

Manchin in the Middle

Joe Manchin is either a moderate role model for a party that's lost its way, or a doomed species from a less partisan era. Soon we'll know which.

Michael Kruse and Burgess Everett

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The day before the inauguration of Donald Trump, in the Hart Senate Office Building on Capitol Hill, Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia was sitting at his desk eating chili out of a paper cup when his cellphone buzzed. He didn't recognize the number, but he answered anyway, something he almost always does.

"Hey, hey—governor!" he said. "How ya doin', buddy?"

It was Jeb Bush. The two have known each other for years. Bush was the governor of Florida at the same time Manchin was the governor of West Virginia, and "governors have a bond," Manchin mused to Bush on the phone. But Bush had not called to catch up. He had called to lobby. One of Trump's Cabinet nominees was in trouble—Betsy DeVos, his pick to be education secretary—and she would need help to win confirmation in the Senate. Two moderate Republicans would vote against her, and Manchin, perhaps the most conservative Democrat in Washington, was the likeliest candidate to break from his party and push DeVos over the line. He had already proved his willingness to back other nominees. Could he see his way to getting behind Trump's education pick as well?

The former Republican presidential front-runner is not a voice most Democrats would expect to find on the line, or so clearly take in stride. But most Democrats don't sit where Joe Manchin sits, in one of the most unusual positions in Washington today. The instant Trump won his surprise victory in November, all eyes turned to Manchin as maybe the most vulnerable senator on the 2018 electoral map. Trump had swept Manchin's state by an astonishing 42 points. His home-state voters hadn't just leaned away from the candidate he endorsed—they had rejected her more convincingly than any voters outside Wyoming.

But if Manchin is worried, he isn't behaving that way. In fact, as Bush's personal entreaty suggests, Manchin is being courted by both parties: He was tapped for the Senate Democratic leadership within days of the election, but that didn't prevent him from making a visit to Trump Tower almost a month later, briefly putting his name in the mix for a Cabinet job. Nationally, the

party needs him for his 48th vote in the Senate and also as a kind of translator for its ideas to Trump's America. As for his home state, he seems almost relieved no longer to be tied to the liberal policies of a president his voters hated. And he doesn't mind the attention from the new one. "I've had more personal time with Trump in two months," he marveled, "than I had with [Barack] Obama in eight years."

Manchin's comfort working with Trump has infuriated progressives, which have lambasted him as an enemy of party purity—a Democrat in name only—and there's chatter in West Virginia about a possible primary from his left. Emboldened Republicans, meanwhile, see the seat in red-shifting West Virginia as theirs for the taking. It's hard to view his 2018 race as anything other than a referendum on what it means to be a Democrat. Here at the hyperdivisive dawn of the era of Trump, Manchin sits smack in the middle of the unresolved debate over whether rattled Democrats should respond to an angry base by veering harder to the left or instead notch some compromises in an effort to regain the trust of people who aren't clustered on the coasts or in cities and college towns. Is Manchin, in other words, part of the answer for the Democratic Party, a piece of the future—or is he the end of a line, one of the last of his breed?

"If the question is, 'Is there space for Joe Manchin inside the tent of the Democratic Party?'" said Matt Bennett of Third Way, a group that advocates for center-left Democrats, "the answer is, 'There better be.' Or else we're going to be in the minority forever."

"If you want to have a Democratic Party in places like West Virginia," said Democratic Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut, "you have to be happy about somebody like Joe Manchin, right?"

Progressives, though, say extinction is next to inevitable for Democrats who have chosen the route Manchin has. "Our position," said Adam Green, co-founder of the Progressive Change Campaign Committee, "is that Democrats in red states are shooting themselves in the foot for the November 2018 election if they are not fighting Trump."

"Not fighting Trump" is a pretty fair description of how Manchin had spent November, December and January. He had chided House Democrats for their decision to boycott the new president's inauguration. He had supported nearly all of Trump's Cabinet nominees. He had even introduced Rick Perry, another former governor and Trump's nominee for energy secretary, at his Senate hearing.

