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French leader Macron proposes big expansion of his counterterrorism powers

PARIS — President Emmanuel Macron's government on Thursday proposed a significant expansion of authorities' powers to fight terrorism, alarming civil liberties advocates even as defenders said the plans would help keep French citizens safe.

The draft law was introduced after a series of attempted terrorist strikes in Paris and Brussels in recent weeks and several bloody attacks in Britain that were claimed by Islamic State-inspired militants. Those have prompted European leaders to search urgently for new strategies to combat terrorism.

Before Macron's election last month, the politician said he would seek new approaches to fight terrorism. But he also cast himself as a friend of the Muslim world, raising expectations he would try to build bridges with France's often-marginalized Muslim community.

His far-right opponent, Marine Le Pen, sought to paint him as weak on Islamist violence.

The changes proposed Thursday seek to wind down a state of emergency that gave French security officials broad powers and was imposed after the November 2015 Paris attacks, which claimed 130 lives. Some of those powers would be made permanent, including the ability to temporarily shutter places of worship that promote extremism and conduct searches with fewer restrictions. The draft also strips some oversight powers from judges and gives security officials more latitude to act without judicial review.

"I think we have achieved a good balance," Interior Minister Gérard Collomb told reporters after a meeting of the French cabinet Thursday during which he proposed the law. "The aim is to put an end to the state of emergency."

Macron and his predecessor, François Hollande, have sought to end the state of emergency, which has been extended several times since the 2015 attacks. It is slated to expire July 15, although Macron has

asked for it to be prolonged until November. Both leaders have worried about political blowback if they end the state of emergency and there is another terrorist strike, analysts say.

The threat against France was underlined Monday when a 31-year-old man rammed a car packed with explosives and guns into a police van on the famed Champs-Élysées in Paris. The man was killed; no one else was injured.

Critics of the emergency powers say that they have been applied indiscriminately, not just to combat terrorism. Even some analysts who believe the expanded powers can be useful in disrupting terrorist plots say that the efficacy wears off as militants find new ways to evade detection.

"Emergency powers are effective because they are unusual," said François Heisbourg, an analyst with the Paris-based Foundation for Strategic Research. "If you make them usual, they cease to be effective."

Advocates of the new proposal — which still needs to be passed by parliament — say they have sought to respect civil liberties while improving safety. Some of the changes are less controversial, such as a measure that allows police to cordon off large public events such as concerts where there could be a security threat — something that is commonplace elsewhere in the world.

The proposal "tries to preserve the balance between controlling terrorism and respecting liberties," French Prime Minister Édouard Philippe said Wednesday on France's TF1 television station. "We cannot give up what we are."

He acknowledged that the law was a work in progress, saying that consultation with parliament, where Macron has a majority, would "enrich the text."

Macron last month announced the formation of a terrorism task force that would streamline communication among branches of

intelligence and law enforcement, an idea praised by terrorism experts.

"There is a favorable window of opportunity now" to fight terrorism, with the Islamic State disrupted in Syria and Iraq, said Gilles Kepel, who informally advised Macron on counterterrorism during the campaign and whose book "Terror in France" was just published in English.

But the new proposal has drawn more skepticism. Some critics say that the emergency powers have been ineffective in preventing terrorism in France, pointing to last year's deadly Bastille Day truck attack in Nice and other violent incidents.

"The more we militarize this, the more it generates a reaction," said Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou, a terrorism expert at the Graduate Institute in Geneva. Terrorism "feeds on those pressure points. The challenge is to take out the conditions in which this terrorism proliferates."

One particular concern among critics is a proposed measure that would give police wider powers to conduct warrantless searches.

"For 30 years we've been fighting terrorism within the realm of the rule of law," said Jean-Charles Brisard, a French terrorism expert.

Even though such operations would still be subject to judicial review, it appears that law enforcement would need little proof to conduct them, said Nicolas Krameyer, a specialist on civil liberties issues at Amnesty International France.

The proposal is "dangerous for the rights and liberties of people in France," he said.

The draft law has set off alarms among members of France's Muslim community, many of whom associate the state of emergency with harsh measures taken in 1955 during Algeria's bloody war for independence from France.

During the presidential campaign, Macron said that France's

colonization of Algeria involved "crimes against humanity."

Macron "was very keen on addressing all forms of discrimination," including those against Muslims, said Marwan Muhammad, director of the advocacy group Collective Against Islamophobia in France.

"We were shocked" about the draft law, he said. "Muslims are the first victims and the first targets of the state of emergency."

Since November 2015, French police have conducted over 4,000 searches and raids using emergency powers and placed about 400 people under house arrest, according to statistics collected by Amnesty International. While no official data breaks down the identities of the suspects involved, Muhammad's organization assisted more than 400 French Muslims who said their homes were searched without probable cause in 2016.

"We are not monsters," said Khalid, 31, a French-born IT worker in western France who said his door was kicked down by at least a dozen security officers days after the November 2015 attacks in Paris. The officers pointed a gun at him and woke his 4-year-old son, he said. He spoke on the condition that his family name not be used because he fears professional repercussions.

According to Khalid, police said they conducted the raid because of suspicions of "radical activity" because he was a member of a youth outreach organization at his mosque. But he was not charged, and he has since filed a complaint with local authorities.

"Aren't we French people like them? I was born here. I've lived here my whole life. It's really broken my heart," he said.

Birnbaum reported from Brussels.

Matthew Dalton

France's Macron Shifts Country's Stance on Removing Assad From Power

PARIS—French President Emmanuel Macron said removing Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad from power shouldn't be a precondition for a peace deal in the war-torn nation, a shift in French policy after years of Paris calling for Mr. Assad to step aside.

"The real update I have done on this subject," Mr. Macron said in an interview with European newspapers, when asked about Syria, "it's that I have not announced that the removal of Bashar al-Assad is a precondition for everything. Because no one has showed me a legitimate successor."

Mr. Macron's comments mark his first major foreign policy departure from his predecessor, François Hollande, who has insisted since the early days of Syria's bloody civil war

that Mr. Assad should step down. Mr. Macron took office last month after winning the election in a landslide.

Mr. Macron added that he had found some common ground with Russian President Vladimir Putin, a key supporter of Mr. Assad, on the question of Syria. The two leaders met in Versailles outside Paris last month.

"We've been blocked for a long time on the figure of Bashar al-Assad," Mr. Macron said, "But Bashar, he is not our enemy. He is the enemy of the Syrian people."

Mr. Macron, however, drew a "red line" against Mr. Assad using chemical weapons, after the international community accused the Syrian regime of unleashing sarin gas in April on rebel-held areas, killing scores of people. U.S.

President Donald Trump ordered cruise missile strikes against a Syrian military air base in retaliation. Mr. Macron said that France would conduct airstrikes if Mr. Assad used chemical weapons again, with or without French allies.

"If it's found that chemical weapons are used on the ground and that we know the origin, France will then proceed to strikes to destroy stocks of chemical weapons," he said.

Mr. Macron's remarks could spark debate within Europe about the bloc's diplomatic stance on the Syrian conflict. European diplomats have long called on Mr. Assad to step aside after six years of brutal civil war, in which tens of thousands of people have died at the hands of regime forces.

"The EU recalls that there can be no lasting peace in Syria under the

current regime," the bloc's foreign ministers said in a statement in April.

France is a major contributor to the U.S.-led military coalition fighting Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. French jets fly bombing missions out of regional air bases, while French artillery batteries and special forces are fighting the extremist group on the ground.

Tensions have flared recently between Russia and the coalition. A U.S. jet fighter shot down a Syrian government plane that dropped bombs near U.S.-backed forces that are bearing down on Raqqa, Islamic State's de facto capital in northern Syria. Russia responded by threatening to shoot down coalition planes operating west of the Euphrates River.

The
Washington
Post

gloried in France's political dysfunction.

France's then-Socialist government had, after all, repeatedly proved itself an anti-business basket case. President François Hollande's proposal for a 75 percent marginal income-tax rate drove wealthy celebrities to renounce their French citizenship. He called "the world of finance" his "enemy." Other French ministers attacked industry titans.

Major national and political news as it breaks.

The gleeful response from the mayor of London: "Venez à Londres, mes amis" (Come to London, my friends).

And in a Group of 20 speech that really galled the Gauls, then-British Prime Minister David Cameron said that he would "roll out the red carpet" for anyone fleeing anti-business policies in France.

Eh bien, tut the French today. How the tables have turned.

Exactly a year after the shattering Brexit vote, uncertainty and political incompetence roil the United Kingdom. Brits don't know whether their split from the European Union will be "hard," "soft" or "scrambled," or even what their leaders are asking for in the divorce.

Many British industries, from academia to automobiles, fear losing access to top talent and the European market. Arguably no

Rampell: How France could win the post-Brexit beauty contest

Five years ago, British politicians in France's political dysfunction.

sector has more at stake, though, than Hollande's former "enemy" — that lucrative financial industry.

Depending on how Brexit talks shake out, British and global financial institutions may no longer be able to use their London bases to sell services throughout Europe. Also at risk is London's enormous euro-clearing business, which processes transactions worth about \$1 trillion per day.

London could lose tens of thousands — perhaps more than 100,000 — jobs in the finance industry alone to the continent.

And French officials are licking their lips. Or, to use their own preferred, Cameron-inspired metaphor: They are rolling out the "blue-white-red carpet."

"I was against Brexit and I'm still very much in favor of the U.K. staying in Europe," Valérie Pécresse, the president of the Paris region, told me. "But that's a sovereign decision of the British people, and I respect it." No point, she says, in wasting a precious opportunity to repatriate some of the "thousands of jobs" that left Paris for London in recent years.

She and other French officials have moved swiftly to try to peel off British jobs, which their counterparts in Frankfurt, Dublin and other cities are also eyeing.

Almost immediately after the Brexit vote, France launched an aggressive ad campaign ("Tired of

the fog? Try the frogs!"). Financial regulators began allowing firms to submit their legal paperwork in — sacré bleu! — English. Hollande's government even expanded a generous suite of tax breaks for foreigners who decamp for France, as well as French expats who decide to return home.

At pitch meetings in London and New York, officials and lobbyists tout French international schools, job opportunities for spouses, proximity to big clients and, of course, the cultural allure of the City of Light.

"When was the last time you booked a weekend in Frankfurt?" teased Ross McInnes, chairman of French aerospace and defense firm Safran and a government-appointed "economic ambassador" in the British courtship effort.

But the "game-changer," as Arnaud de Bresson, chief executive of financial lobbying group Paris Europlace, put it, was the recent election victories of Emmanuel Macron and his brand-new centrist party.

The charismatic new French president is in some ways the reputational opposite of the predecessor he served under as economy minister. He's also a convenient foil for more insular, backward-looking leadership in Britain (and the United States).

He's a former banker, for one, a fact not lost on British financiers otherwise wary of France's

reputation for hostility toward bankers.

More critically, Macron has vowed to make the country more business-friendly, entrepreneurial and economically flexible. This means fixing France's notoriously rigid labor laws — no easy task — and further reducing French tax rates (including exempting financial assets from the national wealth tax).

Nearly every French official, lobbyist and business leader I've interviewed has said that France desperately needs these reforms to happen if France is to win the post-Brexit beauty contest. And in the same breath they insist that France's anti-business reputation is unfair.

The 75 percent "supertax" on the wealthy is gone, everyone is quick to remind me. (The policy quietly died at the end of 2014.) And France's famed 35-hour workweek isn't always observed by finance employees and executives.

"The reputation we have, it was probably fully justified a few years ago, but not to the same point today," said Christian Noyer, the former Bank of France governor who has been commissioned by the French government to woo London financiers.

So far just one major financial institution, HSBC, has publicly committed to sending jobs to Paris. But the charm offensive isn't over.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Migrants Return to France's 'Jungle' in Calais

Noemie Bisserbe

CALAIS,

France—Migrants are returning to the French side of the English Channel, saddling France's newly elected president with a humanitarian and diplomatic challenge that has long bedeviled the European Union.

Hundreds of migrants from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and Africa have taken refuge in wooded areas around the port town of Calais, which for decades has served as a gateway for refugees trying to reach the U.K. The seasonal flow defies efforts by the predecessor of President Emmanuel Macron to dismantle the notorious refugee camp known as the Jungle. Last year, Paris relocated thousands of refugees to other parts of France.

Their return is likely to exacerbate tensions along the channel just as Brexit negotiations get under way. Immigration to the U.K. of both documented and undocumented migrants was a major factor in Britain's vote last year to leave the economic bloc. Mr. Macron has said that in light of Brexit, France and the U.K. should renegotiate a 2003 border treaty that put the onus on France to secure the border.

Under that agreement, known as the Touquet accords, London provides some border agents and helps finance security walls and razor wire on the French side of the channel to

keep migrants from entering the tunnel that carries trains and trucks under the waterway.

But France processes the vast majority of asylum claims made by those hoping to reach the U.K. French police also deploy in large numbers across the port to not only bar entrance to the tunnel, but also maintain public order in areas that are seasonally flooded with migrants.

On Tuesday, a truck driver died in an accident after migrants placed tree trunks on the highway, police said. Migrants typically obstruct the roadways leading into the tunnel so they can clandestinely board the vehicles and sneak into the U.K. Nine Eritreans were detained by French police.

About 30 migrants are discovered every day hiding in the back of a truck at border controls, said Gilles Debove, a police officer in Calais. "It's starting again."

The perennial problem has fueled support around Calais for the far-right National Front. Half of the eight National Front candidates elected to Parliament last week—including party leader Marine Le Pen—will represent areas around Calais.

For more than a decade, migrants have taken advantage of the free movement within the EU to hopscotch across the region and reach their preferred destinations.

The U.K. remains a magnet due to its looser labor rules, multicultural cities and the ability of many migrants to speak at least some English.

Farid Kahn, a 23-year-old from Afghanistan, arrived in Calais a few weeks ago after transiting through Italy.

"I sold three homes in Afghanistan to pay for my journey to England," he says. "I speak English and studied computer science. I could get a job there."

Mr. Macron says the solution to stemming the flow of migrants is to reinforce the borders of countries at the edge of the EU, such as Greece and Italy. A staunch pro-European, he doesn't want to restrict travel between France and its European neighbors—a measure favored by Ms. Le Pen.

"Macron wants to let migrants into the country, but he does nothing to take care of them," says Emanuel Candas, 52, an employee at a mechanical contractor who works across the street from an area where meals are distributed by aid workers in Calais.

One way for Mr. Macron to relieve political pressure is to make it easier for migrants bottled up in Calais to leave France. The Touquet accords aren't part of Brexit negotiations, and Mr. Macron has pledged not to engage in separate bilateral talks

with the U.K. that might undercut negotiators in Brussels. Still, the accords allow either of the signatories to withdraw unilaterally.

For now, French authorities continue to play cat-and-mouse. Migrant camps were dismantled in 2002 and 2009, but many more returned in subsequent years.

On a recent afternoon, a white truck carrying food for migrants parked near a canopy of trees. About 400 migrants emerged from hiding to stock up on supplies. Moments later, police came and chased them away.

Aid workers say police are using excessive force against migrants and trying to prevent them from distributing meals. On Thursday, a spokesman for the French government said police chiefs "had been given instructions for more flexibility and humanity to be shown."

Jimmy Sami, a 17-year-old from Eritrea, was back in Calais after fleeing the Hollande government's relocation program. He lived in the streets of Paris before returning to the port town in May to make another attempt at crossing the channel.

"I don't want to stay in France," Mr. Sami said.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Barnes

EU Leaders Support Defense Cooperation Plan

Laurence Norman and Julian E.

BRUSSELS—European Union leaders backed a new defense cooperation plan Thursday, potentially allowing groups of member states to jointly purchase critical equipment or launch overseas missions together.

Critical details of the pact must still be agreed upon in coming months and defense experts warned the initiative could still collapse. But European officials and analysts said the deal, along with other defense initiatives, could open a new era of closer cooperation and more effective military spending in Europe.

European leaders made "real advances in the area of defense," said French President Emmanuel Macron. "We've adopted a more comprehensive strategy."

The initiative, known as "Permanent Structured Cooperation," or PESCO, was first tabled when the EU updated its basic treaty law in 2009. The plan was essentially shelved due to British concerns that EU defense ambitions could weaken or duplicate work done by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

With Britain leaving the bloc and U.S. President Donald Trump demanding increased military spending from NATO partners, Brussels has accelerated its ambitions for greater defense cooperation.

"This is an enhanced cooperation initiative, open to everyone but not everyone needs to participate," German Chancellor Angela Merkel said at a news conference Thursday evening. "From the French and German perspective, it's very important and a real step forward in the quality of

cooperation among EU member states."

EU leaders on Thursday also broadly backed a plan for a new half-billion-euro EU defense fund that would provide financial incentives for defense companies to cooperate across borders on common projects. The bloc has also launched a pilot project to help defense-research firms.

PESCO has long been seen as a vital tool in greater defense cooperation. It will provide an EU structure for common projects or missions that don't require backing of all 28 member states at each step, as many joint projects now do.

At Thursday's meeting, EU leaders fixed a three-month deadline for agreeing on critical elements of the plan, such as criteria for participating. An initial list of projects will allow EU members to decide whether to join.

EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini has said she hopes to launch PESCO by year-end, a goal EU leaders backed Thursday, according to people briefed on discussions.

Still, important differences remain. Some countries, particularly Germany, have pushed for easier entry criteria, allowing more countries to participate. France, in contrast, wanted to ensure that participating countries made ambitious pledges of money and material from the outset. That could allow PESCO to provide a platform for groups of EU countries to undertake demanding overseas operations.

German officials have said they favor early projects that don't involve combat operations. They have suggested the first projects should focus on plans like a common European medical evacuation facility or drone technology. Ms. Merkel

acknowledged “conceptual differences” between France and Germany.

Mr. Macron said France and Germany plan to deepen discussions on PESCO when their governments hold a joint cabinet meeting on July 13.

Pauline Massart, the deputy director for security and geopolitics at Friends of Europe, a Brussels-based think tank, said there is strong momentum behind the common

defense project, but “it could falter on technicalities or political will.”

“France has been okay with being a big military power and is well-supported by French citizens,” said Ms. Massart. “That obviously in Germany is less acceptable.”

But EU diplomats say differences between Berlin and Paris may be narrowing. They say while France is signaling more patience on how quickly to scale up PESCO projects, Germany is signaling it will make a

serious commitment to joint initiatives.

“I think we are witnessing a rapprochement between France and Germany,” said a senior EU diplomat on Wednesday. But, “we are not there yet,” he said.

Julia Himmrich, a research fellow and the European Leadership Network, a London-based think tank, said the success of the initiative would depend in part on whether the EU’s other defense projects come to fruition.

“We are in a much more pro-European era than we were a year ago. The mood has really changed,” Ms. Himmrich said. “It is about sending a political message that there is a unified Europe, that member states are able to come together this time when it has failed so many times before.”

—Valentina Pop and Stacy Meichtry contributed to this article.

The New York Times

BRUSSELS — Prime Minister Theresa May of Britain vowed on Thursday to protect the rights of millions of citizens of other European Union countries who are living in Britain after the country withdraws from the bloc.

Mrs. May made the pledge in remarks to the leaders of the other 27 European Union nations at a summit meeting in Brussels. It was intended to allay fears about mass dislocation stemming from Britain’s decision to withdraw.

“The U.K.’s position represents a fair and serious offer,” Mrs. May told the leaders over dinner at the summit talks. She said she wanted to give “as much certainty as possible to citizens who have settled in the U.K., building careers and lives and contributing so much to our society.”

More than three million citizens of other European Union countries live in Britain, while more than one million Britons live in the other 27 nations. Many of these people have formed families and raised children, and have been anxious about their

May Offers Plan for E.U. Citizens to Stay in U.K. After ‘Brexit’

James Kanter

status since the referendum a year ago when British voters decided to leave the union.

Mrs. May is expected to present her plans in far greater detail on Monday in London, and she left important questions unanswered in her remarks Thursday evening. Some of the substance of her plans appeared to be sharply at odds with her European counterparts’ expectations.

Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, described Mrs. May’s proposal as “a good start” although it met with skepticism from some other leaders. “There were so many details left open,” Christian Kern, the Austrian chancellor, told reporters.

A key issue is setting a cutoff date for European Union citizens living in Britain to qualify for what is called settled status, allowing them to remain indefinitely. The date must fall sometime between March 29, 2017, the day Mrs. May formally notified the union of its intention to withdraw, and the day the withdrawal actually takes effect — two years after the notice was given, barring an extension.

European Union officials have said they want Britain to guarantee their citizens’ rights to live in Britain right up to the date of withdrawal, or Brexit as it is known. And they want the Court of Justice of the European Union to oversee residency and rights to education, health care and pensions.

But Mrs. May said on Thursday that the cutoff date had not yet been determined, and that the system would be overseen exclusively by British courts, with no role for the European court.

Five years’ residency is normally required to qualify to stay in Britain indefinitely, but Mrs. May offered on Thursday to allow a “grace period” of up to two years after the cutoff for people who had moved to Britain more recently.

Earlier in the day, several European leaders urged Britain to reverse course and remain a member of the European Union.

Donald Tusk, the president of the European Council, the body that organizes summit meetings, invoked the John Lennon song “Imagine” in

discussing his hopes for a change of heart.

“Some of my British friends have even asked me whether Brexit could be reversed, and whether I could imagine an outcome where the U.K. stays part of the E.U.,” Mr. Tusk told reporters. “I told them that, in fact, the European Union was built on dreams that seemed impossible to achieve. So, who knows? You may say I’m a dreamer, but I am not the only one.”

Mark Rutte, the prime minister of the Netherlands, had a far tougher message, saying that in order to avoid extensive economic damage, Britain needed to accept the jurisdiction of the European court and to go on allowing citizens of other European Union countries to live and work freely in Britain. “I hate Brexit from every angle,” said Mr. Rutte. But he added that the withdrawal was “a sovereign decision by the British people, and I can’t argue with democracy.”

