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FRANCE - EUROPE

Emmanuel Macron Is Inaugurated as France's President (UNE)

Alissa J. Rubin

Mr. Hollande, however, proved ultimately unpopular in large part because he could not ameliorate France's relatively high levels of unemployment. Sensing the political winds, Mr. Macron left the government in August 2016 after forming his own movement in April named En Marche!, or Onward!

At the time, few thought he could become president, but a combination of happenstance, hard work and voters' impatience with the old political choices contributed to his victory. He was helped both by Mr. Hollande's decision not to stand for a second term and by a corruption scandal that engulfed Mr. Macron's most formidable opponent, François Fillon, a former prime minister, whose hiring of his wife and children to work for him led to an embezzlement investigation.

After greeting Mr. Macron on the steps of the palace on Sunday, Mr. Hollande met with him in private so that the departing French leader could give the incoming one "secrets of state," identified as a handover of the codes for France's nuclear weapons.

It was also, in many ways, a meeting of a political era that appears to be fading in France with one that is on the horizon. Mr. Hollande is a Socialist Party member who has been in politics his entire adult life. Mr. Macron, in addition to being 20 years younger, is a former investment banker who created a movement that he describes as neither "left nor right," essentially an effort to fuse elements of both.

Mr. Macron has something of the image of a wunderkind who has leapfrogged his way to the top, while Mr. Hollande comes across as a political character who proceeded step by step and who had the misfortune to come to power at a difficult time and without the mandate for change that Mr. Macron hopes to profit from.

That said, Mr. Macron's aspirations to loosen labor rules, overhaul aspects of the pension system and simplify unemployment benefits are a tall order in a country whose citizens regularly take to the streets whenever any change is perceived as potentially weakening the social safety net.

Laurent Fabius, the president of the constitutional council, who proclaimed Mr. Macron's election official on Sunday during the formal ceremony, referred obliquely to his efforts to forge a new politics for France, citing François-René de Chateaubriand, one of the country's great intellectuals and conservatives of the end of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th.

"Chateaubriand wrote a formula that fully makes sense: 'To be a man of his country, one must be a man of his times,'" Mr. Fabius said. He added that Mr. Macron was both, but then urged him to reach out to everyone — an important exhortation for the new president, who was the choice of only 24 percent of voters in the first round of the election.

Mr. Macron won handily in the second round, but many voted not so much for Mr. Macron, but against his far-right opponent, Marine Le Pen, who was seen as representing a radical and even fascist departure from France's traditions.

"Calm the anger, repair the wounds, alleviate the doubts, show the road forward and embody the hopes" of France, Mr. Fabius urged.

Mr. Macron and his wife, Brigitte, were to take up residence in the presidential palace on Sunday, although they have a home in Paris's Seventh Arrondissement. It has generally been deemed too difficult to guarantee the president's security if he lives outside the Élysée Palace.

Mr. Macron waved at crowds as he was driven up the Champs-Élysées in a military jeep to the Arc de Triomphe, where he attended a ceremony honoring France's fallen service members at a Tomb for the Unknown Soldier. He then greeted bystanders and shook hands with those who had come to cheer him, before returning to the palace.

Emmanuel Macron Is Inaugurated as French President

Matthew Dalton

PARIS— Emmanuel Macron took office as president of France on Sunday, launching the 39-year-old's mission to overhaul the French economy and reinforce the European Union.

At the start of a ceremony at the Élysée Palace, Mr. Macron strode on a red carpet toward François Hollande, the departing president who brought Mr. Macron into government as a personal adviser and then elevated him to economy minister. The two headed inside for a meeting to discuss the most sensitive matters of state.

Mr. Macron then proceeded to a ceremony on the other side of the palace, where the results of last week's election were read out and Mr. Macron officially became president. He is France's youngest head of state in the postwar era.

In his first speech shortly after, Mr. Macron said France under his presidency would act as a bulwark for the international community.

"The world and Europe today more than ever need France," he said. "They need a France strong and sure of its destiny."

Sunday's ceremony caps a remarkable rise for Mr. Macron that is remaking France's political order. A former investment banker who had never run for office, Mr. Macron swept into the presidency by sidestepping France's mainstream political parties, which for decades have groomed the country's leaders.

Instead, Mr. Macron decided to form his own party, Republique en Marche, 13 months ago. Now he sits atop French politics, controlling a party that is fielding hundreds of candidates in upcoming legislative elections. Half of them are newcomers to politics and owe their political fortunes largely to Mr. Macron.

Mr. Macron a week ago won the presidential election in a landslide against Marine Le Pen, a far-right nationalist who sought to pull France from the EU and close the country's borders. He ran as a staunch defender of the bloc and a business-friendly centrist who would shake up France's tightly regulated economy.

Ms. Le Pen's message, however, resonated with large portions of the electorate who are opposed to immigration and discontent with the country's long-running economic slump. She won 34% of the vote, the best showing by a French far-right party in the postwar era. Mr. Macron on Sunday cast his presidency as a mission to reinvigorate the economy and address the malaise that has fueled Ms. Le Pen's rise.

"Employment will be unblocked, businesses will be supported, initiative will be encouraged," Mr. Macron said. "French men and women who have been forgotten amid global upheavals must be better protected."

Mr. Macron's first order of business will be tending to France's relationship with Germany, the country's most important ally. Mr. Macron is scheduled to fly to Berlin on Monday to meet with German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Mr. Macron has made changing the eurozone's architecture a priority. His ideas include creating shared budget for the common currency that could help member countries in economic distress. But for that, he will need the approval of Ms. Merkel, who has resisted similar overtures from French politicians in the past.

"The Europe that we need will be rebuilt, relaunched, because it protects us and allows us to bring our values to the world," Mr. Macron said.

Under high security in a city repeatedly hit by terror attacks in recent years, Mr. Macron's car left his apartment Sunday morning in the 7th arrondissement of Paris, headed across the Seine river, and arrived at the Élysée. Later in the day, Mr. Macron's team will receive France's nuclear launch codes and briefings on the country's counterterrorism arrangements.

France remains in a state of emergency, declared shortly after the terror attacks of November 2015. The emergency regime allows security forces to consign people deemed to be security threats to house arrest, conduct searches without judicial approval and take other measures that are forbidden by the French constitution under normal circumstances.

During the campaign in March, Mr. Macron said the state of emergency should be maintained unless new information comes to light that would justify lifting it.

The Washington Post

Emmanuel Macron sworn in as president of a divided France

PARIS — First-time politician Emmanuel Macron was inaugurated Sunday as France's president, facing the difficult task of transforming electoral success into political strength in a society beset by unemployment and divided by anger.

The solemn ceremony in the gilded halls of the Elysee Palace capped Macron's rise from political obscurity just a year ago, when he was the economy minister starting a long-shot centrist bid against the parties that had run the nation for decades. Now the 39-year-old is France's youngest leader since Napoleon.

Macron won after a bitter campaign against a strong far-right opponent, Marine Le Pen, who delivered the best-ever result for the country's far-right party after her furious denunciations of immigration and open borders.

He is an outlier in this era of crusading populist politicians: a head of state who unapologetically embraces the borderless European Union and the economic opportunities and disruptions of globalization. The stakes are high in his effort to deliver on his promises. If he fails to budge France's stubbornly high joblessness, the far-right National Front may roar back stronger than ever in 2022 elections, a step that could bring the entire European Union tumbling down.

On Sunday, Macron sought to inject fresh optimism into a French public so disillusioned with the political establishment that in the first round of the presidential elections nearly half of its voters opted for candidates who wanted to blow up the nation's political order. Macron's predecessor, Socialist President François Hollande, broke records for unpopularity after a five-year term filled with political failure.

"The world and Europe need France more than ever," Macron said in a brief speech to a packed Elysee ballroom filled with the country's political elite, his supporters and his family. The address came after he walked down the red carpet at the entrance to the palace to be received by Hollande, who launched Macron's career by appointing the ex-investment banker as an economic adviser, then elevating him to the economy ministry. The two huddled privately for an hour, and then Hollande departed the presidential palace for the last time in a modest Citroen sedan.

"The power of France is not declining," Macron said. "We hold in our hands all the strengths of a power of the 21st century."

Acknowledging the fears of the one-third of French voters who opted for his opponent, he said that "the French men and women who feel forgotten by this vast movement of the world have to be better protected."

A president who has said he is "neither of the right, nor of the left" pledged to "give back the French their self-confidence."

After the ceremony, he took part in a slow procession down the Champs-Elysees, walking and riding in a military vehicle until he reached the Arc de Triomphe and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at its base. The warm spring day in Paris was punctuated by showers, prompting one observer to joke on Twitter that it was a "very Macronian" inauguration: "it's raining AND AT THE SAME TIME it's lovely."

Macron has vowed to overhaul France's slow-growing economy by implementing business-friendly reforms while also strengthening the country's social safety net. He has pledged to push for increased integration of countries that use the euro currency, a step that would mean rich nations such as Germany would have to pay more to support poorer ones such as Greece.

But his power to deliver change will be determined by a breakneck legislative campaign over the next four weeks. June elections will determine whether he can sweep in a majority for his new political party, Republic on the Move, which is too new to hold any seats and has nominated hundreds of people to run, half of them newcomers to political life.

If Macron fails, he will be forced to share power with his political opponents, an arrangement that could force him to build a piece-by-piece majority for his reforms and sap much of his political energies.

Macron on Monday will visit German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin, a traditional first trip to France's most important partner that will be a test of his ability to jump-start the relationship that has driven Europe since the end of World War II. Macron already has a warm relationship with Merkel after two Berlin visits this year, but she has pushed back on some of Macron's most ambitious plans for Europe.

Today's WorldView

What's most important from where the world meets Washington

A first sign of Macron's political strategy will also come Monday, when he is to announce his pick for prime minister. Macron will seek to reassure voters on the left and the right that he is not moving too far away from them — all while emphasizing his newcomer bona fides.

Two candidates frequently mentioned in the French news media are International Monetary Fund chief Christine Lagarde — a onetime finance minister who has never held elected office — and the center-right mayor of the port city of Le Havre, Édouard Philippe.

"If we don't want France to fall, he needs help," Philippe said in an interview last month before Macron's May 7 runoff victory. "The risk of Marine Le Pen getting elected five years from now, if Macron fails, is strong."

Birnbaum reported from Brussels.

Bloomberg

Raphael : France's Young President Has a Youth Problem

Therese Raphael

Five years can be an eternity in politics. Addressing youths in the north of Paris during the 2012 presidential campaign, Francois Hollande declared that, if elected, he wanted to be judged by one objective. "Will young people be better off in 2017 than in 2012?" His bold challenge helped draw a solid majority of the youth vote (62 percent of the 25-24 year range), but it would soon become a bitter indictment of his presidency, ending with Hollande becoming a ghost-like occupant of the Elysee Palace awaiting his replacement.

Emmanuel Macron, his successor who was inaugurated Sunday, promised his own Camelot-style renewal. But Macron's youth vote was disappointingly low for a figure who styled himself as a usurper (if a centrist one) and who will be France's youngest president ever. And much of the vote he did capture may have been more attributable to a dislike of the anti-Europe Le Pen than an embrace of Macron's message, as this Bloomberg News story noted at the time. How that youth vote broke down is a pretty good proxy for the country's main divisions and an indicator of the enormous challenge ahead. Here was the first-round breakdown:

Young and Restless

First round French election voting by age group

Source: Ipsos

Far-left candidate Jean-Luc Melenchon did better than Le Pen among the 18-to-24 age group in the first round; in part this was because of the Bernie Sanders-like appeal of his socialist economic message and in part because many young people were repelled by Le Pen's pledge to take France out of the euro. In the second round of voting, the older the voter, the more likely he or she was to vote for Le Pen, so that seems good for Macron. However, Le Pen still received 40 percent of 25-t0-34 year old vote; that must be seen as a cry of desperation from an age cohort that is old enough to be realistic about its prospects.

Le Pen's Lost Votes

Second round voting by age group, in percentages

Source: Ipsos

Politically, young people tend to veer between apathy and radicalism. When they bother to vote at all, young people in America and Britain have largely stuck together recently. In Britain voted overwhelmingly to remain in the European Union, 75 to 25 for the 18 to 24-year-old age group. In the U.S. presidential election, 55 percent of voters under 30 voted Democrat, down from 60 percent in 2012.

Donald Trump got 37 percent of the youth vote.

But this election was essentially a tale of two youth populations in France: roughly speaking, those who have options in life and those who despair. Around a quarter of French aged 18 to 24 are unemployed, more than double the overall unemployment rate. France's balkanized labor market -- where the lucky have iron-clad "permanent" contracts but a growing number have part-time or temporary work -- hits the young hard. The average age for obtaining the first permanent work contract rose to 28 in 2016 from 22 in 1992.

Education also lets down the young. France has a rigorous selection system. Those who land in good schools and make it through the early stages go on an academic track, followed by jobs in the private sector or, as likely in a county where one in five workers is employed by the state, government. But it is brutal on those who fall by the way side, as the brilliant 2013 book La Machine a Trier (or the sorting machine) explained. Some 20 percent of primary school students fail to acquire adequate mastery of basic literacy and numeracy skills, and drop-out rates are too high. Polls show the French pessimistic about their education system and how well it prepares students for the world of work.

Apprenticeship programs have increasingly been a route to skills and employability in Germany, Austria, the U.K. and elsewhere. President Hollande promised "that no apprentice is without an employer, and no employer remains without an apprentice." But France's apprenticeship system is excessively centralized and mind-numbingly complex, and seems to serve best only those who don't need the positions to succeed. In a paper for the French Council of Economic Analysis, Pierre Cahuc and Marc Ferracci noted that while enrollment numbers for apprenticeships rose between 1992 and 2013, the rise came almost solely from those with higher levels of qualifications, while the proportion of apprentices without prior qualifications fell to 35 percent from 60 percent.

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But, you might note, inequality in France looks a lot less stark than in many other countries, including the U.S. That is true but also deceptive because the country has very low levels of social mobility, more in line with the rates in the U.S. or the U.K. than the Scandinavian social democracies to which it is often compared. Parental earnings are a depressingly good indicator of an offspring's prospects.

Like Father, Like Son

Link between a son's earnings and his father's; the higher the value, the lower the intergenerational social mobility.

Source: OECD

The barriers to social mobility, particularly education but also the labor market and even the structure of public housing, will continue to drive frustrated voters to Le Pen's National Front if nothing changes. And the National Front may get better at attracting them.

Shortly before the first round of voting, I visited the leader of the National Front's highly organized youth movement. With his prep-school polish and quiet confidence, 23-year-old Gaetan Dussausaye, a former philosophy student, seemed an unlikely poster boy for Marine Le Pen's movement. He said, with the air of someone who has to repeat himself a lot, that the National Front has many supporters like him. Many have made it through the selection machine that is France's education system or found employment, but came from humbler roots and see the system as fundamentally flawed.

The National Front's fundamental devotion to its populist cause would not be changed of an electoral defeat, he was convinced. "We in the National Front don't seek to serve the markets," he said. "We just want to serve the people. We feel the economy and finance should serve the goal of the policies, not that policies should be at the service of the markets or finance."

To Dussausaye and his cohort in the movement, Macron is not a reformer. They will be looking for ways to do to the new president what voters did to the party of Francois Hollande. So will Melenchon, who remains popular among the young. And yet young people are nothing if not changeable. Maybe they can be wooed back to the mainstream. But it will take actions this time, not just words.

Bloomberg

Editorial : The City of London After Brexit Isn't Just About Jobs

Britain's new relationship with the European Union is still a long way from being settled, but Brexit has started a process that is bound to hurt the City of London. Earlier this month, the European Commission launched a review of the rules governing one of the City's lucrative lines of business -- the clearing of derivatives denominated in euros.

The U.K. wants to keep it in London. The European Central Bank was skeptical about that even before Brexit. Now Brussels is considering two alternatives -- imposing stricter EU oversight over clearing houses in London or forcing some activities to relocate within the euro zone.

The U.K. is in no position to complain about the politics driving the discussion: This kind of jockeying for advantage was only to be expected. But wherever this business ends up, the main thing is that vital financial infrastructure is properly supervised and keeps working well. That's the overriding interest for both sides.

Britain is not part of the single-currency area, but the City clears around three-quarters of trading in euro-denominated derivatives, mainly through LCH.Clearnet Ltd. Clearing houses are an essential part of the financial system. They stand between buyers and sellers, guaranteeing settlement of trades and managing the risks involved. This structure reduces the danger of a default spreading across the system.

In 2011, the European Central Bank proposed that the euro-denominated activities of systemically important institutions such as LCH should relocate within the euro zone. The Bank of England and the ECB subsequently agreed on a framework of joint supervision. If London-based clearing houses needed emergency liquidity, a swap line between the two central banks would ensure the Bank of England had enough euros to stem financial panic.

This arrangement has worked well and, Brexit or no Brexit, has some advantages. It allows LCH to provide central clearing in multiple currencies, not just euros, all in a single pool, which lowers costs. However, it's vulnerable to a future breakdown of central-bank cooperation. During a crisis, would the Bank of England stand behind London-based clearing, even if the risks of failing to do so were concentrated in the euro zone?

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Letting European authorities directly oversee clearing houses abroad, including in London, would copy an existing U.S. arrangement, maintain existing efficiencies and spare companies a complex relocation; post-Brexit, though, the Bank of England and the ECB would need to negotiate a new relationship. Requiring euro-denominated clearing to be based in the euro zone would make lines of responsibility clearer, but there'd be a disruptive transition, and added costs in the longer term if the whole idea of multi-currency clearing were called into question.

Each of these models could be made to work, so long as close regulatory cooperation continues and the two sides don't lose sight of what matters most -- not which city gets which jobs, but the need for well-run international infrastructure and effective cooperation among central banks and regulators.

Britain has no right to insist that the business stays in London, and should expect to pay a heavy price for Brexit. But as this negotiation moves forward, Europe should also keep in mind its own larger stake in a smoothly running international financial system.

--Editors: Ferdinando Giugliano, Clive Crook

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U.K.'s Corporate Tax Cuts Offer a Lesson for Trump

Taxes

They boost growth only if the money isn't taken from much-needed investment

U.S. President Donald Trump's plans to cut corporation tax are likely to cost a lot. Will the cuts boost the economy or just prove to be a sop to the wealthy? The answer may lie in Britain, which is already running that experiment.

Together with large cuts to public spending, lowering corporate tax rates was former British Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne's signature policy. When he arrived in 2010, the rate was 28 percent; now it is 19 percent and is set to fall to 17 percent in years to come. It's a big policy, and it came with a big price tag.

According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the tax cuts and other savings to business announced since 2010 has cost the treasury £11 billon ($14 billion) a year in foregone revenues -- enough to meet Britain's healthcare needs for about five weeks. That estimate includes the benefit to the exchequer of internationally mobile income arriving into the U.K. to take advantage of the low tax rate.

What the estimate does not take into account is how lower business taxation affects the wider economy -- which is what Trump is counting on to help finance his tax plan. The idea is that the tax cuts will lift firms' profitability, spurring investment, improving the productive capacity of the economy and ultimately pushing up household incomes, spending and tax revenues.

In some corners, the benefits of Britain's experiment with corporate taxation have been dismissed as paltry, because overall investment is lower as a share of GDP than in the past. But look at investment by just businesses and it is clear that the share is a good deal higher than in the 1970s when corporate taxes were more burdensome:

Investment has grown faster than GDP since cuts were announced in 2010 and the share of GDP is forecast by the independent Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) to rise. Bloomberg Intelligence also expects spending to recover as a share of GDP following Brexit negotiations and in both cases that's partly thanks to the corporation tax cuts.

Investment spending would probably be higher still, were it not for the Brexit vote. Economic uncertainty, captured by a Bloomberg Intelligence gauge in the chart below, has spiked. Conditions for starting major projects are not optimal, as surveys of investment intentions also show. And think of the counterfactual: Investment would probably have been lower if taxes had not been cut.

No Brexit Bounce Here

Bloomberg intelligence uncertainty gauge and investment intentions

Source: Bloomgerg Intelligence, Bank of England

A government economic model suggests that lower tax rates do lift investment spending. The independent OBR has its own model, which reaches similar conclusions, and uses it to adjust its forecasts of business capital spending when policy changes. A one-percentage point cut in the corporation tax rate has in the past been estimated to lift business investment spending by as much as 0.5 percent within 5 years.

If that holds true then the planned 11 percentage point cut in corporation tax might create a medium-term boost to business investment of around 5 percent. There will be more machinery, buildings and software available to produce output than before the cuts. Still, even with this impact, cutting corporation tax is not even close to paying for itself. The government estimates that the cost of the cuts would be halved only over the course of a couple of decades.

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The problem with these assessments is that they assume all else is equal, which it isn't. As others have rightly noted, the impact of corporate tax cuts on the economy depends on where the money to pay for the measure has come from. In the U.K., businesses have been induced to spend more but public investment has been shrinking relative to GDP. And spending on healthcare and education -- investment in human capital -- has been squeezed compared with historical norms.

Trump should take note. A lower U.S. corporate rate may encourage companies to invest more there. But if he decides to cut growth-friendly funding to win support for his corporation tax plans, the growth dividend he hopes will help pay for them may never materialize.

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

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats Win Election in Germany's Biggest State

Anton Troianovski

BERLIN—Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union beat the center-left Social Democrats in the regional election Sunday in Germany's biggest state, providing a major boost to the German leader ahead of national elections in September.

The center-right Christian Democrats finished ahead of the Social Democrats 33% to 31.5% in Sunday's state election in North Rhine-Westphalia, according to a projection based on exit polls and early results released by ARD public television.

The result represented a major upset in German politics and underlined Ms. Merkel's political strength as she prepares to run for a fourth term. North Rhine-Westphalia—whose population of 18 million is more than one-fifth of Germany's total—has long been a stronghold of the Social Democrats, who have governed in the state for all but five of the last 50 years.

The upstart, anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany party took 7.4%, meaning it will now have seats in 13 of Germany's 16 state parliaments. But the party's hopes of soaring into the double digits in a region with many working-class voters failed to materialize.

The pro-business Free Democratic Party won 12.5% according to the projection, its best-ever result in the state, building momentum ahead of the party's campaign to try to regain seats in the national parliament in the federal election on Sept. 24.

The campaign in the state turned in part on the record of the Social Democratic premier, Hannelore Kraft, who has governed in partnership with the environmentalist Greens since 2010. Armin Laschet, the Christian Democratic candidate, slammed her performance on the economy and in education. Security was also a major issue, in part because several suspected Islamist extremists, including the Berlin truck attacker Anis Amri, spent time in the state.

But the closely watched vote also sent a message nationwide, showing that despite German discomfort with Ms. Merkel's acceptance of more than a million refugees and migrants in the last two years, many voters still back her. Of those who voted for the Christian Democrats, 40% said the chancellor played a "very important" role in their decision, according to an Infratest Dimap exit poll.

"I think it has become clear that we have big problems to solve—in North Rhine-Westphalia but also in Europe and internationally," Ms. Merkel's chief of staff, Peter Altmaier, said on ARD public television after the results came in.

The vote delivered a blow to Ms. Merkel's challenger in the September election, Social Democrat Martin Schulz, who hails from the region. Both politicians campaigned in the state in recent days, and Mr. Schulz said Sunday evening that the vote was "a resounding defeat" for his party.

Mr. Schulz, a former president of the European Parliament, has been scrambling to try to regain his early momentum after his surprise designation in January as the Social Democrats' challenger to Ms. Merkel.

The party's position in the polls surged to a near tie with the Christian Democrats after Mr. Schulz's designation, but it has fallen back to 10 points behind the Christian Democrats—37% to 27%--in two national polls published in recent days. The result in North Rhine-Westphalia, the last state to vote ahead of the national election, places the Christian Democrats in "a nearly optimal" starting position as the campaign approaches, University of Mainz political scientist Jürgen Falter said.

"People continue to feel taken care of by" Ms. Merkel, Mr. Falter said. "She has managed to more or less bend things back into shape after her mistake with opening the border."

For the Social Democrats, or SPD, the result represented a stunning setback in a state whose many blue-collar workers once formed a rock-solid base for the party. After the Christian Democrats last won in the state in 2005, Social Democratic Chancellor Gerhard Schröder called early elections. He lost them to Ms.

Merkel, who has governed ever since.

“A loss in North Rhine-Westphalia is, of course, something that will hit the SPD especially hard in its self-esteem and self-confidence,” Mr. Falter said.

The Washington Post

Merkel’s party wins vote in rivals’ German heartland

German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s conservatives won a state election Sunday in their center-left rivals’ traditional heartland, a stinging blow to the challenger in September’s national vote.

The western state of North Rhine-Westphalia is Germany’s most populous and has been led by the center-left Social Democrats for all but five years since 1966.

It is also the home state of Martin Schulz, the Social Democrat seeking to deny Merkel a fourth term in the Sept. 24 election. Schulz was hoping for a boost after two previous state election defeats sapped his party’s momentum.

Instead, Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union won 33 percent of the vote in the election for the state legislature, with the Social Democrats trailing at 31.2 percent.

Social Democratic Gov. Hannelore Kraft’s coalition lost its majority as her junior governing partners, the Greens, took only 6.4 percent. Conservative challenger Armin Laschet, a deputy leader of Merkel’s party, was set to replace Kraft.

“The CDU has won the heartland of the Social Democrats,” said the conservatives’ general secretary, Peter Tauber.

