

SPECIAL EDITION | December 2018

THE EPOCH TIMES

TRUTH AND TRADITION

YEAR IN REVIEW

After decades of enduring the Chinese regime's abuses, the United States is now fighting back.

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Trump breaks pattern of costly wars in the Middle East with Syria pullout.

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The Obama-Clinton Spygate scandal is slowly unraveling.

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The border security battle will dominate spending bills and the Supreme Court.

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THE SPYGATE SCANDAL: What We Learned in 2018

From the Editor

Dear readers,

2018 proved to be a year of pivotal change. Most notably, this was the year that President Donald Trump recast America's relationship with China. For decades, the United States has passively endured China's unfair economic practices and the theft of American intellectual property. This year, however, the United States started to aggressively counter both of these—using tariffs and the law to force a change in China's behavior. The Trump administration's efforts against China have had a direct impact on America's economy, quality of life, and national security. Under pressure from Trump, Chinese leader Xi Jinping agreed to classify fentanyl—a deadly synthetic opioid pouring into the United States from China—as a controlled substance. The extent of meaningful change by the Chinese Communist Party remains to be seen, but at least the United States is no longer playing along. This year, we also saw continued attempts by the Trump administration to patch holes in border security. Most of

these efforts, however, were quickly struck down by federal judges. As a current government shutdown over funding for a border wall continues, Trump is weighing military options to complete the job, which was a central campaign promise. This year, more of the Spycgate scandal came to light, showing how the Obama administration attempted to influence the 2016 presidential election by spying on the Trump campaign and promoting the Russia collusion narrative. But even those who promoted the main source of the narrative—the so-called Steele dossier, which was paid for by the Clinton campaign and the DNC—are now saying its contents are false. Multiple investigations involving the dossier remain ongoing, including how it could have been used by the FBI and the Department of Justice to obtain a warrant to conduct surveillance Trump campaign foreign policy adviser Carter Page. 2019 will prove to be an eventful year.



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US-CHINA

AMERICA GOES ON THE OFFENSIVE AGAINST CHINESE REGIME

ANNIE WU

This was the year that the United States rewrote its relationship with China.

It began with President Donald Trump's decision to tackle the Chinese regime's practice of intellectual property (IP) theft.

Trump used tariffs to punish China for its longtime trade offenses and shine a spotlight on Beijing's "Made in China 2025" economic blueprint—the ambitious game plan for China to dominate several cutting-edge technology industries and become an advanced manufacturing powerhouse by the year 2025.

But working to force China to change its trade practices was just the beginning.

As Vice President Mike Pence outlined in a definitive speech at the Hudson Institute in October, Beijing deploys a "whole-of-government approach, using political, economic, and military tools, as well as propaganda, to advance its influence and benefit its interests in the United States."

The message was clear: The United States would no longer simply stand by as China undermined U.S. interests, on U.S. soil and abroad. Pence hinted at the all-encompassing scope of a more hardline U.S.-China policy in the years ahead. Past administrations have ignored China's misbehavior, "but those days are over," Pence said.

In 2018, the Trump administration and U.S. Congress—in a show of bipartisan-ship—tackled China's aggressive IP theft; espionage and influence campaigns; manufacture of the highly toxic opioid fentanyl, responsible for tens of thousands of deaths in the United States annually; and expansion of geopolitical interests around the world. It was an unprecedented attempt to force China to play fair.

So far, the Chinese regime has done little

to convince the world that it intends to play by the rules—despite platitudes promising to open its markets and liberalize its economy.

For now, the ongoing trade row has taken a toll on an already slowing Chinese economy, putting pressure on Chinese leader Xi Jinping and his leadership to make the right compromises.

A 90-day truce has commenced, with China making some concessions, such as cutting tariffs on U.S. car imports. It remains to be seen whether the Chinese regime will make fundamental changes to its economic policies that support and prop up domestic sectors to the detriment of the United States and other Western competitors.

Intellectual Property

This year, the Trump administration decided the United States must launch a tactical offensive to counter China's state-sponsored IP theft.

The Department of Justice (DOJ) has ensnared alleged wrongdoers in case after case of economic espionage. Most recently, on Dec. 20, two Chinese nationals—allegedly hackers working for China's chief intelligence agency, the Ministry of State Security (MSS)—were charged with stealing IP and business data from companies around the world. The targets belonged to a large range of industries, all in fields that Beijing wants to develop aggressively.

In November, the DOJ announced a bombshell case as part of a new initiative to go after Chinese espionage. Prosecutors alleged that Chinese semiconductor firm Fujian Jinhua had stolen technology from U.S. chipmaker Micron on how to manufacture advanced chips.

At the same time, the Department of Commerce banned U.S. suppliers from exporting tech components to Fujian Jinhua, effectively crippling its operations—as ➡



President Donald Trump (C), Secretary of the Treasury Steven Mnuchin (2nd R), Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer (R), White House Chief of Staff John Kelly (L), assistant to the president Peter Navarro (2nd L), national security adviser John Bolton (3rd L), and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo hold a dinner meeting with Chinese leader Xi Jinping (not pictured) at the G-20 summit in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on Dec. 1, 2018.

SAUL LOEB/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



Chinese technology firms rely heavily on foreign imports due to China's domestic sectors lagging in chip innovation.

In another rare show of force, an alleged MSS spy was extradited from Belgium, where he had been arrested, to the United States in October to face charges for running a scheme to steal trade secrets from U.S. and European aerospace companies. This is the first time an MSS official has been extradited to face trial in the United States.

The Trump administration has made it clear that intellectual property is key to U.S. economic prowess—and China must be confronted squarely as the latter seeks to steal valuable information through any means necessary.

And as clearly outlined in the “Made in China 2025” plan, China is desperate to catch up in lagging technologies and end its reliance on foreign imports, such as in semiconductor manufacturing.

Amid a string of reports that China ramped up cyber attacks in recent months, the Pentagon also switched gears to tackle the China threat head-on. It unveiled a new cyberspace strategy that would more proactively stop or disrupt malicious cyber activity that harms both U.S. military and economic interests.

IP theft also occurs by way of acquiring U.S. technology companies. To stymie this outflow, Congress passed a bill that would give the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States—which reviews business deals to assess national security risks—more power, including the ability to scrutinize venture-capital investments from foreign entities.

Trump also notably blocked a deal by Singapore-based Broadcom to acquire U.S. chipmaking innovator Qualcomm, citing concerns that the company could end up under Chinese control.

Academia

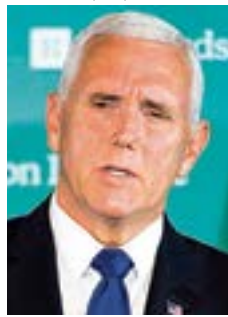
The administration has also recognized that espionage happens at universities and laboratories, where Chinese scientists are aggressively recruited by the Communist Party and firms to transfer cutting-edge innovations for commercialization in China.

The White House has taken steps to limit the length of stay for visas granted to Chinese nationals studying in specific fields that the Chinese regime has targeted for development, such as robotics, aviation, and high-tech manufacturing.

Then the National Institutes of Health took action, first by telling research organizations across America to seek out the FBI for advice on how to detect espionage, then by warning about China's “Thousand Talents” recruitment program designed to bring top Chinese scientists and engineers working abroad back to China.

Concerned about foreign governments

JIM WATSON/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



Vice President Mike Pence

said in a speech at the Hudson Institute in October that previous administrations have ignored China's misbehavior, “but those days are over.”

This year, the Trump administration decided the United States must launch a tactical offensive to counter China's state-sponsored IP theft.

A man walks past a Huawei store in Beijing on Dec. 10, 2018.

GREG BAKER/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



getting their hands on important research funded by the NIH or other federal agencies, the NIH recommended changes to the peer-review process and financial disclosure forms for research projects.

The Trump administration has also called out the often-overlooked issue of Chinese influence on U.S. campuses via Beijing-funded Confucius Institutes and Chinese student associations, which observers say stifle academic freedom and spread Beijing's propaganda. Several lawmakers have introduced bills to restrict Confucius Institute funding.

