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The Trump White House's ugly new strategy: Use 'dreamers' as a bargaining chip

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THE MORNING PLUM:

President Trump is earning some praise for condemning bigotry and calling for national unity during his Monday night speech announcing an escalation in Afghanistan, and while those remarks were welcome as far as it goes, that loud clanging you hear is the sound of the bar being dropped to the floor for Trump yet again. Republicans such as House Speaker Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) appear to be hoping this means Trump is now moving beyond the race-mongering that drove his weak condemnation of the white supremacists who marched in Charlottesville.

But looming in the background is a major dilemma that may once again refocus the nation on the ugliness of Trumpism and could (again) put Republicans in the uncomfortable spot of dealing with the fallout — both substantive and political. In the next two weeks, Trump will have to decide on the fate of some 800,000 “dreamers” — people brought here illegally as children who enjoy temporary work permits and protection from deportation.

In an important story, McClatchy reports today that some senior White House officials want Trump to use the uncertainty over the fate of these 800,000 human beings as a “bargaining chip,” to pressure Congress into supporting his border wall, funding for expanded deportations, and cuts to legal immigration:

The White House officials want Trump to strike an ambitious deal with Congress that offers Dreamers protection in exchange for legislation that pays for a border wall and more detention facilities, curbs legal immigration and implements E-verify, an online system that allows businesses to check immigration status, according to a half-dozen people familiar with situation, most involved with the negotiations.

Trump must decide whether to continue Barack Obama's executive action protecting the dreamers (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA). A coalition of states is threatening to sue to get it overturned, if Trump has not canceled it by Sept. 5th. If that happens, Trump will then have to decide whether to instruct Attorney General Jeff Sessions to defend it in court. Thus, Trump must decide in one way or another whether he favors continuing it.

The debate over the dreamers early on featured some of the most squalid strands of Trumpism woven into one. Trump brashly vowed to kill all Obama executive actions on Day One (showing off both his seething contempt for everything Obama-related and his total indifference to policy complexity) and implicitly treated hundreds of thousands of people brought here as children, through no fault of their own, as merely a subset of a larger population (undocumented

immigrants) that Trump relentlessly demonized throughout a campaign that was launched with the claim that Mexicans are “rapists.”

To his credit, Trump came to appreciate the moral complexity of the dreamers’ predicament once in office and kept the program going. But now the Trump White House wants to use this population as a bargaining chip to compel Congress to fund a border wall, stepped-up deportations, cuts to legal immigration and a requirement that all employers use E-Verify. Evaluated solely on its own terms, this would be a truly awful deal for immigration advocates and Democrats: It would constitute giving the restrictionists a whole range of things they covet, in exchange for *not* removing protections from dreamers that even many Republicans are loath to see removed. (Advocates say mandatory E-Verify would force undocumented immigrants out of work and compel them to self-deport, breaking up families; advocates are okay with E-Verify as long as it is paired with legalization of the 11 million, which would allow them to work legally.)

There is no way Democrats could possibly assent to any such deal. To be clear, it is *possible* to envision some kind of deal involving the dreamers, as a kind of last-ditch (if sordid) way to salvage their fates, in which they gain protection (perhaps legislatively) in exchange for some form of increased border security funding or tweaks to the formula for legal immigration. But the White House deal taking shape would require Democrats to sell out all sorts of core priorities, and it is likely Democrats will draw a hard line against funding that would be used for the wall and an expanded deportation force.

Indeed, even some congressional *Republicans* may balk at this new White House strategy. Many Republicans have long agreed that the dreamers are blameless for their plight, and some Republicans don’t even want the cuts to legal immigration and don’t want to fund the border wall. So in a sense, if Trump does try to use the dreamers as a bargaining chip, this will put pressure *on them* to go along with large chunks of Trump’s immigration agenda.

What will happen? Unfortunately, the plight of the dreamers appears precarious. Trump is under heavy pressure from the right to either kill DACA himself or have his attorney general decline to defend it in court. It is perfectly plausible that he could announce that the program is done and call on Congress to do something to protect the dreamers if its members are so inclined. The White House will demand border wall and deportation force funding as part of this deal, and if and when Congress fails to pass such a thing, Trump can excoriate Congress for it.

But in that scenario, the mess has been dumped *on Republicans as well as Democrats*. An analysis by the Cato Institute’s David Bier shows that if Trump ended DACA, it would probably be unwound over time, which would mean large chunks of dreamers losing work permits in rolling intervals. The dreamers are very sympathetic figures; they are well-organized politically; the national press will feature their stories; and a major blamefest will break out. Republicans have already proven queasy about defending the uglier aspects of Trump’s immigration agenda — the mass deportations and the thinly disguised Muslim ban — and now they will risk owning the fates of the dreamers as well.

