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FRANCE - EUROPE

**The
Washington
Post**

Will : Will France elect its own Barack Obama?

The French are too intellectually vain to borrow others' political ideas but too interested in style not to appreciate and appropriate that of others. So, on May 7 they might confer their presidency on a Gallic Barack Obama.

In 2008, Obama, a freshman senator, became a national Rorschach test, upon whom Americans projected their longings. Emmanuel Macron, 39, is a former Paris investment banker, untainted by electoral experience, and a virtuoso of vagueness. His platform resembles (as Jonathan Miller described in the Spectator) "a box of chocolates from one of those upscale confiseries on the Rue Jacob: full of soft centres." This self-styled centrist is a former minister for the incumbent president, Socialist François Hollande, who in a recent poll enjoyed 4 percent approval. (Last Sunday, the Socialist Party candidate won 6.35 percent of the vote.) Macron calls his movement En Marche!, meaning "on the move," which is as self-congratulatory and uninformative as Obama's "We are the ones we've been waiting for." Macron proposes to cure France's durable stagnation by being ever so nice. Which means, above all, by not being ... her.

In 1984, when Marine Le Pen's anti-Semitic and xenophobic father, Jean-Marie, received more than 2 million votes for president, a Paris headline asked: "Are there 2,182,248 Fascists in France?" It was not an unreasonable question, he having advocated uniting all "the forces of the nation in a fasces." He was pointedly invoking the Roman symbol of power — rods lashed together around an ax handle with the blade protruding — from which fascism took its name. His slogan was cunningly sinister: "My program is what you are thinking." Meaning: what you flinch from saying about Jews, immigrants and other deplorables.

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It is unclear how far from this tree the sour apple that is his daughter has fallen. Her rallies feature chants of "On est chez nous" ("This is our home"), which expresses anxiety that France is less and less that. Millions of unassimilated immigrants have made a mockery of the dreamy multiculturalism preached by people living comfortably insulated from the influx. Le Pen's blood-and-soil nationalism is a primal scream against the felt dilution of identity.

It is untrue that French libraries file the nation's constitutions under

periodicals. There have been a slew of them since 1791; the current one is a relatively ancient 59 years old. But a nation's identity is usually bound up with linguistic unity, so France's national identity is, in a sense, relatively young. Political scientist Francis Fukuyama has written: "In the 1860s, a quarter of France's population could not speak French, and another quarter spoke it only as a second language. French was the language of Paris and the educated elite; in rural France, peasants spoke Breton, Picard, Flemish, Provençal, or any number of other local dialects." Marine Le Pen, self-styled avatar of Frenchness, got less than 5 percent of the vote in Paris, running strongest where national identity has been most recently realized.

In 1977, France's gross domestic product was about 60 percent larger than Britain's; today it is smaller than Britain's. In the interval, Britain had Margaret Thatcher, and France resisted (see above: keeping foreigners' ideas at bay) "neoliberalism." It would mean dismantling the heavy-handed state direction of the economy known as "dirigisme," which is French for sclerosis. France's unemployment rate is 10 percent, and more than twice that for the young.

Public-sector spending is more than 56 percent of France's GDP, higher

than any other European nation's. Macron promises only to nibble at statism's ragged edges. He will not receive what he is not seeking — a specific mandate to challenge retirement at age 62 or the 35-hour workweek and the rest of France's 3,500 pages of labor regulations that make it an ordeal to fire a worker and thus make businesses wary about hiring. Instead, he wants a more muscular European Union, which, with its democracy deficit, embodies regulatory arrogance.

The 1930s confounded the European left because capitalism's crisis benefited the rancid right, which by melding economic and cultural anxieties produced aspirations from the base metal of resentments. Today, globalization is causing similar stirrings on both sides of the Atlantic. Le Pen's surge probably will crest short of floating her into the presidency. But in France and elsewhere, complacent people should remember the words of the African American spiritual with which James Baldwin in 1963 warned Americans during the struggle for civil rights:

God gave Noah the rainbow sign

No more water, the fire next time.

**The
New York
Times**

Marine Le Pen Draws Cheers in Macron's Hometown, and He Gets Boos

Aurelien Breeden

Mr. Macron met first with a few union representatives from the factory at the local chamber of commerce; Ms. Le Pen beat him to the plant itself.

Mr. Macron said that he could not stop companies from firing workers, but that he would fight to find a buyer for the plant or to retrain workers. Ms. Le Pen promised to save the plant and the nearly 300 jobs there that are supposed to be shifted to Poland next year, and said she would discourage companies from moving jobs abroad with a 35 percent tax on any products imported from plants that are outsourced from France.

One of Mr. Macron's supporters, the writer and economist Jacques Attali,

said in an interview on French television that the case of the Whirlpool factory was an "anecdote," meaning a detail in the wider context of France's economy.

"The president of the Republic isn't here to fix every individual case," Mr. Attali said.

Of course, it was no detail to the people who work there, and campaign officials for Mr. Macron, who has sometimes been criticized as lacking empathy for working people, had to scramble to distance themselves from the comments.

It was just one example of how Mr. Macron, 39, who has never held elected office and is running against a political veteran, was on the back foot all day.

Ms. Le Pen, 48, praised the Whirlpool workers for "resisting this wild globalization," and, taking a page out of the populist playbook of President Trump, she promised that the plant would not close if she were elected.

"When I heard that Emmanuel Macron was coming here and that he didn't plan to meet the workers, that he didn't plan to come to the picket line, but that he was going to shelter in some room at the chamber of commerce to meet two or three handpicked people, I considered that it was such a sign of contempt for what the Whirlpool workers are going through that I decided to leave my strategic council and come see you," Ms. Le Pen said at the site.

Mr. Macron, speaking at a news conference after meeting with the union representatives, shot back that Ms. Le Pen would fix "nothing" if elected, arguing that her protectionist proposals would destroy more jobs and that she was "making a political use" of the Whirlpool workers. Still, he announced quickly that he would visit the plant, too.

He arrived at the site surrounded by a giant, jostling scrum of journalists with cameras and microphones as he tried to talk with the crowd of workers around him.

Black smoke from burned tires lingered in the air, and some of Ms. Le Pen's supporters cried out, "Marine for president!"

"Why didn't you come before?" one worker shouted at Mr. Macron. "You are in favor of globalization," another said, critically.

"I didn't come here to promise the moon," Mr. Macron replied. "When Marine Le Pen comes here to tell you that we have to leave globalization, she is lying to you."

The workers did not seem convinced. One man joked that Mr. Macron was a "copy-paste" of President François Hollande, a highly unpopular Socialist who failed to significantly reduce France's unemployment rate. In the 2012 presidential race, Mr. Hollande sought blue-collar support at a threatened steel plant in Florange in northeastern France, but unions later accused him of betraying them after the plant's blast furnaces were kept idle.

It was not Mr. Macron's first tense encounter with union workers or protesters. Last year, he was targeted by egg-throwing union activists in an eastern suburb of Paris, and he famously told a T-shirt-wearing protester in southern France — who had heckled him

about his suit — that "the best way to pay for a suit is to work."

In Amiens, after Mr. Macron was able to leave the crowd of journalists behind a factory gate, he engaged in a more constructive conversation with the workers, broadcast live on his Facebook page and ending with him shaking hands and promising he would return.

But his emphasis on going along with globalization, not trying to stop it, was clearly a hard sell.

Mr. Macron finished ahead in the first round of the presidential election on Sunday, with 24 percent of the vote versus 21.3 percent for Ms. Le Pen, and polls still predict that he will beat her in the second round.

But his campaign for the runoff has gotten off to a shaky start, with critics saying he celebrated too early and returned to the campaign trail too late.

He has also suffered from cracks in the so-called Republican Front, the usually solid phalanx France's mainstream political parties have

traditionally formed to prevent a National Front victory.

One such call came on Wednesday from former President Nicolas Sarkozy, who ran unsuccessfully in right-wing presidential primary contests last year.

Mr. Sarkozy said on Facebook that the results of the vote on Sunday were a "political earthquake" and that he would vote for Mr. Macron because a National Front victory would have "very serious consequences for our country and for the French."

"It is a choice of responsibility, which should in no case be taken as support for his project," said Mr. Sarkozy, who noted that France would still have the opportunity to vote for his party, the center-right Republicans, in upcoming legislative elections.

But on the far left, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who came in fourth with 19.6 percent of the vote, has not endorsed Mr. Macron.

Instead, his France Unbowed movement is organizing an online "consultation" asking supporters

whether they plan to vote for Mr. Macron, abstain or vote with a blank ballot.

Mr. Mélenchon's first-round voters skew younger and more working-class than Mr. Macron's. Some worry that left-wing voters who supported Mr. Mélenchon will hurt Mr. Macron's prospects of winning the runoff by abstaining in large numbers.

That is especially true in regions like the one around Amiens, where Ms. Le Pen came in first during voting on Sunday.

At a news conference in Paris on Wednesday, Alexis Corbière, a spokesman for Mr. Mélenchon, said "not one vote must go to the National Front." But he rejected criticism that Mr. Mélenchon's attitude was helping Ms. Le Pen.

"It isn't with absurd admonitions that you are going to suddenly lead people to rally behind Mr. Macron," Mr. Corbière said. "You have to discuss things, and convince that the National Front vote is not an option."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Macron, Le Pen Cross Swords at Closing Whirlpool Plant in Northern France

Matthew Dalton

AMIENS, France—French presidential candidates on Wednesday turned a Whirlpool Corp. factory slated for closure here into an impromptu stage for an ideological battle over how to revive the country's declining industrial might.

Far-right candidate Marine Le Pen has made the plant's looming closure a national rallying point for her antiglobalist, euroskeptic campaign. The Michigan-based appliance maker announced in January it would close the plant and move production to Poland, a European Union country where wages are a fraction what they are in France.

Her rival, centrist candidate Emmanuel Macron, held a scheduled meeting with Whirlpool union delegates behind closed doors in the center of Amiens. For 45 minutes he argued for his economic program, preaching the importance of free trade and of guarding France's place in the EU.

Shortly before his meeting was over, Ms. Le Pen showed up in a surprise visit 2 miles away at the Whirlpool plant itself and criticized Mr. Macron for not being there with the workers.

"I'm here exactly where I belong, among Whirlpool workers who are resisting wild globalization," she said in the plant's parking lot. "There are millions of unemployed today, and there will be millions more tomorrow under the economic model Mr. Macron wants to impose."

In a last-minute decision, Mr. Macron's team took him to the factory, where he made his way through a crowd chanting "Marine for president" to present his case to workers. "After the closure of borders, what is there? The destruction of thousands of jobs that need them open," Mr. Macron shouted over jeers and whistles as clouds of black smoke from tires set alight by the workers enveloped the parking lot.

Wednesday's sparring in Amiens, in France's economically struggling north, shows how France's withering industrial regions have become a key battleground in a presidential race that has become a referendum on the EU, free trade and open borders.

Polls show Ms. Le Pen's candidacy facing long odds. With less than two weeks until second-round balloting on May 7, an OpinionWay survey published Wednesday showed she would lose 40% to 60%.

Still, first-round results suggest the country is more divided than ever over the EU. Votes for the main euroskeptic candidates, primarily Ms. Le Pen and far-left firebrand Jean-Luc Mélenchon, accounted for nearly half of the tally on Sunday.

The anger against the political establishment in industrial areas like Amiens is one result of France's industrial decline, which governments of the left and the right have been powerless to stop. French industrial production is 10% lower than it was when France adopted the euro in 1999.

Although the Whirlpool plant is in his hometown region, Mr. Macron has been reluctant to weigh in on the looming factory closure. "My silence is a refusal to manipulate the situation," he said on French television earlier this month.

After meeting with workers on Wednesday, he criticized Whirlpool for not negotiating with the unions in recent days. Workers have been on strike since Monday because the company's management hasn't started talks over severance and other issues associated with the plant's closure.

"Our top priority remains to enable the emergence of a viable and sustainable solution for the Amiens site," Whirlpool said. The company,

its workers and the French government are looking for investors to buy the site, a process required under a law passed in 2015 to stem France's industrial losses.

Ms. Le Pen has pledged to impose a 35% tax on Whirlpool and other companies that move production out of France. She also said the government would step in to buy the plant if she is elected and no other buyer has been found.

Mr. Macron sought to warn the workers surrounding him on the parking lot of the risks of withdrawing from the EU and imposing tariffs at French borders, as Ms. Le Pen has proposed. Another major employer in the region, Procter & Gamble Co., whose Amiens plant exports across the EU, would see its business suffer, he said.

"If Ms. Le Pen is elected, that [other] plant closes," he told reporters.

Afterward, David Gallo, who has worked at Whirlpool for more than 20 years, said Mr. Macron was well-spoken but had failed to convince him.

"He's been trained to speak," Mr. Gallo said, "that's not the problem. The question is what he will do."

Mr. Gallo, who voted for conservative Nicolas Sarkozy in

2012, said he wants to give Ms. Le Pen a chance. "We've voted left-

right, played Ping-Pong for 20 years," he said. "Finally, we've seen

they're the same. We'll try the National Front."

**The
Washington
Post**

Michael Birnbaum : Marine Le Pen's narrow path to French victory: Get opponents to stay home

PARIS — With a tense battle for the future of France underway ahead of a presidential runoff election next month, the far-right insurgent Marine Le Pen is pulling a page from the same improbable victory playbook as President Trump: encouraging her opponents to stay home.

Opinion polls suggest that Le Pen's opponent, centrist newcomer Emmanuel Macron, holds a commanding lead ahead of the May 7 runoff, less because French voters believe in him than because they are frightened by Le Pen's National Front, which has long been dogged by charges of anti-Semitism and Nazi sympathies.

But in a year when voters are storming the establishment bastions around the world, many mainstream French politicians are warning that Macron's campaign is dangerously complacent. Despite polls that show Macron sweeping up more than 60 percent of the vote, several post-election missteps have kept the door open to a Le Pen upset, analysts say — even as the path she must walk to the Elysee Palace is vanishingly thin.

[What you need to know about Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen]

"An election is combat, and it's necessary to fight," Ségolène Royal, a senior Socialist leader who has thrown her backing to Macron, told BFMTV.

Emmanuel Macron, a 39-year-old centrist, will face Marine Le Pen, the far-right nationalist in the presidential runoff May 7, leaving French voters with a stark choice. Macron takes on Le Pen for French presidency. Now What? (The Washington Post)

(The Washington Post)

Macron, who was economy minister until August, is a 39-year-old former investment banker who has never held elected office. His unorthodox campaign platform mixes ideas from the left and right — but above all is a cheerful endorsement of the idea that a borderless, globalized world is the best way to ensure prosperity for France's citizens.

But the political neophyte's path to the doorstep of the presidency has been eased by the failures of his

traditional party rivals. A corruption scandal downed center-right candidate François Fillon, who was otherwise considered a shoo-in. The incumbent president, Socialist François Hollande, is historically unpopular, destroying his party's chances of a second term.

Now Le Pen's victory chances depend on disillusioned left-wing voters staying home, holding down the total voting pool enough for her to top 50 percent. With nearly half of French voters opting for anti-establishment candidates in Sunday's first-round vote, there is a slender possibility it could happen, even if it's unlikely.

An upset would have some of the echoes of Trump's victory. Far-left candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon, whose anti-globalization agenda had many shades of Sen. Bernie Sanders's campaign, has held back from calling on his supporters to vote for Macron to deny the far-right a victory.

[Marine Le Pen goes from fringe right-winger to major contender]

Le Pen's campaign has seized on Mélenchon's wavering, pushing out a point-by-point comparison of their campaign positions, many of which share a skepticism of globalization and big business.

Many of Mélenchon's supporters resent the pressure to vote for Macron, saying that even if they loathe Le Pen's attitude toward foreigners, her centrist opponent embodies all of the globalist, pro-business stances they detest.

(Reuters)

Far-right French presidential candidate Marine Le Pen told reporters, April 24, that her opponent, independent centrist Emmanuel Macron, does not have a plan to protect against the "danger of Islamist terrorism." Far-right French presidential candidate Marine Le Pen says her opponent, Emmanuel Macron, does not have a plan to protect against "Islamist terrorism." (Reuters)

"What really bothers me the most is the amount of unanimity," said Antoine Hémon, 30, a PhD student in economics who worked on Mélenchon's campaign. "As though it were a parlor reflex, saying you

have to vote for Macron in order to build a rampart against Le Pen."

He said he was still making up his mind about how — or whether — to vote in the runoff.

"On Sunday I was in favor of voting blank," casting an empty ballot as a protest against the system, he said. "On Monday I was in favor of voting Macron." Now he's thinking about abstaining, he said, although "if there's the slightest chance that the fascists come to power," he said, referring to Le Pen, he'll probably reconsider.

Even if Macron wins, a narrow victory will sap his momentum going into June legislative elections and could make it difficult for him to enact his agenda. And if France's unemployment remains stranded at 10 percent and economic growth stays disappointing, Le Pen could return stronger than ever in the next elections in 2022.

"He will have to dramatize the election in the coming week," said Vincent Martigny, a professor of politics at École Polytechnique, a university in a suburb of Paris. "It's not about victory but the type of mandate he wins."

Le Pen has been delighted to exploit her opponent's missteps. Her skills were on display Wednesday when she seized on a trip by Macron to his home town of Amiens, where workers at a Whirlpool clothes dryer factory have been picketing to protest plans to shutter the plant and move production to Poland. About 290 jobs will be lost, a prospect that has ignited a debate over globalization.

[The leading French presidential candidates Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen, in their own words]

Macron met with a handful of representatives from labor unions in a stuffy, gray-walled conference room in the city's Chamber of Commerce, taking notes across the conference table and earnestly nodding at their concerns in front of rolling television cameras. It was a classic political set-piece intended to show his solemn dedication to solving workers' problems.

But as the meeting was underway, Le Pen rolled up unannounced in a white passenger van to the striking

workers' encampment at the factory entrance and cheerfully set off a campaign explosion.

"The fact that Macron isn't with the workers here today is a sign of contempt," Le Pen said, as she was thronged by dozens of strikers in front of a pile of burning tires. "I'm not currently eating petit fours with representatives who actually only represent themselves."

As she hugged appreciative workers one by one, she told them she heard their concerns and would fight for them against the forces of globalization. Some of them started to cry. French television networks aired the powerful split-screen drama, contrasting Le Pen's earthy appeal with Macron's policy-wonk note taking. His campaign scrambled to add a stop at the factory, which he had not initially planned to visit.

"Ms. Le Pen is playing politics and goes into parking lots and whips up the crowd," a testy Macron told reporters at the end of his meeting. "I in turn with will deal with things in depth."

Today's WorldView

What's most important from where the world meets Washington

Analysts said that Macron's weaknesses had been in sharp relief since Sunday.

"They're completely unprepared for this very peculiar atmosphere between the rounds," said Charles Lichfield, an analyst at the Eurasia Group, a political risk consultancy. He has given Le Pen a 35 percent chance of winning on May 7, despite polling agencies' analyses that turnout would need to be significantly lower in the second round in order for Le Pen to stand a chance of taking the election.

"If turnout is lower in the second round, and there is more complacency on the far-left and the center-right because of these very reassuring polls, it is just about possible," Lichfield said.

Virgile Demoustier contributed to this report.

Bloomberg

Raphael : French Front-Runner Campaigns Against Himself

Therese Raphael

The conventional wisdom has it that Emmanuel Macron won't have to break a sweat to win the May 7 presidential election runoff against Marine Le Pen. But first he'll have to survive his own campaign.

Stung by criticism that he is the candidate of elites and the beneficiaries of globalization, Wednesday's campaign schedule was meant to demonstrate Macron's common touch. Instead, it was a debacle.

Macron traveled 75 miles north of Paris to Amiens, a picturesque town with an awe-inspiring Gothic cathedral. That's in the heart of the Somme region, where the global appliance-maker Whirlpool Corp. has a factory that is due to shut down in 2018 as production moves to Poland.

Macron hoped to visit the workers there, but Whirlpool's management worried that the globalist politician would get a hostile reception. So they shunted him off to the town's Chamber of Commerce, where he met with a few union representatives.

His nationalist opponent didn't miss a beat. While Macron was at his meeting in town, Le Pen made a surprise visit to Whirlpool's parking

lot, where she was surrounded by cameras and employees shouting "Marine! Marine!" She launched into speech mode, renewing her promises to prevent the factory shutdown and to make sure the state protects the workers' jobs. Then she turned her fire on Macron. Her opponent was, she practically spat, over a mile away eating petit-fours.

Le Pen is a mediocre debater in a formal setting, but give her a parking lot, a camera and some factory workers and few opponents stand a chance. The footage from Amiens was captured on TV and went viral. Thirty minutes later, she was back in her car and on to the next stop. Macron tried to save the day, but was booed when he turned up at the factory. He had to shout to be heard and promised to visit the workers again after the election.

This particular Battle of the Somme won't make history, but it did say something about the front-runner's experience as a candidate, and perhaps foreshadows the troubles he might have as a president grappling with entrenched interests and widespread discontent. It also wasn't his first questionable call since his first-round victory on Sunday.



A middle way forward for a divided France? Macron voters hope so.

April 26, 2017
Paris—France has a well-earned reputation for being quick to protest over everything from labor laws to Uber to increasing the age of retirement.

But that's not how Quentin Legouy and Jeremy Camilleri, supporters of presidential hopeful Emmanuel Macron, see their country.

The pair are convinced that Mr. Macron, who will face Marine Le Pen in France's May 7 presidential runoff, and his "En Marche" movement will shine a light on a different side of France: a side that pounds the pavement to found startups and seeks a revival in politics.

"This is the new France, and we spoke," says Mr. Camilleri, a young engineer, moments after Macron addressed his jubilant base after winning the first round of voting Sunday.

The presidential candidate — at turns compared to former US President Barack Obama and his message of hope, to Tony Blair's centrist New Labour movement, and even the youthful military leader Napoleon Bonaparte — has inspired a social movement that is convinced that spanning the political spectrum is the best hope for France.

The youthful former investment banker who claims to be neither right nor left also evokes deep skepticism, seen in some of his election posters in Paris this week that were defaced with the words "ultrabanker." But his supporters say if he delivers on his promises, he can reform France and help restore confidence to the country and the European project.

Pierre Boisard, a sociologist of work and social cohesion at ENS Cachan University, says that the French seek reform, but their leaders have failed to light the path to it. "Everyone wants change, but they are afraid," he says. "The point with Macron is that he's pragmatic, he's not going to say he wants a grand reform that changes everything. He proposes changes that don't scare people."

Perceptions

There was reason to expect any number of outcomes in the first round. On the one hand, Britain's vote to leave the European Union and then America's choice of Donald Trump as president pointed at a populist revolt. On the other, Austria elected a pro-European president in December, and right-wing populist Geert Wilders underperformed

eyebrows arched at Macron's decision to celebrate that triumph at a quintessential Parisian brasserie in the chic Montparnasse district. The restaurant, La Rotonde, isn't just any Parisian eatery with fragrant escargot and tender roast duck; it was a favorite of Macron's former boss and mentor, President Francois Hollande, who celebrated his 2011 victory in the Socialist Party primary there.

Challenged about his culinary choice, Macron irritably told journalists that if he's not allowed to have a little celebration with his closest supporters, "Then you have understood nothing about life." His opponents pounced.

The meal drew comparisons to a much-criticized celebration by former President Nicolas Sarkozy at the glitzy Fouquet's on the Champs-Elysees after his 2007 victory. But Fouquet's is a fixture of the patrician Right Bank, Macron's supporters protested, while La Rotonde reflects the free-spirited Left Bank! Too late; contemporary populist politics overpowered hoary left-bank, right-bank distinctions, just as it has buried the categories of left and right in today's France.

"We saw this bling-bling France coming back," Sebastien Chenu, a

Le Pen ally told Europe 1 radio. "It's the hallmark of Emmanuel Macron: start-ups, champagne, glitter. No, thank you." From the center right, a Republican Party mayor denounced Macron for displaying an "indecent attitude at a time when the extreme right is in the second round."

Most polls give Macron a 20-percentage-point lead over Le Pen. As my Bloomberg News colleagues Helene Fouquet and Mark Deen wrote on Tuesday, even if turnout drops to the 1969 low of 64 percent, Le Pen would need a big swing of support to spring a surprise. So maybe Macron really doesn't have to worry about a few stumbles.

But as both Sarkozy and Hollande discovered after bruising tumbles from political grace, French voters have a habit of falling out of love with politicians they put on a pedestal.

(Corrects year of the lowest voter turnout to 1969 in penultimate paragraph.)

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

expectations in the Netherlands in March.

Ultimately, Macron came out over two points ahead of Ms. Le Pen, soothing pro-EU Europeans beyond France, many of whom mingled at Macron's election event Sunday. And he currently enjoys a 20-point lead over Le Pen ahead of round two.

Charles O'Donnell, an Irish economist getting his PhD in Paris, says Macron's success so far "is a reminder not to panic, that we're still very much together as a European society, to give us some confidence that things are going to be OK." But he warns it's not over — Macron has neither won nor proven he can do what he says he would do.

He needs to win over a country divided by class and geography. And in an era when Euroskepticism has reigned, even turning many a pro-EU leader Euro-reticent, Macron has come out in unfettered defense of the bloc and its future.

Although the election results pushed out of the runoff both mainstream center-right and -left parties for the first time in the Fifth Republic, Le Pen has tried to paint Macron as a political elitist disguised as a revolution. An "En Marche" post-results celebration featuring writers

and celebrities at a classy bistro on Sunday night did nothing to dispel the perceptions of elitism and arrogance.

Since Sunday, Macron has been congratulated across European capitals. Earlier this month he received a phone call from Mr. Obama. Macron has received the backing of the mainstream players, including French President François Hollande.

For foes, it feeds into the idea that he's just "Hollande-bis": an encore of the current president and a continuation of the status quo.

A finder of consensus?

Macron is said to be inspired by an Anglo-Saxon spirit, putting particular emphasis on entrepreneurship. A fluent English speaker, he says French people "should revel in success." At a campaign stop in Toulon earlier this year, he said France has "become a country that is afraid to dare."