DeVos, though, was turning out to be an exception. In his office, in his folksy, meandering way, Manchin displayed no hint of existential fear as he politely explained to Bush the limits of his Trump support. "Jeb," he said, "I appreciate your call, because that means a lot, but" Charter schools, vouchers, the privatization of education—it wasn't a good fit, Manchin believed, for rural West Virginia. He had heard from constituents, and from the state's teachers' union. He assured Bush that he would work with DeVos no matter what, and that she almost certainly was going to get confirmed, even without his vote—eventually she did, albeit barely—but Manchin let him know that on this vote he would stick with his party. "I've got people back home who are very much concerned," he said.

He hung up, finished his chili and rested one of his big brown shoes on top of his desk. On one wall in his suite in Hart is a poster with a picture of John F. Kennedy and a quote from the 35th

president—“Let us not seek the Republican answer or the Democratic answer, but the right answer”—and to Manchin’s right in his office is a glass case filled with campaign buttons for Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy, Jimmy Carter and other Democrats from the past half-century. Next to the glass case is a small bronze statue of a coal miner. And above the coal miner is a flat-screen television, and now it was set on CNN, with the sound back on, showing images of Trump’s arrival in Washington.

“I can call Donald Trump now, and he’ll probably pick up,” Manchin said in his office. “He picks up his phone. If you’ve got his number, he’ll talk to you. Damnedest thing I ever seen in my life. And he’ll call me and say, ‘Hey, this is Donald.’” Trump had called him—the first of several conversations—on Thanksgiving weekend. “Just called me out of the clear blue sky,” Manchin said. “And he says, ‘I know you’re a centrist Democrat, and you don’t look at party lines, and you want to work across the aisle and get something done, and I want to work with you.’ I said, ‘Oh, you got no problem with me.’”

I’ve had more personal time with Trump in two months than I had with Obama in eight years. ... he’ll call me and say, ‘Hey, this is Donald.’”

This Trump-friendly stance, of course, comes with risk as well. The extent and durability of Trump’s popularity is impossible to predict. If Trump doesn’t deliver on his promise of coal jobs; if the flashy New Yorker goes down in some kind of self-dealing scandal, he could become a liability for the rural voters who put him in office. But as the clock ticked down on the Obama presidency, Manchin wasn’t holding himself like a man under threat. Outside his office, he walked the halls of the Hill and the streets with the loping, confident gait of the ex-athlete that he is.

One man flagged him down, wanting to shake his hand. “You’re a good man,” the man said to Manchin. “I like what you do. And I’m a Republican.”

“You’re an American,” Manchin responded.

Several people wearing red hats saying MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN asked to have their picture taken with Manchin, and he happily obliged.

Was this bipartisan glad-handing a glimpse of the way forward for the Democratic Party, or a quaint anachronism of a less partisan time? On the way back to his office, Manchin was stopped once more, by Buck McKeon, the former California congressman—another Republican. “You’re doing great,” McKeon said. He told Manchin he was in the “sweet spot.”

“Well,” Manchin said, as he walked on, mulling over the notion, “it’s either the sweet spot or the hot spot.” He laughed. “It’s some kind of spot.”

Regardless, he said, “I like it.”

Joe Manchin’s ascent as a Democrat in West Virginia is remarkable given that it has coincided with his state’s lurch from being one of the most resolutely blue to one of the most reliably red. Since 2000, West Virginia has voted for only Republicans for president, its congressional delegation has turned from all Democrats to all Republicans except Manchin, and the state

legislature in 2014 flipped to GOP control for the first time in 83 years. And during this transformative span, exactly one statewide Democrat won again and again.

His many supporters say it's because Manchin, 69, is skilled and shrewd and pragmatic. His many critics say it's because he's politically pliable and driven by instincts of self-preservation. All of them are right.

What Manchin is doing right now vis-à-vis Trump and his administration, this exacting straddling act—a nod to the left and a nod to the right, balancing the preferences of his party with the realities of the state he represents—is a version of something Democrats used to do almost reflexively, blending strains of liberalism and conservatism to create a mixture that appealed to their specific constituents. Zell Miller of Georgia and Ben Nelson of Nebraska personified that ethic in the Senate; representatives like Jane Harman anchored the conservative Blue Dog Democrats in the House. By the time Manchin arrived in the Senate in 2010, filling the seat held for half a century by Robert Byrd, he had been honing his own unique combination of political ideas for decades.

