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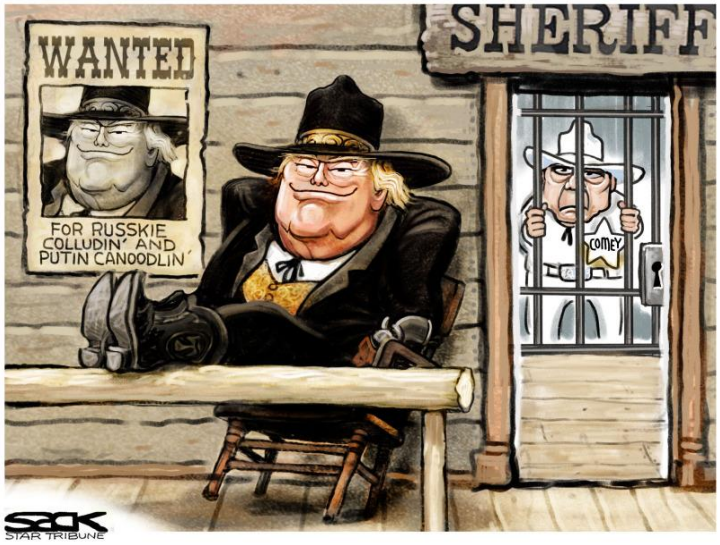

FRANCE - EUROPE

Macron's party announces its parliamentary candidates. Half are political neophytes.

PARIS — French President-elect Emmanuel Macron's party on Thursday announced a list of legislative candidates that is heavy on political novices, a sign of France's reshaped and unsettled landscape ahead of crucial June parliamentary elections.

The 429 announced candidates, of whom more than half are new to politics and half are women, were a first indication of the direction of Macron's still-fluid party, which the president-elect — himself a relative political neophyte — formed just a year ago and which has no representatives in Parliament. In a measure of the challenge of building a movement from scratch, candidates were still being vetted hours before the announcement, and the party said after the list's release that at least five people were included mistakenly. As many as 147 additional candidates are still being finalized.

The legislative elections in June will determine whether Macron, a 39-year-old centrist who was swept into the presidency on Sunday, will have a free hand to pursue his ambitious agenda. He has mixed proposals for business-friendly labor reforms with pledges to strengthen the security net for struggling workers, fusing aspects of France's center-left and center-right parties while rejecting the fierce protectionism of his defeated far-right rival, Marine Le Pen.

[Why the populists didn't win France's presidential election]

But many of the 66 percent of voters who backed Macron appear to have done so less to support him and more because they loathed Le Pen, who failed to shake off her party's Nazi-apologist past. That may spell trouble for Macron in the June elections, which France's traditional parties have vowed to use as a toehold to climb back into power. If Macron does not win a governing majority in the 577-seat National Assembly, he could be forced into a power-sharing arrangement with an opposing party that could severely curtail his agenda. And another five years of stagnation could lead to a roaring comeback for Le Pen in the next election, in 2022.

Centrist Emmanuel Macron has won the French presidency. He defeated Marine Le Pen, the leader of France's far-right National Front, a strongly anti-immigrant populist party. Macron, 39, will now become France's youngest head of state since Napoleon Bonaparte. What Emmanuel Macron's victory means for France and the world (Adam Taylor, Jason Aldag/The Washington Post)

(Adam Taylor,Jason Aldag/The Washington Post)

The unusual political moment was underlined by the number of applications Macron's party fielded for a spot on its slate in June: 19,000. It was a rare chance for citizens from all walks of French life to dream of a shot at a political career. The oldest candidate is 72; the youngest is 24.

"It's the definitive return of citizens to the heart of our political life," Richard Ferrand, the secretary general of Republic on the Move, Macron's party, told reporters Thursday.

The announced candidates include a prizewinning mathematician, an advocate for refugees and a business consultant. One is the former head of France's national SWAT team. Twenty-three candidates come from the governing Socialist Party, which collapsed in the presidential election after the five-year term of the unpopular François Hollande, whose term ends this Sunday.

And, after a campaign against Le Pen that often touched on sensitive issues of race, religion and immigration, about 6 percent of the candidates have family names of Arab origin, while others have backgrounds in France's former colonial possessions in Africa. France does not track race or religion in its official census, but its Muslim population is widely estimated to be somewhere between 5 and 8 percent of the population. The proportion of candidates from ethnic or religious minorities appears to be higher than in previous elections, analysts said.

"It's a very important issue, because when Macron talks about renovating French politics, it's not just to make it younger, but also to make it more representative of the diversity of society," said Bruno Cautrès, an expert on French politics at Sciences Po.

With the center-left Socialists polling in the single digits and many of their lawmakers seeking to defect to Macron's party, the main political threat to Macron comes from the center-right Republican party. Its presidential candidate, François Fillon, was expected to have a lock on the Elysee Palace until a nepotism scandal derailed his bid this year.

Macron, a former investment banker and economic adviser to Hollande, broke with his patron a year ago to form his own movement.

[Emmanuel Macron's unlikely path to the French presidency]

After his improbable rise to power, he is searching for a way to capture disenchanted voters from both sides of the political spectrum, a delicate dance that risks appealing to no one. He cannot stake out too many center-left positions without the risk of being portrayed as the political heir of the unpopular Hollande. But appointing a center-right prime minister, as he is widely expected to do Monday, could drive left-wing voters back to the Socialists and other leftist parties.

"It'll be very difficult to get a majority, because the 66 percent result doesn't show 66 percent in favor of his project," said Olivier Rouquan, a political analyst at the University of Paris Pantheon-Assas.

The delicate dance was on display Thursday when Macron's party announced that it will not allow former Socialist prime minister Manuel Valls to run as one of its candidates but that it will not seek to unseat him, either. Valls has declared his Socialist Party dead and sought to join forces with Macron.

Ferrand, the secretary general of Macron's party, said Thursday that the party has not yet named all of its candidates because it is trying to leave the door open to candidates from the center-right political establishment who might want to switch allegiances before the filing deadline next Wednesday.

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So far, the number of center-right defections has been limited. A senior center-right leader went for Macron's throat Thursday, highlighting the dangers faced by the future president, who will be France's youngest head of state since Napoleon.

"The French are going to define the orientation of the government through their vote," said François Baroin, who is favored to become prime minister if his party is the top vote-getter in the elections, which will be held in two rounds, on June 11 and 18.

In the presidential election, Macron "won the battle of ambiguity by explaining that he is neither of the right nor of the left," Baroin told Le Figaro newspaper. But, he added, "he is the direct heir of François Hollande."

Cléophée Demoustier contributed to this report.

France's First Lady, a Confidante and Coach, May Break the Mold

Susan Chira and Lilia Blaise

"It's like a breath of fresh air in this country," said Natacha Henry, a writer on gender issues. "I think he won because he didn't do any kind of macho performance, and that's what we need. If she's done that for him, great."

Some women see the Macrons as breaking with a pattern of powerful men adorning themselves with younger women; others say French history is replete with examples of younger men seeking out older women, from Henri II's affair with Diane de Poitiers in the 16th century on.

To some, Mr. Macron, 39, is a welcome antidote to past hypermasculine French politicians, and he surrounds himself with strong female advisers and models an egalitarian marriage. Others have mocked him as being under the thumb of a mother figure and even accused him of a gay affair, which he was driven to publicly deny.

The candidate he defeated, Marine Le Pen, could not resist a dig at the marriage during their final debate: "I can see you want to play this teacher and pupil game with me, but it's not really my thing."

In the days after the election, social media posts went viral criticizing the way the couple have sometimes been portrayed in the press: she as a predatory "cougar" and he as a "boy toy"; Ms. Macron, 64, has been called everything from a grandmother making his tea to a "cagole," a French term for a bimbo. If the ages were reversed, her defenders pointed out, no one would have blinked an eye.

"Madame Macron's age is a feminist issue here," Ms. Henry said. "I was at the hairdresser's at a very small town in Orléans the day he was appointed minister of economy, and all the ladies were so happy she was so much older than him. We're so fed up with these older guys with young actresses."

The Macrons both grew up in the northern city of Amiens, Brigitte Macron as the sixth child of a family whose chocolate business was a local institution founded in 1872. She married a banker in 1974 when she was 21, had two daughters and a son, and taught French, Latin and drama in high school.

Like many schoolboys, Emmanuel Macron developed a crush on his teacher. Ms. Macron, during an interview she gave in 2016 to Paris Match magazine, described falling in love: "I felt that I was slipping, too," she said. "I then asked him to go to Paris" to finish his education, and his parents were also eager to separate them.

While the age of sexual consent in France is 15, it is illegal for teachers to have sex with students under the age of 18; Ms. Macron told the authors of a book about the couple that they did not consummate the relationship while he was in high school. She declined a request for an interview.

In a documentary aired this week on French television, she said he had called her every day and had gradually worn down her resistance. "He assured me that he would return," she told Paris Match. "At the age of 17, Emmanuel told me, 'Whatever you do, I will marry you.' Love took everything in its path and led me to divorce."

They married in 2007, a year after she formally divorced. A video clip of their wedding shows him thanking her children for accepting him; her daughters were active in his campaign, and the documentary shows him hunting for Easter eggs with his seven stepgrandchildren.

Anne-Élisabeth Moutet, an analyst of French politics and culture, notes that the presentation of the Macron marriage, including Ms. Macron's interviews, has been carefully staged to try to get out ahead of what might otherwise have been seen as a liability.

In this, she said, they have had the canny advice of Michèle Marchand, known as Mimi, one of France's best-known celebrity handlers and the owner of a photo agency, who was often photographed at their side during the campaign.

"They decided that it was bound to be an image problem if it was not tackled in a clever way," Ms. Moutet said.

Candice Nedelec, an author of a book on them, "Les Macron," said Mr. Macron would emerge backstage from a campaign appearance and reflexively ask, "Where's Brigitte?"

Mr. Macron has sometimes come off as wordy, theoretical or hard to follow. Ms. Macron told him bluntly to cut parts of his campaign book because they were too boring, Ms. Nedelec said. The documentary shows Ms. Macron rehearsing a speech with him, telling him that he had not spoken loudly enough.

"During a presidential campaign, it's usually the king and his court," Ms. Nedelec said. "She's the one who won't hesitate to tell him the truth."

Leah Pisar, an expert in Franco-American relations who worked in the Clinton White House, said Ms. Macron served as his gatekeeper: "You want to get to him, you go through her."

In this, Ms. Macron also appears maternal, protecting her husband as many French wives are expected to do. She is seen chiding him not to eat junk food on the trail in a documentary that followed his campaign for several months.

But Marlène Schiappa, a campaign adviser on gender issues, and others who know the couple warn against painting her as a Pygmalion figure.

They say that he frames policy and that she is more of a sounding board, contributing only on issues she knows well, including education, culture and women's rights. Ms. Nedelec said Ms. Macron had urged her husband to include proposals for smaller classes for students in disadvantaged areas.

She and one of her daughters pushed him to help advance women in politics; he has pledged that half the candidates his party will field in the coming legislative elections will be women and that he will appoint many to his cabinet.

Some of these may be issues that Ms. Macron takes up as first lady, a role that is undefined in France and has no government-paid staff — and polls show the French public wants to keep it that way, said Robert Schneider, who wrote a book about first ladies in France.

Some first ladies in France have been virtually invisible, like Carla Bruni-Sarkozy. During François Hollande's presidency, there was no official first lady. He left his companion, the journalist Valérie Trierweiler, for an actress, Julie Gayet.

"The role of first lady evolved as women in French society evolved," Mr. Schneider said. "We went from de Gaulle's wife, who was very submissive, taking care of the children, very discreet — it corresponded to a bourgeois French family. Then with Carla Bruni and Valérie Trierweiler, we came to modern women who take their place, and that will be accepted."

But there is less support for overtly political first ladies, he said.

"She can't be someone who whispers in the ears of the president," said Alix Bouilhaguet, a journalist who covered the spouses of the presidential candidates. "We had that with Valérie. She created a blurring of the lines, and people didn't like it."

Ms. Nedelec said that she had spoken with Ms. Macron a few days ago and that Ms. Macron was thinking about Michelle Obama as a model. "Brigitte said she knows it was her husband who was elected and not her," Ms. Nedelec said.

Yet in a television interview after he made it to the presidential runoff, her husband made it clear that she was not vanishing: "She will have a say in what she wants to be. She will have a presence, a voice, a look. She will have it privately by my side as she always has, but she will have a public role because that's how it goes."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

France's Macron Inundated With Applications for Legislative Election Candidates

William Horobin and Noemie Bisserbe

PARIS—French president-elect Emmanuel Macron on Thursday fell short of naming all of his candidates for June's legislative elections, as his fledgling En Marche movement tried to find a balance of veterans and fresh faces in an influx of applications.

En Marche had said Monday it would name all 577 candidates for the legislative elections on Thursday, a key step in Mr. Macron's attempt to strengthen political backing for his plans to overhaul the country.

It still has until May 19 to name its candidates, but with elections on June 11, that leaves parties with little time to organize their campaigns.

En Marche—founded barely a year ago—was submerged by a wave of over 19,000 applicants, including from political heavyweights Mr. Macron may have to rely on to build coalitions in parliament.

On Thursday, it was only ready to name 428. Beyond the difficulties of assessing so many applicants, En Marche also wants to leave the door open to figures from the center-right who have been reluctant to cross over to the party, secretary-general Richard Ferrand said.

"We want to be able to welcome the broadest possible coming together," Mr. Ferrand said. The names of the remaining 149 candidates will be disclosed by May 17, after Mr.

Macron takes office Sunday and appoints his government.

The process of naming candidates for the legislative elections has put the freshly elected Mr. Macron in a bind.

The 39-year-old emerged from behind the scenes to win the presidential election on a promise of transcending France's mainstream parties, whose bickering he says prevented the country from repairing its economy.

But the relative newcomer also needs the experience and networks of established politicians to ensure he can pass key economic measures, including labor-law overhauls, this summer.

In January, before becoming the favorite to win the election, Mr. Macron set strict criteria for selecting En Marche candidates as part of his quest for a "democratic revolution."

He said half of the party's legislative candidates would come from outside the political establishment and have never held elected office. Mr. Macron also ruled out making deals with political parties and said he would field candidates in every constituency.

But politics forced En Marche to compromise this week, after former Socialist Prime Minister Manuel Valls declared he would be a candidate for Mr. Macron's party. Mr. Valls, however, didn't qualify in the end as he has been a lawmaker too long to meet En Marche's criteria for political renewal.

To avoid a quarrel and humiliating Mr. Valls, Mr. Ferrand said En Marche wouldn't field a candidate in the former prime minister's constituency, meaning the party will at most field 576 candidates instead of 577.

"We aren't slamming the door in the face of a former prime minister," Mr. Ferrand said.

The En Marche selection procedure was anathema to many political veterans who cut their teeth in the backroom politics of France's parties and were waiting for the presidential election result before making a move.

In a first step, all candidates had to fill out an online application and submit a résumé, cover letter and photocopy of their ID card. Those who made the cut then faced interviews over the telephone or in person. Afterward, a 12-strong nomination commission assessed whether a short-list of candidates measured up to Mr. Macron's program and demands.

Out of the 428 candidates already selected, just over half have no political experience, the youngest is 24 and the oldest 72. They include Fields medalist winner Cedric Villani and the former head of France's national SWAT team, Jean-Michel Fauvergue. Twenty-four socialist lawmakers and Gaspard Gantzer, the communication chief of President François Hollande, will also run for En Marche.

"The promise of renewal has been kept," Mr. Ferrand said.

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Broughton : Where Has All the French Talent Gone

Philip Delves Broughton

Over the past two decades, France's best have abandoned home. Once they would have tap-danced their way through careers in and out of the public and private sectors—a job at the Inspection Générale des Finances followed by a stint in banking, then back into government before settling in at the top of some state-sponsored industrial giant.

But some time after the opening of the Channel Tunnel in 1994, during the long drear of the Jacques Chirac years, they began to leave. All those graduates of Paris's famed *lycées*, Henri IV and Stanislas, and the products of its vaunted *grandes écoles* looked at what France had to offer and hoofed it, some for New York, a few for Silicon Valley, and a great thundering herd for London.

They have earned millions as hedge-fund traders and investment bankers, or by setting up businesses free of the mind-bending constraints of French employment law. London has prospered from their presence. They have bought townhouses in South Kensington and filled the private schools with hordes of little Xaviers and Sylvies. If some enterprising PR company were to set up a cross-Channel croissant-making contest, the winner would be as likely to come from Mayfair as from the Marais.

So if you wonder how a mysterious 39-year-old with only a brief record of public service can find his way to the French presidency, one answer is that his generation's talent pool has been drained by emigration. Emmanuel Macron achieved his ascent while the best of his class were off elsewhere. He won the support of 93% of French voters living outside the country. In that number were many who in an earlier era might have proved stiff opposition on the campaign trail.

It never used to be this way. Past presidents such as Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, François Mitterrand and even Mr. Chirac were epitomes of a certain kind of Frenchman: Mr. Giscard d'Estaing, all floppy-limbed aristocratic disdain; Mitterrand, a cryptic Socialist with a history as smoky and convoluted as France's own; and Mr. Chirac, a swaggering clan chief of indiscernible political or personal morality.

Their careers had exposed them to all the glories and contradictions of French public life, to reversals and compromises, and to years of sharp-elbowed political fights. They were the winners of a Darwinian struggle among France's finest. When they ventured out into the world, no one doubted they represented the sharp end of French political talent—that unique blend of charm, technocratic bludgeoning and devilish self-interest. You would back them in any fight, whether it was with the Germans to remake EU rules, a union boss to settle a strike or a West African potentate to ensure the privilege of French oil companies.

This hasn't been the case since. Nicolas Sarkozy spun his wheels, enveloping his presidency in pointless noise and smoke. François Hollande has done very little at all. They are arguably the two worst presidents of the Fifth Republic so far. The last relic of that bygone era of French leadership is Alain Juppé, Mr. Chirac's prime minister and now the long-serving mayor of Bordeaux, who has been thwarted time and again from making the final leap to the Élysée Palace.

Mr. Macron triumphed as a Frenchman who had decided to stay, when his education and opportunities might easily have led him to leave. He could have joined the quarter of a million French citizens living in London. But he didn't. He stayed and took advantage of an emptied political field, in which midgets loom like giants.

He is now seeking to repopulate that field, hastily putting together a list of candidates to stand for his new En Marche party in next month's parliamentary elections. The names read like the mythical everyman and everywoman candidates that political parties crave: a farmer, a lawyer, a former head of the police rapid-intervention force, the deputy director of a hospital in Toulouse. They are supposed to represent a new and untainted generation in French politics.

It would be a far greater achievement if he could persuade the hundreds of thousands who have left to come back. To renounce their easy foreign lives and re-create the kind of truly competitive political leadership France once had, and which it so badly needs once again.

Mr. Delves Broughton is an author and former Paris correspondent for the Daily Telegraph.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Germany Debates How to Spend Its Overflowing Coffers

Andrea Thomas

BERLIN—This year's election could herald a bonanza for German consumers.

With the country's coffers overflowing, the competing candidates are brimming with ideas about how to spend the money—or how much of it to give back.

Tax-revenue estimates released on Thursday showed the strong economy and labor market would deliver a €54.1 billion ($58.7 billion) windfall through 2021, underlining the firepower at politicians' disposal. If they deliver on their pledges, this could be good news for the U.S., the European Union and the international organizations that have been urging Germany to loosen its purse strings for years.

In a sharp departure from past elections, the candidates in September's election have lined up spending proposals—including free child care, higher unemployment benefits and infrastructure investment—and tax cuts that could bring German voters tens of billions of euros extra per year, some economists say.

"The sky appears to be the only limit," said Holger Schäfer, economist with the business-funded IW economic institute.

For years, Germany ignored calls from the U.S., the International Monetary Fund and the European

Commission to spend more as a way to reduce its large current-account and trade surpluses and help the embattled economies of its eurozone neighbors.

While Germany's change of mind comes late, economists say it could give a welcome fillip to the budding recovery in the eurozone. More domestic spending would mean more internal demand, with positive spillover effects for neighboring economies, they have argued.

It could also go some way to defusing criticism of Germany in France, where many politicians, including President-elect Emmanuel Macron, have called for more expansionary economic policies in Berlin to help the rest of the region.

The European Commission predicted in its spring forecasts on Thursday that Germany's current-account surplus would ease to 7.6% of gross domestic product in 2018 from 8.5% of GDP in 2016, helped by a rebound in investment and rising imports.

Extravagant campaign pledges are the stuff of democracy, but they haven't been a dominant feature of German elections for almost two decades, as politicians stressed the need to save money and repay ballooning public debts.

In the first decade of the century, the government took an ax to the welfare state, slashing benefits and entitlements. Since then, Chancellor Angela Merkel has raised pensions for some people but otherwise maintained the status quo. And German taxpayers and businesses haven't seen substantial tax cuts since the mid-2000s.

But with healthy growth, near-full employment and now three years of budget surpluses, priorities are shifting.

Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble on Thursday announced a rise in the government's countrywide tax-revenue estimate that he said created leeway for tax cuts. His ministry expects the budget to remain in surplus at least until 2018 after last year's record €24 billion profit, and the country's public debt, which has been shrinking for the past five years, is set to fall below 60% of GDP by 2020.

Leading the competition for spending ideas are the center-left Social Democrats, now junior partners in Ms. Merkel's ruling coalition. The party has promised more funding for training and education, infrastructure investments and child care as well as cuts in health-insurance contributions. Economists put the combined stimulus at €30 billion a year.

Ms. Merkel's conservative bloc has suggested grants for home buyers with children and reducing and eventually abolishing nursery fees. It also wants €15 billion a year in tax cuts for small- and middle-income earners, and Mr. Schäuble has said Berlin may have to react to mooted corporate-tax cuts in the U.S. and the U.K.

In the opposition, the pro-business Free Democrats want to cut taxes by €30 billion a year. Others, including the antiestablishment AfD and the Left Party, want to focus spending on families, from one-time cash benefits for newborns to free day care and a near doubling in child benefits. The Greens have said they would earmark an extra €12 billion for families on low incomes and single parents.

Unlike the possible tax cuts, the promised benefits boost received a mixed welcome from German economists, many of whom say Germany already spends too much on welfare—some €888.2 billion, or 29.4% of its GDP, in 2015, and one in two euros in the federal budget.

"They can spend a euro only once…and if they really cut taxes and provide more benefits I expect them not to cut spending elsewhere but to simply increase debt," said Niklas Potrafke from the Ifo economic institute.

Still, pollsters say this year's avalanche of new spending ideas is tapping into a diffuse but mounting resentment among voters at a perception that the rich are getting richer and small- and middle-income Germans are missing out.

"Social disparity has become the No. 2 concern [behind the integration of refugees], but only because we don't have other problems right now," said Matthias Jung, head of the polling institute Forschungsgruppe Wahlen.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

EU Raises Growth Forecasts but Warns on Threat From Brexit and Trump

Emre Peker

BRUSSELS—The European Union raised its 2017 economic growth forecast Thursday, saying the bloc's revival is strengthening despite geopolitical risks that could undermine its fifth year of recovery.

Gross domestic product in the 28-country EU will grow by 1.9% in both 2017 and 2018, the bloc estimated in its latest economic outlook, up from its February forecast of 1.8%.

It raised its GDP forecast for the 19-member eurozone to 1.7% this year from its previous forecast of 1.6% and maintained its estimate of 1.8% economic growth in 2018.

The thrice-yearly review comes on the heels of Emmanuel Macron's presidential victory in France on a business friendly and pro-EU platform, and as centrist politicians across Europe appear to be beating back a populist backlash against the bloc. After years of tepid economic growth fueled voters' anger against the EU, officials in Brussels say the drag on investments is slowly disappearing as a busy election cycle nears the finish line with Germany's polls in September.

"The high uncertainty that has characterized the past 12 months may be starting to ease," said Pierre Moscovici, the European commissioner for economic and financial affairs, taxation and customs. "Europe is entering its fifth consecutive year of growth, supported by accommodative monetary policies, robust business and consumer confidence and improving world trade."

But while some of the risks to the European economy are ebbing, geopolitical developments and a host of "elevated" uncertainties still pose threats, according to the European Commission—the bloc's executive arm.

EU officials said the eurozone's recovery from the global financial crisis of 2007-08 faced threats, such as negotiations over Britain's exit from the EU, China's economic adjustment and potential protectionist measures from U.S. President Donald Trump.

Compounding the headwinds facing Europe, and contributing to its uneven recovery, are also high levels of debt and ongoing fragilities in parts of the banking system, Mr. Moscovici said.

"Growth is still held back," he said, citing the hangover from the financial crisis alongside geopolitical uncertainties.

Members of the common-currency area are seen with an average deficit of 1.4% of GDP in 2017, unchanged from the EU's earlier forecast. The gap is seen declining to 1.3% in 2018, down slightly from the previous estimate of 1.4%.

A temporary increase in inflation toward the European Central Bank's target of close to but below 2% will moderate as the impact of rising oil prices fades, the EU said.

The eurozone's inflation rate is seen slightly lower at the end of 2017, at 1.6%, rather than the 1.7% forecast in February, and accelerating to 1.8% in 2018, in line with the EU's previous outlook.

Inflation's low trajectory is also poised to be a boon for European economic growth this year and in 2018, enabling the ECB to keep up monetary stimulus. The commission expects central bank policies "to remain expansionist," Mr. Moscovici said.

Of the EU's most severely hit countries during the financial crisis, Spain, Portugal and Ireland are forecast to bounce back even stronger than previously estimated with growth rates ranging from 1.8% to 4%, according to the commission.

Among other hard-hit countries, Italy's recovery is seen steady at 0.9% while Greek forecasts for this year were pared down to 2.1% from 2.7%—a reflection of the delays in completing the second review of the country's bailout package.

Still, EU officials painted an optimistic picture of declining unemployment, cutting their 2017 forecast for the eurozone to 9.4% from 9.6% and for 2018 to 8.9% from 9.1%.

