

POLITICS

Trump Removes Stephen Bannon From National Security Council Post

By PETER BAKER, MAGGIE HABERMAN and
GLENN THRUSH APRIL 5, 2017

WASHINGTON — For the first 10 weeks of President Trump’s administration, no adviser loomed larger in the public imagination than Stephen K. Bannon, the raw and rumpled former chairman of Breitbart News who considers himself a “virulently anti-establishment” revolutionary out to destroy the “administrative state.”

But behind the scenes, White House officials said, the ideologist who enjoyed the president’s confidence became increasingly embattled as other advisers, including Mr. Trump’s daughter and son-in-law, complained about setbacks on health care and immigration. Lately, Mr. Bannon has been conspicuously absent from some meetings. And now he has lost his seat at the national security table.

In a move that was widely seen as a sign of changing fortunes, Mr. Trump removed Mr. Bannon, his chief strategist, from the National Security Council’s cabinet-level “principals committee” on Wednesday. The shift was orchestrated by Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster, Mr. Trump’s national security adviser, who insisted on purging a political adviser from the Situation Room where decisions about war and peace are made.

Mr. Bannon resisted the move, even threatening at one point to quit if it went forward, according to a White House official who, like others, insisted on anonymity to discuss internal deliberations. Mr. Bannon's camp denied that he had threatened to resign and spent the day spreading the word that the shift was a natural evolution, not a signal of any diminution of his outsize influence.

His allies said privately that Mr. Bannon had been put on the principals committee to keep an eye on Mr. Trump's first national security adviser, Michael T. Flynn, a retired three-star general who lasted just 24 days before being forced out for misleading Vice President Mike Pence and other White House officials about what he had discussed with Russia's ambassador. With Mr. Flynn gone, these allies said, there was no need for Mr. Bannon to remain, but they noted that he had kept his security clearance.

"Susan Rice operationalized the N.S.C. during the last administration," Mr. Bannon said in a statement, referring to President Barack Obama's national security adviser. "I was put on the N.S.C. with General Flynn to ensure that it was de-operationalized. General McMaster has returned the N.S.C. to its proper function."

Mr. Bannon did not explain what he meant by "operationalized" or how his presence on the committee had ensured it would not be.

It was one more drama in a White House consumed by palace intrigue, where officials jockey for the ear of the president, angle for authority and seek to place blame for political defeats. Even as Mr. Bannon lost a national security credential, Jared Kushner, the president's son-in-law and senior adviser, seems to be acting as a shadow secretary of state, visiting Iraq and taking on China, Mexico and Middle East portfolios.

Mr. Bannon's many enemies, inside and outside the White House, celebrated what they saw as a defeat for his brand of fiery, nationalist politics.

"He didn't belong on the principals committee to begin with — doesn't really belong in the White House at all," said Representative Adam B. Schiff of California, the ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee. "I hope that this is a sign that McMaster is taking control of the National Security Council."

Karl Rove — who, as senior adviser to President George W. Bush, was not allowed to

join national security meetings — said it was a move back to a better process. “It was wrong for him to be added in the first place, and it was right to take him off,” he said.

Even if Mr. Bannon really was removed only because there was no longer a need for someone to mind Mr. Flynn, Mr. Rove added, the end result was a victory for General McMaster. “It’s either a sign of McMaster’s strength, or the result is it strengthens McMaster,” he said.

Still, Mr. Bannon, who has been under attack from outside the administration since the early days of the transition, is a crafty survivor, and insiders warned that it would be a mistake to underestimate him. When General McMaster wanted to fire a staff member, Ezra Cohen-Watnick, Mr. Bannon intervened to save his job.

Mr. Cohen-Watnick had alerted colleagues that Mr. Trump’s associates had been caught up in surveillance of foreigners, information then shown by another White House official to Representative Devin Nunes, Republican of California and chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, which is investigating Russian meddling in last year’s election.

James Jeffrey, a deputy national security adviser to Mr. Bush, said General McMaster appeared to have “scored one on the presumably more powerful Bannon,” but cautioned against reading too much into what it meant for Mr. Bannon. “He seems to be very close to the president and, by most accounts, still wins many of his battles,” Mr. Jeffrey said.

From the start, General McMaster intended to revamp the National Security Council organization that he inherited from Mr. Flynn. The principals committee, which is led by the national security adviser and includes the vice president, secretary of state, defense secretary and others, is the primary policy-making body deciding questions that do not rise to the level of the president and framing those that do.