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

BRUSSELS—All European Union citizens currently in Britain would have a pathway to apply for permanent residency under an offer British Prime Minister Theresa May outlined Thursday evening to her European Union counterparts.

Delivering some detail on one of the first issues to be discussed in divorce negotiations between the U.K. and the EU, Mrs. May attempted to find common ground with the rest of the EU in what British officials said was a generous offer.

Mrs. May said EU citizens who have arrived in Britain before a yet-to-be-determined date—likely between

Theresa May to Allow EU Citizens to Stay in U.K. Post-Brexit

Jenny Gross and Valentina Pop

this year and 2019—and have remained in the country for at least five years could apply to stay indefinitely and receive the same rights as U.K. citizens. Those who have stayed for fewer years would have a path to eventually apply for that status.

“The U.K.’s position represents a fair and serious offer and one aimed at giving as much certainty as possible to citizens who have settled in the U.K., building careers and lives and contributing so much to our society,” the prime minister said.

While the proposals may be palatable to EU leaders in their general outline, tougher challenges are likely to emerge in working out the details, such as rights of family members of EU citizens and which

courts would rule on disputes over those rights.

Speaking on her way out of the meeting, German Chancellor Angela Merkel described Mrs. May’s offer on citizens’ rights as “a good start” but said “many, many other questions remain,” for instance on Britain’s financial settlement with the EU and on issues regarding the border between Northern Ireland and EU member Ireland.

Leaders didn’t respond to Mrs. May’s offer while she was in the room, as they had previously said negotiations would be left to the two sides’ negotiating teams. Once she left the room they briefly discussed her presentation, according to an EU official who was present.

“Once she was gone we said, ‘OK, that was interesting, but now it’s for [EU negotiator] Michel Barnier to evaluate it,’” Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said.

Mrs. May, speaking at the end of a dinner with the other 27 EU leaders, said she wanted to provide clarity to the roughly three million EU citizens living in the U.K., whose future status there has hung in question since the U.K. voted a year ago to leave the bloc.

She said her offer would stand only if the EU agrees to give reciprocal rights to the roughly one million British people living in the EU.

The EU has already said it was seeking the full range of rights and benefits EU and British citizens

currently enjoy on each others' territories.

The host of the Brussels summit, Donald Tusk, played down expectations about a detailed Brexit discussion during the dinner.

"It must be clear that the European Council is not a forum for the Brexit negotiations. We have our negotiators for this, and so leaders will only take note of these intentions," he said ahead of Mrs. May's presentation.

Britain's vote last year to leave the EU has significant consequences, both for British people living in other parts of Europe and for Europeans living in the U.K., and her plan for these people left a lot of questions unanswered. Mrs. May has said the U.K. would in the future no longer

abide by European rules on the free movement of people, which allow citizens to live and work anywhere in the bloc.

Mrs. May was meeting EU leaders in Brussels for the first time since she lost her parliamentary majority in an election that dented her standing at home and abroad. The response of EU officials in the coming weeks will be an early test of her strength in the negotiations.

Differences between the two sides may emerge over the cutoff date for migrants to have arrived in the U.K. for the proposed rights to apply, as well as over what rights would apply to the families of EU citizens living in the U.K. Another divisive issue may be whether the top European court has jurisdiction to enforce the rights

of EU citizens in the U.K. A British government official said U.K. courts would have jurisdiction over EU citizens in Britain.

Mrs. May declined to go into detail about some of the more difficult issues, saying they would be laid out in a paper that the government will publish Monday. The paper will outline various scenarios of EU citizens living in the U.K. to help explain the proposals, a senior government official said.

Once she finished her presentation, Mrs. May left and the other leaders continued to discuss issues including which countries should host the European Medicines Agency and European Banking Authority, EU bodies which are

currently based in the U.K. but will be transferred because of Brexit.

Some EU officials criticized Mrs. May for taking time away from other issues, such as Europe's migration crisis, by speaking about details of Britain's exit from the EU.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel underlined that while she supports the idea of granting EU citizens' rights as broadly as possible, the negotiations are carried out by Michel Barnier, the bloc's Brexit negotiator, rather than at the level of EU leaders.

"We have bigger things at 28 to talk about," said one senior EU official.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

U.K. Warns Cladding From Grenfell Tower Fire on Hundreds of Buildings

Denise Roland and Wiktor Szary

LONDON—The U.K. government warned that hundreds of public-housing high rises across the country could be covered with the same cladding suspected of contributing to the quick spread of a fire that incinerated an apartment tower in London last week, killing at least 79 people.

The government on Thursday said it had identified about 600 publicly owned residential towers that had installed some form of cladding—an exterior facade often used to make a building more energy efficient or improve its outward appearance. Authorities are now testing the cladding on those buildings to determine how many used the same material as Grenfell Tower, the site of the disaster.

British Prime Minister Theresa May, in an appearance before Parliament on Thursday, said a number of buildings had already been found to contain "combustible" cladding.

A spokesman for the prime minister's office said that so far cladding samples from seven high-rise public-housing buildings in four local government areas have failed the inflammability tests. The tests are continuing and this number could rise, he said.

During a refurbishment of Grenfell Tower completed last year, contractors installed a widely used material on the exterior of the

building. It consists of an aluminum shell and a flammable plastic filling.

The cladding material, called Reynobond PE and made by Arconic Inc., is marketed around the world. In the U.S., its use is generally limited to lower buildings because of fire-safety concerns.

U.K. officials have said the material didn't meet building standards for towers above 18 meters, or about 59 feet, tall. But British building industry experts and the British company that supplied the material to Grenfell Tower contractors maintain that it is compliant with current building codes.

Arconic makes a similar product, Reynobond FR, using a fire-retardant filling. It wasn't used in the Grenfell Tower refurbishment.

The cladding has become a focus for authorities in the aftermath of the fire because video footage of the blaze appeared to show flames spreading fast up the building along its exterior. Recent fires in France, Australia and the United Arab Emirates have involved quickly spreading flames along buildings' exterior cladding, as well, raising global concerns about such material.

It isn't clear if any of those fires involved the exact same cladding as that covering the 24-storey Grenfell Tower.

British authorities are conducting a criminal investigation into the fire.

British fire-service officials and others were now involved in a large-scale testing operation, soliciting samples of building materials from across Britain to test. Mrs. May suggested the U.K. would relocate residents in towers that were identified as containing flammable cladding. Such a move could involve relocating tens of thousands of residents.

"We cannot and won't ask people to live in unsafe homes," she told Parliament.

London Mayor Sadiq Khan called for the government specifically to rehouse residents affected. "There is now a huge amount of work to urgently do to ensure that it is safe for people to remain in properties affected. If not, the government must support people being rehoused immediately while cladding is being removed."

The U.K. Department for Communities and Local Government has said such cladding isn't compliant with building regulations, citing rules that say any insulation used in external wall construction for high-rise buildings should be of "limited combustibility." A spokesman repeated that position Thursday morning.

But others inside the industry have contested the government's interpretation of that rule. This week, CEP Architectural Facades Ltd., the company that supplied the cladding material, said Reynobond PE does

comply with building regulations in England and Wales. CEP provided the cladding to a separate contractor, Harley Facades Ltd., which installed it as part of the refurbishment.

Harley Facades last week said it would be inappropriate to comment on any aspect of the fire or its causes in advance of the investigation and that it wasn't aware of any link between the fire and the exterior cladding to the tower. A spokesman on Thursday declined to comment on whether Reynobond PE was compliant with building regulations.

Arconic couldn't immediately be reached for comment.

Arnold Tarling, a chartered surveyor and fire-safety expert, said building regulations did allow for cladding to contain flammable substance, as long as it was "fully bonded" to a noncombustible material like aluminum, as is the case with Reynobond PE. He said cladding wasn't generally viewed as insulation but that, even if it were, then bonding aluminum sheets to both faces would make it compliant.

Mrs. May, during her appearance in the House of Commons, declined to answer questions about whether the Grenfell Tower cladding was compliant with building rules, saying she didn't want to prejudice the investigation.

The New York Times

Europe Dismantles Ukraine's 'Paper Curtain'

Andrew Kramer

E. MOSCOW — Petro O. Poroshenko, the Ukrainian president, called it the collapse of the "paper curtain."

Since June 11, when 30 European countries began waiving short-stay visa requirements for Ukrainians as

an incentive for Kiev to pursue further reforms, tens of thousands of

Ukrainians have flocked to those nations.

More than 20,000 Ukrainians have already seized on the rule change, some stepping out of airports at their destinations pumping their fists to celebrate putting the bureaucratic headache of visas behind them. On peak days, Ukraine's border service says, about 5,000 of its citizens leave for the European countries.

They are not permitted to work, and can be required to show a return ticket. Still, the change is a rare bright spot for Ukraine, a country mired in war with Russia, plagued by economic woes and struggling to gain a sympathetic hearing from the Trump administration, which has sought closer ties with Moscow.

"It was all quite quick and comfortable," Timofey Matskevich, a small-business owner, said of transiting with his wife, Daria, through an airport serving Barcelona.

"They asked no questions, they stamped our passports and said, 'Welcome to Spain,'" Mr. Matskevich said in an online chat from the apartment where he was staying, which he said had a marvelous view of the beach and the Mediterranean beyond.

"It's a change in mentality," he said. "You have more freedom to go somewhere, to see things. For the

mentality of the country to change, to get rid of the Soviet legacy, you need to see other parts of the world."

While the visa waiver for Ukrainians is the largest shift of the kind for former Soviet countries, most of Ukraine's 45 million people cannot afford to go on vacation abroad. Citizens of Georgia and Moldova already qualified for short-term visa-free travel to most of Western Europe, and those of the Baltic countries, which are members of the European Union, can come and go as they please.

Mr. Poroshenko celebrated the change by opening a symbolic "door to Europe" that had been set up on a stage at a border crossing with Slovakia. To help illustrate what lay to the west, the door was surrounded by walls depicting the Eiffel Tower, the Colosseum in Rome, Dutch windmills and other European tourist sights.

Mr. Poroshenko called the visa waiver "a final exit of our country from the Russian Empire," and he joked that "the words 'Back in the U.S.S.R.' would be heard only listening to The Beatles."

Three years ago, tens of thousands of Ukrainians, including Mr. Matskevich, took to the streets of Kiev to reject the pro-Russian government of the time, and to show support for a trade pact between

Ukraine and the European Union called the Association Agreement.

Russia responded with a military intervention, annexing Crimea and deploying forces in two provinces of eastern Ukraine, in a war that has since killed more than 10,000 people. Amid this grinding crisis, the Ukrainian story line shifted to keeping Russia out, not to getting into Western Europe.

The European Union has kept pressing the government in Kiev to adhere to European norms, not only on technical matters such as agricultural standards but also by curbing corruption, to little effect.

In newspapers, disheartened Ukrainians read daily about members of Parliament or finance officials lining their pockets with public money.

The visa-rule change allowed Mr. Poroshenko to claim credit for one popular achievement of Ukraine's shift toward the West, in the hopes more substantive measures will follow, said Kadri Liik, a senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations.

"It greatly empowers the forces in society that push reforms," she said.

"Visa-free travel is the first thing people received from the Association Agreement," Mr. Matskevich said. "It's a step by our

country into the normal world, into normal society."

The opening went smoothly, with a few exceptions. A woman who had no passport for her 8-year-old son tried to smuggle him over a land border with Poland in a suitcase. They were discovered, fined and deported.

Mostly, though, the change led to excited Ukrainians posting about their European vacations on Facebook.

"Hurray! It works!" one Ukrainian traveler, Ivetta Delikatnaya, wrote after sliding through passport control in Toulouse, France.

With the easing of travel restrictions, low-cost airlines are increasingly looking to Ukraine. Wizz Air recently began operating flights between Lviv and Berlin for as little as \$22 each way. Ryanair is introducing flights to Kiev and Lviv.

Andriy Homanchuk, a veteran of the war in eastern Ukraine, posted on Facebook that he was, somehow, able to eke out a weekend in Brussels for less than \$100, his first trip to Western Europe.

"The visa-free regime works," he wrote excitedly from Belgium. "You don't need documents, or even knowledge of any language. You can go for a weekend."

INTERNATIONAL



U.S. Taxpayers Are Helping Bashar Al-Assad in a Strategic City

David Francis

Almost every weekday, tons of lentils, salt, oil and wheat flour are loaded onto an Ilyusin-76 cargo plane at an airport in Jordan. Russian contract pilots then fly nearly 400 miles across the Syrian border and parachute the supplies from about 15,000 feet over the outskirts of a government-controlled neighborhood in Deir Ezzor.

The costly air drop operation organized by the World Food Program has saved countless lives in the besieged Sunni-majority city, which has been encircled by hostile forces of the Islamic State for more than three years. But the operation — heavily funded by American and European taxpayers — has also benefited the Syrian regime, and its Russian and Iranian backers, providing a lifeline to a strategic eastern city.

The feeding of Deir Ezzor provides a poignant illustration of how Syria and its allies have harnessed the good intentions of the United States, the United Nations and other international donors to advance its military interests during the country's more than 6-year civil war.

In contrast, Syria has been starving hundreds of thousands of civilians in opposition held towns, imposing an Kafka-esque set of regulations that systematically delay and deny the delivery of food and medicines to those in need. The impediments, U.N. emergency relief coordinator Stephen O'Brien recently told the Security Council, reflects "a mindset and approach by the government of Syria that uses civilian suffering as a tactic of war."

"The Syrian government has a big interest in having the U.N. feeding these people in Deir Ezzor, because food is loyalty," said Joshua Landis,

a Syria expert who heads the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma. "It reassures the locals that the government, not ISIS, is on their side."

Securing the support of locals has gained importance in recent months as Deir Ezzor has emerged as a major flashpoint in the battle to defeat the Islamic State. With U.S. backed forces on the attack in Raqqa, Islamic State fighters have been fleeing towards Deir Ezzor.

Bashar Al-Assad's military, backed by Russian and Iranian firepower, is advancing on eastern Syria in an effort to dislodge the Islamic State, reestablish government control over eastern Syria, and secure a government-controlled border crossing into Iraq.

The conquest of Deir Ezzor, the administrative capital of eastern Syria, would ensure Assad's

dominion over the east, at least below the Euphrates. But it would also undercut a key strategic U.S. objective in the region: thwarting Tehran's efforts to extend its influence in the Middle East by establishing a so-called "Shia Crescent," a land corridor connecting Iran to its allies in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

"If you want to rule eastern Syria, Deir Ezzor is a very good thing to have," said Aron Lund, an expert on the region and the Century Foundation, noting that possession of the eastern administrative capital is critical to laying claim to the region's oil reserves and farmland along the Euphrates River. "It seems to me what's happening is that Assad is on the way to being ruler of most of Syria west and south of the Euphrates, which includes the capital, the other big cities, and most of the population."

The Syrian advance has heightened tensions with the United States and allied Arab and Kurdish fighters, who are battling the Islamic State for control of Raqqa in northeastern Syria. The rival coalitions appear to be jockeying for position as they compete to fill a security vacuum that would follow the defeat of the Islamic State.

On Sunday, a U.S. fighter jet shot down a Syrian warplane after it dropped a bomb near a group of U.S.-backed fighters in the town of Tabqa, near Raqqa. The U.S. has also shot down Iranian drones overflying territory occupied by U.S.-trained militia in southern Syria.

Iran, meanwhile, has for the first time launched missile strikes into Syria from its own soil, targeting Islamic State forces around Deir Ezzor. At the same time, Iranian-trained Iraqi militia are poised to advance from Iraq towards the city's eastern border.

The Deir Ezzor airdrops are part of a broader humanitarian relief plan brokered by the U.N. special envoy, Staffan de Mistura, and backed by Russia and the United States. The arrangement — which was endorsed by the 17-nation International Syria Support Group, or ISSG, in February, 2016 — placed the burden on key international powers, including the U.S. and Russia, to ensure that combatants on all sides abided by the agreement.

The United States, which has footed the majority of the bill, poured more than \$10 million into it its first months of operations, with Britain, Canada, Germany and the Netherlands throwing in several million more. There have been more than 260 airdrops to date, at a total cost of between \$36 million and \$65 million.

Initially, the pact saw U.N. and Syrian Red Cross convoys delivering food and other goods to towns that had been cut off from basic supplies for years.

"For a few months, it worked really well," said one

State Department official. "The government provided the approval for the convoys, ensuring that even the government besieged areas received assistance. We were shocked at how well it was working."

But over time, and as the world's attention turned elsewhere, Syria resumed its policy of blocking aid deliveries to rebel-controlled towns. Those convoys that did get through were required to unload stocks of medicines. "The initial success had gone down the tubes."

Russia, which offered strong political support for the U.N. aid drops, but no funding, scored propaganda points as Russian media credited Moscow with shipping foods supplies to Deir Ezzor, paid for by the United States and its European allies.

A WFP spokeswoman acknowledged that the source of the airdrops — which are carried out by a Russian company on contract to the U.N.— are "occasionally misrepresented in the media" as Russian and that the food agency "continues" to address this challenge.

Inside the State Department last Fall, there were calls for shutting down the air drops, on the grounds that Russia and Syria had not lived up to their part of the bargain, and the West was being played for fools. The WFP drops, officials noted, simply freed up resources to supply their own troops.

"The Americans paid while the rest of the opposition areas starved. Only Deir Ezzor got stuff," said a former State Department official. "I pushed hard to end it since the Russians reneged. But the State Department's humanitarian advocates, as well as the National Security Council, argued for maintaining the program because it was saving lives, according to the former official.

"These are hungry people who are besieged" Jeremy Konyndyk, who served as the director of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance during the Obama administration, told FP.

"We have a very fundamental humanitarian imperative to try to assist who we can."

In the end, a compromise was reached.

The program would continue, but the U.S. and other donors would stop contributing to a special airdrop fund, leaving it to the World Food Program to determine whether it could meet the costs within its own operating budget. The expectation was that Deir Ezzor would no longer be a major priority.

But the food drops to Deir Ezzor, continued. The food agency's donors, including the United States agreed to increase its operating budget to accommodate the Deir Ezzor air drops.

The airdrops are carried out by a Russian contract airliner, Abakan Air, which is owned by two Russian nationals, Nikolai Ustimenko and his son Patel Ustimenko. They had previously been barred from UN business following allegations that a separate company they owned paid bribes to a Russian UN procurement officer, according to a report in the New York Times. Abakan Air did not respond to an emailed request for comment.

But it appears the ban does not extend to Abakan.

Abeer Etefa, a World Food Program spokeswoman based in Cairo, Egypt, defended the decision to hire Abakan, saying the company was not on any U.N. blacklists, and that "it was the only company that was able to do the high altitude airdrops and was accepted with insurance."

Etefa acknowledged the operation poses "ethical and moral dilemmas," but she suggested it would be unfair to punish civilians besieged by the terror organization.

The crucial questions the food agency needs to weigh, she said, is "do the people who receive food need it or not? Will those people starve if they don't get the food or not? That will determine whether we deliver to this area or not."

For many at World Food Program, the Deir Ezzor air drops have become a source of pride. The agency had never before dropped food from such a high altitude in a conflict zone, she said. The initial drops strayed from their target, sometime falling into the hands of the Islamic State. Some of the parachutes didn't open.

The food agency was forced to halt for two months, carrying out trial runs in the Jordanian desert until they could perfect the operations.

Etefa said the food is distributed on the ground by representatives of the Syrian Red Cross, which oversees much of the humanitarian assistance throughout Syria. But she acknowledged that the U.N. food agency, which has no access to Deir Ezzor, can't independently monitor how the food is delivered.

That said, she noted that there are indicators suggesting that civilians are being fed. Prices for basic food commodities in Deir Ezzor have fallen. For instance, in the first six months of 2016, when the air drops were started, prices of food staples dropped by 52.7 percent.

Critics say the airdrops are potentially aiding the Syrian military operation and several observers indicated that food may be diverted to the Syrian military, or locals who are loyal to the regime. The aid drops "pull civilians into your orbit. If they want the aid they have to deal with the government. But that is the story all over Syria," said Lund.

But it has also served another American objective: denying the Islamic State control over another critical city near the Iraqi border, according to Landis. "It's in America's interest not to allow ISIS to take Deir Ezzor and set up a new caliphate," he said. "It means the Americans will not have to defeat them in Deir Ezzor."

The New York Times

Fears Grow That U.S. Is Inching Toward Bigger Role in Syria War

Helene Cooper

WASHINGTON — To hear the Pentagon tell it, the United States still has no intention of getting involved in Syria's six-year civil war; the American presence there is solely to help its allies defeat the Islamic State.

But a recent spate of incidents have raised alarm from diplomats and national security officials that the United States may be inadvertently

sliding into a far bigger role in the Syrian civil war than it intended.

"We don't seek conflict with anyone other than ISIS," Capt. Jeff Davis, a Pentagon spokesman, said on Wednesday, using an acronym for the militant Sunni extremist group that is rooted in Syria and Iraq.

This month alone, the United States has shot down a Syrian warplane, come close to shooting another and downed two Iranian-made drones

that were nearing American-backed troops on the ground.

Russia has retaliated by threatening to treat American planes as targets; in a dramatic "Top Gun"-style maneuver on Monday, one of Moscow's jets buzzed within five feet of an American spy plane.

None of these encounters involved the Islamic State. The contradiction opens a larger question, national security experts say, of what kind of

broader strategy the Trump administration plans once the Islamic State — now on the defensive — is defeated in Syria.

With each episode, "we own more of the conflict in Syria without articulating a strategy," said Vali Nasr, dean of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. "We are sleepwalking into a much broader military mandate, without saying what we plan to do afterward."

American military gains in Syria have far outpaced any diplomacy toward a political settlement of the Syrian civil war.

