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Clock ticks toward shutdown

Democrats face make-or-break moment on stoppage, Dreamers

BY HEATHER CAYGLE, RACHAEL BADE AND SEUNG MIN KIM

Congressional Democrats face a critical decision this week as negotiations to shield 700,000 young undocumented immigrants from deportation stall: Are they willing to shut down the government to protect Dreamers?

Government funding runs out on Friday. And with talks about a bipartisan budget and immigration deal on the rocks, Speaker Paul

Ryan (R-Wis.) and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) are preparing a fourth short-term spending measure to buy more time to negotiate.

But as the March 5 end date for the Obama-era Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program looms, Democrats are under increased pressure to hold the line for a solution on immigration. Outside groups have urged Democrats

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EVAN VUCCI/AP

President Donald Trump's recent tweets have tried to cast blame for any shutdown on Democrats.

Closure would backfire on the party in power, Republicans say

BY KYLE CHENEY AND ELANA SCHOR

President Donald Trump has already started framing a potential government shutdown as the singular fault of Democrats demanding liberal immigration policies at the expense of border security.

But Republicans and Democrats on Capitol Hill, as well as veterans of past budget battles and campaigns, say that argument isn't likely to fly — not while the GOP

runs the House, Senate and White House and a deeply unpopular president sits in the Oval Office.

"The perception of most Republicans is that a shutdown does not accrue to Republican benefit. It's a relatively tough sale," Rep. Mark Sanford (R-S.C.) said in an interview. "It makes it that much harder for Democrats to acquiesce on a deal because they feel like they have the upper hand."

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J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE/AP

It is unclear how concerned Robert Mueller may be about his probe's political impact. But politics is a recurring theme of special counsel probes, as many stretch well beyond any two-year campaign cycle.

Republicans fear midterm pain from Mueller probe

BY DARREN SAMUELSON

Robert Mueller's Russia probe isn't ending anytime soon, and that's bad news for President Donald Trump and congressional Republicans already bracing for a possible 2018 Democratic midterm wave.

While many Republicans insist the Trump-Russia saga is overblown, they worry headlines about federal indictments, high-profile trials — and a potential blockbuster meeting between Mueller and Trump himself — could obscure their positive mes-

sage ahead of November elections that could threaten their House and Senate majorities.

In an ominous development for Republicans, a federal judge overseeing the upcoming trial of former Trump campaign man-

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Potential Trump challengers get a free pass in 2018

GOP has failed to recruit strong candidates against a slate of Dem reelection opponents

BY GABRIEL DEBENEDETTI

NEW YORK — Gov. Andrew Cuomo got the good news just after New Year's Day: Two of his most formidable potential Republican challengers for reelection this year were taking a pass. Days later, it was Democratic Sen. Sherrod Brown's turn, when the Republican front-runner to take him on dropped out of the race.

Cuomo and Brown are not alone among Democrats who might challenge President Donald Trump in 2020: At least eight of them, all high-profile politicians, appear poised to avoid facing Republicans' top-choice challenger this year.

And in many cases, that's allowing the potential White House hopefuls to envision a 2018 spent honing their image as leaders of the anti-Trump resistance as they stockpile campaign cash — rather than having to focus on a serious GOP attempt to beat them, or just sullify their image.

"No one wants to be a sacrificial lamb, but [Republicans] don't even appear to be trying in some of these

states," Shripal Shah, a Democratic Senate campaign veteran who is now a vice president at the Democratic super PAC American Bridge, said of the lack of viable GOP candidates. "It's not a missed opportunity. It's malpractice."

The GOP recruitment shortfall isn't limited to races in liberal states where ambitious Democrats are considering national runs. Republican leaders have failed to secure their top-choice candidate in eight of the 10 Senate races in states that Trump won in 2016, and Florida Gov. Rick Scott has yet to commit to his expected run for Sen. Bill Nelson's seat.

Most or all of the potential presidential hopefuls probably would have won regardless. But it's customary for a president's party to try and tarnish the image and deplete the war chests of potential threats to their leader's reelection.

"In some cases, it's not avoidable: Some of these states seldom have been friendly places to Republicans, and certainly not in a

CHALLENGERS on page 15

Seniors Need the Senate to Finish the Job. Repeal the IPAB!



The House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed H.R. 849, the Protecting Seniors Access to Medicare Act, with 307 votes, including 231 Republicans and 76 Democrats. And, a bipartisan majority of Senators, including 14 Democrats, are sponsoring IPAB repeal. Without Senate action, Medicare funding is at risk.

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Trump on immigrants: 'I want them to come in from everywhere'

President Donald Trump said Tuesday he wants immigrants coming in "from everywhere," in response to questions about his alleged remarks challenging U.S. admittance of people from "shithole countries."

"I want them to come in from everywhere," Trump told reporters during a White House meeting with Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev.

The remark came as reporters shouted questions about his reported statement last week that he'd prefer the United States welcome people from countries like Norway over nations like Haiti and El Salvador and African countries.

Trump has denied using any derogatory language to describe Haitians and said one Democratic lawmaker "totally misrepresented" his remarks when he said Trump used "vile" and "hate-filled" language, including repeatedly referring to the foreign nations as "shitholes," during a bipartisan meeting with lawmakers on immigration Thursday. Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) said Tuesday he stands by "every word" of his statement on the matter.

Two Republican lawmakers in attendance disputed Durbin's account after initially saying they could not recall whether Trump had made the derogatory remark.

White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders declined to deny the reports on Tuesday, adding that the "president hasn't said he didn't use strong language. This is an important issue. He's passionate about it," she told reporters.

Trump's Tuesday remarks stand in contrast to his own rhetoric and policy on immigration, with his administration aggressively seeking to curb the influx of immigrants from Latin America and from Muslim-majority countries.

Since entering office, the Trump administration has pursued several iterations of a travel ban that would restrict immigration from several Muslim-majority countries, an initiative that has been repeatedly shot down by federal courts.

Earlier Tuesday, Trump called for additional security along the "very dangerous" U.S.-Mexico border, writing that "we must have a great WALL to help protect us, and to help stop the massive inflow of drugs pouring into our country!" During the 2016 presidential campaign Trump lamented that "we have some bad hombres" cross the border into the U.S. from Mexico.

—Cristiano Lima

Trump: 'Senator Dicky Durbin' lying about DACA meeting

President Donald Trump on Monday tweeted that Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) mischaracterized what was said at Thursday's meeting on immigration, at which the president was accused of calling African nations and Haiti "shithole countries."

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DAMON HIGGINS/PALM BEACH POST VIA AP

Haitian group in Florida seeks apology

Haitian community members hold an image depicting (from left) Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini and President Donald Trump during a protest Monday near Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate. The group said it was there to demand an apology from Trump, who last week made disparaging comments about Haiti and African nations.

"Senator Dicky Durbin totally misrepresented what was said at the DACA meeting. Deals can't be made when there is no trust! Durbin blew DACA and is hurting our military," the president posted online.

The president has made a habit of using derogatory nicknames for his political enemies. He referred frequently to "Crooked Hillary Clinton," "Lyn' Ted Cruz" "Little Marco Rubio" and "Crazy Bernie Sanders" during the 2016 campaign. "Sneaky Dianne Feinstein," "Liddle Bob Corker" and "Wacky Congresswoman Wilson" are among other monikers he has used.

On Friday, Durbin spoke out against Trump to confirm reports of the president's wording in Thursday's meeting. Durbin told the media that the president used "hate-filled, vile and racist" language while speaking about immigrants from Haiti, El Salvador and African countries.

Trump has vehemently denied the "shithole" comment, and he told reporters in Florida on Sunday that he is the "least racist person you have ever interviewed." While some Republican lawmakers — including Sens. David Perdue of Georgia and Tom Cotton of Arkansas, who were present at the meeting — have taken issue with the accusation, the White House itself has not denied the comment.

Durbin was one of six lawmakers who proposed a bipartisan immigration agreement that offered a path to citizenship for so-called Dreamers while giving additional funding to the president's border wall. Trump rejected the deal and has blamed Democrats for the lack of progress on a solution for

the expiring Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program.

—Emily Goldberg

Trump spends Martin Luther King Jr. Day at golf course

President Donald Trump returned to his Florida golf course on Monday, appearing to disregard his own advice that people spend Martin Luther King Jr. Day performing acts of service for others.

Trump arrived at his golf course shortly after 9 a.m., and the White House did not respond to a request for comment about his activity. His public schedule was empty.

When signing a proclamation to honor King on Friday, Trump called on all Americans to honor the late civil rights leader's birthday "with acts of civic work and community service."

King's nephew, Isaac Newton Farris Jr., hit the same theme at the White House event.

"It's not a day to hang out in the park or pull out the barbecue grill," he said. "It's a day to do something to help someone else, and that can be as simple as delivering someone's trash or picking up the newspaper for that elderly person who can't get to the end of the driveway."

Vice President Mike Pence visited King's Washington, D.C., monument on Sunday to lay a wreath.

Past presidents have engaged in service activities to honor the holiday. Barack Obama, for example, was joined by his wife and aides at the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Washington during the 2015 holiday. George W. Bush visited the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library to mark the day in 2008.

Trump has spent recent days denying that he privately

complained that the U.S. admitted too many people from "shithole" countries like Haiti and El Salvador and African countries and not enough from places like Norway.

—Matthew Nussbaum

Romney rebukes Trump over 'shithole' comment

Mitt Romney on Monday took Donald Trump to task for the president's "shithole" comment, writing on Twitter on Martin Luther King Jr. Day that an immigrant's "nation of origin is as irrelevant as their race."

"The poverty of an aspiring immigrant's nation of origin is as irrelevant as their race. The sentiment attributed to POTUS is inconsistent w/ America's history and antithetical to American values," wrote the 2012 Republican presidential nominee, who is reported to be weighing a run for Utah's Senate seat. "May our memory of Dr. King buoy our hope for unity, greatness, & 'charity for all.'"

Trump has come under fire for reportedly questioning why the United States allows people from "shithole" countries to enter — a comment widely construed as having racist overtones. The president denied making the remark and on Sunday night told reporters that he is "not a racist."

Romney has been a frequent critic of the president, stretching back to the 2016 campaign, though he also was considered as a potential secretary of state for Trump. Recently, Romney criticized Trump's pick in an Alabama Senate race — accused molester Roy Moore — and he strongly criticized the president over his comments after the violent protests in Charlottesville, Virginia.

—POLITICO staff

Flake compares Trump's treatment of press to Stalin's

Sen. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) said Sunday that President Donald Trump's declaration that media are "the enemy of the people" is a throwback to Josef Stalin that should have no place in political discourse.

"I'm saying he borrowed that phrase," Flake told MSNBC's Kasie Hunt of Trump's choice of words. "It was popularized by Josef Stalin, used by Mao as well — enemy of the people. It should be noted that Nikita Khrushchev, who followed Stalin, forbade its use, saying that was too loaded and that it maligned a whole group or class of people, and it shouldn't be done."

"I don't think that we should be using a phrase that's been rejected as too loaded by a Soviet dictator."

One of the Republican Party's most vociferous critics of Trump, Flake decided not to run for reelection after his popularity dove in Arizona, in part due to his criticism of the president, which he expanded on in his book "Conscience of a Conservative: A Rejection of Destructive Politics and a Return to Principle." Taking to the Senate floor last October to announce his decision to retire, Flake warned his colleagues to never adjust their tone to what is set at the top and to "never ever accept the deadly sundering of our country."

On Wednesday, Flake will return to the Senate floor to excoriate Trump and the White House for their treatment of the press, ahead of Trump's planned "fake news" awards. The goal of the speech, Flake said, is to nudge the president back to the correct form of behavior when it comes to dealing with the press.

"We can't just retreat into camps like we're doing," Flake told Hunt on "Kasie DC." "People need to stand up and say this is not right. This is not normal."

According to excerpts, Flake will say on Wednesday that 2017 was "a year which saw the truth — objective, empirical, evidence-based truth — more battered and abused than any other in the history of our country, at the hands of the most powerful figure in our government."

He will add that an "unrelenting daily assault on the constitutionally protected free press was launched by that same White House, an assault that is as unprecedented as it is unwarranted."

Addressing Trump's favored "fake news" insult, Flake will caution that "when a figure in power reflexively calls any press that doesn't suit him 'fake news,' it is that person who should be the figure of suspicion, not the press."

"Those of us who travel overseas, especially to war zones and other troubled areas around the globe, encounter members of U.S.-based media who risk their lives, and sometimes lose their lives, reporting on the truth," Flake will say. "To dismiss their work as fake news is an affront to commitment and their sacrifice."

—Brent D. Griffiths

W.H. doctor gives president 'excellent' bill of health

Trump did well on cognitive testing, too

BY CRISTIANO LIMA

A White House physician declared on Tuesday that President Donald Trump is in "excellent" overall health and that he performed "well" on a cognitive screening exam, while noting the commander in chief could benefit from a low-fat diet and additional exercise.

"All clinical data indicates that the president is currently very healthy and that he will remain so for the duration of his presidency," Dr. Ronny Jackson said at the daily White House news briefing during a nearly hourlong question-and-answer period with reporters.

Jackson added that during the physical on Friday at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, he performed some cognitive testing at the president's behest and that Trump "did well on it." He noted the exam was limited to a screening for cognitive impairment and was not part of a larger psychological examination.

Trump, according to Jackson, is 6-foot-3, 239 pounds. The doctor said that he and Trump discussed losing weight and exercising, which he recommended, and that the president expressed "he would like to lose 10 to 15 pounds."

Currently, Jackson added, Trump "doesn't have a dedicated, defined exercise program."

Jackson recommended that the president begin a diet lower in fats and carbohydrates. The doctor also noted the president's history of "elevated cholesterol" in recommending that he mix up his dietary habits.



MANUEL BALCE CENETA/AP

According to White House physician Ronny Jackson, President Donald Trump is 6-foot-3, 239 pounds. The doctor said Trump discussed exercising more and the president expressed "he would like to lose 10 to 15 pounds."