Unemployment in the broader EU is now seen at 8% this year and 7.7% in 2018—down from the 8.1% and 7.8% previously estimated.

"Growth in the EU is gaining strength and unemployment is continuing to decline. Yet the picture is very different from member state to member state," European Commission Vice President Valdis Dombrovskis said. "To redress the balance, we need decisive reforms across Europe from opening up our products and services markets to modernizing labor market and welfare systems."

The Most Hated Man in Britain Thinks He Can Save the Country

Tom Whyman : Tony Blair is returning to front-line politics. We know this because, in an interview with the *Daily Mirror* published April 30, he announced that he was doing so. Of course, it's unclear what exactly Blair means by this, since — despite there being a general election in the U.K. scheduled for June 8 — he has ruled out standing as a member of Parliament. Rather, he'll be getting his "hands dirty" in some nonspecific way, helping "shape the policy debate" by "reconnecting" with voters.

Tony Blair is returning to front-line politics — but then again, he always is or is just about to. The *Mirror* interview was hardly a bolt from the blue; over the past few years, Blair has been spewing essentially the same line to some rag, I'd wager, at least once every few months, "taking a break" from his various, ever-shifting network of charitable foundations to tease a return (examples include this one from 2016 and this one from way back in 2012). These interviews are typically accompanied by photos of Blair sprawled out on the couch, mug in hand, his body language projecting comforting vibes of "daddy's home," but those wild eyes and that messianic turn of phrase making sure that we know he is telling us: "I am Him, returned. Soon my saving light will shine forth onto the world" — saving the U.K. from Brexit; saving the Labour Party from the supposedly electorally toxic evil of providing a robust left-wing alternative to neoliberalism.

But just where is the front line Blair is returning to supposed to be drawn? If members of Parliament and prime ministers are at the front line of politics, then where are those directly impacted by their policies? What about the pensioners dying in the crumbling hospitals front-line politicians are responsible for overseeing or the new graduates saddled with dwindling employment prospects to go with their massive debt? Are they just standing at the back somewhere, the direct nature of the pain that politics causes them leaving them somehow ignorant compared with those in power? Was *Blair* back with them, until a few days ago? Presumably not, since he now says he wants to reconnect with them. But where was he in the intervening years? Some uncanny nether region? Some vampire's castle?

Perhaps. Certainly, in order to fully appreciate the significance of Blair's return to "front-line politics," one needs to understand the deeply uncanny position Blair occupies within the British psyche. Twenty years ago this month, Blair was elected prime minister in a landslide. Selling his party under the "New Labour" moniker, Blair's glossy third-way centrism brought 18 years of Conservative rule to an end and unleashed a wave of "Cool Britannia" optimism. Blair's victory was sound-tracked by the bouncy synth-pop of D:Ream's "Things Can Only Get Better," and I remember — as a child — genuinely thinking that they would. As an adult, of course, I now realize that the statement "things can only get better" is also resignedly pessimistic, at least to the extent that it permits low expectations. A more honest message for the third way has perhaps never been put forward: Vote for us! We're the only realistic alternative to something too horrible to contemplate!

But despite D:Ream's promises, things ended up going rather badly wrong. Blair's government introduced a few progressive policies, for sure. It instigated a minimum wage, started funding schools and hospitals properly, and founded Sure Start centers to assist early-years care and reduce child poverty. But as a centrist, Blair's comfortableness with neoliberal capitalism left him uninterested in reforming the deep apparatus of the state that Margaret Thatcher had created — and so these gains have been easily reversed by his Tory successors.

Still worse, post-9/11 Blair's attitude toward civil liberties became increasingly draconian, and he completely disregarded mass protests against his support for George W. Bush's disastrous war in Iraq. This latter venture, in particular, poisoned the public's perception of Blair such that the initial optimism surrounding his premiership now seems distinctly strange, like the memory of someone you fell in love with in a dream. Since leaving office, Blair's sleazy globe-trotting business dealings, most notably with the authoritarian President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan, have only compounded his unpopularity. Blair remains largely hated by the electorate; indeed, recent polling suggests that more than half of voters believe Blair's actions on Iraq are literally unforgivable, placing him beyond the moral pale of humanity itself.

And yet, amid all this, he still has his fans. Plenty of people within the Labour Party, and writing on behalf of the "moderate left" in the British press, feel nostalgic for the days when Blair had them on top and beating the Tories, when he finally seemed to have stolen the cheat codes for winning elections from whatever vast country estate the right was hiding them in. In Blair, they see a figure whom — in the golden days — voters genuinely liked and trusted, who was a dynamic public speaker with the right mix of socially progressive and "business-friendly" economic policies, and who seemed able to speak for Britain on the world stage. In the current Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, they see an out-of-touch fuddy-duddy more interested in tending his allotment and making jam than speaking to the press, electorally poisoned if not by his open hostility to neoliberalism then by his long-standing friendliness toward groups such as Hamas and the Irish Republican Army. They blame the Brexit result on Corbyn's lack of appeal to swing voters and the lack of passion he displayed toward the European Union and toward the referendum campaign. They think that if a "strong," devotedly Europhile leader such as Blair were to return, then the whole sorry farce might still be prevented.

Given the profound ambivalence with which the U.K. perceives Blair, it is perhaps no surprise that reactions to his return lend themselves to Freudian theorizing.

Given the profound ambivalence with which the U.K. perceives Blair, it is perhaps no surprise that reactions to his return lend themselves to Freudian theorizing. To Angus Harrison, writing in *Vice*, Blair is "our estranged father," elected as "the country's cool new dad" but now descended into "delusion." "Like all bad dads, even after all the shit he's put us through, he still thinks he knows best."

Sam Kriss goes still further. To him, Blair is an ancient monster, "a gremlin, an incubus, very strange and very cruel and very foreign to our world," whose true nature we have tried collectively to repress. Blair was no mere politician: Rather Blair, or what he stands for, has always been with humanity — but he will never die, never leave us alone, because he was never truly alive. No wonder, then, that Blair is always returning to front-line politics or just about to. What we repress comes back with fangs.

Blair, of course, says he is returning because he wants to help fight Brexit, preventing it if possible. If anything, this just shows how out-of-touch he is. It is perhaps true that there is room, in the U.K., for stronger anti-Brexit voices. But what's crucial here is *how* such voices make their arguments. In the upcoming general election, Corbyn's Labour Party will almost certainly lose badly. But what's striking about this apparently inevitable loss is that the public, when asked, typically agrees with most of his policies. The trouble for Labour is really that the political conversation at the moment is not about schools, hospitals, or public transport; it is about Brexit. The public sees delivering Brexit as of the utmost national importance, and Theresa May is the politician they trust most to deliver it. So, if Labour wants to start winning elections again, realistically, its best bet is probably to get the whole process over with as quickly as possible and hope the Tories don't find a way of shifting the blame onto them after it proves a disaster.

For this reason, if a Labour figure like Blair is going to make anti-Brexit arguments, they need to do it very carefully: It can't be about *preventing* Brexit — it has to be about contesting *May's version* of Brexit, steering the U.K. back toward a "soft" Brexit in which the country remains within the common market. This goal is perhaps a realistic one (which incidentally is good news for Labour supporters, since Corbyn's party — admittedly with plenty of moaning from the backbenches — seems to have adopted it). If May continues to falter in talks with the European Union's remaining countries, anti-Brexiteers could conceivably find some way of preventing her from shifting the blame onto Brussels and manage to discredit her as a leader instead. But let's face it, given Blair's unpopularity, it would help enormously if none of the people making this argument were *Tony Blair*. It is high time for Blair to realize that, whenever he comes out in support of anything, the vast majority of British people will find themselves on some level inclined to oppose it. If he really wants to help, perhaps he ought to do an interview declaring that Theresa May has his full support.

On a more serious note, though, there is this: The Brexit result was, among other things, the product of decades of alienation between voters and the political classes. More than any other individual, Blair accelerated this process of alienation — in particular as a result of his cynical, ultimately incredibly destructive handling of the Iraq War. He therefore bears a great weight of responsibility for the Brexit result himself. Perhaps if he really wants to "help," Blair ought to start by acknowledging this moral burden, just as he did, following the Chilcot

Inquiry, over the torturous mess he made of Iraq.

Tony Blair is returning to front-line politics. But he never really left it. Both in the U.K. and abroad, Blair's damaging legacy has remained with us ever since he departed office a decade ago. Let this latest comeback remind us, then, of just how urgent it still is to expel him properly and not simply repress his memory.

Photo credit: Hannah Peters/Getty Images

Labour Party in Britain Approves Jeremy Corbyn's Sharp Left Turn

Stephen Castle

The leaked draft — initially published by The Daily Mirror, The Daily Telegraph, the BBC and other news outlets — suggested that Mr. Corbyn, a left-wing politician, had broken decisively with the centrist legacy of most of his recent Labour predecessors, most notably with that of former Prime Minister Tony Blair, who won three general elections.

Instead, Mr. Corbyn's strategy contains echoes of Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, who ignited liberal passions in his unsuccessful race for the Democratic presidential nomination last year. Labour's manifesto also serves the more prosaic function of shoring up the party's core vote as it approaches a difficult electoral contest on June 8.

Motivating those supporters, and achieving a decent election result, could be crucial for Mr. Corbyn, who says he wants to stay on as leader, even if he loses, as pollsters predict.

A spokesman for Labour, reached by telephone on Thursday, declined to authenticate the document, saying the party's policy was not to comment on leaks. But Andrew Gwynne, Labour's national elections and campaign coordinator, speaking to the BBC on Thursday morning, did not deny the document's authenticity.

Labour has not yet outlined how it would pay for its pledges, though Mr. Gwynne said that all costs would be accounted for when the final manifesto document was published next week.

The Conservatives and Labour's other opponents seized on the leak as evidence that the party lacked discipline.

"This is a total shambles," the Conservative Party said in a statement. "Jeremy Corbyn's plans to unleash chaos on Britain have been revealed. Jobs will be lost, families will be hit, and our economic security damaged for a generation if Jeremy Corbyn and the coalition of chaos are ever let anywhere near the keys to Downing Street."

Key Proposals in Labour's Draft Manifesto

The program includes some eye-catching policies likely to appeal to traditional party supporters and younger voters.

- Abolish university tuition fees.
- Provide free meals to more schoolchildren, paid for by removing the VAT exemption on private school fees.
- Renationalize some energy companies, train operators and Royal Mail.
- Impose a levy on companies "with high numbers of staff on very high pay."
- Prohibit government contracts from companies that pay bosses more than 20 times as much as the lowest earners.
- Guarantee the rights of European Union nationals living in Britain, and "secure reciprocal rights" for British citizens living elsewhere in the bloc.
- Ensure no rise in income tax for those earning below 80,000 pounds, or about $105,000.

Britons will vote on June 8 in a snap general election called by Prime Minister Theresa May. Mrs. May wants to increase her slim parliamentary majority before negotiating Britain's withdrawal from the European Union, known as "Brexit." According to surveys, her Conservative Party is well ahead of Labour.

Mr. Corbyn remains unpopular, even among many of his own lawmakers; last year, some tried unsuccessfully to unseat him. There have been fewer public displays recently of party divisions, but the leak of the draft manifesto was a reminder that a lack of unity still exists in the party just weeks before the election.

The leaked document, nevertheless, gives a clear indication of the type of campaign that Labour is likely to pursue, and the clear political dividing lines it will create. For years, Labour's left-wing politicians have argued that the party has been unsuccessful because it has not offered voters a sufficiently radical alternative to Conservative policies, and that theory looks likely to be tested in the coming elections.

The draft says that Labour would renew the Trident nuclear submarine system, which Mr. Corbyn has opposed, but that any Labour prime minister would be "extremely cautious" about deploying it. There would be a ban on so-called zero-hours contracts, under which employers are not obliged to offer employees a minimum amount of work.

The Royal Mail would be renationalized, as would rail companies; and the draft proposed caps on energy prices. Mr. Gwynne also said that in each region there should be a state-run energy company.

On leaving the European Union, the document says that Labour "will reject 'no deal' " as "viable," a departure from Mrs. May's stance; she has threatened to walk away from negotiations with the bloc if she does not get the accord she wants.

Car Carrying Jeremy Corbyn Runs Over Cameraman's Foot

A BBC cameraman was injured on Thursday morning, as Mr. Corbyn, the leader of the Labour Party, rushed to attend a meeting about the party's new manifesto.

By REUTERS. Photo by Neil Hall/Reuters.

The draft also proposes raising income taxes for the top 5 percent of earners to fund greater spending on health care. John McDonnell, Labour's economics spokesman, has suggested that those earning more than 80,000 pounds, or just over $100,000, would be asked for a "modest" increase in tax payments, with bigger increases for those who earn £150,000 or more.

Over all, the agenda suggests that Labour's primary objective is to shore up its core vote to avoid a big defeat, rather than seeking to persuade any wavering Conservative supporters.

Mrs. May, for her part, has promised to spend more on defense, announcing that a Conservative government would meet its NATO spending target but would also increase the military budget "by at least 0.5 percent above inflation in every year."

The Conservatives were not the only ones to deride the leaked manifesto. Tommy Sheppard, a lawmaker for the Scottish National Party, said in a statement, "The very fact that this draft manifesto has been leaked shows how divided and chaotic the Labour Party are."

(As if the leak were not enough, as Mr. Corbyn arrived on Thursday for the meeting to discuss the manifesto, the car in which he was traveling ran over the foot of a BBC cameraman, the broadcaster reported. The cameraman, Giles Wooltorton, has been hospitalized.)

Most observers say they believe Labour's new manifesto is the most left-wing since the 1983 general election, when the party lost badly. That platform included more-sweeping nationalization and unilateral nuclear disarmament, and one Labour lawmaker at the time described the 1983 manifesto as "the longest suicide note in history."

'Brexit' Imperils London's Claim as Banker to the Planet (UNE)

Peter S. Goodman

LONDON — From a skyscraper in Canary Wharf, the once-bustling cluster of docks transformed into a global banking center, traders at Citigroup's regional headquarters move unfathomable sums of money around the planet. They are exploiting London's unrivaled connections to the intricate plumbing of the international financial system.

Now the flow of money is in doubt, imperiling London's fortunes.

Many of the transactions Citigroup oversees here are dependent on Britain's inclusion in the European Union. Italian banks tap London's vast pools of money to strengthen tattered balance sheets. German manufacturers borrow funds for expansion. Swiss money managers ply their fortunes. Citigroup and other global banks manage much of this activity, executing trades, and

ensuring that money lands where it is supposed to, leaning heavily on their London operations.

In March, Prime Minister Theresa May set in motion Britain's pending divorce from the European Union, starting talks with Europe to resolve future dealings across the English Channel. The negotiations come with a two-year deadline. If no agreement is struck — an outcome that cannot be discounted — Britain's relationship with the European marketplace would be thrown into chaos.

That prospect was seemingly enhanced this week as France elected as its next president, Emmanuel Macron, who has vowed to ensure that Britain emerges the weaker from negotiations. He has promised to fight any agreement preserving access to Europe for London-based financial services companies, while openly calling for bankers to decamp for Paris.

"It's the British who will lose the most," Mr. Macron said in a pre-election interview with the global affairs magazine Monocle. "The British are making a serious mistake over the long term."

If a rupture across the channel results, global banks like Citi stand to feel significant consequences.

Somewhere between one-fifth and one-third of London's financial undertakings now involve clients based in Europe. Much of this business is dependent on so-called passports that give financial firms in one European Union nation permission to operate in the others. Free of a deal preserving the essentials of passport rights, many of these trades would be effectively illegal. The rules and regulatory proclivities of 27 remaining European Union nations would have to be satisfied.

"I wouldn't even be able to service some clients, theoretically, once the U.K. exits," says Jerome Kemp, a New Yorker who is Citi's global head of futures, clearing and collateral at its London headquarters. "If the client driving the order is sitting in the European Union, then we've got a problem."

Brexit, as it is known, has jeopardized London's status as banker to the planet. London will surely retain credentials as one of the world's most important financial centers. Yet it is likely to surrender stature to European competitors exploiting Brexit as an opportunity to capture spoils. It risks losing ground in its obsessive rivalry with New York.

On a recent afternoon at Citigroup's headquarters, traders sit at banks of computer screens watching prices in markets scattered from Shanghai to São Paulo. One trader monitors the price of crude oil, eyeing a deal for an American refinery in Brazil. Another seeks to divine how stock markets in South Africa and Indonesia will react to higher American interest rates.

A Swedish trader helps a money manager in Paris place a complicated bet that German government bonds will fall.

"There's about 10 questions that immediately come to mind as to whether we could execute that trade in London after Brexit," Mr. Kemp says.

Those questions stand to become more abundant as the European authorities mull whether to require that so-called clearing — settling up the money — on trades involving the euro currency take place within the European Union.

Clearing is a crucial part of the work Mr. Kemp's team handles in London. Trades of derivatives worth about 850 billion euros a day ($928 billion) are now cleared daily in London, or roughly three-fourths of the total for the globe.

Like every bank with a regional headquarters in London, Citi cannot just wait in the hopes that politicians will strike a deal preserving its access to Europe. Banks are already configuring plans to move significant numbers of people to other financial centers within the European Union, ensuring that trading can continue without a hitch after Brexit is complete.

This is a historic reversal for a city that has for centuries functioned as a central artery for finance.

As the seat of a colonial realm stretching from the Americas to Asia, London financed enterprises attendant to empire. Banking operations established by pioneers like Nathan Mayer Rothschild extended credit to shipping ventures that brought back treasure from distant shores.

In modern times, the deregulation of London's financial markets attracted an influx of overseas banks. As globalization eroded international borders, money washed in from every shore.

Today, nearly one-fifth of global banking transactions are booked in the United Kingdom, most of them in London. About $2.4 trillion in foreign currencies is traded here daily, according to the Bank of England.

The industry employs more than 1.1 million people in Britain, while generating annual revenues reaching 205 billion pounds (about $265 billion).

New York is bigger by some measures, but much of its business caters to the American market. London has become the ultimate international financial marketplace.

Sovereign wealth funds from Asia and the Middle East manage investments here. Russian oligarchs and Saudi princes park fortunes here. China looks to London as a promising place to handle transactions involving its currency.

Brexit will not touch most of this activity. At least one-third of London's financial industry revenues involve business inside Britain. Another third is tied to the world outside Europe.

But disruption to the European business carries risks. Between 15,000 and 80,000 finance jobs could depart over the next two years, according to various studies. As transactions move, regulators in the new venues are likely to demand a heavier presence of human beings — people to hold accountable should matters go awry. As bankers move, so could accountants and lawyers.

"Everyone is preparing for the worst," says Davide Serra, chief executive of Algebris Investments, a hedge fund he co-founded in 2006. "You will see the emergence of Frankfurt, Paris, Dublin, Luxembourg, Madrid."

"To the world, London now matters more than New York," he adds. "In 10 years' time, New York will matter more."

The Rise of the City

In the view from the headquarters of Rothschild & Company, London's past and potential future are effectively laid out on display.

The building sits on land that once held the home of the founder Nathan Mayer Rothschild. Conference rooms look down on the Bank of England. Across the River Thames, a 95-story glass-fronted pyramid known as the Shard punctuates the view. It was erected by a consortium of investment funds from Qatar.

Within the original City of London — the heart of the finance industry, known as the Square Mile — cranes sit atop a half-dozen new skyscrapers in various stages of completion. Who will occupy them once Britain leaves Europe?

Mr. Rothschild saw the beginning. Born into a Jewish ghetto in Frankfurt, he landed in the English mill town of Manchester at the end of the 18th century, intending to buy patterns for his family's textile business.

He soon sniffed out a better opportunity in the City of London, the warren of streets laid down by the Romans at the lowest crossing point of the Thames. The bounty of empire was landing on the docks — tea from India, silk from China, cotton from the American South. Trade required credit. Mr. Rothschild carved out a niche. He negotiated terms at the Royal Exchange — today, a shopping mall full of Italian luxury goods.

As the Duke of Wellington confronted Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815, Mr. Rothschild worked on behalf of the crown, quietly amassing gold and silver to pay the troops. Napoleon succumbed.

The Rothschild bank soon helped other governments finance operations by borrowing from British merchants.

By the middle of the 20th century, Warburg, another London bank, was selling bonds for the Italian highway network, raising $15 million in American currency. This was the first issue of so-called Eurobonds, those raised in foreign currency — now a mammoth business.

The mid-1980s brought the run of deregulation known as the Big Bang. Financial firms gained the freedom to set their own commissions, and to speculate and advise clients. Overseas companies could now acquire British banks.

In came the foreigners — especially the Americans. The rule of law prevailed. The English language sufficed. A banker waking up in London could trade in Asia in the morning, then across Europe, catch the opening of markets in New York, and still make it home for dinner at some palatial spread in a leafy neighborhood.

London finance had previously operated by gentlemanly code.

"I used to catch the 5-to-9 tube," recalls Robert Leitão, who spent the '80s at Morgan, Grenfell & Company, one of the oldest banks in the City, and who now counsels clients on mergers for Rothschild. "We were reliably in a bar by 5 o'clock."

Yet as investment banks like J. P. Morgan and Morgan Stanley swept in, they began poaching clients. "We had to get up earlier," Mr. Leitão says.

He recalls his first brush with an American bank during a telecommunications merger in the early 1990s.

"We'd go in with our little black-and-white documents and Goldman Sachs came in with what was the first landscape-color presentation

we'd ever seen," he says. "I remember one of my colleagues saying to me as we came out of that meeting, 'Oh my God, the world's changed.'"

As trading swelled and buildings required rewiring for high-speed internet, the global banks outgrew the City. Many established headquarters in new skyscrapers in Canary Wharf.

Much of what was taking place now had little to do with financing business. Money was arriving to avoid tax collectors in other jurisdictions. Traders were wagering via exotic, lightly regulated instruments known as derivatives — creations that would play a leading role in pulling the world into the financial crisis of 2008.

Paul Woolley worked in the asset management industry. He watched pension funds flood in from around the world, as local managers concentrated more on collecting fees than doing right by retirees. He saw London refashioned into a playground for hedge fund billionaires.

"I'm in favor of free markets," says Mr. Woolley, now a professor at the London School of Economics, where he oversees the Center for the Study of Capital Market Dysfunctionality. "But the whole thing has ballooned into a complete monster."

The Channel Widens

For Mr. Kemp, Citibank's global head of futures, history is rolling backward.

Back in 1987, when he landed in Paris, working as a broker at a French bank, every nation was effectively its own fief. Buying a bond in Spain meant having to go through the local trading desk.

But as Mr. Kemp jumped to JPMorgan Chase and more recently to Citi, these institutions increasingly concentrated people in London.

More than a trillion dollars in foreign exchange and interest rate derivatives change hands in the City every day, nearly three times the volume in New York, according to the Bank for International Settlements.

"It just made perfect sense to focus everything in a U.K. entity," Mr. Kemp says. "Now, we are looking at unwinding that ball of string that we've worked so hard to put together over the last 20 years."

Banking executives have urged the government to keep Britain within Europe's single marketplace. But that requires that Britain accept Europe's rules, including the right of people to move freely. The Brexit vote was, in one sense, a primal scream against unlimited immigration.

In January, Prime Minister May acknowledged the choice and declared that her government would limit immigration. Within finance, the message was unmistakable: Prepare to move jobs.

"Anything involving sales and trading in European currency or to European customers is exposed," says William Wright, founder of New Financial, a London-based research institution.

Some British leaders express hope that Europe will assent to a deal that allows finance to carry on, even as Britain leaves the single market. But Europe confronts existential threats to its union. Leaders are intent on ensuring that Britain absorbs a blow to discourage other countries that might leave.

Frankfurt, Dublin and other European cities are courting financiers. Mr. Macron — a former Rothschild investment banker — is keen to win finance jobs for Paris.

All of this enhances the prospect of no deal, and the beginning of a new era for London.

Two decades ago, Mr. Serra, the hedge fund manager, arrived here from his native Italy, landing as a researcher at UBS, the Swiss financial services giant.

"You couldn't get a decent espresso," he recalls. "I remember the first Lavazza machine I wanted to put in my bank, and the compliance and I.T. came. They felt, because it was a non-U.K. machine, it had a risk of burning the place down."

Two decades later, Mr. Serra's fund manages about $7 billion worth of holdings. His office in the upscale neighborhood of Mayfair boasts a top-of-the-line espresso machine.

For his company, Brexit is just a minor nuisance, he says. He must merely open a small subsidiary somewhere in Europe.

But one thing could prompt him to abandon London — limits on who can live here. His team hails from Hungary, Bulgaria, India, China, Spain, the United States, Ireland, Australia and Britain.

"If their immigration policy will curb my capacity to hire the best talent," he says, "then I'll move."

The Quest for Growth

Admiralty House in central London is a solid brick piece of Britain's imperial legacy, a four-story building fronted by columns near the Royal Horse Guards. "From here," reads a plaque at the entrance, "the worldwide affairs of the Royal Navy were run for centuries."

Today, the building is a central element in a transaction connecting British finance to investors scattered from the Middle East to Southeast Asia, a deal structured to comply with Shariah, or Islamic law.

As London reimagines its place in a post-Brexit world, city leaders are probing terrain far beyond Europe for potential financial business. They are seeking to make London a hub for settling purchases of Chinese wares. They are exploring new varieties of bonds involving foreign currencies. They are redoubling efforts to tap into the growing world of Shariah-compliant finance.

The Brexit vote was, on one level, an angry rejection of globalization. Yet for London's leaders, the economic solution to the resulting crisis is more globalization than ever.

"London being the global hub, there's a huge amount of liquidity," says London's deputy mayor for business, Rajesh Agrawal. "We have a huge advantage."

The Islamic world is awash in money, yet the dictates of Shariah forbid trading in interest. This has prompted creative minds to consult with Muslim clerics to dream up financial instruments that effectively pay interest without technically doing so.