When President Barack Obama first began airstrikes against Islamic State targets in Syria three years ago, the instructions to the Pentagon seemed clear: Defeat the Islamic State through alliances with Syrians who oppose the brutal extremist group, but do not help them fight President Bashar al-Assad.

The Islamic State is now reeling in Syria. It has been battered by strikes from a host of enemies, from the United States and its regional allies to the Syrian government that is backed by Russia and Iran. It no longer holds one-third of the country, according to American officials who say that the group has lost around half of the territory it once controlled.

In past years, the Pentagon and its allies could stay out of the Syrian government's way — and that of Mr. Assad's backers in Russia and Iran — as all fought the Islamic State. Now, all sides are converging on a smaller piece of territory, resulting in competing forces increasingly turning on one another, in addition to the common enemy.

Captain Davis, at the Pentagon, noted that when American-backed ground troops are confronted by “armed drones,

that leaves us with no choice but to defend ourselves and our partners.”

He said that the downing of an Iranian-made drone this week was done in self-defense. Defense officials insist that does not amount to a greater United States involvement in the broader war.

But privately, American military officials acknowledge that they are quickly running out of space in Syria to stay out of Mr. Assad's way — not to mention Russia's and Iran's.

In Europe, the new president of France, Emmanuel Macron, announced that he would be taking a distinctly different tack on Syria than his predecessor. Mr. Macron said that getting rid of Mr. Assad was no longer a top priority.

Instead, Mr. Macron said, getting rid of terrorists is more important — and he is prepared to work with anyone toward that end, including Moscow.

“The real change I've made on this question is that I haven't said the deposing of Bashar al-Assad is a prerequisite for everything,” Mr. Macron said in an interview with European newspapers, according to Agence France-Presse.

“My line is clear: One, a total fight against terrorist groups. They are our enemies... We need the cooperation of everyone to eradicate them, particularly Russia,” Mr.

Macron said. “Two, stability in Syria, because I don't want a failed state.”

He also said he was looking for a “political and diplomatic road map” but did not mention the United States or the United Nations.

That suggested that he would like to see the leading European Union countries play a larger role — not on the ground, but in diplomacy and the effort to disentangle the warring parties.

But at the moment there are no continuing talks among the major parties over what to do once the Islamic State is defeated in Syria.

And with the fight now intensifying in eastern Syria's Euphrates River Valley — home to oil reserves and water — defense officials say that they are bracing for Mr. Assad and his backers to go all-out to reclaim that territory from the Islamic State.

Iran, in particular, does not want American-backed forces to take that ground for concern it would complicate Tehran's supply line to Shiite allies in neighboring Iraq and Lebanon.

“The Obama administration's policy, which was to focus solely on ISIS, kept the harder question about what to do about Russia and Iran and Assad off the table for a long time,” said Eric Robinson, a research programmer and analyst with the

RAND Corporation. “That was doable in the beginning.”

But he added that “as ISIS is pushed out of northern Syria and Raqqa, and things are pushed into the middle Euphrates River Valley, we will see everyone focusing their attention on the same area.”

That, he said, will increase the chances of more episodes like the ones of the past month.

In turn, that could spur a larger conflict, particularly given that Russia has never been shy about escalation, and Mr. Trump is widely viewed as quicker to act than his predecessor.

“One of the last things Obama wanted was to get into a shooting war with Russia over Syria,” said Derek Chollet, Mr. Obama's assistant secretary of defense for international affairs. “The risk of escalation with Russia was a constant factor in the administration's planning and management of the military campaign.”

A big challenge, he said, is that Moscow likes “escalation dominance.” He characterized that as Russia's willingness to risk more, even to its own detriment, to save Mr. Assad than the United States is willing to risk to take him out.



You'd Be Scared if You Were Donald Trump, Too

David Francis

In the last month, for the first time since the civil war in Syria began in 2011, the United States has directly attacked Syrian government forces or proxies — not just once, but at least four times. The urgent question now is less about Syria than Russia, which in response to the latest of these incidents, in which a U.S. fighter plane shot down a Syrian jet, threatened to target any U.S.-led coalition aircraft flying over Syria.

Are the U.S. and Russia being sucked into war in the Middle East, and if so, how can escalation be averted?

The present political dynamics in the Middle East are unsettled and kaleidoscopic. But in the interests of brevity, leaving aside smaller players, and before we think about the role of the United States and Russia, the basic configurations of power in the region since the 2011 Arab Spring can be simplified in terms of five loose groupings.

First, a grouping of Sunni monarchies (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and

Bahrain); Arab secular nationalists (Egypt since President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi took over in 2013, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia); and Gen. Khalifa Haftar's faction in eastern Libya.

Second, a grouping of Turkey; Qatar; and Muslim Brotherhood affiliates such as Hamas in Gaza, Egypt under President Morsi before 2013, and the internationally-recognized Libyan government based in the western part of that country.

Third, a grouping of Iran and its Shiite allies, including Iraq (at least among key factions of the Baghdad government), the Assad regime in Syria, and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Fourth, the collection of various Sunni jihadi networks, including the Islamic State, various al Qaeda affiliates, and any number of smaller factions.

Fifth, there is Israel, which does not fit into any of the above, but is most closely aligned with members of the first grouping.

Three key stories since the 2011 Arab Spring broadly explain how the

United States and Russia fit into these dynamics, and why these two great powers are being dragged into confrontation in the Middle East.

The first story is the tension between human rights and stability. Initially motivated by humanitarian impulse, the United States and its Western allies achieved regime change in Libya and attempted it in Syria, by backing rebels in each case. These rebellions rapidly became infected by radical Islamists, giving Russia the opportunity, not unreasonably, to claim that, in the interest of preventing Islamist chaos, it was backing strongmen on the opposite side (Haftar in Libya and Assad in Syria).

Egypt is a similar case. Russia took advantage of the Obama administration's aversion to the Sisi regime's human rights abuses following the overthrow of Muslim Brotherhood rule to increase Russian influence in Cairo, as exemplified by Egypt's current diplomatic support for the Russian intervention in Syria.

The second story is the 2015 Iran nuclear deal brokered by the Obama administration, and reluctantly accepted by the Trump administration, whose advocates claimed that it was the best way to stop Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon without the resort to force. Russia joined sanctions against Iran, but since they were lifted, Moscow has developed warmer relations with Tehran, as exemplified by the way it acted as a key broker between Saudi Arabia and Iran to set up the November 2016 OPEC agreement.

By contrast with Moscow, the Trump administration has taken a hard-line stance toward Tehran. It has various motives for that shift: Iranian missile testing since the deal was signed; Iranian support for Shiite militia groups in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon; and a belief that traditional U.S. allies such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel are in need of greater support (notwithstanding that many Israelis supported the nuclear deal).

The third story is the role that radical Sunni Islamist networks now play in the region, enabled by social media

and other online tools that facilitate networking. One simply cannot explain the speed and scale at which the Islamic State formed, for example, without that network effect. These fluid jihadi networks have proved effective in exploiting tears in the fabric of order in fragile states, and then governing captured ground, predominantly in areas with Sunni majority populations, above all in western Iraq, northern Syria, and southern Yemen.

When one puts these three stories together, we see the nexus of the current U.S.- Russia standoff in Syria.

At the center of the nexus is the fact that while the U.S.-led coalition has done a good job of beating back the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the policy goal under both the Obama and Trump administrations has only been negatively defined as the defeat of the Islamic State. Neither administration has set out a positive vision for who will govern territory cleared of the Islamic State. In other words, the U.S. has a military strategy without a political counterpart — and the more the Islamic State's territorial control has been squeezed, the more evident the absence of U.S. political strategy has become.

Enter the Trump administration, which in keeping with its broader hard-line stance toward Iran, has been consistently clear about who it does *not* want to govern r-captured ground, namely, Iran-backed Shiite militias, who form a large part both of Assad's ground forces and indeed Baghdad's.

Hence the Trump administration has taken the view that both Sunni jihadi groups and Shiite militias should be grouped under

the same category of radical Islamic terrorism. Consistent with this, it has stepped up action against Shiite paramilitary groups in Syria. Furthermore, the administration's hard-line attitude, conveyed by Trump in his visit to Riyadh in May, encouraged the blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt, on the basis of alleged Qatari support for Iranian proxies.

But the glaring absence of a U.S. positive political vision in the Middle East has left its negatively defined anti-Islamic State and anti-Iranian goals untethered, which has generated regional confusion. Imagine a sheepdog who is good at barking, but has little sense of direction: The Middle East is now in the position of its harried flock.

Even the administration itself seemed confused about how to respond to the implications of its own strategy, as was clear from its plainly contradictory signals on the Qatar crisis: While President Trump initially enthusiastically endorsed the blockade of Qatar in public, his national security team sought to de-escalate it behind the scenes, and this calmer line seems to be prevailing. So, what does Washington positively want? Who knows.

Although the most likely outcome of the Qatar crisis at this point is a U.S. brokered de-escalation, it is likely that a jilted Doha will subsequently look to become less dependent on the United States by building up existing relations with Turkey, which already has a base in Doha; Russia, which already has strong commercial links with the emirate (Qatar owns a large stake in Rosneft, for example); and Iran, with whom it needs good relations given

the need to cooperate over the shared exploitation of natural gas fields in the Persian Gulf.

The limits of having no positive political strategy are also evident in Iraq and Syria. In Iraq, the United States military has effectively helped clear ground for Iranian Shiite militias to backfill, which contradicts the administration's anti-Iranian position. The only real alternative is to support a greater governance role for Kurdish groups, potentially as part of an enlarged independent Kurdish state. But so far, the U.S. position has been to support the unity of Iraq.

In Syria, the situation is more complex, because unlike the Iraqi Kurds, who have reasonably good relations with Ankara, the Turkish government is vehemently opposed to any kind of independent Kurdish state in northern Syria. But the U.S.-led coalition overwhelmingly relies on Kurdish ground forces in Syria, and they hold most of the ground cleared from the Islamic State. Does the United States support a Kurdish state in northern Syria? We don't know. Has it provided any alternative to a Kurdish state in northern Syria? No. Is the territory still legally part of Syria? Yes. Unsurprisingly, there is serious confusion on the ground, which has produced the U.S.-Russian escalation we see today.

So back to the original question: Are we are headed toward a great-power conflict in the middle east?

In my view, until the U.S. presents a positive political strategy, we will continue to have direct clashes between Russian-supported Shiite militias and U.S. forces, which may well produce an accident in which either Russia shoots down a U.S.

plane or vice versa. Even then, I think that neither Washington nor Moscow would rationally want a conventional fight. But conflict dynamics are never wholly rational; far from it. Violence can generate new emotional pressures in conflict and spin out of control in a direction nobody anticipated.

Besides the risk of escalation with Russia, the more the United States starts directly attacking Shiite militias, the more likely the Iranian nuclear deal will completely break down. This would reopen the possibility of a U.S. war with Iran. Even before that point, Iran would likely react to counter the United States in the region by exerting much more aggressive influence over Baghdad. The nightmare scenario would be an Iranian puppet like ex-Prime Minister Nouri alMaliki getting back into power, and issuing a demand for U.S. forces to leave Iraq, which would put Washington in a vexed position of either accepting or returning to direct rule.

To avoid escalations of this sort, the Trump administration should now lay out a positively defined political vision for the Middle East, which would accompany and tether its negatively defined anti-Islamic State and anti-Iranian goals. At this time, the fundamental part of this vision must be a clear U.S. position on the future of Kurdish-held areas in Iraq and Syria.

The New York Times U.S. Sends Civilian Team to Syria to Help the Displaced Return Home

Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration is sending a civilian team into Syria to try to bring stability to areas that American-backed forces have retaken from the Islamic State and to avert a humanitarian crisis, according to United States officials.

The team consists of only seven members, State Department officials and security personnel, several of whom have already arrived in Syria. Their mission, which has not been made public, is not to rebuild damaged cities and towns but to help Syrians return home by organizing efforts to clear roadside bombs left behind by the Islamic State and to restore electricity and access to clean water, in part to

prevent the areas from becoming breeding grounds for militants.

The minimal footprint reflects President Trump's opposition to nation-building and a war-weary public's desire to minimize huge reconstruction projects after more than a decade of rebuilding in Iraq at a cost of over \$60 billion.

Sending in such a small group, however, leaves open the question of whether the effort will be sufficient to deal with the daunting task of restoring normal life for millions of Syrians and solve wrenching problems, such as ensuring that the local governments are representative, restoring a functioning judicial system and preventing revenge killings.

"It is a minimalist approach that should be adequate to get them

through the first few weeks, but beyond that, there are going to be problems that may require a more substantial effort," said James F. Dobbins, who served as a special envoy to Afghanistan, Somalia, Haiti and the Balkans.

The decision to send the team into the combat zone followed extensive deliberations in the American government about security, with memories still fresh about the 2012 attack on the United States diplomatic compound in Benghazi, Libya, an attack that led to the deaths of the United States ambassador, J. Christopher Stevens, and three other Americans. The roughly 1,000 American troops already in Syria will help protect the civilian team against the Islamic State, also known as ISIS.

"Our efforts in post-ISIS areas will be strictly focused on stabilization and thus meeting the immediate needs of civilians in order to enable them to return home and to prevent the return of ISIS," the State Department said in a statement on Thursday in response to a request for comment. "The efforts are limited to the provision of humanitarian assistance, clearing explosive remnants of war, and the restoration of essential services."

Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, pointed to the need for a broader civilian mission, suggesting in remarks this week that it include "an ongoing effort, led by the State Department, to put together a governance body so that as soon as Raqqa is seized, there is effective local governance."

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, in testimony last week before Congress, said the administration did not yet have "a fully fleshed out" strategy for maintaining stability in Syria and Iraq after the Islamic State is defeated.

Mr. Mattis said he was consulting with Secretary of State Rex Tillerson on a larger strategy that includes both diplomatic and military components. "His diplomats are literally serving alongside us in Syria right now with our officers who are in that fight," Mr. Mattis told the House Armed Services Committee. "So I am confident it's being put together. It's not complete yet."

A State Department officer has rotated through Syria over the past 18 months, reporting on the political situation in the accompanying United States Special Operations forces who are advising American-backed Syrian Arab and Kurdish fighters combating the Islamic State. As those militias have reclaimed towns and villages in eastern Syria in recent months, and are now poised to recapture Raqqa, the Islamic State's self-declared capital, in the coming months, a sense of urgency has grown about addressing post-conflict priorities, including ensuring governance and providing aid to more than 400,000 civilians in the

Raqqa province that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has cited as in need.

The looming problems in Syria are daunting. Unlike in Iraq, there is no functioning government or security force in the predominantly Arab areas that the American-backed fighters are about to take back from the Islamic State.

"In Iraq, you have got a police force and court system, which are not perfect but at least exist," Mr. Dobbins said. "In Syria, there is no comparable authority to whom you can hand off these problems."

Adding to the challenge, neither the United States nor other nations are eager to commit significant funds to reconstructing a Syria that is run by President Bashar al-Assad. Nor is the United States interested in remaining as an occupying power as it did for years in Iraq.

Another consideration, said Linda Robinson, a senior international policy analyst at the RAND Corporation, is that a major civilian American presence to advise on the governing of newly liberated area might provoke a backlash.

"That is not a country that we control," she said. "This is stabilization light. We do not have, nor do we intend to get, control of

the place, which would enable us to move and do these state-building activities.

"What is also very important to understand is what is the tolerance of the Syrian government for the U.S. to go in and do these activities," Ms. Robinson continued. "There have been increasing tensions with the regime, with the Iranians and with the Russians and the possibility that we are backing into a war with the Assad government and its backers."

Yet the United States and its allies also do not want Raqqa to fall into chaos that the Islamic State and other militants could exploit.

"The vital question is whether law and order will be re-established because if it isn't, ISIS will be back in some form," said Daniel Serwer, a professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, who has experience in Iraq and the Balkans.

"It is terribly small," Mr. Serwer said of the State Department deployment of specialists. "You need more than that just to talk with people, never mind do things. It is at least a recognition that there are civilian tasks that have to be fulfilled after you liberate the place. To be vital for success, it will have to grow."

American officials said the team will include experts from the Agency for International Development as well as the political officer who has been with Special Operations forces. It will draw on hundreds of millions that have been appropriated to support programs in Syria.

One immediate focus for the group will be removing improvised explosive devices, tasks that will be carried out by contractors who will also train local Syrians. But the team will also organize efforts to restore services and provide humanitarian assistance.

The State Department will not have the mission of training and advising the local police, as it did after the American invasion of Iraq. Syrians trained and vetted by the American military will serve as a transitional security force.

To maintain a small American civilian footprint in a war zone, contractors funded by the United States government will not be allowed to have American citizens working inside Syria.

American officials said they would welcome similar civilian efforts by foreign nations and are exploring the possibility.

The Washington Post

Beatings, shocks and 'the grill': Reports allege torture in secret prisons run by UAE in Yemen

By Kareem Fahim

ISTANBUL — The United Arab Emirates and allied security forces maintain a secret network of prisons in Yemen where dozens and perhaps hundreds of people are detained, routinely abused and in some cases severely tortured, according to separate reports released Thursday by Human Rights Watch and the Associated Press.

The investigation by the AP also found that forces from the United States, a close counterterrorism ally to the UAE, had participated in interrogations of prisoners in Yemen. American forces had been "yards" away from a facility where torture took place, one Yemeni security officer told the news agency.

The UAE is part of a Saudi-led military coalition fighting in Yemen against Houthi rebels and their allies, with the goal of restoring the government of ousted Yemeni President Abed Rabbo Mansour

Hadi. The conflict has devastated Yemen, the Arab world's most impoverished country, and killed more than 10,000 people, according to the United Nations.

[Trump administration weighs deeper involvement in Yemen war]

The government of the UAE denied the existence of a clandestine prison network, telling the AP that "there are no secret detention centers, and no torture of prisoners is done during interrogations."

Asked about allegations raised in the AP article, Marine Corps Maj. Adrian Rankine-Galloway, a Pentagon spokesman, said in an email that "as a matter of policy we do not discuss the details of bilateral intelligence arrangements with partner nations."

"Under no circumstances do DoD personnel participate in violations of human rights," he added, referring to the Department of Defense. "Additionally, as a matter of policy,

they are required to report any observation of human rights violations through standard reporting procedures."

The UAE has taken a leading role in the war, landing troops in southern Yemen and participating in the air campaign against the rebels while also pursuing relief and reconstruction projects. Emirati officials have portrayed the country's foray into Yemen as part of its increasingly assertive counterterrorism efforts in the region.

The reports released Thursday added new, troubling details to that effort and to the shadowy conflict that pits coalition forces and their Yemeni allies against extremist groups such as al-Qaeda in southern Yemen.

The day's most important stories.

In its report, Human Rights Watch said it documented the cases of at least 38 people detained or arrested

by Yemeni forces that are financed, armed or trained by the UAE. Some of the detainees were "abused or tortured inside detention facilities, most often through heavy beatings with officers using their fists, their guns or metal objects," the group said. "Others mentioned electric shocks, forced nudity, threats to the detainees or their family members, and caning on the feet."

Witnesses told the AP of a torture method known as the "grill." Victims were "tied to a spit like a roast and spun in a circle of fire." That method and others were used at a detention complex at an airport in the southern city of Mukalla — one of at least 18 secret prisons in southern Yemen documented by the AP and run by the UAE or its allied forces at "military bases, ports, an airport, private villas and even a nightclub."

Thomas Gibbons-Neff in Washington contributed to this report.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

First Test for Saudi Arabia's King-in-Waiting: Fixing the Economy

DUBAI—Now that he has secured

his place as next in line to the Saudi throne, Mohammed bin Salman

faces his next big test: overhauling the kingdom's ailing economy.

As deputy crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman last year championed a

plan to transform the kingdom's oil-dependent economy by creating jobs, boosting the private sector and attracting foreign capital.

But more than a year later, the so-called Vision 2030 reform plan has made little headway. Saudi Arabia's revenues are still largely reliant on oil sales and with crude prices low, the kingdom has been forced to borrow heavily to shore up its finances.

The troubles bolster a perception that now-Crown Prince Mohammed has been fast to promise and slow to deliver. More important, they raise the prospect that the most unpopular economic reforms he has promoted could be reversed.

"The promulgation of the new vision went at supersonic speed," said Florence Eid-Oakden, chief economist at Arabia Monitor, a London-based research and strategy firm. "The implementation is going more slowly."

The crown prince's push for reform has come up hard against the bureaucratic and legal obstacles that have long made Saudi Arabia a difficult place to do business. In the World Bank's Doing Business Index, Saudi Arabia ranks 94 out of 190 economies. For ease in starting a business, the kingdom ranks 147, trailing Gulf neighbors Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

There also remain pockets of resistance to reform among members of the royal family, the religious establishment, the business elite and the civil service, analysts say.

Not all members of the Allegiance Council, which has the final say over

the issue of succession in the Saudi royal family, voted in favor of Prince Mohammed's promotion. This suggests there are still some in the royal family who aren't fully behind him.

Still, some analysts say the crown prince is better positioned to push ahead with reform now that he is next in line to the Saudi throne, supplanting his more-cautious cousin Mohammed bin Nayef. He can consolidate domestic power and more effectively counter opposition to the 2030 plan, these people say, and eventually redirect and revitalize the region's biggest economy.

"The change in succession cements the prospects of the successful implementation of Vision 2030," said Giyas Gokkent, an economist at the Institute of International Finance, a Washington, D.C.-based trade group representing global financial institutions.

Just hours before Mohammed bin Salman's promotion was announced Wednesday, index provider MSCI Inc. said that it would consider classifying the kingdom as an emerging market as early as next year, a move that could draw billions of dollars to the economy.

During his recent visit to Saudi Arabia, U.S. President Donald Trump also provided a vote of confidence. He was accompanied by a large delegation of prominent business leaders eager to explore opportunities in the kingdom and betting that its economic liberalization will prove profitable.

