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## 100 Days of Trump: Chaos, Course-Correction and Chocolate Cake

**A president who has shown little understanding of the institutions of American democracy and, in contrast to his campaign promise, has proved willing to interfere in international conflicts. The first 100 days of Donald Trump in the White House has yielded spectacular headlines but few tangible results. Anthony Silberfeld, Director of Transatlantic Relations at the Bertelsmann Foundation in Washington, D.C., delivers an interim review.**

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The first 100 days of a presidential administration is an arbitrary benchmark. It provides an opportunity for those inside and outside of the White House to assess the performance of the incumbent, but, as history has shown, it is hardly an indicator of an administration's overall success or failure.

Between Election Day 1860 and President Abraham Lincoln's 100th day in office, 11 states had seceded from the Union. On the 86th day of John F. Kennedy's presidency, the United States embarked on an ill-conceived invasion of Cuba that ended in embarrassment and ridicule for the young president. And, of course, there was poor William Henry Harrison, who died of pneumonia after

just 32 days in office. While there was no hope of redemption for Harrison, Lincoln and Kennedy managed to salvage their place in history despite an inauspicious start.

President Donald Trump, who spent much of the 2016 campaign trumpeting everything he would achieve in his first 100 days to "make America great again," has reached the century mark with a mixed record. The man who campaigned as a Washington outsider has discovered that he will need to work with insiders to advance his agenda.

In domestic affairs and foreign policy, Trump has tested the limits of his executive powers, and found that American institutions are firmly entrenched and will be formidable obstacles to any aspirations of absolute authority. Therefore, if he wants succeed, he must learn to function in the very environment he spent his brief political career denigrating.

### **Trouble at Home: Rudderless Healthcare Reform**

For a president whose only discernable doctrine seems to be "**America First**," Trump has demonstrated little understanding of how the American system actually works. Despite the deluge of executive orders signed by the president on issues ranging from construction of the Keystone XL pipeline to reducing regulation, Trump cannot govern by fiat. There are judicial and legislative branches that have been largely ignored or mishandled to the detriment of the president's early priorities.

One of the centerpieces of the Trump presidential campaign was the promise to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare. The White House decided to invest its scarce political capital and limited mandate to repeal Obamacare without any credible plan to fill the void.

This effort was outsourced to Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, who ultimately brought a bill to the floor that raised the ire of Republicans and Democrats alike. Some opposed the bill for the sheer cruelty of stripping millions of Americans of their health insurance, while others decried the proposal for not being draconian enough.

Trump attempted to negotiate a solution at the eleventh hour only to be rebuffed by the hyper-conservative Republican Freedom Caucus, which was neither convinced by Trump's arguments nor intimidated by his threats.

### **A Nomination with Potentially Grave Consequences**

After putting healthcare reform on the back burner, the White House turned its attention to the Senate confirmation of Supreme Court nominee Neil Gorsuch. The challenges that Trump faced in an unruly House of Representatives during the healthcare battle did not exist in the Senate.

With the majority in the Senate, Republicans were able to confirm Gorsuch, though not without upending the rules of that chamber. The use of the "nuclear option" by Senate Republicans to end the filibuster of Supreme Court nominees without a supermajority may appear on its face like something in which the average voter would have little interest, but the practical consequences of this decision will reverberate for years. At just 49 years old, a lifetime appointment for the conservative Gorsuch gives him the opportunity to shape the court for a generation to come.

This is clearly a win for the Trump White House but it came at the cost of further alienating a Democratic party that he may need to pass any meaningful legislation now that there is a mutiny in some corners of his own party. With tax reform next on the agenda, there will be ample opportunity to determine if there is lasting damage from the Gorsuch episode, as the parties haggle over legislation that both sides believe is long overdue.

During his inaugural address, Trump vowed to work for all Americans, not just those who voted for him. The cases of Obamacare and Gorsuch suggest that this commitment may now be a necessity rather than just a rhetorical flourish. Passing legislation is about counting votes and at the moment, Trump doesn't have the numbers. Whether he ultimately forms a coalition that is strictly Republican or can somehow attract Democrats to support certain aspects of his agenda, the president will have to make a concerted effort to salvage relationships that may already be damaged beyond repair.

### **Opportunity Overseas: The Isolationist Intervenes in Syria**

With a recalcitrant Congress at home, the young administration found solace in shaping events overseas. The April 4 chemical weapons attack on civilians in the Idlib province of Syria affected Trump in a way previously unseen. Reportedly moved by the images of women and children dying excruciating deaths, and the blatant violation of international law by Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, the erstwhile isolationist American president decided to respond.

In remarks making the moral case for intervention, along with the requisite condemnation of the alleged spinelessness of his predecessor, Trump sent his first signal to the international community that his foreign policy speeches on

the campaign trail that alarmed allies worldwide, may have been nothing more than red meat for the party faithful.

The subsequent bombardment of a military installation in Syria made two critical points. First, that America will act decisively and proportionally to provocation. And more importantly, it signaled that the military professionals in the administration (principally Defense Secretary James Mattis and National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster) had prevailed over the ideologues who drove decision-making during the campaign. This was a welcome relief for allies at home and overseas, and offered a glimmer of hope for those heretofore concerned with the president's amateurish and erratic behavior.

## **An Uneven Approach to North Korea**

Before the dust settled on the Syrian episode, the White House would face a greater challenge on the Korean peninsula. North Korean ballistic missile launches and threats of further nuclear tests have now brought the possibility of confrontation back to the fore.

Trump's response to the North Korean situation has been uneven to date. On the one hand provocative and confrontational, on the other hand strategic in his dealings with Chinese President Xi Jinping and in dispatching Vice President Mike Pence to the region to reassure American allies.

It is unclear at this moment where the current standoff will go, but the administration has declared that the era of "strategic patience" is over. Trump will likely be forced to confront this threat in his first term, calling into question a campaign agenda focused on rebuilding the economy and infrastructure at home.

## **What's Next**

These first 100 days, while not definitive, have revealed much about what we're likely to see in a Trump presidency. From a personality perspective, any hope of Trump behaving more presidential, given the gravity of the issues at stake, should be discarded. Trump remains a populist at heart who is vindictive and often prone to gross incompetence. This will not change.

But what we have seen over the course of the first 100 days is the increasing role of professionals surrounding the president. As the influence of the likes of Steve Bannon and Stephen Miller wane in favor of McMaster and Deputy National Security Advisor Dina Powell on the foreign policy front and National Economic Council Director Gary Cohn on the domestic one, there is an opportunity for this president to course-correct in these early days.

In his brief political career, we have seen that Trump can learn from his mistakes and change tack. The president, for example, has stated publicly that he no longer believes in the obsolescence of NATO or that China is a currency manipulator. He has learned about the strength of the judicial branch as he watched his proposed ban on travelers from a list of predominantly Muslim countries ban stalled twice by the courts. Trump has received a first-hand lesson in the need for bipartisanship on Capitol Hill, and the importance of knowing one's brief before wading into legislative negotiations.

The question is whether Trump will internalize these lessons, or continue to revert to the juvenile blowhard who flippantly brags about firing 59 tomahawk missiles into a foreign country while eating the "most beautiful chocolate cake" one has ever seen. Trump's legacy won't be written in these first 100 days, let alone the next 100 years. But as history passes final judgment on the 45th president of the United States, our ancestors will look back at these early days and note that the signs were there all along.

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