

# **United States: Steve Bannon's role in inner circle of Trump team raises fears of security crisis**

Thursday 2 February 2017, by [ACKERMAN Spencer](#), [BORGER Julian](#) (Date first published: 30 January 2017).

**Donald Trump's chief strategist and ideologue will be party to all discussions on the White House National Security Council unlike military and intelligence chiefs.**

The formal inclusion of Steve Bannon, Donald Trump's chief strategist and ideologue in the small circle of top officials who decide US national security policy, sparked alarm among former officials who described it as an unprecedented politicisation of decisions that could mean the difference between peace and war.

Bannon, a former executive of the rightwing Breitbart news site, will be a permanent fixture of the "principals committee" of the National Security Council (NSC), the White House announced, but said that the director of national intelligence and chairman of the joint chiefs of staff would only attend if the "issues pertaining to their responsibilities and expertise are to be discussed".

"This is stone cold crazy. After a week of crazy," Susan Rice, the Obama administration's national security adviser, said in a tweet, asking sarcastically: "Who needs military advice or intel to make policy on ISIL, Syria, Afghanistan, DPRK [North Korea]?"

David Rothkopf, author of a history of the NSC, said the turbulence of Trump's foreign policy, intricately connected to the deliberative processes that led to it, was already creating a crisis with international reverberations.

"We have an escalation of chaos as a consequence of White House decision-making, made without consultation with the federal bureaucracy, that has no precedent in modern history and now has people taking to the streets in numbers and ways that is evocative of the 1960s," Rothkopf said.

"It is not an overstatement to say we have a brewing crisis."

Placing Bannon on the NSC, with his lack of national security experience, was a "radical" step, Rothkopf said, as the former Breitbart media chairman had shown himself to hold "racist, misogynist and Islamophobic" views. His seat on the NSC principals committee was "essentially putting a thumb on the scale of deliberation in the direction of that kind of thinking".

Trump, Rothkopf said, was building a security apparatus "with the wrong people at the table and the wrong person at the head of the table" - Trump himself.

Foreign governments, seeing the diminished influence of the established pillars of national security decision-making in the US, were likely to begin dealing with Bannon and his cohort directly to secure their influence with Trump, he continued.

The White House spokesman, Sean Spicer, insisted that the composition of the National Security Council's principals committee under the Trump administration was no different than it had been under Bush or Obama and waved sheaves of paper to prove his point as television screens showed highlighted text on either side of him.

He said the chairman of the joint chiefs and the director of national intelligence were welcome to attend, but did not have to if the issues under discussion were not directly part of their brief.

The announcement of Bannon's national security role came at the end of the Trump administration's first week in office, during which Bannon was increasingly seen as the most powerful figure in the White House after the president himself, spurring on the issuance of a string of executive orders culminating in the radical immigration ban on travellers and refugees from seven Muslim-majority countries.

As more details emerged about the chaotic launch of Trump's flagship immigration ban, it emerged the White House office of management and budget, responsible for coordinating executive action with the rest of the government, was told not to put the ban through the normal review process with the justice, state, homeland security and defense departments, so it was as surprised as everyone else about the announcement.

The newly confirmed homeland security secretary, John Kelly, was airborne when it took effect on Friday and only discovered the president was signing the order on Friday because an aide he was talking to by phone saw the signature ceremony on television, according to the *New York Times*.

Although the defense secretary, James Mattis, was standing at Trump's shoulder at the Pentagon when the order was signed, the defense department was also not consulted on its contents beforehand.

Trump's choice for secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, who is expected to be confirmed in the Senate this week, was also not consulted, according to a source he spoke to at the annual Alfalfa Club dinner in Washington, an event which brings the country's mega-rich together with top politicians. Tillerson, as a former oil executive, is both.

Tillerson, who will be America's top diplomat, appeared unruffled by the executive order and by a purge of top career officials at the state department, the source said, but made it clear he had not been consulted on either issue.

He will inherit a department in turmoil, in the wake of the dismissals of top administrative staff and a growing mutiny over the refugee ban among diplomats, who were circulating a draft cable dissenting from the executive order on Monday.

The elevation of Bannon, who ran a media organisation that offered itself as a platform for the far right and promoted fake news during the election, has alarmed European capitals as he is a fervent opponent of the European Union. It has also provoked unease about how the new administration will take decisions on intelligence and national security issues, among former officials with experience of the way the NSC functions at the heart of Washington.

"What is striking about it is it is such an explicit rejection of the well-entrenched principle that when it comes to matters of national security that politics doesn't have any place in the room," said James Steinberg, former deputy national security adviser in the Clinton administration. "It is a flat rejection of what has been a shared view of Republican and Democratic administrations."

National security professionals considered Bannon's placement on the NSC an indicator that the

institutional disarray following Trump's immigration halt would be replicated in future policy decrees.

The leadership of the influential Senate armed services committee appeared stunned and appalled by the Trump White House elevating Bannon and diminishing the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff and the director of national intelligence.

The Senate armed services committee chairman, John McCain, who as recently as Thursday lavished praise on Trump's security team at a Republican retreat, said Bannon's appointment was "a radical departure from any National Security Council in history" [1].

His Democratic colleague, Jack Reed, called it "outrageous and potentially dangerous" and said Trump was turning the NSC into "an entity that is without a non-partisan military voice".

With the senior, non-partisan US military officer or the US intelligence chief absent for critical deliberations, presidents are more likely to stumble into unforced errors with significant global repercussions, said Kori Schake, a defense analyst at the Hoover Institution who has advised McCain and co-edited a book with the defense secretary, Mattis.

"Any president should want their intel and military advisers in on the decisions for the same reason you want a lawyer present: they keep you from making mistakes," Schake said.

"A president would not, for example, want to find out after issuing an executive order banning immigration from countries fighting alongside us that those countries would reciprocally ban Americans, to great detriment for the war effort.

"Evidently the president's political advisers lacked the judiciousness to see that coming; the experience it takes to make it to the top of the intelligence or military leadership would easily have been able to call that in advance."

Stephen Hadley, national security adviser in the last Bush administration, argued that the new administration's guidelines for the new National Security Council were "not very dissimilar from other orders that other administrations have adopted".

He said that George W Bush had vetoed the participation of his own closest political adviser to the NSC principals committee, but that the Obama administration had not observed such a distinction between politics and national security. "Karl Rove at one point wanted to participate in the NSC meetings and I ran it by President Bush, who said no. He did not want to suggest in any way that national security decisions are made on domestic politics, which is something that I respect," Hadley told the *Guardian*.

"David Axelrod, [who] was President Obama's political person in the first term, I am told attended a number of NSC meetings. This is something where there is no rule written in stone. Presidents basically make the decisions on who they want at their meetings. You can make a stronger case for Bannon because he is not just political adviser ... So I can see why the president would want him at the NSC meetings."

**Julian Borger** in Washington and **Spencer Ackerman** in New York

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**P.S.**

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<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/30/steve-bannon-nsc-politics-national-security>

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**Footnotes**

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/27/john-mccain-says-us-has-no-strategy-to-deal-with-russian-cyber-warfare>