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## REPEAL AND REPLACE

A few days after the election, Steve Bannon told the president-elect—in what Katie Walsh would characterize with a raised eyebrow as more "Breitbart shenanigans"—that they had the votes to replace Paul Ryan as Speaker of the House with Mark Meadows, the head of the Tea Party-inspired Freedom Caucus and an early Trump supporter. (Meadows's wife had a particular place of regard in the Trump camp for continuing a campaign swing across the Bible Belt over Billy Bush weekend.)

Nearly as much as winning the presidency itself, removing Ryan—indeed, humiliating him—was an ultimate expression of what Bannon sought to accomplish and of the mind-meld of Bannonism and Trumpism. From the beginning, the Breitbart campaign *against* Paul Ryan was a central part of its campaign *for* Donald Trump. Its embrace of Trump, and Bannon's personal enlistment in the campaign fourteen months after it began, was in part because Trump, throwing political sense to the wind, was willing to lead the charge against Ryan and the GOP godfathers. Still, there was a difference between the way Breitbart viewed Ryan and the way Trump viewed him.

For Breitbart, the House rebellion and transformation that had driven the former Speaker, John Boehner, from office, and which, plausibly, was set to remake the House into the center of the new radical Republicanism had been halted by Ryan's election as Speaker. Mitt Romney's running mate, and a figure who had merged a conservative fiscal wonkishness—he had been the chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee and, as well, chairman of the House Budget Committee—with an old-fashioned idea of unassailable Republican rectitude, Ryan was the official last, best hope of the Republican Party. (Bannon, typically, had turned this trope into an official Trumpist talking point: "Ryan was created in a petri dish at the Heritage Foundation.") If the Republican Party had been moved further right by the Tea Party rebellion, Ryan was part of the ballast that would prevent it from moving further, or at least at a vastly slower pace. In this he represented an adult, older-brother steadiness in contrast to the Tea Party's ADD-hyper immaturity—and a stoic, almost martyrlike resistance to the Trump movement.

Where the Republican establishment had promoted Ryan into this figure of not only maturity but sagaciousness, the Tea Party-Bannon-Breitbart wing

mounted an ad hominem campaign pushing an image of Ryan as uncommitted to the cause, an inept strategist and incompetent leader. He was the Tea Party-Bannon-Breitbart punch line: the ultimate empty suit, a hee-haw sort of joke and an embarrassment.

Trump's distaste for Ryan was significantly less structural. He had no views about Ryan's political abilities, and had paid no real attention to Ryan's actual positions. His view was personal. Ryan had insulted him—again and again. Ryan had kept betting against him. Ryan had become the effective symbol of the Republican establishment's horror and disbelief about Trump. Adding insult to injury, Ryan had even achieved some moral stature by dissing Trump (and, as usual, he considered anybody's gain at his expense a double insult). By the spring of 2016, Ryan was still, and by then the only, alternative to Trump as the nominee. Say the word, many Republicans felt, and the convention would stampede to Ryan. But Ryan's seemingly smarter calculation was to let Trump win the nomination, and then to emerge as the obvious figure to lead the party after Trump's historic defeat and the inevitable purge of the Tea Party-Trump-Breitbart wing.

Instead, the election destroyed Paul Ryan, at least in Steve Bannon's eyes. Trump had not only saved the Republican Party but had given it a powerful majority. The entire Bannon dream had been realized. The Tea Party movement, with Trump as its remarkable face and voice, had come to power—something like total power. It owned the Republican Party. Publicly breaking Paul Ryan was the obvious and necessary step.

But a great deal could fall into the chasm between Bannon's structural contempt for Ryan and Trump's personal resentment. If Bannon saw Ryan as being unwilling and unable to carry out the new Bannon-Trump agenda, Trump saw a chastened Ryan as suddenly and satisfyingly abject, submissive, and useful. Bannon wanted to get rid of the entire Republican establishment; Trump was wholly satisfied that it now seemed to bend to him.

"He's quite a smart guy," Trump said after his first postelection conversation with the Speaker. "A very serious man. Everybody respects him."

Ryan, "rising to a movie-version level of flattery and sucking-up painful to witness," according to one senior Trump aide, was able to delay his execution. As Bannon pressed his case for Meadows—who was significantly less yielding than Ryan—Trump dithered and then finally decided that not only was he *not* going to push for Ryan's ouster, but Ryan was going to be his man, his partner. In an example of the odd and unpredictable effects of personal chemistry on Trump—of how easy it can be to sell the salesman—Trump would now eagerly back Ryan's agenda instead of the other way around.

"I don't think that we quite calculated that the president would give him carte blanche," reflected Katie Walsh. "The president and Paul went from such a bad place during the campaign to such a romance afterward that the president was happy to go along with whatever he wanted."