Worldwide, Islamic banks — those run on the principles of Shariah — were stocked with about $1.4 trillion in assets in the first quarter of 2016, according to the Islamic Financial Services Board.

London has been angling for a piece of the action. Three years ago, the British government issued a Shariah-compliant version of a government bond, using a structure called a sukuk.

Admiralty House and two other buildings were officially sold to a government entity. The government then rented the buildings back from itself, distributing the proceeds to investors who bought the sukuk.

Britain was the first Western government to issue Shariah-compliant bonds, raising £200 million (then, about $340 million).

"The U.K. government's primary objective was effectively a demonstration of the City of London and the U.K. legal and regulatory and tax system being open for business," says Richard O'Callaghan, a partner at the law firm Linklaters, who advised the British government on the bond issue. "You can't be a global financial center without being able to demonstrate that you have a viable Islamic framework."

Expanding the city's fortunes by going global makes sense. Yet arithmetic suggests these new frontiers cannot compensate for the revenues Brexit may displace.

In the decade since the London Stock Exchange began listing sukuk bonds, about $48 billion has been raised through 65 different issues. London clears derivatives worth that much in the course of a morning.

"Islamic finance is starting from a very low base," Mr. O'Callaghan says. "It is a base that is growing, but it is never going to take over the world."

Brexit does not negate London's financial savvy. It does not taint British law, or undermine London's appeal as a cosmopolitan entrepôt.

But it redraws the lines of global trade, impeding the flow of money that built the city.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Spanish Vote Calling for Franco's Exhumation Revives Old Divisions

Jeannette Neumann

SAN LORENZO DE EL ESCORIAL, Spain—Spanish lawmakers on Thursday voted to exhume the remains of dictator Francisco Franco, in a symbolic decision that is reigniting a divisive debate about whether digging up Spain's dead will open old wounds.

The parliamentary vote, the first ever in support of disinterment, is underscoring the longstanding division among Spaniards about how to remember Franco, whose rule was marked by the imprisonment of opponents and summary executions.

Some Spaniards want to move his body from the basilica he commissioned in the mountains north of Madrid, saying it glorifies the victory by his nationalist forces in the 1936-1939 civil war. The massive Valley of the Fallen site

where it sits is an affront to families struggling to recover the remains of people, many from the losing republican side, left in unmarked, mass graves, they say.

"You realize the injustice of it all, not just because the dictator is actually in a mausoleum he built for himself," said 33-year-old forensic anthropologist René Pacheco with Spain's Association to Recover Historical Memory, who is working to exhume a grave in the city of Guadalajara where two dozen people killed by Franco's supporters are believed to lie.

"What's painful is that the family members of republicans, during forty years of dictatorship and forty years of democracy, haven't been able to recover their victims," he said.

But others argue against what they say is stirring up the past, saying Spain's social and economic successes stem in part from the decision by political leaders after Franco's 1975 death not to hold a truth commission and to allow some of his ministers to remain in government.

Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's center-right government abstained from the vote, arguing that there was no good reason to revisit the past. The measure, which passed overwhelmingly, is meant to put Mr. Rajoy under pressure, the opposition said.

Socialist lawmaker Gregorio Cámara said his party is working on drafting binding legislation. The vote also demands the removal of public symbols of Franco's regime, to establish a truth commission and calls for greater funding for the groups exhuming the graves of some of the more than 100,000 unidentified victims buried throughout the country.

Mr. Rajoy's party railed against the vote. "What you all have accomplished today is to return to the past and to stay there, unfortunately," Popular Party lawmaker Alicia Sánchez-Camacho said in parliament on Tuesday.

At the Valley of the Fallen in San Lorenzo de El Escorial, which also contains the remains of about 33,000 people killed in the civil war, 63-year-old Juan Chamorro argued Franco should be moved into a normal tomb. His grandfather was shot by Franco's forces in 1939 and his grandmother spent nearly a decade in jail for supporting the republican government.

"It's a fascist monument" that should be destroyed, Mr. Chamorro said, while standing outside the basilica, which is topped with a 500-foot cross and was built in part by political prisoners.

Victims' relatives have long sought to exhume the dead in order to identify the remains of their loved ones, often fighting resistance from government officials. Around 6,500 corpses have been exhumed in Spain since 2000.

Francisco and Chon Vargas Mendieta hope the exhumation that began this week at a cemetery in the city of Guadalajara uncovers the remains of their grandfather, Timoteo, who was shot by nationalist forces in November 1939 because he ran a union in a nearby town.

After municipal authorities wouldn't allow the attempt, relatives received a court order from an Argentine judge investigating Franco's crimes under international human rights law.

On Wednesday, Francisco stood near a hole dug in Guadalajara's cemetery. "My grandfather is in there," the 66-year-old retired medical worker said.

"Real democracy won't exist until these people—the ones who fought to defend it—emerge," he said. "That's the seed of Spanish democracy, it's buried in there.

The Washington Post

Uber isn't a tech company — it's basically a taxi company, E.U. court adviser says

When it comes to challenging entrenched taxi companies, few have a bigger reputation than Uber. The ride-hailing company has successfully forced taxi drivers to compete with it in hundreds of markets around the world.

But now, a top official at the European Court of Justice has said Uber is more like the transportation companies it's sought to disrupt than the firm would have regulators believe.

Thursday's opinion from the court's advocate general finds that Uber is not the so-called information society service it claims to be, because the company's policies and app designs influence when, how and whether its independent drivers pick up passengers.

"Uber cannot be regarded as a mere intermediary between drivers and passengers," the opinion reads.

The finding marks the latest in a string of setbacks for Uber, which faces the prospect of stricter regulation should a final court ruling concur with this week's nonbinding opinion. The case could also hold wider implications for the so-called "gig economy" in Europe as regulators grapple with changing patterns of commerce, employment and technology.

The advocate general's opinion is merely advisory in nature. But the opinion will be taken into consideration by the senior-most court in the European Union, which will issue its final ruling later this year.

Under the advocate general's interpretation of the law, Uber could be required to seek licenses and permits to operate in Barcelona, where the case first arose, according to a Thursday statement from the court.

The suit, filed by a local taxi association, saw Uber arguing that it is an "information society service," a label that entitles the company to lighter regulation. But the advocate general said Uber does not meet a number of qualifying tests for the regulatory classification.

Uber said Thursday that it had seen the advocate general's opinion and would await the court's final ruling.

"Being considered a transportation company would not change the way we are regulated in most EU countries," Uber said in a statement, "as that is already the situation today. It will, however, undermine the much needed reform of outdated laws which prevent millions of Europeans from accessing a reliable ride at the tap of a button."

The Switch newsletter

The day's top stories on the world of tech.

Uber is operating in 21 European countries.

In 2016, Uber launched its UberX service in Madrid after authorities there forced the company out roughly a year before. Unlike its counterpart in the United States, UberX drivers in Spain must be licensed professionals, not just private citizens with a car of their own.

Uber has faced legal battles in a number of other countries across the Atlantic, including Italy, the United Kingdom and Denmark — the last of which Uber said it would withdraw from after a law passed mandating the use of fare meters and other equipment.

Uber has had a tough start to the year, with multiple executive departures; a major intellectual property lawsuit between itself and Waymo, the self-driving car outfit owned by Alphabet, Google's parent company; defections by customers over links between chief executive Travis Kalanick and the Trump administration; and a federal probe into an internal application Uber used to circumvent regulatory officials in various cities.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Lithuania Calls for Permanent U.S. Military Presence Amid Russia Tensions

Julian E. Barnes

VILNIUS, Lithuania—Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė said she wants a continued presence of U.S. troops in her country as Russia builds up its forces in the region and prepares for military exercises in September.

In an interview Thursday, a day after meeting U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, Ms. Grybauskaitė said she was in talks with the U.S. and other countries on securing Lithuania's airspace.

"We need the serious involvement of the U.S. to not only deter but to defend," she said. "It is important to have adequate response capabilities against possible threats."

Tensions are high in the region months before Russia is planning to stage military exercises in Belarus, which borders Lithuania. U.S. officials say the drills could be used by Russia to move upgraded weaponry into the region, as well as

demonstrating new military capabilities.

The U.S. is considering moving a Patriot missile-defense system to Lithuania as part of air-defense exercises of its own this summer, and officials have said the system could remain there longer—through the duration of the Russian exercises.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization has been building its troop presence in Lithuania, a former Soviet state, with more than 1,000 troops from Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Norway stationed there.

Since 2014, the U.S. had kept a constant presence of 150 soldiers in Lithuania. But now it intends to rotate soldiers from its heavy tank brigade in and out of the country.

They are due to move to Germany for training drills next week, ahead of traveling to the Black Sea region in June for a large multinational exercise, U.S. military officials said.

Ms. Grybauskaitė said her country needs U.S. troops to maintain a constant presence. NATO decision-making moves slowly, and in the event of a crisis with Russia it would likely be the U.S. that could first move to shore up Lithuania's defense.

"Our goal is that not only NATO troops need to be involved in deterrence in the Baltic region, but also, bilaterally, U.S. troops," she said. "Having in mind the challenges we are facing and the increase in tensions in our region it would be preferable to have the U.S. on a permanent basis."

Defense Minister Raimundas Karoblis said a permanent U.S. presence will strengthen the Lithuanian military's effectiveness and give Russia pause.

"The presence of Americans is a multiplying factor for deterrence," he said. "With Americans here it is a game changer."

Lithuania is on pace to increase its military spending to 2% of gross domestic product by next year, meeting a key demand of the Trump administration. Ms. Grybauskaitė said her goal was to exceed the 2% recommendation.

She said she supported the Trump administration's goals to overhaul NATO, but said her priority was to speed the alliance's decision-making and improve the alliance's defense plans.

"Security of the eastern border of NATO is the security of all of NATO," she said. "If we fail in any of the 28 members, it will be a failure of all of NATO."

INTERNATIONAL

Bloomberg

Editorial : Call Turkey's Bluff on Arming Syrian Kurds

The White House's announcement that it would start directly arming the Syrian Kurds fighting Islamic State was greeted as big news. It was no such thing for the Kurds themselves, who have been receiving U.S. weapons for more than two years, and opposition from Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan shouldn't deter the plan from going forward.

It's not as though Turkey was unaware that U.S. weaponry was ending up with Kurdish Democratic Union forces, which Ankara considers a terrorist group allied with Turkey's outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK. But for the White House to announce that such shipments are now official policy, and will include heavier equipment such as mortars and armored cars, is a direct warning to Erdogan, who has become increasingly autocratic as a leader -- and problematic as an ally -- since he put down an attempted coup last summer.

It's a delicate balancing act for Washington to maintain relationships with both the Turks and the Kurds in Iraq and Syria. At the moment, however, annihilating Islamic State is the overriding priority in the Syrian civil war -- reason enough to make arming the Kurds official U.S. policy. They have been the most effective proxy force for the anti-Islamic State coalition, and should take the lead in the final push to defeat the jihadists in their self-proclaimed capital of Raqqa.

Moreover, and uncharacteristic for Donald Trump's White House, the decision on the Kurds seems to have been taken carefully. Trump's top military advisers, including National Security Adviser General H.R. McMaster, are said to have been the prime advocates of the plan, arguing that the push for Raqqa should be made quickly while Islamic State is concentrating on the fight for Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city. Former President Barack Obama also reportedly favored stepping up Kurdish arms shipments and had his aides present the incoming Trump administration with a plan to do so.

Once the terrorists are defeated, the U.S. can turn to longer-term issues such as patching up relations with Erdogan, as well as reaching some sort of peace deal involving protected, autonomous zones for U.S.-supported factions and, eventually, the end of President Bashar al-Assad's murderous reign.

Erdogan has responded to the arms announcement with typical bellicosity, raising concerns he will step up attacks on anti-government Turkish Kurds. This presents a complication for the U.S., but not necessarily a bad one. The U.S. also considers the PKK a terrorist group, and it is a bitter rival of the Iraqi Kurdish groups that have been fighting on the American side for more than two decades.

Clear thinking from leading voices in business, economics, politics, foreign affairs, culture, and more.

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As frustrating as Erdogan can be, Turkey remains a vital NATO ally and a bulwark against terrorism and instability in the Middle East. So the U.S. can make some concessions to ease Turkey's concerns: promising that it has no intention of recognizing a sovereign Kurdish state, for example, or that it will cut off the arms flows if there is strong evidence weapons are flowing across the border to Turkish Kurds, or that Turkish forces can remain in control of the city of al Bab, west of Raqqa, which they conquered in February.

But Trump's strongest case -- which he should make to Erdogan in their scheduled meeting next week in Washington -- is that it's in Turkey's interest to accept this policy. Not only does Turkey have a greater stake in defeating Islamic State and ending the civil war on its southern border, but drifting away from the West and NATO toward Russia's orbit would result in an economic disaster for a nation whose economy is looking increasingly vulnerable.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Kurd-Led Force Homes In on ISIS Bastion With Assent of U.S. and Syria Alike

Maria Abi-Habib and Raja Abdulrahim

BEIRUT—A Kurdish-led military force backed by Washington and now approved by Damascus is closing in on Islamic State's stronghold of Raqqa after taking the strategic Tabqa dam nearby.

The Kurd-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces captured Tabqa Wednesday, a day after the U.S. pledged to arm the fighters. On Monday, the Damascus government for the first time endorsed the group's battle against Islamic State, with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem complimenting the SDF's fight against Islamic State at a press conference in Damascus, describing the force as legitimate.

The SDF is now the only ground force with both U.S. and Syrian government approval in the fight against Islamic State as the offensive on Raqqa draws near. The group has long co-existed with the Syrian government, unlike U.S.-backed factions that Damascus

deems terrorists in light of their goal to oust President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Islamic State's loss of the dam on the Euphrates River about 30 miles southwest of its Syrian seat of power is a major blow to the terror group, which held the structure for more than three years. The U.S. long worried the militants would rig the dam with explosives, allowing it to unleash floods on the surrounding population and American-backed forces.

The SDF launched its attack in March from numerous fronts on the town of Tabqa and its nearby dam, which provides water and electricity for hundreds of thousands of people. After weeks of battle and nearly surrounding the town, the SDF negotiated the withdrawal of dozens of Islamic State militants from the area to protect the dam infrastructure, according to the U.S. Central Command.

In March, Islamic State accused the U.S. of launching airstrikes on the dam, saying it caused potentially devastating damage.

As the Kurdish-led fighters supported by U.S. Special Operations Forces on the ground inch closer to Raqqa, the question of who will hold the city the day after it falls is becoming more urgent. Turkey, a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and its Syrian Arab rebel allies oppose the rival Kurds leading the battle and fear they will try to hold onto the majority-Arab city after it is captured.

Arab rebels particularly distrust the YPG, the Syrian Kurdish militia that dominates the SDF, because it has used the U.S.-backed fight against Islamic State to take over a large swath of territory across northern Syria—including predominantly Arab cities and towns—with the expressed goal of carving out a semi-autonomous Kurdish region. The rebels and opposition activists have long accused the YPG of colluding with the Syrian regime for its own benefit.

U.S. President Donald Trump has made clear he opposes the expensive nation-building missions that have historically accompanied U.S. counterterrorism operations to support local governments and prevent insurgents from returning.

For these reasons, Western diplomats say the post-capture plan is for the SDF to hand over the administration of Raqqa to a local civilian council friendly to the Syrian regime. That council could eventually transfer control of the city back to the regime, these diplomats said.

The formation of the local civilian council for Raqqa, composed of both Kurds and Arabs, was announced last month. On Thursday, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov said Moscow supports the formation of local councils to administer territory taken from Islamic State but said they must not circumvent the Syrian government's authority, in comments carried by Interfax news agency.

"The U.S. military will be going in [to Raqqa] and trying to figure out who the tribal leaders are," said an American official involved in the anti-Islamic State campaign. "The regime knows these details. They have a natural home-field advantage and have a way of slowly getting back in. We won't be in Raqqa in 2020, but the regime will be there."

Western officials say the SDF operation that unfolded in the northern Syrian city of Manbij last year could serve as a blueprint for Raqqa's eventual handover to Damascus. The Kurdish-led force took Manbij from Islamic State in August and handed over some surrounding towns to the Syrian and allied Russian armies in March.

An official from the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, which is fighting for the Syrian regime, recently described increasing Kurdish cooperation with the Syrian government as a win for both sides. With Damascus poised to retake much of the country with help from Iran, Russia, Hezbollah and other Shiite foreign fighters, the official said the Syrian Kurds realize they can gain from cooperating with Mr. Assad's government. The regime treated the ethnic minority as second-class citizens before the outbreak of war in 2011.

"Now the regime needs the Kurds and will count them as loyal citizens and improve their services if they cooperate," the Hezbollah official said. "For a long time, many of them didn't have the Syrian nationality or even basic government services."

Ahead of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit to Washington next week to meet Mr. Trump, Turkish officials have opposed U.S. plans to liberate Raqqa using the SDF. They have instead lobbied for a Turkish-trained Syrian Arab force to take the city.

The U.S. has been skeptical of Turkish claims that it has a large enough rebel force to take Raqqa. Turkey views the SDF as an extension of the main Syrian Kurdish militia, the YPG, which is closely tied to the PKK—a group fighting for autonomy within Turkey that Ankara deems a terror organization.

The Pentagon's statement Tuesday that it would arm the SDF to take Raqqa ends the debate and political jockeying over which force will be used to spearhead the offensive.

American officials confirmed Thursday that Tabqa dam was taken by the SDF, backed by U.S. ground forces. The extremists' hold on their Iraqi capital in Mosul is also near collapse in a separate offensive led by the Iraqi army, backed by the U.S. and other Western countries.

—Nour Alakraa

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Editorial : Guns for the Syrian Kurds

Donald Trump inherited bad and worse options for dealing with Syria. This week the President selected one of the less bad ones by approving a plan to arm Syrian Kurds combating Islamic State.

The Pentagon on Wednesday said it's preparing to deliver the first cache to the Kurdish Peoples' Protection Units, or YPG. The weapons are intended to bolster the Kurdish fighters as they set out to dislodge the caliphate from its "capital" of Raqqa. Washington already provides the YPG with air cover and special-forces help.

The arms transfer will solidify the YPG's position as the main American proxy on the ground in Syria, not that there are many alternatives. There is no comparably reliable partner in the areas where the YPG fights.

The Kurdish fighters have also proved themselves on the battlefield. On Wednesday they took control of Taqba, 33 miles west of Raqqa and home to Syria's largest dam. Their successes going back to 2014's battle of Kobane have led the Pentagon to conclude that the fastest way to liberate Raqqa is cooperation with the Kurds.

There are risks to arming the YPG. Kurds make for poor liberators in Arab areas such as Raqqa. Kurdish forces can defeat Islamic State militarily outside traditionally Kurdish areas, but it's harder for them to hold and govern territories that are majority Sunni Arab. The YPG does have Arab allies in its ranks, and the Pentagon should insist that Arabs take the lead in Raqqa.

The bigger worry is Turkey. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan sees the YPG as a thinly disguised Syrian affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, the U.S.-designated terror group he is fighting in southeast Turkey. Mr. Erdogan says the U.S. is using terrorists to fight terrorists.

He might retaliate by denying the U.S. Air Force basing rights at Incirlik, which has been critical to the anti-Islamic State fight. He might also target YPG positions inside Syria, as he has in the past, though that seems less likely now given the risk of harming embedded U.S. special forces.

To alleviate his concerns, Washington can press the YPG to distance itself from the PKK. With American arms comes leverage. U.S. intelligence cooperation against the PKK can also help cool Mr. Erdogan's temper. As our Journal colleagues reported Wednesday, Mr. Trump is expanding capabilities at an anti-PKK joint U.S.-Turkish intelligence center in Ankara. Mr. Erdogan also rightly considers Syrian strongman Bashar Assad to be the main instigator of the civil war. Taking a tougher line on the Syrian regime can ease tensions over the Kurdish arms.

Once a Syrian settlement is in sight, the Kurds will look to translate their services to the West into some form of autonomy on the model of the Kurdish zone in northern Iraq. That's a bridge to be crossed down the road. For now Mr. Trump can make the case that defeating Islamic State should be the top priority for all responsible players in the region, and arming the Syrian Kurds is one of the less bad ways for doing so.

The Washington Post

U.S. military cyber operation to attack ISIS last year sparked heated debate over alerting allies

A secret global operation by the Pentagon late last year to sabotage the Islamic State's online videos and propaganda sparked fierce debate inside the government over whether it was necessary to notify countries that are home to computer hosting services used by the extremist group, including U.S. allies in Europe.

While U.S. Cyber Command claimed success in carrying out what was called Operation Glowing Symphony, the issue remained unresolved and now confronts the Trump administration, which is conducting a broad review of what powers to give the military in countering the Islamic State, including in the cyber realm.

As part of the operation, Cyber Command obtained the passwords to a number of Islamic State administrator accounts and then used them to access the accounts, change the passwords and delete content such as battlefield video. It also shut the group's propaganda specialists out of their accounts, former officials said.

Cybercom developed the campaign under pressure from then-Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter, who wanted the command to raise its game against the Islamic State. But when the CIA, State Department and FBI got wind of the plan to conduct operations inside the borders of other countries without telling them, officials at the agencies immediately became concerned that the campaign could undermine cooperation with those countries on law enforcement, intelligence and counterterrorism.

[Cyber Command has launched a new digital war against the Islamic State]

(AP)

Cyber Command and National Security Agency chief Adm. Michael S. Rogers says fighting the Islamic State in the cyber arena is challenged by the fact that it's difficult to define their missions to a geographical space because infrastructure the Islamic State might be using "is not necessarily physically in Syria or Iraq." Cyber Command and National Security Agency chief Adm. Michael S. Rogers says fighting the Islamic State in the cyber arena is challenged by the fact that it's difficult to define their missions to a geographical space because infrastructure the Islamic State might be using "is not necessarily physically in Syria or Iraq." (AP)

The issue took the Obama National Security Council weeks to address and still looms large for the Trump administration as the military seeks greater latitude to wage offensive cyber operations around the world.

"It's a tricky thing to navigate," said aformer U.S. official, who like a dozen other current and former officials interviewed, declined to be named because the operation remains classified. "Think how we would react if one of our allies undertook a cyber operation that affected servers here in the United States without giving us a heads-up."

The operation was supposed to be launched at the end of September last year. Pentagon officials argued that under an existing authority they had to counter terrorists' use of the Internet they did not need to request the permission of countries in which they were zapping propaganda.

"At a very basic level, what they were trying to do was remove content that the adversary was putting out there," said a former defense official. "It didn't require exquisite tools."

The Pentagon drew up a list of about 35 countries outside of the war zones of Iraq and Syria that might have hosting services with videos and other Islamic State content to remove.

In a series of Obama Situation Room meetings, CIA Director John Brennan, Secretary of State John F. Kerry, FBI Director James B. Comey and Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper Jr. argued that notice was necessary — especially to allied countries — to preserve relationships. Carter, Cybercom commander Adm. Michael S. Rogers and Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, countered that existing authority did not require it, particularly as the Pentagon insisted there would be no harmful collateral effects.

[Dismantling of Saudi-CIA website points to holes in cyberwar policies]

At a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing May 9, Cyber Command and National Security Agency chief Adm. Michael S. Rogers responded to Sen. John McCain's question about the worst and best case scenarios for the future of cyber. At a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing May 9, Cyber Command and National Security Agency chief Adm. Michael S. Rogers responded to Sen. John McCain's question about the worst and best case scenarios for the future of cyber. (AP)

(AP)

They also argued that if notice is given, word of the operation could leak. That could tip off the target and enable other adversaries to discover the command's cyber capabilities.

A major flash point was Germany, a strategic ally and a country with which the United States had a dust-up several years ago in the wake of disclosures by former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden that the NSA had intercepted the phone calls of Chancellor Angela Merkel.

In the end,about 15 countries were notified, but action was taken in only about five or six.

Beginning in November, personnel at Cybercom's headquarters in Fort Meade, Md., began a rolling series of propaganda takedowns and account lockouts in a campaign that stretched into the new year.

The Pentagon and Cyber Command officials maintain the operation was a success. It showed that Cybercom could integrate computer attack capabilities into traditional battle plans as U.S. Central Command sought to help local allies push the Islamic State out of strongholds in Iraq and Syria.

Intercepts of Islamic State militants revealed that in some cases they "didn't know what the hell was going on" with their platforms, one former official said.

A senior defense official said: "It took a little while, but they learned so much in the first few months of doing it that it set the stage for things that are happening now, and I would say for operations in the future."

U.S. intelligence officers, in contrast, concluded about a month into the campaign that the impact on the Islamic State was short-lived at best as the group either restored the content or moved it to new servers, current and former officials said.

The conflicting assessments stem from different definitions of success, said a second former defense official. "Cyber Command and DOD tend to define success as temporary disruptions or distraction of the adversary," he said, while "the intelligence analysts say, 'Prove to me what effect you had. Was it or wasn't it enduring?'"

Private sector researchers who track militant websites also expressed skepticism about the operation's value. Evan Kohlmann, chief innovation officer of Flashpoint, a research firm, said there was a dip in Islamic State propaganda releases beginning in mid-October that lasted through January, but it was impossible to know whether it was the result of cyber operations or physical operations in Syria.

Checkpoint newsletter

Military, defense and security at home and abroad.

"In the last year, ISIS has suffered heavy casualties among its media emirs, video narrators, cameramen, and others associated with propaganda production," Kohlmann said, using an acronym for the Islamic State. "Even absent any specific cyber campaign targeting them, one would naturally expect them to be producing and releasing less content."

Rita Katz, director of SITE Intelligence Group, said the group's primary means to release propaganda is on the encrypted messaging app, Telegram, through a channel called Nashir, which has suffered no significant disruptions in the past six months. "ISIS media isn't something you can just shut off or directly disrupt," she said. "The group and its network of supporters are too adaptive and persistent, and they'll adjust to any attempts to do so."