As part of the DOJ's campaign, the administration is also scrutinizing Chinese-language media companies that spread Beijing's propaganda on U.S. soil. The DOJ wants to make sure these media outlets register as foreign agents and openly disclose their ties.

Countering OBOR

China's signature project for expanding geopolitical influence is the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative. Through financing infrastructure projects and striking trade deals, the regime has pressured countries—most aggressively those in Southeast Asia and Africa—to comply with its agenda. Many countries have become debt-laden as a result of OBOR projects, and some have been forced to give up control of strategic ports and other assets when they are unable to pay up.

U.S. officials have realized they must provide an alternative. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo unveiled an Indo-Pacific strategy devoting \$113 million to tech, energy, and infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia. The effort includes working with allies such as India and Japan to forge more healthy partnerships in the region.

This month, national security adviser John Bolton explained that the new Africa strategy aims to boost the continent's growing middle class, assist in anti-terror

efforts, and encourage U.S. companies to invest in African nations.

Fentanyl

China is the biggest source of fentanyl, a synthetic opioid that's causing tens of thousands of deaths in the United States annually. The drug is at the heart of the current opioid addiction crisis in America.

Since meeting with Chinese leader Xi Jinping last November in Beijing, Trump has put the issue at the top of his agenda. For a long time, Chinese authorities did little to curb the manufacture of the drug within its borders. Trump persuaded Xi to control exports and share intelligence on drug trafficking.

During the most recent trade negotiations held on the sidelines of the G-20 summit, Xi agreed to classify the drug as a controlled substance, subject to maximum penalties under China's criminal code. Whether any meaningful crackdown will be enforced remains to be seen.

The Future

From lawmakers to China scholars, top U.S. decision-makers are supporting a tougher stance on China, after decades of hoping that economic liberalization would bring greater political freedoms to China.

Instead, “in recent years, China has taken a sharp U-turn toward control and oppression of its own people,” Pence said in his speech.

It's become clear that a new approach is needed to push China to change.

Amid a year of tough legal action, the DOJ pulled off perhaps the boldest move yet: requesting the arrest and extradition of Meng Wanzhou, the chief financial officer of Chinese telecom giant Huawei.

As she was about to board a flight in Vancouver, Canada, Meng was arrested on U.S. allegations that she committed bank fraud in order to skirt sanctions on Iran. Since Huawei is a key company financially supported by the Chinese regime to fulfill its tech ambitions—including to carry out China's planned global 5G rollout—her arrest prompted swift, angry reactions from Beijing.

Already, three Canadians have been detained in China following her arrest, with state-run media calling on Chinese citizens to boycott Canadian brands. As the daughter of Huawei's founder, Meng is one of the highest-level company executives to be ensnared by U.S. authorities in recent years.

Similarly to how the United States slapped an export ban on Chinese telecoms firm (and Huawei competitor) ZTE after it failed to comply with court agreements related to its violation of Iran sanctions, Meng's prosecution could be a taste of what's to come if China continues to flagrantly ignore established international norms.

JEFF KOWALSKY/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



An employee works on the assembly line for trucks at Ford's Rouge Complex in Dearborn, Mich., on Sept. 27, 2018.

ECONOMY

TRUMP'S TARIFFS SHAKE UP THE GLOBAL TRADE ORDER

EMEL AKAN

WASHINGTON—Since President Donald Trump was elected in 2016, he has made trade one of his key policy priorities. His rejection of globalism, support for U.S. national security, and retaliation against unfair foreign trade practices marked a fundamental shift in America's trade policy.

In 2018, trade conflict rose to its highest level in more than three decades following Trump's decision to impose tariffs on steel, aluminum, and Chinese goods. The United States also imposed restrictions on foreign direct investments.

Trump pursued trade protectionism, which has ironically long been a Democratic priority. But he repeatedly asserted that he favored trade that was both free and fair.

"First of all, I understand the benefits of trade. I just want a better deal for American businesses and workers," Trump told his campaign's economic advisers, Stephen Moore and Arthur Laffer, who co-authored the book "Trumponomics."

His focus on bringing back jobs and pro-


tecting American businesses was one of the pillars that shaped his economic policies, including trade.

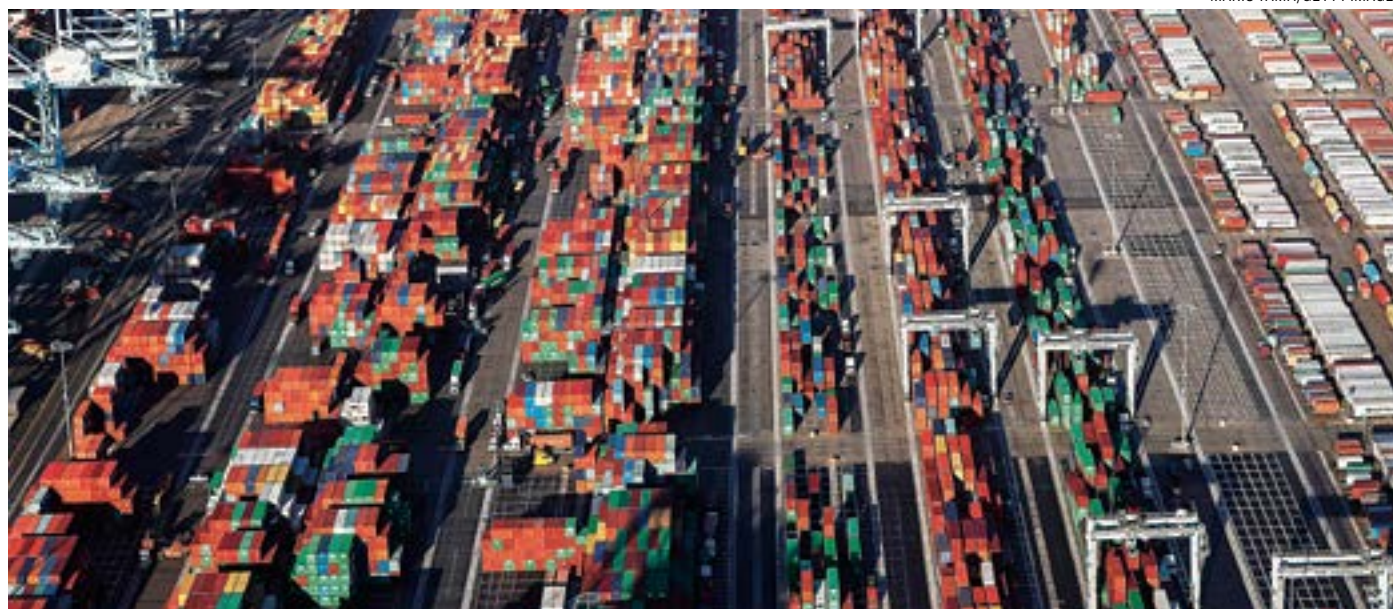
After his election, he followed through on his promises and began ending what he called "broken trade deals." In one of his first acts as president, Trump withdrew the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). He discarded the U.S.-European Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership negotiations. He announced plans to renegotiate the terms of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which he called "the worst trade deal in the history of the country."

Rise of Bilateralism

Trump made it clear that he preferred bilateral trade deals to regional or multilateral agreements.

"Believe me, we're going to have a lot of trade deals. But they'll be one-on-one. There won't be a whole big mash pot," he told Republican lawmakers on Jan. 26, 2017.

He and his administration saw the big advantage of bilateral deals. They knew that the United States, being the world's 



MARIO TAMA/GETTY IMAGES

Shipping containers sit at the Port of Los Angeles, the nation's busiest container port, on Sept. 18, 2018.

largest economy, would be able to get more concessions from its bilateral partners than its multilateral partners.

Trump launched a tariff campaign early this year, as part of his hard-nosed strategy to level the playing field for American workers and end unfair trade practices against the United States.

"We're going to see who's treating us fairly, who's not treating us fairly," he said at the White House on March 8 while rolling out his steel and aluminum tariffs.