It didn't exactly surprise Bannon when Trump flipped; Bannon understood how

easy it was to bullshit a bullshitter. Bannon also recognized that the Ryan rapprochement spoke to Trump's new appreciation of where he found himself. It was not just that Ryan had been willing to bow to Trump, but that Trump was willing to bow to his own fears about how little he actually knew about being president. If Ryan could be counted on to handle Congress, thought the president, well, phew, that takes care of that.

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Trump had little or no interest in the central Republican goal of repealing Obamacare. An overweight seventy-year-old man with various physical phobias (for instance, he lied about his height to keep from having a body mass index that would label him as obese), he personally found health care and medical treatments of all kinds a distasteful subject. The details of the contested legislation were, to him, particularly boring; his attention would begin wandering from the first words of a policy discussion. He would have been able to enumerate few of the particulars of Obamacare—other than expressing glee about the silly Obama pledge that everyone could keep his or her doctor—and he certainly could not make any kind of meaningful distinction, positive or negative, between the health care system before Obamacare and the one after.

Prior to his presidency, he had likely never had a meaningful discussion in his life about health insurance. "No one in the country, or on earth, has given less thought to health insurance than Donald," said Roger Ailes. Pressed in a campaign interview about the importance of Obamacare repeal and reform, Trump was, to say the least, quite unsure of its place on the agenda: "This is an important subject but there are a lot of important subjects. Maybe it is in the top ten. Probably is. But there is heavy competition. So you can't be certain. Could be twelve. Or could be fifteen. Definitely top twenty for sure."

It was another one of his counterintuitive connections to many voters: Obama and Hillary Clinton seemed actually to want to talk about health care plans, whereas Trump, like most everybody else, absolutely did not.

All things considered, he probably preferred the notion of more people having health insurance than fewer people having it. He was even, when push came to shove, rather more for Obamacare than for repealing Obamacare. As well, he had made a set of rash Obama-like promises, going so far as to say that under a forthcoming Trumpcare plan (he had to be strongly discouraged from using this kind of rebranding—political wise men told him that this was one instance where he might not want to claim ownership with his name), no one would lose their health insurance, and that preexisting conditions would continue to be covered. In fact, he probably favored government-funded health care more than any other Republican. "Why can't Medicare simply cover everybody?" he had impatiently wondered aloud during one discussion with aides, all of whom were careful not to react to this heresy.

It was Bannon who held the line, insisting, sternly, that Obamacare was a litmus Republican issue, and that, holding a majority in Congress, they could not

face Republican voters without having made good on the by now Republican catechism of repeal. Repeal, in Bannon's view, was the pledge, and repeal would be the most satisfying, even cathartic, result. It would also be the easiest one to achieve, since virtually every Republican was already publicly committed to voting for repeal. But Bannon, seeing health care as a weak link in Bannonism-Trumpism's appeal to the workingman, was careful to take a back seat in the debate. Later, he hardly even made an effort to rationalize how he'd washed his hands of the mess, saying just, "I hung back on health care because it's not my thing."

It was Ryan who, with "repeal and replace," obfuscated the issue and won over Trump. Repeal would satisfy the Republican bottom line, while replace would satisfy the otherwise off-the-cuff pledges that Trump had made on his own. (Pay no attention to the likelihood that what the president construed as repeal and replace might be very different from what Ryan construed as repeal and replace.) "Repeal and replace" was a useful slogan, too, in that it came to have meaning without having any actual or specific meaning.

The week after the election, Ryan, bringing Tom Price—the Georgia congressman and orthopedist who had become Ryan's resident heath care expert—traveled to Trump's Bedminster, New Jersey, estate for a repeal and replace briefing. The two men summed up for Trump—who kept wandering off topic and trying to turn the conversation to golf—seven years of Republican legislative thinking about Obamacare and the Republican alternatives. Here was a perfect example of an essential Trump paradigm: he acceded to anyone who seemed to know more about any issue he didn't care about, or simply one whose details he couldn't bring himself to focus on closely. *Great!* he would say, punctuating every statement with a similar exclamation and regularly making an effort to jump from his chair. On the spot, Trump eagerly agreed to let Ryan run the health care bill and to make Price the Health and Human Services secretary.

Kushner, largely staying silent during the health care debate, publicly seemed to accept the fact that a Republican administration had to address Obamacare, but he privately suggested that he was personally against both repeal alone and repeal and replace. He and his wife took a conventional Democratic view on Obamacare (it was better than the alternatives; its problems could be fixed in the future) and strategically believed it was best for the new administration to get some easier victories under its belt before entering a hard-to-win or no-win fight. (What's more, Kushner's brother Josh ran a health insurance company that depended on Obamacare.)

Not for the last time, then, the White House would be divided along the political spectrum, Bannon taking an absolutist base position, Priebus aligned with Ryan in support of the Republican leadership, and Kushner maintaining, and seeing no contradiction in, a moderate Democratic view. As for Trump himself, here was a man who was simply trying to get out from under something he didn't especially care about.

