NORTH AMERICA 29.03.2017 | Cathryn Clüver Ashbrook

Donald Trump: the disastrous week that was

As the Trump administration lurches from calamity to crisis, impeachment proceedings are still a long way off

When historians look back at the extraordinary Trump Presidency, the ninth week of his administration will seem like a great unveiling – the moment the curtain fell on the single-spotlight reality show marked by bluster, bravado and deflection to reveal in the harshest light the reality of governing through and with the cast of Congress.

Though his executive orders have already been challenged in the courts, it is in Congress – where his Republican majority is robust – that his strong-man allure has been tested, even by some of his most ardent supporters. The House Intelligence Committee held their first public inquiry into Russian interference in American democracy, while House Republicans showed themselves deeply divided on the future of American healthcare.

The "terrible, horrible, no good, very bad week" that was

On Monday 20 March, when FBI-Director James Comey and NSA-Director Admiral Michael Rogers exposed White House assertions about a wiretap of Trump Tower as an outright lie, and underlined their belief in Russian interference in the electoral campaign, the President defaulted to known tactics: A tweet to obfuscate, a press conference to dismiss, and a 'victory' rally in Kentucky to visually capture consent among his base.

And yet, cracks in the veneer began to show, despite attempts by Republican members of the Intelligence Committee to make the leak of information about Americans – and not the attack on the integrity of American democracy – the predominant line of inquiry. By Wednesday, the chairman of the intelligence committee, Congressman Devin Nunes, had come under fire for breaking with protocol and taking sensitive information to the President before he brought it to his own

investigating committee. Press Secretary Sean Spicer had attempted to distance the Trump campaign from former manager, Paul Manafort, as information emerged he may have been engaged in laundering payments linked to Russian money. Meanwhile, opposing forces within the Republican Party were in open conflict about the breadth of the proposed Obamacare replacement bill, drawing the President into protracted negotiations.

By Friday, the self-proclaimed 'deal-maker with the best deals' who wanted to get Americans 'so used to winning,' they would tire of it, had lost the chance of fulfilling his key legislative promise to voters. More: Chairman Nunes had been publicly described as a "lap dog, not a watchdog," with Republican colleagues like Senator John McCain demanding an independent – not merely a House inquiry – into Russian interference and possible collusion.

Even an American public seemed to be turning away: The cheering crowds of Monday's 'victory' rally, replaced by frequent press citations of a Gallup, Fox News and Quinnipac polls demonstrating perhaps that tactical deflection might be beginning to lose its functionality, showing his general approval ratings below 40%; only 16% of all voters approving of his Twitter habits, and only 17% of Americans in favour of the Republican healthcare bill.

Impossible impeachment?

Since his election in November of last year, Trump sceptics at home and abroad have imagined his outlandish behaviour might set him up for impeachment. Until now – until this week, a Republican party desperate for the kind of power that could see their vision of America realised was willing to hitch its legislative agenda to his populist bandwagon, making whispers of impeachment impossible. They had his flank. Mid-week, the phalanx began to crumble, as three critical realities were exposed: Donald Trump failed them as a dealmaker, as a 'golden battering ram.' The party's congressional unity was exposed – publicly – as vulnerable, as factions and individual members of the House majority overreached. Finally, members were not able to hold the line in the committee charged with investigating the very election that brought Donald Trump to power, which could prove to be the President's real Achilles heel. The certainty of congressional protection has weakened.

And yet, given that other victories might still be in the offing, it remains unlikely a sufficient majority of the Republican Party will join the early rumblings of calls for impeachment made by constitutional law experts and Democrats. While the constitutional remedy for presidential

misconduct is impeachment, designed to punish "high crimes and misdemeanors," Republicans will need to see conclusive proof emerge from the intelligence report. A formal impeachment process, with its judiciary committee investigation, its House and Senate deliberations and votes, and the media focus on the very minutiae of the investigation all but halts all other legislative activity – as we saw during the attempt to impeach Bill Clinton. Republicans will opt for all intermediary options to push what they can of their plans – certainly before the 2018 mid-term election. While some legislative successes are still potentially attainable ahead of the 2018 mid-term elections, and while the President is not (yet) directly linked to Russian collusion, the Republican majority will fight impeachment until they feel the party's reputation is intolerable even to its base. The promise of power remains a strong adhesive overall.

Congressional Republicans will have to find cohesive energy around other key elements of their platform, including tax reform and the passing of a new federal budget, while they await the findings of FBI Director Comey's investigation. In the meantime, one way to recapture a certain amount of credibility could be to dismiss Devin Nunes from his role as chair of the House Intelligence Committee, or to agree to a fully independent prosecutorial investigation.

Finally, President Trump and his strategic advisor, Steve Bannon, cannot be counted out to provide some of the cohesion to keep even this seemingly fractious Republican majority together. A targeted and planned diversion might be a useful tactic in pulling party support back in: An international incident, an outside 'attack' on the United States – their arsenal might not yet be exhausted.

When Donald Trump was elected, his supporters hoped he might transform the country from within. This week has proven to him – and to them – that these plans might be much, much harder to realise – and if pushed closer to the brink might have lasting consequences for the credibility of American democracy.



Cathryn Clüver Ashbrook

Cambridge, MA

Cathryn Clüver Ashbrook is a German and American national and the founding Executive Director of the Future of Diplomacy Project at the Harvard Kennedy School (HKS), which examines the challenges to negotiation and statecraft in the 21st century.

-