The first time Manchin ran for governor, in 1996, he was against abortion and for the death penalty and boot camps for juvenile offenders, and he had campaign contributions from the coal industry and endorsements from the state's biggest bankers and business leaders. He then lost in the Democratic primary to Charlotte Pritt, a teacher, a daughter of a coal miner and an unabashed liberal who had the enthusiastic backing of union labor. Progressives in West Virginia still fume over what Manchin did next. In October of that year, weeks before the general election, he sent 900 letters to top Democrats around the state saying he wasn't supporting Pritt because she wasn't "interested in the concerns of moderate and conservative Democrats." Instead, Manchin wrote, he would be supporting Cecil Underwood, the Republican candidate. Underwood won.

"He's not a real Democrat and never has been," Pritt said in a recent interview. Back in 1996, though, the most important Democrats in the state made the same decision he did. Gaston Caperton, the outgoing governor at the time, didn't actively support Pritt. Neither did Byrd in Washington. And Pritt wasn't endorsed by a single major newspaper in the state—not even the Democratic-leaning Charleston Gazette. Most Democrats in West Virginia, its editorial pointed out, are "middle-of-the-road folks, not inclined to stray too far from the centerline."

Manchin gauged the political makeup of the state and chose pragmatism over ideological purity. His calculus paid off. By 2005, he was the governor, a tax-cutting, anti-abortion, pro-gun Democrat—an overall political portrait that hasn't changed. His tax policies earned him an "A" from the libertarian Cato Institute—the sole Democrat to get that grade—and he would slam Obama's Environmental Protection Agency for "pie-in-the-sky" environmental standards, siding more with the interests of the state's influential extraction industries. "I'm Governor Joe Manchin," he said in one of his first speeches in the office, "and I am proud to be a friend of coal." He talked a lot about wanting to run the government like a business, sounding like a Republican at least as often as he sounded like a Democrat, but he also managed to gain the support of labor groups that had shunned him in 1996. He won in 2004 with 64 percent of the vote. He won in 2008 with just shy of 70 percent of the vote.

When he ran for the Senate, to highlight his endorsement from the National Rifle Association while simultaneously distancing himself from the toxic-in-West Virginia Obama, he filmed a theatrical ad titled “Dead Aim,” in which he slowly loaded a rifle, pointed it downfield and fired a bullet through a copy of the president’s cap-and-trade bill. It was a Manchin touch on a GOP template—and it worked. But in Washington, he was willing to cross the NRA crowd as well. After the murder of 20 elementary school students in Newtown, Connecticut, in 2012, he partnered with Republican Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania to push for bipartisan legislation to bolster background checks on sales of guns. For this, some Second Amendment crusaders called him a faker and a traitor.

The effort with Toomey ultimately failed, but it cemented how Manchin wanted to be seen: as a common-sense conduit between warring political factions, an image he has tried to cultivate throughout his time in the Senate. He has the most conservative voting record of Senate Democrats, according to GovTrack, a congressional analyst. He wishes more of his colleagues would do the same, too, to soften up the party-line lockstep.

In Washington, he lives on a houseboat, Almost Heaven, which he keeps docked in Southeast D.C.—“You buy something permanent, they think you like the place, and I sure as hell don’t like the place,” he says—and uses it as a neutral ground for foes from the Hill. Once, he invited Senate colleagues Tom Harkin and Ted Cruz, ideological opposites from Iowa and Texas, respectively. “Tom wasn’t really excited about it, because they come from the yin and the yang,” Manchin recalled. “I thought, ‘Oh, hell, have another glass of wine.’” Liquor is a go-to lubricant. Manchin likes hosting bipartisan happy hours for staffers of senators who are politically combative. “A little moonshine loosens ’em up,” he said.

It’s fair to say these matchmaking efforts in Washington haven’t made much of a difference. Congress has gone the opposite way. Rarely have the nation’s political parties been more starkly divided. Regular aisle-crossers like Manchin have been vanishing from both parties. And never has his brand of bipartisanship been more of a tightrope than over the past year and a half.