Ryan and Priebus's salesmanship promised to get the president out from under other issues as well. Health care reform, according to the Ryan plan, was something of a magic bullet. The reform the Speaker would push through Congress would fund the tax cuts Trump had guaranteed, which, in turn, would make all that Trump-promised infrastructure investment possible.

On this basis—this domino theory that was meant to triumphantly carry the Trump administration through to the August recess and mark it as one of the most transformational presidencies in modern times—Ryan kept his job as Speaker, rising from hated campaign symbol to the administration's man on the Hill. In effect, the president, quite aware of his and his staff's inexperience in drafting legislation (in fact, nobody on his senior staff had any experience at all), decided to outsource his agenda—and to a heretofore archenemy.

Watching Ryan steal the legislative initiative during the transition, Bannon faced an early realpolitik moment. If the president was willing to cede major initiatives, Bannon would need to run a counteroperation and be ready with more Breitbart shenanigans. Kushner, for his part, developed a certain Zen—you just had to go with the president's whims. As for the president, it was quite clear that deciding between contradictory policy approaches was not his style of leadership. He simply hoped that difficult decisions would make themselves.

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Bannon was not merely contemptuous of Ryan's ideology; he had no respect, either, for his craft. In Bannon's view, what the new Republican majority needed was a man like John McCormick, the Democratic Speaker of the House who had served during Bannon's teenage years and had shepherded Johnson's Great Society legislation. McCormick and other Democrats from the 1960s were Bannon's political heroes—put Tip O'Neill in that pantheon, too. An Irish Catholic working-class man was philosophically separate from aristocrats and gentry—and without aspirations to be either. Bannon venerated old-fashioned pols. He looked like one himself: liver spots, jowls, edema. And he hated modern politicians; they lacked, in addition to political talents, authenticity and soul. Ryan was an Irish Catholic altar boy who had stayed an altar boy. He had not grown up to be a thug, cop, or priest—or a true politician.

Ryan certainly wasn't a vote counter. He was a benighted figure who had no ability to see around corners. His heart was in tax reform, but as far as he could tell the only path to tax reform was through health care. But he cared so little about the issue that—just as the White House had outsourced health care to him—he outsourced the writing of the bill to insurance companies and K Street lobbyists.

In fact, Ryan had tried to act like McCormick or O'Neill, offering absolute assurances of his hold on the legislation. It was, he told the president during his several daily calls, a "done deal." Trump's trust in Ryan rose still higher, and it seemed to become in his own mind proof that he had achieved a kind of mastery over the Hill. If the president had been worried, he was worried no more. Done

deal. The White House, having had to sweat hardly at all, was about to get a big victory, bragged Kushner, embracing the expected win over his dislike of the bill.

The sudden concern that the outcome might be otherwise began in early March. Katie Walsh, who Kushner now described as "demanding and petulant," began to sound the alarm. But her efforts to personally involve the president in vote collecting were blocked by Kushner in a set of increasingly tense face-offs. The unraveling had begun.

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Trump still dismissively called it "the Russian thing—a whole lot of nothing." But on March 20, FBI director James Comey appeared before the House Intelligence Committee and tied the story up in a neat package:

> I have been authorized by the Department of Justice to confirm that the FBI, as part of our counterintelligence mission, is investigating the Russian government's efforts to interfere in the 2016 presidential election, and that includes investigating the nature of any links between individuals associated with the Trump campaign and the Russian government and whether there was any coordination between the campaign and Russia's efforts. As with any counter intelligence investigation, this will also include an assessment of whether any crimes were committed. Because it is an open, ongoing investigation and is classified I cannot say more about what we are doing and whose conduct we are examining.

He had, however, said quite enough. Comey converted rumor, leaks, theory, innuendo, and pundit hot air—and until this moment that was all there was, at best the hope of a scandal—into a formal pursuit of the White House. Efforts to pooh-pooh the narrative—the fake news label, the president's germaphobe defense against the golden shower accusations, the haughty dismissal of minor associates and hopeless hangers-on, the plaintive, if real, insistence that no crime had even been alleged, and the president's charge that he was the victim of an Obama wiretap—had failed. Comey himself dismissed the wiretap allegation. By the evening of Comey's appearance, it was evident to everyone that the Russia plot line, far from petering out, had a mighty and bloody life to come.

Kushner, ever mindful of his father's collision with the Justice Department, was especially agitated by Comey's increasing focus on the White House. Doing something about Comey became a Kushner theme. What can we do about him? was a constant question. And it was one he kept raising with the president.

Yet this was also—as Bannon, without too much internal success, tried to explain—a structural issue. It was an opposition move. You could express surprise at how fierce, creative, and diabolical the moves turned out to be, but you shouldn't be surprised that your enemies would try to hurt you. This was

check, but far from checkmate, and you had to continue to play the game, knowing that it would be a very long one. The only way to win the game, Bannon argued, was with a disciplined strategy.

