for the first time in eight years, pledging close cooperation with Abdel Fatah al-Sissi on counterterrorism operations and praising his leadership of the Middle Eastern nation.

"I just want to let everybody know, in case there was any doubt, that we are very much behind President al-Sissi," Trump said, sitting next to his counterpart in the Oval Office. "He's done a fantastic job in a very difficult situation. We are very much behind Egypt and the people of Egypt. . . . We have strong backing."

Sissi's arrival at the White House marked a reversal of U.S. policy after President Barack Obama refused to invite him, because of concerns about human rights violations.

Trump and his aides did not mention human rights ahead of Sissi's visit, suggesting that the issue would be raised in private, if at all. Instead, Trump and Sissi appeared focused on security, and they sought to demonstrate warmth, shaking hands during their brief remarks to reporters.

"The president made it clear this is a new day in the relationship between Egypt and the United States," White House press secretary Sean Spicer said.

During a later meeting between the presidents and their senior aides, Trump said the day's work went well.

"We've made great progress today with Egypt, really great progress," he said.

The White House summit marked the first of several high-profile encounters for Sissi in Washington during a six-day visit that includes meetings with congressional and business leaders and with International Monetary Fund chief Christine Lagarde. Sissi also is expected to meet with King Abdullah of Jordan, who will visit Trump at the White House on Wednesday.

In his remarks in the Oval Office, Trump recalled their first meeting in September during the presidential campaign, a get-to-know-you conversation that he said ran well over the planned time as they struck up a personal connection.

"We agree on so many things," Trump said. He added that Sissi also met with his Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton. "Hopefully, you liked me a lot more," Trump said.

The last time an Egyptian leader visited the White House was in August 2009 when Hosni Mubarak met with Obama in the Oval Office. Mubarak resigned in 2011 during the mass protests in Cairo and other cities associated with the Arab Spring uprisings.

Through an interpreter, Sissi told Trump that he has a "deep appreciation and admiration of your unique personality, especially your standing very strongly in the counterterrorism field."

Egypt is battling an Islamic State affiliate in its northern Sinai Peninsula and exerts regional influence in numerous crises where the United States is engaged, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen.

Sissi referred to an "evil ideology that is claiming innocent lives" and said the United States will find "Egypt and myself always beside you in bringing about effective strategies in counterterrorism."

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Ahead of the summit, the White House was criticized by human rights groups because of its refusal to publicly challenge Sissi over the case of Aya Hijazi, an Egyptian American humanitarian worker from Falls Church, Va., who has been incarcerated by the Egyptian regime for nearly three years. She has been accused of abusing children she was seeking to help through her nonprofit organization — charges that are widely considered false.

"We are alarmed by the repeated delays in the trial and verdict for Ms. Hijazi," a bipartisan group of senators, led by Tim Kaine (D-Va.), wrote in a letter to Trump on Monday. "She has been unjustly imprisoned since May 2014 and held on unsubstantiated charges related to her nonprofit's efforts to educate and rehabilitate street children."

Trump did not mention her during his remarks.

The president used the occasion to tout his efforts to ramp up military spending, including "plane orders, ship orders, aircraft carrier orders."

He said his administration will "rejuvenate our military to a higher level. In these times, more than ever before . . . that's what we need."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Trump, Welcoming Egypt's Sisi, Says 'We Agree on So Many Things'

Felicia Schwartz

Updated April 3, 2017 5:01 p.m. ET

WASHINGTON—President Donald Trump provided a boost to Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al Sisi on Monday, giving him a warm welcome to the White House as his administration shifts the U.S. focus in its relationship with Cairo away from human rights while emphasizing security cooperation.

The visit appeared to go well for the Egyptian leader: He received coveted photos posing with Mr. Trump in the Oval Office and walking down the White House colonnade, while neither Mr. Trump nor White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer made any public mention of Egypt's spotty human rights record.

"The president recognizes...that's best discussed privately," Mr. Spicer said. "I'm not going to get into what they discussed privately. But I will tell you we understand the concern and I think those are the kinds of things that I think progress is made privately."

Mr. Trump praised Mr. Sisi throughout the day, saying that he has "done a fantastic job in a very difficult situation" as they sat side by side in the Oval Office.

"We agree on so many things," Mr. Trump said in the Oval Office Monday, as he sat beside Mr. Sisi on what was the Egyptian leader's first official visit to Washington. "You have a great friend and ally in the United States and in me."

Mr. Sisi said he has deep appreciation for Mr. Trump's "unique personality" and praised the American president's efforts to counter what Mr. Sisi described as an evil ideology that is "terrorizing innocent people." Mr. Sisi said Egypt will always be a "strong partner" in confronting terrorism.

"We will do that together, we will fight terrorism and other things," Mr. Trump said. "I look forward to a very long and strong relationship."

The visit marked a step forward for Mr. Sisi, analysts said.

"He has longed for a big hug from Washington as a sign of his broadening international legitimacy and he got that today," said Eric Trager, an Egypt expert at The Washington Institute. "The key question moving forward is whether Trump can translate this big hug for Sisi into better and deeper cooperation with Egypt."

In a meeting in the Cabinet Room, where Mr. Trump was joined by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, White House strategist Steve Bannon and other senior administration officials, Mr. Trump nodded to U.S. concerns with Egypt's human rights abuses. Experts and former officials say the human rights conditions have significantly deteriorated over the past several years.

"We have many things in common; we have a few things we don't agree on," Mr. Trump said.

Mr. Spicer said later Monday that Mr. Trump and Mr. Sisi's meetings on Monday were a "candid dialogue in which they discussed areas of cooperation and concern."

In the Oval Office, Mr. Trump also said that as he seeks closer ties with Egypt, the U.S. is boosting its own military.

"We are building up our military to a level that will be the highest, probably the highest that we've ever had." Mr. Trump said.

Mr. Trump is seeking to significantly boost the Pentagon's budget while cutting State Department spending.

Egypt is one of the largest recipients of U.S. military and foreign aid, getting about $1.5 billion a year. The Trump administration's budget blueprint doesn't guarantee aid to Egypt, and State Department officials have said aid to every country, except Israel, is under review.

Also on Mr. Trump's agenda for the meeting was a discussion of the Middle East peace process, as the Trump administration is seeking to bring the Israelis and Palestinians back to the negotiating table.

Mr. Sisi's trip is the first state visit of an Egyptian leader to Washington since 2009. Mr. Sisi won an election in 2014, several months after the military, then under his command, led a coup to oust Egypt's first freely elected leader, President Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Human rights groups on Monday called on Mr. Trump to press Mr. Sisi to ease up on arbitrary arrests and harsh prison conditions, among other abuses

"As President Sisi visits the White House, his government is overseeing a campaign of repression that flies in the face of American values," said Maya Foa, a director at international human rights organization Reprieve.

Tens of thousands of people have been imprisoned since Mr. Sisi came to power, including several American citizens.

The most high profile is Aya Hijazi, an American aid worker from Virginia who has been imprisoned for nearly three years on what are widely seen as false charges. Ahead of the visit, White House officials said they would raise her case in a way that they thought would best resolve her plight. It was unclear if Mr. Trump raised Ms. Hijazi's case with Mr. Sisi during the Monday meetings.

The New York Times

Trump Shifts Course on Egypt, Praising Its Authoritarian Leader (UNE)

Peter Baker and Declan Walsh

That big hug was just what Mr. Sisi's government sought, said Eric Trager, a scholar on Egypt at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "It wants to see the White House legitimate it, and set it on a new course."

The scene provided a powerful counterpoint to Mr. Sisi's many critics, in Egypt and abroad, who know him as the leader of the military takeover that removed an elected president, oversaw a vicious security operation in which hundreds of protesters were gunned down in the streets of Cairo and has cemented his authority by filling prisons with his opponents while strangling the free press.

It was the first visit by an Egyptian president to Washington since 2009, when the guest was the autocratic former president Hosni Mubarak, then in the waning years of his rule — an era now viewed by many Egyptians as a time of relative freedom, prosperity and security. Mr. Mubarak was pushed out in 2011 by a wave of street protests and succeeded, in a democratic election, by the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi. Taking advantage of popular discontent with Mr. Morsi two years later, the military, led by Mr. Sisi, then a general, took power and Mr. Sisi became president in a pro forma election that awarded him 97 percent of the vote.

Little of that seems to matter to Mr. Trump, though, who has showcased his determination to reshape America's relationship with a number of Middle Eastern countries, regardless of human rights concerns. In his public remarks on Monday, Mr. Trump made no mention of such issues; aides said he believed discussing them in private might be more effective.

"I just want to say to you, Mr. President, that you have a great friend and ally in the United States and in me," Mr. Trump told Mr. Sisi.

Mr. Sisi responded in kind, sometimes in language mimicking a Trumpian sales pitch. "You will find Egypt and myself always beside you in bringing about an effective strategy in the counterterrorism effort," he said. He also vowed to support Mr. Trump's effort to negotiate peace between Israelis and Palestinians, calling it an effort to "find a solution to the problem of the century in the deal of the century."

While Egypt has long been a crucial American ally in the Middle East, Mr. Trump's admiration for Mr. Sisi seems to mirror in some ways his appreciation for President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia as a fellow tough figure. After their first meeting in September, on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly when Mr. Trump was running for president, he hailed Mr. Sisi as "a fantastic guy" and spoke admiringly of his iron-fisted methods. "He took control of Egypt. And he really took control of it," Mr. Trump said in an interview with Fox Business Network.

Mr. Sisi has rejected suggestions that he rules like a dictator. Speaking to The Financial Times in December, he said he was "building love between Egyptians, a wave of respect for the other that will start in Cairo and spread across the region."

Yet as he was preparing to meet Mr. Trump on Monday, a court in Cairo sentenced 17 people to jail terms of five years each for taking part in street protests in January 2015.

In Rome, the parents of Giulio Regeni, an Italian postgraduate student found dead in Cairo last year, held a news conference to press their longstanding accusations that Egyptian security officials had abducted, tortured and killed their son, probably on suspicion that he was a spy. The family's lawyer, Alessandra Ballerini, said they had identified two high-ranking Egyptian national security officials said to be implicated in the case, but declined to give further details.

Beyond a shared love for harsh rhetoric warning against the dangers of jihadist Islam, Mr. Trump has striking similarities with Mr. Sisi's brand of authoritarianism in Egypt, according to Middle East analysts. Both leaders came to power promising splashy projects derided by experts — an expensive extension of the Suez Canal for Mr. Sisi, and a giant wall along the Mexico border for Mr. Trump. In speeches, both leaders have been ridiculed for making exaggerated claims, embracing conspiracy theories and speaking in a limited rhetorical style.

Egyptians also often mock Mr. Sisi for speaking in a rustic form of Arabic that contrasts with the formal version usually favored by national leaders. Mr. Trump has the grammar and vocabulary of a fifth-grade student, one study last year found.

Both leaders are notoriously thin-skinned and project a sense of unfiltered self-regard. In recent months, Mr. Trump branded critics in the "fake news" media as the "enemy of the American people"; last year, in a fit of exasperation, Mr. Sisi told Egyptians, "Please, do not listen to anyone but me!"

Yet in many other ways there are vast differences between their styles. While Mr. Trump wrestles with a hostile media and recalcitrant factions in his Republican party, Mr. Sisi's government has imprisoned dozens of journalists — fewer only than China and Turkey, according to press freedom groups — while the national Parliament is stuffed with his supporters.

It remains far from clear what the two leaders can offer each other in concrete terms. Mr. Sisi has resisted loud appeals to release Aya Hijazi, an American aid worker imprisoned in Egypt, while Mr. Trump's White House is considering slashing foreign aid to countries including Egypt's $1.3 billion in military assistance. The Trump administration also appears to have gone cold on proposals to designate the country's Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization.

While human rights advocates criticized Mr. Trump, a lawyer for Ms. Hijazi said her supporters had been working with his administration to highlight her case and those of others held. "We are confident that the case is being prioritized at the highest levels of the United States government," said the lawyer, Wade McMullen, managing attorney at Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, an advocacy center.

One thing Mr. Sisi desperately wants, according to Western officials in Cairo, is for Mr. Trump to reinstate a military financing deal, suspended under Mr. Obama in 2015, allowing Egypt to effectively buy, on credit, the tanks, warplanes and other large-ticket military items it desires. Such a deal would give Mr. Sisi something to bring home to his backers in the military.

But experts say that while a military finance deal might please American defense contractors, it could frustrate American counterterrorism goals by making Egypt less likely to pour resources into smaller weapons that are better suited to battling Islamic State insurgents in Sinai.

"If Trump is really interested in getting the Egyptians to fight radical Islam, giving them more tanks will

not help our goals," said Amy Hawthorne of the Project on Middle East Democracy, a Washington nonprofit that has been sharply critical of Mr. Sisi.

Some experts worry that Mr. Sisi's hard-knuckled approach to Islamism — banning all forms of political Islam, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as fighting jihadist violence — could ultimately feed a new wellspring of radicalism that could blow back on the United States.

"The authoritarian bargain the U.S. has struck with Egypt might seem to be the right thing, but it never pays off in the long run," Ms. Hawthorne said. "It's not just about being on the wrong side of history, but about over-investing in a regime that is fueling radicalization that will ultimately harm U.S. interests."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

China's Currency Takes a Twist Ahead of Trump-Xi Meeting (UNE)

Saumya Vaishampayan and Carolyn Cui

Updated April 3, 2017 8:17 p.m. ET

As China's leader prepares to head to the U.S. this week, there's a new twist in the persistent argument that China is keeping its currency artificially low against the dollar. The yuan has recently been rising.

The gains have been small—the yuan is up 1% against the dollar so far this year—but began shortly before Donald Trump was inaugurated as president. The rise could complicate a central criticism that Mr. Trump has leveled against China: that it is manipulating its currency downward at the expense of the U.S. to help bolster exports and its economy.

Mr. Trump and Chinese leader Xi Jinping are due to meet Thursday.

China for years had been criticized by other countries for its heavy-handed efforts to keep the yuan undervalued, even while it made moves to open its markets to free trading. Then came a period of appreciation which led to the government to suddenly devalue the currency in August 2015, causing a global market selloff.

Since Mr. Trump took office, Chinese authorities have relied on capital controls and a broadly weakening dollar to keep the yuan in a narrow range against the U.S. currency.

China achieved the recent calm with relatively mild nudges. In late 2015 and early 2016, the People's Bank of China heavily intervened in the foreign-exchange market by selling its dollar reserves to support the yuan. This year the authorities resorted to a combination of measures, including heightened capital controls and increases of domestic interest rates, analysts and investors say.

The yuan's decline against major trading partners other than the U.S. suggests an effort to maintain global trade advantages while reducing political friction with the U.S., China's second-largest partner in goods trading behind the European Union, analysts said.

The yuan has fallen more than 2% against a basket of China's major trading partners, which include the U.S., the EU and numerous Asian countries including Hong Kong, Japan and South Korea, according to data published by the EU.

Letting the yuan strengthen against the dollar while weakening against other currencies helps China "achieve the objective of export competitiveness and reflation in the economy while at the same time avoiding that negative spillover effect," said Roland Mieth, emerging-markets portfolio manager for Pacific Investment Management Co. in Singapore.

China's currency practices have long been a source of tension between the two biggest economies.

Throughout his campaign for the presidency, Mr. Trump and his surrogates repeatedly accused China of manipulating the yuan in a way that boosted the U.S. trade deficit and destroyed U.S. jobs. Global investors feared new U.S tariffs.

But the administration's tone on trade has been more conciliatory in recent weeks. Last month, U.S. officials signaled they would accept only modest changes to the North American Free Trade Agreement, which Mr. Trump previously blasted as "the worst trade deal" ever.

Accordingly, financial markets have been buoyed by wagers that Mr. Trump won't follow through on tough talk that only a few months ago sparked fears of a global trade war.

"The relative stability or even mild strength against the dollar certainly provides for a less contentious backdrop for the Trump-Xi meeting coming up later this week," said Eswar Prasad, a Cornell University professor and a former head of the International Monetary Fund's China division.

In mid-April, the Treasury Department is set to release its semiannual report on foreign-exchange policies of the U.S.'s major trading partners, and China is on its monitoring list, which tracks countries that run large trade surpluses with the U.S.

Many economists and investors say that China doesn't meet the Treasury's criteria to be named a currency manipulator because its current-account surplus has shrunk and it has been burning through its reserves to prop up the currency, rather than letting it fall. China's currency was undervalued until 2013, some analysts say, but its recently economic and trade weakness has led the currency to a more overvalued position.

An index of the yuan against a broad group of currencies published by a branch of China's central bank is at its lowest since the basket was introduced more than a year ago, as China pledged to decouple the yuan from the dollar and let it move on market forces.

The White House is exploring a new tactic to discourage China from undervaluing its currency to boost exports by designating the practice of currency manipulation as an unfair subsidy.

By keeping the yuan from falling further against the dollar, the Chinese want Mr. Trump to "know that they're willing to play ball on currency and trade issues so that the bilateral economic relationship can be maintained," Mr. Prasad said.

China's exchange rate is a major concern in the U.S., while issues such as excess capacity in the global economy are "multilateral issues" that matter more to other countries, former Treasury secretary Jacob Lew said last week at a panel in New York held by the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, a nonprofit organization.

Among its major trading partners, China runs a trade deficit with Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, suggesting that China imports more goods from these economies than what they buy from China. China runs a surplus against the EU, Vietnam and Singapore, but to a lesser extent than its surplus with the U.S.

For much of 2017, the yuan's value against the dollar has been higher in offshore markets, where it trades more freely, than in domestic markets, suggesting that broader market expectations of yuan depreciation have receded for now.

"It's politically induced stability," said Claire Dissaux, head of global economics and strategy at Millennium Global Investments Ltd., a London-based currency investment firm.

However, over the long run, economists say the Chinese currency is still under pressure to weaken against the dollar, as China's current-account surplus continues to narrow along with its slowing economy. Chinese households and companies are still eager to find ways to swap their yuan-denominated savings into overseas assets.

Ms. Dissaux said: "Capital controls are never sustainable."

Bloomberg

Minter : How China Can Become a True Climate Leader

Adam Minter

One of the world's largest reserves of low-grade, dirty coal is located roughly 250 miles west of Karachi, Pakistan in the Thar Desert. Discovered in the 1990s, it remained largely untapped until last year, when Chinese financing underwrote a $3.5 billion project to exploit it. The investment is part of a larger Chinese energy plan for Pakistan that includes seven new coal plants. By 2020, if everything goes as planned, Pakistan will derive 24 percent of its power from coal, up from 0.1 percent today.

And Pakistan is hardly alone. In fact, China is the world's single largest exporter of coal-related financing and equipment, especially to developing countries. Between 2001 and 2016, Chinese financial institutions backed more than 50 coal-fired power plants abroad; as of last September, Chinese companies were involved in at least 79 additional coal-fired generation projects. Collectively, those projects will generate more power than all the coal plants that the U.S. plans to take offline by 2020.

The subject is unlikely to come up when Chinese President Xi Jinping

meets President Donald Trump in Florida later this week. Yet as the U.S. retreats from its climate commitments, the world is looking to China to lead the fight against global warming. The country deserves cautious praise for cleaning up and slowing the production and use of coal at home. It should strive to be equally responsible abroad.

QuickTake Coal Power

China has good reason to export coal technologies and equipment. Developing countries in which China has varied interests, ranging from raw materials to manufacturing, are in search of cheap power, and coal usually fits the bill. Meanwhile, a slowing economy and anti-pollution measures have reduced demand for new coal projects at home. So China's energy giants have to look abroad for growth.

China's state-run lending institutions -- in particular, China Development Bank Corp. and the Export-Import Bank of China -- are happy to help. According to one recent study, two out of three overseas power projects supported by Chinese development banks between 2007 and 2014 were coal-related. By contrast, 96 percent of the World Bank's power-sector financing over the same period supported renewable-energy projects, not including hydropower.

The impact is significant. Chinese-built coal plants constructed overseas between 2001 and 2015 were responsible for the equivalent of around 11 percent of total U.S. emissions in 2015 -- a sizeable amount, considering the U.S.'s status as the world's second largest CO2 emitter after China.

This puts an added burden of responsibility on China to minimize the environmental impact of its projects. Unfortunately, of the plants it built between 2001 and 2016, nearly 60 percent used "sub-critical" technologies that are inefficient and highly polluting. While the rest were modern "super-critical" plants that operate more efficiently, even those only manage to emit 10 to 20 percent fewer greenhouse gases than their older counterparts. Newer technologies can reduce emissions by as much as 30 percent.

Of course, China isn't solely to blame for the promotion of coal. Between 2007 and 2015, G20 nations financed $76 billion worth of overseas coal projects -- two-thirds sponsored by other countries. And the fact remains that developing nations need power. Given cost pressures, coal will have to fill a good chunk of that demand for the foreseeable future.

But in 2015, OECD nations at least agreed to restrict overseas coal financing to the cleanest technologies, except in the most impoverished nations. Chinese leaders made a vague pledge to support low-carbon technologies internationally as part of a landmark 2015 climate change agreement with the U.S. Yet they may be wondering what obligation they have to keep that promise now -- especially since the OECD has largely abandoned the international coal financing market to them.

