

Trump: Political Crisis, Right-wing Policies, and the Resistance

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Donald Trump's first six months as president of the United States has been bad in so many ways that it is hard to know where to begin.

What is worse, more dangerous, more horrifying: his withdrawal of the United States from the Paris climate accord? His rocket-rattling regarding Korea? His bombing of Syria? Or is it his plan to lighten the tax burden on the rich while cutting programs that benefit the poor? Or perhaps his Islamophobia and repressive immigration policies? What worries and angers us more: his promotion of the alt-right news media? His championing of right-wing thugs? Or his rhetoric, which has encouraged the growth of white nationalist, racist, and fascist groups? What is more reprehensible, the nepotism that makes close family members (two of his children) principal advisors? Or the cabinet of millionaires and generals? Or is it all the proliferating private interests at every level of government?

Since Trump's election, the American political system has been in a constant crisis, the most serious political crisis in fifty years, with churning investigations of the president, his associates, his campaign, and his administration by several security agencies, including the CIA and the FBI, as well as by five congressional entities. It is known that Trump and his team had multiple, inappropriate, and perhaps illegal contacts with the Russian government, and there is a suspicion that they colluded with Vladimir Putin's dictatorship to undermine Hillary Clinton's campaign and support Trump. As this essay goes to press on June 15, the future of the Trump government appears to be in question, and no doubt by the time you read this there will have been more revelations and the crisis will have grown greater. At the same time, Trump and the Republicans in Congress pursue an archconservative political agenda that would enrich the wealthy, expand the military, and have a devastating impact on blacks and Latinos, on immigrants, on labor unions, on the poor, and on the environment. Finally, the resistance that we heralded during the first few months of the Trump presidency has become largely dominated by the Democratic Party, has no independent political agenda, and has little participation from labor and the working class generally, the force that might give it both power and perhaps independence. We look here, then, at the political crisis, the conservative agenda, and the state of the resistance

In mid-May, Trump fired FBI Director James Comey, who said that Trump had earlier asked him to drop the investigation into fired National Security Director Mike Flynn. Flynn had been fired for lying to Vice President Mike Pence about his contacts with Russia. Trump first justified his firing of Comey by saying he was following advice from a memo by Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, who criticized Comey's handling of the issue of Hillary Clinton's possible email security violations—though both Trump and Rosenstein said that Trump was planning to fire Comey before he read Rosenstein's memo. Alternately, in other statements, Trump claimed he fired Comey

because he was “very unpopular with most people,” or because he was a “showboat,” or, as he told the Russian officials, because he was “a nut job.” To the Russians he confessed, “I faced great pressure because of Russia. That’s taken off,” an explanation that suggests that he fired Comey to derail the FBI investigation. The public outcry following Comey’s firing led Deputy Attorney General Rosenstein to appoint former FBI Director Robert Mueller as independent counsel to carry on the FBI investigation. We have since learned that Trump also asked Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats to intervene in the Russia investigation and ask Comey to back off. (*Washington Post*, June 6) At about the same time we learned from a National Security Agency memo apparently leaked by an NSA contractor named Reality Winner that Russia had hacked U.S. voting systems. (*Intercept*, June 5) These developments suggested that Trump had been engaged in the crime of obstruction of justice, which could be grounds for impeachment.

There has been no comparable U.S. political crisis since President Richard Nixon fired independent special prosecutor Archibald Cox, leading to the resignations of Attorney General Elliot Richardson and Deputy Attorney General William French Smith on October 20, 1973. Nixon resigned to avoid impeachment after it was revealed that he and his advisors had organized the illegal break-in at Democratic Party headquarters in the Watergate Office Building. Though the Democratic Party leadership; Nancy Pelosi, the House minority leader; and Charles Schumer, the Senate minority leader have attempted to hush them, representatives Maxine Waters of California and Al Green of Texas have both explicitly called for Trump’s impeachment, and many other Democrats have suggested their sympathy with that view. Two Republican representatives, Justin Amash of Michigan and Carlos Curbelo of Florida, have also suggested Trump should be impeached for firing Comey. Meanwhile, Trump and the Republicans move their agenda forward.

