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Weekly Commentary

The Fed's own Independence Day

President Trump has tested the bulwark protecting the Federal Reserve from political interference and found it as sturdy as ever. His insults of Chair Powell are one thing, but claiming he had the authority to fire him is another. That stance threatened the Fed's independent stature and was serious enough to earn a slapdown by the bond market. No one bullies like bondholders.

But when the administration dismissed the leaders of two independent agencies, the National Labor Relations Board and the Merit Systems Protection Board, concern arose that Trump might try an end-around to replace the Federal Reserve Board of Governors, which, of course, includes Powell. Thankfully, the Supreme Court stepped in. While it affirmed that the White House could dismiss the directors in question, it proactively shut the door on any similar attempt with the central bank: "The Federal Reserve is a uniquely structured, quasi-private entity that follows in the distinct historical tradition of the First and Second Banks of the United States." That ruling came on May 22, though as far as the Fed is concerned, it might as well have happened on July 4.

The fact that the high court issued this carve-out without being specifically asked about it should convince Trump that he has no case. This doesn't mean he will stop. He recently met with Powell at the White House to say the chair is, "making a mistake by not lowering interest rates," according to the president's spokesperson. The June 18 Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) meeting is all but certain to result in no rate change. It is equally clear that Trump will continue to criticize Powell.

An updated Summary of Economic Projections is always notable, and the FOMC will release one at the meeting, but it might not hold as much insight as usual. So long as the fog that is the administration's fiscal and trade policy obscures the state of the economy, Fed voters are likely to reiterate their "wait-and-see" position.

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