Banks such as J.P. Morgan Chase & Co. play a key role in advising and financing Vision 2030 reforms, such as the listing of Saudi National Oil

Co., or Aramco, a state asset that the new crown prince has previously valued at \$2 trillion. Citigroup Inc. recently obtained a much-coveted banking license. General Electric Co. and other companies have pledged to invest billions of dollars in the Saudi economy.

"It is a market where you more likely than not want to be present," said Sjoerd Leenart, head of J.P. Morgan for the Middle East, Africa and Turkey. But he added: "Those looking for the quick buck will not succeed."

While the Saudi government is on track with some of its 2030 targets such as reducing the fiscal budget, it lags behind in others.

The \$200 billion program to privatize state entities, airports and utilities has moved slowly. Even the Aramco IPO is facing delays because of its complexity, though Saudi officials say it will still take place in 2018 as scheduled. The listing of Aramco is to provide the country's sovereign-wealth fund with the resources for investment abroad.

Still there are other signs that reforms are going to be painful and require more time, and may not be implemented if domestic pressures prove too severe.

In late April, the Saudi government reinstated benefits for government employees that were among the most publicized austerity cuts introduced last year. On Wednesday, the same day Mohammed bin Salman's appointment as crown prince was announced, the government went a step further and reimbursed government workers for the benefits they weren't paid.

To make ends meet, Saudi Arabia raised \$17.5 billion through an international bond sale last year—the biggest ever by an emerging economy—and secured a \$10 billion loan. This year, it raised \$9 billion in its debut international Islamic bond sale.

Those fresh funds, however, haven't prevented the kingdom's net foreign reserves from sinking to just below \$500 billion, the lowest level in 6 years.

With government funds for big projects drying up, construction firms have fired more than a 100,000 workers. Saudi Binladin group, the country's largest and most prominent construction firm, laid off close to 70,000 workers last year to avoid financial collapse.

The tensions generated by the Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen and efforts to isolate neighboring Qatar are rising as Saudi Arabia faces growing economic pressures at home. Unemployment remains high at around 12% while the economy—expanding at an estimated 0.1% this year—isn't growing fast enough to create enough new jobs.

"The biggest issue he faces is that he's waded into centuries-old conflicts that are difficult to resolve in the short term," said Arabia Monitor's Eid-Oakden. "These are long-term issues, but he needs to produce short-term results."

The New York Times Editorial : The Young and Brash Saudi Crown Prince

Long ruled by an ossified gerontocracy, Saudi Arabia could soon be in the hands of a 30-something who may be more in tune with the nation's overwhelmingly young population but whose impetuosity and hard-line foreign policy have raised concerns about whether he is ready for the top leadership post.

The young man in question is Prince Mohammed bin Salman, 31, whose elevation this week to crown prince and next in line to the throne has been assumed since his father, King Salman, appointed him deputy crown prince two years ago. But few experts expected that the transition would be so swift.

In naming his favorite son as heir apparent, the king ousted the vastly more experienced crown prince, Mohammed bin Nayef, 57, a

nephew of the king, who was also the powerful interior minister. The move ends a period of uncertainty, while also raising questions about the wisdom of empowering an inexperienced and brash new leader so quickly.

In some ways, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who serves as defense minister, is just what his country needs. Roughly 70 percent of Saudis are under the age of 30. He has cultivated an image as a dynamic leader, keen to take a rigid conservative country into the modern era. He has staked his reputation as a reformer who aims to reduce the kingdom's dependence on oil and open the national oil company, Aramco, to limited foreign investment.

The prince has pushed to lessen the influence of the religious police who roam shopping malls and other

public spaces, interfering in private lives. He would allow concerts, and would consider reforming laws tightly controlling the lives of women.

His foreign policy, however, has been reckless. He was the prime mover behind the decision to escalate Saudi Arabia's role in the Yemen civil war, where Saudi airplanes have bombed Houthi rebels backed by Iran. The result has been a quagmire for the Saudis and a humanitarian disaster for Yemen.

The prince has also been unyielding on Iran, resisting talks and accusing Tehran of following an "extremist ideology" and seeking to take over the Muslim world. Iran has indeed created problems in the region, but so has Saudi Arabia, and neither has clean hands when it comes to fighting extremism. The prince has

found common cause with President Trump, whose administration has also taken a tough line on Iran, and who has made clear that he sees the prince as a crucial ally in his effort to solidify a Sunni Muslim alliance in the gulf.

In addition, the prince picked an unnecessary fight with Qatar, partly because Qatar had not cracked down hard enough on extremist groups and partly because Qatar has a relationship, however limited, with Iran. Here again he has an ally in Mr. Trump, although not in the State Department or Pentagon, which values Qatar as the host of an important American military base.

In both cases, Yemen and Qatar, the prince acted without thinking through the consequences. He may eventually prove to be a wise and transformative leader. For the time being, he needs the guidance of

more experienced hands, including the deposed crown prince, whom

many American officials consider the United States' best friend in the

royal family and a singular partner against terrorism.

**The
Washington
Post**

Egypt ships fuel to Gaza amid crisis

GAZA CITY — There's a power struggle here over power.

The people of Gaza have been suffering through a steamy summer, subsisting on three or four hours of electricity a day, barely enough to charge their mobile phones and top off the car batteries they use to light a few bulbs at night.

The besieged coastal enclave is struggling to keep the lights on not just because of limited capacity, but also because of a rough political brawl between the Islamist militant movement Hamas, which controls Gaza, and its longtime rival, the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. Also in the mix are Egypt, Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Israelis, who all play a role in supplying electricity to the seaside strip.

Gaza saw a trickle of relief arrive on Wednesday afternoon, when Egypt sent 22 tanker trucks loaded with diesel across the border from Sinai. Eleven more trucks were due Thursday. It was the first legal fuel shipment through the Rafah crossing in years. Before, supplies were smuggled in through the Hamas tunnels, now mostly destroyed. The Egyptian fuel will be used to run the turbines in Gaza's only power station, but it is only enough for a few days. The generating station has been offline for months.

The fuel from Egypt is just a temporary fix. Gaza, underserved for the past decade, suffering from a partial trade and travel blockade enforced by Egypt and Israel, is now seriously starving for power.

[The \$1.4 billion bet on a new Palestinian future]

The bulk of electricity for Gaza today is delivered via Israeli power lines, which have experienced a steep drop in electricity transmission in recent days, the power reduced not by Israel but by the Palestinian Authority, which pays the bills and is demanding that Hamas cough up its share of the cost. Groups such as Amnesty International say it is still Israel's responsibility to provide electricity because, in their view, it is the occupying power. Israel disputes this.

Hamas officials accuse Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas of trying to squeeze the Islamist movement to surrender — or at least share — control of the strip. Hamas in Gaza, now run by Yehiya Sinwar, a hard-line militant who spent years in Israeli prisons, has other ideas.

On the streets in Gaza City, Palestinians expressed frustration, saying they felt they were being used as pawns in a game.

"I don't care who brings fuel or electricity. I only care about having power at home and work. I need to live. I am not interested in understanding the dirty politics that we are living in currently," said Hisham Thawabta, 45, who was out running errands in the heat.

"Hamas, the Palestinian Authority, the Arabs and of course Israel are responsible for the miserable life that Gaza is suffering from," he said.

After Hamas won legislative elections in 2006, the group seized control of the enclave in 2007 in a spasm of violence that saw Hamas cadres fighting Abbas's Fatah movement in the streets.

For years, Hamas and Fatah have sought reconciliation — or at least pretended to — pushed by regional powers such as Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Now it appears Abbas is weary of the game.

Hamas spokesman Hazim Qasim this week said Abbas was collaborating with the Israelis to besiege the strip.

Abbas says Hamas hegemony needs to end.

Ghada Sarhan, 28, who has three young children, was sitting in a sliver of shade in Gaza City. "We're here in the park because we've got no electricity at home. Four hours a day is not enough for anything. We become sick, and with the heat in the summer ahead, we will die slowly."

She said that "Hamas is making our life miserable, and the Palestinian Authority shares the blame. Politics is taking us nowhere. I can't understand what's going on around us. What I only understand that I don't have electricity and my brother has no job and my husband is barely able to put food in our mouths."

Abbas has begun preliminary talks with President Trump's envoys to see whether it is possible to restart peace talks with Israel — an effort made even more difficult by Hamas, which the United States and Israel consider a terrorist organization.

Israel's defense minister, Avigdor Lieberman, on Thursday accused Abbas of playing a dangerous game: withholding electricity from Gaza to incite Hamas to confront Israel. The last war in Gaza, in

2014, left thousands of Palestinians dead, alongside more than 70 Israelis, and wide swaths of the Palestinian territory in ruins.

Lieberman said Abbas had a two-pronged strategy: "Hurt Hamas and drag it to war with Israel. Abbas is doing this unilaterally, without having coordinated with Israel or Egypt."

What's most important from where the world meets Washington

Lieberman said earlier that the Israeli electricity company is willing to provide a steady supply to Gaza but that someone has to pay for it. In his effort to press Hamas, Abbas informed Israel that the Palestinian Authority planned to slash payments for Gaza electricity by 40 percent.

Egypt's supply of fuel might come with strings attached, too. Egypt's military leaders have no love for Hamas, which was born of the Muslim Brotherhood. To supply fuel, Egypt is reportedly pushing Hamas to enter a power-sharing arrangement with an ousted Fatah leader named Mohammed Dahlan.

"We the people are the losers," said Ayman Jamal, 37, who lives in a high-rise without power. "We lost 10 years of our lives for nothing. We passed through three wars and suffered with the blockade for what? No electricity now? Barely we get three hours a day. I don't know what the Egyptian fuel will do for us. I don't think it will make a difference."

Booth reported from Jerusalem.

**The
Washington
Post**

Charles Krauthammer :The great Muslim civil war — and us

The U.S. shoots down a Syrian fighter-bomber. Iran launches missiles into eastern Syria. Russia threatens to attack coalition aircraft west of the Euphrates. What is going on?

It might appear a mindless mess, but the outlines are clear. The great Muslim civil war, centered in Syria, is approaching its post-Islamic State phase. It's the end of the beginning. The parties are maneuvering to shape what comes next.

It's Europe, 1945, when the war was still raging against Nazi Germany, but everyone already knew the

outcome. The maneuvering was largely between the approaching victors — the Soviet Union and the Western democracies — to determine postwar boundaries and spheres of influence.

PowerPost's must-read morning briefing for decision-makers.

So it is today in Syria. Everyone knows that the Islamic State is finished. Not that it will disappear as an ideology, insurgency and source of continuing terrorism both in the region and the West. But it will disappear as an independent, organized, territorial entity in the heart of the Middle East.

It is being squeezed out of existence. Its hold on Mosul, its last major redoubt in Iraq, is nearly gone. Raqqa, its stronghold in Syria and de facto capital, is next. When it falls — it is already surrounded on three sides — the caliphate dies.

Much of the fighting today is about who inherits. Take the Syrian jet the United States shot down. It had been attacking a pro-Western Kurdish and Arab force (the Syrian Democratic Forces) not far from Islamic State territory.

Why? Because the Bashar al-Assad regime, backed by Iran, Hezbollah and Russia, having gained the

upper hand on the non-jihadist rebels in the Syrian heartland (most notably in Aleppo), feels secure enough to set its sights on eastern Syria. If it hopes to restore its authority over the whole country, it will need to control Raqqa and surrounding Islamic State areas. But the forces near Raqqa are pro-Western and anti-regime. Hence the Syrian fighter-bomber attack.

Hence the U.S. shoot-down. We are protecting our friends. Hence the Russian threats to now target U.S. planes. The Russians are protecting their friends.

On the same day as the shoot-down, Iran launched six surface-to-surface missiles into Syrian territory controlled by the Islamic State. Why? Ostensibly to punish the jihadists for terrorist attacks two weeks ago inside Iran.

Perhaps. But one obvious objective was to demonstrate to Saudi Arabia and the other Sunni Arabs the considerable reach of both Iran's arms and territorial ambitions.

For Iran, Syria is the key, the central theater of a Shiite-Sunni war for regional hegemony. Iran (which is non-Arab) leads the Shiite side, attended by its Arab auxiliaries — Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Shiite militias in Iraq and the highly penetrated government of Iraq, and Assad's Alawite regime. (Alawites being a non-

Sunni sect, often associated with Shiism.)

Taken together, they comprise a vast arc — the Shiite Crescent — stretching from Iran through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon to the Mediterranean. If consolidated, it gives the Persians a Mediterranean reach they have not had in 2,300 years.

This alliance operates under the patronage and protection of Russia, which supplies the Iranian-allied side with cash, weapons and, since 2015, air cover from its new bases in Syria.

Arrayed on the other side of the great Muslim civil war are the Sunnis, moderate and Western-allied, led by Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, Egypt and Jordan — with

their Great Power patron, the United States, now (post-Obama) back in action.

At stake is consolidation of the Shiite Crescent. It's already underway. As the Islamic State is driven out of Mosul, Iranian-controlled militias are taking over crucial roads and other strategic assets in western Iraq. Next target: eastern Syria (Raqqa and environs).

Imagine the scenario: a unified Syria under Assad, the ever more pliant client of Iran and Russia; Hezbollah, tip of the Iranian spear, dominant in Lebanon; Iran, the regional arbiter; and Russia, with its Syrian bases, the outside hegemon.

Our preferred outcome is radically different: a loosely federated Syria, partitioned and cantonized, in which

Assad might be left in charge of an Alawite rump.

The Iranian-Russian strategy is a nightmare for the entire Sunni Middle East. And for us too. The Pentagon seems bent on preventing it. Hence the cruise missile attack for crossing the chemical red line. Hence the recent fighter-bomber shoot-down.

A reasonable U.S. strategy, given the alternatives. But not without risk. Which is why we need a national debate before we commit too deeply. Perhaps we might squeeze one in amid the national obsession with every James Comey memo-to-self?

The New York Times

Barry

TONGO, Senegal — Amadou Anne, the oldest son, tried first.

"If you have a way to get there, maybe you should try it," his father told him.

The journey required crossing thousands of miles of ruthless desert and sea to reach Europe. Months passed with no news. And then the phone call.

Friends in France spotted a list of drowned migrants. Mr. Anne's name was on it.

"I was standing right there, and I cried," his mother, Salmata Boulo Diallo, said near the family compound in a vast expanse of fallow peanut fields in this remote part of Senegal.

The loss did not end there. Mr. Anne's younger brother Gibbe also tried to reach Italy. He, too, died at sea.

Their fates, sealed in journeys nearly two years ago, matched those of so many in this region, where young men often fall into three unforgiving categories: the ones who have made it to Europe, the ones who were blocked or deported along the way and the ones who died trying.

"If they would have made it, it really would have changed things for us," Ms. Diallo said.

The same sea that swallowed the Anne brothers in their journeys on the Mediterranean has already claimed the lives of more than 2,100 migrants and refugees this year. Ninety-five percent of those deaths have occurred on the so-called

Why Migrants Keep Risking All on the 'Deadliest Route' (UNE)

Dionne Searcey and Jaime Yaya

central route between Libya and Italy, a passage used chiefly by sub-Saharan Africans that the International Organization for Migration calls "the deadliest route migrants ply anywhere on Earth."

Yet more people keep trying. As of Wednesday, nearly 72,000 migrants had made it to the shores of Italy — a 28 percent increase compared with the same period last year, according to the migration organization.

The stormy sea is the last in a deadly series of obstacles to Europe. For migrants like the Anne brothers, the journey begins in packed buses that may topple over on bad roads patrolled by thieves. If they make it through the days-long desert crossing to Libya, the migrants are sometimes beaten, detained for weeks by smugglers and shaken down for yet more cash.

Late last month, 44 migrants, including children, died in the Sahara after their vehicle broke down and they ran out of water. More recently, a dinghy carrying 130 people capsized after rival smugglers stole the engine. Only four people aboard were rescued.

"Human smugglers will go to any extent to exploit desperate refugees and migrants," said Babar Baloch, a spokesman for the United Nations refugee agency. "These shocking deaths are part of the bigger picture of exploitation."

The stream of migrants from this region — from Nigeria, Guinea, Gambia, Ivory Coast and Mali — is growing. In 2016, the number of Senegalese making the journey nearly doubled from the year before.

Senegal is one of the more developed countries in West Africa.

In the capital, Dakar, tall buildings rise downtown and seaside restaurants charge New York prices for plates of the local catch. Recent offshore oil and gas discoveries offer hopes for transforming the economy, luring international companies like Total to sign exploration agreements.

Yet almost 47 percent of the Senegalese population lives in poverty, according to the World Bank. In rural areas, almost two-thirds of residents are considered poor.

The Anne brothers' sparsely populated region is among the poorest in Senegal. At least 110 people from here have died along the migrant route since 2015, local officials said. This area lost 17 of its men in a single episode, a shipwreck in April 2015 that killed more than 800 people.

"We have no machinery to cultivate the land, no rain and now no young people," said Alassane Diallo, mayor of the nearby village of Koussan.

In this sandy landscape, with its blistering heat and fat baobab trees, the chief means of survival is farming. The kind of life it provides is on full display in the small compounds of one-room mud homes: a mini-flock of two or three sheep, a piece of foam to soften a bed of sticks, a few changes of clothing, plastic flip-flops.

But some of the compounds strung along the bumpy dirt roads here serve as siren calls to Europe: concrete homes instead of mud, an automobile parked outside, a satellite television dish poking from the ground, an iPhone.

All of it comes from money sent home from Europe — from the

migrants who made it. They are local heroes, the envy of everyone.

"A young Senegalese is always covered with shame and guilt when he sees his own mother trying to make ends meet without being able to support and relieve his parents," said Ousmane Sene, director of the West African Research Center in Dakar.

Some parents and spouses push their sons to make the trip. Village life is so isolated that often they are unaware of the dangers of the voyage. The pressure to try can be so intense that some men who fail never return home. Ashamed, they would rather have their families think they are dead.

Moussa Kebbe, who lives in the area, tried making the journey in 2014. He sold his home to finance the trip, which included 16 days in the desert with so little water that he was forced to drink his own urine. Four people in his vehicle died from thirst, he said.

Once Mr. Kebbe arrived in Libya, he worked in construction and cleaned toilets to try to earn enough money to pay for the boat to Italy. Libyan immigration officials threw him in jail for three months before he was deported.

He came back home empty-handed, worse off than when he started. Mr. Kebbe explained to his wife what had happened. She cried and pleaded with him to try again.

"It's a suicide mission," said Ousmane Thiam, who also failed to reach Europe.

In the Anne family's tiny compound, the side-by-side huts of Amadou and his brother Gibbe are still empty, a broken bicycle resting against the mud wall in one.

No one realized the journey would be so dangerous, said the men's mother, Ms. Diallo.

"We'd only heard success stories," she said, shaking her head.

Before he left, Amadou, 36, told his brother to wait. But Gibbe, 28, working in Dakar as a brick maker, thought he could earn more in Europe. Anxious to follow his brother, he took off on his own, even before he heard of Amadou's fate.

"We had no idea where he was," Ms. Diallo said.

Gibbe's name showed up on a list of dead migrants a few weeks after his brother's did.

The Anne family relied on other sons to help financially. One of them had been living in Gabon, where he had found work. A few months ago, he came to the village. He suddenly fell ill and died, of natural causes,

the family said.

Another son, Adama Anne, had planned to leave for Europe or somewhere else promising, his family said.

But he, too, had been ill. A few weeks ago, while The New York Times was interviewing the family in the village, Adama began coughing violently. His father tried to help him walk back to his hut, but the man collapsed in his father's arms and went cold.

"He's gone," his father howled. "He's finally gone."

Now, it is up to Arouna Anne, the last male in the family, to make a better life for his parents and the children his dead brothers left behind.

He is just 14 years old.

Arouna knew he couldn't support his family living in their tiny village. He

left for a town a few hours to the east.

He arrived on a Wednesday, market day, carrying only a change of clothes and the equivalent of \$33. When darkness fell, he spotted children reading Arabic outside a big house. He went inside and asked for help from the teacher. Arouna now lives there with three other boys, sleeping on a mattress made of rice stalks.

He thinks about his brothers often — about Amadou, the strict one, always trying to discipline him, and Gibbe, the jokester, always playing pranks.

Once, Arouna accompanied Gibbe to the fields. He turned his back and Gibbe disappeared, hiding in a tree. He made baboon noises and pounced on Arouna, who was terrified and ran away.

"Everyone laughed when we told them what happened," Arouna said,

giggling so hard he could barely continue talking.

Arouna hasn't seen his parents for six months. He sends a bit of money to them from time to time. It's not enough.

"I am the only remaining son now," he said. "I have to support the family."

Arouna knows well the dangers of the trip to Europe. One of his friends from home also tried the trip not long ago and died in Libya.

Eventually, Arouna says, he will go to Gabon or Congo, to work in the mines.

"It's not risky there like Libya," he said.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Militaries Huddle to Head Off Islamic State in Southeast Asia

Ben Otto

MANILA, Philippines—Three Southeast Asian nations pushed for better counterterrorism coordination amid a battle between government troops and Islamic State-aligned militants in the southern Philippines.

Military and police chiefs and foreign ministers from the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia on Thursday discussed boosting intelligence sharing and cutting off terrorism financing, part of efforts to block Islamic State's expansion into the Philippines and the wider region.

Officials also said they would review each other's terrorism laws "with a view to enhancing legislation," consider the provision of specialized military and law enforcement training and seek ways to stem the movement of terrorists, among other measures.

"Our enforcement agencies must constantly engage with one another," Malaysian Foreign Minister Anifah Aman said.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi described the regional security threat as "imminent." Officials said they would hold a follow-up meeting in Indonesia.