He endorsed Hillary Clinton early in the presidential campaign, in the middle of 2015, almost a year before she said her policies were “going to put a lot of coal miners and coal companies out of business”—and yet he still campaigned with her after that, making sure to label her comment “horrific” but insisting it wasn’t what was “in her heart” and that she was “a friend” to West Virginia. It didn’t work. In the state’s Democratic primary, Bernie Sanders won all 55 counties. In the general election, only 26 percent of the voters in his state voted for Clinton. After that, it didn’t take long for Manchin to toggle toward Trump.

If the question is, ‘Is there space for Joe Manchin inside the tent of the Democratic Party?’ the answer is, ‘There better be.’”

In November, when exiting Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, with whom Manchin had a frosty relationship, called Trump “a sexual predator who lost the popular vote,” Manchin noisily sided with Trump, saying Reid’s comments were “an absolute embarrassment.” In December, Manchin eagerly accepted the invitation to go to Trump Tower, issuing a statement that he was

“honored” to meet with Trump and “humbled” to be considered for secretary of energy. It wasn’t clear at the time whether he was ever in serious contention for the post—Trump went with Perry shortly after meeting with Manchin—but a source familiar with GOP deliberations told Politico there was concerted maneuvering to get Manchin into the Trump administration, blessed by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky. In a Machiavellian play, McConnell hoped to remove Manchin from the Senate, the source says, believing it would all but guarantee the seat going to a Republican. “There was serious effort to get him into the Cabinet,” a top GOP official said. Manchin pooh-poohed this: “I talked to Mitch a few times, but it was nothing,” he said. “It wasn’t anything about, ‘I want you to do anything.’”

Either way, Manchin continued in January with his pro-Trump activity. He skipped a meeting on the Hill to discuss health care with Obama and fellow Democrats because he couldn’t “in good conscience” talk to “only Democrats.” He announced his support for Trump’s selection to lead the EPA, Scott Pruitt, a climate-change denier who has been an antagonist of the agency he was tapped to lead, by participating in a highly unusual joint news release with Trump’s transition team, in which Manchin was quoted saying he and Pruitt had “a great deal in common.”

The day before the inauguration, over a breakfast of oatmeal and berries at the Hay-Adams Hotel a block from the White House, he let loose with some parting shots for Obama. The “redundancies” of his environmental regulations, Manchin said, “broke the will of the businessperson.” Manchin is not in favor of “repealing and replacing” the Affordable Care Act, wanting to fix what needs to be fixed rather than starting over, but he said “Obamacare” was “when everything in the states got crazy—just divided the country.” In West Virginia, he said, Obama is beyond disliked. “There’s hatred.” Manchin voted for Obama in 2008, and for Clinton last year, but he won’t say whether he voted for Obama in 2012—“that’s between me and my ballot.”

About the new president, on the other hand, Manchin expressed fairly unfettered optimism. “He’ll correct the trading policies, the imbalance in our trade policies, which are horrible,” he said. “He’ll hold China’s feet to the fire. He’s spot-on on China.” And “hell no,” Manchin said, he didn’t have a problem with Trump calling companies to keep them from moving factories overseas. “Go right ahead and bully them, if we get more jobs in America,” he said. Then he went and introduced Rick Perry—“my friend,” he said—at his confirmation hearing.

In the first week of the Trump presidency, he voted to confirm Trump defense secretary General James Mattis, Trump homeland security secretary General John Kelly and Trump ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley, which put him in line with most Senate Democrats—but he also objected to his party’s delay tactics on confirming many of Trump’s other, more disputed nominees, which he called “bullshit.”

In interviews with Politico, Republicans lobbed compliments his way. “He is certainly someone who’s unafraid of crossing the aisle,” said Senator Susan Collins, the moderate Republican from Maine. “The American people need people like Joe Manchin,” said Senator Richard Burr of North Carolina, who has a Manchin bumper sticker—his only bumper sticker for a Democrat—on his beat-up, semi-notorious Volkswagen Thing.