While Jackson praised Trump's overall health, he acknowledged that the president's body mass index puts him just shy of an obesity classification.

"The president's acknowledged

that he would be healthier if he lost a few pounds, and that's what we're going to try to do," Jackson said. He noted Trump was more "enthusiastic" about the prospects of losing weight through dieting than

exercising.

Jackson added that Trump, who is known to enjoy drinking soda daily and to occasionally consume fast foods and sweets, could attribute much of his health

to "genetics."

"He has incredibly good genes, and it's just the way God made him," Jackson said.

According to an examination TV personality Dr. Oz gave Trump in September 2016, Trump weighed 236 pounds at the time. Despite similarly indicating he would like to lose 10 to 15 pounds then, the president has since gained three.

The president's medication regimen, Jackson said, includes 81 milligrams daily of aspirin for cardiac health, 10 milligrams daily of Crestor for cholesterol, and 1 milligram daily of Propecia for hair-loss prevention, as well as daily multivitamins and Soolantra Cream as needed for rosacea.

White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders, Jackson said, urged him to answer all questions regarding the president's health during the lengthy, wide-ranging briefing.

Jackson said last week that Trump was in "excellent health" shortly after conducting his annual physical at Walter Reed on Friday.

Trump has faced growing questions about his mental health, prompting dozens of psychologists, psychiatrists and mental health professionals to send a letter to the president's physician on Thursday urging him to evaluate Trump's neurological health.

The White House has dismissed the speculation, with Trump calling himself "very smart" and a "stable genius" on Twitter earlier this month.

The White House said tests of mental fitness were not a part of Friday's physical.

Trump said prior to the exam that he'd be "surprised" if it didn't go well.

DOJ seeking SCOTUS review of DACA ruling

BY JOSH GERSTEIN

The Justice Department on Tuesday announced plans to seek direct Supreme Court review of a judge's ruling that blocked President Donald Trump from shuttering a program that gave work permits and other protections to some people who entered the U.S. illegally as children.

The administration is also appealing the ruling to the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, but the unusual tactic of petitioning directly to the Supreme Court would make an end run around the lower court, which Trump and his aides have repeatedly criticized for what they view as liberal rulings.

San Francisco-based U.S. District Court Judge William Alsup's ruling last week required the administration to resume accepting renewal applications for the Obama-era Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, known as DACA.

"It defies both law and common sense for DACA ... to somehow be mandated nationwide by a single district court in San Francisco," Attorney General Jeff Sessions said in a statement. "We are now taking the rare step of requesting direct review on the merits of this injunction by the Supreme Court so that this issue may be resolved

quickly and fairly for all the parties involved."

Still, while Justice Department attorneys could have asked the courts to stay Alsup's ruling, they did not seek any immediate relief on Tuesday. Letting the injunction remain in place and delaying any immediate action in the legal battle could give the White House more time to hash out a deal with Democrats and Republicans in Congress to provide long-term relief for the young undocumented immigrants known as Dreamers.

Trump decided last year to end the program and call for a legislative fix instead. But while a bipartisan group of lawmakers reached a deal to extend DACA protections, the White House has not signed off, and Trump's rhetoric about immigration has made the talks more difficult. Alsup's ruling does not require officials to accept new applications, but the administration must allow the renewal of expiring applications for DACA protections.

A Justice Department spokesman had no immediate comment on why the administration did not seek emergency relief from Alsup's order.

Even if the Supreme Court agrees to take up the case without an appeals court ruling, it could be months before the justices resolve

the legal fight. If they follow their typical timeline for cases, the matter would not even be scheduled for argument until the fall.

A lawyer involved in one of the DACA lawsuits called the Justice Department decision to appeal the ruling "disappointing."

"It's all a negotiating gambit," said Mark Rosenbaum of Public Counsel. "The administration is using these young people as bargaining chips." Alsup's ruling said Sessions acted based on "a flawed legal premise" when he declared that DACA needed to be shut down because it was likely unconstitutional and faced the threat of a lawsuit from several conservative states. The judge also said there were indications that the decision to wind down the program might not have been driven by legal concerns but by an effort to obtain leverage in broader negotiations with Congress on immigration issues.

In a related decision Friday, Alsup said there was a "plausible inference" that Trump decided to end the program because of racial animus against Mexicans and Latinos. He said those challenging the end to DACA could argue that racial comments Trump made during the 2016 campaign raised doubts about his stated reasons for stopping the program.

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These 34 Republicans say they stand with Dreamers. It's time for action!



These Republicans signed a letter telling Speaker of the House Paul Ryan that they support a permanent legislative solution for recipients of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. Taking a stand is good, but more is needed. By Jan. 19, these 34 Republicans need to get Ryan and his leadership to hold a vote on a bill that provides permanent protection for Dreamers. It's Republicans who control Congress and the fate of 800,000 Dreamers. If they join Democrats, who support the Dreamers as well, Dreamers can be protected from deportation.

These 34 Republicans + Democrats = A Majority in Congress to Protect Dreamers from Deportation

The time for action is now. More than 16,000 Dreamers have already lost protection from DACA and are vulnerable to deportation. These young people have been in the United States since childhood; many are still children themselves. They are college students, nurses, teachers and business owners. They have done everything we've asked, and it's time for Congress to pass a permanent solution so they can continue to live their lives and contribute to our nation.

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Nielsen testifies: 'I did not hear' Trump say 'shithole'

Dems grill secretary on POTUS' remarks

BY SEUNG MIN KIM

Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen testified Tuesday that she did not hear President Donald Trump refer to African nations as "shithole" countries — remarks he reportedly made last week that triggered an international uproar and roiled ongoing immigration talks on Capitol Hill.

The profane comments, confirmed by Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) and multiple sources, were not disputed by White House officials immediately after they were reported by The Washington Post and other news outlets. But in the days since, Trump has denied using that phrase, though he has stressed that he did use "tough" language.

"I did not hear that word used, no sir," Nielsen said at a hearing under questioning from Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.). Asked whether Trump used a similar word, the DHS chief responded: "The conversation was very impassioned. I don't dispute that the president was using tough language. Others in the room were also using tough language."

Trump's remarks, during a meeting with Durbin and other lawmakers at the White House, came when Trump was expressing his desire to shift the nation's immigration system into one based on merit, Nielsen said.

"He'd like to move away from a country-based quota system to a merit-based system," Nielsen said, explaining Trump's intent. "It shouldn't matter where you're from, it should matter what you can contribute to the United States."

The profane comments have consumed Washington the past few days, as lawmakers and the White House struggle to devise an agreement to help "Dreamers" who will lose legal protections after Trump rescinded an Obama-era executive action.

A court order has forced the administration to temporarily begin accepting renewal applications for the program, called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. The Justice Department said Monday that it will the appeal the decision to the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, and will also ask for immediate review from the Supreme Court.

The remarks also dominated Nielsen's appearance before the Senate Judiciary Committee, which was scheduled before the comments were reported late last week and was meant to serve as a routine oversight hearing. One Democrat after another pressed Nielsen on Trump's reported comments, and she repeatedly dodged, saying she didn't recall whether "shithole" specifically — or other variations, such as "shithouse" — was used.

"I actually was struck more by the fact that the conversation, although passionate and appropriately so, had gotten to a place where many people in the room were using inappropriate language in the Oval Office, in front of the president," Nielsen said. "That's what struck me."

Durbin, one of two members of the committee who attended the White House confab, delved into

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JOHN SHINKLE/POLITICO

"The conversation was very impassioned. I don't dispute that the president was using tough language. Others in the room were also using tough language," Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen told the Senate Judiciary Committee on Tuesday.

the deepest specifics of the meeting. The Illinois Democrat disclosed that Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) pushed back at Trump after the president allegedly used the "shithole" remarks, telling the president that his ancestors did not emigrate to the United States with significant merit or wealth.

"His strong words repeated exactly the words used by the president, which you cannot remember," Durbin told Nielsen.

sonalities at play last week: "The Tuesday Trump and the Thursday Trump."

During the hearing, Graham said Durbin and Trump spoke privately around 10 a.m. and that after the phone call with Trump, Durbin told him, "I had the best conversation with the president. We need to follow up on it." Graham said he would call the White House and set up a midday meeting to present the bipartisan immigration plan devised

12?" Graham wondered aloud. "I am going to find out and I am not going to ask you, because between 10 and 12 we went from having conversations between Sen. Durbin — which I believe every word — and the president that was very hopeful and by the time we got there something had happened."

Graham said that on Tuesday, "we had a president that I was proud to golf with, call my friend, who understood immigration had to be bipartisan."

"I don't know where that guy went," Graham said. "I want him back."

The senator went into more detail with reporters outside the hearing, specifically pointing the finger at White House aides.

"Somehow by 12 o'clock on Thursday, something happened and I don't think he was well served by his staff," Graham told reporters. "But he's responsible for the way he conducts himself, so am I, can't blame that on his staff."

The alleged profanity wasn't the only Trump comment that Nielsen was forced to repeatedly explain during the hearing.

Earlier, Leahy also pressed Nielsen on Trump's reported remark that he would like more immigrants from Norway, rather than from Africa and Haiti. Nielsen responded: "I don't believe he said that specifically."

"What he was referencing is from the merit-based perspective, we'd like to have those who have skills, who can assimilate and contribute to the United States," she said.

When Leahy asked Nielsen whether Norway is a predominantly white country, the secretary deflected: "I actually do not know that, sir, but I imagine that is the case."

Later in the exchange with Durbin, Nielsen elaborated on the Norway comments when Durbin asserted that Trump said he wanted more European immigrants in the United States. Nielsen said Trump was asking more about the concept of removing the diversity lottery and reallocating the visas doled out in the program.

"I do remember him asking if we do that, and we then assign those to countries that are unrepresented, aren't we just continuing nonmerit-based immigration?" Nielsen said. "From that perspective, I think he did ask, would that cover European countries or by its nature would that mean we are further establishing immigration to purposely exclude Europeans?"

At some points during the hearing, Democrats clearly lost patience with Nielsen's responses. "Your silence and amnesia is complicit," New Jersey Sen. Cory Booker, who recently joined the Judiciary Committee, told the Homeland chief.

"We had a president that I was proud to golf with, call my friend, who understood immigration had to be bipartisan. I don't know where that guy went. I want him back."

— Sen. Lindsey Graham

Nielsen acknowledged: "I did hear tough language from Sen. Graham. He used tough language."

Graham himself shed more light on last Thursday's meeting, which came two days after a televised strategy session the president held with lawmakers at the White House that was praised as productive by both Democrats and Republicans. The South Carolina Republican suggested there were dueling per-

by six senators after months of closed-door negotiations.

However, once Graham and Durbin arrived, they found several other lawmakers at the White House, including Rep. Bob Goodlatte (R-Va.) and Sens. Tom Cotton of Arkansas and David Perdue of Georgia — conservatives who have endorsed more hard-line policies on immigration.

"What happened between 10 and



The Democrat Trumpworld fears most

MATT CARDY/GETTY IMAGES

President Donald Trump has handicapped the 2020 Democratic presidential field and thinks he could beat virtually anyone now on the radar. But a former Trump White House aide pointed to former Vice President Joe Biden and media mogul Oprah Winfrey as two potential candidates who pose a serious threat to Trump. "Oprah would be a problem," said a top GOP strategist.

POTUS says Bernie's too old, and Warren and Gilibrand too liberal, but Biden spooks GOP

BY ANNIE KARNI

In early December, as President Donald Trump's approval rating reached a new low of 32 percent, the commander in chief was rating the 2020 Democratic field from behind the Resolute Desk in the Oval Office.

Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders — who had recently bested Trump in a poll that tested the two septuagenarians in a head-to-head matchup — wasn't a serious threat and would be easy to beat, Trump told a Republican with close ties to the White House who was in the room.

It wasn't the lefty politics of the self-described socialist that Trump thought were a losing proposition. Instead, according to the person in the room, Trump was hung up on Sanders' age, arguing that Sanders, now 76, wouldn't have the energy to run another national campaign.

Sanders wasn't the only potential presidential candidate who Trump, 71, brushed off as a nonthreat. Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren, the woman he has nicknamed "Pocahontas," would be "easy to beat," he said. New Jersey Sen. Cory Booker probably wouldn't end up running, Trump mused. When someone in the room brought up California Sen. Kamala Harris, the president seemed not to have her on his radar yet.

Handicapping potential 2020 challengers — however premature the exercise is — has become a favorite pastime for the competitive president, who still regularly rehearses his shock win in the 2016 race.

"He's always asking people, 'Who do you think is going to run against me?'" said the Republican who heard the president's assessment in December.

Despite a bumpy first year and historically low approval ratings, this Trump ally said: "I don't think he sees anyone, right now, being a serious competitor."

But the people close to Trump are alert to potential challenges — though no consensus view seems to have emerged about whom Trump needs to be most concerned. More than a half-dozen interviews with former White House officials, people affiliated with outside Trump-supporting groups and staffers at the Republican National Committee revealed divergent theories of who would pose the greatest challenge to Trump, and who is seen as a cakewalk candidate.

New York Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, who has feuded with Trump on Twitter after calling for his resignation because of sexual harassment and assault allegations, doesn't make these people nervous. Former Vice President Joe Biden, however, is seen as someone who could cut into Trump's base.

One former White House official outlined a theory of the case that has gained some traction: Trump's policies will continue to be popular all the way through his reelection campaign, but his approval rating will never crack 45 percent — creating an opening for Biden, or someone like him, to recapture the loyalty of white Rust Belt Democrats who helped elect Trump in 2016.

"What we can't let voters do is think they can get the same policies with someone they like better, like Joe Biden — someone who would fight for them but who doesn't have the cross edge," said the former White House staffer. "I hope CNN has Kirsten Gillibrand on every minute of every day. Love it. Bring

it. She's easy to destroy. If you're the president, or the RNC, you're more worried about someone who looks like Biden — someone who has more mainstream appeal, who blue-collar workers could identify with."