The operation was carried out by Cybercom's Joint Task Force Ares, created by Rogers last year to develop digital weapons and strategies to go after the Islamic State's networks.

Adam Entous, Greg Miller and Missy Ryan contributed to this report.

The Washington Post

More U.S. soldiers may be heading to Afghanistan. That might not solve the problem.

KABUL — The emerging signs that the Trump administration may send thousands more U.S. troops to Afghanistan are generating a variety of reactions here, including relief at a signal of strong commitment from the new administration in Washington, and worry that it may not be enough to turn around a long, expensive war that the Taliban has fought to a draw.

But many Afghan observers agree on one thing: Without a complementary political policy aimed at bolstering the weak Kabul government, pressing fractious leaders to get along and fending off the country's meddlesome neighbors, no U.S. military surge alone can solve the broader problems that have made peace and stability so elusive.

"There is more fighting and more ground held by Taliban now than ever before, and increasing the troops can help reverse that," said Abdul Bari Barakzai, a member of the government's High Peace Council. "But people have lost their trust in the government. No matter how many troops you bring now, it will have no lasting impact unless there is real reform and good governance."

[U.S. watchdog finds major internal flaws hampering Afghanistan war effort]

Earlier this week, after a lengthy review, top Trump administration advisers were reported to be urging an ambitious new military role in Afghanistan, led by the Pentagon, with at least 3,000 troops added to the current 8,400, to halt the country's deteriorating security and push the Taliban back to the negotiating table. President Trump is expected to make a final decision this month.

Such a policy would dramatically ramp up American involvement in the war, which was systematically cut back under President Barack Obama. By the end of 2014, most U.S. and NATO forces had left the country, leaving Afghan troops struggling to hold off a determined Taliban insurgency, at a loss of life that a U.S. watchdog group recently called "shockingly high."

Today, Afghan officials and experts agree that the defense forces are desperately in need of both short- and long-term U.S. assistance — more equipment, air support and Special Operations partnerships as the summer fighting season intensifies, and more troop training and leadership reforms so that the defense forces can become self-sufficient.

"Our biggest challenge is the Taliban. We need help to keep up the pressure and force them to negotiate," said Sediq Siddiqi, a spokesman for the government of President Ashraf Ghani. "We're not waiting for the U.S. to go in and take over, but we need help with the transition," he said. "We need the Taliban to feel the pressure, and we can't do it alone."

No one in Afghanistan, though, sees the insurgents as operating in a vacuum. Rather, the insurgents are viewed as capitalizing on widespread perceptions that the state is weak, corrupt, consumed with internal and external rivalries, and unable to deliver services, jobs, reforms and modernization.

A wide variety of Afghans, asked this week whether the United States should step up its military presence, almost immediately raised the issues of poor government performance and political quarreling as significant deterrents to peace. One civic activist described the government as being in a state of "continuous crisis."

Some said it was more important for foreign allies and donors, especially the United States, to help resolve these problems than to immerse themselves again in a bloody civil conflict. And many said that it was equally crucial for the United States to press next-door Pakistan to stop harboring anti-Afghan insurgents, a charge Pakistan has denied.

[After decades as fugitive, Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar returns with appeal for peace]

"A U.S. troop increase can be effective, but you need to put maximum pressure on Pakistan to stop training and sheltering terrorists," said Gen. Mirza Mohammed Yarmand, a former deputy interior minister. "The challenge of leaders bickering in the government is far more serious," he added. "Without sorting out these two issues, there will be no peace in Afghanistan, whatever amount of money you spend here and whatever number of troops you send."

The Trump administration has said little about Afghanistan's government problems and has not yet announced any policy decisions on Pakistan, although it has hinted at using both economic and diplomatic sanctions against its former Cold War ally if the Islamabad government does not do more to rein in violent Islamist groups.

Afghans are also worried about the designs of other aggressive neighbors and regional powers, especially Iran and Russia, on their economically weakened and war-torn country. Several said a U.S. decision to send more troops would also send an important "hands-off" message to those powers.

"We know Pakistan, Iran and the Russians do not want to see peace in Afghanistan, but decisive action by President Trump will plant a seed of hope in people," said Ismael Hashimi, director of the private Citizens' Foundation here. "If he sends more troops, people will feel they have a strong partner on their side."

Today's WorldView

What's most important from where the world meets Washington

With no U.S. ambassador in Kabul since December, U.S. military officials, especially Gen. John W. Nicholson, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, and H.R. McMaster, a former military adviser in Kabul who is now Trump's national security adviser, have played especially high-profile roles, and both have urged more military involvement.

But Davood Moradian, director of the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies, said the U.S. administration needs to develop "complementary" military and political policies, especially with the Afghan government embroiled in ethnic disputes and losing public support, while the Taliban is already using the international military presence as an excuse to continue fighting the state.

"President Obama overly idealized political and diplomatic solutions. The danger now is that President Trump will see everything as a military problem with a military solution," he said. "The challenge is to combine them both, and be smart about it."

Sayed Salahuddin and Sharif Walid contributed to this report.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Trump Administration Announces Deal With China to Boost Exports (UNE)

Jacob M. Schlesinger, Christopher M. Matthews and Jacob Bunge

WASHINGTON—After months of bashing China for its trade practices, the Trump administration said it had agreed with Beijing on a broad range of measures aimed at improving the access of American beef producers, electronic-payments providers and natural-gas exporters, among others, to the world's second-largest economy.

Some items on a 10-point plan the White House released Thursday address longstanding irritants between the two countries, as both governments strive to show warming ties while seeking cooperation on a range of economic and diplomatic issues like North Korea's nuclear-weapons program. Others are general principles and may not ensure concrete policy changes beyond promises to try to expand commerce in certain sectors.

"U.S.-China relationships are now hitting a new high especially in trade," Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross said in unveiling the package at the White House.

The plan was reached as part of a new economic dialogue launched when Chinese President Xi Jinping visited President Donald Trump at his Mar-a-Lago Florida resort home in early April and was unveiled shortly before a high-profile global economic summit Mr. Xi is hosting Sunday in Beijing. Chinese officials have been eager for the U.S. to signal support for that meeting.

The Trump administration said the plan reflected an agreement reached with Chinese Vice Premier Wang Yang, and it portrayed its announcement as a "joint release" with the Chinese government.

At a news conference in Beijing an hour after the White House statement, China said the two sides

had made "active progress on key issues" and had reached consensus on how to proceed over the next year. Its language mirrored the White House statement.

It is unclear how much, if at all, the changes would reduce the U.S. trade deficit with China, which reached $347 billion last year and has been a major complaint of Mr. Trump's. While the Trump administration hailed the measures as breakthroughs, many of them were related to sectors where U.S. negotiators have repeatedly over the years claimed progress in entering China's market, only to get stymied by new roadblocks.

Mr. Trump has regularly talked tough on trade so far during his presidency, but he has pulled back from dramatic action even while declaring victory for modest moves. His approach has frustrated some supporters of the sharp changes he promised with an "American First" trade policy. Mr. Ross's claims on Thursday of quickly improved trade relations with China over long-entrenched problems may prompt similar skepticism if the measures don't bear fruit.

"So far this administration's trade strategy amounts to a muddle of 140-character tweets, mixed message, and overhyped announcements that are backed by little substance," Orgeon Sen. Ron Wyden, the top Democrat in the Senate's trade committee, said during congressional debate Thursday.

The biggest points in the 10-point plan are aimed at the American agriculture and financial sectors, which are being promised greater access in a range of areas. In addition to beef, China agreed to accelerate the process for approving U.S. biotechnology products. Beyond electronic payments, Beijing also said it would grant more access to U.S. credit ratings firms and bond underwriters.

In return, the U.S. promised it would remove obstacles to importing Chinese poultry meat and pledged that it "welcomes direct investment by Chinese entrepreneurs," reassuring words at a time when Washington is heightening scrutiny of Chinese investment as a national security threat.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce issued a lukewarm statement in response to the plan, saying that it is "hopefully ensuring full and timely implementation of commitments China has already made" and that "the real work lies ahead."

One of the biggest moves was the agreement on China's beef market by mid-July. Reopening China to U.S.-produced beef, Mr. Ross said, paves the way to a $2.5 billion market that U.S. ranchers and meatpackers haven't been able to fully access since 2003. China that year banned most U.S. beef imports partly due to concerns over "mad cow" disease.

China's expanding middle class has made the country the fastest-growing beef market in the world and an appetizing target for U.S. cattlemen, who have grappled with lower prices in recent years due to a buildup in U.S. meat supplies generally.

China also agreed to convene its national biosafety committee by the end of May to evaluate eight pending biotechnology product applications, which have awaited approval from Chinese crop regulators.

The Trump administration's effort to hasten China's regulatory reviews for genetically modified seeds follows years of complaints by crop developers about the country's lengthy and opaque approval process. The move could help seed companies like Monsanto Co. , Syngenta AG and Dow Chemical Co.

The new plan also aims to give a lift to the American natural-gas industry, with the Chinese government giving a green light to Chinese companies to import more gas. It didn't address the bigger concern for Chinese companies over whether they would be allowed to invest in U.S. energy infrastructure, such as export terminals and gas pipelines.

China has a bevvy of options when it comes to importing liquefied natural gas, including big emerging producers in the Asia-Pacific such as Australia and Papua New Guinea, which would compete with the U.S. for China's potentially lucrative market.

The financial planks of the plan appear to offer more small steps in China's opening its markets to big U.S. players. China has pledged to take steps to allow U.S. electronic-payments firms to seek licenses by mid-July, giving them "full and prompt access," according to the White House fact sheet.

If that happens, it would be a major step for Visa Inc. and MasterCard Inc., which have long sought to do business in China but have been repeatedly frustrated by broken pledges to open up the market, even after the U.S. won a World Trade Organization case over the issue.

One factor that appeared to be driving the timing of the announcement was Mr. Xi's upcoming "One Belt One Road" summit, which is aimed at reviving the Silk Road trading route. The announcement included a statement that the U.S. "recognizes the importance" of the initiative.

While some countries are sending heads of state, the U.S. had originally planned to send a low-level Commerce Department official. It now plans to send Matthew Pottinger, the White House's top Asia expert, according to a person familiar with the matter.

—Kate O'Keeffe and Brian Spegele contributed to this article.

The New York Times

Moon Jae-in of South Korea and China Move to Soothe Tensions

Choe Sang-Hun

Rather, they said, Mr. Moon will try to persuade China that it should help rein in North Korea's provocative behavior until both the South and the United States decide the system is no longer necessary.

In a call with President Trump on Wednesday, Mr. Moon pledged to strengthen his country's alliance with Washington, calling it "the foundation of our diplomacy and national security."

Many of Mr. Moon's liberal supporters opposed the Thaad deployment, accusing Washington of foisting a weapons system on South Korea that they say is part of a broader American strategy of containing China with an antimissile shield. Mr. Trump angered them further recently by demanding that South Korea pay $1 billion for the system.

At the same time, the Thaad system has led to a deep schism in relations between Beijing and Seoul, and it has prompted widespread boycotts in China of popular South Korean brands. China is South Korea's largest trading partner by far.

"I am well aware of the concern and fear of the Chinese about the Thaad deployment," Mr. Moon told Mr. Xi, according to Yoon Young-chan, the South Korean leader's spokesman. "I hope both countries can understand each other better on this and will soon open a channel of communication."

During his 40-minute conversation with the Chinese leader, Mr. Moon said he would send separate delegations to Beijing to discuss the Thaad dispute and North Korea's nuclear threat. He also asked Mr. Xi to help end the Chinese boycott of South Korean goods.

"It will be easier to resolve the Thaad issue when North Korea doesn't do any more provocations," Mr. Moon said, according to his aide.

He also called for dialogue with the North, emphasizing that the goal of sanctions must be to bring the country back to the negotiating table. Mr. Xi agreed, according to Mr. Moon's office.

North Korea appeared to make an overture of its own on Thursday, suggesting in the state-run news media that the two Koreas expel foreign influence from the Korean Peninsula and work together for reunification.

It then repeated a longstanding demand that South Korea and the United States stop their joint military exercises and withdraw American troops from the South.

Tensions on the Korean Peninsula have ebbed since the joint American-South Korean military exercises ended late last month without major provocations, like a nuclear test, from North Korea.

China's state-run news media portrayed the call between Mr. Xi and Mr. Moon as conciliatory, saying Mr. Xi had reminded Mr. Moon of the friendly relations between China and South Korea since the establishment of diplomatic ties 1992.

China views Mr. Moon as a leader who will be far easier to deal with on North Korea than his predecessor, Ms. Park, who was impeached and ousted as president.

"I have never met you, but I have been watching you with great interest," Mr. Xi told Mr. Moon, according to the South Korean leader's office. "I have been greatly impressed by your unusual personal background, thoughts and viewpoints."

Mr. Moon, a former student activist and human rights lawyer, served in the government of Roh Moo-hyun, the South Korean president from 2003 to 2008, who promoted dialogue and economic exchanges with North Korea.

Thaad Defense System Is Deployed in South Korea

The United States began installing the advanced antimissile system after North Korea tested four ballistic missiles on Monday. Correction: An earlier version of this caption misidentified the military base. As the article correctly notes, the equipment arrived at Osan Airbase, not Yongsan Garrison.

By CAMILLA SCHICK and ROBIN LINDSAY on March 6, 2017. Photo by U.S. Forces Korea. Watch in Times Video »

While the Chinese news media did not specifically say that Thaad had been discussed, the context was clear in a statement by CCTV, the national broadcaster.

"It is hoped the new government of South Korea would pay high attention to China's major concerns and take practical action to promote the healthy and stable development of bilateral relations," it said.

China would probably be willing to work out a compromise on the deployment of the missile defense system, said Cheng Xiaohe, associate professor of international relations at Renmin University of China. It is probably unrealistic to expect South Korea to scrap the missile system entirely, he said.

Mr. Moon also held a 25-minute phone conversation with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan on Thursday. The two leaders agreed to hold a summit meeting soon, both sides said.

Mr. Abe called on South Korea to uphold a December 2015 agreement in which the two countries announced what they called at the time a "final and irreversible" settlement on the issue of "comfort women" — a euphemism for Koreans forced into sexual slavery for Japan's World War II army.

In the deal, Japan expressed responsibility and extended a new apology to the women, promising an $8.3 million fund to help provide old-age care. But some of the women have since rejected the deal, saying it failed to specify Japan's "legal" responsibility or to provide official reparations.

The deal proved deeply unpopular among South Koreans, and during the presidential campaign, all of the candidates, including Mr. Moon, said they opposed it.

"The reality is that most of our people emotionally cannot accept the deal," Mr. Moon was quoted as saying by his office. But he stopped short of saying he wanted to scrap the agreement.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Trump Calls on Russia and Ukraine to Make Peace

Nathan Hodge in Moscow and Paul Sonne in Washington

President Donald Trump called on Russia and Ukraine to make peace Thursday, presenting himself as something of a neutral peacemaker between the nations, a day after meeting foreign ministers from both countries in Washington.

Mr. Trump tweeted two side-by-side photos of himself—one with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and another with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin —and said he met with the two top diplomats in the same day at the White House.

"Lets make peace!" a headline beneath the photographs reads, above an image of Mr. Trump's signature and an American flag.

The message marked a shift in tone from Washington on Ukraine. The Obama administration rarely called on the two sides to make peace, instead presenting the U.S. as an advocate for Ukraine's sovereignty and demanding that Russia cease its occupation of Crimea and its support for armed rebels in east Ukraine.

The Kremlin on Thursday seized on its top diplomat's visit to the White House the day before as a sign of improving relations, as Russia remained lodged at the heart of a controversy engulfing the Trump administration.

In the U.S., the Russian foreign ministry's publication of images of a grinning Mr. Lavrov in the Oval Office on Wednesday contributed to the political storm over allegations of Russian meddling in U.S. affairs.

Moscow's portrayal of a friendly relationship with Washington was particularly volatile coming after Mr. Trump abruptly fired FBI chief James Comey on Tuesday amid an FBI probe into possible collusion between Russia and the Trump campaign.

Mr. Lavrov was accompanied by Sergey Kislyak, Russia's ambassador to the U.S., a diplomat who could be vital to improving relations but was at the center of a scandal that has troubled the Trump administration since its early days, after former national security adviser Mike Flynn was forced to resign for misleading Vice President Mike Pence about his contacts with the Russian diplomat.

Relations between Russia and the U.S. remain at a post-Cold War low. Mr. Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin, slated to meet for the first time in July, have spoken of each other in admiring terms, but Russian hopes of a rapid thaw in relations with Washington haven't materialized.

That is in part because of allegations by U.S. intelligence services that the Kremlin backed a campaign of hacking and disinformation to tip the election in favor of Mr. Trump, charges that are now the subject of a U.S. congressional investigation. Relations took a significant downturn in early April when Mr. Trump called a missile strike against the Russia-backed Syrian regime, hitting a Syrian air base.

Russian officials expressed cautious optimism on Thursday about a possible boost in ties with the Trump-Lavrov meeting. "It's too early to draw any conclusions," said Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, according to the Russian news agency Interfax. "But the very fact that the conversation is being conducted is certainly very positive."

The Oval Office meeting with Mr. Lavrov was closed to the White House press corps, prompting criticism of the administration's handling of the event. Allowing a Russian government photographer in the Oval Office while barring U.S. reporters was a "PR coup for Kremlin," said Colin Kahl, a Georgetown University professor and former deputy assistant to President Barack Obama, on Twitter.

The White House also wasn't pleased that Russia used its allowed official photographer to act as a state media photographer. "It's not what was agreed to," a White House official said.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova told Russian news agencies the Russian foreign ministry was allowed by the U.S. side to have a photographer from the state news agency TASS present, acting as personal photographer to Mr. Lavrov.

"I think in this situation everyone understands that this is a real hysteria in the American media," she said in remarks carried by Russian news agencies. "We can already talk about intellectual agony."

Mr. Lavrov wasn't the only foreign diplomat who had a Washington photo opportunity on Wednesday. On the same day as the Russian diplomat's visit, Mr. Pence met with Pavlo Klimkin, Ukraine's minister of foreign affairs.

Russia and Ukraine have been in conflict since Moscow annexed the Black Sea peninsula of Crimea from Kiev in 2014.

Mr. Pence said he "emphasized unwavering U.S. support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity" in his meeting with Mr. Klimkin.

On Thursday morning, the Ukrainian foreign ministry released its own image from Washington: A photo of Mr. Klimkin standing next to Mr. Trump at his desk.

—Carol E. Lee in Washington contributed to this article.

FP Foreign Policy

The Annexation of Crimea Isn't Going as Planned

Lily Hyde

SIMFEROPOL, Crimea — When the new Russian-appointed Crimean government opened its investigation into Akhtem Chiygoz in 2015, Chiygoz's family said they heard the case against him was being called "candy" — that is, a sweet, ideal case.

The goal was simple. Chiygoz, a prominent figure in the Crimean Tatar community, was to be tried and convicted under Russian law, along with five other Crimean Tatars, for inciting "mass disturbances" on Feb. 26, 2014. On that day, less than a month before Crimea would be annexed by the Russian Federation, about 13,000 pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian demonstrators clashed over closer Russian ties at rallies outside the parliament building in the Crimean capital, Simferopol. Two people died.

The trial — which started in December 2015 — was to serve a dual purpose for Crimea's new Russian government. First, it would demonstrate that the most visible resistance to the Russian takeover

was generated by an unpopular minority ethnic group with a history of protesting for indigenous rights. Second, a conviction would discourage further opposition and discredit the Crimean Tatars' governing body, the Mejlis, one of the organizers of the February protest and source of the strongest opposition to the new regime since the peninsula's annexation.

"It was supposed to be an intimate court case in Crimea," said Chiygoz's lawyer, Nikolai Polozov. "It should have gone quickly and nicely, and painted a beautiful picture."

More than a year later, the trial has gone wildly off the rails. Witness after witness called by the prosecution has directly contradicted the prosecution's case. Many told the court they never saw Chiygoz inciting unrest; others called as injured parties said they never suffered any harm. Two of the other accused men said in court they'd been pressured to give false evidence against Chiygoz in return for lighter sentences. And then there is the major problem that at the time of events, the participants were Ukrainian citizens on what even Russia agrees was Ukrainian territory (although Russia has adopted legal changes to retroactively cover Crimea pre-March 2014).

The original prosecutor left to become a deputy in the Russian Duma in autumn 2016. The trial has since descended to such absurdity that the presiding judges often struggle to keep straight faces.

What was intended to be a quick, clean case has transformed into a sprawling show trial gone wrong. In the process, the "26 February" case, as it's come to be called, is revealing some of what went awry in the annexation of Crimea itself.

* * *

On a recent day in court, Polozov, a bullish defense lawyer who hails from Moscow, opened hearings with his regular request to the judges to grant Chiygoz bail, and access to the court room where he is being tried. Chiygoz has been banned, under a never-before-used clause in Russian law which says defendants can be excluded if they are considered a danger — although Polozov has never managed to get an explanation of why the 52-year-old Chiygoz poses a threat.

Both requests were, as usual, denied. And so the trial continued, with Chiygoz watching via Skype from his pretrial detention cell less than 500 meters away from the courtroom.

This arrangement not only denies Chiygoz the opportunity to confer in private with his lawyer, it poses logistical problems, too.

That same day a witness was asked if he recognized the defendant. The witness looked around the courtroom in vain until Chiygoz, only visible on a small flat screen, waved and shouted "Look! I'm here!" — at which point the surprised witness said he'd never seen this man before.

That same day a witness was asked if he recognized the defendant. The witness looked around the courtroom in vain until Chiygoz, only visible on a small flat screen, waved and shouted "Look! I'm here!" — at which point the surprised witness said he'd never seen this man before.

Chiygoz is being tried for organization of mass unrest under Article 212 of the Russian criminal code. His trial was restarted in August 2016 after his case was split from the five other Crimean Tatar men who are accused of participation in the day's violence. None of the accused deny being present at the gathering, but say they never incited or took part in any unrest. In fact, there is no evidence that there was any large scale unrest that day at all.

On the day the supposed mass disturbance took place, the Crimean parliament was scheduled to meet for an emergency session to debate closer relations with Russia. The Yanukovych government in Kiev had fallen just days before, and two sanctioned rallies were planned that day outside parliament in Simferopol: one led by the Russian Unity party supporting closer relations, and one by the Mejlis, against any such rapprochement. The pro-Kievites numbered about 7,000 — mostly Crimean Tatars, but also ethnic Ukrainians and Russians from Crimea among them. The pro-Moscow demonstrators numbered about 5,500. Some came in buses from Sevastopol; others belonged to recently formed Crimean "self-defense militias."

Extensive video footage shot by the media and participants shows some isolated fights, and bottles and sticks being thrown, while leaders on both sides call for restraint. The meeting broke up peacefully. The cause of the two deaths is unclear but a recent, exhaustive report by human rights groups from Russia, Ukraine, Poland, and Moldova concludes they were likely crushed when demonstrators were caught in a narrow gap between the parliament building and the outer courtyard.

Despite the lack of evidence, Russian prosecutors have forged ahead with criminal charges. Yet those charging Chiygoz seem to be regularly caught off-guard by their own witnesses, who have not been inclined to back up the state's version of events. During 90 minutes of cross-examination, the same witness who did not recognize Chiygoz on the screen — a gruff fisherman anxious to get back to the herring season — said he didn't know who had hit him on the head that day, or why he was being called to court as an injured party even though he had never sought any medical aid or compensation, and did not consider himself injured.

"A fight's a fight," he said. "I don't know who was throwing what, everyone was throwing things."

Over 100 hearings and 153 prosecution witnesses later, only three people have actually testified to seeing Chiygoz planning or inciting any unrest at the meeting — and two of them were secret witnesses known only as Ablyayev and Petrov, who testified via video link with their faces hidden.

* * *

The trial has revealed little proof of "mass disturbances" instigated by Chiygoz on Feb. 26, 2014. But it is inadvertently revealing details about the contested events in spring that year that led up to annexation.

On the night of Feb. 26, Russian soldiers in unmarked uniforms — who would soon come to be nicknamed the "polite people" — surrounded the parliament in Simferopol and other state and military structures. The next day, in a closed session, parliament voted to hold a referendum on joining Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin admitted in April 2014 that the "polite people" were Russian servicemen. Nevertheless, the Russian narrative of events holds that annexation was a result of a popular local uprising. Central to this story is the supposedly spontaneous rise of the peninsula's self-defense militias — groups of Crimeans who independently organized and armed themselves for fear of the pending arrival of right-wing groups from mainland Ukraine.

Many witnesses called in the 26 February case against Chigyoz belonged at the time to the Crimean self-defense militias. Their statements have revealed the extent of their outside assistance; testimony confirms they were established with assistance from the Russian Unity party, which helped them purchase riot gear. (Russian Unity was banned in April 2014 by a court in Kiev and its former leader, Sergey Aksyonov, now heads the Crimean government.) Others have shown how Russian propaganda deliberately fostered misconceptions among them to feed a sense of danger. They also, in some cases, reveal some sheepishness about their actions during the heady weeks around annexation.

The fisherman, for example, told the court he had belonged to a 300-strong self-defense militia of Afghan war veterans, one of about 14 divisions around the peninsula. The militias met daily, he said, and were sent to the Feb. 26 meeting by "Valeryich" (Aksyonov's patronymic) and Sergey Tarasov, the head of the Crimean Afghan veterans' league, who is now a Crimean parliament deputy.

Under questioning by Polozov and Chiygoz, the fisherman said his militia went to parliament that day because of rumors that fascists were on their way. "We heard that supposedly there should be something like some others coming, from there, from Ukraine," he told the court. "They were called Banderites" — a Soviet term for Ukrainian nationalists. "No one knew when they were coming, but we were at the railway station as well because it was said there'd be a train." He was referring to the so-called "friendship train," a story fomented by Russian propaganda of supposedly violent Ukrainian nationalists on their way to Crimea. The story is still cited today by Crimeans who support annexation; there is no evidence that the train existed.