“This is a difficult day for the Social Democrats, a difficult day for me personally, as well,” Schulz, who wasn’t on Sunday’s ballot, said to supporters in Berlin. “I come from the state in which we took a really stinging defeat today.”

But he urged the party to concentrate now on the national election. He said that “we will sharpen our profile further — we have to, as well.”

“We will continue fighting. The result will come on Sept. 24,” Schulz said.

Today's Headlines newsletter

The day's most important stories.

The Social Democrats’ national ratings soared after Schulz, a former European Parliament president, was nominated in January as Merkel’s challenger. But defeats in two other state elections since March punctured the party’s euphoria over Schulz’s nomination.

The Social Democrats’ result in Sunday’s election, the last before the national vote, was their worst in North Rhine-Westphalia since World War II. In the state’s last election in 2012, the Social Democrats beat the CDU 39.1 percent to 26.3 percent.

The pro-business Free Democrats won a strong 12.6 percent of the vote Sunday after a campaign headed by their national leader, Christian Lindner. That gave the party, with which Merkel governed Germany from 2009 to 2013, a strong base for its drive to return to the country’s Parliament in September after it was ejected four years ago.

The nationalist Alternative for Germany won 7.4 percent, giving it seats in its 13th state legislature. The opposition Left Party fell just short of the 5 percent needed to win seats.

The New York Times

Angela Merkel’s Party Scores Big Win in Key German State Election

Alison Smale

Mr. Schulz, reacting to the results, said that it was a “tough day” but that he and his party would now focus on winning the national elections in September.

A deputy leader of the Social Democrats, Ralf Stegner, conceded minutes after exit polls suggested his party was headed for what he called a “bitter defeat.”

The state leader of the party immediately resigned, in a clear effort to deflect blame for the defeat away from Mr. Schulz.

Mr. Schulz rode a wave of hype and hope to sudden popularity early this year but has fizzled badly since. By contrast, Ms. Merkel has played up her status as a world leader and savored two unexpected clear victories for her party in other state elections, last week and in late March.

In recent weeks, Ms. Merkel marshaled Europe into a joint position on negotiating Britain’s exit from the European Union and warned the British against “illusions” that it would come easy.

She dined with the Saudi king in Riyadh, the capital, and the Russian president in Sochi, days after hosting a women’s conference in Berlin with powerful figures as different as America’s “first daughter,” Ivanka Trump, and Christine Lagarde, the head of the International Monetary Fund.

In a turbulent world, Ms. Merkel’s status as an undramatic but effective problem solver seems to have won over voters at home, despite what her critics say is a lack of a clear domestic agenda.

Her Christian Democrats won elections in Germany’s northernmost state on May 7, and one poll conducted afterward for the public broadcaster ARD found that a staggering 87 percent of conservative voters endorsed the view that “Angela Merkel ensures that we are doing fine in an unsettled world.”

Forty-six percent said she was the “most important reason” to vote conservative, while 28 percent said they would not vote for the party without her.

Publicly, Ms. Merkel almost never acknowledges such numbers. In private, she and her team track poll data, as any successful politician must. After appearing reluctant last winter to run again for office, she has clearly been buoyed by recent events.

Before a crowd of about 550 conservative movers and shakers in this wealthy state capital on Thursday, Ms. Merkel was almost playful with her interviewer, Michael Bröcker, the editor of the Rheinische Post newspaper.

When he asked, for instance, if she ever looked herself up online, Ms. Merkel joked, “I only look at my cellphone once in a while so I can remember my own phone number.”

But she was serious when asked about polls that showed the race tightening in North Rhine-Westphalia, where Ms. Merkel’s conservatives have governed for only five of the past 50 years.

North Rhine-Westphalia “is no easy terrain” for us, she said, while proceeding to pummel the center-left with charges of letting infrastructure deteriorate, tinkering with education and being lax on security.

Those themes, also important nationally, have dominated debate here, in particular the issue of security. The mass assaults on women in Cologne on New Year’s Eve in 2015 and the state authorities’ failure to detain a Tunisian terrorist who plowed a truck into a Berlin Christmas market last year, killing 12, have prompted fierce criticism of the current coalition government of Social Democrats and Greens.

The far-right Alternative for Germany, which held a fractious congress in the state in late April, is predicted to clear the 5 percent barrier for entering the state legislature but to fall short of the double digits it confidently forecast last winter.

The party’s support, for now, has been dented by outrage over a party leader’s criticism of the monument in Berlin to Jews killed in the Holocaust.

It has been similarly undercut by Ms. Merkel’s moves to reduce the refugee influx and to assuage anti-Islam activists by supporting a ban on the full veil for Muslim women. The distaste for populism as practiced by President Trump in the United States has also reduced its attraction here.

Initially, Mr. Schulz had siphoned support from the far right. He hails from the far west of North Rhine-Westphalia, which encompasses the gritty Ruhr industrial heartland, several of Germany’s most troubled and most prosperous cities, and bucolic Rhine River country.

To listen to voices from Germany’s rust belt is to hear strong echoes of Mr. Trump’s supporters in the United States.

Guido Reil, a 26-year veteran of the Social Democrats and a coal miner, quit the party in disgust last year and joined Alternative for Germany.

“In the last 10 years, I have been forced to watch the decline of my home, the Ruhr,” he said while campaigning for the state legislature. “We are always speaking so grandly of changing the structure — coal and steel have vanished, and in their place comes something else. But that didn’t happen.”

Susanne Neumann and Christel Wellmann, both 58, are cleaners in the Ruhr area who gained national prominence after Ms. Neumann confronted leading Social Democrats at a forum last year.

They have kept the faith, just, but Ms. Wellmann suggested that Mr. Schulz and other politicians "should do our jobs — cleaning, care for the elderly — for just one day."

"Then perhaps they would act a little more — not just talk," Ms. Wellmann said.

Ms. Neumann said, "The gulf between rich and poor is getting bigger and bigger."

Mr. Schulz has made much of righting inequality, and his program, due only in June, may yet see him surge anew in the long months until the fall elections, scheduled for Sept. 24.

But after being chosen to lead his party's campaign with an unheard-of 100 percent of votes cast at a party congress in mid-March, Mr. Schulz and the Social Democrats have stumbled.

Mr. Schulz, initially welcomed as a fresh face in Germany's often dull politics, had spent most of his career in European structures in Brussels.

So far, he has failed to make a lasting impact, suffering because he does not hold government office, which would guarantee him a certain amount of attention.

INTERNATIONAL

The Washington Post

How a woman in England tracks civilian deaths in Syria, one bomb at a time (UNE)

One recent morning in the countryside beyond London, Kinda Haddad dropped her two children off at school, came home and began scanning her computer for the day's first reports of Syrian civilians killed by American bombs.

Outside her living room window, a willow tree was swaying in the breeze. Inside, Haddad was staring at a computer screen full of ghostly images of dead children, dusty and bloodied corpses and pile after pile of rubble. She kept the volume low.

"I try not to listen because it makes the images more disturbing," she said.

This is her second year of doing this, an almost daily routine since Haddad, 45, became one of the first analysts for Airwars, an eight-person nonprofit group started with a simple question: Exactly how many civilians were being killed in the American-led air campaigns in Iraq and Syria?

Was it even possible to know?

The usual sources of such information — reporters, the United Nations and human rights groups that traditionally monitor civilian deaths — have been largely absent from the battlefields, especially after a series of kidnappings and beheadings of journalists and aid workers in Syria.

And so Airwars — which is to say Haddad in her living room and seven others in London, Jordan, Turkey and Baghdad — began quite literally piecing together the answer — a painstaking process that involves sifting through tens of thousands of shakily filmed videos, photos, Facebook postings, U.S. military accounts and other fragments of information from a war that often feels remote to everyone except the Syrians and Iraqis trying desperately to document their own destruction.

Haddad focused on Syria.

She at first doubted there would be enough information to even begin her work. But she soon realized the problem was the opposite: "There isn't too little information. It is almost too much."

The result so far: In more than 1,000 days of bombing, Airwars estimates that the United States and its allies have killed at least 3,200 civilians — more than nine times the 352 deaths acknowledged by the U.S. military, which has nonetheless come to see Airwars as a partner, even as it often disputes the group's numbers.

"We kind of consider them part of the team," said Navy Lt. Michael Grimes, who leads the military's two-person unit charged with doing an initial assessment of civilian casualty allegations in Iraq and Syria. "A lot of the allegations we get can be very vague. It makes the job extremely difficult when we don't have specific information."

Haddad tries to get to the specifics. At the moment, they were all over her computer screen.

"I just open a few sources at a time," she said, clicking open Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently, Voice of the East, the Raqqa Truth and the Euphrates Post — sites that secretly report from Islamic State territory.

Many had started as Facebook pages or Twitter accounts focused on documenting the brutal excesses of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government or the bloody deprivations of the Islamic State. As the fighting ground on and the combatants multiplied, the missions of such sources broadened to relaying all of the chaos and suffering that afflicted Syria.

Haddad skimmed reports of regime raids in Damascus, medicine shortages in Daraa and the destruction of an Islamic State tank in Raqqa by U.S. forces. Soon she found her first account of possible civilian casualties. According to the Euphrates Post, U.S. planes had struck a field hospital in Tabaqa, about 30 miles from Raqqa, killing a doctor and wounding a nurse and several patients.

That brief account led her to others. Smart News Agency, a news source with an editor in Germany and correspondents in Raqqa, was reporting that the attack on the field hospital had taken place in the city's second district and had killed a doctor and several patients. An official U.S. military report for the same day said it had struck three targets in Tabaqa, which had been the site of fighting between the Islamic State and U.S.-backed Kurdish forces.

Haddad translated the Arabic posts into English and pasted them into a shared document that she and her colleagues could add to and analyze over the course of the day.

Some allegations, like the Tabaqa strike, yield scarce details, while others result in massive entries that take days to assemble and include names of the dead, photos and videos. In more than two years of work, Haddad and the other Airwars researchers have collected the names of more than 1,300 victims in Iraq and Syria.

"These are not the anonymous victims of past wars," said Chris Woods, an investigative journalist who founded Airwars in the fall of 2014.

The biggest challenge for the Airwars analysts has been determining with certainty whether the United States or some other combatant dropped the bomb in a given incident.

In March, Airwars analysts, overwhelmed by the accelerating pace of the war in Iraq and Syrian, temporarily stopped doing detailed assessments of Russian airstrikes. The group doesn't track Syrian government attacks. Nor does it track artillery barrages, which sometimes can be mistaken for aerial strikes.

Airwars estimated that the United States and its allies killed more than 320 civilians in Syria in March — almost seven times the death toll compiled for February. To Woods, the spike demonstrated that the Trump administration had loosened protections that had shielded civilians.

"When we are getting these huge numbers of reports saying civilians are dying, we should be listening," he said.

Haddad focused on the gritty specifics. Two days earlier, Haddad and Abdulwahab Tahhan, Airwars' other Syria researcher, had spent a full day documenting the aftermath of a series of airstrikes in Bukamal, a village in eastern Syria.

Haddad dipped back into the now 30-page report and noticed that her colleague had added a video from the scene that she had somehow missed in her initial search. "I was probably being blind," she messaged him by way of apology and then clicked on the video, which opened in darkness with flashlight beams dancing over rubble. She eased up the volume on her computer.

"God help us," a man screamed as rescue workers swirled around him.

"Move! Move! Move!" other voices yelled.

The shaky cellphone footage cut suddenly to a makeshift morgue where hands in surgical gloves were cradling the faces of dead children who had been pulled from the rubble.

“The problem with a war like this one is that people just report the numbers,” she said. “At first three deaths is shocking, and then 20 —” she said, trailing off.

Sharing with the military

It was soon after she started with Airwars that Haddad, alone in her house, decided that the images on her screen were easier to take if she kept the volume low, shutting out the screams.

She had clicked on a video from Ber Mahli in northern Syria, which had been the site of a sustained American aerial assault in the spring of 2015. The scene opened on a pickup truck filled with mangled children’s bodies. An older man, heartbroken and full of fury, picked up the body of a headless child and thrust it toward the sky where the American planes had been.

“Is this Islamic State? Is this Islamic State?” he bellowed.

Such graphic images often disappeared from YouTube or Facebook, so it fell to Haddad and her colleagues to archive them. Back then, she imagined that the United Nations, the media or human rights groups would be interested in the information.

Lately, though, one of most eager consumers of Airwars’ work has been the U.S. military. Last fall, Airwars officials offered to share all of the data it had amassed on civilian casualty allegations. “We had this huge public database, and they weren’t using it,” Woods said of the Pentagon. “It was kind of laid out on a platter for them.”

Since then, the U.S. military has reviewed nearly 350 Airwars allegations dating back to November and determined that close to 80 of them require a fuller assessment. In the other instances, military officials said they could not find records of “potentially corroborating strikes in the area” at the time of the allegation.

Now Airwars sends the military more allegations to review each month. Military officials, in some instances, have given Airwars precise bomb geo-coordinates to ensure they aren’t double-counting attacks.

“I guess it is unusual, but I don’t think it is odd,” Col. Joe Scrocca, a U.S. military spokesman in Baghdad, said of the partnership. “We admit that there is probably evidence in these cases that we don’t have. We’re not able to interview every single victim out there or their families. We don’t have people on the ground for that.”

Despite the cooperation, the relationship remains tense. Even as military officials concede that their civilian casualty figures are “probably low,” they insist that the Airwars estimates are too high and sometimes built on unreliable evidence. Airwars doesn’t have access to classified surveillance video and U.S. military strike logs that are critical to determining the credibility of an allegation. “They are taking allegations at face value,” Scrocca said.

Airwars workers, such as Haddad, counter that the military is too quick to dismiss on-the-scene evidence from Iraqis and Syrians that contradicts their grainy surveillance video.

“They only trust what their cameras show,” she said, “and quite frankly, that’s insane.”

A Syria left behind

Hanging over Haddad’s desk is an image from another Syria. In the 1970s-era black-and-white photo, Haddad and her sister sit between her Syrian father and her Armenian-Dutch mother.

“My mom wanted us to move before we grew up, married and stayed there,” Haddad said of the country where she spent her childhood and teenage years. “She didn’t want us living in a dictatorship.” She asked The Washington Post not to identify the English village where she lives for security reasons.

Haddad last visited Syria in 2011 to see her father, who had retired and moved home after many years abroad. Only a few days into their vacation, the uprising against the Assad regime began in their home town of Latakia. “You couldn’t leave the house,” she said. “The kids were small, so I thought, what’s the point?” She left three days into the trip.

Several months later, her father died. Haddad’s husband urged her not to make the dangerous trip back for the funeral, and she reluctantly agreed. It’s a decision she now regrets.

“I should have just put my foot down and gone,” she said.

Since then, she has experienced Syria almost entirely through the often-confusing fragments she sees online.

Two years ago, she was researching the death of a man in his 20s who was reported killed in a U.S. airstrike near Idlib. It was a small incident — just one civilian death in a war that seemed to be growing more cruel with each passing day. Haddad plugged his name into a few online search engines and discovered a video from February 2013 of the man, clad in a gray sweatshirt that said “New York,” singing resistance songs. “Muslims and Christians, they are all cursing Bashar,” he sang in the short cellphone video that received only 163 views. “We won’t give up on our revolution until the butcher is condemned to death.”

In a video made 18 months later, the man has a full beard and is singing a plaintive ballad in praise of Islamic State martyrs. Haddad wondered how she should classify him: Was he a civilian or a combatant? A victim or a terrorist?

Now she sees him as a something of an omen. “The videos show how the revolution began and where it has gone,” she said. “It shows where Syria has gone.”

Haddad spent the last part of her day, before her children returned from school, searching online for Amaq, the Islamic State affiliated news agency. Much of the site is devoted to Islamic State propaganda, but it can also be an important source of information, photos and video on civilian casualties in places, such as Raqqa, where the Islamic State’s brutal clampdown has made it exceedingly dangerous for Syrians to communicate with the outside world.

“Amazingly, they don’t exaggerate civilian casualties,” she said. “In fact, you get some higher numbers elsewhere. Maybe they don’t want people to think they’re losing? Maybe they want to project strength?”

Lately, though, Amaq has been hard for her to find. Anti-Islamic State activists will break the site’s links, taking it off the Internet for several days before it emerges under a new Web address.

Haddad’s search for the site led her to a group focused on keeping it offline. “If you find an #ISIS site let us know and we will SMASH it!!!” the group boasted on Twitter.

“Oh, this is annoying,” she complained. “I need to tell whoever is pulling it down that it is quite useful.”

She was still looking for Amaq 30 minutes later when her children came home from school and flipped on cartoons in the next room.

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“Did you feed the cat?” her daughter asked. Haddad told her to open some canned food and returned to her computer.

“I often think that’s it. I can’t do it anymore,” she said of her job with Airwars. “Then it gets busy and I think that I can’t stop.”

She glanced at the clock on her computer screen and realized it was time for her daughter’s ballet lesson.

“Coats, coats,” she called out as she herded her children toward the door. A few minutes later they were buckled into the family station wagon, hurtling through the English countryside.

The Washington Post

U.S.-Turkish relations deeply strained ahead of Erdogan’s visit to White House (UNE)

By Karen DeYoung

Barely two months ago, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was one of President Trump’s biggest fans. Fed up with what he saw as the Obama administration’s wishy-washy Syria policy, its unwise alliance with Kurdish “terrorists” and its failure to understand the need for some of his authoritarian policies, Erdogan envisioned a new dawn in U.S.-Turkish relations.

But as he prepares to meet with Trump on Tuesday in Washington, Erdogan has been less than pleased.

Last week, his top military and intelligence officials traveled here for a final effort to stop the administration from arming Syrian Kurdish fighters for an upcoming offensive in Raqqa against the Islamic State, only to be told by their U.S. counterparts that a decision to do so had already been made.

At the same time, his justice minister brought new evidence to support Turkey’s long-standing extradition request for Fethullah Gulen, the Pennsylvania-based Turkish cleric Erdogan holds responsible for a failed coup attempt last July. The U.S. Justice Department thanked him and sent him away with no news of progress.

The purpose of those visits was "to pave the ground for fruitful discussions between the two presidents. We were hopeful," a senior Turkish official said afterward. "Now, we are in a crisis period."

In remarks to reporters Friday, Erdogan appeared simultaneously to hold out hope that he could persuade Trump to change his mind — and to prepare for failure.

"We have sent a delegation ahead to the U.S., and they have held meetings with officials," Erdogan said before he headed to China en route to Washington. "However, the highest level of discussions will be held between President Trump and me." Their first face-to-face meeting, he said, would be a "milestone" in U.S.-Turkish relations.

Turkey's pro-government Daily Sabah suggested that Obama administration holdovers had somehow snookered Trump officials, ramming through the decision on arming the Kurds before Erdogan arrives here.

"America is going through a transitional period currently," Erdogan said, and Turkey "must be more careful and sensitive."

But Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, who met with Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim last week in London, after the arming decision had been announced, described it as final. "I have no doubt," Mattis said, "that Turkey and the United States will work this out with due consideration, significant attention paid to Turkey's security." The important thing, he said, is that they present a "united front" against terrorism.

"Oftentimes, it can be untidy," Mattis said of keeping allies focused on that goal.

Beyond the crisis, both Turkey and the United States will look for elements of a "positive agenda," said the senior Turkish official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivities of the upcoming visit. Trade between the two countries is small, at only $17 billion a year — although the United States sells about twice as much to Turkey as vice versa — and both sides would like to expand it.

Trump, who has said that he will be "respectful" of the domestic decisions made by other governments, is unlikely to dwell on the mass arrests and restrictions on free expression since the coup attempt, about which even his own State Department has expressed concerns. Last month, he called to congratulate Erdogan on winning a referendum, widely criticized by other U.S. allies, that vastly increased presidential power in Turkey.

On the Gulen matter, Erdogan is expected to discuss some interim steps that his government has already asked for, such as Justice Department questioning of the cleric and restrictions on his U.S. movements while the extradition request is pending, or at least an effort to curtail the weekly video messages he sends to his followers in Turkey.

But the main subject on Turkey's mind is the People's Protection Units, the military arm of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party, which is the primary U.S. proxy in the fight against the Islamic State in Syria. Turkey considers the force, known as the YPG, to be a terrorist ally of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, a separatist Turkish organization that both Ankara and Washington have labeled terrorist.

Erdogan believes that the U.S. government — first Obama and now, apparently, Trump — are naive about the YPG and its territorial ambitions, and that support for the group is both setting up an ethnic conflict in Syria and aiding PKK terrorism in Turkey itself.

A decision to directly arm the YPG was made by President Barack Obama before he left office, according to Colin Kahl, a former top national security aide to Vice President Joe Biden. But during the transition, Kahl wrote in an article last week in Foreign Policy, Michael Flynn, Trump's then-incoming national security adviser, "asked the administration to hold off" so Trump could review the situation. Flynn, Kahl noted, was later found to be a paid consultant to pro-government Turkish interests.

At the end of the day, Kahl said, Trump came to the same conclusion as Obama, but only after Erdogan had won his referendum without the annoyance of an open breach with Washington.

Turkey has long insisted that U.S. arms were already going directly to the Syrian Kurdish group. As evidence, it points to U.S. weapons seized from the PKK — saying they were funneled from the YPG — and the fact that the United States has been unable to dislodge Kurdish fighters from controlling Arab parts of northern Syria that they have seized, with U.S. assistance under Obama, along the Turkish border.

As they prepare for the offensive in Raqqa, the Islamic State's de facto Syrian capital, the Americans have told Turkey that the YPG will not be permitted to stay in the city but will turn over control to Arab elements that are part of the combined, U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces. The Turks say they have heard that story before, in liberated northern towns such as Manbij, which remain under YPG control.

"They say it's a very difficult decision . . . they don't have any other alternatives, so on and so forth," the senior Turkish official said. "It's the same story. We are in a vicious circle. We keep on explaining that it's not the only alternative, and they keep saying it's the only alternative."

"Put yourself in the shoes of the Turkish president," the official said. "Could you accept that kind of decision? Here is an ally, for 60 years now — even before NATO. We fought side by side in Korea. We have fought in Somalia, in Kosovo, in Macedonia, in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Side by side. Now, instead of siding with your ally — which has 800,000 soldiers — you are opting to side with a terrorist organization."

Turkey has offered its own troops, and separate Syrian Arab forces under its wing, for the Raqqa offensive, but the Americans maintain that the Kurds have proved their mettle and are ready to move. Although, in deference to Turkey, U.S. commanders have refrained until now from directly arming the YPG, they say the urgency and magnitude of the Raqqa offensive gives them no choice.

The YPG-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces, a Pentagon statement announcing the decision said, is "the only force on the ground that can successfully seize Raqqa in the near future."

"They keep saying that time is of the essence for the liberation of Raqqa, that all of the planning is done," the Turkish official said. "They've been saying that for a year now."

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U.S. officials have said they are confident they can keep the YPG from taking over Raqqa, but Turkey is doubtful. "If they say no, how are you going to force them out?" the Turkish official said. "The United States is trying to substitute a threat, which is against the West's interests, with a threat against Turkey."

The official said Turkey would leave open its options to attack the YPG itself — as it did when Turkish warplanes last month struck YPG and PKK positions on the border, killing 20 YPG fighters only miles from U.S. Special Operations forces and nearly causing an open breach with the Pentagon.

Turkey also retains the option of canceling an agreement that allows U.S. and anti-Islamic State coalition warplanes to fly out of its air base at Incirlik.

Karim Faheem in Istanbul contributed to this report.

The Washington Post

Editorial : What Mr. Trump should say in his toughest meeting yet with a foreign leader

PRESIDENT TRUMP will face what may be his toughest meeting yet with a foreign leader this week when he welcomes Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to the White House. Mr. Erdogan is a blustery and autocratically minded man, rather like Mr. Trump, and he comes to Washington with a list of demands that senior U.S. officials rightly regard as unacceptable. Mr. Trump would do best by saying so directly — while urging the Turkish ruler to consider a change of course.

Syria will likely top the agenda. Though they are NATO allies, the United States and Turkey have come perilously close to a breach over how to fight the Islamic State. U.S. generals believe the only way to capture the jihadists' capital, Raqqa, is by backing the Syrian Democratic Forces, which are dominated by Syrian Kurds. But Mr. Erdogan considers the Kurds enemies because of their connection to Kurdish militants in Turkey and their aspiration to carve out a ministate along the Syrian-Turkish border.

Last week Mr. Trump opted to accept the Pentagon's plan to arm the Kurds. Mr. Erdogan responded by saying he would seek to have the decision reversed "as soon as possible." He proposes an alternative plan under which Raqqa would be captured by a Turkish-backed force, including Syrian Islamist militias.

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The U.S. plan for Raqqa is far from perfect — it would probably have the end result of returning the city to the control of the regime of Bashar al-Assad — but it is better than the Turkish alternative. It's not clear that Mr. Erdogan's force has the capacity to recapture the city, and even if it succeeded, the result might be to empower groups linked to al Qaeda. More broadly, Mr. Erdogan's strategic aims are misguided. Eventually he will have to accept the inevitability of Syrian Kurdish autonomy, if not a statelet.

Mr. Erdogan's other demands will likely include the extradition of Fethullah Gulen, the U.S.-based spiritual leader whom Ankara blames for a failed 2015 military coup. But Turkey has never offered persuasive evidence that Mr. Gulen was involved in the coup, and extradition is likely to be blocked by U.S. courts. Rather than attempt to mollify the Turkish ruler on this matter, Mr. Trump should urge him to end the sweeping persecution of suspected Gulen followers and Kurdish political leaders that followed the coup. Tens of thousands have been purged from state jobs, and thousands imprisoned; Turkey now has more journalists in prison than any other nation.