But the president, prodded here by his family, was an obsessive and not a strategist. In his mind, this was not a problem to address, this was a person to focus on: Comey. Trump eschewed abstractions and, ad hominem, zeroed in on his opponent. Comey had been a difficult puzzle for Trump: Comey had declined to have the FBI pursue charges against Clinton for her email dodge. Then, in October, Comey had single-handedly boosted Trump's fortunes with the letter reopening the Clinton email investigation.

In their personal interactions, Trump had found Comey to be a stiff—he had no banter, no game. But Trump, who invariably thought people found him irresistible, believed that Comey admired *his* banter and game. When pressed, by Bannon and others, to fire Comey as one of his early acts—an idea opposed by Kushner, and thus another bullet on Bannon's list of bad recommendations by Kushner—the president said, "Don't worry, I've got him." That is, he had no doubt that he could woo and flatter the FBI director into positive feeling for him, if not outright submission.

Some seducers are preternaturally sensitive to the signals of those they try to seduce; others indiscriminately attempt to seduce, and, by the law of averages, often succeed (this latter group of men might now be regarded as harassers). That was Trump's approach to women—pleased when he scored, unconcerned when he didn't (and, often, despite the evidence, believing that he had). And so it was with Director Comey.

In their several meetings since he took office—when Comey received a presidential hug on January 22; at their dinner on January 27, during which Comey was asked to stay on as FBI director; at their Valentine's Day chat after emptying the office of everybody else, including Sessions, Comey's titular boss—Trump was confident that he had laid on the moves. The president was all but certain that Comey, understanding that he, Trump, had his back (i.e., had let him keep his job), would have Trump's back, too.

But now this testimony. It made no sense. What *did* make sense to Trump was that Comey wanted it to be about him. He was a media whore—this Trump understood. All right, then, he, too, could play it this way.

Indeed, health care, a no-fun issue—suddenly becoming much less fun, if, as seemed increasingly possible, Ryan couldn't deliver—palled before the clarity of Comey, and the fury, enmity, and bitterness Trump, and Trump's relatives, now bore him.

Comey was the larger-than-life problem. Taking Comey down was the obvious solution. Getting Comey became the mission.

In Keystone Cops fashion, the White House enlisted House Intelligence Committee chairman Devin Nunes in a farcical effort to discredit Comey and support the wiretap theory. The scheme shortly collapsed in universal ridicule.

Bannon, taking a public hands-off with respect to both health care and

Comey, began to advise reporters that the important story wasn't health care but Russia. This was cryptic advice: it was not clear whether he was trying to distract attention from the coming health care debacle, or couple it with this new dangerous variable, thus amping up the kind of chaos that he usually benefited from.

But Bannon was unequivocal about one thing. *As the Russia story unfolds*, he advised reporters, *keep your eye on Kushner*.

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By mid-March, Gary Cohn had been drafted into the effort to salvage the faltering health care bill. This might have seemed like a form of hazing for Cohn, whose grasp of legislative matters was even more limited than that of most in the White House.

On Friday, March 24, the morning of the theoretical House vote for the Republican health care bill, Politico's *Playbook* characterized the chances of a vote actually coming to the floor as a "toss-up." In that morning's senior staff meeting, Cohn was asked for an assessment of where things stood and promptly said, "I think it's a toss-up."

"Really?" thought Katie Walsh. "That's what you think?"

Bannon, joining Walsh in a pitiless contempt for the White House effort, targeted Kushner, Cohn, Priebus, Price, and Ryan in a series of calls to reporters. Kushner and Cohn could, per Bannon, be counted on to run at the first sound of gunfire. (Kushner, in fact, had spent much of the week on a skiing holiday.) Priebus mouthed Ryan talking points and excuses. Price, supposedly the health care guru, was an oafish imposter; he would stand up in meetings and mumble nothing but nonsense.

These were the bad guys, setting up the administration to lose the House in 2018, thereby assuring the president's impeachment. This was vintage Bannon analysis: a certain and immediate political apocalypse that sat side by side with the potential for a half century of Bannonism-Trumpism rule.

Convinced he knew the direction of success, keenly aware of his own age and finite opportunities, and—if for no clear reason—seeing himself as a talented political infighter, Bannon sought to draw the line between believers and sell-outs, being and nothingness. For him to succeed, he needed to isolate the Ryan, Cohn, and Kushner factions.

The Bannon faction held tight on forcing a vote on the health care bill—even knowing defeat was inevitable. "I want it as a report on Ryan's job as Speaker," said Bannon. That is, a devastating report, an epic fail.

The day of the vote, Pence was sent to the Hill to make one last pitch to Meadows's Freedom Caucus. (Ryan's people believed that Bannon was secretly urging Meadows to hold out, though earlier in the week Bannon had harshly ordered the Freedom Caucus to vote for the bill—"a silly Bannon show," according to Walsh.) At three-thirty, Ryan called the president to say he was short fifteen to twenty votes and needed to pull the vote. Bannon, backed by

Mulvaney, who had become the White House's Hill operative, continued to urge an immediate vote. A defeat here would be a major defeat for the Republican leadership. That suited Bannon just fine: let them fail.