Philippine troops have been battling militants linked to Islamic State for a month in Marawi, a city of 200,000 on the predominantly Muslim island of Mindanao. More than 300 people have been killed and 180,000 displaced in the fighting, and the military estimates around 500 civilians remain trapped in the city. President Rodrigo Duterte placed the region under martial law last month.

Muslim-majority nations Indonesia and Malaysia fear the battle could spill onto their shores or inspire local terrorist cells as foreign jihadists

attempt to join the conflict or as militants attempt to flee the Philippines. Dozens of Islamic State-aligned militants from Indonesia, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and other countries are among the fighters in Marawi, authorities say.

The conflict in Marawi pushed Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia earlier this week to begin long delayed, joint patrols in the Sulu Sea, a vast, little-policed area between the three nations where kidnappings and piracy are common.

Elsewhere Thursday, Philippine presidential spokesman Ernesto Abella told journalists that Mr. Duterte spoke with Indonesian President Joko Widodo by phone a day earlier, with both leaders affirming "the need to step up cooperation to address threats posed by terrorism and violent extremism."

Mr. Abella said Mr. Duterte would "work closer together with Indonesia and like-minded states" to address security issues, including the conflict in Marawi.

Within the Philippines, authorities have also feared the conflict in Marawi could spread to other areas of Mindanao as militants escape the city. On Wednesday, members of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters staged a daylong attack on a village 80 kilometers south of the fighting in Marawi, holding 31 civilians hostage as human shields at a local school before dispersing under the cover of dark to evade security forces.

The hostages were released unharmed, but the military said Thursday that one civilian militia member had been killed during the siege.

The Washington Post

Klingner and Terry Bruce: We participated in talks with North Korean representatives. This is what we learned.

Bruce Klingner and Sue Mi Terry *Bruce Klingner, senior research fellow for Northeast Asia at the Heritage Foundation, previously served as the CIA's deputy division chief for Korea. Sue Mi Terry, a former CIA analyst and director for Korea, Japan and oceanic affairs at the U.S. National Security Council, is managing director for Korea at the Bower Group Asia consultancy.*

Not even the fate of American student Otto Warmbier, who died

this week after returning to the United States following his detainment in North Korea, will dissuade advocates of "engagement" with Pyongyang. They argue that, however repugnant the regime, diplomacy is the only way to stop North Korea's rapidly advancing nuclear and missile programs. But our recent experience suggests that trying to talk to supreme leader Kim Jong Un is a waste of time.

This month, we were part of a group of delegates from the United States, Japan, China and South Korea who met in Sweden with representatives of North Korea to explore possible grounds for resuming the six-party talks that collapsed in 2009. After many hours with the North Korean delegation at these "1.5 track" talks, we left more pessimistic than when we arrived.

North Korean officials made unambiguously clear that Pyongyang will not be deterred from

augmenting its nuclear arsenal or test-launching an intercontinental ballistic missile that could eventually threaten the U.S. homeland. There were no signals of flexibility or willingness to negotiate on these programs.

Major national and political news as it breaks.

Throughout, the North Korean message was that denuclearization is off the table. Pyongyang's representatives declared: "The most perfect weapons system will never

become the exclusive property of the United States."

We tried repeatedly to ascertain whether any combination of economic and diplomatic benefits or security reassurances could induce Pyongyang to comply with its previously negotiated commitments and with U.N. resolutions. The answer was an emphatic, unwavering no. Citing the fates of Iraq's Saddam Hussein and Libya's Moammar Gaddafi, the North Koreans repeatedly said that their nuclear program is the ultimate life preserver for the regime.

Our North Korean interlocutors presented a stark choice: "First accept us as a nuclear state, then we are prepared to talk about a peace treaty or fight. We are ready for either." The North Koreans weren't saying that they would initiate hostilities but that they would fight if provoked. A peace treaty ending the Korean War and legitimizing the North Korean state is a long-standing goal for Pyongyang, which sees it as a catalyst for the removal of all U.S. forces from the peninsula.

Strikingly different from similar meetings in the past was the self-confidence, even cockiness, of the North Koreans, clearly a result of the recent successes of their nuclear and missile programs. The North Koreans also made clear that their nuclear program is a response to the general "U.S. hostile policy." As such, nothing Seoul could offer would alter Pyongyang's commitment to its nuclear arsenal. The North Koreans won't even deign to negotiate with the South Koreans, whom they described repeatedly as "puppets" of the United States. Thus, the new South Korean president, Moon Jae-in, is in for a major disappointment if he tries to resurrect the "sunshine policy" of unconditional engagement pursued by previous progressive presidents from 1998 to 2008.

President Trump called the death of Otto Warmbier, an American recently released after being held by North Korean authorities, a "disgrace," on June 20 at the White House. Trump calls Otto Warmbier's treatment by North Korea 'disgrace' (The Washington Post)

(The Washington Post)

President Trump has placed his hopes on Chinese promises to more fully implement U.N. sanctions. But as even he now seems to acknowledge, this hasn't happened. He tweeted on Tuesday: "While I greatly appreciate the efforts of President Xi [Jinping] & China to help with North Korea, it has not worked out. At least I know China tried!"

Although Trump has criticized President Barack Obama's "strategic patience" policy as weak and ineffectual, he has yet to distinguish his North Korea policy from his predecessor's. Trump's policy of "maximum pressure" is anything but, and he continues to pull his punches against North Korean and Chinese violators of U.S. law. The Trump administration has also sent conflicting signals about whether it would negotiate with North Korea or potentially conduct a military attack to prevent the regime from mastering an intercontinental ballistic missile.

Initiating a preemptive strike would be a bad idea against a state that

already has nuclear weapons, as well as 10,000 artillery tubes aimed at Seoul. In our talks, the North Korean officials emphasized that they did not struggle to acquire nuclear weapons only to perish without using them. The implied threat was clear: If the United States were to use military force against North Korea, Pyongyang would retaliate, potentially leading to hundreds of thousands or millions of casualties.

Instead of trying to preempt the North Korean nuclear weapons program, the Trump administration would be better advised to ramp up sanctions — including secondary sanctions, despite predictable Chinese protests. This would impose a penalty on North Korea, without risking a war — and could conceivably hasten the day the Kim regime finally collapses. Bolstering sanctions might not be exciting, but it would be a more pragmatic step than yet another attempt at negotiations.

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Volodzko : Keep Trade With Korea Free

David Volodzko

In their summit next week, President Donald Trump and South Korean President Moon Jae-in are expected to renegotiate a landmark free-trade agreement the two countries struck 10 years ago, known as Korus. Trump has called it a "disaster," a "job-killing" deal and "a horrible deal made by Hillary." He even claimed it "destroyed 100,000 jobs."

He's wrong on pretty much all those counts. Although Korus can still be improved, it has largely benefited both sides. Trump shouldn't "terminate it," as he's vowed. He should strengthen it.

The agreement, negotiated and signed under President George W. Bush in 2007 and renegotiated under President Barack Obama, went into force in March 2012. It slashed tariffs on a range of goods, substantially expanded trade between the two countries, and bolstered protections for labor and the environment. Contrary to Trump's claim, Korus has actually resulted in a net gain of 2.6 million private-sector jobs.

Trump's claim comes from a blog post by the Economic Policy Institute, which says that the U.S.'s growing trade deficit in goods with Korea has led to the loss of more

than 95,000 American jobs. And it's true that the deficit has increased to \$27.7 billion, which is why Trump thinks the deal is one-sided (although relatively minor compared to the U.S.'s \$68.9 billion deficit with Japan or its \$347 billion deficit with China).

But this isn't necessarily a bad thing. The fact is, U.S. imports of Korean vehicles, electronics and pharmaceuticals are simply more valuable than Korean imports of American machinery, aircraft or medical instruments. Consumers in both countries are getting what they want at better prices.

And while the goods trade deficit may be up, so is the services trade surplus -- which the EPI calculation ignores. Thanks to Korus, U.S. exports of services to Korea, such as travel and intellectual property, have risen by nearly 30 percent, resulting in a surplus of \$10.7 billion. According to the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, American direct investment in Korea rose by 3.3 percent from 2014 to 2015, while Korean FDI in the U.S. rose 0.5 percent.

More to the point, Korus wasn't the reason that the goods deficit rose. Thanks to slower economic growth in South Korea, imports would've shrunk anyway. If not for Korus --

which lowered barriers to American exports -- the deficit would probably be much worse.

A final benefit is that Korus offers the U.S. a crucial geopolitical link in Asia, where China is widening its influence, North Korea is escalating its military provocations and South Korea is questioning America's commitment in the region. Now is the time to strengthen, not soften, that commitment.

None of which is to say that the deal is without flaws. As detractors point out, Korea still subsidizes its farmers, to the disadvantage of their U.S. competitors. Its automobile standards and regulations are so unclear that they act as effective trade barriers. Transparency and oversight are so lacking that domestic stocks are subject to a "Korea discount," or a persistent undervaluation needed to attract foreign investors. Finally, there's the dominance of chaebol, or politically connected conglomerates, which own more than half of Korea's stock market.

But these are all areas for improvement, which should be Trump's aim. If anything, South Korea's problems -- too much red tape, a lack of transparency, unfair subsidies -- stem from too much government meddling in trade

matters. In other words, the problem with Korus is that it doesn't go far enough.

Renegotiating should mean leveling the playing field for U.S. farmers and automakers, so both sides can gain freer access to businesses and customers and compete more fairly. It should mean ensuring that the free-trade deal is more truly free, rather than trying to alter a bilateral deficit that largely reflects supply and demand.

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

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Speaking at Kansas State University in 1978, Milton Friedman opened with an old chestnut: "If you have two economists in one room you are bound to have at least three opinions." But he added there's one topic about which that isn't true. When it comes to free trade, he said, "economists have spoken with almost one voice for some 200 hundred years." That's because, in general, there aren't winners and losers in such deals, as Trump always claims. Everybody wins.

Chuck Schumer: Trump railed against China while campaigning. Now he's gone soft.

Chuck Schumer, a Democrat, represents New York in the U.S. Senate and serves as minority leader.

Since his inauguration, President Trump has backed off several core campaign positions, including making a stark reversal of his posture toward China. He has explained that rather than pursue a tough-on-China trade policy, he will capitulate on U.S. trade interests to win Beijing's cooperation on North Korea. Taking a softer tack on China is misguided: It will hurt hundreds of thousands of U.S. workers and businesses, without changing Beijing's behavior. The best and perhaps the only way to achieve results with China is to be strong and consistent about our priorities — on economic issues and national-security issues — rather than the reverse.

Bolstering our economy and creating good-paying jobs is one of the most important goals a president can pursue, especially given middle-class stagnation and discontent. Failing to address China's unfair advantage on trade will mean hundreds of thousands of American workers and businesses must continue to compete on a skewed playing field. By dumping counterfeit and artificially cheap goods into our markets, denying the most productive U.S. companies fair access to its markets and relentlessly stealing the intellectual property of U.S. companies, China has robbed the U.S. economy of

trillions of dollars and caused the loss of millions of U.S. jobs. Estimates by our government pin the cost of cyberespionage alone at \$400 billion a year to the U.S. economy, 90 percent of which comes from China's government. Retired Gen. Keith Alexander, the former director of the National Security Agency, has called the loss of industrial information and intellectual property through cybertheft "the greatest transfer of wealth in history." The American worker can ill afford another soft-on-China presidency.

Under Chinese President Xi Jinping, Beijing will continue to act in its self-interest unless the United States does something to alter the status quo. And yet, despite numerous promises during the campaign to crack down on these unfair practices by China, Trump has failed to take any significant action after almost five months in office. In fact, he has made trade threats against U.S. allies such as Canada and South Korea while giving China a pass.

The big stories and commentary shaping the day.

The reason? Trump believes that obliging China on trade will win its cooperation in handling North Korea. He's gone so far as to promise even more favorable trade terms if China can "solve the North Korea problem." This approach deeply misreads China's motivations, and the president seems to have just realized it. He

recently tweeted: "While I greatly appreciate the efforts of President Xi & China to help with North Korea, it has not worked out. At least I know China tried!" We will wait to see if this tweet actually signals a shift in U.S. policy, but no doubt it is a confession that the president's conciliatory approach toward China has failed.

The president should have known from the very beginning.

Several decades of history have shown that accommodating China on trade will not yield greater collaboration in foreign policy. In this area, China has acted as it has on economic policy — it looks out for its own interests and does not shift course unless compelled to. So long as China can get away with engaging in the smallest amount of cooperation with the United States abroad while protecting its core economic interests, it will do so, especially if the United States gives away a major bargaining chip — trade — for free.

Trump seems to have done exactly that, accepting China's bare-minimum concessions in exchange for putting U.S. trade and economic interests on the back burner. It is a lose-lose for the United States.

China has its own interests in a denuclearized Korean Peninsula. It wants to maintain a divided Korea, with North Korea as a buffer state. Concerned about the prospect of increased U.S. pressure, it has

taken a few small steps in recent months to curb North Korea's aggression. But China would prefer to contain the problem, not solve it.

To get China to actually bear down on its ally North Korea, the United States must have some leverage in dealing with Beijing. Because China's government cares most about economic growth, trade and dominance in the region, our best bet is to be tough on trade and straightforward about our own national security interests in the region.

In truth, no one has a perfect solution to dealing with North Korea. But what absolutely doesn't make sense is a Trump strategy that undermines South Korea and sells out American workers in the vague hope that China will start cooperating with the United States out of its good graces.

Rather than retreating from his position on trade, Trump should start consistently enforcing trade laws. Rather than retreating from our ally South Korea, Trump should strengthen ties. He ought to focus less on flattery and charm and heed President Teddy Roosevelt's admonition to "speak softly and carry a big stick." That's the best way to help American workers and businesses. It's the best way to get China to cooperate on North Korea, too.

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ETATS-UNIS

POLITICO Inside McConnell's plan to repeal Obamacare

By Burgess
Everett

As Mitch McConnell unveiled the Senate's long-anticipated Obamacare repeal bill at a closed-door briefing Thursday morning, he urged GOP senators to withhold statements announcing outright opposition to the proposal and remain flexible, according to people familiar with the matter.

About four hours later, a quartet of McConnell's most conservative members said in a joint statement that they are "not ready to vote for this bill."

Story Continued Below

But notably, GOP Sens. Rand Paul, Mike Lee, Ron Johnson and Ted Cruz left themselves plenty of room to eventually support it after further negotiation and persuasion — a critical nod to the Senate majority leader's request.

The Kentucky Republican still has much work to do to get his health care overhaul across the finish line and may have to offer those senators some concessions that move the bill to the right. And somehow while doing so, he also must keep on board a pair of moderates and a half-dozen stalwart defenders of Obamacare's Medicaid expansion.

Right now, McConnell is far from having a commitment for the 50 votes needed for passage, according to senators who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal politics of the 52-member caucus. But no one on Capitol Hill seems to be betting against the wily majority leader as he plans for one of the most critical roll call votes of his career next week.

"He is extremely talented in cobbling together coalitions of people who disagree," said Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine), a moderate Republican skeptical of the GOP's direction. "I never

underestimate his ability to pull something off."

McConnell's strategy has been a slow burn, allowing his members to vent in private party discussions while gradually writing a bill that takes in their considerations over the past six weeks. He's had more than 30 meetings with his members about taking down the 2010 health law, intended to give his members more input and get them comfortable with the product.

Johnson, for example, doesn't even serve on the two committees that oversee health care policy, so the process has empowered him more than he might have been through

regular order. People close to McConnell believe Lee's staff has been read in more than any other member on the chamber's complicated parliamentary procedures that constrain what is possible under reconciliation.

"He believes that given the amount of input we've had from everybody, we'll get to 50. Because everybody's had a seat at the table," said Sen. John Thune of South Dakota, a close McConnell ally in leadership. "If you get 80 percent of what you want in a circumstance like this, it's going to have to be a victory because we're not going to get 100 percent."

The most immediate concern is certainly the four Republicans who've banded together to enhance their negotiating position.

Republican leaders believe McConnell can probably get Johnson (R-Wis.) to eventually support the bill, either through persuasion or an amendment. Republicans hope that positive comments from insurance companies and health care experts in Wisconsin could sway the senator to the yes column.

Cruz (R-Texas) is a tougher task: He and Lee (R-Utah) have been working together on several conservative proposals. Cruz's biggest ask is to allow insurance companies that offer Obamacare policies to be able to offer non-Obamacare policies as well, arguing that it would provide consumers an additional option and likely drive down prices.

Adoption of such a proposal could win the votes of those two conservative stalwarts, as well as other Republicans, but there's a problem: The parliamentarian may not allow them under the Senate's strict budget reconciliation rule. In fact, it might pose a big enough problem to kill the whole bill. McConnell may be able to win those conservatives over, said a Republican senator, but a "little help from the parliamentarian would be nice."

There is also some concern that the proposal would destabilize markets because the sickest people would end up in pricier Obamacare plans. Cruz and Lee also want to allow insurance to be sold across state lines, but Republicans are confident that will not pass muster with the parliamentarian. It's not clear what, if anything, McConnell can do to satisfy them if those measures are not included.

In addition to the joint statement with his colleagues, Paul went on a media tour de force criticizing the bill as "Obamacare lite" on Thursday. He's still viewed by GOP insiders as a likely "no" vote, but with a stronger hand as part of the conservative gang.

McConnell "said this morning that this is a draft and that he's open to changes. But I think it's more likely we get changes if there's four of us asking for changes," Paul said on Thursday afternoon. "The bill's got to look more like repeal and less like we're keeping" Obamacare.

In the past, Paul, Cruz and Lee have all defied McConnell. But they

also all entered the Senate on campaigns to repeal Obamacare. McConnell's message ultimately will boil down to: "It's time to put up or shut up," said the party's chief vote counter, John Cornyn of Texas.

"I think he's right. We could talk about this endlessly and never reach a conclusion," Cornyn said in an interview.

Thune added that a more dire argument is beginning to circulate among Republican leaders.

"If we don't get this done and we end up with Democratic majorities in '18, we'll have single payer. That's what we'll be dealing with," Thune said.

On the other side of the party's ideological spectrum, Collins said Thursday she's angling for a vote to strip the bill's Planned Parenthood defunding provision, which could roil the rest of the conference's social conservatives.

And senators from Medicaid expansion states like Rob Portman of Ohio and Dean Heller of Nevada raised "concerns" about future funding constraints, though they also did not come out forcefully against the bill as leaders had feared.

"I'm still up in the air," said Sen. Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia, another backer of robust Medicaid funding.

Despite the public perception — partly pushed by Democrats — of a rushed process and closed-door negotiations, most Republican lawmakers say McConnell has done

as much as he can to incorporate each senator's wants and craft a bill that could satisfy a wide-ranging conference.

Rank-and-file lawmakers say they would want more time to review the bill, but they understand McConnell has to make the push now instead of letting the controversial plan twist in the wind or further stall the GOP's agenda.

"We have 23 work days between now and the end of the fiscal year," a second Republican senator said. "So what he's saying is, 'You know guys, if we talk about this for another month, we'll still be bickering.'"

Now, the majority leader has one week before his self-imposed deadline to convince the parliamentarian on key legislative language and corral 50 votes — all while facing the risk that he'll be held responsible if the GOP doesn't repeal Obamacare, as the party has promised for four election cycles.

Republicans said their hope is that if the bill does fail, McConnell won't be the one held responsible.

"I don't think he'll get the blame. I think he'll get credit for trying," said a third Republican senator. "It'll be the people that vote against it that get the blame."

Jennifer Haberkorn, Elana Schor and Rachana Pradhan contributed to this report.

**The
New York
Times**

Senate Health Care Bill Includes Deep Cuts to Medicaid (UNE)

Robert Pear and
Thomas Kaplan

WASHINGTON — Senate Republicans, who for seven years have promised a repeal of the Affordable Care Act, took a major step on Thursday toward that goal, unveiling a bill to make deep cuts in Medicaid and end the law's mandate that most Americans have health insurance.

The 142-page bill would create a new system of federal tax credits to help people buy health insurance, while offering states the ability to drop many of the benefits required by the Affordable Care Act, like maternity care, emergency services and mental health treatment.

But the measure landed in rough seas ahead of a vote that Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the majority leader, wants next week. Four conservative senators, Rand Paul of Kentucky, Ted Cruz of Texas, Mike Lee of Utah and Ron

Johnson of Wisconsin, announced that they would oppose it without changes — more than enough to bring it down.

"It does not appear this draft as written will accomplish the most important promise that we made to Americans: to repeal Obamacare and lower their health care costs," the four wrote in a joint statement.

Other Republican senators, like Dean Heller of Nevada and Rob Portman of Ohio, expressed their own qualms, as did AARP, the American Hospital Association, the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network and the Association of American Medical Colleges.

How the G.O.P. Health Bill Would Change Medicaid

The reporter Margot Sanger-Katz examines how the Republican health plan aims to roll back a program that insures one in five Americans.

By MARGOT SANGER-KATZ, ROBIN STEIN and SARAH STEIN
KERR on June 22, 2017. Photo by Doug Mills/The New York Times.
Watch in Times Video »

"We are extremely disappointed by the Senate bill released today," the medical school association wrote. "Despite promises to the contrary, it will leave millions of people without health coverage, and others with only bare-bones plans that will be insufficient to properly address their needs."

Once promised as a top-to-bottom revamp of the health bill passed by the House last month, the Senate bill instead maintains its structure, with modest adjustments. The Senate version is, in some respects, more moderate than the House bill, offering more financial assistance to some lower-income people to help them defray the rapidly rising cost of private health insurance.

But the Senate bill would make subsidies less generous than under current law. It would also lower the annual income limit for receiving subsidies to cover insurance premiums to 350 percent of the poverty level, or about \$42,000 for an individual, from 400 percent.

Older people could be disproportionately hurt because they pay more for insurance in general. Both chambers' bills would allow insurers to charge older people five times as much as younger ones; the limit now is three times.