A few weeks later, Trump announced his first trade win in reaching a deal with South Korea. According to the White House, it was the first renegotiation of a trade pact in U.S. history. Both sides signed the revised bilateral free trade deal known as the U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS) in September.

Through this deal, the United States has reduced steel imports from South Korea by 30 percent and has gained concessions for U.S. automotive exports. Trump boasted about his deal, saying that the new agreement would reduce the U.S. trade deficit with South Korea and widen opportunities for American exporters.

The deal has important national security implications as well, since it reduces America's dependence on foreign steel and aluminum. Tariffs on metals imposed in March sparked reinvestment in domestic production, bringing back thousands of jobs.

Former Sen. Evan Bayh (D-Ind.), who advocates for tariffs, says the metals are essential to the U.S. defense industry.

"That's why it is important that we retain at a minimum the capacity to produce steel and aluminum products necessary for our military," he said at an event hosted by the American Primary Aluminum Association.

The Trump administration also reached a deal with the European Union, declaring a "new phase" in relations. Trump and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker agreed to work together to eliminate tariffs and other trade barriers on all

Former Sen. Evan Bayh (D-Ind.), who advocates for tariffs, says steel and aluminum are essential to the U.S. defense industry.

industrial goods. For the first time, both sides reached an understanding to cooperate against unfair trade practices and reform the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Trump's tariff strategy also put pressure on Tokyo to enter bilateral trade talks with Washington. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had earlier resisted bilateral talks, preferring a multilateral trade pact with the United States under the TPP. In September, both sides agreed to begin negotiations for a bilateral free-trade agreement. In hope of avoiding U.S. tariffs on imported autos, Abe was rumored to have made concessions to the United States by departing from his earlier stance.

NAFTA Revamp

The Trump administration landed its biggest trade win this year by overhauling the 24-year-old NAFTA and ending tensions with two of the United States' biggest trading partners, Canada and Mexico. The three countries signed on Nov. 30 a new trade deal, the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), on the sidelines of the G-20 Summit in Argentina. The pact has to be ratified by lawmakers in the three countries.

Critics called the deal a minor update to NAFTA. The new pact, however, has strong labor rules, which makes it an important milestone for international trade.

Trump succeeded in altering the agreement in ways that Democrats have longed to achieve for years, said Edward Alden, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, praising Trump's accomplishment.

The new "rules of origin" on cars is a substantial improvement to the old agreement, which promotes production and jobs in the region. Under the new deal, 75 percent of automobiles' content must come from North America, up from the original threshold of 62.5 percent. The rules also incentivize the use of high-wage manufacturing labor in the auto sector.

The new deal with Canada and Mexico also revealed Washington's plan to isolate Beijing in a new global trade order by edging China out of trade deals with allies. The USMCA has a so-called "poison pill" provision that essentially blocks any trade flirtation with China.

According to the agreement, "entry by any party into a free-trade agreement with a non-market country" like China would allow the other parties to terminate the pact.

Patrick Mulloy, a former member of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, called it a "brilliant provision."

"Because that changes the whole parameters," Mulloy said during an interview in October.

US-China Trade War

Trump's trade war with Beijing goes beyond the rationale of reducing the U.S. trade deficit with China. For years, the Chinese communist regime has refused U.S. demands that it change its unfair trade practices.

The United States has accused China of stealing key technologies and intellectual property (IP) from foreign companies using various tactics that include physical and cyber theft and forced technology transfers.

Since China's accession to the WTO in 2001, globalization has been all about incorporating China, according to Diana Cheylova, chief economist of Enodo Economics.

"Despite joining the WTO, China never became a fully-fledged market economy, which the Americans expected," she said.

According to Cheylova, the Chinese people were the primary beneficiaries of globalization. Meanwhile, "a large chunk of the electorate in the Western World felt left behind" in relative terms, she said.

In December, Trump came away from the G-20 summit with several triumphs, including a trade truce with China and the WTO reform.

Trump and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping declared a 90-day ceasefire on tariff increases on Dec. 1 at the end of their bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the summit. As part of the deal, China for the first time made a firm commitment to deliver structural reforms to address Washington's long-standing concerns.

It is not clear whether China will fulfill its pledges within the 90-day ceasefire. However, "if it happens, it goes down as one of the largest deals ever made," Trump said after the meeting.

During the summit, leaders of the world's top economies also agreed for the first time to reform the 23-year-old WTO, backing Trump, who has repeatedly called the organization a "disaster."

The G-20 countries collectively acknowledged that the multilateral system was failing and needed improvement.

SAUL LOEB/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

President Donald Trump forced North Korean leader Kim Jong Un to the negotiating table using diplomatic efforts backed by sanctions and a credible military threat. At the conclusion of their historic summit in Singapore, Trump and Kim signed a joint statement in which North Korea declared its “unwavering commitment to complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.” The two leaders will have another summit in 2019. However, as the United States continues to pressure North Korea for complete denuclearization, the biggest wildcards are the Chinese communist regime—the North’s biggest backer—and Russia, which has sought to extend its influence.



BORDER SECURITY

From the Caravans of 2018 to the Supreme Court in 2019

CHARLOTTE CUTHBERTSON

WASHINGTON—Although the wall is dominating the final breaths of 2018, it was the migrant caravans and the record number of family units crossing the border that towered over border security this year.

As the pace of illegal activity along the southwest border increased, Congress slowly ground to a halt on finding solutions, and federal judges took a blowtorch to all of President Donald Trump's attempts to patch holes in the system.

Major media outlets played a role in injecting hysteria into an already-fraught humanitarian crisis, including several times showing photos or footage from the Obama era to discredit Trump by letting people assume the images were current.

This year, tens of thousands of Central Americans paid smugglers to journey north and enter the United States as asylum-seekers. Thousands more joined caravans in April and in October.

In total, almost 400,000 people were apprehended along the southwest border after crossing illegally during fiscal year 2017—averaging out to almost 1,100 per day.

Driving the increases were family units, which consist of at least one child and one adult.

The administration tried several methods to stem the flow, explaining that while most asylum claims are bogus, the system is being used as an effective way to gain access to the United States and disappear once inside the country.

Eighty-nine percent of asylum-seekers from Central America pass an initial screening at the border when they claim fear of returning to their country. If a child is involved, as is the case for more than

396,579

▶ illegal aliens were apprehended by Border Patrol in fiscal 2018

SOURCE: CBP.GOV



▼
A Border Patrol agent near the U.S.-Mexico border in Yuma, Ariz., on May 25, 2018.

SAMIRA BOUAOU/THE EPOCH TIMES

60,000 crossings per month right now, the maximum detention stay for both parent and child is 20 days—a timeframe that renders an asylum adjudication impossible.

Everyone is then released into the United States—hence the concept of “catch and release.” Yet only 9 percent of them are subsequently granted asylum by an immigration judge, according to the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ).

The rest remain in the wind.

“Indeed, only 1.5 percent of family units from Central America apprehended [in fiscal] 2017 have been removed to their countries of origin, despite the fact that most will not end up having valid claims to remain in the United States when their court proceedings conclude,” Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Commissioner Kevin McAleenan said during a Senate oversight hearing on Dec. 11.

Hoping Something Sticks

Absent congressional action to close the loopholes that are allowing economic migrants and those who want to join family members to enter anytime, the administration has tried several approaches to reduce the number of fake claims of asylum.

In May, the Department of Justice launched a “zero tolerance” policy, saying all illegal border crossers are subject to prosecution. The policy was intended to funnel asylum-seekers through ports of entry where processing was easier and keep Border Patrol agents out in the field.

The prosecutions forced the temporary separation of adults and children while an illegal entry case was being adjudicated. Officials also verified the familial relationship between the adult and the child, conducted a criminal background check, and dealt with any medical issues, including communicable diseases.

An uproar ensued; the administration

was blamed by Democrats and some media for “ripping babies from mothers’ arms,” and it quickly walked the policy back.

In June, then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions narrowed the criteria for asylum. He essentially reverted the criteria to what it was before 2014, when the Obama administration opened it up to include private criminal cases, including domestic violence.