Mr. Trump's approach until now has been to ignore or even endorse Mr. Erdogan's autocratic abuses. He was quick to place a congratulatory call to the president last month after he narrowly won a flawed referendum on a huge expansion of his powers. The White House may believe that Turkey is too strategically important to risk alienating over domestic political matters.

The problem is that Mr. Erdogan's domestic and foreign policies are linked. Once he prided himself on observing democratic norms and sought membership in the European Union and rapproachment with the same Kurds he now bombs and jails. His domestic turn to autocracy has been accompanied by a nationalist policy of strenuously opposing legitimate Kurdish aspirations and deepening ties with Vladimir Putin's Russia. Mr. Trump should tell him that he is on the wrong track, both in Syria and at home.

Colin H. Kahl : The US and Turkey Are on a Collision Course in Syria

America's relationship with Turkey has entered a period of deep crisis. At the heart of the matter is continued U.S. support for Syrian Kurds fighting the Islamic State. The partnership between the United States and a coalition of Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and Syrian Arab militias, currently known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), began more than two years ago under President Barack Obama. President Donald Trump's administration continues to back the 50,000-strong SDF as the most capable anti-Islamic State force in northern Syria. The SDF are now closing in on Raqqa, the capital of the Islamic State's self-described caliphate, and Trump has approved a plan to provide arms directly to the YPG for the final push. Yet Turkey sees the SDF as mortal enemies due to the YPG's affiliation with the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), a designated terrorist organization which has fought a bloody insurgency inside Turkey for three decades. These clashing interests have put Washington and Ankara on a collision course just as the U.S.-led campaign to crush the caliphate enters its culminating phase.

Turkey's concerns about the YPG are understandable and widely appreciated. What is less well known is the fact that it was Turkey's own actions, in particular a set of decisions made by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, that stymied joint U.S.-Turkey efforts to identify an alternative anti-Islamic State force. This pushed the United States and the YPG closer together and eventually created the SDF. And, with Raqqa in their sights, the Trump administration is unlikely to abandon them now.

In the closing days of the Obama administration, President Barack Obama was willing to increase training and assistance to the SDF, including YPG elements, for the final push on the Islamic State's capital. But retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, Trump's incoming national security advisor, asked the administration to hold off so the new team could run its own review. (We now know that Flynn was paid to represent Turkish government interests prior to becoming national security advisor, although it is unclear whether that had any impact on the decision.)

After surveying the options, the Trump administration seems to have come to the same conclusion Obama did: the SDF represent the only viable force to seize Raqqa anytime soon.

After surveying the options, the Trump administration seems to have come to the same conclusion Obama did: the SDF represent the only viable force to seize Raqqa anytime soon. Nevertheless, the Trump administration decided to delay providing additional support to the SDF — especially armaments directly to the YPG — for months out of deference to the U.S.-Turkey alliance and Erdogan's domestic politics. The hope appears to have been that waiting until after Turkey's April 16 referendum on enhancing the power of the presidency would give Erdogan less incentive to whip up nationalist sentiment against the American plan. Following the narrow approval of the referendum consolidating Erdogan's power, Trump even took the controversial step of calling Erdogan to congratulate him, most likely to make the bitter pill of the Raqqa operation easier to swallow. Erdogan was also invited to meet with Trump at the White House, a political boon to the Turkish president given rising international criticism over Turkey's democratic backsliding.

It didn't work. On April 25, Turkish warplanes struck YPG and PKK positions on both sides of the Syria-Iraq border. The bombing raid against a YPG command center on Mount Karachok in northeastern Syria — which occurred only a few miles from where U.S. troops were operating — killed 20 YPG fighters. Meanwhile, the Turkish strikes in northwestern Iraq, which targeted the PKK on Mount Sinjar, mistakenly killed several Kurdish Peshmerga troops instead. There was no formal coordination with the United States, and the U.S. military was given less than an hour's notice prior to the Turkish operation. In the days since, U.S. forces have been patrolling the Syrian side of Turkey-Syria border, acting as de facto peacekeepers to deter the two side from going at each other's throats.

Erdogan has warned that Turkey will continue to strike the YPG unless the United States abandons its partnership with them, even as Turkey has thrown its support behind a Russian proposal to create "de-escalation zones" to freeze the conflict elsewhere in Syria. One Erdogan advisor even hinted that U.S. forces could be struck if they continue to back the Syrian Kurds. If Turkey follows through with these threats, it could trigger a Turkey-Kurd border war that derails the Raqqa campaign, undermining a core national security interest of the United States. And, if a military mistake by Turkey results in the death of U.S. forces, it could bring Washington and Ankara — two NATO allies — into direct conflict.

When Erdogan travels to Washington next week, American support for the Syrian Kurds will be the top issue he raises with Trump. Erdogan is likely to urge Trump to cancel his decision to arm the YPG and look for other alternatives to take Raqqa — moves Trump is unlikely to take. Does that mean the two NATO allies are fated for an irreparable breach? No. But it does mean that, between now and then, the administration needs to develop a comprehensive plan to ease tensions, before it is too late. The campaign to defeat the Islamic State and the future of the U.S.-Turkey alliance hang in the balance.

Musa, a 25-year-old Kurdish marksman, stands atop a building as he looks at the destroyed Syrian town of Kobane, also known as Ain al-Arab, on January 30, 2015. Photo credit: BULENT KILIC/AFP/Getty Images

The Guns of September

Understanding the options available to the Trump administration requires understanding how we got to this point in the first place. The United States has made its fair share of mistakes in Syria. But the current predicament is largely the result of choices Erdogan made that pushed the United States to partner with the Kurds as the only viable anti-Islamic State force in northern Syria.

The story starts in September 2014, when Islamic State militants assaulted Kobani, a predominantly Kurdish border town under YPG control since 2012, pushing more than 100,000 refugees into Turkey. Turkey moved tanks to the border, but as the world watched jihadists lay siege to the city, Turkish forces refused to intervene on the YPG's behalf. Kurds on the Turkish side were also blocked from entering Syria to help. Turkish officials saw Kobani as a fight between two terrorist entities, and Erdogan initially conditioned any Turkish assistance to the town on the YPG distancing itself from the Syrian regime, dismantling its administrative cantons in northeastern and northwestern Syria, and committing not to threaten the Turkish border.

In mid-October 2014, Obama authorized an air drop to provide Kurdish fighters desperately needed medical supplies and ammunition. Ankara and Washington then managed to broker an arrangement

allowing Iraqi Peshmerga forces to transit Turkey into Kobani to help reinforce the YPG. (The Turks hoped that Iraqi Peshmerga forces aligned with Kurdistan Regional Government President Masoud Barzani would help counterbalance YPG influence.) Over the next three months, with the help of coalition airstrikes, thousands of Islamic State militants were killed and the YPG eventually succeeded in repelling the onslaught.

As the battle for Kobani raged, U.S. and Turkish officials began discussing the conditions for the U.S.-led coalition to gain access to Turkish air bases, as well as the extent of U.S.-Turkish cooperation to push the Islamic State off Turkey's border. The U.S. Special Envoy for the Counter-Islamic State Coalition at the time, retired Gen. John Allen, and his deputy, Brett McGurk, worked up a proposal that would open up Turkish bases — which were already used by the United States for unarmed intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) flights — for armed-ISR and strike missions against the Islamic State. The plan also included an ambitious joint U.S.-Turkish effort to identify, vet, train, and arm Syrian opposition forces, backed by U.S. and Turkish air power, to clear the Islamic State from the entirety of the Turkey-Syria border. There was even talk of introducing Turkish special operations forces as advisers to work alongside these fighters.

In late November 2014, I accompanied Vice President Joe Biden for two days of talks with Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and President Erdogan in Istanbul (where Erdogan often preferred to hold meetings). The primary goal was to get the Allen-McGurk proposal, which had been worked on extensively with senior Turkish officials, across the goal line. In Biden's meeting with Davutoglu, the vice president secured Davutoglu's agreement to the joint plan. Biden then met with Erdogan, who clearly had different priorities. During nearly five hours of talks, Biden acknowledged Erdogan's concerns over U.S. support to the YPG in Kobani, while noting that Turkey also supported highly problematic groups from the U.S. perspective, including Ahrar al-Sham, a powerful hardline Salafist force which often worked closely with al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate. Biden urged Erdogan to put these differences aside by embracing the Allen-McGurk proposal. To address Erdogan's concerns about the YPG, the United States and Turkey would identify an alternative, jointly vetted anti-Islamic State force. Erdogan was open to the proposal, but with one condition: the United States first had to impose a no-fly zone over all of northern Syria, including Aleppo city.

This was not a new request. For two years, Erdogan had pushed to establish a safe zone in Syria's northern provinces of Aleppo and Idlib to stem the flow of Syrian refugees and provide an area for anti-Assad rebels to organize and train, backed by a no-fly zone to keep Assad's planes at bay. Yet despite the threat being on Turkey's doorstep, and the fact that Turkey possessed the most powerful land army and air force in the region, Erdogan was unwilling to directly intervene. Instead, he preferred that the United States take the lead in establishing these zones. The Obama administration's campaign against the Islamic State, and the U.S. request for Turkish base access, was seen by Erdogan as useful leverage to achieve this longstanding objective.

Erdogan's decision to play hardball stemmed from the priority he placed at the time on toppling Assad over combatting the Islamic State and other extremist groups.

Erdogan's decision to play hardball stemmed from the priority he placed at the time on toppling Assad over combatting the Islamic State and other extremist groups. Indeed, for the first few years of the war, Ankara's commitment to regime change led Turkey to impose few restrictions on the transit of anti-Assad fighters across the border into Syria. Even as the Islamic State spread in eastern Syria and the influence of al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate grew among the northern opposition — including groups Turkey worked with — toppling Assad remained the focus of Erdogan's policy.

Ultimately, Erdogan believed the specific threat the Islamic State posed to Turkey could be managed through a live-and-let live approach: if Turkey left the Islamic State alone in Syria, the Islamic State would not conduct attacks in Turkey. Erdogan therefore saw cooperation against the Islamic State as a favor to Washington, rather than something that was vital to Turkish national security. Thus he was intent on extracting a concession in return — namely, a commitment for the U.S. military to directly confront the Assad regime.

That condition proved to be a deal breaker. Imposing a no-fly zone would require the United States to take out Syria's air defenses and shoot down Syrian aircraft. In the absence of a clear military end game, an international mandate, or domestic authorization, Obama was unwilling to enter into a direct conflict with the Assad regime. Moreover, the Pentagon told the president that a no-fly zone would require significant air and ISR assets to police it, directly trading off with the scarce resources needed for the anti-Islamic State campaign and operations in Afghanistan.

YPG women fighters stand near a check point in the outskirts of the destroyed Syrian town of Kobani, Syria. Photo credit: AHMET SIK/Getty Images

Turning Points

In the absence of U.S.-Turkey agreement, the Pentagon backed the only forces willing and able to take on the Islamic State in northern and eastern Syria: the YPG and affiliated Syrian Arab militias. After holding Kobani and regrouping, the YPG and their Arab allies went on the offensive in the spring of 2015. By mid-June they had seized Tal Abyad, one of two key Islamic State border crossings in northern Syria (the other being Jarabulus), gaining control of all but 60 miles of the Turkey-Syria border (see the maps below). Capturing Tal Abyad was particularly consequential since the Islamic State used the crossing to flow men, leaders, material, and explosive mixtures directly south into Raqqa, and often on to Iraq.

Map: Areas of Control, May 2015

Meanwhile, Erdogan's belief that Turkey could avoid being attacked by the Islamic State proved unfounded. On July 20, 2015, a bombing carried out by the Islamic State killed 33 people and wounded more than 100 in the southern Turkish city of Suruc. Many of the victims were Kurds. Several days later, PKK militants killed two Turkish policemen, claiming the attack as retaliation for Turkey conspiring with the Islamic State.

On July 22, 2015, following a phone call between Obama and Erdogan, Turkey agreed to open up Incirlik and other Turkish air bases to the U.S. coalition; strike missions began a few weeks later. Erdogan's decision was prompted by the growing threat posed by the Islamic State. But, even more, it was motivated by Erdogan's desire to check Kurdish expansion. Washington and Ankara agreed to work to identify vetted Syrian opposition forces to clear the Islamic State from the remaining 60 miles of the border not controlled by the Kurds — an area between the crossings at Azaz (in northwestern Syria) and Jarabulus (on the bank of the Euphrates River) known as the Manbij pocket. But Turkey was slow to identify opposition forces willing to prioritize fighting the Islamic State over Assad.The Pentagon's "train-and-equip" program intended to stand up 5,000 opposition fighters per year struggled for the same reason, and had to be reoriented to focus on groups already combating the Islamic State on the ground. As a result, despite devoting nearly half of coalition ISR and strike missions flown out of Incirlik in this period to operations in the Manbij pocket, little progress was made.

In the face of these challenges, U.S. reliance on the YPG to combat the Islamic State continued to deepen.

In the face of these challenges, U.S. reliance on the YPG to combat the Islamic State continued to deepen. In October 2015, the Obama administration deployed a contingent of 50 U.S. special operations forces to improve training, planning, and support to Syrian Kurdish and Arab forces east of the Euphrates, who were rebranded as the SDF.

During another vice presidential trip to Istanbul in January 2016, Biden and other senior U.S. officials spent hours poring over maps of Iraq and Syria with Erdogan and his aides. Top on Biden's agenda was conveying to Erdogan the urgent need to clear the Islamic State from Manbij City. The city was a key transit point for foreign fighters, a primary supply line to Raqqa, and a hub for Islamic State militants involved in external plotting. Indeed, U.S. officials believed that a number of the individuals involved in the November 2015 Paris attacks passed through Manbij. The U.S. proposal was to use the SDF to cross the Euphrates and push west to the city. But Ankara objected, seeing any SDF move into the Manbij pocket as a step toward unifying Kurdish cantons, and thus a geographic red line. In lieu of the SDF, Erdogan assured Biden that Turkey had thousands of opposition fighters ready to move east from the Azaz-Marea corridor area toward Jarabulus and then turn south to Manbij City.

The Obama administration agreed to hold off on using the SDF to work with Turkey. Yet only a few hundred Turkish-backed fighters materialized. In April, a small Turkish-backed force composed of Turkman, Free Syrian Army, and Salafist factions — supported by coalition air power — made a push to seize al-Rai (22 miles east of Azaz) and a number of other border villages moving toward Jarabulus. After some initial success, however, Islamic State militants regrouped and routed the Turkish-backed groups. On net, the operation lost ground.

With the Turkish play a bust, the United States once again swung behind the SDF alternative. In late May 2016, the SDF crossed the

Euphrates headed toward Manbij City. After months of bloody battle, with thousands of casualties on both sides, the Islamic State stronghold fell to the SDF on August 12.

Two weeks later, Turkey finally discovered a larger opposition force and decided to intervene in Syria.

Turkish Army soldiers walk by tanks set to join a contingent for Turkey's operation Euphrates Shield on August 25, 2016. Photo credit: BULENT KILIC/AFP/Getty Images

Euphrates Shield

The Obama administration had promised that all YPG forces would move back east across the Euphrates following the liberation and stabilization of Manbij City. The failure of a small cadre of YPG to do so, as well as Ankara's perception that the Arab-majority Manbij Military Council governing the city served as YPG proxies, heightened Turkish fears that Syrian Kurds might soon take over the rest of the border. The establishment of defensive positions by the SDF north of Manbij City, in proximity to Jarabulus, magnified this perception.

Compounding matters, in the aftermath of the attempted coup in Turkey in July 2016 by supporters of Fethullah Gulen, a Turkish cleric residing in Pennsylvania, relations between Ankara and Washington deteriorated further. A trip by Biden to Ankara in late August prevented the relationship from going completely off the rails, but serious tensions over the failure to extradite Gulen and continued U.S. support for the SDF persisted.

As Turkish-backed forces moved south, quick intercession by the U.S. military and diplomats was required to narrowly avert a major clash with the SDF near Manbij City.

On August 24 (the same day as Biden's visit), Turkish-backed opposition forces, supported by Turkish special operations troops and tanks, launched "Operation Euphrates Shield," crossing into Jarabulus to push out the Islamic State and, most especially, contain the Kurds. As Turkish-backed forces moved south, quick intercession by the U.S. military and diplomats was required to narrowly avert a major clash with the SDF near Manbij City. Although Turkey had given the United States almost no warning of the operation, the Obama administration quickly offered U.S. special operations forces, ISR, and air support to Euphrates Shield, encouraging Turkish-backed militants to move west and southwest to clear Islamic State fighters from a string of additional border towns. After six months of fighting, Euphrates Shield culminated in the seizure of al-Bab, on the southern edge of the Manbij pocket, creating a 772-square mile buffer zone controlled by the Turks (see map).

Map: Areas of Influence, Early May 2017

In many respects, Euphrates Shield represented the type of joint endeavor against the Islamic State first discussed in the fall of 2014. Yet it took nearly two years for Erdogan's calculations regarding the Islamic State to shift sufficiently to justify direct Turkish intervention. More than anything else, however, Erdogan's move was about the Kurds. In one of the many ironies of the Syrian war, it was Erdogan's earlier reluctance to focus on the Islamic State that produced the very dynamic — close U.S.-YPG ties — that eventually forced Turkey's hand.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and former Turkish president Abdullah Gul attend the funeral of a victim of the coup attempt in Istanbul on July 17, 2016. Photo credit: ARIS MESSINIS/AFP/Getty Images

Where Do We Go From Here?

Regardless of where one places the blame for the current predicament, we are where we are. The key question is: What can the Trump administration do about it?

Given the vital national interest the United States has in defeating the Islamic State, it would be unwise to abandon the SDF at this point, despite the frictions with Turkey. And it is hard to see the Trump administration doing so. During an April 26 event in Washington, for example, retired Lt. Gen. Terry Wolff, the current U.S. deputy special envoy for defeating the Islamic State, noted that the SDF represent the "only viable effort to liberate Raqqa." He then added: "How long can you allow [the Islamic State] and its external operations to wait? We have a sense of urgency here."

Not surprisingly, Turkish officials disagree. Erdogan will likely ask Trump to pause U.S. plans and reverse the decision to arm the YPG, arguing that the administration should support an assault on Raqqa utilizing thousands of Turkish-backed forces instead, essentially redirecting the groups mobilized for Euphrates Shield. Yet there is no such alternative force. The Pentagon estimates that the SDF totals 50,000 fighters, including 27,000 YPG and 23,000 Arab forces. In contrast, Turkey only marshalled a few thousand fighters for Euphrates Shield. Although some analysts believe that force may have now grown to perhaps 10,000-strong, they are needed to hold the buffer zone Turkey has created. And even if they could be freed up to assault Raqqa, their numbers remain too small — and the coherence and command-and-control of the motley assortment of groups too uncertain — to represent a credible alternative to the SDF for the foreseeable future.

Moreover, as a simple matter of geography, Turkish forces and the armed opposition groups operating in the Euphrates Shield buffer zone are boxed in, and it is unclear how they would even get to Raqqa. Moving south and east from the Euphrates Shield area in an attempt to hook up to Raqqa from the south would require them to fight through Russian and Assad regime forces. And if they opted to assault Raqqa from the north, it would require a permissive corridor through SDF lines, which is hard to imagine, or seizing the Tal Abyad crossing and then fighting through thousands of American-backed Kurdish and Arab fighters, which would be disastrous (see the map below.)

Nor would it be a good idea to substitute American G.I.s for the SDF in an effort to appease Turkish concerns. Last month, reports surfaced that senior National Security Council staff floated the option of sending tens of thousands of U.S. troops to Syria to seize Raqqa. Such a move, which would essentially represent an invasion of Syria, would be a major departure from the "indirect approach" that relies on local partners to seize and hold terrain. Beyond the costs in American lives, it would leave the U.S. military owning a Syrian city with more than 200,000 inhabitants with no exit strategy. It should come as no surprise that the Pentagon is not a fan of this option, and Trump has recently reiterated his desire to avoid sending large numbers of U.S. ground forces into combat against the Islamic State, as well as his reluctance to sink further into a Syrian quagmire.

Given the paucity of good alternatives, the Trump administration should move ahead with the SDF option.

Given the paucity of good alternatives, the Trump administration should move ahead with the SDF option. But it should do so as part of a broader strategy aimed at mitigating Turkey's concerns as much as possible. Such a plan should include at least five elements.

First, even as Trump impresses upon Erdogan the urgent need to liberate Raqqa with the forces at hand, the administration needs to make a stronger case — both in private and in public — for the potential advantages *to Turkey* of the U.S. partnership with the YPG. The Raqqa operation orients the SDF away from the Turkish border and away from further attempts to link Kurdish cantons. American backing also provides important influence over YPG cadre in north central and northeastern Syria, limiting the prospect that the YPG will pursue an alternative alignment with Russia and Iran, which could prove much more detrimental to Turkish interests.

The U.S. relationship with the YPG and its political wing, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), also positions the United States to potentially play a quiet mediating role between Turkey and the PKK in the event the parties are willing to re-start peace talks. This is something that *should* be in Erdogan's interest given the toll the PKK insurgency has taken on Turkish society, and the fact that there is no purely military solution to the conflict. Moreover, having consolidated executive power, Erdogan's political need to whip up anti-Kurdish sentiment should theoretically be lessened. It is important to remember that, from 2012 to early 2015, Erdogan previously pursued a strategy that aimed to end the war with the PKK via a negotiated settlement. Simultaneously, the Turkish government engaged the PYD/YPG in the hopes of driving a wedge between them and the PKK. This strategy collapsed in 2015 as the cycle of PKK violence reignited and Erdogan's own political interests in checking Kurdish political gains in Turkey led him to take a harder line. One key task for Trump, therefore, is to make the case to Erdogan that it is in Turkey's interest to return to a version of this earlier approach — and that the U.S. dealmaker-in-chief is prepared to help.

Second, to address Ankara's concerns that U.S. assistance to the YPG could produce a direct military threat to Turkey, Trump should commit to being fully transparent with Erdogan about the nature of the military support the United States is providing to the SDF. U.S. defense officials have said the assistance will include small arms, machine guns, ammunition, armored vehicles, and engineering equipment. The administration should follow through with a Pentagon proposal to meter the quality and quantity of the weapons and ammunition it provides to YPG forces such that it enables the Raqqa operation while posing as little danger to Turkey as possible. And the administration should present a credible mechanism to track weapons provided to the YPG so they do not end up across the border in the hands of the PKK. Any

heavy weapons provided should also be returned to the United States following the Raqqa campaign.

Third, Trump should outline a broader *modus vivendi* between Ankara and the SDF that, while far from ideal from Erdogan's perspective, would preserve core Turkish interests in containing Kurdish ambitions and sustaining the U.S.-Turkey alliance. The Trump administration must define and enforce clear and credible limiting conditions on the expansion of the Kurds' territorial control and influence in Syria. In practice, that means the United States should be willing to deliver a total SDF withdrawal across the east bank of the Euphrates, leaving Manbij City to be administered by groups acceptable to Turkey. It also means providing additional U.S. assistance to Turkey's efforts to consolidate its Euphrates Shield buffer zone — both as a hedge against the return of the Islamic State and to ensure that the Kurds do not link their cantons and control the entire Turkey-Syria border. The administration should restate U.S. opposition to an independent Kurdish state in northern Syria. And it should push for the inclusion of non-PYD and non-Kurdish political organizations Turkey can live with in SDF-administered areas east of the Euphrates, including in Raqqa once the city is liberated.

Furthermore, it is imperative that Trump does more to reassure Erdogan that the United States continues to regard the PKK as a terrorist organization, offering more intelligence and assistance to head off PKK attacks. To further address Turkish security concerns, the administration should make it crystal clear to the YPG that a continued operational relationship with the PKK — especially in the context of ongoing PKK attacks in Turkey — will make any long-term, post-Raqqa relationship with the United States unviable.

Even as it takes steps to address legitimate Turkish concerns, however, Trump must insist that Erdogan take reciprocal actions to address the concerns of Syrian Kurds.

Even as it takes steps to address legitimate Turkish concerns, however, Trump must insist that Erdogan take reciprocal actions to address the concerns of Syrian Kurds. If the SDF fully withdraws east of the Euphrates, for example, Turkey should facilitate the creation of a secure transportation corridor across its buffer zone to allow the movement of Kurdish civilians between disconnected Kurdish cantons. In exchange for greater participation of openly pro-Turkish political organizations in SDF-controlled areas, Turkey should also agree to tolerate a future Syrian government that provides a degree of local autonomy to SDF-controlled areas in northern Syria. And, in return for the YPG distancing itself from the PKK, the Trump administration should offer the SDF continued U.S. assistance.

Finally, Trump should be prepared to present options to address Erdogan's concerns regarding the PKK outside of Syria, especially in northern Iraq. Erdogan is very worried about the presence of the PKK in the Sinjar mountain region, one of the areas bombed on April 25, fearing that the PKK will work with Iran to establish a "land bridge" to ship weapons from Iran to Syria via Iraq. Here, the United States has unique influence with all the relevant parties, and Trump should offer to use that influence. As a recent International Crisis Group report usefully suggests, the administration could potentially leverage U.S. relationships with the YPG, Iraqi Kurdistan President Barzani, and Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to remove the PKK from Sinjar. Trump could also offer to intercede with Baghdad, warning Abadi that attempts by Iranian-backed Shiite militia to build a land bridge into Syria could prompt a military confrontation between Iraq and Turkey and complicate the long-term military partnership Abadi seeks with the United States after the fall of Mosul.

