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Trump Diaries: Commander in a Box

By Jack Random
April 11, 2017

We have survived ten weeks of the Trump White House. Trump has failed to pass healthcare legislation. He has failed to get his Muslim ban past the courts. He has failed to secure a down payment on The Wall. He has failed to withdraw from NAFTA and CAFTA.

The president has succeeded in stripping away regulations that deter polluters. He has made it legal to dump toxic wastes in rivers and streams. He has pushed through major oil pipelines that will inevitably break and contaminate drinking water.

In the shadows of the Pentagon while our attention was focused elsewhere, Trump has quietly raised troop levels in Iraq and Syria. Without official announcement 400 marines were deployed to Syria in early March. Three hundred paratroopers were added to Iraq. What appears to be mission creep is underway as civilian casualties rise under Trump's reign. [1] There are now 5,200 official troops in Iraq and 500 in Syria. There are an additional 1,000 soldiers with "temporary" status and several thousand mercenaries. Our bombs and air strikes have killed over a thousand civilians in March alone as Trump fulfills his promise to "bomb the hell out of them." [2]

The problem is: We were supposed to bomb the enemy.

This is the eleventh installment of the Trump Diaries.

Trump signs executive order on trade policy – one calling for study of the causes of imbalance and the other calling for stronger reactions to unfair dumping. These are hardly the vision of trade policy reform that the candidate trumpeted during his campaign. Remember when he knew better than anyone what the causes of trade imbalance were? He has discovered that his own party is the strongest opposition to fair trade. They may give him the power to impose selected tariffs but they will not upend the free trade mandate.

His Secretary of the Treasury Steve Mnuchin says they are preparing to renegotiate our trade agreements. Whatever happened to withdrawing from NAFTA and CAFTA? Trump could have posted notice on day one; now he wants to study the issue.

Secretary of State and former Exxon CEO Rex Tillerson announces that sanctions against Russia for its actions in Ukraine will remain in place until it reverses its actions.

Is this a gambit meant to placate the nation's growing suspicion that Tillerson and Trump are assets working for the Russian government?

Secretary of Defense Jim "Mad Dog" Mattis expresses concern in London regarding Russia's recent support for the Taliban – America's enemy in Afghanistan. Should that support take a military turn we could find ourselves on opposing sides of an Afghan battlefield. Dangerous games.

DAY 72: PREEMPTIVE STRIKE

April 1, 2107

Late at night, Trump calls his team to the situation room and orders preemptive strikes on Pyongyang (North Korea) and Tehran (Iran). The president announces he will bring down the wrath of God on anyone who opposes the mighty will of the United States of America. Experts fear hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, are dead as counter attacks are launched on Seoul (South Korea) and Tel Aviv (Israel). [3]

The president tweets an attack on NBC's Chuck Todd for not covering the Obama surveillance scandal.

DAY 73: GOLF WITH RAND PAUL

April 2, 2017

Trump plays golf with Kentucky Senator Rand Paul ostensibly to discuss the future of healthcare in America. That should be a short conversation. Senator Paul fundamentally does not believe in government healthcare – including Medicare.

Trump teases the idea of using trade leverage on China to force them into dealing with the North Korea problem. He will retract the notion in less than twenty-four hours.

DAY 74: EGYPT COMES TO WASHINGTON

April 3, 2017

Egyptian President-Dictator Abdel Fattah el-Sisi pays an official visit to Trump at the White House. Trump expresses admiration and support. “You have a great friend in the United States and in me.”

El-Sisi is responsible for a brutal crackdown in the wake of a coup that overthrew elected president Mohamed Morsi, killing hundreds if not thousands of political opponents. He has secured his power through torture, mass arrests, forced disappearances, extrajudicial killing and abolishing the right to dissent, the right to assemble in protest and the right to a free and independent press. [4]

Still, Trump is downright effusive in his praise of el-Sisi. Well, we’re all killers anyway, aren’t we? We’re all strong men. We do what we have to do to obtain and secure power.

The war on terror makes strange bedfellows indeed.

The Senate Judiciary Committee puts forth the name of Neil Gorsuch as a nominee to become an associate justice of the Supreme Court. The Democrats claim enough pledges to block the vote from coming to the floor in what passes today as a filibuster. With pained expressions, the Republicans swear they stand ready to invoke the dreaded “nuclear option.”

The Democrats better hold on this one. Goodbye, filibuster! You will not be missed.

DAY 75: BLACKWATER BACKCHANNEL

April 4, 2017

The Washington Post reports that the United Arab Emirates arranged a clandestine meeting between Trump supporter Erik Prince and an unidentified Putin surrogate on January 9th of 2017.

Prince is the founder of mercenary contractor Blackwater and a major contributor to Trump’s “self-financed” campaign. The alleged purpose of the meeting, according to unnamed UAE sources, was to explore a deal exchanging Russian concessions on Iran and Syria for reduced sanctions. [5]

What scandal would be complete without the involvement of a mercenary army? As noted above, there are several thousand mercenaries under American contract in Syria and Iraq.

