
Steve Bannon Is Making Sure There's No White House Paper Trail, Says Intel Source

The Trump administration's chief strategist has already taken control of both policy and process on national security.

BY **KATE BRANNEN**

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@K8BRANNEN

If there was any question about who is largely in charge of national security behind the scenes at the White House, the answer is becoming increasingly clear: Steve Bannon, the former head of Breitbart News, a far-right media outlet, and now White House advisor.

Even before he was given a formal seat on the National Security Council's "principals committee" this weekend by President Donald Trump, Bannon was calling the shots and doing so with little to no input from the National Security Council staff, according to an intelligence official who asked not to be named out of fear of retribution.

"He is running a cabal, almost like a shadow NSC," the official said. He described a work environment where there is little appetite for dissenting opinions, shockingly no paper trail of what's being discussed and agreed upon at meetings, and no guidance or encouragement so far from above about how the National Security Council staff should be organized.

The intelligence official, who said he was willing to give the Trump administration the benefit of the doubt when it took office, is now deeply troubled by how things are being run.

"They ran all of these executive orders outside of the normal construct," he said, referring to last week's flurry of draft executive orders on everything from immigration to the return of CIA "black sites."

After the controversial draft orders were written, the Trump team was very selective in how they routed them through the internal White House review process, the official said.

Under previous administrations, if someone thought another person or directorate had a stake in the issue at hand or expertise in a subject area, he or she was free to share the papers as long as the recipient had proper clearance.

With that standard in mind, when some officials saw Trump's draft executive orders, they felt they had broad impact and shared them more widely for staffing and comments.

That did not sit well with Bannon or his staff, according to the official. More stringent guidelines for handling and routing were then instituted, and the National Security Council staff was largely cut out of the process.

By the end of the week, they weren't the only ones left in the dark. Retired Marine Gen. John Kelly, the secretary of homeland security, was being briefed on the executive order, which called for immediately shutting the borders to nationals from seven largely Muslim countries and all refugees, while Trump was in the midst of signing the measure, the *New York Times* reported.

The White House did not respond in time to a request for comment.

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The lack of a paper trail documenting the decision-making process is also troubling, the intelligence official said. For example, under previous administrations, after a principals or deputies meeting of the National Security Council, the discussion, the final agreement, and the recommendations would be written up in what's called a "summary of conclusions" — or SOC in government-speak.

"Under [President George W. Bush], the National Security Council was quite strict about recording SOCs," said Matthew Waxman, a law professor at Columbia University who served on Bush's National Security Council. "There was often a high level of generality, and there may have been some exceptions, but they were carefully crafted."

These summaries also provided a record to refer back to, especially important if a debate over an issue came up again, including among agencies that needed to implement the conclusions reached.

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If someone thought the discussion was mischaracterized, he or she would call for a correction to be issued to set the record straight, said Loren DeJonge Schulman, who previously served in former President Barack Obama's administration as a senior advisor to National Security Advisor Susan Rice. Schulman is now a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security.

"People took the document seriously," she said.

During the first week of the Trump administration, there were no SOCs, the intelligence official said. In fact, according to him, there is surprisingly very little paper being generated, and whatever paper there is, the NSC staff is not privy to it. He sees this as a deterioration of transparency and accountability.

"It would worry me if written records of these meeting were eliminated, because they contribute to good governance," Waxman said.

It is equally important that NSC staff be the ones drafting the issue papers going into meetings, too, said Schulman. "The idea is to share with everyone a fair and balanced take on the issue, with the range of viewpoints captured in that document," she said.

If those papers are now being generated by political staff, she added, it corrupts the whole process.

It could also contribute to Bannon's centralization of power.

"He who has the pen has the authority to shape outcomes," the intelligence official said.

Now Bannon's role in the shadows is being formalized thanks to an executive order signed Saturday by Trump that formally gives Bannon a seat on the National Security Council's principals committee. The same executive order removed from that group the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the director of national intelligence, and the secretary of energy. Their new diminished role is not unprecedented, but some still find it a troubling piece of this larger picture.

For example, former Defense Secretary Robert Gates — who served under both Bush and Obama — **told** ABC News this weekend that sidelining the chairman of the Joint Chiefs and the director of national intelligence was a “big mistake.” Every president can benefit from their “perspective, judgment, and experience,” Gates said.