None of these actions represent a silver bullet. And none will be an easy sell for Erdogan. No amount of reassurance or compensation by the Trump administration will lead Turkey to accept the U.S. relationship with the YPG. But, taken together, the steps suggested here may be just enough to prevent the campaign against the Islamic State and the U.S.-Turkey alliance from sliding into the abyss — something that should be in the interest of both countries.

As with many of the global challenges Trump faces, the president is undoubtedly discovering that events in northern Syria are complicated. Indeed, there may be no more complicated piece of terrain on the planet. But with U.S. forces caught in the middle of escalating Turkey-Kurd tensions and Erdogan's impending arrival to Washington, the president has no choice but to grapple with this complexity. Fast.

Top photo credit: DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP/Getty Images

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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

U.S. Nears Deal on Arms Coveted by Saudis

Carol E. Lee and Margherita Stancati

WASHINGTON—The U.S. and Saudi Arabia are working on a package of arms deals and financial investments aimed at elevating economic and security cooperation between Washington and Riyadh after several years of strained relations over the U.S. diplomatic outreach to Iran.

The potential agreements, coupled with Mr. Trump's scheduled arrival in Saudi Arabia this week or his first stop outside the U.S. since taking office, include a missile-defense system and heavy arms the Obama administration either refused to sell Saudi Arabia or pulled back from amid concerns about Riyadh's role in the conflict in Yemen, according to U.S. and Saudi officials.

While Mr. Trump has come under criticism for seeking warm, personal rapports with some world leaders and for bringing family members into the White House as advisers, these approaches have been welcomed by Saudi Arabia's royal family.

The proposed arms deal is taking shape as the White House tries to encourage a longtime Middle Eastern ally to take the lead on regional security but without alienating Israel, another critical friend in the region.

Part of Mr. Trump's goal is to get the Gulf states, principally Saudi Arabia, to help him achieve a peace agreement between the Israelis and Palestinians. Mr. Trump is scheduled to visit Israel after his stop in Riyadh

A senior U.S. official said "every system that we're talking about" with the Saudis maintains Israel's military advantage over its neighbors, known formally as its Qualitative Military Edge.

Israel isn't objecting to the U.S. selling an advanced antimissile system, known as Thaad, to Saudi Arabia, U.S. officials said.

The president is also seeking new cooperation with Saudi Arabia on the fight against Islamic State and countering Iran's influence in the region, White House officials have said.

The timing of any deals is unclear but could come before or during Mr. Trump's visit."You're going to see on this trip some steps toward beefing up, and maybe even down the road formalizing, a security arrangement with Gulf states, Arab States and the United States," one official said.

Discussions over arms sales have been assigned higher priority over economic initiatives as the two governments aim to complete agreements ahead of Mr. Trump's visit to Riyadh on Friday. "That's the easy part," a senior U.S. official said of economic talks. "The security stuff is harder."

Since Mr. Trump's election, the two governments have worked to appeal to each other's top priorities, with Saudi officials promising Mr. Trump they would invest $200 billion in the U.S., and the White House committing to green-light the new arms sales to Riyadh.

Driving the outreach between the two countries are the Saudi king's 31-year old son, Deputy Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, and the president's 36-year-old son-in-law and senior White House adviser, Jared Kushner, according to officials in Washington and Riyadh.

Mr. Kushner coordinates on the policy with the National Security Council, the State Department and the Pentagon, administration officials said.

"The Saudis know that the person who is trying to get Trump on our side is Kushner," said Ahmed al-Ibrahim, a Saudi businessman and political commentator. "He is the guy who has the Middle East portfolio."

Mr. Trump's premium on developing personal relationships with his counterparts is an approach the Saudis felt was missing with former President Barack Obama's administration. In turn, King Salman last month named another son, Prince Khaled bin Salman, as the new Saudi ambassador to Washington.

The monarchy in Saudi Arabia saw the election of Mr. Trump as an opportunity to reset ties with its most important strategic ally after relations soured during Mr. Obama's two terms in the White House largely because of differences over policy in the Middle East.

The monarchy felt betrayed by the Obama administration's conciliatory approach toward Riyadh's No. 1 foe, Iran, which culminated in the 2015 deal with Tehran to restrain its nuclear program in exchange for lifting economic sanctions.

"The narrative of the Obama administration was that Saudi Arabia and Iran must share the region," said Mohammed Alyahya, a Saudi political analyst and nonresident fellow at the Atlantic Council. "The Trump administration is very clear that it will put allies first."

Saudi officials quickly reached out to Mr. Trump's aides after the November election to lay the groundwork for renewed relations.

"The Saudis have been bending over backwards to try to strike a positive relationship with the president," said Jon Alterman, director of the Middle East program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "I think if he asked the Saudis for things he'd get a lot more than President Obama would have gotten."

U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis noted the shift in remarks during a recent trip to Riyadh, saying "with a spirit of cooperation, we can overcome any past frustrations."

When Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman visited the White House on March 14, he presided over a 20-slide power-point presentation that outlined, among other things, his government's plans to invest $200 billion in the U.S. economy in the coming years.

His White House pitch, described by U.S. and Arab officials, also laid out Riyadh's plans to open up new business opportunities for American companies in the Kingdom, stepped-up counterterrorism operations, and support for the Trump administration's renewed campaign to forge a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

The presentation was created for Saudi Arabia by the U.S. consulting firm Booz Alan Hamilton, according to these officials. It was designed "to have the maximum" impact on Mr. Trump, who campaigned on bringing jobs back to disadvantaged U.S. states, particularly in the Midwest, said one Arab official.

The economic portion of the presentation was broken out by sector, such as infrastructure and energy, with the crown prince walking the president and his aides through each one to explain how Saudi investments could help, a U.S. official who saw the presentation said. The crown prince also offered to give U.S. companies an advantage in Saudi King Salman's 2030 initiative to open up the Kingdom's economy.

Deepening commercial ties with the U.S. is an important component of Saudi Arabia's ambitious plan to overhaul its oil-dependent economy and diversify its sources of revenue by looking for investments abroad and developing new sectors at home.

Mr. Trump responded to the crown prince's offer of $200 billion by saying he wanted much of the money to be funneled into Rust Belt states, such as Ohio, Michigan and Wisconsin, according to people familiar with the discussion. Those states helped put Mr. Trump over the top in the November election.

For its part, Saudi Arabia is hoping Mr. Trump's hard line on Iran will persuade Tehran to rein in its regional ambitions. Riyadh and its Gulf allies want Iran to stop supporting armed proxies and political groups in the region as a condition for improved relations.

The New York Times

Iranians See Little Hope Elections Will Alleviate Economic Strain (UNE)

Thomas Erdbrink

TEHRAN — As a college student studying mechanics, Hamidreza Faraji had expected after graduation to land a steady job with a fixed salary, a pension plan and the occasional bonus. He envisioned coming home at 6 p.m. to his family and vacationing at a resort on the Caspian Sea.

But Mr. Faraji, 34, has long since given up on all that. These days, he said, the only people who lead such predictable lives are government employees. Their jobs are well paid and offer security, but are hard to get in part because older employees stay on well past retirement age, limiting opportunities for the next generation.

So millions of Iranians, particularly younger ones, find themselves caught like Mr. Faraji in a vicious cycle of hidden poverty, an exhausting hustle to stay afloat, working multiple jobs and running moneymaking schemes just to keep up. The youth unemployment rate is 30 percent.

"Seeking opportunities, and trying to make the best of them," Mr. Faraji said when asked about how he supported himself and his wife. A baby is on the way — "that just happened" — but they have no idea how they are going to pay for the additional costs with the money he makes as a small-time trader.

To many in the outside world, Iran seems to be riding high, its coffers replenished with billions of dollars it received after reaching a nuclear agreement with foreign powers. International businesses have been swarming into the country, seemingly eager to clinch deals.

The government is throwing its weight around regionally as well, lending political and military support to Shiite groups and governments in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen and extending its influence eastward into Afghanistan. In fiery speeches, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, boasts of Iran's far-reaching impact.

The Trump administration has expressed deep concerns about Iran's expanding power, with the secretary of defense, Jim Mattis, saying recently, "Everywhere you look if there is trouble in the region, you find Iran."

But with a presidential election coming Friday, many middle-class Iranians see things in a different way. Disillusioned and cynical, they are frustrated by years of high unemployment, inflation that eats relentlessly into living standards and widespread corruption.

And they are frustrated with a state widely regarded as ossified and out of touch, a mixture of a quasi-socialist economy dominated by the military and clergy, and elective institutions supervised by conservative clerical bodies that have the final say on legislation and candidates for political office.

Veterans of the 1979 revolution, like Ayatollah Khamenei, are still in charge, reinforcing a rigid revolutionary ideology and doing their best to resist pressures for change. With no obvious younger generation of leaders, the country also faces a looming succession crisis.

While foreign investors often are said to be intent on doing deals, it is unclear whether they will help start an economic boom. With few exceptions, they are signing memorandums of understanding, not actual contracts.

Many are concerned that the Trump administration could penalize big international banks that choose to do business in Iran, if they are deemed to violate nonnuclear American sanctions still in force against the country.

Only big banks can provide the large-scale financing needed for the major, job-creating infrastructure projects that Iran desperately needs.

President Hassan Rouhani — who is running for re-election against, among others, Ebrahim Raisi, a favorite of hard-liners — had hoped to have made headway on these problems by now. He ran in 2013 promising to reinvigorate the economy by forging the nuclear deal, ending or easing sanctions that cut Iran off from international finance and opening the country to foreign investment and ideas.

He accomplished the nuclear pact, but the economic benefits have been meager at best. Instead, Iranians, many of them college graduates, are working longer and harder just to make ends meet.

'Everything Has Ground to a Halt'

For Mr. Faraji, that means selling honey and saffron to supermarkets and running a cosmetics shop. To survive in a brutally competitive marketplace, he has to keep an eye out for the police while he buys smuggled products, pays bribes, intimidates delinquent bill payers and devises schemes to dupe store owners into buying his products.

He counts himself lucky, in some respects. He says he has avoided doing any smuggling himself, or resorting to other illegal activities like selling alcohol or organizing mixed weddings, where men and women dance with one another — all common in Iran's underground economy.

Some afternoons his wife joins him at his shop. Otherwise, they would never see each other. "I go to sleep at 1 a.m. and leave the house at 6 a.m.," Mr. Faraji said.

Most of the time, he tries not to think about why his life has become such a struggle, he said. But in his heart he knows: "Everything has ground to a halt. We're moving back, rather than forward."

Still, he explained, he would be voting for Mr. Rouhani, saying he would choose "the least-bad candidate to prevent an even worse situation."

Mr. Faraji's workday begins around 6:30, when he feeds his two caged

songbirds, settles behind his desk in a run-down house and starts working the phones, pressing for unpaid bills and checking with his field representatives.

In the struggle to move the honey and saffron, Mr. Faraji has resorted to an age-old scheme, sending his team into supermarkets across the city asking for the brands he has amassed, hoping to build a market for them. The next day, he sends his employees out again, each to a different store, offering to sell the products they had asked for the day before.

But as they gathered around Mr. Faraji's desk on a recent morning, it was clear that business was not going well.

"The supermarkets aren't buying anything," said Hassan Seyedi, 29, who moved from the western city of Kermanshah to Tehran, the capital, a year ago in search of work.

Across from him sat Mehdi Khanzadeh, 27. Mr. Khanzadeh was lucky, the others said, in that he worked two days a week for Iranian state television, a position he had secured through a family contact.

"I studied architecture, but there are no jobs," he said, adding that like many Iranians in their 20s and 30s, he still lives with his parents. He said he often fell short of the $750 a month he needed to scrape by, but "at least I have some steady income."

The young men laid out how they saw the facts. Business was bad, and if the shopkeepers ordered anything, it was in small quantities and they refused to pay in advance.

"Give them a reasonable bribe, if necessary, so that they take our honey," Mr. Faraji advised. "We'll worry about payment later."

Also in the room was a bulky man with a mustache: Mr. Faraji's debt collector. There is rarely a need to rough people up, the man said, because "usually they pay when I come over."

Iran's Ministry of Labor counts every Iranian who works at least one hour a week as employed. There is no welfare for the long-term unemployed, but laid-off workers get some unemployment insurance. By the official figures, which economists say understate the problem, eight million Iranians are jobless, and only half of Iran's educated women ever find a job.

At the same time, the government, seeking to provide some sort of safety net in hard economic times, is running fat: It employs around 8.5 million people, out of a national population of just 80 million. But those highly sought-after jobs are difficult for younger Iranians to even hope for.

For Mr. Faraji, the day was barely half-done when at 11 a.m. he shared a taxi to the shopping center where he had recently rented a tiny space to sell perfumes and cosmetics. Most of his merchandise is smuggled into the country, often by powerful groups related to security organizations, he said. While technically illegal, it is a common practice, the only way to avoid a hefty official import tax.

In the mostly empty mall, the only sound was the odd crackle of an escalator.

Whether it's honey or perfumes, Mr. Faraji concluded, prices are too high and no one is buying. Like many Iranians, he blamed politicians and an ideology that has left roughly 80 percent of the economy under state ownership.

"Our leaders need money, so they raise the prices," he said. "They need to spend money in Syria, in Yemen and Iraq to defend their ideology. We are paying."

The ideology, a mix of anti-Western socialism and a rigid interpretation of Islam, is widely regarded as outdated. Mr. Faraji is not alone in calling it a drag on the economy or in throwing up his hands in frustration.

"Stop saying, 'Death to America,' make amends with the world and foreign investors and jobs will come," he said. "But let's be realistic: That will not happen."

Change, in Fits and Starts

Not everyone is so jaded. Many in Iran's moderate and reformist faction are guardedly optimistic that the country is changing, albeit in fits and starts, and always subject to reversals by hard-liners.

One of those optimists, Mahmoud Sadeghi, a former cleric and son of a famous ayatollah, now wears a suit as a member of Parliament and takes to Twitter as he probes corruption among the ruling elite.

In the parliamentary elections of 2015, reformists and moderates gained a small majority, which they have used to attack problems like corruption that discourage economic initiatives.

Mr. Sadeghi and other reformists note that, largely under the radar, Iran has changed a great deal over the years, in some ways resembling many Western societies. After roughly 20 years of the internet, satellite television and affordable foreign travel, Iranians have grown more sophisticated, educated and moderate, and less pious.

Iran's aging leaders have been forced to give ground, tolerating changes they can no longer prevent. Gone are the days when police officers would raid rooftops to remove illegal satellite dishes. Most Iranians can now watch more than 150 foreign-based Persian language channels, while state television, heavily salted with lectures by conservative clerics, is increasingly ignored.

"We are successful in bringing change, as otherwise I would not be sitting in Parliament," Mr. Sadeghi said, referring to his status as a corruption fighter.

In November, Mr. Sadeghi gave a speech in Parliament accusing the head of the judiciary, Sadegh Amoli-Larijani, of maintaining a secret bank account to collect diverted public funds. After the speech, representatives of the judiciary tried to arrest him, but were stopped when dozens of people gathered in front of his house to protect him.

Nevertheless, change for Mr. Sadeghi and many within Iran's establishment means altering existing law, not overhauling Iran's political system and establishment.

And that change is halting. For instance, in 2016, Parliament passed a measure that would have made women eligible for top political positions, only to have it blocked by the 12-member Guardian Council — now led by a 90-year-old hard-liner, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati — which reviews all new laws to ensure they are properly "Islamic."

Parliament's attempts to make it easier for women to obtain a divorce and more difficult for men to take a second wife were similarly rejected by the council, which also vets candidates for elections.

This, too, has consequences for the economy, as obscure laws enacted after the revolution in 1979 remain on the books, often used by ideologues or unscrupulous officials to undermine business ventures that in most other countries would be brilliant successes.

Take, for example, Sohrab Mostaghim, 28, and some of his friends, all graduates of Tehran's best universities, who designed a treasure hunt set in the city's most popular park. Soon, hundreds of people were happily paying the equivalent of $11 each to play the game, based on riddles and questions embedded in an app on their mobile phones.

But when they told a manager of the park what was going on, they were blindsided by his reaction.

"Instead of welcoming the extra visitors and this fun game, he pressured us, claiming our promotional video was against Islam, since at the end the brother and sister hug," Mr. Mostaghim said. Physical contact between men and women in public is officially forbidden in Iran, but the rules are widely flouted in the larger cities.

Ultimately, the partners felt they had to shut the game down, whereupon the manager changed his tune.

"Now, he is asking us for bribes to allow us to use the park," Mr. Mostaghim said. "We are not even sure if he will really allow us if we pay."

The whole idea of a start-up is to embrace freedom to think and create, he said, "but we don't have that here."

Even established businesses that suffered during the years of sanctions are finding it difficult to recapture lost customers. For Bahram Shahriyari, 58, the prospect of lifting international sanctions after the nuclear deal was a faint light at the end of what had become a dark tunnel.

Until the sanctions were imposed, he had owned a business providing parts and components for new and used vehicles made by Peugeot-Citroën of France, one of the most prominent foreign brands in the country. At its peak just four years ago, his company had 400 employees and even exported parts to France.

"But the sanctions and mismanagement of our leaders was neck-breaking," Mr. Shahriyari said. His principal customer, an Iranian state-owned automotive company, Iran Khodro, stopped placing orders because it was having trouble selling cars. Before long, his checks started bouncing, he said, and he told employees that he could no longer pay their wages.

Peugeot-Citroën has now re-entered the market, restarting an existing joint venture but dealing only with Iran Khodro. For Mr. Shahriyari, who lost his most valuable employees and customers and still cannot obtain financing, it is far too late.

"A contact, an ambassador for Iran, once told me, 'You have to pay the price for the nuclear advancement of our country,'" he said. "Believe me, I did."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

U.S. Secretary of State Signals Caution on Israel Embassy Move

Dion Nissenbaum

WASHINGTON—Secretary of State Rex Tillerson suggested that President Donald Trump might not move the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem if it could hurt efforts to jump-start the stagnant Middle East peace process.

In an interview broadcast Sunday on NBC News' "Meet the Press with Chuck Todd," Mr. Tillerson said the president "is being very careful to understand how such a decision would affect the peace process."

Mr. Trump repeatedly vowed on the campaign trail to move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a decision that could inflame tensions across the Middle East.

Israel seized East Jerusalem from Jordan in 1967 and declared the holy city its united capital, but most nations have refused to condone the annexation by moving their embassies to Jerusalem.

While U.S. law requires Washington to move its embassy to Jerusalem, Democratic and Republican presidents have signed waivers blocking the move out of concern about the impact on Middle East peace.

Mr. Trump will meet Israeli and Palestinian leaders next week when he heads to the region on his first overseas trip. The president will also visit Saudi Arabia and Rome.

In the interview aired Sunday, Mr. Tillerson said the president's embassy decision would be based on talks with regional leaders, and he suggested that Israel might not see the move as a top priority.

"I think it'll be informed, again, by the parties that are involved in those talks," Mr. Tillerson said. "And most certainly Israel's view on whether Israel views it as being helpful to a peace initiative or perhaps a distraction."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Kontorovich : Russia Recognizes Jerusalem as Israel's Capital. Why Can't the U.S.?

Eugene Kontorovich

President Trump's visit to Israel next week is expected to lead to some announcement about his Jerusalem policy. The trip will coincide with celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the city's reunification after the Six Day War. Only days after the visit, the president will have to decide between waiving an act of Congress or letting it take effect and moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv—as he promised last year to do if elected.

Jerusalem is the only world capital whose status is denied by the international community. To change that, in 1995 Congress passed the Jerusalem Embassy Act, which mandates moving the U.S. Embassy to a "unified" Jerusalem. The law has been held in abeyance due to semiannual presidential waivers for "national security" reasons. President Obama's final waiver will expire June 1.

There's no good reason to maintain the charade that Jerusalem is not Israeli, and every reason for Mr. Trump to honor his campaign promise. The main arguments against moving the embassy—embraced by the foreign-policy establishment—is that it would lead to terrorism against American targets and undermine U.S. diplomacy. But the basis of those warnings has been undermined by the massive changes in the region since 1995.

While the Palestinian issue was once at the forefront of Arab politics, today Israel's neighbors are preoccupied with a nuclear Iran and radical Islamic groups. For the Sunni Arab states, the Trump administration's harder line against Iran is far more important than Jerusalem. To be sure, a decision to move the embassy could serve as a pretext for attacks by groups like al Qaeda. But they are already fully motivated against the U.S.

Another oft-heard admonition is that America would be going out on a limb if it "unilaterally" recognized Jerusalem when no other country did. An extraordinary recent development has rendered that warning moot. Last month Russia suddenly announced that it recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

Note what happened next: No explosions of anger at the Arab world. No end to Russia's diplomatic role in the Middle East. No terror attacks against Russian targets. Moscow's dramatic Jerusalem reversal has largely been ignored by the foreign-policy establishment because it disproves their predictions of mayhem.

To be sure, Russia limited its recognition to "western Jerusalem." Even so, it shifted the parameters of the discussion. Recognizing west Jerusalem as Israeli is now the position of a staunchly pro-Palestinian power. To maintain the distinctive U.S. role in Middle East diplomacy—and to do something historic—Mr. Trump must go further. Does the U.S. want to wind up with a less pro-Israel position than Vladimir Putin's ?

The American response to real attacks against U.S. embassies has always been to send a clear message of strength. After the 1998 al Qaeda bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, Washington did not shut down those missions. Instead it invested in heavily fortified new facilities—and in hunting down the perpetrators.

Moving the embassy to Jerusalem would also improve the prospect of peace between Israel and the Palestinians. It would end the perverse dynamic that has prevented such negotiations from succeeding: Every time the Palestinians say "no" to an offer, the international community demands a better deal on their behalf. No wonder no resolution has been reached. Only last week, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas insisted that new negotiations "start" with the generous offer made by Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in 2008. Relocating the embassy would demonstrate to the Palestinian Authority that rejectionism has costs.

If Mr. Trump nonetheless signs the waiver, he could do two things to maintain his credibility in the peace process. First, formally recognize Jerusalem—the whole city—as the capital of Israel, and reflect that status in official documents. Second, make clear that unless the Palestinians get serious about peace within six months, his first waiver will be his last. He should set concrete benchmarks for the Palestinians to demonstrate their commitment to negotiations. These would include ending their campaign against Israel in international organizations and cutting off payments to terrorists and their relatives.

This is Mr. Trump's moment to show strength. It cannot be American policy to choose to recognize a capital, or not, based on how terrorists will react—especially when they likely won't.

Mr. Kontorovich is a department head at the Kohelet Policy Forum and a law professor at Northwestern University.

The New York Times

How Venezuela Stumbled to the Brink of Collapse

Max Fisher and Amanda Taub

Their pact, meant to preserve democracy, came to dominate it. Party elites picked candidates and blocked outsiders, making politics less responsive. The agreement to share wealth fostered corruption.

Economic shocks in the 1980s led many Venezuelans to conclude the system was rigged against them.

In 1992, leftist military officers, led by Lt. Col. Hugo Chávez, attempted a coup. They failed and were imprisoned, but their anti-establishment message resonated, catapulting Mr. Chávez to stardom.

The government instituted a series of reforms that were intended to save the two-party system, but that may have doomed it. A loosening of election rules allowed outside parties to break in. The president freed Mr. Chávez, hoping to demonstrate tolerance.

But the economy worsened. Mr. Chávez ran for president in 1998. His populist message of returning power to the people won him victory.

Populism's Unwinnable War With the State

Despite Mr. Chávez's victory, the two parties still dominated government institutions, which he saw as antagonists or even potential threats.

He passed a new Constitution and purged government jobs. Some moves were broadly popular, like judicial reforms that reduced corruption. Others, like abolishing the legislature's upper house, seemed to have a broader aim.

"He was reducing potential checks on his authority," said John Carey, a Dartmouth College political scientist. Beneath the revolutionary language, Mr. Carey said, was "pretty savvy institutional engineering."

Distrust of institutions often leads populists, who see themselves as the people's true champion, to consolidate power. But institutions sometimes resist, leading to tit-for-tat conflicts that can weaken both sides.

"Even before the economic crisis, you have two things that political scientists all agree are the least sustainable bases for power, personalism and petroleum," Mr. Levitsky said, referring to the style of government that consolidates power under a single leader.

When members of the business and political establishment objected to a series of executive decrees in 2001, Mr. Chávez declared them enemies of the people's revolution.

Because populism describes a world divided between the righteous people and the corrupt elite, each round of confrontation, by drawing hard lines between legitimate and illegitimate points of view, can polarize society.

Supporters and opponents of a leader like Mr. Chávez come to see each other as locked in a high-stakes struggle, justifying extreme action.

A Coup Escalates Conflict Beyond Ideology

In 2002, amid an economic downturn, outrage against Mr. Chávez's policies swelled into protests that threatened to overwhelm the presidential palace.

When he ordered the military to restore order, it instead arrested him and installed an interim leader.

Mr. Chávez's foreign policy shifts, aligning with Cuba and arming Colombian insurgents, had angered some military leaders. His war on the elites turned out to carry risks.

The coup leaders overstepped, dissolving the Constitution and legislature, sparking counterprotests that quickly returned Mr. Chávez to power.

But his message of a revolutionary struggle against internal enemies no longer felt like a metaphor for reducing poverty.

Mr. Carey called it a "hugely polarizing moment" that allowed Mr. Chávez to portray the opposition as "trying to sell Venezuelan interests out."