*** HOW GENERALS TALKED TRUMP INTO DECISION ON AFGHANISTAN:** The New York Times reports on the behind-the-scenes debates that led up to last night’s decision. Trump had been skeptical of sending more troops. But here’s what happened in late August:

By then, the options for dealing with Afghanistan had narrowed to three: pull out, pour in more troops or shift to a covert counterterrorism strategy led by the C.I.A. But the C.I.A. director, Mike Pompeo, was hesitant to throw the agency into the war full-scale, according to one official, because of its difficult history there. ... The generals told the president that a complete pullout would leave Afghanistan in danger of becoming another haven for the Islamic State, as happened in Iraq.

So that left only sending in more troops as an option — a decision, as the Times puts it, that Trump embraced as “less a change of heart than a weary acceptance of the case.”

* **TRUMP IS ADDING 4,000 TROOPS:** Trump did not say how many more troops will be sent to Afghanistan. But The Post reports:

Although Trump did not specify how many more troops will be sent to Afghanistan, congressional officials said the administration has told them it will be about 4,000 more than the 8,500 U.S. service members currently in the region.

Trump also said that “victory will have a clear definition,” but then defined winning as “attacking” and “obliterating” our enemies.

* **PRO-TRUMP PUNDITS AND OUTLETS RIP TRUMP:** The Daily Beast has a rundown of the scalding criticism that is being heaped on Trump’s Afghanistan decision by pundits and outlets that were sympathetic to his anti-interventionist “America First” posture:

“Why did we even have an election?” wondered Mike Cernovich, a popular far-right internet media personality generally supportive of Trump. ... Breitbart’s coverage ranged from skeptical to hostile. “America First? With Steve Bannon Out, Globalists Push For More War Abroad” read one headline. After Trump’s speech concluded, the lead story on Breitbart’s homepage braced readers for “UNLIMITED WAR.”

It will be interesting to see whether rank-and-file Trump voters feel the same way.

* **TRUMP DECISION SHOWS THERE ARE NO GOOD ANSWERS:** The Post’s analysis sums it up:

By tweaking a course set by President Barack Obama, Trump suggests that he ... is facing the bleak reality of Afghanistan: There is no fast or politically palatable way to win, but losing quickly isn’t an acceptable option, either. ... Military strategists ... have long argued that there is no military solution in Afghanistan and that the goal should be to convince the Taliban that they have more to gain from talking than fighting. No military or diplomatic strategy has shown the homegrown insurgency that such a tipping point was at hand.

And Trump also declined to set any limit on how long we will remain.

* **TRUMP COULDN’T RESIST TAKING A SHOT AT OBAMA:** This is an interesting piece by Susan Glasser:

In many ways, the target of much of his speech was neither al Qaeda nor the Taliban but Barack Obama. Trump went out of his way, for example, to criticize his successor for “hastily and mistakenly” withdrawing from Iraq in 2011 – without mentioning that he supported that move at the time. In his speech on Monday, he claimed that he now viewed it as a mistake so consequential it had shaped his own determination to fight on in Afghanistan.

Note that in this formulation, there is one layer of dishonesty piled on top of another.

* **REPUBLICANS FRET ABOUT TRUMP'S ARIZONA RALLY:** Politico reports that Republicans worry that at his Arizona rally tonight, Trump will attack Sen. Jeff Flake (who has been criticizing the president) and will make life miserable for the party in other ways:

Senate GOP leaders have implicitly warned Trump that attacking Flake, who faces a treacherous path to reelection, would only serve to further rupture his relationship with a congressional GOP wing that he's grown increasingly isolated from in recent weeks. ... Many in the party are worried that he will use the event to pardon controversial former Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio.

As noted yesterday, Trump's handling of the Arizona rally and the possible Arpaio pardon will help establish whether anything has really changed after Stephen K. Bannon's departure.

* **AND TRUMP'S DAYS ARE NUMBERED, GOP STRATEGIST SAYS:** Veteran Republican strategist and Never Trumper Mike Murphy tells CNN that he thinks Trump will be gone before 2020:

"I fear the GOP will have a very rough midterm election, particularly in the House. ... voting against Trump/the GOP will become a big social value for a lot of young, marginal voters in 2018. If these Democratic-leaning, presidential year voters show up to protest Trump in the midterms, we Republicans will ... lose the House. If that happens, post-election Donald Trump will be alone, despised by his own party, a failure rebuked by the nation, and politically neutered even more than he is today. ... A resignation is far from impossible."

You heard it here first.