

Trump blasts Bannon over book, says ex-aide 'lost his mind'

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Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump launched a scathing attack on former top adviser Steve Bannon on Wednesday, responding to a new book that portrays Trump as an undisciplined man-child who didn't actually want to win the White House and quotes Bannon as calling his son's contact with a Russian lawyer "treasonous."

Hitting back via a formal White House statement rather than a more-typical Twitter volley, Trump insisted Bannon had little to do with his victorious campaign and "has nothing to do with me or my Presidency."

"When he was fired, he not only lost his job, he lost his mind," Trump said.

It was a blistering attack against the man who helped deliver the presidency to Trump. It was spurred by an unflattering new book by writer Michael Wolff that paints Trump as a leader who doesn't understand the weight of the presidency and spends his evenings eating cheeseburgers in bed, watching television and talking on the phone to old friends.

White House aides were blindsided when early excerpts from "Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House" were published online by New York magazine and other media outlets ahead of the Jan. 9 publication date.

The release left Trump "furious" and "disgusted," said White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders, who complained that the book contained "outrageous" and "completely false claims against the president, his administration and his family."

Asked what specifically had prompted the president's fury with Bannon, she said: "I would certainly think that going after the president's son in an absolutely outrageous and unprecedented way is probably not the best way to curry favor with anybody."

In the book, an advance copy of which was provided to The Associated Press, Bannon is quoted as describing a June 2016 meeting at Trump Tower between Donald Trump Jr., Trump campaign aides and a Russian lawyer as "treasonous" and "unpatriotic." The meeting has become a focus of federal and congressional investigators.

Bannon also told Wolff the investigations into potential collusion between Russia and Trump campaign officials would likely focus on money laundering.

"They're going to crack Don Junior like an egg on national TV," Bannon was quoted as saying in



AP Photo/Alex Brandon, File

In this Jan. 28, 2017 file photo, President Donald Trump speaks on the phone with Prime Minister of Australia Malcolm Turnbull, with then-National Security Adviser Michael Flynn, center, and then-chief strategist Steve Bannon, right, in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington.

one section that was first reported by The Guardian.

A spokeswoman for Bannon did not immediately respond to a request for a comment. Trump Jr. lashed out in a series of tweets, including one that said Andrew Breitbart, the founder of the Breitbart News site that Bannon now runs, "would be ashamed of the division and lies Steve Bannon is spreading!"

Bannon, who was forced out of his White House job last summer, was not surprised or particularly bothered by the blowback, according to a person familiar with his thinking but not authorized to speak publicly on the matter. That person said Bannon vowed on Wednesday to continue his war on the Republican establishment and also predicted that, after a cooling-off period, he'd continue to speak with Trump, who likes to maintain contact with former advisers even after he fires and sometimes disparages them.

Sanders said Bannon and Trump last spoke in the first part of last month.

The former-and-current Breitbart News head has told associates that he believes Trump has been ill-served by some of his closest allies, including eldest son Don Jr. and Jared Kushner, the president's son-in-law. Bannon believes they have exposed Trump to the Russia probe that could topple his presidency and that Trump would be able to accomplish more without them.

So far, there is no indication that

Bannon is being investigated by Special Counsel Robert Mueller. But the House intelligence committee has invited him, along with former Trump campaign manager Corey Lewandowski, for a closed-door interview as a part of the panel's investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 election, according to a person familiar with the invitation.

Trump, up until Wednesday, had been complimentary of Bannon, saying in October that the two "have a very good relationship" and had been friends for "a long time."

In the book, Bannon also speaks critically of Trump's daughter and White House adviser, Ivanka, calling her "dumb as a brick."

"A little marketing savvy and has a look but as far as understanding actually how the world works and what politics is and what it means — nothing," he is quoted saying.

New York magazine also published a lengthy adaptation of the book on Wednesday, in which Wolff writes that Trump believed his presidential nomination would boost his brand and deliver "untold opportunities" — but that he never expected to win.

