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Trump boasts of record judicial appointment pace, promises more to come

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WASHINGTON – President Donald Trump boasted Wednesday about the record 158 federal judges that have been confirmed under his watch, with dozens more to come as he carries through on a campaign promise to remake federal courts.

The announcement came as Trump nominated 10 more judges, including one for the U.S. District Court for Arizona, where three Trump-appointed judges are already on the bench. The Senate on Wednesday also confirmed Danielle Hunsaker to the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, making her the eighth Trump nominee seated on the court that hears appeals from Arizona.

Trump, backed by a number of Republican senators at a White House event, praised his nominees as the “finest legal minds” who are “protecting American freedoms” through their strict interpretation of the Constitution.

“Today, we celebrate a professional milestone and truly tremendous achievement,” Trump said. “In two months, we will have 182 federal judges.”

But liberal activists saw little to celebrate – and were even more concerned that more Trump appointments are yet to come.

“Now these Trump judges are on the courts for life and they’re going to continue to have bad effects for a very long time,” said Elliot Minberg, senior fellow and counsel at People For the American Way.

Minberg said Trump’s nominees have judicial outlooks that are “extremely favorable to those on the religious right and the far right.” Advocates said those views could undermine everything from environmental regulations to reproductive rights and protections for LGBTQ individuals.

While conservatives hailed Trump’s picks as “superstars,” with almost two-thirds rated “well qualified” by the American Bar Association, critics responded that nine nominees were classified “not qualified” by the ABA. None of President Barack Obama’s nominees got the not-qualified rating, they said.

One of those deemed not qualified was 9th Circuit nominee Lawrence J.C. VanDyke, said Lena Zwarenstejn, Fair Courts Campaign director for the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights.

She pointed to last week's confirmation hearing. In it, Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse, D-R.I., read an ABA report that said interviews with scores of people on VanDyke called him "arrogant, lazy, an ideologue, and lacking in knowledge of the day-to-day practice," among other complaints.

"Serving on the 9th Circuit, he could have an impact on Arizona," Zwarenstejn said of VanDyke, who was assailed by Democratic senators focused for his record of antagonism to LGBTQ, reproductive, and clean air and water protections.

"By the end of the week, 45 U.S. circuit court appointees may be approved," she said of Trump's nominees.

But Trump criticized the current bench, which he said has issued sweeping injunctions against his administration "prohibiting us from enforcing the plain letter of the law" on many issues, particularly on immigration.

Both Trump and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell have been "intensely" focused on judicial appointments, tapping younger judges whose terms will "surely endure until the middle of the century," said William A. Galston, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

That was echoed by Trump, who celebrated the fact most of his judicial appointees are an average of "10 years younger" than Obama's nominees.

"Judicial nominees have easily been the biggest success of the Trump administration," said Ilya Shapiro, director of the Cato Institute's Robert A. Levy Center for Constitutional Studies.

The most high-profile of Trump's appointments have been Supreme Court Justices Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh. But the 158 federal judges confirmed so far also include one-quarter of U.S. circuit court judges, from whom Supreme Court justices are usually drawn.

As of Nov. 1, the Senate had confirmed more Trump nominees than any of the last five presidents at the same point in their tenure, according to the Heritage Foundation's judicial tracker.

Overall, Trump has appointed about "19% of the judiciary," despite resistance "that no president has had to face" over his nominees, said Heritage's Thomas Jipping. He said Trump could easily wind up filling half of the circuit court bench.

There were 49 nominations pending in the Judiciary Committee before the 10 added Wednesday, with 103 current vacancies on the federal bench, according to Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts.