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Power goes to the political spenders

Voters need to let elected leaders know they are watching

Details continue to emerge about the 2,242-page grab-bag of a budget passed by Congress in the waning hours of its ignominious 2015 session. Secretive political contributors turn out to have been a key beneficiary of lawmakers' fast and furious deal-making.

When citizens learn a budget has been passed, we mostly imagine a straightforward document detailing how many dollars will be spent on national defense and a cornucopia of government programs. But beyond this, members of Congress stuff it full of other goodies and baddies, many with only a tangential relationship with spending.

Thanks to a couple of these sneaky maneuvers, the IRS and the Securities and Exchange Commission will be blocked from making new rules to force more public disclosure of the anonymous campaign contributions that are warping the American democratic process. The ability of "dark money" groups and corporations to influence politicians will remain unchallenged at least through the 2016 election.

University of California, Irvine, law Prof. Rick Hasen, writing at electionlawblog.org, notes "these provisions will ensure that the American public

As Cubans lag, our relationship flounders

There are many ways of summing up Fidel Castro and Cuba. One way would be: Fidel and Raul Castro were good at running a revolution, but they have failed utterly at running a country. Or, Fidel Castro peaked decades ago, and it's been downhill ever since.

The New York Times reported on Dec. 20 that Raul Castro is upset that Cuban physicians are leaving for the U.S. in considerable numbers. Castro wants to change that in the next round of negotiations.

One of Cuba's successes is in educating physicians. Cuba has exported them to other Latin American countries, which pay Cuba in oil and cash. One Cuban physician told the *Times* it was "modern-day slavery" for the Cuban physicians.

But the nation's economy is so anemic, with a declining population, that Cuba has physicians with little to do. And the disparity between what a Cuban physician makes at home or would earn in a developed economy is wide.

The Times reported that, "The number of Cuban medical professionals who defected for residency in the United States reached a record this year, putting a crimp in the newly restored relations between the two countries and forc-

ing Cuba to scramble to stop the exodus."

One year after President Obama's opening to Cuba, he is being pummeled from both ends of the political spectrum — to revisit his Cuban policy. *The Times* editorial page urges that the opening to Cuban physicians be narrowed. Writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, Mary Anastasia O'Grady argues that Obama's opening to Cuba has done nothing for Cuban dissidents and that Cuba is being intransigent on talking seriously about money owed to people and businesses whose property was seized in the Cuban Revolution.

There are at least a couple messages in this. One is to Americans who are convinced their own nation is heading to ruin. If that is that case, why are so many Cubans, Mexicans and refugees from other nations so eager to reach our shores?

Like all totalitarian societies, Cuba's economy is hostage to an ideology the party elite in power. Even within the framework of Communism, Cuba is hopelessly calcified. This is not China, whose pragmatic despots built an economic engine. If Cubans cannot see prosperity or the opportunity for growth, its relations with the U.S. will be lopsided.

Germany, a can-do refugee nation

By ROGER COHEN
New York Times News Service

There's a new can-do nation. It's called Germany.

The United States, fear-ridden, has passed the torch.

Throughout the extraordinary process that has seen roughly 1 million refugees arrive in Germany this year, Chancellor Angela Merkel has had a consistent refrain: "Wir schaffen das" — "We can do this." The gesture in question is the most extraordinary redemptive act by any European nation in many years.

Germans on the whole have understood. They have understood that to flee Syria through Islamic State checkpoints, place your family in flimsy boats on stormy waters and trudge across Europe in search of a home is not a desperate decision. It is a reasonable decision if the alternative is to see your children blown up by a barrel bomb or your daughter raped by a jihadist. Postwar Germans are reasonable people.

The United States would have had to admit about 4 million refugees this year to take in a similar proportion of its population. It has fallen more than 3.9 million short of that mark.

Most of the refugees in Germany are from Syria. The United States has admitted about 1,900 refugees from Syria over the past four years. Yes, you read that right. President Barack Obama has now pledged to resettle 10,000 Syrian refugees — a decision that had met defiance from more than two dozen Republican governors eager to conflate the words "Muslim" or "Middle Eastern" with terrorist.

Whatever happened to "the home of the brave"?

Set aside the fact that the Syrian crisis cannot be disentangled from the spillover of the Iraq war, and so America's direct responsibility is engaged. Set aside the fact that Obama said in 2011 that President Bashar Assad must step aside, and so America's responsibility is engaged. Set aside the presidential "red line" not upheld in 2013. Even then, by any reasonable measure, the U.S. response to the Syrian refugee crisis has been pitiful.

For a land of immigrants peopled over centuries by families fleeing war, famine or hardship, it has been especially pitiful.

Blood, sweat and Donald Trump

By FRANK BRUNI
New York Times News Service

Everybody pees. That's actually the name of a public service campaign by the National Kidney Foundation, and I thought it a needless statement of the obvious until Donald Trump brought me to my senses.

Apparently some people think that the laws of urology don't apply to them. Apparently Trump is in this category.

Last week, he said this of Hillary Clinton's mid-debate bathroom break: "I know where she went. It's disgusting. I don't want to talk about it. No, it's too disgusting."

He didn't specify why. But it's difficult to find anything indecorous about Clinton's behavior unless you see it as entirely volitional and utterly controllable — something you do to indulge yourself, something that can be put off for hours or forever, an emblem of your weakness. I guess in Trump's world, only "low energy" people need to go.

That would make sense, given how fantastical his cosmos is. It's a place where thousands of Muslims in New Jersey publicly cheer the fall of the World Trade Center; where a stretch of the Potomac River alongside a Virginia golf club of his magically becomes a Civil War site; where his own net worth changes by an order of billions from one moment to the next, in accordance with his need to puff up his chest.