The Senate measure, like the House bill, would phase out the extra money that the federal government has provided to states as an incentive to expand eligibility for Medicaid. And like the House bill, it would put the entire Medicaid program on a budget, ending the open-ended entitlement that now exists.

Audio

We discuss the health bill that was finally unveiled by the Senate. After all the waiting, what was promised to be a drastic revamp of the House bill looks a lot like it.

It would also repeal most of the tax increases imposed by the Affordable Care Act to help pay for expanded coverage, in effect handing a broad tax cut to the affluent in a measure that would also slice billions of dollars from Medicaid, a program that serves one in five Americans, not only the poor but also almost two-thirds of people in nursing homes. A capital-gains tax cut for the most affluent Americans would be retroactive to the beginning of this year.

The bill, drafted in secret, is likely to come to the Senate floor next week, and could come to a vote after 20 hours of debate.

If it passes, President Trump and the Republican Congress will be on the edge of a major overhaul of the American health care system — about one-sixth of the nation's economy.

The premise of the bill, repeated almost daily in some form by its chief author, Mr. McConnell, is that "Obamacare is collapsing around us, and the American people are desperately searching for relief."

Mr. Trump shares that view, and passage of the Senate bill would move the president much closer to being able to boast about the adoption of a marquee piece of legislation, a feat he has so far been unable to accomplish.

Democrats and some insurers say Mr. Trump has sabotaged the Affordable Care Act, in part by threatening to withhold subsidies paid to insurers so they can reduce deductibles and other out-of-pocket costs for millions of low-income people.

And President Barack Obama, who has been hesitant to speak up on political issues since leaving office, waded into the debate on Thursday, saying the Senate proposal showed a "fundamental meanness."

"The Senate bill, unveiled today, is not a health care bill," Mr. Obama wrote on his Facebook page. "It's a massive transfer of wealth from

middle-class and poor families to the richest people in America. It hands enormous tax cuts to the rich and to the drug and insurance industries, paid for by cutting health care for everybody else."

In a message to his supporters, Mr. Obama urged people to demand compromise from their lawmakers before senators vote on the Republican bill next week.

In the Senate, Democrats are determined to defend a law that has provided coverage to 20 million people and is a pillar of Mr. Obama's legacy. The debate over the repeal bill is shaping up as a titanic political clash, which could have major implications for both parties, affecting their electoral prospects for years to come.

Mr. McConnell faces a great challenge in amassing the votes to win Senate approval of the bill, which Republicans are trying to pass using special budget rules that would allow them to avoid a Democratic filibuster. But with only 52 seats, Mr. McConnell can afford to lose only two Republicans, with Vice President Mike Pence breaking the tie.

Democrats have assailed Republicans for putting the bill together without a single public hearing or bill-drafting session.

And Mr. Trump has been only fitfully helpful. He cheered on passage of the House version, then told senators it was "mean." On Thursday, a White House spokeswoman, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, declared, "I don't believe that the president has specifically weighed in that it's right to cut Medicaid" — something the Senate bill decidedly does, as does the president's proposed budget. Later, Mr. Trump tweeted that he was "very supportive" of the Senate bill.

Republican leaders still must contend with internal divisions that will be difficult to overcome. Numerous Republican senators from states that expanded Medicaid are concerned about how a rollback of the program could affect their constituents, and they face pressure from governors back home.

Some Republican senators, like Susan Collins of Maine, said they were waiting for an analysis of the

bill to be issued soon by the Congressional Budget Office, the official scorekeeper on Capitol Hill.

The budget office found that the bill passed by the House would leave 23 million more people without insurance in a decade.

Under the Senate bill, the federal government would continue paying crucial subsidies to health insurance companies through 2019, alleviating the uncertainty caused by litigation and by mixed signals from the Trump administration. Without this money, many insurers have said, they will sharply increase premiums or pull out of the marketplaces in many states.

The Senate bill would also cap overall federal spending on Medicaid: States would receive a per-beneficiary allotment of money. The federal payments would grow more slowly than under the House bill starting in 2025. Alternatively, states could receive an annual lump sum of federal money for Medicaid in the form of a block grant.

State officials and health policy experts predict that many people would be dropped from Medicaid because states would not fill the fiscal hole left by the loss of federal money.

"The Senate bill creates an illusion of being less draconian than the House bill, but is arguably more so" on Medicaid, said Sara Rosenbaum, a professor of health law and policy at George Washington University.

The Senate bill would make it much easier for states to opt out of insurance standards in the Affordable Care Act, including the requirement for insurers to provide certain "essential benefits."

Republicans said the bill would still guarantee access to insurance for people with pre-existing conditions. But consumers could be exposed to new medical costs if, for example, insurers did not have to cover certain expensive new drugs or medical procedures.

"An individual with a pre-existing condition could be insured, but the services needed to treat that condition might not be covered because of a waiver," said Timothy S. Jost, an emeritus professor of

health law at Washington and Lee University.

The Senate and House bills would both provide tax credits to help people buy health insurance, but Senate Republicans said they tried to direct more of the assistance to lower-income people. Under the House bill, the tax credits would be based mainly on a person's age. Under the Senate bill, they would be based on a person's income and age, as well as local insurance costs.

The Senate bill, like the House bill, would cut off federal Medicaid payments to Planned Parenthood for one year. The money reimburses clinics for birth control, cancer screenings and other preventive care. About half of Planned Parenthood patients are on Medicaid.

Also like the House measure, the Senate bill would repeal taxes imposed on high-income people by the Affordable Care Act, including a payroll tax increase that helps finance Medicare.

The bill would delay a tax on high-cost employer-sponsored health insurance — the so-called Cadillac tax — to 2026. It is currently scheduled to take effect in 2020. Employers and labor unions detest the tax and would have nearly a decade to try to kill it.

The Senate bill would provide \$50 billion to help stabilize insurance markets and hold down premiums from 2018 through 2021. The money would be distributed by the federal government to insurance companies that apply. The bill would provide \$62 billion in grants to states for similar purposes from 2019 to 2026.

In addition, the Senate bill would provide \$2 billion next year in federal grants to help states respond to the opioid crisis.

The bill would generally prohibit consumers from using federal tax credits to help buy insurance that includes coverage for abortions. Democrats plan to challenge this provision as a violation of Senate rules being used to speed passage of the repeal bill.

The New York Times Bill Shifting Dollars From Poor to Rich Is a Key Part of the Senate Health

Margot Sanger-Katz

The Affordable Care Act gave health insurance to millions of Americans by shifting resources

from the wealthy to the poor and by moving oversight from states to the federal government. The Senate bill introduced Thursday pushes back forcefully on both dimensions.

The bill is aligned with long-held Republican values, advancing states' rights and paring back growing entitlement programs, while freeing individuals from

requirements that they have insurance and emphasizing personal responsibility. Obamacare raised taxes on high earners and the health care industry, and

essentially redistributed that income — in the form of health insurance or insurance subsidies — to many of the groups that have fared poorly over the last few decades.

The draft Senate bill, called the Better Care Reconciliation Act, would jettison those taxes while reducing federal funding for the care of low-income Americans. The bill's largest benefits go to the wealthiest Americans, who have the most comfortable health care arrangements, and its biggest losses fall to poorer Americans who rely on government support. The bill preserves many of the structures of Obamacare, but rejects several of its central goals.

Audio

We discuss the health bill that was finally unveiled by the Senate. After all the waiting, what was promised to be a drastic revamp of the House bill looks a lot like it.

Like a House version of the legislation, the bill would fundamentally change the structure of Medicaid, which provides health insurance to 74 million disabled or poor Americans, including nearly 40 percent of all children. Instead of open-ended payments, the federal government would give states a maximum payment for nearly every individual enrolled in the program. The Senate version of the bill would increase that allotment every year by a formula that is expected to grow substantially more slowly than the average increase in medical costs.

Avik Roy, the president of the Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity, and a conservative health care analyst, cheered the bill on Twitter, saying, "If it passes, it'll be the greatest policy achievement by a G.O.P. Congress in my lifetime." The bill, he explained in an email, provides a mechanism for poor Americans to move from Medicaid coverage into the private market, a goal he has long championed as a way of equalizing insurance coverage across income groups.

States would continue to receive extra funding for Obamacare's expansion of Medicaid to more poor adults, but only temporarily. After several years, states wishing to cover that population would be expected to pay a much greater share of the bill, even as they adjust to leaner federal funding for other Medicaid beneficiaries — disabled children, nursing home residents — who are more vulnerable.

High-income earners would get substantial tax cuts on payroll and investment income. Subsidies for those low-income Americans who buy their own insurance would decline compared with current law. Low-income Americans who currently buy their own insurance would also lose federal help in paying their deductibles and co-payments.

The bill does offer insurance subsidies to poor Americans who live in states that don't offer them Medicaid coverage, a group without good insurance options under Obamacare. But the high-deductible plans that would become the norm might continue to leave care out of their financial reach even if they do buy insurance.

The battle over resources played into the public debate. Mitch McConnell, the Senate majority leader, said the bill was needed to "bring help to the families who have been struggling with Obamacare." In a Facebook post, President Barack Obama, without mentioning the taxes that made his program possible, condemned the Senate bill as "a massive transfer of wealth from middle-class and poor families to the richest people in America."

In another expression of Republican principles, the bill would make it much easier for states to set their own rules for insurance regulation, a return to the norm before Obamacare.

Under the bill, states would be able to apply for waivers that would let them eliminate consumer protection regulations, like rules that require all health plans to cover a basic

package of benefits or that prevent insurance plans from limiting how much care they will cover in a given year.

States could get rid of the online marketplaces that help consumers compare similar health plans, and make a variety of other changes to the health insurance system. The standards for approval are quite permissive. Not every state would choose to eliminate such rules, of course. But several might.

"You can eliminate all those financial protections," said Nicholas Bagley, a law professor at the University of Michigan. "That would be huge."

Americans with pre-existing conditions would continue to enjoy protection from discrimination: In contrast with the House health bill, insurers would not be allowed to charge higher prices to customers with a history of illness, even in states that wish to loosen insurance regulations.

But patients with serious illnesses may still face skimpier, less useful coverage. States may waive benefit requirements and allow insurers to charge customers more. Someone seriously ill who buys a plan that does not cover prescription drugs, for example, may not find it very valuable.

There are features that would tend to drive down the sticker price of insurance, a crucial concern of many Republican lawmakers, who have criticized high prices under Obamacare. Plans that cover fewer benefits and come with higher deductibles would cost less than more comprehensive coverage.

But because federal subsidies would also decline, only a fraction of people buying their own insurance would enjoy the benefits of lower prices. Many middle-income Americans would be expected to pay a larger share of their income to purchase health insurance that covers a smaller share of their care.

The bill also includes substantial funds to help protect insurers from

losses caused by unusually expensive patients, a measure designed to lure into the market those insurance carriers that have grown skittish by losses in the early years of Obamacare. But it removes a policy dear to the insurance industry — if no one else. Without an individual mandate with penalties for Americans who remain uninsured, healthier customers may choose to opt out of the market until they need medical care, increasing costs for those who stay in.

The reforms are unlikely to drive down out-of-pocket spending, another perennial complaint of the bill's authors, and a central critique by President Trump of the current system. He often likes to say that Obamacare plans come with deductibles so high that they are unusable. Subsidies under the bill would help middle-income consumers buy insurance that pays 58 percent of the average patient's medical costs, down from 70 percent under Obamacare; it would also remove a different type of subsidy designed to lower deductibles further for Americans earning less than around \$30,000 a year.

Out-of-pocket spending is the top concern of most voters. The insurance they would buy under the bill might seem cheap at first, but it wouldn't be if they ended up paying more in deductibles.

Mr. McConnell was constrained by political considerations and the peculiar rules of the legislative mechanism that he chose to avoid a Democratic filibuster. Despite those limits, he managed to produce a bill that reflects some bedrock conservative values. But the bill also shows some jagged seams. It may not fix many of Obamacare's problems — high premiums, high deductibles, declining competition — that he has railed against in promoting the new bill's passage.



Senate GOP's health plan debuts amid doubts (UNE)

The health-care proposal unveiled by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell on Thursday came under immediate attack from conservative and centrist Republican senators as well as industry officials, casting the bill's viability into doubt even as GOP leaders plan to bring it to a final vote next week.

The 142-page bill, which McConnell (R-Ky.) released after weeks of

drafting it in secrecy, drew swift criticism from hard-right senators who argued it does not go far enough in undoing Barack Obama's signature health-care law, the Affordable Care Act. It also prompted an outcry from centrist senators and medical organizations worried that it takes on the law, known as Obamacare, too aggressively and would lead to millions losing their health care or receiving fewer benefits.

These critics effectively delivered their opening bids in what is expected to be a contentious week of negotiations. McConnell is trying to pass the bill before the July 4 recess, with Republican leaders seeking to quickly learn whether they will be able to fulfill years of promises to roll back the law or whether it's time to turn to other items on their legislative agenda, such as overhauling the tax code.

No Republican senators definitively said they would vote against the bill, instead focusing attention on the provisions that would need to be changed to earn their vote. President Trump predicted the final product is "going to be great" — but only after some more negotiations take place.

The next big showdown will come early next week when the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office releases its analysis of the

bill. Congress's scorekeeper is expected to release a comprehensive estimate of how many people could lose their insurance coverage under the proposal and what impact it may have on premiums, as well as on the federal budget deficit — numbers many Republican senators said they need to see before making a final decision.

A health-care bill released June 22 by the Senate Republican leadership faces opposition from Democrats as well as four GOP senators, making the proposal's fate uncertain. A health-care bill released June 22 by the Senate Republican leadership faces opposition from Democrats as well as four GOP senators. (Video: Alice Li, Jorge Ribas, Libby Casey, Bastien Inzaurrealde/Photo: Melina Mara/The Washington Post)

(Alice Li, Jorge Ribas, Libby Casey, Bastien Inzaurrealde/The Washington Post)

It is unclear what a bill capable of attracting the 50 out of 52 Republicans needed for passage would look like — or whether such a compromise is possible. What is clear is that the bill McConnell released will need to change to survive.

"This current draft doesn't get the job done," Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Tex.) said. "But I believe we can get to yes."

Cruz joined forces with three other Republicans — Sens. Rand Paul of Kentucky, Ron Johnson of Wisconsin and Mike Lee of Utah — to issue a statement saying that although they cannot support the bill as written, they are open to negotiating changes that could ultimately win their backing. Cruz, Lee and Paul are pushing for the bill to more fully repeal the ACA, while Johnson has worried that the legislation is being rushed.

On the other end of the GOP spectrum, Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine) said she also has "concerns about some of the provisions." She opposes blocking federal funding for Planned Parenthood, as the Senate bill would, and said she was unsettled by the changes to Medicaid that would result in long-term federal spending cuts to the program.

Sen. Dean Heller (R-Nev.), who is up for reelection in 2018 in a purple state that expanded Medicaid under the ACA, said he has "serious concerns" about the Medicaid provisions.

Like the bill that passed the House in May, the Senate measure would

cut off expanded Medicaid funding for states — but at a more gradual rate, by phasing out the higher federal spending between 2020 and 2024. But it would enact deeper long-term cuts to the program, which provides health-care coverage for 74 million Americans.

Rick Pollack, president and chief executive of the American Hospital Association, said in a statement that the plan "moves in the opposite direction" in terms of providing health coverage and that "Medicaid cuts of this magnitude are unsustainable and will increase costs to individuals with private insurance."

Which GOP senators have concerns with the health-care bill

In a nod to centrist senators, the Senate bill would preserve two of the ACA's most popular provisions: Insurers could not deny coverage based on preexisting conditions, and children could stay on their parents' plans until the age of 26 — though critics said people with past illnesses might not be able to afford plans under the revamped rules.

But the bill would allow states to use an existing ACA program, known as 1332, in which they can file for waivers from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services that allow them to scale back the requirements for plans offered by insurers.

Some argued that the complaints about McConnell's proposal — particularly from the GOP senators who came out quickly and forcefully against it — amounted to little more than posturing that would allow critics to eventually claim credit for reshaping the final version of the bill.

"If anyone actually believes Ted Cruz isn't going to vote for final passage of this bill, well, I have some rainforest in Arizona to sell you," John Weaver, a Republican strategist, wrote on Twitter.

Cruz, who is up for reelection in 2018, helped start a health-care working group that has been huddling for months. Allies have said that Cruz wants and needs to support a repeal bill, leading many to conclude that he will eventually come around.

The Senate bill would abolish the penalties for two of the ACA's central mandates — that individuals must show proof of insurance when filing their taxes and that firms with 50 workers or more must provide health coverage — while providing less money for moderate- and low-income Americans buying insurance on the individual market.

Cruz said he wants to eliminate even more regulations so that insurers can offer cheap plans with bare-bones coverage. He also wants to allow people to buy plans across state lines, expand health savings accounts and cap the amount of damages that can be awarded in medical malpractice lawsuits.

McConnell introduced his draft text — which he spent weeks crafting with only a small circle of aides — in a private meeting with Republican senators Thursday morning before showing it to the public.

"Republicans believe we have a responsibility to act — and we are," McConnell said on the Senate floor.

McConnell is privately threatening to bring the bill to a vote next week, even if he does not have the necessary votes, according to two Republicans in close contact with Senate GOP leadership who were granted anonymity to describe private conversations.

But that message may be more of an attempt to pressure Republicans to support the bill rather than an ultimatum, and some aides and outside observers speculated McConnell would pull the bill rather than have it go down in defeat. A McConnell spokeswoman declined to comment.

There is still a dispute over whether Senate rules will allow the bill to include language in McConnell's draft that would deny Medicaid reimbursements for Planned Parenthood's services for one year. Federal law already prevents taxpayer funding to pay for abortions, except to save the life of the mother or in the case of rape or incest. But some Republicans want to ban all federal funding for Planned Parenthood, which also provides health services such as birth control and preventive screening.

While the House legislation would peg federal insurance subsidies to consumers' age, the Senate bill would factor in income as well, as the ACA does. But younger people would still get more generous subsidies than they do now, and the bill would allow insurers to charge older consumers based on a 5-to-1 ratio, rather than the current 3-to-1 ratio.

"It needs to look more like a repeal of Obamacare rather than that we're keeping Obamacare," Paul said. He expressed displeasure that GOP leaders had not done more to undo the insurance subsidies created under Obamacare.

Some medical experts warned that while the adjustments to the tax credits in the Senate proposal are better than the House bill, they would probably still fall short of what is needed.

Sharad Lakhnanpal, president of the American College of Rheumatology, said in a statement that they "do not go far enough in ensuring individuals living with rheumatic disease will be able to maintain their current level of coverage."

The bill is being moved under arcane budget rules that allow it to be passed with a simple majority. McConnell has little margin for error in a chamber where Republicans hold a 52-to-48 advantage and Democrats are firmly united against the legislation.

Senate Democrats swiftly protested the bill Thursday, criticizing Republicans for crafting it under secretive conditions and asking for more time to debate and vet the measure. Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) said Republicans were "turning truth upside down" with their promises of an open amendment process next week.

Obama, who has weighed in sparingly on public policy since leaving office, posted a scathing critique of the Senate bill Thursday on Facebook, urging voters from both parties to lobby senators to slow down and renegotiate the measure. "Simply put, if there's a chance you might get sick, get old, or start a family — this bill will do you harm," he wrote.

The Daily 202 newsletter

PowerPost's must-read morning briefing for decision-makers.

Senate Republican Conference Chairman John Thune (S.D.) made it clear that party leaders are well aware of the challenge they face in marshaling sufficient GOP votes for their proposal.

"Forty-eight. That's not enough to pass," Thune said, counting out the four GOP senators who declared their opposition in a joint statement.

But, he added, "we're not voting yet."

Paige Winfield Cunningham, Elise Viebeck, Amy Goldstein and David Weigel contributed to this report.

Senate Republicans' claim of saving individual health insurance markets could prove hollow (UNE)

Goldstein

By Amy Goldstein

Republicans have vowed for months to undo the Affordable Care Act and stave off the collapse of the nation's most fragile health insurance markets, which serve people who buy coverage on their own. In the Senate, that turns out to be a short-term goal.

Legislation that the Senate's GOP leaders finally disclosed on Thursday would keep billions of dollars flowing — but only for two years — to health plans that have been begging for continued help with the expense of millions of lower-income customers in ACA insurance marketplaces. After 2019, the payments would stop.

And the cutoff of those payments would coincide with the end of subsidies that help the vast majority of people with ACA health plans afford their premiums. The subsidies would be replaced with smaller tax credits with clear winners and losers. The new credits would not reach as many middle-income Americans, and although they would be available for the first time to people below the poverty line, the amounts could be too small to be useful.

Taken together, these and other features of the Better Care Reconciliation Act could drive prices up after a few years for people who buy individual insurance — a core group the ACA is designed to help. After the next three years, it also would begin a sharp downward path in federal support for Medicaid, the cornerstone of the nation's health-care safety net for the past half-century.

According to health policy experts across the ideological spectrum, the bill's design amounts to a strategic calculation: Try to allay the immediate fears of insurance companies and states, at the risk of letting problems with affordability and access to coverage accumulate.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) unveiled the legislation that would reshape a big piece of the U.S. health-care system on Thursday, June 22.

By Amy

Here's what we know about the bill. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) unveiled the legislation that would reshape a big piece of the U.S. health-care system on Thursday, June 22. Here's what we know about the bill. (Monica Akhtar/The Washington Post)

(Monica Akhtar/The Washington Post)

"It stabilizes things nicely for 2018 and 2019, and after that is a crap shoot," said Dan Mendelson, president of Avalere, a Washington-based health-care consulting firm.

Other elements — touted by the GOP as freeing Americans from burdens of the ACA — could accelerate insurance-rate increases over time and leave health plans with a greater share of unhealthy customers. The bill would defang the ACA's requirement that most Americans carry health coverage by erasing penalties for being uninsured. Unlike a similar bill that House Republicans narrowly adopted last month, the Senate version would compel insurance companies to take all customers, healthy or sick, and charge them the same prices.