Yet he seeks this for France within the protection of the welfare state the way Nordic countries have organized their economies.

His platform has been called vague, and its left-right nature is unfamiliar — and risky — in a French context.

Édouard Lecerf, global director of political opinion and research at Kantar Public in Paris, has compared him to the egg required in the emulsification of vinegar and oil to make mayonnaise.

"He's aggregating things that come from the left and right," Mr. Lecerf said at a meeting with the Anglo-American Press Association in Paris ahead of the first round. "You have to keep whipping for it to take shape.... If you put a little too much of one or the other at one time, it will start to turn."

Among his proposals, he wants more welfare for the worst off, but wants to reduce public spending, getting the budget deficit to under 3 percent as the EU requires. He says he can get unemployment down to 7 percent from its current 10 percent. He wants to shed 120,000 state jobs, reduce the size of government, and make France's famously rigid labor market more flexible.

Mr. Boisard says he believes Macron is better poised to carry out reform than his predecessors, who faced crippling protests that left

economic structures largely unmoved. "He's pragmatic," Boisard says.

Instead of saying he'll overhaul the labor system, for example, Macron proposes to extend unemployment benefits for workers who choose to leave their jobs. Many stay in them unhappily and unproductively for fear they'll have nothing if they leave.

And Mr. Legouy, the "En Marche" volunteer, says by adopting policies on the right and left, Macron could introduce to France the kind of consensus that is a hallmark of the "grand coalitions" that have become common, for example, in Germany.

"Maybe it's the best way to get the best of France," he says. "I think French people are bored by left, right, left, right. We have to do what is best for France."

Favorite by default

Formidable challenges lie ahead for him.

Despite the optimism of his Sunday night victory gathering – filled with young people, many of them

exceedingly well-dressed – he didn't get the most votes among young people ages 18 to 24. That age bracket went first to Mr. Mélenchon, followed by Le Pen. And the race revealed a streak of defiance in the French electorate, with over 40 percent of votes going to both the far-right and far-left.

Much of Macron's rise has come down to luck – the woes of the ruling classes and in particular the corruption charges that engulfed center-right candidate François Fillon, who was once the clear frontrunner.

Thomas Guénolé, a professor of politics at Sciences Po in Paris, says Macron is rallying "happy France," which could ultimately leave the country more divided.

"Macron is a champion of the part of the French population that doesn't have serious problems in life," Mr. Guénolé says.

If he wins and attempts his reform package, it could lead to even more digging in of heels – and some fear could even pave the way to a future Le Pen victory. Implicit in the

personal comparisons to Mr. Blair and Mr. Obama is the reality of both Britain and the US today: the Labour Party is in shambles as Britain prepares to leave the EU, while Mr. Trump followed Obama into the White House.

Roland Freudenstein, director of policy at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies in Brussels, says that he hopes the "newcomer aura" that currently surrounds Macron will, if he's elected, open space and confidence for the structural reforms that France needs, and that the EU needs of France. He says there is still a huge gap between the optimism of his movement and the hard choices implicit in reforming a country.

But he also says he believes that Macron, if adept at crossing political lines, is the best hope for a "once-in-a-half century chance to actually seriously reform France."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

EU Struggles to Reset Ties With Turkey, Erdogan

Emre Peker

BRUSSELS—European Union officials are struggling to figure out how to improve vital economic and security cooperation with Turkey amid a widening political rupture that threatens the fraught relationship.

After Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan won a referendum this month on constitutional amendments that will drastically expand the power of his office, European officials said the changes to Turkey's democracy would make it incompatible with EU standards.

That brings Brussels and Ankara to a crossroads they have tried to avoid for at least half a decade: deciding the fate of Turkey's all-but-dead talks to join the EU.

"There's an obvious crisis in EU-Turkey relations," European Parliament member Kati Piri, who handles relations with Turkey, said Wednesday. "The EU should officially suspend the accession talks if the constitutional changes are implemented."

EU officials have signaled, however, that they wouldn't unilaterally end Turkey's aspiration to join the bloc. "It is for Turkey to clarify its intentions toward the EU," European Commission Vice President Valdis Dombrovskis said Wednesday after a meeting of the bloc's executive body.

For many officials in Brussels, a move by Ankara to drop its bid for EU accession would helpfully eliminate what has been a venue for mutual recriminations and mistrust.

Although Ankara says joining the EU remains a strategic objective, Mr. Erdogan has called for a referendum on the issue. He has also said he would back reinstating the death penalty, which was abolished to secure membership talks and has been called a red line by EU officials.

Mr. Erdogan's political survival depends in part on the support of Turkish nationalists, whom he wooed in the referendum by bashing Europe with accusations of anti-Muslim views, fascism and Nazi practices. He faces re-election in two years, when the enhanced executive powers will kick in, and is therefore unlikely to abandon the rhetoric, an EU official said.

Such squabbles illustrate how far apart Turkey and the EU have drifted in recent years after seeking closer ties for more than half a century. A failed mid-July coup in Turkey accelerated the deterioration. Mr. Erdogan placed Turkey under a state of emergency and has presided over the arrests or detention of over 100,000 civil servants—over 1,000 people were detained on Wednesday—in an effort to root out supporters of the alleged coup plotters.

The EU has called the emergency rule undemocratic. The president hit back that Turkey's Western allies were siding with putschists.

Adding to long-simmering tensions, the Council of Europe—a 47-member body including all 28 EU nations and Turkey—decided on Tuesday to start monitoring Turkey for the first time since 2004, making it the only country to come under renewed scrutiny over concerns about democracy, rule of law and human rights.

The developments make it harder for policy makers to find common ground. At stake is close cooperation on global issues such as fighting Islamic State, ending the Syrian war and addressing the refugee crisis, which destabilized Europe until Brussels struck a deal with Turkey to curb illegal immigration.

"If some people think they can wag their finger from Europe to Turkey and get it in line, they're mistaken," Mr. Erdogan's spokesman, Ibrahim Kalin, said on Tuesday.

Mr. Kalin, defending Turkey's record in keeping its promises to the EU under a March 2016 migration deal and as a candidate country, added that Brussels failed to deliver on pledges. Illegal migration from Turkey to the bloc almost stopped, but the EU has yet to grant Turkish nationals visa-free travel to Europe.

A joint push to accelerate Ankara's membership talks is dead.

As Brussels seeks to navigate the challenges, it is pondering how to re-establish the EU as an anchor for democratic reforms in Turkey. EU officials said Europe shouldn't turn its back on the nearly half of Turkey's voters who rejected Mr. Erdogan's proposals in the referendum. The changes were approved with 51% support, in a vote marred by irregularities.

"We need Europe more than ever," said Zekine Ozkan, a Turkish expatriate in France who traveled Tuesday to Brussels to protest the referendum outcome outside the European Parliament.

While the EU is trying to regain leverage it lost when Ankara's membership push stalled, Turkey wants to revamp a two-decade-old customs union to bolster its slowing economy.

Updating the customs union and broadening its scope could help start mutually beneficial cooperation, the EU's enlargement chief, Johannes Hahn, said. Mr. Hahn will seek a mandate Friday from EU foreign ministers to revamp Turkey ties based on a transactional relationship that both sides privately recognize as a good way forward.

Still, details of a future arrangement remain unclear and at least three

previous resets have failed since 2012.

"It's important to find a more realistic relationship between Turkey and Europe," Mr. Hahn said. "The whole

accession negotiation...has overshadowed this."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

EU Sets Sights on Hungary's Orban in Bid to Fight Off Critics

Valentina Pop

BRUSSELS—

The European Union's executive branch is ramping up its defense against critics, taking an unusually firm stand against Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban over his "Stop Brussels" campaign and moves against foreign-funded universities and nongovernmental organizations.

The European Commission Wednesday took legal action against the Hungarian government in response to its recently adopted law targeting the U.S.-funded Central European University in Budapest. The commission said the law, which obliges CEU to obtain permission from the Hungarian government to continue operations, is in breach of the bloc's rules on freedom to provide services, academic freedom, the right to education and international obligations under trade law.

The commission also criticized Mr. Orban for including "highly misleading claims and allegations" about the EU in his public consultation dubbed "Stop Brussels." The questionnaire, sent to eight million voters in Hungary, suggests that EU's migration policies have enabled terror attacks and that foreign-funded organizations "jeopardize" Hungary's independence.

"The EU is not and has never been about Brussels, it's a project driven and designed by its member states, each of which has decided individually and democratically that this is the path they wish to adopt. This includes Hungary," said European Commission Vice-President Frans Timmermans, who debunked point by point Mr. Orban's "Stop Brussels" questionnaire in a debate in the European Parliament.

Mr. Timmermans warned Mr. Orban not to go ahead with a draft law obliging NGOs that receive foreign aid to register with the government, a move critics say is putting Hungary on par with Russia. In addition, he said, more legal action could follow on Hungary's controversial asylum law allowing applicants to be detained in containers, on pregnant workers' rights and on discrimination of Roma children in schools.

A defiant Mr. Orban brushed off criticism during that same parliamentary debate and said that his government's commitment to the EU is "unquestionable," but that "in many aspects we are unhappy with how the EU works." The Stop Brussels consultation is simply asking how the government should act in Brussels on issues it disagrees with, he said. And the university law is not targeting CEU specifically, but aims to create a level playing field with Hungarian universities, Mr. Orban said.

He suggested that the entire row was stoked by George Soros, the Hungarian-American billionaire who founded the university and several human rights organizations in the country and abroad. Mr. Soros has openly criticized Mr. Orban's policies on migrants and ethnic minorities and was due to meet commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker Thursday. During the debate, Mr. Orban was confronted with the fact that he himself, as a young student, had received a grant from Mr. Soros allowing him to study at Oxford University. "I don't think he ever gave a stipend to anyone because he thought by this he would buy that person's opinion for a lifetime," Mr. Orban replied.

The commission's newfound backbone comes just days after its top brass endorsed the centrist, pro-EU French presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron ahead of the May 7 runoff against far-right, anti-EU candidate Marine Le Pen.

"The timing of all this is not innocent," said a senior EU official in reference to the moves against Hungary and the coming French election. A second EU official said that "the stakes are very high" because the popular backlash against the EU is being fueled by false claims. "It's no longer defensive, it's offensive," the second official said.

Mr. Orban has had several clashes with Brussels over the past seven years, after he won a supermajority in the Hungarian parliament and started a string of moves against foreign investors, critical media outlets, migrants and, more recently, against foreign-funded universities and NGOs. Mr. Orban has openly rejected the concept of liberal democracy that underpins the EU and has kept close ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Central European University rector Michael Ignatieff told The Wall Street Journal that on his way to the airport in Budapest he noticed how "every third poster is a Stop Brussels poster."

"It's outrageous to take an institution hostage to serve your political interests," he said.

Mr. Ignatieff said that although CEU has longstanding contacts with the Hungarian government, the law came as a surprise even to some civil servants in the ministry of education.

"What's at stake is that this would be the first time since 1945 that a European state tries to shut down a free university," Mr. Ignatieff said. "It would be advisable for the future of the European project that they take it seriously and act."

INTERNATIONAL

The Washington Post

Samples from Syria's deadly sarin attack bear Assad's 'signature,' France says

By Louisa Loveluck and James McAuley

were killed, many of them as they slept.

BEIRUT — Samples from a deadly sarin attack in Syria bear "the signature" of President Bashar al-Assad's chemical weapons program and point to its use in other massacres, French officials said Wednesday.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault announced the results of an independent French investigation into the April 4 attack on the town in Idlib province.

"There is no doubt about the use of sarin," Ayrault said. "The responsibility of the Syrian regime can no longer be doubted." Hours later, the French government released a dossier compiled by intelligence officials stating that sarin samples from the attack site showed

that the nerve agent was produced "according to the same manufacturing process" used in an earlier attack attributed to Assad's armed forces.

The discovery of sarin, a banned chemical agent, has been corroborated through independent tests by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, as well as British and Turkish forensic scientists.

The nerve agent forces the nervous system into overdrive and can kill within minutes.

Although the Syrian government was supposed to have surrendered stocks to international inspectors in 2013, investigators and Western diplomats have long suspected that stockpiles were secretly withheld or that new batches were produced.

The French dossier, published online Wednesday, appeared to offer strong indications of the Assad government's long-denied involvement in other deadly attacks.

Images of children convulsing and foaming at the mouth after the Khan Sheikhouh attack stirred President

Trump to launch the first American military action against Assad's government, with the United States firing dozens of cruise missiles at an air base in central Syria from which the warplanes had departed.

[Assad decries 'arrogant aggression' by U.S.]

There was no immediate response from Syria on the French report. But Assad has denied that his government has ever used chemical weapons against its own people. In the hours after the April 4 attack, it claimed the sarin emanated from a rebel-run chemical factory after it was bombed by the Syrian air force.

There is little known evidence to support that claim. On the morning of the attack, a network of civilian observers issued an alert as Syrian warplanes took off from the nearby Shayrat airfield and headed for Khan Sheikhoun.

As the aircraft circled in the sky, an observer radioed colleagues to warn of an imminent attack. "Guys, tell people to wear masks," the observer

**THE WALL
STREET
JOURNAL**

Sam Schechner in Paris and Raja Abdulrahim in Beirut

Samples from a deadly sarin attack in northern Syria bear "the signature" of the Assad regime's chemical weapons program and demonstrate its responsibility for the assault, France's foreign minister said Wednesday.

The disclosure by Jean-Marc Ayrault, based on a French intelligence report, is the strongest proof yet that the Assad government carried out the April 4 attack on the rebel-held town of Khan Sheikhoun in northern Idlib province that killed 89 people, according to the White Helmets, a civil defense organization.

The French government's findings support previous assertions by Turkey, along with the U.S. and other Western countries, that the Syrian regime was behind the strike against the town.

They also back suggestions by the Trump administration that the Syrian government has retained chemical weapons, despite President Bashar al-Assad's repeated insistence that his government relinquished all of its chemical weapons following a deal brokered by the U.S. and Russia in 2013

Turkey and the nongovernmental global chemical weapons watchdog, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, have said that sarin was used in the April 4 attack.

said, according to a transcript. "It has chemicals with it. I am sure of that."

Chemical-weapons experts say the Syrian government has used its supplies of toxic agents primarily to depopulate civilian areas and strike fear into those who remain there.

The pockets of residents left behind in Khan Sheikhoun have been subjected to repeated bombing raids since the April 4 attack. On Monday, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group said a missile killed seven people in the town's newly reopened market, scattering bodies and limbs among cartloads of spoiled fruit.

Experts and monitors said the French report also appeared to offer near-definitive proof of the Syrian government's involvement in an August 2013 sarin attack on the Damascus suburbs. Those strikes killed more than 1,000 people and pushed the Obama administration to the brink of military action against Assad.

The Turkish finding was based on blood and urine samples of victims who received medical treatment or were autopsied in Turkey. Ankara supports the rebel groups fighting to take out the Assad regime.

In its 6-page report, along with an 11-page annex, the French government said its intelligence services took the "necessary steps" to obtain its own soil and blood samples from the attack.

In those samples, investigators detected the chemicals hexamine and diisopropyl methylphosphonate, or DIMP. Citing information gathered by French intelligence, the report says that the recipe used by the regime to manufacture sarin includes hexamine as a stabilizer and produces DIMP as a byproduct.

"It's the method that bears the regime's signature, and that allows us to establish its responsibility," Mr. Ayrault told reporters.

The same mixture of chemicals was discovered in an unexploded grenade recovered from a chemical attack carried out by a Syrian military helicopter on the northern town of Saraqeb on April 29, 2013, the report said.

The foreign minister said the chemical evidence, together with the presence of a Syrian government airplane that carried out airstrikes in the vicinity of Khan Sheikhoun on April 4, left no doubt that the Syrian regime had made and deployed the deadly gas.

The report identified the use of hexamine in Khan Sheikhoun, a chemical that it said was manufactured in the same way as samples found in an earlier attack in April 2013.

In the August 2013 attacks — the deadliest of Syria's war — chemical-weapons inspectors also found hexamine.

"With France making a connection between those two attacks because of the presence of hexamine, it would stand to reason the same connection exists with the August 21st, 2013, sarin attacks," said Eliot Higgins, a Britain-based researcher who founded the investigative website Bellingcat.

[Opinion: Why would Assad use sarin with his forces winning? To terrify.]

Speaking to reporters Wednesday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Russia's position on the attack is "unchanged" and that "the only way to establish the truth about

what happened near Idlib is an impartial international investigation."

World News Alerts

Breaking news from around the world.

In an interview with The Washington Post this week, a former head of Syria's chemical-weapons program said the orders to use sarin could only have come from the highest level.

"The chain of responsibility is always clear," said Brig. Gen. Zaher al-Sakat, who served in the army's 5th Division until his defection in 2013.

"The order to use a nerve agent has to come from the Presidential Palace, and in this case that's Assad," Sakat said. "If it's a lower-level chemical like chlorine, then field commanders can give the order. But for something like this, it's Assad."

McAuley reported from Paris.

Deadly Sarin Attack Bears Syrian Regime's 'Signature,' France Says

"France is convinced of the Syrian regime's responsibility," he said, adding that the perpetrators of the gas attacks "will have to answer for their crimes both before international courts and the judgment of history."

The report said that French intelligence services believe that Syria has maintained its capacity to produce and stock sarin gas. That conclusion, it said, was based on inconsistencies in Syria's accounting for some 20 tons of a chemical precursor for sarin and its attempts since 2014 to acquire "dozens" of tons of isopropanol, which the report says is another sarin precursor.

Neither Mr. Ayrault nor the report indicated whether the sarin used in the attack earlier this month came from stocks manufactured before or after the 2013 deal.

On Friday, U.S. Defence Secretary Jim Mattis said there was "no doubt" Syria has retained some chemical weapons and warned the Syrian regime not to use them.

The Syrian government had no immediate response to the French findings.

Mr. Assad has repeatedly denied that his forces were behind the April 4 attack and has called the evidence of the regime's use of sarin in Khan Sheikhoun fabricated.

Russia, whose military forces provide crucial support to the regime, rejected the report's findings.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Moscow's stance on the April 4 attack was "unchanged." An impartial international investigation is the only way to determine what happened in Khan Skeikhoun, the RIA news agency quoted him as saying.

Both Damascus and Moscow have said the sarin came from a rebel-run chemical factory that was hit in a regime airstrike, though they have offered no evidence to back the claim.

Since the attack, the Kremlin has continued to support its ally and blocked steps to hold the regime accountable. It has condemned the U.S. missile strikes that President Donald Trump ordered against a Syrian air base several days after the attack, with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Wednesday saying they had damaged the prospects of a peace settlement in Syria.

Earlier this week, Washington imposed sanctions on 271 employees of Syria's Scientific Studies and Research Center, the government agency involved in developing and producing chemical weapons.

Russia has criticized the OPCW for not sending experts to the site of the attack and being biased. Russia's Defense Ministry said Monday that the Syrian military was ready to halt fire around Khan Sheikhoun so the OPCW could conduct a probe.

Regime airstrikes continued this week in Idlib province, the Assad opposition's last major stronghold. Hospitals, markets and other population centers have been

targeted daily, residents and medical sources say.

At least six civilians, including one child, were killed Monday when government aircraft struck a

vegetable market in Khan Sheikhoun, opposition monitoring groups said. Their claims couldn't be independently verified.

The New York Times

On the Mosul Front, a Brutal Battle Against ISIS and Time

Michael R. Gordon

Mr. Gordon, a military correspondent for The Times, is working with the Iraqi reporter Kamil Kakol on the front lines in Iraq.

Clambering onto a rooftop with a small group of soldiers from Iraq's counterterrorism service, we scanned the Islamic State's stronghold in western Mosul as one of its armored car bombs maneuvered toward the front line.

Within minutes, there was an enormous explosion — a shoot of red flame and a funnel of black smoke that reached into the sky.

This time, at least, there were no friendly casualties. The Iraqi troops who were clawing their way forward in the streets below had piled enough debris ahead of them that the suicide driver was stopped short of his target. All over the city, you can see that kind of wreckage and ad hoc barriers, put up by both sides.

Every day, for weeks, the battle to take western Mosul from the Islamic State has looked like this: a block-by-block crawl as casualties mount.

The militants are contesting every move by the counterterrorism forces, and they are making full use of the hundreds of thousands of civilians still trapped in their strongholds.

"If the city was empty of civilians, we could have been done with our mission a long time ago," said Lt.

Gen. Abdul-Wahab al-Saadi, a senior commander with the counterterrorism service.

The plight of civilians appears to be worsening by the day, adding to commanders' urgency to find some edge against the Islamic State here.

The Iraqis do not have the luxury of conducting a siege: Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has told his generals that dragging out the Mosul operation, now in its seventh month, would work only to the advantage of the Islamic State, which many in the West call ISIS or ISIL, but the Iraqis call Daesh.

This was not the mission that American military commanders envisioned for the counterterrorism service when they established it after the United States invasion in 2003. The force's original mission was to conduct lightning raids against terrorists and insurgents.

"The CTS has made enormous sacrifices since 2014, and many of the old hand are dead, killed in Anbar Province and elsewhere," said David M. Witty, a retired colonel with the United States Army Special Forces and former adviser to the counterterrorism service, known as CTS.

The militants' basic strategy appears to be to focus much of their efforts on blunting the CTS attack, calculating that if they can stymie Iraq's most experienced fighting force, the Iraqi government's broader offensive will bog down. Now, the CTS is fighting on a southern front just to the west of

Iraq's federal police and other Interior Ministry troops.

General Saadi, a senior CTS commander, invited me to come with him to the front in his armored Humvee. We carefully navigated past the wreckage of car bombs and hastily constructed barriers made of sand or abandoned cars.

Along the way, he showed me his tactical iPad, displaying the locations of all the friendly forces, his own position and the streets in the city.

When we started the drive, there was a smattering of civilians, some of whom had marked their houses with white flags. By the time we got to the Tanak section of the city, civilians were nowhere to be seen. Tanak was no longer a neighborhood — it was terrain.

We got out of the vehicles in Tanak and entered an abandoned house with a small courtyard, where we encountered a small group of soldiers. None wore body armor; most seemed to favor bandannas over uniforms.

There were no advisers from the American-led coalition in sight. A small team, with mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles, was monitoring the fight from Yarmouk.

The Iraqi soldiers established a machine-gun position on the roof to provide covering fire for soldiers pressing the fight below.

None of this was lost on ISIS, which flew a reconnaissance drone over

and sent a scout on a motorcycle to try to find the Iraqis' position. Two American Black Hawk helicopters could be seen flying in the distance.

For hours, the two sides traded machine-gun fire. Young soldiers lugged heavy canisters of ammunition to the rooftop.

An aide to General Saadi, who used binoculars to monitor the fight and typed updates into the iPad, said that many of the Islamic State forces they had been battling were foreign fighters. From the bodies the Iraqis had recovered, he said, it appeared that many had not bathed in weeks.

"They don't have a social life," he said dismissively. "They just come here to fight and die."

Eventually, enough seemed to be enough, and an American airstrike was called in to quell some of the enemy resistance. An Iraqi machine-gunner poured on the fire.

ISIS would not be silenced. A sniper fired a round toward the covered landing where the stairwell reached our rooftop, figuring that an Iraqi spotter and other personnel might be lingering inside.

It was a good guess: That is where the general's aide and a few other journalists and I were sheltering. But we were low to the ground. The round was high and struck the back wall, splattering plaster, dust and tiny beads of glass into the air. One Iraqi cameraman took off his shirt to shake off the residue.

The Washington Post

Editorial : How Trump can make progress in America's longest conflict

April 26 at 7:27 PM

ONE OF the most curious aspects of President Trump's foreign policy has been his absence of a clearly articulated view — much less a strategy — on Afghanistan, where 8,400 U.S. troops are still helping fight a war. Before and during his campaign, Mr. Trump hardly spoke about what has become the United States' longest conflict, except to denounce Pakistan for its role in supporting the Taliban and to deride U.S. attempts at nation-building in one of the world's least developed countries. This month, the president authorized the dropping of the world's biggest nonnuclear bomb in a remote part of eastern Afghanistan

even though he had yet to decide whether and how the United States would remain engaged in the country.

Now the administration appears to be moving toward filling this glaring gap. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis visited Kabul this week, following a trip by national security adviser H.R. McMaster; a policy review is said to be near completion. A recommendation is pending from the U.S. commander in the theater, Gen. John W. Nicholson, to send 3,000 or more additional U.S. troops to the country in an attempt to break the momentum of the Taliban, which has been slowly taking ground from the Afghan government and inflicting

unsustainable casualties on its security forces.

Mr. Trump should approve the increase along with other military measures that could turn the tide. But he should also drop his resistance to U.S. programs to bolster the Afghan economy and political system and to fight corruption. Without them, the war will never be won.

Opinions newsletter

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The military problems plaguing the government of President Ashraf Ghani were tragically exemplified last week when a Taliban attack on

an army base killed more than 160 soldiers — many of them raw recruits. The skillful operation by militants disguised as soldiers was attributed by some U.S. officials to the Haqqani network, which continues to find safe harbor in Pakistan. Meanwhile, administration officials say Russia and Iran have begun supplying weapons to other Taliban factions in a clear attempt to undermine the U.S. and NATO forces backing the Ghani government.

At least 6,700 of the more than 300,000 Afghan security forces were reportedly killed last year as the Taliban gained territory across the country. That was partly because many Afghan units remain poorly

trained, but also because they lack adequate air support in battle, due to tight restrictions on U.S. operations imposed by President Barack Obama. Mr. Trump should address both problems by dispatching additional U.S. trainers and Special Operations forces and by allowing American planes and

drones to operate with the same freedom against the enemy that they have in Iraq and Syria.

At the same time, Mr. Trump should back a parallel effort to bolster Mr. Ghani's government, which has been hamstrung by political infighting and continued corruption.

Reading inspectors general's reports about how billions in U.S. and other international development aid have been squandered, it is easy to jump to the conclusion that the West should abandon Afghan nation-building. Yet progress has been made — the country's gross domestic product has doubled, and

education levels, including for women, have risen sharply. Sustaining that development, even if it is slow and painful, is as important as turning back the Taliban.