Manchin's chumminess with Trump, the statements he has made and the stances he has taken, have left some in his own caucus, meanwhile, privately rolling their eyes and shaking their heads. For the most part, though, his Democratic Senate colleagues tacitly have given him latitude based on a resigned understanding of his looming test in 2018.

"He will have a very hard reelection, and we know it," one Senate Democrat told Politico.

"We know West Virginia voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump as president, and he has to represent his state, so it's not unusual for him to take the positions he does," said Gary Peters of Michigan.

"You can't really blame Joe," another Senate Democrat said. "You can blame West Virginia."

"And he really tries, I think, to help when he can," said Dick Durbin of Illinois. "But there are times when he can't."

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York gave Manchin a leadership role after the election in November, tasking him with, among other things, improving Democrats' "messaging" to Democrats, or one-time Democrats who voted for Trump in places like West Virginia. And on the sixth day of the Trump presidency, at a retreat for Senate Democrats in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, Manchin hosted a panel of half a dozen such people—people whose families he has known for a long time, people who have voted for Manchin who nonetheless also voted for Trump. Some of Manchin's colleagues got more out of the session than others—Senator Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut called it "interesting, but certainly not novel"—but the overall takeaway was sufficiently simple: These are the sorts of people Democrats are going to have to win back, at least if they want to win again in areas that are red and getting redder, and they will vote for a Democrat so long as that Democrat looks something like Manchin. "Joe," Durbin told Politico, "is a reminder to us."

Two days later, in Charleston, the capital of West Virginia, and where Manchin lives when he's not staying on Almost Heaven in Washington, Manchin attended a small ceremony to recognize eight graduates of a program called Mined Minds to help train blue-collar workers for technology jobs. The venue was the airy, high-ceilinged atrium of the state culture center and history museum, across a courtyard from the capitol's handsome gold dome. Outside, it was cold and gray and looked like snow. Inside, Manchin shook hands, kissed cheeks and touched shoulders. He is 6-foot-3, but his physical presence is tempered by his soft-featured face and genial, first-name-basis disposition. In his non-politics life, he was a carpet salesman and a coal broker. He's good at the retail side of the job, and even his critics concur. Manchin congratulated the graduates, concluding his remarks by saying, "Please come to Washington to visit me. I get lonely up there for West Virginians."

As the people filed out, off to the side, Manchin was asked about a story on the bottom of the front page of that day's local paper. A state legislator from the southern part of the state had dropped his party affiliation, changing from a Democrat to an independent. The legislator was quoted in the article saying the national Democratic Party hadn't done a good job of being "pro-coal, pro-gun, pro-life and pro-jobs."

"I can understand that," Manchin said.

“My secret sauce is this: It’s just me. I am who I am,” he explained. “My brand is Joe Manchin, and I don’t think they’re looking at the ‘D’ or the ‘R.’ They know me—they knew me as governor, they knew me as secretary of state—and they say, ‘Yeah, but he’s not that type of Democrat.’”

Some wonder why he’s still any kind of Democrat.

“I’m hanging on to my roots,” Manchin said.

Manchin is a Democrat because of the Kennedys, and because he was and is Catholic, and because of coal and the unions of workers who pulled it out of mountains, and because of where he grew up, and when—the 1950s and ’60s, when basically everybody in West Virginia, and especially in Farmington, up by the Pennsylvania border, was a Democrat. Republicans, Manchin thought when he was young, were rich. And he lived “between the crick and the tracks.” He didn’t know anybody who was rich.

He is a Democrat because of his grandfather, who came to this country in 1904 as a boy from Italy named Giuseppe Mancini. America made that Joe Manchin. He went to work in the mines when he was 11 and helped organize a union in his 20s and then opened an auto repair shop and finally a grocery store, where he kept what customers owed in a black box of debts he seldom tried to collect.

Manchin is a Democrat because of his grandmother, Kathleen Roscoe Manchin, or Mama Kay. She was all but officially Farmington’s largest charity. He watched her take in hobos off the passing trains, giving them a place to stay only if they agreed to dry out. He watched her broker peace between pregnant teenagers and their mothers. He delivered the loaves of bread she baked for neighbors on Saturdays.

