

-- **"U.S. missile shield not yet ready for North Korean nukes:** The Pentagon and its contractors still haven't figured out how to reliably shoot down an intercontinental ballistic missile like the one recently tested by North Korea," by Jacqueline Klimas and Connor O'Brien: "Tens of billions of dollars spent over three decades have still left the Pentagon with no reliable way to shoot down nuclear-tipped missiles approaching the U.S. homeland - a vulnerability that has taken on sharp new urgency after North Korea's Independence Day test of its first ICBM. Instead, the missile defense system designed to shield the United States from an intercontinental ballistic missile - a diverse network of sensors, radars, and interceptor missiles based in Alaska and California - has failed three of its five tests, military leaders acknowledge.

**"Even the two successful ones were heavily scripted.** 'If the North Koreans fired everything they had at us, and we fired at all of the missiles, we'd probably get most of them,' said Jeffrey Lewis, the director of the East Asia nonproliferation program at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies. 'But is 'probably get most' a good day or a bad day?'" <http://politi.co/2tL6ny6>

-- **"U.S. diplomat blasts China and Russia for 'holding the hands' of North Korean leader,"** by WaPo's David Nakamura and Emily Rauhala: "The top U.S. diplomat at the United Nations blasted Russia and China on Wednesday for 'holding the hands' of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, as the Trump administration struggled to respond to Pyongyang's latest ballistic missile test. U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley chided Moscow and Beijing over their opposition to a Security Council resolution condemning North Korea and imposing greater economic sanctions for what she called its 'sharp military escalation.'" <http://wapo.st/2usY2Nb>

**TARA PALMERI -- FIEFDOM ALERT -- "Trump's aides build their own empires in the West Wing":** "President Donald Trump won office on promises to shake up how Washington works, and so far that's been most apparent in his own West Wing, where his top advisers have built up personal staffs to support their own agendas instead of using a traditional White House policy and messaging operation. ...

**"Chief strategist Steve Bannon has two special assistants** , a deputy assistant, an executive assistant and a body man working in his 'war room' -- plus his external press hand, something his predecessors under President Barack Obama, David Axelrod and David Plouffe, never had while working in the White House. Senior adviser Jared Kushner has seven staffers below him, including his own communications adviser, a former Hollywood PR exec who previously repped Kushner's real estate work. ...

**"Senior counselor Kellyanne Conway** ... has a chief of staff, Renee Hudson, who manages one person below her ... Ivanka Trump also has a chief of staff, Julie Radford, who holds the title of special assistant to the president and only manages a single person below her. ... Most noticeable is the proliferation of spokespeople operating parallel to the White House press office. That includes spokesman Josh Raffel, a commissioned officer with a senior title and salary who handles White House-related queries concerning Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump's initiatives. He's also worked to promote initiatives from the Office of American Innovation like a tech CEO event in addition to Kushner's work on Israel and Ivanka Trump's paid leave initiatives. Raffel previously represented Kushner Companies when he worked at Hiltzik Strategies, a New York firm." <http://politi.co/2sPjARW>

**MITCH MCCONNELL'S LATEST HEADACHE -- "Right threatens McConnell's Obamacare repeal,"** by Burgess Everett: "Conservative groups are aggressively backing Mike Lee and Ted Cruz in their bid to move the Senate Republicans' Obamacare repeal bill further to the right, setting up a major confrontation between the party's warring factions next week.

**"On Wednesday afternoon** both FreedomWorks and the Club for Growth urged Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) to adopt an amendment from Sens. Cruz of Texas and Lee of Utah that would largely gut Obamacare's regulatory regime. The move is significant: Without at least a neutral stance from conservative groups, it could be impossible for McConnell to find the 50 votes needed to pass a repeal this month. But what the right is asking for may not be able to pass the Senate either.

**"Cruz and Lee's Consumer Freedom Act** would allow the sale of non-compliant healthcare plans as long as insurers offered plans that also covered pre-existing conditions and other terms mandated by the Affordable Care Act. Lee and Cruz, who were part of the Senate's health care working group, have been pushing their colleagues privately to adopt the language, arguing they should at least allow consumers to buy cheap plans if they can't repeal the law entirely."

<http://politi.co/2sr0jXD>

-- **"GOP Scrambles to Recruit Senate Candidates,"** by WSJ's Natalie Andrews:

<http://on.wsj.com/2ssKK1R>

**THE OPPOSITION -- "Dems' new pitch to voters: A 'Better Deal',"** by Elana Schor and Heather Caygle: "Democratic leaders are zeroing in on a new mantra for their long-promised economic agenda: the 'Better Deal.' The re-branding attempt comes as