The fisherman said he never saw the purported Banderites, either at the railway station or at the Feb. 26 meeting. In the end, he seemed embarrassed by the whole subject.

* * *

Human rights groups like Amnesty International and the Russian nongovernmental organization Memorial recognize Chiygoz as a prisoner of conscience, and the trial as part of a wider ongoing effort by the Russian government to repress any political opposition in Crimea, particularly from Crimean Tatars who, even after three years, cannot be persuaded to support the annexation. It's notable that although there were two sides and two organizers to the Feb. 26 rallies, only Crimean Tatars are in the dock.

"There's an obvious segregation on ethnic grounds," said Polozov. The prosecutor's office has said this is because no Crimean Tatars claimed injury or damages.

It's no surprise the Crimean Tatars and Crimea's Russian leadership have found themselves at odds. Members of this ethnic group have

not forgotten how their nation was expelled from the peninsula en masse by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in 1944 and not permitted to return until the Soviet Union collapsed. Just a few months after taking control, Russia banned two Crimean Tatar leaders from Crimea: Mustafa Dzhemilev and Refat Chubarov.

Remaining members of the Crimean Tatar community were initially courted by the new authorities. Chiygoz — one of the Mejlis's most prominent representatives left in Crimea — was flown to Kazan, Russia by private jet for discussions on cooperation, according to his father, while his wife, Elmira Ablyalimova, was made director of the 16th-century Crimean khan's palace in Bakhchisaray, one of Crimea's most famous heritage sites. But at the same time, increasing numbers of Crimean Tatars disappeared or were arrested on charges of "extremism" and "terrorism." Ablyalimova left her museum post in December 2014, saying she was subjected to constant pressure to influence her husband. "The authorities in Crimea need 100 percent loyalty — not professionalism, but loyalty — and everything is based on that principle," she said.

The brief truce soon descended into all-out war. Chiygoz, Ablyalimova says, refused to show such loyalty — and so a way was found to remove him. He was arrested in January 2015. The Mejlis was banned in 2016 and labeled an extremist group.

Ludmila Lyubina, Russia's former human rights commissioner in Crimea, denied bias against any of Crimea's many ethnic groups post-annexation. In an interview last autumn, she suggested that the Mejlis ban and other repressive measures are only what the Crimean Tatars — about 12 percent of the Crimean population — had coming to them after years in Ukraine of demanding the rights they lost after they were deported in 1944, often through mass peaceful protest. (Chiygoz once laid down in front of a bulldozer to protest for land rights.)

"It's not my opinion — I'm the ombudsman — but the opinion of most Slavic and German and Greek people [in Crimea] is that the Crimean Tatars have at last been made to live according to the law. And that's really gratifying. Really gratifying," she told me.

* * *

Other than Crimean Tatars, hardly anyone in Crimea today is still paying attention to the events taking place in the Simferopol courtroom. Few Crimeans can name Valentina Korneva and Igor Postny, the two people who died on Feb. 26, 2014. The court case is ignored by local and Russian media. But the gathering, like the "friendship train" and the "polite people," has entered into local folklore about what happened in spring 2014, and reinforces among some Crimeans a long-held belief in Tatar lawlessness.

"If it hadn't been for Vladimir Vladimirovich [Putin] we would have been left alone with the Tatars and it would have been the most terrible thing in the world," said Irina Antonova, who sells souvenirs in Simferopol International Airport, including Putin T-shirts and models of a new monument to the "polite people" erected outside the Crimean parliament. "At that meeting, the Tatars would have just destroyed us." She did not attend the meeting.

In the center of Simferopol, patrolled by the self-defense militias as well as police, posters from 2014 warning about Ukrainian fascists have disappeared. It's hard to remember the sea of people, flags, and high emotion that filled the square outside parliament on Feb. 26.

Three years since annexation, many Crimeans find themselves disappointed by the results. Russian promises of higher living standards have not materialized.

Few speak openly about their dissatisfaction, however; trials like Chiygoz's have made it clear that dissent is not welcome.

Few speak openly about their dissatisfaction, however; trials like Chiygoz's have made it clear that dissent is not welcome. But even Lyubina, the human rights ombudsman, while denying there are any human rights violations post-annexation, complained about corruption and a lack of freedom.

"I feel there's not enough freedom to express my personal opinion," she said. "In Ukraine, you can spit out whatever's on your mind… In Russia, it's not always possible to formulate and to understand where we're heading."

A few streets away from the parliament, a small, dogged group of friends and supporters gather almost daily outside the supreme court for Chiygoz's hearings. For all its unintentional comedy, the trial has been brutal: Conditions in the pretrial jail are notoriously bad, and Chiygoz spent seven months of his ongoing two-year incarceration in solitary confinement. If found guilty, he could be sentenced to up to 15 years in prison.

"We're here because it could be any one of our sons or husbands," said Ferasultan Musliadinova, a Crimean Tatar who arrives each lunchtime with a van full of rice plov and hot tea for supporters.

Other political trials of Crimeans post-annexation, such as that of the Ukrainian filmmaker Oleh Sentsov, have resulted in long sentences, and few expect Chiygoz's trial to end differently, despite the lack of evidence and the reluctance of witnesses to play along. Still, with the hysteria and euphoria of spring 2014 long gone — and the case's initial prosecutor, Poklonskaya, in Moscow — local zeal to make a public example of Chiygoz seems to be fading.

"There was no mass unrest and there were no injured, just some invented victims, so it's not interesting for [the witnesses]. It's only interesting for the prosecutor," said Daria Svyrydova, a lawyer from the Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union and co-author of the report on the 26 February case. "But as time goes on, it'll get less interesting for the prosecutors, too, as they understand the case is collapsing and it's their headache."

Judges closed the questioning of the fisherman witness by asking if he wanted to see Chiygoz punished for his role on Feb. 26. The fisherman, who in between grilling from Chiygoz, had engaged in an amicable exchange with him about fishing, looked nonplussed.

"I don't know him, so how can I judge him?" he said. "Should I sentence him just because he's asked me a lot of questions?"

Photo credit: Alina Smalko

NATIONAL REVIEW ONLINE

Williamson : Trump & Russia – No Treason

In the words of the sage:

"Settle down, Beavis."

We are in the midst of a great and greatly embarrassing national outbreak of hysterical ninnyism, for the moment focused on the person of Donald J. Trump, the failed casino operator and reality-television figure who was inexplicably elected president of these United States by an electorate that apparently has abandoned (together with its senses) the national motto of "E Pluribus Unum" for "Hey, how could it possibly be any worse?" which is of course the most unconservative sentiment there is.

Some of this is to be expected. We expect hysterical ninnyism from talk radio and the cable-news ranters and the more jackass corners of the Internet. It is always the end of the world when you have gold coins to peddle and dehydrated apocalypse lasagnas to move: Ron Paul loves freedom, and he loves, loves, loves his freeze-dried ice cream. Nuts are nuts, and it is the nature of certain subgenres of media to bring out the shallowness and stupidity in people who didn't know they had it in them: Watching the underlying business realities of MSNBC transform Chris Hayes into the Sean Hannity of the Left has been painful to watch, but it was not entirely unexpected.

"Treason" is the word of the moment, along with "traitor." And this allegation is not coming only from yahoos on Twitter but from yahoos on Twitter who are university professors at Harvard. Lawrence Tribe, who once was considered a possible candidate for a Supreme Court seat, is among those who recently have taken to the public square to suggest that President Trump may be guilty of "treason." Treason is a well-defined crime, the elements of which are specified in no less a document than the Constitution itself. There is no plausible case that Trump is guilty of treason, inasmuch as even if he were entirely guilty of whatever it is the Democrats imagine him to have done, there exists no state of hostilities between the United States and Russia, which would be necessary for treason to have been committed.

We aren't talking about Keith Olbermann here. Olbermann shouts "Treason and Treachery!" if his assistant accidentally brings him a latte made with dairy milk rather than soy milk. He is not a lunatic, but he plays one on television to some success. Richard Blumenthal, arguably the dumbest man in a Senate that includes Bob Casey Jr., has used the word "treason" in reference to the president. Harvard Law's John Shattuck has done the same. Historian Douglas Brinkley told the *Washington Post*, "There a smell of treason in the air," and Nicholas Kristof of the *New York Times* quoted him approvingly.

The related word "traitor" is being thrown around a good deal, too, and not exclusively at Trump. The Catholic diocese of Mexico City

recently published a statement that any Mexican who helps with the construction of a U.S. border wall — say, the gentlemen who own Cemex — ought to be considered "traitors." With all due respect for Mexico City's admirable Norberto Cardinal Rivera Carrera, His Eminence and his editors ought to consider taking a deep breath and meditating on the virtue of charity. There are Mexicans, and Mexican Americans, who hold a wide range of views on immigration policy, and none of those views makes any one of them a "traitor." There is a very wide range of moral territory between "wrong" and "traitor."

You can move from a dispute over insurance regulation to accusations of mass murder pretty quickly, provided you are either dumb or dishonest enough.

My friend Michael Berry, a lawyer and talk-radio host, this week performed a real service when one of his more excitable listeners called in to suggest that a federal judge, who had put the kibosh on the president's No-Muslims-Well-That's-Not-Exactly-What-We-Mean-But-Mostly-No-Muslims executive order, ought to be charged with murder. If you close your eyes and work yourself into the sort of state where your anger begins to bring down your IQ, you can just about see the reasoning: If the judge prevents policy X from being enacted, and people die who might have been saved by policy X, then those who opposed policy X are complicit in those deaths and hence guilty of murder. Berry very carefully explained what it takes for an action to add up to murder, but I fear he may as well have been talking to a pumpkin. Once someone develops a real taste for rage, it is a hard habit to break: Democrats, and not only the ones who call in to talk-radio programs, have been offering more or less the same murder indictment regarding the American Health Care Act. Phil Wilson of the Black AIDS Institute called the act "genocide."

Genocide.

Really.

Democrats ranging from Senator Elizabeth Warren to Senator Bernie Sanders suggested that the Republicans were using legislation to intentionally inflict death on thousands of Americans in order to score a few political points. You can move from a dispute over insurance regulation to accusations of mass murder pretty quickly, provided you are either dumb or dishonest enough.

President Trump, of course, is far from being above this sort of thing. (There is not very much he seems to be above.) Perhaps he has not read his Ibsen and was not paying very much attention during the 20th century, but his labeling of his media critics as "enemies of the people" harkens to a favorite allegation of dictators and caudillos around the world. Biased and incompetent journalists are not "enemies of the people." They are PolitiFact writers, and they deserve our pity.

Settle down, America.

Perhaps "treason" is destined to become, like "fascism," a word that simply means: "I hate you."

It is possible, and even seems likely, that Trump behaved improperly in the matter of the firing of James Comey and in his earlier attempts to exert influence on the FBI. His administration includes some excellent people, but his circle also includes a rogues' gallery of cretins, misfits, and profiteers with links not only to the Kremlin but to a few other surpassingly creepy foreign governments. This should be investigated, both by Congress and by the relevant law-enforcement and national-security agencies. But there is no plausible accusation against him that amounts to treason, and even most of the wildly implausible allegations fall short of that, too. This ought to be of some concern to both sides: Treason brings with it a pretty heavy burden of proof, and Democrats who invoke that crime are going to over-promise and under-deliver.

Perhaps "treason" is destined to become, like "fascism," a word that simply means: "I hate you." But if so, we're going to need a new word for what "treason" used to mean, because it does come up from time to time.

– *Kevin D. Williamson is* National Review*'s roving correspondent.*

The Washington Post

Uncertainty over Trump decision on Paris climate accord clouds Arctic meeting

FAIRBANKS, Alaska — Secretary of State Rex Tillerson promised nations with a stake in the Arctic that the United States would listen to their concerns about rapid climate change but offered no hint Thursday about whether the Trump administration will back away from past commitments on the issue.

The new U.S. administration is considering where it will come down on global warming, Tillerson said, as the United States completed a two-year chairmanship of the Arctic Council, which had made the risks of climate change a priority under former president Barack Obama.

"We are not going to rush to make a decision. We are going to work to make the right decision for the United States," Tillerson said.

That was mainly a reference to the upcoming decision on whether the United States will pull out of the landmark international agreement on climate change and reducing carbon emissions known as the Paris accord.

The Trump administration is in turmoil over whether to fulfill the president's campaign pledge to pull out of the agreement and has postponed a decision until at least late this month.

Climate change is the main topic dominating discussion of the Arctic region, and questions about the future of U.S. leadership on the issue loomed over the meeting.

Other foreign ministers and representatives of indigenous groups avoided criticism of President Trump or Tillerson, although several indigenous speakers stressed the direct impact of a warming region on their lives and traditions.

Although Tillerson is among the Trump Cabinet officials and advisers arguing that the United States has more to gain than lose by remaining a part of the Paris agreement, he could not promise some of the nations most engaged on the issue that Trump will see it that way.

The eight-nation group issued a joint statement that called climate change a pressing issue in the Arctic and took note of the Paris agreement without endorsing it. That was a compromise, as Finnish Foreign Minister Timo Soini noted.

"The document addresses . . . the impacts of climate change and is a most welcome sign of our will to cooperate," Soini said.

The joint declaration from the United States, Canada, Russia, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Iceland stressed "the need for global action to reduce both long-lived greenhouse gases and short-lived climate pollutants."

The Paris climate agreement is considered by many Arctic countries to be a vital first step toward global reckoning with the effects of climate change, and they want to see nations go further. Although that agreement seeks to hold global warming to "well below" an increase of 2 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels, the Arctic is expected to warm up far more than that, because of factors that affect sea ice at the top of the world.

[Trump, reversing Obama, will push to expand drilling in the Arctic and Atlantic]

The Arctic is the fastest-warming part of the planet; it is heating up roughly twice as rapidly as the rest of the globe. The repercussions include enormous ice loss from the ice sheet of Greenland, which is raising sea levels by as much as a millimeter a year; major retreats in floating sea ice; and the thawing of frozen soil, known as permafrost, which can not only destabilize infrastructure but also releases more carbon into the atmosphere as it warms up, further amplifying global warming.

A growing number of scientists suggest that the changes in the Arctic will have an impact on the globe's far more populous mid-latitudes by predisposing the atmosphere to extreme weather events.

A working group of the Arctic Council documented signs of climate change in a just-released study, which raised projections for global sea-level rise according to the pace of Arctic melt. That study, "Snow, Water, Ice and Permafrost in the Arctic," was the subject of an informational display Tillerson toured Thursday.

Meanwhile, another new study found that the permafrost of Alaska is already adding substantial volumes of greenhouse gases to the planet's atmosphere.

[NASA mission yields stunning aerial views of the Arctic]

Environmental groups and other opponents of any U.S. retreat from its commitments on climate change are trying to frame the issue as one that affects U.S. national security and economic interests. Activists marched through downtown Fairbanks on Wednesday, the day Tillerson arrived here.

"We want to tell our secretary of state and our country that Alaskans want a clean economy and we want to honor the Paris climate agreement," the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner quoted protester Enei Begaye as saying.

The Paris accord is the latest policy decision that pits Trump's campaign trail "America First" rhetoric against practical concerns for the new administration. If the president keeps the United States in the agreement, even with the goal of reducing its obligations, the decision will follow foreign policy reversals that included his stances on the NATO alliance and Chinese currency manipulation.

The White House postponed a much-anticipated meeting Tuesday that was expected to further air the differences between a conservative camp of administration officials — including Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt — who want the United States to leave the accord, and a group including Tillerson that argues that the country will have more leverage if it stays within the agreement.

[The EPA just buried its climate change website for kids]

The same day, White House press secretary Sean Spicer said that Trump would not reach a decision on whether to stay or go until after the Group of Seven meeting of major industrial democracies in late May, because the president "wants to make sure that he has an opportunity to continue to meet with his team to create the best strategy for this country going forward."

[Climate change could destroy far more Arctic permafrost than we thought — which would worsen climate change]

Checkpoint newsletter

Military, defense and security at home and abroad.

Nordic countries, including Finland, which takes over leadership of the Arctic Council from the United States, issued a statement this month affirming the Paris agreement and pledging continued leadership on climate issues.

For Canada and Nordic countries deeply concerned about climate change, the Arctic Council meeting is a chance to lobby Tillerson at a moment when the U.S. decision is at a "stalemate," said Andrew Light, a climate specialist with the World Resources Institute.

"This is an opportunity to make the case that the U.S. needs a seat at the table," Light said.

Mooney reported from Washington.

ETATS-UNIS

Aderholt : Clinton would've fired Comey

Democrats seem to have a love-hate-love-hate-love relationship with former FBI director James Comey.

When Comey opened the investigation into Hillary Clinton's basement email server, he become persona non grata in the Clinton camp.

Then fast-forward to July 2016, when Director Comey announced that he would not prosecute Clinton. Suddenly, Comey was like the prodigal son who had come home. Democrats heaped praise on him for his courage to do the right thing.

But like most summer romances, this one was headed toward a hard breakup come fall. On Oct. 28, Comey announced that he had reopened the investigation into the Clinton email scandal and, again, Clinton supporters were crying foul. As recently as May 2, USA TODAY reported that Mrs. Clinton was publicly blaming Comey for her loss to now-President Trump.

Now just a week later, Democrats and the press can find nothing but glowing superlatives to heap on the former director. Does anyone think that if Hillary Clinton had been elected last fall that she would not have dismissed Comey from his post? And she likely would have fired him much sooner.

OUR VIEW: Comey is now a GOP problem

Meanwhile, the premise that the Russian government cast votes for millions of Americans is preposterous.

Did the Russians advise the Clinton campaign to ignore Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin? Did the Russians advise the Clinton campaign to spend resources in red states they had no real chance of winning, such as Texas and Arizona? Did the Russians advise the Clinton campaign to ignore the advice of former president Bill Clinton, who urged his wife's team to focus more on the everyday challenges of blue-collar Americans?

I believe if a psychologist were examining most Democrats and many in the news media, he or she might come to the conclusion they are going through the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

It's clear, we are still a long way from the last step on that list.

Rep. Robert Aderholt*, a Republican, represents Alabama's 4th congressional district.*

Trump's attempt to fix the Comey crisis made it worse

Josh Dawsey

President Donald Trump spent many of the first 48 hours after he fired his FBI director grumbling to friends and associates about his lousy media coverage — and about the shortcomings of his senior aides.

Then, after he went on television himself to give his own, contradictory version of events, he made it even worse. Speaking to NBC's Lester Holt, Trump said he'd planned to fire James Comey "regardless" of whether the Department of Justice recommended it, undermining the claims made by his spokesman, vice president and every other senior aide to the contrary.

Story Continued Below

The president who only a week ago was celebrating the hard-fought passage of health care legislation in the Rose Garden, and who was supposed to spend the week preparing for his first overseas trip — a six-stop tour through the Middle East and Europe — is mired in a crisis that doesn't seem to be getting better.

Inside the White House, the mood was dour. Several White House officials said aides who didn't need to see the president stayed away from the Oval Office — and kept their doors closed. The president had little on his public schedule and spent several hours talking about the Comey situation, mostly fuming, and even re-tweeted criticism of Comey posted by his longtime nemesis Rosie O'Donnell in December.

Trump did the lengthy interview with Holt even though some on his staff believed it was a bad idea and gave his answers off-the-cuff. One person who spoke to him said he'd been "fixated" on his news coverage and believed his press team was failing him and that he needed "to take the situation into his own hands."

The episode highlights two fundamental issues of the Trump presidency: It is often impossible to work for Trump in the White House — and it is often impossible for Trump to be happy with those who work for him.

"They're hostages," said longtime political consultant Mark Corallo, who served as Attorney General John Ashcroft's spokesman under President George W. Bush.

In the span of a dizzying few hours, the president contradicted the vice president and his press secretary, who had maintained for two days that Trump fired Comey because Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein suggested it. Trump instead said the department was in "turmoil" even though he'd previously offered praise for Comey, even blowing him a kiss.

The president, whose campaign and transition officials remain under the scrutiny of a congressional probe into potential collusion in Russian government's interference in the 2016 election, also added that he had determined that the controversy over Russian election interference was simply a "made-up story."

Earlier in the day, the acting FBI director contradicted the president

and his spokespeople, testifying in the Senate that the investigation into Russian contacts with Trump's campaign is "highly significant" — though Trump has called for the probe to end immediately and labeled it a taxpayer-funded "charade." Trump's spokeswoman, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, in turn, stood at the podium in the White House briefing room and contradicted the acting FBI director, who testified that Comey was well-regarded in the bureau, citing "countless" agents who she said had complained to her about his performance.

Asked what the strategy was to get through the crisis, one senior administration official laughed and asked whether the reporter was "joking." This official said aides weren't as bothered as some might imagine because they had been through so many challenges — from Trump during the campaign saying he grabbed women by the genitals to the now infamous accusations about President Barack Obama ordered a "wire tap" on Trump Tower.

Another White House official said there is a "widespread recognition this was handled terribly but not a real sense that we can do much here." This person said Trump remains convinced he made the right decision by firing Comey and that he handled it properly — "maybe even more than two days ago."

Sanders gave staff members a stern lecture on leaking to the media during a staff meeting Thursday morning, according to several people familiar with the incident, saying it was damaging the White House. The lecture seemed to take staffers by surprise, said one person present.

"The rules aren't normal," said one White House official. "If you can't work in that universe, then don't work here."

The White House press shop, which Trump has criticized both privately and publicly, has been at the receiving end of most of the criticism. Trump told aides and outside advisers that the press shop was failing him and he was displeased that "they don't know how to defend anything," in the words of one adviser. Jared Kushner, the president's son-in-law, is also upset with the press operation, according to a close Trump ally.

On the night of the announcement, White House officials were left to scramble. "It was chaos, there was no direction, no marching orders, no execution, it was like people were having to learn what to do before they could do it. Instead of knowing what happens in a crisis PR situation, here's what we're doing," said one White House official. This person noted that Sen. Chuck Schumer, a New York Democrat, had crafted a better message and held a news conference within an hour — while it took White House officials three hours to put surrogates on TV.

Some said the criticism was unfair. Press Secretary Sean Spicer, for example, learned about the firing within an hour of it occurring — in a meeting with Trump, communications director Michael Dubke, White House Counsel Don McGahn and chief of staff Reince Priebus, according to a person familiar with the matter.

"Trump goes out there and creates a total mess, and then blames others for not being able to fix it," one adviser said. "I don't pity them."

Spicer declined to comment on the office's performance. Trump was pleased in the last two days by Sanders' performance, two White House officials said.

Sanders, the White House deputy press secretary, was forced to change her planned answers for Thursday's press briefing just minutes before. She watched as Trump interviewed with Holt, unsure exactly what he'd say. Trump admitted that he asked Comey whether he was under investigation at a dinner where Comey made clear he was seeking to keep his job — and the president changed his entire explanation for why he let Comey go, calling him a "showboat."

"Nobody was in the dark," Sanders said Thursday, seconds after saying she gave an incorrect answer the day before because she had been in the dark.

The communications crisis followed a familiar pattern in which the president — frustrated by his press team's flatfooted response — takes charge of the situation himself and, in doing so, undermines the White House message. One outside adviser said the shifting explanations have made surrogates less willing to go on TV and back the president, for fear of being embarrassed.

White House aides have also been trying to paper over the apparent disorganization of the internal response to Comey's abrupt firing.

Spicer repeatedly said in a phone call Tuesday night there was no talk of firing Comey before Trump received the Rosenstein letter and said any question to the contrary would impeach the "integrity" of Rosenstein, "who was confirmed 94-6."

"Have you seen the letter?" Spicer asked, raising his voice and decrying "anonymous sources who don't know anything." He also said that Priebus hadn't express concerns about the firing, even though several other people close to Trump said that he had.

Spicer missed the briefings Wednesday and Thursday while on Naval Reserve duty, but engaged in a heated argument with The Washington Post's national editor after the newspaper reported he hid in bushes Tuesday night outside the White House after doing a TV hit to defend Trump's firing of Comey.

One White House official said Spicer, who is set to return to the podium Friday, seemed more upset about that story than much of the terrible coverage Trump received.

Spicer said late Thursday that The Washington Post "falsely described the situation" and "grossly misstated the situation around our attempt to brief the press."

A person familiar with the press secretary's location late Tuesday night said Spicer was standing between or behind bushes, but not physically in a bush.

More than 12 hours after the story ran, Spicer eventually secured an editor's note. "Spicer huddled with his staff among bushes near television sets on the White House grounds, not 'in the bushes,' as the story originally stated," the newspaper wrote.

A spokesperson for The Post said their correction speaks for itself and declined to comment further.

Shane Goldmacher, Hadas Gold, Matthew Nussbaum and Edward-Isaac Dovere contributed to this report.

The New York Times

Trump Shifts Rationale for Firing Comey, Calling Him a 'Showboat' (UNE)

Peter Baker and Michael D. Shear

But by the next day, that story had begun to unravel.

Mr. Rosenstein and Donald F. McGahn II, the White House counsel, spoke by telephone on Wednesday to review details that precipitated the firing, seeking to agree on a version of events that could be released to the public.

That conversation led to a new timeline that the White House shared with reporters hours later. It said that Mr. Trump had in recent weeks been "strongly inclined to remove" Mr. Comey, but that he had made his final decision only after receiving written recommendations on Tuesday from Mr. Rosenstein and Mr. Sessions.

And then on Thursday, the president himself brushed away that narrative, reversing his own aides' version of events.

In fact, the president asserted, he had decided to fire Mr. Comey well before he received the advice from the Justice Department officials. He said he was frustrated by Mr. Comey's public testimony regarding the F.B.I. investigation into Russia's meddling in the 2016 campaign and its possible contacts with Mr. Trump's advisers.

"I was going to fire Comey — my decision," Mr. Trump told NBC. "I was going to fire regardless of recommendation."

The president's comments appeared aimed at reassuring Mr. Rosenstein, who was reportedly upset at the White House's original narrative that seemed to suggest he had instigated Mr. Comey's firing. The White House has cited Mr. Rosenstein's reputation as a straight shooter in justifying Mr. Trump's move.