The definition has not changed. Asylum-seekers have always needed to prove that they have suffered past persecution or have a well-founded fear of future persecution in their home country because of their race,



CHARLOTTE CUTHBERTSON/THE EPOCH TIMES



Migrants break through the U.S. border fence just beyond the east pedestrian entrance of the San Ysidro crossing in Tijuana, Mexico, on Nov. 25, 2018.

religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.

“It is not enough to simply show that the government has difficulty controlling the behavior or that certain populations are more likely to be victims of crime,” the Department of Homeland Security stated in June.

U.S. District Judge Emmet Sullivan blocked this change on Dec. 19.

On Nov. 9, as the large caravan from Central America was approaching, Trump said



The real battle is for voting numbers.

Trevor Loudon, leading expert on communist and socialist movements

anyone crossing the border illegally would be rendered ineligible for asylum.

U.S. District Judge Jon Tigar blocked Trump’s proclamation on Nov. 20, and on Dec. 19, the Supreme Court declined to intervene until the case completes its journey through the lower courts.

Remain in Mexico Deal

But, in what may be a breakthrough in controlling undeserving asylum claims, Department of Homeland Secretary Kirstjen

Nielsen announced on Dec. 20 that asylum-seekers may now be returned to Mexico for the duration of their immigration proceedings.

“If they are granted asylum by a U.S. judge, they will be welcomed into America. If they are not, they will be removed to their home countries,” Nielsen said. “‘Catch and release’ will be replaced with ‘catch and return.’ This will also allow us to focus more attention on those who are actually fleeing persecution.”

The agreement seems to be more of a handshake at this point, but it's the right thing for Mexico to do, said Jessica Vaughan, director of policy for Center for Immigration Studies.

"What is really motivating Mexico [to agree] is the fact that this is becoming their problem, too. That the United States is not just accepting people into the country," she said. "Politically, no Mexican president wants to be seen as doing the bidding of the United States, but this is really bigger than that—this is a problem for Mexico, too."

Vaughan said a \$10.6 billion foreign aid package for southern Mexico and Central America announced on Dec. 18 would have sweetened the deal. "I think everyone agrees that could help if it's used in the right way," she said.

Expectations for 2019

"If 2018 was the year of the caravan, then the Supreme Court is going to play the lead role in 2019," Vaughan said. "Nothing is going to happen in Congress. Everything that the administration tries to do is going to be subject to a lawsuit and possibly enjoined."

Birthright citizenship, asylum criteria, the end of DACA, and sanctuary city funding will all likely be taken up by the Supreme Court in 2019 after the cases work their way through the lower courts.

Vaughan predicts the House Democrats will pass some kind of amnesty deal, most likely for recipients of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA).

"Some big amnesty that will go nowhere in the Senate," she said. "But they want to do that for their base. Because they think that benefits them politically and they want to get the Republicans on record as opposing an amnesty."

And she predicts that Democrats will look to cut funding for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), detention centers, and "all kinds of enforcement programs. And then the Senate will put it back in."

She said that the Remain in Mexico policy might get challenged in court and that it's not a complete solution anyway. "It can be overturned by the next president, or dropped by Mexico, or something—there are things that can go wrong with it," she said. "It's still dysfunctional if all these people end up getting approved for asylum anyway—if the definitions are not tightened up to the language in the law. And it's still dysfunctional if we can't figure out a way to adjudicate these cases more quickly."

Immigration courts currently have a backlog of almost 800,000 cases awaiting adjudication.

The Broader Picture

Trevor Loudon, an expert on communism and a contributor to The Epoch Times, agrees that the battle in 2019 will largely shift from Congress to the judiciary.



Members of the U.S. military install concertina wire on the levee behind Granjeno, Texas, just north of the U.S.-Mexico border on Nov. 7, 2018.

SAMIRA BOUAOU/THE EPOCH TIMES



If 2018 was the year of the caravan, then the Supreme Court is going to play the lead role in 2019.

Jessica Vaughan, policy director, Center for Immigration Studies

But "the real battle is for voting numbers," Loudon said. Democrats would gain an electoral advantage through millions of illegal alien votes, he said, "versus the patriots' desire for national sovereignty."

"That's what it comes down to," he said.

"And you've got a complicating factor in there—you've got some elements of the right, the Chamber of Commerce types, who all they care about is open borders so they can get an unending supply of cheap labor."

He predicts 2019 will bring a real confrontation.

"This is going to be really, really, tense confrontation," he said. "And we're going to see an amp up in the aggravation. I think the wall will get started, and I think the left will do everything they can to stop it."

Loudon said he also expects "a civil war" in the Democratic Party between the new progressives and the old guard.

"This isn't socialist versus liberal. This



SAMIRA BOUAOU/THE EPOCH TIMES

The Supreme Court of the United States in Washington on Dec. 10, 2018.

is communist versus socialists," he said. "They're going to be preoccupied. They're not going to get a lot done because President Trump is going to veto it anyway, but they're going to push the most extreme, left-wing, progressive measures you could possibly think of."

"And the judiciary is chock-full of socialist and open-border Marxists, so they will do whatever they can."

JOHN MOORE/GETTY IMAGES



Illegal border crossers turn themselves in to a Border Patrol agent after crossing from Mexico into the United States near Mission, Texas, on Nov. 7, 2018.

DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



U.S. forces, accompanied by Kurdish People's Protection Units fighters, drive their armored vehicles near the northern Syrian village of al-Darbasiyah, on the border with Turkey on April 28, 2017.

EXIT FROM SYRIA

*A New Phase for Trump's
'America First' Foreign Policy*

NEWS ANALYSIS

IVAN PENTCHOUKOV

President Donald Trump caught all of Washington by surprise on Dec. 19 by doing what he promised to do on the campaign trail and foreshadowed this August. Having virtually defeated the ISIS terrorist group in Syria, he ordered U.S. troops out of the region.

Within hours, outrage poured in from Democrats and Republicans. News reports painted a picture of how withdrawal from this strip of desert in the Middle East would lead to death and destruction, how America had abandoned its allies, and how the maneuver was nothing short of surrender to Russia and Iran.

Relevant factors underlying America's ground presence in Syria were lost amid the hype and outrage. Key among them is why our troops were deployed there to

The United States has spent \$6 trillion on post-9/11 wars in the Middle East.

begin with. Defeating ISIS was the original mission and remains the only justification under which the deployment is constitutional under the 9/11-era Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Terrorists Act.

Doing what one promised and abiding by the Constitution can cause a ruckus in Washington. Some Americans voted for Trump to do just that. But many more voted for a man who promised to put America first at home and abroad.

Trump has boldly delivered on that promise daily since coming to Washington. The exit signifies a new stage in the rollout of the "America First" agenda, extending it, for the first time, to how the White House deals with military engagements around the world.

"I won an election, said to be one of the greatest of all time, based on getting out of endless & costly foreign wars & also based on

Strong Borders which will keep our Country safe. We fight for the borders of other countries, but we won't fight for the borders of our own!" Trump wrote on Twitter on Dec. 22.

The United States has spent \$6 trillion on post 9/11 wars in the Middle East, according to the Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs. Trump is not alone to view that investment as ill-advised. Less than half of a percent of the \$6 trillion would be enough to build the wall on the southern border, using an April 2017 Homeland Security cost estimate of 21.6 billion. The \$45 billion price tag for America's presence in Afghanistan this year would be enough to build the barrier twice.

War hawks may argue that pulling the military out of Syria is counter to America's interests because it may lead to chaos in the region and create the condi- ➡

tions for the reemergence of ISIS.

“That’s exactly the flawed argument hawks employed to criticize the 2011 withdrawal from Iraq. Sure, it left a vacuum in which ISIS emerged. But ISIS itself is a product of the U.S. invasion of Iraq,” wrote John Glaser, director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.

“And our presence in Syria could very well be creating comparable unintended consequences, instead of preventing them.”

Whether the exit is a significant boon to Russia, a country with a gross domestic product smaller than that of Texas, is arguable. Moscow, with its single, dilapidated aircraft carrier and a military budget 14 times smaller than the United States, has resorted to opportunism and disruption.