It says Trump Jr. told a friend that his father looked as if he'd seen a ghost when it became clear he might win. The younger Trump described Melania Trump as "in tears — and not of joy."

The first lady's spokeswoman, Stephanie Grisham, disputed that,

saying Mrs. Trump supported her husband's decision to run, encouraged him to do so and was happy when he won.

"The book is clearly going to be sold in the bargain fiction section," Grisham said in a statement.

Wolff was generally granted access to the White House with a "blue badge" instead of the traditional press badge, giving him wide access to the West Wing, according to officials who spoke on condition of anonymity in order to discuss internal protocol.

One former White House official said Wolff was known to camp out for hours in the West Wing lobby after meetings, sitting on a sofa as he waited to talk to staffers passing by.

Wolff said in an author's note that the book was based on more than 200 interviews, including multiple conversations with the president and senior staff. But Sanders said Wolff "never actually sat down with the president" and had spoken with him just once, briefly, by phone, since Trump had taken office.

She also said the vast majority of interviews Wolff conducted with other White House officials were done at Bannon's request.

Bannon's comments in the book are just his latest published criticism of the president and his family. In a Vanity Fair piece late last year, he was quoted telling friends and advisers that Trump had "lost a step" since his swearing-in and was "like an 11-year-old child."

Trump disbands voter fraud commission

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump has signed an executive order disbanding his controversial voter fraud commission amid infighting, legal threats and information denials.

The White House blamed the decision, announced Wednesday evening, on a refusal by more than a dozen states to comply with the commission request for reams of personal voter data, including voters' names, voting histories and party affiliations.

"Rather than engage in endless legal battles at taxpayer expense, today President Donald J. Trump signed an executive order to dissolve the Commission, and he has asked the Department of Homeland Security to review its initial findings and determine next courses of action," White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders said in a statement.

Critics saw the commission as part of a conservative campaign to make it harder for poor people and minority voters to access the ballot box, and to justify unfounded claims made by Trump that voter fraud cost him the popular vote in 2016.

Trump has repeatedly alleged, without evidence, that 3 million to 5 million people voted illegally in the 2016 election, delivering the popular vote to his Democratic rival, Hillary Clinton.

Past studies have found voter fraud to be exceptionally rare.

Critics also viewed the commission as an attempt to distract from the ongoing investigations into Russian election meddling and potential collusion between Moscow and Trump campaign aides. The intelligence community concluded that the Russian government mounted a campaign to help Trump win.

At least a dozen states, plus Washington, D.C., had rebuffed the commission's request for voter data, citing privacy concerns and a fear that complying would legitimize the idea that voter fraud is widespread.

While there have been isolated cases of people voting illegally, and many voter rolls often contain outdated data, there is no evidence voter fraud is a widespread problem in the United States or has impacted election results.

BRIEFLY

Cross-border communications reopened between Koreans

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korean leader Kim Jong Un reopened a key cross-border communication channel with South Korea for the first time in nearly two years Wednesday as the rivals explored the possibility of sitting down and talking after months of acrimony and fears of war.

The sudden signs of easing hostilities, however, came as President Donald Trump threatened Kim with nuclear war in response to his threat earlier this week.

In his New Year's address Monday, Kim said he was willing to send a delegation to next month's Winter Olympics in South Korea. But he also said he has a "nuclear button" on his desk and that all U.S. territory is within striking distance of his nuclear weapons, comments Trump latched onto Tuesday when he boasted of a bigger and more powerful "nuclear button" than Kim's.

The two leaders exchanged crude insults last year, as the North received new U.N. sanctions over its sixth and most powerful nuclear test explosion and a series of intercontinental ballistic missile launches.

The recent softening of contact between the rival Koreans may show a shared interest in improved ties, but there's no guarantee tensions will ease. There have been repeated attempts in recent years by the rivals to talk, but even when they do meet, the efforts often end in recriminations and stalemate.

Outside critics say Kim may be trying to use better ties with South Korea as a way to weaken the alliance between Washington and Seoul as the North grapples with toughened international sanctions over its nuclear and missile programs.