Why wouldn't it also be a place where people relieve themselves only if they're losers and they're intent on a messiness that they can avoid? Maybe Trump really doesn't pee. Maybe he outsources that to a



Geert Vanden Wijngaert/AP Photo

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, left, speaks with Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras during a round table meeting at an EU summit in Brussels, Dec. 18. Throughout the extraordinary process that has seen roughly 1 million refugees arrive in Germany this year, Chancellor Angela Merkel has had a consistent refrain: "Wir schaffen das" — "We can do this."

Germany has stepped in. Wir schaffen das — we can do this. The can-do spirit has made a trans-Atlantic crossing.

Merkel's place in the history books was already assured. She was the woman who over a decade steered a united Germany to a self-assurance striking for a country that, even at the turn of the century, was still uncertain if it could allow itself a modicum of pride. But with her decision this year to admit Syrian and other refugees, she has become a towering European figure, certainly the equal of such postwar German giants as Konrad Adenauer, Helmut Schmidt and Helmut Kohl — perhaps even surpassing them because her Germany is its own master whereas theirs was still under degrees of American tutelage.

"She does not want to be — she refuses to be — the person who witnessed a serious fracture of the European Union," Julian Reichelt, the editor in chief of *Bild Online*, told me. "She will throw money at a problem, as with Greece. She will admit an unlimited number of refugees. And she will go down in history as a great European who defended the Union no matter what."

When Merkel decided last summer to admit the refugees, she averted violence that might have spilled out of control. Critics within her own Christian Democrat party portray her as emotional. But for a leader committed to preserving the European idea, her decision was rational.

Raised in East Germany, she owes her freedom to European unity.

It is a personal matter. The last time Europe was awash in millions of refugees was in 1945 as the Third Reich collapsed. It is a historical matter. Germany could not turn its back. Still the decision required statesmanship — that quaint, almost forgotten word — and the conviction that any risk of terrorism could be managed.

One million refugees change the landscape. They are in supermarkets. They are in hospitals. They are in schools. Germans have been accepting, despite the huge cost. A far-right party may benefit, but the consensus is this had to be done.

As a result, over the next generation, Germany will become a stronger, more vital, more dynamic, more open country. Abdulfattah Jandali, a Syrian immigrant known as John, was the biological father of Steve Jobs. Perhaps a future Syrian-German Jobs has just entered school.

Germany has shamed its European partners, including Britain. A Europe-wide program for refugees is needed. Germany can't take in another million in 2016.

"There is no real plan beyond buying time to get the rest of Europe on board," Reichelt said.

In a grim year, Merkel has re-deemed the Europe that once closed its frontiers to Jews fleeing Germany. When, at unification, Kohl spoke of a "blooming landscape" in the former East Germany, he was derided. But it came to pass. Germany can do this. As for can't-do America, that's another story. Fear and electoral politics constitute an explosive brew.

Whatever happened to 'the home of the brave'?

Mexican immigrant in his employ.

You have to hand it to him: He divines character flaws where no one else could or would. Through his warped lens, there's shame in John McCain's imprisonment in Vietnam, horror in Clinton's use of a toilet, dysfunction in each bead of Marco Rubio's sweat.

Those last two items underscore his bizarre obsession with, and objection to, body fluids. In early November, Daniel Lippman of *Politico* noted that Trump had "remarked on Rubio's perspiration at least eight times in the last seven weeks." On two of those occasions, Trump suggested that sweating would put Rubio at a disadvantage in negotiations with Vladimir Putin, who would find him too soggy.

The fluids of women in particular rattle Trump. When a lawyer who was questioning him during a 2011 deposition asked for a break so that she could leave the room and pump breast milk for her 3-month-old daughter, he was unhelped. "You're disgusting," he berated her, according to a story in *The Times* earlier this year by Michael Barbaro and Steve Eder. Then he stormed out of the deposition.

More famously, he reflected on Megyn Kelly's interrogation of him at the first Republican presidential debate by saying that "you could see there was blood coming out of her eyes, blood coming out of her wherever."

Clinton's bathroom break — or, more precisely, Trump's revulsion toward it — lies at the intersection of his misogyny and his fastidiousness. He's a germophobe who once



Frank Bruni

labeled himself "a clean hands freak," called handshakes a "terrible custom" and said that the obligation to engage in them was one of the great curses of celebrity like his.

Even so, a kidney doctor I know was baffled by his latest outburst.

"Urine is sterile," Maya Rao, an assistant professor of nephrology at Columbia University, pointed out. "It's not 'disgusting.' Wow. I literally feel like I'm dealing with an elementary-school child and we're talking about cooties."

Trump is routinely — and rightly — tagged as a playground bully, but that phrase doesn't do full justice to his arrested development, his potty mouth and the puerile nature of his vulgar bleats.

He taunts people for being unpopular, for being unattractive, for physical disabilities. The altitude of his debate vocabulary is only millimeters above "I know you are, but what am I," words that he'll surely utter before this is all over.

Last week, he not only cringed at Clinton's bathroom visit, he mocked her loss in the 2008 presidential election by substituting a phallic verb for the word defeated.

This, ladies and gentlemen, is your Republican front-runner. It's probably too late to teach him manners but maybe not to teach him biology: When you imbibe fluids, you excrete fluids, sometimes through sweat, often through urine.

And while "the typical person goes to the bathroom every three or four hours," said Matthew Rutman, a urologist at Columbia, that frequency increases for someone who's older, who's enduring stress, who's ingesting caffeine. In other words, for most presidential candidates.

Everybody pees. But it's the rare man-child who finds that worthy of ridicule. And it's up to voters: Is that the kind of exceptionalism you want in the White House?

Apparently some people think that the laws of urology don't apply to them.