Little heard in public, Bannon is quiet power in Oval Office

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Associated Press

WASHINGTON — People are beginning to pay more attention to the man behind the curtain.

It is a mark of Steve Bannon's extraordinary sway in the Trump White House that a man who has spoken so little in public over the past two weeks is getting so much credit — and blame — for what's going on.

The conservative media executive's fingerprints are on virtually every significant move taken by President Donald Trump, from Trump's sweeping order to suspend the country's refugee program and block visitors from seven Muslim-majority countries to the nomination of Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court.

Trump raised eyebrows and hackles when he gave Bannon a seat on the powerful National Security Council Principals Committee. Bannon, a shaggy-haired agitator-turned-insider eager to make a lasting mark on Washington, was a strong advocate for Gorsuch, according to a person who spoke with him recently. That person spoke on the condition of anonymity in order to discuss a private conversation.

Bannon's early moves to consolidate power haven't come without pushback.

In a phone call Monday, Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly and Acting Secretary of State Tom Shannon asked the White House to take a back seat in cleaning up confusion caused by the chaotic rollout of the immigration order, according to two U.S. officials who spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to speak publicly about internal government discussions.

AP Photo/Evan Vucci, File

In this Jan. 31 photo, White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon arrives for a meeting with President Donald Trump on cyber security in the Roosevelt Room of the White House in Washington.

White House spokeswoman Lindsay Walters disputed the portrayal of the call with Homeland Security, saying it was the White House that reached out and asked other agencies to take the lead.

Still, the extent of Bannon's influence was underscored by Trump's striking decision over the weekend to add his name to the roster of top national security hands who meet on the Principals Committee, not typically the province of political strategist.

"Steve's the main ideological mover of the administration. He's the chief ideological officer and he has a strong point of view," said Christopher Ruddy, the CEO of Newsmax and a friend of the president. "I think the bond is their world view."

The 64-year-old Bannon shares Trump's business and media experience, as well as his dramatic flair. He's a fellow disruptor who helped Trump capitalize on the populist anger and frustration that propelled them both to the White House.

> "Darkness is good. Dick Cheney. Darth Vader. Satan. That's power."
>
> **— Steve Bannon,** White House chief strategist

Rarely seen or heard during Trump's campaign, Bannon is now a fixture.

If Trump is moving quickly to overthrow the established order, Bannon is the one fomenting rebellion.

If White House chief of staff Reince Priebus is there to maintain order and focus, Bannon is there to wage war.

"He wants to be the intellectual, strategist bomb-thrower," says former House Speaker and informal Trump adviser Newt Gingrich, who sees Bannon as the perfect ally to the president in disrupting the status quo. "He does not want to be the guy who makes the trains run on time."

Bannon has cultivated a near-diabolical image in his rare, headline-making interviews.

He recently told *The New York Times* he sees the media as "the opposition party," and advised the press to "keep its mouth shut" after it underestimated Trump.

"Darkness is good," he told The Hollywood Reporter shortly after Trump's win. "Dick Cheney. Darth Vader. Satan. That's power."

As Trump's chief strategist and senior counselor, Bannon had a hand in crafting the president's inaugural address and in selecting his Cabinet. He's bringing in aides from the conservative Breitbart media empire where he ruled before Trump tapped him to direct his campaign.

Trump's move to add Bannon to the National Security Council has drawn howls from Democrats and even some Republicans. Bernie Sanders called it "dangerous and unprecedented." Republican Sen. John McCain called it a "radical departure" from recent history. Former Clinton adviser Robert Reich called Bannon "nuts and malicious."

Former deputy campaign manager David Bossie, who introduced Trump to Bannon in 2011, says the two got to know each other as Trump appeared multiple times on Bannon's Breitbart radio show over the ensuing years.

"They believe in each other's agendas, which is why they have grown so close," says Bossie.

Still the two are an unusual match. While Trump is not an avid reader, Bossie describes Bannon as "a carnivore of books" who's always reading and talking history — ancient Greece, the Civil War, World War II and more.

Bannon took over Breitbart News after the sudden death of its founder in 2012 left people wondering what would become of the website. By then, the former U.S. Navy officer and Harvard MBA had left behind Goldman Sachs and investment banking, capitalized on an entertainment deal that left him with a share of "Seinfeld" royalties, founded an institute to ferret out government corruption and created a number of his own films, including paeans to Sarah Palin, the tea party movement and Ronald Reagan.

Under Bannon's guidance, Breitbart grew into one the right's most powerful voices as it took on establishment Republicans like House Speaker Paul Ryan. Critics, however, accused Bannon of allowing the website to become a platform for the white nationalist sentiments of the alt-right — a charge Bannon has denied.

Trump launches his attack on bank restraints

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump launched his long-promised attack Friday on banking rules that were rushed into law after the nation's economic crisis, signing new orders after meeting with business and investment chiefs and pledging further action to free big banks from restrictions. Wall Street cheered him on, but Trump risks disillusioning his working-class voters.