If China wants to be taken seriously as a leader in the battle against climate change, it'll resist the urge to renege. Indeed, it should follow the OECD's lead and commit to supporting only the most advanced and environmentally responsible coal projects abroad as well as at home. At the same time, it should devote more resources to financing renewable-energy facilities in the developing world. In Pakistan, for example, it's supporting modest solar and wind farm projects alongside its coal investments. Chinese money and expertise is much-needed in these countries. It should be spent wisely.

The New York Times

Maoists for Trump? In China, Fans Admire His Nationalist Views

Chris Buckley

China's Maoists are a small minority; most Chinese have no desire to revive the ruthless, convulsive politics of the Mao era. But the Maoists' growing assertiveness, echoed in their embrace of aspects of Mr. Trump's agenda, could help push the country in a more authoritarian direction.

They also complicate the efforts of Mr. Xi to play both sides of an ideological divide: as a robust defender of Mao's legacy, but also a proponent of market liberalization and even a champion of globalization in the Trump age.

It is a paradox that these admirers of Mao Zedong, a Marxist revolutionary who railed against Western imperialism, have found things to like about this American president, a property tycoon with a cabinet crowded with millionaires. But they want Mr. Xi to take a page from Mr. Trump's "America First" script and protect Chinese workers from layoffs, privatization and foreign competition.

"Trump opposes globalization, and so should China," said one article on Utopia, a popular Maoist website. "Trump's ideology has oriented toward China, and he is learning from China," said another hard-left Chinese site.

China's neo-Maoists, as they are sometimes called, are loosely united by demands for stringent economic equality, zealous nationalism and a loathing of the capitalist West and liberal democracy.

"Many of the same ideas now animating the global populist movement have been the hallmarks of the neo-Maoist movement for over a decade," said Jude Blanchette, a researcher in Beijing who is writing a book about the movement.

"The neo-Maoists have also clearly benefited from the rise of Xi Jinping, as he has blasted a pretty large dog whistle in their direction," Mr. Blanchette added.

Many on China's far left see Mr. Trump as a dangerous foe who has questioned established American policy on Taiwan, vowed to confront China's hold on the disputed South China Sea and threatened to cut Chinese exports to America.

But some Maoists say Mr. Trump also offers a model. They think he led a populist revolt that humbled a corrupt political establishment not unlike what they see in China. They cheer his incendiary tactics, sometimes likening them to Mao's methods. And they hear in his remarks an echo of their own disgust with Western democracy, American interventionism and liberal political values.

Maoist meetings and websites dwell on a clutch of enemies, including the C.I.A. and America in general, genetically modified crops and advocates of privatizing state companies. But they reserve a particular venom for liberal Chinese intellectuals and celebrities who have condemned Mao.

In the West, Mr. Zhang argued, the nationalists are on the right while the left generally supports internationalism. "But China is the opposite," he said. "Chinese rightists are the traitors, while Chinese leftists are the patriots."

The Communist Party never repudiated Mao's legacy after his death in 1976, but it condemned his excesses, including the violent Cultural Revolution, and for years he was ignored or discredited while Deng Xiaoping pursued economic liberalization.

In the 1990s, though, the party refurbished Mao's image and fostered a popular revival to bolster its authority and blunt calls for political liberalization. Officials started using Maoists to intimidate liberal academics, dissidents and other critics. Before Mr. Xi came to power in 2012, a political rival, Bo Xilai, openly encouraged "red" nostalgia for the Mao era as part of an effort to build a populist power base.

Mr. Bo was purged in a scandal, but the Maoists regrouped as Mr. Xi associated himself more closely with Mao's legacy than his predecessors and called for a return to Marxist purity.

Under Mr. Xi, Maoists have become bolder in taking to the streets and organizing online campaigns. A court ruling last year and legislation adopted last month protecting Communist heroes buoyed them further.

Nobody expects Maoists to seize power in Beijing. They are disdained by the middle class and kept on a tether by the party authorities. Across China, there are maybe a few thousand active supporters of Maoist groups and causes, and their petitions against liberal intellectuals have gathered tens of thousands of signatures online, according to Mr. Blanchette, the researcher.

But the Chinese left's broader message of muscular nationalism and its criticism of widening inequality have reverberated, especially among retirees, hard-up workers and former party officials dismayed by extravagant wealth and corruption. Mr. Trump and the global surge of nationalism and populism have added to the political tinder.

Dai Jianzhong, a sociologist in Beijing, said Maoists could gain a bigger following if an economic slowdown caused mass layoffs, or if tensions with the United States escalated into confrontation.

"It was a big shock for China to see American middle-class society overwhelmed by this tide of populism," Mr. Dai said. "China is a different society, but if the economy stagnates and workers feel badly let down, populism will gain influence. The influence of Maoists and ultraleftists would spread."

In January, about a hundred protesters gathered in Jinan, a provincial capital in eastern China, to condemn a professor of communications and advertising, Deng Xiangchao, who had dared criticize Mao online. They chanted

and held banners near Mr. Deng's home, reviling him as a "traitor" and "enemy of the people," and roughed up a few people who came to show their support for him.

"We love Chairman Mao because we're poor, and the poor all love Chairman Mao," Yang Jianguo, a retired worker who was among the protesters, said by telephone after the protest.

The university swiftly dismissed Mr. Deng rather than engage in a prolonged battle with the Maoists. Later, left-wing activists also successfully demanded the dismissal of a television station worker who had voiced support for Mr. Deng.

It would be unthinkable for the party to be so obliging of protesters for free speech or other causes the party considers anathema. But while Mr. Xi has silenced the party's liberal critics, the party has tolerated, even abetted, its hard-left opponents, giving the Maoist populists room to grow stronger.

"Their influence has clearly grown with the leftist turn in ideology, especially since 2015," said Deng Yuwen, a current affairs writer in Beijing who has criticized the Maoists.

"It's not that the top level of the party directly controls them, but the Maoists are politically astute, and they have a good sense of what they can get away with," he added. "They know the officials use them, but they also use the officials."

While party leaders may find them useful for intimidating critics, the Maoists want to take China in a different direction and reverse market policies that have fueled decades of growth, by seizing the assets of the rich and strengthening state ownership of industry, for example.

Most phrase their criticism of the party carefully, but some openly accuse it of betraying Mao. "China is a capitalist state under socialist guise," said Mr. Yang, the retired worker. "Capitalists dominate the country."

Asked about the American president, Mr. Yang was more generous: "Trump has socialist tendencies, because the way he won power in a way reflected the workers' demands."

Many Maoists see Mr. Xi as a fellow traveler who is taking China in the right direction by restoring respect for Mao and Marx. But others say privately that even Mr. Xi may not be a dependable ally. They point out that he has promoted himself abroad as a proponent of expanding global trade and a friend of multinational corporations, drawing an implicit contrast with Mr. Trump.

He Weifang, a law professor at Peking University who is often reviled by China's far left, said Mr. Xi was playing a dangerous game by allowing Maoist populists to silence liberal voices and risked igniting political fires that he cannot easily control.

"If political currents in China increasingly converge with populism," Mr. He added, "that would have a powerful effect on China's future."

The New York Times

North Korea's Nuclear Strength, Encapsulated in an Online Ad for Lithium

David E. Sanger and William J. Broad

If that is the case, Mr. Trump may find little success in borrowing from the playbook of the four presidents before him, who fruitlessly tried, with differing mixes of negotiations, sanctions, sabotage and threats of unilateral strikes, to force the North to give up its program. And it remains unclear exactly what the president meant when he said he would "solve" the problem of North Korea.

While experts doubt the declaration last year by Kim Jong-un, the North's leader, that the country had tested a hydrogen bomb, intelligence estimates provided to Mr. Trump in recent weeks say the mercurial young ruler is working on it. The acceleration of Mr. Kim's atomic and missile programs — the North launched four ballistic missiles in a test last month — is meant to prove that the country is, and will remain, a nuclear power to be reckoned with.

For Mr. Trump, that reckoning is coming even as his strategy to halt the North's program remains incomplete and largely unexplained, and as some experts say the very idea of stopping Pyongyang's efforts is doomed to failure. Mr. Trump's budget is expected to include more money for antimissile defenses, and officials say he is continuing a cyber- and electronic-warfare effort to sabotage North Korea's missile launches.

The president's insistence that he will solve the North Korea problem makes it hard to imagine a shift toward acceptance of its arsenal. But in private, even some of his closest aides have begun to question whether the goal of "complete, verifiable, irreversible disarmament" — the policy of the Obama and Bush administrations — is feasible anymore.

"We need to change the fundamental objective of our policy, because North Korea will never willingly give up its program," Michael J. Morell, a former deputy director of the C.I.A., and James A. Winnefeld Jr., a retired admiral and a former vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, wrote last week on the website The Cipher Brief.

"Washington's belief that this was possible was a key mistake in our initial policy thinking," added the two men, experienced hands at countering the North. The United States and China, they argue, should abandon the idea of denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula and turn to old-fashioned deterrence.

Similarly, Robert Einhorn, a former senior State Department nonproliferation expert, writes in a new report for the Brookings Institution that a "dual-track strategy involving both pressure and negotiations" would be more likely to "bring China on board." The technique is reminiscent of what was used to push Iran into nuclear negotiations.

But Mr. Einhorn cautioned that "while the complete denuclearization of North Korea would be the ultimate goal of negotiations, there is virtually no prospect that it could be achieved in the near term."

The Chinese appear unlikely to make more than token efforts to squeeze North Korea, fearing the repercussions if the regime were to collapse, and Mr. Kim has made it clear that he is not about to negotiate away what he sees as his main protection against being overthrown by the United States and its allies.

"China will either decide to help us with North Korea, or they won't," Mr. Trump said in the Financial Times interview. If the Chinese fail to act, he added, "it won't be good for anyone."

It is unclear how close North Korea is to constructing a hydrogen bomb. But Siegfried S. Hecker, a Stanford University professor who once directed the Los Alamos weapons laboratory in New Mexico, and has visited the North's main nuclear complex, said the ad for lithium 6, while surprising, was a reminder that North Korea, though a backward country, was still capable of major technical advances.

"I can't imagine they're not working on true thermonuclear weapons," Dr. Hecker said in an interview.

As Mr. Trump and Mr. Xi meet on Thursday and Friday, Mr. Kim, on the other side of the world, may have a plan of his own for the summit meeting: Satellite photographs suggest he is preparing for a sixth nuclear test. Workers have dug a deep tunnel, which can block radioactive leaks if carefully sealed, leaving intelligence experts struggling to estimate the North's progress.

American intelligence officials, and their South Korean and Japanese counterparts, are debating whether the next blasts will mark major steps down the road to a true thermonuclear weapon.

The lithium 6 ad is evidence that Mr. Kim is following a road map that the United States drew up back in 1954. That was when it tested its first thermonuclear weapon fueled by the isotope. The blast, code-named Bravo, was the most powerful the United States ever detonated. In minutes, its mushroom cloud rose to a height of 25 miles.

Though difficult to make, hydrogen bombs became the symbol of Cold War power — they are awesomely destructive and relatively cheap. The weapon relies on a small atom bomb, inside a thick metal casing, that works like a match to ignite the hydrogen fuel. For decades, bomb makers have used lithium 6 as a standard way of making hydrogen fuel for nuclear arms.

Last month, two Los Alamos scientists argued that the rocky North Korean test site the United States monitors could confine explosions of up to 282 kilotons — roughly 20 times as strong as the Hiroshima blast. Although a hydrogen bomb can be that powerful, so can large atom bombs. Previously, the largest blasts at the site were in the Hiroshima range.

When Mr. Kim declared last year that the North had set off a hydrogen bomb, there was no evidence to back up the claim, such as enormous shock waves felt around the globe. More likely, experts said, Mr. Kim's scientists had created a "boosted" atomic bomb in which a tiny bit of

thermonuclear fuel resulted in a slightly higher explosive yield but fell well short of a true hydrogen bomb.

"It's possible that North Korea has already boosted," said Gregory S. Jones, a scientist at the RAND Corporation who analyzes nuclear issues. Like other experts, he pointed to the nation's two nuclear blasts last year as possible tests of small boosted arms.

A next logical step would be for the North to turn the material it was advertising online, lithium 6, into a more complex kind of thermonuclear fuel arrangement for a much more powerful bomb. The first Soviet thermonuclear test, in 1953, used that method. It was more than 25 times as strong as the Hiroshima bomb.

"It's a big step," Dr. Hecker, the Stanford professor, said of a true hydrogen bomb, adding that it was perhaps beyond the North's skill. But over all, he said, the North has shown technical savvy in carefully pacing its nuclear tests, suggesting that it would eventually learn the main secrets of nuclear arms.

"They've done five tests in 10 years," he said. "You can learn a lot in that time."

As for the excess lithium 6, any interested buyers may have a hard time answering the ad.

The street address given in the advertisement does not exist. The phone has been disconnected or no one answers. But if the operation really is being run out of the North Korean Embassy in Beijing, it should not be hard for Mr. Xi to find out: It is about two and a half miles down the road from the compound where he lives.

The Washington Post

Editorial : External pressure, not empty talk, can rescue Venezuela

THE RELATIVE good news from Venezuela, which is enduring the worst political, economic and humanitarian crisis the Western hemisphere has seen in this century, is that Latin American nations are finally showing a willingness to call out President Nicolás Maduro for his abuses of power. Even better, notwithstanding its rants about Yanqui imperialism and the crude insults flung at its nearer neighbors, the regime is demonstrating a healthy fear of becoming a regional pariah.

Just a few days after 14 members of the Organization of American States released a letter to the Maduro government calling for it to restore powers to the elected National Assembly, the regime-controlled Supreme Court issued a decision last week stripping the legislature of all remaining authority. The international reaction was immediate: The Maduro government was denounced by countries across the hemisphere, and Colombia, Chile and Peru withdrew their ambassadors from Caracas. Twenty OAS members called for an emergency meeting on Monday of the organization's permanent council, which approved a resolution calling for "measures that allow a return to democratic order" in Venezuela.

The pressure had a clear effect. Fissures opened in the regime: The attorney general held a news conference to call the ruling "a rupture of the constitutional order." According to the Wall Street Journal, Mr. Maduro came under pressure from the head of the armed forces. The president eventually was obliged to hold a midnight meeting of the national security council, after which he asked the court to revise its ruling. On Saturday, it complied, at the cost of demonstrating more clearly than ever that it is not part of an independent judiciary, but merely an instrument of the authoritarian regime founded by Hugo Chávez.

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In reality, even the original ruling did not change much. The court already has overruled every decision taken by the National Assembly since the opposition won two-thirds of its seats in late 2015. Mr. Maduro has been governing by decree. The principal thrust of the latest decision, from a domestic standpoint, was not the coup de grace to the National Assembly, but a related decision empowering the president to sign oil deals with foreign investors without review. Mr. Maduro is desperately seeking a bailout before a big debt payment due this month, and that portion of the court ruling was not reversed.

It is nevertheless encouraging that Venezuela's neighbors are creeping toward a stand in defense of its dying democracy. OAS members, including Venezuela, are signatories to a 2001 treaty committing them to constitutional government, free speech and regular elections; the Inter-American Democratic Charter calls for collective action when those norms are violated. Yet while Mr. Almagro has pushed for action against the Maduro government for more than a year, most governments — including the United States — have preferred to hide behind feckless calls for "dialogue" between the regime and its opposition.

The State Department reiterated that call for dialogue last week and ruled out action in the near term to threaten the suspension of Venezuela's OAS membership, as advocated by Mr. Almagro. Later that same day came Caracas's coup against the National Assembly. What followed ought to be a lesson for the Trump administration: Only concerted external pressure, not more empty talk, can rescue Venezuela.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Editorial : Venezuelan Reality Check

A global sigh of relief went up over the weekend when Venezuela's dictatorship backtracked on its latest power grab. At the instruction of strongman Nicolás Maduro, the Supreme Court reversed last week's decision to take over the opposition-controlled National Assembly.

The international community celebrated the retreat as a sign that Mr. Maduro is beginning to understand limits and patted itself on the back for making him stand down. Too bad he didn't.

Mr. Maduro rules by decree. The Supreme Court and judiciary are under his control, as are the National Electoral Council, the armed forces, police and *chavista* militia.

The exception is the National Assembly, which has been controlled by opponents since January 2016. The Supreme Court routinely strikes down any legislation it passes, but it is a meaningful voice of dissent. Mr. Maduro stopped paying legislative salaries last August, but the deputies persist and technically enjoy immunity from prosecution.

Another National Assembly annoyance is its role in approving international oil contracts. The regime has so battered the economy that its main lifeline is selling petroleum assets or finding new oil partners. Yet investors thinking about cutting deals with Mr. Maduro have to worry that, without congressional approval, those contracts might be voided. This explains why the court gave Mr. Maduro new power to negotiate oil deals unilaterally even as it retreated from seizing the assembly.

For every problem that Mr. Maduro confronts he can find a "legal" solution, which is how modern dictators operate. Global elites should stop pretending that Mr. Maduro will reform and start calling for restoration of a free Venezuelan government.

The Washington Post

A kinder, gentler leftist aims to bridge angry divisions after Ecuador win

https://www.facebook.com/nmiroff

QUITO, Ecuador — As a candidate, Lenín Moreno ran as a sunny, conciliatory figure, a leader who would preserve President Rafael Correa's left-wing policies without his pugilistic, domineering style.

Moreno's nice-guy skills will now be put to the test.

Moreno squeaked to a win in the presidential election Sunday, an outcome that triggered street protests amid cries of fraud from his opponent, Guillermo Lasso. Although election authorities have not officially declared Moreno the winner, his 51 percent to 49 percent advantage — with more than 99 percent of the ballots counted — looked insuperable.

Moreno will need to mend ties not just with the opposition but with the United States, Ecuador's top trading partner, with whom relations were often strained during the decade that Correa was in power. Correa kicked out the U.S. ambassador in 2011, gave

political asylum in his country's - London embassy to WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange in 2012, and reliably sided with the leftist bloc of Latin American nations that view the United States as an imperialistic bully.

Moreno, 64, will need to accomplish all this healing at a time of heightening political tensions in South America and a showdown over the erosion of democracy in leftist ally Venezuela.

[Ecuador on edge as leftist party appears to extend its reign]

Analysts say Moreno may not have the luxury of taking a more moderate path if Lasso's rejection of the election results leads to a prolonged standoff that requires the new president to shore up support from Correa's more radical base and regional allies like Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro.

But Moreno, who lost the use of his legs when he was shot by carjackers in 1998, is the stylistic opposite of alpha-dog Correa, who relished political combat. On the campaign trailed, Moreno seemed to use his wheelchair to close the distance that usually exists between politicians and ordinary people. He met them below eye level, instead of towering over them, and invited children onto his lap. At rallies he cracked jokes and crooned ballads.

In his victory speeches, he promised to extend a hand to his rivals and seek compromise.

"Moreno is less rigid and ideological than Correa, but whether or not he can be conciliatory will also depend on the stance of the opposition," said Sebastian Hurtado, a Quito-based political analyst. "If the opposition turns more radical, the government could also dig in and turn more radical as well."

Lasso, 61, a conservative former banker, immediately declared victory after polls closed Sunday, citing three exit surveys showing him winning. Deep stores of resentment at the Correa government seemed to spill out at the mere sight of those unofficial results, as many middle-class Quito residents zoomed through the streets in cars, honking and waving flags.

Those emotions quickly turned to anger when the official count showed Moreno with a slight lead. Lasso called on his supporters to reject the results and resist what he said was a naked attempt to steal the election.

His campaign began posting photographs to Lasso's Twitter account Monday that it said bore evidence of manipulated vote-tally sheets.

"We will exhaust all our political and legal channels, here in Ecuador and abroad, to make them respect the will of the people who called for CHANGE," Lasso declared Monday.

But the head of the Organization of American States and the region's right-wing presidents congratulated Moreno on his victory, leaving Lasso with little international support. And with the Correa government in full control of state institutions and backed by a majority in Ecuador's congress, it was unlikely Lasso's challenge could change the results, Hurtado said.

"The opposition will question the results and insist there was fraud, but I don't think it will destabilize the country," he said. "The government will work to quickly impose its will."

Ecuador is deeply divided politically, and its presidential contest became a proxy fight between struggling left-wing governments in the region, led by Venezuela, and more-conservative forces that have won recent elections in Argentina, Peru and elsewhere.

[A leftist tries to hold the line in Ecuador as Latin America moves right]

Today's WorldView

What's most important from where the world meets Washington

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Venezuela's Maduro effusively praised Moreno in a flurry of tweets, congratulating him for a "heroic" victory.

Analysts say Lasso's defeat saves Maduro from seeing another close ally turn against his government at a time when countries in the region have condemned Venezuela's slide toward authoritarian rule.

"That effort likely would have intensified had Lasso won, given comments he made on the campaign trail," said Eric Farnsworth, a former U.S. diplomat who is the vice president of the Council of the Americas, a business group.

"Despite a desire to improve relations with the United States, particularly as a means to draw investment, there is little likelihood that a Moreno government would break publicly with Caracas," Farnsworth added, "particularly given the active and vocal support that Moreno has received from outgoing president Correa."

The Washington Post

Bomb in St. Petersburg subway, killing 11, sets a city on edge (UNE)

ST. PETERSBURG — A blast that ripped through a train as it traveled between two central subway stations in Russia's second-largest city on Monday killed at least 11 people, injured at least 30 and panicked the heart of one of the world's most renowned urban centers.

It also cut across the fault lines of a country grappling with its first signs of political upheaval in years. Some are calling for increased security measures; others warned of an impending crackdown.