And he is a Democrat because of his uncle, A. James Manchin, perhaps the most colorful politician in the history of West Virginia, a 5-foot-9, 280-pound “parade of handshakes, kisses and oratory,” in the words of his biographer. There are those who say John F. Kennedy would not have won the presidency without winning the primary in West Virginia, and that he wouldn’t have won the primary without A. James Manchin, and so it would follow that Kennedy would not have been president without the grass-roots help of the man Manchin knew as Uncle Jimmy.

Manchin got married in 1967, and he became a father in 1969, but the month he became an adult really was November 1968. His father owned a furniture store, and it burned down, killing three customers and a sales clerk. A week later, the local No. 9 mine blew up, killing 78 miners—including his mother’s brother. Manchin took a semester off from West Virginia University, where he was a business administration major, to help his family regroup. November 1968 was a blur of grief for the Manchins, a before-and-after event.

For the country, too, it would prove to be an inflection point, because Richard Nixon’s election as president marked the end of the winning Democratic coalition pieced together in the aftermath of the Depression by Franklin D. Roosevelt—and the beginning of a new political framework in which many people who were white and lived in rural, working-class places peeled away from Democrats and started to vote for Republicans. Looking back, the late ’60s and early ’70s were the incubator for the long-arc trends that put Manchin on an island of congressional moderates

and Trump in the Oval Office—mechanization and then globalization, the decline of the unions that helped non-college-educated workers earn wages that enabled middle-class existences, and the slow deaths of so many towns like the one in which Manchin was raised.

Farmington today is a shell of what it was. St. Peter's Catholic Church, where Manchin was an altar boy, is still there. So is the smoke-filled pool hall called Sam's, where the Manchin men played poker. The Manchin clinic, where Manchin's brother is a doctor, is still open as well. Otherwise, the two-block main drag is mostly vacant. Manchin's high school is long since closed. The No. 9 mine shut down a decade after the disaster, and other mines in the area have closed or slowed, able to operate with fewer employees. Manchin says people in Farmington were Democrats "because Roosevelt saved 'em in the Depression." "But the old FDR Democrats, they're not alive anymore," said Ted Boettner, executive director of the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy—and subsequent generations didn't see the party "working for them the way it did for their parents." Farmington has been losing population since the '50s. And in November, Marion County, a cradle of the candidacy of JFK, voted for Trump just as passionately as the rest of the state. Democrats at this point in a place like this are clinging to pieces of the past.

The first week of February, in the house where Manchin grew up, his sister, Paula Manchin Llana, plucked from their parents' chest of drawers photo albums and brittle, yellowed clippings from local newspapers. Later, in a house across town, one of Manchin's cousins, Theresa Witt, gathered her own collection of Manchin memorabilia. Together they formed a jumbled archive of the life of Senator Joe Manchin—the news of his all-conference exploits ("Versatile QB," the headline said), of his athletic scholarship to WVU ("strong arm," the coach said), of his injured knee and finished career ("heartbroken," his sister said), the coverage of the fire ("the town's largest business establishment," the article said), a brief about his first political victory in 1982, a picture of him on election night in 2000 with Uncle Jimmy. And all the obituaries. Of his uncle and his father and his grandfather. Of Mama Kay.

"I'm going to call Joe," Witt announced. "I want him to tell you about Mama Kay."

It was a Thursday, nearing the end of the second hectic week of President Trump, dinner hour, dark now, and Manchin was in Washington. He had votes early the next morning, leading up to the DeVos decision. To that point in the week, Manchin—the West Virginia Democrat, the Farmington Democrat, a Democrat by birth just as much as by choice and therefore this idiosyncratic, iconoclastic mix on display in D.C.—on Tuesday had voted to confirm Trump Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao and on Wednesday had voted to confirm Trump Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and met in his office with Trump's unsurprisingly conservative pick for the Supreme Court. In his statement about Neil Gorsuch, Manchin had urged his colleagues to "put partisan politics aside." The biggest ongoing story of the week, though, was the furor and nationwide protests over Trump's immigration ban—and here was another break from Trump for Manchin. It had taken Manchin, conspicuously, three days to say something about it, putting him well behind his peers—his mother-in-law had died over the weekend—and his statement read cautiously compared with many of the other Democrats' stern rebukes. But Manchin noted that the "scope and execution" of the order "unfortunately" did not in his estimation constitute "a common sense approach" and seemed to be "rushed through before being properly vetted by senior security advisers."

