

Banking on his base, Trump charts his own path forward

Washington (CNN) President Donald Trump is back where he belongs — triggering political earthquakes that threaten to tip Washington off its axis.

One moment, Trump is presenting his impregnable political base with its biggest test yet as he edges toward a deal with Democrats on immigration — one that will test whether he or outraged conservative pundits have the best fix on the loyalties of his supporters.

The next, he's proving how polarizing, and sometimes detrimental to his own fortunes he can be, reigniting the controversy over his response to neo-Nazi violence in Charlottesville, insisting that there were "bad dudes" on both sides.

If that was not enough for one frenetic day on Thursday, The New York Times reported that Trump had upbraided his Attorney General Jeff Sessions, calling him "an idiot" and disloyal, over his handling of allegations of collusion between the President's campaign aides and Russia.

Trump's signature ability to place himself at the center of multiple, simultaneous political storms is on display as he reaches the end of a momentous week that started with Hurricane Irma tearing a trail of destruction across Florida, for a while eclipsing even Trump's gargantuan political personality and capacity to dominate the news.

The President's attempt to broker a deal with Democrats to allow hundreds of thousands of young, undocumented migrants to stay in the US sparked a political explosion and predictions he will rupture his visceral connection with his most faithful supporters on an issue that helped electrify his campaign.

But there are many reasons to believe that despite initial wave of outrage about his dinner conversation with top Democrats Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi on Wednesday, Trump will not inevitably pay a heavy political price even if he goes ahead and reverses a core campaign promise.

First, the rush by both the White House and Democrats to clarify the terms of

what is being discussed have tempered initial interpretations that the President simply caved on an issue that was integral to his political appeal in the election — less than two weeks after ending the DACA program that protected the 800,000 migrants brought to the US as children.

In a series tweets and comments to reporters, Trump repeatedly sought to explain himself to his supporters amid a flurry of criticism from prominent celebrity conservatives after the Democrats had initially indicated that a deal would be made to twin protection for DACA recipients in return for border security “excluding the wall.”

“No deal was made last night on DACA. Massive border security would have to be agreed to in exchange for consent. Would be subject to vote,” Trump wrote on Twitter.

Later, his campaign blasted out an email from the President.

“There’s been a lot of noise today and a lot of rumors. Let me set the record straight in the simplest language possible...

“...WE WILL BUILD A WALL (NOT A FENCE) ALONG THE SOUTHERN BORDER OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA TO HELP STOP ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION AND KEEP AMERICA SAFE.”

The pushback operation was a sign that the President appreciates the hypersensitivity of any potential deal on immigration among his core voters. After all, during his campaign, he branded DACA an illegal “executive amnesty.”

Room to maneuver

But at the same time, Trump’s room to maneuver with his base may also be wider than some pundits assume.

Firstly, given Trump’s vehement pronouncements on immigration ever since he sprung onto the political stage, he has the kind of credibility with arch conservatives that more moderate Republicans — like Sen. Marco Rubio for instance — have lacked and that could be deployed in a kind of “Nixon goes to China” moment to compromise with Democrats.

Those covered by DACA, who in many cases know no other home than the United States, are also in many cases the most sympathetic undocumented migrants to

public opinion.

Trump has frequently slammed other classes of undocumented migrants — including some in MS-13 gangs as “animals” and notoriously accused Mexico of sending criminals and rapists to the US in his campaign announcement speech.

But he has made a special case for those affected by his decision to cancel DACA.

“Does anybody really want to throw out good, educated and accomplished young people who have jobs, some serving in the military? Really!.....,” Trump tweeted.

The President has also created significant political capital for himself among his core supporters in his eight months in power. By pardoning former Arizona Sheriff Joe Arpaio, convicted of contempt in a racial profiling case, signing an executive order to cut funds for sanctuary cities and introducing a travel ban on certain Muslim countries, Trump has made it unlikely that any significant political challenger can get to the right of him on immigration.

Arpaio, a hero to many voters for whom immigration is a driving issue, offered the President some political cover on the DACA issue Thursday, showing the political value of a pardon that alienated many more moderate voters.

“Whatever final policy he supports, I’ll also support. He’s very intelligent. He cuts deals,” Arpaio said, according to The Los Angeles Times.

Conservative callers to Rush Limbaugh’s radio show on Thursday, meanwhile, appeared to be reacting with less outrage to Trump’s meeting with Schumer and Pelosi than some conservative opinion leaders.

Some suggested that the media was misinterpreting Trump’s intentions. Others believed that the President was simply running rings around the top Democrats with masterful strategy. Some said that Trump was only working with Democrats because he had been let down by establishment Republicans — for example, in the failure to repeal and replace Obamacare.

Limbaugh told his listeners that he could not recall any calls from a “legitimate Trumpist” who felt betrayed by the President’s bipartisan outreach in recent days.

“Their faith in Trump is total and it is unshakeable, at least as of now, and they are not at all worried about this,” he said.

While recent CNN polls have shown that there has been an erosion of enthusiasm for Trump among Republicans and independents who voted for him, there is no clear evidence that his base is deserting him.

Trump enjoys immense trust among his largely white, working class core of supporters. Many regard him as the only politician who has ever dared to give voice to their grievances and bonded with him over his economic nationalism and “America First” creed.

A wholesale repudiation of that philosophy would likely be needed to splinter the President’s core support.

Some voters, bitterly disappointed with gridlock in Washington turned to Trump, an outsider, because of his professed deal making abilities — another factor that may give him some political running room. And if he can finesse a deal that includes genuine measures to boost border security in a DACA deal, he may spare himself serious political damage.

A Monmouth University poll taken before and after the controversy over his failure to quickly and unequivocally condemn white supremacists after violence in Charlottesville last month found that six in 10 of people who approve of Trump could not think of anything that he could do that would make them disapprove of the job he is doing as President.

Many of Trump’s supporters in conservative media and in Congress have been watching to see if the arrival of John Kelly as White House chief of staff and the departure of other more radical members of Trump’s inner circle would cause him to work to please the Washington establishment he promised to eviscerate.

That has especially been the case since the President jilted Republican congressional leaders and accepted a Democratic deal for a three month extension of the government’s debt ceiling.

The prospect that Trump could do a deal on DACA recipients with Democrats therefore caused massive shockwaves on Thursday.

“The base will leave him. They can’t support him anymore,” said Iowa Rep. Steve King, warning on CNN’s “New Day” that if Trump replaced the DACA program and watered down his plans for the border wall he would smash his political

support.

Breitbart News branded Trump “Amnesty Don,” while conservative radio host Laura Ingraham slammed “The Art of the Steal.”

But another well-known Trump supporter, Roger Stone, told CNN’s Kaitlan Collins that there was little evidence that a potential deal with Democrats will harm Trump since border crossings are down and the administration has increased pressure on sanctuary cities.

However, Stone did say there are many people who wonder whether “our king,” meaning Trump, “has been captured” and now Kelly and the “establishment clique are now governing.”

Source: <http://www.cnn.com/2017/09/15/politics/donald-trump-base-support/index.html>

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