The New York Times

Protests, Taliban and a Warlord's Return: Afghan Leader Faces a Tough Year Ahead

Mujib Mashal and Jawad Sukhanyar

The return of Mr. Hekmatyar, one of the most divisive figures in Afghan politics, is bound to upset other factions. He has been spotted in eastern Afghanistan, and is reported to be making his way to Kabul, the city that was left in rubble in the 1990s civil war in which he played a major role. He has not been back since.

Sadiqzada Nili, a member of the Afghan Parliament, said missteps by Mr. Ghani would come to haunt him in the year ahead. He said the president had tried to centralize power and decision-making around him and a small team, and had ended up alienating even the closest of his allies.

If Mr. Ghani continues this behavior, Mr. Nili said, "things will get to a point where he won't be able to control them."

The protest against Mr. Ghani on Wednesday, which included as many as 2,000 people according to participants, was organized by the office of General Dostum. His supporters and

aides said the protest, in Jowzjan Province, was the first of others to come in northern provinces.

"We raised our voices to demand our rights, which are not given to us, and to get permission for the first vice president to come to his office" said Massouda Omari, an adviser to General Dostum.

Enayatullah Babur Farahmand, General Dostum's chief of staff, told the crowd the government wanted to "physically remove your leader." The general's entourage was attacked a couple times in Faryab Province last year, and his aides have accused elements within the government of having a role.

Mr. Ghani's administration has been struggling to figure out what to do with General Dostum, who is accused of abducting a 63-year political rival, Ahmad Ishchi, torturing him, and raping him with the tip of a weapon.

Mr. Ghani's attorney general has opened a criminal case against General Dostum and nine of his bodyguards, and many Afghans were hoping for justice to be served

after years of seeing the powerful get away with abuses. But the process has dragged on for months, and many Afghans feel the vice president is unlikely to be prosecuted.

As a face-saving solution, the government is looking into forcing General Dostum into exile in Turkey again, according to one senior Afghan official who was not authorized to speak on the record. The official said Mr. Ghani had spoken to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey twice about the plan, and once a Turkish plane landed in Kabul to take the general out, but General Dostum refused to leave.

Meanwhile, pressure has been mounting on Mr. Ghani's government after a string of attacks by insurgents in recent months, including one last week in Balkh Province in which 10 Taliban suicide bombers infiltrated the country's largest army base in the north and massacred off-duty soldiers. The Ministry of Defense says 135 soldiers were killed, but many officials say the number is most

likely much higher, possibly around 300.

Politically, tensions are also high. Last week, Mr. Ghani fired one of his campaign allies, Ahmad Zia Massoud, his "special representative for good governance and reform" who had been the most senior figure from the Tajik ethnic faction in his campaign. Mr. Massoud's staff was barred from entering their office the day after their boss was fired, and their guards were disarmed and sent home.

Mr. Hekmatyar may also be a troublesome ally for Mr. Ghani, according to some officials and analysts.

"President Ghani is bringing Hekmatyar to join his government, but looking at the ability and popular support that Mr. Hekmatyar has, I don't think President Ghani will be able to control him once he comes in," said Mr. Nili, the member of Parliament.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Pope Francis to Visit Egypt in Wake of Attacks

Francis X. Rocca in Vatican City and Dahlia Kholaf in Cairo

Pope Francis will pursue efforts to reach out to Muslims during a visit to Egypt this week that comes as rampant Islamist terrorism is posing the greatest test to dialogue between the faiths since the Vatican made it a priority a half-century ago.

The pope has earned approval in the Muslim world for his attempts to improve relations. He has washed the feet of Muslims during Holy Week liturgies and, when he brought a dozen Syrians back with him from a Greek refugee center last year, all were Muslims.

He condemned the 2015 massacre in Paris of the staff of Charlie Hebdo after it mocked the Prophet Muhammad, but also said those who deride other faiths can expect a strong response.

Yet some Catholics also want the pope to challenge Muslims more vigorously to repudiate religiously inspired violence and intolerance, amid continuing Islamist terrorism and persecution of Christians in some Muslim-majority countries—including church bombings in Egypt on Palm Sunday that killed more than 40 people.

The pope should call on Muslim leaders "to reinterpret the Quran for today in a way that fosters peace," said the Rev. Samir Khalil Samir, an Egyptian Catholic priest and professor at the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome, who said he raised the subject with Pope Francis in June 2016.

The Vatican spokesman, Greg Burke, said that the "pope is constantly condemning those who kill in God's name. What he doesn't want to do is encourage a clash of civilizations."

Such concerns could come to the fore when Pope Francis arrives on Friday in Egypt, where he will speak that day at Al-Azhar University, considered the most authoritative religious institution in the Sunni Muslim world.

The words of the pope—who has said "authentic Islam" is "opposed to every form of violence"—will be scrutinized in a country with a large Christian minority.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al Sisi has in the past blamed intolerant interpretations of Islam for the "violence and terror and killing and destruction that we witness all around us today," and called on Al-Azhar to "revolutionize our religion" by rejecting "extremism and its erroneous understanding of Islam."

But some say the call has yielded little. Al-Azhar should "cleanse its curriculum of texts that dub Christians as infidels and terminate

staff members who promote that," said Michael Armanious, 26, an Orthodox Coptic Christian teacher in Cairo.

Al-Azhar has rejected such criticisms, saying in a statement last week that its instruction promotes "peace and stability among Muslims themselves and between Muslims and others."

The Second Vatican Council established dialogue between the faiths as a priority for the Catholic Church in the 1960s. The outreach to Islam started at the behest of Arab Catholics, who saw dialogue with Muslims as a necessary diplomatic complement to the church's post-war overtures to Jews.

But Middle East Christians have long been wary of what they regard as an uncritical embrace of Islam, epitomized for many by the image of Pope John Paul II kissing a Quran in 1999.

Pope Benedict XVI—a more skeptical participant in interfaith dialogue—stirred controversy with his 2006 speech quoting a medieval description of Muhammad's teachings as "evil and inhuman" and "spread by the sword." That led to protests by Muslims, some of them violent.

Later, after Pope Benedict called for Egypt to protect its embattled Christian minority from terrorism, Al-Azhar broke off its dialogue with the Vatican. Talks between the Vatican and Al-Azhar resumed earlier this year.

Like Pope Benedict, Pope Francis has called for better protection of

Christians and other religious minorities. But the same action that gratified many Muslims last year—bringing only Muslim refugees back with him from Greece—troubled Christians in the Middle East, said the Rev. Henri Boulad, a former head of the Jesuit order in Egypt, who called the gesture an act of "demagogy on the part of the pope."

Pope Francis has also struck a conciliatory note on the question of religiously inspired violence, maintaining that the terrorism of Islamic State is motivated by economic or political concerns, not religion.

Some Catholics have urged the pope to recognize that Islamic scripture and tradition offer justifications for violence, and to distinguish among traditions within Islam that are more or less open to peaceful coexistence with other faiths.

They argue Pope Benedict's tough-love approach was more realistic and yielded real results. His 2006 speech elicited an open letter from more than a hundred Muslim clerics and scholars, which led in turn to a Vatican inter-religious conference that issued a common declaration condemning terrorism.

And they contend that Pope Francis should deal squarely with the differences confronting the two faiths.

"We drink a cup of tea together, we laugh together, but this is hypocrisy," said Father Boulad. "This is why we don't progress."

Church authorities argue for patience. "Gradually, the impact will be reflected on the whole of society," said the Rev. Rafic Greiche, a spokesman for the Catholic Church in Egypt.



When We Almost Went to War With North Korea

Gordon G. Chang

Last time tensions on the Korean Peninsula got this high President Carter jetted in to Pyongyang. This time North Korea is a much bigger threat.

You can smell war.

China, according to a U.S. defense official speaking to CNN, has put cruise missile-capable bombers "on high alert" and brought up other planes to a full state of readiness. The moves are meant, according to the official, to "reduce the time to react to a North Korea contingency." Moreover, Beijing, according to various dispatches, is deploying troops and mechanized units to areas bordering the North.

Russia reportedly is transporting forces close to its 11-mile border with North Korea. Moscow says the movements, part of previously scheduled exercises, have nothing to do with tensions on the peninsula.

U.S. and South Korean troops, tanks, and planes, still participating in regular spring exercises, are at a high state of readiness, and the Carl Vinson strike group is sailing to waters off the east coast of the Korean Peninsula, where it will arrive this week. The USS Michigan, a submarine that can carry 154 cruise missiles, arrived in the South Korean port of Busan on Tuesday, soon to join the Vinson strike group. There are rumors, now denied, that two other carrier groups, centered around the Nimitz and the Ronald Reagan, are ready to rush to the area if needed.

"The United States is not looking for a fight, so don't give us a reason to have one," America's ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, told Pyongyang on Monday.

The last time the U.S. almost had a fight with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was in 1994. In

early May of that year, North Korean workers began unloading spent fuel rods from their small reactor in the Yongbyon nuclear complex, apparently in preparation for reprocessing the plutonium. The rods contained enough fissile material for about a half dozen bombs. In the middle of June, the Kim regime heightened the sense of crisis by announcing it was pulling out of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the UN nuclear watchdog.

In response, the Clinton administration said it would push for UN Security Council sanctions, which North Korea insisted would be a "declaration of war." Even Beijing, the North's long-time protector, was in favor of punitive measures—and had warned Kim Il Sung, then the North's ruler, that it might side with Washington.

The U.S. took Pyongyang at its word when it said sanctions meant war. The Pentagon began marshaling assets for conflict on the Korean Peninsula, and the Air Force updated contingency plans for air strikes on Yongbyon.

Enter Jimmy Carter. At the height of the crisis, the former president told the then-current one, Bill Clinton, that he would meet Great Leader Kim Il Sung in Pyongyang to find a resolution. A wary State Department had blocked the attempts of the 39th president to travel to the North in 1991, 1992, and 1993, but in 1994 he insisted, and a Clinton White House in crisis—and in obvious disarray—could not bring itself to prevent the trip.

Seoul, which did not want to see Carter go there either, fumbled attempts to block the visit.

Carter, in talks with Kim in Pyongyang in mid-June, worked out a tentative deal that in main outline followed a suggestion that Korea analyst Selig Harrison had made to

the Great Leader a week before. North Korea, according to the Carter plan, would suspend reprocessing. In return, Kim would get "proliferation-resistant" light-water reactors.

James Earl Carter Jr., as wily as Kim Il Sung in some ways, then made sure Clinton could not repudiate the deal by giving what became a famous live interview from Pyongyang to CNN's Wolf Blitzer.

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The aged Kim Il Sung died three weeks later from a heart attack, but Carter's arrangement survived to be incorporated into the Agreed Framework, signed in Geneva the following October.

North Korea pursuant to the Agreed Framework froze its nuclear reactors in Yongbyon and "related facilities" and agreed to dismantle them when they were replaced by light-water reactors. Before the new reactors went online, Washington agreed to provide 500,000 tons of heavy fuel oil annually. The North's fuel rods from the old reactors would be disposed of "in a safe manner."

Pyongyang also committed to remain a part of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, the global pact that it had threatened in 1993 to leave. The North also agreed to permit IAEA monitoring of facilities.

As important, both sides pledged to take steps to build an enduring relationship by reducing barriers to trade and investment, opening liaison offices in each other's capital, and moving toward "full normalization of political and economic relations." Washington and Pyongyang promised to provide a raft of "assurances" to each other.

The Agreed Framework by its terms could have led to a lasting peace. Washington and Pyongyang, however, made sure that didn't happen by repeatedly violating the comprehensive arrangement. "There is blame on both sides," Carter pronounced in late 2002 as he tried to defend his achievement.

Carter was correct in this assertion, but his even-handed treatment completely missed the point. Yes, America failed to live up to the deal. Construction of the reactors fell far behind schedule, Washington did not lift some sanctions as promised, and it ended others years late. The U.S. failed to give a promised no-nuclear-attack pledge. Clinton was also slow on commitments to establish relations.

What Carter failed to say was that, while America was guilty of infractions, Pyongyang committed a rash of felonies. Pyongyang not only failed to honor various pledges but also, at the time of the signing, was covertly attempting to enrich uranium for weapons. Although the deal focused on the North's plutonium efforts, the uranium program was still a violation of the Agreed Framework because in that document Pyongyang agreed to abide by two comprehensive agreements, the global nonproliferation pact and a 1991 denuclearization agreement with South Korea.

The secret uranium program was one of the most breathtaking betrayals of an international agreement in our time. The North Koreans had, in all probability, started uranium enrichment efforts in the 1980s and had certainly gone beyond the planning stage by the beginning of the following decade, in other words, while inking the Agreed Framework.

Yet for all its faults, the Agreed Framework stopped the North Koreans from producing plutonium.

As Ambassador Joseph DeTrani, who played a pivotal role in its negotiation, told *The Daily Beast*, the deal succeeded in halting a frightening “downward spiral” and got North Korea to put more than 8,000 spent fuel rods in cooling ponds indefinitely. That bought the world’s most precious commodity, time.

That the Clinton and Bush administrations did not use the time well was not the fault of the original deal itself.

Yet the 1994 agreement has one legacy that we still live with today: It rescued the Kim family at a critical moment. “At the time of the Agreed Framework negotiations, the Kim regime was in bad straits,” says Robert Collins, a veteran Defense Department adviser based in South

Korea. “Kim Il Sung had very recently died, and the great famine was affecting all segments of society. The regime needed room, not to mention all of the heavy fuel oil we gave them.”

At a time when Kim Il Sung’s son, Kim Jong Il, had just succeeded his father and therefore needed legitimization, the Agreed Framework provided it. By nothing more than signing the agreement, the Clinton administration essentially signaled America’s acceptance of Kim family rule, not only to the outside world but also to the internal regime figures unsure about Kim Il Sung’s heir. No wonder South Korean President Kim Young-sam vociferously opposed the Agreed Framework.

There’s an eerie resemblance to today, when another Kim family member, Kim Jong Un, is also trying to consolidate power after the death of his father. From all appearances, the current Kim is having a hard time. So far, to ensure his rule, he has ordered the killing of more than a 150 senior regime figures and at least two family members, his elder half-brother and his aunt’s husband.

Almost 26 million people live in the Seoul metropolitan area, which is only about 30 miles south of the Demilitarized Zone separating the two Koreas. Casualties in a general conflict on the peninsula could number in the hundreds of thousands—in the first hours. That was the case in 1994, and that is even more true today when the

North’s weapons are far more destructive.

Therefore, many say at this time diplomacy is the only way forward. Nonetheless, we have to make sure that any new agreement, deal, or bargain does not perpetuate the horrific rule of the Kims. There will never be peace in Korea as long as they rule half—or any part—of it.

“The crisis is over,” Carter declared in June 1994.

No, the crisis did not end then. It was just deferred to now, when the North Koreans have used the time they won in 1994 to build long-range missiles and the nuclear warheads to put atop them.



U.S. Keeps Its Military Threat Alive While Pressing North Korea

Ben Kesling,
Felicia Schwartz,
Byron Tau and Carol E. Lee

WASHINGTON—The Trump administration said it is launching an urgent push, combining diplomatic pressure and the threat of military action in a bid to halt North Korea’s advancing nuclear-weapons program.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, one of those who briefed senators at a classified briefing hosted by the White House on Wednesday, also plans to host a special meeting of the United Nations Security Council on Friday, where he will propose international officials redouble efforts to enforce economic sanctions and isolate North Korea.

The State Department said Mr. Tillerson is considering harsh measures such as asking other countries to shut down North Korea’s embassies and other diplomatic facilities.

Meanwhile, the top U.S. military commander for Asia said in testimony before a House committee that while the U.S. was amassing naval military force near the Korean Peninsula, a diplomatic outcome was the administration’s preference.

- Trump Calls for Deep Cuts in Business Taxes, Changes for Individuals

Under President Trump’s proposed tax overhaul, the corporate rate would drop to 15% from 35%, with a 35% top rate for individuals. Lower brackets would be set at 10% and 25%. The plan would end deductions for state and local taxes, and the alternative minimum tax would be repealed.

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- Trump Tax Plan Sets Up Trade-Offs for Industries

Now that the Trump administration has made its broad-brush tax proposal, companies are likely to line up in support—and start sweating the details.

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TRUMP’S FIRST 100 DAYS

“We want to bring Kim Jong Un to his senses, not to his knees,” Adm. Harry Harris, head of the U.S. military’s Pacific Command, told the House Armed Services Committee at a hearing. “I do think the State Department has a key role.”

A senior administration official said the U.S. soon will adopt new economic penalties against North Korea and is preparing for a potential military confrontation. The economic measures are aimed at stopping the flow of materials and technologies that bolster North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic missile programs, the official said.

“What you’ve seen is really an integrated effort to prioritize diplomatic and informational aspects of national power, but also what you’ll see soon is using the economic dimension of national power as well as the military preparations that are under way,” the official said.

The White House also is looking at relisting North Korea as a state sponsor of terrorism, the official said. North Korea was removed from the list under the George W. Bush administration as part of a deal for nuclear talks that later collapsed. Asked what the military preparations entail, the official said, “I don’t think

we’re going to describe those in any detail.”

Adm. Harris said the U.S. has multiple options for military action in North Korea, pre-emptively, if necessary, which would have devastating consequences for the regime.

But he also testified, when asked about the matter, that military action is likely to result in a North Korean strike on South Korean and American troops near the border and on the densely populated South Korean capital, Seoul.

However, there was no indication from either administration officials or senators that U.S. military action is imminent. All 100 senators were invited to the classified briefing to allow President Donald Trump to “communicate the seriousness of the threat from North Korea,” including the increasingly “erratic and unlawful behavior” from Mr. Kim, the North Korean leader, the administration official said.

An administration statement released after the meeting said the briefing was held to update senators on a review of North Korea ordered by Mr. Trump after he assumed office. The official said the U.S. has seen a willingness from China to take the North Korea threat more aggressively than it has in the past, but will see how it unfolds in coming days and months.

The steady rise in tensions on the peninsula has been accompanied by a buildup of U.S. military forces, including the expected arrival of U.S. aircraft carrier Carl Vinson and its strike group, which is now “in striking range” of North Korea, according to Adm. Harris. The U.S. also is deploying a sophisticated antimissile system, capable of

providing limited defensive air cover in case of a North Korean strike.

Adm. Harris said the Vinson group was in no danger in the region. "North Korea does not have a ballistic missile antiship weapon that would threaten the Carl Vinson strike group," he said.

Adm. Harris testified that while the North Korean leader's rhetoric is now largely bluster, there may come a time when he may be able to carry through on the threats, which could make war more likely.

"Kim's strategic capabilities are not yet an existential threat to the U.S., but if left unchecked, he will gain the capability to match his rhetoric," Adm. Harris said. "At that point we

will wake up to a new world."

Rep. Adam Smith (D., Wash.), the top-ranking Democrat on the House committee, said while Mr. Kim has shown a willingness to use force against other nations, the congressman didn't think Mr. Kim was likely to start a full-on war, a notion that Adm. Harris declined to endorse.

"I don't share your confidence that North Korea is not going to attack either South Korea or Japan or the United States or our territories or our states or parts of the United States once they have the capability," Adm. Harris said. "I won't say that they will, but I don't share your confidence that they won't."

The New York Times

The Drumbeats Don't Add Up to Imminent War With North Korea (UNE)

Mark Landler

"We want to bring Kim Jong-un to his senses," he said, "not to his knees."

There are other signs that the tensions fall short of war. Mr. Kim continues to appear in public, most recently at a pig farm last weekend. South Koreans are not flooding supermarkets to stock up on food. There is no talk of evacuating cities and no sign the United States is deploying additional forces to South Korea. Nor is the American Embassy in Seoul advising diplomats' families to leave the country.

All those things happened in the spring of 1994, when President Bill Clinton was considering a pre-emptive strike on a North Korean reactor to prevent the North from extracting plutonium that it could use to make a bomb. That is the closest the United States has come to a military clash with North Korea since the end of the Korean War in 1953.

"The reality is not as tense as the rhetoric on both sides would lead you to believe," said Joel S. Wit, an expert on North Korea at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies.

None of this is to say there is no risk of miscalculation that could escalate into hostilities. Mr. Trump's penchant for provocative statements introduced an element of unpredictability to a relationship in which the uncertainty has historically been on the North Korean side. How Mr. Kim reacts is the major variable in a complicated equation.

North Korea is also steadily adding to its nuclear arsenal and edging

closer to testing an intercontinental ballistic missile, tipped with a warhead, that could hit the United States. Intelligence estimates vary on how quickly that could happen, but some say within three years: a timetable that would put a successful test within Mr. Trump's term in office.

"No previous president has ever been in that situation," said Victor D. Cha, director of the Asian studies program at Georgetown University, who advised the administration of George W. Bush on North Korea. "I don't think we're going to war, but we're in a different phase."

Mr. Cha said he viewed the briefing for senators as part of an effort by the White House to signal the seriousness of North Korea to an American public that regards it as a distant, complicated issue. But others criticized the president for being theatrical, with some saying he was using the senators as a prop to burnish his 100-day record.

"There was very little, if anything, new," said Senator Richard Blumenthal, Democrat of Connecticut and a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee. "It is still unclear what our strategy and policy is."

Even some Republican senators complained afterward that they had learned little and wondered why they needed to pile into buses for the trip from Capitol Hill to the Eisenhower Executive Office Building on the White House grounds, where they were seated in an auditorium.

"I'm not sure I would have done it," said Senator Bob Corker, Republican of Tennessee, the

Meeting with senators at the White House briefing were Mr. Trump, Mr. Tillerson, Vice President Mike Pence, national security adviser Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats and other national security officials.

Sen. Chris Coons (D., Del.) said it was a "sobering" presentation, while Sen. Marco Rubio (R., Fla.) said it underscored the difficulty of North Korea.

"It's a serious threat with not many easy options," Mr. Rubio said. "I'm convinced they understand the threat and I'm convinced they've established a strategic approach to a very difficult situation."

chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. He said he was not sure why the briefing had been timed for this week and begged off further comment, adding, "All I can say is, it was fine."

White House officials said they had been responding to a request from Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the Republican leader, and that Mr. Trump had proposed moving the site of the briefing. He spoke to the senators for less than three minutes, mainly promoting his efforts to persuade President Xi Jinping of China to put more economic pressure on North Korea.

Mr. Trump then turned the briefing over to Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson; Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis; the director of national intelligence, Dan Coats; and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr.

Analysts said it was too early to assess Mr. Trump's claim that the Chinese were finally cooperating with the United States. Previous presidents believed they had made headway with Beijing, only to have China's actions fall short of expectations.

The reports of closed gas stations in North Korea were intriguing, analysts said, because they suggested that the North was bracing for a suspension of fuel shipments from China. The Chinese have yet to take such a step, though they have curtailed purchases of North Korean coal.

In a separate briefing for reporters, the White House said Mr. Trump had decided on a strategy that would include diplomacy to

Sen. Ted Cruz (R., Texas) said: "The military is doing their job of planning for all of the different contingencies, including contingencies where a conflict could escalate and escalate significantly."

A separate event was being held at the Capitol on Wednesday afternoon to brief members of the U.S. House.

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Appeared in the Apr. 27, 2017, print edition as 'U.S. Redoubles North Korea Push.'

persuade China to keep up pressure on its neighbor, as well as military preparations.

A senior White House official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, declined to discuss the nature of the military preparations or the timetable for seeing a change in North Korea's behavior. He also said the administration was considering returning North Korea to the government's list of state sponsors of terrorism.

On Thursday morning, the National Security Council will hold a principals committee meeting to weigh economic and military options.

Admiral Harris told lawmakers that North Korea's recent setbacks in its missile launches would not slow the country's efforts to achieve its nuclear goals.

"With every test, Kim Jong-un moves closer to his stated goal of a pre-emptive nuclear strike capability against American cities, and he's not afraid to fail in public," he told the House Armed Services Committee in a hearing on security challenges in the region.

Admiral Harris welcomed China's role in influencing the North, but also singled it out for criticism. "While recent actions by Beijing are encouraging and welcome, the fact remains that China is as responsible for where North Korea is today as North Korea itself," he said.

Trump administration talks tough on North Korea, but frustrated lawmakers want details (UNE)

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9-11 minutes

(Dalton Bennett, Alice Li/The Washington Post)

After senators attended a briefing on North Korea at the White House, April 26, Sens. Ted Cruz (R-Tex.), Angus King (I-Maine) and Cory Gardner (R-Colo.) said China must pressure North Korea into stopping its nuclear weapons program. Sens. Ted Cruz (R-Tex.), Angus King (I-Maine) and Cory Gardner (R-Colo.) say China must pressure North Korea into stopping its nuclear weapons program. (Dalton Bennett, Alice Li/The Washington Post)

President Trump and his top national security advisers briefed congressional lawmakers Wednesday on what a senior aide called the “very grave threat” posed by North Korea, but they offered few details about the administration’s strategy to pressure Pyongyang.

Administration officials emphasized in a pair of private briefings — one open to all senators and held at the White House complex and one for House members on Capitol Hill — that they were developing a range of economic, diplomatic and military measures in the wake of a series of provocations from North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un’s regime.

Lawmakers said they came away convinced that the Trump administration recognized the urgency of the mounting tensions on the Korean Peninsula, where Pyongyang conducted a failed missile test last week and drew international condemnation for the launch.

But several members of Congress said the administration remained vague about its efforts to confront Pyongyang beyond tougher talk from Trump.

“There was a definite degree of resolve that we’ve got a bad situation on our hands and they’re ratcheting up the importance of this,” said one Republican senator, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to candidly discuss a private meeting. “One of the things that I surmised from it was that as much as anything else, perhaps they wanted to prepare everybody for the fact that this could escalate quickly. That’s my own read on it.”