A competing worst-case scenario theory advanced by another top Republican strategist is that the strongest Trump opponent would be a "thoughtful, centrist minority" with grass-roots organizing skills, like Booker, whom Trump has dismissed.

"Oprah would be a problem: She'd be their best," the strategist said. "She's ubiquitous, she's black, she has crossover appeal, and she probably clears a lot of the field out."

"To the extent that Trump sees Warren as a candidate he'd like to run against, it's probably because he thinks taunting her as 'Pocahontas' appeals to a swath of white voters."

— Brian Fallon
Former Hillary Clinton press secretary

Then there's the question of another potential non-Winfrey wild card. Billionaire Mark Cuban, a second former White House official noted, "gets under Trump's skin like no one else — he knows how to needle this guy. He could get people around him to train him, and he's naturally got charisma."

The public line from the White House is that the team is focused

on creating a winning strategy for the midterm elections in 2018. White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders did not respond to multiple requests for comment about the 2020 presidential race.

But the majority view out of Trumpworld is that the best-case scenario would be a progressive Democratic nominee like Sanders or Warren.

Last week, the Republican National Committee blasted out a report about Sanders' wife, Jane, titled "Jane in Jail?" highlighting news that a grand jury is hearing sworn testimony around allegations that she committed bank fraud while serving as president of the now-defunct Burlington College.

"If the Democrats think a socialist or a liberal professor from Massachusetts is a path to victory, we're happy to help them highlight that, because we don't think that is in tune with the vast majority of Americans," said an RNC spokeswoman.

Democrats disagree that running far to Trump's left poses a risk. "I don't think there is going to be any penalty for a Democrat who runs on a very bold, progressive agenda," said Brian Fallon, who served as Hillary Clinton's press secretary in 2016. "The public is pretty firmly against the tax plan, the health care law is popular, increasing the minimum wage is popular. There is passion and energy on the side of the progressive wing of the party, and there's no cost from the general public standpoint in terms of any of those ideas and policies being unpopular."

Democrats expect Trump to run a reelection campaign that stokes cultural divides and plays up controversies like the kneeling protests against police brutality led by black NFL players. "To the

extent that Trump sees Warren as a candidate he'd like to run against," added Fallon, "it's probably because he thinks taunting her as 'Pocahontas' appeals to a swath of white voters who like to engage in misogyny and racism."

Hanging over the entire 2020 handicapping exercise, however, is a big question mark about the president's own plans. "There is no environment in which a Republican thinks Trump is going to be impeached," explained the top Republican strategist. "But there's a high degree of speculation that he doesn't run — he doesn't appear to be having fun, he's old and angry. If he's able to create his own fiction for why he's leaving, why would he do this twice?"

That means that Democrats aren't the only politicians making travel plans, fundraising moves and taking public stances based on 2020 — Republicans are positioning themselves for a potential primary of their own. Former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney's expected run for a Senate seat in Utah, for instance, is seen by people close to Trump as a way for the failed 2012 Republican presidential nominee to keep his own options open for 2020.

"If Romney runs," said a former Trump adviser, Roger Stone, "he's not doing it to be a freshman senator."

Some Trump advisers soberly indicated it's far too early to have any real sense of what the 2020 landscape will look like — and that it doesn't matter, anyway.

"I have no favorite Democratic candidate," said former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, an outside adviser to Trump. "If the economy is good, Trump wins easily. If the economy is bad, he has a tough time. Our side should focus on substance and then plan to beat whoever stumbles out of their process."

DNC struggles as Sanders-Clinton divisions persist

Perez, Sanders split on email list, reforms

BY EDWARD-ISAAC DOVERE

One year into Tom Perez's project to save the Democratic National Committee from complete collapse, officials are beginning to dig out of the hole left by Debbie Wasserman Schultz's mismanagement, Barack Obama's indifference, Russian hacking, and the bitter rivalry between Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders capped by accusations of election rigging.

But going into a midterm election that should be the Democrats' to lose, the DNC is still struggling to bring its factions together and assert itself. Throw into the mix powerful super PACs, the much-better-funded party committees focused on Congress and governorships, and more independent voters than ever, and many wonder whether the DNC has a place at all anymore.

"I knew it was a turnaround job when I ran, but I undeniably underestimated the depth of the turnaround job. We had to rebuild almost every facet of the organization, and equally importantly, we had to rebuild trust," Perez said in a recent interview at party headquarters. "Not just people who had invested in the DNC, but others — they just felt the party had let them down."

It's hard to overstate the scale of his task. The DNC has become every frustrated Democrat's favorite piñata, and a symbol of everything that went wrong in 2016. Sanders-Clinton hostilities have taken on a new form: The tension now is over whether Sanders should hand over his massive voter list to the committee, as Perez has asked, and whether the committee has gone far enough to overhaul internal rules that Sanders' forces are convinced rigged the nomination for Clinton. Neither side is satisfied, and words like "crazy," "still doesn't get it" and, in one case, "Judahs" are tossed around to describe people in the opposite camp.

The relationship between Perez and Rep. Keith Ellison (D-Minn.), the former rival whom Perez named deputy chair in an attempt to ease tribal infighting, remains chilly, with periodic explosive fights over party strategy and appointments. "Functioning unity is something we've got to build back over time," Ellison said, after praising Perez.

But there are glimpses of progress, and a sense of tempered optimism.

Most of the DNC's officers and members have coalesced behind Perez. Fundraising, while still trailing far behind the Republican National Committee, is on the uptick, boosted by a major donor program Perez has nurtured and checks that picked up after Democrats won high-profile races last fall in Virginia and Alabama. State party chairs say they're being listened to again. And a tech operation that had atrophied to the point of near collapse under the previous leadership is being rebuilt.

"People understanding, because of [President Donald] Trump and what's going on, want things to be moving quickly," said Michael Blake, a DNC vice chair. "But because it's not moving fast, that does



ZACK STANTON/POLITICO

"We had to rebuild almost every facet of the organization, and equally importantly, we had to rebuild trust," Democratic National Committee Chairman Tom Perez told POLITICO. Internal divisions left over from the Bernie Sanders-Hillary Clinton primary continue to dog the committee.

not mean it's not moving well."

The DNC's 2018 will be about tailored expectations: adapting its 2017 strategy of targeted, under-the-radar field and infrastructure investments to a much bigger map of races and a much smaller pool of money than it would like to have. Officials say it'll stay off TV — in part because it won't have the money — but will fund staff on the ground, new voter turnout initiatives driven by new technology, and constituency-specific mailers and outreach by phone and text message.

As it did in a host of down-ballot races last year, the DNC will also deploy staff to competitive elections as well as people to train campaign aides and volunteers.

The committee will make some donations to campaigns and the committees for House and Senate races, as well as \$10,000 per month to each state party. And it's rushing to bank money for a promised \$10 million "innovation fund" for which state parties will compete.

But aware of just how tarnished the party's national brand is, not to mention the DNC's own tattered reputation, most of this will happen under the radar. The committee put \$1 million into Alabama's special election last month for voter turnout efforts targeting millennials and African-American voters, but kept mostly quiet about it.

"They provided the support that we needed. They were always there to give us advice and understood that we wanted to keep this race local," Sen. Doug Jones (D-Ala.), the upset winner, said in a statement. "Chairman Perez understood we had a message that was consistent with the party, but it was also a message that he felt like, and we felt like, would be consistent with folks in the state of Alabama."

The committee is trying to forge ahead even as it remains saddled by factionalism. The war between Sanders and Clinton has morphed into a battle between people who believe the Vermont senator needs

to actively participate in an institution that's changing to accommodate his demands — and those who believe the DNC should just be grateful Sanders and his allies are helping it change.

The dispute largely revolves around Sanders' massive email list: The DNC wants it, but Sanders has no intention of handing it over. The Sanders line is clear: No way will he be providing his list or any other information to the DNC, as Perez has asked, or pitch in otherwise to an organization that he is demanding be reshaped. To the Sanders orbit, it's not nearly enough that Perez backed the recommendations of a yearlong Unity Commission set up to revise internal rules that Sanders supporters argued disenfranchised the base.

"We still have a long way to go. We've made big steps forward in opening up the party and making the nominating process more democratic," said Jeff Weaver, campaign manager for the 2016 Sanders campaign and a leader of the efforts on his behalf in the Unity Commission. "We've also got to make sure that all the different factions of the party are represented at the DNC. Tom can do a little bit more to bring in some other voices."

Weaver said, though, that there won't ever be a point when Sanders gives the DNC access to his voter data.

"I don't think you should expect that to happen. If people think the Sanders list is just an ATM, they're sadly mistaken," he said. "It's a list of millions of people who are motivated by a certain policy agenda. If they think it can be easily transferred, I think it's a fantasy."

Blake, a New York State Assembly member who's focused on local candidate training, called that "a missed opportunity."

"Not everyone is going to be Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton or Bernie Sanders, but for the local candidate for statehouse and the local candidate for city council,

having more data gives them more opportunities," he said.

The fight boils down to one between people who say there's no time for infighting as they confront an existential threat in Trump — and those who argue that aren't insistence on conformity with party leadership is exactly what led to the Democrats' destruction.

Either way, the sniping is exhausting to many in the party.

"We have a great opportunity in 2018, and let's not screw it up by fighting over things that aren't going to have much of an impact," said Michigan Democratic Party Chairman Brandon Dillon, whose attention is on trying to win races for governor and Senate in a state Trump flipped. "The fundamentals are what's going to be important, not whether we have Bernie's email list or not."

Perez has spent the past year reaching out to disaffected outside allies, both committee officers that he's been trying to keep united and key players in the Sanders axis. He has focused on fundraising, introducing himself to donors who didn't know him or didn't see the point in giving to the DNC.

Perez's unlikely inspiration was Reince Priebus, who ran the RNC for six years before becoming Trump's first chief of staff.

"To the extent that a person is tempted to say parties don't matter anymore — it is a new world order, without a doubt — I would say, look at what the RNC did," Perez said.

He cited the RNC's investments in expanding its voter file, building technology and funding field offices well ahead of the last presidential election. "If we don't understand as Democrats how they were able to leapfrog us, then we will not succeed in leapfrogging them and sustaining our own success," Perez said.

Perez said the DNC's fundraising woes are overblown, noting that it raised more in the second half of 2017 than in the same period in

2015 or 2013, without an incumbent president to help. (Obama did just one DNC fundraising event last year but has plans to do several more in the months ahead.) Downplaying the importance of the GOP's money advantage, Perez noted that the RNC outraised the DNC by about \$30 million in 2005, ahead of the 2006 Democratic wave election.

"If you want to write a story that says RNC outraises DNC, that is the quintessential 'dog bites man' story, and has been for some time. They've got a lot more wealthy people," Perez said. "Am I content with that? Absolutely not. We have a size 12 vision that can enable us to win everywhere, and we currently have a size 9 budget."

Ellison, meanwhile, continues to push the committee to do more to tap into grass-roots, anti-Trump energy, championing Resistance Summer activist events last year and proposing to expand Facebook Live events with DNC leaders talking directly to supporters.

"You can win a race here and there. You can get a wave. You can get a backlash election to a particularly bad candidate," Ellison said. "But if you want to replicate long-term success, you have got to have a wide-awake, well-trained, well-connected Democratic base. That's the DNC's job."

All of these efforts come amid deeply ingrained antipathy toward the DNC within the party. But winning does help.

Grace Meng, the New York congresswoman and DNC vice chair, was so frustrated with how little credit the committee was getting for the party's progress last year that she started printing her own newsletter of accomplishments for her House colleagues. For months, most of them refused to take it, she said. But Meng said she's had more luck since the party's wins in Virginia and Alabama.

"Now," Meng said, "some people even say, 'Thank you.'"

President's report card: Voters say he's no genius

Poll: More than third say he failed first year

BY STEVEN SHEPARD

Donald Trump's quarterly report card is in — and if he were back in school, he'd find himself on academic probation.

More voter respondents would give Trump a failing grade for his first year as president than those who thought he deserves an "A" or "B," according to a POLITICO/Morning Consult poll, conducted earlier this month. Trump's best marks come on the economy, jobs and fighting terrorism. But he gets poor marks for his handling of health care, the national debt and foreign relations.

Overall, 35 percent would give him an "F" — slightly more than the 34 percent of voters who would give Trump an "A" or a "B" for his first year. The remaining voters said they would give him a "C" (14 percent) or a barely passing "D" (11 percent), and 5 percent expressed no opinion.

The gender gap that marked his election remains wide. Men were more positive toward Trump's performance thus far: 38 percent would give him an "A" or a "B," while 42 percent would give him a "D" or "F." Among female voters, fewer than one-third, 31 percent, said they would give Trump an "A" or "B," while half, 50 percent, said they thought he should get a "D" or an "F."

Perceptions of Trump's perfor-

mance also broke sharply along partisan lines. More than 7 in 10 Republicans, or 72 percent, would give Trump an "A" or "B," while just 10 percent of Republicans would give Trump a "D" or "F."

Democrats had a much harsher assessment: 79 percent graded him a "D" or an "F," compared with just 8 percent who would give him an "A" or a "B."

Independent voters also were unimpressed. Just 27 percent would give Trump high marks — an "A" or "B" — while roughly twice as many, 45 percent, would give him a "D" or "F."

Trump's overall marks were higher the last time the POLITICO/Morning Consult poll asked voters to fill out his report card as he approached the 100-day mark in April of last year. At that point, 39 percent of voters gave him an "A" or "B," and 37 percent gave him a "D" or "F."

But although his overall grades have declined markedly between Day 100 and Day 365, Republican voters were happier with his performance now, the poll shows.

"Despite a tumultuous first year in office, our polling shows an uptick in Republican voters who think Trump is doing an excellent job as president," said Morning Consult co-founder and Chief Research Officer Kyle Dropp. "In mid-April, 33 percent of Republicans said they would grade Trump's presidency an 'A,' compared to 43 percent of Republicans who said they would give him the same grade today."