The initial structure approved by Mr. Trump not only gave Mr. Bannon formal membership on the committee, but also downgraded the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the director of national intelligence to occasional participants as issues demanded.

In addition to removing Mr. Bannon, the new order issued by Mr. Trump, dated Tuesday and made public on Wednesday, restored the Joint Chiefs chairman and intelligence director and added the energy secretary, C.I.A. director and United Nations ambassador. It also put

the Homeland Security Council under General McMaster rather than making it a separate entity, as Mr. Trump's original order had done.

Mr. Trump was angry over the fallout from his first order, feeling that he had not been properly warned about its implications. He briefly considered reversing it the same weekend it was announced, according to a person with direct knowledge, but decided against it for fear of creating more of a public storm.

For the first two months of Mr. Trump's presidency, Mr. Bannon occupied an unassailable perch at the president's side — ramming through key elements of his eclectic and hard-edge populist agenda, including two executive orders on freezing immigration from several predominantly Muslim countries. Mr. Trump viewed Mr. Bannon as a street-fighting kindred spirit who favored his own attack-when-attacked communications strategy.

But blunders by Mr. Bannon's team — especially the first immigration order, which was rejected by multiple courts — have undermined his position. His take-no-prisoners style was not a winning strategy on Capitol Hill, and Mr. Bannon declined to take a significant part. Experienced politicians, including Mr. Pence and Mr. Trump's budget director, Mick Mulvaney, stepped into more expansive roles as negotiations over the failed health care overhaul dragged on.

Mr. Trump initially supported Mr. Bannon's take-it-or-leave-it final message to holdouts in the House Freedom Caucus. But, needing a win, the president grew skeptical and authorized Mr. Pence to resume health care talks, with Mr. Bannon playing more of a supporting role, according to three people close to Mr. Trump.

Mr. Bannon has also been at odds with Gary Cohn, the president's national economics adviser. Mr. Cohn is close with Mr. Kushner, who has said privately that he fears that Mr. Bannon plays to the president's worst impulses, according to people with direct knowledge of such discussions.

Moreover, Mr. Bannon's Svengali-style reputation has chafed on a president who sees himself as the West Wing's only leading man. Several associates said the president had quietly expressed annoyance over the credit Mr. Bannon had received for setting the agenda — and Mr. Trump was not pleased by the “President Bannon” puppet-master theme promoted by magazines, late-night talk shows and Twitter.

Yet there is a risk for Mr. Trump in appearing to minimize Mr. Bannon, a hero to the nationalist, anti-immigration base that helped drive Mr. Trump to an Electoral College victory. With his approval ratings at historic lows for so early in a presidency, he is counting on the same people who see Mr. Bannon as their champion — just as Mr. Bannon is counting on Mr. Trump to retain his place in the White House inner circle.

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President Trump on Wednesday removed controversial White House chief strategist Stephen K. Bannon from the National Security Council, part of a sweeping staff reshuffling that elevated key military and intelligence officials to greater roles on the council and left Bannon far less involved in shaping the administration's day-to-day national security policy. The restructuring reflects the growing influence of national security adviser H.R. McMaster, an Army three-star general who took over the post after retired general Michael Flynn was ousted in February and is increasingly asserting himself over the flow of national security information in the White House. President Trump has removed his chief political strategist, Steve Bannon, from NSC post. WASHINGTON — President Trump's decision to remove Steve Bannon from the National Security Council is not evidence of a diminished role for the controversial chief political strategist, White House officials say. A senior White House official said that Bannon, who only attended one meeting of the council, was originally given the post as a check on former national security adviser Michael Flynn. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss a personnel matter. Flynn was fired in February after misleading Vice President Pence about the substance of his discussions with the Russian President. Trump has decided to shake up his National Security Council and to remove his chief strategist, Steve Bannon, from the groups principals committee, as first reported by Bloomberg. Trump has also reportedly decided to downgrade the role of his Homeland Security Adviser, Tom Bossert. Bannon was controversially placed on the committee shortly after Trump's inauguration. The official also said that the removal had been planned for a while and that it was "in the works from the day" Bannon met National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster. Another senior aide told the Beast that "that's [all] spin and CYA, but fine," but mentioned that Bannon still has his security clearance.