Authorities launched a terrorism investigation that centered on a single bomber who left an explosive device at one central station before boarding a train and detonating a second device. But officials gave no immediate confirmation of details on the identity of the bomber or any suspected affiliation in the blast, and no one claimed responsibility.

About 11 p.m., Russian President Vladimir Putin made a public, if carefully guarded, appearance and placed a bouquet of roses at the subway station where the train came to a halt after the blast. Above ground, children placed roses and tea-light candles at a makeshift memorial outside Sennaya Ploshchad station, the busy central interchange from which the train departed before the bomb went off.

Some of Putin's opponents expressed concern that the Kremlin might use the attack as an excuse to curtail a nascent movement that brought tens of thousands of people into the streets eight days earlier to protest official corruption.

"The actions of the authorities as far as any mass protests are predetermined," tweeted opposition activist and former legislator Dmitry Gudkov, earning a rebuke from Russian state television, which called his remark a calculated and cynical ploy.

But the blast ignited anger among ordinary residents, too.

"Shock, I felt shock. It's disgusting," said Andrei Gontarevsky, 51, who said he manages a small team of construction workers. "It's unthinkable. This was always a quiet city, and I think it shows the times are turning bad now."

Alexander Borkov, 31, said the doctors at his local clinic stood for a moment of silence when they heard about the blast. Many called loved ones — he called his wife, Vera. When evening came, he wandered over to the square, alone, visibly shaken and angry.

"This happened because we are fighting a war," he said quietly, pulling a gray knit cap more tightly over his head. "I walk through those [subway metal detectors] every day, but I know it's all for show." Subway personnel often wave through passengers with concealed metal objects like cameras.

"The police grab kids off the square for protesting," said Borkov, "but they're not doing what they really need to be: protecting us."

[The recent history of terrorist attacks in Russia]

Security forces fanned out on extra patrols as police helicopters crisscrossed overhead in one of the city's most celebrated, and tourist-visited, neighborhoods. The area around the Sennaya Ploshchad station is near some of the most famous sights of St. Petersburg, and was the setting of Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel "Crime and Punishment."

Shortly after the blast, the entire St. Petersburg subway system was shut down for a time as a precaution, and security was heightened around the city, Putin's home town, where the Russian leader was holding talks with Belarusan leader Alexander Lukashenko.

Authorities said the blast was caused by an improvised explosive devise that went off in one of the cars as the train traveled from Sennaya Ploshchad about 2:40 p.m.

The operator was able to get the train to the next station, where authorities reached the victims. Pictures broadcast on Russian television showed that the doors had been blown out of the side of one car. Russia's Federal Security Service said the second device was found and defused at the Ploshchad Vosstaniya station, another central interchange.

[A right-wing militia trains for Russia's next war]

Russia's health minister, Veronika Skvortsova, said seven people died at the scene, one died en route to the hospital and two more while

undergoing treatment. She said six people remained in serious condition, raising the possibility that the death toll could rise. Authorities said late Monday that an 11th person had died.

Late Monday, a spokesman said Putin was being briefed by law enforcement. Earlier, Putin expressed condolences to the victims' families in televised remarks, adding: "Naturally, we always probe all theories, both domestic and criminal ones, primarily actions of a terrorist nature."

Viktor Ozerov, a member of the defense and security committee of the upper house of the Russian parliament, told the Interfax news agency that the attack had "all the characteristics of a terrorist attack." Other legislators called for increased security measures.

Islamist militants from the North Caucasus have been blamed in more than a dozen major terrorist attacks in Russia since the country fought two civil wars in Chechnya. Russia still faces a simmering insurgency in the neighboring Dagestan province, and in March, six Russian soldiers and six militants were killed in a shootout in Chechnya. But the post-Soviet republics of Central Asia have also been a source of Islamist fighters. Interfax, citing sources, said the bomber was believed to be a Kazakh national.

The city of St. Petersburg announced three days of mourning beginning Tuesday. The U.S. Embassy in Moscow joined other countries in expressing condolences.

Today's WorldView

What's most important from where the world meets Washington

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In Washington, President Trump called the incident a "terrible thing." He called Putin to express his condolences, according to Putin's spokesman.

In Moscow, dozens of young people gathered outside the Kremlin to lay flowers at a World War II memorial to the city of Leningrad — as St. Petersburg was called then.

Filipov reported from Moscow. Brian Murphy in Washington contributed to this report.

Bergen and Sterman : The likely culprits behind the St. Petersburg bombing

Peter Bergen is CNN's national security analyst, a vice president at New America and a professor of practice at Arizona State University. He is the author of "United States of Jihad: Investigating America's Homegrown Terrorists." David Sterman is a policy analyst at New America's International Security Program.

(CNN)While it's not clear who carried out the deadly attack on the St. Petersburg metro, there are two groups that have both the capability and the intent to carry out large-scale terrorist attacks in Russian cities.

First, there are Chechen separatists who have mounted a wide range of terrorist attacks in Russia. The Russians have been waging wars with these separatists since the 19th century.

Leo Tolstoy served in an artillery regiment in the Caucasus and wrote about his experience in "The Cossacks," saying of the Chechens: "No one spoke of hatred for the Russians. The feeling which the Chechens felt, both young and old, was stronger than hatred."

That hatred lingers. In 2002, Chechen militants raided a Moscow theater, where they took hundreds hostage and 130 were killed. Two years later, Chechen militants

bombed

a metro station in Moscow, killing 39.

In 2004, Chechen militants took hundreds of students and others hostage at a school in Beslan. The resultant multi-day siege, which Russia broke with the use of tanks, resulted in more than

300 deaths.

Militants continued such attacks through the late 2000s. In 2009, militants reportedly directed by the Caucasus Emirate, an Islamist group run by the Chechen warlord Doku Umarov, killed 28 people in a suicide bombing attack on the high-speed railway linking St. Petersburg and Moscow. Umarov's group also claimed a 2011 attack on Moscow's Domodedovo airport that killed

37 people

.

But more recently, ISIS has mounted a series of terrorist attacks and plots against Russia. ISIS despises the Russian government for its support of the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, and so it's no surprise that ISIS began targeting Russia in 2015, around the

same time

that Russia first intervened in the Syrian civil war.

It has also increasingly subsumed large parts of the Chechen militant movement that had already been moving in a more Islamist direction.

Indeed, Russian citizens -- many of whom are from the largely Muslim Caucasus region of Russia and a good number of whom are Chechen -- are the

largest group

of ISIS foot soldiers from a non-Muslim majority country.

In June 2015, ISIS announced the establishment of a "province" in Russia's Caucasus region. Because the conflict in the Caucasus had tamped down in recent years, the announcement of the group's Caucasus province stoked concern about the potential for terrorism. And, indeed, ISIS quickly began to carry out operations in the Caucasus. In September 2015, it claimed its

first attack

, which targeted a Russian military barracks in southern Dagestan.

Three months later, ISIS carried out another attack in which a gunman killed one person and injured

11 others

at the Derbent citadel, a UNESCO World Heritage site in Dagestan.

Then, in February 2016, ISIS' Caucasus Province mounted a suicide attack on a police checkpoint in Dagestan, which it followed one month later with

two more attacks

on Russian soldiers also in Dagestan.

ISIS also clearly signaled that it was planning attacks outside the Caucasus region and was planning to bring its so-called holy war to the key Russian cities of St. Petersburg and Moscow.

On October 31, 2015, ISIS bombed a Russian airliner carrying vacationing passengers from Sinai, Egypt to St. Petersburg, killing 224 people. ISIS

celebrated the attack

both in its English language magazine Dabiq as well as in its Russian language magazine Istok.

In August 2016, ISIS claimed its first attack in Russia outside of the Caucasus. Two men, reportedly of Chechen descent, attacked a traffic post near Moscow. Police killed the men, but ISIS

released a video

of the attackers pledging their allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi.

Then, in November, Russian officials arrested

five people

suspected of ISIS links who had obtained firearms and explosives. They were accused of plotting attacks in Moscow.

These terrorist attacks and plots in Russia are compounded by the fact that Russia has contributed the

most fighters

to ISIS from any non-Muslim majority country, surpassing even France, the leading European contributor of fighters to ISIS.

Last year, Russian President Vladimir Putin estimated the number of fighters who had left for Syria and Iraq from Russia and the former Soviet republics at

5,000 to 7,000

.

As ISIS loses on the battlefields of Iraq and Syria, contingents of Russian ISIS fighters who survive may try and make their way home to foment additional terrorism on Russian soil. They must be stopped from possible re-entry.

In addition to continuing the aggressive campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria that began under President Obama and has been ramped up under President Trump, the international community must share with INTERPOL as many names of "foreign fighters" as possible-- including the names of the thousands of Russian ISIS recruits -- so that as the group's foreign fighters disperse from the warzones in Iraq and Syria, they can be arrested as they attempt to transit out of the region.

And given the estimated 30,000 foreign fighters that ISIS has manged to recruit, Russia and the international community certainly have their hands full.

The New York Times

Explosion in St. Petersburg, Russia, Kills 11 as Vladimir Putin Visits (UNE)

Ivan Nechepurenko and Neil MacFarquhar

ST. PETERSBURG, Russia — It was 2:40 p.m. on Monday, a lull before the evening rush hour in Russia's second-largest city, St. Petersburg, where the subway normally carries two million people a day. The train had just entered a tunnel between stations, on its way out of a sprawling downtown hub, when the bomb exploded.

The homemade device, filled with shrapnel, tore through the third car. It killed 11 people; wounded more than 40, including children; and spread bloody mayhem as the train limped into the Technology Institute station with smoke filling the air.

Videos circulating on social media showed long red streaks across the white floor as the injured were dragged from the car. With the doors damaged, some people smashed windows to get out. "What a nightmare!" somebody yelled amid piercing screams.

With the attack, Russia once again appeared to have found itself a target of terrorism, shattering a respite in its main urban centers. Law enforcement agencies initially said they were seeking two people suspected of planting explosive devices, according to Russian news reports, but later indicated that the attack might have been carried out by a suicide bomber from a militant Islamic group.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility, but speculation turned toward militants from southern Russia, who fled the shoot-to-kill law enforcement policy in Chechnya and elsewhere in the Caucasus, joined the Islamic State by the thousands and have repeatedly threatened attacks. President Vladimir V. Putin sent the Russian military to Syria in September 2015 in order, he said then, to battle militants on their own turf before they could strike in Russia.

In a nod to that possibility — a potential political setback — Mr. Putin, who was in St. Petersburg for the day, emphasized that terrorists were the likely culprits, although he said investigators were exploring various possibilities. He laid flowers at the site of the explosion and went to the local security headquarters to be briefed on the investigation. The last major terrorist attack in a Russian city was in Volgograd in 2013.

"If somebody announces that it is related to the Russian invasion in Syria, it would be a sensitive scenario for Putin, because the Syria campaign would lose support inside Russia," said Kirill Rogov, a political analyst, while adding that it was too early to connect the attack to Mr. Putin's Syria policy with any certainty.

The dead and wounded had barely been evacuated before the factions in Russia's heated political sphere began blaming one another.

Nationalists and others on the right pointed the finger at the opposition, saying such attacks emerged from the same womb as the street protests on March 26, in which tens of thousands of people marched against high-level government corruption. Opposition figures responded that the security forces, feeling vulnerable, were perfectly capable of provoking a crisis in order to expand their powers of search and seizure.

There were also unconfirmed reports that a suicide bomber from Uzbekistan or a neighboring country might have been responsible, unnerving St. Petersburg's Central Asians.

"This will be a stain on us, as though we are criminals," said Rafael Artikov, a 57-year-old Uzbek, standing in front of a makeshift memorial. "The goal was to frighten us and split us into separate groups," he added, lamenting that "people look at me as though I am suspicious."

There was some relief that the attack had not been worse. A larger bomb was found at a nearby station, Vosstaniya Square, but was disarmed, a spokesman for the National Anti-Terrorism Committee, Andrei Przhezdomsky, said on television. That bomb had been disguised as a fire extinguisher.

Security was increased in the Moscow Metro system and at major transportation facilities across Russia.

The health minister, Veronika Skvortsova, announced live on television that 10 people had died — seven in the subway system, one en route to a hospital and two while they were being admitted to an emergency room — and that 39 had been injured. Some of the wounded were children, she said.

Mr. Przhezdomsky appeared on television later with an update that 11 people were dead and 45 wounded.

Mikhail Syrovatsky, 20, wrote on VKontakte, a Russian social media network, that he had been ascending the escalator at the Technology Institute station when the blast occurred, followed by urgent calls to evacuate the station and the arrival of ambulances and a helicopter. "Left metro just in time," he wrote.

Mr. Syrovatsky added later, "I was standing on the escalator when some kind of noise started coming from below, then I heard the noise of the coming train."

People began to scream, he said, and an announcement ordered passengers to evacuate. "Very soon, you could detect the smell of burning, but I didn't see any smoke," he said. "I didn't see what was going on the platform itself. I think everyone thought this was a fire."

A St. Petersburg transit worker, speaking on the condition of anonymity because he was forbidden to comment to the news media, said the bomb exploded just after the train left the Sennaya Square station but was not powerful enough to derail it. The train limped to a stop at the Technology Institute station with smoke billowing, as passengers broke glass windows to escape and rescue workers smashed open the doors.

At the Dzhanelidze Hospital, a large Soviet block of concrete, arriving relatives were whisked into a special room away from the news media.

Valery Parfenov, the chief doctor, said at a news conference that many of the victims were dazed. He said six patients were in serious condition and four in very serious condition, including some with skull injuries that would require complex surgery. He held up a ball bearing to show the metal bits extracted from victims.

The subway system was shut down for about five hours, and the city declared surface transportation free. Still, as offices let out, the streets clogged with traffic, and sidewalks were jammed with people making the long trek home from work on foot.

"I appeal to you, citizens of St. Petersburg and guests of our city, to be alert, attentive and cautious, and to behave in a responsible manner in light of events," Georgi S. Poltavchenko, the governor of St. Petersburg, said in a statement. He declared a three-day mourning period starting on Tuesday.

In a televised statement less than an hour after the explosion, Mr. Putin said he had spoken with the leaders of the special services, including the Federal Security Service, and with law enforcement officials, who he said would "do everything to find out the causes of what had happened."

Speaking from the Konstantin Palace in the Strelna district of St. Petersburg, about 10 miles west of the blast, he added, "The government, both on the city and federal levels, will do everything to support families of the victims and injured."

Mr. Putin was in St. Petersburg for a meeting with the president of Belarus — Alexander G. Lukashenko, a traditional ally who has recently feuded with the Kremlin — and to give a speech to the All-Russia People's Front, a political group Mr. Putin started. At a joint appearance with Mr. Lukashenko to say they had resolved their differences, he did not mention the attack again.

According to a White House statement, President Trump spoke with Mr. Putin on Monday and condemned the "attack" in Russia.

Over the years, most terrorist attacks against domestic targets in Russia have been the work of Islamic insurgents. The Islamic State claimed responsibility for a bomb that brought down a Russian airliner in Egypt in October 2015, killing all 224 people on board. Many victims were from St. Petersburg.

In December 2013, weeks before the start of the Winter Olympics in Sochi, twin bombings at a train station and on a bus in the southern city of Volgograd killed more than 30 people. And in January 2011, a suicide attack at Domodedovo International Airport near Moscow killed more than three dozen people.

The last fatal attack on a subway system in Russia occurred in March 2010, when explosions at two stations in central Moscow killed at least 33 people. Investigators blamed two suicide bombers from

the Dagestan region for those attacks, and the leader of the Islamic insurgency in Chechnya, who has since been killed, claimed responsibility.

The subway system in Moscow was also struck twice in 2004. In February of that year, a bomb detonated inside a train car as it left the Avtozavodskaya station in southeastern Moscow, killing at least 39 people. That August, a suicide bomber detonated explosives at a station in northern Moscow, killing nine.

Mr. Putin, in deploying the Russian military to Syria, said the move was meant to take the fight to Islamic radicals. Once deployed, however, the Russians concentrated more on shoring up the government of President Bashar al-Assad than on attacking the Islamic State.

The Russian militants in Syria have periodically threatened reprisals in Russia. In a video posted on YouTube last July, a masked man driving across a desert landscape growled, "Listen, Putin, we will come to Russia and kill you at your homes."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Karatnycky : How Trump Became a Russia Skeptic

Adrian Karatnycky

April 3, 2017 7:22 p.m. ET

A Kremlin spokesman told ABC News on Friday that despite the new administration in Washington, Russian-American relations remain "at the lowest possible point." Yet the spokesman also suggested that if Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin were to meet in person "there will be chance for our volatile relations to get better."

These are telling remarks, given that only a few months ago Mr. Putin was salivating at the thought of a Trump presidency. Mr. Trump had extolled the Russian leader, declared the North Atlantic Treaty Organization "obsolete," and hinted that the U.S. might accept Russia's annexation of Crimea. A few years ago Steve Bannon, an influential Trump adviser, promoted the idea of a grand alliance between the West and a traditionalist Russia against secularism and Islam. Mike Flynn, a Putin-friendly recipient of Moscow's largess, was appointed national security adviser.

Yet as the investigations continue into Trumpworld's Russia connections, the White House has replaced these friendly soundings with a sober, decidedly hawkish stance.

As the atmosphere shifts, Russia's state-controlled and state-directed media have begun to turn against Mr. Trump, suggesting that Moscow no longer expects a cooperative relationship. Gazeta.ru, a Kremlin mouthpiece, called Mr. Trump a narcissist not long after he took office. Another, Lenta.ru, announced in February the "end of illusions" about a warming in relations, reporting that some of President Trump's "most ardent boosters" in the Russian media were turning on him. Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev told Russian television viewers to expect the international sanctions on their country to remain in place "indefinitely."

The shift has moved beyond rhetoric: Mr. Putin has escalated violence in eastern Ukraine. Since early February, his proxies and fighters have dropped significant amounts of missiles and ordnance on towns and cities in the Donbas region. Moscow has deployed a new cruise missile in violation of treaty obligations. And Russian pilots have resumed the practice of buzzing U.S. ships deployed in the Black Sea.

Mr. Trump's friendly comments toward Mr. Putin have also brought resistance from a unique coalition: Republican hawks, Democrats angry over Russia's election meddling, the national-security establishment and intelligence community, and key European leaders. Together they have applied enough pressure to profoundly shift administration policy. For one thing, the president was compelled by the weight of evidence to acknowledge in January that Russian hacking had indeed influenced the American political process, even as he insisted this interference did not affect the election's outcome.

The expert consensus about Mr. Putin is so negative that Mr. Trump couldn't have put together a Kremlin-friendly national-security team even if he had tried. As a result, serious-minded Russia hawks are emerging in key posts. When Mr. Flynn was forced to resign as national security adviser, H.R. McMaster took his place. The appointment of Putin critic Fiona Hill to be the National Security Council's Russia expert is pending.

Mr. Trump's most senior appointees, including the vice president and defense secretary, began criticizing Russian actions almost immediately after taking office. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley made clear that America will continue to back Ukraine. Last week Mr. Tillerson declared that the U.S. and its allies would remain "steadfast" in their "support of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity." A senior government official in Kiev told me that Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko has been reassured by his direct discussions with Mr. Trump.

Sanctions against Russia over its annexation of Crimea and occupation of eastern Ukraine have also been reaffirmed. Mr. Trump has proposed a $54 billion increase in Washington's defense budget. He has made clear that he wants NATO allies to significantly boost their own military spending. These moves cannot be welcome in Moscow.

The idea that Mr. Trump could strike some sort of grand bargain with Mr. Putin isn't dead. Questions remain about whether Mr. Trump or some of his advisers may be vulnerable to Russian blackmail. But so far the White House has proved more susceptible to the pressures that come from press scrutiny, congressional oversight and the elite consensus.

Mr. Trump's early view of Moscow as potentially a close ally has been routed. The president is now beginning to articulate a policy toward Russia rooted in American strength, albeit with predictable digs at his White House predecessor. He tweeted last month: "For eight years Russia 'ran over' President Obama, got stronger and stronger, picked-off Crimea and added missiles. Weak!"

The bad news for Mr. Putin doesn't stop there. Despite Brexit, the U.K. seems to be taking a hard line, with Prime Minister Theresa May and Foreign Minister Boris Johnson championing Ukraine's interests. In Germany's election this September, voters will choose between Angela Merkel, the tough-minded chancellor, and Martin Schulz, a Social Democrat with a record of criticizing Mr. Putin. In France, the likely winner in May's presidential runoff appears to be the pro-European centrist Emanuel Macron, who is comfortably ahead of two pro-Russian candidates from the right.

The American investigations remain critical. All leads concerning Russian cyberattacks on U.S. political targets should be investigated. Any contacts between Trump campaign advisers and Russia should be followed up. Potential vulnerabilities of administration personnel should be fully explored. But it's also important to understand that Russia's effort to gain an advantage from meddling in the election appears to have abjectly failed.

American institutions are working well. The security policies that were shaped in the aftermath of World War II and the Cold War remain firmly in place. Although it's unlikely that Mr. Putin helped swing the vote in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin or Michigan, his hapless meddling appears only to have awakened American and European hawkishness.

Mr. Karatnycky is co-director of the Ukraine in Europe Initiative at the Atlantic Council.

FP Foreign Policy

Is Trump Russia's Useful Idiot, or Has He Been Irreparably Compromised?