He and his supporters now saw politics as a zero-sum battle for survival. Independent institutions came to be seen as sources of intolerable danger.

The licenses of critical media outlets were suspended. When labor unions protested, they were weakened by blacklists or replaced outright. When courts challenged Mr. Chávez, he gutted them, suspending unfriendly judges and packing the Supreme Court with loyalists.

The result was intense polarization between two segments of society who now saw each other as existential threats, destroying any possibility of compromise.

Converting Oil Into Loyalty

Shortly after the coup, Mr. Chávez faced another battle that would prove just as fateful. Workers went on strike at the state-run oil firm, Petróleos de Venezuela, or PDVSA, which he had long denounced for its associations with business elites and the United States.

The strike threatened to destroy the economy and Mr. Chávez's presidency. But it also presented an opportunity to stave off another uprising.

After the strike collapsed, he fired 18,000 PDVSA workers, many of them skilled technicians and managers, and replaced them with some 100,000 supporters.

Much of the firm's operating budget was diverted into programs for Mr. Chávez's political base, payoffs for government cronies and subsidies to keep his promise of affordable food.

In 2011, $500 million from a PDVSA pension fund found its way into a pyramid scheme run by government-linked financiers, none of whom faced prosecution. After running on smashing the corrupt elite, Mr. Chávez had merely established his own.

As an oil company, PDVSA was ruined. Production dropped despite a global boom in oil prices. The injury rate, measured in lost man-hours, more than tripled.

In 2012, a refinery exploded, killing at least 40 and causing $1.7 billion in damage, suggesting that even maintenance budgets had been siphoned.

Its cash reserves depleted and development projects stalled, PDVSA, and by extension the Venezuelan economy, was left without a cushion when oil prices dropped in 2014.

Mr. Chávez had set up Venezuela for not just economic collapse but also a political crisis. If his support relied on oil-fueled patronage, what would happen when the money ran out?

Replacing Urban Unrest With Urban Chaos

The 2002 coup taught Mr. Chávez that an alliance of convenience with armed groups known as colectivos could help him control the streets where protesters had almost brought him down.

The colectivos, funneled money and arms from the state, became political enforcers. Protesters learned to fear these men, who arrived on Chinese-made motorcycles to disperse them, often lethally.

The colectivos grew in power, challenging the police for control. In 2005, they expelled the police from a region of Caracas, the capital, that had tens of thousands of residents.

Though the government never officially approved such violence, it publicly praised colectivos, granting them tacit impunity. Many exploited this freedom to participate in organized crime.

Alejandro Velasco, a New York University professor who studies colectivos, said the groups were later joined by criminal "opportunists" who learned that "adding a little ideology to their operations" could win them impunity.

Criminality and lawlessness flourished, spiking murder rates.

Selling Off the Economy

President Nicolás Maduro, who took power when Mr. Chávez died in 2013, inherited an economy that was a shambles and tenuous support among elites and the public.

In desperation, he parceled out patronage. The military, with which he had less sway than his predecessor, got control of lucrative drug and food trades, as well as gold mining.

Unable to pay for subsidies and welfare programs, he printed more money. When this drove up inflation, making basic goods unaffordable, he instituted price controls and fixed the currency exchange rate.

This made many imports prohibitively expensive. Businesses shut down. Mr. Maduro printed more money, and inflation grew again. Food became scarce. Unrest deepened, and Mr. Maduro's survival grew more contingent on handouts he could not afford.

This cycle destroyed Venezuela's economy.

It also worsened street violence. With government stores empty, black markets mushroomed. Colectivos, less reliant on government support, took command of the informal economy in some areas. They grew more violent and harder to rein in.

Mr. Maduro tried to restore order in 2015, deploying heavily armed police and military units. But the operations became "blood baths," Mr. Velasco said. Many officers turned to criminality themselves.

Neither Democracy Nor Dictatorship

The political system, after years of erosion, has become a hybrid of democratic and authoritarian features — a highly unstable mix, scholars say.

Its internal rules can shift day to day. Rival power centers compete fiercely for control. Such systems have proved far likelier to experience a coup or collapse.

Mr. Maduro has struggled, as leaders of such hybrid systems often do, to assert control.

Without Mr. Chávez's personal connections or deep pockets, Mr. Maduro has little leverage with authoritarian elements dominated by political and military elites. Because he is deeply unpopular, his hold over democratic institutions may be even weaker.

After opposition groups won control of the legislature in 2015, tension between those two systems exploded into outright conflict. The Supreme Court, stacked with loyalists, briefly sought to dissolve the legislature's powers. This month, Mr. Maduro said he might seek a new Constitution.

Venezuela's paradox, Mr. Levitsky said, is that the government is too authoritarian to coexist with democratic institutions, but too weak to abolish them without risking collapse.

Protesters have spilled into streets, but appear deadlocked with security forces and colectivos. Francisco Toro, a Venezuelan political scientist, said it was unclear whose side the military would take if called to intervene.

With neither side able to exert control, little in the way of an economy or public order to take over, and a political system seemingly unable to break or bend, Venezuela has brought itself from wealth and democracy to the brink of collapse.

The New York Times

Ordered to Catch a Warlord, Ugandan Troops Are Accused of Hunting Girls

Zack Baddorf

According to internal United Nations records, peacekeepers in the Central African Republic have documented allegations of the rape, sexual abuse or sexual harassment of more than 30 women and girls by Ugandan soldiers. Beyond that, they found 44 instances of girls and women being impregnated by Ugandan forces.

“Several women and girls reported they had been taken from their villages by U.P.D.F. members and forced to become prostitutes or sex slaves, or to marry Ugandan soldiers,” the head of the United Nations peacekeeping mission wrote in a letter to Ugandan authorities last June, using the initials of the Ugandan People’s Defense Force, the Ugandan military.

“I was working out in the fields when it happened,” one girl who said she’d been sexually assaulted by a Ugandan soldier told The New York Times in an interview. “The man came behind me without me noticing. He grabbed me. Then he raped me in the field.”

She was 13 years old at the time, she said, and she became pregnant. Her parents went to the nearby Ugandan military base to report the crime, she said. Ugandan officers said that the soldier had already left the country but that they would “bring him to justice and put him in prison,” said the girl.

She is now 15 and says no action was ever taken.

Jeanine Animbou said she was 13 when a Ugandan soldier used to send a motorcycle taxi to her mud hut and take her to his military camp. The sentry let her in without any problems, she said.

Ms. Animbou, who is now 18, said she met the Ugandan soldier while walking down a dirt road here in Obo, a town used as a base in the search for Mr. Kony. The soldier said he wanted to start a relationship with her, promising to take care of her and give her things like soap and food, she said.

Living on her own in a country where most people make less than a dollar a day, she said she agreed, seeing few other options.

The Ugandan military denies all such allegations of sexual violence and abuse.

“Our soldiers did not get involved in such unprofessional behavior,” said a military spokesman, Brig. Richard Karemire. “We don’t have one” case.

Similarly, the American Special Operations forces partnering with the Ugandans in the fight against the Lord’s Resistance Army denied any “direct knowledge of any sexual misconduct by U.P.D.F. forces,” according to Brig. Gen. Donald C. Bolduc, who commands American Special Operations in Africa.

A United States State Department official said, however, that American diplomats did discuss the allegations with military and civilian leaders in Uganda, who promised that “any soldiers responsible for such acts would be repatriated and prosecuted.”

Over almost three decades, Mr. Kony and his fighters killed more than 100,000 people and abducted more than 20,000 children to use as soldiers, servants or sex slaves, according to the United Nations.

But the Lord’s Resistance Army has withered, to about 100 fighters from a peak of about 3,000. No longer viewing the group as the threat it once was, the Ugandan military said last month that it was withdrawing its entire contingent of about 1,500 soldiers in the Central African Republic. The 150 American soldiers helping in the hunt for Mr. Kony are also standing down.

This region of the Central African Republic is one of the most remote and lawless parts of the country. Surrounded by dense forests, the town of Obo is right at the triple border with South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo — the territory of Mr. Kony’s L.R.A.

Inside the Ugandan camp here, the headquarters for the military’s regional mission against the Lord’s Resistance Army, soldiers cluster around a fire pit and hang their laundry on strings. Broken, rusted and half-disassembled military trucks litter the area.

The women and girls entered the Ugandan headquarters “like it was the most normal thing in the world,” said Lewis Mudge, a researcher for Human Rights Watch who has investigated allegations of sexual violence. “It was a complete culture of impunity where this was completely tolerated and accepted.”

The United Nations defines sexual exploitation as “any actual or attempted abuse of position of vulnerability, differential power or trust, for sexual purposes.” The African Union prohibits any “sexual activities” with children as well as any “sexual favor in exchange for assistance.”

Jolie Nadia Ipangba said she was 16 when a Ugandan soldier pursued a relationship with her.

“My father had died, so that’s why I accepted to be with” the soldier, she said. “Because he would support me,” she added. “For me, it was an opportunity.”

Ms. Ipangba, who is now 18, said the soldier told her he was looking for a woman to have a child for him and promised to take care of the mother. However, a month after she got pregnant, he was back home in Uganda.

“After he left, that was it,” she said. “I never heard from him again.”

Under Ugandan law, the Ugandan military conducts the investigations and prosecutes its own soldiers for crimes committed while they are deployed outside Uganda.

Ugandan authorities sent their own team in September 2016 to look into the allegations. No soldier has been charged or prosecuted for sexual crimes, said the spokesman, Brigadier Karemire.

Troops from Uganda are far from the only forces accused of abuse in the country.

Central African Republic, one of the continent’s most vulnerable countries, has been rife with allegations that foreign soldiers sexually exploited its citizens. Peacekeepers from France, Gabon, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Republic of Congo, as well as contingents from the European Union and the African Union have all been accused of sexual abuse over the past couple of years, including against children.

The top United Nations human rights official has called the problem of sexual abuse by peacekeepers “rampant.” The former head of the United Nations mission in the country was fired in 2015, after the first allegations.

The security environment in the southeastern Central African Republic contributes to the environment of impunity, said Mr. Daba, the local victims’ advocate.

“There is no law here in Obo,” Mr. Daba said. “There’s no authority. There’s no gendarmes, no police, not even a court. So the U.P.D.F. do what they want.”

Ms. Animbou said she eventually got pregnant with the soldier’s child. He promised to take care of the baby but left the country before she gave birth and has not helped since.

Uganda’s penal code does prohibit abandoning and failing to support children. But Ms. Animbou said she never went to the Ugandan base or the local authorities to report the soldier.

“They don’t want to talk about this, even with the authorities,” said Mr. Daba, adding that some women were threatened by Ugandan soldiers. “The U.P.D.F. said they will do something bad to them — kill them or something else.”

The United Nations and Human Rights Watch found similar evidence of threats of retaliation.

Mr. Daba said it was difficult for the abandoned women to feed their children.

“I don’t have enough clothes or even soap to clean her,” Ms. Ipangba said of her child. “I pray to God to guard me and give me strength to watch over my child because it’s just me who has to take care of her.”

Gladis Koutiyote said she, too, had a child with a Ugandan soldier who promised to marry her. She said some Ugandan soldiers did bring her “a little bit of sugar in a cup and some rice.”

“I used it for just one day and then it was finished,” she said.

The girl who said she was raped in the fields at 13 said she had to drop out of school to take care of her child. She wants the soldier to go to prison and to provide money for the baby’s care. But she said she was not sure she would ever get justice.

She still walks miles to a field to grow beans, manioc and maize to eat. “But I’m scared,” she said. “I worry that he could come for me again.”

Brigadier Karemire, the Ugandan military spokesman, said the Ugandan investigations were finished. He said that no cases of rape or statutory rape were registered here in the Central African Republic, and that there was no plan to support any children left behind. All Ugandan forces will be gone from the Central African Republic within a few weeks.

The New York Times

North Korea Says Missile It Tested Can Carry Nuclear Warhead

Choe Sang-Hun

David Wright, a director of the Global Security Program at the Union of Concerned Scientists, wrote in a blog post that if the same missile was flown on a standard trajectory, it would have a maximum range of 2,800 miles.

That would qualify the projectile as an intermediate-range ballistic missile, which could fly far enough to target key American military bases in the Pacific, including those in Guam. The North on Monday used the unfamiliar term "medium-long range" to describe the missile.

The missile test was conducted to verify "the tactical and technological specifications of the newly developed ballistic rocket capable of carrying a large-size, heavy nuclear warhead," the state news agency said, adding that the North's leader, Kim Jong-un, watched the launch.

"He declared that the D.P.R.K. is a nuclear power worthy of the name whether someone recognizes it or not," said the agency, using the acronym of the North's official name, Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

If the United States provokes North Korea, Mr. Kim said, it will not escape "the biggest disaster in history" because "its mainland and Pacific operation region are in the D.P.R.K.'s sighting range for strike," according to the news agency.

"The coward American-style fanfaronade militarily browbeating only weak countries and nations which have no nukes can never work on the D.P.R.K., and is highly ridiculous," Mr. Kim said, without naming Mr. Trump. "If the U.S. dares opt for a military provocation against the D.P.R.K., we are ready to counter it."

Although North Korea has vowed to develop the ability to attack the United States with nuclear warheads and has tested missiles that can reach throughout the Korean Peninsula and its vicinity, it has never tested a long-range missile that could fly across the Pacific. Missile experts say North Korea may still be years away from mastering the technologies needed to build a reliable intercontinental ballistic missile, although Mr. Kim warned in his New Year's Day speech that his country had reached a "final stage" in preparing to conduct its first ICBM test.

The new missile "may represent a substantial advance to developing" an ICBM, said John Schilling, a missile expert, in an analysis posted on 38 North, a United States-based website that specializes in North Korea.

"This missile would allow North Korea to conduct at least some of the testing necessary to develop an operational ICBM, without actually launching ICBMs, particularly if it includes the same rocket engines," Mr. Schilling said.

Under a series of United Nations Security Council resolutions, the country is banned from developing or testing ballistic missiles.

The North's launch took place as its biggest supporter, China, was hosting delegations from around the world at its "One Belt One Road" forum in Beijing. It also came only days after Mr. Moon, the South Korean leader, took office with a call for dialogue with the North.

Analysts say North Korea has often raised tensions to test new leaders in Washington or in Seoul or to increase its leverage when its foes propose negotiations.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Inside North Korea's Accelerated Plan to Build a Viable Missile (UNE)

SEOUL—North Korea's launch on Sunday of its most-sophisticated missile yet offered new clues into how serious the country is in its nuclear ambitions.

In the past three years, North Korea has launched more major missiles than in the three previous decades combined.

That acceleration is one of the most dramatic signs of leader Kim Jong Un's push to overhaul the country's weapons program since he took power in late 2011. He has modernized production of nuclear and missile parts, upgraded the program within the military hierarchy and overtly pampered engineers, forcing Western leaders to worry more about Pyongyang's intentions than ever before.

On Sunday, North Korea launched a newly developed intermediate-range missile, its 10th missile firing this year. Mr. Kim attended the test of the nuclear-capable missile and described it as a "perfect weapon system," according to a state media report. Initial projections from several experts suggested it would be able to reach U.S. military forces in Guam.

Even apparent failed missile launches, like one that blew up within minutes on April 28, are now seen by independent experts as signs of North Korea's progress. Learning from those failures would move the regime closer to its ultimate goal of mastering a long-range missile that could threaten the U.S. with nuclear attack.

For decades, Mr. Kim's father and grandfather used the country's missile program to gain leverage in diplomatic talks and revenue from weapon exports. Technological advances came slowly. That changed when Kim Jong Il died and was succeeded by his youngest son, believed to be 33 years old.

The dictator has shown no interest in negotiating with the U.S. about the missile program, and North Korea's nuclear ambition and skill are advancing much more quickly.

The country is conducting missile tests with the frequency needed to ensure the weapons can be reliably used in conflict. A range of recent breakthroughs has forced the U.S. and its allies to review their missile defenses.

"Kim Jong Un very much wants to reach out and touch the homeland," Gen. Lori Robinson, head of the U.S. Northern Command, the part of the military responsible for defending the U.S. mainland, told the Senate Armed Services Committee in April.

Tackling the threat could become an early point of tension between U.S. President Donald Trump, who is trying to pressure Pyongyang into changing course, and new South Korean President Moon Jae-in, who favors diplomacy and economic engagement with North Korea.

In a factory about 60 miles north of Pyongyang, the capital city, dozens of computer-controlled machines, similar to those used by Samsung Electronics Co. to make smartphones, churn out intricate parts that can be used in missiles and nuclear centrifuges, according to photographs released by state media.

Songs about machines

In a visit to the same factory in 2013, Mr. Kim angrily demanded that engineers replace old devices for making parts with robots and computer numerical control, a process for high-precision machine tools, according to a state media report at the time. The government has composed songs about CNC machines and put them on postage stamps.

Photos from a return visit by Mr. Kim last August showed CNC machines with bright orange, robotic arms bearing the logo of Swiss engineering company ABB Ltd.

Weapons experts who study satellite images and photos released by North Korea say the newer machines have become ubiquitous in North Korean missile plants. The machines allow faster, more precise manufacturing of parts around the clock, reducing the need to skirt sanctions by importing similar parts. The United Nations bans any imports that could be used in weapons programs.

Weaponry in a military parade in April in Pyongyang to mark the 105th anniversary of the birth of state founder Kim Il Sung, the grandfather of Mr. Kim, included rocket casings that might have been made by the new CNC machines, missile experts say. North Korea also showed off what appeared to be at least one new long-range missile.

"Basically, they can now produce anything [for missiles] that's made of metal," says Jeffrey Lewis, a missile specialist at the Middlebury Institute for International Studies in Monterey, Calif.

A U.N. panel that monitors sanctions on North Korea identified Tengzhou Keyongda CNC Machine Tools Co. of China as a supplier of the new CNC machines.

A sales manager at the company who declined to provide his name says it sent machines worth about $40,000 to North Korea through an intermediary company "two or three years ago." The person says North Korea tried to buy more machines this year, but the company declined "since relations between the two countries are tense."

An ABB spokesman says the Zurich company doesn't sell equipment to North Korea but couldn't rule out the possibility that some products were resold there.

North Korea has said through state media that it has no choice but to advance its nuclear and missile

development to defend itself from attack. It has said its weapons program is impervious to sanctions and is already capable of hitting the U.S. with a nuclear-tipped missile.

The missile program was born in the 1960s when state founder Kim Il Sung created a military academy that was told to develop missiles that could reach as far as U.S. military bases in Japan.

Progress was slow until North Korea imported Soviet-made ballistic missiles from Egypt around 1980. North Korea copied them to make short-range Scud-type missiles. They became an important revenue source and were exchanged for oil, nuclear technology and other items from countries such as Iran, Syria and Pakistan.

North Korea successfully tested a medium-range missile in 1993, the year before Kim Il Sung died. In 1998, it launched a multistage rocket widely viewed as North Korea's first long-range missile test.

Successor and son Kim Jong Il was rarely shown in state media reports attending missile tests. During his 17-year reign, he seemed more interested in using missiles to extract concessions. In 2000, Kim Jong Il demanded $1 billion from the U.S. to halt missile exports.

"So it's clear, since we export [missiles] to get money, if you guarantee compensation, it will be suspended," he told Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in 2000, she wrote in her 2003 memoir. Negotiations fell apart, and North Korea resumed missile testing and exports.

Its next major missile launch didn't come until 2006. Mr. Kim was wary of alienating South Korea and China, a key source of financial and diplomatic support, says Kim Kwang-jin, a former North Korean government official who defected in 2003 and now lives in Seoul.

"In contrast, Kim Jong Un owes nobody," says Mr. Kim, who isn't related to the ruling family.

Since taking power five years ago, the young dictator has met no other world leaders or traveled outside North Korea. That isolation likely motivates him to seek respect with military achievements, the former North Korean government official adds.

One of the first signs Kim Jong Un was serious about accelerating the missile program came with the elevation of North Korea's Strategic Rocket Force Command in March 2012, about three months into his reign.

The move put missile development on par with the army and air force—and a direct reporting line to Mr. Kim, according to state media. The command's leader, Kim Rak Gyom, is a four-star general, the same as other military-division chiefs.

In 2013, Mr. Kim introduced his "byungjin" policy, which emphasized that North Korea can simultaneously pursue economic progress and nuclear weapons. "When one is firmly equipped with the capability to make precision strikes with nuclear weapons…no aggressor can dare to attack recklessly," he said.

The leader began assigning more people with technical skills to the missile program, rather than political appointees made by his predecessors, says Joseph Bermudez, an American expert on North Korea's military. Some of the newcomers might have picked up expertise while studying in India and other countries, according to recent U.N. reports.

Kim Jong Sik, an engineer promoted in 2015 to become a major general in the rocket command, previously worked on North Korea's space program and at the Second Academy of Natural Sciences, a major research center for North Korea's missile and nuclear efforts, say U.S. officials.

Next to Kim Jong Un's wife

The major general, who isn't related to the North Korean leader, is often shown with him in state-media photos of missile tests. In February 2016, Kim Jong Sik sat next to Kim Jong Un's wife at a banquet celebrating a satellite launch.

Many missile and nuclear technicians were given apartments in swanky, new, high-rise buildings along the Taedong River, which runs through Pyongyang. State media showed dozens of visits in the past three years by the North Korean leader to three residential areas set aside for scientists. He offered advice on plastering and furniture.

"Take care of them like their real parents would do so that they may not have any slightest inconvenience in their living," Mr. Kim said, according to a February 2015 report by state media.

Advances in the missile program have accelerated since 2014. Among the most crucial: the introduction of solid-fuel missiles. For decades, North Korea used liquid-fueled missiles, which are powerful but dangerous to handle and slow to prepare for launch. The U.S. stopped using liquid-fueled missiles in the late 1980s after a series of deadly ground explosions.

Solid-fuel missiles can be readied to fire within a few minutes because they are stored with fuel inside. They are also easier to move around on transporters because they are safer and don't require support vehicles for fueling.

In March 2016, North Korea tested a large solid-fuel engine for the first time, according to state media, which described it as a success. In February of this year, North Korea successfully tested a medium-range, solid-fuel missile that likely used the same engine, according to missile experts.

The new missile was carried and fired from a transporter, which allows North Korea to deploy the weapons in remote areas that are harder for adversaries to spot. It also could help North Korea strike back if its main missile sites are destroyed early in a conflict.

Solid-fuel science

Markus Schiller, a rocket scientist at ST Analytics, a research and consulting firm in Munich, says making a solid-fuel missile is a "black art" that requires the presence of a sophisticated chemical-engineering industry to produce the fuel. Small mistakes can be catastrophic, like the 1986 Challenger space-shuttle explosion, caused by failure of a part in a solid-fuel rocket booster.

Iran's first test flight of a solid-fuel missile was in 2008, more than three years after its first ground test of a large, solid-fuel engine. Some experts speculate North Korea got help from other countries to develop its solid-fuel missiles or sent its own engineers abroad to learn needed skills.

Last year, the U.S. alleged cooperation between Iran and North Korea on missile development, which Tehran denies.

In another breakthrough, North Korea successfully launched last year a missile from a submarine. Only seven other countries have demonstrated the ability to fire missiles from submarines, including Pakistan earlier this year.

The technology is hard to master because the missile must be forced out of the water by high pressure—and then the engine must quickly ignite to initiate the missile's flight. It has taken other countries about a decade's work to successfully develop such missiles.

North Korea has held about a dozen tests of submarine-launched missiles since late 2014, starting with land-based trials of the first part of the process.

Many experts say North Korea last August had its first successful launch from a submarine of a missile with an estimated operational range of about 1,000 kilometers (620 miles). North Korea has just one old submarine capable of firing such missiles; satellite images show it is developing more.

On April 16, a ballistic missile believed by U.S. intelligence officials to be the first test of new type of antiship missile exploded shortly after being launched.

10th missile launch

The launch spurred expectations among analysts that North Korea would successfully launch a similar missile before long, possibly within months. On April 28, North Korea fired its ninth missile so far this year. Sunday's launch was immediately seen as another sign of progress.

Some analysts say North Korea's record of exaggeration makes them cautious about its claim of being able to mount a nuclear warhead on a long-range missile that could reach the U.S. North Korea hasn't tested its KN-08 missile, the gravest potential threat in the country's arsenal.

"The motive may also be threat demonstration, but they are making real progress," says John Schilling, a rocket and missile specialist at the Aerospace Corp., which runs a research center for the U.S. Air Force.

The Washington Post

North Korea's Kim celebrates test of 'perfect weapon system'

TOKYO — North Korean leader Kim Jong Un celebrated a test of the "perfect weapon system" after his engineers launched what they said was a new kind of intermediate-range ballistic missile system capable of carrying "a large-size heavy nuclear warhead."

The missile, launched Sunday morning, appeared to show substantial progress toward developing an intercontinental ballistic missile that can reach the

mainland United States, U.S. rocket scientists said.

“North Korea’s latest successful missile test represents a level of performance never before seen from a North Korean missile,” said John Schilling, an aerospace engineer who specializes in rockets. This means North Korea might be only one year, rather than the expected five, from having an ICBM, he said.

The latest launch was widely condemned, with the White House calling North Korea a “flagrant menace” and urging allies to impose stronger sanctions. South Korea and Japan also condemned the launch.

Releasing the first photos of the launch — something Pyongyang does with missiles it deems successful — North Korea’s state media said that it was a “new ground-to-ground medium long-range strategic ballistic rocket” that it called Hwasong-12.