But the president's story line left the White House struggling to explain his motivation for firing his F.B.I. director a day after calling the Russia investigation nothing more than a "taxpayer funded charade" that should end.

Critics said the credibility of the White House had been badly damaged and renewed calls for a special prosecutor to take over the Russia investigation, independent of the administration.

The White House's explanation was challenged on Thursday in other ways as well. The president's spokeswoman said on Wednesday

that Mr. Comey was fired in part because he had lost the support of rank-and-file F.B.I. employees. But on Thursday, Andrew G. McCabe, the new acting director of the agency, told the Senate that Mr. Comey enjoyed "broad support within the F.B.I. and still does to this day."

And while the White House said on Wednesday that the Russia inquiry was only a small part of the bureau's activities, Mr. McCabe called it "a highly significant investigation."

Throughout the rapidly shifting 48 hours, Mr. Rosenstein appeared to be caught in the middle.

Confirmed just last month, he made a trip to Capitol Hill on Thursday for a previously unannounced meeting with the Republican and Democratic leaders of the Senate Intelligence Committee. In a brief hallway conversation with a reporter, Mr. Rosenstein denied reports that he had threatened to quit.

Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the majority leader, has agreed to invite Mr. Rosenstein to brief the entire Senate next week, said the minority leader, Senator Chuck Schumer of New York.

In his Wednesday deliberations, Mr. Rosenstein made clear that the timeline needed to be accurate, and that he did not want to "massage" the version of events. His discussions included Mr. McGahn, Mr. Sessions and other senior administration officials, according to a person familiar with the conversation who was not authorized to discuss it. It concluded with a four-sentence statement that was released by the White House on Wednesday evening.

That statement noted that Mr. Trump had met with both Mr. Rosenstein and Mr. Sessions on Monday to discuss reasons to remove Mr. Comey. It said that Mr. Rosenstein had submitted his written recommendation to Mr. Sessions on Tuesday, who sent his own recommendation to Mr. Trump soon afterward.

Mr. Rosenstein's memo, while highly critical of Mr. Comey's actions over the past year, stopped short of explicitly recommending his ouster. "Although the president has the power to remove an F.B.I. director," he wrote, "the decision should not be taken lightly."

In the NBC interview, Mr. Trump elaborated on his claim that Mr. Comey had told him on three occasions that the president himself was not under investigation. The F.B.I. has been looking into whether associates of Mr. Trump and his campaign coordinated with Russia as Moscow orchestrated an effort to intervene in the American election and tilt the election to Mr. Trump.

Mr. Trump said Mr. Comey had reassured him first at a private dinner, and then during two phone conversations. He acknowledged that he had directly asked if he was being investigated.

"I said, 'If it's possible, would you let me know if I'm under investigation?'" Mr. Trump said. "He said, 'You are not under investigation.'"

The admission raised questions on Thursday among reporters, who asked Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the deputy White House press secretary, whether it was inappropriate for the president to ask the F.B.I. director whether he was under investigation. "No, I don't believe it is," Ms. Sanders said.

The president said Mr. Comey requested the dinner early in his administration to ask to keep his job. That would be an unusual — and perhaps unnecessary — step for an F.B.I. director, who by law is appointed for a 10-year term. Mr. Comey was four years into his term when Mr. Trump was inaugurated.

"He wanted to stay on as the F.B.I. head," Mr. Trump said. "I said: 'I'll consider. We'll see what happens.' But we had a very nice dinner and at that time, he told me I wasn't under investigation, which I knew anyway."

In explaining his decision to fire Mr. Comey, Mr. Trump said that "the F.B.I. has been in turmoil" since last year, an apparent reference to the controversy over how the Clinton investigation was managed, and "it hasn't recovered from that."

Mr. Trump also insisted, as he has before, that there was "no collusion between my campaign and Russia."

The interview underscored what has been a continuing challenge for the Trump administration to provide the public with accurate information about the president's actions and motivations.

On Tuesday evening, Sean Spicer, the White House press secretary, said in an interview on Fox Business Network that it was Mr. Rosenstein who had "made a determination" about Mr. Comey and the president had followed it. At the time, Mr. Spicer was merely dutifully relaying the White House's position.

Mr. Pence did the same in his comments to reporters the next day. And at the daily White House briefing on Wednesday, Ms. Sanders was asked whether the advice from Mr. Rosenstein and Mr. Sessions was only a pretext for a decision the president had already made. "No," she said.

On Thursday, after the president's NBC interview, she changed gears.

"I hadn't had a chance to have the conversation directly with the president," she said. "I'd had several conversations with him, but I didn't ask that question directly — 'had you already made that decision.' I went off of the information that I had when I answered your question."

But she stuck by her contention that Mr. Comey had lost the faith of his employees — even though the agency's acting director had contradicted it. "I've certainly heard from a large number of individuals, and that's just myself," Ms. Sanders said, "and I don't even know that many people in the F.B.I."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Donald Trump Planned Firing of James Comey Before Aide's Letter (UNE)

Michael C. Bender, Del Quentin Wilber and Rebecca Ballhaus

WASHINGTON—President Donald Trump said he was planning to fire former FBI Director James Comey regardless of any advice from the Justice Department, because Mr. Comey was a "showboat" who he claimed had lost the faith of his employees.

In an interview with NBC News on Thursday, Mr. Trump offered his first full account of the events that led up to the firing of Mr. Comey on Tuesday as head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. In doing so, the president contradicted the initial White House accounts that he acted after top Justice Department officials recommended Mr. Comey's ouster.

Mr. Trump also confirmed he had directly asked Mr. Comey whether he was personally a target of a federal investigation involving his campaign's possible ties to Russian hackers.

Mr. Trump said Mr. Comey told him he wasn't a target. Close associates of Mr. Comey said on Wednesday that he didn't provide such assurances to Mr. Trump about an investigation in which the president has a personal stake.

"The president of the United States should not be involving himself in an ongoing investigation by soliciting details about that investigation from the head of the investigative agency," said Richard Ben-Veniste, a prosecutor on the task force that investigated the 1970s Watergate scandal involving President Richard Nixon. "That's just not the way the system is supposed to work."

During last year's campaign, Mr. Trump criticized former President Bill Clinton for meeting briefly with then-Attorney General Loretta Lynch in the midst of an email probe of Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. Ms. Lynch said they didn't talk about the probe.

Mr. Trump's comments added to the evolving story line about how and why he decided to oust Mr. Comey, who was overseeing an investigation into Russia's alleged interference with the 2016 election and its possible ties to Trump campaign associates. Russia and Mr. Trump have denied any wrongdoing.

In the past three days, the administration's shifting explanations have led the new deputy attorney general to insist that the White House correct the record on his role in the firing; Mr. Comey's acting successor to defend the integrity of the agency; and Democrats to renew demands that an independent prosecutor take over the Russia probe.

In his interview, Mr. Trump said he decided to fire Mr. Comey well before receiving on Tuesday critical performance reviews from top Justice Department officials, including Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein.

Mr. Rosenstein had been summoned Monday to the White House, where he discussed Mr. Comey's performance with the president. Mr. Trump asked Mr. Rosenstein to write a memo detailing his concerns about the director's conduct.

In that letter, Mr. Rosenstein never expressly recommended that Mr. Comey be fired. Instead, the 12-paragraph letter is deeply critical of Mr. Comey's handling of the investigation into Mrs. Clinton's use of a private email server to conduct

public business. Mr. Rosenstein concluded that the FBI had lost the public's trust and that "the director cannot be expected to implement corrective action."

After White House officials cited that report as the reason for sacking Mr. Comey, Mr. Rosenstein pressed White House counsel Don McGahn to correct what he felt was an inaccurate White House depiction of events, according to a person familiar with the conversation.

In his talk with Mr. McGahn, Mr. Rosenstein left the impression that he couldn't work in an environment where facts weren't accurately reported, the person said.

Justice Department spokesman Ian Prior Thursday denied reports that Mr. Rosenstein had threatened to outright quit over the White House depiction of the events leading up to Mr. Comey's dismissal. He declined to comment further.

In a Wednesday afternoon news briefing, spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders started to shift the White House narrative. Asked about the tipping point in Mr. Trump's decision to dismiss Mr. Comey, she responded: "He'd lost confidence in Director Comey, and, frankly, he'd been considering letting Director Comey go since the day he was elected."

Asked if Mr. Trump had directed Mr. Rosenstein to write a recommendation that Mr. Comey be fired, she said, "No."

In a brief appearance before reporters, Mr. Trump said he fired Mr. Comey because "he wasn't doing a good job," and Ms. Sanders asserted that she had heard from scores of FBI employees relieved that the director had been fired.

But during a Capitol Hill hearing on Thursday, acting FBI Director Andrew McCabe disputed that assessment.

"The vast majority of FBI staff enjoyed a deep, positive connection to Director Comey," Mr. McCabe said.

Sen. Chuck Grassley (R., Iowa) pressed Mr. McCabe to confirm Mr. Trump's assertion that he wasn't the subject of the Russia probe.

The agency "should confirm to the public whether it is or is not investigating the president," he said. "Because it has failed to make this clear, speculation has run rampant."

One of Russia's goals, Mr. Grassley said, is to undermine Americans' faith in U.S. institutions, and the FBI's silence plays into that objective.

Mr. McCabe said the FBI has given no indication it would be willing to make such a statement.

Also on Thursday, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D., N.Y.) demanded further explanation for the firing of Mr. Comey. He said on the Senate floor that he would soon be sending Mr. Rosenstein a letter with a list of questions the lawmaker said he wanted to be answered publicly.

Mr. Rosenstein won the backing of most Senate Democrats when he was confirmed to his position late last month in a 94-6 vote.

Democrats voted for Mr. Rosenstein "because he had a reputation for integrity" and assured them that he would act independently at the Justice Department, Mr. Schumer said.

"The events of the last week have made many of us question that belief," Mr. Schumer said.

Mr. Rosenstein on Thursday was invited by Mr. Schumer and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.) to do a full briefing with the Senate next week.

—Aruna Viswanatha, Eli Stokols and Kristina Peterson contributed to this article.

The New York Times

Acting F.B.I. Chief Contradicts White House on Russia and Comey (UNE)

Adam Goldman and Matthew Rosenberg

"Our committee will get to the bottom of what happened in the 2016 presidential election," said Mr. Warner, who has called the Intelligence Committee's own inquiry into Russian election interference "probably the most important thing I've done in public life."

Senator Martin Heinrich, Democrat of New Mexico and a member of the panel, said he appreciated Mr. McCabe's candor.

"Clearly, he took a moment and thought about this and had a personal and professional conviction he was not willing to deviate from, and I think that's what we look for from people who run the F.B.I.," Mr. Heinrich said in an interview after the hearing. "He deserves credit for not dodging the tough questions."

When asked to help unravel some of the explanations that have swirled in the news media about Mr. Comey's firing and interactions between him and the president, Mr. McCabe, who worked closely alongside Mr. Comey as the F.B.I.'s deputy director, was more circumspect.

He said he could not describe any conversations that his former boss might have had with the president and would not comment on Mr. Trump's claim that Mr. Comey had told him three times that he was not under investigation.

When asked whether it would be wrong to tell the president he was not being investigated, Mr. McCabe said, "We typically do not answer that question."

He also sought to sidestep delicate questions about the number of agents working on the Russia inquiry, assuring the committee that the bureau had the resources it needed.

Times Reporters Decode the Trump-Comey Saga

The New York Times reporters Peter Baker, Maggie Haberman and Matthew Rosenberg analyze the firing of the F.B.I. director, James B. Comey.

By A.J. CHAVAR on May 11, 2017. . Watch in Times Video »

Days before he was fired, Mr. Comey had asked the Justice Department for more prosecutors to aid in the investigation, according to four congressional officials, including Senator Richard J. Durbin, Democrat of Illinois. Mr. McCabe was not asked on Thursday whether Mr. Comey had specifically sought more prosecutors, but he was asked whether Mr. Comey had requested additional resources more broadly.

Mr. McCabe said he was unaware of any such appeal.

"We don't typically request resources for an individual case," he said.

He also said the F.B.I. had secured and preserved Mr. Comey's files after he was fired.

Thursday's hearing was supposed to be about the range of threats facing the United States around the world. At its outset, Senator Richard M. Burr of North Carolina, the Republican chairman of the committee, signaled his intent to keep the focus global — and away from the political drama over Mr. Comey's firing that has engulfed Washington.

"I understand that many people tuned in today are hopeful we'll focus solely on the Russian investigation of their involvement in our elections. Let me disappoint everybody up front," Mr. Burr said in his opening statement.

"The committee certainly views Russian intervention in our elections as a significant threat," he continued. But, he added, "the purpose of today's hearing is to review and highlight to the extent possible the ranges of threats that we face as a nation."

He told Mr. McCabe, "Welcome to the table and into the fray."

But with Mr. McCabe on the dais, the hearing invariably turned back to the Russia investigation, and Mr. Comey's firing.

"It is impossible to ignore that one of the leaders of the intelligence community is not here with us today," Mr. Warner said.

In firing Mr. Comey, the Trump administration chose not to wait for the results of a review by the Justice Department's inspector general into Mr. Comey's actions in the Clinton email investigation. On Wednesday, Representative Jason Chaffetz of Utah, the Republican chairman of the Oversight Committee, asked that the inspector general's investigation be expanded to include an examination of Mr. Comey's dismissal.

Mr. Burr and Mr. Warner slipped out of Thursday's hearing briefly to meet with the deputy attorney general, Rod J. Rosenstein, who has come under scrutiny for his memo criticizing Mr. Comey, which was cited by the president in the F.B.I. director's ouster.

Although their meeting caused a brief stir when the senators' exit disrupted the hearing, Mr. Burr said afterward that he and Mr. Warner had requested the meeting before Mr. Comey was dismissed. He called the timing a coincidence.

At least part of the conversation centered on ensuring that the committee's inquiry into Russian meddling in the election did not impede the government's investigation of the same thing, Mr. Burr told reporters afterward.

Mr. Warner called the private meeting "fairly productive," but quickly added, "I still have concerns about Mr. Rosenstein in terms of his role in the circumstances of Mr. Comey's departure."

Mr. Rosenstein left without talking to reporters, save for responding "no" to a shouted question about whether he had threatened to quit.

The senators also noted that they had asked Mr. Comey to brief them next week to learn more about the Russia investigation, but had not heard back. It was not clear what he might reveal.

"It just gets stranger here by the day," Mr. Heinrich said.

In a Private Dinner, Trump Demanded Loyalty. Comey Demurred. (UNE)

Michael S. Schmidt

The White House says this account is not correct. And Mr. Trump, in an interview on Thursday with NBC, described a far different dinner conversation with Mr. Comey in which the director asked to have the meeting and the question of loyalty never came up. It was not clear whether he was talking about the same meal, but they are believed to have had only one dinner together.

By Mr. Comey's account, his answer to Mr. Trump's initial question apparently did not satisfy the president, the associates said. Later in the dinner, Mr. Trump again said to Mr. Comey that he needed his loyalty.

Mr. Comey again replied that he would give him "honesty" and did not pledge his loyalty, according to the account of the conversation.

But Mr. Trump pressed him on whether it would be "honest loyalty."

"You will have that," Mr. Comey told his associates he responded.

Throughout his career, Mr. Trump has made loyalty from the people who work for him a key priority, often discharging employees he considers insufficiently reliable.

Times Reporters Decode the Trump-Comey Saga

The New York Times reporters Peter Baker, Maggie Haberman and Matthew Rosenberg analyze the firing of the F.B.I. director, James B. Comey.

By A.J. CHAVAR on May 11, 2017. . Watch in Times Video »

As described by the two people, the dinner offers a window into Mr. Trump's approach to the presidency, through Mr. Comey's eyes. A businessman and reality television star who never served in public office, Mr. Trump may not have understood that by tradition, F.B.I. directors are not supposed to be political loyalists, which is why Congress in the 1970s passed a law giving them 10-year terms to make them independent of the president.

Mr. Comey described details of his refusal to pledge his loyalty to Mr. Trump to several people close to him on the condition that they not discuss it publicly while he was F.B.I. director. But now that Mr. Comey has been fired, they felt free to discuss it on the condition of anonymity.

A White House spokeswoman on Thursday disputed the description of the dinner by Mr. Comey's associates.

"We don't believe this to be an accurate account," said Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the deputy press secretary. "The integrity of our law enforcement agencies and their leadership is of the utmost importance to President Trump. He would never even suggest the expectation of personal loyalty, only loyalty to our country and its great people."

At the dinner described by Mr. Trump in his interview with NBC, the conversation with Mr. Comey was quite different. Mr. Trump told NBC that Mr. Comey requested it to ask to keep his job. Mr. Trump said he asked the F.B.I. director if he was under investigation, a question that legal experts called highly unusual if not improper. In Mr. Trump's telling, Mr. Comey reassured him that he was not.

Mr. Trump did not say whether he asked Mr. Comey for his loyalty. Asked at Wednesday's White House news briefing whether loyalty was a factor in picking a new F.B.I. director, Ms. Sanders said Mr. Trump wanted someone who is "loyal to the justice system."

Trump on Comey: 'He's a Showboat'

President Trump told NBC's Lester Holt that the F.B.I. was in turmoil, and that he was going to fire its director, James B. Comey, regardless of any recommendation.

By NBC NEWS. Photo by Doug Mills/The New York Times. Watch in Times Video »

The dinner described by Mr. Comey's associates came in the early days of Mr. Trump's administration, as the F.B.I. was investigating Russian meddling in the election and possible ties to Mr. Trump's campaign. That investigation has since gained momentum as investigators have developed new evidence and leads.

Mr. Trump had met Mr. Comey for the first time in January, during the transition, when, along with the intelligence chiefs, the F.B.I. director presented him with evidence of that intervention. Mr. Comey was tasked by his fellow intelligence directors to also pull Mr. Trump aside and inform him about a secret dossier suggesting that Russia might have collected compromising information about him.

The dinner at which the conversation Mr. Comey related took place was on Jan. 27, almost a month later. CNN reported on Thursday that Mr. Comey never gave Mr. Trump an assurance of his loyalty.

Mr. Comey's associates said that the new president requested the dinner he described, and said that he was wary about attending because he did not want to appear too chummy with Mr. Trump, especially amid the Russia investigation. But Mr. Comey went because he did not believe he could turn down a meeting with the new president.

During the meal, according to the account of the two associates, Mr. Comey tried to explain to Mr. Trump how he saw his role as F.B.I. director. Mr. Comey told Mr. Trump that the country would be best served by an independent F.B.I. and Justice Department.

In announcing Mr. Comey's dismissal on Tuesday, the White House released documents from the attorney general and the deputy attorney general that outlined why Mr. Comey should be fired.

Mr. Trump said in the NBC interview, "Regardless of recommendation, I was going to fire Comey."

"In fact, when I decided to just do it, I said to myself, I said, you know, this Russia thing with Trump and Russia is a made-up story," Mr. Trump said.

Strassel : Why James Comey Had to Go

Kimberley A. Strassel

Testifying last week before the Senate Judiciary Committee, James Comey recalled a moment that should have held more significance for him than it did. At the height of the presidential campaign, President Obama's attorney general, Loretta Lynch, had chosen to meet with Bill Clinton on an airport tarmac. That, said the now-former FBI director, "was the capper for me." Hillary Clinton's emails were being probed, but Ms. Lynch was too conflicted to "credibly complete the investigation." So Mr. Comey stepped in.

Donald Trump and senior Justice Department leaders might appreciate the impulse. According to Democrats and the media, Attorney General Jeff Sessions is too conflicted to recommend sacking Mr. Comey; the Trump administration is too conflicted to name a successor; the entire Justice Department and the Republican Congress are too conflicted to conduct true oversight.

Entirely missing from this narrative is the man who was perhaps the most conflicted of all: James Comey. The FBI head was so good at portraying himself as Washington's last Boy Scout—the only person who ever did the right thing—that few noticed his repeated refusal to do the right thing. Mr. Comey might still have a job if, on any number of occasions, he'd acknowledged his own conflicts and stepped back.

Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein's memo to Mr. Sessions expertly excoriated Mr. Comey's decision to "usurp" Ms. Lynch's authority and his "gratuitously" fulsome July press conference. But Mr. Comey's dereliction of duty preceded that—by his own admission. Remember, he testified that the Lynch-Clinton meeting was but the "capper." Before that, he told lawmakers, "a number of things had gone on which I can't talk about yet that made me worry the department leadership could not credibly complete the investigation."

We don't know what these things were, but it seems the head of the FBI had lost confidence—even before TarmacGate—that the Justice Department was playing it anywhere near straight in the Clinton probe. So what should an honor-bound FBI director do in such a conflicted situation? Call it out. Demand that Ms. Lynch recuse herself and insist on an appropriate process to ensure public confidence. Resign, if need be. Instead Mr. Comey waited until the situation had become a crisis, and then he ignored all protocol to make himself investigator, attorney, judge and jury.

By the end of that 15-minute July press conference, Mr. Comey had infuriated both Republicans and Democrats, who were now universally convinced he was playing politics. He'd undermined his and his agency's integrity. No matter his motives, an honor-bound director would have acknowledged that his decision jeopardized his ability to continue effectively leading the agency. He would have chosen in the following days—or at least after the election—to step down. Mr. Comey didn't.

Which leads us to Mr. Comey's most recent and obvious conflict of all—likely a primary reason he was fired: the leaks investigation (or rather non-investigation). So far the only crime that has come to light from this Russia probe is the rampant and felonious leaking of classified information to the press. Mr. Trump and the GOP rightly see this as a major risk to national security. While the National Security Agency has been cooperating with the House Intelligence Committee and allowing lawmakers to review documents that might show the source of the leaks, Mr. Comey's FBI has resolutely refused to do the same.

Why? The press reports that the FBI obtained a secret court order last summer to monitor Carter Page. It's still unclear exactly under what circumstances the government was listening in on former Trump adviser Mike Flynn and the Russian ambassador, but the FBI was likely involved there, too. Meaning Mr. Comey's agency is a prime possible source of the leaks.

In last week's Senate hearing, Chairman Chuck Grassley pointed out the obvious: The entire top leadership of the FBI is suspect. "So how," Mr. Grassley asked, "can the Justice Department guarantee the integrity of the investigations without designating an agency, other than the FBI, to gather the facts and eliminate senior FBI officials as suspects?" Mr. Comey didn't provide much of an answer.

All this—the Russia probe, the unmasking, the leaks, the fraught question of whether the government was inappropriately monitoring campaigns, the allegations of interference in a presidential campaign—is wrapped together, with Mr. Comey at the center. The White House and House Republicans couldn't have faith that the FBI would be an honest broker of the truth. Mr. Comey should have realized this, recused himself from ongoing probes, and set up a process to restore trust. He didn't. So the White House did it for him.

Colleagues describe Mr. Comey as an honorable man. The problem seems to be that his sense of perfect virtue made him blind to his own conflicts and the mess he had made. New leadership at the FBI is a chance for a fresh start.

The New York Times

Editorial : The Trump-Russia Nexus

The acting director of the F.B.I., Andrew McCabe, told Congress on Thursday that President Trump's firing of James Comey has not derailed the agency's investigation into possible collusion between Russia and the Trump campaign. Which is good news. Despite Mr. Trump's assertion that the idea of collusion is "a total hoax," and despite many unknowns, the links continue to pile up. Here is a partial accounting of the connections we do know something about.

THE TRUMP FAMILY BUSINESS There may be no Trump Tower in Moscow or St. Petersburg, but it is not for lack of trying. Mr. Trump and his family have sought to do business in Russia since at least the 1980s. They have also developed extensive commercial and personal relationships with politically connected Russian businessmen. In 2008, Donald Trump Jr. told a real estate conference, "Russians make up a pretty disproportionate cross section of a lot of our assets; say in Dubai, and certainly with our project in SoHo and anywhere in New York," according to eTurboNews, a travel industry news site. The author James Dodson said that another son, Eric Trump, told him in 2013 that Russians have bankrolled Trump golf courses: "Well, we don't rely on American banks. We have all the funding we need out of Russia." Eric Trump denies saying that.

In addition, Donald Trump worked with the Agalarov family, a prominent Russian business group, to host the 2013 edition of his Miss Universe pageant in Moscow. Mr. Trump met more than a dozen of the country's most prominent oligarchs while he was there, Bloomberg News reported. Jared Kushner, who is married to Ivanka Trump and is a senior adviser to the president, has also been caught up in the Russia story. During the transition, Mr. Kushner met with the Russian ambassador, Sergey Kislyak, as well as with the top executive of a Russian government-owned bank.

The world would know much more about Mr. Trump's foreign partnerships if he had released his tax returns, as every president has done for the last 40 years.

MICHAEL FLYNN Mr. Flynn, the former national security adviser, had several conversations with Mr. Kislyak during the transition in which they discussed American sanctions against Russia. Mr. Trump fired Mr. Flynn after public disclosure that the had lied to Vice President Mike Pence about the nature of those talks. In addition, RT, a Russian government-backed news outlet, paid Mr. Flynn $45,000 for giving a speech in December 2015 in Moscow. On the same trip, he sat next to President Vladimir Putin at an RT gala. The Pentagon is investigating whether Mr. Flynn, a retired military intelligence officer, failed to disclose and obtain approval from the State and Defense Departments before taking money from a foreign government.

JEFF SESSIONS Mr. Sessions, the attorney general, said during his Senate confirmation hearing that he did not have any contacts with Russian officials while he was actively campaigning for Mr. Trump. In fact, he met with Mr. Kislyak twice, once in his Senate office and once at the Republican National Convention.