Trump’s Strategy and Agenda

Since Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt’s first term in 1933, a new president’s “first hundred days” have become an important measure of a new administration. During Trump’s first hundred days he moved quickly to take action, pursuing a strategy aimed at fulfilling campaign promises to his overwhelmingly white voter base that he would keep out the Mexicans who supposedly threatened their jobs and stop the Muslims who supposedly threatened their lives. So, just five days after his inauguration, Trump issued an order to begin immediately the construction of a wall on the Mexican border and to more aggressively find and deport undocumented immigrants by expanding the definition of criminal immigrants. Just two days later, Trump issued an order that—in the midst of the mass migration of Syrian war refugees—temporarily banned immigration from seven majority Muslim countries and suspended the immigration of refugees for 120 days. His order also imposed a religious test, allowing Christian refugees from Muslim countries to enter the United States. In his first hundred days, Trump deported 40 percent more immigrants than Obama, who had been called “the deporter in chief.”



Time to take out the garbage

Trump's "Muslim ban," as he had originally called it, led to massive protests at airports across the country. A federal appeals court overturned the ban. As the *New York Times* reported, "The three-judge panel, suggesting that the ban did not advance national security, said the administration had shown 'no evidence' that anyone from the seven nations—Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen—had committed terrorist acts in the United States." (Liptak, *New York Times*, Feb. 9, 2017) Trump's first major initiative, poorly planned and executed, failed completely. Trump went on to issue a second executive order, but the courts overturned that too.

Trump's second major initiative was an attempt to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act, popularly known as Obamacare, the government-coordinated and subsidized private insurance and health care program. Republican House Speaker Paul D. Ryan began the push to repeal even before Trump's inauguration and attempted to pass the repeal in March. But he could not get a majority in the House because of desertions by members of the right-wing Freedom Caucus, who wanted a more thoroughgoing destruction of Obamacare, and also because of defections of moderates who had come under pressure from their constituents concerned about losing their health insurance. Town hall protests mobilized large numbers and put a lot of pressure on moderate Republican legislators, several of whom refused to vote for repeal. The failure to repeal Obamacare was an even greater defeat for Trump and the Republican Party than was the loss on the Muslim ban. The Republicans made a second and third attempt, which eventually passed the House by appeasing the Freedom Caucus, but not yet the Senate.

The one victory that Trump enjoyed in his first few months in office came with the Senate's confirmation of his nominee to the Supreme Court, Neil Gorsuch, an extremely conservative judge who could be expected to vote to limit gay rights, to uphold restrictions on abortion, to invalidate affirmative action programs, and to reduce the power of labor unions. Evasive about his views

during the Senate hearings, Gorsuch was confirmed on a near party-line vote in the Senate, with Republicans being joined by three Democrats for a vote of 54 to 45.

The Budget and the Tax Plan

The other major Trump initiative in the first hundred days was the budget. Trump's budget proposal for the fiscal year would total over \$4 trillion. It called for large increases for Defense (up 10 percent), for Homeland Security (up 7 percent), and for Veterans Affairs (up 6 percent) while at the same time cutting the Environmental Protection Agency (down 31 percent), the Agriculture and Labor departments (both down 21 percent), Justice (down 20 percent, through cuts to crime victims, for example, though the FBI will see an increase), Health and Human Services (down 16 percent), and Education (down 14 percent). (Parlapiano and Aisch, *New York Times*, March 16, 2016) As the *Washington Post* observed (March 16, 2017),

If you're a poor person in America, President Trump's budget proposal is not for you. Trump has unveiled a budget that would slash or abolish programs that have provided low-income Americans with help on virtually all fronts, including affordable housing, banking, weatherizing homes, job training, paying home heating oil bills, and obtaining legal counsel in civil matters.

The budget also eliminates nineteen small programs particularly disliked by conservatives, whose cost is only \$500 million, among them: the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Legal Services Corporation, AmeriCorps, and the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities. (LaFraniere and Rappeport, *New York Times*, Feb. 17, 2017; Blake, *Washington Post*, March 16, 2017).

Trump's proposed tax plan also works to further enrich the wealthiest. Proposed in April, it would, according to the *New York Times* (Davis and Cohen, Apr. 27, 2017), "amount to a multitrillion-dollar shift from federal coffers to America's richest families and their heirs." The plan would repeal the estate tax, cut corporate taxes from 35 to 15 percent, and end a surtax that funds the Affordable Care Act. Like presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush before him, Trump argues that tax cuts will lead to economic expansion that will recoup lost taxes, so that there will be no increase in the deficit. Voodoo economics all over again, and virtually no one believes this. The budget sits in Congress as we are writing.

Trump Reverses Himself on Nearly Everything

Candidate Trump told his followers that he rejected the American foreign policy of military intervention and regime change, and he specifically promised that he would not become involved in Syria. But when he received news of a chemical weapons attack that killed 72 men, women, children, and infants, Trump ordered a missile attack on the airbase that had supposedly carried out the chemical attack. According to the Pentagon, 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles were fired at Al Shayrat airfield in Syria, though there was no report on damage or casualties. Three other U.S. airstrikes in Syria in April, which had received less media attention, reportedly killed dozens of civilians.