As the bill emerged from weeks of secrecy Thursday, Senate Republicans were not the only ones to have reached an accommodation. Within the insurance industry, officials have decided to protest the eventual cuts to Medicaid but accept for now the relief — short-term though it is — that the measure would offer them in the individual market.

"The health plans now need to think about, 'Does this provide stability for the long term, and when do you have those discussions?'" said one industry insider who spoke on the condition of anonymity about political discussions that remain fluid.

The long-term uncertainty never was broached Thursday as Senate GOP leaders revealed their health-care plan to fellow senators.

"We agree on the need to stabilize the insurance markets that are collapsing under Obamacare," Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) declared on the chamber's

floor. He promised that the bill would bring "hope to Americans who face the possibility of limited or zero options next year under Obamacare."

Few Republican lawmakers questioned that outlook as they were absorbing the details of the legislation. Sen. Bill Cassidy (La.) told reporters that, with two funds designated to help states keep insurance rates stable, in part by cushioning the costs associated with people with the highest-medical expenses, "there's a lot of money."

The \$112 billion the legislation would provide through those two pots of money is \$28 billion less than parallel funding in a similar bill that House Republicans narrowly adopted last month.

The cross pressures on Republican leaders also were on display in the Capitol. Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) said the fact that the measure would devote billions to shoring up the private market was a reason that he is unwilling to support it. He will hold out for "a bill that looks more like a repeal of Obamacare and less like we're keeping Obamacare," he declared.

Like the House version, the Senate plan would immediately abolish the ACA's penalties for most Americans who fail to carry health coverage, although it does not eliminate the mandate itself — a step impossible under the rules of a special budget process that Senate leaders plan to use to avoid a potential filibuster.

[Complete live coverage: Senate health-care bill]

Even ending the penalty "is a very big deal," said Larry Levitt, senior vice president of the Kaiser Family Foundation. "The individual mandate was the stick that encouraged healthy people to sign up for insurance. Without it, premiums will increase significantly."

Unlike the House bill, which allows health plans to temporarily charge higher rates to customers who let their insurance lapse, the Senate's version does not include any such deterrent.

Without any legal prod for people to buy insurance, "you would have a

disaster of a marketplace," said Robert Laszewski, a health-care industry consultant. The Senate plan would require insurers to charge the same prices to sick customers as healthy ones, while allowing consumers to wait to buy coverage until they become ill. "You can let people buy insurance on the barn after it burns down," Laszewski said.

The intersection of culture and politics.

Federal financial help in affording insurance premiums also would differ in the Senate plan. It would take into account how much insurance costs in different communities, but the tax credits that would replace the ACA's subsidies in 2020 would be tied to the skimpiest category of coverage under the current law. Such health plans usually come with high deductibles before the coverage begins.

The subsidies in the Senate GOP plan would make insurance more affordable to young adults and more expensive for people from middle age through their mid-60s. While the ACA allows financial help for those with incomes up to four times the federal poverty level, the Senate version would stop at 350 percent of the poverty level.

On the other hand, it would for the first time allow insurance tax credits to be given to people living below the poverty line. That would primarily help a group now estimated at 2.6 million in the 19 states that decided not to expand their Medicaid programs under the ACA. This pool of people, policy experts predict, would expand because cuts to Medicaid under the bill could lead more low-income Americans to become uninsured.

"It's essentially replacing the Medicaid expansion with tax credits for low-income people," Kaiser's Levitt said. "Whether those people at the low end really [would] get enough help to buy insurance is a different question."

Juliet Eilperin contributed to this report.

Stephanie Armour, Kristina Peterson and Louise Radnofsky

WASHINGTON—Senate Republican leaders released a proposal Thursday that would undo major parts of the Affordable Care Act and transform a large part of the American health-care system by changing and cutting the funding for the Medicaid program.

The bill would reverse the ACA's expansion of Medicaid, a move that could affect millions of people, and would for the first time limit states' overall Medicaid funding from Washington. It also would eliminate the requirement in the 2010 law that most Americans sign up for health insurance, and provide instead less-robust tax credits than the ACA to help people afford insurance. It would repeal hundreds of billions of dollars in taxes on businesses and high-income households and retroactively cut taxes on capital gains.

The Senate plan in many ways echoes a health bill passed by the House last month, but it contains several differences. It isn't clear if those changes, such as the shape of the tax credits and a more gradual phasing-out of the Medicaid expansion, would be enough to attract more centrist Republicans without alienating the most conservative lawmakers in both chambers.

The challenge quickly became evident when four GOP senators—Ted Cruz of Texas, Ron Johnson of Wisconsin, Mike Lee of Utah and Rand Paul of Kentucky—said they couldn't vote for the bill as it stood, though they were open to negotiation.

A more centrist GOP senator, Dean Heller of Nevada, who faces re-election next year, said he had "serious concerns" about the bill, particularly its effect on Medicaid recipients.

With 52 Republican senators, Majority Leader Mitch McConnell can lose no more than two GOP votes for the bill to pass under a special process tied to the budget.

Thursday's release of the 142-page bill, after its elements had been

closely held by GOP leaders, launched a fast-moving process that top Republicans hope will culminate in a new health law's passage possibly before Congress's August recess. Senate GOP leaders say they plan to vote next week; if the bill passes, then the House could take it up, or the two chambers could try to reach a compromise on the two bills.

The Senate bill, mirroring its House counterpart, keeps some of the ACA's provisions in place, like the tax credits to subsidize health coverage. But it would shift the income eligibility and some of the structure for those credits, which in some cases could reduce their size for older Americans, in particular.

In other areas the bill takes fuller aim at the ACA, former President Barack Obama's signature law. The enhanced federal funding the 2010 law provided for states to expand Medicaid would be phased out starting in 2021 and eliminated by 2024. States could still keep the expansion, but they wouldn't get the additional federal funds.

Beyond that expansion, federal funding for Medicaid would be capped for the first time. States would be given a choice on whether they would prefer block grants or a per-capita payment for beneficiaries.

In 2025, the bill would lower the growth rate for Medicaid spending, a move that alarmed some centrist Republicans. "That translates into literally billions of dollars, and it would result in states either cutting back on eligibility or rural hospitals going under because of uncompensated care," said Sen. Susan Collins of Maine. "Those are serious problems."

Among Republicans' loudest complaints about the ACA, sometimes called Obamacare, was that it imposed several new taxes, and the GOP push would undo most of them.

Like the House bill, the Senate bill would repeal a 3.8% tax on investment income retroactively to January 2017 and delay the repeal of a 0.9% payroll tax until 2023.

Both of those taxes only apply to individuals making more than \$200,000 and married couples making more than \$250,000. A tax on generous employer health plans, which has yet to go into effect, would remain but be further delayed, until 2026.

Democrats criticized the bill for curbing Medicaid funding while repealing taxes on the wealthy, and referred to President Donald Trump's recent characterization of the House version of the bill as "mean."

"The House and Senate bills should be known as 'mean' and 'meaner,'" said Sen. Ron Wyden (D., Ore.). "Republicans will keep telling Americans they're fixing their health care right up until the minute it's taken away."

GOP leaders were quick to note that the text was subject to change.

"Right now we've got members who are going to be interested in seeing it, digesting it, and then looking to see if there are things we can do to refine it, make it more acceptable to more members in our conference to get to 50" votes, said Sen. John Thune (R., S.D.).

In particular, Republicans may seek to "dial" the levels up or down on the tax credits and phase-out of the enhanced funding for Medicaid expansion, Mr. Thune said.

Other Republicans, like Mr. Paul, said the law didn't go far enough in repealing the ACA, and the Kentucky senator said he didn't favor the government subsidizing the cost of health insurance.

"The bill needs to look more like repeal of Obamacare, and less like we're keeping Obamacare," Mr. Paul said.

If the Senate splits 50-50, Vice President Mike Pence would break the tie.

Mr. McConnell has set a rapid-fire timeline for passage. An analysis by the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, laying out the bill's effect on cost and coverage, could come as early as Monday. Senate Republicans plan to vote on the bill

days later, and then it would be taken up by the House.

The CBO report on the House bill showed it would leave 23 million more people uninsured while reducing the cumulative federal deficit by \$119 billion in the next decade compared with current law.

House Speaker Paul Ryan (R., Wis.) declined to discuss the Senate bill's prospects in the House Thursday. At the White House, Mr. Trump said he hoped the Senate would pass a health bill "with heart" and that he was pleased with the legislation unveiled earlier in the day.

Mr. Trump was heavily engaged in pushing the health bill through the House, sometimes dialing lawmakers late into the night. He has taken a more hands-off approach with the Senate, but a senior White House official said that could change.

Mr. Obama, in a post on Facebook Thursday, urged Republicans and Democrats to work together on a health bill but said the Senate's proposal would harm many Americans.

"Simply put, if there's a chance you might get sick, get old, or start a family—this bill will do you harm," he said in the post.

Under the bill, states would get billions more in funding largely to help stabilize markets for insurance bought on exchanges that were set up under the ACA. The measure also includes a formal, temporary appropriation for billions of dollars for health insurers to offset subsidies that reduce costs for low-income consumers, though it faces procedural challenges.

Insurance-market woes in some states have prompted health plans to withdraw entirely, citing a combination of problems succeeding under the Affordable Care Act and additional turbulence under Republicans.

—Byron Tau and Natalie Andrews contributed to this article.

The New York Times

Washington — After weeks of speculation and secret meetings, on Thursday Senate Republican leaders unveiled their version of the plan to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act. On the surface, this bill and its optics are unbelievably bad. It cuts health benefits for millions of poor and

Binder : What Is Mitch McConnell Thinking on Health Care?

Sarah Binder

disabled Americans, increases costs for the elderly and others, and slaps a temporary Band-Aid on the Obamacare insurance markets. And it surely fails to deliver on President Donald Trump's promise to make insurance both better and more affordable. Oh, and fewer than one in five Americans support the bill's

close cousin that has already passed the House.

So what is the supposed wizard of the Senate, the majority leader, Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, thinking? After all, he's not just backing an unpopular bill — he's pushing his conference to vote on it by the end of next week.

In fact, there's a method to his madness. Mr. McConnell is not one to take unnecessary risks; nor is he an ideologue who will stop at nothing to get his agenda enacted. Rather, what seems to be an electoral disaster in the making is a highly strategic, partisan gambit.

First, he's probably betting that it's better to keep party promises than

to buckle to majority sentiment. Republicans vowed for years to repeal and replace Obamacare. By stitching together a deal that aims to meet the demands of conservative and centrist Republican senators, Mr. McConnell can claim the bill as an unalloyed win for conservative voters. It cuts taxes on the wealthy, ends government mandates and slashes entitlements — a dream come true for the ideological right.

Second, the bill delivers the goodies now and kicks costs down the road. Mr. McConnell has engineered a deeply cynical, but not uncommon, legislative move: The bill cuts taxes immediately and retroactively, but it pushes draconian health care cuts for the poor and disabled into the future. It is a classic case of Edward Tufte's "myopic policy for myopic voters." Mr. McConnell gambles that by delaying the downside to 2020 and beyond, he can muffle and deflect blame when voters hit the polls in 2018.

Third, he's clearing the deck for tax reform. Republicans prefer to spend



Williams : GOP created a health care monster by lying to its base

Montel Williams

The hope for the Senate Republican health care plan was that it would be more humane than its House counterpart, which President Trump labeled "mean." It may be, but only in the sense that it's more humane to shoot someone in the leg than to shoot them in the head.

As a Reagan-style conservative, I'm naturally suspicious of new entitlement programs. But I also have multiple sclerosis, a painful and chronic disease. In 1999, my doctors told me that I wouldn't live past 60 — but in two weeks I'll be 61. Proving them wrong has been the hardest fight of my life. And it's been expensive.

Although I'm blessed to afford the best of the best in medical coverage, I've known and lost many friends who weren't so fortunate. Most Americans without health insurance, after all, are living one diagnosis away from bankruptcy. I'm also the father of a two-time cancer survivor who was able to stay on my insurance plan because of Obamacare. So when Trump called for "repeal and replace" without offering any specifics or any sympathy for those who depend on it, I was disgusted.

And I still am. Because here's the truth: This new health care plan is simply a tax cut for the rich, offering billions to pharmaceutical companies, wealthy investors, and health insurance companies at the

their time on taxes, not health care. Under normal Senate rules, action on both issues requires votes from Democratic senators, a tall order in polarized times. Instead, Republicans have submitted to arcane budget rules that let them pass bills with a simple majority, i.e., without the Democrats. But there's a catch: There's only one set of tracks that can carry these sorts of filibuster-proof measures, and the rules allow only one train car on the tracks at a time. Granted, Republican cleavage has thus far precluded any progress on taxes. But until health care is off their plate and budgeteers can prepare the next bill, tax reform is stuck in the rail yard.

That's the bet. Will it pay off?

Skeptics have pointed out that Mr. McConnell is walking a tightrope between the poles of his Republican conference. He can spare the votes of only two of 52 Republicans, relying on Vice President Mike Pence to break a 50-50 Senate tie. What's more, the bill must still pass

muster with complicated budget rules and secure consent of the House and the president. So this is not yet a done deal, at all.

And lots could go wrong. The bill was initially greeted with silence from the president, who called a related House bill "mean" even after feting its passage in the Rose Garden. And on the Hill, a historically divided Republican conference is not yet on board.

On the left of the Republican conference, blue and purple state Republicans reacted skeptically. That's not surprising given that the related Republican House plan polls terribly among Democratic and independent voters. Other senators need convincing that the bill will meet the particular health care needs of rural states. And the bill's ban on funding Planned Parenthood for a year jeopardizes the votes of the Republicans' two lone pro-choice senators.

On the far right, Republicans object that the bill keeps too much of Obamacare. And some could stake

their votes on adding stronger limits on funding plans that cover abortion. Moreover, this isn't the only big request Mr. McConnell will make of his conservative colleagues this year. The challenges of funding the government and raising the debt ceiling in particular await him.

It's easy to assume that the pull of these two sides will carve off enough senators to kill the bill. And lawmakers rarely vote for unpopular measures. But Mr. McConnell's gamble is that the bill's strategic value, however cynical, will persuade just enough members to go along. And of course, even if the health care bill fails, he still clears the tracks for pressing business ahead. Conventional wisdom says to never bet on a bad bill. But it also says to never bet against Mitch McConnell.

expense of the most vulnerable. In his victory speech, Trump promised to lift up the "forgotten men and women" of this country. Instead, under Trumpcare, they'll be crushed and left to die.

More than 20 million people would lose insurance under the House bill, and this new Senate bill could be worse. The recent expansion of Medicaid to millions more low-income Americans will be ended as of 2024, becoming an unfunded program that individual states can choose to implement, or not. Furthermore, the bill weakens efforts to address the nation's opioid epidemic, allowing states to decide whether insurers should cover substance abuse treatment. This bill, in short, is a sham. It's a very dangerous press release. Those most hurt will be the ones who put Trump in the White House.

We've been told Obamacare is on the brink of collapse, that it's too limiting, that it's unsustainable. Rare are the stories about the lives it has saved — including my daughter's — or about the reasons for its flaws. With few exceptions, the states experiencing the worst problems with Obamacare are the ones that refused to set up exchanges and/or engaged in a deliberate sabotage effort.

Yes, Obamacare has flaws, as you might expect from any law of its size in its infancy —including the costs on businesses and higher insurance rates for many. Deductibles are too

high and premiums are the largest single expense for many households.

But instead of tackling these problems and striving for bipartisan solutions, the health care debate has become a proxy war for issues like abortion and tax cuts for the wealthy. The phrase "bipartisan solutions" may sound like an oxymoron these days, but believe it or not, there are politicians who want to find them on health care — including Republicans like Ohio Gov. John Kasich, Ohio Sen. Rob Portman and Maine Sen. Susan Collins.

We can absolutely do better, but not by dropping a MOAB (mother of all bombs) on the system. The solution, as it so often does, lies in both sides sitting down, stopping the stupid and figuring out how we move forward together.

Above all, we need to take patients off the political battlefield. Health care discussions should be about the effective delivery of health care, plain and simple. Democrats need to admit that Obamacare isn't perfect, and Republicans have to stop using health care as a disguise for a massive tax cut for the rich.

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

For seven years, House Speaker Paul Ryan and congressional Republicans told us they had "a better way." Many voters took them at their word. We're finding now,

however, that Republicans had no replacement plan, instead cobbling one together last minute. Most likely, congressional Republicans believed they'd never have to actually repeal Obamacare. I'm betting many of them are praying that enough colleagues oppose the bill so that it simply dies, allowing them to blame Democratic obstruction.

At the end of the day, I don't want another tax cut at the expense of another father not being able to get his daughter the lifesaving care I was able to provide my daughter. No father should have to choose between back-breaking debt and his child's life. That is the inevitable result of the Senate proposal.

Republicans need to own the fact they've created a monster by lying to the base for the last seven years. They need to come clean. The truth is that they don't really think this is a good bill. They are afraid of their own voters, to whom they gave a bad idea as a battle cry.

Montel Williams, a 22-year veteran of the Marine Corps and Navy who served primarily as a special duty intelligence officer, went on to start the Emmy-award-winning Montel Williams Show that ran for 17 seasons. Follow him on Twitter @Montel_Williams.

Editorial : The Senate's Unaffordable Care Act

It would be a big mistake to call the legislation Senate Republicans released on Thursday a health care bill. It is, plain and simple, a plan to cut taxes for the wealthy by destroying critical federal programs that help provide health care to tens of millions of people.

The Senate majority leader, Mitch McConnell, and other Republicans have pitched the bill as a fix for the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare. But their true ambition is not to reform Obamacare, which, whatever its shortcomings, has given 20 million Americans access to health insurance. If passed in its current form, the Senate bill would greatly weaken Medicaid, the federal-state program that provides insurance to nearly 69 million people, more than any other government or private program. It would do this by gradually but inexorably shifting more of the financial burden of Medicaid to states, in effect, forcing them to cover fewer people and to provide fewer services. Over all, the Senate would reduce federal spending by about \$1 trillion over 10 years and use almost that much to cut taxes for rich families and health care companies.

In the days ahead, while the Congressional Budget Office totes

up the bill's cost, and before a floor vote, some Republicans, President Trump included, might be tempted to see the Senate bill as an improvement over the draconian House measure passed in May that would take insurance away from 23 million people. Mr. Trump previously expressed the hope that the Senate version would be less brutal.

It isn't. True, Mr. McConnell and his colleagues have made a few superficial improvements; the rollback of Obamacare's intended expansion of Medicaid would proceed more slowly than under the House's timetable. But the long-term damage might be worse. That is because the Senate bill would cap federal spending on Medicaid on a per-person basis. Currently, federal spending varies from year to year based on demand for medical services and the cost of care. Starting in 2025, the cap would be allowed to increase at the rate of inflation in the economy. But the overall inflation rate has typically been much lower than the inflation rate for medical services; in 2016, the overall inflation rate was 1.3 percent, whereas medical costs increased by 3.8 percent. Over time, this would mean states will get a lot less money than they do under current law.

The inevitable shrinkage in Medicaid will be particularly devastating to older Americans. Contrary to what many people think, the program does not just benefit the poor. Many middle-class seniors depend on it after they have exhausted their savings. Medicaid pays for two-thirds of the people in nursing homes. The disabled and parents who have children with learning disabilities also rely on Medicaid. The program covers nearly half of all births in the country. And in recent years, it has played a very important role in dealing with the opioid epidemic, especially in states like Kentucky, Massachusetts, Maryland, Ohio and West Virginia. Medicaid pays between 35 percent and 50 percent of the cost of medication-assisted addiction treatment, according to two professors, one from Harvard and one from New York University.

Like its House counterpart, the Senate bill would also hurt millions of non-Medicaid beneficiaries of Obamacare, those who buy insurance on federal and state marketplaces. It would greatly reduce federal subsidies that help low-income and middle-income families buy health coverage, while allowing insurers to increase deductibles, forcing people to pay more for medical services. It would let states waive rules that now

require insurers to cover essential health services like maternity care, cancer treatment and mental health care, which is likely to happen because this will be the only way that states can lower premiums. In sum, it will make health insurance more expensive and less useful, to the great misfortune of the poor, elderly and sick.

Mr. McConnell seems determined to steamroll this travesty through the Senate before July 4, despite complaints by conservatives and moderates. Expect him and his colleagues to try to buy support of wavering lawmakers by offering sweeteners like a few billion dollars for addiction treatment and some extra cash for states with high medical costs. Republican senators like Susan Collins of Maine, Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia, Rob Portman of Ohio and Dean Heller of Nevada ought not to fall for these cheap gimmicks. Instead, they should vote no on a bill that will take a devastating toll on millions of Americans and that no amount of tinkering around the edges can make better.

Editorial : The Senate's Health-Care Advance

Senate Republicans released their draft bill to repeal and replace ObamaCare on Thursday, and Majority Leader Mitch McConnell is hoping for a vote next week. The binary choice now is between pushing past the media and Democratic flak to pass a historic achievement, or wilting under the pressure and ratifying the ObamaCare status quo.

The bill is an imperfect compromise between moderate and conservative Republicans, and it makes pains to accommodate different interests and the Americans, states and businesses that have adapted to ObamaCare over the years. The center-right nature of the details means the Senate won't be ushering in some free-market utopia. But the reform is a major improvement over the U.S. health-care status quo that will worsen if the bill fails.

The Senate bill works off the American Health Care Act that the House passed in May. Like the House, the legislation replaces

ObamaCare's subsidies with tax credits for people who buy insurance on the individual market, ends Medicaid's status as an open-ended entitlement, and starts to resolve some of the health-care system's abiding flaws.