PAUL MANAFORT Mr. Manafort, a former chairman of the Trump campaign, worked as a consultant for a pro-Russia political party in Ukraine and for Ukraine's former president, Viktor Yanukovych, who was backed by the Kremlin. Mr. Manafort has been accused of receiving secret payments from the pro-Russia party. About a decade earlier, Mr. Manafort also worked for Oleg Deripaska, a Russian oligarch with close ties to Mr. Putin. The Associated Press obtained a memo he wrote to Mr. Deripaska offering a plan that he said would "greatly benefit the Putin Government."

CARTER PAGE American officials believe that Mr. Page, a foreign policy adviser, had contacts with Russian intelligence officials during the campaign. He also gave a pro-Russia speech in Moscow in July 2016. Mr. Page was once employed by Merrill Lynch's Moscow office, where he worked with Gazprom, a government-owned energy giant.

ROGER STONE Mr. Stone, an informal but close Trump adviser, exchanged messages last summer with Guccifer 2.0, a Twitter account widely believed to be a front for Russian intelligence operatives who were involved in the hacking of the Democratic National Committee and Hillary Clinton's campaign. During the campaign, Mr. Stone seemed to know in advance that WikiLeaks would release emails from the account of John Podesta, Mrs. Clinton's campaign chairman.

Mr. Trump and his associates can cry themselves hoarse that there is neither smoke nor fire here. But all in all, the known facts suggest an unusually extensive network of relationships with a major foreign power. Anyone who cares about the credibility of the American electoral process should want a thorough investigation of whether and how Russia interfered in the election and through whom.

The Washington Post

Trump said he was thinking of Russia controversy when he decided to fire Comey (UNE)

President Trump on Thursday said he was thinking of "this Russia thing with Trump" when he decided to fire FBI Director James B. Comey, who had been leading the counterintelligence investigation into Russia's interference in the 2016 election.

Recounting his decision to dismiss Comey, Trump told NBC News, “In fact, when I decided to just do it, I said to myself, I said, ‘You know, this Russia thing with Trump and Russia is a made up story, it’s an excuse by the Democrats for having lost an election that they should have won.’”

Trump’s account flatly contradicts the White House’s initial account of how the president arrived at his decision, undercutting public denials by his aides that the move was influenced in any way by his growing fury with the ongoing Russia probe.

Later in the same interview, Trump said he had no intention of trying to stop or hinder the FBI’s Russia probe, which is examining whether any Trump associates coordinated with Russians to influence the election. Trump also said he wants the probe “to be absolutely done properly.”

“I want that to be so strong and so good,” Trump told NBC anchor Lester Holt. He added, “I want to get to the bottom. If Russia hacked, if Russia did anything having to do with our election, I want to know about it.”

Team Trump’s ties to Russian interests

Trump’s account of his decision to fire Comey — whom he denigrated as “a showboat” and “a grandstander” — exposes the explanations made over the previous 48 hours by White House officials, including Vice President Pence, as misleading and in some cases false.

[Inside Trump’s anger and impatience — and his decision to fire Comey]

Initially, Trump aides had said the president fired Comey simply at the recommendation of Attorney General Jeff Sessions and Deputy Attorney General Rod J. Rosenstein, who wrote a memorandum detailing what he considered to be Comey’s flawed handling of the investigation into Hillary Clinton’s use of a private email server as secretary of state.

In media appearances, administration officials repeatedly highlighted Rosenstein’s reputation of integrity and bipartisan appeal, effectively using his independence as a shield against criticism that Comey’s firing was politically motivated by the president.

Officials insisted that Trump’s decision was not shaped in any way by his growing fury with the Russia controversy. Trump has publicly called the ongoing probes by the FBI, as well as the Senate and House, “a total hoax” and “a taxpayer charade.”

But Trump made clear in Thursday’s interview that Russia indeed was on his mind. And he said Sessions and Rosenstein’s recommendations did not prompt his decision.

“I was going to fire Comey,” Trump told Holt. “Oh, I was going to fire regardless of recommendation.”

The White House on May 11 continued to defend President Trump’s dismissal of James B. Comey as FBI director. The White House continues to defend President Trump’s dismissal of James B. Comey as FBI director. (Video: Bastien Inzaurralde, Alice Li, Jayne Orenstein/Photo: Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

(Bastien Inzaurralde,Alice Li,Jayne Orenstein/The Washington Post)

The White House on Thursday struggled to explain its evolving and contradictory accounts of Trump’s decisionmaking process.

“Nobody was left in the dark,” Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the principal deputy White House press secretary, insisted at Thursday’s press briefing. She added, “It was a quick-moving process. We took the information we had as best we had it, and got it out to the American people as quickly as we could.”

In interview, Trump also detailed three conversations he said he had with Comey about the Russia investigation. The president said the FBI director assured him in each discussion that he was not under investigation — once at a White House dinner when Comey was seeking to remain in his post and again in two phone calls. Trump said Comey initiated one of the calls.

“I said, ‘If it’s possible, would you let me know am I under investigation?’ He said, ‘You are not under investigation,’’’ Trump said.

In offering more details about an assertion he made when firing Comey on Tuesday—that Comey had repeatedly assured him he was not under investigation—the president raised new questions about his conduct toward the ongoing FBI probe into whether any Trump associates coordinated with Russia to meddle with last year’s presidential election.

Trump has repeatedly criticized that investigation, calling it a waste of taxpayer money, and denied he has any ties to Russia.

“There’s no collusion between me and my campaign and the Russians,” Trump told Holt.

[Senate Democrats demands answers to Rosenstein about Comey firing]

Democrats have called for the appointment of a special counsel to investigate the matter without the threat of political interference.

In the NBC interview, Trump said Comey came to eat dinner with him at the White House. “I think he asked for the dinner. . . . And he wanted to stay at the FBI, and I said I’ll, you know, consider and see what happens … But we had a very nice dinner, and at that time he told me, ‘You are not under investigation.’ ’’

The exchange as described by the president is remarkable since he said the FBI director was discussing an ongoing investigation with the president — something Justice Department policy generally prohibits — at the same time Comey was seeking assurances he would remain in his job.

Current and former officials said Trump’s description of statements by Comey is not accurate, but they declined to elaborate. Legal experts also expressed doubts about Trump’s account.

“I just can’t even begin to think about that comment being true,’’ said Michael Greenberger, a law professor at the University of Maryland who has previously worked in the Justice Department. “It defies belief in general because of the practices of not commenting on investigations, and it would especially defy belief in the case of Comey who prides himself on strict observance of propriety.’’

Greenberger noted the implication of Trump’s statement is severe – that Comey may have offered that assurance to try to ingratiate himself with the president and remain in his job. “I just have a very hard time imagining that,’’ he said, though he added he also didn’t think Trump simply asking that question came close to a criminal act of trying to obstruct the investigation.

The federal law against obstruction of justice is broadly worded but in practice, prosecutors have a high bar for bringing charges that someone “corruptly or by threats or force, or by any threatening letter or communication’’ attempts to “influence, obstruct, or impede the due administration of justice.’’ Generally, such cases are only brought when prosecutors have clear evidence of the underlying motive behind a person’s actions.

[Acting FBI director vows to tell Congress if White House undermines Russia probe]

White House spokeswoman Sanders would not provide further details about the conversations between Trump and Comey, such as when they occurred and whether all three were after the president’s Jan. 20 inauguration. She said commentary by legal experts on cable news showed there had been no conflict of interest with Trump asking the FBI director whether he was the subject of the Russia probe.

Robert Chesney, a University of Texas law professor who specializes in national security and constitutional issues, said that even assuming Trump’s account is accurate, “legally speaking, I don’t think that crosses any lines.’’

At base it is more a political issue than legal, he said. Offering a more extreme hypothetical—that Trump began firing anyone involved in the investigation—that could come closer to obstruction of justice. But then it would be a matter for Congress to act. “Our system is designed so that impeachment is the remedy,’’ he said. “But the fact pattern you’d need is something more Nixonian.”

FBI directors are appointed for 10-year terms, and Comey had been on the job less than four years. A president may fire an FBI director at any time for any reason, but it is very rare to do so because of the potential political blowback if the White House is perceived to be interfering with federal law enforcement work.

Checkpoint newsletter

Military, defense and security at home and abroad.

Comey’s temporary replacement, Andrew McCabe, told senators at a hearing Thursday morning that no White House officials had tried to interfere with the Russia probe.

In the interview, Trump said he fired Comey because he had mismanaged the FBI and was an attention-seeker.

“Look, he’s a showboat, he’s a grandstander,” the president said. “The FBI has been in turmoil. You know that. I know that. Everybody knows that. You take a look at the FBI a year ago, it was in virtual turmoil, less than a year ago. It hasn’t recovered from that.”

Robert Barnes contributed to this report.

The Washington Post

Acting FBI director contradicts Trump White House on Comey, Russia probe (UNE)

Acting FBI director Andrew McCabe on Thursday rejected the Trump White House's characterization of the Russian meddling probe as a low priority and delivered a passionate defense of former director James B. Comey — putting himself squarely at odds with the president while the bureau's future hangs in the balance.

McCabe, who had been the No. 2 official in the FBI until President Trump fired Comey this week, said that the bureau considered the probe of possible coordination between the Kremlin and the Trump team during the 2016 election campaign a "highly significant investigation" and that it would not be derailed because of a change in leadership.

"You cannot stop the men and women of the FBI from doing the right thing, protecting the American people and upholding the Constitution," McCabe said.

[Furor over Comey firing grows with news that he sought resources for Russia investigation before his dismissal]

McCabe's assertion, which came during a hearing before the Senate Intelligence Committee, directly contradicted a White House spokeswoman's description of the Russian case as "probably one of the smallest things that they've got going on their plate."

Team Trump's ties to Russian interests

McCabe also promised that if the White House tried to interfere in the bureau's work, he would alert the committee, and he said he would not offer any status updates about the matter to the president or those who work for him. McCabe said there had "been no effort to impede our investigation to date."

The hearing was supposed to have been one at which Comey appeared with other top U.S. intelligence officials to discuss threats to the United States across the globe. But after Comey was fired Tuesday and McCabe was chosen to fill his seat, the discussion of threats turned largely to Russia and the integrity of the FBI.

McCabe is not even certain to remain as the FBI's acting director. He was elevated to the post essentially by default, and on Wednesday, Attorney General Jeff Sessions and Deputy Attorney General Rod J. Rosenstein interviewed four candidates to find someone potentially to take over in the short term. It is also possible that McCabe could stay on.

Ultimately, Trump will have to nominate a permanent replacement, and that person will have to undergo the Senate confirmation process.

McCabe did not seem concerned with winning Trump's favor. Asked by Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) whether he would "refrain" from providing "updates to the president or anyone else in the White House on the status of the" Russia probe, McCabe said unequivocally, "I will."

That was noteworthy, because just hours after McCabe's testimony ended, NBC News published portions of an interview with Trump in which the president claimed that Comey had told him three times that he was not under investigation — at least once in a phone call that Trump initiated.

"I said, 'If it's possible would you let me know am I under investigation?' [Comey] said, 'You are not under investigation,' '' Trump said in the interview.

Washington Post reporter Adam Entous explains what President Trump's firing of former FBI director James B. Comey means for the investigation into Russia's alleged attempts to interfere with the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Post reporter Adam Entous explains what President Trump firing James Comey means for the investigation into Russia's alleged interference in the 2016 election. (Jason Aldag, Sarah Parnass/The Washington Post)

(Jason Aldag,Sarah Parnass/The Washington Post)

The claim — which Trump also made in his letter firing Comey — could not immediately be verified, and McCabe declined to speak about it.

McCabe also rejected the president's assertions that Comey "was not doing a good job" and that the bureau was "in turmoil." McCabe acknowledged that there were some in the agency who were "frustrated with the outcome" of the investigation of Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server while she was secretary of state — the handling of which was cited as a rationale for firing Comey.

But McCabe defended leadership at the bureau and praised Comey, in particular.

"It has been the greatest privilege and honor of my professional life to work with him," McCabe said of Comey. "Director Comey enjoyed broad support within the FBI and still does to this day."

White House principal deputy press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders later disputed that assertion.

"I have heard from countless members of the FBI that are grateful on the president's decision, and we may have to agree to disagree," Sanders said.

McCabe was joined at the hearing by virtually every other top official whose job it is to detect and prevent Russian spy operations. The others on the witness list were CIA Director Mike Pompeo; Director of National Intelligence Daniel Coats; the National Security Agency's director, Mike Rogers; National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency Director Robert Cardillo; and the Defense Intelligence Agency's director, Vincent Stewart.

The Senate Intelligence Committee, like the FBI, is investigating alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election campaign, and its chairman and vice chairman announced Wednesday that they had issued a subpoena to former national security adviser Michael Flynn for documents related to that investigation.

Flynn resigned from the Trump White House after news reports on potentially illegal contacts with the Russian ambassador to the United States, which acting attorney general Sally Yates warned might make Flynn susceptible to blackmail. He also has faced scrutiny for payments he received from Russian-backed entities, including the RT television network.

The bureau's probe, the only one that could produce criminal charges, is separate from the committee's, and lawmakers on both sides of the aisle feared that it might be upended now that Comey is gone. Many have called for a special counsel to be appointed; Rep. Mike Coffman (R-Colo.) became the latest to do so, in a statement issued Thursday. McCabe asserted that the bureau's independence had not been compromised.

"Do you need somebody to take this away from you and somebody else to do it?" Sen. James Lankford (R-Okla.) asked.

"No, sir," McCabe responded.

McCabe did not definitively resolve a dispute over whether Comey asked Rosenstein for more resources for the Russia investigation last week, although he asserted that the bureau had "resourced that investigation adequately." Democrats have said that Comey informed lawmakers of such a request, but the Justice Department has denied that one was made.

McCabe said he was "not aware of that request, and it's not consistent with my understanding of how we request additional resources."

As the deputy director of the FBI, McCabe would have been intimately involved in the Russia investigation even before Comey's firing. He was notably at the center of a February incident in which the White House reportedly enlisted senior members of the intelligence community and Congress in efforts to counter news reports about Trump associates' ties to Russia.

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Military, defense and security at home and abroad.

CNN reported at the time that the FBI had refused administration requests to knock down media reports on the subject, and the administration fired back with a claim that McCabe had pulled aside White House Chief of Staff Reince Priebus to tell him a New York Times story was "B.S."

McCabe was also at the center of a controversy in the Clinton email investigation — the case that administration officials have pointed to as Trump's basis for firing Comey. The Justice Department inspector general is investigating whether McCabe should have been recused from the case because his wife ran for a Virginia Senate seat and took money from the political action committee of Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe (D), a Clinton ally.

The FBI asserted at the time that McCabe had checked with ethics officials and followed agency protocols. He also was not yet deputy director when his wife was recruited to run.

Amber Phillips contributed to this report.

Acting FBI Chief Defends Ousted Comey, Vows Independent Russia Investigation

Jenna McLaughlin

Amid ongoing turmoil over the sudden ouster of the FBI chief James Comey, the bureau's acting director vehemently defended the agency's Russian counterintelligence investigation before the Senate Intelligence Committee on Thursday.

Andrew McCabe, who testified in place of the recently fired director, assured Vice Chairman Sen. Mark Warner (D-Va.), that he would "absolutely" notify Congress if the administration interferes in the ongoing investigation, which is looking at Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election and possible collusion with the Donald Trump campaign. "There has been no effort to impede our investigation to date," he said. "You cannot stop the men and women of the FBI from doing the right thing….we are a fiercely independent bunch."

Trump's decision to fire Comey came just days after the director testified in an open hearing about the FBI's Russia investigation, however. Comey testified at the hearing that he felt "nauseous" he might have influenced the election.

President Trump tasked his longtime security guard Keith Schiller on Tuesday evening with hand delivering a letter to FBI headquarters informing Comey, who was traveling for a recruitment conference, that he was fired effective immediately. The ostensible reason was his handling of the FBI's investigation into former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's use of a personal email server.

The termination touched off a political firestorm, particularly because the White House failed to notify the congressional leadership that oversees intelligence matters that the FBI director was about to be fired. Sen. Richard Burr (R-N.C.), chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee and a former member of Trump's transition team, said the timing of the announcement "troubled" him.

The White House has argued Comey's firing had nothing to do with the Russia probe, while simultaneously suggesting the inquiry was going nowhere and should be abandoned. Press reports indicate the investigation was ramping up, however, and Comey had been having daily check-ins on its progress and approached the Justice Department for additional resources, specifically prosecutors, to work on the probe.

While McCabe refused to comment on the substance of Comey's meetings with the president or the Justice Department, he directly challenged the contention that Comey had been doing a bad job and the FBI's rank-and-file were demoralized. "I hold Director Comey in the absolute highest regard," McCabe said. "It has been the greatest privilege and honor of my professional life to work with him. Director Comey enjoyed broad support within the FBI and still does to this day."

Though President Trump repeatedly thanked Comey in his termination letter for letting him know he was not a direct target of the investigation into his network, McCabe told the committee that it is not common practice for the FBI to notify targets of its investigation.

Appearing Thursday on NBC, the president said that he had spoken with Comey three times, during two phone calls and one dinner, and the then FBI director told him he was not under investigation.

McCabe also said he had not spoken with the White House or Attorney General Jeff Sessions about the investigation since Comey was fired—only Rod Rosenstein, the deputy attorney general, who he confirmed is directly in charge of the ongoing counterintelligence investigation.

Midway through the hearing, the deputy attorney general Rod Rosenstein arrived to meet with Chairman Burr and Vice Chairman Warner, who abruptly left. However, Burr insisted that the meeting with Rosenstein, requested by the Justice Department, was scheduled entirely for the purposes of "deconfliction" between the Senate's investigation and the parallel probe at the Justice Department.

"There was acknowledgement and understanding of the need for us to pick up the phone and share with them what we were likely to do, and get immediate clearance on whether that would interfere with the investigation," Burr told reporters outside the secure Senate briefing room where the intelligence committee was due to meet with intelligence chiefs in a classified setting that afternoon.

Burr echoed McCabe's defense of Comey, and his support from within the bureau. "The lion's share of FBI employees respect the former director," he said. He told reporters he had not yet received a response from Comey about appearing before the Committee in a closed session next Tuesday.

Warner said he told Rosenstein that he was disappointed in the deputy attorney general's role in Comey's firing, and that he wanted an independent counsel to look into the Trump campaign's interactions with the Russians. He said Rosenstein was taking that request, which Burr has not expressed support for, "under advisement."

Rosenstein's letter, published alongside the White House press release announcing th FBI director's termination, blasted Comey's public handling of the investigation into Clinton's use of a private email server. Rosenstein has been reportedly frustrated with the way his role in Comey's firing was portrayed, even threatening to quit.

Rosenstein exited the meeting in the opposite direction of Burr and Warner, declining to answer most press questions—though he did say he was "not quitting."

Lipsky : Watergate Lessons for Trump's Era

Seth Lipsky

With all the calls for an independent prosecutor for President Trump after his firing of the FBI's James Comey, why not move the investigation to the House Judiciary Committee? It could get right down to whether the president has done anything worthy of impeachment.

It's not that I think the president is guilty. It's just the only properly constitutional way to investigate this, or any, president. No one has adduced any evidence of wrongdoing by Mr. Trump. I'd like to see him cleared. But if he is to be investigated for crimes or misdemeanors, the House, with its impeachment authority, is the venue.

The Democrats are outraged at the thought that Mr. Trump, though he denies it, may have fired the director because the FBI boss was investigating the president. But if Mr. Comey was investigating the president, that would be grounds to take the investigation away from him (or simply to fire him). If the president is the target, the matter belongs to the House.

Like others in my generation, I came to this view through the experience of Watergate, when President Nixon fired special prosecutor Archibald Cox, and Whitewater, when President Clinton was pursued by independent counsel Kenneth Starr.

Cox was brought in after Attorney General Elliot Richardson — ignoring the separation of powers— made a deal with Congress to diminish the president's authority. The deal was that Cox would be dismissed only for cause. Cox subpoenaed Nixon and refused a compromise. The president then ordered the attorney general to fire him. An insubordinate Richardson and his deputy refused. It took Solicitor General Robert Bork to do the constitutional deed.

Eventually, the Judiciary Committee hired staff and went after Nixon, voting out three articles of impeachment (obstruction, abuse of power, and contempt of Congress). Before the House could decide whether to press the charges, Nixon quit.

The Ethics in Government Act of 1978 enabled the unleashing of a prosecutor almost completely beyond the reach of the executive branch. It was used to harry the Reagan administration. The Supreme Court, in *Morrison v. Olson* (1988), rejected a constitutional challenge. In a lone dissent, Justice Antonin Scalia warned that an independent prosecutor could affect the "boldness of the president." While issues often come before the court "clad in sheep's clothing," he wrote, "this wolf comes as a wolf."

Democrats finally recognized the wolf in the form of Mr. Starr, who was put up against President Clinton. He sent his findings to the Judiciary Committee, which recommended four counts of impeachment, of which the full House affirmed two (perjury and obstruction). Mr. Clinton was acquitted by a Republican Senate. The GOP would have needed help from the Democrats to reach the

constitutionally required supermajority of 67 votes for guilty.

It was a bitter disappointment to those who'd fought for an investigation. The one salve was the almost universal bipartisan conclusion that independent counsels led to abuse. Within months, Congress allowed the independent-counsel law to expire.

The dangers Scalia warned about in 1988 have rarely loomed larger than today, when a new president confronts a global terrorist war. In the middle of this existential struggle, who would benefit were Mr. Trump to be "dragged from pillar to post"?

That's a phrase Thomas Jefferson used when warning against subjecting presidents to the common courts, as Mr. Trump's aides, cabinet officials, family, and onetime business associates will be if the current calls for an "independent" investigation are heeded.

The right adjective for what is needed is "constitutional." Moving the probe to the House Judiciary Committee certainly has risks. But no one could say it lacks the power to put this controversy to bed, one way or another, under the quilt of the Constitution.

Mr. Lipsky is editor of the New York Sun.

Borger : No one can save Trump from himself

Gloria Borger

*(CNN)*So maybe a few times in your life you have screamed at the television set. And then what? You flip the channel, and get on with your life.

Ah, unless you're the current President of the United States. Because he probably watches way more TV than you do, and when he sees something he doesn't like, he doesn't flip. He stews. He calls his friends and complains. He tweets.

And then he acts, because he can.

According to a source with knowledge, Trump told friends he was increasingly concerned that FBI Director James Comey had grown "out of control" and was "pursuing his own agenda." Comey's testimony last week, this source says, "pushed him to the edge."

So he acted out, and decided to fire Comey, in a childish, impetuous -- and dangerous -- manner. Then he looked for a rationale, and found it in a memo written by Rod Rosenstein, deputy attorney general.

The White House used that cover story; so did the vice president. But now Trump has blown up that explanation by telling NBC that he would have fired Comey no matter what Justice officials had recommended. (Did Trump lie to Pence like Mike Flynn did? Just asking.)

And all credibility is lost.

Apparently, no one is able to tell the 70-year-old newbie how to behave. That firing the current FBI director in the middle of the Russia investigation -- no matter how tarnished his reputation -- is a bad idea. No one can tell him that, no matter how furious he is about an investigation that is growing and requiring more resources, trying to kill it by striking at the FBI director is a very, very bad idea. And that it might be interpreted as obstruction of justice.

But none of this matters to Trump. It never has. As Louise Sunshine, a former Trump organization employee told me months ago, Trump had always lobbed grenades -- and then walked away.

"Nobody ever knew when he walked in a meeting what he was going to say or do because he didn't," she said. "Donald has always managed to walk into a meeting and say something that nobody else expected him ever to say, upend the entire meeting, leave everybody agog, and control every situation that way, so by the time he leaves the room, he has the store, he owns the store."

But this isn't Trump's store anymore.

Trump has clearly learned little in office. He still throws tantrums, and his staff is sent to clean up the mess.

The pattern was set on the first full day in office.

That's when Trump fumed about the pictures about crowd size at his inauguration, and sent his press secretary Sean Spicer, out there to rationalize his obsession.

Then came the president's ridiculous assertion that there were 3 million illegal votes cast in the election -- and that's why he lost the popular vote.

That's when Spicer came out to try and explain the unexplainable. The solution -- just set up a presidential commission to examine the fiction, which the White House finally announced Thursday.

Then came the president's impulsive tweet-storm early on Saturday morning, March 4, when he accused his predecessor of having him wiretapped. Never mind that he was accusing Barack Obama of a felony, or that it wasn't true. He did it, anyway.

So then, once again, came the shovel brigade. Because to balk, even a bit, would be seen as disloyal to Trump --and that is not allowed. Ever.

Only this time it was really hard to figure out how to explain the unexplainable. And so a plan was hatched: call for congressional investigations. And stop talking about Russia hacks and potential Russian collusion with the campaign, but focus instead on investigating leaks that cast a negative light on Trump and his people.

You get the idea. The President tweets nonsense, and the staff scrambles to make it sensible. Even if the emperor has no clothes, you can't tell him.

So it was with the firing of James Comey.

The President decides he wants to fire Comey, and the staff is tasked to come up with a rationale. But it was very hard this time -- absurd on its face. After he praised Comey in late October on the campaign trail and last week his spokesman declared

confidence

in the FBI director, are we to suddenly believe that the president really thought Comey was unfair to Hillary? Really? As one source close to the president tells me, his real concern was that if Comey had treated Clinton so badly, he would do the same to Donald Trump.

Oh, and as he told NBC, Comey was a "showboat" and a "grandstander." It was a telling insult; in Trump's galaxy, there can be no star brighter than Trump.

One requirement of the presidency is to believe that your job is about something greater than yourself -- your country.

But first you have to believe there is something greater than yourself.

Lacovara : It's impossible not to compare today to Watergate. And our officials are falling short.

Philip Allen Lacovara*, a former U.S. deputy solicitor general in the Justice Department, served as counsel to Watergate special prosecutors Archibald Cox and Leon Jaworski.*

As the senior surviving member of the Watergate special prosecutor's office from the time of the "Saturday Night Massacre," it is impossible to consider the firing of FBI Director James B. Comey without recalling that fateful night. One comparison — the behavior of senior Justice Department officials in the face of presidential pressure — is disappointing. Another — the insistent focus of the president and his allies on stopping damaging leaks rather than getting to the bottom of the underlying conduct — is chilling.