Max Boot

Every day seems to bring fresh news in the Kremlin-gate scandal about Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Just a few highlights from the past week:

—CBS News reports that the FBI is investigating whether "Trump campaign representatives had a role in helping Russian intelligence as it carried out cyberattacks on the Democratic National Committee" as far back as March 2016.

—The BBC reports that one of the key allegations in the dossier on links between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin compiled by a former British intelligence officer has been "verified."

—NBC News reports that former Trump campaign manager Paul Manafort, who has at least 15 bank accounts in Cyprus and bought homes in New York with cash, has been investigated for money laundering.

—USA Today reports that "the president and his companies have been linked to at least 10 wealthy former Soviet businessmen with alleged ties to criminal organizations or money laundering."

—And the Wall Street Journal reports that Michael Flynn, Trump's former national security advisor, who did not come clean on his initial financial disclosure form about all of his income from Russian entities, is now offering to testify in return for immunity. The latter development is particularly ominous. As Trump himself said last year, "If you're not guilty of a crime, what do you need immunity for?"

All of this, of course, comes on top of previous revelations, such as an unfairly overlooked New York Times report from early March that "American allies, including the British and the Dutch, had provided information describing meetings in European cities between Russian officials — and others close to Russia's president, Vladimir V. Putin — and associates of President-elect Trump.… Separately, American intelligence agencies had intercepted communications of Russian officials, some of them within the Kremlin, discussing contacts with Trump associates."

The big question is whether Trump and his aides participated in the Russian hack-and-leak campaign to influence the U.S. presidential election in his favor. Or was Trump just an unwitting beneficiary of Russian meddling? The FBI is now seeking answers in an unprecedented investigation of a sitting president's ties to a hostile foreign power.

Rather than facilitate the inquiry, Trump and his followers have launched a slash-and-burn campaign to shift the focus away from him and onto his predecessor, former President Barack Obama. Trump launched this counteroffensive in earnest on March 4 when, following revelations that Attorney General Jeff Sessions had lied under oath about his contacts with the Russian ambassador, he tweeted out of the blue that "Obama had my 'wires tapped' in Trump Tower." "Bad (or sick) guy," he said of Obama, comparing him to "Nixon/Watergate."

This vile accusation, which was later extended to include Britain's GCHQ intelligence agency, has been refuted by Trump's own FBI and NSA directors. But that is no obstacle for Trump, who keeps brazenly repeating this falsehood. On April 1, for example — and not as an April Fools' joke — the president tweeted: "When will Sleepy Eyes Chuck Todd and @NBCNews start talking about the Obama SURVEILLANCE SCANDAL and stop with the Fake Trump/Russia story?"

Not even the president's most determined defenders can bring themselves to claim, as Trump does, that Obama wiretapped him in defiance of the law. So they have been making a lesser, if still questionable, claim — that Trump and/or his aides were caught conversing with foreign officials who were legitimate targets of wiretapping and that intelligence officials in the Obama administration failed to do enough to "mask" the identity of the Trumpites in classified transcripts.

It is in furtherance of this dubious storyline that Rep. Devin Nunes, the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee and a former member of the Trump transition team, has turned himself into a Washington laughingstock. Nunes made a big production of rushing to the White House on March 21 to receive highly classified information about the supposed "unmasking" of Trump associates in the course of "incidental" wiretapping. The next day, he held a press conference and then went back to the White House to breathlessly share his findings — "if they don't have it, they need to see it," he said. Nunes told House Speaker Paul Ryan that his source was a "whistleblower-type person," as if he were the second coming of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. To Eli Lake of Bloomberg View, he said his source was an intelligence official, not a White House aide.

That cover story did not last long, however, before the New York Times and Washington Post revealed that Nunes's actual sources were a trio of Trump appointees: Ezra Cohen-Watnick, the National Security Council's senior director for intelligence; Michael Ellis, a White House lawyer who had previously worked for Nunes; and John Eisenberg, the top lawyer at the National Security Council. In other words, Nunes was not uncovering information from whistleblowers; he was being cynically used as a middleman by the White House to launder top-secret information for public release, namely transcripts of wiretaps.

This raises that old bit of Washington wisdom about "the cover-up being worse than the crime." Even if Nunes's allegations are accurate, and if Obama administration officials — Eli Lake's latest reporting fingers former National Security Advisor Susan Rice — requested the "unmasking" of the anonymized identities of Trump aides in surveillance transcripts, it is far from clear that they did anything wrong. According to Robert Deitz, the former general counsel at the National Security Agency, it's permissible for senior officials such as the national security advisor to "unmask" Americans caught in wiretaps if there is a crime involved or if their identities are necessary to make sense of the transcript. Given all of the Trumpites' suspicious links to Russia (see above for only a few examples) at a time when Russia was interfering in the U.S. election on Trump's behalf, there was certainly good cause for further investigation. Even if some improper "unmasking" occurred, that still doesn't remotely prove Trump's allegation that Obama was guilty of wiretapping him. These revelations might raise questions about whether Obama appointees broke the law by leaking top-secret information — but they also certainly now raise questions about Trump aides doing the same.

Barton Gellman, a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter who is now at the Century Foundation, suggests that this disclosure was indeed illegal — as was, in fairness, the February leak of information from a wiretap of the Russian ambassador showing that Flynn had lied about their conversations. If he had an iota of intellectual consistency (which, of course, he does not), Trump should agree. After all, he is on record fulminating against "lowlife leakers" spilling government secrets.

There are few documents more secret than raw transcripts of national security wiretaps.

There are few documents more secret than raw transcripts of national security wiretaps.

What was young Cohen-Watnick, a 30-year-old favorite of Flynn, Steve Bannon, and Jared Kushner whom National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster tried and failed to fire, doing ransacking this supersensitive database? Gellman speculates that he was trying not only to buttress Trump's smears against Obama but also to monitor the status of the FBI investigation into Kremlin-gate. If so, was he acting on his own initiative, or did someone higher up, e.g., Bannon or Kushner, authorize an attempt to use top-secret intelligence for political purposes?

Add this to the long list of questions that Kremlin-gate investigators will have to address. The only thing we know for certain is that no credible answers will come from the House Intelligence Committee. Nunes has destroyed its integrity — not only with his Inspector Clouseau antics but also by canceling the planned testimony of former acting Attorney General Sally Yates at White House instigation. How he can remain in his post after this shameful toadying to the subject of the committee's investigation is a mystery.

What's truly depressing is the extent to which Trump's strategy of obfuscation and deflection may be working.

What's truly depressing is the extent to which Trump's strategy of obfuscation and deflection may be working. He has managed to convince 74 percent of Republicans that he was indeed surveilled by Obama in spite of the total lack of evidence to support this grave charge. And he has shifted the national conversation from the real issue — the Russian role in influencing America's presidential election, an attack on our democratic process that may have been conducted with the winning campaign's cooperation — to the imaginary Obama "SURVEILLANCE SCANDAL" and lesser controversies involving classified leaks.

As he showed during the campaign, Trump is a master at uttering so many spurious statements so quickly that it is impossible for the public to sort out what's really going on. He may not convince many people outside of blind partisans to believe in his "alternative facts," but by making so many baseless accusations, he confuses the whole issue and causes normal people of goodwill to throw up their hands in despair. Let us hope that does not happen in this case. We desperately need to get the whole story on Kremlin interference lest the Russians continue manipulating our politics in the future — as they are now doing in France, Germany, Canada, and Ukraine, among other countries.

NATIONAL REVIEW ONLINE

Tuttle : Donald Trump's Russia Scandal: What's He Accused of Doing?

A recent report in Spain's El País touts "the Spanish connection with Trump's Russia scandal":

On February 1, Alexander Porfirievich Torshin, 63, a Russian politician and banker who is close to Vladimir Putin and whom the

Spanish anti-corruption prosecutor and the Civil Guard define in their reports as a godfather from a notorious Russian mafia organization, had in his diary for the next day an appointment to meet in Washington with the world's most powerful man: Donald Trump.

The meeting never took place, but according to El País, Torshin, who is currently the deputy governor of the Central Bank of Russia and is suspected by Spanish authorities of being part of a Russian money-laundering operation, has other links to the administration: Last May, he sat beside Donald Trump Jr. during a private dinner in Louisville, Ky.

Links between the new administration and the Kremlin are not hard to come by. There are the legitimate (e.g., Jeff Sessions's visit with the Russian ambassador), the dubious (e.g., ousted NSA director Michael Flynn's many communications with the same), and the alarming (e.g., nearly anything involving campaign advisers Paul Manafort, Roger Stone, or Carter Page). But after months of "explosive" revelations, it remains unclear precisely what the charges against the White House are. Has the new president simply been too friendly to Vladimir Putin? In his stupendous ignorance, has he permitted his egotism to reshape American foreign policy? Or — more troubling — has he wooed the Kremlin to advance his overseas business interests? Or — most troubling — did he work with Russian sources to manipulate November's election? Prominent critics of the president have suggested that Donald Trump is "a Kremlin stooge," "a pawn of Putin," and a "collaborator" with Russian intelligence. But what the president is being accused of is always left hanging in a cloud of insinuation.

This is likely because, as of now, there is no concrete charge to make. There is no evidence that the president or his close advisers have broken the law in their communications with Russian officials. There is no reliable evidence that anyone "collaborated" with Russian officials to influence the election, or that Russian influence was more than indirect (i.e., votes may have been swayed by WikiLeaks's exposure of the DNC e-mails, but Russia did not "hack the election," in the sense of manipulating voting machines). Even Manafort, Stone, and Page, the three advisers with the closest and most troubling ties to the Kremlin, have not been shown to have done anything prosecutable. All of this is provisional, of course — and must remain so until the congressional intelligence committees complete their investigations — but it's noteworthy nonetheless, as critics on right and left compare Donald Trump to Richard Nixon and whisper about impeachment.

What, then, is the problem with the administration's Russia ties? The news from El País is instructive.

Part of Donald Trump's appeal was that he would keep out of the White House Hillary Clinton and her whole network of should-be felons. The Right's chief concern about the Clinton Foundation and the Clintons' "charitable" work was that it provided a veiled way for parties — especially foreign parties — with alarming agendas to purchase White House influence. Right-leaning voters were convinced that the Clintons would not surround themselves with responsible, ethical public servants, but with people happy to sell American policy to the highest bidder.

If the Trump administration is entangled with the Kremlin, it seems — so far, at least — to be in precisely this way. With no interest in upholding any normal standards of public integrity, the White House has been willing to engage any comer with influence, and so time and again put its highly questionable judgment on display. This was Trump's m.o. during the campaign, recall. There was no carefully plotted endgame in his praising Alex Jones; he was simply happy to help anyone who helped him. The same impulse goes a long way toward explaining not only the administration's decision to invite a Russian gangster to breakfast, but its enthusiasm for individuals associated with the alt-right and much else. The White House is unconcerned with the dictates of propriety; it is self-interested and reckless.

This hypothesis — that the administration is more reckless than sinister — will displease Trump critics on both sides of the political spectrum, who need the president to be an out-and-out villain, and who have decided that the only appropriate conclusion to this saga is impeachment and a prison cell. That is a fantasy. But the fact that the president's conduct does not merit a Senate trial does not mean it doesn't merit vigilance and vigorous criticism. And that criticism is important in helping to keep the administration as much as possible on the straight-and-narrow. It has worked at least once: Under pressure from the media about its unseemly ties to Russia, the White House canceled the meetup with Torshin.

"Trump's Russia scandal," if what we know so far is any indication, may turn out to have been more smoke than fire. But this administration's unflagging bad judgment leaves plenty to worry about.

— Ian Tuttle is the Thomas L. Rhodes Fellow at the National Review Institute.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Stephens : A World Unsafe for Democracy

This week marks the centenary of America's entry into World War I, when Woodrow Wilson vowed that "the world must be made safe for democracy." He and his fellow statesmen failed to do so in their day. We are failing in ours.

Snapshots from a week in the news: In Russia, opposition leader Alexei Navalny is in jail for leading last month's anticorruption protests. In Venezuela, the Supreme Court stepped back from seizing the powers of the legislature but handed President Nicolás Maduro broad control over the country's oil revenues. In Ecuador, a candidate with the telling name of Lenín Moreno claimed victory in a runoff vote Sunday with pledges to carry forward the populist-authoritarian policies of outgoing President Rafael Correa.

In Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is campaigning for constitutional changes that would extend his lease of office till 2029. In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte has promised to pardon and promote 19 police officers implicated in murdering a politician while jailing the former head of the country's human rights commission.

In Hong Kong, Carrie Lam, Beijing's favored candidate, was "elected" as chief executive with the votes of 0.03% of the territory's population; nine democracy activists were arrested the next day. In France, presidential front-runner Marine Le Pen sought to boost her appeal among voters by paying a flattering visit to Vladimir Putin in Moscow.

These stories aren't just a string of anecdotes. The year 2016 "marked the 11th consecutive year of decline in global freedom," reports Freedom House in its latest annual survey. "A total of 67 countries suffered net declines in political rights and civil liberties in 2016, compared with 36 that registered gains." Just 39% of the world's people live in free countries today, down from 46% a decade earlier.

How did the world become unsafe for democracy?

The striking finding in the Freedom House report is that the global erosion of political liberty is largely taking place in the democracies. People are losing faith in freedoms that no longer seem to deliver on the promise of a safer, richer, fuller, fairer life.

In some cases, long-term political polarization leads to ineffectual governance, which in turn whets the public appetite for leaders promising fast results irrespective of legal niceties. In others, a stale form of consensus politics leads to ideological polarization as mainstream parties fail to address mainstream concerns.

And sometimes people fall under the sway of charismatic demagogues, discovering only too late the direction in which they are being steered. That was the tragedy of Venezuela under the late Hugo Chávez and of Russia under Vladimir Putin. In both cases it helped to have an oil boom grease the way.

In 1991 the late political scientist Samuel Huntington proposed the thesis that democracy advanced and retreated in waves—a long "Jacksonian" wave that began in the early 19th century and only collapsed after Mussolini's rise to power in 1922; a brief postwar wave that crashed in the 1960s as postcolonial states fell prey to dictatorship; and then a "Third Wave" that began with the restoration of democracy in Portugal in 1974 and crested with the Soviet collapse 17 years later.

Huntington's thesis suggests that what is happening today is inevitable: that democracy has a way of overextending itself before it later succeeds in sinking deep roots. It also offers the comfort that the current trend can't last forever: that most dictatorships will eventually be undermined by their internal contradictions, while most democracies will bounce back thanks to their ability to correct mistakes through elections.

Maybe. Or maybe the cause of democracy just got lucky in 1931 when Winston Churchill wasn't killed by a New York City cab, and lucky again in 1942 when American pilots hit their targets at Midway, and lucky a third time in 1985 when the Soviet Union chose a leader foolish enough

to think communism could be reformed. The march of freedom rests on wings of butterflies.

It also rests on the moral example and ideological confidence of the strongest democratic powers. The U.S. now has as a president a man who explicitly renounces the concept of American exceptionalism, shows no interest in denouncing authoritarian crackdowns or championing democratic dissidents, draws parallels between the practices of the Putin regime and those of the U.S. government, and has fanned conspiracy theories about a "deep state" that pulls the strings in D.C.

If Americans can't be persuaded of the merits and decency of our system, why should anyone else? If the winner of a U.S. presidential election is a man who embarrasses—or terrifies—much of the free world, how do we make the case to ordinary Russians or Chinese that the road of democracy isn't simply the way of the buffoon?

Americans used to care deeply about the future of freedom in the world. Lose the care, risk the freedom.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

U.S. to Review U.N.'s Peacekeeping, Human Rights Functions, Haley Says

Farnaz Fassihi

April 3, 2017 9:46 p.m. ET

UNITED NATIONS—United States Ambassador Nikki Haley said Monday that the U.S. would closely scrutinize two prominent U.N. functions—peacekeeping and human rights—as the U.S. assumes the Security Council's rotating presidency this month.

In her first news conference at the U.N., Ms. Haley appeared softer in tone and more praising of the U.N. and its core mission in her one-hour long press encounter than when she arrived in January pledging to overhaul the world body.

She said Monday's attack at a subway station in St. Petersburg underscored the importance and role of the U.N. and the Security Council, and she dismissed the perception among many diplomats and U.N. officials that the Trump administration was a threat to the institution.

"I want to show that there is value to this place," said Ms. Haley. "The administration is looking at the U.N. with fresh eyes."

The White House has said it is considering de-funding certain U.N. programs and has suggested it could pull out of the organization's Geneva-based Human Rights Council and dial back support for the 2015 Paris climate agreement to limit climate change.

Late Monday, the U.S. State Department announced that it was cutting funding to the United Nations Population Fund, which supports maternal and reproductive health programs, stripping the organization of contributions that amounted to $69 million in 2016. The defunding would be effective immediately, UNFPA said.

In a statement, the UNFPA said the move was based on what the organization called "erroneous claims" by the Trump administration that UNFPA supports or participates in coercive abortion programs and sterilization in China.

"With previous United States contributions, UNFPA was combatting gender-based violence and reducing the scourge of maternal deaths in the world's most fragile settings," UNFPA said.

Ms. Haley didn't mention the cuts in her press conference a few hours earlier.

When pressed on a critical challenge facing the U.N.—the conflict in Syria—Ms. Haley told reporters that the U.S. priority in the country was to fight Islamic State. She reiterated the Trump administration's position that there was no plan to work jointly in that effort with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, whom she said the Syrian people no longer want to remain in power.

"We have no love for Assad. We've made that very clear," Ms. Haley said. "We think that he has been a hindrance to peace for a long time. He's a war criminal."

Ms. Haley said that the U.S. had told Israel that it must freeze settlement expansion in the West Bank and told the Palestinian representative at the U.N. that there could be no more resolutions against Israel. These two demands, she said, were meant to bring the two sides to the negotiating table.

She has been critical of what she perceives as the Council's overemphasis, in its monthly discussions, on the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. April's session will instead concentrate on Iran, Hezbollah, terrorism and the Assad regime, she said.

During the U.S.'s April presidency, she said, the Security Council also will debate the function of the U.N.'s peacekeeping operations and review whether or not the 16 missions, from Africa to Lebanon, were performing according to their mandates. Later in April, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson will lead the Council in a debate on North Korea and non-proliferation.

The U.S. also hopes to hold a debate in mid-April on human rights as they relate to terrorism and conflict, Ms. Haley said, but that debate is conditional on the approval of other member states on the Security Council.

The future of the U.S.'s position on the Human Rights Council has raised alarm among U.N. officials and human-rights advocates, with talk that the U.S. might pull out of the Council altogether, potentially delivering a huge blow to human-rights advocacy at the international body.

Ms. Haley plans to travel to Geneva in June to discuss U.S. interests with the Human Rights Council, she said, to see up close "what does it do well? What does it not do well? What we'd like to see them do."

She said a decision to stay or leave will be made after her trip and is contingent on whether or not Council members "fall in line with what the U.S. wants them to do." She didn't elaborate on those goals.

Ms. Haley also had praise for Secretary-General António Guterres, saying they hold similar views on the need to overhaul the U.N.'s bureaucracy. Mr. Guterres has said that he prefers behind-the-scene diplomacy that avoids open confrontation with the Trump administration.

Senior U.N. officials said that Mr. Guterres was also pursuing a parallel track of diplomacy by building alliances with representatives in Congress, who could vote in favor of the U.N. by blocking or challenging some of the donation cuts proposed by President Donald Trump.

"In the past, Secretary Generals have always also established relationships on the hill. During visits in Washington they would meet both representatives and senators involved in foreign policy and appropriation matters," said a senior U.N. official.

ETATS-UNIS

Los Angeles Times

Editorial : Trump's Authoritarian Vision

By The Times Editorial Board

Standing before the cheering throngs at the Republican National Convention last summer, Donald Trump bemoaned how special interests had rigged the country's politics and its economy, leaving Americans victimized by unfair trade deals, incompetent bureaucrats and spineless leaders.

He swooped into politics, he declared, to subvert the powerful and rescue those who cannot defend themselves. "Nobody knows the system better than me, which is why I alone can fix it."

To Trump's faithful, those words were a rallying cry. But his critics

heard something far more menacing in them: a dangerously authoritarian vision of the presidency — one that would crop up time and again as he talked about overruling generals, disregarding international law, ordering soldiers to commit war crimes, jailing his opponent.

Trump has no experience in politics; he's never previously run for office or held a government position. So perhaps he was unaware that one of the hallmarks of the American system of government is that the president's power to "fix" things unilaterally is constrained by an array of strong institutions — including the courts, the media, the permanent federal bureaucracy and Congress. Combined, they provide an essential defense against an imperial presidency.

Yet in his first weeks at the White House, President Trump has already sought to undermine many of those institutions. Those that have displayed the temerity to throw some hurdle in the way of a Trump objective have quickly felt the heat.

Consider Trump's feud with the courts.

He has repeatedly questioned the impartiality and the motives of judges. For example, he attacked the jurists who ruled against his order excluding travelers from seven majority Muslim nations, calling one a "so-called judge" and later tweeting:

Just cannot believe a judge would put our country in such peril. If something happens blame him and court system. People pouring in. Bad!

— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) February 5, 2017

It's nothing new for presidents to disagree with court decisions. But Trump's direct, personal attacks on judges' integrity and on the legitimacy of the judicial system itself — and his irresponsible suggestion that the judiciary should be blamed for future terrorist attacks — go farther. They aim to undermine public faith in the third branch of government.