The Trump administration on April 26 unveiled measures to revamp the tax code while House Speaker Paul

D. Ryan (R-Wis.) praised a new GOP proposal to revise Obamacare. The administration unveils measures to revamp the tax code while House Speaker Paul D. Ryan (R-Wis.) praises a new GOP proposal to revise Obamacare. (Bastien Inzaurrealde, Alice Li, Dalton Bennett/The Washington Post)

(Bastien Inzaurrealde, Alice Li, Dalton Bennett/The Washington Post)

Rep. Eliot L. Engel (N.Y.), the top Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, emphasized, however, that there was no talk from the administration about a preemptive strike on North Korea.

Among the options the administration is considering are additional economic sanctions on the North and attempts to further isolate the Kim regime in the international community. The Pentagon also is developing military options, officials said, after having already directed the USS Carl Vinson aircraft carrier strike group toward the peninsula in a show of force that has drawn rebukes from Pyongyang.

A senior administration official told reporters that a timeline had been developed to press North Korea, but he emphasized that the approach would be “mainly events-driven,” predicated on the Kim regime’s actions.

“Nothing is risk-free. This situation is not risk-free,” said the senior official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to outline internal planning. He spoke as the briefing for the senators was underway at a secure location at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building next door to the White House.

“But the team has done everything we can try to anticipate reactions [from North Korea] and mitigate the risk,” the official said.

Trump has tried to reset the U.S. approach to North Korea, citing the failure of past administrations to rein in the rogue nation’s nuclear-weapons and ballistic-missile programs. The administration has said the era of “strategic patience” — isolating the regime economically and diplomatically in hopes of reengaging in diplomatic talks — is over, and Trump has promised that the United States would “solve” the North Korea problem unilaterally if necessary. The president also has directly pressed Chinese President Xi Jinping to exert more pressure on Kim.

But the Trump White House has not defined a policy that looks strikingly different from the approach of past administrations, lawmakers said.

The top U.S. commander in the Asia-Pacific told Congress on April 26 that the goal with North Korea’s Kim Jong Un is to “bring him to his senses, not to his knees,” and that a missile defense system would be operational within days. Video: U.S. commander on Kim Jong Un: ‘Bring him to his senses, not to his knees’ (Reuters)

(Reuters)

Asked by reporters to speak more broadly about Trump’s foreign policy doctrine, the senior administration official said the president “weighs the risk of any action . . . but what he’s also done in the first few weeks is weigh the risk of inaction.”

“He’s recognized there’s a cost to inaction,” the official said, citing Trump’s decision to authorize a missile strike against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s forces over the use of chemical weapons in that nation’s civil war.

Trump offered to host the briefing for the senators at the White House as a courtesy after Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) requested that the full chamber hear directly from administration officials. The location at the White House was a first for such a large group, prompting some lawmakers to speculate the administration would disclose a major initiative.

Senators rode together to the White House on a large white bus, and they were instructed to leave their cellphones outside the auditorium, which had been configured as a secure briefing room to prevent electronic eavesdropping.

Although the briefing was sobering, it was not revelatory, some of the participants said.

“There was very little, if anything new,” said Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.). “I remain mystified about why the entire Senate had to be taken over to the White House rather than conducting it here.”

Trump and Vice President Pence briefly addressed the senators at the beginning of the meeting.

When they left, senators heard from Secretary of State Rex Tillerson; Defense Secretary Jim Mattis; Daniel Coats, the director of national intelligence; and Marine Corps Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

In a joint statement, Tillerson, Mattis and Coats called North Korea’s pursuit of nuclear weapons “an urgent national security threat and top foreign policy priority.” They said Trump’s approach aimed to tighten economic sanctions and pursue “diplomatic measures” with allies and partners.

The goal is to “convince the regime to de-escalate and return to a path of dialogue” toward peaceful denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, they said. “We remain open to negotiations towards that goal. However we remain prepared to defend ourselves and our allies.”

Several of the same national security aides later briefed the House members on Capitol Hill, although Trump did not attend that meeting.

The Republican senator who requested anonymity said “the basic gist of it at the beginning was that we’re going to get more aggressive; we’ve waited and they’ve continued to be bad actors. We’ve reached a point where things are getting pretty dire and getting to the point where we’ve got to get more aggressive.”

“From then on, what we all wanted to know is: What does that mean?” the senator added. “What is it that we should be looking for as the trigger that something is about to happen and that we’d end up taking some kind of kinetic action? That’s where things got a little elliptical.”

Politics newsletter

The big stories and commentary shaping the day.

Lawmakers who planned to push the administration to take intermediary steps — such as stiffening sanctions against China for its support of Pyongyang, or relabeling North Korea a state sponsor of terrorism — came away with no promises from the administration.

“I have supported putting North Korea back as a state sponsor of terror,” Sen. Cory Gardner (R-Colo.) said. “But no indication yet from the administration.”

House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Edward R. Royce (R-Calif.) came away from the briefing promising to file legislation that would increase sanctions against North Korea and its supporters to “choke off some of the hard currency that this regime uses for its nuclear program.” He said his proposal would focus on financial institutions, North Korea’s shipping

industry and “slave labor” crews that are sent to work abroad so the Kim regime can collect their wages.

The New York Times

Russia Bans Group Led by a Kremlin Critic as More Protests Loom

Neil MacFarquhar

MOSCOW — The Russian government moved on Wednesday to defang efforts to stage antigovernment rallies this weekend by blacklisting the coordinator, Open Russia, an organization founded by the Kremlin critic Mikhail B. Khodorkovsky.

Although the main organization is based in Britain, Russia’s prosecutor general labeled it “undesirable,” effectively making it illegal for the body to operate inside Russia. It cited the protest efforts as the main reason.

Two other groups linked to Mr. Khodorkovsky were included in the ban. One, the Institute of Modern Russia, is run from the United States by Mr. Khodorkovsky’s son, Pavel, and the other, Open Russia Civic Movement, has headquarters in Britain.

“Their activities are aimed at inspiring protests and destabilizing the internal political situation, which threatens the foundations of the constitutional

system of the Russian Federation and the security of the state,” the prosecutor general said in a statement.

It was not clear what effect the attempt to pre-empt the protests would have. Open Russia within the country declared that it was independent of the British headquarters and not covered by the ban, and therefore would proceed with attempts to mobilize antigovernment marches in some 30 cities on Saturday.

A statement distributed on Twitter by the Khodorkovsky Center quoted Mikhail Khodorkovsky as telling the independent television station Rain that the domestic organization “exists separately and will continue to operate.” In the statement, Mr. Khodorkovsky, a former chairman of the Yukos oil giant who spent several years in prison before being pardoned by President Vladimir V. Putin in 2013, predicted that the ban would backfire.

“I think that such a terrified reaction from the government will only

motivate more people to come out into the streets and tell those in power that if they cannot run the country properly, and solve the issues that face Russian society, then they should leave,” he said.

The Kremlin was taken by surprise on March 26 when thousands of Russians in some 80 cities, many of them young people, responded to a call by the opposition leader Alexei A. Navalny to protest against widespread government corruption. Open Russia, which had been weighing how to support opposition candidates, recently indicated that it would try to work more closely with Mr. Navalny. Mr. Navalny, although jailed for 15 days after the protests, has continued his antigovernment drumbeat.

In a video released on Tuesday he made new accusations against the prime minister, Dmitri A. Medvedev, claiming that four organizations falsely labeled charities spent \$66 million in 2016 to maintain various estates used by Mr. Medvedev. An earlier Navalny video, accusing Mr. Medvedev of amassing estates,

vineyards and yachts through corrupt charities and shell companies, helped inspire the March rallies.

Before the ban was announced on Wednesday, Open Russia provoked some dismay among opposition groups by posting on Twitter a picture of the naked torso of a woman with each breast covered only by a strip of yellow tape printed with the Russian word “nadoel” or “tired” (meaning of the government). The caption on the post read “Waiting for you on 29.04.” The Twitter message pushing for the demonstrations was denounced in opposition circles as being overtly “sexist.”

Mr. Khodorkovsky, 53, once Russia’s richest oligarch, was arrested in 2003 and convicted on charges of fraud, embezzlement and money laundering. Since his pardon, he has lived abroad, becoming one of the Kremlin’s most outspoken critics.

The New York Times

Trump Tells Foreign Leaders That Nafta Can Stay for Now

Mark Landler and Binyamin

Appelbaum

It was not clear whether the president would still sign an executive action to authorize renegotiation of Nafta, which he once called the worst trade deal ever signed by the United States. Washington must give Canada and Mexico six months’ notice before exiting the trade agreement, which came into force in 1994. Any action to that effect would start the clock.

But the prospect of the United States’ pulling out obviously alarmed the Canadian and Mexican leaders and prompted their calls to the White House.

The Mexican peso plummeted in trading after news broke at midday on Wednesday that the White House had drafted an executive order withdrawing the United States from Nafta. Mr. Trudeau called Mr. Trump twice, on Tuesday and Wednesday, to discuss the sudden rupture in the trade relationship between the United States and Canada.

On Tuesday, the Trump administration announced that it would impose a tariff on Canadian softwood lumber, in retaliation for

what it said was unfair treatment of American dairy farmers.

The president has repeatedly derided Nafta, describing it last week as “very, very bad” for the country, companies and workers, and he promised during his campaign that he would remove the United States from it if he could not negotiate improvements.

The White House wants Congress to authorize those negotiations under legislation that would allow expedited approval of the reworked agreement, but talks between administration officials and congressional Republicans have moved slowly.

While some of Mr. Trump’s senior advisers, notably Stephen K. Bannon and the economist Peter Navarro, are eager to take strong steps on trade policy, another group — which includes Gary D. Cohn, the head of the National Economic Council — has argued for a more cautious approach, concerned that larger steps could cause economic disruptions.

Lately, Mr. Trump has taken the stronger line, moving to reshape America’s economic relationships with foreign nations. The Nafta order would come on the heels of the announcement of the new tariffs on

Canadian lumber and reviews of whether steel and aluminum imports are undermining national security.

“Nafta’s been very, very bad for our country,” Mr. Trump said last week. “It’s been very, very bad for our companies and for our workers, and we’re going to make some very big changes, or we are going to get rid of Nafta once and for all.”

Walking away from Nafta would disrupt the economies of the United States, Canada and Mexico, and strain broader relations among the countries. Over the last two decades, their economies have become increasingly intertwined. The volume of trade has multiplied, and the manufacture of many goods, notably cars, involves multiple border crossings and factories in all three nations.

If the United States actually pulled out, experts said, trade with Canada would probably still be subject to a similar agreement between the two countries that took effect in the late 1980s and served as a model for Nafta. The Trump administration, however, could seek to withdraw from that agreement as well.

The shift in the rules governing trade with Mexico would be more significant. The two countries both take part in the World Trade

Organization, but that allows much higher tariffs. Mexico, for instance, could impose a 37 percent tariff on American corn. The disruptions to manufacturing could also come at a hefty cost to consumers: Caroline Freund, a fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics, has estimated that the cost of a pickup truck might increase by \$3,000.

Monica de Bolle, a senior fellow at the Peterson Institute, said: “It would be a very disruptive shock that would impact everybody. It would impact growth; it would impact companies and supply chains; it would impact workers; it would impact voters in Trump states. It’s just crazy to imagine that they would go that route.”

The suggestion of withdrawal, reported by Politico on Wednesday, raised anxieties in financial markets. The peso fell more than 2 percent against the dollar, and the Canadian dollar fell about 0.3 percent.

“Scrapping Nafta would be a disastrously bad idea,” Senator Ben Sasse, Republican of Nebraska, said in a statement. “Yes, there are places where our agreements could be modernized, but here’s the bottom line: Trade lowers prices for American consumers, and it

expands markets for American goods. Risking trade wars is reckless, not wise."

Both Mexican and Canadian officials have said repeatedly that they are ready to negotiate changes to the trade agreement. Written in the early 1990s, it is outdated in key respects: Its drafters, for example, did not foresee the rise of the internet.

"Canada is ready to come to the table at any time," Alex Lawrence, a spokesman for the Canadian foreign minister, Chrystia Freeland, told Reuters on Wednesday.

In fact, the Obama administration negotiated changes to the deal as

part of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a broader agreement that would have supplanted Nafta. Mr. Trump withdrew from that agreement as one of his first official acts.

The Trump administration provided an indication of its own priorities in a letter circulated among members of Congress last month. While proposing some significant changes, such as strengthening the available penalties for breaches of the rules, it suggested that the administration was not seeking to alter the basic structure of the agreement, prompting relief both north and south of the United States.

The administration must send a final version of that letter to Congress to start another clock: a 90-day waiting period before negotiations. Starting both clocks would allow the White House to begin negotiations with Mexico and Canada while holding in hand the threat of walking away from the table.

It is not clear whom that would hurt most. Mr. Trump has repeatedly denounced trade deficits as a major contributor to what he sees as the nation's broken economy.

But trade among the three North American nations is relatively balanced, particularly in comparison

with trade between the United States and China.

The United States actually ran a trade surplus with Canada in 2015 and during the first three quarters of 2016, according to the most recent data available from the Commerce Department. American sales of goods and services to Canada exceeded purchases of goods and services from Canada, on average, by \$1 billion a month.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Pearson

BRASÍLIA—Brazil's Supreme Court recently gave its approval to prosecutors to investigate scores of senior political figures for alleged corruption, but the court itself will have to overcome some unusual challenges to put them on trial. Not least is its backlog—as of Tuesday—of 54,951 cases.

Just last week, the court ruled on the long-running dispute about which soccer team deserved the right to claim the 1987 championship.

"We can't go on like this," an exasperated Chief Justice Cármen Lúcia Rocha said in a rare interview.

Chief Justice Rocha said it would likely take years to wrap up the trials of any sitting politicians that may result from the current "Car Wash" probe into bribery and kickbacks at state-run oil company Petrobras.

Brazil's constitution makes the Supreme Court the venue for final appeal in virtually any criminal or civil case, from divorces to stolen cellphone batteries.

Only the Supreme Court is allowed to try high-ranking political figures. Given the caseload, politicians who are charged are rarely brought to trial, effectively affording them immunity while in office. In recent years, Brazil's congress has included lawmakers accused of murder, rape and involvement in drug trafficking as well as a host of white-collar crimes.

That has many Brazilians concerned that the Car Wash probe—the

Brazil Car Wash Scandal Faces Supreme Court Backlog

Paulo Trevisani and Samantha

biggest of its kind in the country's history—will fizzle when it comes to putting top politicians behind bars, despite the Supreme Court authorization to prosecutors this month to open investigations into one-third of the country's cabinet members, over 60 congressmen and four former presidents.

Since the probe began in 2014, around 90 people—mostly businessmen, lawyers, bankers and black-market money dealers—have been convicted. The few politicians brought to trial, including former house speaker Eduardo Cunha, had been booted out of Congress, allowing them to be tried as ordinary citizens. To make that happen in more cases would require significant political momentum.

At the current rate, Brazilians will still have no idea who is actually guilty when they go to the polls in next year's presidential elections. It took the court seven years to try politicians over the smaller "Mensalão" vote-buying scandal that erupted in 2005.

With so many businessmen convicted in Car Wash, the Supreme Court is under pressure to make sure guilty politicians meet the same fate, said Matthew Taylor, a professor who specializes in Brazil's legal system at American University in Washington.

"This is a troubling two-track system," he said. "The [faster-moving lower] courts are generating a great deal of public angst about corruption in Brazil while the high court is unable to deal with even the most basic and straightforward cases."

Chief Justice Rocha said she supports moves to restrict politicians' legal privileges, allowing for lower courts to determine their fates in some cases. Substantial change, however, could only come through legislation passed by lawmakers themselves.

Brazil's high court likely has the highest caseload in the world as a proportion of the country's population, a problem that is true of the country's entire judiciary, said Ivar Hartmann, a constitutional scholar at Brazil's Getulio Vargas Foundation.

In 2015, there were 102 million lawsuits pending across all of the country's courts, according to the latest data from Brazil's National Council of Justice—equivalent to one lawsuit for every two Brazilians.

The Supreme Court's 11 justices manage to process roughly as many cases as they accept, checking off around 30,000 so far this year. They don't tackle the docket in chronological order, and the backlog includes cases that entered the court system decades ago.

That means the court could prioritize Car Wash cases. But while appeal cases tend to flow more quickly because much work has already been done in lower courts, those involving sitting politicians start at the Supreme Court, posing a much greater logistical challenge for a staff already juggling thousands of appeals.

One of the older cases to reach the court was a dispute over who was Brazil's legitimate soccer champion in 1987, a year in which there were two parallel leagues. The case got to the top court in 2015; on April 18,

a panel of justices gave the title to a club based in the northeastern city of Recife.

In one tragic example, a paternity case took 38 years to make its way from a lower court to a high court verdict in 2016; by then, the plaintiff had committed suicide.

"There is an excess of cases," said Chief Justice Rocha. "When I arrived in 2006 I was given 17,000 cases to handle."

Brazil's judges, who are largely well-paid and well-trained, are relatively efficient. But a generous public-defense service makes legal action easily accessible, and the country's staunchly independent judges pay little regard to precedent. Plaintiffs file cases despite previous rulings, as each foray may have a different outcome, Mr. Hartmann said.

The Supreme Court is also slowed by formal procedures that include a tradition of reading lengthy documents aloud.

Efforts to speed up the high court in 1998 by allowing magistrates to rule on some appeal cases alone rather than collectively, and again in 2007 by giving them the option of turning down some appeals cases, helped reduce its caseload.

When the justice in charge of the Car Wash investigation died in a plane crash in January, Chief Justice Rocha hurried to keep the probe moving. "It doesn't even enter my head that a case this big can just stop in the middle," she said. "The investigative process has to go all the way to the end."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Kejal Vyas

Venezuela to Begin Process to Withdraw From Organization of American States

CARACAS, Venezuela—Venezuela said it would begin a two-year process to pull out of the world's oldest regional diplomatic body, in a move that is likely to heighten tensions with its neighbors over President Nicolás Maduro's authoritarian rule.

Foreign Minister Delcy Rodríguez said Wednesday that Mr. Maduro ordered the withdrawal from the Organization of American States after 19 of the group's 34 members agreed on a resolution to discuss Venezuela's precarious situation.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Venezuela Says It Will Leave Pro-Democracy Organization

Nicholas Casey

Experts called the decision to leave unprecedented.

"It is evidence of an authoritarian character of the government, especially in the case of the O.A.S., whose pillars are to defend democracy and human rights," said Félix Arellano, an international relations professor at the Central University of Venezuela. He added that this was the first time a country had pulled out of the organization.

The decision came amid a month of huge protests against Mr. Maduro's rule that have involved looting and attacks on demonstrators and security forces. At least 26 people have died, according to human rights groups, including a 20-year-old man who the authorities say was

In response to a collapsing economy marked by food and medicine shortages, Mr. Maduro over the last month has faced massive street demonstrations and civil unrest, costing at least 29 lives.

"Behind this coalition of countries is a sight set on our sovereignty and the pretension to intervene, and that can never be allowed to happen," said Ms. Rodríguez in a televised statement. The minister has routinely blamed Venezuela's problems on the U.S. and

killed during a demonstration on Wednesday.

Last year, the O.A.S. invoked its Democratic Charter against Venezuela, citing an "alteration of the constitutional order" there. The move was a rebuke of the country's ruling leftists, whom the organization accused of stifling opponents, holding political prisoners and ruling by decree.

In the months that followed, Mr. Maduro's powers increased, and the organization's demands became louder.

On March 29, Venezuela's Supreme Court, controlled by loyalists of the president, moved to dissolve the National Assembly and assume lawmaking powers for itself. The ruling was described by the O.A.S.

opponents to the ruling Socialist Party.

Venezuela's government has called the OAS a shill for U.S. interests. The group counts as its members all of the region's countries except Cuba. The organization was founded in 1948 to strengthen regional solidarity, as well as democratic and human rights.

Venezuela faces a 24-month legal process and must pay \$8.7 million in dues it owes to the organization before it can quit the group, an OAS

spokesman said, who declined to comment further.

Venezuela's announcement comes after a nearly two-year feud with OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro, who has led an aggressive campaign to suspend Venezuela from the diplomatic body over a host of human-rights violations, including suspending elections, jailing political rivals and prohibiting humanitarian aid.

secretary general, Luis Almagro, as "a self-inflicted coup."

After an international outcry, Mr. Maduro quickly told the Supreme Court to roll back much of the ruling, but legislators say they remain essentially powerless.

On Wednesday, a spokesman for Mr. Almagro — who had warned that Venezuela faced suspension from the organization — said that in order to withdraw, the country would have to wait two years and pay a debt of \$8.7 million under O.A.S. rules.

David Smilde, an analyst at the Washington Office on Latin America, said the two-year departure window meant the organization could continue to discuss Venezuela, regardless of whether it was

planning to quit. He noted that the rupture came after years in which Venezuela accused the O.A.S. of being a pawn of Washington and tried to undermine it by establishing alternative regional bodies.

"But symbolically, this is important," Mr. Smilde added, saying it showed that Venezuela's neighbors were losing patience.

For years, Venezuela was bolstered by friendly leftist governments throughout the region. But now, old stalwarts like Brazil and Argentina are governed by right-of-center leaders, and Cuba, once Venezuela's closest ally, has opened diplomatic relations with the United States.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Editorial : Springtime Out of Paris - WSJ

President Trump and his advisers are debating whether to withdraw the U.S. from the Paris Climate Accords, and the issue is coming to a head. If he doesn't want to topple his own economic agenda, Mr. Trump's wisest course is to walk away from a pact that President Obama never put before the U.S. Senate.

Mr. Trump wants to revive growth and lift wages (see above), and a large part of that project is a bet on liberating U.S. energy production, notably natural gas and oil. Toward this end Mr. Trump issued an executive order in late March asking the Environmental Protection Agency to unwind Mr. Obama's Clean Power Plan.

The Obama team finalized CPP in late 2015, and the rule was immediately challenged in court by

28 states. Notable among the Obama Administration's legal defenses is that CPP is essential to fulfill the U.S. commitments to reduce carbon emissions under Paris. By the end the White House cited Paris as the legal justification for all its climate policies.

EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt is moving to repeal CPP and other Obama climate rules. Environmental groups will inevitably sue. If the U.S. remains in Paris, Mr. Pruitt will have to explain to the many Obama appointees on the federal bench that gutting CPP is a reasonable exercise of administrative power in light of the Administration's continued fealty to Paris carbon reductions. This is the sort of logical inconsistency that a creative judge might seize on to justify blocking Mr. Trump's EPA rules. By staying in Paris Mr. Trump may hand

opponents a sword to kill his agenda.

The left is also pointing to Section 115 of the Clean Air Act, which gives EPA a mandate to regulate emissions that "may reasonably be anticipated to endanger public health or welfare in a foreign country." The catch is that EPA can only act if there is regulatory "reciprocity" among the nations involved. Such as the Paris accords.

Mr. Obama knew he was setting these carbon political traps as he rushed to commit the U.S. to Paris. His bet was that even a future GOP President would be reluctant to endure the international criticism that would follow withdrawal. And sure enough, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and National Economic Council director Gary Cohn are making precisely this argument for staying in Paris.

Then again, Candidate Trump promised to withdraw, and he can't possibly be vilified for Paris more than he already has for everything else. His advisers have presented a way to short-circuit the supposed four-year process for withdrawing, which involves U.S. resignation from the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change.

This isn't a question of science or diplomacy. For Mr. Trump, the question is whether he wants to put his economic agenda at the mercy of anticarbon warriors and federal judges.

ETATS-UNIS



Tom Nichols: Are Trump voters ruining America for all of us?:

President Trump's record in his first 100 days, by any standard of presidential first terms, is one of failure. Aside from the successful nomination of the eminently qualified Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court, there are almost no accomplishments — and a fair number of mistakes.

The president's first national security adviser had to quit after a record-setting tenure of only 24 days. The administration's first major legislative initiative, on health care, crashed and burned in a spectacular political wreck. Foreign policy has lurched from alienating China to relying on China to help us with North Korea. A rain of cruise missiles on a Syrian air base led to a brief moment of hope for those who care about humanitarian intervention (and a moment of despair for Trump's isolationist base); less than a month later it is all but forgotten by supporters and critics alike because no actual policy emerged from this stunning use of American force.

Meanwhile, almost every day produces a cringe-worthy moment of messaging failure, from spokesman Sean Spicer's bizarre comment about how Hitler didn't use chemical weapons on his own people to Trump's claim that his ratings on a television news program were bigger than 9/11.

Not surprisingly, Trump is at this point the most unpopular new president in the history of modern polling. What is bewildering is that at the same time, 96% of Trump voters say they have no regrets about their choice. How can this be? Is it just partisanship, with Americans so divided that they will

simply cheer on their own team and stay loyal beyond all rational thought?

Possibly. A hard knot of Hillary Clinton's supporters, for example — led by Clinton herself — refuse to accept that her defeat was anything less than a plot by the Russians or the FBI (or both). The idea that Clinton was an awful candidate who ran a terrible campaign is utterly alien to them.

The wide disagreement among Americans on the president's performance, however, is more than partisanship. It is a matter of political literacy. The fact of the matter is that too many Trump supporters do not hold the president responsible for his mistakes or erratic behavior because they are incapable of recognizing them as mistakes. They lack the foundational knowledge and basic political engagement required to know the difference between facts and errors, or even between truth and lies.

As the social psychologist David Dunning wrote during the campaign, "Some voters, especially those facing significant distress in their life, might like some of what they hear from Trump, but they do not know enough to hold him accountable for the serious gaffes he makes." In other words, it's not that they forgave Trump for being wrong, but rather that they failed "to recognize those gaffes as missteps" in the first place.

This was most evident during the campaign itself, when candidate Trump's audiences applauded one fantastic claim after another: that he saw Muslims cheering the 9/11 attacks, that the United States pays

for over 70% of NATO's costs, that he knew more than the generals about strategy. When he became president, he continued the parade of strange assertions and obsessions.

To be sure, some of Trump's voters, like any others, are just cynical and expect the worst from every elected official. Others among them grasp Trump's failings but fall back on the sour but understandable consolation that at least he is not Clinton. But many simply don't see a problem. "I think I like him more now that he is the president," Pennsylvania voter Rob Hughes told *New York Post* writer Salena Zito.