Democrats, while criticizing the process, "either condoned or did not take issue with the military action":

[Charles] Schumer, the Senate minority leader, said on Thursday night that "making sure Assad knows that when he commits such despicable atrocities he will pay a price is the right thing to do," while House Minority Leader [Nancy] Pelosi said the strike appeared "to be a proportional response" to the chemical weapons attack. Senator Elizabeth Warren said the "Syrian regime must be held

accountable,” while Senator Mark Warner said that Assad “could not go unpunished,” and Senator Dick Durbin called it a “measured response.” (Bernstein, *Atlantic*, Apr. 7, 2017)

Democratic Party leaders tacitly supported Trump’s airstrike, though polls showed that 61 percent of Democrats disapproved of America’s latest belligerent act. (Stein, *Vox*, Apr. 14, 2017)

The attack on Syria’s airbase in reprisal for the chemical attack led to a series of dramatic shifts in Trump’s foreign policy positions. Previously Trump had seen Syria as a de facto ally in the struggle against ISIS, but not only did Trump order an airstrike in Syria, but a few days later his Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stated that the Assad era is “coming to an end.” (Harris, *New York Times*, Apr. 11, 2017) Putin, suddenly no friend to Trump, condemned the U.S. airstrike as a violation of international law and denied that Syria had been responsible for the chemical attack, suggesting that the regime’s opponents had carried it out. Russia also rescinded the agreement to coordinate air operations in Syria to avoid potential U.S.-Russian conflict there. Trump, who had previously condemned NATO as obsolete, now hailed it as a bulwark in the defense of Europe and the United States and definitely “not obsolete.” (Baker, *New York Times*, Apr. 13, 2017)

Trump reversed himself on a host of other issues as well. After meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping, he announced, breaking a campaign promise, that he would not label China a currency manipulator. He also declared that the Export-Import Bank, which he had previously characterized as unnecessary, was now “a very good thing.” *New York Times* reporter Alan Rappeport wrote on April 12, “The shifts confounded many of Mr. Trump’s supporters and suggested that the moderate financiers he brought from Wall Street are eclipsing the White House populist wing led by Stephen K. Bannon, the political strategist who is increasingly being sidelined by the president.” Trump the populist had knuckled under to the Wall Street and Washington establishments.

Trump’s aggressive language with regard to Korea, stating that a “major, major conflict” with “socialist” North Korea is possible, represents a continuation of longstanding U.S. hostility to North Korea because of its production of nuclear weapons and development of a long-range missile to deliver them to targets as far away as America. President George W. Bush had famously called North Korea, together with Iraq and Iran, the “axis of evil,” and Obama had warned President-elect Trump that Korea was the number one national security priority. While Trump has adopted a more threatening attitude, accompanied by dispatching naval forces to the region, his policy is not new. Trump’s visit in May to Saudi Arabia and Israel indicated his turn from Obama’s attempt to establish an alliance with Iran to the building of an alliance with the Sunni Arab states and Israel against Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah, that is, a return to an earlier U.S. posture.

The Resistance

Trump’s aggressive right-wing politics have been greeted with resistance at all levels, from federal judges to Democratic Party politicians, and from many sectors by protests in the streets and even some small strikes. The resistance has continued now for four months, with a major event every few weeks. Most impressive was the Women’s March: Millions of women around the world marched on Saturday, January 21, the day after Trump’s inauguration, to repudiate his presidency, his vulgar and misogynistic language and behavior, and his anti-woman policies. In the United States about four million marched in the largest national protest demonstration in the country’s history, reawakening the women’s movement. While Washington, DC, was the main march, there were some 700 sister marches—some involving hundreds of thousands and many, tens of thousands—in dozens of other cities and towns in the United States and many more on every continent.

Less than a month later came the protests against Trump’s Muslim ban. On January 28, thousands from New York City to Seattle went to the nation’s major airports to protest President Donald

Trump's order banning, for 120 days, Muslim immigrants and refugees from seven nations, an order issued that same day. The protests, initiated by immigrant rights groups through social media, took place at John F. Kennedy Airport in New York—where it grew to several thousand—and also at Dulles in Washington, DC; O'Hare in Chicago; and at the Los Angeles and San Francisco airports.