Meanwhile, Bannon's new role is unprecedented. Under Obama, it wasn't unheard of for his chief political advisors, John Podesta and David Axelrod, to attend NSC meetings, but they were never guaranteed a seat at the table. Under Bush, the line between national security and domestic political considerations was even clearer. Top aides have **said** they never saw Karl Rove or “anyone from his shop” in NSC meetings, and that's because Bush told him explicitly not to attend.

The signal Bush “especially wanted to send to the military is that, “The decisions I'm making that involve life and death for the people in uniform will not be tainted by any political decisions,”” former White House Chief of Staff Josh Bolten **said** last September.

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) **called** Bannon's appointment to the council as a permanent member a “radical departure” from how the decision-making body was organized in the past, adding that he found the change “concerning.”

Inside and outside of government, there are also deep reservations about Bannon's alignment with the far right and white nationalism, thanks to his previous leadership of Breitbart. One Bannon **quote** making the rounds this weekend: “Lenin wanted to destroy the state, and that's my goal, too. I want to bring everything crashing down and destroy all of today's establishment.”

There are new questions about where retired Army Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, Trump's national security advisor, fits into all of this. Internally, it remains unclear what his role is, the intelligence official said. “He has a voice at the table, but he's overshadowed by Bannon.”

Meanwhile, Tom Bossert, a former Bush national security aide whom Trump picked to serve as the White House's homeland security advisor, is not “one of Bannon's,” so he is also on the outside looking in, according to the official. However, in Saturday's executive order, Bossert was also given a permanent seat on the NSC principals committee.

But there is not a lot of infighting right now, because to have infighting, there needs to be a power struggle, and there is no struggle, the intelligence official said.

However, there is an effort to crack down on leaking. Last week, a draft executive order, which raised the prospect of bringing back CIA “black sites” and reopening the debate on torture, leaked to the press. White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer **said** it was “not a White House document” and that he had “no idea where it came from.” But according to the *New York Times*, “the White House had circulated it among National Security Council staff members for review on Tuesday morning.” The *Times* was even provided with the details of the email chain that showed “the draft order’s movements through the White House bureaucracy.”

“They’re doing a witch hunt now to find out how that got out,” the intelligence official said. “There is zero room for dissenting opinion.”

Trump did say publicly that he would defer to Defense Secretary James Mattis for now on the question of torture, which would suggest that disagreement is OK. But while publicly the president is allowing for different opinions, there is unhappiness about what is permitted behind the scenes, according to the official. If you take a stand against the White House, you might find yourself frozen out of future meetings, he said.

The NSC staff is mostly in shock after last week, the intelligence official said. For now, no one knows what each day will bring. There is no organizational chart yet for the NSC, meaning there has been no internal guidance yet about which portfolios still exist and to whom they report, the official said. The *Washington Post* **reported** Sunday on some of the changes being made, including that “some offices such as cyber have been expanded, while others have been collapsed.” The directorates on Europe and Russia, which were separate under Obama, have now been combined.

It’s possible that the current chaos and lack of bureaucratic process is a result of the Trump administration still going through growing pains and figuring out how best to run things. But former NSC officials said an organizational chart for the NSC is the kind of thing you have in place weeks before taking office.

Only time will tell if the way things are currently being done is deliberate or part of a new administration learning on the job how best to provide advice to the president and communicate with the relevant agencies.

Trump's management style is known to be highly unstructured, if not chaotic. The *Post* reported in May that he was running his presidential campaign like he ran his business — “fond of promoting rivalries among subordinates, wary of delegating major decisions, scornful of convention and fiercely insistent on a culture of loyalty around him.”

“While this may have worked for his company, it is certainly not a way to run a country,” the official said.

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Hundreds of U.S. Diplomats Protest Trump Immigration Ban in Internal Memos

The surge of signatures sows early tension between Trump and Foggy Bottom, while the White House tells them to get with the program “or go.”