There is a more disturbing possibility here than pure ignorance: that voters not only do not understand these issues, but also that they simply do not care about them. As his supporters like to point out, Trump makes the right enemies, and that's enough for them. Journalists, scientists, policy wonks — as long as "the elites" are upset, Trump's voters assume that the administration is doing something right. "He makes them uncomfortable, which makes me happy," Ohio Trump voter James Cassidy told the *Toronto Star's* Daniel Dale. Syria? Korea? Health care reform? Foreign aid? Just so much mumbo-jumbo, the kind of Sunday morning talk-show stuff only coastal elitists care about.

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

There is a serious danger to American democracy in all this. When voters choose ill-informed grudges and diffuse resentment over the public good, a republic

becomes unsustainable. The temperance and prudent reasoning required of representative government gets pushed aside in favor of whatever ignorant idea has seized the public at that moment. *The Washington Post* recently changed its motto to "democracy dies in darkness," a phrase that is not only pretentious but inaccurate. More likely, American democracy will die in dumbness.

Those of us who criticized Trump voters for their angry populism were often told during and after the election not to condescend to our fellow citizens, and to respect their choices. This is fair. In a democracy, every vote counts equally and the president won an impressive and legitimate electoral victory.

Even so, the unwillingness of so many of his supporters to hold him to even a minimal standard of accountability means that a certain amount of condescension from the rest of us is unavoidable.

In every election, we must respect the value of each vote. We are never required, however, to assume that each vote was cast with equal probity or intelligence.

Tom Nichols, a professor of national security affairs at the Naval War College and an adjunct professor at the Harvard Extension School, is the author of the new book The Death of Expertise. The views expressed here are solely his own. Follow him on Twitter: @RadioFreeTom

POLITICO The education of Donald Trump

Josh Dawsey

25-31 minutes

The 70-year-old leader of the free world sat behind his desk in the Oval Office last Friday afternoon, doing what he's done for years: selling himself. His 100th day in office was approaching, and Trump was eager to reshape the hardening narrative of a White House veering off course.

So he took it upon himself to explain that his presidency was actually on track, inviting a pair of POLITICO reporters into the Oval Office for an impromptu meeting. He sat at the Resolute desk, with his daughter Ivanka across from him. One aide said the chat was off-the-record, but Trump insisted, over objections

from nervous-looking staffers, that he be quoted.

Story Continued Below

He addressed the idea that his senior aides weren't getting along. He called out their names and, one by one, they walked in, each surprised to see reporters in the room—chief of staff Reince Priebus, then chief strategist Steve Bannon, and eventually senior adviser Jared Kushner. "The team gets along really, really well," he said.

He turned to his relationships with world leaders. "I have a terrific relationship with Xi," he said, referring to the Chinese president, who Trump recently invited for a weekend visit at his Mar-a-Lago resort.

Finally, he rattled off the biggest hits of his first three months and promised more to come.

It was classic Trump: Confident, hyperbolic and insistent on asserting control.

But interviews with nearly two dozen aides, allies, and others close to the president paint a different picture — one of a White House on a collision course between Trump's fixed habits and his growing realization that this job is harder than he imagined when he won the election on Nov. 8.

So far, Trump has led a White House gripped by paranoia and insecurity, paralyzed by internal jockeying for power. Mistrust between aides runs so deep that

many now employ their own personal P.R. advisers — in part to ensure their own narratives get out. Trump himself has been deeply engaged with media figures, even huddling in the Oval Office with Matt Drudge.

Trump remains reliant as ever on his children and longtime friends for counsel. White House staff have learned to cater to the president's image obsession by presenting decisions in terms of how they'll play in the press. Among his first reads in the morning is still the *New York Post*. When Trump feels like playing golf, he does — at courses he owns. When Trump feels like eating out, he does — at hotels with his name on the outside.

As president, Trump has repeatedly reminded his audiences, both public and private, about his longshot electoral victory. That unexpected win gave him and his closest advisers the false sense that governing would be as easy to master as running a successful campaign turned out to be. It was a rookie mistake. From the indignity of judges halting multiple executive orders on immigration-related matters—most recently this week—to his responses to repeated episodes of North Korean belligerence, it's all been more complicated than Trump had been prepared to believe.

"I think he's much more aware how complicated the world is," said former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, who serves as an informal administration adviser. "This will all be more uphill than he thought it would be because I think he had the old-fashioned American idea that you run for office, you win, then people behave as though you won."

Trump has had some successes. He nominated and saw confirmed a new Supreme Court justice, rolled back Obama-era regulations, and oversaw dramatic military actions in Syria and Afghanistan. He has signed rafts of executive actions, unilateral decisions familiar to the former Trump Organization president.

Yet he approaches the 100-day mark with record-low approval ratings and no major legislative accomplishment to his credit. Nothing hit Trump harder, according to senior White House officials, than the congressional defeat of his first major legislative package—the bill to repeal Obamacare. As he sat in the Oval Office last week, Trump seemed to concede that even having risen to fame through real estate and entertainment, the presidency represented something very different.

"Making business decisions and buying buildings don't involve heart," he said. "This involves heart. These are heavy decisions."

More than 200 of Trump's campaign promises are scribbled in marker on a whiteboard in Steve Bannon's West Wing office, which he calls his "war room." Other pledges are printed and taped beneath a poster that says: "Make America Great Again."

"Deport 2 million criminal illegal immigrants," reads one pledge. Others call for all of President Obama's executive orders to be reversed and for the U.S. to exit the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA. A few have

large check marks next to them. Another sign notes 11 have been delayed. It's a visual encapsulation of how Bannon sees the presidency about keeping promises.

In Kushner's office, just steps away, there's no "Make America Great Again" memorabilia. Instead, the whiteboard lists deadlines for bipartisan projects in his newly-founded Office of American Innovation on infrastructure and veterans' affairs. Kushner often talks about the presidency like it's a business, describing it privately as "entrepreneurial" and in "beta mode." He often doesn't mind when Trump flip-flops, if it's in the service of striking a deal.

The gap in worldview and temperament between the two has produced the most combustible, and consequential, conflict in the West Wing. In the first days following Trump's inauguration, it was Bannon who pushed to speed through a blitz of executive orders, including the ill-fated travel ban. And it's been Kushner, a 36-year-old real estate scion, who's leaned the other way, encouraging his capricious father-in-law to espouse less divisive positions.

"It's an ideas and ideology battle every day," one senior administration official said.

Perhaps the defining and unanswered question of the Trump presidency is what he truly believes in. Is he the inflexible immigration hardliner who described undocumented Mexican immigrants as "rapists" in his June 2015 kickoff speech or the president who recently said those brought here illegally as children should "rest easy" because he doesn't plan to deport them? Will he try to make deals with Democrats? Or will he devote himself to Bannon's nationalist agenda? And, other than winning, what does Trump really want?

No single day was more telling about the ambiguity of Trumpism than April 12. It was that day that Trump not-so-quietly reversed himself on at least four of his campaign promises. He canceled a federal hiring freeze imposed in his first week. He flipped on labeling China a currency manipulator. He endorsed the Export-Import bank that he had called to eliminate. He declared NATO relevant, after trashing it repeatedly on the campaign trail.

"I said it was obsolete," Trump said. "It is no longer obsolete."

Trump's critics and supporters alike are equally flummoxed about what this president stands for.

White House communications director Mike Dubke told staff in a recent meeting "there is no Trump doctrine" when it comes to foreign policy. The president was moved to send missiles into Syria in part based on gruesome images of dead Syrian children he saw on TV. But he's maintained the same hardline that those suffering children should not be accepted into America as refugees. Trump has overseen the use of the largest bomb short of a nuclear weapon in Afghanistan and talks tough about obliterating the Islamic State. Yet in a recent chat in his West Wing office, Priebus backed away from the idea of greater troop engagement, saying the administration doesn't want to engage in "long-term ground wars in the Middle East."

"He is not a movement conservative. He is definitely not an establishment Republican," said Ken Blackwell, who headed domestic policy during Trump's transition. "He's transactional and makes calls based on his gut. Those of us who are accustomed to an ideological framework — it takes getting used to."

But Trump's ideologically noncommittal approach has bumped up against the constraints of a hyperpartisan Washington where the letters on congressional vote cards — D or R — are paramount.

Some are whispering that Trump should work with Democrats on infrastructure. Others say he must forge ahead only with Republicans on health care. Maybe he should work with both on taxes. Trump, it seems, is just looking for success.

"I am flexible," as Trump said recently in a Rose Garden appearance. "And I'm proud of that flexibility."

When Donald Trump gets angry, he fumes. "You can't make them happy," he said. "These people want more and more."

He was complaining to friends that he had negotiated for weeks with Freedom Caucus members and he couldn't believe the group was still against the health care legislation. Trump and his advisers were buzzing about making an enemies list and wanted to force a vote. But it was Trump, a man who hates to show weakness, who had to blink. As support flagged, the bill was shelved.

"I kind of pooh-poohed the experience stuff when I first got here," one White House official said of these early months. "But this shit is hard."

Nowhere has Trump's learning curve been steeper than Capitol Hill. According to people close to the president, Trump believed that in selecting Priebus as chief of staff he was getting a deeply connected Washington wise man, someone who could guide his agenda through Capitol Hill.

Between Priebus and Vice President Mike Pence, who once served in House leadership, Trump thought he had the experts he needed and wouldn't have to worry about Congress that much. But Priebus is a political insider, not a congressional one. And Pence, who was governor of Indiana before joining Trump's ticket, has been absent from the Hill during the rise of the House Freedom Caucus, the ideological hardliners who delivered Trump the most stinging defeat of his young presidency.

House Republicans' rejection of his plan to repeal-and-replace Obamacare served as a wake-up call — and a clarifying moment when he realized he couldn't leave Congress to others, even Speaker Paul Ryan.

Trump had campaigned in generalities — "repeal-and-replace with something terrific," he'd promised — and after the election Trump and his team decided to let Ryan take the lead on health care. Trump just wanted to sign a bill. He didn't necessarily care what it said.

But the Freedom Caucus did. They felt left out of the process—and they hated Ryan's bill. They complained to the White House almost every day and made threats. They seized on the bill's anemic public approval.

So Trump personally got involved, just as he had long negotiated with business partners, offering a mix of wooing and threats. He even dispatched his budget director, Mick Mulvaney, a former House GOP hardliner himself, to threaten a particularly outspoken critic, Rep. Mark Sanford.

It backfired. Freedom Caucus members weren't afraid to say no. In an embarrassing setback, Trump called to pull the bill.

White House officials played down the loss in recent conversations — even as Trump has put immense pressure on Pence and Priebus to resuscitate the bill. "The narrative that somehow or another a signature piece of legislation must be out of the House and Senate in 100 days is a ridiculous standard," Priebus said.

Trump seemed, at first, not to even understand the scope of his health care failure. He called reporters and spoke about moving on. Top-level aides bragged about his good

mood. “No bullshit, I think he’s actually pretty comfortable with the outcome,” a senior White House official crowed.

After the health care fight, Marc Short, the president’s legislative director, had a meeting with his team on “lessons learned,” people familiar with the meeting say. Several administration officials said Trump has told them not to leave the Congressional details to Ryan and others – and that he eventually grasped how damaging the health care defeat could be to the rest of his agenda.

“I don’t think they realized what a big issue this was for the grassroots,” said Jenny Beth Martin, head of Tea Party Patriots, who had met with Trump.

Trump’s team now has another chance to pass the law. They spent several weeks wooing conservatives – and secured the backing Wednesday of the Freedom Caucus, which blocked the first bill from passing. They brought members and outside groups – including those funded by the conservative billionaire donors Charles and David Koch – to the White House.

They successfully convinced the conservatives who don’t like Ryan to get on board. But now, moderates concerned about making health benefits worse for their constituents are balking. White House officials are hoping to have a vote Friday or Saturday, just in time for Trump’s 100-day mark.

The defeat represented an early inflection point for a president who is openly more transactional than ideological. More than anything, it reinforced the president’s conviction that he could only trust the tight circle of people closest to him.

Now, Trump is forging ahead alone on taxes, rolling out a dramatic package of tax cuts on Wednesday without input from Hill leaders. “We aren’t listening to anyone else on taxes,” said one senior administration official, referring to Ryan. “It’s our plan.”

As Trump is beginning to better understand the challenges—and the limits—of the presidency, his aides are understanding better how to manage perhaps the most improvisational and free-wheeling president in history. “If you’re an adviser to him, your job is to help him at the margins,” said one Trump confidante. “To talk him out of doing crazy things.”

Interviews with White House officials, friends of Trump, veterans of his campaign and lawmakers

paint a picture of a White House that has been slow to adapt to the demands of the most powerful office on earth.

“Everyone is concerned that things are not running that well,” said one senior official. “There should be more structure in place so we know who is working on what and who is responsible for what, instead of everyone freelancing on everything.”

But they’re learning. One key development: White House aides have figured out that it’s best not to present Trump with too many competing options when it comes to matters of policy or strategy. Instead, the way to win Trump over, they say, is to present him a single preferred course of action and then walk him through what the outcome could be – and especially how it will play in the press.

“You don’t walk in with a traditional presentation, like a binder or a PowerPoint. He doesn’t care. He doesn’t consume information that way,” said one senior administration official. “You go in and tell him the pros and cons, and what the media coverage is going to be like.”

Downplaying the downside risk of a decision can win out in the short term. But the risk is a presidential dressing-down—delivered in a yell. “You don’t want to be the person who sold him on something that turned out to be a bad idea,” the person said.

Advisers have tried to curtail Trump’s idle hours, hoping to prevent him from watching cable news or calling old friends and then tweeting about it. That only works during the workday, though—Trump’s evenings and weekends have remained largely his own.

“It’s not like the White House doesn’t have a plan to fill his time productively but at the end of the day he’s in charge of his schedule,” said one person close to the White House. “He does not like being managed.”

He also doesn’t like managing—or, rather, doesn’t mind stoking competition among his staffers. While his predecessor was known as “no-drama Obama,” Trump has presided over a series of melodramas involving his top aides, including Priebus, Bannon, counselor Kellyanne Conway and economic adviser Gary Cohn.

“He has always been a guy who loves the idea of being a royal surrounded by a court,” said Michael D’Antonio, one of Trump’s biographers.

Many of those aides spent the opening weeks of the presidency

pushing their own agendas – and sparring with one another. Priebus brought into the White House his chief of staff, chief operating officer and chief strategist from the RNC; Bannon has his own P.R. person and two writers from Breitbart; Kushner brought allies from the business world, and recently recruited his own publicity adviser; Conway has her own chief of staff; now Ivanka Trump has a chief of staff, too.

For now, all sides seem to have forged a delicate détente. Kushner and Bannon met earlier this month at Trump’s Mar-a-Lago estate and agreed to work out their differences. Trump aides now downplay talk of a shakeup involving Bannon – talk that, until just a few days ago, had reached a fever pitch. There have been a few changes here and there – Katie Walsh is out as deputy chief of staff, and KT McFarland has been moved off the national security team – but don’t expect any big personnel changes anytime soon, they say.

Yet there is little question that the months of infighting have taken a toll on Trump’s aides. Many are unaccustomed to working for a man who can consult with 20 outside associates a day, change his mind in a minute and change his mood even quicker.

Of late, some Republican National Committee members have become deeply concerned about Priebus, who was party chairman before joining Trump’s team. Priebus, who is distrusted by some rival White House factions and lacks the control previous chiefs of staff have had, has privately complained about the profound frustrations of the job.

Priebus, who is married and has two young children, has vented about the long hours he’s had to spend away from his family. In March, he missed an RNC donor retreat in Florida because, he told friends at the time, he needed to be at home to celebrate one of his children’s birthdays.

Trump the businessman and presidential candidate loved pitting top aides against one another. The internal competition ensured that the best ideas would rise to the top, he believed. Plus, he liked telling people, it made his employees work even harder to impress him.

White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer has developed a ritual of sorts: Just before going onstage for his televised briefings, he usually walks down the hall to the Oval Office to ask Trump what he wants to hear on TV that day. Cable news only occasionally carried press

briefings from Obama’s secretaries in the later years of his presidency, but Spicer’s almost-daily outings have become a regular, wall-to-wall fixture.

His sessions with Trump were described by people familiar with them as part pep talk and part talking-point seminar. In the early days, Trump criticized Spicer fiercely, prompting him to upgrade his delivery at the podium as well as his wardrobe of suits. Now, people close to the president say, Trump brags about Spicer’s ratings.

Yet Trump continues to see himself as the best guardian of his own image. In New York, he infamously made calls to reporters pretending to be a spokesman. He personally called into the New York tabloid gossip pages as a source for years, and he even dialed cable news control rooms to suggest coverage after he became the presumptive Republican nominee in 2016.

That hasn’t changed in the White House, where Trump continues to crave attention and approval from news media figures. Trump huddled in the Oval Office with Matt Drudge, the reclusive operator of the influential Drudge Report, to talk about his administration and the site. Drudge and Kushner have also begun to communicate frequently, said people familiar with the conversations. Drudge, whose visits to the White House haven’t previously been reported, didn’t respond to a request for comment.

Several senior administration aides said Trump loves nothing more than talking to reporters – no matter what he says about the “failing” New York Times or CNN – and he often seems personally stung by negative coverage, cursing and yelling at the TV. Kushner, too, sometimes calls TV personalities and executives, in particular MSNBC host Joe Scarborough, according to people close to the Trump son-in-law. (It didn’t go unnoticed in the West Wing that, at the height of the Kushner-Bannon war, the Drudge Report and Scarborough’s *Morning Joe* had an anti-Bannon flair to their coverage.)

If the goal of most administrations has been to set the media agenda for the day, it’s often the reverse in Trump’s White House, where what the president hears on the cable morning gabfests on Fox News, MSNBC and CNN can redirect his attention, schedule and agenda. The three TVs in the chief-of-staff’s office sometimes dictate the 8 a.m. meeting – and are always turned on to cable news, West Wing officials say.

Behind the scenes, Trump – who beneath his confident veneer can

be deeply sensitive to criticism – has been jolted when lawmakers took to TV to jab the president. If anyone had anything to say to the president, White House aides vented, they should do it with him personally – not from the camera. “If you go on TV and blast him, it’s over,” one senior administration official said.

Since taking office, Trump has 16 times tagged Fox and Friends, the network’s morning show, in his tweets, and countless other times weighed in on whatever they were talking about on air. After Democratic Rep. Elijah Cummings went on Morning Joe and asked the president to call him, Trump did. After Republican Rep. Dana Rohrabacher defended Trump in an early Saturday morning Fox News hit, Trump called him moments later, inviting him to an Oval Office meeting. And after news segments, Trump will sometimes call his own advisers to discuss what he saw.

No slight is too small to ignore. West Wing staffers have even fumed about news coverage of the Easter Egg Roll. First, it was that Trump’s White House wouldn’t be smart enough to pull it off. Then, it was that no one would be there. And after the Easter Egg Roll went off without a hitch, “no one wanted to give us any credit,” said one senior administration official.

It is part of a siege mentality that has taken hold, from the president down, with Trump and his associates believing their coverage has stayed just as bad — or gotten worse — since the campaign ended in November. Senior administration officials said they’ve never seen Trump angrier than when the media

focused its attention on the crowd size at his inauguration.

The darkest cloud shadowing the West Wing has been continuous questions about the Trump campaign’s connections to Russia.

The FBI director testified he is investigating Trump associates for possible collusion with a hostile foreign power, Trump’s first national security adviser, Michael Flynn, resigned over his interactions with the Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak and Attorney General Jeff Sessions ultimately had to recuse himself from his own department’s investigation after he failed to disclose his own conversations with Kislyak.

“If we have a good day, then within 48 hours there’s a Russia story,” said another senior administration official. “That’s just how it works.”

The news about Sessions’ interaction with the Russian ambassador came the day after Trump’s widely praised speech to a joint session of Congress. And it stomped on any momentum the White House had, especially Trump’s trip to an aircraft carrier later that week. At the end of the week, after Sessions recused himself from the probe, Trump exploded at his aides about his frustrations.

Yet Trump was grinning in his office last week. He wanted to pose for pictures behind the cleaned-off Resolute desk and in front of his gold curtains. He has posed for hundreds of pictures there – sometimes with a grin, sometimes with a thumbs-up – and has guests stand behind him. He seemed a

man of few worries -- even though his aides were back out pushing a high-stakes health care vote, the government was one week from shutting down and North Korea was continuing its provocations.

The fact that 100 days, as a marker, has no legal or actual significance outside the media has not seemed to matter to Trump. While he has publicly derided the deadline as “ridiculous” on Twitter, he has decidedly reshuffled his schedule, priorities and agenda in the last two weeks to notch political points, knowing the deadline would get inordinate media coverage.

He has repeatedly pressed aides to have a health care vote before Saturday. He surprised his own staff by promising a tax reform plan by this week and urged them to round out his list of accomplishments. He has maintained an aggressive calendar, wooing conservative outlets and traditional reporters alike.

He told aides this week needed to be a busy one — just as he told them after his inauguration.

In days 1 through 10, it was executive orders on a federal hiring freeze, abortions abroad, withdrawing from an Asian trade deal and the explosive immigration order barring immigrants from certain Muslim-majority countries. He got into a diplomatic row with Australia, one of America’s closest allies. The immigration order sparked international protests and was stopped in court. Trump later told advisers he regretted how it was handled.

In days 90 through 100, it was a flurry of executive orders. He got

into a diplomatic row with Canada, one of America’s closest allies, threatening a trade war. He moved toward unwinding NAFTA. “There is no way we can do everything he wants to do this week,” one senior official said.

“Trump is a guy of action. He likes to move,” said Chris Ruddy, a close friend. “He doesn’t necessarily worry about all the collateral damage or the consequences.”

White House officials say they now have a more deliberative process of decision-making. Issues don’t go to his desk until they’ve had a thorough vetting in at least three meetings. Aides have cautioned him to slow down and have told him everything is not possible in his time frame. Sometimes, administration officials say, he listens and takes the news well. Sometimes, he keeps the demands going.

Trump may be learning and adjusting. But he is still Trump. On Saturday, he’ll celebrate his 100th day in office by boycotting the traditional White House Correspondents’ Dinner in favor of a rally in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The rallies, which remind of the campaign trail, often improve his mood, several people close to him say. “I will be holding a BIG rally in Pennsylvania,” he tweeted by way of announcement. “Look forward to it!”

Ben White contributed to this report.

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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Rove : The First Day of the Rest of the Presidency

Karl Rove

Only one president in the past century had a first 100 days of any consequence. That was Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who enjoyed advantages no other commander in chief had.

The former New York governor entered office with a huge mandate, having won 57% of the popular vote and nearly 90% of the Electoral College. In addition to carrying 42 of 48 states, FDR’s Democrats had a 59-36 advantage over Republicans in the Senate and a 313-seat majority in the House. The urgency of the Great Depression also gave Roosevelt extraordinary leverage to pass legislation.

Comparisons between Roosevelt’s historic opening and any other president’s first months are strained

and artificial, but the press is obsessed with the milestone. Donald Trump contributed to their mania late in the campaign by offering a 100-day plan to make America secure and prosperous.

Much of this plan has yet to be passed into law or even introduced, but Mr. Trump has nonetheless compiled some respectable achievements. He recruited an impressive cabinet, especially in the foreign-policy and national-security areas. His spectacular Supreme Court nominee was confirmed, and Mr. Trump greenlighted the Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipelines. He took action against Syria, adopted a surprisingly tough line on Russia, and held positive meetings with world leaders.

Mr. Trump froze hiring of many federal workers, required rescinding

two regulations of equal cost for every new rule created, and signed laws repealing last-minute Obama regulations that cost the economy billions. The stock market is up around 14% since Election Day and consumers are more confident than they’ve been in years.

Mr. Trump also points to nixing the Trans-Pacific Partnership, issuing dozens of executive orders, browbeating Ford and Carrier to keep jobs in America, and slowing illegal immigration. Not all the executive orders needed to be executive orders, but that’s unimportant to voters, who want to see action, strength, and promises being kept.

On the down side, the president’s poorly drafted travel ban blew up and his sanctuary-city executive order could too. Worse, House

Freedom Caucus members stymied ObamaCare’s repeal and replacement, slowing the administration’s overall momentum. Tax reform will take until the fall—and always would—and remains a heavy lift. The administration seems more ragged, unfocused, understaffed and disorganized than any other in modern times, prone to overpromising and under-delivering.

This all leaves Mr. Trump with only 42% of Americans approving his performance, according to the RealClearPolitics average. With a 53% disapproval, the president easily earns the worst numbers ever recorded at this point. The Gallup average for modern presidents around this time is 61% approval. Mr. Trump had no honeymoon as president.

Yet 96% of his 2016 supporters would vote for him again, according to an April 17-20 ABC/Washington Post survey. Matched against Hillary Clinton in the poll, Mr. Trump turns a two-point deficit in last fall's popular vote into a 43% to 40% advantage. This is good news for Mr. Trump, but he can't rely on Democrats again nominating someone as immensely unlikable and deeply flawed as Mrs. Clinton. Nor can Team Trump count on a left-wing lunatic as the Democratic 2020 standard-bearer, which would result in a GOP romp to victory.

**The
Washington
Post**

Milbank : In praise of President Trump (really)

I've written a million columns critical of Donald Trump, give or take. This one is in praise.

His campaign was a toxic stew of dog whistles to white nationalists and at times overt anti-Semitism. He continued during his first weeks in office to flirt with the racist fringe; his administration excised any mention of Jews from a statement on the Holocaust; he suggested that the rise in anti-Semitic threats and violence since his election might be a false-flag campaign orchestrated by Jews; he repeatedly hesitated to disavow anti-Semitism; and his spokesman perversely claimed that the Jews Adolf Hitler gassed weren't "his own people."

But give him credit for this: Trump's speech in the Capitol Rotunda this week for the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's Yom Hashoah remembrance ceremony was spot-on. Some highlights:

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"The survivors in this hall, through their testimony, fulfill the righteous duty to never forget and engrave into the world's memory the Nazi genocide of the Jewish people."

"For the dead and the living we must bear witness. That is why we are here today, to remember and to bear witness, to make sure that humanity never, ever forgets."

