



In this Dec 8, 2016 file photo, construction continues on the Inaugural platform in preparation for the Inauguration for President-elect Donald Trump on the Capitol steps in Washington, DC. Trump's Presidential Inaugural Committee has raised a record \$90 million-plus in private donations, far more than President Barack Obama's two inaugural committees. — AP

CABINET PICKS CONTRADICT TRUMP STANDS ON ISSUES

PRESIDENT-ELECT ACKNOWLEDGES DIFFERENCES

WASHINGTON: The lack of fireworks surrounding Senate consideration of President-elect Donald Trump's Cabinet picks may reflect a slew of statements his choices have made contradicting the billionaire businessman's position on key issues. Trump acknowledged the differences early yesterday, posting a message on his Twitter account saying: "All my Cabinet nominee are looking good and doing a great job. I want them to be themselves and express their own thoughts, not mine!"

This week's confirmation hearings produced an odd political chemistry where, for instance, one of the harshest examinations of a Trump Cabinet choice came from one of Trump's fellow Republicans, presidential campaign rival Sen. Marco Rubio. Despite Democrats' dismay over some of Trump's selections, the hearings were relatively tranquil, with Democrats generally restrained even in quizzing the more contentious picks. The reason, according to a few Democrats: The nominees are proving more palatable than Trump himself.

"As I meet members of the Cabinet I'm puzzled because many of them sound reasonable," said Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois, the No 2 Senate Democrat. "Far more reasonable than their president."

That could change in weeks to come, because some of the most potentially explosive hearings are still pending, including the scrutiny of former Goldman Sachs partner Steven Mnuchin for Treasury secretary. Several of Trump's Cabinet selections this week made statements this week contradicting policy stances espoused by their soon-to-be boss on issues ranging from Russia and NATO to climate change and Muslims.

Sen. Jeff Sessions, picked for attorney general, said he's against any outright ban on immigration by Muslims, in contrast to Trump's onetime call to suspend admittance of Muslims until US officials could learn more about nature of the threat of extremism.

His secretary of state candidate, Rex Tillerson, took a relatively hard line on Washington's dealings with Russia, even though Trump has been talking about improving relations between Washington and Moscow and held out for days before saying he accepted the intelligence community's conclusion that Moscow meddled in the US election process. Tillerson demurred, however, when one senator tried to lure him into calling President Vladimir Putin, whom he knows, a "war criminal," although he emphasized support for NATO commitments that Trump had questioned. The secretary-of-state designate also said the United States should not back away from its efforts against nuclear proliferation, notwithstanding Trump's suggestion earlier this year that some key US allies like Japan and South Korea provide their own defense.

Some of the toughest questioning of Tillerson came not from Democrats but from Rubio, who grilled the Exxon Mobil executive on human rights issues. As Mnuchin's confirmation hearing approaches, Democrats have set up a website to solicit stories from the thousands of people whose homes were foreclosed on by OneWest Bank while he headed a group of investors who owned the bank. They hope to use Mnuchin's nomination hearing to attack Trump's populist appeal with working-class voters and cast themselves as defenders of the middle class. Thus far, though,

Republicans are congratulating themselves for generally smooth sailing. And overall, the lack of drama may also be due to the decision by Democrats while in the Senate majority to lower the vote threshold for Cabinet nominees and others from 60 votes to 50, allowing Republicans to ensure approval as long as they can hold their 52-seat majority together.

"The purpose of confirmation hearings is to examine the record and views of potential nominees and I think that's what these hearings are doing," said Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas. "I think it's likely that all of the Cabinet nominees are going to be confirmed, I think the hearings have gone quite well this week."

A hearing Thursday for neurosurgeon Ben Carson to head the Department of Housing and Urban Development featured some pointed questioning from Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren, but also warm exchanges between Carson and other committee Democrats. Afterward Carson thanked the panel and said that it "was actually kind of fun."