But the president backed down. Faced with this singular opportunity to make the Republican leadership the issue, and to name them as the problem, Trump wobbled, provoking in Bannon a not-so-silent rage. Ryan then leaked that it was the president who had asked him to cancel the vote.

Over the weekend, Bannon called a long list of reporters and told them—off the record, but hardly—"I don't see Ryan hanging around a long time."

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After the bill had been pulled that Friday, Katie Walsh, feeling both angry and disgusted, told Kushner she wanted out. Outlining what she saw as the grim debacle of the Trump White House, she spoke with harsh candor about bitter rivalries joined to vast incompetence and an uncertain mission. Kushner, understanding that she needed to be discredited immediately, leaked that she had been leaking and hence had to be pushed out.

On Sunday evening, Walsh had dinner with Bannon in his Capitol Hill redoubt, the Breitbart Embassy, during which, to no avail, he implored her to stay. On Monday she sorted out the details with Priebus—she would leave to work part time for the RNC and part time for the Trump (c)(4), the outside campaign group. By Thursday she was gone.

Ten weeks into the new administration, the Trump White House had lost, after Michael Flynn, its second senior staff member—and the one whose job it was to actually get things done.

# 13

## BANNON *AGONISTES*

He, too, felt like a prisoner, he had told Katie Walsh when she came to tell him she was leaving.

By ten weeks in, Steve Bannon's mastery of the Trump agenda, or at least of Trump himself, appeared to have crumbled. His current misery was both Catholic in nature—the self-flagellation of a man who believed he lived on a higher moral plane than all others—and fundamentally misanthropic. As an antisocial, maladjusted, post-middle-aged man, he had to make a supreme effort to get along with others, an effort that often did not go well. Most especially, he was miserable because of Donald Trump, whose cruelties, always great even when they were casual, were unbearable when he truly turned against you.

"I hated being on the campaign, I hated the transition, I hate being here in the White House," said Bannon, sitting one evening in Reince Priebus's office, on an unseasonably warm evening in early spring, with the French doors open to the arbor-covered patio where he and Priebus, now firm friends and allies in their antipathy toward Jarvanka, had set an outdoor table.

But Bannon was, he believed, here for a reason. And it was his firm belief—a belief he was unable to keep to himself, thus continually undermining his standing with the president—that his efforts had brought everybody else here. Even more important, he was the only person showing up for work every day who was committed to the purpose of actually changing the country. Changing it quickly, radically, and truly.

The idea of a split electorate—of blue and red states, of two opposing currents of values, of globalists and nationalists, of an establishment and populist revolt—was media shorthand for cultural angst and politically roiled times, and, to a large degree, for business as usual. But Bannon believed the split was literal. The United States had become a country of two hostile peoples. One would necessarily win and the other lose. Or one would dominate while the other would become marginal.

This was modern civil war—Bannon's war. The country built on the virtue and the character and the strength of the American workingman circa 1955–65 was the ideal he meant to defend and restore: trade agreements, or *trade wars*, that supported American manufacturing; immigration policies that protected American workers (and, hence, American culture, or at least America's identity

from 1955 to 1965); and an international isolation that would conserve American resources and choke off the ruling class's Davos sensibility (and also save working-class military lives). This was, in the view of almost everyone but Donald Trump and the alt-right, a crazy bit of voodoo economic and political nonsense. But it was, for Bannon, a revolutionary and religious idea.

For most others in the White House, it was Bannon's pipe dream. "Steve is . . . Steve," became the gentle term of art for tolerating him. "A lot of stuff goes on in his head," said the president, pursuing one of his reliable conversational themes, dismissing Bannon.

But it wasn't Bannon versus everybody else so much as it was Bannon Trump versus non-Bannon Trump. If Trump, in his dark, determined, and aggressive mood, could represent Bannon and his views, he could just as easily represent nothing at all—or represent solely his own need for instant gratification. That's what the non-Bannon people understood about Trump. If the boss was happy, then a normal, incremental, two-steps-forward-one-step-back approach to politics might prevail. Even a new sort of centrism, as inimical to Bannonism as it was possible to conceive, could emerge. Bannon's pronouncements about a fifty-year rule for Trumpism might then be supplanted by the rule of Jared, Ivanka, and Goldman Sachs.

By the end of March, this was the side that was winning. Bannon's efforts to use the epic health care fail as evidence that the establishment was the enemy had hopelessly backfired. Trump saw the health care failure as his own failure, but since he didn't have failures, it couldn't be a failure, and would in fact be a success—if not now, soon. So Bannon, a Cassandra on the sidelines, was the problem.

