

## Declarations: In Trump's Washington, Nothing Feels Stable

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Washington -- This week in Trump:

We are living through big history and no one here knows where it's going or how this period ends. Everyone, left, right and center, feels the earth is unsteady under their feet. Too much is happening. Democratic senators boycott confirmation hearings, Iran tests ballistic missiles, President Trump has testy phone calls with prime ministers and it's quickly leaked to the press, the president tells Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to "go nuclear" -- meaning use the so-called nuclear option to get the new Supreme Court nominee through. (No president, ever, should use those words in public; the Senate should ban that hideous, he-man, drama queen of a phrase.) Everyone's political views are now emotions and everyone now wears their emotions on their faces. People are speaking more loudly and quickly than usual. At parties, dinners and gatherings the decibel level hits the ceiling right away and stays there. No one can hear anything. It somehow seemed right that a 25-pound bobcat escaped from the National Zoo; a Washington Post columnist speculated it fled to Canada. With his usual sense of occasion, the president asked the National Prayer Breakfast to pray for Arnold Schwarzenegger, whose ratings on "The Celebrity Apprentice" are "right down the tubes."

Mr. Trump has overloaded all circuits. Everything is too charged, with sparks and small shocks all over. "Nothing feels stable," I mused to a longtime Washington media figure at a dinner the night before the Prayer Breakfast. "Nothing is stable," she replied. Earlier, on the Hill, a veteran conservative member of Congress, speaking of the president, got a puzzled look: "There's no calming with him. It's 'Look what I can do now!'"

Battle lines are sharply drawn and no one is especially interested in understanding the other side. The Trump White House is viewed from the outside as heady and triumphalist. Inside they feel up against it, with the Democrats and the press arrayed against them, half their party's leaders wishing they'd go away, and with a highly distinctive, not-fully-known quantity as president.

Last week's executive order on immigration continues to reverberate. There was no Republican in Washington -- not one, on the Hill or within the party structure -- who did not privately call the order a disaster. Its public defenders argue it put force and focus on efforts to make America safer, that it was long-promised, that it's a pause, not a ban, and one of relatively narrow scope. But it could have been done without such expense if it had been done without surprise and with coordination. You have to help your allies in the agencies and on the Hill know,

understand and be able to defend what you're doing. Instead, they were ignored, especially lawmakers. The Congress of the United States is not composed of meek and modest human beings. They were not amused to spend the days after the order taking phone calls from frightened, angry constituents and donors. (A senator, on its suddenness and the anguish at the airports: "They couldn't do a three-day grace period?")

What went wrong has been fully adjudicated in the press. But this should be said: The president and his advisers are confusing boldness with aggression. They mean to make breakthroughs and instead cause breakdowns. The overcharged circuits are leaving them singed, too. People don't respect you when you create chaos. Prudence is not weakness, and carefulness is a virtue, not a vice.

The handling of the order allowed the organized left to show its might, igniting big demonstrations throughout major cities. And not only downtown -- they had to make it out to the airport to give the media the pictures, and they did. In Washington I witnessed a demonstration of many thousands of people carrying individualized, hand-lettered signs.

If all this was spontaneous, the left is strong indeed. If it was a matter of superior organization, that's impressive too.

You should never let your enemy know its own strength. They discovered it in the Women's March, know it more deeply now, and demonstrated it to Democrats on the Hill. It was after the demonstrations that Democratic senators started boycotting the confirmation hearings. They now have their own tea party to push them around.

The handling of the order further legitimized the desire of many congressional Republicans to distance themselves from the president, something they feel they'll eventually have to do anyway because they know how to evaluate political horse flesh, and when they look at him they see Chief Crazy Horse.

The furtiveness and timing of the order opened the administration to charges of smallness and bigotry and obscured a widening of the government's lens on refugees -- the welcome and justified prioritizing of persecuted religious minorities, including the Christians and Yazidis of Syria.

It has seemed to me the administration is engaged in a populist correction that springs in part from the insight that America at this point in its political history -- after the crash of '08 and the long foreign and internal cultural wars, and in the age of terror -- is going to go in either of two directions, a moderate-populist one or a socialist one, and the former is vastly preferable. But the administration must become careful never to allow its populism to be turned into something that looks dark, as if it's not aimed at helping the ignored but at hurting various enemy

groups. Of all political tendencies populism can never allow itself to appear dark, because its roots are in part emotional and because it depends on public esteem. Americans want an America that looks after itself, but they don't admire bigotry or respect prejudice. They're embarrassed by it.

The announcement of Supreme Court nominee Neil Gorsuch seemed to me both horrifying and wonderfully effective. A jubilant, partisan-seeming rally in the august East Room is lowering, undignified, not right. It is also true it was a total hit, with a highly sane speech by the president that had a rather stirring ending: "Judge Gorsuch, the podium, sir, is yours."

Judge Gorsuch: Jimmy Stewart. His spoken thoughts were modest, impressive: "When we judges don our robes, it doesn't make us any smarter, but it does serve as a reminder of what's expected of us: impartiality and independence, collegiality and courage." When Mr. Trump shook his hand in a way that seemed intended to tug Judge Gorsuch toward him, the nominee literally stood his ground, kept his right arm fully extended, and did not come closer.

No one is going to take this guy down.

Judge Gorsuch reads Dickens; he quoted "Bleak House" in a 2009 decision. He writes clearly, a former clerk told me, because his grounding in legal philosophy allows him to proceed with simplicity. You don't have to get fancy when you know what you're doing. He loved Antonin Scalia but unlike Scalia "there is no acid in his pen." He is a respectful persuader. It is reported that upon being nominated his first phone call was to Merrick Garland. If that is true the Court is about to get classier.

Democrats leveled the usual precooked, reheatable criticisms -- he is for corporations and against women -- and looked dopey and unusually insincere. They're going to lose on this one and on some level probably know they should.