Now Manchin was on speakerphone, his voice filling the kitchen of his cousin's house in his hometown, and he was talking about the bedtime stories his Mama Kay used to tell him.

“She’s 6 years old, and she’s on a ship, she’s in steerage, the cheapest area of the boat, which is the bottom, and I remember her telling the story that she heard people screaming. She couldn’t—she’s down at the bottom of the boat—but she says she remembers when they’re coming into New York Harbor. She didn’t know where she was or what was going on, but all she remembers hearing is people screaming, ‘The lady, the lady, the lady!’ And the lady was the Statue of Liberty. And she wanted to see that lady. She kept running up and they kept chasing her down, she kept running up and they kept chasing her down, and she finally stuck around, to where she could see that lady.”

Compared with his statement critiquing Trump’s order, this seemed like a far more intimate, affecting way of discussing immigration. He was asked whether he had thought about the story in the aftermath of Trump’s immigration order. If he had thought about Mama Kay.

“Yes,” Manchin said.

The next day, back in Charleston, fresh off a flight from Washington, Manchin sat shotgun in a big white SUV with signs on the sides saying it was his mobile office. Mara Boggs, his state director, gripped the steering wheel and sped south on Interstate 77, slicing through the brown-blue hills on the way to Beckley, where Manchin was scheduled to drop by a Veterans Affairs hospital before proceeding to a nearby funeral home to help his wife, Gayle, prepare for her mother’s burial. It had been a long two weeks.

He was asked in the SUV about Trump’s executive orders, their substance, the pace. “First of all,” Manchin said, pushing back, again sounding almost more like a Republican, “Obama did a lot of executive orders.” He said he was pleased the new president was “moving fast.”

He was asked about Gorsuch. Some Democrats were clamoring to block Gorsuch the way Republicans had obstructed Obama’s pick for the court. “It truly was an embarrassment the way Mitch McConnell treated a really accomplished jurist and a decent person in Merrick Garland,” Manchin said. “But I don’t know if two wrongs make a right.”

And he was asked about his own seat in 2018. Was he siding with Trump in preparation for the fight he could see coming? The suggestion that he might be operating out of political calculation made him bristle. “What really pisses me off is all anybody thinks is I’m going to vote the way I vote or think the way I think because of getting elected,” he said. “They don’t understand. I don’t give a shit about getting elected.” If he loses, he gets to come home, he said. And if he wins, it’s “meant to be.”

In the SUV, there was silence for a spell.

Know this, though, Manchin added: “A Democrat that adheres to the Washington Democrat philosophy can’t win,” he said flatly. Not in West Virginia. Not in 2018. “I can tell you that.”

He has been right so far. And in spite of its recent voting patterns, West Virginia still has more registered Democrats than Republicans, after all—but the national debate about what it means to

be a Democrat and the direction of the party is happening now in Manchin's state through the prism of his current positioning and his upcoming election.

"If Joe Manchin is the answer, we're doomed," said Walt Auvil, an attorney in Parkersburg and a member of the state Democratic executive committee.

"There's no future in my mind for this 'Republican lite,'" said Chris Regan, an attorney in Wheeling considered an up-and-coming progressive in the state. "If there is going to be a Democratic resurgence in West Virginia and other states that have gone red, it's going to be as a party that articulates its views and takes the fight to Republicans, not me-too-ism."

"Your new West Virginia Democrat is going to be aligned with a Bernie Sanders type," said Shawn Fluharty, a left-leaning Democratic member of the state House of Delegates, "and not a Joe Manchin type."

That's crazy, said Mike Plante, a longtime Democratic strategist based in the state: "Asking Joe Manchin to vote like a progressive Democrat is like asking him to put the noose around his neck and kick the chair out from under his feet."