Trump was given the best grades,



EVAN VUCCI/AP

The president's performance fell along partisan lines, drawing an "A" or "B" from most Republicans and a "D" or an "F" among most Democrats.

per his report card, on the economy, jobs and fighting terrorism. With a healthy economy and the Dow Jones Industrial Average at an all-time high, 42 percent of respondents said they would give Trump an "A" or "B" on the economy and jobs. But a considerable number would not credit him at all — 36 percent said they would give him a "D" or "F."

On fighting terrorism, his grades were a wash — 39 percent of respondents would give him an "A" or "B," the same percentage that would give him a "D" or "F."

On all other subjects, more voters indicated they would give Trump low marks than high ones. His worst subject was climate change, the poll shows — hardly a surprise given Trump's statements questioning scientists' conclusions

about global warming. Roughly half of voter respondents (49 percent) gave him a "D" or "F," while only a quarter (24 percent) give Trump an "A" or "B."

In what might be a warning sign, Trump earned low marks on some core Republican issues. After a year in which he and the GOP made modest progress in rolling back the Democratic-passed Affordable Care Act, only 27 percent would give Trump an "A" or "B" on health care. Nearly half, 48 percent, said they would give him a "D" or "F."

Only one-third of voters, 33 percent, gave Trump an "A" or "B" on immigration — the issue on which he built much of his presidential campaign — while close to half (46 percent) gave him a "D" or "F." (The poll was conducted Jan. 4-5, prior to

before the latest negotiations over the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, at which Trump reportedly used vulgar language to characterize countries such as Haiti and El Salvador and African nations.)

Trump also scored poorly on the national debt (28 percent "A" or "B," versus 47 percent "D" or "F") and foreign relations (30 percent "A" or "B," versus 48 percent "D" or "F"). Only 33 percent would give him an "A" or "B" thus far on international trade, compared with 40 percent who would give him a "D" or "F."

Few voter respondents said Trump has changed the culture of the nation's capital: Only 22 percent said they would give him an "A" or "B" on "draining the swamp," while nearly twice as many (42 percent) think he deserves a "D" or an "F."

Trump is only a quarter of the way into his term as president, and voters are divided along partisan lines about his remaining time in office. Overall, 37 percent of respondents said they think his performance will get better, 37 percent said they think it will get worse and 19 percent said it would stay about the same.

The POLITICO/Morning Consult poll, which included 1,988 registered voters, has a margin of error of plus or minus 2 percentage points.

Morning Consult is a nonpartisan media and technology company that provides data-driven research and insights on politics, policy and business strategy.



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Immigration deal on the rocks, shutdown is looming

SHUTDOWN from page 1

to vote against any legislation until the matter is addressed, and some progressives are itching for a shutdown fight that forces Republicans to deal on immigration.

Yet there may be enough moderate Democrats in the Senate — who are not eager to shut down the government over the issue — willing to push forward another short-term punt in funding.

“I think everyone has the empathy and compassion and want to help these young people who are stranded and we’re trying to find that,” Sen. Joe Manchin (D-W.Va.) said Tuesday. “But shutting down the government is not going to help them.”

Other Democrats are taking a tougher tone.

“Time’s up,” House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) told reporters on Tuesday, adding Republicans take for granted Democrats’ long-held conviction against shutting down the government.

“We want to keep the government open. But I will repeat, we’re not going to be held hostage to do things that we think are contrary to the best interests of the American people, because we will do the right thing and [Republicans] don’t care,” Hoyer said.

Republicans said they hoped to avoid a government closure.

“I think it would be a terrible mistake to shut down the government and particularly while we are negotiating in good faith. Just because we’re not meeting their deadline, that’s not really very productive,” Senate Majority Whip John Cornyn (R-Texas) said Tuesday.

Cornyn and other deputy leaders — Senate Minority Whip Dick Durbin (D-Ill.), House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) and Hoyer — continue to engage in immigration talks that Republicans are hopeful will yield a deal.

Cornyn said he spoke with McCarthy over the weekend and Durbin on Tuesday morning. Their staffs met again Tuesday afternoon with White House legislative affairs director Marc Short, who told reporters there was some progress but declined to elaborate on details.

“We think we’ll avoid a shutdown,” Short said. “It’s important to avoid a shutdown.”

Short did, however, say that the prospects of reaching an immigration deal this week were “fairly herculean.”

“It can’t just be an agreement between six senators,” Cornyn continued, referencing the bipartisan agreement Durbin and Sen.



J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE/AP

“We want to keep the government open. But I will repeat, we’re not going to be held hostage to do things that we think are contrary to the best interests of the American people,” said House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer.

Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) presented last week that was dismissed by the White House. “It has to be one that will pass both houses and that the president would sign, and I’m committed to making sure we stay at it until we find a solution.”

Short and White House chief of staff John Kelly are expected to meet with the Congressional Hispanic Caucus on Wednesday morning. CHC members held a series of calls over the weekend to discuss strategy and then released a statement seemingly in opposition to the Graham-Durbin deal without mentioning the proposal by name.

But Democrats remain pessimistic that the group of No. 2 leaders can reach an agreement and some have said privately they think the talks are an effort by Republicans to stall on immigration to secure Democratic votes to keep the government open.

Meanwhile, lawmakers in the House and Senate are trying to position their competing bills as the baseline for negotiations, illustrating that members aren’t even in agreement on where to focus immigration talks with the government funding deadline just days away.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) challenged GOP leaders to bring the bipartisan Senate bill to the floor for a vote, calling it the “last train leaving the station.”

But a bipartisan group of House lawmakers held a competing news conference Tuesday, pushing a much narrower proposal. It would address Dreamers and border security but not touch the controversial aspects of the Senate proposal, including changes to family-based migration and the diversity visa lottery.

The House bill, its 40-plus co-sponsors argue, is just narrow enough to win bipartisan support in both chambers without alienating key minority groups like the Senate plan, including the CHC, by the Jan. 19 funding deadline.

“Let’s start with something that’s narrow. Let’s start with something that everybody agrees on,” said Rep. Will Hurd (R-Texas), a leading co-sponsor. “We haven’t seen a bill that has 218 votes or 60 [votes in the Senate], but this is something that’s a foundation to build upon.”

Party leaders on both sides of the aisle are aware of the House proposal but have not endorsed the bill.

House Democratic leaders haven’t said how the caucus will vote on another short-term spending bill but privately aides said they expect the caucus to follow a strategy similar to what they did in December. House Democrats opposed the proposal until Republicans put up enough votes to pass — and then some vulnerable Democratic front-

liners were free to vote in favor.

Democratic leaders have remained steadfast in their unwillingness to strike a long-term budget accord with Republicans until DACA is resolved. But they — particularly Senate Democrats — have been unwilling to withhold votes for temporary funding measures keeping the government open.

Eighteen Senate Democrats voted for a so-called continuing resolution last December, kicking the deadline to Jan. 19. Democratic leaders and centrists fear they’ll be blamed for shuttering federal agencies — and that President Donald Trump’s accusation that they’re doing so to protect undocumented immigrants will backfire.

Still, one senator who voted in favor of the stopgap funding measure in December — independent Sen. Angus King of Maine — signaled that he could switch, but not necessarily over immigration.

“I have not decided. I’m not inclined to support one,” King said in a brief interview. “We need to start doing budgets.”

Sen. Jon Tester (D-Mont.) also declined to commit to voting for a stopgap spending bill this week that didn’t address his key priorities, citing community health centers rather than DACA. Any funding bill “has to have” those priorities included, he told reporters.

Of course, GOP leaders are ex-

periencing their own internal tensions. House Republican sources say they currently don’t have the 218 votes to carry a short-term spending measure by themselves.

Defense hawks in the party are furious that leaders have yet to reach a budget accord to increase Pentagon funding and have threatened to vote against the measure without a long-term funding deal that provides stability for the military.

House Armed Services Chairman Mac Thornberry (R-Texas) told reporters Tuesday he thought congressional leaders could reach a spending caps deal soon. But Democratic leaders have shown no desire to strike a long-term funding agreement until DACA is resolved — and could face an intraparty revolt if they were to do so.

“Frankly, I think it’s not that hard to get a DACA deal, but the question is do they want to?” Thornberry said.

If Ryan can’t muscle the votes from his own party, he’ll have to turn to Democrats. One option being considered includes attaching long-term funding for the Children’s Health Insurance Program — an addition that would theoretically entice some House Democrats, particularly Congressional Black Caucus members, to vote for the bill.

In December, when GOP leaders attached a short-term CHIP provision to the stopgap bill funding the government through Jan. 19, some Democrats privately complained about voting against the measure.

It’s unclear, however, whether the president’s recent comments about African nations and Haiti being “shithole” countries will change that calculus. CBC members have discussed censuring the president for those remarks, and over the weekend, civil rights icon Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.) blasted the president for what he called racist remarks.

House GOP leaders are also considering including delays of several Obamacare taxes in a stopgap bill in a bid to win over reluctant Republicans.

Should the continuing resolution clear the House, it could face an uphill battle in the Senate, where nine Senate Democrats are needed for passage.

But lawmakers are still hopeful a deal will be reached by Friday.

“I don’t think there’s going to be a shutdown,” Cornyn said. “I think that would be a big mistake.”

Connor O’Brien and Elana Schor contributed to this report.

Minority whip Hoyer is latest Democrat to label Trump a racist

BY HEATHER CAYGLE AND JOHN BRESNAHAN

House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) said President Donald Trump’s controversial comments about certain “shithole” countries make clear that he is a “racist.”

“If you use racist rhetoric, if you pursue policies based on a racial premise, I consider that to be a definition of a racist,” Hoyer told reporters Tuesday. “I think the president

articulates racist language and pursues policies based upon race.”

Hoyer is the latest Democrat to label Trump a racist following comments the president reportedly made asking why the U.S. let in so many immigrants from Haiti and African nations and not more from countries like Norway.

Trump made the remark last week during a White House meeting on a bipartisan Senate immigration deal. Trump rejected the deal, and nego-

tiators remain at odds over whether they will be able to reach an agreement to protect so-called Dreamers before government funding runs out Friday, upping the chances for a potential government shutdown.

Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.), a civil rights icon, called Trump a racist over the weekend, and the Congressional Black Caucus is preparing a censure motion in response to the president’s remarks.

Senate Minority Whip Dick

Durbin (D-Ill.), who was in the meeting when Trump made the remarks, has since confirmed the comments and dismissed pushback from Republicans who claimed the president said “shithouse” rather than “shithole.”

Trump has also denied using the language and told reporters Sunday, “I am the least racist person you have ever interviewed.”

Durbin told reporters on Tuesday: “I stand by every word I said

about what was said and what happened at that meeting.”

During his sit-down with reporters, Hoyer also highlighted reports of previous instances of racially motivated behavior by the president. Hoyer specifically cited the example of Trump being sued by the Justice Department in the 1970s for allegedly refusing to rent apartments to African-Americans.

“One can say ‘I’m not a racist,’ but that is a racist act,” Hoyer said.

Dems hope voters direct blame for shutdown at GOP

BLAME from page 1

The last time federal agencies shuttered, in 2013, Democrats controlled the Senate and White House. But with Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas) and fellow conservatives pushing for a shutdown in order to whack funding for Obamacare — a popular cause among the Republican base, but not beyond — the GOP could not escape blame in the public eye.

During the 17-day shutdown of 2013, “the Republican Party’s favorable rating dropped 10 points in a matter of days, and it took a year to fully recover,” said Whit Ayres, a veteran GOP pollster. “It would take an act of extraordinary political agility to avoid a similar fate today.”

This year, Democrats hold none of Washington’s levers of power, but their central goal in the immigration talks — protections for undocumented individuals brought to the country as minors — is viewed favorably by bipartisan majorities. Trump is mired in low approval ratings, even in battleground states he won in 2016, as he pushes for more money for the border wall he promised on the campaign trail.

And new polling suggests voters are already poised to blame Republicans if talks go awry. A poll released Tuesday by the Democratic-leaning firm Hart Research Associates found 81 percent of voters in a dozen Trump-leaning states supportive of adding aid to the undocumented Dreamers to any government funding bill.

That leaves Democrats with a significant strategic advantage, knowing that Republicans need their votes to keep the government open and would have trouble laying blame for a shutdown in their laps.

But even though they’re privately confident they have the upper hand, Democrats don’t know for sure how it would play. The public supports Dreamers in the abstract, but would that support hold if the cost were a government shutdown?

That unpredictability, especially



MANUEL BALCE CENETA/AP

Congressional Republicans worry that voters will blame the GOP for a government shutdown. And Democrats recall that, though voters blamed the GOP for the 2013 shutdown, Republicans retook the Senate in 2014.

for a slate of Democratic incumbents up for reelection in states that Trump carried, could make it doubly difficult for party leadership to force a closure. With the midterm elections lining up in Democrats’ favor, the risk of upsetting the playing field might prove too great.

There are other wild cards. For the first time in eight years, Republicans will have a president with a bully pulpit to amplify their message. Former Trump campaign aide

and veteran GOP operative Barry Bennett vowed that Democrats would face voters’ wrath if they decide block a spending bill over inaction on Dreamers.

“The side that holds out over the least popular issue loses,” Bennett said. “In ‘95 we were holding firm on cutting welfare and budget cuts. Our ideas won the day, but we got blamed as the obstructionist. We didn’t control the presidency and therefore the microphone.”

One former Democratic aide, speaking candidly on condition of anonymity, recalled that the blame the public laid at Republicans’ feet for the 2013 shutdown fight didn’t stop them from winning back the Senate in 2014.

“There might be this wish to suggest that this is going to hurt them at the ballot box ... that didn’t happen the last time,” the aide said.

Another reason Democrats aren’t pre-emptively charging into a pre-

shutdown blame game is reluctance within their own ranks to pick a fight over aid for undocumented immigrants. Despite the global outrage that followed Trump’s alleged reference to Haiti and African nations as “shithole countries” last week, moderate and Trump-state Democrats are loath to even entertain withholding their votes for a stopgap spending bill.

