

The New York Times

Amid Turmoil From Washington to Wall Street, a Surprisingly Passive President

Peter Baker

February 9, 2018

WASHINGTON — When he took office a year ago, President Trump vowed that the “hour of action” had arrived. But as momentous events whipsawed Washington and Wall Street in recent days, Mr. Trump seemed oddly offstage, more of a spectator than the star.

He stayed largely out of sight as the stock market plummeted in its most volatile week in years. He was largely uninvolved as Congress crafted a two-year budget agreement without him, ending a brief, middle-of-the-night shutdown Friday morning after just a few hours rather than allowing the full shutdown he wanted to force an immigration deal. And he angrily chastised aides for keeping him out of the loop on spousal abuse allegations against a top aide.

There are times when it serves a president’s interests to step back and let events play out around him, but it goes against the grain for Mr. Trump, who has always styled himself as the master of his universe. The passive presidency of recent days presumably will not last, but even when he tries to impose his will on the capital and the world, Mr. Trump has found that there are limits to his ability to shape events.

“The president prides himself on being a great deal maker and understanding the art of the deal,” Senator Chris Coons, Democrat of Delaware, said this week during negotiations on immigration. “Sometimes he makes the best contribution when he makes his position known and then steps back and lets us work out the details and decide what he can and can’t accept.”

Mr. Trump is not a detail person even in his more active days, but his natural instinct is to involve himself in the broad strokes. His often impulsive Twitter blasts can upend negotiations and shift the focus of events, sometimes at odds with the official position of his own White House. And so his relatively low profile in recent days has been striking.

Even some of his top advisers sounded surprisingly passive this week on different issues. Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson said that Russia was already trying to interfere in the midterm congressional elections this year, but there was not much the United States could do to stop it. “If it’s their intention to interfere, they are going to find ways to do that,” he told Fox News. “We can take steps we can take, but this is something that, once they decide they are going to do it, it’s very difficult to pre-empt it.”

Vice President Mike Pence, who is in South Korea for the opening of the Olympics, likewise sounded relatively detached from the spending debate involving his former colleagues in Congress back home. Asked whether he had called any lawmakers, he said he had only talked with the White House unit that lobbies Congress. “I’ve been in touch with the legislative office and the president and I have talked frequently,” he told reporters, “but we’re on standby as the vote approaches.”

Other presidents have discovered that there can be benefits from staying on standby. When President Bill Clinton assigned Hillary Clinton to lead an effort to pass universal health care, she and a task force crafted a highly detailed plan that died on Capitol Hill. The lesson that Mr. Clinton and his successors took from that is that sometimes it is better to set a broad goal but let Congress figure out how it wants to proceed. President George W. Bush did that with his No Child Left Behind education program and President Barack Obama did that with health care and some spending fights.

But Mr. Trump has proved a divisive force so that even his broad direction is now sometimes ignored. Just this week he declared that he wanted Congress to let the government shut down rather than pass spending measures if there were no agreement on immigration. But Senate leaders of both parties disregarded him altogether and drafted their own deal without immigration.

“The other players in Washington, whether it’s Congress or the Senate leadership, really have come to the conclusion: Let’s ignore him, because we have things to do,” said Maria Echaveste, a former deputy White House chief of staff under Mr. Clinton. “The budget deal is a perfect example of that. He’s not constructive so they’re ignoring him.”

Speaking after reaching the budget deal with his Republican counterpart, Senator Chuck Schumer of New York, the Democratic minority leader, said he had learned to proceed without bothering with the president. “Often times we can get a lot more done working with one another and let the White House just sit on the sidelines, because you don’t know what their positions are,” he said.

The president’s hands-off approach on the budget deal worked for him to the extent that it included the boost in military spending that he has been demanding, but it also included a large increase in domestic spending as well.

As a result, the federal deficit will balloon to nearly \$1.2 trillion by 2019, despite Mr. Trump’s campaign promise to get the nation’s fiscal house in order. At one point during the campaign, Mr. Trump even promised to eliminate not just the annual deficit but the entire national debt accumulated over decades and now totaling more than \$20 trillion. Instead, at this rate, he will pile up trillions of dollars of additional borrowing.

Conservatives complained that he should have played a more active role in the negotiations to avoid that. “I think it would have made a big difference if Trump had pushed hard for lower spending numbers, particularly if he had pushed a consistent message,” said Chris Edwards, the

director of tax policy studies at the Cato Institute. He noted that Democrats backed down during the last government shutdown. “That would have given Trump power,” he said.

The White House was, again, not engaging on Friday. It held no news briefing and a spokesman did not respond to a request for comment on the president’s approach. But on Twitter, Mr. Trump blamed Democrats for the spending increases in the budget deal. Even though Republicans control both chambers, they need Democratic votes to end filibusters in the Senate.

“Without more Republicans in Congress, we were forced to increase spending on things we do not like or want in order to finally, after many years of depletion, take care of our Military,” Mr. Trump wrote. “Sadly, we needed some Dem votes for passage. Must elect more Republicans in 2018 Election!”

Still, some Republicans said Mr. Trump may be most successful by setting the larger goals and then backing off. “Different presidents have different interest levels in being in the weeds on policy details,” said J. Scott Jennings, who was a special assistant to Mr. Bush and is now a fellow at the Harvard Institute of Politics. “This one, it seems to me, works best when he lays out broad priorities — more defense spending, cut taxes — and then allows the tacticians to engage and make it so.”

After a fractious first year between Mr. Trump and Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the Republican majority leader, Mr. Jennings said the president seemed to have finally found traction in the relationship, trusting the leader to manage legislative strategy. “Once they found their groove, things started working,” he said. “Trump’s job approval has gone up, the numbers on the economy have improved and the generic ballot has begun to shrink.”

Still, there is the danger of looking as if he is too removed. He did not sound particularly aggressive about domestic violence after his staff secretary, Rob Porter, was accused of physically abusing two former wives and resigned. Instead, his only public comment was to praise Mr. Porter and express sadness for him. In private, advisers said Mr. Trump was angry both that he had not been informed earlier about the allegations and that he had not been consulted on the initial White House response.

He likewise remained generally quiet about the tumble of the stock market, which has now reached an official correction, after lauding its increases for a year. Critics said he could not have it both ways, claiming credit when share prices rise while avoiding blame when they fall.

Democrats and some Republicans said Congress is dysfunctional enough without Mr. Trump getting involved. “I am absolutely convinced that at this point in time the best thing for everyone involved is for this president to stay as far away as possible,” said Jim Manley, a former top Democratic aide in the Senate. “The last thing this chaotic institution needs is for him to wreak more havoc by getting involved.”

The one exception, he added, would be immigration, where Mr. Trump should play more of a role. “The issue is so toxic,” he said, “that they’re never going to get anything done unless he leans in and gives some cover to the Republicans.”

