

Cabinet confirmations - As of February 7th, 2001 Bush 43 had all his 14 Cabinet nominations confirmed & in 2008 Obama 11 of his 14. But by this February 7th Trump had only had seven of his 15 confirmed : February 7th - Education, Betty DeVos (age 58) 51-50¹, February 1st - State, Rex Tillerson (64)² 56-43, January 31st - Transportation, Elaine Chao³ (63), 93-6, January 24th - UN Ambassador, Nikki Haley⁴ (45), 96-4, January 23rd - CIA Director, Mike Pompeo⁵ (53) 68-32, and January 20th - Homeland Security, John Kelly⁶ (66) 88-11 & Defense, James Mattis⁷ (66) 98-1 - *The DeVos vote made history since, after Sens. Lisa Murkowski ®.-AK]] & Susan Collins [R.-GA]] had voted NO, the Vice President had, for the first time ever, to cast the tie-breaking vote. Her confirmation was a serious blow to the 1+MM member AFT (American Federation of Teachers); for it heralds a bigger role in the system for 'alternate'/non public schools that typically employ non-union teachers & often produce better results, especially with less-privileged kids.*

-
- 1 She was educated in Michigan's Holland (*Christian private*) school system & at Calvin College, a Grand Rapids-based Christian Reformed Church liberal arts college; her husband, multi-billionaire Dick DeVos, is heir to the Amway fortune & once was CEO of Alicor , Amway's parent company.
 - 2 A mechanical engineering graduate of the University of Texas at Austin, he was until recently Chairman & CEO of ExxonMobil & supposedly has a net worth of US\$245MM.
 - 3 Born in Taiwan, she has an MBA from Harvard & *investment* banking experience with Citicorp & Bank of America, served as Bush 41's Deputy Secretary of Transportation & Bush 43's Secretary of Labor. She has been married since 1993 to Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY).
 - 4 Of Sikh descent, she has a BSc in Accounting from Clemson University. After serving six years in the state's House of Representatives, she ran for Governor in 2011 & has served for six years ended last month as the state's first female & first non-white governor.
 - 5 In 1986 he graduated first in his class from West Point with a mechanical engineering degree & served six years in the Regular Army. Then he went to Harvard Law, graduated with a J.D. and served as the Harvard Law Review Editor. After a few years in private practice, he headed, one after the other, two aerospace-, & oilfield service-, companies. For six years ended last month he was a member from Kansas of the House of Representatives & of its Tea Party caucus, and of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence & of its CIA Sub-Committee.
 - 6 He retired last year as a four star Marine Corps general after 36 years of service. In 1970 he joined the Marine Corps & in 1972 was discharged as a sergeant. In 1976 he was commissioned via the University of Massachusetts' ROTC program & has an MA in National Security Studies from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. In 1995 he was the *Corps* Commandant's liaison officer to the House of Representatives & later a Special Assistant to the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe. His eldest son was killed in Afghanistan as a 29 year-old Marine Corps captain, making him the highest-ranking Marine officer to have lost offspring serving there.
 - 7 He too retired as a four-star Marine general, but after 44 years of service & in 2013. He last headed the Tampa, FL-based Central Command that is responsible for the Middle East, North Africa & Central Asia for three years to March 2013. He too has an MA, his in Security Affairs from the National War College. After retiring he joined the Board of General Dynamics. He has a reputation of not putting up with underperforming subordinates & believes that Putin is intent on "breaking NATO apart", that the world order is under its biggest threat since World War Two from Russia, terrorists & China's activities in the South China Sea, that Iran has much to gain from the turmoil ISIS is creating in the Middle East & that the settlements harm the prospects for peace between the Israelis & Palestinians, and will lead to an apartheid-like situation in the West Bank.

China raises short-term rates - The People's Bank of China took financial markets by surprise when it raised them (modestly) on February 3rd, the first working day after the New Year's holiday (that features the world's largest annual human migration, involving as many as 700MM making 3.6BN trips). This seemed like an odd thing to do at a time its GDP growth rate has for several quarters been consistently below the 7% level Beijing perceives to be the 'tipping point' into potential social unrest. This suggests the authorities are focused on discouraging capital outflows & on achieving a 'soft landing' from years of debt-fueled stimulus.