And with the notoriously mercurial president sending mixed signals about what he wants in an immigration deal, Democratic leaders know they won’t secure any agreement by alienating their congressional GOP counterparts.

Brian Fallon, a former spokesman for Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) who’s now a senior adviser to the super PAC Priorities USA Action, said “I can understand” why Schumer “would not want to be going around crowing why they have all the leverage ... because he’s got to give Republicans some ability to save face.”

“They’ve got to let a very moody, rash president come around,” Fallon added in an interview. “So it’s smart of Schumer not to be going around, puffing his chest, acting like he holds all the cards.”

But leading Democrats were confident in one sentiment as Friday’s government funding deadline drew near: Republicans, and Trump, should fear being blamed for a shutdown enough that they start taking the Senate’s bipartisan immigration deal more seriously.

“This is a president who could choose to make deals,” Sen. Cory Booker (D-N.J.) told reporters Tuesday. “If the great deal-maker can’t do a deal when you control the House and Senate, that’s a massive failure on his part and any government shutdown is a reflection on his leadership.”

Off the Hill, some Republicans were inclined to agree.

“If there is a shutdown, GOP will — and should — get blame,” tweeted Doug Heye, a former senior congressional aide and Republican National Committee spokesman.

Pawlenty won’t seek Minn. Senate seat held by Franken replacement Smith

BY KEVIN ROBILLARD

Former Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty said Tuesday he won’t run in a special election for the Senate later this year.

Pawlenty, now CEO of the Financial Services Roundtable, a powerful bank lobbying group, ruled out a run during an appearance on Fox Business News. “I’m interested in continuing to serve,” Pawlenty said. “There’s a variety of ways to do that, [but] running for U.S. Senate this year won’t be one of them.”

Pawlenty was the best Republican hope to challenge appointed Sen. Tina Smith (D-Minn.), until recently the state’s lieutenant governor. She took office after repeated sexual harassment allegations forced Sen. Al Franken to resign earlier this month. A special election will be held in November for the remaining two years of Franken’s term.

Republicans pushed the former governor to run, hoping his name identification and reputation as a so-called Sam’s Club Republican could help them pick up a Senate seat in a difficult national environment. Minnesota, traditionally a blue state, has trended Republican in recent years, and Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton won it by just 2 percentage points in 2016. Democrats, however, thought they would be able to use Pawlenty’s post-gubernatorial career as a conservative presidential candidate and bank lobbyist as a way to convince Minnesotans their former governor was out of step with the state.

Pawlenty’s decision not to run leaves state Sen. Karin Housley as the major GOP challenger to Smith, who has thus far avoided any major opponents in a Democratic primary.



GETTY IMAGES FILE PHOTO 2016

Former Gov. Tim Pawlenty was the best Republican hope in the special Senate election.

Small donors are powering Sen. Warren’s fundraising

BY LAUREN DEZENSKI

Elizabeth Warren, the Senate’s most prolific fundraiser, closed out 2017 with another strong fundraising haul — \$2.88 million over the final three months of the year.

Once again, the Massachusetts Democrat padded her campaign war chest — now at \$14.1 million — with small-dollar donations. Ninety-eight percent of Warren’s donations from October through December were \$100 or less, while 80 percent of the donations were \$25 or less, according to new numbers provided to POLITICO by Warren’s campaign.

The first-term senator, who faces reelection in November, raked in donations from 9,199 individuals in Massachusetts during the quarter.

Despite Warren’s potent fundraising, the last three months

of 2017 actually represented her weakest fundraising performance of 2017. In the first quarter, Warren raised \$5.2 million (which doubled her campaign account at the time),

followed by \$3.45 million in the second quarter, and \$2.98 million in the third quarter.



Warren

Warren, who’s frequently mentioned as a presidential prospect in 2020, currently faces a field of three Republicans and an independent candidate who are eager to brand her as more focused on her own national ambitions than on the commonwealth.

The challengers have not yet released their latest campaign finance data. As of October, Republican businessman Jon Kingston led the pack with \$3.2 million raised — \$3 million of which was contributed by the candidate himself.

Timing of Manafort-Gates trial gives GOP jitters

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ager Paul Manafort and his deputy Rick Gates rejected Mueller's request to begin in May and instead outlined a scheduled start as soon as September or October — peak election season.

"The timing of the Manafort-Gates trial will dictate major coverage going into early voting," said veteran Republican strategist John Weaver. "And this is without knowing for certain how many more indictments and how much closer this Siberian political cancer gets near the Oval Office."

"It's mood music that doesn't help," agreed a senior Republican campaign strategist working on several midterm races. "Every day the party is talking about this investigation is a day they're not talking about the economy and the tax cuts they provided and jobs and things that are successfully happening."

A second GOP operative active in the midterm elections said there is no "good time" for a public trial of two of the president's senior campaign officials. But, he added: "You'd rather it not be in the fall."

And few observers believe Mueller is finished bringing criminal charges. The special counsel so far has kept under wraps any criminal charges until they've been filed, leaving Republicans nervous about the prospect that new indictments could land without warning against top Trump associates just as voters are making their decisions.

Mueller has also told Trump's attorneys he's interested in interviewing the president. Though such questioning would not occur in a public setting, it would be an historic event sure to generate blaring headlines.

Also sure to rock the political word: any potential pardons Trump might issue for former staffers ensnared in the Russia probe, including his former national security adviser, Michael Flynn, who pleaded guilty in December for lying to the FBI. Trump has refused to rule out such a move.

While Trump lawyers and aides downplay speculation that Trump might fire Mueller, Democrats say a "Saturday Night Massacre" akin to President Richard Nixon's 1973 sacking of the first Watergate investigator could be a final straw for voters.

"I think that'd guarantee control of the House or Senate for us," said former Vermont governor and Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean.

Whatever happens, said Michael Steel, a former spokesman to Republican House Speaker John Boehner, "Republicans will require iron discipline to stay focused on what the American people really care about: jobs, the economy and tax reform."

"Fortunately, they've gotten plenty of practice over the past couple of years," Steel added.

Democrats say they won't focus their campaigns on the Russia in-

vestigations, seeing larger issue-based themes like health care and taxes as their ticket to returning to the majority in Congress for the first time since 2010. But they are not running away from what happened in 2016, either.

The Russia investigation, Democrats say, is likely going to keep coming up for Republicans, noting a town hall meeting last week in rural western Iowa at which Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Chuck Grassley faced critical questions about his panel's probe.

"Every member of Congress is going to have to answer for why they're trying to sweep this under the rug, whether they were on the relevant committee or not," said Jesse Ferguson, a Democratic strategist and former spokesman for both House Democratic campaigns and Hillary Clinton's presidential run in 2016. "They are the ones in control of Congress, and they're the ones in the driver's seat behind any cover-up."

Democrats also say the constant news coverage of the Russia probe also can benefit them because it has so consistently triggered angry tweets from a president that can rile up his base but also forces his party off-message.

Perhaps surprisingly, however, Trump himself has already made at least one effort to inject Russia into the midterm campaign via Twitter, when he took aim at Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein after she released the transcript of a closed-door Russia hearing.

"The fact that Sneaky Dianne Feinstein ... would release testimony in such an underhanded and possibly illegal way ... is a disgrace," Trump wrote, adding: "Must have tough Primary!"

Some senior GOP leaders say they welcome a Russia-centric Democratic campaign that neglects kitchen-table issues like health care or the economy.

A large swath of the country is following Russia-related developments, Ohio Rep. Steve Stivers, chairman of the House GOP campaign arm, acknowledged. But Stivers said he doubts it will shape voter behavior.

"It doesn't change people who are moderately against us to against us, and it doesn't change people who are for us to against us," he said. "It's all noise."

A former senior Trump White House official said the Russia probe is "not helpful," but added: "Among the spectrum of problems to have, this is not cataclysmic."

As the Manafort-Gates trial approaches, Republicans concede they'll likely suffer political damage as cable television shows images of the former campaign aides entering and leaving the courtroom every day. White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders can expect to face daily questions about each development in the trial. But Republicans say they will counter the grim publicity by noting the charges have nothing to do with Trump or the GOP field of candi-

dates in 2018.

"No one is going to be out there defending Paul," said the former White House staffer.

It is unclear how concerned Mueller may be about his probe's political impact. The special counsel could face a dilemma similar to that of the FBI's then-Director James Comey during the 2016 presidential campaign. Comey was harshly criticized by Democrats and Republicans for public statements about the status of the FBI investigation into Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server while secretary of state.

But politics is also a recurring theme of special counsel probes, many of which stretch well outside the bounds of any two-year campaign cycle.

Nixon had already resigned from office by the 1974 midterms, but the lingering effects of Watergate still stung Republicans, who were crushed by a Democratic wave of 54 pickups in the House and Senate, and the members would become known as Watergate babies.

Republicans lost five House seats in 1998 amid their ultimately unsuccessful attempt to remove President Bill Clinton through impeachment, marking the first time in more than 170 years that the party out of power from the White House failed to gain seats in the middle of a president's second term.

Kyle Cheney contributed to this report.



CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY IMAGES

Special counsel Robert Mueller has kept under wraps any criminal charges until they've been filed, leaving Republicans nervous about the prospect that new indictments could hit top Trump associates just as voters are making their midterm decisions. "The timing of the Manafort-Gates trial will dictate major coverage going into early voting," said GOP strategist John Weaver.



CAROLYN KASTER/AP

Sen. Sherrod Brown, a potential challenger to President Donald Trump in 2020, will not face Ohio Treasurer Josh Mandel in the race for Brown's Senate seat this year. Mandel dropped out Jan. 5, and Rep. Jim Renacci agreed to run after being wooed by Trump administration officials.

GOP shortfall not limited to liberal states

CHALLENGERS from page 1

cycle like this," said Republican strategist Jonathan Felts, who was political director for President George W. Bush during his second term. He pointed to the Democratic tilt in states like New York, Massachusetts and Connecticut.

Still, Felts added, "in every White House in the modern era — back to Clinton — the political shop is traditionally very active in helping to recruit [such challengers]. Having sat there and done that recruitment in a tough time: If the president has bad numbers, that's a challenge."

Brown's race in Ohio has long been the only one in which Republicans felt they could unseat a potential Trump 2020 contender. (Brown hasn't said he's considering running for president.) So when Republican front-runner Josh Mandel, the state treasurer, dropped out on Jan. 5, citing his wife's health, GOP leaders scrambled to find a replacement candidate. They settled before long on Rep. Jim Renacci, who switched over from the gubernatorial race after being wooed by Trump administration officials to join a primary in which banker Mike Gibbons is self-funding his own long-shot bid.

The list of potential Trump challengers facing underwhelming or nonexistent competition so far in 2018 includes Sens. Bernie Sanders

of Vermont and Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota — neither of whom was ever expected to have a top-flight opponent — as well as Tim Kaine of Virginia — who was.

Democrats close to both New York Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand and Connecticut Sen. Chris Murphy had also worried that Trump-allied self-funding candidates would jump in against them, forcing them to spend serious campaign cash to defend their otherwise safe seats.

"No one wants to be a sacrificial lamb, but [Republicans] don't even appear to be trying in some of these states."

— Shiripal Shah Vice president of super PAC American Bridge

But while Republicans are making a serious run at Connecticut's governor's mansion, no high-profile local GOP figure has surfaced to take on Murphy, and he now enters the year sitting on \$7 million in campaign funds. Gillibrand's most likely opponent, meanwhile, appears to be Chele Chiavacci Farley, a little-known private equity executive and party fundraiser.

And while at least three Republicans have lined up to take on Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren, none has caught fire even

as she amasses a cash stockpile of more than \$14 million. Even an anti-Warren super PAC funded by Trump-aligned billionaire Robert Mercer has not reported spending any money against her since dropping \$150,000 on anti-Warren radio ads in June, according to federal filings.

Even as few of these races are likely to become competitive, national Republicans are monitoring the potential presidential

surprises closely, regularly hitting them with negative news releases and occasional small ad buys. Plus, back home, each of the Democrats faces regular accusations from local Republicans that they're looking ahead to 2020 while taking 2018 — and their own state — for granted.

While Democratic strategists warn that it's likely to be harder than usual to run up large margins of victory given 2018's political polarization, many of those same operatives say they're happily

surprised not to see more GOP attempts to muddy lawmakers who have made names for themselves standing against Trump.

"The saddest thing for the Republican Party is I think these are their top-level candidates. That's it," Susan Swecker, chair of the Democratic Party in Virginia, said of the slate of Republican challengers.

In Virginia, Republicans have been desperate to find a top-tier opponent for Kaine. But the current field pits a state delegate against Corey Stewart — Trump's former state chair who failed in his 2017 gubernatorial run as a defender of Confederate "heritage" — and E.W. Jackson. Jackson is a far-right pastor who has failed in previous bids to become a senator and lieutenant governor after calling gay people "very sick people" and tying yoga to Satan.

Among the other Virginia candidates GOP leaders have tried unsuccessfully to recruit is former Gov. Jim Gilmore, who lost his 2008 Senate race by 31 points before running for president in 2016. He dropped out after receiving just 12 votes in Iowa and not qualifying for the debates.

"That's the state of the Republican Party," Swecker said. "No one wants to run on a ticket when you have Donald Trump as the head of your party."

POLITICO INFLUENCE

Welcome to PI. Tips: tmeyer@politico.com. Twitter: @thedoricmeyer.

Even 'Sesame Street' lobbied on the tax bill

Sesame Workshop, the nonprofit behind the children's television program "Sesame Street," hired the Glover Park Group on Nov. 28 to lobby on tax reform, according to a new disclosure filing. The nonprofit is one of a number of companies and other groups that hired lobbyists in the final weeks of the tax reform debate that are only now disclosing their involvement. (Lobbying firms have 45 days to file disclosures of any new clients they've signed.) Conduent, a New Jersey-based business services firm, hired Ernst & Young on Nov. 30 to lobby on anti-base-erosion provisions in the tax bill.