Medicaid was most divisive for Republicans in their months-long internal debate, so the pleasant surprise is that the Senate's entitlement overhaul is somewhat stronger than the House's. The program originally meant for poor women, children and the disabled—which ObamaCare opened to able-bodied, working-age adults above the poverty level—would be modernized for the first time. This could become the most consequential social reform since the welfare reconstruction of 1996.

Like the House, the Senate would end the funding formula that rewards states for spending more and transition to block grants, allocated on per capita enrollment. Governors would receive far more regulatory flexibility to manage their programs. Under the final House bill, the grants would max out at the

rate of inflation plus one percentage point, starting in 2020.

The Senate waits four years instead of three but pegs the grants to inflation with no adjuster. The danger of delay is that grants become another phony rule like the old Medicare "doc fix" that Congress refused to enforce. But the Senate's structural changes are more ambitious, and the benefits of those revisions will compound over time.

The Senate also ends ObamaCare's discrimination between old and new enrollees, which liberals caricature as "rolling back" the Medicaid expansion. The government now pays the whole cost for the expansion population, to encourage Governors to join, but states are only compensated at a national-average 52% match rate for traditional beneficiaries like poor kids. Funding everyone equally—starting in 2021—will cause Governors to find efficiencies and retarget care to the most vulnerable.

As for the failing ObamaCare insurance exchanges—Anthem quit Wisconsin and Indiana on Wednesday—the Senate would

provide tax credits for use in a somewhat deregulated individual market. Rather than mandates to force Americans to buy coverage, which don't work in any case, the bill uses incentives to lure consumers and insurers back with patient-centered coverage that is more affordable and better meets individual needs.

The House's tax credits are flat but rise with age as a proxy for health expenses. By extending the credits to all income levels through the upper middle class, the idea is to minimize work disincentives, where earning an extra dollar of income means losing a dollar or more of federal benefits. The Senate's credits are more generous than the House's, and thus more costly to the federal fisc, and also means-tested.

The fear among Senators is that the House approach doesn't prioritize resources and lacks sufficient "heart" for the less affluent, as President Trump has put it. The House also would create its own work disincentive for people who leave Medicaid as their income rises slightly above the poverty line

and would then become exposed to the full out-of-pocket cost of private insurance.

The opportunity is to show that center-right solutions can get better results than government in the form of lower premiums and more coverage options. The Senate includes about \$100 billion for a "stability fund" that would start to contain ObamaCare's damage and could be used by creative Governors to support insurance markets, as states like Maine and Alaska have recently demonstrated.

The House bill creates waivers that would allow states to opt out of most ObamaCare regulations and mandates, but this provision violates Senate budget rules. The Senate adapts an Affordable Care Act program called 1332 waivers that would become nearly identical in practice. Freed from federal command-and-control, partially deregulated state insurers could sell a much wider variety of products.

There's one exception to the waivers: The Senate wouldn't allow states to apply to relax the community rating regulation, which limits how much premiums can vary among individuals with different health risks to a 3-to-1 ratio. This rule helps explain why costs have exploded and enrollment is declining, but Republicans have shown they are hapless in the pre-existing conditions debate. Better to fight another day than doom the entire effort.

Importantly, the Senate bill also repeals all of ObamaCare's tax hikes, including the industry taxes that are passed on to consumers and the 3.8-percentage-point surtax on investment income. Some Senators pushed to keep the surtax to avoid the tax-cuts-for-the-rich label and spend the revenue on something else, but the payoff in economic growth and rising incomes outweighs the temporary political hit.

Republicans have campaigned across four elections against ObamaCare, and now Americans will see if they have the courage of their professed convictions. Conservatives must determine if progress that is politically feasible is preferable to impossible ideological purity, and moderates must defend policy substance from the distortions of critics.

Four conservative Senators said Thursday they oppose the draft in its current form, enough to kill it. They say they're open to negotiation, but Majority Leader McConnell's goal over many weeks of talks has been to produce a bill that can get 50 votes. Perhaps Mike Lee, Ted Cruz, Rand Paul and Ron Johnson are merely trying to coax one or two policy changes during debate, but a final "no" really would be a vote to live with ObamaCare.

Failure would expose Republicans as feckless, with conservatives attacking the GOP for having failed and Democrats attacking the GOP for having tried. And don't think Republicans could then drop the issue. Republicans would be under enormous pressure to shore up the failing insurance markets in this Congress. The question is whether they do it on their terms with this bill, or later on Democratic leader Chuck Schumer's. Republicans would splinter over "bailing out" ObamaCare, while Democrats demand more money in return for help.

The Senate bill is imperfect, but it includes many conservative policy victories that have long been Republican goals. It's not too much to say this is a defining moment for whether the GOP can ever reform runaway entitlements. If Republicans fail, the next stop is single payer.



Editorial : Senate Republicans' Obamacare replacement is bad for America's health

SENATE REPUBLICAN leaders released on Thursday a draft health-care bill, supposedly designed to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act. It includes a range of mostly unwise and ungenerous changes to the nation's health-care system, but it might, if enacted, end up as mostly a massive, unpaid-for tax cut for wealthy people and industries with pull on Capitol Hill.

The bill proposes rolling back nearly all of the taxes that supported Obamacare's health-care coverage expansion, on everything from high wages and investment income to medical devices and tanning services. It would in theory retain the "Cadillac tax" on expensive insurance plans, which is meant to discourage taxpayer-funded overspending on health care, but would delay its implementation for nearly another

decade. Though the scorekeepers at the Congressional Budget Office will count the revenue the Cadillac tax would eventually raise, it is a good bet the federal government will never see any of that money. The tax has already been delayed once, and Congress has shown little interest in restraining health-care costs when doing so poses any threat to middle-class benefits.

The tax cuts are supposed to be financed by slashing health-care spending for people of limited means. Federal assistance that helps people afford insurance premiums would be scaled back, and the quality of taxpayer-subsidized insurance plans would decline. As deductibles rise, federal help with out-of-pocket medical expenses would also disappear. Meantime, Medicaid, the state-federal program covering the poor and near-poor, would endure

punishing cuts over time, likely leading states to reduce enrollment, benefits or both. The only option for those falling off the Medicaid rolls would be skimpy insurance plans they could rarely if ever use.

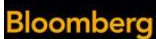
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If future Congresses allowed this policy to phase in fully, it would do away with Obamacare's individual mandate requiring all Americans to carry insurance coverage, which could throw insurance markets badly off-kilter. States would have so much more flexibility in setting insurance rules that insurers might be able to sell plans that cover few treatments sick people really need. Even if these sorts of negative

consequences were mitigated, the policy would still boil down to eroding health-coverage access and quality in order to pay for tax cuts.

The cynicism of this exercise is evident in its staging. The bill would kill a variety of taxes right away, but the subsidy and Medicaid cuts would not phase in until after the 2018 midterm election. It would be left to future Congresses to allow severe cuts to the safety net or major expansion of the federal debt, or a combination of the two. Instead of forcing this choice between Americans' physical health and the nation's fiscal health, senators should end this repeal-and-replace disaster now.



Wilkinson : Why Republicans Will Pass Trumpcare

Francis Wilkinson

No one seems to like the Senate health-care bill. Liberal wonks detest it. At least four Republican Senators claim they aren't prepared to support it, while other colleagues grumble about it. The White House, whose chief executive promised he wouldn't cut Medicaid, as this bill does, is balking.

But the Senate bill is very similar to the bill passed last month by the House. And the reason for that

similarity is pretty basic: Both bills accomplish what Republicans want.

Despite the periodic dramas of reactionary versus conservative factions, Republicans are united around a couple key goals. Both versions of the Republican health-care legislation accomplish those goals, albeit in slightly different ways along slightly different timelines. That's why, all the wailing aside, Congress will probably put a

bill on President Donald Trump's desk that grievously damages Obamacare, if not precisely repealing it.

Both Senate and House versions will transfer hundreds of millions of dollars from poor and middle-class people, in the form of health care, to rich people in the form of tax cuts.

The wealthiest Americans, who have a disproportionate role in managing the economy, have famously awarded themselves a

gargantuan share of its gains in recent decades. However, Republicans continue to insist that gargantuan is less than sufficient. According to the liberal (and reliable) Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the House health-care bill would provide the 400 highest-income families in the U.S. with tax cuts worth about \$7 million annually.

Thus health-care legislation is a vehicle to achieve a preeminent

goal of the Republican Party -- transferring more wealth to the wealthy. In addition, by changing the baseline for federal revenues, the legislation will facilitate another round of tax cuts later this year.

Another paramount goal is destroying Barack Obama's presidency. Since Republicans were unable to accomplish that in real time, they hope to do it retroactively. The Republican legislation keeps much of the architecture of Obamacare. But by cashing in its funding base, Republicans can seriously damage it.

More important, their "repeal" of Obamacare, however compromised in detail or drawn out over multiple election cycles, serves as a

repudiation of Obama himself. Argue among yourselves whether the driving force behind GOP animus is Obama's liberal, multicultural, cosmopolitanism or something even more atavistic. But after spending years voting to smite Obama symbolically, Republicans are now poised to deliver a blow for the history books.

The third goal the Republican legislation accomplishes is the rollback of an "entitlement" and a reversal of the trend toward universal health care.

Government support -- Medicare, Social Security, Medicaid -- tends to go on and on. Historical Republican opposition to all three of those programs long precedes their obsession with high-end tax cuts. If

Obamacare laid the track for universal health care, Trumpcare promises to blow up the railroad bridge and send the whole enterprise plunging into a ravine, albeit in slow motion.

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The Republican Senators currently expressing their displeasure with the plan could easily thwart it. But will they? Majority Leader Mitch McConnell knows his troops. He knows what they want and, more important, what they will settle for. Opioid treatment funding, maybe, for Senators Rob Portman of Ohio and Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia, whose states have serious

addiction problems. Perhaps a more aggressive retreat from Obamacare regulations for Senator Mike Lee of Utah.

The chorus of boos heightens the political drama but it doesn't stop the play. Concessions are made. Victories are claimed. The legislation moves toward conclusion.

How many Republicans will really abandon the twin pillars that have upheld the GOP for nearly a decade -- tax cuts for the rich and the repudiation of Obama? How many will walk away from the cause of multiple generations of Republicans -- rolling back the welfare state?

I'm betting fewer than three.



D'Antonio : No tapes? Trump has us through the looking glass

Michael
D'Antonio

(CNN)As the Mad Hatter of the White House tweeted his response to Congress's questions on Thursday about the existence of audiotapes related to James B. Comey's firing as FBI director, he stayed true to character. "I did not make, and do not have, any such recordings," President Trump announced. But he also added that "with all of the recently reported electronic surveillance, intercepts, unmasking and illegal leaking of information, I have no idea..."

Trapped in a controversy of his own creation after tormenting Comey, the Congress, the press and the American public with the implication that he might have bugged the White House, Donald Trump fell back on one of his regular tricks, offering a unclear clarification and acting more like a bad magician than President of the United States.

In the immediate term, all this craziness may well divert the nation from revelations of the Senate's heretofore secret health care legislation and the fact that it would do grievous harm to Donald Trump's own

promise

to leave the Medicaid system intact.

In the long term, the actions of President Trump and his team will inspire an even more dogged pursuit of the truth by Congress and the special prosecutor, Robert Mueller -- who, it must be remembered, would have never been named if Donald Trump had left James Comey alone in the first place.

By speaking of "tapes," the President cavalierly evoked the

Watergate scandal and the worst political crisis in the history of the presidency in order to hint that he, like Nixon, was capable of secretly recording his visitors.

Richard Nixon fought the release of his tapes because he knew that the system had caught him planning and ordering the post-Watergate cover-up that drove him from office. Donald Trump, on the other hand, made the false claim that he possessed tapes because he understood the power of merely making the suggestion that recordings exist.

In this game, the President implied that he possessed valuable evidence to support his own position and discredit and intimidate James Comey, the man who knew more than anyone about the possibility of collusion between the Trump campaign and Russian operatives. He hoped, in this gambit, to benefit from two factors: the idea that people would assume that no President would take the risk of bluffing on such a matter and his belief that he could get away with anything. "I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose voters," was

how Trump put it

during the 2016 campaign.

The problem for Trump, when it came to Comey, was that the former FBI director couldn't be bluffed. "Lordy I hope there are tapes," Comey

said

when he testified before a Senate committee, because he believed that accurate recordings of his conversations with Trump would support his contention that the

President had pressured him on the Russia matters.

President Trump would have known that his bullying bluff would fail if he understood how principled people like Comey work. During decades of service, Comey had built a reputation for integrity and made it clear to almost everyone in Washington that he was not a man to mess with. In 2004, it was Comey who

successfully defied President Bush

when he tried to get hospitalized Attorney General John Ashcroft to sign an order reauthorizing a domestic spying program. When Scott Pelley of CBS News asked him in 2014 if his loyalty belonged to the President, Comey

said no

. "I took an oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States," he said.

Never one for deep reflection, Donald Trump missed the signs of Comey's true character and deemed him a "showboat." He's made this kind of mistake of misjudging people before. In the early 1990s, he underestimated the strength of his first wife, Ivana, as she fought him, leak for leak, in the war of the tabloids that accompanied their divorce. Later he underestimated author

Tim O'Brien

and his publisher when he sued over O'Brien's book. The defendants prevailed and the record created by the case made Donald Trump look irrational, as he claimed that his net worth depended, in part, on his level of self-esteem.

These are just two examples -- in many cases, Donald Trump's miscalculations are followed by intense efforts by underlings and hirelings to somehow shape reality to conform to the big man's impulsive remarks and actions. Those who stick with him through these exercises do so because they lack the gumption to say no. Their efforts, unfortunately, only bolster his belief that people generally act out of self-interest and not on the basis of any higher moral values.

So when Donald Trump made the mistake of musing about "tapes," and left the door hanging open with his tweets, he once again put both his legal team and his White House staff in the awful position of trying to explain his actions and contain their damage. It's no wonder that Sarah Huckabee Sanders fell back on a Trumpian trope when pressed by reporters to address the President's relationship to facts, saying, "Look, the President won the election." While generally true, this statement has nothing to do with the problem of a President who refuses to offer straight answers to a host of questions, including whether he believes in the science that shows the world's climate is changing due to human activity or that Russia attempted to influence the 2016 election.

Huckabee Sanders and the press office intensified the Wonderland atmospherics at the White House when they refused to let her appearance be shown on video and then described an announcement of this refusal as "

NONREPORTABLE.

" In other words, journalists were barred from distributing images of Huckabee Sanders, then told, in

Red Queen style, that they better not say why.

In the story of Wonderland, Alice eventually left behind the Mad Hatter and all of

the other unruly and unsavory characters who lived there and shared with the world what she had seen. In Washington, Special Prosecutor Robert Mueller now

occupies the Alice role. And like her, he will likely emerge from his investigation with quite a tale to tell.

The Washington Post

The words leapt from President Trump's mind to Twitter at 8:26 a.m. on the Friday after he fired FBI director James B. Comey, setting off a cascade of activity inside and outside the federal government to figure out what, exactly, he meant.

"James Comey better hope that there are no 'tapes' of our conversations before he starts leaking to the press!" Trump wrote.

With that tweet, Trump immediately deepened his own legal and political quagmire, evoking comparisons to President Richard M. Nixon and prompting congressional committees investigating his campaign's alleged ties with Russia to demand the disclosure of any such recordings. The message also prompted Comey to release previously undisclosed memos of his conversations with the president, which ultimately led to the appointment of a special counsel, who is now investigating whether Trump obstructed justice.

Far from knocking down the assertion that Trump had recorded conversations in the White House, his aides refused to give a definitive answer for weeks. Trump, ever the reality television host, teased at a news conference, "I'll tell you about it over a very short period of time."

On Thursday, 42 days later, he finally did. As most in Washington had anticipated, Trump said he did not have any such tapes.

Former FBI director James B. Comey said he has seen President Trump's May 12 tweet that suggested there could be "tapes" of their private conversations, saying "Lordy, I hope there are tapes." The former FBI director talks about President Trump's May 12 tweet suggesting there could be "tapes" of their private conversations (Photo: Matt McClain / The Washington Post/Reuters)

(Reuters)

The incident highlights a new reality for Washington, which now must spring into action to bolster or rebuff presidential assertions of dubious origin and with no evidence to back them up. In many cases, the claims have had the opposite effect of what the president presumably intended — feeding into doubts about his credibility, deepening his legal woes and generating unflattering

accounts that dominate the news for weeks at a time.

[Trump says he has no 'tapes' of Comey conversations]

And even when Trump has walked back a questionable comment, he has sometimes planted a new and similarly unsubstantiated claim. In denying Thursday that he had created "tapes" of his conversations with Comey, for example, Trump also suggested that he may have been surveilled.

"With all the recently reported electronic surveillance, intercepts, unmasking and illegal leaking of information, I have no idea whether there are 'tapes' or recordings of my conversations with James Comey," Trump wrote in one tweet, before denying that he had created any.

Before the tapes, there was Trump's unfounded claim that President Barack Obama "wiretapped" him in Trump Tower during the presidential campaign, setting off a flurry of official inquiries from Congress. His oft-repeated assertion during the campaign that a wall along the southern border would be paid for by Mexico is one that lawmakers in Trump's own party believe will never come to fruition — yet they and others in the government continue to look for some way to help the president save face.

Trump has also repeatedly claimed that millions of illegal immigrants voted in the last presidential election, with no proof. Yet in an effort to validate his comments, the Trump administration has created a commission aimed at investigating his claim of widespread voter fraud.

"What happens with the president is he shoots himself in the foot, and soon the gangrene spreads to the entire body politic," said Norm Eisen, a former U.S. ambassador to the Czech Republic and a former ethics czar in the Obama administration. "This is going to be the new normal: elements of the president's own executive branch openly, or indirectly through leaks, responding to these false tweets."

[Earlier: Trump suggests there may be 'tapes' of his private conversations with former FBI director]

After Trump raised the prospect of Comey-related tapes, exasperated lawmakers in both parties pledged

to find out one way or another. "I don't have the foggiest idea," Sen. Mark R. Warner (D-Va.) said on ABC News the following Sunday.

But the most significant consequences were yet to come.

Comey told lawmakers in testimony this month that as he lay awake in his Northern Virginia bed a week after he was summarily fired, he decided to act — in large part because of Trump's tweet.

"It didn't dawn on me originally that there might be corroboration for our conversation. There might be a tape," he said, explaining why he leaked memos of his conversations with Trump to the media. He also testified, "Lordy, I hope there are tapes!"

Comey's memos prompted the appointment of special counsel Robert S. Mueller III, a former FBI director, to investigate possible collusion between Trump campaign associates and Russians who interfered in the election. The Washington Post has also reported that Mueller is investigating whether Trump attempted to obstruct the investigation.

"There's nothing criminal or illegal about bluffing," said Alan Dershowitz, a Harvard Law School professor who has often defended Trump against various allegations. "I don't think he would have said he had tapes if he had them."

But Dershowitz acknowledged that the tweet may have been a shortsighted attempt to ensure that Comey was careful about his public statements on Trump.

"I don't know whether it was an unforced error or a tactic, but it could have been both: a tactic that turned out to be an unforced error," Dershowitz said. "He should have thought through all of that. I very often keep contemporaneous memos, particularly when I'm dealing with people who have credibility issues."

"Lawyers do that," he added.

[The Fact Checker's tally of Trump's false claims]

A similar dynamic played out in March when Trump blasted out another shocker of a tweet claiming that Obama had wiretapped him — an implausible assertion that

government officials and lawmakers moved quickly to deny.

But among Trump loyalists in the White House and in Congress, there was a spirited effort to validate the claim.

Three White House officials unearthed classified documents that suggested that Obama administration officials may have "unmasked" the names of Trump campaign associates that were contained in classified intelligence reports. Intelligence experts note that unmasking is a legal practice, if done properly, and completely different from Trump's claim that he was illegally "wire tapped."

But armed with the documents procured by the White House, Rep. Devin Nunes (R-Calif.), chairman of the House Intelligence Committee and a member of Trump's transition team, set out to defend the president's tweets. Nunes later told Fox News host Sean Hannity that he felt obligated to brief the president on the unmasking issue because he was "taking a lot of heat in the news media" for his wiretapping tweets.

To intelligence experts, the controversy was an attempt by Trump loyalists to confuse two entirely separate issues — illegal surveillance and legal "unmasking" of the names of American individuals — to defend the president.

"The notion that President Obama could instruct the intel community to set up a tap on Mr. Trump's offices is preposterous on its face. He doesn't have that authority," said Robert Deitz, a former general counsel at the National Security Agency and the Defense Department. "One of the things that's interesting about Washington is that it's a little bit of 'Alice in Wonderland': You hear something or you see something in the press, and you try to make sense of it."

[With a raucous rally in Iowa, Trump transports himself back to 2016]

Breaking news about local government in D.C., Md., Va.

The Trump administration has moved to accommodate the president's dubious rhetoric in other ways.

Trump has repeatedly insisted without evidence that he lost the

popular vote because of millions of illegal-immigrant voters. That led the White House to create a commission to study the issue — an effort widely dismissed as a sham but which nevertheless is slated to produce a report of its findings next year.

A similar phenomenon has taken hold with Trump's proposed border

wall. The president, lawmakers and his aides have floated a number of schemes to make his promise that taxpayers wouldn't foot the bill come true, including initially financing the wall with solar panels or a border adjustment tax. Even with Mexico refusing to entertain the idea of funding — and with Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) answering “no” when asked

if Mexico would be paying up — Trump hasn't dropped the issue.

“It's not unprecedented for people anywhere in the bureaucracy to have to do cleanup or to deal with in other ways statements that are short on veracity from the man at the top,” said Paul Pillar, a former CIA officer. “What you're talking about with the current president is a

substantial difference of degree in which some of these things happen.

“There's as much eye-rolling with respect to our foreign partners. They realize the kind of boat their American counterparts have been put in,” he added.