Breitbart and Fox News go crazy over the revelation that former Obama national security advisor Susan Rice sought to identify Trump associates inadvertently recorded in surveillance operations.

While the Trump propaganda machine believes it has the real scandal in hand, to the rest of us it seems reasonable if Trump's associates were suspected of colluding with an adversarial foreign government.

Something's got to give.

A chemical attack in Syria kills dozens of innocent civilians. The international community blames Bashar al-Assad and waits for a coherent statement from the White House. After hours formulating a response, Trump blames Barrack Obama.

Back in 2013 when Assad used chemical weapons in Ghouta, Trump pleaded with Obama not to intervene.

North Korea launches yet another ballistic missile into the Sea of Japan, once again challenging Trump to act or back down. No response from the president.

Clearly, Trump is in over his head. He's already given Iraq, the Middle East and reorganizing the federal government to his son-in-law. At some point he's going to have to take on the presidency himself.

DAY 76: THE BUTCHER'S BILL

April 5, 2017

Images of the victims of the chemical attack in Idlib province arouse the indignation of the international community. The latest death toll is seventy-two – including twenty children. Russia holds up the possibility that the attack is the result of rebels blowing up a chemical weapons depot.

British clown and foreign minister Boris Johnson lays the “butcher's bill” at the feet of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. UN Ambassador Nikki Haley goes beyond blaming Assad, demanding that Russia act. Days after proclaiming a hands-off policy on Assad, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson joins the chorus of denunciation. Finally, standing in the Rose Garden next to King Abdullah of Jordan, Trump points the finger firmly at Assad.

One day after blaming Obama for drawing a line in the sand and not following through with military action (Obama negotiated an agreement with Russia for the removal of chemical weapons), Trump tells a reporter the events at Idlib go “beyond a red line.”

It is the first time in his presidency that Trump has personally challenged a direct ally of Vladimir Putin. Having drawn the line, he is obligated to act. If he does we may soon find out what if anything Putin has on our president.

In a stunning presidential rebuke, Steve Bannon – the dark mastermind of Trump’s rise to the Oval Office – is relieved of duty on the National Security Council. The move reportedly comes at the request of Trump’s new national security advisor, Army Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster. There’s a new sheriff in town.

Bye, bye Bannon! We hardly knew you. You should have known the boss would not long stand for anyone getting credit for his success.

DAY 77: SENATE REPUBLICANS KILL THE FILIBUSTER

April 6, 2017

Senate Republicans in a fit of righteous indignation revise the antiquated rules of the Senate so that only a majority is required to confirm a nominee to the Supreme Court. The revision keeps the filibuster (60 vote requirement) alive for legislation but enables Neil Gorsuch to take his seat on the nation’s highest court.

Congratulations to the Senate Democrats for holding their ground. Ultimately, this decision may have the most enduring impact on the future of the nation. The balance of the court could move to the far right with two of the court’s liberal leaning justices – Ginsberg and Breyer – ages 84 and 78 and the traditional swing vote – Kennedy – age 80. With the 49-year-old Gorsuch taking his seat, if Trump is allowed two more nominees, the corporate court could be cemented for decades.

Representative Devin Nunes steps down from his role as chair of the House Intelligence Committee under the pressure of an internal ethics investigation.

As the death toll in Syria’s Idlib province climbs to 86, including 26 children, Trump raises the possibility of military action. This is of course the first occasion where our president has broken from the Putin playbook. The Russians are challenging Trump to state his policy and take whatever actions he will. Trump has painted himself into a corner. If he negotiates with the Russians and Syrians he will have done precisely what his predecessor did. If he engages troops to take on Assad as well as ISIS he will put us in military conflict with Russia and in the crossfire of a civil war – precisely what he promised he would not do.

What he does next may be the most important decision of his presidency.

Thursday evening Trump orders a Tomahawk missile strike at the Syrian airbase where US officials believe the chemical weapon attack was launched. The Russian military was given prior notice but nine are reportedly killed.

This action marks a new and more aggressive direction in the Trump administration. It is a political coup for an unpopular president, winning praise from hawks on both sides of the aisle.

What do presidents do when they have lost the support of the American people? They launch an attack and raise the flag. In this case, the greater question is: What does Vladimir Putin do? The next move is his.

Notes.

1/ "Trump administration stops disclosing troop deployments in Iraq and Syria" by W.J. Hennigan. Los Angeles Times, March 30, 2017.

2/ "Under Trump U.S. Military has allegedly killed over 1,000 civilians in Iraq, Syria in March" by Jason Le Miere. Newsweek, March 31, 2017.

3/ "Breaking News: Trump to Resign" by Kimberly Morin. The Federalist Papers Project, April 1, 2107.

4/ "We Agree on So Many Things: Despite Human Rights Abuses, Trump Heaps Praise on Egypt's Al-Sisi" by Andrea Germanos. Common Dreams, April 3, 2017.

5/ "Blackwater founder held secret Seychelles meeting to establish Trump-Putin back channel" by Adam Entous, Greg Miller, Kevin Sieff and Karen DeYoung. Washington Post, April 3, 2017.