North Korea launched a ballistic missile Sunday, May 14 from a test facility near its west coast that flew 435 miles, according to the South Korean military. The North has attempted but failed to test-launch ballistic missiles four consecutive times in the past two months. North Korea launched a ballistic missile Sunday, May 14 from a test facility near its west coast that flew 435 miles, according to the South Korean military. The North has attempted but failed to test-launch ballistic missiles four consecutive times in the past two months. (Reuters)

(Reuters)

It used a reentry vehicle capable of delivering a warhead to a target, the Korean Central News Agency reported.

“If the U.S. dares opt for a military provocation against the DPRK, we are ready to counter it,” the agency said, using the abbreviation for North Korea’s official name.

[North Korea launches a ballistic missile that flies about 435 miles]

“If the U.S. awkwardly attempts to provoke the DPRK, it will not escape from the biggest disaster in the history,” the agency quoted Kim as saying. “The U.S. should not . . . disregard or misjudge the reality that its mainland and Pacific operation region are in the DPRK’s sighting range for strike and that it has all powerful means for retaliatory strike.”

Although North Korea is known for its florid rhetoric, experts are concerned that it is making substantial progress toward Kim’s stated goal of developing an intercontinental ballistic missile.

North Korea fired a ballistic missile early Sunday, sending it from a launch site near its border with China 435 miles into the sea between the Korean Peninsula and Japan.

Analysts think the Hwasong-12 could be the “mystery missile” displayed in a huge military parade in Pyongyang last month, which appeared to be a smaller version of its KN-08 ICBM.

The missile flew for 30 minutes, much longer than other recent missile launches, meaning that it went straight up rather than trying to fly as far as possible — a path that would have sent it over Japan.

“This was a single-stage liquid rocket but it was still using high-energy fuel, so it probably had a really great range,” said Melissa Hanham of the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation in California, after poring over the North Korean photos. “This is the longest-range intermediate range ballistic missile they have shown us, and it could be part of an ICBM,” she said.

David Wright, co-director of the global security program at the Union of Concerned Scientists, said the missile appeared to have reached an apogee of about 1,240 miles.

If it had been launched on a standard trajectory, it would have a technical range of 2,800 miles, he said. That would easily put the U.S. territory of Guam within range.

“This clearly tells us they have several different development programs going on,” Wright said.

[On first day in office, South Korean president talks about going to North]

Schilling, the aerospace engineer, said that the latest launch demonstrated only what might be able to reliably strike the U.S. military base on Guam.

“But more importantly, [it] may represent a substantial advance to developing an intercontinental ballistic missile,” Schilling wrote in a post for 38 North, a specialist website devoted to North Korea.

Today's WorldView

What's most important from where the world meets Washington

This could be a “hedge” against U.S. military action against it, he said.

The Trump administration has repeatedly said that all options are on the table to stop North Korea from advancing its nuclear weapons and missile programs. The president has signaled that this includes military action.

Tensions had cooled down somewhat since the heated words of April, when the United States and South Korea were conducting joint military exercises and an aircraft carrier strike group was ordered back to the peninsula.

In mid-April, North Korea put on a huge military parade, displaying several new kinds of missile models, and conducted two missile launches, although neither was successful.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Why Trump’s Scorn for Pacific Trade Pact May Have Been Hasty

Bob Davis

WASHINGTON—On his first workday in the Oval Office, President Trump killed the Trans-Pacific Partnership. He will probably spend the rest of his term trying to revive parts of it.

The TPP was a 12-nation trade pact among Pacific Rim countries negotiated under President Barack Obama that became a punching bag in the presidential election. It was opposed by Mr. Trump, who called it “a horrible deal,” and his opponent, Hillary Clinton.

But the pact plowed new ground favorable to U.S. interests, going well beyond the tariff and subsidy cuts found in traditional trade deals.

TPP would have given a boost to e-commerce by limiting restrictions on data flows and prohibiting any of the participating countries from requiring computer servers be located domestically—where information is easier to censor or control. It also would have required state-owned enterprises to operate like commercial companies rather than political tools of the state. Intellectual property protection would have been strengthened and restrictions to competition in services reduced.

These are all longstanding goals of the U.S., which is a leader in technology and finance and wants to beat back efforts to constrain U.S. cross-border dominance. As with all trade deals, TPP had critics on the left, who argued labor provisions would be weakly enforced, and on the right, who complained patent protection for pharmaceuticals should have been stronger. Critics across the political spectrum say TPP’s investment protections would have encouraged U.S. companies to set up factories overseas at the expense of U.S. jobs.

Still, it would also have helped the new administration accomplish some of its major trade goals. First, because it included Canada and Mexico, it was in effect a backdoor renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, something the Trump administration is demanding. Second, although it didn’t include China, it would have cemented relations with other Asian nations and given the U.S. a stronger hand in dealing with Beijing.

“Why reinvent the wheel when you can take an agreement and try to improve upon it,” said Jeffrey Schott, a trade economist at the free-trade Peterson Institute for International Economics.

Some Trump trade officials are starting to come to the same conclusion. “We should learn from, and build on earlier negotiated trade agreements,” said U.S. Trade Representative nominee Robert Lighthizer in mid-March confirmation proceedings. “In a renegotiation of Nafta, we should consider incorporating those provisions (in TPP) as well as improving areas where we may be able to go beyond TPP.”

Two weeks later, the administration sent to Capitol Hill Nafta negotiating objectives which echoed TPP provisions on intellectual property, digital trade and services trade, state-owned enterprises and labor and environmental standards. The changes proposed were surprisingly mild, compared with Mr Trump’s campaign rhetoric. Congress had already mandated those TPP-style objectives in 2015 when it approved so-called fast-track legislation which the White House would need to pass any new trade deal.

Mexico and Canada already agreed to TPP provisions, said Josh Bolten, president of the Business Roundtable, a lobbying group of CEOs. If negotiations were largely confined to those measures “it may be a pretty fast and successful negotiation.”

On China, TPP also played an important role. The trade pact was a symbol of the U.S. commitment to the region and offered Asian nations an alternative to depending solely on China. Beijing wasn’t a member of TPP, but U.S. negotiators were pushing TPP provisions on state-owned enterprises and digital

commerce, among others, as global norms, which Beijing would be expected to eventually adopt.

President Trump says he favors bilateral deals because he believes the U.S. can use its economic power to press smaller nations to make concessions. In multilateral deals, he argues, U.S. leverage is more diffuse.

But the opposite is often true. Multilateral deals can help countries make concessions. Malaysia feared the political cost domestically of making concessions to the U.S. so it couldn't conclude a free-trade pact during the Bush administration, say negotiators. But Malaysia was able to sign on to TPP, and agree to lower tariffs on autos and other goods, because it could portray the deal as one involving other Southeast Asian nations.

Japan agreed to reduce its tariffs on beef and leave U.S. automotive tariffs intact for 25 years, among other concessions, because it was able to look across the group and add up all the concessions the others had made that would help Japanese industry.

Japanese Finance Minister Taro Aso warned last month that in a more limited bilateral deal, Japan will be "less generous" to the U.S. Mr. Lighthizer said that the U.S. "intends to maintain its leadership in the region," including by negotiating bilateral agreements. Since then, Mr. Trump has publicly courted Chinese President Xi Jinping and the two countries recently announced a trade deal to end fights over beef, credit cards and natural gas.

But a U.S. International Trade Commission report last year offered a different route. It said multilateral deals that focus on specific industries or issues—zero tariffs on steel or information technology, for instance—have had much bigger economic payoff than bilateral deals. In the same way, a multilateral deal on aspects of TPP—intellectual property, state-owned enterprises, data exchange—could recover some of the gains that were lost when TPP was killed.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Editorial : Trump's Pretty Good China Deal

Wilbur Ross made some startling claims after Thursday's announcement of a 10-point agreement with China on trade. The U.S. Commerce Secretary boasted that the "herculean accomplishment" was "more than has been done in the whole history of U.S.-China relations on trade," putting the relationship on "a new high."

The hyperbole may be due to the Trump Presidency's bumpy ride and the need for a policy victory. But overstatements tend to backfire, as this one did once trade experts examined the details. That's unfortunate because the Administration deserves credit for setting aside its protectionist threats for the hard work of negotiating a trade-expansion agreement.

The deal is modest but potentially significant. Beijing's two most important pledges are an end to the ban on U.S. beef and to the barriers against payment giants Visa and Mastercard entering the Chinese market. We've heard those promises before. Premier Li Keqiang said in September that beef imports would resume "soon," and China was supposed to end the monopoly of its Unionpay payments network under its 2001 accession to the World Trade Organization. Nevertheless, the July time frame is new and encouragingly close.

In return, the U.S. will allow imports of Chinese cooked chicken and sell natural gas to China. The latter is largely meant as political reassurance to investors in U.S. LNG export terminals. The U.S. also gave reassurance that investment by Chinese entrepreneurs is welcome and recognized the importance of President Xi Jinping's "Belt and Road" initiative to improve trade infrastructure in Asia.

The deal is positive for both sides and should dial back tension over trade in the short term. But Mr. Ross may have planted a land mine by claiming that China's market opening will reduce the bilateral trade deficit this year. That seems unlikely. Beef exports are expected to reach a few billion U.S. dollars a year, a modest sum in the overall relationship. Building facilities to export natural gas will take years, and Mastercard and Visa will need about 18 months at least to expand in China.

The trade deal comes at a moment when consistency in U.S. relations with China is imperative. On Sunday North Korea launched what appears to be a new type of ballistic missile, which some experts said could have flown 2,800 miles on a normal trajectory.

No doubt the urgency of dealing with this threat is one reason Mr. Trump in an interview with the Economist magazine last week praised Mr. Xi as "a great guy." But his seeming willingness last month in Mar-a-Lago to accept the Chinese President's excuses for failing to rein in North Korea no doubt discomfited allies and friends in Asia, already anxious about Beijing's maritime aggression. The U.S. is now asking these nations to unite as it works to shape a policy to deal with Pyongyang.

While it's good that Mr. Trump has pulled back from protectionism, dampening the swings in the way his Administration portrays China relations would bring better results. Mr. Ross's accomplishment would have found a more appreciative reception if he had simply said that hard negotiating gets results from Beijing but much work remains to be done.

The Washington Post

Political chaos in Washington is a return on investment for Moscow (UNE)

Russia has yet to collect much of what it hoped for from the Trump administration, including the lifting of U.S. sanctions and recognition of its annexation of Crimea.

But the Kremlin has collected a different return on its effort to help elect Trump in last year's election: chaos in Washington.

The president's decision to fire FBI Director James B. Comey last week was the latest destabilizing jolt to a core institution of the U.S. government. The nation's top law enforcement agency joined a list of entities that Trump has targeted, including federal judges, U.S. spy services, news organizations and military alliances.

The instability, although driven by Trump, has in some ways extended and amplified the effect Russia sought to achieve with its unprecedented campaign to undermine the 2016 presidential race.

In a declassified report released this year, U.S. spy agencies described destabilization as one of Russian President Vladimir Putin's objectives.

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 Kremlin sought to advance its longstanding desire to undermine the U.S.-led liberal democratic order," it said.

[Read the report on Russian interference]

Russia's "active measures" campaign ended with the election last year. But Comey's firing on Tuesday triggered a new wave of -Russia-related turbulence.

His removal was perceived as a blow to the independence of the bureau's ongoing investigation of possible collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia. Current and former U.S. officials said that even if that probe remains on track, Comey's ouster serves broader Russian interests.

"They feel pretty good overall because that's a further sign that our political system is in a real crisis," said Eugene Rumer, a former State Department official who served as the top intelligence officer on Russia issues from 2010 to 2014. "The firing of Comey only aggravates this crisis. It's now certain to be more protracted and more painful, and that's okay with them."

James R. Clapper Jr., the former director of national intelligence, offered a similar assessment in Senate testimony last week, even before Comey was dismissed, saying that Moscow must look on the election and its aftermath with a great deal of satisfaction.

"The Russians have to be celebrating the success of . . . what they set out do with rather minimal resource expenditure," Clapper said. "The first objective was to sow

discord and dissension, which they certainly did."

Team Trump's ties to Russian interests

Clapper went further in interviews on Sunday, saying that U.S. institutions are "under assault" from Trump and that Russia must see the firing of Comey as "another victory on the scoreboard for them."

Even Trump alluded to Russia's presumed glee at the post-Comey turmoil, although he blamed Democrats. "Russia must be laughing up their sleeves watching as the U.S. tears itself apart over a Democrat EXCUSE for losing the election," Trump said in Twitter post on Thursday.

If Russia's most specific priorities have proved elusive, it may be partly because Moscow overachieved in its effort to cultivate ties to Trump.

Former national security adviser Michael Flynn, who shared many of Trump's pro-Russia positions, was forced to resign in February after it was revealed that he had misled other White House officials about his post-election conversations with Sergey Kislyak, the Russian ambassador to the United States.

In a late December phone call that was intercepted by U.S. intelligence, Flynn assured Kislyak that Trump planned to revisit the sanctions issue shortly after taking office. Trump has so far not followed through on that front, largely because the Flynn controversy and multiple Russia probes have made it politically unfeasible.

[Flynn was warned by Trump transition officials about contacts with Russian ambassador]

Trump's policies toward Russia have also taken a harder line in part because of the rising influence of senior members of his administration, including Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and CIA Director Mike Pompeo, who are critics of Moscow.

Even so, Trump himself continues to send pro-Russia signals, sometimes at the expense of agencies that report to him. Trump recently signaled, again, that he remains unconvinced that Russia was behind the hack of the 2016 election and release of tens of thousands of emails that damaged Hillary Clinton's campaign. His position is a rejection of the consensus view of U.S. intelligence agencies.

Trump has provided a steady stream of material for Russian propaganda platforms.

One day after firing Comey, Trump welcomed Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, to the White House. U.S. news agencies were barred from attending, but a photographer for Russia's state-run Tass news agency was granted access to the Oval Office.

Photos released later in the day showed Trump warmly welcoming his guests, including a shot that showed Trump smiling and shaking hands with Kislyak, the ambassador embroiled in the controversy with Flynn.

[Presence of Russian photographer in Oval Office raises alarms]

Russian officials have denied the country meddled in the U.S. election. In brief public appearances last week, Lavrov joked about Comey's dismissal — "Was he fired? You're kidding!" — and mocked claims of Moscow interference.

"We are monitoring what is going on here concerning Russia and its alleged 'decisive role' in your domestic policy," Lavrov said in a quote reported by Tass.

Trump's defenders acknowledge that he seeks improved relations with Moscow but insist that his goals are designed entirely to advance U.S. interests.

They point to sharp criticism of Moscow by senior administration officials, strained diplomatic relations on key issues and Trump's decision to order a missile strike on an air base in Syria where Russian military operatives were based as part of Moscow's support to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The assertion that the Trump administration has been advantageous to Moscow "is laughable," said James Carafano, the vice president of foreign and defense policy at the Heritage Foundation, who served as an adviser to the Trump transition team. "The president has actually stiff-armed them on a number of occasions."

But critics argue that many of Trump's foreign policy positions undercut U.S. influence overseas and, as a result, strengthen Moscow — his effective endorsement of nationalist candidates including Marine Le Pen in France; his effort to impose an immigration ban on Muslim-majority countries; and his threats, since softened, to restructure NATO.

[On Russia, Trump and his top national security aides seem to be at odds]

Trump has repeatedly dismissed allegations of ties between his campaign and Russia as "fake news." The White House insisted that Comey's firing was based solely on his handling of the investigation of Clinton's emails.

But Trump's own later statements made clear the decision was linked to his frustration that the Russia inquiry was expanding under Comey, a director whom Trump viewed as disloyal.

Trump had telegraphed the move a day earlier on Twitter, saying: "The Russia-Trump collusion story is a total hoax, when will this taxpayer funded charade end?"

Checkpoint newsletter

Military, defense and security at home and abroad.

The implication that the FBI would perpetuate an unwarranted investigation out of political animus echoes other instances in which Trump has disparaged U.S. institutions or principles.

U.S. intelligence officials said such comments bolster the case that Putin makes against Western democracies.

"It plays into the idea that we are as corrupt as anybody else, that what the United States is exporting isn't something you want," said a former senior U.S. intelligence official involved in tracking the Russian election hack and its aftermath. The official spoke on the condition of anonymity, citing the sensitivity of the issue.

With sanctions still in place, Russia may think that the election interference "didn't pan out the way they expected," the official said. "But what they're getting now is more positive than what they had under [President Barack] Obama and what they feared under Clinton. It's not pro-Russia, but it's certainly not anti-Russia. It's more a kind of chaos. And that does benefit them."

The New York Times

Ransomware's Aftershocks Feared as U.S. Warns of Complexity (UNE)

David E. Sanger, Sewell Chan and Mark Scott

The source of the attack is a delicate issue for the United States because the vulnerability on which the malicious software is based was published by a group called the Shadow Brokers, which last summer began publishing cybertools developed by the National Security Agency.

Government investigators, while not publicly acknowledging that the computer code was developed by American intelligence agencies as part of the country's growing arsenal of cyberweapons, say they are still investigating how the code got out. There are many theories, but increasingly it looks as though the initial breach came from an insider, perhaps a government contractor.

Copycat variants of the malicious software behind the attacks have begun to proliferate, according to experts who were on guard for new attacks. "We are in the second wave," said Matthieu Suiche of Comae Technologies, a cybersecurity company based in the United Arab Emirates. "As expected, the attackers have released new variants of the malware. We can surely expect more."

The National Police Agency in Japan found two computers with the malicious software over the weekend, according to reports by NHK, the national broadcaster. One instance was found on a personal computer in a hospital and the other on a private citizen's home computer. A hospital in Taiwan also reported that one of its computers was compromised, Taiwan's Central News Agency said Sunday.

Five businesses in South Korea reported ransomware attacks over the weekend, according to the government's internet security agency, and a Korean theater chain said late-night moviegoers on Sunday alerted them when computer ransom notes appeared on screens instead of programmed advertisements.

The spread of the malicious software, or malware, has focused attention on several questions, including why a software patch, issued by Microsoft in March, was not installed by more users. But for many systems, especially older systems, such patches are not installed automatically — a fact the hackers took advantage of. Microsoft has not said how it became aware of the vulnerability, but it seems likely it was tipped off by the National Security Agency.

Brad Smith, the president and chief legal officer of Microsoft, said in a blog post Sunday that the attack should be a "wake-up call" for the tech industry, consumers and governments.

Mr. Smith said that Microsoft had the "first responsibility" for addressing vulnerabilities in its

software, and that customers must be vigilant. But he said the latest attack showed the dangers of governments' "stockpiling of vulnerabilities."

"Repeatedly, exploits in the hands of governments have leaked into the public domain and caused widespread damage," Mr. Smith wrote.

So far, the main targets of the attack have been outside the United States. But neither the federal government nor American corporations assume that this will continue to be the case.

Britain's National Cyber Security Center said Sunday that it had seen "no sustained new attacks" but warned that compromised computers might not have been detected yet and that the malware could further spread within networks.

Monday could bring a wave of attacks to the United States, warned Caleb Barlow, the vice president of threat intelligence for IBM. "How the infections spread across Asia, then Europe overnight will be telling for businesses here in the United States," he said.

The cyberattack has hit 200,000 computers in more than 150 countries, according to Rob Wainwright, the executive director of Europol, Europe's police agency.

Among the organizations hit were FedEx in the United States, the Spanish telecom giant Telefónica, the French automaker Renault, universities in China, Germany's federal railway system and Russia's Interior Ministry. The most disruptive attacks infected Britain's public health system, where surgeries had to be rescheduled and some patients were turned away from emergency rooms.

A 22-year-old British researcher who uses the Twitter name MalwareTech has been credited with inadvertently helping to stanch the spread of the assault by identifying the web domain for the hackers' "kill switch" — a way of disabling the malware. Mr. Suiche of Comae Technologies said he had done the same for one of the new variants of malware to surface since the initial wave.

On Sunday, MalwareTech was one of many security experts warning that a less-vulnerable version of the malware is likely to be released. On Twitter, he urged users to immediately install a security patch for older versions of Microsoft's Windows, including Windows XP. (The attack did not target Windows 10.)

Robert Pritchard, a former cybersecurity expert at Britain's defense ministry, said that security specialists might not be able to keep pace with the hackers.

"This vulnerability still exits; other people are bound to exploit it," he said. "The current variant will make its way into antivirus software. But what about any new variants that will come in the future?"

Allan Liska, an analyst with Recorded Future, a cybersecurity company, said a new version of the ransomware he examined Sunday did not have the kill switch. "This is probably version 2.1, and it has the potential to be much more effective — assuming security defenders haven't spent all weekend patching," he said.

The Microsoft patch will help, but installing it across large organizations will take time.

Microsoft has complained for years that a large majority of computers running its software are using pirated versions. The spread of hacking attacks has made legal versions of software more popular, as they typically provide automatic updates of security upgrades.

Governments around the world were bracing themselves for new attacks.

"Please beware and anticipate, and take preventive steps against the WannaCry malware attack," Indonesia's communication and information minister, Rudiantara, who like many Indonesians uses only one name, said Sunday at a news conference.

He confirmed that one hospital — Dharmais Hospital in the capital, Jakarta, which specializes in cancer treatment — had been afflicted by the malware, but without major effects on patients.

In Britain, fallout continued Sunday. Two opposition parties, the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats, asserted that the governing Conservative Party had not done enough to prevent the attack. With a general election June 8, officials have been racing to get ahead of the problem.

Britain's defense minister, Michael Fallon, told the BBC on Sunday that the government was spending about 50 million pounds, about $64 million, to improve cybersecurity at the National Health Service, where many computers still run the outdated Windows XP software, which Microsoft had stopped supporting.

A government regulator warned the N.H.S. in July that updating hardware and software was "a matter of urgency," and noted that one hospital had already had to pay £700,000, about $900,000, to repair a breach that began after an employee clicked on a web link in an unsafe email.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Cyberattack Is Likely to Keep Spreading (UNE)

Nick Kostov, Jenny Gross and Stu Woo

The cyberattack that spread around the globe over the weekend, hitting businesses, hospitals and government agencies in at least 150 countries, infected more computers as users returned to work early Monday.

Investigators launched a far-reaching hunt for the perpetrator, as institutions around the world worked to mitigate damage from the highest-profile computer-worm outbreak in nearly a decade. Europe's police-coordination agency estimated at least 200,000 individual terminals had fallen victim to the attack, while Chinese authorities put the number as high as 1 million world-wide.

The fallout in the early hours of Monday morning appeared limited, with some government agencies in Asia reporting that operations had been affected as employees returned to work after the weekend.

"This is something we haven't seen before," Europol director Rob Wainwright told U.K. television channel ITV. "The global reach is unprecedented."

Among the highest-profile corporate victims was French auto maker Renault SA, RNO -0.45% which was forced to shut down factories across Europe.

When workers arrived at a Renault plant in Sandouville, in northern France, on Saturday morning, TV screens that usually update staff on company productivity had a different message: A demand, in French, for $300 in ransom. The screens also showed two clocks counting down the time Renault had to deliver the payments before the factory's files were deleted.

"Everyone was running around, saying we've been hacked," said Mohamed Amri, a 41-year-old parts maker. "It spread like wildfire."

The cyberattack involved a ransomware dubbed WannaCry, designed to spread quickly after infecting computers. Files on affected computers were encrypted, and users were told to pay a ransom with bitcoin, an untraceable online currency, to unscramble them.

So far, the virus hasn't been blamed for destroying hardware itself. Where users have backed up data, long-term damage likely can be limited. But some targets responding to the attack had to shut down entire systems to help combat or slow the virus.

The computers of dozens of hospitals and health-care facilities in the U.K. were affected, but officials said that—so far—there was no indication patients had been put in grave danger from the outages. They also said patient data hadn't been stolen. German train operator Deutsche Bahn AG said its trains were running as usual despite the attack, though it was straining to get its computer systems back online. U.S. delivery company FedEx Corp. was also affected.

Japan's Hitachi Ltd. said Monday that its email system had been hit. It said system failures had affected it in Japan and overseas, and that the issue hadn't yet been resolved as of Monday morning.

The police force in Yancheng, a Chinese city 200 miles north of Shanghai, apologized on its official social-media account for being unable to provide certain services because of the virus. A swath of Chinese gasoline stations, run by China National Petroleum Corp., was closed because of the attack.

Russia's central bank said domestic banks had been targeted, according to state news agency RIA. Sberbank , Russia's largest lender, said Friday night its cyber infrastructure had been targeted but that it had fended off the attack, news wires reported. The country's interior ministry said around 1,000 computers had been affected, but that the attack had been localized.

Britain's National Cyber Security Center, a government agency, said Sunday that there hadn't been any new attacks similar to Friday's, but that existing infections from the malware could continue to spread within networks.

"This means that as a new working week begins it is likely, in the U.K. and elsewhere, that further cases of ransomware may come to light, possibly at a significant scale," the agency said.

The virus was slowed down over the weekend by the identification and

activation of a "kill switch" embedded in the virus' code, computer experts said. But few believe it was halted completely, and one security expert had identified late Sunday at least one new strain, unaffected by the kill switch, though it was spreading slowly.

While the U.S. appears relatively unscathed compared with Europe and Asia, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the National Security Agency and the Department of Homeland Security all were on the case. Tom Bossert, President Donald Trump's homeland security and counterterrorism adviser, held emergency meetings with cabinet members Friday night and Saturday morning at the White House, an administration official said Sunday.

