

Trump steadily fulfills goals on religious right wish list

By DAVID CRARY
Associated Press

NEW YORK — When Donald Trump assumed the presidency, conservative religious leaders drew up “wish lists” of steps they hoped he’d take to oppose abortion and rein in the LGBTQ-rights movement. With a flurry of recent actions, Trump’s administration is now winning their praise for aggressively fulfilling many of their goals.

Mat Staver, president of the legal advocacy organization Liberty Counsel, said Trump has fulfilled about 90% of the goals on a list that Staver and other conservative leaders compiled.

“In the first two years of his administration, he’s achieved more than all of the presidents combined since Ronald Reagan,” Staver said. “He’s been the most pro-religious freedom and pro-life president in modern history.”

One of the most dramatic steps — hailed by conservatives and decried by liberals — came this week when the Department of Health and Human Services implemented a new rule for the federal family planning program known as Title X. Planned Parenthood, long a target of religious conservatives because of its role as the leading U.S. abortion provider, quit the program — walking away from tens of millions of dollars in grants — rather than comply with a new rule prohibiting clinics from referring women for abortions.

Last week, the Labor Department proposed a rule that is expected to shield



People take part in an anti-abortion march in January as they stand on the steps of the Legislative building at the Capitol in Olympia, Wash. With a flurry of recent actions, Trump’s administration is now winning the praise of conservative religious leaders for fulfilling many of their goals opposing abortion and reining in the LGBTQ-rights movement.

federal contractors from discrimination complaints regarding hiring and firing decisions motivated by religious beliefs. Critics say the rule, if implemented, would enable employers to discriminate against LGBTQ people.

On Friday, the Justice Department filed a brief telling the Supreme Court that federal law allows firing workers for being transgender. The brief is related to three cases that the high court will hear in its upcoming term related to LGBTQ discrimination in the workplace.

Earlier this year, Health and Human Services issued a waiver allowing a state-contracted foster care agency in South Carolina to deny services to same-sex and non-Christian families. HHS

also moved to revoke newly won health care discrimination protections for transgender people.

These and other actions aimed at curtailing abortion rights and LGBTQ rights have helped many conservative Christians overlook other aspects of Trump’s presidency, such as his often-divisive rhetoric on Twitter and at rallies.

The Rev. Robert Jeffress, pastor of the Southern Baptist Dallas and a frequent guest at the White House, predicted that Trump would win more evangelical votes in 2020 than he did in 2016, when they helped provide his margin of victory.

“When he ran in 2016 and promised pro-life, pro-religious freedom policies, most

evangelicals who voted for him didn’t know whether he would or could fulfill those promises,” Jeffress said. “When they look back now, they see he checked off all of those goals. ... He’ll win by an even larger margin on basis of promises kept.”

The same phenomenon being celebrated by religious conservatives is viewed with alarm by liberal activists.

For the religious right, “Every day is Christmas,” said Rachel Laser, president & CEO of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. She worries that the mantra of “religious freedom” is being used to protect some Americans while hurting others.

“It can’t be religious freedom just for white evangelical Christians — it has to be

religious freedom for all of us,” she said. “We’re witnessing divisiveness as Trump and his cronies and religious extremists across the country continue to chip away at church-state separation.”

The American Civil Liberties Union is among several organizations seeking to block some of the administration’s moves in court.

“This is essentially the wish list of groups that have a very extreme and discriminatory perspective on what religious liberty means,” said Ian Thompson, the ACLU’s senior legislative representative in Washington.

“It’s important not to see any one of these policies in isolation but to see them as part of a coordinated effort by the administration across agencies,” Thompson said. He urged the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives to go on record against the policies, and investigate those which seem particularly problematic.

From both the right and left, activists noted that Trump’s numerous appointments of federal judges have been welcomed by the religious right as a potential long-term boost to its causes.

“We are heartened by the appointment of constitutionalist judges, including two excellent Supreme Court justices (Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh), and look forward to more such appointments throughout the federal court system,” said Bruce Hausknecht, judicial analyst for Focus on the Family.

Peter Montgomery of People for the American Way, which is often crit-

ical of religious conservative groups, said their Trump-supported agenda “is bad news for women in the U.S. and around the world, for LGBTQ people, and for the principle that taxpayer money should not be used to fund discrimination.”

“Trump is advancing religious right priorities in the short term through administrative actions and in the long term through his appointment of young, right-wing ideologues to lifetime positions on the federal judiciary,” Montgomery added in an email.

The Trump administration actions represent a sharp turnaround from the presidency of Barack Obama, who supported abortion rights and same-sex marriage, mandated that contraception be covered by the Affordable Care Act, enabled transgender people to serve openly in the military, and issued guidance to school districts that they should let transgender students use the bathrooms of their choice.

Alliance Defending Freedom is among the conservative legal groups that has litigated against numerous Obama-era initiatives and has welcomed Trump’s moves to reverse them.

“The defense of life, free speech, and religious liberty should never be subject to political and cultural whims,” said Kristen Waggoner, an ADF senior vice president. “They are constitutional guarantees, and we are grateful that this administration recognizes that reality and is taking serious steps to correct injustice and protect all Americans.”



AP Photo/Charles Krupa

Weber grills are displayed at the Home Depot store in Londonderry, N.H. The Home Depot Inc. on Tuesday reported fiscal second-quarter net income of \$3.48 billion.