Trump rationalized his early embrace of Bannon by heaping scorn on him—and by denying that he had ever embraced him. If there was anything wrong with his White House, it was Steve Bannon. Maligning Bannon was Trump's idea of fun. When it came to Bannon, Trump rose to something like high analysis: "Steve Bannon's problem is PR. He doesn't understand it. Everybody hates him. Because . . . look at him. His bad PR rubs off on other people."

The real question, of course, was how Bannon, the fuck-the-system populist, had ever come to think that he might get along with Donald Trump, the use-the-system-to-his-own-advantage billionaire. For Bannon, Trump was the game he had to play. But in truth he hardly played it—or couldn't help undermining it. While ever proclaiming it Trump's victory, he would helplessly point out that when he had joined the campaign it was facing a polling deficit that no campaign, ten weeks from election day, had ever recovered from. Trump without Bannon, according to Bannon, was Wendell Willkie.

Bannon understood the necessity not to take what otherwise might be Trump's own spotlight; he was well aware that the president meticulously logged all claims against credit that he believed solely to be his. Both he and Kushner, the two most important figures in the White House after the president, seemed professionally mute. Still, Bannon seemed to be everywhere, and the president

was convinced—rightly—that it was the result of Bannon's private press operation. More often than self-mockery could sustain, Bannon referred to himself as "President Bannon." A bitter Kellyanne Conway, regularly dissed for her own spotlight grabbing, confirmed the president's observation that Bannon stepped into as many White House photo ops as possible. (Everybody seemed to keep count of everybody else's photo bombs.) Bannon also did not much bother to disguise his innumerable blind quotes, nor to make much of an effort to temper his not-so-private slurs against Kushner, Cohn, Powell, Conway, Priebus, and even the president's daughter (often, most especially, the president's daughter).

Curiously, Bannon never expressed a sideways thought about Trump—not yet. Trump's own righteousness and soundness was perhaps too central to Bannon's construct of Trumpism. Trump was the idea you had to support. This could seem to approach the traditional idea of respecting the office. In fact, it was the inverse. The man was the vessel: there was no Bannon without Trump. However much he might stand on his unique, even magical-seeming, contributions to the Trump victory, Bannon's opportunity was wholly provided by Trump's peculiar talent. He was no more than the man behind the man—Trump's Cromwell, as he put it, even though he was perfectly aware of Cromwell's fate.

But his loyalty to the idea of Trump hardly protected him from the actual Trump's constant briefs against him. The president had assembled a wide jury to weigh Bannon's fate, putting before it, in an insulting Borscht Belt style, a long list of Bannon's annoyances: "Guy looks homeless. Take a shower, Steve. You've worn those pants for six days. He says he's made money, I don't believe it." (The president, notably, never much took issue with Bannon's policy views.) The Trump administration was hardly two months old, yet every media outlet was predicting Bannon's coming defenestration.

One particularly profitable transaction with the president was to bring him new, ever harsher criticism of his chief strategist, or reports of other people criticizing him. It was important to know not to say anything positive to Trump about Bannon. Even faint praise before the "but"—"Steve is obviously smart, but . . ."—could produce a scowl and pout if you didn't hurry to the "but." (Then again, saying anyone was "smart" invariably incurred Trump's annoyance.) Kushner enlisted Scarborough and Brzezinski in something of a regular morning television Bannon slag-a-thon.

H. R. McMaster, the three-star general who had replaced Michael Flynn as National Security Advisor, had secured the president's pledge that he could veto members of the NSC. Kushner, a supporter of McMaster's appointment, had quickly ensured that Dina Powell, a key player in the Kushner faction, would join the NSC and Bannon would be removed.

Bannonites would, with lowered voices and certain pity, ask each other how he seemed and how he was holding up; invariably they would agree about how bad he looked, the strain etching ever deeper into his already ruined face. David Bossie thought Bannon "looked like he would die."

"I now understand what it is like to be in the court of the Tudors," reflected Bannon. On the campaign trail, he recalled, Newt Gingrich "would come with all these dumb ideas. When we won he was my new best friend. Every day a hundred ideas. When"—by spring in the White House—"I got cold, when I went through my Valley of Death, I saw him one day in the lobby and he looks down, avoiding my eyes with a kind of mumbled 'Hey, Steve.' And I say, 'What are you doing here, let's get you inside,' and he says, 'No, no, I'm fine, I'm waiting for Dina Powell.' "

Having attained the unimaginable—bringing a fierce alt-right, anti-liberal ethnopopulism into a central place in the White House—Bannon found himself face to face with the untenable: undermined by and having to answer to rich, entitled Democrats.

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The paradox of the Trump presidency was that it was both the most ideologically driven and the least. It represented a deeply structural assault on liberal values—Bannon's deconstruction of the administrative state meant to take with it media, academic, and not-for-profit institutions. But from the start it also was apparent that the Trump administration could just as easily turn into a country club Republican or a Wall Street Democrat regime. Or just a constant effort to keep Donald Trump happy. Trump had his collection of pet-peeve issues, test-marketed in various media rollouts and megarallies, but none seemed so significant as his greater goal of personally coming out ahead of the game.