Government agencies have started a global manhunt for the perpetrator—a complex international probe that requires the same sort of cooperation and intelligence sharing common in large terrorist attacks.

Security experts have been able to track a small amount of bitcoin transactions they said were likely ransom linked to the attack. It was impossible to say how many companies were paying, or whom they were paying. Unlike bank and other financial accounts, bitcoin accounts are theoretically untraceable to their owners.

The attack took advantage of security vulnerabilities in Microsoft Corp. MSFT -0.12% software that was either too old to be supported by security patches or hadn't been patched by users. Microsoft on Sunday said that the software tool used in the attack came from code stolen from the National Security Agency. The NSA has declined to comment on the matter.

None of the infected computers had installed a March 14 software patch by Microsoft that stopped the worm, either because they were running older versions of Microsoft Windows that no longer received software updates, or because companies had simply delayed installing the software.

An early sign of trouble at the Renault plant in Sandouville came when the assembly line's alarm system stopped working early Saturday—right after the demand for ransom appeared on TV screens. Tanguy Deschamps, a 38-year-old who was working at the factory when the virus hit, said the alarms were failing to sound whenever workers tried to alert others to crooked or improperly welded parts.

Management told workers to unplug the machines.

At 1 a.m. French time, Malik Denon was making final alterations on cars that were almost finished when his boss came down to tell him Renault had been hacked. At first, Mr. Denon thought it was a joke, but his boss wasn't laughing.

"He was panicked," Mr. Denon said.

Séverin Beuche, a local IT expert, was called to the plant Saturday morning to help restart the site.

"I've never seen something of this size," Mr. Beuche said. He and a crisis unit worked around the clock to rebuild servers that had been crippled.

The auto maker's cybersecurity team time pored over company computer systems before the factories were due to resume full production on Monday.

The assembly remained dormant much of Saturday. Instead of making car parts, workers were asked to tidy up the factory. Union officials estimated that 100 cars weren't produced at the plant as a result of the hack.

—Robert McMillan in San Francisco, Liza Lin in Shanghai and Louise Radnofsky in Washington contributed to this article.

ETATS-UNIS

James Traub : Donald Trump Is the President America Deserves

In the hours after Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen emerged as the finalists in France's presidential election, on April 23, one defeated French politician after another trooped to a microphone to announce that, whatever their differences with Macron, they would support his candidacy in order to defeat a figure they viewed as a threat to France's cherished republican values. "Extremism can only bring unhappiness and division," said François Fillon, the nominee for the center-right Les Républicains. Benoît Hamon, the Socialist candidate, and Alain Juppé, who had lost the primary to Fillon, used similar language. Among major candidates, only the far-left Jean-Luc Mélenchon declined to join the parade.

The "republican front," as the French called this coalition, succeeded: Macron won a stunning two-thirds of the vote, though 43 percent of Macron voters said they had cast a ballot to defeat Le Pen's National Front. They were endorsing republicanism, not Macron's program of liberalization.

This raises an uncomfortable question for Americans: Where was the "liberal front" when Donald Trump stormed through the Republican primaries and then gained the White House? Do Americans simply not care about their professed values as deeply as the French do about theirs?

It needs to be said, first, that the French hardly spoke with one voice. More than one-third of voters either did not vote or submitted a blank ballot, the highest figure in almost half a century. Many supporters of Mélenchon spurned the republican-front appeal, viewing Macron's liberalism as no less catastrophic than Le Pen's xenophobia. If Macron falls victim to inertia in office, as his predecessors have, French voters may repudiate both liberalism and republicanism next time around.

Second, Trump had advantages Le Pen lacked. He commandeered one of the two main political parties and thus its electorate. And at a time when voters loathe the guardians of the status quo, he ran against the ultimate symbol of the political establishment, while Le Pen had to face a young man who inspired real hope for change. The stars aligned for him, as they did not for her.

That said, it is just a fact that the French thrill to the organ tones of republicanism more profoundly than Americans do the music of liberalism. A tragic history has taught the French never to take their values for granted. The republican front echoes the "Popular Front" of the 1930s in which parties from across the spectrum of the left formed coalitions in both France and Spain to keep fascist parties out of power. After the Nazi conquest, France was ruled by the homegrown fascists of Vichy. The first republican front was formed in 1955 to stave off a threat from the far-right supporters of Pierre Poujade — mentor to Jean-Marie Le Pen, the founder of the National Front — and later revived in the 1990s to describe the forces opposed to the elder Le Pen, both of which stirred memories of Vichy that were not yet entirely dormant. The French know that you cannot trifle with history; Americans have had fewer reasons in modern times to worry about the dark consequences of political choices.

But that's not the whole story. Donald Trump never disguised his contempt for democratic process, free speech, and the rule of law; his political rallies were exercises in demagoguery and mob incitement. Marine Le Pen, by contrast, is almost refined. Trump posed a more visceral threat to democracy than she did — and yet the French immune system responded more effectively than the American one did.

The reason, at bottom, is that our own system has been deeply compromised by the slow-filtering poisons of political hatred. That hatred began to seep into the political mainstream in the 1980s when Newt Gingrich, first as congressman and then as speaker of the House, capitalized on the rise of the Christian right to promote an apocalyptic politics that could accept nothing less than the destruction of the opposition. Gingrich, like Maximilien Robespierre, fell victim to his own extremism and was ousted by exhausted fellow Republicans, but not before he had charted a new, absolutist path for the right and profoundly undermined the idea that Americans of different views nevertheless shared common values.

It is an irony, and one not much noticed, that America's delicate liberal fabric began to unravel in the immediate aftermath of the end of the Cold War, when liberalism was thought to have won its definitive victory. This is not the paradox it seems. The national struggle against the Depression, then Nazism, then communism had enforced a sense of common purpose; the absence of an

existential foe allowed extremism to flourish. And as that extremism became the default ideology of one of the nation's two parties, the old idea of a set of principles that stood outside of, and above, the world of partisan politics became increasingly far-fetched.

Perhaps our watershed, or Waterloo, in the abandonment of the idea of shared neutral principle came with the disputed election of 2000, when the Supreme Court, the one remaining institution that most Americans regarded as standing above partisanship, was enlisted by both parties in the desperate fight for mastery, with five justices chosen by Republicans ultimately handing the victory to the Republican candidate. Don't be naive, we now think, rules of combat went out with World War I flying aces. What is true of institutions is true of the realm of ideas: We now take it for granted that "the news" is not an impartial record of events but an instrument for reinforcing one of several competing and irreconcilable narratives.

Or, rather, one side does: A recent Pew Research Center survey found that while 89 percent of Democrats believe that the media serves a "watchdog" role over those in power, only 42 percent of Republicans do. The numbers switch when Democrats are in power, but the gap between the two sides has never been nearly as great as it is today.

The last public figure to pose a genuine threat to America's democratic values, Sen. Joseph McCarthy, was destroyed by (among other things) a simple question asked in a televised hearing: "Have you no sense of decency?" Whatever their views of communism, Americans thought that a man without decency did not deserve his office. If Donald Trump was never confronted with that question during the Republican primaries, it surely wasn't because he fell short of McCarthyite standards of indecency but rather because the question had lost its moral and political weight. For today's Republican Party, nothing is beyond the pale.

Is there some way back to where we were? France is not really a very useful model in that respect. The French have purchased their comity at the cost of a sterile *alternance*, as they refer to the back-and-forth between two parties, neither of which has taken real risks to break the country out of what has come to feel like paralysis. That, in turn, has led to profound embitterment on both the left and right. One hopes that Macron can help lead France out of the doldrums, but a big fraction of the country is rooting for him to fail.

Nevertheless, the French turned back from the edge, and we didn't. We seem to have lost not only the path but the sense of a path. We can't go back to the era of at least minimal comity under George H.W. Bush, if only because the problems Americans face are so much harder to solve now than they were then. But we cannot continue to behave as if America were divided between Sunnis and Shiites. Not long ago, most of us would have said the great threat to liberalism came from the outside. Now we know that it comes from ourselves.

Dionne : The amateurish autocrat - The Washington Post

President Trump's opponents have spent his administration's first months engaged in an unusual but important debate: Is Trump a problem because he is incompetent or because he harbors autocratic designs that threaten American democracy itself?

At the end of his first 100 days, the debate was tilting toward ineptitude. Trump didn't know or care much about policy, shifted from one issue position to another, shunned eloquence in favor of often-deranged tweeting and didn't even bother filling hundreds of government jobs.

The wealthy, especially Wall Street types, rejoiced when Trump backed away from many of his populist-sounding economic promises, particularly on trade, and moved toward a conventional, if rather radical, conservatism: steep tax cuts for the rich, deregulation on a grand scale. For the privileged, happy days were here again.

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Those who fear Trump's authoritarian side acknowledged that his potential for excess had been at least partly contained by our system of rights. The freedom to organize and express opposition, the power that free elections confer on every citizen, the independence of the courts and the liberty of the media — all are very much alive.

Nonetheless, members of this anti-Trump wing insisted on vigilance against Trump's alarming indifference to the basic norms of self-government, his affection for thuggish leaders and his vicious attitude toward opponents.

James B. Comey, Sally Yates and Preet Bharara were all law enforcement officials until President Trump fired them — and they were all investigating Trump or his administration at the time of their firing. 3 officials who were fired while investigating Trump (Peter Stevenson/The Washington Post)

(Peter Stevenson/The Washington Post)

Last week, the argument took a sharp, decisive and chilling turn. Trump proved that we can never be lulled into losing focus on the ways he could undermine the rules and principles of our democratic republic.

Sen. Richard J. Durbin (D-Ill.) appeared Friday on MSNBC's "Morning Joe" and spoke the essential truth: "I think we ought to get to the bottom line here. President Trump is dangerous."

Yes, he is.

The firing of James B. Comey as FBI director and the administration's fog of lies aimed at clouding the real reason for Trump's decision are the most important signs that we have a leader who will do whatever it takes to resist accountability.

He will fire anyone who gets in his way. Trump's dismissal of Sally Yates, the acting attorney general, and Preet Bharara, the U.S. attorney in New York, can now be seen in a more sinister light. Rod J. Rosenstein, the deputy attorney general on whom the Trump apparat initially tried to pin responsibility for Comey's firing, may be next — if he is the person of integrity his friends describe.

Of course, Trump can be fairly regarded as *both* incompetent and authoritarian. We may be saved by the fact that the feckless Trump is often the authoritarian Trump's worst enemy. If we're lucky, Trump's astonishing indiscipline will be his undoing.

At first, his pathetically deceitful spokespeople tried to pretend that the president's firing decision arose from a deep if newfound concern for how Comey had treated Hillary Clinton. Then Trump blew up his own spin. He told NBC's Lester Holt that he had long planned to get rid of Comey, and that it had something to do with "this Russia thing." Here's betting that spin will have changed again by the time you read this, because hinting that you're hindering an investigation of yourself is not a good idea.

Not one word out of Trump's White House is believable on its face, and sowing convenient untruth is another mark of autocracy. So is Trump's effort to rig future elections, which is what his commission on "election integrity" is really all about. It will seek to justify making it as hard as possible for Trump's opponents, particularly in the minority community, to vote.

And like authoritarians everywhere, he aims not simply to defeat his enemies but to humiliate them. Thus his assault on Comey in the Holt interview as a "showboat" and "a grandstander" — talk about a lack of self-awareness — and his Twitter threat Friday: "James Comey better hope that there are no 'tapes' of our conversations before he starts leaking to the press!" Presidential obsessions with "tapes" are perilous.

Trump clearly realized that reports of his demanding Comey's loyalty made him sound like a mafia don or a two-bit despot.

It was fitting that Trump's jolliness with the Russian ambassador and foreign minister was photographically captured last week by Tass, Vladimir Putin's government news agency. The pesky American media were excluded from this happy meeting of minds. It can no longer be seen as outlandish to suspect that Trump's role model is Putin, a man he has praised for having "very strong control over a country." This should scare us all to death.

Klaas : Can American democracy survive Donald Trump?

In 2014, Turkey's authoritarian president fired four prosecutors who were leading an investigation into an alleged corruption scandal involving the president himself. The interference was blatant. The intent was clear. President Recep Tayyip

Erdogan wanted the corruption scandal to disappear. It was technically within his authority, but there was widespread outcry that the rule of law was under attack. In response, Erdogan claimed he was the victim of a widespread conspiracy by his political rivals. Then, he threatened his opponents.

And he got away with it.

It's hard not to see parallels with President Trump's decision to fire former FBI Director James Comey. In ousting the man leading the FBI investigation into Trump team ties and possible collusion with Russia, Trump behaved like a strongman. The only open question is whether the democratic institutions of the United States will fight back in a way they were unable to in Turkey.

There is reason to be hopeful. American democracy has robust institutions and the framers designed resilient checks and balances. The Constitution provides an ingenious model that has survived every threat for 230 years. Any would-be despot or demagogue faces long odds against it.

Yet Trump is deeply damaging American democracy as he tests its limits. That damage will last well beyond his time in office and will be extremely difficult to repair. As with sand castles, it's far easier to destroy democracy than to build it. Trump's abuses of power and his administration's assault on the truth are the latest waves of attack.

If lying were an Olympic sport, the White House would have won gold, silver and bronze this week. They tried to convince the American people that Trump acted for noble reasons, unrelated to the Russia investigation. Vice President Pence, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, and of course the Usain Bolt of "Alternative Facts" herself, Kellyanne Conway, all deceived the American people. They aimed to show that there was no conflict of interest, no authoritarian effort to undermine an active and ongoing investigation into the Trump team.

They failed, because it was a lie. And the person who "unmasked" the lie was none other than Trump. In saying he was thinking about "this Russia thing" when he removed Comey, Trump fired the smoking gun while we all watched on national television. It was like the lawyer giving his closing arguments only to have the defendant stand up and say "Actually, I did it. And when you're a star, they let you do it."

A day later, Trump took to Twitter for an early morning meltdown. Two authoritarian outbursts stood out.

First, Trump floated the idea of no longer holding press briefings. That would be a tremendous attack on the principle of open and transparent government that is at the heart of democracy. Consent of the governed is impossible if the White House won't tell them what they are doing. That has already happened with the obscuring of White House visitor logs, but the end of press briefings would be catastrophically opaque. Second, Trump openly threatened the FBI director he had just fired. This amounts to witness intimidation, as Comey is likely to be called on to testify during the ongoing investigations.

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

We must accept a deeply shocking and unfortunate truth: the president of the United States is a man who not only admires despots, but mimics them. He aspires to their strength. He loathes constraints placed upon him by democratic institutions like the press ("enemy of the people"); Congress ("obstructionists!"); and the courts ("so-called" judges that he blamed for any future terror attack). Those constraints deter his worst authoritarian impulses. That's why they are under constant attack from Trump's White House.

In the past, democracies used to die with a bang — a coup d'état, a war or a revolution. Now, more democracies are dying slow deaths. In places like Hungary or the Philippines, they wither, as a power-hungry president gets away with one authoritarian abuse after another. Opposition gets bullied into submission. The goalposts of what is deemed acceptable within the democracy shift. Previously unthinkable transgressions become routine (sound familiar?). And over time, democracy hollows out to just a shell of its former self — as it did in Erdogan's Turkey.

The response to Comey's firing is a crucial moment for American democracy. If Trump gets away with it free from serious consequences, as Erdogan did, then it will encourage further authoritarian abuses. Just as worrisome, it will also chill future opposition to Trump, as he successfully sends the message that anyone who challenges him will be fired. Rule of law will weaken. The beacon of American democracy will dim even further.

That is, unless citizens stand up for democracy, stand against authoritarian abuses of power, and insist that their elected officials do the same.

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The New York Times

Krugman : The Priming of Mr. Donald Trump

Paul Krugman

Second, we're talking about some really bad economics here. There are times when temporary deficit spending can help the economy. In the first few years after the 2008 financial crisis, for example, unemployment was very high, and the Federal Reserve — normally our first line of defense against recessions — had limited ability to act, because the interest rates it controls were already very close to zero. That was a time for serious pump-priming; unfortunately, we never got enough of it, thanks to scorched-earth Republican opposition.

Now, however, unemployment is near historic lows; quit rates, which show how confident workers are in their ability to find new jobs, are back to pre-crisis levels: wage rates are finally rising; and the Fed has begun raising interest rates.

America may not be all the way back to full employment — there's a lively debate among economists over that issue. But the economic engine no longer needs a fiscal jump-start. This is exactly the wrong time to be talking about the desirability of bigger budget deficits.

True, it would make sense to borrow to finance public investment. We desperately need to expand and repair our roads, bridges, water systems, and more. Meanwhile, the federal government can borrow incredibly cheaply: Long-term bonds protected from inflation are paying only about 0.5 percent interest. So deficit spending on infrastructure would be defensible.

But that's not what Trump is talking about. He's calling for exploding the deficit so he can cut taxes on the wealthy. And that makes no economic sense at all.

Then again, he may not understand his own proposals; he may be living in an economic and political fantasy world. If so, he's not alone. Which brings me to my third point: Trump's fiscal delusions are arguably no worse than those of many, perhaps most professional observers of the Washington political scene.

If you're a heavy news consumer, think about how many articles you've seen in the past few weeks with headlines along the lines of "Trump's budget may create conflict with G.O.P. fiscal conservatives." The premise of all such articles is that there is a powerful faction among Republican members of Congress who worry deeply about budget deficits and will oppose proposals that create lots of red ink.

But there is no such faction, and never was.

There were and are poseurs like Paul Ryan, who claim to be big deficit hawks. But there's a simple way to test such people's sincerity: when they propose sacrifices in the name of fiscal responsibility, do those sacrifices ever involve their own political priorities? And they never do. That is, when you see a politician claim that deficit concerns require that we slash Medicaid, privatize Medicare, and/or raise the retirement age — but somehow never require raising taxes on the wealthy, which in fact they propose to cut — you know that it's just an act.

Yet somehow much of the news media keeps believing, or pretending to believe, that those imaginary deficit hawks are real, which is a delusion of truly Trumpian proportions.

So I'm worried. Trump may be not just ignorant but deeply out of it, and his economic proposals are terrible and irresponsible, but they may get implemented all the same.

But maybe I worry too much; maybe the only thing to fear is fear itself. Do you like that line? I just came up with it the other day.

The New York Times

Blow : Trump's Madness Invites Mutiny - The New York Times

Charles M. Blow

Legal and ethical questions abound about the impropriety and even legality of attempting to strong-arm, and then dismissing and threatening, the law enforcement official leading an investigation into your circle of associates.

Many of those questions rise not from clandestine sources, but rather from Trump himself. He is talking and tweeting himself into legal jeopardy. He can't seem to help himself. Something in the man is broken.

He is insecure, paranoid and brittle, jostling between egomania and narcissism, intoxicated with a power beyond his meager comprehension and indulging in it beyond the point of abuse.

Some people are ebulliently optimistic that the abomination is coming undone and may soon be at an end.

But I would caution that this is a moment pregnant with calamity.

The man we see unraveling before our eyes still retains the power of the presidency until such time as he doesn't, and that time of termination is by no means assured.

Trump is now a wounded animal, desperate and dangerous. Survival is an overwhelming, instinctual impulse, and one should put nothing beyond a being who is bent on ensuring it.

Banking on an easy impeachment or resignation or a shiny set of handcuffs is incredibly tempting for those drained and depressed by Trump's unabated absurdities, perversions of truth and facts and assaults on custom, normalcy and civility.

But banking on this is, at this point, premature. I share the yearning. A case for removal can most definitely be made and has merit. But there remain untold steps between plausibility and probability. Expectations must be managed so that hopes aren't dashed if the mark isn't immediately met.

There are incredibly encouraging signs that the Comey debacle has crystallized sentiment about the severity of Trump's abnormality and the urgent need for an independent investigation into the Russia connection.

Last week after Comey was fired, 20 attorneys general sent a letter to the Department of Justice urging it to immediately appoint an independent special counsel to oversee the investigation. The letter read in part:

"As the chief law enforcement officers of our respective states, we view the President's firing of F.B.I. Director James Comey in the middle of his investigation of Russian interference in the presidential election as a violation of the public trust. As prosecutors committed to the rule of law, we urge you to consider the damage to our democratic system of any attempts by the administration to derail and delegitimize the investigation.

Furthermore, according to a poll released on Thursday: "A majority of Americans — 54 percent — think that President Donald Trump's abrupt dismissal of F.B.I. Director James Comey was not appropriate, while 46 percent think that Comey was fired due to the Russia investigation, according to results from a new NBC News|SurveyMonkey poll."

This followed a Quinnipiac Poll taken before the Comey firing that found: "American voters, who gave President Donald Trump a slight approval bump after the missile strike in Syria, today give him a near-record negative 36-58 percent job approval rating."

The report continued: "Critical are big losses among white voters with no college degree, white men and independent voters."

The army of righteous truth-seekers is gathering; the hordes of sycophants are faltering. The challenge now is to keep the media's microscope trained on this issue and to keep applying sufficient pressure to elected officials.

We may have reached an inflection point at which even partisans grow weary of the barrage of lies and the indefensible behavior, and Republican representatives finally realize that they are constitutional officers who must defend the country even if it damages their party.

Something is happening. It's in the air. It is an awakening, it is an adjustment, it is a growing up.

POLITICO

How Trump gets his fake news

By Shane Goldmacher

White House chief of staff Reince Priebus issued a stern warning at a recent senior staff meeting: Quit trying to secretly slip stuff to President Trump.

Just days earlier, K.T. McFarland, the deputy national security adviser, had given Trump a printout of two Time magazine covers. One, supposedly from the 1970s, warned of a coming ice age; the other, from 2008, about surviving global warming, according to four White House officials familiar with the matter.

Story Continued Below

Trump quickly got lathered up about the media's hypocrisy. But there was a problem. The 1970s cover was fake, part of an Internet hoax that's circulated for years. Staff chased down the truth and intervened before Trump tweeted or talked publicly about it.

The episode illustrates the impossible mission of managing a White House led by an impetuous president who has resisted structure and strictures his entire adult life.

While the information stream to past commanders-in-chief has been tightly monitored, Trump prefers an open Oval Office with a free flow of ideas and inputs from both official and unofficial channels. And he often does not differentiate between the two. Aides sometimes slip him stories to press their advantage on policy; other times they do so to gain an edge in the seemingly endless *Game of Thrones* inside the West Wing.

The consequences can be tremendous, according to a half-dozen White House officials and others with direct interactions with the president. A news story tucked into Trump's hands at the right moment can torpedo an appointment or redirect the president's entire agenda. Current and former Trump officials say Trump can react volcanically to negative press clips, especially those with damaging leaks, becoming engrossed in finding out where they originated.

That is what happened in late February when someone mischievously gave the president a printed copy of an article from GotNews.com, the website of Internet provocateur Charles C. Johnson, which accused deputy chief of staff Katie Walsh of being "the source behind a bunch of leaks" in the White House.

No matter that Johnson had been permanently banned from Twitter for harassment or that he offered no concrete evidence or that he's lobbed false accusations in the past and recanted them. Trump read the article and began asking staff about Walsh. Johnson told POLITICO that he tracks the IP addresses of visitors to his website and added: "I can tell you unequivocally that the story was shared all around the White House."

White House chief strategist Steve Bannon defended Walsh, who has since left the administration to advise a pro-Trump group, in a statement to POLITICO: "Katie was a key member of the team and is a trusted friend and ally of the White House. No one in the White House took that article seriously." Walsh declined to comment.

But the smear of one of Priebus' closest allies – Walsh was his chief of staff at the Republican National Committee – vaulted from an obscure web posting to the topic of heated conversation in the West Wing, setting off mini internal investigations into who had backstabbed Walsh.

When Trump bellows about this or that story, his aides often scramble in a game of cat-and-mouse to figure out who alerted the president to the piece in the first place given that he rarely browses the Internet on his own. Some in the White House describe getting angry calls from the president and then hustling over to Trump's personal secretary, Madeleine Westerhout, to ferret who exactly had just paid a visit to the Oval Office and possibly set Trump off.

Priebus and White House staff secretary Rob Porter have tried to implement a system to manage and document the paperwork Trump receives. While some see the new structure as a power play by a weakened chief of staff – "He'd like to get a phone log too," cracked one senior White House adviser—others are more concerned about the unfettered ability of Trump's family-member advisers, Jared Kushne and Ivanka Trump, to ply the president with whatever paperwork they want in the residence sight unseen.

"They have this system in place to get things on his desk now," the same White House official said. "I'm not sure anyone follows it."

Priebus has implored staff to do so in order to abide by presidential record-keeping laws, which require cataloguing what the president sees for the archives.

Lisa Brown, who served as White House staff secretary under President Barack Obama for two years, said it can be "dangerous" when people make end-runs around

paperwork procedures, leaving the president with incomplete or one-sided information at key junctures.

"It's even more important with someone like this," she said of Trump, a president notoriously influenced by the last person he has spoken to, "but the challenge is he has to buy into it."

"You know that people are going to go around the system. But then it's up to the principal to decide how to handle it," Brown added. "You need the president to say 'thanks, I appreciate it' [when he receives stories] and to hand it off to get it into a process."

McFarland, who is expected to leave the NSC for the ambassadorship to Singapore, did not respond to requests for comment about bringing the president a fake news magazine cover. But another White House official familiar with the matter tried to defend it as an honest error that was "fake but accurate."

"While the specific cover is fake, it is true there was a period in the 70s when people were predicting an ice age," the official insisted. "The broader point I think was accurate."

Trump may not be a fan of briefing books but he does devour the news. Most mornings, current and former aides say, Trump reads through a handful of newspapers in print, including the *New York Times, New York Post, Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal* — all while watching cable news shows in the background.