**THE WALL
STREET
JOURNAL**

Editorial : Trump's Tax Principles - WSJ

The White House rolled out its tax principles on Tuesday, investing new energy in the first serious reform debate in 30 years. While the details are sparse and will have to be filled in by Congress, President Trump's outline resembles the supply-side principles he campaigned on and is

Another troubling sign: While Mr. Trump is seen as "a strong leader" by 53% in the ABC/Washington Post survey, a majority thinks he "lacks the judgment and the temperament it takes to serve effectively." Meantime, about 6 voters in 10 doubt his honesty and think he is out of touch.

This should provide openings for Democrats, but they have little to gloat about. While 47% said in an April 17-20 NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll they favored a Democratic Congress in the midterms, 43% favored keeping Republicans in charge. Democrats

"The Nazis massacred 6 million Jews. Two out of every three Jews in Europe were murdered in the genocide. . . . Yet even today, there are those who want to forget the past. Worse still, there are even those filled with such hate, total hate, that they want to erase the Holocaust from history. Those who deny the Holocaust are an accomplice to this horrible evil."

"We've seen anti-Semitism on university campuses, in the public square and in threats against Jewish citizens. Even worse, it's been on display in the most sinister manner when terrorists attack Jewish communities, or when aggressors threaten Israel with total and complete destruction. This is my pledge to you: We will confront anti-Semitism."

[Holocaust speech shows Trump may be growing up]

Yes, he was reading from a teleprompter a speech somebody wrote for him. His delivery was prosaic and he occasionally repeated a phrase he liked as if reading the speech for the first time, which perhaps he was. So what? At least he gave the speech.

I don't pretend to know whether Trump has changed in his heart. His campaign was so laced with bigotry toward African Americans, Latinos and immigrants that the anti-Semitism was just one outrage. But his Holocaust speech and similar words in a video and a White House statement in recent days suggest

an ambitious and necessary economic course correction that would help restore broad-based U.S. prosperity.

Many voters heard Mr. Trump's make-America-great-again slogan as a promise to raise their incomes and improve economic opportunities after a long stagnation. Eight years

led on this measure by 9 points in April 2009 before being soundly beaten in the next midterm elections.

Because they control the White House and Congress, Republicans have the advantage of being masters of their own fate. They can shape the 2018 narrative by getting things done, especially on the economy. Democrats must hope the GOP screws up at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. That's a distinct possibility, but if Republicans don't, there's no good foothold for Democrats.

that Trump has the capacity to adjust. And that's welcome news.

His first 100 days have been a disaster: No health-care reform, no travel ban, a passel of unmet promises, international confusion, historically low support. He has resorted to creating a fake sense of momentum with executive orders — the kind of governing he and his allies decried when President Barack Obama did it.

But Trump has never been a man of consistent principles, and he has shown that he's willing to jettison his campaign program, changing his positions on China, trade, the debt, the influence of lobbyists and others. He has apparently backed down from his promise to build a wall, to avoid a government shutdown. I don't expect some broad transformation, but if he's moving even tentatively or temporarily in the right direction — in this case, shifting from his courtship of Steve Bannon's alt-right nationalists — he should be encouraged.

The Hill absurdly criticized Trump's Holocaust remembrance proclamation for using "similar wording to the Holocaust Museum website" when it said, "The Holocaust was the state-sponsored systematic persecution and attempted annihilation of European Jewry by the Nazi regime and its collaborators." The White House should be praised for echoing the museum's description of the Shoah.

of 2% growth since the recession ended in 2009 is the weakest recovery in the postwar era, and the result has been rising anxiety and diminished expectations for millions of Americans.

Faster growth of 3% a year or more is possible, but it will take better policies, and tax reform is an

The first 100 days of the Trump presidency shouldn't bring comfort to either party: The Trump legacy will be decided by what happens after this arbitrary milestone. The president would be wise to recalibrate, reset and make changes in how he operates before today's lowly ratings lock in place.

Mr. Rove helped organize the political-action committee American Crossroads and is the author of "The Triumph of William McKinley" (Simon & Schuster, 2015).

My friend Peter Beinart quibbled in the Atlantic with Trump's speech for failing to acknowledge that "the Holocaust creates obligations to protect the dignity of all people, not just Jews." That's true, but given Trump's history, he needed to make a full-throated acknowledgment of Jews' suffering.

After a campaign that trafficked in the filth of anti-Semitism — tweeting an image showing a Star of David atop a pile of cash; retweeting messages from white supremacists; refusing to condemn anti-Semitic threats against Jewish journalists; granting access and interviews to white-nationalist outlets; and closing with an ad showing prominent Jews juxtaposed with warnings of an international banking conspiracy — Trump needed to speak clearly.

This week, he spoke. "Today, we remember the 6 million Jewish men, women and children whose lives and dreams were stolen from this Earth," he said. ". . . We remember the hatred and evil that sought to extinguish human life, dignity and freedom." And, crucially, he added: "Today we mourn, we remember, we pray and we pledge: Never again."

Well said, Mr. President.

indispensable lever. Mr. Trump's modernization would be a huge improvement on the current tax code that would give the economy a big lift, especially on the corporate side. The reform would sharply cut the business income rate to 15% from 35%, while simplifying the code for individuals and cutting some marginal rates.

Though Mr. Trump's proposal dabbles in some politically fashionable tax redistribution, at its core it is an exercise in growth economics. The cuts would be permanent and immediate, and the rates are low enough to enhance the incentives to work and invest.

The plan also fits the economic moment, because a main source of U.S. malaise is poor business investment. Spending on the likes of new factories, equipment and software is soft, which in turn has undermined the productivity gains that produce more jobs, higher wages and higher living standards. Productivity growth in the 2000s and 2010s is only about half the average of the 1980s and 1990s.

One reason for this underinvestment—even though corporations have about \$2.5 trillion parked overseas—is the uncompetitive and complex American tax system. The 35% statutory rate is the developed world's highest, and an archipelago of credits, exclusions and deductions means the tax collects only about 11% of federal revenue, or roughly a meager 2% of GDP.

Slashing the headline rate to 15% would instantly lead to a surge in capital investment. Mr. Trump would make small businesses like S corporations and other pass-throughs that now pay through the individual tax code eligible for the 15% rate. Tax parity among all companies is a useful goal, not least because owner-operated companies are an engine of hiring and growth.

Increasing the capital stock will raise productivity. The economic literature conservatively suggests that about half of the corporate tax burden is carried by workers in the

form of lower wages. In other words, moving to 15% is a national pay raise.

Another benefit is that the Trump plan would move to a territorial tax system, where U.S. companies pay taxes on income only in countries where it is earned. Businesses are now taxed on world-wide profits (less certain credits), which is why so many have moved headquarters overseas. The White House also endorsed a one-time required tax on profits earned abroad, the rate to be determined. A single-digit rate would be best and voluntary would be better.

On the personal side, the Trump plan would make the code more efficient by collapsing the current seven brackets down to three of 10%, 25% and 35%. The White House is still debating at which income levels these rates would apply. The plan would also double the standard deduction to \$24,000, so fewer taxpayers would need to itemize.

A top marginal rate of 35% is progress over the status quo of well above 40% (including surcharges and phase-outs), though above the 33% rate that Mr. Trump proposed during the campaign. The President's economic advisers are sensitive to the "tax cuts for the rich" label, though they'll be pilloried for that no matter what they propose.

The Trump plan eliminates all deductions except for home mortgages and charitable donations. This killing spree includes political favorites like the write-off for state and local tax payments. This is a federal subsidy for high-tax New York, New Jersey, Oregon and California, but about 90% of these tax expenditures flow to taxpayers with adjusted gross income over \$100,000. Depending

on the specifics, the affluent could pay more.

But the economic evidence is substantial that lower marginal tax rates provide the biggest growth bang for the buck. The 1986 Reagan reform—the last major reform—cut the top rate to 28% from 50%, which sustained the 1980s boom. Growth averaged 4.8% in the six years after the 1981-82 recession and the growth effects continued to pay dividends into the 1990s. These have since dissipated as the tax code has been riddled with more and more rent-seeking dispensations.

Speaking of which, the White House affirmed new tax credits for families with children, and perhaps this is the price of fulfilling an Ivanka Trump-brand campaign promise. But such credits are expensive and do nothing for growth.

The Trump plan is silent on the House's controversial 20% border adjustment tax, and perhaps that is more than the political bandwidth could bear. Retailers and other importers oppose a tax on imports, and the transition in practice—such as a rapidly appreciating dollar—could be rougher than economic theory suggests. But this means losing revenue of about \$1 trillion that was supposed to offset the lost revenue from tax-rate cuts. Without border adjustment, or some other tax increase or budget cuts, the Trump plan will increase the deficit.

Thus the blueprint is being assailed from both the left and the balanced-budget right. The Trump economic team acknowledges that their plan would mean less federal revenue than current law under conventional Beltway score-keeping that assumes no increase in economic growth. But unlike in Washington, in the real world people and companies will change their

behavior in response to better incentives, the economy will grow faster, and over time revenues will grow faster than without reform.

We've been somewhat skeptical of Mr. Trump's economic team, but Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and National Economic Council chief Gary Cohn have delivered a supply-side outline that will unleash the pent-up productive capacity of U.S. workers and businesses. Credit is also due House Speaker Paul Ryan and Ways and Means Chairman Kevin Brady, whose "Better Way" platform made tax reform a priority.

Mr. Trump's plan is an opening bid to frame negotiations in Congress, and there are plenty of bargaining chips. Perhaps the corporate rate will rise to 20%, or maybe the House will include a more modest border adjustment. Budget rules and Democratic opposition could force Republicans to limit the reform to 10 years. But better to start with a big pro-growth offer rather than preemptively lower aspirations. Republicans won't get another opportunity like this to reshape the tax code for a generation.

The Trump principles show the President has made growth his highest priority, and they are a rebuke to the Washington consensus that 1% or 2% growth is the best America can do. Now Mr. Trump has to show results. If anything close to his this reform can survive the political maelstrom, it will go a long way toward returning to the abundance of the 1980s and 1990s.

Appeared in the Apr. 27, 2017, print edition.

The Washington Post Trump, in new tax plan, promises to do what Reagan couldn't (UNE)

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8-10 minutes

The Trump administration unveiled their proposal to overhaul the tax code on April 26, outlining sharply lower tax rates but fewer tax breaks. The Trump administration unveiled their proposal to overhaul the tax code on April 26, outlining sharply lower tax rates but fewer tax breaks. (Video: Jenny Starrs/Photo: Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

The Trump administration unveiled their proposal to overhaul the tax code on April 26, outlining sharply

lower tax rates but fewer tax breaks. (Jenny Starrs/The Washington Post)

At the center of President Trump's plan to dramatically cut taxes on businesses and individuals is a promise to stimulate extraordinary economic growth, so much so, his advisers say, that the plan will pay for itself.

If he succeeds in keeping that promise, Trump will have accomplished something his tax-cutting Republican predecessors failed to do, according to economists and tax policy experts from both parties.

In describing the proposal Wednesday, Trump's top economic

advisers said the plan would unleash new investment and spending by American companies and consumers, supercharging economic growth. That growth, in turn, would prevent the plan from leaving the federal government short trillions of dollars of tax revenue.

But in the experience of two other Republican presidents, Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, tax cuts produced an uneven record on prompting economic growth. And in both instances, reductions in taxes failed to pay for themselves and, instead, left the nation to deal with increasing federal debt.

After his 1981 tax cut, Reagan was forced to raise taxes several times.

And Bush's tax cuts put the nation on vulnerable fiscal footing, depriving the government of revenue as the United States waged two wars and faced a financial crisis. Ultimately, Congress and President Barack Obama, after several standoffs over federal finances, hiked taxes by billions of dollars and imposed strict limits on government spending.

Economists fear it will happen again. "This is definitely not in pay-for-itself territory," Alan Cole, an economist at the conservative Tax Foundation, said of Trump's plan.

At the White House on Wednesday, Trump's advisers touted the cuts as the start of an economic renaissance, recommitting to

promises that their proposed tax regimen would both grow the economy and cut the debt.

"This tax reform package is about growing the economy, creating jobs. It's about the economy," Gary Cohn, director of Trump's National Economic Council, told reporters. "That's how we're looking at this plan."

Treasury Secretary Steven T. Mnuchin said the plan would curb the debt. "The economic plan under Trump will grow the economy and will create massive amounts of revenues, trillions of dollars in additional revenues," Mnuchin said.

Trump's tax guidelines diverges from an effort by congressional Republicans, led by House Speaker Paul D. Ryan (R-Wis.), to craft a plan that aims to cut rates while keeping the government's total tax revenue level, as the reductions would be balanced out by new taxes elsewhere and the elimination of loopholes.

For Trump, the attraction of his strategy is that it allows his administration to avoid proposing massive spending cuts or offsetting tax increases to keep the debt in check. And indeed, even the modest proposals he is making to raise some offsetting funding — such as limiting tax deductions to offset state and local taxes — promise to be controversial as he attempts to enlist Congress in support of his plans.

But while Trump says his tax plan is part of a broader agenda that will validate his campaign promises of economic growth not seen for decades, economists remain skeptical.

After reviewing the tax policy outline the Trump administration released Wednesday, several said that they're hopeful Republicans can craft a plan that would have modest benefits for the

economy, but few expected Trump would be able to deliver the level of growth he has promised.

"The evidence shows clearly that no feasible tax reform in this country will raise economic growth to 3 percent on a sustained basis given our current demographics," said Doug Elmendorf, former director of the Congressional Budget Office.

As Trump attempts to succeed where Reagan stumbled, he'll deal with multiple hurdles the former president didn't, argued Douglas Holtz-Eakin, a conservative economist and former adviser in the Bush White House.

When Reagan reduced rates, he cut the maximum marginal rate on ordinary income for individual taxpayers from 70 percent to 50 percent. That rate currently sits at 39.6 percent, and cutting it further is unlikely to have the same on-the-ground impact on taxpayers' decisions.

Further reductions in rates are "just not going to have as big an impact as some of those early, dramatic fixes did," Holtz-Eakin said.

Reagan, Elmendorf said, benefited from women's entry into the workforce, which accelerated economic growth. Now, as the baby-boomer generation hits retirement, the labor force is shrinking, limiting the prospects for the economy.

Trump is also coming into office facing far more debt. According to the Congressional Budget Office, the U.S. public debt is now the equivalent of 77 percent of the gross domestic product, a level that's more than double the rate faced by Bush or Reagan.

That worries fiscal conservatives. "I don't want to run some fiscal-policy experiment with the largest, most important economy on the planet. I mean, we're not Belgium," said

James Pethokoukis, an economic commentator at the conservative American Enterprise Institute. "I would urge caution."

Trump will be attempting to cut taxes in a more difficult environment than either Bush or Reagan, but even those two presidents' policies had mixed results. Economists debate how successful they were in stimulating the economy, but nearly all agree that the cuts ultimately added to the debt as they failed to pay for themselves.

During the Bush administration, two rounds of large-scale tax cuts, first in 2001 and then in 2003, were followed by an economy that stagnated and then cratered amid the financial crisis of 2008. The economy grew at an average rate of 2.1 percent annually during his eight years in office, though there were external factors — including the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the ensuing economic aftershock.

Reagan experienced far more economic success. When he cut rates in 1981, the economy was beginning to recover from a tumultuous decade of unemployment and inflation. By 1984 however, GDP expanded at an annual rate of 7.3 percent in 1984, an extraordinary figure. The expansion continued for the remainder of Reagan's term, but in no year since 1984 has the growth in GDP reached even 5 percent annually.

Economists, however, debate how much of the boom was due to Reagan's tax policies and how much was due to the actions of the Federal Reserve and other economic forces outside of the president's direct control.

Reagan's policies marked an inflection in the national debt, which had been declining rapidly and was near just 25 percent of GDP when Reagan took office. The debt

reached 39 percent of GDP by the end of his presidency — in part a consequence of increased spending on the military.

Despite recent history, members of Trump's camp say Trump will deliver on his promises.

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"When you think about that cutting that corporate rate, let's say, from 35 to 15, that's not going to cost you any money," said Arthur Laffer, a former adviser to Trump's campaign and economist and among the most prominent advocates of reducing rates. "There are not going to be any revenue losses there."

"This isn't going to be easy. Doing big things never is," Cohn said Wednesday. "We will be attacked from the left and attacked from the right, but one thing is certain: I would never, ever bet against this president. He will get this done for the American people."

Outside of his circle, however, Trump faces skepticism. Democrats are already lining up against the plan. While Ryan on Wednesday praised Trump's plan as a positive step, George Callas, the speaker's senior counsel for tax issues, warned against a temporary reduction in the corporate rate.

"It would not alter business decisions. It would not cause anyone to build a factory," Callas said last week. "It would just be dropping cash out of helicopters on corporate headquarters for a couple of years."



White House unveils dramatic plan to overhaul tax code in major test for Trump (UNE)

By Damian Paletta

10-13 minutes

President Trump's call for a dramatic overhaul of the tax code sets in motion his most ambitious legislative initiative to date, testing whether he can cut the deal of his life on an issue that has long bedeviled Washington.

On Wednesday, Trump issued a one-page outline for changes to the tax code, pinpointing numerous changes he would make that would affect almost every American.

He wants to replace the seven income tax brackets with three new ones, cut the corporate tax rate by more than 50 percent, abolish the alternative-minimum tax and estate tax, and create new incentives to simplify filing returns.

But the White House stopped short of answering key questions that could decide the plan's fate. For example, Trump administration officials didn't address how much the plan would reduce federal revenue or grow the debt. They also didn't specify what income levels

would trigger inclusion in each of the three new tax brackets.

President Trump's tax plan greatly lower rates for individuals and businesses. What would it mean for your wallet? President Trump's tax plan greatly lower rates for individuals and businesses. What would it mean for your wallet? (Jhaan Elker/The Washington Post)

(Jhaan Elker/The Washington Post)

The goal, White House officials said, was to cut taxes so much and so fast that it led to immediate

economic growth, creating more jobs and producing trillions of dollars in new revenue and wealth over the next decade.

Despite its brevity — it was less than 200 words and contained just seven numbers — the document marked the most pointed blueprint Trump has presented Congress on any matter.

"This is about economic growth, job creation, America first, and that's what [Trump] cares about," White House National Economic Council Director Gary Cohn said. "Our tax

plan is a big leg of that stool. It's a big leg. And in many respects, he thinks it's the most important leg."

The plan now must navigate a legislative and political gantlet on Capitol Hill that has killed numerous other efforts to rework the tax code.

Business groups were already squaring off. The National Association of Realtors called the proposal a "non-starter," alleging that it would remove tax incentives for people to buy homes because of changes it would make to certain tax deductions.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, by contrast, issued a statement saying the plan would "help drive job creation, investment, and economic growth."

Ronald Reagan was the last president to shepherd a major tax overhaul through Washington, but he did it by working with Democrats to cut a deal. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said Wednesday that he would like to negotiate details of the plan with Democrats but would cut them out of talks if necessary and seek only support from Republicans, perhaps by pursuing a strategy known as "reconciliation." Using that process, a tax overhaul could escape a 60-vote requirement in the Senate, but it also would have a 10-year expiration date.

Trump's proposal now poses key tests for both parties. Republicans, who for years chided President Barack Obama about any plan to raise the deficit, must decide whether to back a plan that many budget experts calculate will add to record levels of government debt. The Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget said the plan would probably lead to a loss in government revenue by roughly \$5.5 trillion over 10 years.

But so far, key Republicans have praised the core of Trump's plan and signaled a willingness to negotiate with him on key details.

Speaking Wednesday morning on Capitol Hill, House Speaker Paul D. Ryan (R-Wis.) called Trump's framework "a critical step forward in this effort."

"We've been briefed on what they are going to do, and it is basically along exactly the same lines we want to go," Ryan said. "So we see this as progress being made, showing that we are moving and getting on the same page. We see this as a good thing."

Democrats, meanwhile, must decide whether to negotiate with an unpopular president who is threatening to pull away tax revenue

that pays for many of their cherished social programs.

"This is an unprincipled tax plan that will result in cuts for the [wealthiest Americans], conflicts for the president, crippling debt for America and crumbs for the working people," said Sen. Ron Wyden (Ore.), the top Democrat on the Senate Finance Committee.

[Trump's tax proposal: How his plan could affect you]

Trump's proposal includes significant changes to both of the major elements of the tax code, the individual side and the business side.

For individuals, it would eliminate the seven existing income tax brackets and replace them with three brackets, containing new rates of 10 percent, 25 percent and 35 percent, based on a person's income. White House officials haven't specified which income levels would hit the higher tax brackets, as they see this being part of ongoing discussions with Capitol Hill.

The proposal would also roughly double the standard deduction that Americans can use to reduce their taxable income. The deduction for married couples would rise from \$12,600 to \$24,000. This would incentivize people not to itemize their tax returns and instead use the larger standard deduction, simplifying the process and potentially saving taxpayers thousands of dollars each year. It may also change how people value certain tax breaks: For example, fewer people might buy homes with the help of the mortgage interest deduction if they don't itemize their taxes.

The White House plan would eliminate the alternative-minimum tax and the estate tax, provisions that raise billions of dollars each year and mainly raise the taxes paid by wealthier Americans.

To offset the loss of revenue from lower tax rates and other changes, Cohn and Mnuchin said they were proposing to eliminate virtually all tax deductions that Americans claim, provisions that they argued primarily benefited wealthier Americans. Cohn said they would preserve tax breaks for mortgage interest, retirement savings and charitable giving. But almost all others would be jettisoned.

This includes the tax deduction people can claim for the state and local taxes they pay each calendar year, a provision that saves taxpayers more than \$1 trillion every 10 years. These taxes can be particularly high in states with

higher income taxes, such as California and New York, so the change could be acutely felt there.

"It's not the federal government's job to be subsidizing the states," Mnuchin told reporters at the briefing with Cohn.

For businesses, Trump's proposal would lower the corporate tax rate from 35 percent to 15 percent. It would also allow millions of small businesses, structured in such a way that they are affected by the individual tax rate, to use the 15 percent rate as well. These businesses, known as "pass-throughs" or "S corporations," are often small, family-owned firms.

[Trump's tax proposal: What it means for the rich and for the world]

But they can also be large law firms and lobbying shops, with highly paid top executives. Mnuchin said special protections would ensure that the wealthiest of these earners don't take advantage of the 15 percent rate, although he didn't say how the White House would do this.

The White House is also proposing a one-time tax "holiday" to encourage companies to bring several trillions of dollars held in other countries back into the United States. They didn't specify what that tax rate would be, saying it's part of negotiations on Capitol Hill, but they said they believed providing this incentive would bring money back for investment and hiring.

"We expect that trillions of dollars will come back on shore and will be reinvested here in the United States, for capital goods and job creation," Mnuchin said.

This process is called "repatriation," and it's controversial. Critics allege that the money is brought back and then paid out in dividends to shareholders instead of being used for hiring and investing.

A key part of Trump's tax plan during the campaign was to levy a tax or tariff against companies that move overseas and then try to sell their products back to U.S. consumers. Cohn and Mnuchin said they were still looking at alternatives on how to structure this idea, and it was not an element of the plan rolled out Wednesday. They said they found a proposal embraced by House Republican leaders to be unworkable, but they plan to work with key lawmakers to see if adjustments can be made, Mnuchin said.

That GOP plan, led by Ryan and House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Kevin Brady (R-Tex.), would have offset broad reduction in

rates with a change in the way imports and exports are taxed, a proposal known as a "border adjustment tax."

But House Republicans have sought to lower the corporate tax rate only to 20 percent. Lowering it even further, as Trump has proposed, would lead to such a loss in revenue that the proposal could become difficult to pass through Congress, many lawmakers contend.

If Democrats won't support the White House's plan, Mnuchin said they could use the reconciliation process to pass the changes through the Senate with a simple majority vote, though this would be very difficult given how sharply they are planning to cut taxes. Mnuchin also said their goal was to permanently change the tax code, but they would consider a shorter-term change if necessary to win political support.

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"This is what's important to get the American economy going," Mnuchin said. "So I hope [Democrats] don't stand in the way. And I hope we see many Democrats who cross the aisle and support this. Having said that, if they don't, we are prepared to look at the reconciliation process."

One of the biggest tests for Trump's plan will be fending off critics who allege that his plan would grow the deficit and add trillions of dollars in debt. White House advisers allege that cutting tax rates and eliminating certain deductions will lead to so much economic growth that trillions of dollars in new revenue will be generated. Congress's nonpartisan budgetary referees at the Joint Committee on Taxation won't work off that same assumption.

Because of the rules of the Senate, legislation that would result in more borrowing over the long term would be vulnerable to a Democratic filibuster, requiring 60 senators to advance the legislation.

Republicans hold 52 seats in the chamber, and without 60 votes, Trump and his fellow Republicans would only be able to pass more narrowly tailored cuts. Those cuts would eventually expire unless Congress takes action, setting up another fight over taxes.

Trump Unveils Broad Tax-Cut Plan (UNE)

Richard Rubin

President Donald

Trump called for deep reductions in business tax rates and major changes to the individual tax system in a bid to invigorate his agenda as he nears the 100-day mark.

With Wednesday's proposals—which include a 15% tax rate for all businesses, lower individual rates, a bigger standard deduction to benefit middle-income households and the repeal of the estate and alternative minimum taxes—Mr. Trump hopes to speed up economic growth and make his mark as a historic tax cutter.

Still, the sweeping tax plan departed in important ways from congressional Republican proposals and alienated Democrats, giving the president a narrow path to victory through Congress.

"Clearly, we have a unique opportunity to do something major here," said Gary Cohn, the director of Mr. Trump's National Economic Council at the White House on Wednesday. "It's our intention to create a huge tax cut, and equally as important, a huge simplification of the tax system in America."

The new president appears determined to take a more proactive role in shaping the structure of the planned tax overhaul than he did to repeal major parts of the Affordable Care Act, which has struggled to get through the Republican-controlled House.

A week ago, with the 100-day mark looming and no legislative victories, Mr. Trump ordered advisers to have a tax plan ready soon. The result was an outline that is heavy on ambition, light on technical detail and likely to drive up budget deficits.