As the drumbeat for Bannon's removal grew, the Mercers stepped in to protect their investment in radical government overthrow and the future of Steve Bannon.

In an age when all successful political candidates are surrounded by, if not at the beck and call of, difficult, rich people pushing the bounds of their own power—and the richer they were, the more difficult they might be—Bob and Rebekah Mercer were quite onto themselves. If Trump's ascent was unlikely, the Mercers' was all the more so.

Even the difficult rich—the Koch brothers and Sheldon Adelson on the right, David Geffen and George Soros on the left—are leavened and restrained by the fact that money exists in a competitive market. Obnoxiousness has its limits. The world of the rich is, in its fashion, self-regulating. Social climbing has rules.

But among the difficult and entitled rich, the Mercers cut a path through disbelief and incredulity. Unlike other people contributing vast sums to political candidates, they were willing not to win—ever. Their bubble was their bubble.

So when they did win, by the fluke alignment of the stars for Donald Trump, they were yet pure. Now, having found themselves—by odds that were perfect-storm outlandish—in power, they were not going to give it up because Steve Bannon had hurt feelings and wasn't getting enough sleep.

Toward the end of March, the Mercers organized a set of emergency meetings. At least one of them was with the president himself. It was exactly

the kind of meeting Trump usually avoided: he had no interest in personnel problems, since they put the emphasis on other people. Suddenly he was being forced to deal with Steve Bannon, rather than the other way around. What's more, it was a problem he had in part created with his constant Bannon dissing, and now he was being asked to eat crow. Even though the president kept saying he could and should fire Bannon, he was aware of the costs—a right-wing backlash of unpredictable proportions.

Trump thought the Mercers were super-strange bedfellows too. He didn't like Bob Mercer looking at him and not saying a word; he didn't like being in the same room with Mercer or his daughter. But though he refused to admit that the Mercers' decision to back him and their imposition of Bannon on the campaign in August was, likely, the event without which he would not now be in the White House, he did understand that if crossed, the Mercers and Bannon were potential world-class troublemakers.

The complexity of the Bannon-Mercer problem prompted Trump to consult two contradictory figures: Rupert Murdoch and Roger Ailes. Even as the president did so, perhaps he knew he would come up with a zero-sum answer.

Murdoch, already briefed by Kushner, said getting rid of Bannon was the only way to deal with the dysfunction in the White House. (Murdoch, of course, made the assumption that getting rid of Kushner was not an option.) It was the inevitable outcome, so do it now. Murdoch's response made perfect sense: by now, he had become an active political supporter of the Kushner-Goldman moderates, seeing them as the people who would save the world from Bannon and, indeed, from Trump as well.

Ailes, blunt and declarative as always, said, "Donald, you can't do it. You've made your bed and Steve is in it. You don't have to listen to him, you don't have to even get along with him. But you're married to him. You can't handle a divorce right now."

Jared and Ivanka were gleeful at the prospect of Bannon's ouster. His departure would return the Trump organization to pure family control—the family and its functionaries, without an internal rival for brand meaning and leadership. From the family's point of view, it would also—at least in theory—help facilitate one of the most implausible brand shifts in history: Donald Trump to respectability. The dream, long differed, of the Trump pivot, might actually happen without Bannon. Never mind that this Kushner ideal—saving Trump from himself and projecting Jared and Ivanka into the future—was nearly as far-fetched and extreme as Bannon's own fantasy of a White House dedicated to the return of a pre-1965 American mythology.

If Bannon were to go, it also might cause the ultimate split in the already fractured Republican Party. Before the election, one theory suggested that a defeated Trump would take his embittered 35 percent and make hay with a rancorous minority. Now the alarming theory was that as Kushner tried to transform his father-in-law into the kind of latter-day Rockefeller that Trump, however implausibly, had on occasion dreamed of becoming (Rockefeller Center

being an inspiration for his own real estate branding), Bannon could run off with some meaningful part of that 35 percent.

This was the Breitbart threat. The Breitbart organization remained under the control of the Mercers, and it could at any moment be handed back to Steve Bannon. And now, with Bannon's overnight transformation into political genius and kingmaker, and the triumph of the alt-right, Breitbart was potentially much more powerful. Trump's victory had, in some sense, handed the Mercers the tool with which to destroy him. As push came to shove and the mainstream media and swamp bureaucracy more and more militantly organized against him, Trump was certainly going to need the Mercer-backed alt-right standing up in his defense. What, after all, was he without them?

As the pressure mounted, Bannon—until now absolutely disciplined in his regard for Donald Trump as the ideal avatar of Trumpism (and Bannonism), rigidly staying in character as aide and supporter of a maverick political talent—began to crack. Trump, as almost anyone who had ever worked for him appreciated, was, despite what you hoped he might be, Trump—and he would invariably sour on everyone around him.

