

Trump's Beleaguered European Allies

Many of the president's EU counterparts are in deep water politically.

by Conrad Black



On the heels of my misguided intuition, expressed on another site last week, that Judge Coney was the president's most likely selection for the Supreme Court vacancy, the president should be (but won't be), commended for choosing the least controversial candidate, Judge Brett Kavanaugh. The nomination of Kavanaugh, a Bush appointee and friend, may be taken as (but again probably won't be) a conciliatory gesture to traditional Republicans. Whatever appearances, conservatives are placated, moderates have nothing to complain about, and an obviously highly qualified candidate is unlikely to be seriously damaged by the Democratic kamikaze attacks, which did not await the banal formality of having the name of the justice-designate before hurling themselves at the unnamed

choice. Assistant Democratic Senate leader Dick Durbin bravely advised the most vulnerable Democrats up for reelection to the Senate, those in states that went heavily for Trump two years ago, to sacrifice themselves, take one for the (shrinking) team, and fight the president's nominee. There is no indication at this point that Trump needs any Democrats to get Judge Kavanaugh confirmed, or that some of the more vulnerable Democrats can win reelection, whatever their selfless histrionics over this issue.

One of the features of this action-packed week for President Trump, as he travels to Europe and meets with the NATO leaders, the British queen and prime minister, and then the Russian president, that hasn't been much noticed in the U.S. is that most of the leading allies, for whom Trump's domestic enemies express such unceasing solicitude, are in deep water politically. Of the principal European powers, France's Emmanuel Macron is the strongest, one year into a five year term in the powerful presidency of France (designed by Charles de Gaulle in his 1958 constitution, to satisfy republicans and monarchists by the authority of the office). Macron is trying to reduce the destructive power of the French unions, especially the public-service and nationalized-industry unions. They have long been accustomed to being groveled to by socialist regimes (three terms in the history of the Fifth Republic) and left alone or appeased by the Gaullists (seven terms since 1958). Macron has moved cautiously, starting with the railway workers, who retire on full inflation-indexed pensions at 52 and have a semi-holiday working life, and has been generally supported by public opinion. So far, Macron is a promising leader but continues to support the Paris Climate Accord – which has no chance of serious implementation since the U.S., China, India, Russia, Brazil, and many other countries are ignoring it – and a politically integrated Europe, even as the British and Italians are making that a steadily more tenuous concept. Macron is a talented and dashing figure trying to straddle reform conservatism with

wide-eyed, one world, accelerated human brotherhood.

Considerably more strained is the political condition of British prime minister Theresa May. She has announced a cabinet-majority-approved Brexit proposal that retains the common market and free flow of goods and people, but liberates Britain from the Brussels micromanagement bureaucracy, the idiosyncratic fiat of the European Court of Justice, the repressive Common Agricultural Policy, and the large annual cash payments to Europe. No one knows if these proposals will be approved by the governing Conservative party, which relies on a Northern Ireland splinter group for its majority, or by the other European Union members. If Mrs. May is on a high wire like M. Macron, she has thrown away the safety net. Her European-negotiations minister and her foreign secretary, the flamboyant Boris Johnson, have resigned. She could vanish noiselessly and without trace while conferring with her eminent U.S. visitor, or she could emerge somewhat later as a very skilled and successful navigator of an immensely complicated political crisis. If her skittish party can cohere into the summer recess and her new European negotiator can get agreement from the European Union on the many open points in the British government's position paper, Mrs. May, from a desperate vortex, could open the way to a two-speed Europe: a common market for all and political union for those countries that want it. If this happened, she would save herself politically, and would rejuvenate Europe and partially liberate it from the sclerosis of Brussels's mindless pettifogging authoritarianism. Initial omens were positive, as the beleaguered German chancellor, Angela Merkel, welcomed the British overture.

There is less, yet considerable, speculation about the status of Chancellor Merkel. It is always difficult to discern the mobile undercurrents of German opinion. The country has not emancipated itself from the double trauma of its overwhelming guilt for having plunged the world into war and massacred

millions of innocent civilians, and of having been so crushingly and completely defeated. The genocidal exterminations and war crimes were on a scale so horrifying that no matter how familiar one is with the history of those awful times, still within living memory, it is difficult and cautionary to believe that the culture of Beethoven and Goethe could be driven to such atrocities. A Nazi triumph would have ushered in "the abyss of a new Dark Age," in Mr. Churchill's words, "made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science." Perhaps only a people descended from the authors of such monstrous crimes can understand how difficult it is to outgrow them, and the humiliation and shame of the consequences. But Germany must outgrow them. It is fundamentally the most powerful country in Europe, and there is a vacuum at the center of Europe as long as Germany is not occupying its full, and after all these unexceptionable years, certainly rightful place.

The British, French, Russians, and the old Habsburg polyglot Empire all recognized the danger of a united Germany, which is why such diverse statesmen as Richelieu, Napoleon, Metternich, Palmerston, and Stalin, went to such lengths to ensure that Germany was not united. It was the United States, as the only great power that was unafraid of Germany, which brought West Germany into the western Alliance in 1955, over objections of the French and even Churchill's lack of enthusiasm, and it was the U.S. that led in the reunification of Germany in 1991. It is unlikely that President Trump or many people in his entourage examine the historical context, but to some degree, Trump's call for Germany to bear its proper burden of military responsibilities may be seen as a nudge in the right direction. In presumed pursuit of a liberated national conscience, Chancellor Merkel admitted over a million desperate refugees from the Middle East and Africa in the last few years. One can admire her humanity without crediting her political judgment. Her governing coalition with the Bavarian Christian Social Union is under great strain, and Germany has

no history of managing political instability well. The possibility of a wobbly Germany, over-populated with muddled leftist splinter parties, does not bear thinking about. The faith of the West, with Germany as with Britain, now has to reside with a worthy woman of uncertain political prospects. The strongest of the western European leaders is Viktor Orban in Hungary, just reelected, and, predictably, he is widely reviled as a Trumpian reactionary, an unfair charge to both men.

Italy is now unsteadily governed by a gravity-defying (in all senses) coalition of far left and far right, with a cameo role for the imperishable scoundrel Silvio Berlusconi, and a disreputable comedian as the grey eminence. Spain has a socialist government with a chronic parliamentary minority, and is wrestling with a separatist threat from its greatest province, Catalonia (where Barcelona is located). As he remarked on departing Washington, President Trump may find dealing with Vladimir Putin straightforward, compared with his proverbial "allies." At the least, he may make some progress to normalize relations with Russia and deescalate the partisan-fueled Democratic hysteria about Putin. Russia is an emasculated remnant of the Soviet Union with a GDP smaller than Canada's. The challenge is to reach satisfactory agreements on Ukraine and Syria and not allow Putin's pugnacity to force Trump to face him down and scare him into the arms of China and Iran. It is probably too much to hope that sensible exchanges with Putin could cause the frenzied diehards of the Russian-collusion theory to go off that nonsense cold turkey. An orderly session in Helsinki can't do any harm, but if he listens to her, the president's most useful conversation could be with the timeless Queen Elizabeth, with 67 unblemished years on the throne. He will be the 13th U.S. president she has dealt with, and Mrs. May is her 13th British prime minister. She has seen a lot, and from all accounts, she has forgotten nothing.

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