First, it is important to recognize how different were the acts of the two top officials of the Justice Department in these two gravely important events. President Richard Nixon demanded the firing of Watergate special prosecutor Archibald Cox for refusing to obey the president's order to abandon his quest for the "White House tapes." Attorney General Elliot Richardson resigned rather than dismiss Cox. When Nixon then turned to Deputy Attorney General William Ruckelshaus to do the deed, Ruckelshaus chose principle over pragmatism and resigned in turn. It was left to the next ranking official, Solicitor General Robert Bork, to carry out the president's will.

The Washington Post's Bob Woodward weighs in on President Trump's decision to fire FBI Director James Comey, and remembers the Saturday Night Massacre and the Watergate scandal. Bob Woodward on Trump-Watergate comparisons: 'Let's see what the evidence is' (Peter Stevenson/The Washington Post)

(Peter Stevenson/The Washington Post)

This time, however, the senior leaders of the Justice Department — Attorney General Jeff Sessions and Deputy Attorney General Rod J. Rosenstein — displayed no such courage or independence. Instead, as President Trump confirmed in an interview with NBC's Lester Holt on Thursday, Sessions and Rosenstein were summoned to the White House and tasked to write memorandums supporting a decision the president had already reached: to get rid of the man leading the investigation into Russian meddling with the presidential election and possible collusion between the Trump campaign and Russian agents. Unlike Richardson and Ruckelshaus, they complied.

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Henry II is said to have used the arguably ambiguous lament, "Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?" to induce four lackeys to ride off to Canterbury to assassinate the archbishop. Lacking Henry's subtlety, Trump merely summoned his subordinates a few blocks up Pennsylvania Avenue and demanded action.

Unlike their predecessors four decades earlier, Sessions and Rosenstein failed to recognize that they have a higher public duty than merely to implement the president's will, even if Trump's action was technically within his constitutional power.

In pre-revolutionary days in England, pleadings by counsel for the government were signed "who comes to plead on behalf of our lord, the king." What Sessions and Rosenstein have ignored is that the official seal of the Justice Department modifies this ancient notion of fealty and declares that the officers of the Justice Department "prosecute on behalf of justice."

Most distressing to those of us who served in the department is that in his first significant act as deputy attorney general, Rosenstein apparently was willing to place his generally applauded credibility into a blind trust and deliver the sharpened dagger to the president in the form of a critique of Comey's handling of the Hillary Clinton email investigation. Reports that Rosenstein threatened to resign when the White House sought to cast him as a prime mover in the firing, with Trump acting only on the recommendation of the Justice Department, provide little reassurance. Whether those reports are accurate (he denied them on Thursday), Rosenstein owes it to himself and his colleagues at the Justice Department to explain why he was so malleable in crafting the president's pretext for firing Comey.

Reports about why the president was so set on ousting Comey are equally resonant of those long-ago Watergate days. Trump, according to The Post, grew increasingly infuriated with Comey for not pursuing leaks about the probe. In Capitol Hill hearings, the president's defense team among Republicans in Congress has adopted a similar diversionary strategy, focusing on the leaks rather than the far more serious underlying abuses.

Like Trump and his allies, Nixon and his compatriots were furious about leaks emerging during the early stages of the Watergate investigation. Then, key information that put The Post's Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein on the trail of the coverup and kept up the pressure for thorough official investigations came from a source they referred to as Deep Throat, later identified as FBI Assistant Director Mark Felt. Felt chose the difficult course of leaking important information because he feared that the Nixon administration might be successful in suppressing the FBI investigation and maintaining the coverup.

The highest duty of those in public service is to make sure that the truth about serious misconduct emerges. It would be a tragedy if threats to lock up leakers were to cow honorable FBI agents and career prosecutors into silence, even if they smell a coverup at the top. Leaks may be manipulative or mischievous, but — as in Watergate — they may be essential to the transparency and accountability that the American public has the right to expect.

After Nixon resigned, there were congratulatory comments that "the system worked." But this assessment was overly simplistic. Now, as then, the system works only if the right people in the system do the right thing when deciding whether to roll over or to stand up.

The Washington Post

Editorial : The FBI must be protected — from the White House

THE FBI is in trouble and must be protected — from the White House, first and foremost.

Last year's Hillary Clinton email investigation put the agency in the middle of a political fight. President Trump raised even bigger concerns for the agency's independence when he fired Director James B. Comey on Tuesday.

At first Mr. Trump and his staff claimed he moved against Mr. Comey based on a Tuesday memo from Deputy Attorney General Rod J. Rosenstein condemning Mr. Comey's handling of the Clinton email probe. On Thursday, Mr. Trump admitted in an NBC interview that "I was going to fire regardless of recommendation," calling Mr. Comey a "showboat" and a "grandstander." Reports suggest that Mr. Comey infuriated Mr. Trump with his investigation and discussion of Moscow's meddling in the 2016 election, which helped Mr. Trump's campaign.

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Mr. Trump also claimed Thursday that he asked Mr. Comey at one point if he was the subject of an FBI investigation, and that Mr. Comey said no. If true, both the question and the answer ring alarm bells: Federal law enforcement should be insulated from all political interference and, when the administration is a subject of a probe, walled off from the White House. But Trump administration officials reportedly have prodded the FBI to prioritize investigations of alleged leaking over Russia's hacking.

The disorderly firing process and shifting rationales have shredded what was left of this White House's credibility. A strong chief of staff or White House Counsel's Office would have insisted on a well-prepared and carefully defended process to remove the FBI director if that were necessary — and would have counseled against doing it at all while the director was ramping up an investigation of Mr. Trump's campaign. Instead, Mr. Trump's worst instincts were enabled by everyone around him.

It is essential that this White House not be allowed to export its credibility-destroying dysfunction to the Justice Department and the FBI. Attorney General Jeff Sessions promised in March not to be involved in "any matters related in any way to the campaigns for president of the United States," a commitment already called into question by his involvement in Mr. Comey's termination, as The Post's Jennifer Rubin outlined Thursday. It must be clear that Mr. Rosenstein will have final say on the FBI's Russia inquiries. The deputy attorney general was reportedly chagrined that the White House attempted to pin Mr. Comey's firing on him. Burned once, he must protect federal law enforcement from the White House. The best way to do so in the Russia investigation would be with the appointment of a special prosecutor.

Mr. Rosenstein and the Senate, meanwhile, must ensure that those chosen to lead the FBI — either on an interim or a full-time basis — are committed to preserving the agency's independence. During a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing Thursday, acting FBI director Andrew McCabe presented a baseline of integrity against which to judge a future nominee. Mr. McCabe said that the FBI will not update the White House on the Russia investigations and promised to tell Congress if the White House tries to interfere. By insisting that FBI staff respected Mr. Comey and that the Russia probe is "highly significant," he implied by example that a good FBI director should have the confidence to contradict administration spin. Protecting the agency's independence must be the next director's mission.

The Washington Post

Krauthammer : A political ax murder

It was implausible that FBI Director James Comey was fired in May 2017 for actions committed in July 2016 — the rationale contained in the memo by Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein.

It was implausible that Comey was fired by President Trump for having been too tough on Hillary Clinton, as when, at a July news conference, Comey publicly recited her various email misdeeds despite recommending *against* prosecution.

It was implausible that Trump fired Comey for, among other things, reopening the Clinton investigation 11 days before the election, something that at the time Trump praised as a sign of Comey's "guts" that had "brought back his reputation."

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It was implausible that Trump, a man notorious for being swayed by close and loyal personal advisers, fired Comey on the recommendation of a sub-Cabinet official whom Trump hardly knew and who'd been on the job all of two weeks.

It was implausible that Trump found Rosenstein's arguments so urgently persuasive that he acted immediately — so precipitously, in fact, that Comey learned of his own firing from TVs that happened to be playing behind him.

The White House on May 11 continued to defend President Trump's dismissal of James B. Comey as FBI director. The White House continues to defend President Trump's dismissal of James B. Comey as FBI director. (Video: Bastien Inzaurralde, Alice Li, Jayne Orenstein/Photo: Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

(Bastien Inzaurralde,Alice Li,Jayne Orenstein/The Washington Post)

These implausibilities were obvious within seconds of Comey's firing and the administration's immediate attempt to pin it all on the Rosenstein memo. That was pure spin. So why in reality did Trump fire Comey?

Admittedly, Comey had to go. The cliche is that if you've infuriated both sides, it means you must be doing something right. Sometimes, however, it means you must be doing everything wrong.

Over the past year, Comey has been repeatedly wrong. Not, in my view, out of malice or partisanship (although his self-righteousness about his own probity does occasionally grate). He was in an unprecedented situation with unpalatable choices. Never in American presidential history had a major party nominated a candidate under official FBI investigation. (Turns out the Trump campaign was under investigation as well.) Which makes the normal injunction that FBI directors not interfere in elections facile and impossible to follow. Any course of action — disclosure or silence, commission or omission — carried unavoidable electoral consequences.

Comey had to make up the rules as he went along. He did. That was not his downfall. His downfall was making up contradictory, illogical rules, such as the July 5 non-indictment indictment of Clinton.

A series of these — and Comey became anathema to both Democrats and Republicans. Clinton blamed her loss on two people. One of them was Comey.

And there's the puzzle. There was ample bipartisan sentiment for letting Comey go. And there was ample time from Election Day on to do so. A simple talk, a gold watch, a friendly farewell, a Comey resignation to allow the new president to pick the new director. No fanfare, no rancor.

True, this became more difficult after March 20 when Comey revealed that the FBI was investigating the alleged Trump campaign-Russia collusion. Difficult but not impossible. For example, just last week Comey had committed an egregious factual error about the Huma Abedin emails that the FBI had to abjectly walk back in a written letter to the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Here was an opportunity for a graceful exit: Comey regrets the mistake and notes that some of the difficult decisions he had previously made necessarily cost him the confidence of various parties. Time for a clean slate. Add the usual boilerplate about not wanting to be a distraction at such a crucial time. Awkward perhaps, but still dignified and amicable.

Instead we got this — a political ax murder, brutal even by Washington standards. (Or even Roman standards. Where was the vein-opening knife and the warm bath?) No final meeting, no letter of resignation, no presidential thanks, no cordial parting. Instead, a blindsided Comey ends up in a live-streamed O.J. Bronco ride, bolting from Los Angeles to be flown, defrocked, back to Washington.

Why? Trump had become increasingly agitated with the Russia-election investigation and Comey's very public part in it. If Trump thought this would kill the inquiry and the story, or perhaps even just derail it somewhat, he's made the blunder of the decade. Whacking Comey has brought more critical attention to the Russia story than anything imaginable. It won't stop the FBI investigation. And the confirmation hearings for a successor will become a nationally televised forum for collusion allegations, which up till now have remained a scandal in search of a crime.

So why did he do it? Now we know: The king asked whether no one would rid him of this troublesome priest, and got so impatient he did it himself.

D'Antonio : The little boy president

Michael D'Antonio is the author of the book "Never Enough: Donald Trump and the Pursuit of Success" (St. Martin's Press). The opinions expressed in this commentary are his.

*(CNN)*Like most little boys, Donald Trump can be disarmingly honest, as when he once said, "When I look at myself in the first grade and I look at myself now, I'm basically the same. The temperament is not that different." The trouble is that the first grader is now President of the United States, and his temperament is on display for the world to see.

Unpredictable, impulsive and immature, Trump acts in a way that would be expected of a 6-year-old boy, but is terrifying in a man whose moods dictate decisions carried out by adults on behalf of the most powerful nation in the world.

Trump's dismissal of FBI Director James Comey offers a sterling example of the childish -- and reckless -- Trump style. When Comey

broke with bureau tradition

and spoke negatively about Trump's rival in the election, though initially he was criticized by candidate Trump, he was later praised -- and effusively. Over and over again, the soon-to-be-president described how Comey had done the right thing in criticizing Hillary Clinton. Comey remained in Trump's good graces after he was inaugurated, and Trump's team

expressed confidence

in him up until last week.

As CNN's John King and Jeff Zeleny reported, the change in Trump's feelings about Comey were evident to a friend who spoke with him last weekend and noticed the President was "white hot" over Comey's recent testimony on Capitol Hill. Comey had said he felt "mildly nauseous" about the possibility of having affected the November election. This, and continued investigations into possible connections between Trump's associates and Russians who meddled in the election, were causing a presidential temper tantrum.

Like many a 6-year-old, the stewing President chose to act on his feelings. Within days he had signed a letter dismissing the director. But instead of doing the adult thing and firing Comey face-to-face, Trump

sent

his former personal bodyguard Keith Schiller to deliver it to Comey's office -- while Comey was away in Los Angeles.

Schiller's last star turn involved

bullying

newsman Jorge Ramos out of a Trump rally. Long a human security blanket for Trump, Schiller now hangs out at the White House. His appearance at FBI headquarters signaled that the buddies -- Trump and Schiller -- were in charge of this power play.

Like a boy who plays with matches and sets the back yard on fire, Trump

has been surprised

by the effects of his actions. He expected Democrats who resented Comey's election season performance to applaud the firing. Of course, this thinking ignores the fact that Comey was in charge of investigating Russia's influence on the election and very real concerns about providing stable leadership to the American people. The FBI is so vital an agency that directors receive 10-year appointments precisely because they shouldn't be fired on the basis of presidential pique.

In the aftermath of the President's incendiary act, we have seen the adults around him scramble to put out the fire. White House spokesman Sean Spicer reportedly

met

with his staff near bushes on the White House grounds while nearby reporters sought comment, and Kellyanne Conway was dispatched to offer on-air gobbledygook to CNN's Anderson Cooper. At one point, she complained to Cooper that people "are looking at the wrong set of facts."

The struggle of the administration officials tasked with cleaning up the

Trump/Comey debacle resembled the frenzied effort of parents who do whatever they can to shield fellow diners when a child has a meltdown in a restaurant. They know they have lost control of the situation, but there's not much you can do once the meatball has sailed across the room and the spaghetti has been dumped on the floor.

White House officials have tried to cover the mess with

shifting explanations

. First it was a sudden loss of confidence. Next it was a long-simmering dissatisfaction. And, most recently, Trump told NBC's Lester Holt it was because Comey was a "

showboat

." But the equation doesn't add up.

Fortunately, the President himself, true to first grader form, can't help but

give us clues

to his process.

In his first tweet about the controversy, he taunted "Cryin' Chuck Schumer" and complained that the New York senator had gone from Comey critic to defender. Hours later he was at it again, tweeting that Connecticut Sen. Richard Blumenthal "cried like a baby" during a previous and unrelated controversy. In the tweet, which was written as Blumenthal spoke on CNN, he called the senator "Richie" and said, "He should be the one who is investigated." Next he's going to say, "I'm rubber, you're glue..."

Watching Trump this week recalls the days when he was a tabloid sideshow in New York City, and his antics energized headline writers who couldn't get enough of his boy-in-daddy's suit behavior. In the most notable example, Trump became a source in the war of scoops over his divorce from his first wife Ivana.

But now the man is President, and he seems incapable of controlling his temper even if, in the long run, maturity would serve the country's interests. If you want proof, just consider

the report

from Time magazine on Trump's odd White House habits, including the fact that he got extra dessert when he dined with the magazine's writer. A grown-up, upon getting two scoops of ice cream when others at the table only received one, would quickly fill his companions' dishes. A child, who sees every moment as an opportunity to demonstrate he is the special boy, would, as Trump did, just wolf it down.

The solution to the problem posed by the fact that we have a first grader in the Oval Office lies in whatever systems exist to take decisions out of his hands. The courts have already acted to thwart him on his proposed ban on Muslim visitors to the United States, and Congress possesses the power to moderate other initiatives. Next must come special counsel to run the Russia investigation, who

could be appointed

by Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein.

Rosenstein was the author of a critical memo that the White House is citing to justify Comey's dismissal. By all accounts, he is an adult who understands the need for a credible investigation of Russia's meddling in the 2016 election. He should act before he's hit by a meatball.

Note: An earlier version of this article cited news reports that Sean Spicer hid in the bushes to avoid reporters' questions. It has been updated in light of a correction in the Washington Post, which said, "Spicer huddled with his staff among bushes near television sets on the White House grounds, not 'in the bushes.'"

The Washington Post

Changes to visa program could set back Kushner family's real estate company (UNE)

By Shawn Boburg

Changes to a controversial visa program under consideration by the Trump administration could hurt a real estate project partially owned by the family of White House adviser Jared Kushner, the president's son-in-law.

The decision, which rests with Homeland Security Secretary John F. Kelly, stands as an early test of how the Trump administration will handle matters that could carry significant consequences for the financial interests of the president's extended family.

At the center of an ongoing controversy is the Kushner Cos.' use of a federal visa program to raise $150 million from Chinese investors for two luxury towers in New Jersey. Under the EB-5 program, wealthy foreigners can get a fast-track visa if they invest at least $500,000 in an eligible project. Program critics have nicknamed it "visas for cash."

The changes Kelly is considering, which have already gone through extensive review and public comment, would make it much more difficult to attract foreign money to projects in relatively prosperous areas, such as the one in Jersey City, experts said.

Kushner's sister Nicole Kushner Meyer generated criticism for the Trump White House on Saturday when she pitched her company's project to investors in China, mentioning her brother's name and featuring a photograph of President Trump. Potential investors were urged to sign up before the rules change.

(Monica Akhtar/The Washington Post)

Here's what you need to know about those visas. Here's what you need to know about investor visas. (Monica Akhtar/The Washington Post)

[China pitch by Kushner sister renews controversy over visa program]

A spokeswoman for Kushner Cos. said Thursday morning that Meyer would not appear at another investor presentation scheduled for Saturday in Shenzhen. "No one from Kushner Companies will be in China this weekend," Risa Heller, a company spokeswoman, wrote in a statement to The Washington Post on Thursday.

Sen. Charles E. Grassley (R-Iowa), a longtime critic of the EB-5 program, said Thursday that Kushner's sister may have left investors with the false impression that they would get special treatment because of her brother's position in the White House.

Grassley, who says the visa program should be used to help create jobs in rural and economically depressed areas, sent a letter to Kelly demanding that he quickly implement the proposed program changes.

Grassley urged Kelly "to clarify and affirm that no foreign investors will receive preferential treatment, that applications will be processed in the order in which they are received — subject to any existing backlog — and that future applications will be subject to the proposed regulations, when approved."

The Department of Homeland Security will "respond to the senator appropriately," agency spokesman David Lapan said.

The Kushner project, known as One Journal Square, is the latest example of the potential conflicts of interest that Jared Kushner faces in his prominent administration role. Kushner, who is married to Trump's daughter Ivanka, ran his family's real estate company before joining the administration and was instrumental in planning the Jersey City project.

Kushner has divested himself from One Journal Square, one of a number of luxury projects the family has undertaken outside New York City. The White House has said he will not be involved in any discussions about the future of the EB-5 program. Kushner also was not involved in his sister's China presentations last week, officials said.

The White House and Jared Kushner did not respond to requests for comment Thursday. Kushner's sister previously apologized for mentioning her brother's name during last week's presentation and said it was not an attempt to attract investors.

Kelly is expected to make a decision on whether to adopt the changes in the coming months.

The regulatory changes, proposed by the Obama administration one week before Trump took office, would close an opening that allows developers who propose projects in wealthy urban areas, such as Manhattan and even Beverly Hills, to qualify for incentives that are supposed to be reserved for poorer areas. Under the new rules, foreigners who want visas would have to invest hundreds of thousands of dollars more if a project is not in an area with high unemployment.

Gary Friedland, a scholar in residence at New York University's Stern School of Business, said the Kushner family's One Journal Square is an example of a project that would have more trouble raising money under the new rules.

"If the rules are finalized, they'd affect that project and many other

projects throughout the country," Friedland said.

Big-name developers have hired armies of lobbyists to fight changes in the EB-5 rules.

Among them is a Florida businessman who has helped the Kushners raise EB-5 money and is a major player in the EB-5 industry.

Nicholas Mastroianni III, president of U.S. Immigration Fund, a firm that specializes in pooling EB-5 investors, contributed $100,000 to the Trump inauguration. He was invited to an exclusive dinner with Trump's future Cabinet members on Jan. 18, days after the changes were proposed. Kelly was one of the Cabinet members who mingled with top donors at the event.

The Palm Beach Post reported last month that the two sat at the same table. A spokesman for Mastroianni initially told The Post that he did not think the report was accurate but did not respond to follow-up requests for comment.

Lapan, the DHS spokesman, said Kelly has no recollection of meeting Mastroianni at the dinner.

"The dinner occurred before he was confirmed as secretary of homeland security, and he had no knowledge of the EB-5 program until recently," Lapan said.

U.S. Immigration Fund has spent $280,000 in the past four years lobbying federal lawmakers on EB-5, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

In 2012, Kushner turned to Mastroianni to help secure $50 million in financing for another Jersey City project, a 50-story tower in a waterfront neighborhood across from Lower Manhattan. A representative of Mastroianni's firm asked DHS to speed up its approval of the EB-5 project because the neighborhood had suffered damage from Hurricane Sandy. DHS approved the project months later.

The project, called Trump Bay Street, features a pool deck, saunas and 417 one- and two-bedroom apartments that rent for between $2,500 and $5,000. Kushner still has an ownership stake in the building.

Kushner Cos. also previously planned to raise $850 million in EB-5 money to renovate a marquee building at 666 Fifth Ave. in Manhattan, according to published reports earlier this year.

Trump recently extended the EB-5 program without making changes that had been recommended by the Obama administration and were supported by congressional leaders.

One Journal Square faces other hurdles. A key prospective tenant, WeWork, told The Post on Wednesday that it had suspended plans to lease space in the building, as first reported by Bloomberg. That threatens pledged tax breaks from the state of New Jersey.

Steve Fulop, the mayor of Jersey City, also said over the weekend that he opposed the Kushners' request for $30.4 million in city bonds and a 30-year tax abatement.

Emily Rauhala in Beijing and Alice Crites in Washington contributed to this report.

The New York Times

Walt : The Power of a Strong State Department

Stephen M. Walt

President Trump clearly admires America's military. He has put generals in charge of the Pentagon, the National Security Council and the Department of Homeland Security, and he has called for a big increase in military spending. He was quick to order missile strikes after chemical weapons were used in Syria, and he plans to send more troops to Afghanistan.

At the same time, Mr. Trump appears to have little regard for traditional diplomacy. He made Rex Tillerson, a foreign policy neophyte, his secretary of state. He has left key diplomatic posts unfilled and proposed slashing the State Department's budget by some 30 percent. Mr. Tillerson, who also wants to shake up the department, has already suggested eliminating 2,300 jobs there. Morale has plummeted, so Mr. Tillerson gave an in-house speech on May 3 that sought to convince his employees that their work was still important. But a pep talk is unlikely to restore the State Department's sense of diminished status.

America's armed forces are undeniably impressive, but Mr. Trump's veneration of military power and disregard for diplomacy is mistaken. Many of America's greatest foreign policy successes were won at the negotiating table, not on the battlefield: Think of the Louisiana Purchase, which doubled the size of the country in 1803, or the formation of NATO and the Bretton Woods economic institutions, equally farsighted acts that enhanced American influence. Similarly, the 1968 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty slowed the spread of nuclear weapons and made it easier to monitor states with nuclear ambitions.

The list goes on: Richard Nixon's opening to China in 1972 tilted the balance of power in our favor and helped smooth the United States' exit from Vietnam; Jimmy Carter's stewardship of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty ended a conflict that had produced four wars since 1948. Adroit diplomacy managed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany. More recently, patient negotiations led to an agreement with Iran that reversed its progress toward a nuclear bomb.

Mr. Trump's deference to the military, meanwhile, is hard to square with its track record. The United States had more than half a million troops in Vietnam at the peak of the war and still lost. The 1991 Persian Gulf war was a short-term triumph but did not yield a stable peace. The 2003 invasion of Iraq led to a costly quagmire, to enhanced Iranian influence and, eventually, to the creation of the Islamic State. The American military has been fighting in Afghanistan for nearly 16 years, and the Taliban today controls more territory than at any time since 2001. United States airstrikes helped drive Muammar el-Qaddafi from power in Libya in 2011, and the country is now a failed state.

These campaigns were unsuccessful not because the Pentagon lacked resources, or our soldiers lacked valor or our generals don't know how to lead. They failed because the United States' leaders either picked the wrong fights or could not translate battlefield successes into political solutions. Unmatched military might means little unless it is wedded to realistic political goals and effective diplomacy.

To be sure, military strength can facilitate diplomatic success. As George Kennan once observed, "you have no idea how much it contributes to the general politeness and pleasantness of diplomacy when you have a little quiet force in the background." But bludgeoning others into doing our bidding is not diplomacy. Diplomacy is first and foremost about reaching mutually beneficial arrangements that others will accept and not look to overturn.

Paradoxically, the stronger we are, the more important diplomacy becomes. America's vast power makes even its closest allies nervous, and diplomacy is needed to assuage others' concerns and persuade them to follow our lead. Doing this requires officials with a sophisticated knowledge of other states' interests, a keen appreciation for how America's actions are perceived and the awareness that even weaker opponents have the ability to resist if we cannot persuade them. That is why Secretary of Defense James Mattis once bluntly warned, "If you don't fully fund the State Department, then I need to buy more ammunition."

The State Department would no doubt benefit from certain reforms. But putting America's diplomats on a starvation diet is not the way to do it. Gutting the State Department will dissuade smart and ambitious people from entering diplomatic service and make it harder for those who remain to acquire the professional training they need as they rise in the ranks — something our more lavishly funded military does quite well.

If Mr. Trump continues to privilege force over diplomacy, the United States will continue to blunder into trouble, upset allies unnecessarily and be unable to end its present conflicts on favorable terms. Diplomacy is an essential part of a successful foreign policy. Ignoring that fact is a recipe for continued failures.