Current US situation - It was perhaps best summed up by David Shribman, a Pulitzer Prize winner & Executive Editor of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, in a column in the Globe and Mail entitled The United States of chaos and confusion, the second paragraph of which reads : "The United States in the first breath of the Trump era is no peaceable Kingdom. The President is bickering with the press, the Democratic opposition is plotting how to defeat the President's nominee for the Supreme Court, the Republicans are trying to patch over their fissures to work with a President they quietly regard as a threat, conservatives are worried their movement has stalled, liberals are scrambling how to transfer a series of protest marches into a formidable political force and everybody is trying to figure out what the Trump immigration policy is or means."

Growing hoi polloi power? - Romania ranks 57th on Transparency International's corruption watch list. On December 11th the ruling Social Democratic party (that has its roots in the Soviet era Communist party) was re-elected with 45% voter support. During the night of January 31 the government (now headed by a new leader since the old one had gotten a two year suspended sentence for election fraud & still faces a charge of abuse of power for awarding contracts to associates under which they did no work) approved legislation to pardon corrupt government officials (incl. the former PM). Within minutes protesting crowds had started to gather outside government offices that grew & grew and spread & spread to eventually involve half a million people, forcing the government to reverse its decision within a week.

Putin's net worth - Bill Browder (age 52) is CEO, & a co-founder, of London-based Hermitage Capital Management. Prior to 2013, when it was the largest foreign investor in Russia, he was a Putin supporter, but has since 'seen the light'. In a February 2015 interview on Fareed Zakaria's GPS program on CNN he estimated it at US\$200BN.

Recent flare-up of fighting in Eastern Ukraine - In a column in the February 3rd Globe & Mail entitled Is Putin scoring political goals on an empty net? the question was raised whether it was a coincidence that it had flared up to a level not seen in over two years on the very day following the "very cordial" January 28th Trump-Putin phone conversation - *it is increasingly beginning to look that Trump may be 'the Peter Principle incarnate' (i.e. he has risen to "the level of his incompetence"). For in his career to date, he operated like a potentate, barking orders that underlings jumped to comply with without question, whereas his current position requires real leadership, getting people to do without undue grumbling things they might not necessarily like doing, or want to do.*

Undesirable mixing of public duties & private business interests - Last week Nordstrom announced that, after a review had established unsatisfactory sales levels, it would discontinue carrying the Ivanka Trump line of clothing & accessories. This prompted a February 8th Trump tweet that whined "My daughter Ivanka has been treated so unfairly by @Nordstrom. She is a

great person - always pushing me to do the right thing! Terrible!”⁸ Meanwhile, the regional discounters T.J. Maxx⁹ & Marshalls, and the luxury department store Neiman Marcus have followed suit without, at least so far, not a peep out of ‘The Donald’ - *he obviously does still not appreciate that as their President Americans expect him to devote all his time to his public duties (except for what he devotes to his family responsibilities). But it is easy to understand why he was upset; for this could be a harbinger of an erosion of the monetary value of the Trump ‘brand’.*

GLEANINGS II - 697
Thursday February 9th, 2017

STERLING MAY BECOME “SWISS FRANC ON STEROIDS
(Telegraph, Ambrose Pilchard-Evans)

- According to BAML’s currency strategists Athanasios Vamvakidis & Kamal Sharma there may be one last leg down left for the pound after Article 50 (*giving notice of leaving the EU*) is triggered in March (when it may hit a three decade low before staging a V-shaped recovery) : “The pound looks low. We think the start of the countdown to Brexit may prove the low and the opportunity to enter sterling longs ... we doubt that the market will be in a perpetual state of panic over every Brexit-related deadline ... Sterling is likely to climb back.”

Quite a vote of confidence in Her Majesty’s government & the people of Britain.