Meanwhile, America’s biggest adversary, China, has spent almost nothing in the Middle East while amassing a giant, technologically advanced fighting force. Any cost cutting in the Middle East strengthens Washington’s posture against Beijing.

The withdrawal from Syria will also be popular with voters, most of whom have grown weary of endless wars. Most Americans surveyed last year believed the war in Syria is not in the national interest, according to a survey by Quinnipiac University.

In April, when Trump began discussing a pullout with his staff, nearly half of Americans surveyed said the best way to handle the Syrian crisis was to leave it alone, according to a poll by Rasmussen Reports.

The exit from Syria is likely the first of many moves by Trump to shift the global military theater with American interests in mind. Sources in the administration told The Wall Street Journal that Trump has also ordered a complete withdrawal from Afghanistan, with 7,000 of the 14,000 troops there scheduled to return home over the next several weeks, a surprise gift for the families of those who return in time for Christmas.

“It’s an incredibly bold maneuver,” Sen. Rand Paul said of the exit from Syria. “All of the naysayers in Washington will be against him. But, guess what? If you ask the American people, this is why President Trump won the election.”

DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



Smoke billows after bombings in the Deir Ezzor Province near Hajin, eastern Syria, on Dec. 15, 2018.

OBAMACARE

The Unaffordable Care Act’s Death by Many Drops

HOLLY KELLUM

“**I would argue that all the healthy people were gone from the exchange plans long before this year.**

Joseph Antos, researcher, American Enterprise Institute

WASHINGTON—The Roman poet Ovid once wrote that water is soft and marble hard, “and yet we see soft water through hard marble eat.”

The metaphor is now used to describe the virtue of persistence, which the Trump administration has demonstrated as it seeks to degrade what was once dubbed by the House Budget Committee as “The Unaffordable Care Act,” also known as Obamacare or the Affordable Care Act (ACA).

This year didn’t see sweeping change to the law. In fact, this year was mostly defined by the Republicans’ lack of unity in failing last year to repeal it—twice.

But like water whittling away at hard marble, the Trump administration has given it a good weathering with drop-like rulemakings, law reinterpretations, and exploitation of its loopholes to do exactly what the Obama administration tried hard to prevent—having Republican opposition make it irrelevant.

The day before the midterms, Obama warned Americans that if they didn’t vote for Democrats who would keep the law in place, “the character of our country” was at stake. Ironically, when the ACA first passed, Republicans warned the law would change the country’s character.

Reinsurance Programs

One of the reasons premiums on the health care exchanges more than doubled after Obamacare was implemented is that companies were suddenly required to cover people with pre-existing conditions, and they weren’t allowed to charge them higher rates.

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid



Services (CMS) has tried to buck that trend by exploiting a provision in Obamacare that allows states to suspend some key ACA rules for experimentation purposes.

CMS put out guidelines earlier this month encouraging states to apply for section 1332 innovation waivers and suggested programs the waivers could be used for. All but one of the eight waivers that have been granted so far have been for re-insurance programs, which use public money to offset the costliest beneficiaries so that insurance companies keep premiums low for everyone else.

The states that have implemented these programs have seen decreases in their premium rates in the individual marketplace,

WHITEHOUSE.GOV



President Donald Trump at a listening session with four families adversely affected by Obamacare at the White House on July 24, 2017.

according to CMS data, but it's not clear how much residents in those states are actually saving. States are having to dig into their coffers to fund what was once being paid by beneficiaries through higher premiums.

"There's nothing cost-saving about these programs, they're just cost shifting," said Michael Cannon, the director of health policy studies at the Cato Institute, who points out that taxpayers are paying for them through higher taxes.

Some states are offsetting the costs with federal savings resulting from fewer people receiving premium tax credits. The tax credits target people of low or moderate income who buy insurance on the exchanges.

There's nothing cost-saving about these programs; they're just cost shifting.

Michael Cannon, director of health policy studies, Cato Institute

Re-insurance at the federal level was implemented for the first three years of the Affordable Care Act in an effort to stabilize the market amid all the changes. The Trump administration has so far not proposed doing it on the federal level again, but strongly encourages it at the state level, saying it promotes competition by reducing uncertainty and risk for insurers.

"With no competition, these monopoly insurers have the market power to hike rates," said CMS Administrator Seema Verma at the ALEC Policy Summit in Washington on Nov. 29. "For anyone who understands how competition delivers better value to consumers, it should come as no surprise that a recent study found

that Exchange premiums were 50 percent higher, on average, in rating areas with a monopolist insurer."

While the number of insurers dipped in 2018, more are expected to enter the market or expand their coverage in 2019, which, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF), is thanks in part to insurance company margins improving this year.

Paul Ginsburg, the Leonard D. Schaeffer chair in health policy studies at the Brookings Institution, says he thinks re-insurance was effective at the federal level and has shown to be effective at the state level as well.

"I think the state often comes out ➡

JIM WATSON/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



President Barack Obama during a rally on health care in College Park, Md., on Sept. 17, 2009.

ahead, because if people are covered by insurance, there will be less burden on states from uninsured people who show up in hospitals and get uncompensated care,” he said.

Short-Term, Limited Duration Health Plans

Getting the uninsured rate down is a target both Democrats and Republicans are behind, but how they approach it usually differs.

Conservatives often favor bringing plan prices down through competition while liberals often favor mandating coverage.

In August, the administration announced that it would be reversing an Obama-era rule by increasing the length of short-term plans from three months to up to three years to create more options for people facing high premiums.

The plans, called short-term, limited duration health plans, are meant to cover people who face a gap in their health coverage, and are not subject to ACA requirements.

For this reason they are cheaper than most ACA plans—54 percent less than ACA-compliant plans, according to a KFF analysis.

Critics argue that making these plans a viable alternative will increase premiums for people buying ACA-compliant health plans because healthy people, who offset the costs of the sick, will buy them instead.

SAMIRA BOUAOU/THE EPOCH TIMES



Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services Administrator Seema Verma in Washington on Oct. 1, 2018.

“I would argue that all the healthy people were gone from the exchange plans long before this year,” said Joseph Antos, the Wilson H. Taylor scholar in health care and retirement policy at the American Enterprise Institute. He adds that it’s too early to tell how big of an impact the short-term, limited duration plans will have.

Critics have labeled them “junk insurance” policies because they don’t cover the range of benefits ACA compliant plans do and may offer lower premiums but higher deductibles.

Proponents point out that the ACA one-size-fits-all benefits cover items consumers may not need, such as maternity care for individuals in their sixties, jacking up costs in the process.

Marie Fishpaw, the director of domestic policy studies at The Heritage Foundation’s Institute for Family, Community, and Opportunity, says the short-term, limited duration plans are not a “silver bullet” solution to high premiums, but could “be a lifeboat” for those who would otherwise go without coverage.

More Drops

This year is the last year the “Shared Responsibility Payment,” more commonly known as the individual mandate, will be in effect. It imposes a tax penalty on Americans who do not have health coverage, and was meant to incentivize the healthy to get insurance to offset the costs of the sick.

Late last year, Trump signed a bill that made the tax penalty \$0 starting in 2019, saying “you’re basically saying, pay for something in order not to have to get healthcare.”

His administration has further sought to erode the penalty by offering guidance on how to avoid it in 2018. In September, CMS released guidance on claiming a “hardship exemption” from the penalty and announced a new streamlined process to apply for it.

Further showing its disdain, the administration also chose not to defend it in a lawsuit by 20 state attorneys general. That lawsuit resulted in a Texas judge ruling on Dec. 14 that the individual mandate is unconstitutional, and since the mandate cannot be separated from the rest of the ACA, the judge ruled the entire law is invalid.

While this ruling will likely be challenged, it will be closely watched in the year or years ahead. In the meantime, the decision has “no impact to current coverage or coverage in a 2019 plan,” Verma wrote after the ruling.

