

It was a good week for the GOP. But it could have been great.

By [Hugh Hewitt](#) March 25

The pulling of the GOP health-care bill this week was a big loss, and perhaps significant beyond its own costs, as it may signal that the “Area 51” sub-caucus within the Freedom Caucus is made up not so much of conservative Republicans as parties of one with no interest in an agenda shared beyond whatever exists in the space between their own ears.

But it was still, the record must show, a very good week for the conservative cause generally and President Trump specifically. He promised a worthy successor to Justice Antonin Scalia, and [Judge Neil Gorsuch](#) proved to be that in his hearings. Gorsuch also seems to have triggered the return of the now-Charles E. Schumer-led political madness of the Harry Reid era. Schumer, the Senate minority leader, [has promised a filibuster of Gorsuch](#), which will oblige Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to invoke the “Reid Rule” — which allows the Senate’s rules and precedents to be changed by a simple majority vote. The first application of the Reid Rule allowed Democrats to avoid supermajority confirmation of life-tenured federal appellate and district court judges and executive branch nominees. The second application would break the rule about supermajority confirmation of Supreme Court justices. Originalists have long wanted this result. Now we will get it, along with a great originalist justice in Neil Gorsuch.

So Trump had good reason to shake off the rebuff from the Freedom Caucus and the pulling of the health-care bill, and despite his Oval Office aside about being surprised by the lack of loyalty in the caucus, he was loyal to House Speaker Paul D. Ryan, as was Ryan to Trump. This bodes well for the party and for governing over the next 18 months.

What doesn’t bode well is the shared decision of president and speaker to advance [next on tax reform](#), with the twin political death traps of abolition of the home mortgage interest deduction and the state and local taxes deduction. I expect (and hope) for a loss on those Beltway Holy Grails not sought by many, if any, outside of it. A corporate tax cut, yes, and tax simplification, yes, but not two big intraparty squabbles and crackups in a row.

Better to go for infrastructure, including the border wall, and best of all, the fulfillment of the promise of a [350-ship Navy](#) and the general defense buildup that needs to surround that Trump goal.

To that end, though, there needs to be a nomination rush, and soon, in both the Defense and State departments. And those nominees need to be Republicans.

This is the good week that could have been much better. Putting a 30-year-plus originalist on the court would be a history-maker. A legislative loss is an inevitability. The latter is disappointing, but the lessons learned along the way are invaluable to everyone, even the Republican members who will be punished in ways large and small in the weeks, months and years ahead.

I would have preferred the best of weeks. But I'd take a likely SCOTUS confirmation over a one-house-of-Congress win any day. The real pain millions will continue to feel from the accelerating collapse of Obamacare could have been avoided, but as the president and others have noted, "collapse and replace" may have political advantages over "repeal and replace." I'd prefer real reform, but the political benefits are not bad consolation prizes.

The GOP leadership team needs to keep planning and keep pressing, and the 2018 cycle has to adjust for some casualties from among the inside-the-caucus wreckers who will draw primary challengers and thus be bled before the general. But on the Senate side, where Democrats facing the 2018 midterms were probably hoping for some health-care theatrics in their chamber to wipe away the memory of Gorsuch, the smiles are forced.

A good week for the GOP. It could have been a great one.

Now, though, with Aetna's president voicing what everyone blessed with behind-closed-doors objectivity understands — that the Obamacare "death cycle" is real — the opportunity for legislation shifts to the Senate, where the doors of Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.), chairman of the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, and Orrin G. Hatch (R-Utah), chairman of the Finance Committee, must be open to ranking Democrats Patty Murray (Wash.) and Ron Wyden (Ore.) should the latter want to approach the former with reform proposals. Democrats face a potential disaster with 25 of their seats up in 2018 and only eight of the GOP incumbents campaigning. The urgency to find a fix to Obamacare's collapse should be on Senate Democrats. If they can find a way to gracefully exit the nightmare of Obamacare without calling it a repudiation of the former president, the Senate GOP should listen and consult with Trump and Ryan about genuine bipartisan compromises. Those could include immigration regularization, targeted infrastructure, tax reform and, of course, the defense buildup via an end to the sequester. A big deal would have to come out of the Senate, and it would have to be mostly — though not exclusively — the GOP's agenda, and it might keep Democratic losses down to a handful of seats in 2018.

That way, of course, votes the Area 51 sub-caucus of the Freedom Caucus off the island. But that's what they asked for. They prefer their late-night meetings and cold-pizza breakfasts to legislation that addresses the country's many deep problems. If Alexander and Hatch start meeting with Murray and Wyden, good — not great, but good — things could happen.

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Hugh Hewitt, a Post contributing columnist, hosts a nationally syndicated radio show and is author of "The Fourth Way: The Conservative Playbook for a Lasting GOP Majority."  Follow @hughhewitt