OIL PRICES FALL ON BLOATED U.S. INVENTORIES AND STALLING CHINA DEMAND
(Reuters, Ahmad Ghaddar)

- *After slipping on February 7th in the expectation US inventories would be up more than expected, by 1257 GMT the next day Brent had slipped another 24¢ to US\$54.81, & WTI 40¢ to US\$51.77, on the news that in the week to February 3rd US crude inventories had increased by 14.2 MM bbls to 503.6 bbls while only 2.5bbl had been expected [& gasoline stocks had been up 2.9MM bbls, vs. the 1.1MM expected]. And Goldman Sachs analysts said the data pointed to “US gasoline demand falling sharply by 460,000 barrels per day ... year on year in January, with such declines only previously (seen) during recessions”. Finally the EIA expects US crude output to jump 500,000 bbls in 2018. Prices also came under pressure from news China’s 2016 oil demand had grown at its slowest pace in three years (by 2.5%, down from 3.1% in 2015 & 3.8% in 2016).*

US\$70 oil may turn out like a mirage in the desert, seemingly close never getting closer.

LOOK OUT : GOLD AND BONDS ARE SENDING A SIGNAL ... (CNBC, Rebecca Ungarino)

- According to a report by BAML strategist Michael Hartnett both the stock market crash of 1973-1974 & Black Monday in October 1987 had been preceded by three quarters of rising bond yields & gold prices. His thinking is that when the two rise in tandem it

⁸ And in a move that raised some eyebrows, after he sent his complaint out using his personal account, he then dispatched it a second time from the official White House account.

⁹ With, according to The Independent, employees instructed to toss her displays “in the bin”.

signals inflation, prompting the Fed to raise rates which tends to be bad news for the economy, & for stocks in particular. And inflation expectations have been on the rise recently, in part due to Trump's election & in part to the Fed's December decision to raise rates¹⁰ & warn three more increases may be in the offing for 2017. And gold is up almost 6% YTD (albeit only 3.2% YoY) after sliding in the Second Half of last year.

In a historical context the bull market is getting long in the teeth & price earnings are relatively high, while higher bond yields will lead to book losses in bond portfolios & negatively affect the popularity & market value of high-dividend stocks.

US JOB GROWTH BEATS FORECAST DESPITE SOFT WAGE GAINS (Reuters, L.Mutikani)

- On February 3rd the Labor Department reported that in January non-farm payrolls had grown by 227,000 as construction & retailers increased hiring, although the unemployment rate rose by 0.1% to 4.8% (vs. forecasts of 175,000 & 4.7%) & that it had cut the November & December job growth numbers down by 39,000. But average hourly earnings had only edged up 0.1% in January, far from the 0.3% expected, & December's wage gain was cut from 0.4% to 0.2% (as a result of which wages were up 2.5%, down from 2.8% in December. And January's marginal rise in average earnings was surprising since during the month minimum wage increases had taken effect in at least 19 states.

Be all that as it may, the Fed still believes the labour market is at, or near, full employment. And any slowing in average earnings growth may be flashing an amber light for GDP growth that depends for 70% on consumption, & hence on consumers' willingness-, & ability-, to spend.

THE MORTGAGE-BOND 'WHITE WHALE'¹¹, THAT EVERYONE SUDDENLY IS WORRIED ABOUT (Bloomberg, Liz McCormick)

- After nearly a decade the Fed is *finally* talking about unwinding its *unconventional* monetary policy experiment (*that in the five years to September 2014 had quintupled its balance sheet to US\$4.TR & hiked it from 6% to 25% of GDP*). When that happens, it could threaten the US housing recovery; for the Fed holds US\$1.75TR of MBS¹² (10% of GDP), up from zero on January 1st, 2009. Moody's Analitica Inc. says Fed liquidating its fixed income assets could cause mortgage rates to hit 6+% within 3 years (vs. their 4.32% three-year high last December, up 0.75% in 4 months). Already, according to the National Association of Realtors, while in 2016 as a whole previously-owned home sales had been the strongest in a decade, in December they had been weaker than expected.

The Fed owns one-third of all MBS outstanding, resulting in fewer 'market makers' & a 'thinner', more volatile market. And, if inflation continues 'perking up' & Trump's policies hike the budget deficit, this estimate of future mortgage rates may well be 'lowballing' the eventual outcome.