He uses the Internet minimally, other than tweeting and tracking his mentions, so what other news stories he sees can be more haphazard. Trump does receive a daily binder of news clippings put together his communications team, but White House officials disagreed about how much he reads those. White House and former campaign aides have tried to make sure Trump's media diet includes regular doses of praise and positive stories to keep his mood up – a tactic honed by staff during the campaign to keep him from tweeting angrily.

There is universal agreement among Trump advisers on this: The best way to focus the president's attention on any story is to tell him about it personally, even if it is in one of the papers he's already thumbed through. But officials say it's a high-risk, high-reward proposition because Trump's frustrations at bad stories can easily boomerang against those delivering him the news.

Still, Trump advisers are unwilling to give up the chance to directly bend the president's ear and hand him supporting documents because they have seen how he can be swayed.

When Secretary of State Rex Tillerson wanted to appoint Elliott Abrams, a veteran of the Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush White Houses, as his No. 2, someone in the president's orbit made sure Trump was freshly aware of Abrams' anti-Trump comments from 2016, such as a Weekly Standard op-ed in which Abrams wrote, "The party has nominated someone who cannot win and should not be president."

Trump personally intervened to block Abrams' appointment.

More recently, when four economists who advised Trump during the campaign — Steve Forbes, Larry Kudlow, Arthur Laffer and Stephen Moore — wrote in a New York Times op-ed that "now is the time to move it forward with urgency," someone in the White House flagged the piece for the president.

Trump summoned staff to talk about it. His message: Make this the tax plan, according to one White House official present.

The op-ed came out on a Wednesday. By Friday, Trump was telling the Associated Press, "I shouldn't tell you this, but we're going to be announcing, probably on Wednesday, tax reform," startling his own aides who had not yet prepared such a plan. Sure enough, the next Wednesday Trump's economic team was rolling out a tax plan that echoed the op-ed.

Moore was at the White House that day. "Several of the White House folks came up to us and said, 'It's your op-ed that got Trump moving on this,'" Moore said. "I've probably written 1,000 op-eds on my life but that might have been the most impactful."

So who was his guardian angel in the White House?

"We still don't know," he said.

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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Editorial : Obstruction of the Executive

Progressives have been lamenting the erosion of "democratic norms" in the Trump era, but they'd have more credibility if they didn't trample constitutional norms in their own rush to run President Trump out of town.

Start with Democratic Senator Mark Warner's assertion on Fox News Sunday that Attorney General Jeff Sessions should play no role in vetting the next director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

"I think it's inappropriate that the attorney general, who was supposed to recuse himself for anything dealing with the Russian investigation, and clearly the Russian investigation is tied into who the next FBI director is going to be because the President fired [FBI director James] Comey because of his ties to the Russian investigation," Mr. Warner said Sunday.

Fox's Chris Wallace : "You don't believe he [Mr. Sessions] could be part of this?"

Senator Warner: "I don't believe he should be part of this review process if he can have a true recusal."

Mr. Wallace didn't follow-up, so we will. Mr. Sessions has recused himself from the Russia probe, but the FBI director reports to the Attorney General on hundreds of other matters beyond that one investigation. The AG has not recused himself from those matters. Mr. Warner seems to be saying that Mr. Sessions's narrow recusal disqualifies him from supervising the FBI director at all.

Yet Mr. Comey's usurpation of the power of the AG and Deputy AG last year in the Hillary Clinton email probe is one reason Mr. Comey deserved to be fired. The FBI is part of the Justice Department, not an independent actor who reports on his own to Congress and the public. Mr. Warner is essentially saying that the executive branch must disable the normal rules of constitutional accountability at the Justice Department because of the Russia probe. (Richard Epstein and Ken Starr ably elaborate on this point nearby.)

The same goes for the argument oft-heard this weekend that President Trump obstructed justice by dismissing Mr. Comey. Harvard professor Laurence Tribe became the first prominent progressive to say that Mr. Trump should be impeached for this act, and he won't be the last. Mr. Tribe is offended that Mr. Trump said in an interview that he didn't like the Russia probe and that was on his mind when he fired Mr. Comey.

But this is an absurd standard. Presidents often disagree with decisions their deputies make, and sometimes they fire them for it. Are we supposed to believe that if a President opposes something an FBI director is doing, then a President can't fire him?

Mr. Tribe is establishing a standard by which an FBI director—or even an Attorney General—could never be fired. All a director would have to do is begin a single investigation that might affect the President, and then he would be liberated from supervision. This would de facto strip the President of his constitutional authority to supervise the executive branch.

As for obstruction of justice, this is defined under federal law as a specific act that interferes with a pending judicial proceeding. A President offering an opinion, however ill-advised, on a counterintelligence investigation is not obstruction. Neither are stupid tweets.

Genuine acts of obstruction include destroying evidence, intimidating witnesses, lying to the FBI or blocking investigators from doing their jobs. None of that has been alleged here, and Acting FBI director Andrew McCabe has said his agents are moving full-speed ahead with ample resources to do the job.

If Democrats believe evidence exists to impeach the President, the proper venue for offering it is the House Judiciary Committee. No doubt that's what they'll do if they retake the majority in 2018. Meantime, they shouldn't be allowed to deform the institutions of government to serve their partisan purposes. If they want to impeach Mr. Trump, they will have to follow American democratic norms.

CNN

Pate: Rosenstein's only good choice: name a special prosecutor

Page Pate, a CNN legal analyst, is a criminal defense and constitutional lawyer based in Atlanta. He is an adjunct professor of law at the University of Georgia, a founding member of the Georgia Innocence Project, a former board member of the Federal Defender Program in Atlanta, and the former chairman of the criminal law section of the Atlanta Bar Association. Follow him on Twitter @pagepate. The opinions expressed in this commentary are his.

*(CNN)*If I had a dollar for every time I heard the words "special prosecutor" over the past week, I would have enough money to qualify for a cabinet position in the Trump Administration.

Various Democratic

senators

have been calling for a special prosecutor whenever they can get close enough to a microphone. Last week, a number of state attorneys general

wrote

a joint letter to Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosentein urging him to appoint an independent special prosecutor. The New York Times Editorial Board

joined the chorus

a few days ago.

The idea of appointing a special prosecutor to take over the Russia investigation is not new. In March, a public opinion

poll

suggested that two-thirds of Americans supported the appointment of a special prosecutor. That was before Comey was fired, and before the competing excuses

for firing him that came from the White House and President Trump himself.

A few months ago, I

predicted

that Trump might fire Comey. (I'm not happy I was right, and the writing on the wall was clear enough for anyone who cared to look.) I thought back then that the only way to move forward with a credible investigation into Russia's involvement with the last election would be to appoint a special counsel.

What was a good idea then is a necessity now. It's not just because Trump pulled the trigger on firing Comey. Although it's unusual, it's not illegal for a President

to fire

an FBI Director. A President can hire and fire executive branch officials as he sees fit.

And that's the problem. Trump can remove anyone and everyone holding a top position at the Justice Department who may be involved in this investigation. Clearly, he's not been shy about sacking Justice Department officials. Just ask

Sally Yates and Preet Bahrara

, or the other 46 US Attorneys who were told to vacate their offices before sundown earlier this year.

Let's imagine for a minute that the people in charge decided that appointing a special prosecutor was the right thing to do.

This is how it would work

. The attorney general (or the deputy attorney general in a case like this one, where the attorney general recuses himself) has the discretion to appoint a "special counsel" when: (1) a criminal investigation is warranted; (2) there is a potential conflict of interest if the Justice Department conducted the investigation, or there are "extraordinary circumstances" present; and (3) it would be in the public interest to appoint a special counsel.

The decision by the deputy attorney general to appoint (or not appoint) a special counsel is not be reviewable. Although political and public pressure can certainly influence the decision, it's entirely up to Rosenstein to do it or not.

I know that, according to sources cited by CNN,

Rosenstein doesn't see the need

for a special counsel at this point. He's wrong. It doesn't really matter if there is nothing to the allegations of Russia's meddling in the election or collusion with the Trump team. At this point, there is so much distrust and skepticism about the process itself that there needs to be an independent prosecutor looking into these allegations just to assure the country that the President and his associates did not commit a crime.

Rosenstein shouldn't get any friction from his boss. Attorney General Jeff Sessions has publicly

recused

himself from any investigation dealing with Russian meddling, and Sessions

had no problem

with the idea of a special prosecutor when the potential target was Hillary Clinton.

I recognize that there are legitimate arguments against the appointment of a special counsel. The process can be expensive, lack clear direction, last for a year or more, and is not guaranteed to reach any meaningful conclusions. But the benefits of appointing a special counsel in this case greatly outweigh the potential downsides.

Although no one has asked me (and no one probably will), I know just the person for the job: Larry Thompson, a former deputy attorney general and former US attorney in Republican administrations.

He has extensive private sector experience, and is currently trusted by a federal court to oversee Volkswagen's compliance with criminal sanctions related to its emissions scandal. He is a loyal Republican and

a supporter of Sessions

, so the GOP couldn't credibly claim he's politically biased. More importantly, he's well-respected, extremely competent, and experienced in complex criminal investigations.

Whether it's Larry Thompson or someone else, a special prosecutor should be appointed to take over this investigation. If Rosenstein is the man everyone

says he is

, I believe he will appoint a qualified, independent prosecutor to take over this mess of an investigation.

Mr. Rosenstein, the ball is in your court. Don't let America down.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Starr : Rosenstein's Compelling Case Against Comey

Kenneth W. Starr

The long knives are out. The ultimate doomsday scenario for a constitutional republic in peacetime—calls for impeachment of the president—has now been augmented by a growing chorus of voices demanding a far less dramatic but nonetheless profoundly serious step: appointment of a special prosecutor. Even for this less drastic move, the calls are way off base. At a minimum, the suggestion is premature.

The developing narrative, trumpeted on the weekend talk shows, is that Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein must appoint a special prosecutor to restore his long-established reputation for integrity and professionalism. Attorney General Jeff Sessions has recused himself from the entire matter.

The basic complaint is that the newly appointed second-in-command at the Justice Department lost public confidence by crafting a three-page memorandum to the attorney general that severely criticized then-FBI Director James Comey, whom President Trump quickly fired. At least one senator has already mocked Mr. Rosenstein's May 9 memorandum as "laughable." They are wrong.

Let's see what the Rosenstein memorandum actually says. It is titled "Restoring Public Confidence in the FBI." Mr. Rosenstein rightly praises the bureau as "our nation's premier investigative agency." Mr. Rosenstein singles out Mr. Comey for high praise as "an articulate and persuasive speaker about leadership and the immutable principles of the Department of Justice." The memorandum goes on to praise the FBI chief for his long and distinguished public service.

Mr. Rosenstein then turns to the director's profound failures during his stewardship of the FBI. Above all, the new deputy attorney general states: "I cannot defend the Director's handling of the conclusion of the investigation of Secretary [Hillary] Clinton's emails." In this Mr. Rosenstein echoes the vehement complaints by Democrats during the 2016 campaign, and indeed comments only last week by Mrs. Clinton herself. Even Republicans had raised an arched eyebrow at what the director did and when he chose to do it. The deputy attorney general goes on to express befuddlement that Mr. Comey still refuses "to accept the nearly universal judgment that he was mistaken."

The memorandum then identifies the fatal offense of any FBI leader—the usurpation of the authority of the Justice Department itself. In a power grab, Mr. Comey had announced the ultimate prosecutorial decision, namely that Mrs. Clinton would not be prosecuted. The FBI director had no authority to do that. That was not all. Mr. Comey, the memo went on, "compounded the error" by holding a press conference releasing

"derogatory information about the subject of a declined criminal investigation." This was all way outside the foul lines of Justice Department professionalism.

Succinctly, but with devastating effectiveness, the Rosenstein memorandum demonstrates Mr. Comey's egregious violations of long-settled Justice Department practice and policy. Mr. Rosenstein draws from the director's testimony before Congress and his unprecedented letter to Congress days before the election. He addresses Mr. Comey's argument that had he failed to insert himself once again into the presidential campaign—as voting was already under way in many states—it would have constituted "concealment."

Balderdash, the deputy attorney general concludes, albeit in more polite language. Prosecutors, to say nothing of FBI directors, are not to set out a confidence-shattering bill of particulars with respect to any potential defendant's conduct, and certainly not a presidential candidate in the heat of a national campaign.

Finally, the Rosenstein memorandum sets forth paragraph after paragraph recounting the scathing criticism of the director's woefully timed election interference. The deputy attorney general demonstrates that his own conclusions are shared by a wide range of respected former officials of the Justice Department in both Democratic and Republican administrations. One example: President Clinton's deputy attorney general, Jamie Gorelick, is quoted as condemning Mr. Comey for having "chosen personally to restrike the balance between transparency and fairness, departing from the department's traditions."

There's nothing "laughable" about what the Rosenstein memorandum says. In setting forth undisputed and fireable offenses, the memorandum bespeaks professionalism, integrity and fidelity to Justice Department policy and practice, as befits the Harvard-trained lawyer and career prosecutor who was overwhelmingly confirmed by the Senate only weeks ago.

Rod Rosenstein is universally respected, a broad-based admiration founded on his long service and distinguished record in the Justice Department. Unless stepping aside represents the deputy attorney general's considered judgment as the right thing to do, calling in a special prosecutor now would simply cause further delay, add greater cost, and disrupt the continuing work of the FBI.

The bureau's investigation into Russia's involvement in the 2016 election is continuing, under the leadership of Acting Director Andrew McCabe. In addition, the work of the bipartisan Senate Intelligence Committee is well under way. Regardless of the unhappy fate of one public servant, the guardrails of constitutional republic are in place. And with its 10,000-plus special agents, the world's most respected law-enforcement agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, should be encouraged to get on with the job, and a respected deputy attorney general permitted—with accountability to Congress—to come to his considered judgment. That's precisely the kind of structural protection that the Founders had in mind over two centuries ago.

Mr. Starr served as a federal judge, solicitor general and Whitewater independent counsel.

The Washington Post

Senate GOP's agenda is at a moment of reckoning with unpredictable Trump (UNE)

Senate Republicans are suddenly grappling with a demanding agenda riddled with political peril, as they prepare to try to confirm a new FBI director and reshape the nation's health-care system — two challenges that have landed before them in rapid succession.

President Trump's abrupt firing of James B. Comey has raised concerns in both parties that threaten to linger in the effort to replace him. The president's controversial decision could also take a toll on the pace of the health-care talks, which were already off to a rocky start.

"Anytime you have something else come along when you're debating legislation, while you're trying to iron out something, it can — it takes some of the momentum away," Sen. Mike Lee (R-Utah) said Sunday on "Fox News Sunday." But he added that on health care, "We're going to get it done one way or another."

For Republican senators, it is a moment of reckoning with an unpredictable president, whom most supported in the election and have championed in office. Many said the Comey firing caught them by surprise. And while it looked for months as though the health-care push might fizzle in the House, Trump and others revived it, leaving the Senate to pick up the baton in a contentious effort to undo key parts of the law known as Obamacare.

Either task on its own would be challenging. Trying to do both has left some Republicans speechless.

When asked last week whether the White House had injected uncertainty into the Senate health-care negotiations — which, before Comey's firing, was the Senate GOP's main focus — Sen. Bill Cassidy (R-La.) simply grinned, stepped into an elevator and smiled broadly again as the door shut.

Trump's dismissal of Comey has continued to seize the attention of senators in both parties since he was ousted last week. It is expected to draw more attention this week : Senate leaders have invited Deputy Attorney General Rod J. Rosenstein to brief all senators, but aides said Sunday that the time and format of his appearance is not yet determined.

[Acting FBI director contradicts Trump White House on Comey, Russia probe]

At some point, Trump will nominate a new FBI director. The nominee will have to endure a grilling in the Senate Judiciary Committee and is expected to encounter heavy skepticism from Democrats.

Senate Republicans hold a 52-to-48 advantage over Democrats and can ultimately confirm an FBI director with a simple majority under the Senate's rules. But concerns that some GOP senators have raised about the timing of Comey's dismissal and uncertainty about whom Trump will tap to replace him could lead to a dicey confirmation process.

Amid reports that Trump might tap Sen. John Cornyn (R-Tex.) — a former judge and Texas attorney general — to lead the FBI, Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.) told NBC's "Meet the Press" on Sunday that Trump should instead "pick someone who comes from within the ranks or has such a reputation that has no political background at all that can go into the job on day one."

"I don't think Jim Comey leaving was a surprise. I think the timing was a surprise," said Sen. James Lankford (R-Okla.), a member of the Intelligence Committee. The committee is investigating potential Russian meddling in the 2016 election, including possible coordination with Trump associates.

Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Charles E. Grassley (R-Iowa) said he does not plan to recommend any Comey replacements to the White House unless he is asked to do so. Lee used his Fox interview to revive calls for Trump to tap Judge Merrick Garland, Barack Obama's stalled Supreme Court nominee.

Democrats have accused Trump of engaging in Nixonian tactics in his dismissal of Comey and suggested that the former director may have been fired over his investigation into whether Trump associates coordinated with Russia to interfere in the campaign. They have used Comey's ouster to amplify their calls for a special prosecutor and an independent investigation of Russian meddling.

To apply further pressure, Democrats used procedural tactics to delay at least one committee hearing this week before they abandoned their blockade to allow an Intelligence Committee hearing to go forward.

From a procedural standpoint, Democrats can slow, but not stop, Republicans on executive branch confirmations — so long as they hold together. While that has been less of a problem in the Senate than in the House, some Democrats now say they believe the circumstances of the Comey firing could put some cracks in the Republican coalition.

"I'm finding more of the Republicans who are saying privately and quietly that this is worth looking into," said Senate Minority Whip Richard J. Durbin (D-Ill.). "It is worth investigating."

Even if Republicans stick together to confirm a new FBI director, time spent on that is time not spent on health care. Senate Republicans are trying to write their own health-care bill after the House narrowly passed its own version last week, an ambitious and complicated endeavor.

"It is going to be difficult at best. Anything like that adds to it," said Sen. Orrin G. Hatch (R-Utah), speaking of Comey firing's impact on health-care and tax retooling, another major GOP goal.

Hatch is one of 13 members of an all-Republican group of senators that is meeting twice a week to talk about health care. The group has come under criticism for not including any women. And deep differences exist among the members of the group, as well as the broader Senate GOP Conference, about how to approach Medicaid, health-care tax credits and preexisting medical conditions.

Health-care talks in the Senate could drag on for months. GOP leaders have been reluctant to put a timetable on their efforts. But already, the House GOP leadership is applying pressure on them to plow ahead swiftly.

"I really do believe we can get this by the end of the summer. I hope the Senate can move this bill fairly quickly — hopefully in a month or two," House Speaker Paul D. Ryan (R-Wis.) said in an interview with Fox News.

Senate Democrats, meanwhile, are keeping tabs on public opinion to determine how far they can go in obstructing Trump's legislative agenda without angering voters who already view Congress as hopelessly gridlocked, according to Democratic aides who spoke on the condition of anonymity to speak about strategy. As Trump's favorability falls, Democrats grow more hopeful that Republicans will abandon efforts to protect him, the aides said.

The Health 202 newsletter

Your daily guide to the health-care debate.

For much of the year, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) has focused on more routine business, like vetting and approving Trump administration nominees and rolling back federal regulations. He also helped shepherd Neil M. Gorsuch's confirmation to the Supreme Court, notching a big early win for the new Republican-controlled government.

Under current law, the legislative window for voting on regulations closed this week — just as Senate Republicans started sizing up their more challenging tasks ahead. Some are trying to take it in stride.

"We should be able to walk, chew gum and confirm an FBI director at the same time," Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) said.

Ed O'Keefe contributed to this report.

The New York Times — G.O.P. Senators, Pulling Away From Trump, Have 'a Lot Less Fear of Him' (UNE)

Jennifer Steinhauer

But with the White House lurching from crisis to crisis, the president is hampering Republicans' efforts to fulfill his promises.

"All the work that goes into getting big things done is hard enough even in the most tranquil of environments in Washington," said Kevin Madden, a Republican operative who worked for John A. Boehner when he was the House speaker. "But distractions like these can become a serious obstacle to aligning the interests of Congress."

When Congress and the White House are controlled by the same party, lawmakers usually try to use the full weight of the presidency to achieve legislative priorities, through a clear and coordinated vision, patience with intransigent lawmakers and message repetition. Mr. Trump's transient use of his bully pulpit for policy messaging has upended that playbook.

"It does seem like we have an upheaval, a crisis almost every day in Washington that changes the subject," Senator Susan Collins, Republican of Maine, who has been trying to advance health care legislation, said in a television interview on Thursday night.

The latest subject-changing crisis has been the fallout from Mr. Trump's sudden dismissal of Mr. Comey, who was leading the F.B.I.'s investigation into contacts between the Trump campaign and Russia. Mr. Trump suggested last week that he might have surreptitiously taped his conversations with Mr. Comey, and on Sunday two Republican senators, Mike Lee of Utah and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, said the president should turn over any such tapes, if they exist.

In the days after Mr. Trump's election victory, the mood was different, as Republicans expressed high hopes that they could move quickly on a conservative agenda that merged with Mr. Trump's. "We're going to be an enthusiastic supporter almost all the time," Mr. McConnell said of Mr. Trump in November.

But Republicans have so far achieved few of their legislative priorities, like repealing the Affordable Care Act or cutting taxes. When Mr. Trump suggested this month that the Senate should change its rules to make it easier for Republicans to push bills through, Mr. McConnell firmly rejected the idea.

Lawmakers are also bucking the president by pushing ahead with bipartisan measures on sanctions against Russia. And this month, Republicans rejected many of the administration's priorities in a short-term spending measure, including money for a wall along the border with Mexico.

Two Republican senators who face potentially tough re-election fights next year — Dean Heller of Nevada and Jeff Flake of Arizona — have been unabashed in their criticism of Mr. Trump and his administration, which they have clearly begun to view as a drag on their political prospects.

"In Arizona, we grow them independent," Mr. Flake said, noting the unpopularity in his state of Mr. Trump's views on the border wall and Nafta. "I expect people want someone who will say, 'I'm voting with Trump on the good stuff and standing up to him on the not good stuff.'"

Some Republicans, like Mr. Ryan, have preferred to keep the focus firmly on the good stuff. Mr. Ryan has remained in harmony with the president, last month calling him "a driven, hands-on leader, with the potential to become a truly transformational American figure."

Mr. Trump retains the support of about 80 percent of Republican voters, and although his overall popularity is at historic lows at this point in a presidency, it remains well above the depths eventually reached by presidents like George W. Bush and Jimmy Carter. At those levels, larger numbers of lawmakers might start to turn away from Mr. Trump — though even if they wanted to do so, Republicans would not be able to completely separate themselves from him on issues like a tax overhaul, where his blessing would be needed to move forward in any major way.

But while Mr. Trump's approval rating has been sufficient to prevent mass defections — a Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll released on Sunday showed it at 39 percent — it is too low to pressure Democrats to support him in any significant way.

Any bills that require 60 votes to pass — almost everything aside from Republicans' health care and tax measures — will be impossible to advance without the help of Democrats.

Republicans had been counting on Senate Democrats who are up for re-election next year in states won by Mr. Trump to bend to their will. But so far those Democrats, like Senators Claire McCaskill of Missouri and Joe Manchin III of West Virginia, have been largely comfortable standing against Mr. Trump, especially when their Republican colleagues tell them that they, too, have had about enough.

"I'm hearing more and more of them say privately that they are more and more concerned," said Senator Sherrod Brown, Democrat of Ohio. "More importantly, there is a lot less fear of him than there was just a month ago."

Already, Republicans are talking openly about rejecting components of the budget request that Mr. Trump is expected to release in two weeks. Any new request for money for a border wall would almost certainly be rejected, as would large cuts to drug control programs.

Senator Rob Portman, Republican of Ohio, has spoken in support of the programs on the Senate floor, and Senator Shelley Moore Capito, Republican of West Virginia, which has had large numbers of opioid deaths, issued a news release calling on the administration to "propose a realistic budget that demonstrates the administration's commitment to combating drug addiction."

If it does not, she warned in a letter to Mick Mulvaney, the White House budget director, "I will lead a bipartisan group of my colleagues on the Appropriations Committee and in the Senate to reject those proposed cuts."

During his campaign, Mr. Trump found a winning message in criticizing trade agreements. But traditionally pro-trade Republicans — after yielding for a while to his rejection of such deals, including when he abandoned the Trans-Pacific Partnership on his first full weekday in office — have begun to push back. The president has vacillated on whether to also abandon Nafta.

"If you cancel Nafta, you harm the economy of my state," said Senator John McCain, Republican of

Arizona. Mr. Flake concurred: “Our trade relationship with Mexico is a positive, and not just in an economic sense, but in terms of security as well,” he said, citing cooperation between Mexican and American authorities on combating drug trafficking.

Mr. Trump should also not expect Congress to give Russia a pass over its actions in Ukraine, Syria and the 2016 American election.

“My sense is that Congress is going to act on sanctions against Russia,” said Senator Bob Corker, Republican of Tennessee and the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which is working on bills now. “We plan to be very much in the middle of that.”

Even some of Mr. Trump’s most fervent backers see tensions in the future.

“There will be times when we disagree with the president,” said Senator Jim Inhofe, Republican of Oklahoma, who has criticized the administration for what he perceives as the possibility that it will keep the country in the Paris climate accord. “And we when do, we’ll be outspoken about it.”