Republicans see this intraparty sniping and smile. Conrad Lucas, the state GOP leader, thinks Manchin's practically beaten already, given West Virginia's political swerve. "I think in 2018," Lucas said, "he'll be defeated overwhelmingly." By? "Whoever our nominee is." Potential opponents include Patrick Morrissey, the state's first Republican attorney general since the 1930s; U.S. Representative David McKinley; and U.S. Representative Evan Jenkins, who flipped from Democrat to Republican in 2013 and told Politico he is "very seriously considering" running for Manchin's seat in the Senate. Conservative groups are expected to hit Manchin with perhaps millions of dollars in ads. His endorsement of Clinton will be fodder. So might one of his three children, Heather Bresch, the CEO of drug company Mylan, tainted by the recent EpiPen price-hike controversy.

Manchin is unconcerned. "I think they'll talk about everything," he said.

Back in Washington, in the ensuing days and weeks, in the midst of the chaos of the first month of the Trump presidency, Manchin made good on his pledge to go against DeVos and also voted against Tom Price, Trump's pick for secretary of Health and Human Services (who was confirmed). But Manchin voted for Jeff Sessions for attorney general and for Steven Mnuchin for Treasury secretary, two of the most contentious nominees. He was the only Democrat to vote for either of them. One evening, at an anti-DeVos rally in Washington, Manchin hugged liberal Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren; three days later, at a luncheon at the White House, he hugged Trump and then sat right next to the president as cameras clicked and rolled; two days after that, he met for an hour-long, off-the-record conversation with reporters and editors from the ethno-nationalist, Trump-loving, formerly Steve Bannon-run Breitbart website. And then national security adviser Michael Flynn was ousted only 24 days into his new job, and a late-night bombshell broke the news that Trump aides had communicated with Russian intelligence officials throughout the presidential campaign.

The next morning, in the Manchin suite in Hart, the headlines of the newspapers on the coffee table in the lobby blared. "Capital Reels Amid Tumult." "White House in crisis mode." Manchin,

who in December was assigned to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, sat at his desk. Had members of Trump's staff colluded with top Russian officials to influence the outcome of the most important election in America? Had Trump? "The doggone public needs to know," Manchin said.

Not even a full four weeks beforehand, at breakfast at the Hay-Adams, on the last day of Obama's presidency, Manchin had talked about the incoming president in optimistic tones that sounded an awful lot like relief. Now? "Wherever the intel takes us is where we'll go," he said, decidedly warier. But he stressed he wasn't "running from" Trump.

"I'm not prejudging," he said. "I'm not prejudging." And he wasn't hearing much from constituents, anyway, at least not yet.

"It's too early," Manchin said. "He's only been here a month. Democrats who don't like him still don't like him. He hasn't won any of them over. Those who are still, like myself, wanting to work with him, and wanting him to succeed, I think we're still in that position."

As soon as he figures out he's not the CEO of the United States, he's gonna be fine," Manchin said. Think he will? "I'm hopin', buddy," he said.

Manchin leaned back in his chair and watched Trump on the TV. "As soon as he figures out he's not the CEO of the United States, he's gonna be fine," he said.

Think he will?

"I'm hopin', buddy," he said.

A framed picture that had just been delivered sat outside his office. It showed Senate Democratic leaders—Sanders to Schumer's far left, Manchin to his far right. Schumer had written a note. "Dear Joe," it said. "Thanks for being part of the team!" The following week, Manchin would have a cantankerous conference call with political activists in West Virginia in which he called Sanders "not even a Democrat" and dared somebody to challenge him in a primary. "Vote me out!" he said. "I'm not changing!" And before Trump's late February speech to a joint session of Congress, he would be part of Trump's official escort to the front of the chamber; after the speech, he would give Trump another hug and laud his "presidential tone." Now, though, Manchin walked past the Democratic leadership picture on his way to a meeting with Tom Perez, the soon-to-be-elected Democratic National Committee chairman, to discuss the party's future. Bound for the offices of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, he stepped outside onto the sidewalk on Maryland Avenue and then bolted to a slim median. For a second, it looked like Manchin was going to make a break and run the rest of the way across. But he thought better of it, catching himself and retreating, opting instead to stay in the middle of the road as a cold wind whipped and traffic raced around him.