What the administration delivered Wednesday largely hews to tax-cut proposals Mr. Trump made during his campaign last year, but includes some crucial changes. Most notably, he is proposing to repeal a provision of the tax code that allows individuals to deduct the state and local taxes they pay from their reportable income. That will hurt residents of high-tax states such as Mr. Trump's home state of New York, New Jersey and California, and is already spurring objections from Republican lawmakers in those largely Democratic states.

Such a repeal has the potential to raise more than \$1 trillion over a decade, which would help fund the reduction in rates and get the tax plan through Congress, which is

focused on deficits in part because of budget rules.

Business groups and Republicans cheered the proposals as a confidence booster for the economy and a helpful guidepost for what will be months of negotiations over hundreds of details.

Democrats and budget hawks panned it as an unaffordable giveaway to the richest Americans that could add trillions of dollars in debt.

"This could have been written on a napkin, and the changes could have been written on a business card. This is an effort to create some buzz within the first 100 days, but not propose any meaningful changes to his tax plan," said Lily Batchelder, who was an aide to President Barack Obama and now teaches at New York University.

Unless Mr. Trump can attract votes from Democrats—which appears unlikely—the plan must comply with legislative procedures that allow for a party-line vote in the Senate, where Republicans have 52 seats out of 100.

The key to those procedures: Any tax plan can't increase budget deficits beyond a 10-year period. The Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget said Wednesday that the plan would cost about \$5.5 trillion in lost revenue over a decade. Those limitations could lead Republicans to make some or all of the tax cuts temporary to limit the long-run fiscal effect.

Mr. Trump's team intends to argue that his tax cuts will spur economic growth and increase revenue, which would help avert increased deficits. Lawmakers and Congress's nonpartisan tax policy scorekeepers—the Joint Committee on Taxation—need to agree for the plan to proceed. Independent experts cautioned that the administration's growth assumptions appear optimistic.

"We've been hearing from the last administration that 3% is hard to get to and they couldn't get there," Mr. Mnuchin said. "That's why we got a new president. If they had been at 3%, maybe there would have been a different outcome."

Asked during an executive-order signing on education if he could promise his tax plan wouldn't balloon the deficit, Mr. Trump said: "It's a great plan. It's going to put people back to work." The president didn't speak at an event Wednesday focused on the tax plan. He will be selling his ideas to

the public in the future, said Marc Short, his legislative affairs director.

Mr. Trump's plan leaves several crucial issues unresolved. They include how to treat business deductions for capital expenses; what happens to personal exemptions; how to tax the earnings of U.S. companies stockpiled overseas; how a break for child care would be structured; and where the tax brackets for individuals would be set.

Because of those omissions, it is difficult, if not impossible, to calculate the exact fiscal impact of the plan and how it would affect individual households.

Despite their broad support for the plan, Republicans cautioned that differences remained to be worked through, and they have little margin to lose members of their own party. Republicans are split on how big a tax cut they think is feasible and what tax breaks should go away, and there are plenty of details that may divide GOP lawmakers along regional lines.

Sen. Richard Shelby (R., Ala.) said he would remain wary until he saw what it would cost and how it would be paid for. "If it's not paid for, we're going to run a huge deficit, and we don't want to do that," Mr. Shelby said.

Democrats said the plan appeared heavily tilted toward high-income households. They pointed in particular to lower rates on individuals and a new 15% rate for income created in sole proprietorships, partnerships and other "pass-through" companies. These include many small businesses, law firms, hedge funds and the president's own real estate and branding businesses.

Cutting the pass-through tax rate to 15% while keeping top tax rates above 30% could put firms in the unusual position of having firm owners, such as law-firm partners and hedge-fund owners, paying much lower tax rates than their own employees. Averting such distortions would require complex new rules in the tax code.

"This is an unprincipled tax plan that will result in cuts for the 1%, conflicts for the president, crippling debt for America and crumbs for the working people," said Sen. Ron Wyden of Oregon, the top Democrat on the Senate Finance Committee. "Instead of providing a real tax-reform plan as promised, this administration is offering cakes to the fortunate few."

Mr. Cohn said the goal of the plan isn't to deliver tax cuts to upper-income households. Cutting some deductions would keep the tax code fair, he said. "What we're doing is we're just broadening the base of taxable income," he said. "Their effective rate is what you have to look at."

Among the most important deductions to face a cut is the state and local tax deduction. The effect of repealing it would be to shift the tax burden from low-tax states such as Texas and Florida to high-tax states such as New York and New Jersey.

Democratic objections will force Republicans to find near-unanimity in their own ranks. "We're in agreement on 80%, and then that 20%, we're in the same ballpark," House Speaker Paul Ryan (R., Wis.) said.

Mr. Mnuchin said the administration's proposal won't endorse the border-adjustment feature that is central to the House GOP plan. The provision attempts to raise revenue by taxing imports, but not exports. Mr. Mnuchin said the administration wasn't opposed to the provision in concept, and that he liked aspects of it. But he said: "We don't think it works in its current form."

Mr. Ryan hasn't backed down on the border-adjustment idea, but he said Wednesday that he knows the proposal needs modifications in response to criticism from retailers and others. "We don't want to have severe disruptions," Mr. Ryan said.

Mr. Mnuchin said key pieces of the business tax plan were still being worked out. The House GOP plan repeals the deductibility of interest and allows business to write off capital expenses immediately. Mr. Mnuchin said the administration favored some form of immediate write-off but didn't commit to any details. He also said the administration knew that some industries, including real estate and utilities, were concerned about losing the interest deduction.

"We do think some level of expensing is important," he said. "We're sensitive to that certain industries are very sensitive to interest deductibility, and we want to make sure that we don't do anything that creates uncertainty in the economy."

—Nick Timiraos, Janet Hook and Peter Nicholas contributed to this article.

Editorial : Trump's Misguided Approach to Tax Reform

The Editors

President Donald Trump's much-anticipated tax proposal is true to his style of governing: bold and vague. More an agenda for discussion than the promised blueprint, it espouses some appealing principles, but the chances that the administration might mold them into an effective reform seem slim.

The proposal aims to cut tax rates and greatly simplify the code -- worthy goals. The U.S. corporate tax rate is one of the highest in the world and ought to be cut. And no American needs persuading that the personal-tax system is too complicated.

But a plan based on the president's bullet points would involve a big increase in public borrowing, which would be unwise. In addition, starting from here, the political maneuvering needed to get it passed would cancel out much of the benefit.

**The
New York
Times**

Board

As a rule, Republican presidents like offering tax cuts, and President Trump is no different. But the skimpy one-page tax proposal his administration released on Wednesday is, by any historical standard, a laughable stunt by a gang of plutocrats looking to enrich themselves at the expense of the country's future.

Two of Mr. Trump's top lieutenants — Steven Mnuchin and Gary Cohn, both multimillionaires and former Goldman Sachs bankers — trotted out a plan that would slash taxes for businesses and wealthy families, including Mr. Trump's, in the vague hope of propelling economic growth. So as to not seem completely venal, they served up a few goodies for the average wage-earning family, among them fewer and lower tax brackets and a higher standard deduction.

The proposal was so empty of illustrative detail that few people could even begin to calculate its impact on their pocketbooks. Further, depending on where they live, some middle-class families might not benefit much or at all, because the plan does away with important deductions like those for state and local taxes.

Trump says his tax cuts would be the biggest in U.S. history. The top marginal rate would fall to 35 percent; the standard personal deduction would be doubled to \$24,000; the standard corporate rate would drop from 35 percent to 15 percent. The revenue to pay for these cuts would come, he says, from faster economic growth and from measures to broaden the tax base. Most personal-tax deductions would go -- including the deduction for state and local taxes, though the deductions for mortgage interest and charities would stay.

Unfortunately, that acceleration in growth can't be relied on. The economy is already at or close to full employment. The government could and should aim to spur growth by raising productivity -- a long-term endeavor, in which tax reform certainly ought to play a part -- but not by boosting demand to raise employment. The time for that has passed.

Without a surge in growth, the broadening of the tax base that

Trump is advocating won't bridge the revenue gap. By itself, his cut in corporate taxes would cost some \$2.4 trillion in lost revenue over the next decade.

Good tax reform also aims for certainty and simplicity. Trump's plan is a failure on both those counts. By alienating Democrats and fiscally responsible Republicans, his proposal won't get the supermajority it needs in the Senate to be made permanent. If it passes with just a simple majority, it would be explicitly temporary, expiring automatically after 10 years if not sooner. Businesses would be unable to plan for the future, decisions would be distorted in an effort to game the interval, and investment and innovation would suffer.

For good measure, the plan also includes an enormous new loophole, which would encourage many high-earning individuals to set up as "pass-through corporations" and pay a far lower rate of tax on their incomes. Preventing that,

which the administration says it will, would require new rules. In this and other ways, the plan promises more complexity, not less.

Trump's basic idea isn't wrong: Broaden the base, simplify taxes and cut rates. But then those parts have to be arranged, and presented to the public, in a way that commands consensus. Trump has made no effort as yet to frame a plan that might appeal to moderate Democrats as well as most Republicans. That's a fatal flaw.

Maybe a plan of this sort can emerge from the wrangling still to come. But as it stands, Trump's proposal is not much help.

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Editorial : President Trump's Laughable Plan to Cut His Own Taxes

The Editorial

As to the rationale offered up by Mr. Mnuchin and Mr. Cohn, even many conservative economists believe that the argument that tax cuts will pay for themselves, by increasing investment and creating jobs, is the same supply-side fantasy that has repeatedly been proved wrong. This durable nonsense would instead add mightily to a federal debt that Americans will be paying off for generations to come.

Here again, the long-term consequences were hard to figure, because Mr. Cohn and Mr. Mnuchin offered no estimates of the plan's costs; guesswork by some analysts put the figure in the same ballpark as the tax plan Mr. Trump offered during the campaign, or about \$7 trillion in additional debt over the first 10 years and nearly \$21 trillion by 2036.

Whatever the number, the outcome cannot be good. There are legitimate reasons to run deficits, including lifting the economy in tough times, strengthening the military against proven threats and building or rebuilding public infrastructure. Borrowing trillions of dollars to provide a huge windfall for people at the top is not one of those reasons.

Mr. Trump's plan aims to cut corporate tax rates from 35 percent

to 15 percent. To hear the administration tell it, the present rate is choking investment and killing jobs. In fact, big businesses are earning record profits, and many of them pay no federal taxes. The corporate income tax brought in just 10.6 percent of the federal government's revenue in 2015, down from between a quarter and a third of revenue in the 1950s, according to the Pew Research Center. A better approach, as part of broad-based reform, would be to eliminate loopholes that have encouraged businesses to avoid their fair share of taxes.

Mr. Trump would also apply that 15 percent tax rate to pass-through income that business owners get from limited liability companies, a change that would directly benefit real estate developers like him. This would also create a huge incentive for wealthy Americans to turn their earnings into pass-through income in order to avoid paying higher personal income tax rates. This is no idle threat. Many Kansas residents, including the men's basketball coach of the University of Kansas, have sheltered income in L.L.C.s since that state exempted income generated through such legal structures from its income tax in 2012.

In addition to lowering the top individual income tax rate to 35 percent, Mr. Trump would do away with the alternative minimum tax, which accounted for a vast majority of the taxes he paid in 2005, according to his leaked tax return from that year, and is one way of making sure that most well-off Americans pay a significant tax on ordinary income. He would also get rid of the estate tax, benefiting mainly wealthy families like his.

It is hard to know whether Mr. Trump's tax plan or some version of it could pass. Republican leaders have said that they want to pass revenue-neutral changes to the tax code that would not explode the deficit. Still, many of these same lawmakers went along with the budget-busting tax cuts offered by President George W. Bush.

Regardless of the plan's fate, Mr. Trump has already sent a strong message about where his sympathies really lie. They lie not with the working people who elected him, but with the plutocracy that envelops him.

White House Proposes Slashing Tax Rates, Significantly Aiding Wealthy (UNE)

Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Alan Rappeport

The proposal envisions slashing the tax rate paid by businesses large and small to 15 percent. The number of individual income tax brackets would shrink from seven to three — 10, 25 and 35 percent — easing the tax burden on most Americans, including the president, although aides did not offer the income ranges for each bracket.

Individual tax rates currently have a ceiling of 39.6 percent and a floor of 10 percent. Most Americans pay taxes somewhere between the two.

The president would eliminate the estate tax and alternative minimum tax, a parallel system that primarily hits wealthier people by effectively limiting the deductions and other benefits available to them — both moves that would richly benefit Mr. Trump. Little is known of Mr. Trump's tax burden, but one of the small nuggets revealed in the partial release of a 2005 tax return this year was that he paid \$31 million under the alternative minimum tax that year.

Corporations would not have to pay taxes on their foreign profits, an unusual proposal for a president who has championed an "America first" approach and railed against companies that move jobs and resources overseas. They would also enjoy a special, one-time opportunity to bring home cash that they are parking overseas, though administration officials would not say how low that rate would be or how they would ensure that the money would be invested productively.

Mr. Trump wants to double the standard deduction for individuals, essentially eliminating taxes on around \$24,000 of a couple's earnings. That proposal was met with alarm by home builders and real estate agents, who fear it would disincentivize the purchase of homes. The proposal would scrap most itemized deductions, such as those for state and local tax payments, a valuable break for taxpayers in Democratic states like California and New York.

But the president would leave in place popular breaks for mortgage interest, charitable contributions and retirement savings.

In a brief session with reporters, Mr. Cohn and Mr. Mnuchin said they had been toiling for weeks on the proposal, much of which closely resembles the plan Mr. Trump

championed as a presidential candidate. They argued that it would spur robust economic growth that would — along with the elimination of deductions — cover the potentially multitrillion-dollar proposal entirely, a prospect that even many Republicans privately concede is virtually impossible.

"This will pay for itself with growth and with reduction of different deductions and closing loopholes," Mr. Mnuchin said, repeating his optimistic estimate that the plan would spur the economy to grow at a rate of 3 percent annually. "The economic plan under Trump will grow the economy and will create massive amounts of revenues, trillions of dollars in additional revenues."

Democrats rejected what they described as magical thinking behind the plan and condemned it as a giveaway to the rich masquerading as a tax overhaul.

"This is an unprincipled tax plan that will result in cuts for the 1 percent, conflicts for the president, crippling debt for America and crumbs for the working people," Senator Ron Wyden of Oregon, the ranking Democrat on the Finance Committee, said in a statement. "Instead of providing a real tax reform plan as promised, this administration is offering cakes to the fortunate few."

Bernard Baumohl, the chief global economist at the Economic Outlook Group, a forecasting firm, was unsparing.

"The effort to introduce more fiscal stimulus into the economy is genuinely underway," he wrote to clients. "But the bare bones plan we saw unveiled today is already conceptually flawed and unlikely to go far in Congress. The final product will bear no resemblance to the principal points highlighted in today's meager release. Certainly, the first step in this process was unimpressive."

Mr. Cohn said the plan was "the most significant tax reform legislation since 1986" — the last time a comprehensive tax overhaul was enacted — as well as "one of the biggest tax cuts in American history," in line with Mr. Trump's grandiose portrayal.

As expected, the White House did not include in its plan the border adjustment tax on imports that was a centerpiece of a plan developed by House Speaker Paul D. Ryan of Wisconsin and Representative

Kevin Brady, Republican of Texas and chairman of the Ways and Means Committee. Earlier on Wednesday, Mr. Mnuchin said the White House could not support that proposal "in its current form," setting up an intraparty struggle over the elements of a tax plan and how to offset the deep reductions envisioned.

But Republican leaders who are eager for large tax cuts did not allow their internal divisions over elements of the package to obscure their overall support for Mr. Trump's effort.

Mr. Ryan and Mr. Brady issued a joint statement with Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the majority leader, and Senator Orrin G. Hatch of Utah, the chairman of the Finance Committee, saying the principles outlined Wednesday would "serve as critical guideposts" as Congress and the administration worked together on a tax overhaul.

Mr. Trump also signaled support for revisions to the tax code that would help families with child-care costs, although his document provided no details. He called for ending the 3.8 percent tax on investment income that was imposed by the Affordable Care Act, restoring the capital gains rate to 20 percent.

Democrats are ready to battle Mr. Trump over the tax cuts, which they are determined to tie to his refusal to release his tax returns.

"Trump's latest proposal is another gift to corporations and billionaires like himself," said Thomas E. Perez, the Democratic Party chairman. "Trump must release his tax returns, as millions of Americans are demanding, before Congress can consider any Trump tax plan. We must know how much Trump would personally financially benefit from his own proposal."

Questioned about that repeatedly on Wednesday, Mr. Mnuchin said that Mr. Trump, the first president in four decades not to disclose at least a portion of his tax returns, had "no intention" of releasing them now.

"I can't comment on the president's tax situation since I don't have access to that, O.K.?" Mr. Mnuchin said when asked how large of a tax cut the president would receive under his own plan.

The plan contrasts starkly with the one championed by House Republicans, who proposed paying for their tax cuts in part with the new tax on imports, an effort to ensure

that the measure would not swell the deficit.

The White House plan does call for "a territorial system to level the playing field for American companies," akin to a component of House Republicans' plan that would allow United States corporations to pay taxes only on their domestic profits.

"I worry that the Trump proposal would shift a tremendous amount of income abroad," said Alan B. Krueger, who was a chairman of President Barack Obama's Council of Economic Advisers. "It's hard to square that with incentivizing investment in the U.S."

Republicans have long called for permanent, comprehensive changes to the tax code, but lately they have shown increasing openness to tax cuts with an expiration date. If they embark on a plan to pass legislation that adds to the deficit and cannot be filibustered by Democrats, Senate budget rules dictate that the tax cuts would expire after a decade.

"If we have them for 10 years, that's better than nothing," Mr. Mnuchin said.

Democrats were particularly critical of Mr. Trump's idea of allowing firms known as pass-through entities — including hedge funds, real estate concerns like Mr. Trump's and large partnerships — that currently pay taxes at individual rates, which top off at 39.6 percent, to be eligible for the 15 percent corporate rate.

Critics worry that lawyers, doctors, consultants and other individuals in partnerships could structure much of their personal income as business income, effectively reducing their tax rate from 39.6 percent to 15 percent.

Mr. Mnuchin said the administration would not allow that to happen.

"We will make sure that there are rules in place so that wealthy people can't create pass-throughs and use that as a mechanism to avoid paying the tax rate that they should be on the personal side," he said.

The explanation did not seem to mollify Democrats.

"We don't need a tax plan that allows the very rich to use pass-throughs to reduce their rates to 15 percent while average Americans are paying much more," Senator Chuck Schumer of New York, the Democratic leader, said

Wednesday. "That's not tax reform. That's just a tax giveaway to the very, very wealthy that will explode the deficit."

**The
New York
Times**

Trump's Tax Plan Is a Reckoning for Republican Deficit Hawks (UNE)

Alan Rappeport

Ms. MacGuineas's group estimates that Mr. Trump's plan could reduce federal tax revenue by \$3 trillion to \$7 trillion over a decade. The economy would need to grow at a rate of 4.5 percent — more than double its projected rate, an unlikely prospect — to make the plan self-financing.

While Mr. Trump and his team point to the growth linked to tax cuts passed by previous presidents, today's economy is different from that of 1981 or 2001, when Presidents Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush cut tax rates.

The Congressional Budget Office projects that the federal debt will grow by \$10 trillion over the next decade. By 2027, the deficit could reach \$1.4 trillion, or 5 percent of the economy, it says.

The office's predictions have been off before, and the impact of tax cuts on the economy is a matter of debate, as so many variables determine a country's economic fortunes. But tax historians and veterans of previous tax fights are quick to point out that lower rates are not necessarily a panacea for slow growth.

"This is fool's gold that you'll cut taxes, everybody will work harder, more money will come and you'll erase the fiscal impact," said Steve Bell, who was a Republican staff director of the Senate Budget Committee from 1981 to 1986. "It never happens."

Joseph J. Thorndike, director of the Tax History Project at Tax Analysts, said the Trump plan appeared to

have strong parallels with Reagan's 1981 cuts. Mr. Thorndike recalled that the Reagan administration soon realized the problem of the red ink it was facing and started looking for new sources of revenue.

"This looks like '81, where they said, 'Deficit be damned, we want to do a tax cut,'" Mr. Thorndike said. "It's a cautionary tale."

Twenty years later, the Bush tax cuts, which reduced the top individual tax rates and increased the standard deduction for low-income households, took place in a different environment. Mr. Bush made the case that it was time to spend the nation's surplus to jump-start a flagging economy.

"It's very important to recognize that the fiscal situation today is not what it was in 2001," said Scott Greenberg of the Tax Foundation, a nonpartisan group. "Instead of facing a large projected surplus, the country faces a large projected deficit."

The White House's outline was too thin on details to allow for a concrete analysis of how much deficits would grow. There were no specifics about what income would fall into the three, instead of seven, individual tax brackets. The explanation of how the mammoth switch to a territorial corporate tax system would work was vague. There was no word on how low the tax on repatriated foreign corporate earnings would be. And Gary D. Cohn, the director of the president's National Economic Council, could not say how much of a tax cut a middle-income American would get.

The debate over the impact of the plan is only beginning. If Republicans are not able to make the cuts revenue-neutral — that is, causing no increase in the deficit — they will need the support of Democrats to get 60 votes in the Senate and make the legislation permanent under budget reconciliation rules. Otherwise, any changes to the tax code will expire in 10 years.

While Republicans in the House, Senate and Trump administration have said they do not want to add to the deficit, there is a growing acknowledgment of the possibility that they will need to settle for temporary tax cuts. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said Wednesday that short-term cuts were better than nothing. And Senator Orrin G. Hatch of Utah, the influential Republican chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, said this week that he could live with cuts that added to the deficit if it meant getting the economy moving faster.

Republican budget hawks will need to decide whether they want to stick to the arguments of fiscal responsibility that they used to bludgeon Democrats during the Obama era. One of those hawks, Senator Patrick J. Toomey of Pennsylvania, said Wednesday, "Rather than conforming to arbitrary budget constraints, the president's plan rightfully aims to jump-start investment, which will produce significantly more revenue for the Treasury over the long term than any revenue-neutral tax plan could generate."

Mick Mulvaney, director of the Office of Management and Budget, who was a fierce critic of deficits when he was a member of Congress, offered a glimpse of the rationale his former colleagues might embrace. "As a conservative, that bothers me a little bit," he said Tuesday on CNN of the possibility that Mr. Trump's tax plan would increase the deficit. "But we also look at deficits through sort of a different lens."

For Democrats, now out of power, the reversal is bitterly ironic, and several lawmakers assailed the president for, they said, preparing to cripple the country with debt.

"I'm not the first to observe that a Republican Congress only cares about the deficit when a Democrat is in the White House," said Alan B. Krueger, the Princeton economist who was chairman of President Barack Obama's Council of Economic Advisers. "It may be that Dick Cheney is right and that deficits don't matter to the public, but they do matter to the economy."

But for Republicans who have been craving big tax cuts for years, confidence was high that the worries about deficits were overwrought.

"This is a thing of beauty, a thing of wonder," Grover Norquist, the president of Americans for Tax Reform, said of Mr. Trump's one-page plan. "Growth, growth, growth!"

**The
New York
Times**

Kristof : This Isn't Tax Policy; It's a Trump-Led Heist

Nicholas Kristof

Trump's tax "plan" is a betrayal of his voters. He talks of helping ordinary Americans even as he enriches tycoons like himself.

For example, it's great that the tax plan promises help with child care costs, a huge burden for low-income families, especially single moms. But Trump doesn't explain what form his help will take.

Maybe he will eventually provide details, but in his campaign tax plan (which over all seems similar to the latest), fewer than 10 percent of low-income households with children would get anything at all, according to a study by the nonpartisan Tax Policy Center in

February. It added that under the campaign plan, families earning between \$10,000 and \$30,000 a year would receive an average child care benefit of just \$10.

In fairness, Trump's proposal does include some sensible elements. Raising the standard deduction is smart and would simplify everything, reducing cheating and the need for record-keeping because millions of filers would no longer itemize deductions.

But the heart of Trump's "plan" is to lower taxes for corporations and the affluent. It would eliminate the alternative minimum tax, without which Trump would have paid less than 4 percent in taxes for 2005; with it, he paid 25 percent.

Conservatives emphasize that the official top corporate tax rate in the U.S. is too high, and they have a point. The top rate for American corporations — almost 39 percent, including a 35 percent federal rate and a bit more for the average state rate — is among the highest in the world, according to the Tax Foundation.

Yet that's deeply misleading, because most companies don't pay that rate. The Government Accountability Office found that two-thirds of active corporations paid no federal tax. Even large, profitable corporations paid an average federal rate of only 14 percent — and Boeing, Verizon, General Electric and Priceline paid no

federal income tax over a five-year period, according to Citizens for Tax Justice.

There've been many studies showing that the U.S. effective marginal rate for corporations is in the same ballpark as in other industrialized countries (some say it's a bit lower, others a bit higher).

So, sure, let's lower the official corporate tax rate while reducing loopholes, but don't pretend this will create a ton of new jobs.

Where the tax plan would have a big impact is in empowering some very wealthy people, because of another bit of chicanery in the proposal: Trump apparently would allow some business owners to

dodge personal income tax by paying at the much lower corporate rate. In other words, tycoons would try to structure their incomes to pay not at a 39.6 percent top personal rate but at a 15 percent corporate rate.

This isn't tax policy; it's a heist.

Then there's the elimination of the estate tax. The White House talks

solemnly about protecting family farms and other businesses, but give us a break! The estate tax now affects only couples worth more than \$11 million. About one-fifth of 1 percent of Americans are affected — but the estate tax does limit the rise of inequality and assures a hint of fairness, since much of the wealth in rich estates has never been taxed at all.

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin says Trump's tax "plan" would be paid for partly "with growth" — which means that he has no idea how to pay for it. The Tax Policy Center examined Trump's campaign tax plan and found it would cause the federal debt to rise by at least \$7 trillion in the first decade, and more than \$20 trillion by 2036 — slowing growth, not

raising it. To put the latter number in perspective, that's additional borrowing of about \$160,000 per American household.