The courts are the last line of defense for the Constitution and the rule of law; that's what makes them such a powerful buffer against an authoritarian leader. The president of the United States should understand that and respect it.

Other institutions under attack include:

1**The electoral process.** Faced with certified election results showing that Hillary Clinton outpolled him by nearly 3 million votes, Trump repeated the unsubstantiated — and likely crackpot — assertion that Clinton's supporters had duped local polling places with millions of fraudulent votes. In a democracy, the right to vote is the one check that the people themselves hold against their leaders; sowing distrust in elections is the kind of thing leaders do when they don't want their power checked.

2**The intelligence community.** After reports emerged that the Central Intelligence Agency believed Russia had tried to help Trump win, the president-elect's transition team responded: "These are the same people that said Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction." It was a snarky, dismissive, undermining response — and the administration has continued to belittle the intelligence community and question its motives since then, while also leaking stories about possibly paring and restructuring its ranks. It is bizarre to watch Trump continue to tussle publicly with this particular part of the government, whose leaders he himself has appointed, as if he were still an outsider candidate raging against the machine. It's unnerving too, given the intelligence services' crucial role in protecting the country against hidden risks, assisting the U.S. military and helping inform Trump's decisions.

3**The media.** Trump has blistered the mainstream media for reporting that has cast him in a poor light, saying outlets concocted narratives based on nonexistent anonymous sources. In February he said that the "fake news" media will "never represent the people," adding ominously: "And we're going to do something about it." His goal seems to be to defang the media watchdog by making the public doubt any coverage that accuses Trump of blundering or abusing his power.

4**Federal agencies.** In addition to calling for agency budgets to be chopped by up to 30%, Trump appointed a string of Cabinet secretaries who were hostile to much of their agencies' missions and the laws they're responsible for enforcing. He has also proposed deep cuts in federal research programs, particularly in those related to climate change. It's easier to argue that climate change isn't real when you're no longer collecting the data that documents it.

In a way, Trump represents a culmination of trends that have been years in the making.

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Conservative talk radio hosts have long blasted federal judges as "activists" and regulators as meddlers in the economy, while advancing the myth of rampant election fraud. And gridlock in Washington has led previous presidents to try new ways to circumvent the checks on their power — witness President George W. Bush's use of signing statements to invalidate parts of bills Congress passed, and President Obama's aggressive use of executive orders when lawmakers balked at his proposals.

What's uniquely threatening about Trump's approach, though, is how many fronts he's opened in this struggle for power and the vehemence with which he seeks to undermine the institutions that don't go along.

It's one thing to complain about a judicial decision or to argue for less regulation, but to the extent that Trump weakens public trust in essential institutions like the courts and the media, he undermines faith in democracy and in the system and processes that make it work.

" He sees himself as not merely a force for change, but as a wrecking ball. "

Trump betrays no sense for the president's place among the myriad of institutions in the continuum of governance. He seems willing to violate long-established political norms without a second thought, and he cavalierly rejects the civility and deference that allow the system to run smoothly. He sees himself as not merely a force for change, but as a wrecking ball.

Will Congress act as a check on Trump's worst impulses as he moves forward? One test is the House and Senate intelligence committees' investigation into Russia's meddling in the presidential election; lawmakers need to muster the courage to follow the trail wherever it leads. Can the courts stand up to Trump? Already, several federal judges have issued rulings against the president's travel ban. And although Trump has railed against the decisions, he has obeyed them.

None of these institutions are eager to cede authority to the White House and they won't do so without a fight. It would be unrealistic to suggest that America's most basic democratic institutions are in imminent jeopardy.

But we should not view them as invulnerable either. Remember that Trump's verbal assaults are directed at the public, and are designed to chip away at people's confidence in these institutions and deprive them of their validity. When a dispute arises, whose actions are you going to consider legitimate? Whom are you going to trust? That's why the public has to be wary of Trump's attacks on the courts, the "deep state," the "swamp." We can't afford to be talked into losing our faith in the forces that protect us from an imperial presidency.

The New York Times

Editorial : A Peek Into the White House Swamp

The White House boasted that the release of financial disclosures for dozens of administration officials exemplified President Trump's "commitment to ensure an ethical and transparent government." The Friday night document dump did nothing of the sort.

The opaque, incomplete filings — which met the bare legal requirements for disclosures — merely raise more questions than they answer about the byzantine dealings of the richest White House in history.

Besides, Mr. Trump has no commitment to ethics or transparency. His failure to shed his business ties and release financial records makes him the most suspect, conflicted president in modern history. If the boss doesn't care about accountability, why should anyone else?

Here's a good reason: Unlike the president, for whom conflict of interest laws don't apply, staff members could go to jail for actions that affect their financial interests.

The Office of Government Ethics spent months pushing Senate-confirmed nominees to resolve the potential conflicts in their disclosures, because they won't get a hearing, and therefore their jobs,

without it. But it has more limited power with Mr. Trump's White House employees, who did not face a Senate vote. The ethics office reviews these disclosures and can raise red flags as a condition for certifying them. But the White House released them before the ethics office could do so, leaving many questions unanswered.

White House employees are required to file the disclosures within 30 days of taking their posts. Most of them blew that deadline, and many missed extended deadlines as well. So how did these officials manage their business dealings during the months they avoided disclosing them?

In 2011, Reince Priebus, the White House chief of staff, look a leave of absence as partner in the Wisconsin law firm of Michael Best & Friedrich. Why then was he paid more than $300,000 in bonuses and other payments in 2016, after he quit? Did Mr. Priebus' big payday have anything to do with his new job in the Trump administration, and his firm's boast to potential clients that it possesses the "connections to help you shape public policy?"

Kellyanne Conway's filing indicates she still has a financial interest in her firm, the polling company/WomanTrend. Is she recusing herself from White House initiatives that could benefit her company and clients?

How has Kathleen "K. T." McFarland, deputy national security adviser, managed the potential conflicts of interest presented by her stock holdings, including in Amazon, which is pitching government cybersecurity business?

There may be legitimate answers. But the White House has provided none and has no legal responsibility to do so.

Enforcing ethics is the responsibility of Donald McGahn, the White House counsel, and Stefan Passantino, the White House ethics officer. Mr. McGahn, a former Federal Election Commission chairman, was told by the Justice Department that Michael Flynn, the former national security adviser, lied about his contacts with the Russian ambassador weeks before the administration did anything about it. Mr. Passantino made the decision not to censure Ms. Conway for hawking Ivanka Trump-branded bags and shoes.

Mr. Trump has boasted about bans on lobbying by executive branch officials, but the White House staff can be granted waivers from any ethical restrictions with no reason given and no disclosure of who gets them. The entire White House could be exempt and Americans would never know it.

If the administration were committed to "an ethical and transparent government," Friday's releases would be a first step in an extensive, public examination of these officials' holdings, followed by steps to avoid potentially criminal conflicts. We'll be watching — but we won't hold our breath.

The Washington Post

Blackwater founder held secret Seychelles meeting to establish Trump-Putin back channel (UNE)

https://www.facebook.com/kevin.sieff

The United Arab Emirates arranged a secret meeting in January between Blackwater founder Erik Prince and a Russian close to President Vladimir Putin as part of an apparent effort to establish a back-channel line of communication between Moscow and President-elect Donald Trump, according to U.S., European and Arab officials.

The meeting took place around Jan. 11 — nine days before Trump's inauguration — in the Seychelles islands in the Indian Ocean, officials said. Though the full agenda remains unclear, the UAE agreed to broker the meeting in part to explore whether Russia could be persuaded to curtail its relationship with Iran, including in Syria, a Trump administration objective that would be likely to require major concessions to Moscow on U.S. sanctions.

Though Prince had no formal role with the Trump campaign or transition team, he presented himself as an unofficial envoy for Trump to high-ranking Emiratis involved in setting up his meeting with the Putin confidant, according to the officials, who did not identify the Russian.

Prince was an avid supporter of Trump. After the Republican convention, he contributed $250,000 to Trump's campaign, the national party and a pro-Trump super PAC led by GOP mega-donor Rebekah Mercer, records show. He has ties to people in Trump's circle, including Stephen K. Bannon, now serving as the president's chief strategist and senior counselor. Prince's sister Betsy DeVos serves as education secretary in the Trump administration. And Prince was seen in the Trump transition offices in New York in December.

U.S. officials said the FBI has been scrutinizing the Seychelles meeting as part of a broader probe of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. election and alleged contacts between associates of Putin and Trump. The FBI declined to comment.

The Seychelles encounter, which one official said spanned two days, adds to an expanding web of connections between Russia and Americans with ties to Trump — contacts that the White House has been reluctant to acknowledge or explain until they have been exposed by news organizations.

"We are not aware of any meetings, and Erik Prince had no role in the transition," said Sean Spicer, the White House press secretary.

A Prince spokesman said in a statement: "Erik had no role on the transition team. This is a complete fabrication. The meeting had nothing to do with President Trump. Why is the so-called under-resourced intelligence community messing around with surveillance of American citizens when they should be hunting terrorists?"

Prince is best known as the founder of Blackwater, a security firm that became a symbol of U.S. abuses in Iraq after a series of incidents, including one in 2007 in which the company's guards were accused — and later criminally convicted — of killing civilians in a crowded Iraqi square. Prince sold the firm, which was subsequently re-branded, but has continued building a private paramilitary empire with contracts across the Middle East and Asia. He now heads a Hong Kong-based company known as the Frontier Services Group.

Prince would probably have been seen as too controversial to serve in any official capacity in the Trump transition or administration. But his ties to Trump advisers, experience with clandestine work and relationship with the royal leaders of the Emirates — where he moved in 2010 amid mounting legal problems for his American business — would have positioned him as an ideal go-between.

The Seychelles meeting came after separate private discussions in New York involving high-ranking representatives of Trump with both Moscow and the Emirates.

The White House has acknowledged that Michael T. Flynn, Trump's original national security adviser, and Trump adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner met with the Russian ambassador to the United States, Sergey Kislyak, in late November or early December in New York.

Team Trump's ties to Russian interests

Flynn and Kushner were joined by Bannon for a separate meeting with the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, who made an undisclosed visit to New York later in December, according to the U.S., European and Arab officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive matters.

In an unusual breach of protocol, the UAE did not notify the Obama administration in advance of the visit, though officials found out because Zayed's name appeared on a flight manifest.

Officials said Zayed and his brother, the UAE's national security adviser, coordinated the Seychelles meeting with Russian government officials with the goal of establishing an unofficial back channel between Trump and Putin.

Officials said Zayed wanted to be helpful to both leaders, who had talked about working more closely together, a policy objective long advocated by the crown prince. The UAE, which sees Iran as one of its main enemies, also shared the Trump team's interest in finding ways to drive a wedge between Moscow and Tehran.

Zayed met twice with Putin in 2016, according to Western officials, and urged the Russian leader to work more closely with the Emirates and Saudi Arabia — an effort to isolate Iran.

At the time of the Seychelles meeting and for weeks afterward, the UAE believed that Prince had the blessing of the new administration to act as its unofficial representative. The Russian participant was a person whom Zayed knew was close to Putin from his interactions with both men, the officials said.

Scrutiny over Russia

When the Seychelles meeting took place, official contacts between members of the incoming Trump administration and the Russian government were under intense

scrutiny, both from federal investigators and the press.

Less than a week before the Seychelles meeting, U.S. intelligence agencies released a report accusing Russia of intervening clandestinely during the 2016 election to help Trump win the White House.

The FBI was already investigating communications between Flynn and Kislyak. The Washington Post's David Ignatius first disclosed those communications on Jan. 12, around the time of the Seychelles meeting. Flynn was subsequently fired by Trump for misleading Vice President Pence and others about his discussions with Kislyak.

Yousef Al Otaiba, the UAE's ambassador in Washington, declined to comment.

Government officials in the Seychelles said they were not aware of any meetings between Trump and Putin associates in the country around Jan. 11. But they said luxury resorts on the island are ideal for clandestine gatherings like the one described by the U.S., European and Arab officials.

"I wouldn't be surprised at all," said Barry Faure, the Seychelles secretary of state for foreign affairs. "The Seychelles is the kind of place where you can have a good time away from the eyes of the media. That's even printed in our tourism marketing. But I guess this time you smelled something."

Trump has dismissed the investigations of Russia's role in the election as "fake news" and a "witch hunt."

The level of discretion surrounding the Seychelles meeting seems extraordinary given the frequency with which senior Trump advisers, including Flynn and Kushner, had interacted with Russian officials in the United States, including at the high-profile Trump Tower in New York.

Steven Simon, a National Security Council senior director for the Middle East and North Africa in the Obama White House, said: "The idea of using business cutouts, or individuals perceived to be close to political leaders, as a tool of diplomacy is as old as the hills. These unofficial channels are desirable precisely because they are deniable; ideas can be tested without the risk of failure."

Current and former U.S. officials said that while Prince refrained from playing a direct role in the Trump transition, his name surfaced so frequently in internal discussions that he seemed to function as an outside adviser whose opinions were valued on a range of issues, including plans for overhauling the U.S. intelligence community.

He appears to have particularly close ties to Bannon, appearing multiple times as a guest on Bannon's satellite radio program over the past year as well as in articles on the Breitbart Web site that Bannon ran before joining the Trump campaign.

In a July interview with Bannon, Prince said those seeking forceful U.S. leadership should "wait till January and hope Mr. Trump is elected." And he lashed out at President Barack Obama, saying that because of his policies "the terrorists, the fascists, are winning."

Days before the November election, Prince appeared on Bannon's program again, saying that he had "well-placed sources" in the New York City Police Department telling him they were preparing to make arrests in the investigation of former congressman Anthony Weiner (D-N.Y.) over allegations he exchanged sexually explicit texts with a minor. Flynn tweeted a link to the Breitbart report on the claim. No arrests occurred.

Prince went on to make unfounded assertions that damaging material recovered from Weiner's computers would implicate Hillary Clinton and her close adviser, Huma Abedin, who was married to Weiner. He also called Abedin an "agent of influence very sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood."

Prince and his family were major GOP donors in 2016. The Center for Responsive Politics reported that the family gave more than $10 million to GOP candidates and super PACs, including about $2.7 million from his sister, DeVos, and her husband.

Prince's father, Edgar Prince, built his fortune through an auto-parts company. Betsy married Richard DeVos Jr., heir to the Amway fortune.

Erik Prince has had lucrative contracts with the UAE government, which at one point paid his firm a reported $529 million to help bring in foreign fighters to help assemble an internal paramilitary force capable of carrying out secret operations and protecting Emirati installations from terrorist attacks.

Focus on Iran

The Trump administration and the UAE appear to share a similar preoccupation with Iran. Current and former officials said that Trump advisers were focused throughout the transition period on exploring ways to get Moscow to break ranks with Tehran.

"Separating Russia from Iran was a common theme," said a former intelligence official in the Obama administration who met with Trump transition officials. "It didn't seem very well thought out. It seemed a little premature. They clearly had a very specific policy position, which I found odd given that they hadn't even taken the reins and explored with experts in the U.S. government the pros and cons of that approach."

Michael McFaul, former U.S. ambassador to Russia, said he also had discussions with people close to the Trump administration about the prospects of drawing Russia away from Iran. "When I would hear this, I would think, 'Yeah that's great for you guys, but why would Putin ever do that?' " McFaul said. "There is no interest in Russia ever doing that. They have a long relationship with Iran. They're allied with Iran in fighting in Syria. They sell weapons to Iran. Iran is an important strategic partner for Russia in the Middle East."

Following the New York meeting between the Emiratis and Trump aides, Zayed was approached by Prince, who said he was authorized to act as an unofficial surrogate for the president-elect, according to the officials. He wanted Zayed to set up a meeting with a Putin associate. Zayed agreed and proposed the Seychelles as the meeting place because of the privacy it would afford both sides. "He wanted to be helpful," one official said of Zayed.

Wealthy Russians and Emirati royalty have a particularly large footprint on the islands. Signs advertising deep-sea fishing trips are posted in Cyrillic. Russian billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov owns North Island, where Prince William and Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge, went on their honeymoon in 2011. Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan, president of the UAE, built a hilltop palace for himself with views across the chain of islands.

The Emiratis have given hundreds of millions of dollars to the Seychelles in recent years for causes including public health and affordable housing. But when the Emirati royal family visits, they are rarely seen.

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"The jeep comes to their private jet on the tarmac and they disappear," said one Seychellois official who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he did not want to be seen as criticizing the Emiratis.

Zayed, the crown prince, owns a share of the Seychelles' Four Seasons, a collection of private villas scattered on a lush hillside on the main island's southern shore, overlooking the Indian Ocean, according to officials in the Seychelles. The hotel is tucked away on a private beach, far from the nearest public road.

Current and former U.S. officials who have worked closely with Zayed, who is often referred to as MBZ, say it would be out of character for him to arrange the Jan. 11 meeting without getting a green light in advance from top aides to Trump and Putin, if not the leaders themselves. "MBZ is very cautious," said an American businessman who knows Zayed and spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject. "There had to be a nod."

The Seychelles meeting was deemed productive by the UAE and Russia, but the idea of arranging additional meetings between Prince and Putin's associates was dropped, officials said. Even unofficial contacts between Trump and Putin associates had become too politically risky, officials said.

Sieff reported from the Seychelles. Julie Tate, Devlin Barrett, Matea Gold, Tom Hamburger and Rosalind S. Helderman contributed to this report.

Bloomberg

Bernstein : What Trump Has Lost So Far in Washington

Jonathan Bernstein

Perhaps in a sign that the White House is beginning to understand the folly of simply claiming that everything is going fantastically well, a senior official tried a new approach last week: he framed the chaos as part of the kind of work in progress celebrated in Silicon Valley. "It's a beta White House," Axios wrote in summing up the interview.

That's unlikely. I think a better read is Dan Drezner's analysis that President Trump is particularly bad at realizing what he doesn't know, and therefore will be particularly unable to improve things. And there's no sign of improvement so far.

Still, it's worth considering the possibility that the president will wake up one morning soon and realize just how bad things are, and take action to improve. That's what Bill Clinton did (well, not just in one day) after his own rough transition and first days in office, and he wound up with a well-regarded presidency after a miserable start. On the other hand, Jimmy Carter's White House never really did operate very well, and his presidency never recovered from a poor start.

If Trump did take Clinton's path, he'll still have squandered two important resources: Time and reputation. The latter can be restored, although not easily; the former is just gone.

Lost Time

Yes, it's only been ten-plus weeks mostly lost, or about one fifth of one year of a four-year term. But not all weeks are created equal for a president. There's no upcoming election to distract everyone. Congress is (normally) unusually receptive to a freshly-inaugurated president's agenda. Even when new presidents are not popular, it's fairly normal for many Americans to give one a lot more leeway than they might later on. The idea that the first 100 days are all-important is certainly an exaggeration, but it's based on some real facts about how the presidency and how Washington works. Early losses hurt the president's reputation more than later ones.

Moreover, Trump is so far behind in so many ways that even a rapid improvement would still leave him in awful shape. In Congress, within executive branch agencies, even within the White House, competition for the agenda tends to grow more fierce with the intervention of outside events and fixed deadlines (such as the need to keep the government funding and increase the debt limit).

This hardly means the president's legislative chances are fully sunk. Clinton wound up with several wins even after Republicans gained majorities in both chambers of Congress two years into his presidency. But his best chance is probably gone.

'Professional Reputation'

A large part of a president's ability to influence members of Congress, bureaucrats, state governments, interest groups, his party, and even judges is what Richard Neustadt called the president's "professional reputation." This is about what elites think of him, not voters as a whole. What do they think of his ability to do his job? Can they rely on his word? Is he willing to fight hard for what he wants? Do his friends prosper and his enemies suffer? As Neustadt says, the people the president deals with "must be convinced in their own minds that he has skill and will enough to use his advantages."

Trump has, in just over 10 weeks, thoroughly destroyed his own professional reputation. He's constantly backing down from positions he sets out forcefully. Constantly, of course, failing to tell the truth. He demonstrates no mastery of policy, or even basic competence. His own White House constantly leaks unflattering stories about him.

He's even managed to squander in record time something all new presidents share: The vague notion that he must have some sort of magic touch for winning even if it's not obviously evident. If it wasn't gone earlier from his setbacks on the travel ban and over some of his personnel choices, Trump's defeat over the health care bill buried that one for good. Any new reputation as a winner he's going to have to earn.

The Clinton example in particular shows that earning a better professional reputation really is possible. But it can come at a cost. Clinton lost so many fights in his first two years that Republicans convinced themselves he could be rolled on anything, and many Democrats feared that was correct; it took two extended government shutdowns in 1994-1995 for Clinton to change people's minds.

To recover his reputation, and to avoid losing any further time, Trump would have to do what I and others have been urging upon him from the start: Bring in an experienced, capable chief-of-staff, and empower him or her to run the White House properly, including letting go the current leaders of various factions within the presidency. Even if Trump can't clean up his own personal act, that would go a long way towards righting the ship.

Bill Clinton never did, after all, learn very much personal discipline, just as Ronald Reagan never learned the details of policy, but both of them often had a well-run White House which could cover for the president's weaknesses and use his strengths.