Sessions was denied confirmation once before by the Senate, but that was three decades ago for a federal judgeship. This time around the Alabaman is a sitting senator and was treated gently, for the most part, by his colleagues, even when Democrats brought up the racial issues that brought him down last time around. There was potential for drama as Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J., broke with Senate tradition to testify against his colleague, but it came on the second day of the hearing after Sessions had finished testifying, so he was not even in the room. Tillerson had the rockiest outing thus far, with Rubio pressing him on Russia and Democratic Sen. — AP

US TO PAY BILLIONS TO MARINES AFFECTED BY TOXIC WATER

WASHINGTON: After years of waiting, veterans who were exposed to contaminated drinking water while assigned to Camp Lejeune in North Carolina may now be able to receive a portion of government disability benefits totaling more than \$2 billion. Beginning in March, the cash payouts from the Department of Veterans Affairs may supplement VA health care already being provided to eligible veterans stationed at the Marine base for at least 30 cumulative days between Aug 1, 1953, and Dec 31, 1987. Veterans will have to submit evidence of their diagnoses and service information.

Outgoing VA Secretary Bob McDonald determined that there was "sufficient scientific and medical evidence" to establish a connection between exposure to the contaminated water and eight medical conditions for purposes of awarding disability compensation.

The estimated taxpayer cost is \$2.2 billion over a five-year period. The VA estimates that as many as 900,000 service members were potentially exposed to the tainted water. "This is good news," said retired Marine Master Sgt. Jerry Ensminger, whose daughter Janey was born in 1976 while he was stationed at Lejeune. Janey died from leukemia at age 9. Ensminger now heads a veterans group, The Few, The Proud, The Forgotten, which advocates for those seeking disability compensation.

"This has been a hard, long slog," said Ensminger, who argues the government must go further in covering additional diseases. "This is not the end of the issue."

The new rule being announced today covers active duty, Reserve and National Guard members who developed one of eight diseases: adult leukemia, aplastic anemia, bladder cancer, kidney cancer, liver cancer, multiple myeloma, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and Parkinson's disease. Documents uncovered by veterans groups over the years suggest Marine leaders were slow to respond when tests first found evidence of contaminated ground water at Camp Lejeune in the early 1980s. Some drinking water wells were closed in 1984 and 1985, after further testing confirmed contamination from leaking fuel tanks and an off-base dry cleaner. The Marine Corps has said the contamination was unintentional, occurring when federal law didn't limit toxins in drinking water.

The 246-square-mile military training complex was established in 1941. The new federal rule covers Camp Lejeune and Marine Corps Air Station New River, including satellite camps and housing areas. Spurred by Ensminger's case, Congress in 2012 passed a bill signed into law by President Barack Obama extending free VA medical care to affected veterans and their families. — AP

TRIAL DELAYED FOR OHIO MOTHER ACCUSED OF SUFFOCATING 3 SONS

BELLEFONTAINE, Ohio: An Ohio judge has delayed the trial of a woman accused of suffocating her three young sons out of jealousy at the attention her husband gave them.

The trial for 24-year-old Brittany Pilkington, of Bellefontaine, was scheduled to begin Mar 10. Pilkington's attorneys said they needed more time to prepare and asked a judge in Logan County court to push back the trial. The judge granted the extension on Wednesday and ordered all motions to be filed by Mar 17, ahead of the next hearing Mar 20. A new date hasn't been scheduled for the trial, which is expected to last weeks.

Pilkington has pleaded not guilty to aggravated murder charges. Authorities allege she killed her toddler son and two infants over a 13-month period in 2014 and 2015.

Prosecutors have said Pilkington confessed to all three murders in a recorded police interview in which she says she smothered each boy with a blanket because she didn't want to see them suffering.

Pilkington's attorneys have tried unsuccessfully to get the video thrown out and to have a judge to dismiss the parts of the charges against her that could lead to a potential death penalty if she is convicted. A visiting judge is expected to continue overseeing the case because the elected county judge, William Goslee, was previously involved in the matter as the county prosecutor when Pilkington was first charged. —AP