Two National Association of Realtors staffers out in restructuring

The National Association of Realtors has merged its government affairs and community and political affairs divisions as part of a restructuring and promoted Bill Malkasian to run the new team. His title will be chief advocacy officer and senior vice president. The trade group also laid off two political staffers as part of the changes. "Because of redundancies at the executive level from the merger of several teams across the organization, Walt Witek and Stephanie Singer are no longer with NAR," Sara Wiskerchen, a spokeswoman for the Realtors, wrote in an email to PI.

Price is right for Jackson Healthcare

Former HHS Secretary Tom Price, who quit President Donald Trump's Cabinet in September after coming under fire for his private-jet travel, has a new gig. "Jackson Healthcare, a Georgia-based provider of health care staffing and technology services, said on Tuesday that the former Cabinet secretary and Georgia congressman had joined the company's advisory board," Bloomberg News' Ivan Levings reports.

Jobs report

- Ballard Partners has added former Florida state Rep. Jose Felix Díaz as a senior vice president. He was previously of counsel at Akerman in Miami.
- Scott Gemperline has joined the Brunswick Group as an account director. He previously worked for Hill+Knowlton Strategies.
- The Progressive Policy Institute has added Anne Kim as director of domestic and social policy. She previously wrote for The Washington Monthly.

Spotted

- Former House Speaker John Boehner, who's now a senior strategic adviser at Squire Patton Boggs, having a cigarette and a glass of wine on Friday night under the sign of the Blue Heaven restaurant in Key West, Florida, according to a PI tipster.

— Theodor Meyer

How Mattis softened his stance on Iran — for now

Secretary has emerged as voice of moderation

BY WESLEY MORGAN

As former President Barack Obama's top commander in the Middle East, then-Gen. James Mattis pushed for military strikes to punish Iran for arming anti-American militias in Iraq.

But as President Donald Trump's defense secretary, Mattis has softened his stance and emerged as one of the administration's chief voices of moderation toward Tehran.

Mattis' position may not last much longer, however, as the U.S. war against the Islamic State transitions into a struggle for territory and influence between America's allies and Iran's. But for now, it's a striking change for the former military commander who repeatedly clashed with the Obama administration's diplomatic approach — and who once described the top three threats in the Middle East as “Iran, Iran and Iran.”

In the past year, Mattis has openly contradicted Trump by testifying that Obama's nuclear deal with Iran “is something that the president should consider staying with.” (Trump on Friday declined once again to scrap the agreement despite repeated pledges to do so.) And with U.S. troops and their Iranian counterparts often in close quarters in Iraq and Syria, Mattis has so far declined to take a confrontational approach to limiting or rolling back the influence of Tehran and its proxies.

The shift has surprised some insiders.

“For those who were looking for Qasem Soleimani to drop dead the first year of Secretary Mattis' tenure, that hasn't happened, obviously,” said one senior administration official, referring to an Iranian general accused of interfering with American interests in the Middle East.

One reason for Mattis' new stance: As the Pentagon's civilian leader, he must balance a much larger menu of global challenges than when he led the U.S. military's Central Command from 2010 through 2013, according to current and former administration officials with experience on Iran policy who know Mattis well.

Another factor is the change in presidents: Instead of working for a commander in chief he viewed as weak on Iran, Mattis now works for one who at times appears to be picking a fight.

“He has to be very sensitive to where the president is,” said James Jeffrey, who was Obama's ambassador to Iraq when Mattis headed Central Command. “With Obama, he had a president who was very reticent to challenge Iran militarily ... so he was forward-leaning, and that probably hurt his relationship with Obama.”

Now, Jeffrey said, Mattis is “dealing with a president who is both extremely aggressive on Iran and very volatile. So he has to be the cautioner, the balance of reason, the ‘look before you leap’ guy. You see him doing this with North Korea, and you see him doing it with Iran.”

Mattis' office did not respond to a request for an interview.



Defense Secretary James Mattis, who once described the top three threats in the Middle East as “Iran, Iran and Iran,” has testified that the nuclear deal with Iran “is something that the president should consider staying with.”

ANDREW CABALLERO-REYNOLDS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Trump's rhetoric about Iran has been aggressive, especially when it comes to the nuclear deal. As a candidate, Trump railed against what he called the “worst deal ever.” As president, he called it “one of the worst and most one-sided transactions the United States has ever entered into,” even as he has repeatedly punted on killing it.

Last fall, the administration imposed new sanctions on Iran's ballistic missile program, and Trump has hailed the popular protests against the Iranian regime — promising that the protesters would “see great support from the United States at the appropriate time.”

frontation with Iranian forces and their proxies in the region.

One area where that has been on display is the battle against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Among analysts who say that the war has widened Iran's influence in the two countries, a common fear is the establishment of a “land bridge,” or uninterrupted ground resupply route, from Iran through Iraq into regime-controlled territory in Syria.

After U.S.-backed militias liberated the Syrian city of Raqqa last fall, Iranian-backed forces made a dash for the Iraq-Syria border that some saw as the final step in build-

ing the land bridge. Iran hawks had criticized the Pentagon for closing one of its two remote border outposts ahead of that move, saying that keeping it open might have prevented the land bridge from coming to fruition.

But at a recent news conference, Mattis downplayed that fear. “I don't think there's a land bridge right now,” he told reporters, saying Iranian-backed forces don't have the kind of unfettered access across the border that the phrase suggests.

As the war against the Islamic State winds down this year, however, and the Pentagon settles on a new role for U.S. troops in Iraq and, especially, Syria, Mattis may approve tougher pushback against Iranian interference, the current and former officials said.

That means he would revert to his old hawkishness if he thinks the situation warrants it. Mattis also remains concerned about Iranian land access to Syria, despite his public denial, according to the senior administration official.

official under Obama, agreed that Mattis' restrained approach on Iran during his first year at the Pentagon might give way to a more aggressive one in year two.

In 2017, Exum said, Mattis was focused on finishing the fight against the Islamic State that he inherited from the Obama administration. This year, though, “the Trump administration is now appropriately moving on to some of the unfinished business we left for them,” including starting to roll back Iranian influence now that ISIS is out of the way.

The fate of postwar Syria may be decided in part by the on-again, off-again U.N.-brokered negotiations known as the “Geneva process.” Those talks are seen as the main hope that the future of the Syrian regime and the rebel groups opposing it can be decided diplomatically.

During a trip to Europe in November, Mattis said publicly for the first time that he supported the Geneva diplomatic process. For Syria watchers, it was the first hint he had given of a potential future U.S. military mission in Syria with broader goals than simply defeating ISIS, the Pentagon's stated mission in the country.

Jeffrey said Mattis' remarks suggested he sees a role for U.S. troops in backing the Kurdish and Arab rebels they aided against the Islamic State, and preventing those battlefield allies from being subsumed by the regime and its Iranian patrons. “That's a way to pressure the Syrians and Iranians and ultimately the Russians to accept a political process that will create something other than the horrors of the Assad regime,” Jeffrey said.

But what form that pressure might take is unclear.

Eric Edelman, who was the Pentagon's top policy official during the George W. Bush administration, said one way would be to continue using U.S. special operations forces and air power to advise and back up the same Kurdish and Arab militias alongside which they're already fighting — only now with an aim toward empowering them against attacks from Iranian-backed forces. “You have to have your own forces there behind them so they have leverage in any political negotiation,” he said.

But American troops are in Syria under the legal justification of fighting an offshoot group of Al Qaeda, the group against which the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force is targeted. Military action to take on Iran and its allies in Syria would fall outside that authorization and might require additional permission from Congress.

With thousands of U.S. and coalition troops deployed in Iraq, where they are vulnerable to retaliation by large militias that Iran has advised and armed, the risks of any kind of U.S.-backed military action to roll back Iranian gains in Syria are high, Jeffrey said.

But the alternative won't be appealing to a defense secretary who still sees Iran as the greatest regional threat, either.

“Imagine if we were pushed out of Iraq and Russia and Iran inherited the victory in Syria. It would be a huge American defeat,” Jeffrey said. “So it's a fairly precarious position that Mattis is sitting on top of.”

Mattis is “dealing with a president who is both extremely aggressive on Iran and very volatile. So he has to be the cautioner, the balance of reason, the ‘look before you leap’ guy.”

— James Jeffrey, President Barack Obama's ambassador to Iraq

Mattis hasn't been a dove, either. He has called Iran “the world's largest state sponsor of terror” and last year authorized a rare strike on Iran's ally, the Bashar Assad regime in Syria, for its use of chemical weapons against civilians. And he has overseen the shoot-down of Iranian drones when they strayed too close to U.S. forces.

But he has also sought to minimize the chances of a bigger con-

frontation with Iranian forces and their proxies in the region.

frontation with Iranian forces and their proxies in the region.

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frontation with Iranian forces and their proxies in the region.

The next wave of Republican panic: Governors races

GOP concedes a handful of once-competitive battlegrounds are nearly out of reach in '18

BY GABRIEL DEBENEDETTI
AND DANIEL STRAUSS

Buoyed by November election results, a surge in fundraising and expectations of a massive liberal wave, Democrats are preparing for an assault on one of the GOP's most heavily fortified positions: governors mansions.

It's a far cry from last summer, when Democrats bottomed out at the state level. Back then, after West Virginia Gov. Jim Justice switched allegiance to the GOP, the number of governorships in Democratic Party hands fell to just 15, a historic low.

But the atmospheric conditions have changed since then. Republicans are hampered by an unpopular President Donald Trump. Suburban voters are threatening to desert the party en masse. And Democrats have seen a massive increase in their fundraising numbers after gubernatorial wins in Virginia and New Jersey in November.

The GOP is forced to defend 13 states that President Barack Obama won — from Maine to New Mexico to Wisconsin — while Democrats are protecting just one — Pennsylvania — that fell to Trump.

Republicans now admit that a handful of once-competitive battlegrounds are nearly out of reach for them in 2018. Meanwhile, Democratic hopes are rising in a handful of conservative strongholds.

"I would describe our attitude as rational exuberance, and the reason I say 'rational' is it's based on objective evidence that's consistent in basically every election since the 'stable genius' got to the White House," said Washington Gov. Jay Inslee, chairman of the Democratic Governors Association, using Trump's recent Twitter description of himself. "The map has expanded in the last several months, because these patterns exist even in red states."

Democratic confidence has been building since the party's sweeping wins last fall. At the DGA meeting in New Orleans last month, political director Corey Platt gave governors a presentation indicating that the organization is now targeting 17 GOP-held seats for pickup in 2018, according to slides from the presentation obtained by POLITICO.

The growing optimism on the left is mirrored by a burgeoning Republican pessimism, according to a wide range of GOP operatives and lawmakers involved in this year's races.

Their concerns are legion: With the White House dominating the news across the country on a daily basis, pollsters are seeing signs of a prospective surge in Latino voters that could swamp Republican candidates in battleground states like Florida and Colorado, put New Mexico's governor's race even further out of reach and make Arizona's competitive.

The 2017 off-year election results in Virginia and New Jersey and the special Senate election in Alabama have also given GOP candidates and incumbents reason to believe they will face an energized Democratic base that could turn out in record numbers, matched by a backlash

among highly educated white women whose votes are usually Republican.

"If we nominate bad candidates, we are going to lose: We have to be aware that suburban folks — and suburban women in particular — are going to stay home," warned Republican strategist Jay Williams, who lives in Georgia, a traditionally conservative state that both parties' leaders believe is on the cusp of coming into play.

With exactly half of the 26 Republican-held seats up for grabs in 2018 left open by a departing governor, a surge of Democratic turnout could overwhelm any goodwill individual GOP incumbents may have built up in tight states.

"We're playing [on] a little bit of an uphill playing board," said Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam, the Republican Governors Association chairman. "Add that to the traditional challenges of having your party be in the White House, and for that president's first midterm, and I think there's no question we have our work cut out for us."

Much of the GOP anxiety stems from the way a handful of potentially competitive races have broken strongly toward the Democratic candidate. Rep. Michelle Lujan Grisham is now heavily favored to replace Republican Gov. Susana Martinez in New Mexico, while multiple top New York Republicans have passed on challenging Democratic Gov. Andrew Cuomo. According to top strategists from both parties, similar skepticism about GOP chances has overtaken the races in Pennsylvania — where Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf is running for reelection — and Maine, where Republican Gov. Paul LePage is vacating his seat.

While Republicans still see a clear opportunity to replace outgoing Democratic Gov. Dannel Malloy in Connecticut, they acknowledge they will likely need to spend more resources than they hoped to defend their seats in Ohio, Michigan, Florida, New Hampshire, Illinois and even Maryland, where Gov. Larry Hogan remains popular despite the state's heavily liberal skew.

Add in the costs of competing in expensive battlegrounds like Nevada, Wisconsin, Minnesota and Colorado, and it means they are less likely to spend extensive money or resources to flip once-vulnerable Democratic seats in Rhode Island or Oregon.

Meanwhile, Democrats are on the offensive, expanding their sights into races where they usually wouldn't venture.

"This was always going to be a huge map, and a map with a lot of opportunity for us, regardless of the larger environment. [But] the suburban dynamic, the young voters dynamic, the fact that Democrats are so enthusiastic — all of those things we hoped would be true, and which were certainly true in Virginia and New Jersey — are making us look anew at some states," acknowledged DGA Executive Director Elisabeth Pearson.

Some of that optimism centers around states like Iowa, which



ELAINE THOMPSON/AP

"I would describe our attitude as rational exuberance, and the reason I say 'rational' is it's based on objective evidence," said Washington Gov. Jay Inslee, chairman of the Democratic Governors Association.

broke hard for Trump in 2016 but where his numbers have since taken a dive. While recent polls differ over GOP Gov. Kim Reynolds' popularity, one December survey that described her as broadly popular still reported that roughly half the state thinks it's time for her to be replaced.

The prospect of a suburban surge, paired with quality candidates pitching competence in places in typically out-of-reach Georgia and South Carolina — the line pushed by Alabama Democrat Doug Jones in his successful Senate race in December — is also driving enthusiasm. The presence of high-octane Senate races in other places — namely Nevada, Ohio and even Tennessee — stands to juice turnout even further in those states.