The following month it was "Not My President Day." Thousands of protestors in New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Los Angeles, and some two dozen other cities marched in opposition to President Donald Trump and his policies on Monday, February 20, what is usually called "President's Day." On what was, in the Midwest and the East, a beautiful spring-like day—thanks to climate change—protestors marched to protest Trump's environmental and immigration policies and just about everything else that the new president stands for.

In the following weeks of February, thousands of people showed up at town hall meetings across the United States to challenge Republican congressional representatives and senators on their plans for the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) as well as on issues from immigration to the environment to Trump's relations with Russia. The rowdy demonstrations, mostly organized by Democratic Party networks, virtually disrupted a few Republican legislators' meetings, while in most town halls angry voters rose to demand that the health care plan's fundamental features be preserved, that immigrants' rights be respected, and that the Environmental Protection Agency be funded.

There were also two Day Without Immigrants protests, one on February 16 and the other on May 1, International Labor Day. Tens of thousands of immigrant workers and their allies protested in cities across the country, with small-scale strikes in some areas. And there was a Day Without a Woman. Women in small numbers struck or more often protested against gender discrimination, wage inequality, and racism. Some five thousand meetings were held across the country in February, and by early March tens of thousands of women had pledged their support on line, and on International Women's Day they joined actions large and small.

In mid-April there were the Tax Day protests. Tens of thousands of Americans in some two hundred cities and towns from New York to San Francisco participated in Tax Day marches on April 15 to demand that President Trump release information about his tax payments. Largely organized through Democratic Party groups like Indivisible, the Tax Day demonstrations were peaceful but spirited affairs. And later in April, on Earth Day, came the March for Science in cities across the United States and around the world. There were some four hundred marches in the U.S., with crowds estimated at 20,000 in New York and Los Angeles. Other marches took place in hundreds of other cities around the world from London to Tokyo. The March for Science was largely motivated by Trump's proposed budget that would cut funding for many science programs, such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which is being cut by 31 percent, and the National Institutes of Health, which is being cut by 18.3 percent, or \$5.8 billion.

Finally, on April 29 some 200,000 joined the People's Climate March in Washington, DC, while tens of thousands of others marched in cities across the country to protest Trump's environmental policies, such as weakening the EPA while supporting coal mining and the expansion of oil drilling, all of which contribute to climate change and jeopardize the future of human life on earth. As we go to press, other demonstrations are planned for the summer.

The Future of the Resistance

The resistance has been impressive for its size, for the many sectors of society that have become involved, and for taking up so many crucial issues. We have not experienced anything like this new movement since the 1960s and 70s. Yet there are several serious problems. First, there's the virtual absence of the labor movement. The unions, deeply divided, seem to have no clear plan to mobilize

the working class to fight Trump even though he and the Republicans propose legislation that will promote anti-union right-to-work laws. Second is the fact that the resistance has been largely led by the Democratic Party, which remains a corporate and neoliberal party committed to austerity. The resistance as a movement has failed to create its own political character and identity independent of the Democrats.

Ideally there would be a new left to provide leadership for the movement and perhaps that will happen, though we don't see it yet. In addition to the social movements, there has been a remarkable growth of the left, most spectacularly the Democratic Socialists of America, which in the last two years has grown from a nominal 7,000 members to 22,000. Many other left groups, numbering from a few dozen to a thousand or more, have grown as well. Still the left remains small, divided, often ultra-left and sectarian, and incapable of having much of an impact on the movement at large. If the left can overcome its divisions, it might be able to help create an independent radical identity for the movement, but at the moment that does not seem likely. Without a united left, those of us who are on the left will have to work to build that radical independent position through our work with immigrants, labor unions, women's and LGBT groups, and with the environmentalists.

Since the Republicans are the majority in both houses, Trump's impeachment would depend upon the Republican leadership coming to the conclusion that the president has become a liability to advancing their right-wing agenda. Republicans and Democrats together could rid of us Trump, but this might in fact simply create a more powerful and effective Republican government under Vice President Pence, House Majority Leader Paul Ryan, and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. The battle then is not simply against Trump; it's against the entire Republican Party. Yet, while a Democratic Party victory in the congressional elections of 2018 would block the Republicans and stop some of their more reactionary proposals, the Democrats appear to have no other goal than the restoration of corporate neoliberal policies of their past, together with their own brand of austerity. There is no new Democratic Party agenda for the nation, and the progressives seem to be having little impact on the party. The resistance must continue, but it must involve the labor unions and working-class people. It must become politically independent. And it must become bigger, stronger, more defiant, and more disruptive.

Footnotes