

POLITICS

Trump's First Week: Misfires, Crossed Wires, and a Satisfied Smile

By CHARLIE SAVAGE, PETER BAKER and MAGGIE HABERMAN JAN. 27, 2017

WASHINGTON — If other new occupants of the White House wanted to be judged by their first 100 days in office, President Trump seems intent to be judged by his first 100 hours. No president in modern times, if ever, has started with such a flurry of initiatives on so many fronts in such short order.

The action-oriented approach reflected a businessman's idea of how government should work: Issue orders and get it done. But while the rapid-fire succession of directives on health care, trade, abortion, the environment, immigration, national security, housing and other areas cheered Americans who want Mr. Trump to shake up Washington, it also revealed a sometimes unruly process that may or may not achieve the goals he has outlined.

On the campaign trail, Mr. Trump boasted he had no government experience and, in his first week in the White House, it sometimes showed. Orders were signed without feedback from the agencies they would affect. Policy ideas were floated and then retracted within hours. Meetings and public events were

scheduled and then canceled. Advisers to the president made decisions without telling one another. The president called for an investigation looking at voters registered in more than one state, unaware that it would include his chief strategist, press secretary, treasury secretary, daughter and son-in-law.

And Congress often appeared to be an afterthought.

Whatever the stumbles, Mr. Trump expressed satisfaction with the debut of his presidency and the White House released a list of accomplishments under the headline, "President Trump's First Week of Action." The bottom-line message to the American public was that politics as usual was over, and the new president was energetically remaking the country for the better.

"Big, big progress," he said in an interview earlier in the week. "We have tremendous support, but I'm not doing it for the support."

Thomas Barrack Jr., a longtime friend of Mr. Trump who led his inaugural committee, said the president's accomplishments have been "meteoric." "He has done exactly what he has said he would do," Mr. Barrack said. "He has delivered results at a faster pace than any president in history."

He added that Mr. Trump has little help as his team still gets assembled. "He has simultaneously assumed responsibility for a monstrous governmental regime with only a small group of outsiders from his transition team to guide him," Mr. Barrack said.

Even so, some of his aides were concerned, dissecting and analyzing how some of the roughest moments took place and trying to establish who knew what. One aide, who, like others, insisted on anonymity to discuss internal deliberations, said that by week's end, there was an acknowledgment of a "mutually assured destruction" unless they began to be more candid with each other.

In hopes of sharpening the process, Stephen K. Bannon, the president's chief strategist, and Jared Kushner, his senior adviser and son-in-law, are forming what is being loosely called the Strategic Initiatives Group, a mini-think tank within the White House comprising analysts who can grapple with large-scale issues like cybersecurity.

Such a group would have as many as a dozen strategists, and could help to centralize policy-making on some topics by Mr. Bannon and Mr. Kushner. Reince Priebus, the chief of staff, who knows Washington well and who works in conjunction with the two, is likely to run more of the day-to-day operations of the West Wing, according to one person involved in the planning.

Nearly every new president has a learning curve and it can take time to establish a process that carefully vets proposals, considers counterarguments and limits unintended consequences. But the curve seems especially steep for Mr. Trump, who like his closest aides — Mr. Bannon, Mr. Priebus, Mr. Kushner and Kellyanne Conway — has never served in government at a high level.

A Rushed Beginning

To get off to a powerful start, Mr. Trump chose speed over process. A case in point came last Tuesday, when a flurry of emails was received by National Security Council staff members, at least five between 8:35 and 8:45 a.m., according to administration officials.

Each email carried a different draft directive for Mr. Trump to sign, dealing with consequential changes like stiffening the treatment of terrorism detainees, abrogating multinational treaties, curbing financing for international organizations, barring visitors from certain Muslim-majority countries, and building a wall along the border with Mexico.

None of the agencies with expertise in such areas had reviewed the orders, and the N.S.C. staff was told to read them and provide feedback by 10 a.m. that morning — barely an hour later.

The professional N.S.C. staff members strongly urged the White House to wait for comment, and some forwarded the drafts to outside departments without being directed to do so. That sort of short-circuiting of the normal interagency process creates incentives for leaks by officials who feel shut out, as happened this week with a draft order contemplating reviving secret overseas “black site” prisons.

The administration's early moves in domestic policy have followed a similar course. Hours after taking office, Mr. Trump signed an order directing the

government to look for ways to roll back former President Barack Obama's health care law without consulting the Department of Health and Human Services.

Similarly, he signed an order reviving the Keystone XL pipeline project, as Politico reported, without feedback from the State Department office charged with reviewing cross-border pipelines.

Policy making has been ad hoc. In the interview, Mr. Trump recalled that during a meeting with union leaders the day before the Keystone decision, he learned that not all of the steel that would be used to build the pipeline would be made in America.