BY [JOHN HUDSON](#)

JANUARY 30, 2017

JOHN.HUDSON

@JOHN_HUDSON

The number of State Department officials signing memos protesting President Donald Trump's immigration and refugee ban quickly surpassed 200, department officials told [Foreign Policy](#) on Monday. The exact number of signatures is unknown as several different draft versions are in circulation, but the number far outstrips the [51 signatories](#) who spoke out against former President Barack Obama's Syria policy last summer, a number viewed at the time as “[extremely large, if not unprecedented.](#)”

The surge in opposition to Trump's executive order sows immediate tension between Foggy Bottom and the White House, and creates a headache for Rex Tillerson, the president's nominee for secretary of state who's expected to receive Senate approval on Wednesday.

“This ban ... will not achieve its stated aim to protect the American people from terrorist attacks by foreign nationals admitted to the United States,” warned one version of the memo. Rather, it will inflame anti-American sentiment and “immediately sour relations” with counterterrorism partners in the Muslim world, the **memo** stated.

The president’s order indefinitely bars Syrian refugees from coming to the United States and temporarily bans refugees and immigrants from seven Muslim-majority nations: Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Iran, Libya, and Sudan.

Various versions of the memo are expected to be consolidated and sent to the director of policy planning at the State Department through the “dissent channel,” a means for diplomats to air their grievances without fear of retaliation. The channel was setup in 1971 during the Vietnam War to give rank-and-file diplomats a pipeline to senior leadership.

On Monday, White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer pushed back against the dissenting State Department officials, saying they “should either get with the program or should go.”

“The president has a very clear vision.... He’s going to put the safety of this country first,” he said. “If somebody has a problem with that agenda, that does call into question whether they should continue in that post or not,” Spicer said.

The diplomats argued that “given the near absence of terror attacks committed in recent years” by visa holders from the seven countries, “this ban will have little practical effect in improving public safety.”

The new administration appears to be at pains to scrub information at odds with its policies from public websites. An April 2016 State Department fact sheet on myths and realities of U.S refugee programs was **taken off** the department’s website the day Trump signed the executive order. Democrats on the House Foreign Affairs committee now **house** it (as do some overseas embassy pages).

The signatories include a mix of younger and older officials, and many are career foreign service officers. A State Department official told **FP** on Monday that the letter would soon be closed because organizers were satisfied that a comprehensive subsection of the State Department was represented.

In a statement, acting spokesman Mark Toner said: “We are aware of a dissent channel message regarding the executive order.”

“The Dissent Channel is a long-standing official vehicle for State Department employees to convey alternative views and perspectives on policy issues,” he added. “This is an important process that the acting secretary, and the department as a whole, value, and respect. It allows State employees to express divergent policy views candidly and privately to senior leadership.”

After the memo is submitted, it is distributed to the senior leadership of the State Department and prompts a response from the secretary of state. At times, that can put the nation's top diplomat in an exceedingly awkward position. Last summer, diplomats wrote a dissent memo imploring the Obama administration to launch missile strikes against the Syrian government, a policy Secretary of State John Kerry **reportedly** supported in private. However, choosing not to break with the president publicly, Kerry said through his spokesman that he was “very committed” to the administration's policy.

It's unclear how Tillerson will respond to widespread dissent among his new subordinates even before he takes office. But a State Department official on Monday expressed doubts that the memo would ultimately succeed in changing White House policy.

“I doubt you're going to get Trump to change his mind because of this cable,” said the official.

“You guys will make a big deal of it,” he said, referring to the press, “and leadership here will have to respond. But like the Syrian dissent memo, nothing usually comes out of it.”

Regardless of what comes of the backlash, Tillerson is likely to have a lot of frustrated and dispirited employees on his hands. Sebastian Gregg, a former foreign service officer, said his erstwhile colleagues in consular services are particularly concerned because they will be the ones rejecting or approving applications.

They're making “life-altering decisions on a daily basis,” he said, and some are “abjectly horrified.”

Another State Department official said the White House executive order is “creating an enormous amount of confusion and disarray” because it didn't go through the normal process for clearing.

Spicer said Monday that criticisms of the rollout of the policy are “overblown.”

“Remember, there are 329,000 people who came into this country in a 24-hour period. There were 109 stopped over a 24-hour period,” Spicer said, referring to all international arrivals, rather than those from the seven countries targeted in the order.

Spontaneous demonstrations broke out in dozens of cities and airports across the country, including in Washington, over the weekend, while several courts put a stay on the order.

“When you actually look at the perspective of what’s going on, a majority of Americans agree with the president,” he asserted.

Robbie Gramer and Jessica Holzer contributed to this report.

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