He directed his Treasury secretary to review the devilishly complex 2010 Dodd-Frank financial oversight law, which was signed by President Barack Obama to overhaul regulations after the financial and housing crisis of the past decade. It aimed to restrain banks from misdeeds that many blamed for the crisis.

The new president also signed a memorandum instructing the Labor Department to delay an Obama-era rule that requires financial professionals who charge commissions to put their clients' best interests first when giving advice on retirement investments.

While the order on Dodd-Frank, named after its Democratic sponsors, won't have an immediate impact, Trump's intent is clear. The law has been a disaster in restricting banks' activities, he said earlier this week. "We're going to be doing a big number on Dodd-Frank."

During a meeting with business leaders, including JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon on Friday, he said, "Frankly I have so many people, friends of mine that have nice businesses that can't borrow money. They just can't get any money because the banks just won't let 'em borrow because of the rules and regulations of Dodd-Frank."

AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais

President Donald Trump signs an executive order in the Oval Office of the White House Friday. The order will direct the Treasury secretary to review the 2010 Dodd-Frank financial oversight law, which reshaped financial regulation after 2008-2009 crisis.

Those regulations unnecessarily cramp the U.S. economy and job creation, he declared. But many Democrats see it differently, including Sen. Elizabeth Warren, who was behind the formation of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, formed as part of the Dodd-Frank law.

"Donald Trump talked a big game about Wall Street during his campaign — but as president, we're finding out whose side he's really on," Warren said in a statement. "The Wall Street bankers and lobbyists whose greed and recklessness nearly destroyed this country may be toasting each other with champagne, but the American people have not forgotten the 2008 financial crisis — and they will not forget what happened today."

The crisis touched off the worst recession since the 1930s Great Depression, wiping out \$11 trillion in U.S. household wealth and leaving about 8 million Americans jobless. U.S. taxpayers funded multibillion-dollar bailouts of Wall Street mega-banks, smaller banks across the country and other financial firms.

Eight years on, the economy's recovery has been halting, a situation that contributed to Trump's election. Beyond being fed up with bailouts, consumers have an interest in the Financial Protection Bureau, which expanded regulators' ability to police a wide array of financial products and services.

During his campaign, Trump pledged to repeal and replace the law, but he also railed against Wall Street excess and vowed to hold the industry accountable for the crisis. His rhetoric left questions about how closely he would align with the financial services industries' years-long fight to undo regulations they view as burdensome.

Since winning the White House, Trump has cleared up some of those questions. He has filled his administration with millionaires and financiers and signed the orders after meeting with top CEOs and banking executives.

In his other action Friday, Trump's presidential memorandum on financial advisers delayed implementation of the past administration's "fiduciary rule," aimed at blocking consultants from steering clients toward investments with higher commissions and fees that can eat away at retirement savings. The rule was to take effect in April.

The financial services industry argues that the rule would limit retirees' investment choices by forcing asset managers to steer them to low-risk options.

Meanwhile, unwinding most of Dodd-Frank will require legislation, and on Capitol Hill the Republicans' yearning to cut it down is as strong as ever. But tax reform, reworking "Obamacare" and other issues are more immediate priorities, some Republicans suggest. Further, the big banks already have baked in many of the Dodd-Frank rules.

BRIEFLY

DeVos moves closer to confirmation as education secretary

WASHINGTON (AP) — Betsy DeVos moved closer toward confirmation as education secretary Friday after clearing a major hurdle in the Senate, even as Democrats and labor unions fervently sought another Republican vote against her.

Tensions flew on the Senate floor during an early-morning session, with a senior Republican saying DeVos will make an "excellent" secretary and a top Democrat calling her "one of the worst nominees." Republicans overpowered Democrats, voting 52-48 to cut off debate on the nomination, setting the stage for a final vote Tuesday.

DeVos, a billionaire Republican donor, has faced fierce criticism from labor unions for her promotion of school choice. Democrats and teachers' organizations have accused her of seeking to dismantle public education and divert taxpayer money to charter schools and private school vouchers.

Two Republican senators, Susan Collins of Maine and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, have said they would vote against her nomination, and others are being bombarded by phone calls and letters from parents and teachers across the country. If all Democrats vote against her and no other Republicans dissent, Vice President Mike Pence would have to break a 50-50 tie to gain DeVos' confirmation.

Trump hits Iran with new sanctions for missile test

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration ordered sanctions against more than two dozen people and companies from the Persian Gulf to China Friday in retaliation for Iran's recent ballistic missile test, increasing pressure on Tehran without directly undercutting a landmark nuclear deal with the country.

Those targeted by the Treasury Department include Iranian, Lebanese, Emirati and Chinese individuals and firms involved in procuring ballistic missile technology for Iran. They are now prohibited from doing any business in the United States or with American citizens. The overall impact is likely to be minimal on Iran's economy, though some of the people and companies have ties with Iran's hard-line Revolutionary Guard military forces.