"I said, 'Wait a minute, they ship it in China?'" he recalled. As a result, the next day he signed a directive ordering the Commerce Department to come up with a plan to ensure that pipelines are built with American steel.

Competing for attention with Mr. Trump's substantive policy moves was a chaotic array of sideshows like fights over the size of his inaugural crowd and his false claim that illegal voters cost him the popular vote. His press secretary, Sean Spicer, suggested to reporters on Thursday that the border wall would be paid for by a 20 percent tax on imports, then told reporters hours later that it was just an idea, not the plan.

Similarly, Mr. Trump scheduled a meeting with President Enrique Peña Nieto of Mexico, then signed his order starting the border wall on the same day Mexican officials were in Washington arranging the get-together, only to have Mr. Peña Nieto cancel the meeting. Mr. Trump tried damage control on Friday with a phone call with the Mexican leader, which Mr. Kushner helped arrange.

An Incomplete Roster

Mr. Trump has historically run his business, and his campaign, with a high level of intentional chaos. But the White House is trying to change course in so many areas while still struggling to fill out its team. According to former and current law enforcement officials, the Federal Bureau of Investigation had only vetted about 30 people for White House positions, other staff jobs and nominees that need to be confirmed by the United States Senate, a fraction of the 1,000 it eventually vetted for Mr. Obama's first-term team.

The officials said they were still waiting for more names. Even those who have been named have not all progressed through the Senate process. A confirmation hearing for Mr. Trump's nominee for labor secretary, Andrew F. Puzder, has been postponed three times because he has not submitted his paperwork.

Within the White House, overlapping power centers that have viewed each other with suspicion are working to move past discord from the transition, according to officials. Communication is compartmented among different factions. Mr. Priebus weeks ago began his own outreach to business leaders even as Mr. Kushner was already personally emailing some of them.

Mr. Kushner has emerged as the most important figure in Mr. Trump's White House besides the president. He has told several people that all things on nearly every topic "run through me," according to two people with direct knowledge. He had previously sought to limit Ms. Conway's influence, according to insiders, although she consistently has Mr. Trump's ear.

The internal sway of Mr. Bannon, a former chairman of the conservative news and opinion website Breitbart, has grown with the advance of Mr. Trump's agenda this week, much of which he helped shape. Mr. Priebus is still struggling to master the building. He has not always been kept abreast of what is taking place, and Mr. Spicer's troubles have been seen as potential strikes against Mr. Priebus, who brought him in from the Republican National Committee.

The Sway of Ideology

It is not clear who is generating all of the draft orders floating around Washington or to what extent that they are being shaped by lawyers in the office of the new White House counsel, Donald F. McGahn II. But there were signs of ideological zeal.

One draft order, for instance, would create a committee of cabinet secretaries to review all of the numerous multinational treaties to which the United States is a party, and recommend whether Mr. Trump should abrogate any. An explanatory preamble argues that such treaties are "used to force countries to adhere to often radical agendas."

As justification, it pointed to two United Nations treaties about children's rights and ending discrimination against women, stating they have been interpreted as prohibiting spanking and Mother's Day — echoing concerns raised by cultural conservatives.

John B. Bellinger III, the legal adviser at the State Department under President George W. Bush, said the "premise of this whole executive order seems to be misplaced." For one thing, he said, the N.S.C. "principals committee" already exists to convene cabinet secretaries. For another, the spanking and Mother's Day arguments were "silly" interpretations and not binding. Plus the United States has not ratified those two treaties anyway.

"If these had been signed in their current form," he said of the draft orders, "they would have made the White House appear ill-informed. But hopefully they would have been subject to more careful interagency review."

Tom Malinowski, the former top human rights diplomat under Mr. Obama, said the draft order, which was eventually delayed, read like the "embarrassing" product of "a very enthusiastic undergraduate who writes a paper without having done the reading."

Several former officials said they took heart from the recent hiring of John Eisenberg, a former partner at the Kirkland and Ellis law firm, as legal adviser to the N.S.C. Mr. Eisenberg worked at the Justice Department during Mr. Bush's second term, and helped put the president's surveillance programs on a stronger legal footing.

"He will look at stuff and he won't be rushed or be bullied," said Matt Olsen, who worked with Mr. Eisenberg at the Justice Department. "I think that is a good indication that he will bring some discipline to a flurry of poorly conceived ideas."

Complaints about process from Washington veterans, of course, may not be high on the worry list for a president who came to town castigating its denizens and practices. Mr. Trump has relished his role as a disrupter and, for now at least, feels a certain momentum.

In television appearances on Friday, Ms. Conway said that Mr. Trump arrived in Washington as a non-politician and so it was easy for him to deliver on his campaign promises.

“High-energy, high-impact POTUS,” she wrote on Twitter later on Friday, using the acronym for president of the United States. “Washington still adjusting.”

So is the president.

Max Fisher contributed reporting.

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