¹⁰ For the first time in a year & only the second time in seven years.

¹¹ Named after Bruno Iksil, a London-based JPMorgan CDS (Credit Default Swap) trader, aka 'the White Whale', who, after making made shuge bets in 2012 that lost JPMorgan US\$6+BN in a matter of weeks, caused his boss & two co-workers to be thrown 'under the bus', while getting off easy himself free by 'rolling on them), & JPM to be fined US\$920MM by the US regulators

¹² Mortgage-Backed Securities.

DONALD TRUMP REMOVES THE JUDICIARY FROM BEING LISTED AS PART OF THE GOVERNMENT ON WHITE HOUSE WEBSITE (The Independent, Andrew Griffin)

- Hitherto every mainstream account of US politics, incl. the White House website, had stressed the government has three branches, the Executive, Legislative & Judiciary. But no more so; for since a federal judge in Washington State dealt a blow to Trump's "Muslim ban", the White House website has deleted all mention of the judiciary as part of a sweeping set of changes made since Election Day that also made all mention of climate change & global warming, civil rights & protections for LGBT people disappear.

Interestingly enough, Stephen Hadley, Bush 43's second term National Security Adviser, and now a member of the Council on Foreign Relations & of the Board of defense contractor Raytheon, noted on Fareed Zakaria's February 5th GPS program on CNN that Trump 'doesn't seem to understand' that the Presidency is just one of three branches of the US government.

U.S. MAYORS LEAD THE CHARGE AGAINST TRUMP (G&M, Joanna Slater)

- Two weeks after Inauguration Day, as Trump pushed to implement controversial items on his agenda, a battle was brewing that will pit him against the mayors of some of the nation's biggest cities (whose citizens had voted overwhelmingly for Clinton). While they like his pledge to improve the nation's infrastructure, they are deeply concerned about issues, like healthcare, that matter to the hoi polloi & incensed by his moves on immigration (to the point some joined in the street protests against them). And when Trump responded by threatening to withhold money from cities that didn't cooperate with immigration enforcement actions, they countered with threats of their own of avalanches of litigation in which they feel they will have the upper hand, given legal precedents that prevent Washington from using money as a tool of coercion; in fact, lawyers for San Francisco have already filed a law suit challenging the Executive Order directing government officials to find ways to cut funding for 'sanctuary cities' that have policies ranging from directing their employees not to ask people about their immigration status to refusing to hold undocumented immigrants for deportation.
- Tom Cochran, chief executive of the US Conference of Mayors, said he's never seen an atmosphere like this in his four decades in the organization, not even in the waning Nixon Administration days, and that he & his group are pushing back against the Executive Order on sanctuary cities & had asked for a meeting with John Kelly, the new Homeland Security Secretary who would be responsible for implementing the sanctuary cities' order & would have city police chiefs accompany him to it to explain why fostering good relations between law enforcement officials & immigrant communities enhances public safety.

*Only naive do-gooders think that people from one country have the **right** to settle in another country; on the other hand, Trump went way too far in denying (re-)entry to those with a legitimate right to live in the US. It also is odd that it applies to Iraqi citizens when their country carries a disproportionate share of the burden of the fight with ISIS. And according to Forbes, while Trump has no business interests in the seven banned countries, he does have them in seven other Muslim-majority, non-banned countries (incl. Azerbaijan, Egypt, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey & UAE), one of which (Saudi Arabia) had accounted for all but one of the 9/11 miscreants. Finally, Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration expert at the right wing Cato Institute, said that during the forty years to 2015 not a single citizen of the seven banned countries had killed*

Americans on US soil (although last fall a Somali refugee did wound several people in an attack at Ohio State University).

TRUMP TO ROLL BACK DODD-FRANK RULES (Bloomberg, Zeke Faux et. al.)