POLITICO

Trump faces test mixing Mar-a-Lago with difficult diplomacy

By Darren Samuelsohn

PALM BEACH, Fla. — Mar-a-Lago will finally fulfill its founder's vision as a presidential summit retreat when a Chinese delegation arrives Thursday for two days of contentious talks on everything from currency to North Korea.

The South Florida seaside resort offers President Donald Trump a laid-back setting for his first in-person meeting with the leader of a country he bashed throughout the 2016 campaign and recently targeted with executive orders designed to cut the U.S. trade deficit.

Story Continued Below

Trump has the home-field advantage by hosting Chinese President Xi Jinping, but he's also facing a big early test trying to mix his brash and spontaneous personality with the charm and ambiance of a glitzy Trump-branded private club — an unusual venue to fight a battle he's pinned much of his presidency on.

Past American chief executives charmed Chinese leaders with beer, barbecue and celebrity chefs, inviting them to their personal homes and historic estates. Trump being Trump, his initial meeting with a fellow leader of a global superpower means they're likely to be surrounded by dues-paying members, daily bridge games and, if the club's weekly dinner menu stays the same, a Thursday night all-you-can-eat roast beef buffet.

"The idea at the core of this strikes a smart tone," said David Wade, who served as chief of staff to Secretary of State John Kerry. "In both American and Chinese culture, to welcome someone into your home as your guest is a sign of great respect. In principle, it's a deeply meaningful gesture. But in practice, it requires a lot of work and a little bit of luck to make it a success."

Wade, who helped Kerry prepare for a 2013 U.S-China presidential summit at the Sunnylands estate in Southern California, said Trump's team must navigate the challenges of scheduling a free-form two-day meeting with the Chinese, where ad-libbed diplomacy can easily backfire.

"There's typically a suspicion among the Chinese delegation that westerners can use a spontaneous one-on-one walk or pull-aside as a gambit to gain some advantage and veer off script," he said. "You have to build trust first. Otherwise American-style spontaneity breaks a lot of crystal glasses instead of breaking the ice."

Xi's visit to Mar-a-Lago won't involve the same pomp that accompanied Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's February visit. For one thing, Trump and his guest won't be golfing. The Chinese leader isn't known to play, and the ruling Communist Party back in Beijing has likened the sport to indulgent eating and drinking and urged its members to stay off the links.

There also won't be the trappings of a Saturday night at Mar-a-Lago, when charity galas and other events mean hundreds of additional guests pack the beachfront property. After Trump's dinner with Abe, which got sidetracked when its participants were forced to respond to a North Korean missile test, the two leaders crashed a wedding.

While more than 2,500 Asian-Americans, including many Trump supporters, are planning to greet Xi upon his arrival in South Florida, it's not clear whether the Chinese should expect a larger cultural exchange. When Abe came to Florida, his wife accompanied first lady Melania Trump at a nearby botanical Japanese garden.

"We really lucked out on that one," said Steve Abrams, a Trump-supporting Palm Beach County commissioner. "We can't offer an attraction to the leaders of every country."

Without even leaving Mar-a-Lago, Trump and Xi will have chances to forge connections. Xi's wife, Peng Liyuan, is a fashion-savvy former professional singer who will make for a much-watched pairing alongside the first lady. And Ivanka Trump's 5-year-old daughter Arabella is a viral sensation in China after her mother posted an Instagram video of her singing a New Year's greeting in Mandarin.

Trump's longtime friends and club members say just getting the new president away from Washington will be beneficial for the Chinese.

During Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Mar-a-Lago this

week, there won't be the trappings of a Saturday night at the club, when charity galas – like March 24's Republican Party of Palm Beach County Lincoln Day Dinner – and other events mean hundreds of extra guests pack the property. | M. Scott Mahaskey/POLITICO

"If I was a foreign leader who wanted to really connect with Donald Trump and get to know the real president of the United States, I'd meet him here rather than in Washington," said Chris Ruddy, a conservative media publisher and Mar-a-Lago member. "This is his natural environment. He's very relaxed. He has time to focus."

The Trump-Xi summit will have plenty of substantive policy topics, starting with North Korea's recent missile tests and the country's long-stated intention to build nuclear weapons. China, meantime, has warned of a nuclear arms race in response to Washington's deployment of a controversial antimissile defense system in South Korea. China has also expressed alarm over a Trump administration plan to sell U.S. weapons to Taiwan, and the two countries have jousted over China's placement of military installations on several newly constructed small islands in the South China Sea.

On the economic front, Trump's presidential campaign centered around an "America First" message that was aimed directly at Beijing. He threatened repeatedly during his improbable 2016 run to impose a 45 percent tariff on Chinese imports. Fact-checkers, meantime, repeatedly debunked the Republican for saying China still manipulated its currency.

Last week, Trump ratcheted up the rhetoric on Twitter, saying his meeting with Xi "will be a very difficult one in that we can no longer have massive trade deficits … and job losses. American companies must be prepared to look at other alternatives."

The Trump administration has shown willingness to save face with China. After Trump broke with more than 35 years of U.S. policy shortly after his election by engaging with Taiwan, he called Xi to offer reassurance that the United States still backs the "one China" policy of recognizing a single Chinese government in Beijing.

Trump has plenty of private places at Mar-a-Lago to conduct talks with Xi. But he can't exactly shut down his club easily. Club members expect they'll still have access to at least part of the grounds Thursday while the world leaders are there. | M. Scott Mahaskey/POLITICO

During a recent visit to China, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson drew criticism for echoing a Chinese Communist Party slogan when he vowed the U.S. and China have "a very positive relationship built on non-conflict, non-confrontation, mutual respect and always searching for win-win solutions."

Trump's more blustery stances on China need to have some backbone, otherwise he could weaken his standing in the long run, said Laura Rosenberg, a former senior official in Obama's National Security Council.

"One of the worst things you can do with the Chinese is do empty chest-beating tough rhetoric and then in practice be extraordinary in your accommodation. What the Chinese see is not strength. They see total weakness," she said.

By inviting Xi to Mar-a-Lago — giving the Chinese a powerful photo opportunity that will go over well back home – Rosenberg said Trump is presented with a big opening to force concessions on the policies he's pursuing.

"He has the protocol to trade for the substance and the real question is, does he have a strategy to do it?" she said.

Past high-profile Chinese diplomatic missions to the U.S. have involved a mix of American culture and substance. In 1979, the Chinese delegation drank beer and leader Deng Xiaoping wore a cowboy hat during a visit to a Texas rodeo. In 2002, President George W. Bush drove Chinese President Jiang Zemin around his Crawford, Texas, ranch in a pickup truck and they lunched on fried catfish, barbecue brisket and pork ribs amid talks of their unified opposition to North Korea's claim it was building nuclear weapons.

At Sunnylands, Obama hosted Xi just three months into the Chinese leader's presidency. The get-to-know-you session included celebrity chef Bobby Flay preparing Porterhouse steaks and lobster tamales and a morning outdoor walk in long sleeves despite nearly 100-degree desert temperatures.

"That's not where we are now nor what Mar-a-Lago is about for either side," said Ely Ratner, who served as deputy national security adviser to Vice President Joe Biden. "For Xi, it's mainly a photo op and a prestige play. He also wants to temper the more hawkish voices in the administration. For Trump, it's a chance to take the measure of Xi and see if he's willing to bend more on North Korea and economic issues."

Trump also must overcome skepticism that a club like Mar-a-Lago is a smart location to conduct foreign policy.

Even though the Trump International Golf Club is close to Mar-a-Lago, Trump and his guest won't be golfing. The Chinese leader isn't known to play, and the ruling Communist Party back in Beijing has likened the sport to indulgent eating and drinking and urged its members to stay off the links. | M. Scott Mahaskey/POLITICO

"I do know in the past an ideal setting for real serious negotiations has been Camp David," Sen. John McCain, chairman of the Armed Services Committee, said in an interview. Asked about Trump preparing his response to the North Korea missile test in front of dues-paying club members, McCain replied, "If you live long enough," then he walked away.

Trump has plenty of private places at Mar-a-Lago to conduct talks with Xi. But he also can't exactly shut down his club easily, either. While members told Politico that all dinner reservations for Thursday night are booked up, they still expect they'll have access to at least part of the grounds while the world leaders are there.

Back during the campaign, Trump promised that his first get-together with China wouldn't be formal. "I'd get him a McDonald's hamburger, and I'd say we gotta get down to work because you can't continue to devalue," he said during an August 2015 appearance on "The O'Reilly Factor," as Obama was preparing to host Xi for a State Dinner at the White House.

But fast food is probably not what's on the menu when the two leaders and their wives meet Thursday night. Dinners at the club traditionally involve continental European fare, including Americanized French and Italian dishes. Thursday nights also mean the roast beef buffet, though Trump famously has his go-to meal.

"Donald's favorite dish is Mary Trump's meatloaf," Ruddy said. "And so I think the president of China is going to love that with mashed potatoes, the gravy and the onion rings. I think he may never go back to eating Chinese food after he's done."

the Atlantic Why Trump Supporters Still Don't Blame Trump

Olga Khazan

When President Trump's plan to repeal Obamacare fizzled, his supporters seemed to blame anyone but him.

Soon after the House of Representatives pulled its health-care bill late last month, NPR's Lulu Garcia-Navarro asked two Trump voters, "who do you blame for what just happened?"

"I mean, the president sold himself as a deal-maker ... We have a Republican president, a Republican Congress. Yet they couldn't close the deal. Do you blame President Trump?" Garcia-Navarro asked.

"No," responded the Trump voter, Becky Ravenkamp. "I don't think blaming anybody is the solution. I think part of what we're seeing is that the Republicans are starting to get their wings. It's going to take them a little while to figure out how to come together and how to create policy."

Stat News heard similar responses when its reporters fanned out across Trump Country. The president's supporters said things like, "We just need to give President Trump time," or "He did all he could, I think."

In Little Rock, Arkansas, a retired nurse named Ramona Bourdo, told Reuters, "He can't wave a magic wand. I've not lost confidence in him."

And it's not just health care. The AP found Trump voters across the country applauding his refugee ban even though it was in legal turmoil. One Trump voter in Durant, Oklahoma, where the president's proposed budget cuts would hit especially hard, told the Washington Post's Jenna Johnson he thinks we should "let it go and see what he can do."

"If you voted for Trump quite recently, you're not going to want to say he cocked everything up"

Trump is escaping his supporters' wrath for now, but his string of high-profile policy flubs raises the question, what would spur his fans to turn on him? Will Trump's supporters—especially newly

converted Republicans—ever blame him?

It's possible, political-psychology experts say, but it likely won't happen for at least a year, and he would have to do something that affects his supporters in a very negative way.

First of all, liberals and conservatives alike are quite reluctant to blame presidents they voted for. As the psychologist Robert Abelson put it, beliefs are like possessions, and people generally want to hold on to theirs. It makes a difference how "sophisticated"—informed—and "reflective"—open minded—a given voter is, but people tend to ignore facts that don't sit well with their political identities.

We do this in two ways, says University of Oxford professor James Tilley. In the first, selective evaluation, we go easier on the decisions made by our own leaders and parties—think of Obama voters who can never admit there are problems with Obamacare. In the second, selective attribution, we acknowledge there are problems, but we blame it on someone other than the leaders we like—Obamacare was a Republican policy, after all!

In a study, Tilley found this second process—selective attribution—is stronger. People are more willing, in other words, to find someone else to blame than they are to squint and try to see their party's bad policies in a rosier light.

And who do Republican voters blame when the entire government is stacked with Republicans? Why, Congress, naturally. Sure, some House members and senators might belong to your same party, but at least you aren't responsible for their electoral victories—some schmucks in Janesville are. "If you voted for Trump quite recently, you're not going to want to say he cocked everything up," says Tilley. "But here's a guy, Paul Ryan, I didn't actually vote for him, but here's a chance to blame someone else."

Indeed, people seemed much more willing to blame Congress for the American Health Care Act than they were to blame Trump. Stat's interview subjects thought the GOP put together the bill too hastily, while one Republican man in Kingston, New York, told the New York Times, "I liked the idea of repealing Obamacare, but I thought the Republicans would actually have a plan." Not Trump, that is; The Republicans.

Americans might be less likely to hold the government responsible for things than Brits are, Tilley says, since America relies on the private sector for some things, such as health care, that are responsibilities of the state in other countries. (This is one reason why governments love to privatize things, he says—it's so much easier to the duck blame when it's Anthem, rather than the Department of Health and Human Services, that won't pay your colonoscopy bill.)

One thing going for Trump is how divided the American public has become. Thomas Rudolph, who researches political psychology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, explains that over the years there's been an increase in something called trait polarization. "In 1980, you would still think the Republican nominee [for president] was intelligent even if you were a Democrat," he said. "That has changed." Now, Trump's most hardcore Republican supporters are likely to think he's the smart, capable one, and that Democrats are a bunch of horrible idiots—and vice-versa for ardent liberals. (Of course, both Trump and Hillary Clinton are "very accomplished people," Rudolph said.) Regardless, this level of partisan rancor increases the odds Trump's supporters will stick by him, since they see few attractive options on the other side.

There's typically a few-month honeymoon period for new presidents, Rudolph says. But their policy failures have a cumulative effect, he added, so "a few years from now, he could start losing support even among people who like him."

Months from now, things might get really bad. When policies start to affect people in very clear, direct ways—premiums go up, jobs dry up—eventually "the person who gets the blame is the president, whether he deserves it or not," says Kevin Arceneaux, a political scientist and director of the Behavioral Foundations Lab at Temple University. That's why Obama was blamed for Obamacare—and why Trump's strategy of blaming Obama for the law might not work for long.

"Calling it Obamacare works while [Obama]'s in office," Arceneaux said, "but once he's not in office, that will lose its punch among those [independent] floating voters. Their question will be, 'why haven't you fixed things? I don't see Obama anywhere around here.'"

Even among his supporters, that is, Trump's hall pass has a time limit, and the clock is ticking. As one Trump supporter put it to the Post, the president has 10 strikes before he's out, in her mind: "I have high hopes for Trump, but if he's going to be cutting these kinds of programs, that's going to be [strike] one."

USA TODAY

Carney : Neil Gorsuch is a champion of the little guy

Andrew Yellowbear is not the type of plaintiff you would probably call a "good guy." He is in prison for beating his daughter to death.

But he certainly qualifies as the sort of "little guy" Democrats on the Senate Judiciary Committee like to talk about these days. Yellowbear, a member of the Northern Arapaho Tribe, is an ethnic and religious minority, and a prisoner. Even among the inmates at the Wyoming Medium Correctional Institution, Yellowbear was reviled. He's the type of guy who doesn't have many people looking out for him to make sure he gets a fair shake.

Except for Neil Gorsuch.

The prison in which Yellowbear serves has a sweat lodge. Prison officials barred him from the lodge because Yellowbear required special protection and escorting him to the sweat lodge would be a hassle. Yellowbear sued, but the court ruled against him on summary judgment. Yellowbear appealed, and Gorsuch heard his appeal.

Gorsuch ruled in Yellowbear's favor on the grounds that the federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act and its sister statute, the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act, compelled the prison to go to great lengths to accommodate Yellowbear's religious observation.

Gorsuch's opinion in Yellowbear v. Lampert is a masterpiece in religious liberty jurisprudence, laying out how the text of those two laws requires the state to defer to the religious individual, even if the state thinks it has a good reason not to. Prison guards may not become the law and supercede the law, even if they think they know how best to run their prison.

A very different plaintiff came before Gorsuch in 2015: the Little Sisters of the Poor, an order of nuns whom the Obama administration was trying to force to provide birth control coverage for its employees. Gorsuch was in the minority in this case, joining in the dissent, "When a law demands that a person do something the person considers sinful, and the penalty for refusal is a large financial penalty, then the law imposes a substantial burden on that person's free exercise of religion."

So when Democrats say, as Sen. Mazie Hirono, D-Hawaii, said to Gorsuch, "You rarely seem to find in favor of the little guy," they are at best being very selective. You don't get much littler than the Little Sisters of the Poor. Yet this idea of Gorsuch siding with the powerful over the little guy pops up again and again.

Review Gorsuch's other rulings, such as his dissent in favor of the class clown arrested for burping — a case in which the majority found that the police's actions were protected by the sweeping idea of "qualified immunity." In U.S. v. Ralph Carloss, Gorsuch came down on the side of Ralph, who said federal agents violated his property rights despite many "No Trespassing" signs. There's also USA v. Makkar in which Gorsuch struck down a drug dealing conviction because the prosecution didn't prove that some incense retailers knew they were doing anything wrong.

Gorsuch never ruled in Kelo v. New London, but in an email at the time, he praised the dissent — written by four conservative justices — in a case finding that the government, and the private development corporation it had employed, had the right to take Susette Kelo's home and demolish the whole neighborhood where Pfizer wanted turned into something nicer than a working-class neighborhood.

It's hard to see what Hirono, Senate Democratic
leader Charles Schumer and all the other Democrats are talking about when they say Gorsuch doesn't stick up for the little guy. But if you look more closely at his cases and the Democrats' charges, you realize what the Democrats mean.

First, in Yellowbear, Little Sisters, Makkar, Carloss and the burping case, Gorsuch was ruling against government overreach. In Kelo, he praised the ruling against the government. And there's the issue. When Democrats talk about being for the little guy, they often mean being for government power. The two concepts are inseparable in the liberal mind-set.

So nuns facing down the drug industry and the Department of Health and Human Services — or a working-class woman in a little pink house staring down a bulldozer, the local government, and a developer — don't count as the little guy because they're annoying wrenches thrown in the gears of government.

But there's another hidden meaning in the Democrats' "little guy" attack.

Democrats repeatedly bring up the "frozen trucker" case in which a trucker, who had decided his truck was unsafe to drive in subzero temperatures, unhitched the trailer and drove away, contrary to orders from his bosses — and thus was fired. Two judges ruled that this firing was illegal. Gorsuch, in a dissent, pointed that the law in question only barred trucking companies from firing a driver who refused to operate unsafe equipment.

Gorsuch noted in his dissent: "The trucker in this case wasn't fired for refusing to operate his vehicle. ... The trucker was fired only after he declined the statutorily protected option (refuse to operate) and chose instead to operate his vehicle in a manner he thought wise but his employer did not."

If you read the whole saga, it's obvious the trucking company was morally wrong to fire the driver. But it's also crystal clear that the company didn't violate the law.

Is a judge's job to discern the law or to rule in favor of the good guy in a story?

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

Gorsuch once wrote, "A judge who likes every result he reaches is very likely a bad judge, reaching for results he prefers rather than those the law compels."

And here we see the most important way Gorsuch is the friend of the little guy: He upholds the rule of law, and the rule of law is the little guy's best friend.

Well-meaning liberals want the law to be flexible so they can accommodate the little guy. But that's not what happens in real life.

A flexible, living, bendable law will always tend to be bent in the direction of the powerful — in the direction of the prison guard who wields the power to physically dominate an unpopular prisoner, in the direction of the developer and the drug company who wield political connections and grand plans for a widow's property, and in the direction of a federal government that will trample the voiceless to advance its ideology.

The rule of law doesn't care if you're powerful or powerless; it applies to all. Gorsuch has spent his years on the bench reading the law and applying it, without animus or favor. That's bad news for those, such as New London's mandarins or the Obama administration's HHS, who want special treatment. It's good news for the little guy.

Timothy P. Carney is the commentary editor at The Washington Examiner and a visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. Follow him on Twitter: @TPCarney

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Editorial : Chuck Schumer's Filibuster Lineup

The Judiciary Committee sent Neil Gorsuch's Supreme Court nomination to the full Senate Monday on an 11-9 "party-line vote," as the press likes to say. What a shame. All nine committee Democrats lined up like the Rockettes to oppose the nominee whose qualifications and temperament are universally hailed.

At least 41 Democrats led by Minority Leader Chuck Schumer have also committed to filibuster Judge Gorsuch on the Senate floor, so he will need 60 votes to be confirmed. This will force Republicans to change Senate rules to break what would be the first partisan filibuster of a Supreme Court nominee in history. Democrats and their media friends want to portray Republicans as the radicals in this case, but Democrats are the precedent-busters.

Mr. Schumer is howling that Republicans stole this Court seat because they didn't give a vote to Merrick Garland last year. But Majority Leader Mitch McConnell declared before Barack Obama nominated Judge Garland that there would be no vote on any nominee in the election year. He was merely echoing the standard that Mr. Schumer had set when he declared in 2007 that Democrats would block any nominee that George W. Bush would send up in his final year as President.

Democrats have no good reason to oppose Judge Gorsuch so they are inventing bad reasons. Montana Democrat Jon Tester, who likes to portray himself as a centrist, announced that he'll oppose the judge for what he didn't say. "I cannot support a nominee who refuses to answer important questions," he said, as if more than 2,000 Gorsuch opinions don't provide enough insight into his jurisprudence. If the Judge wasn't as gabby in the confirmation hearing as Mr. Tester would like, the reason is that Democrats would have used anything provocative he said to defeat him. But now even saying nothing offensive is disqualifying. What a crew.

So far only three Democrats have said they'll support Judge Gorsuch— Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota. Joe Manchin of West Virginia, and Joe Donnelly of Indiana. Mr. Schumer has apparently given them a pass to help win re-election next year in states carried easily by Donald Trump.

Mr. Schumer's filibuster carries some risk for Democrats, at least if the GOP follows through and confirms the judge. Once the rules are changed, the 51-vote confirmation standard will prevail for other nominees during this Congress. Democrats will have played their strongest political card in a losing hand against a judge who is likely to have unanimous GOP support.