Execs starting to worry about tariffs’ effects on consumers

By MICHELLE CHAPMAN AND JOSH BOAK
AP Business Writers

WASHINGTON — Americans continue to shop, vacation and buy cars at a brisk clip. But corporate America is starting to worry out loud that President Donald Trump’s tariffs will depress consumer spending and undermine the economy.

Home Depot, the nation’s largest home improvement chain, said as much on Tuesday, when it reported higher-than-expected profits for the quarter but cut its sales expectations for the year, citing the tumbling price of lumber and the “potential impacts to the U.S. consumer arising from recently announced tariffs.”

That marked at least the second time in a week that retail executives raised the fear that consumers might pull back on spending.

Last Wednesday, Macy’s warned that its customers have no appetite for higher prices. The department store chain has already raised prices on luggage, housewares and furniture because of the 25% import duties imposed in May. CEO Jeff Gennette said Macy’s is trying to offset the costs of looming tariffs on shoes and clothing.

So far, consumer spending has insulated the U.S. economy from the slump that is taking hold in such places as China and Germany. But Trump’s trade wars with Beijing and other key trading partners have heightened anxieties.

Dozens of American companies have pared their profit and sales expectations. The markets have swung wildly. Barometers of housing and manufacturing have slumped. Consumer confidence, though healthy on a historical level, dropped sharply this month.

And that is especially troubling, because consumer spending accounts for roughly 70% of economic activity.

That recent slump in consumer confidence has raised the odds of a U.S. recession in the next year to 45% from 40% in mid-July, according to analysts for JPMorgan Chase.

If consumers are to keep fueling economic growth, they might need reassurance that Trump won’t escalate his trade wars.

“If trade policy tensions ease and the labor market remains solid, we would likely see a rebound in consumer sentiment,” said Jesse Edgerton, a senior economist at JPMorgan Chase.

Unlike Macy’s, which, like all department stores, faces tumultuous changes in how

and how much people shop, Home Depot is doing brisk business. Mortgage rates are hovering at historic lows, and the aisles of Home Depot are bustling with homeowners.

But housing starts have tumbled 3.1% so far this year, according to the Census Bureau. This has reduced demand for lumber and caused wood prices to tumble roughly 20% over the past 12 months, according to government figures.

In an otherwise solid period for overall retail sales, purchases at building material and garden supply stores have increased a meager 0.4% year-to-date, according to the Census Bureau. Sales at furniture stores have slumped 0.5%.

The Trump administration delayed most of the tariffs it planned to impose on Chinese products last week and dropped others altogether, responding to pressure from businesses and growing fears that a trade war is threatening the U.S. economy.

The administration was also mindful that the latest round of tariffs would raise consumer prices during the crucial holiday shopping season, so it delayed nearly 60% of them until Dec. 15.

That eased the risk of an immediate shock but raised concerns about what comes next.

BRIEFLY

Any Jew voting Democratic is uninformed or disloyal

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump says any Jewish people who vote Democratic show “either a total lack of knowledge or great disloyalty.”

Trump commented Tuesday amid his ongoing feud with Democratic congresswomen Ilhan Omar of Minnesota and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan. Trump has taken several steps favored by Israel, while the Muslim lawmakers are outspoken critics of Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians.

Trump calls Omar a “disaster” for Jews and says he didn’t “buy” the tears Tlaib shed Monday as she discussed the situation.

At Trump’s urging, Israel last week blocked the pair from entering the country. Israel later agreed to a humanitarian visit for Tlaib to visit her grandmother who lives in the West Bank. Tlaib declined.

Recent polling shows that a majority of Jews identify as Democrats.

3 women sue Epstein’s estate, citing rape, other sex acts

NEW YORK — Three women have filed lawsuits accusing Jeffrey Epstein of raping them or subjecting them to other forced sex acts — in one case while he was serving a Florida jail sentence that allowed him out for work during the day.

The lawsuits in Manhattan federal court were filed Tuesday on behalf of women who remained anonymous. They sought unspecified damages.

The lawsuits say two women were 17 and the third woman was 20 when they

said they were sexually assaulted by Epstein. All said they were also coerced into giving Epstein sexual massages.

One woman maintains Epstein forced her to marry another woman.

A lawyer for Epstein declined to comment on the lawsuits.

Epstein killed himself in his New York prison cell Aug. 10 as he awaited trial on sex trafficking charges.

Italian premier resigns, blames deputy for political crisis

ROME — Italian Premier Giuseppe Conte resigned Tuesday, blaming the collapse of his 14-month-old populist government on his rebellious, anti-migrant Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, who triggered a political crisis to try to force early elections.

Addressing the Senate, Conte blasted Salvini for setting in motion a “dizzying spiral of political and financial instability” by essentially pulling the plug on the government. Salvini’s right-wing League party sought a no-confidence vote against Conte earlier this month, a stunningly bold move for the government’s junior coalition partner.

Conte, a lawyer with no political experience who was tapped to break a post-election stalemate last year, handed his resignation to President Sergio Mattarella at the presidential palace Tuesday night.

Mattarella, who is head of state, requested that Conte and the rest of the government stay on in a caretaker role, while he works in the coming days to determine whether to call new elections. Mattarella will first see if another viable coalition can be cobbled together.

— Associated Press

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