



THE AMERICAN SPECTATOR

Edited by R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.

The Trump Evolution

What might we see three months from now?

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April 10, 2017

On Friday, President Donald Trump got the first real win of his presidency with the confirmation of Colorado's Neil Gorsuch to be the next justice of the Supreme Court. Although there have been other useful actions by the president during his first 80 days such as his welcome assault on the growth of the regulatory state, those were lightly covered by the media and did not involve showing any ability to maneuver Congress into accomplishing any of his — or any other Republican's — major campaign goals.

On one hand, it may have been overly ambitious to hope for a repeal of Obamacare within the first dozen weeks of a Trump presidency. On the other hand, the failure to do so was a spectacular example of Republican legislators still unsure how to operate as the governing party, of spineless GOP “moderates” who can't bear to take away an “entitlement” no matter how harmful to the literal and figurative health of the nation, and of a president whose lack of political experience is not the unvarnished blessing that his supporters thought it to be.

At this point, Mr. Trump is in the unenviable position of needing to expend political capital to nudge House (and then Senate) Republicans to yes on a *real* Obamacare repeal bill (and later on tax reform and other major agenda items) but having begun his presidency with far less political capital than a new president typically does and having lost much of that through a combination of his own unforced errors, uncompliant members of Congress, and incessant and often unfair attacks by the “mainstream media.”

When a new president's approval ratings are hovering around 40%, he has little leverage over members of his party, particularly those very moderates and Tea Party/Freedom Caucus types who are “trying to get to yes” on Obamacare repeal but who do not see their political fortunes tied to Trump's.

A modest bump in Mr. Trump's approval ratings is to be expected following the missile strike on Syria, but even that may fade quickly if the public sees it as no more than the “unbelievably small” strike that former Secretary of State John Kerry promised more than three years ago. Reports that Syrian Air Force jets were taking off from the Shayrat air base less than a day after Mr. Trump ordered it targeted with 59 Tomahawk missiles are something of a propaganda win for Bashar Assad and Vladimir Putin. Within a few hours more, the town of Khan Sheikhoun,

where 86 people died in the chemical attack that stirred Trump to action, was bombed again. That it was not a chemical weapon this time probably does not make the town's remaining population feel much better. Russia and Syria are all but daring Mr. Trump to take more significant action, knowing that he probably won't. With each passing hour, the strike feels to have been much more bark than bite.

However, the fact that there was a U.S. strike on Syria is far more important than what the strike accomplished. To wit: It put distance between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin, helpful for Mr. Trump both domestically and internationally. It told the world that this is no longer Barack Obama's U.S. foreign policy. It reminded Chinese and North Korean leaders that Mr. Trump's recent statements of willingness to act unilaterally must be taken seriously. (Whether that increases or raises risks on the Korean peninsula in the short term is another matter, with North Korea claiming that the U.S. air strike on Syria proves its need for nuclear weapons. A DPRK statement Sunday blustered, "We will bolster up in every way our capability for self-defense to cope with the U.S. evermore reckless moves for a war...") Back on the home front, the strike distracted from the ongoing media-fueled conversation of an administration at war with itself.

And perhaps most importantly for the longer-term prospects for Donald Trump's presidency, it showed a man willing to change his position on an issue that had been a consistent campaign theme for him: that Syria is not enough of an American strategic interest to justify our military involvement.

We can debate whether his campaign position remains the correct one — certainly many of his supporters continue to believe it does and are unhappy with last week's actions — or whether other changes in the strategic situation justify what appears to be an emotional reaction by the president to images of dead children.

The change in Trump's Syrian position would be less remarkable were it not for its being one of many recent changes in Trumpworld and an increasing separation between the president's current actions and his campaign rhetoric.

For example, on Wednesday, President Trump removed his chief strategist, Steve Bannon, from the National Security Council, a group that Mr. Bannon should never have been a member of in any case. There are opposing assertions among White House leaks as to whether Mr. Bannon had to be cajoled into not resigning from the administration over the move.

Given the president's undoubted respect and appreciation for Mr. Bannon, removing him from the RSC shows that Trump is taking guidance from elsewhere, in this case Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly, Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster. It is unlikely to be a coincidence given Mr. Trump's obvious admiration for military leaders that all three are/were U.S. Army generals.

It has also been impossible not to notice the prominence of Jared Kushner in surprisingly many reports of the president assigning him to oversee tasks from restarting an Israeli/Palestinian peace process to overhauling the way the federal government operates, each of which is a near-impossible feat, not least for a 36-year old with approximately no relevant experience.

This represents a significant change in which faction currently has the greatest influence over the president. If the *New York Times* is to be believed (a significant “if,” I grant you), the relationship between Bannon and Kushner has deteriorated to the point where Bannon has called Kushner a Democrat (which may in fact be true, but which can’t be viewed as a compliment in the Trump White House, nor in my house). On Friday, the president told Bannon and Kushner, “We gotta work this out,” leading to a meeting moderated by Chief of Staff Reince Priebus. If I were a betting man, I’d put a few bucks on Steve Bannon being out of the White House by Labor Day, perhaps with policy advisor Stephen Miller, representing a major transformation of Trump’s inner circle.

Another story that received less media attention was the recent signing by the president of two executive orders regarding trade. Despite all the *sturm und drang* of months of railing against China and TPP (which the president withdrew the U.S. from as one of his earliest actions) and NAFTA, the executive orders were something of a yawn. One aims to ensure the collection of duties based on existing tariffs and anti-dumping regulations. The other orders various departments of government to work together to create an “Omnibus Report on Significant Trade Deficits.”

No sudden tariff hikes, no renegotiating of NAFTA, no trade war... at least not yet. It is a welcome change from the ill-considered anti-trade rhetoric of Mr. Trump and some of his advisors, though the executive order itself does contain some economic illiteracy when worrying about “the challenges to economic growth and employment that may arise from large and chronic trade deficits....”*

Mr. Trump has turned into a supporter of NATO since alliance leadership seems to have taken seriously his insistence that its members spend their treaty obligation share of GDP on defense and look at increasing their counter-terrorism activities. At the same time, the president seems to have become more in favor of supporting Japan’s defense even if Japan does not raise its own military spending.

Recent “inside baseball” stories suggest that Trump loyalists who were placed inside of executive branch agencies are being pushed into irrelevant roles or out of the buildings entirely as the establishment pushes back. This even as leaders like Rick Perry (Energy), Scott Pruitt (EPA), and Tom Price (HHS) bring a distinctly revolutionary approach to those bloated petty tyrannies.

Not even three months into Donald Trump’s presidency, the administration seems to be a very different creature from what it was on Inauguration Day, or from what it promised to be three months before that. And that’s probably a good thing.

Last week’s U.S. missile strikes on Syria have wide-ranging implications, but probably none as significant as proving what these other pieces of evidence have increasingly suggested: that, to the chagrin of many in his nationalist-populist base, Donald Trump is a man rapidly evolving in office.

* If trade surpluses cause economic growth, one might wonder why the U.S. ran trade surpluses throughout almost the entirety of the Great Depression and, as a 2011 [Cato Institute report](#) notes,

“since 1980, the U.S. economy has grown more than three times faster during periods when the trade deficit was expanding as a share of GDP compared to periods when it was contracting.”