- On February 3rd Trump signed two directives to start rolling back the regulatory system put in place after the financial crisis, incl. the rules to protect against predatory lenders, to force brokers to lower fees for retirees & to ban proprietary trading (*for a firm's own account rather than to earn commissions by trading for clients*). This caters to 'too-big-to-fail' banks, like JPM & Goldman, that have long argued Dodd-Frank was unduly constraining their industry. According to former Goldman President Gary Cohn, now the Director of the White House National Economic Council, on February 3rd "We're going to attack all aspects of Dodd-Frank" and "the more help we get from Congress the better off we're all (???) are going to be." While he also said in an interview that "Banks have been forced to hoard capital", this must be an "alternative fact"; since according to Bloomberg US commercial banks had US\$9.19TR in loans & leases at the end of last year, up US\$558BN (6.5%) YoY, of which US\$2.1TR were business loans, up 7.3% YoY. And while lending to small businesses & farmers had fallen during the financial crisis, since 2013 it has been growing steadily at a 2% quarterly rate.

Dodd-Frank didn't really affect the vast majority of the nation's 6,500+ banks whose bread & butter business is to fund the needs of individuals & small-to-medium businesses (that create the lion's share of new jobs) but didn't indulge much, if at all, in the kind of 'financial engineering' hokum that brought on the 2008 financial crisis (& that Goldman CEO Lloyd Blankfein conceded in a 2010 Congressional hearing 'hadn't added much to the growth in real GDP'). And the handful of too-big-to-fail US banks & some large foreign banks have had to cough up fines of close to US\$250BN in recent years for their pre-2008 financial malfeasances that had led to the 2008 financial crisis & Great Recession. While BALL paid most, JPMorgan ran a close second, paying US\$35BN for, among others, anti-competitive conduct in the municipal bond market, (home) foreclosure abuse, mortgage loan misrepresentation, improper (home) foreclosures, the 'London Whale' (see footnote 8), abuse of Fanny Mae & Freddie Mac rules, fraudulent trading in MBS, issuing 'toxic' mortgages, rigging the LIBOR¹³ rate, the Madoff retribution¹⁴ & currency manipulation (what is noteworthy is that two-thirds of JPM's fines it paid stemmed for questionable, if not illegal home, mortgage activities that hurt the very 'little people' that had voted for Trump in droves. Be that as it may, it's painful to see how JPM CEO Jamie Dimon has turned a bank that once was the 'class act' in the global banking community into a sleazy, gutter snipe, money-grubbing outfit like Goldman Sachs.

WASHINGTON WATCH : NETANYAHU'S BIG SURPRISE (Jerusalem Post, D. Bloomfield)

¹³ The London Inter Bank Offered Rate, the rate at which banks in London will lend money to each other, that over time had become an important 'bench mark' rate anchoring a wide range of other financial transactions.

¹⁴ For almost two decades to 2008 Bernie Madoff's was a Wall Street 'prominent' as his wealth management firm perpetrated the largest Ponzi scheme that may have cost his "investors" as much as US\$65BN. JPM had been his bank from the outset & was found guilty of two felony charges under the Bank Secrecy Act that requires banks to report any suspicious activities by its clients to the authorities (i.e. it had deliberatl, or not, failed in its fiduciary responsibilities.

- *Netanyahu will meet with Trump in Washington next Wednesday February 15th*. He had enthusiastically welcomed his election in the belief that it would kill the Iran deal and relieve the pressure to quit settlement building & make peace with the Palestinians. And the meetings that Trump's National Security Adviser, Lt.- Gen (ret.) Michael Flynn¹⁵, had in Washington in December with the head of Mossad, Netanyahu's Acting National Security Adviser & the Israeli Ambassador did not disabuse him of that notion; in fact it confirmed his pre-conceived notion. So he moved full speed ahead with authorizing an avalanche of new West Bank building, some of it not in existing settlements but on Palestinian-owned [apparently in the (*mistaken?*) belief that any future 'peace deal' would leave the Palestinians with just "a few Bantustans".¹⁶
- While Netanyahu thought his visit to Washington would be a 'love fest' to say kaddish¹⁷ for the peace process & that his talks with Trump would avoid touchy issues since candidate Trump had told him to "go ahead" with the settlements, he may be about to discover that President Trump sees things differently; for White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer last week noted that, while the settlements may not be "an impediment to peace", they "may not be helpful" either, seemingly signaling that there was to be no 'unilateral action' & *certainly* no "undermining" of Trump's peace making efforts. And he may have been sandbagged by a Knesset that, pushed by Netanyahu's ultra-nationalist partners (*but not necessarily 'friends'*), on February 6th, while Netanyahu was in London, had retroactively legalized settlements built illegally on Palestinian-owned land, a move that Netanyahu had sought to defer until after his Washington visit, in the belief that while Trump may love surprising others, he resents being on their receiving end.