The administration has also cut the budget for the federal exchange navigators who help people sign up through the federal exchanges and for Medicaid. In 2016 the navigator program had a budget of \$63 million. The budget for 2018 was \$10 million. This raised fears that fewer people would sign up for health care through the exchanges this year, but preliminary data put out by CMS shows only a 3.5 percent decrease over last year.

Also this year the administration announced proposed health reimbursement arrangements (HRA) that allow employers to pay into tax-favored accounts that employees can then use to buy individual coverage, as well as pay for other medical expenses. The rule is set to take effect in January 2020.

While all these drops haven’t broken the marble facade that is the Affordable Care Act, the administration has worn it away at the edges. Only time will tell if the water is stronger than the marble.

MARK WILSON/GETTY IMAGES



ALEX WONG/GETTY IMAGES



THE SPYGATE
SCANDAL

WHAT WE LEARNED IN 2018

JEWEL SAMAD/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



BRYAN THOMAS/GETTY IMAGES



THE SPYGATE SCANDAL

JEFF CARLSON

2018 proved to be a year of numerous revelations that provided clarity regarding events leading up to—and following—the 2016 presidential election.

It is now clear that elements within the FBI, the CIA, the Department of Justice (DOJ), and the State Department were actively working against the Trump campaign, and that these elements continued to work against President Donald Trump’s administration following his surprise win.

Immediately following Trump’s victory, these efforts focused on two specific fronts: hobbling the effectiveness of Trump’s newly formed administration and simultaneously working toward his impeachment.

Complicit in this effort was the mainstream media, which almost gleefully promoted story after story full of half-truths and partial facts.

But as we moved into the second half of 2017, the president continued to surprise and confound the opposition. His administration began to assert itself, and a semblance of control was exerted over the FBI and DOJ at the most senior levels.

In early 2018, a purge of sorts appears to have taken place; a number of high-profile individuals abruptly resigned or were fired. Former FBI Deputy Director Andrew McCabe was fired and is currently the subject of an ongoing grand jury investigation.

The investigation by special counsel Robert Mueller, which began in May 2017, began to return indictments, but has noticeably failed to produce any evidence of collusion on the part of the Trump campaign. Each indictment from Mueller has specifically noted there was no collusion on the part of any American citizen. The special counsel appears to be particularly focused on violations of the Foreign Agents Registration Act, and influence peddling under the Obama administration.

At the same time, multiple investigations, including a prominent investigation into FISA abuse, conducted by DOJ Inspector General Michael Horowitz, remain ongoing.

Looking forward into 2019, the questions become “who will be held accountable?,” “how high up the political ladder will the investigation go?,” and “will some of the more prominent players, such as former CIA Director John Brennan, become part of an investigative focus?”



Dec. 1, 2017

Judge Rudolph Contreras presided over the guilty plea of Gen. Michael Flynn, President Donald Trump’s former national security adviser. Contreras would be forced to recuse himself from the case six days later. Notably, Contreras is also a FISA judge and is acquainted with former FBI agent Peter Strzok, who oversaw the FBI’s counter-intelligence investigation into the Trump campaign.



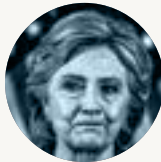
Dec. 2, 2017

The news emerged that Strzok and FBI lawyer Lisa Page had been removed from the special counsel investigation by Robert Mueller after Inspector General Michael Horowitz informed Mueller of the existence of incriminating messages between Strzok and Page that revealed ongoing anti-Trump biases.



Dec. 2, 2017

The IG said in a statement that he was continuing his investigation into “allegations regarding various actions of the Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation in advance of the 2016 election.” The IG is currently continuing several additional investigations, the most prominent of which is looking into FISA abuse by the FBI and DOJ in obtaining a FISA warrant on Trump campaign adviser Carter Page.



Dec. 4, 2017

It was revealed by CNN that it was Strzok who changed the wording of then-FBI Director James Comey’s description of then-candidate Hillary Clinton’s handling of classified information from “grossly negligent” to “extremely careless.” The change in wording was notable as “grossly negligent” carries intent and is a punishable offense, while “extremely careless” does not carry any legal ramifications.



Jan. 23, 2018

James Rybicki, chief of staff to former FBI Director Comey and his successor, FBI Director Christopher Wray, resigned.



Jan. 24, 2018

Sen. Chuck Grassley began broadcasting the existence of another classified document, the Grassley Referral, which he had drafted regarding the relationship between the FBI and Steele.



Jan. 29, 2018

FBI Deputy Director Andrew McCabe was forced to resign from his active position. He was formally fired on March 16, 2018.



Feb. 2, 2018

The Nunes House memo was made public, and it revealed a number of troubling disclosures: The Steele dossier was the primary component of all four FISA applications on Carter Page—and, notably, the FBI hid information about its origin from the FISA court. The FBI used articles created and leaked by Steele as supporting documentation for the Steele dossier in gaining FISA approval—using a practice known as circular reporting. And all the while, the dossier remained uncorroborated by the FBI.

Complicit in this effort was the mainstream media, which almost gleefully promoted story after story full of half-truths and partial facts.

WHAT WE LEARNED IN 2018



Dec. 6, 2017

DOJ Associate Deputy Attorney Bruce Ohr was demoted after House Intelligence Committee investigators found Ohr was in contact with former MI6 agent Christopher Steele while Steele was constructing his dossier. Ohr also met with Glenn Simpson, head of Fusion GPS, after the election. It would later be discovered that Ohr met with Simpson prior to the election as well.



Dec. 7, 2017

It was revealed by Fox News that Ohr had been in direct contact with Steele around the same time the application for a FISA warrant on Trump campaign foreign policy adviser Carter Page was submitted and granted in October 2016.



Dec. 11, 2017

It was reported by Fox News that Bruce Ohr's wife, Nellie Ohr, worked for Fusion GPS during the 2016 election. The article noted: "Mrs. Ohr has written extensively on Russia-related subjects. HPSCI staff confirmed to Fox News that she was paid by Fusion GPS through the summer and fall of 2016."



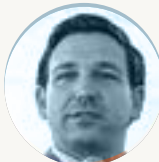
Dec. 20, 2017

James Baker, the FBI general counsel (the senior legal counsel at the FBI), was demoted and reassigned. Baker later resigned and/or was fired, on May 4, 2018.



Jan. 18, 2018

A classified document began to raise alarms within the House Intelligence Committee, prompting sudden and somewhat alarming statements from Rep. Matt Gaetz and then Rep. Ron DeSantis, who noted the following: "The classified report compiled by the House Intelligence is deeply troubling and raises serious questions about the upper echelon of the Obama DOJ and Comey FBI as it relates to the so-called collusion investigation." The classified document seen by the two men was what came to be known as the Nunes House memo.



Jan. 19, 2018

The DOJ produced 384 pages of text messages exchanged between Strzok and Lisa Page. The FBI notified Congress that they had "failed to preserve" more than five months of texts from Dec. 14, 2016, to May 17, 2017, the same day that Mueller was appointed by Deputy Attorney General Rosenstein as special counsel. IG Horowitz was able to recover the missing texts in late January.

Each indictment from Mueller has specifically noted there was no collusion on the part of any American citizen.



Feb. 2, 2018

Josh Campbell, former special assistant to Comey, resigned. Campbell wrote an op-ed in The New York Times on why he was leaving, but failed to disclose his working relationship with Comey, or that he had been offered a lucrative job at CNN.



Feb. 4, 2018

Victoria Nuland, the former assistant secretary of state for Europe and Eurasian affairs, revealed in an appearance on CBS' "Face the Nation" that she had received a copy of the early Steele memos in July 2016. Nuland had provided permission for the FBI to send agent Mike Gaeta to London to meet with Steele in early July 2016. Nuland later said she shared this information with then-Secretary of State John Kerry.



Feb. 7, 2018

The Grassley memo was released, and in some respects, the information it held was even more damning than the House memo. Grassley's memo noted the FBI had relied heavily on the dossier in its FISA application. Based on statements made by Steele in a British Court, either Steele lied or the FBI made materially false statements in documents reviewed by Grassley. There was no corroborating done by the FBI, other than the circular reporting created by Steele.



