

United States: Trump and Bannon Take Control

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Writing on October 28, conservative columnist David Brooks said in the *New York Times*, that the preceding week was “when Donald Trump and Steve Bannon solidified their grip on the Republican Party and America’s national government.”

Brooks speaks for the Republican establishment, and sorely deplores the development he reports.

Steve Bannon was the driving force behind *Breitbart News*, which he proudly claimed was an outlet for the white nationalist and authoritarian “Alt-Right” before he was taken on by Trump to take over his campaign in the final months before the election. Bannon became an official advisor to Trump at the White House after the election.

When Bannon left the White House in August, many “progressives” hoped that would mean that Trump was turning away from Bannon’s extreme racism, economic and white nationalism, and advocacy of “strong man” rule.

This hope has been dashed. Bannon returned to *Breitbart*, and launched a campaign within the Republican Party to fight against all Republicans who he deemed were not supportive enough of Trump. It has turned out that there wasn’t a split between Trump and Bannon, but a division of labor.

What this meant was exemplified in the Alabama Republican primary election in September, which was held in preparation for an election to replace Senator Jeff Sessions, whose seat was vacated when he became Trump’s Attorney General.

In the primary, Bannon endorsed Roy Moore, who may be best described as “slightly to the right of Attila the Hun,” in the words of one song in the musical “Evita.” Trump endorsed his opponent, Luther Strange, who had been appointed by the Alabama governor to temporarily fill Session’s seat until the election.

To counter Bannon’s endorsement, Strange loudly proclaimed that it was he, not Moore, who was the real Trumpist. Heads, Trump won – tails Trump won. When Moore trounced Strange by 55 to 44 percent, Trump, with a grin, said he guessed he was wrong to endorse Strange, and that Moore was a “great guy.”

This dynamic, with the Republican establishment candidate embracing Trump under the whip of Bannon’s endorsement of his opponent, has set the stage for the struggle in the Republican party since, with the result that the “establishment” has given way, abandoning their former stance as critics of Trump “as the GOP tilts to Trump’s orbit,” as another headline in the NYT put it.

Brooks also said, “the polls show that if you want to win a Republican primary these days, you have to embrace the Trump narrative.... The Republican senators went to the White House [last week] and saw a president so repetitive and rambling, some thought he might be suffering from early Alzheimer’s. But they know the way the wind is blowing. They gave him a standing ovation.”

Another example is Senator Lindsey Graham, formerly a sometime Trump critic, who has now joined the Trump bandwagon. Graham said he was trying to help Trump turn his “message into legislative success,” adding “I think what Trump sees in me is a guy that is willing to try to make something happen. I’m willing to do things that sometimes other Republicans won’t.”

“I’m going to stay in a position,” Graham said, “where I can have input to the president. I can help him where I can, and he will call me up and pick my brain. Now, if you are a good United States senator, that’s a good place to find yourself.”

What underlies this development is that polls (which have sometimes understated Trump’s support) show that Trump has an approval rating among Republicans of 83 percent. A large proportion of these comprise Trump’s hard base, and Bannon has emerged as having the capacity to reach and mobilize this base. Bannon stirs fear and trembling in the Republican establishment.

It is true that a few senators have continued to sharply criticize Trump. Most important have been John McCain, Bob Corker and Jeff Flake. But these are quitting the fray. Flake was targeted by Bannon, and his numbers were so low he dropped out vying for the Republican nomination in his state in 2018. Corker said he won’t run in 2018. McCain has brain cancer. They are bleating from the sidelines as they leave the fight.

Trump’s drive against the establishment of both parties began against the Republicans’ from the beginning of his campaign to win the party’s nomination. His initial announcement of his intention to run was accompanied by an open racist attack on Mexicans, calling them rapists and drug dealers. This was in contrast to the stance of the party tops.

Republicans have since the beginning of their “Southern strategy” following the victories of the Black struggle in the 1960s-70s, sought to win the white racist vote. They preferred not to make their efforts too open, making use of sly innuendos that came to be known as “dog whistles.” Trump’s open racism embarrassed them.

The establishments of both parties acted as if they were blind to the economic plight of the working and middle classes, that developed in the mid 1970s and after, and became acute in the Great Recession and its aftermath. While these politicians stood for the status quo, with some differences between them, 80 percent of the population knew that the status quo was bad for them.

Sanders and Trump both understood this, and broke with the status quo in both parties, but with opposite platforms. While Sanders moved to the left of the Democratic pols with pro-working class reforms, Trump made demagogic appeals to workers and the middle class, with the promise that he could cut through the disarray in Washington by establishing his rule as a “strong man” – trust him — and blaming Blacks, immigrants and Latinos for white workers’ problems.

The Republican field of candidates initially consisted of 17 seeking the nomination. In the course of the televised debates and then the primaries, Trump succeeded in convincing a majority of Republican voters that he could step in as a strongman against these “weaklings and losers” and take charge to solve America’s problems.

As Trump’s first term developed after the election, the Republican establishment sought to fight back, increasingly criticizing his most egregious lies and positions. Trump always fired back with personal attacks. Many media commentators claimed Trump was shooting himself in the foot, because he needed the establishment to win votes in congress. But it turned out that they needed Trump more than he needed them, as has been made clear by these recent developments.

Having consolidated their grip on the Republicans, Trump and Bannon will use this to take their next

steps in furthering their reactionary agenda and drive to establish authoritarian rule with democratic trappings, as can be seen in Hungary and Poland today.

Should Trump be removed, this will further inflame his base, which consists of white racists of all classes. Bannon will capitalize on this to further build what he calls his “movement”.

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