President Trump may have decided that settling the Israeli-Palestinian issue would be "the deal of the century" (and that he wants 'a piece of it' for his legacy). If this were due to Defense Secretary, Gen.(ret.) James Mattis, having gotten through to Trump, he may become a 'heavyweight' in the Trump Cabinet - Rumour also has it that, despite his lack of high level-, if any-, international diplomacy experience, Trump is thinking of giving the job of arranging a peace deal to his son-in-law/Ivanka's husband, 36 year-old Jared Kushner who (in anticipation of this?) on January 9th was appointed an (unpaid) Senior White House Adviser (upon which he resigned as CEO of the family's real estate company & divested "significant assets"). If it were to play out like this, it may well prove not to have been the dumbest idea Trump ever had; for Jared is said to be someone whom Trump trusts above all others & who seems intelligent, is a "Modern Orthodox Jew" used to moving in the upper echelons of global Jewry, has the necessary education (BA, MBA & JD) and, given the trust Trump apparently has in him, would be in a position to speak-, & be accepted-, as Trump's 'alter ego'.

-0-0-0-0-0-0-0-

¹⁵ Whose appointment need not be confirmed by the Senate, which could have turned into a circus; for he is known for his inflammatory anti-Muslim utterances, for his paid attendance at a 2015 gala in Moscow honouring Putin & for his consulting firm's ties with Turkey President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and according to *Vanity Fair* at last report was under investigation for his series of phone calls last December to Russia's Ambassador to the US. While he is said to be 'as close to Trump as anyone other than his family, he may have difficulty holding his own in any high level infighting against two former full generals in Cabinet confirmed by the Senate.

¹⁶ An utterly stupid choice of words; for nothing will better mobilize global pro-Palestinian sentiments

¹⁷ And old, deeply religious prayer said upon the demise of a Jewish person.

THE MARCH TO IMPEACHMENT (Huffington Post, Robert Kuttner)

- There are already grounds to impeach Trump. The question is when key Republicans will decide he's more of a liability than an asset; if he keeps sucking up to Putin that may not be long. The first real occasion may well result from the temporary restraining order issued by of the federal Judge James Robart *of the District Court of the Western District of Washington State* that tossed out Trump's ban on the entry/re-entry into the US of immigrants & refugees, and even permanent US residents & holders of valid green cards. It was encouraging that officials of federal agencies, incl. the State Department & Homeland Security deferred to the court order, not to a president who thinks he can rule by decree. If the Supreme Court were to uphold it¹⁸, the question is if he will defy it; even Richard Nixon in 1974 obeyed a Supreme Court order to turn over the Watergate tapes.
- The House must lay the charge & the Senate find him guilty, and both are Republican-controlled, GOP alarm at Trump's actions is increasing at an accelerating rate. What is most appalling to it is his weird habit of apologizing for Putin. And the dam broke on Sunday morning February 5th when Bill O'Reilly *in an interview* on Fox News called Putin "a killer" & Trump responded with "You've got a lot of killers ... What, do you think our country's so innocent? ... We've got a lot of killers too." This led to Senate Majority Leader Mitch O'Connell (R.-KY) saying on CNN's *State of the Union* "he (*Putin*) is a thug ... who annexed Crimea, invaded Ukraine and messed around in our elections ... I don't think there is any equivalency between the way the Russians conduct themselves and the way the United States does.", to the Wall Street Journal thundering on its editorial page "Trump puts US on a moral par with Putin's Russia" & the paper's Brett Stephens tweeting "Never in history has a President slandered his country like this."
- Here is an impeachment scenario that looks increasingly plausible. Republicans will stick with Trump as he delivers the deregulation of the oil & gas industry and of Wall Street, tax cuts, school privatization, the gutting of labor protection & at least one right wing Supreme Court Justice. But at some point the GOP leadership will decide he is just too bizarre, too much of a risk of triggering trade-, and/or 'hot'-, wars, and too much of a risk for the 2018 mid-term elections (*that typically are not kind to the party in power & during which all members of the House and eight Republican Senators must run for re-election, while it would take only three losses for the GOP to lose control of the Senate*). So it will dump Trump in favour of VP Mike Pence, a more conventional far-right conservative (Trump never was 'its guy' anyway), a course insiders report is already being discussed in top GOP circles. And they could do so either via impeachment (that could take long enough for a vengeful Trump to do a lot of damage) or, quicker (*but maybe not that quickly either?*) via the 25th Amendment by having him certified "impaired". Their thinking is that the GOP would then get credit for ridding the country of a would-be dictator & have time to regroup under Pence in time to limit the damage in the 2018 mid-terms. But this raises the question how much good Pence might do the GOP cause; for he was an unpopular & inept governor of Indiana and the dwindling *populist* hard core Trump support never voted for tax cuts for the rich nor for cuts to Social Security & Medicare or for Goldman running the economic team. And forty-four years ago replacing the