"The fact that former Gov. [Phil] Bredesen got into the race for Sen. [Bob] Corker's open seat has drawn a lot of interest from across the country, and it was a confidence booster," said former Nashville Mayor Karl Dean, a Democrat running to replace the term-limited Haslam in a state that has alternated between Democratic and Republican governors without fail since Republican Winfield Dunn replaced Democrat Buford Ellington in 1971.

"There is a feeling out there that people are looking for a change, that people are interested in pragmatism, common sense, [and] it makes the Democratic Party seem very viable, and very much kind of

a centrist party."

Democrats' ebullience could be tempered by a series of potentially messy primary contests that could mar the party's prospects in battlegrounds in at least a half-dozen states. Between the Republicans' strong fundraising and the history of states like Iowa — which has had just two Democratic governors in the past half-century — there's still some hope on the right.

"At the end of the day, I think it comes down to the best candidate usually wins," Haslam insisted.

Yet Republicans must reckon with their own share of uncomfortable primaries, as well as a pair of contests — in Michigan and Florida — where Trump put his finger on the scale with unexpected Twitter endorsements (for Attorney General Bill Schuette in Michigan and Rep. Ron DeSantis in Florida).

While Senate and House leaders have been wary of Trump's involvement in their midterm races, the White House and RGA continue to maintain strong relations thanks in part to RGA Executive Director Paul Bennecke, a longtime aide to Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue, and former RGA Executive Director Nick Ayers, another former Perdue aide who's now chief of staff to Vice President Mike Pence.

Still, Trump's presence looms large. Republican campaign consultants have been working with candidates to find ways to avoid the awkward tiptoeing around

Trump that many believe doomed Virginia Republican candidate Ed Gillespie. Those consultants recently circulated strategy memos explicitly warning that 2018 risks turning into an amplified version of 2006 — Democrats' last big midterm victory year — according to copies seen by POLITICO.

But amid talk of another 2006, Democrats have uncharacteristically stepped up their fundraising operation around these races, often pitching donors on their importance to the next round of redistricting. That push has brought in checks from party megadonors, like Haim Saban and Mark Gallogly, who previously gave primarily to federal candidates, according to filings. So entering the year, the DGA had raised four times more from individual donors than it had at this point four years earlier — on top of quadrupling its number of contributors.

"For far too long our party has focused on the presidential [election] every four years and hasn't done what it needed to do on the state level," said outgoing Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe, a Democrat who has pledged to spend the year campaigning for gubernatorial candidates across the country.

That focus, he said, is finally starting to shift.

"There's a tsunami coming in 2018," he predicted. "We saw it in Virginia with a record voter turnout. We saw it in Alabama."

Bannon refuses to answer House panel's questions

Committee subpoenas former Trump aide

BY KYLE CHENEY

President Donald Trump's former adviser Steve Bannon refused to answer questions Tuesday from the House Intelligence Committee about his time in the White House, prompting panel members to subpoena him on the spot, according to a person familiar with the interview.

Bannon appeared before the committee as part of its investigation of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, speaking just weeks after a falling-out with Trump over comments he made in an explosive new book.

Rep. Devin Nunes (R-Calif.) confirmed Tuesday that he issued a subpoena for Bannon.

"Of course I authorized the subpoena," he told reporters. "That's how the rules work."

According to the person familiar with the interview, Bannon's attorney told the committee he wouldn't discuss anything about his time in the White House or during the transition after the 2016 election. During that period, Trump allegedly sought a pledge of loyalty from then-FBI Director James Comey and later fired him.

The source said Republican lawmakers — including Rep. Mike Conaway of Texas and former federal prosecutor Rep. Trey Gowdy of South Carolina — were frustrated that Bannon was not more forthcoming. Bannon did not invoke executive privilege, the source said.

Bannon, his attorney and his spokeswoman were not immediately available for comment. The



Steve Bannon, shown arriving at a House Intelligence Committee meeting Tuesday, wouldn't discuss anything about his time in the White House or during the transition, his attorney was said to have told the panel. Bannon was also reportedly subpoenaed Tuesday by special counsel Robert Mueller.

MARK WILSON/GETTY IMAGES

White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The dispute inside the committee room came as Bannon was also reportedly subpoenaed by special counsel Robert Mueller in his criminal probe of Russian meddling. The New York Times reported

that Mueller's subpoena was the first grand jury subpoena issued against a member of Trump's inner circle in the probe.

Bannon occupied a senior position in the administration when the Times revealed a June 2016 meeting organized by the presi-

dent's son Donald Trump Jr. and Kremlin-linked people. Mueller reportedly has been interested in a series of misleading statements that emerged about that meeting.

In the book "Fire and Fury" by Michael Wolff, Bannon described the meeting as "treasonous" and sug-

gested Trump Jr., as well as Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, could be in legal jeopardy. Bannon later expressed regret about his comments about the president's son.

Darren Samuelsohn contributed to this report.

Trial for Manafort, Gates likely to start in September at earliest

BY JOSH GERSTEIN

The criminal trial of President Donald Trump's former campaign manager Paul Manafort appears likely to start in September at the earliest after a federal judge on Tuesday rejected a bid by special counsel Robert Mueller's office to kick off the trial in May.

The timeline emerging from an hourlong hearing before U.S. District Court Judge Amy Berman Jackson raises the possibility that Manafort and colleague Rick Gates could go on trial at the height of the midterm campaign season, making an already unwelcome distraction for the White House and Republicans even more uncomfortable.

Jackson indicated that with hundreds of thousands of documents and electronic files turned over to the defense as recently as Friday, it was unrealistic to proceed with the May 14 trial date prosecutors proposed last week.

"I'm not exactly sure when the trial date might be," the judge said. "I don't have a problem with a trial in September or October. ... I don't want something that we're going to continue. We're going to have a real trial date."

Prosecutor Greg Andres said during the court session that Mueller's team expects to need about three weeks to present its case against Manafort and Gates, which includes charges of money laundering

and failing to file as foreign agents in connection with work done for the government of Ukraine and one of its political parties.

One of Manafort's attorneys, Kevin Downing, said he plans to file a series of motions challenging the indictment, asking for more details about the charges and demanding access to more evidence in the government's possession. However, he said the volume of records coming in complicates the defense's efforts. "We're a little surprised that we're this late in the game and there's still discovery," Downing said.

Prosecutor Kyle Freeny told the judge that "the bulk" of the relevant information in the government's possession has been turned over, but Jackson suggested the government needs to complete the task.

"Other than things that are still coming in, there's no excuse for not producing what you have," the judge said. "You're asking for a trial date that's not that far away."

Not all the reasons for Jackson's decision against starting a trial in the spring were clear, because much of the discussion on the scheduling issue was held at the judge's bench, with a noise machine turned on to prevent those in the gallery from hearing what the lawyers and judge were saying.

Both Manafort and Gates were in



Paul Manafort could go on trial at the height of the 2018 midterms, a federal judge indicated Tuesday. Prosecutors had proposed a May 14 trial date.

ANDREW HARNIK/AP

the courtroom for the hearing, the first of the year. During the lengthy sidebar discussion, the two men chatted across the defense table, with Manafort using his hand to try to maintain the privacy of their conversation from the dozens of reporters, FBI personnel and others watching the hearing.

During Tuesday's session, the judge expressed her displeasure with Gates' participation in a fundraiser last month with reporters

present, at which a lobbyist denounced Mueller's team as "very unfair." She said the event, which Gates addressed via a videotaped message, seemed to fly in the face of a gag order she issued in the case.

However, she said she would not hold Gates in contempt over the episode, and she gave him the same type of warning she gave Manafort recently over his involvement in editing an op-ed piece about issues related to the case.

"I think it's important for the defendants to use common sense," Jackson said. She said they were free to speak about the case privately, to raise money for their defense and to thank donors, but she warned the parties not to make public statements through agents or associates.

"If press is going to be invited to an event ... I think that's a pretty big red flag," the judge said, adding that if "an attack on the prosecution" is going to be a method of soliciting funds, the defendants should steer clear.

An attorney for Gates, Shanlon Wu, told the judge that the lines were not that clear because social media can quickly result in a private comment or event being made public. "In this day and age, it's not so easy to ascertain," he said.

Both defendants remain in home confinement, although there were indications that Gates might be formally released from those restrictions as soon as Tuesday. During a tense exchange with Jackson, Downing said Manafort has had difficulty fulfilling the requirements for release.

Jackson set another scheduling hearing for Feb. 14, when she could set a trial date. She also set a hearing for April 17 to take up defense motions aimed at knocking out some or all of the government's charges.

Lawmakers try to cool partisan conflict over Russia

Dems, GOP make nice after rancorous week

BY ELANA SCHOR
AND KYLE CHENEY

Top Russia investigators in Congress are straining to salvage some bipartisan cooperation amid acrimony that has come to threaten the credibility of their probes.

Partisan anger has unsettled Russia inquiries by the Senate Judiciary Committee and House Intelligence Committee, but senior members of those panels say they hope to restore a sense of trust within their ranks. And Senate Intelligence Committee leaders are stressing their relative political unity in an increasingly hostile environment.

But despite hopeful signals from lawmakers and aides of both parties about a return to cooperation, any bipartisan spirit will be sorely tested in the coming weeks — particularly as Democrats raise the volume on concerns that Congress has not taken action to prevent new Russian meddling in the 2018 midterm elections. Some senior Democrats are also insisting that key associates of President Donald Trump be called to give more testimony before Republicans wind down the probes.

Still, some key members of Congress seem determined to pull back from the brink of all-out partisan warfare over Russia.

In a small but important example, the judiciary panel's top Democrat, California Sen. Dianne Feinstein, offered an olive branch to an infuriated Republican colleague last week. Feinstein expressed "regret" for failing to notify her GOP counterpart, Chuck Grassley of Iowa, in person before she released a committee interview transcript with a key witness that Republicans had wanted kept private. The move had upset Grassley, who called it a breach of trust.

Blaming a "bad cold," Feinstein told reporters that she "should have spoken with Sen. Grassley before." That defused a perception that Feinstein — who unilaterally released the testimony of Fusion GPS Founder Glenn Simpson, whose company had commissioned a controversial dossier about Trump's Russia connections — had given up on working with Grassley.

Grassley de-escalated the situation himself on Thursday, telling reporters that he saw no "breakdown in communication or cooperation" between the duo. On the same day that Feinstein released the transcript, Grassley pointed out, the two senators' aides worked together to help secure "testimony she wanted from two people" as part of the investigation.

Another Judiciary Committee Democrat, who has taken a hard line toward Grassley and other GOP colleagues, whom he has accused of slow-walking their Russia probe, also sounded a friendlier note in an interview.

Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island downplayed the Grassley-Feinstein tension as partly "growing pains" from an October splintering of their work and said he hopes the committee can operate as a "coherent and bipartisan" whole in the future.

Meanwhile, Rep. Adam Schiff,



MARK WILSON/GETTY IMAGES

"Obviously, there have been hurdles to overcome — and we've had more than our share on the House intel committee — but we continue to make progress," said Rep. Adam Schiff, the panel's top Democrat.

the top House Intelligence Committee Democrat and a frequently harsh critic of his Republican colleagues, struck a notably conciliatory tone in a briefing with reporters last week.

Noting that Republicans hadn't yet shut down the committee's 10-month-old probe — despite some reports that they might do so by now — the Californian praised his GOP counterpart, Texas Rep. Mike Conaway, for striving to keep a spirit of collaboration alive.

"Obviously, there have been hurdles to overcome — and we've had more than our share on the House intel committee — but we continue to make progress," Schiff said in a Thursday interview.

Schiff added that despite his public skirmishes with commit-

tee Republicans to "take control" of the investigations and prods them to bring the probes to a conclusion soon.

On Twitter and in a Wall Street Journal interview last week, Trump called out Feinstein and Schiff directly, accusing each, without basis, of potentially committing crimes in their handling of their respective probes.

"Democrat Dianne Feinstein should never have released secret committee testimony to the public without authorization," he tweeted Thursday. "Very disrespectful to committee members and possibly illegal."

And partisan suspicions still run deep among members of Congress and could easily become inflamed again.

Democrats said they are losing patience with what they see as a GOP reluctance to take election security seriously.

"To me, the acid test is, we've really got to start thinking about what we're going to do as a committee to recommend legislation to protect the 2018 election," Whitehouse said.

The Senate Intelligence Committee is expected to release its own recommendations as soon as next month. But it is unclear whether Congress will take legislative action.

The committee's vice chairman, Sen. Mark Warner (D-Va.), said Thursday that he and Chairman Richard Burr (R-N.C.) are "still sorting through what form" the panel will use to issue election-

guarding elections falls primarily on state-level election officials. He also said voters need to make their decisions with a discerning eye.

Voters themselves are "always responsible for what kind of information they take in, who they listen to, who influences them, how they make their mind up," he said. Many Democrats believe that Russian "fake news" reports and social media postings might have influenced voters in Trump's favor in 2016.

Some Democrats were skeptical that any congressional findings can be free of political rancor, looking instead to the work of special counsel Robert Mueller.

"I've always been skeptical that the Judiciary Committee or the Intelligence Committee was going to be able to keep Republicans and Democrats together on their own investigations," Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) told CNN on Wednesday. "I think we've got to count on Mueller being the only place that's going to ultimately get to the facts here."

And even as Schiff sounded a conciliatory note Thursday, he warned that any attempt by Republicans to shut down the investigation altogether would force Democrats to air all of their grievances publicly and identify avenues of investigation they believe were left unexplored. Schiff lamented that his committee had interviewed just 56 witnesses, about half the number quizzed by its Senate counterpart.

Schiff and others have grouched that Republicans have blocked them from interviewing dozens of witnesses, scheduled crucial interviews out of state and at inconvenient times, and have diverted attention and resources to the question of potential anti-Trump bias at the FBI — something they call a cynical attempt to undermine officials who launched the investigation of the Trump campaign's ties to Russia.