Republicans should call Mr. Schumer's bluff and confirm Judge Gorsuch to honor their campaign promises, to defeat the implacable left, and above all for the good of the Court and the original meaning of the Constitution.

The Washington Post

Editorial : The Senate is on the brink of a historic mistake

THE STANDOFF over Judge Neil Gorsuch's Supreme Court nomination is the latest episode in a years-long cycle of political retribution that has diminished the Senate and harmed the country. It nevertheless represents a depressing new low. Senator after senator acknowledges that the body is about to make a historic mistake, setting precedent and changing procedures in a way that will, over time, erode the quality of both the Senate and the judiciary. But few seem interested in defusing the dispute.

Democrats are preparing to filibuster a well-qualified judge, marking the first time a partisan filibuster has been mounted against a high court nominee. In response, Republicans are preparing to change the rules and eliminate the filibuster on Supreme Court nominees, ending the minority party's ability to demand meaningful consultation on presidential appointments to any major office (since Democrats, when they were in the majority, had already abolished the filibuster for other nominations). The Senate's 52 Republicans cannot overcome a filibuster of Mr. Gorsuch without the help of eight Democrats. But they can permanently change Senate rules by simple majority vote.

"We're headed to a world where you don't need one person from the other side to pick a judge," Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.) said. "The judges are going to be more ideological, not less."

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It would be better for everyone if the two sides struck a bargain that resulted in Mr. Gorsuch's confirmation and preserved the filibuster for future nominees. But the trust required for an agreement on judicial nominees evaporated when Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) rallied Republicans last year to shut out Judge Merrick Garland, whom President Barack Obama named to fill the seat Mr. Gorsuch has now been tapped to take. "I cannot vote solely to protect an institution," Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.) said Monday, arguing that he could not "ratify" Mr. McConnell's past behavior.

Anger about the majority leader's cynical power play may be clouding Democrats' judgment, even about their own tactical interests. They have tried to paint Mr. Gorsuch as unacceptably radical, despite the fact that former Obama administration officials, the American Bar Association and many others have deemed him well-qualified to serve. Moreover, postponing the discussion over abolishing the filibuster until Mr. Trump's next nomination, if any,

would put Democrats in a stronger position and at least might pressure the president to select a more reasonable nominee next time than he otherwise might.

(Jenny Starrs/The Washington Post)

The Senate Judiciary Committee split down partisan lines in a vote over Neil Gorsuch's nomination to the Supreme Court on April 3. The nomination now heads to the full Senate with 41 Democrats pledging to filibuster the vote, setting the stage for Republicans to enact the "nuclear option." Gorsuch's nomination now heads to the full Senate with 41 Democrats pledging to filibuster the vote, setting the stage for the "nuclear option." (Video: Jenny Starrs/Photo: Matt McClain/The Washington Post)

Yet more than partisan interests are at risk in the current fight. As Mr. McConnell has often noted, eliminating minority rights in the Senate means that when the political tables are turned, Republicans will be the ones with minimal influence on the future of the court. Just as Democrats should recoil at filibustering Mr. Gorsuch, undercutting decades of tradition, Republicans should recoil from the thought of permanently curbing minority prerogatives.

The Senate is on course to give everyone something to rue.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Democrats Have Votes to Block Neil Gorsuch, Sparking Rule-Change Fight (UNE)

Byron Tau

Updated April 3, 2017 7:27 p.m. ET

WASHINGTON—Senate Democrats on Monday assembled enough votes to mount a filibuster that would block consideration of President Donald Trump's nominee to the Supreme Court, setting up a fight over the chamber's rules that could reshape the way the institution considers future nominees to the court.

Forty-one Senate Democrats said they would vote "no" on a procedural motion later this week that is needed to end debate and bring Judge Neil Gorsuch's nomination to a final vote. That is enough to halt the nomination from advancing in the 100-member body, where Republicans control 52 seats but need 60 votes to end debate on the nomination.

As of late Monday, three Democrats had said they would support confirming Judge Gorsuch, who serves on the federal 10th Circuit Court of Appeals in Denver. A fourth, Sen. Michael Bennet of Colorado, said he wouldn't block consideration of his home-state judge, but he hasn't said how he would vote on the nomination itself.

The Senate's Republican majority has the power to change the chamber's rules to eliminate the 60-vote requirement on Supreme Court nominees—a rule change known as the "nuclear option."

Also on Monday, the Senate Judiciary Committee advanced Judge Gorsuch's nomination on a straight party-line vote, clearing the way for him to be considered by the full Senate. Republicans control 11 seats on the 20-member panel, and Democrats control nine.

White House spokesman Sean Spicer said on Monday that the Trump administration was pleased that the panel had advanced Judge Gorsuch.

A successful filibuster against a Supreme Court nominee hasn't been mounted since 1968, though President Barack Obama's nominee for the same court vacancy was denied a hearing and a vote last year. Even Justice Clarence Thomas, a nominee of President George H.W. Bush who faced sexual-harassment allegations during his 1991 confirmation hearing, wasn't filibustered by Democrats and won a narrow 52-to-48 vote in the full Senate.

In fact, Supreme Court nominees historically have been confirmed with some bipartisan support—owing to the traditional view of the position as a neutral arbiter in judicial disputes, and out of deference to the president's right to pick a nominee.

But today, members of both parties say a fight over the rules is inevitable, even as they disagree with each other over the events leading up it.

Democrats say that in refusing last year to even consider Appeals Court Chief Judge Merrick Garland, Mr. Obama's pick, Republicans hit a new low in obstructionism and violated the clear intent of the Constitution, which gives presidents the right to pick Supreme Court justices.

Republicans say Democrats opened the door to ending the filibuster for Supreme Court picks when they ended it for cabinet appointees and lower-court nominations in 2013 but left it in place for Supreme Court nominees. GOP lawmakers also say that by blocking Mr. Obama's selection, they gave voters in the 2016 presidential election the choice of who would make the pick.

In the meantime, Democrats are under pressure from liberal activists not to yield on any of Mr. Trump's agenda, while Republicans are under pressure to deliver a win for the new president.

"This will be the last person that will be subject to a filibuster," said Sen. Lindsey Graham, a South Carolina Republican, at Monday's hearing. "The Senate traditions are going to change over this man."

More than a decade ago, Mr. Graham was part of a group of senators who brokered a deal to avert a similar showdown over court nominees. Then, like now, Senate Republicans were threatening to change the Senate rules, in that case to confirm former President George W. Bush's judicial nominees.

But the 14 senators—seven from each party—reached an agreement under which some of Mr. Bush's nominees were confirmed with Democratic support in exchange for a promise to avoid future rules changes. That maintained the Senate's traditions of long debates and the minority's right to have a say on nominations and legislation.

Democrats portrayed their stance against Judge Gorsuch as a matter of principle, saying that too much was at stake in his nomination to vote for him, including even the future of abortion rights.

The White House's Mr. Spicer said on Monday of Democrats' opposition, "We're obviously disappointed that the overwhelming majority of them are still playing politics with the nation's highest court."

A procedural vote on Judge Gorsuch is expected on Thursday, and if he fails to get the 60 votes to advance, Republicans are expected to hold a vote to change Senate rules, a move that requires a simple majority. A final vote in the Senate to confirm the nominee is expected on Friday.

"What I can tell you is that Neil Gorsuch will be confirmed this week. How that happens really depends on our Democratic friends," Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell said Sunday on NBC.

Longtime Senate institutionalists mourned the all-but-certain rules change, the culmination of decades of institutional infighting between Republicans and Democrats over presidents' judicial selections. Both parties have at times threatened to change the rules over what they say is obstruction from the other party, but it wasn't until 2013 that Democrats made good on those threats.

Former Sen. Harry Reid (D., Nev.), then the Senate majority leader, was angry at what he called Republicans' routine blocking of Obama appointees and said the chamber had to "evolve." "The American people believe the Senate is broken," Mr. Reid said in a floor speech at the time.

His GOP counterpart, Mr. McConnell of Kentucky, called it a "power grab."

If the Republican rules change is successful this week, no more filibusters could be mounted on nominees of any kind.

The New York Times

Democrats' Vow to Filibuster Ensures Bitter Fight Over Gorsuch (UNE)

Matt Flegenheimer

It was the beginning of what both parties consider a seminal week on Capitol Hill, likely to fundamentally reshape the way the Senate conducts its business.

Though lawmakers have long deployed the filibuster — a procedural device that allows for continued debate to block or delay a vote — to suit their circumstances, Supreme Court confirmations have been viewed as another matter,

insulated at least somewhat from the body's most partisan passions.

Under current rules, Republicans cannot break the filibuster if fewer than 60 senators vote to move the nomination to an up-or-down Senate vote. That would require eight Democrats to join the 52-seat Republican majority. As of Monday evening, only four Democrats had announced support for an up-or-down vote.

Judge Gorsuch's fate will depend on whether Republicans follow through on plans for the so-called nuclear option, as Mr. Trump has urged, to circumvent the filibuster for a Supreme Court pick.

"The Republicans are free actors," Senator Chuck Schumer of New York, the Democratic leader, said Monday, urging a withdrawal of the nomination if Judge Gorsuch cannot earn 60 votes. "They can choose to go nuclear or they can sit down with Democrats and find a way forward that preserves the grand traditions of this body."

Such was the theme of Monday's proceedings: a series of meditations on grand traditions, a resignation to their imminent demise and an insistence that the other side was to blame.

During the committee vote, senators took turns lamenting the state of the institution they serve, although none pledged to buck their own party on either the Democratic filibuster or the Republican push for a rule change.

What comes next, it appears, is a slow-motion dismantling of senatorial standards and practice, scheduled for demolition over several days.

"This is a new low," Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the Republican majority leader, said of the likely filibuster, "but not entirely surprising."

Of course, Democrats identify Mr. McConnell as the chief purveyor of new lows. From the beginning, the Gorsuch nomination has been shadowed, in large measure, by Judge Merrick B. Garland, whom President Barack Obama nominated in March 2016 after the death of Justice Antonin Scalia the month before. Mr. McConnell led Republicans in refusing to even consider the nomination during a presidential election year.

But Democrats insist that their opposition to Judge Gorsuch is not about payback. They have cited his record on workers' rights and his degree of independence from Mr. Trump and conservative groups like the Federalist Society, among other concerns.

Perhaps no member sounded as pained on Monday as Senator Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont and the Senate's longest-serving member.

How Neil Gorsuch Interprets the Constitution

Judge Neil M. Gorsuch, President Trump's choice for Supreme Court justice, adheres to originalism, a judicial approach that would deeply affect how he would make decisions from the bench.

By NEETI UPADHYE and DAVE HORN on March 22, 2017. Photo by Eric Thayer for The New York Times. Watch in Times Video »

He first argued that the treatment of Judge Garland had convinced Judge Gorsuch that "this committee is nothing more than a partisan rubber stamp," allowing the nominee to evade straightforward questions during his hearings.

Mr. Leahy suggested that Mr. McConnell had no qualms about "forever damaging the United States Senate."

And he wondered aloud how the Capitol had become so unrecognizable to him, after 42 years.

"I cannot vote solely to protect an institution when the rights of hard-working Americans are at risk," Mr. Leahy said. "Because I fear that the Senate I would be defending no longer exists."

Republicans have in turn faulted Democrats for what they call two escalations of hostilities: a series of filibusters against judicial nominees under President George W. Bush and a vote in 2013, when Democrats controlled the Senate, to bar filibusters for the president's appeals court and executive branch nominees. That shift left the filibuster for Supreme Court nominations untouched.

Supporters of Judge Gorsuch have appeared incredulous that the Senate — whose members approved Justice Scalia unanimously and did not use a filibuster for even some fiercely contested nominees like Justice Clarence Thomas — could come undone over a judge they view as plainly qualified and uncontroversial.

"It's pathetic," Mr. Hatch said, "that they're so stupid that they picked somebody of his quality and ability" to oppose.

Senator Charles E. Grassley, Republican of Iowa and the committee's chairman, accused Democrats of searching in vain for credible reasons to vote against "a judge's judge."

Senator Ted Cruz, Republican of Texas, pressed the case that Judge Gorsuch's nomination carried a "superlegitimacy" because voters last year knew that the next president would get to fill the seat. (Before the election, he had suggested trying to leave the seat open indefinitely if Hillary Clinton won.)

Yet even some Republicans who planned to support a rule change if necessary said they worried about what would come of it.

Senator Lindsey Graham, Republican of South Carolina, predicted that a simple-majority threshold for Supreme Court confirmations would lead to the elevation of future judges who are "more ideological, not less." Every Senate race, he added, would effectively become a referendum on the Supreme Court.

"This is going to haunt the Senate, it's going to change the judiciary, and it's so unnecessary," Mr. Graham said after the vote.

Though some Democrats have expressed concerns, in public and private, about pushing ahead with a filibuster, they are also aware of their political hand: The party's progressive base has called on lawmakers to oppose Mr. Trump at every turn, reminding them of the extraordinary dynamics at play.

Senator Richard Blumenthal, Democrat of Connecticut, linked his vote opposing Judge Gorsuch, at least in part, to the current investigations into connections between Mr. Trump's orbit and Russia.

"It is about the constitutional crisis that may well be looming," he said, arguing that Judge Gorsuch had not demonstrated sufficient independence from Mr. Trump. Mr. Blumenthal added that the prospect of the Supreme Court needing to enforce a subpoena against the president was "far from idle speculation."

Even lighter fare on Monday could not coax consensus from committee members. At one point, Mr. Grassley asked the senators how they would like to manage their lunch schedule: a half-hour break for everyone or an uninterrupted hearing with senators peeling off one by one to eat.

The room appeared split. "Could the majority cater this lunch?" asked Senator Al Franken, Democrat of Minnesota. A few Republicans raised their hands to convey a desire to keep going.

Senator Dianne Feinstein of California, the committee's top Democrat, smiled slightly, her hands clasped. The committee, she said quietly, could not even agree on lunch.

The New York Times

Editorial : How to End the Politicization of the Courts

David Leonhardt

Much of the media coverage has described the situation as the culmination of a partisan arms race: *Both sides do it*. And that description is not exactly wrong. Democrats have engaged in some nasty judicial tactics over the years.

Most famously, they blocked the highly qualified, and extremely conservative, Robert Bork from joining the Supreme Court in 1987. Democrats also blocked a few qualified George W. Bush nominees to lower courts, like Miguel Estrada and Peter Keisler.

But if judicial politics isn't an all-or-nothing story, it's also not a 50-50 story. Too much of the discussion about Gorsuch's nomination misses this point.

Anecdotes aside, Republicans have taken a much more aggressive, politicized approach to the courts than Democrats. The evidence:

Republicans have been bolder about blocking Democratic nominees than vice versa.

The failure rate of Democratic nominees to federal trial courts since 1981 has been almost twice as high as the Republican failure rate: 14 percent versus 7 percent. There is also a gap among appeals court nominees: 23 percent to 19 percent.

The gap between the parties would be even larger if Democrats hadn't eliminated the filibuster on lower-court nominees in 2013, allowing Barack Obama finally to fill more judgeships. Even so, Trump has inherited a huge number of vacancies.

The numbers above (which I put together thanks to Russell Wheeler

of the Brookings Institution) apply only to two-term presidents, to keep comparisons consistent. But the sole recent one-term president makes the point, too: In 1990, a Democratic Congress created dozens of new judgeships, even though George H. W. Bush could then fill many.

Can you imagine Republicans expanding the judiciary for a Democratic president?

Republican nominees have been less centrist than Democratic nominees.

Republican activists have built a strongly conservative network of judicial candidates. Democratic candidates are more idiosyncratic. Some are more sympathetic to prosecutors, others to the defense. Some are more pro-business than others.

No wonder, then, that Samuel Alito, Clarence Thomas and Antonin Scalia are among the most conservative justices ever, according to research by Lee Epstein of Washington University. By contrast, every Democratic-nominated justice of the last 50 years has been closer to the center.

Merrick Garland, Merrick Garland, Merrick Garland.

The Republicans' strategy has been straightforward. They have tried to deny Democratic presidents a chunk of judgeships, hoping the nominations will roll over. Then Republicans have made sure their nominees are very conservative.

The strategy reached its apex last year, when the Senate blocked Obama from filling a Supreme Court vacancy, even with the highly qualified, and notably moderate, Garland. It was unprecedented. Republicans set out to flip a seat and succeeded. Now the Senate is preparing to confirm Gorsuch, likely to be another historically conservative justice.

Republicans are bragging a lot about Gorsuch's qualifications, which are legitimate. But this debate isn't really about qualifications. If it were, Gorsuch wouldn't have been nominated, because Garland would be on the court.

What can Democrats, and anyone else who laments legal politicization, do about it? Absorb the lessons of game theory. Republicans have benefited from their partisan approach. They won't stop just because Democrats ask nicely and submit to Gorsuch. Democrats are right to force McConnell to be the one who takes the partisan step of eliminating the Supreme Court filibuster. Likewise, Democrats should be aggressive in blocking Trump nominees to lower courts.

Paeans to bipartisanship may sound good, but in this case they don't ultimately promote bipartisanship. Right now, the status quo is working quite well for one of the two parties. The country won't return to a less politicized judiciary until both parties have reason to want it.

The Washington Post — Democrats secure enough votes to block Gorsuch, setting stage for 'nuclear' option (UNE)

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Senate Democrats secured enough votes Monday to filibuster the nomination of Judge Neil Gorsuch to the U.S. Supreme Court, making it all but certain that Republicans will change the rules of the chamber to ensure his confirmation later this week.

Democratic opposition to Gorsuch has been building for days, and five more senators announced Monday that they would vote against him. That gives Democrats more than the requisite 41 senators to block a procedural vote and compel President Trump and Republicans either to withdraw Gorsuch's nomination or to change Senate rules to eliminate the 60-vote requirement.

"This is a new low," Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) said in response to Democratic opposition. But he also reiterated his vow that Gorsuch will be confirmed by Friday despite the likelihood of a filibuster. That's because McConnell is prepared to invoke what is known as the "nuclear option" — a change in rules to allow Supreme Court nominees to be confirmed with a simple majority vote. With 52 seats, Republicans would then have enough votes to secure Trump's first selection for the high court.

The procedural vote known as cloture has long set the Senate apart from the House of Representatives — and it has long been hailed by members of the upper chamber for requiring bipartisan cooperation, and forcing consensus, on major legislation or confirmation votes.

If that step is eliminated, the Senate is "headed to a world where you don't need one person from the other side to pick a judge," warned Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.). "And what does that mean? That means the judges are going to be more ideological, not less. It means that every Senate seat is going to be a referendum on the Supreme Court. . . . The damage done to the Senate is going to be real."

(Bastien Inzaurralde/The Washington Post)

There is a lot at stake this week for Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) and Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.). The Post's Paul Kane explains why. There is a lot at stake this week for Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) and Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.). (Video: Bastien Inzaurralde/Photo: Melina Mara/The Washington Post)

McConnell won't be the first to go nuclear, however. Now-retired Sen. Harry M. Reid (D-Nev.) first invoked the option in 2013 when he was majority leader, allowing non-Supreme Court presidential appointments to be confirmed with a simple majority.

And McConnell will probably face more pressure to eliminate the 60-vote requirement in other cases — on budget bills, for instance, or on any legislation at all. If that happens, the need for bipartisan cooperation could disappear entirely from the Senate.

Graham's comments came as the Senate Judiciary Committee voted to refer Gorsuch's nomination to the full Senate, which is expected to begin debating the pick Tuesday. The procedural step that Democrats have the votes to block is expected by Thursday, but if McConnell at that point seeks a rules change — which would succeed with a simple majority — it would start the clock for a final confirmation vote Friday.

[How many votes Democrats need to block Neil Gorsuch's Supreme Court nomination]

The outcome of the Judiciary Committee's vote was never in doubt — Republicans hold a majority of seats on the panel, and Gorsuch was approved on a party-line vote. But the testy hearing foreshadowed what is likely to be a combative floor debate over the merits of Trump's selection and the way both parties have behaved during years of feuding over the makeup of the federal court system.

Democratic Sens. Dianne Feinstein (Calif.), Patrick J. Leahy (Vt.), Christopher A. Coons (Del.), Mark R. Warner (Va.) and Robert Menendez (N.J.) indicated Monday that they would oppose Gorsuch and vote against cloture — the motion to end a filibuster that is required to hold an up-or-down confirmation vote.

During an hours-long committee hearing, Leahy criticized Gorsuch's answers during his marathon confirmation hearing as "excruciatingly evasive." He said that a GOP move to end filibusters of Supreme Court nominees would damage the Senate, but he argued that he had to vote his conscience, even if it pushes Republicans to change the rules.

"I cannot vote solely to protect an institution when the rights of hard-working Americans are at risk," he said, "because I fear that the Senate I would be defending no longer exists."

[Home stretch for Trump's Supreme Court nominee could forever alter the Senate]

Sen. John Cornyn (R-Tex.) shot back, blaming Democrats for years of partisan bickering over judicial nominees that he said started when President George W. Bush made several nominations for federal court vacancies.

"I disagree with those who somehow say this is the end of the Senate as we know it," Cornyn said. "This is a restoration of the status quo ante before our Democratic colleagues directed this artificial 60-vote requirement."

Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) dismissed Republican attempts to blame Democrats for the change.

"I'm sure we could trace it all the way back to the Hamilton-Burr duel," he quipped.