18

Which would be unlikely if the Appeal Court were to uphold Judge Robart's ruling; for as long as Mr. Justice Antonin demise-prompted vacancy remains unfilled, the remaining eight justices are now split three ways between four out-and-out 'liberals', three ditto conservatives & the swing vote (*but conservative-leaning?*) Mr. Justice Kennedy. And, even if the latter were to 'fall in' with the conservative minority, the resultant 4-4- tie would not help the Trump cause since historically a tie vote has meant that the Supreme Court upheld the lower court's ruling.

impeachable Nixon with the well-liked Gerald Ford didn't stop the GOP losing a record number of seats in the 1974 mid-terms.

Few people appreciate that impeachment is a political-, rather than a legal-, move. And it was interesting to see a legal opinion the other day that argued that, while a 60% vote in the Senate is required to impeach, that was not necessarily of all 100 Senators but only of those present when the vote was called, making it much easier to impeach (The writer is a professor at Brandeis University's Heller School of Public Policy that, going by the degrees it offers, has a left-of-centre-bent. He also is Co-Editor of the Washington-based American Prospect quarterly magazine "dedicated to liberalism and progressivism"). So while he has 'an axe to grind', the scenario he paints is not altogether 'out to lunch'.

WIFE OF COMATOSE RUSSIAN DISSIDENT SAYS HE WAS POISONED (Time, J. Hincks)

- Vladimir Kara-Murza is a 35 year-old Russian journalist & opposition activist of Tatar descent (*who once referred openly to political assassinations as "Kremlin policy"*). In 2015 he spent time in hospital, with a French laboratory finding high levels of heavy metals in his blood but unable to identify a specific poison. *After being rushed to a Moscow hospital with similar symptoms on February 2nd (the day before he was to have gone to visit to the US), he was at last report in a stable but critical condition & comatose, with a diagnosis of "acute intoxication by an unidentified substance". According to his wife the symptoms this around cropped up just as suddenly as in 2015.*

He studied in England & has an MA in history from Cambridge. He has been critical of Putin since he came to power (& comes by his rebelliousness honestly : his father was a TV personality highly & openly critical of Brezhnev during the late Soviet era). He is a Senior Advisor at the New York-based, federal tax-exempt public charity Institute of Modern Russia & the coordinator of the Moscow-based Open Russia, that was founded in 2001 by Mikhail Khodorkovsky (& had Henry Kissinger & Jacob Rothschild on its initial Board), at the time the richest man in Russia & 16th on Forbes' list of the world's richest, to advocate democracy & human rights. But two years later, Khodorkovsky was arrested on (trumped-up?) fraud charges & spent ten years in jail, with his Yukos Oil company broken up with most of its assets absorbed by Rosneft,. Upon his release in December 2013, he moved to Switzerland & in 2014 resurrected Open Russia as an "horizontal alliance of individuals & groups that, when working together, can make things happen."