Democrats were also furious earlier this month when Grassley, joined by Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), suggested the FBI consider criminal charges against the author of the Fusion GPS dossier, Christopher Steele, whom they said may have lied to federal officials. Feinstein had been especially angry about the move, and many observers believed her decision to release Simpson's transcript was an act of payback that suggested a downward spiral for the committee's leading members.

Another Democrat on the intelligence panel, Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden, offered a more direct warning Thursday as he pushed back against "this idea that gets bandied about" that the committee's Russia investigation should wind down by any certain date.

Wyden insisted that Donald Trump Jr. and the president's son-in-law should make return appearances before the Senate Intelligence Committee to answer what he called unresolved questions about the Trump Organization's finances.

"For me, I'm going to push back with everything I have if somebody tries to say this is over without Jared Kushner or Donald Trump Jr. coming to the committee to answer questions," Wyden said.

"The sooner I can get this thing done, the better. The American people deserve an answer to these questions."

— Rep. Mike Conaway

tee Republicans, they are heeding some of the minority's requests for testimony.

"We are bringing in additional witnesses — and some of them are even relevant to the investigation," he said with a smile.

Trump himself, however, shows no sign of collegiality when it comes to the Russia probes. Trump continues to apply public pressure to

Conaway said he hopes to conclude the House Intelligence Committee probe quickly, talk that angers Democrats who believe Republicans are trying to rush the panel's investigation to a premature conclusion.

"The sooner I can get this thing done, the better," he said. "The American people deserve an answer to these questions."

security recommendations ahead of a congressional primary season that begins in March. He added that he expects "broad-based bipartisan support" for that move.

Less clear is what election security recommendations the House might offer. Suggesting he believes Congress has little role to play, Conaway told reporters last week he believes the responsibility for safe-

Perez blasts GOP's 'appalling silence' on Trump

Calls rivals worse off despite party's rule

BY EDWARD-ISAAC DOVERE

Tom Perez says Democrats can't go into the midterms campaigning only as anti-Donald Trump, but he wants to tie Trump like an ankle weight to every Republican official, whom he accuses of "appalling silence."

"On a basic level, this president is the antithesis of Martin Luther King," Perez said. "And more than that, Dr. King once said, 'To ignore evil is to become an accomplice to it.'"

As chairman since last February of the Democratic National Committee — one of the most thankless jobs in politics — Perez has been trying to save the institution amid internal fighting that won't stop and skepticism from many party leaders that there's even a point to its existence.

His opponents are in worse shape, he insists, even though they control the White House and both houses of Congress, and most governors' mansions and state houses beyond. "The party of Lincoln is officially dead," Perez told me in an interview for POLITICO's Off Message podcast. "It has become the party of Trump, [Roy] Moore, [Joe] Arpaio, [Paul] Ryan, [Mitch] McConnell."

To Ryan — who decried the "textbook racism" of Trump's citing the Mexican heritage of the judge in the Trump University case during the 2016 campaign but on Friday said only that the president's reported "shithole countries" comment was "unfortunate" — Perez says: Take a long, hard look at yourself. "It's 'unfortunate' when it rains before a Nats game," Perez said. "It's unconscionable when somebody does something like that."

Perez is a civil rights lawyer and former secretary of the Department of Labor. His natural state is wonky, with a knack for coming up with lines that he thinks come off as catchy and repeating them over and over. But put him behind a podium at a political rally, and he goes full rabble-rouser.

At a Martin Luther King Jr. Day breakfast at the Mayflower Hotel, hosted Monday by Al Sharpton's National Action Network, Perez let some more of that rip. "I don't know whether that was sincere ignorance or conscientious stupidity, but I think it's a little of both," he said of the House speaker. As for Ryan's counterpart in the Senate, "I don't know what Mitch McConnell said because he's in the emergency room getting the sock in his mouth removed."

In the podcast, Perez went with a line about how "our democracy as we know it is at risk," and he compared Trump to the proto-fascist leader of a small European country that was formerly part of the Eastern bloc. "You look at [Viktor] Orbán in Hungary,"



ZACK STANTON/POLITICO

Tom Perez has been trying to save the DNC amid internal fighting and skepticism from many party leaders that there's even a point to its existence. But slowly, Perez is starting to assert himself as a party leader, but says he won't seek reelection as party chair.

Perez said. "What did he do when he got into power? He cut the media off at the knees. He attacked the institutions of civil society. He attacked institutions within his own government that were supposed to be independent."

In late 2014, when he was making a dark-horse play to be Eric Holder's replacement as attorney general, and in 2016,

has been more careful about stepping out front. He's rarely on TV, though much of that is because of how much of his time has been consumed pressing donors in a fundraising catchup game, a desperate scramble to fill a gaping hole in the DNC's budget. He's arguing with members of Congress who have no faith in the committee and no interest in getting any, and

he'd been practicing at the Justice Department instead of in-state.

But slowly, by taking charge of Democrats' official infrastructure apparatus and by being a conduit to Obama, Perez is starting to assert himself as a party leader — though only through the end of his four-year term in 2020, with insistent plans not to run for reelection as chair and a noncommittal attitude toward whether he'll ever want another job in politics or government again.

All that while he's looking out for a party and institution in such bad shape that it's an open question how well Democrats will do in the midterms even with Trump's approval rating topping out at 35 percent and voters saying they'd prefer Democrats to Republicans on "generic polls" by at least 15 percent. In a Quinnipiac University poll out last week, 65 percent of people said Trump doesn't share their values, 63 percent said he isn't honest and just 40 percent said he's fit to serve in office.

Perez takes it as a given that Trump is a racist and a misogynist. Some voters who went with Trump are gone, out of reach forever by the Democrats,

Perez acknowledges. But he believes that more voters than most people expect can be won back, though they supported the president without his views about ethnicity and women being much of a secret.

That's the approach he's pushing his party on. Many people "felt the Democratic Party let them down, and so they were voting for change, and they thought Donald Trump would bring them change," Perez said. "Well, he is bringing you change — but it's not change for the better."

Perez's message for Democrats: Despite how threatened they feel, Alabama shows how much politics is changing and how much backlash there is to tap into under Trump.

Standing Monday morning at the NAN breakfast, he started rattling off core values, from unions' right to bargain, to D.C. statehood, to reproductive rights.

"Organize," he yelled repeatedly into the microphone, "and vote everywhere."

Many people "felt the Democratic Party let them down, and so they were voting for change, and they thought Donald Trump would bring them change. Well he is bringing you change — but it's not change for the better."

— Tom Perez DNC Chairman

when he was a surprise finalist for Hillary Clinton's running mate, Perez and his advisers worked to assert his fiery side and get him attention.

In this new job, drafted by President Barack Obama in his last political act after years in which the DNC withered from his ambivalent neglect, Perez

other party leaders who have learned over the years to operate on their own and aren't about to take marching orders from a man whose political experience consisted of being elected to the Montgomery County Council and being kicked off the ballot for Maryland attorney general based on a technicality over how long

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The real people behind Trump's 'shithole' comment

Revoking TPS status is bad, costly policy

BY SETH STODDER

When word leaked out of President Donald Trump's reference to "shithole countries" in a meeting with lawmakers last week, it immediately swamped news coverage of immigration, giving a racially tinged spin to an issue that already was loaded politically. It also crowded out discussion of a real decision he made earlier last week that affects real people.

Last week, the Department of Homeland Security announced that it was revoking a special immigration status for some 200,000 Salvadorans who have worked and lived in the United States since 2001 after an earthquake struck El Salvador. This is only the latest group of immigrants to lose temporary protected status, which allows people to temporarily live and work in the U.S. after a catastrophe strikes their home country; DHS previously ended TPS status for 60,000 Haitians and 5,300 Nicaraguans, giving them deadlines to return home this year or early next year.

Immigrant-rights groups have sharply criticized these decisions, with some calling them racist and discriminatory. And Trump certainly has added fuel to that fire with his outrageous comments. But the question of whether the current TPS beneficiaries should be allowed to stay is a difficult legal and policy question. As a legal matter, DHS Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen's decision makes some sense. TPS is a tricky issue, and the Obama administration — where I served in senior roles at DHS — wrestled with it. Nielsen is right that TPS was meant to be a temporary status in response to a specific crisis; the hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans, Nicaraguans and Haitians who have lived and worked in the U.S. for decades arguably no longer qualify for the program.

But her ultimate decision — to revoke TPS status for these groups — is a serious mistake, taking a minor issue that garnered little attention in Washington and blowing it up into a big problem. It will have cruel repercussions in peoples' lives, in communities around the United States, and in countries like El Salvador and Haiti. Trump's reported comment reveals a personal malice toward these countries and their people but even from the president's perspective, his solution is misguided. If he wants to stop the flow of migrants from these countries, returning these 300,000 people is exactly the wrong policy.

Let me explain. The ongoing use of TPS to keep these people here in the United States has stretched the original intent of the statute. For close to two decades, the Bush and Obama administrations continually



BRYAN R. SMITH/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Immigrants, activists and elected officials hold a news conference on Jan. 8 to demand the Department of Homeland Security extend current Temporary Protected Status for 200,000 Salvadoran immigrants. DHS plans to revoke TPS are a mistake, the author writes.

extended the TPS status of these groups, despite the fact that the original conditions sparking the TPS orders in the first place largely dissipated long ago. Indeed, for all of the serious problems facing El Salvador or Nicaragua, the ongoing recovery from the 2001 earthquake or Hurricane Mitch in 1998 isn't in the top tier. Moreover, the United States deports thousands to each of these countries every year. If the conditions in El Salvador, Haiti and Nicaragua are good enough to allow those deportations to happen, then the ongoing TPS status arguably makes little sense.

But given the realities of the situation, revoking TPS status is a bad idea. For the roughly 300,000 Salvadorans, Haitians, Hondurans and others at risk, TPS has always been a stopgap humanitarian solution, kept in place on the assumption that Congress would eventually reform our immigration laws and allow most of these people to become Americans. In the intervening years, many TPS beneficiaries have formed deep roots here; they work at good jobs, have gotten married, have had U.S. citizen children and have become strongly knitted into communities all over America. Just like most Americans, the TPS beneficiaries generally live law-abiding lives out in the open and, unlike the much-larger undocumented population, fully out of the shadows of the immigration laws. Like many in immigrant communities, they also send money home to their relatives in El Salvador, Haiti and other places. And this money is vital: According to the World Bank, remittances from family members account for nearly 20 percent of El Salvador's gross

domestic product — and without them, the country would face economic privation.

Ending TPS status for these groups would cause huge disruptions in the lives of thousands of people and in communities across America. They will be faced with two options: either leave the country or stay and live in the shadows, joining the 11 million undocumented immigrants already in the United States.

If these immigrants choose to leave, many will have to choose between separating from their U.S. citizen spouses and children to leave America and restart their lives in a foreign country. Employers will lose valued employees, and communities across America will lose valued family members and friends. In addition, the influx of people to El Salvador, Haiti and other places will put further stress on countries that are already wracked with violence and poverty. Indeed, America's biggest immigration challenge right now is the large flow of migrants — including unaccompanied children — fleeing gang violence and poverty in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. Part of the Obama administration's strategy for dealing with this challenge was to strengthen the institutions and economies of these countries to reduce the factors pushing people to migrate and seek refuge in America. But sending hundreds of thousands of people back to El Salvador and cutting off the flow of remittance funds will only deepen the dire economic situation in El Salvador, subject more people to gang violence, and lead to more people seeking to emigrate illegally to the United States.

If, as is more likely, these 300,000 people simply melt into the broader undocumented population, DHS does not nearly have the resources to deport them. Nor should it. For the most part, these are law-abiding people with families here — by no means a priority for deportation. In the meantime, these immigrants would lose their work permits and jobs, pay less in taxes, become less visible to law enforcement, and live in continual fear of deportation. This is a far bigger problem for everyone concerned than simply maintaining the TPS status.

In other words, Nielsen's order — while perhaps legally sound — cuts off our nose to spite our face. If actually enforced, it would cruelly rip families apart, separate U.S. citizen children from their parents, and make the situation worse in Central America and Haiti, leading to a boomerang effect of more illegal immigration. Or it would just make the undocumented population bigger.

There simply was no reason to take this action. Yes, TPS was not the ideal status legally, and it depended on many enduring fictions. But it was a manageable and minor issue that DHS has now made unmanageable, adding it now to the pile of urgent issues — the "Dreamers" issue, our overwhelmed immigration courts, the Central American migration challenge, among others — that Congress is going to have to address. In the meantime, thousands of people now face an anxious and unsettled future.

What now? Assuming the Trump administration doesn't reverse its decision, Congress should clean up the mess by adding the TPS beneficiaries to the current negotiations over the roughly 700,000 Dreamers with

protected immigration status. Indeed, they present almost as compelling a case. Like the Dreamers, the 300,000 TPS beneficiaries have deep roots in our communities, most are gainfully employed, many have children who are U.S. citizens, and they haven't broken any laws by being here. There is zero reason to throw them out. They deserve the same protections as the Dreamers in any immigration deal.

Fortunately, Congress appears to be doing just that. A bipartisan group of senators that brokered a deal over the Dreamers reportedly included these TPS beneficiaries in their agreement, but after they presented it to the president, he uttered his widely published vulgar remark. His comment was just disgraceful, and it shows an ignorance about these 300,000 immigrants. Including them in any Dreamers deal isn't just a humanitarian act. It also is good policy. Ending TPS status and trying to deport these people would undermine Trump's priorities, which include reducing the undocumented population and curbing illegal immigration.

The bottom line is that the Trump administration's decision was unnecessary and foolish, and needs to be reversed. These 300,000 people have been here so long that they are Americans in everything but name. Congress needs to recognize this, do the right thing, and give them the protection they deserve.

Seth M.M. Stodder served in the Obama administration as the assistant secretary of homeland security for border, immigration and trade policy. He also served in the George W. Bush administration as director of policy for U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

MATT WUERKER



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