Effectively, we'd borrow from China or other countries to finance huge tax breaks for Trump and his minions. And this is populism?



Zelizer : Trump is giving the Republicans what they really want -- tax cuts

Julian Zelizer

Julian Zelizer, a history and public affairs professor at Princeton University and a New America fellow, is the author of "The Fierce Urgency of Now: Lyndon Johnson, Congress, and the Battle for the Great Society." He's co-host of the "Politics & Polls" podcast. The opinions expressed in this commentary are his own.

(CNN)With his proposed tax cut, President Trump is giving the Republicans the red meat they have been craving.

After spending so many months toying around with his faux populist agenda, now the White House is really getting down to business. Coming at the end of this 100-day mark, President Trump's dramatic proposal to cut corporate tax rates from 35% to 15%, slashing individual rates, eliminating the alternative minimum tax, and abolishing the estate and gift tax signals that he understands where his bread is buttered, and that is by the Republican majorities on Capitol Hill.

Of all the moves that he could possibly make, including the failed attempt at repealing Obamacare or the infamous border wall, supply-side tax cuts are the most effective way for him to solidify his partisan support, which will be important to his future success with legislation and the possibility of re-election.

Tax cuts have been bread and butter for Republicans since the conservative revolution that rocked American politics in the 1970s. Along with anti-communism, few issues have energized Republicans like dismantling the progressive individual and corporate income tax system put into place in the early 20th century.

Conservatives made a number of arguments about why taxes should be cut on the wealthy. "Supply side" economists claimed that if the government freed up upper income earners and business with lower

marginal tax rates, investment would start to flow and everyone would benefit.

Other conservatives stressed that progressive taxes were unfair, a symbol of big government, and lowering them was the most effective way to put a stake in the heart of big government liberalism.

Tax cuts skewed toward the upper income brackets play well with the business and financial community that have often been big supporters of the GOP. In addition, shrewd conservatives like David Stockman, who served as President Reagan's budget director, championed the "starve the beast" argument.

It's a losing argument to convince Americans that government programs which they perceive as providing benefits should be cut. So if the Republicans wanted to shrink government programs, their best bet was to lower tax revenues, making less money available to Washington for spending.

For decades, Republican presidents have made tax cuts a priority. President Reagan pushed through a historic tax cut in the summer of 1981 that lowered the top rate from 70% to 50% for individuals and lowered corporate income taxes by over \$150 billion.

"No other issue," Reagan said, "goes so directly to the heart of our economic life." In 1986, he worked with Democrats in Congress to pass loophole-closing tax reform in exchange for lowering rates once again.

President George W. Bush did the same in 2001 with a \$1.3 trillion reduction (including the elimination of the estate tax), ending the era of federal surpluses that started under President Clinton, and again in 2003 even though the US was in the middle of a war. Bill Plante of CBS News recalled that "the younger Bush went around telling people, 'Look, I'm more like Ronald Reagan than my father.'"

Indeed, the big exception to GOP tax-cutting was President George H.W. Bush, who despite lowering the capital gains tax accepted tax increases as part of the 1990 deficit reduction plan. He paid the price. Conservatives like Congressman Newt Gingrich, future speaker of the House, never forgave him. And he wasn't able to win a second term in his race against Bill Clinton.

It took some time for President Trump to get to the tax plan, but now it looks like he is going to send conservatives what they want.

While there are many economists who don't believe that this tax cut would have beneficial consequences over the long term, especially by bursting deficits that will strain the nation, politically this could be a winning proposal.

Coming at a time when many Republican legislators are itching to deliver an important victory, this would have great appeal to the traditional constituencies of the Republican Party.

The corporate world, still uneasy with Trump's populist rhetoric and attacks on free trade, might be a bit more comfortable once they are delivered this benefit. And as Presidents Reagan and Bush realized, there are ways to package supply-side tax cuts with rhetoric and targeted sweeteners so that working class conservatives believe they will be sharing a piece of this economic pie.

Even though there is a lot of grumbling among Republicans about the impact on the deficits and proposals such as eliminating the deductions for state and local taxes, which will hit New York and California residents hard, Reagan also had trouble moving his tax bill in 1981.

After the assassination attempt on his life, Reagan came back and mounted a full-scale public relations blitz that was effective. Most Republicans who opposed him backed off. Democrats ended up

adding provisions to the bill (compared to Christmas Tree ornaments) that benefited middle class Americans rather than trying to block it altogether.

It will be difficult for Democrats to fight back against President Trump's proposals. While the House and Senate Democrats have found considerable room to obstruct and say no to President Trump, standing against tax cuts has often been one place the party feels vulnerable.

They all remember when Democratic presidential candidate Walter Mondale admitted in 1984 that if elected he would raise taxes, which gave President Reagan ample material to attack. Democratic senators from swing states will be uneasy taking a stand against tax cuts, even if they believe them to be irresponsible, for fearing of giving their opponents a powerful issue to campaign on.

Unlike some of the other issues thus far, like refugee bans and health care, this is an issue that President Trump can't afford to lose. This is one of the principal demands from Republicans of their president and it is an issue where the political dynamics in an era of united government point to success. This, more than anything, will give us a measure of what he can do on Capitol Hill.

If President Trump can get the tax cut back to his desk for a signature, this could be an important turning point in his policy agenda after the early turbulent months of legislating. Just this one victory, which would be a big one politically, could give him and the Republicans more than they need to take onto the campaign trail in 2018 and 2020 as they aim to keep control of Washington.

What's left out of Trump tax plan? The 'D' word.

April 26, 2017
Washington—Do big budget deficits matter anymore?

That's a big question lurking beneath the surface as President Trump's new tax-cut proposals are rolling into public view.

Mr. Trump's election campaign included both pitches for tax cuts and pledges to tame federal debt. As he has settled into the White House, however, the talk has increasingly shifted toward tax cuts and away from tax reform that holds revenues steady (as would be needed to make tax changes permanent by a majority vote in Congress).

It's not yet a detailed plan, but Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin set goals and principles Wednesday that include slashing corporate tax rates from 35 percent of profits to 15 percent, and cutting individual taxes as well.

This isn't just a pivot for the Trump team. Many fiscal-policy experts say it rests within a larger pattern: Politicians, and to some extent the economists who advise them, aren't as focused as they used to be on restraining government debt and deficits.

That doesn't mean Secretary Mnuchin paid no lip service to the goal of fiscal discipline, or that Congress will ignore that value in its deliberations. But at a time when polls suggest the public still sees deficits as an important problem, lawmakers face a test of whether they'll put the goal of short-term fiscal stimulus ahead of long-term fiscal discipline.

"The economy is doing reasonably well," says Robertson Williams, an expert at the nonpartisan Tax Policy Center in Washington. America got a boost from spending "like crazy when the economy was bad," he says, but in recent times "we've never quite figured out that second step" of getting back on a balanced track during good times.

"We don't fill back up that rainy day fund," he says, drawing a metaphor

from reserves that many states have created as cushions against recession. "States are much better at that."

It may be a false sense of security. Although federal deficits surged during and after the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009, they have actually fallen sharply since then and are now near their five-decade average as a share of the US economy.

But even without tax cuts, that annual gap between revenue and spending appears poised to rise again – and to drive a parallel surge in public debt from this decade into the future, as obligations for both health-care entitlements and interest on the debt soar.

A key shift

It's not that politicians aren't aware of the problem. And some are actively seeking to address it.

But fiscal discipline isn't viewed as an imperative the way it once more generally was.

Bill White, a former Houston mayor who researched and wrote a book on America's fiscal history, says a key shift happened in the early 2000s under George W. Bush. President Bush pushed for big tax cuts in 2003 even though the nation was at war, the economy wasn't in recession, and nonpartisan forecasts showed widening deficits as a result.

Republican strategists had taken note: Bush's father had been voted out of the White House in 1992 after raising taxes despite a "no new taxes" pledge.

And Mr. White says Democrats have shared the blame of Washington's shifting fiscal mores. One bipartisan move under Bush was the funding of a new entitlement – prescription-drug benefits under Medicare – without paying for it.

It's not just politics behind the shift, either. In the wake of the Great Recession, liberal economists have argued the case that fiscal stimulus

(jargon for federal spending or tax cuts that can give a short-term boost to the economy) may be justifiable in some nonrecession times. (But for the record: Those economists generally are skeptical that Trump's tax cuts would raise growth meaningfully.)

A streak of prudence

All this is different from the past, says White.

"The fiscal tradition [of America] recognized the link between decisions on spending and decisions on taxes," he says.

Conservatives believed that having a visible price tag (taxes) would help put a check on public spending, while progressives saw the need for sustainable funding for a social safety net.

And if Americans aren't fans of tax hikes, some polls suggest the public has a streak of fiscal prudence that has held pretty steady.

Looking at government, they've strongly supported the idea of balanced budgets in polls spanning from 1940 to the early 2000s, according to the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. And in their personal lives, Americans increasingly see saving money as preferable to spending (at least as an ideal), Gallup surveys find.

Although economists often aren't fans of strict budgetary balance, they agree on the dangers that too much debt can bring – potentially higher interest rates or a financial panic over default risks.

At the same time, many economists and ordinary Americans say the time is ripe for simplifying the tax system and seeking to make it promote greater economic growth and fairness.

Trump's tax cuts

Those goals took center stage as Mnuchin and Gary Cohn, director of the National Economic Council, announced Trump's proposals Wednesday.

"Making the economy work better for all the American people" is the president's goal, Mr. Cohn said at a White House briefing.

The proposal includes paring the number of individual tax brackets to just three, giving businesses a "massive" tax cut, and eliminating the estate tax.

Voters rarely complain about a cut in their taxes. In April Gallup polling, 51 percent of respondents called their taxes "too high." Yet people aren't necessarily crying out for tax cuts: Some 61 percent in the same poll call what they owe "fair." And two-thirds say businesses pay too little in taxes, not too much.

US stock prices were trading at or near record highs Wednesday afternoon as details of the Trump proposal for business taxes were coming into focus.

Regarding impacts on the budget deficit, Mnuchin said, "we are working with the House and Senate on all the details" to get the legislation passed. In recent days he has also suggested that economic growth would allow a tax cut to pay for itself – a notion disputed by economists.

Republicans in Congress range from some focused on reining in deficits (notably House Speaker Paul Ryan) to others more open to tax cuts that aren't paid for with reductions in spending.

The legislative outlook is uncertain, but longer term White says he's hopeful that forces of fiscal restraint – which he thinks have served the nation well in the past – can revive.

"I think there could be a backlash among small-government conservatives to the Trump programs," he says. "And I think that many people who are Democrats understand that rising interest costs ... are crowding out the possibility for investing more" in things like education and infrastructure.

House GOP Health Insurance Plan Gains New Life (UNE)

Stephanie Armour, Kristina Peterson, and Michelle Hackman

9-12 minutes

Updated April 27, 2017 12:01 a.m. ET

WASHINGTON—House Republicans are moving closer to agreement on a health-care

overhaul but now face the task of persuading centrists in the party to agree to provisions that could raise costs for many people with pre-existing conditions.

The latest effort to repeal large portions of the Affordable Care Act gained significant momentum Wednesday by winning an endorsement from the conservative

House Freedom Caucus, whose roughly three dozen members helped sink an earlier version of the bill last month by withholding their support.

The House could vote on the revised bill as early as this week, aides said, potentially on Saturday, which would be President Donald Trump's 100th day in office. Timing

of a vote remained fluid and will depend on whether the bill picks up enough support.

The chamber's approval of the legislation could rewrite the narrative of Mr. Trump's early tenure, giving the president and GOP leaders an accomplishment after the health overhaul appeared to flop in March.

- Trump Calls for Deep Cuts in Business Taxes, Changes for Individuals

Under President Trump's proposed tax overhaul, the corporate rate would drop to 15% from 35%, with a 35% top rate for individuals. Lower brackets would be set at 10% and 25%. The plan would end deductions for state and local taxes, and the alternative minimum tax would be repealed.

TRUMP'S FIRST 100 DAYS

But it remains unclear whether House leaders have enough support from centrist Republicans to secure passage. And the legislation still faces a very difficult path in the Senate.

The mounting support from conservatives comes amid mixed messages about the fate of billions of dollars that insurers get to offset costs for some low-income consumers. Mr. Trump's administration told lawmakers Wednesday it would continue to pay the subsidies, an aide said, after earlier threatening to withhold them.

The bill has gotten new life because of a compromise crafted by Rep. Tom MacArthur (R., N.J.), a co-chairman of a centrist-leaning coalition of lawmakers called the Tuesday Group. His amendment would let states pursue federal waivers to opt out of some of the law's insurance provisions.

The measure retains a key provision in the law requiring health insurers to sell plans to people with pre-existing medical conditions. But it would permit states to remove several protections aimed at keeping those plans affordable.

With federal waivers, states could let insurers charge higher premiums to some people with pre-existing conditions. That would only apply to people who had let their coverage lapse, a measure that aims to ensure people stay insured. And the higher premiums would generally

only last for about 12 months before decreasing. States that received the waivers would also have to set aside funding to help people with high-cost health conditions obtain coverage.

Conservatives applauded the changes, saying they would lower premium costs by reducing regulations on insurers. The Club for Growth, Freedom Partners and Heritage Action, three conservative groups which had initially drummed up right-wing resistance to the bill, dropped their opposition on Wednesday.

Some health-policy analysts said the changes would undermine consumer protections.

"Insurers would charge astronomically high premiums to people with pre-existing conditions who they will want to avoid covering at all costs," said Larry Levitt, a senior vice president at the Kaiser Family Foundation, a nonprofit that focuses on health care.

States could also use waivers to opt out of the law's essential health benefits, a suite of coverage areas required for all plans that include doctor visits, hospital stays and prescription drugs, as well as specialty areas like maternity care. The change could affect all consumers with ACA-compliant insurance plans.

That provision is also intended to lower premium costs, supporters said. Critics said the likely result would be less robust plans with fewer services covered. People with pre-existing coverage, for example, could find it hard to find plans that cover specific drugs now mandated under the health law.

States with waivers also could eliminate the annual limits on out-of-pocket costs that are now in the law for ACA-compliant individual and small-group plans. The change would apply only to benefits the state determines are no longer an essential health benefit. If a state

said maternity care was no longer an essential benefit, for example, the ACA limit on out-of-pocket costs would no longer apply, health analysts said.

With Democrats firmly opposed to the legislation, pressure to support the bill is now on Republican centrists. Ensuring protections for people with pre-existing conditions remained a key concern for some.

Rep. Mike Coffman (R., Colo.), who had previously backed the bill, said he was now undecided.

"What I've got to do is to make sure people are protected in terms of pre-existing conditions and I'm not there yet," he said.

The bill retains deep cuts to Medicaid and other elements of the original proposal that concerned centrist GOP members who worried too many people would lose coverage.

Many of the centrist Republicans who had been opposed to the bill last month said their position had not shifted, among them GOP Reps. Jeff Denham of California, Dan Donovan of New York and Leonard Lance of New Jersey.

The bill in its current form is unlikely to survive the Senate, said Rep. Charlie Dent (R., Pa.), a co-chairman of the centrist Tuesday Group, where Republicans have raised concerns about other parts of the bill, including its Medicaid cuts. Mr. Dent said passage of the bill would be "an exercise in blame shifting," away from conservatives who had helped sink the earlier bill.

Mr. Dent, who is opposed to the bill, said the amendment from Mr. MacArthur alarmed some Republicans who had pledged to ensure fair treatment of people with pre-existing conditions.

"A lot of us have made very clear statements that we want to protect people with pre-existing illnesses and conditions, and this amendment

calls into question that protection," Mr. Dent said.

Mr. MacArthur defended his measure and said he was "cautiously optimistic" that it would bring more votes on board.

"I'm confident that I proposed a good amendment that makes this bill better," he said.

The Tuesday Group, whose ranks include many of the Republicans representing districts won by Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton last November, is likely to be the focus of GOP leaders' efforts to build enough support to pass the bill.

"There are some worries in the Tuesday Group, I will admit," said Rep. Chris Collins (R., N.Y.), a member of the group who supports the bill. "At this point, we're all going to have to do some soul searching."

Critics of the GOP health plan said the proposed changes would effectively price people out of the market, even if they couldn't be denied coverage.

"Under the Republican plan, families will be slammed with brutal premium increases and massive surcharges for the health coverage their loved ones desperately need," said Rep. Nancy Pelosi, the House Democratic leader, in a statement. "Many would lose access to affordable health coverage entirely."

Groups representing doctors and consumers also voiced strong opposition to the latest changes.

"We believe that pending legislation proposals would dramatically increase costs for older individuals, result in millions of people losing their health care coverage, and return to a system that allows for discrimination against people with pre-existing conditions," read a letter, signed by six doctors' groups, addressed to House Speaker Paul Ryan (R., Wis.).

The New York Times Hard-Line Republican Caucus Backs Revised Bill to Repeal Obamacare (UNE)

Jennifer Steinhauer and Robert Pear

The latest proposal, drafted by Representative Tom MacArthur, a moderate Republican of New Jersey, would allow states to obtain waivers from federal mandates that insurers cover certain "essential health benefits," like emergency services, maternity care, and mental health and substance abuse services, which many Republicans argue have driven up premiums.

It would also permit states to get waivers allowing insurers to charge higher premiums based on a person's "health status," if a state had a program to help pay the largest claims or had a high-risk pool where sick people could purchase health insurance.

To qualify for a waiver, a state would have to explain how it would advance at least one of five purposes: reducing average premiums for consumers;

increasing the number of people with coverage; stabilizing the insurance market; increasing the choice of health plans; or stabilizing premiums for people with pre-existing conditions.

The House Freedom Caucus members, acutely aware that the White House and Republican colleagues blamed them for the failure of the earlier bill, were eager to shift the blame to more moderate members who may now reject the

measure. And the biggest conservative pressure groups off Capitol Hill — Heritage Action, Club for Growth and Freedom Partners — dropped their opposition to the measure, known as the American Health Care Act.

"Over the past couple of months, House conservatives have worked tirelessly to improve the American Health Care Act to make it better for the American people," Alyssa Farah, a spokeswoman for the

House Freedom Caucus, said in a prepared statement. Because of those changes, she added, “the House Freedom Caucus has taken an official position in support of the current proposal.”

The group agrees to take an official position when 80 percent of its roughly three dozen members agree.

But what is good for the most conservative corners of the House is not necessarily going to please their colleagues, including the dozens who had already rejected a less-conservative version of the bill. Republican senators had been equally wary. “I think a better approach is to stabilize the insurance pool,” said Senator Bill Cassidy, Republican of Louisiana.

In effect, the more that the bill changes to get through the House, the less chance it has of surviving in the Senate, both because of Senate rules and because the provisions that conservatives have excised are popular.

A recent ABC News/Washington Post poll found that 62 percent of respondents supported nationwide minimum insurance coverage standards and just 33 percent would leave such standards up to the states. Among Republicans, 54 percent supported a nationwide standard for coverage of pre-existing conditions.

Republican senators from states that have expanded Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act said the new House bill did nothing to ease their concerns about the deep cuts to Medicaid that

remain in the legislation.

“There’s still going to be some of us here in the Senate who would like to weigh in, particularly on Medicaid expansion, which is not part of the bill,” said Senator Rob Portman, Republican of Ohio.

Democrats assailed the latest proposal, saying it did nothing to help those who would be left without coverage under the repeal bill. By 2026, the number of uninsured people would be 24 million higher than under the current law, according to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office.

Democrats denounced one part of the new proposal that, they said, would protect health insurance for members of Congress. This provision, they said, guarantees that lawmakers would not lose “essential health benefits” and could not be charged higher premiums because of their health status. The group that helps elect House Democrats immediately unleashed internet ads in 30 Republican-held districts railing against the carve-out.

“The monstrous immorality of Trumpcare is perfectly encapsulated in House Republicans’ plan to exempt their own health coverage from the damage it will do to everyone else,” said the House Democratic leader, Nancy Pelosi of California.

Mr. MacArthur backed away from this part of his proposal on Wednesday. “Congressman MacArthur does not believe members of Congress or their staff should receive special treatment and is working with House

leadership to make absolutely clear that members of Congress and staff are subject to the same rules, provisions and protections as all other Americans,” a spokeswoman said.

Mr. Trump, seeking a major legislative victory in his first 100 days in office, has been pressing hard to get a floor vote on a measure to repeal Mr. Obama’s signature health care law and to fulfill a campaign promise of most Republicans for the better part of a decade.

Vice President Mike Pence and other White House staff have been feverishly trying to get the most conservative members to support a bill, even one that is not viable in the Senate, and without the input of many moderate members.

But the effort may be creating momentum.

“The key is, all of us recognize we and the president made campaign promises to repeal and replace Obamacare,” said Representative Chris Collins, Republican of New York and a top Trump ally. “We, as a team, all recognize we need to get to yes.” He added, “I am guardedly optimistic.”

Speaker Paul D. Ryan said Wednesday that a new bill could come to the floor at some point if sufficient support surfaced. “We’ll vote on it when we get the votes,” he said.

As Republican leaders maneuvered toward a vote to repeal the Affordable Care Act, they were working to assure Democrats that

the government would continue to subsidize out-of-pocket expenses for people buying insurance through the law’s online marketplaces. Democrats have threatened to hold up legislation to keep the government funded past Friday unless they get guarantees that the so-called cost-sharing reductions would continue.

House Republicans had successfully sued the Obama administration to stop the payments, arguing that the administration was illegally spending money that Congress had not explicitly appropriated. By Wednesday afternoon, Democrats appeared convinced that the money would keep flowing, a significant promise that should help reassure insurance companies as they decide whether to offer policies on the marketplaces in 2018.

Ms. Pelosi neared a declaration of victory on that front, and on efforts to block funding this year for Mr. Trump’s promised wall on the Mexican border.

“Our major concerns in these negotiations have been about funding for the wall and uncertainty about the CSR payments crucial to the stability of the marketplaces under the Affordable Care Act,” she said. “We’ve now made progress on both of these fronts.”

The New York Times

How Trump Could Save Obamacare, and Help Himself

Nancy-Ann Deparle and Phil

Schilliro

Imagine waking up to this headline: “Trump Saves the Affordable Care Act.”

It sounds far-fetched — and would certainly be an audacious move — but President Trump could pull it off. He has already changed course when presented with new information: After all, China is no longer a “currency manipulator,” and NATO is no longer “obsolete.”

In this case, improving the Affordable Care Act would not only be good policy for millions of Americans but would also be farsighted politics for Mr. Trump. The obvious obstacles are his repeated claim that the law is a “disaster” and internal Republican Party dynamics. But his endorsement of the House Republican bill last month ended in

one of the biggest embarrassments of his first 100 days. And the new attempt this week to revive the effort might have a similar fate. So he shouldn’t let his past criticisms preclude him from pivoting from “repeal and replace” to “repair and rebrand.”

A rebranded Affordable Care Act would be consistent with the vision Mr. Trump offered during the campaign. Then, he promised that everyone would be “beautifully covered,” with “much lower deductibles,” and “taken care of much better than they’re taken care of now.” He said he wouldn’t cut Medicaid and would provide coverage for those who can’t afford care.

As former White House aides who worked on the health care law, we remember why reform was desperately needed. Our system was broken, with 50 million uninsured, skyrocketing premiums

and no relationship between cost and quality.

That was then. Now we have the lowest percentage of uninsured Americans on record and the slowest rate of inflation in health care spending in 50 years. Medicare beneficiaries have saved \$27 billion on prescription drugs, quality of care is improving, and nearly 600,000 unnecessary hospital readmissions have been prevented.

Still, the law isn’t perfect. Too many hardworking families struggle to pay their medical bills, deductibles are often too high, and some insurance marketplaces need more competition.

The original House Republican bill would have made these problems worse. Premiums would have spiked for most families in the individual market (especially for older people), 24 million would have

lost coverage, and over \$800 billion would have been cut from Medicaid, a program that provides lifesaving help to severely disabled children, the frail elderly and the poor. Given this, Mr. Trump’s support for the House bill was baffling. And the latest version — which tries to reflect the House Freedom Caucus principle that the federal government should have no role in health insurance — moves even farther from his campaign promises.

The answer to the law’s shortcomings isn’t repeal. Many House Republicans are caught in a classic “inside the Beltway” dynamic — the more they repeat the repeal rhetoric, the more converted they become to the cause. But that self-perpetuating loop isn’t the country’s reality.

There’s still a winning hand for President Trump on health care, but it’s not the one he’s playing. “Repair and rebrand” would take advantage

of Mr. Trump's background as a businessman and his interest in expanding the private sector. What the Affordable Care Act needs most is more customers — and federal officials taking actions to increase enrollment, strengthen private plans and ensure the marketplaces will function properly. With a few smart adjustments, this will foster a virtuous cycle of lower costs and expanded competition and coverage options for millions of working-class voters.

First, Mr. Trump should eliminate any doubt that the cost-sharing subsidies that limit out-of-pocket

expenses for over eight million Americans and stabilize the insurance markets will continue. He can do this by continuing to fund the subsidies through existing authority and by fighting a House Republican lawsuit challenging the program. Another alternative would be to support a bipartisan, permanent legislative proposal.

Second, he should make clear that he will faithfully execute the law and instruct his secretary of health and human services, Tom Price, to maximize enrollment efforts and finalize rules that improve affordability, instead of undermining

coverage. That will give insurers the confidence to stay in the marketplaces and lower premiums.

Third, Mr. Trump should use his singular marketing skills to highlight the very real benefits of coverage. Past enrollment efforts have been constrained by insufficient resources and partisan attacks. Mr. Trump can create innovative ways to persuade people to enroll. Increasing enrollment will bolster private plans and marketplaces that are lagging, and potentially make insurance cheaper in many states.

Finally, the president is well positioned to persuade governors and legislatures in the 19 states that haven't expanded Medicaid — almost all of which he won in the election — to cover four million more people. This would bring billions in benefits to their hospitals and help combat the opioid crisis.

By keeping faith with his own voters, Mr. Trump has an opportunity to combine good substance with good politics.