Feb. 7, 2018

Sen. Ron Johnson (R-Wis.) released a large batch of text messages exchanged between Peter Strzok and Lisa Page. The texts contained many redactions.



Feb. 7, 2018

David Laufman, deputy assistant attorney general in charge of counterintelligence for the DOJ's National Security Division, resigned. Laufman "played a leading role in the Clinton email server and Russian hacking investigations." Laufman would later represent Christine Blasey Ford's friend, Monica McLean, during the hearings of Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh.



Feb. 8, 2018

Michael Kortan, the FBI assistant director of public affairs, resigned (effective on Feb. 15, 2018). Kortan served as assistant director for public affairs, an influential job that controlled media access.



Feb. 9, 2018

Rachel Brand, an associate attorney general and the No. 3 official behind Deputy AG Rosenstein, resigned. She “played a critical role in Congress’ reauthorization” of Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act.



Feb. 12, 2018

Senators Charles Grassley (R-Iowa) and Lindsey Graham (R-N.C.) issued a press release regarding a Feb. 8, 2018, letter sent to Susan Rice. The pair had uncovered a “partially unclassified email sent by President Barack Obama’s former National Security Advisor (NSA) Susan Rice to herself on January 20, 2017 – President Trump’s inauguration day.” Rice’s letter appeared to hint that Obama had discussed the matter of limiting the sharing of classified information with the incoming Trump administration.



Feb. 16, 2018

Special counsel Mueller issued an indictment of 13 Russian nationals and three companies. Notably, no evidence was found of collusion on the part of any American citizen. This fact would be specified during a same-day press conference by Rosenstein:

“There is no allegation in this indictment that any American was a knowing participant in this illegal activity. There is no allegation in the indictment that the charged conduct altered the outcome of the 2016 election.”

FEBRUARY–MARCH 2018

Attention began to refocus on the role of former CIA Director John Brennan. As evidence would continue to unfold through the first half of 2018, it would become increasingly apparent that Brennan had directed a larger effort that encompassed actions by the FBI, DOJ, and the State Department.

It was during this same general period that a series of sudden resignations and departures swept the FBI and DOJ following the earlier demotions and reassignments of Strzok, Ohr, and Lisa Page.



March 16, 2018

McCabe was formally fired on March 16, 2018. He was forced to resign from his position on Jan. 29, 2018. McCabe was fired for lying under oath regarding leaks to the media. His actions would be detailed later in an IG report. McCabe, who is currently sitting before a grand jury, had an active role in what came to be known as Spygate.



March 30, 2018

Greg Brower, the FBI assistant director for the office of congressional affairs, resigned. He was the FBI’s liaison with Congress.



June 28, 2018

During sworn testimony before Congress, Rosenstein noted discrepancies between the FISA warrant he signed and press reports regarding the FISA warrant:

“I’ve reviewed that one in some detail, and I can tell you the information that’s public about that doesn’t match with my understanding of the one that I signed.”



July 13, 2018

A second indictment was issued by the special counsel. As with the Feb. 16 indictment, no evidence of collusion was found on the part of any American citizen.



July 13, 2018

Lisa Page testified before the House Judiciary and Oversight and Government Reform committees in a closed-door session. U.S. Rep. John Ratcliffe (R-Texas) later noted, “Lisa Page left me with the impression, based on her own words, that the lead investigator of the Russian collusion case, Peter Strzok, had found no evidence of collusion after nearly a year.”



July 21, 2018

Heavily redacted versions of the Carter Page FISA warrant applications were abruptly released. Immediately apparent was the importance of the Steele dossier as the primary component of evidence the FBI presented to the FISA court. Large sections of the documents remain redacted, and Nunes has stated emphatically they contain exculpatory information. We are still awaiting declassification of these documents.



Aug. 13, 2018

FBI agent Peter Strzok was formally fired.

MID-AUGUST

The role and importance of DOJ official Bruce Ohr began to emerge. Ohr not only maintained ongoing contact with Steele but also acted as a conduit between Steele and the FBI in 2016 and 2017 in the context of the agency’s counterintelligence investigation into the Trump campaign.

Ohr facilitated the flow of information between Steele, Fusion GPS, and the FBI after Steele was formally terminated by the FBI in late October or early November 2016. Steele’s termination occurred after he revealed—in violation of FBI policy—his relationship with the FBI in an Oct. 30, 2016, article in Mother Jones magazine by journalist David Corn.



April 22, 2018

Rep. Devin Nunes (R-Calif.) disclosed a key piece of information: No official intelligence had been used to open the FBI's counter-intelligence investigation into the Trump campaign on July 31, 2016. In other words, unofficial intelligence, pushed through unofficial channels, was the source of the entire investigation into Russian collusion.

This admission was particularly damning to Brennan, who had testified before Congress regarding his role in establishing the investigative process.



April 27, 2018

The House Intelligence Committee released a declassified version of its complete report on Russian election interference: the Report on Russian Active Measures. Former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper would be identified in the House report as the apparent leaker of information regarding Comey's briefing to Trump on the dossier.

MAY 2018

The scope of the efforts behind the unofficial intelligence gathering—dubbed Crossfire Hurricane—began to be revealed. George Papadopoulos, a young foreign policy adviser for the Trump campaign, was targeted by a number of individuals beginning in March 2016—and perhaps earlier. British and Australian officials were involved, as were U.S. intelligence agencies. Many of the targeting attempts appear to have been efforts to establish evidence of collusion—or the appearance of collusion—with Russia.



May 4, 2018

Baker, the FBI general counsel, resigned and/or was fired. He had previously been demoted and reassigned on Dec. 20, 2017.



May 17, 2018

U.S. District Judge T.S. Ellis III, who presided over the trial of former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort, received an unredacted version of the Aug. 2, 2017, revised Scope of Investigation & Definition of Authority memo secretly issued by Deputy AG Rosenstein to special counsel Mueller. Following his review of the memo, Judge Ellis said the following:

“The record makes clear that the Acting Attorney General [Rosenstein] has required the Special Counsel to consult with the Acting Attorney General.”



June 14, 2018

The IG released his long-awaited report “Review of Various Actions by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Department of Justice in Advance of the 2016 Election.” The IG report contained a surprising amount of detail within the body of the document and reflected significant political bias within the FBI.

Following the release of the IG report, Strzok was escorted out of FBI headquarters and was formally fired on Aug. 13.



Aug. 17, 2018

During an interview with Rachel Maddow, former CIA Director Brennan inadvertently revealed other methods by which information on members of the Trump campaign was being funneled into the FBI. As Brennan was discussing concerns he had that “Russians were trying to leverage U.S. citizens in order to achieve their objectives in the presidential election,” he made this startling admission:

“Any time we would incidentally collect information on a U.S. person, we would hand that over to the FBI because they have the legal authority to do it.”



Aug. 28, 2018

Bruce Ohr testified before the House Judiciary and House Oversight Committees in a closed-door session. Ohr reportedly “gave lawmakers ‘a list of half a dozen’ senior FBI and DOJ officials [who] knew about his involvement with ex-British spy Christopher Steele.”



Sept. 7, 2018

Papadopoulos was sentenced to 14 days in prison for lying to the FBI. Papadopoulos's conviction, which stems from the Mueller investigation, was not related to any collusion on the part of the Trump campaign.



Sept. 9, 2018

Carter Page sent a tweet noting date of meeting with prosecutors from the Southern District of New York and FBI regarding Page's assistance in the case of Russian spy Evgeny Buryakov:

“I can answer an old question on when I spoke with FBI / SDNY Prosecutors whom I had helped. My records show March 2, 2016.”

Page's assistance in the Buryakov case cast further doubt on the validity of the Page FISA warrant.



Sept. 17, 2018

Trump issued an order for the immediate declassification of three series of documents related to the Russia investigation and the spying on his presidential campaign.

The first set of documents related to the FISA warrant application to spy on Trump campaign adviser Carter Page, specifically pages 10–12 and 17–34 of the June 2017 renewal of the warrant.

The second set of documents related to a series of FBI interviews with former Associate Deputy Attorney General Bruce Ohr.