"The answer isn't to change the rules," Schumer added. "The answer is to change the nominee."

In a sign that there is almost no hope of ending the impasse without a rules change, Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) — who helped quell previous fights about judicial nominees — said that this time, he is standing with fellow Republicans.

“I have to. I have no choice,” he told reporters. He said he would have to vote for the change “because we need to confirm Gorsuch.”

McCain has been part of fruitless attempts to reach a bipartisan agreement in recent days, including consultations with Coons and Sen. Joe Manchin III (D-W. Va.) late last week. McCain told reporters that he was part of a similar conversation Monday, but he did not elaborate.

Manchin is one of three moderate Democrats who plan to vote for Gorsuch, and with Republicans, to end the filibuster. Manchin and the other two moderates, Joe Donnelly (D-Ind.) and Heidi Heitkamp (D-N.D.), have been the focus of a $10 million ad campaign by the conservative Judicial Crisis Network, which is pressuring Democrats facing reelection next year in states that Trump won in November to vote for Gorsuch.

Meanwhile, Sen. Michael F. Bennet (D-Colo.) on Monday became the fourth Democrat to say he would join Republicans in trying to end the filibuster. But in a sign of the incredible political pressure he faces as he votes on a nominee from his home state, Bennet did not say whether he plans to support or oppose Gorsuch. He has also faced pressure from JCN to back Gorsuch. So far, he is the only Democratic senator to oppose the filibuster who is not up for reelection in 2018.

[Democrats just took the filibuster off life support]

Carrie Severino, JCN’s chief counsel and policy director, said Monday that in the face of “unprecedented obstruction by Democrats, Republicans now have no choice but to invoke the ‘constitutional option’ ” — the nuclear option — to confirm Gorsuch.

Gorsuch was nominated by Trump on Jan. 31 and spent weeks privately meeting with senators and preparing for his confirmation hearings. He was questioned by the Judiciary Committee last month for almost 20 hours over three days, answering nearly 1,200 questions and later sending about 70 pages of answers to written follow-up questions, according to a team of White House officials assisting with his nomination.

As of Friday, Gorsuch had met with 78 senators — all but some of the most conservative and liberal lawmakers, whose votes are likely to fall along party lines. But three first-term Democratic senators, Catherine Cortez Masto (Nev.), Tammy Duckworth (Ill.) and Kamala D. Harris (Calif.), complained that they were unable to get a face-to-face meeting with the nominee or were not offered the opportunity.

The two big, misleading statements senators can’t stop making in the Neil Gorsuch battle

This week’s anticipated change in Senate procedure dates to 2013, when Democrats, angered by Republican opposition to then-President Obama’s nominees voted to end filibusters of executive branch and lower-court nominees. Republicans warned then that there might one day be retribution.

“Changing the rules is almost inevitable; it’s only a question of when,” said Norm Ornstein, a longtime congressional expert and resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute.

Ornstein warned that with Republicans set to extend the filibuster ban to Supreme Court nominees, they may soon face pressure to end filibusters of legislation to keep major health-care and tax reform bills passed by the GOP-led House from stalling in the more closely divided Senate.

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McConnell “will resist the change in some cases because it’s in his interest not only when he’s in the minority again but also to be able to rely on Democrats when the House sends you crazy things,” Ornstein said. “And because it’s not clear they have the 51 votes necessary to change the rules for filibusters on legislation.”

But McConnell said on NBC’s “Meet the Press” on Sunday that “I don’t think the legislative filibuster is in danger.”

Schumer, appearing on the same program, agreed. “I don’t think there’s any thirst to change the legislative rules,” he said. “Most Democrats and most Republicans have served in both the minority and majority and know what it means.”

Zelizer : Gorsuch filibuster would be good for Democrats

Julian Zelizer

(CNN)Now that Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer seems to have lined up the votes needed to sustain a filibuster against Donald Trump's Supreme Court nominee, Neil Gorsuch, the Democrats need to make a decision about whether to deploy that weapon. The Senate Judiciary Committee approved the nomination Monday, voting along party lines, moving the Gorsuch question to the Senate floor.

Without question a Democratic filibuster would be a bold and aggressive move. Given that Gorsuch does not face problems of ethics or competence, such a move would represent Senate Democrats flexing their partisan muscles.

But beyond that, it would symbolize the complete breakdown of the Senate judicial confirmation process, which, since the 1960s, has been devolving into a state of paralyzing partisanship. Partisan voting, partisan attacks, partisan character assassination, and partisan gridlock have all come to define the way the nation handles selecting its nominees to the highest court in the land.

There are some Democrats who will worry about this filibuster. Even if the Democrats were able to force the administration to withdraw the nomination, Senate Republicans might go through with their threat of the "nuclear option," a parliamentary rule change that would eliminate the filibuster altogether based on a majority vote. Doing so before the vote would allow them to push through the nomination with a majority, or if they did this after the defeat they could seat an even more conservative justice the next time around.

President Trump could push through such a nominee, moving the court even further to the right and undermining the ability of Democrats to count on the justices to protect basic rights and keep intact key government regulations.

But Senate Democrats have good reason to move forward with a filibuster. Indeed, this could turn out to be a defining moment for the party in its struggle against the Trump presidency. Simply in terms of principle, Democrats could rest assured that they would not be the party responsible for breaking the Supreme Court nomination process.

That already happened when Republicans refused to even hold confirmation hearings for former President Obama's Supreme Court nominee Merrick Garland on the bogus grounds that the "next president," who would start his term many months later, should decide whom to pick.

Though Garland commanded widespread support in both parties, Sen. Mitch McConnell kept the seat empty.

If anyone was capable of making sure the process did not break down beyond repair it was President Trump. Had he demonstrated some genuine independence and sent a moderate nominee to the Senate, instead of a right-wing judge who pleased the evangelical right and anti-regulatory business conservatives, he could have made it difficult for Democrats to refuse the confirmation.

A moderate nominee, even from this President, would have persuaded many Democrats to vote yes and brought along enough Republicans who would not want to suffer a defeat. Yet Trump made a different choice, tapping a nominee from the "originalist" camp unlikely to move this divided court to the center.

Democrats are often fearful of obstruction and don't show the kind of temperament as their Republican counterparts. They should learn though, that taking a tough stand has its benefits politically. By denying this victory to the administration, they would hand President Trump a second major defeat at a moment of great vulnerability, while potentially further diminishing the confidence of Republicans who continue to stand by him.

They would intensify the pressure on President Trump to consider a nominee who would undercut some of the Democratic opposition, particularly at a moment that the White House is furious with the Freedom Caucus and right wing of the congressional party for denying him a victory in his recent attempt to undo Obamacare.

Should Republicans pull the trigger and do away with the filibuster, it would not necessarily benefit them in the long-term. Democrats have been arguing for decades that the filibuster doesn't tend to benefit their party. The Senate is already an institution that favors smaller states, and the filibuster, empowering the minority, has turned the upper chamber into a supermajoritarian body. Given that Democrats tend to come from the more populous states, over time Democrats suffer on this and other issues.

As Democrats learned when they eliminated the filibuster three years ago in the face of GOP foot-

dragging on Obama's Cabinet appointments, the nuclear option will create opportunities as well. At some point in the future, maybe sooner than they thought back in November, Democrats will again have majority control and a Democratic president to work with. Enough Republicans might also shy away from eliminating the filibuster, fearing payback, given their realization of how the tool has been potent for Republicans.

Standing firm against Gorsuch could also further embolden the spirits of Democratic voters and activists who will be key in the 2018 and 2020 elections. Too often congressional Democrats forget that the need to listen to the grass roots is as important as listening to the conventional wisdom in Washington. Very often, voters, and not just the base, want their party leaders to take a stand.

Stopping Gorsuch, shortly after the collapse of American Health Care Act, would be a massive victory for the party and stimulate the kind of activism that pushed many Republicans away from repealing Obamacare. It would be a defining issue to get Democratic voters out in the midterm election and improve the possibility of a wave election, which becomes more likely with every drip from the Russia scandal.

There are obviously political risks when taking any bold move. Yet if Democrats turn to their counterparts, they will see how under Obama these kinds of tactics actually produced stronger Republican majorities and ultimately a Republican president.

With many Democrats feeling burned about the way Republicans refused to fill Justice Scalia's position when Obama was in office, insisting on a moderate choice to fill what they consider a "stolen seat" would be a decisive political moment for the party.

It would deny a struggling Trump administration the kind of desperately needed political victory that could turn its situation around.

THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

Will GOP leaders work with Democrats? These Republicans hope so.

April 3, 2017

Bethlehem, Pa.—Three days after the Republican health-care bill collapsed, Rep. Charlie Dent (R) of Pennsylvania called a press conference to tell reporters he was going to try a different way to fix the Affordable Care Act.

Standing just off the House floor, Congressman Dent said the only way to sustainable, durable health-care reform is to work with Democrats – one fix at a time. That was the conclusion he'd come to along with a few other Republicans.

That stance resonated with some voters back in Dent's politically mixed Pennsylvania district. "It was uplifting," says Sandra Birchmeier, a Democrat and Dent fan, who saw the press conference on the local news that night.

Dent's strategy may sound naïve in an era of hyper-polarization, in which the hard-line Freedom Caucus looks to have the upper hand among House Republicans. But Dent and other relatively moderate Republicans just proved they are a force to be reckoned with.

Hard-liners took the fall for the health-care debacle, but at least 25 non-Freedom Caucus members either leaned against, or, like Dent, said flat-out that they would oppose the bill if it came to the floor. For lack of votes, it never did.

In bucking their own leadership – and President Trump – moderate Republicans have suddenly become far more visible, after years of being overshadowed by their staunch right-wing colleagues. Now, on everything from tax reform to spending and infrastructure, they will likely try to pull their conservative leadership toward more centrist positions that will fly in their swing districts.

"There's a tug of war within the party" and moderates are the "majority-makers," says Michael Steel, who was the spokesman for former House Speaker John Boehner (R) of Ohio. "They will provide the margin of victory or loss on every big issue."

Like-minded Republicans have another thing going for them, says Dent, in an interview at his Allentown, Pa., district office on Friday. Reality.

Shedding his bomber jacket on a cold rainy day, the congressmen relaxes into a leather chair and points out that it has taken votes from both parties to pass spending bills, avert fiscal cliffs, increase the debt ceiling, and approve major legislation and reforms. The big exception was Obamacare, of course.

"Now the question is: Why don't we simply accept what appears to be reality, that in order to pass any of these big bills, that we have to do it on a bipartisan basis?"

Why some Democrats cheer for Dent

Hours earlier, cars packed the parking lot at a Bethlehem, Pa., community center, when about 400 people came to hear Dent hold his first in-person town hall of the new Congress.

Standing on a bunting-festooned stage, he reached into a basket of constituent questions, and read from an index card: "Will you, as an elected official representative of the people, stand up against the morass of lies and misinformation put forth by this administration, or will you hide?"

Cheers erupted from an overwhelmingly Democratic crowd (and sometimes, jeers). When the noise died down, Dent – now starting his seventh term – answered in substance: My job is to represent the people of my district. If the administration is on the right track on an issue, I will work with them. If they are on the wrong track, I will stand as a check.

"I've done that," he said, setting off another round of hearty applause. "I know how to say 'no' to people."

The pulling of the health-care bill – brought on in part by opposition from folks like Dent – was a huge defeat for the president. He has since vowed to fight the right-wing Freedom Caucus if they don't "get on the team." But while the failure was blamed on hard-liners, it also underscored the power of GOP moderates.

"I think they recognize at this point what their authority is, what their power is, and what they mean to Trump," says former Rep. Tom Davis (R) of Virginia, who once belonged to the center-right caucus now co-chaired by Dent, called the Tuesday Group.

"I think you're going to see them move more into driving a lot of policy coming out of the House," says Davis, speaking of the Tuesday Group and other Republicans who consider themselves the "governance wing" of the party.

United we stand – but which 'we'?

During the Obama years, this governance wing was overshadowed by the immovable tea partiers, who went on to form the highly disciplined Freedom Caucus in 2015.

While ideological tea partiers practiced fiscal brinkmanship to cut government spending and pushed the country into a partial government shutdown to repeal Obamacare, Dent says the GOP governing wing worked to "keep the wheels from falling off the wagon."

"We were often criticized as capitulators, surrenderers, sell-outs, compromisers, a number of disparaging terms," he says in the interview. "Yet at the same time, many of those people who were criticizing us were also glad that we got the job done."

Dent says the Tuesday Group – whose 54 members were split on the GOP health-care plan – is not by its nature a "no" caucus. Through discussions among its ideologically diverse members, it tries to get to "yes" and work with the GOP leadership.

But as he points out, every major reform or big piece of legislation requires both parties to be involved. "On health care, we feel like we've got to move forward incrementally," he said at the press conference. "We've got to do this in a bipartisan way, so that it's a sustainable, durable reform."

While Ms. Birchmeier, the Democratic voter, applauded Dent for not being "party-line," his bipartisan stance on health-care is a problem for Jean, a Republican at the town hall who did not want her last name used. "I think Republicans need to stay strong, and together," she said.

Will Trump work with Democrats?

That certainly seems to be the sentiment of President Trump, with his threatening tweets against Freedom Caucus members and Democrats.

But there's also the side of him that appears willing to work with Democrats, even as he excoriates them. That's the side that some moderate Republicans hope will come to the fore, though it's unclear when – or if – that might happen.

Carlos Curbelo (R) of Florida, a Tuesday Group member whose district was won by Hillary Clinton, appreciates Dent's bipartisan outreach on fixing Obamacare. He adds that "it seems like the president and his chief of staff have been sending similar messages, so we'll see. It could work."

Would Democrats go along? House and Senate Democratic leaders have made it clear they have no interest unless Republicans

repudiate their efforts to repeal and undermine the Affordable Care Act.

"I hope they come to the table. They haven't done so yet," says Rep. Leonard Lance (R) of New Jersey. A Tuesday Group member, he was a declared "no" vote against the GOP health care plan. Democrats are targeting his district, which also went for Mrs. Clinton.

Dent says that some members of the moderate New Democrat Coalition have expressed an interest in working with him on improving Obamacare. But he wishes that the GOP leadership would recognize the necessity of bipartisanship.

Certainly on health care, Speaker Paul Ryan (R) of Wisconsin shows no interest. If Republicans can't pass reforms on their own, "then [Mr. Trump will] just go work with Democrats to try and change Obamacare and that's not, that's hardly a conservative thing," the speaker said on "CBS This Morning" last week.

Does that mean that pragmatists will have to flex more muscle – like hard-liners?

The Freedom Caucus's 30 or so members have the power to block anything not deemed conservative enough, since Republicans can afford to lose only 21 votes to pass a bill. But that is not because the right-wing caucus is bigger than the Tuesday Group, but rather because it often acts as a uniform bloc – requiring an 80 percent consensus on many decisions. Dent's group is more about discussing. It doesn't take positions and vote as a bloc.

"The Freedom Caucus has strength because it understands the power of 21," says Dent. "I think sometimes we as Tuesday Group members have to understand the power of 21."

THE DAILY BEAST

How to Stop the Senate From Getting Nuked: Confirm Two Justices at Once

Jay Michaelson

Neil Gorsuch for Scalia, Garland for whoever comes next. It's the only way to reset the confirmation process and restore faith in the Senate.

There is still a way to avoid the "nuclear option" and solve the Senate's Supreme Court stalemate: Confirm two justices at once.

Here's what's going to happen in the next few days. Democrats now have at least 40 votes to filibuster the confirmation vote for Judge Neil Gorsuch. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell is expected to have 50 votes to change two centuries of Senate precedent and ban the filibuster for Supreme Court nominations—"nuclear option." If enough Republicans go along, Gorsuch will be confirmed mostly on party lines.

No one wants this to happen. Certainly not Republicans; as Senator John McCain told NPR, "I'm very depressed. We're all arguing against it, but we don't know any other option." Senate Democrats, meanwhile, don't really want to filibuster—but Senate Republicans' unprecedented decision last year not to give a hearing to President Obama's SCOTUS nominee has left them no choice. If Democrats go along with Gorsuch, the cheaters win.

And so the slow-motion runaway train rumbles toward the cliff edge. No one likes where it's going, but no one can do anything about it.

Except they can. If the Senate and the White House really want to solve this problem, they'll cut a deal. Two justices at once: Gorsuch for Scalia now, and Garland for whoever comes next—probably Justice Kennedy, who is said to be considering retirement. Best of all, it's the "institutionalist" centrists of both parties who can bring this deal to pass.

Think about it. Judge Gorsuch is eminently qualified and, judging by the rave reviews he's received from the Heritage Foundation, the Judicial Crisis Network, and the Religious Right, he's a deep-red conservative like the late Justice Scalia. Seating Gorsuch in Scalia's seat basically returns the Court to where it was 14 months ago.

For Democrats, the real crisis comes with the next vacancy. Unless one of the Court's three youngish conservatives—Chief Justice Roberts, Justice Thomas, or Justice Alito—were for some unlikely and unforeseen reason to leave the Court, the next vacancy will move the Court rightward. The shift will be either somewhat rightward, if it's Kennedy to leave, or far rightward, if it's one of the four liberal justices to do so.

And that's what Democrats can't stomach. It's not just that the Republicans stole this seat, they say, by not giving Judge Garland so much as a hearing. It's that, if the Democrats do nothing, that theft will transform the Supreme Court for decades. This isn't about vengeance or pettiness; it's about consequences.

Republicans don't really have an answer to that. Sure, some Democrats had talked about not confirming a justice in the summer or fall of an election year. Others had talked about filibustering Alito or Roberts. But none of that ever came to pass. And a vacancy in February isn't the same as a vacancy in July. In their hearts, Republican senators know they did something new in 2016.

But Republicans were facing the same prospect of a realignment as Democrats are now. If Justice Scalia had been replaced by a moderate like Garland, that would've represented a huge shift. And remember, no one expected Trump to win, so it's a shift that would have been cemented in the years to come.

Which brings us to the mess we're in now, with no satisfactory options for anyone. And that's why the "Two for One" deal makes sense. Replacing Justices Scalia and Kennedy with ideological siblings basically maintains the status quo. It protects Justice Scalia's seat for conservatives, but because it protects Justice Kennedy's seat for moderates, it doesn't reward the shenanigans of 2016. It basically admits that the system is broken right now, and needs a reset before it can function again.

Now, what's to stop Democrats from filibustering President Trump's future picks? Well, for one thing, they'd have no real justification. As many have noted lately, Justices Scalia and Ginsburg were confirmed with more than 95 votes each. Ideology should not be the test of confirmation; qualifications should be. Had the Garland debacle not taken place, Democrats would have no grounds for filibustering Judge Gorsuch. And after the "Two for One" deal, with the reset accomplished, they'd have no grounds for filibustering whichever arch conservative President Trump picks from his list for the vacancy after next (like Justice Ginsburg).

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Obviously, there are many reasons "Two for One" won't happen. Trump seems more inclined to go nuclear, and his "negotiation" style is generally mostly intimidation. The rumors may be wrong about Justice Kennedy. Finally, Democrats and Republicans would actually (gasp) have to trust one another.

But there are also some reasons why it should happen—in particular, the institutionalists of the Senate, Republican and Democrat alike, who take the long view of the Senate as a legislative body and don't want to see it further degraded. They, not Trump and not McConnell, actually hold the keys right now, because if just three Republicans refuse to vote for the nuclear option, it won't happen. (Three, not two, since Vice President Pence would break a 50-50 tie.)

The institutionalists, in other words, are in control of what happens next.

But that doesn't mean that it's reasonable to expect Republicans institutionalists to just fall on their swords and allow an obviously qualified conservative to be blocked. And anyway, what comes next? Another filibuster? How does an endless confirmation stalemate serve the institution of the Senate? No—institutionalists have to get something in return. They have to get Gorsuch.

There's another reason to like "Two for One." With the Senate and the FBI investigating President Trump, Democrats have a strong claim that his Supreme Court nomination should not proceed. But institutionalist Democrats also have to worry about the effects of long-term vacancies on the Court. The truncated 2015-16 term was marked by weird compromises, 4-4 deadlocks, and missed deadlines. Even if you think Trump should be impeached, you've got to worry, too, about the functioning of the Supreme Court. Indeed, precisely because Trump is in office, we need the judiciary functioning as smoothly as possible.

On the other hand, if you're on the Trump Train, a grand bargain on the Supreme Court would represent a much-needed victory right now, coming in the wake of the health care debacle and in the midst of the Russia investigation. It would show that Trump really can make deals

where others have tried and failed. And while the Christian Right obviously would be unhappy with a Kennedy-Garland-style moderate on the Court, they'll have a blank slate when the next vacancy arises. And anyway, with Garland, 64, he'd be older than three sitting justices.

Again, so far, Trump has aligned himself with a maximalist, scorched-earth position. But if he really knows the art of the deal, now is a great time to show it off, especially if institutionalist senators leave him with no better alternative.

Finally, there's a nice irony to "Two for One." Precisely by admitting that the process is broken, such an agreement would also be a major step in mending it. Getting it done would take coordinated action among all three branches, bipartisanship, and a desire to make a deal rather than score points by not making one. It would turn the worst example of partisanship into the best example of rising above party for country.

Senate institutionalists, all eyes are on you. Centrist Republicans and Democrats can, together, restore a bit of faith in our democracy. We need it right now. We need a deal.