Manafort sues Mueller, Justice Department

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump's former campaign chairman sued special counsel Robert Mueller and the Justice Department on Wednesday, saying prosecutors had overstepped their bounds by charging him for conduct that he says is unrelated to Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election.

The lawsuit by Paul Manafort, filed in federal court in Washington, is the most direct challenge to date to Mueller's legal authority and the scope of his mandate as special counsel. It comes amid Republican allegations of partisan bias among members



Yonhap via AP

A South Korean government official checks the direct communications hotline to talk with the North Korean side at the border village of Panmunjom in Paju, South Korea, Wednesday.

of Mueller's team, which for months has been investigating whether the Trump campaign coordinated with Russia to influence the outcome of the U.S. election.

The lawsuit also takes aim at Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, who is overseeing Mueller's investigation and recently said he was satisfied that the former FBI director was staying within the scope of his authority.

Manafort was indicted in October on charges, including money-laundering conspiracy, related to his lobbying work on behalf of a Russia-friendly Ukrainian political party. He has pleaded not guilty. He is one of four Trump associates — including former national security adviser Michael Flynn — to be charged so far in Mueller's investigation.

GOP's Senate majority shrinks with Jones sworn in

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democrat Doug Jones of Alabama was sworn into office Wednesday, shrinking the Senate's Republican majority and leading lawmakers of both parties to plead for more bipartisanship as Congress tackles pressing issues in advance of the 2018 midterm elections.

Vice President Mike Pence administered the Senate's oath of office to Jones, the first Alabama Democrat elected to the Senate in a quarter century, and to former Minnesota Lt. Gov. Tina Smith, who was appointed to replace Sen. Al Franken, who resigned amid allegations of sexual misconduct.

Two former vice presidents, both Democrats, were there to support the Senate's newest members as the GOP majority narrowed to 51-49. In future party-line votes, Republicans cannot afford more than one defection.

Jones was escorted to the Senate chamber by former Vice President Joseph Biden, who had headlined Jones' campaign kickoff rally. Jones defeated Republican Roy Moore in a special election rocked by allegations of sexual misconduct against Moore.

Former Vice President Walter Mondale, along with Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., escorted Smith to the Senate floor. She becomes the 22nd woman currently serving in the Senate, a record.

Mormon church president Thomas S. Monson dies at 90

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — Thomas S. Monson, considered a prophet by nearly

16 million Mormons worldwide, has died at the age of 90 after a nearly a decade as church president. He expanded the church's reach and its transparency and was known for promoting humanitarian causes despite leading a divisive fight against gay marriage.

Monson died Tuesday night at his home in Salt Lake City, according to church spokesman Eric Hawkins.

Monson spent more than five decades serving in top church leadership councils — making him a well-known face and personality to multiple generations of Mormons.

A church bishop at the age of 22, the Salt Lake City native became the youngest church apostle ever in 1963 at the age of 36. He served as a counselor for three church presidents before assuming the role of the top leader of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in February 2008.

As president of the nearly 16 million-member religion, Monson was considered a prophet who led the church through revelation from God in collaboration with two top counselors and members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

Washington sues Motel 6 for giving guest information

SEATTLE (AP) — Washington's attorney general sued Motel 6 on Wednesday, alleging the national budget chain disclosed the private information of thousands of its guests to U.S. immigration authorities in violation of the state consumer protection law.

Attorney General Bob Ferguson said motel employees divulged the names, birthdates, driver's license numbers, license plate numbers and room numbers of at least 9,150 guests to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents without a warrant. At least six people were detained on or near motel property during a two-year period.

Motel 6 was aware that the agents used the guest registry information to single out guests based on their national origin in violation of Washington state's anti-discrimination law, the state's lawsuit filed in King County Superior Court alleged.

Ferguson said at least six Motel 6 locations in the state — all in the Puget Sound region and corporate-owned — provided the information without guests' knowledge or consent. Washington's Supreme Court makes it clear that guest registry information is private, he said, and Motel 6 violated the law each time it gave out private information.