The third set of documents encompassed all FBI reports of interviews prepared in connection with the Page FISA applications.

Looking forward into 2019, the question becomes ‘who will be held accountable?’



Sept. 21, 2018

Trump made a surprising turnaround on his declassification order, asking the inspector general to review the documents on an “expedited basis.”

Trump gave two reasons for the sudden reversal, noting: “I met with the DOJ concerning the declassification of various UNREDACTED documents. They agreed to release them but stated that so doing may have a perceived negative impact on the Russia probe. Also, key Allies’ called to ask not to release.”



Oct. 19, 2018

A third indictment was issued by the special counsel. As with the prior two indictments, no evidence of collusion was found on the part of any American citizen.



Oct. 24, 2018

Politico reported that “special counsel Robert Mueller appears to be locked in a dispute with a mystery grand jury witness resisting giving up information sought in the ongoing probe into alleged Trump campaign collusion with Russia.”



Nov. 7, 2018

Trump asked Attorney General Jeff Sessions to resign. Matthew Whitaker was appointed as acting attorney general by Trump. Whitaker will assume responsibility for the Mueller investigation, taking over from Rosenstein.



Nov. 15, 2018

Acting Attorney General Whitaker told Sen. Lindsey Graham that he was “not aware of any reason to fire the Special Counsel and he has no reason to believe the Special Counsel’s investigation has breached any Department guidelines.”



Nov. 29, 2018

Several ongoing investigations were revealed. The largest includes an ongoing probe of Danske Bank and Deutsche Bank.

Danske Bank is being investigated by the U.S. Department of Justice, and new charges were filed by Danish authorities. The bank’s CEO and chairman both have been forced to resign and numerous current employees are under investigation. Danske Bank has admitted that approximately \$230 billion that has flowed through one of its units in Estonia “needs to be treated as suspicious”, but the focus now appears to be shifting to other financial institutions.

The Steele dossier, written by a British national and former MI6 agent, was used by both the FBI and the CIA, and a summary of the document was provided directly to President Barack Obama.



Dec. 7, 2018

Former FBI Director Comey testified before the joint congressional committees on the Judiciary and Government Reform and Oversight.



Dec. 17, 2018

Comey returned to finish his testimony before the joint Congressional Committees on the Judiciary and Government Reform and Oversight.



Dec. 18, 2018

Lt. Gen. Flynn’s sentencing hearing was held. After a series of unusual events during the hearing, the judge delayed Flynn’s sentencing until 2019. A status report was scheduled to be filed with the court on March 13, 2019.



Dec. 19, 2018

A lawsuit in relation to a defamation claim against BuzzFeed revealed that Steele provided a copy of his final memo—Report 166—to an associate of the late Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), David Kramer; an unidentified British security official; Senior Director for Russian Affairs at the National Security Council Celeste Wallander; Rep. Adam Kinzinger (R-Ill.); and House Speaker Paul Ryan’s chief of staff, Jonathan Burks.

Kramer also provided BuzzFeed reporter Ken Bensinger with a copy of the Steele dossier along with other, unnamed reporters.



Dec. 20, 2018

Former security director for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence James Wolfe was sentenced to two months in prison for lying to the FBI. Wolfe had been accused by the FBI of engaging in ongoing, unauthorized contact with at least four reporters and was investigated for leaking classified information.



Dec. 21, 2018

An unnamed foreign-owned company reportedly involved in the Mueller investigation appealed to the Supreme Court:

“An unnamed, foreign government-owned company in a mystery court case is asking the Supreme Court to pause a grand jury subpoena it received related to special counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation.”

Former FBI Director James Comey recently testified that the Steele dossier wasn’t verified as of May 2017.

Special counsel Robert Mueller (C) on Capitol Hill on June 21, 2017.

CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY IMAGES



THE MUELLER INVESTIGATION

The Mueller investigation has proven to be an emotional issue and a source of concern for many. But there are some potentially reassuring facts for those concerned the special counsel is acting out of bounds. Mueller’s investigation has exhibited a common theme: influence peddling and FARA violations. And the majority of his investigations, such as the one into Paul Manafort, relate to events preceding Trump. Thus far, there have been no allegations of collusion in any of the Mueller indictments relating to the president.

Not widely known is that Trump, Rosenstein, and Mueller met on May 17, 2017—one day prior to Mueller’s appointment. Ostensibly, the meeting was about whether Mueller would accept the role of FBI director, but this would seem to make little sense.

Mueller had previously served as the FBI director from 2001 to 2013—two years beyond the normal 10-year tenure for an FBI director. In 2011, Obama requested that Mueller stay on as FBI director for an additional two years, which required special approval from Congress. A new tenure would almost certainly have been opposed.

The May 17 appointment of Mueller accomplished one very significant thing: It shifted control of the Russia Investigation from the FBI and

McCabe to Mueller. Rosenstein would retain ultimate authority over the probe, and any expansion of Mueller’s investigation required authorization from Rosenstein.

On Aug. 2, 2017, Rosenstein secretly issued Mueller a revised Scope of Investigation & Definition of Authority memo that remains heavily redacted. The full purpose of this Memo remains unknown and few have seen the unredacted version.

Two individuals who have seen the unredacted version are U.S. District Judge T.S. Ellis III, who presided over the trial of Manafort, and newly installed Acting Attorney General Matthew Whitaker.

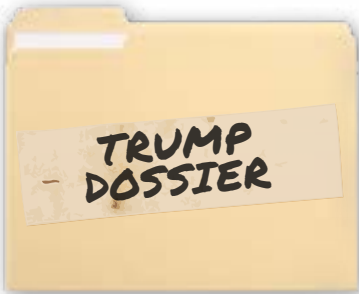
Neither man has given any indication that there are any issues with the contents of Rosenstein’s memo.

THE STEELE DOSSIER

As we move toward the year’s close, one final item worth noting remains:

The Steele dossier has been debunked.

Steele admitted in a recent court filing that he was hired for the purpose of providing information that would allow Hillary Clinton to challenge the validity of the 2016 election. Although a formal legal challenge was never mounted, the Steele dossier, which remains uncorroborated by the FBI, was used precisely for its intended purpose—including its role in obtaining a FISA warrant for spying on Trump campaign adviser Carter Page.



Michael Isikoff, the Yahoo News reporter who met with Steele in September 2016, recently admitted to having significant doubts regarding the dossier:

“When you actually get into the details of the Steele dossier, the specific allegations, we have not seen the evidence to support them, and, in fact, there’s good grounds to think that some of

the more sensational allegations will never be proven and are likely false.”

Former FBI Director James Comey recently testified that the Steele dossier wasn’t verified as of May 2017. Again, the dossier was used as the primary piece of evidence by the FBI to obtain the Page FISA warrant on Oct. 21, 2016.

The Steele dossier, written by a British national and former MI6 agent, was used by both the FBI and the CIA, and a summary of the document was provided directly to President Barack Obama. And yet, for all the weight attached to this document, most of its assertions have never been proven to be factual, many have been proven to be false, and it remains unverified to this day.

Which is perhaps fitting for a document originally intended to be used by Clinton to challenge the election in the then-unlikely event she lost.

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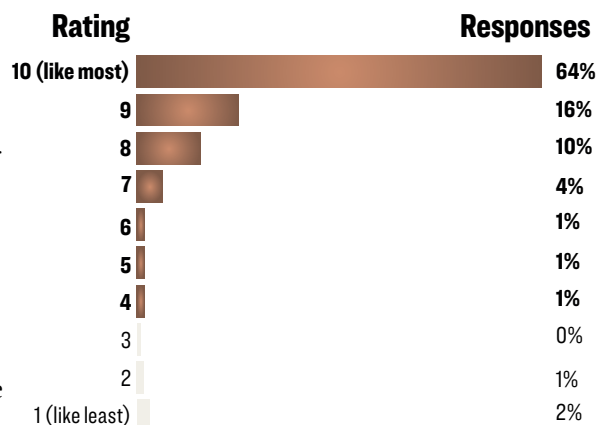
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