But the Mercers dug in. Without Bannon, they believed the Trump presidency, at least the Trump presidency they had imagined (and helped pay for), was over. The focus became how to make Steve's life better. They made him pledge to leave the office at a reasonable time—no more waiting around for Trump to possibly need a dinner companion. (Recently, Jared and Ivanka had been heading this off anyway.) The solution included a search for a Bannon's Bannon—a chief strategist for the chief strategist.

In late March, the Mercers came to an agreed-upon truce with the president: Bannon would not be fired. While this guaranteed nothing about his influence and standing, it did buy Bannon and his allies some time. They could regroup. A presidential aide was only as good as the last good advice he gave, and in this, Bannon believed the ineptness of his rivals, Kushner and his wife, would seal their fate.

* * *

Though the president agreed not to fire Bannon, he gave Kushner and his daughter something in exchange: he would enhance both their roles.

On March 27, the Office of American Innovation was created and Kushner was put in charge. Its stated mission was to reduce federal bureaucracy—that is, to reduce it by creating more of it, a committee to end committees. In addition, Kushner's new outfit would study the government's internal technology, focus on job creation, encourage and suggest policies about apprenticeships, enlist business in a partnership with government, and help with the opioid epidemic. It was, in other words, business as usual, albeit with a new burst of enthusiasm for the administrative state.

But its real import was that it gave Kushner his own internal White House staff, a team of people working not just on Kushner-supported projects—all

largely antithetical to Bannon projects—but, more broadly, as Kushner explained to one staffer, "on expanding my footprint." Kushner even got his own "comms person," a dedicated spokesperson and Kushner promoter. It was a bureaucratic build-out meant not only to enhance Kushner but to diminish Steve Bannon.

Two days after the announcement about Jared's expanded power base, Ivanka was formally given a White House job, too: adviser to the president. From the beginning she had been a key adviser to her husband—and he to her. Still, it was an overnight consolidation of Trump family power in the White House. It was, quite at Steve Bannon's expense, a remarkable bureaucratic coup: a divided White House had now all but been united under the president's family.

His son-in-law and daughter hoped—they were even confident—that they could speak to DJT's better self, or at least balance Republican needs with progressive rationality, compassion, and good works. Further, they could support this moderation by routing a steady stream of like-minded CEOs through the Oval Office. And, indeed, the president seldom disagreed with and was often enthusiastic about the Jared and Ivanka program. "If they tell him the whales need to be saved, he's basically for it," noted Katie Walsh.

But Bannon, suffering in his internal exile, remained convinced that he represented what Donald Trump actually believed, or, more accurately, what the president felt. He knew Trump to be a fundamentally emotional man, and he was certain that the deepest part of him was angry and dark. However much the president wanted to support his daughter and her husband's aspirations, their worldview was not his. As Walsh saw it, "Steve believes he is Darth Vader and that Trump is called to the dark side."

Indeed, Trump's fierce efforts to deny Bannon's influence may well have been in inverse proportion to the influence Bannon actually had.

The president did not truly listen to anybody. The more you talked, the less he listened. "But Steve is careful about what he says, and there is something, a timbre in his voice and his energy and excitement, that the president can really hone in on, blocking everything else out," said Walsh.

As Jared and Ivanka were taking a victory lap, Trump signed Executive Order 13783, a change in environmental policy carefully shepherded by Bannon, which, he argued, effectively gutted the National Environmental Policy Act, the 1970 law that served as the foundation of modern environmental protections and that required all executive agencies to prepare environmental impact statements for agency actions. Among other impacts, EO 13783 removed a prior directive to consider climate change—a precursor to coming debates on the country's position regarding the Paris Climate Accord.

On April 3, Kushner unexpectedly turned up in Iraq, accompanying Gen. Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. According to the White House press office, Kushner was "traveling on behalf of the president to express the president's support and commitment to the government of Iraq and U.S. personnel currently engaged in the campaign." Kushner, otherwise a remote and clammed-up media presence, was copiously photographed throughout the

trip.

Bannon, watching one of the many television screens that provided a constant background in the West Wing, glimpsed Kushner wearing a headset while flying in a helicopter over Baghdad. To no one in particular, recalling a foolish and callow George W. Bush in flight gear on the aircraft carrier USS *Abraham Lincoln* proclaiming the end of the Iraq War, he intoned, "Mission accomplished."

Gritting his teeth, Bannon saw the structure of the White House moving in the exact opposite direction from Trumpism-Bannonism. But even now, he was certain he perceived the real impulses of the administration coming his way. It was Bannon, stoic and resolute, the great if unheralded warrior, who, at least in his own mind, was destined to save the nation.

# 14

## SITUATION ROOM

Just before seven o'clock on the morning of Tuesday, April 4, the seventy-fourth day of the Trump presidency, Syrian government forces attacked the rebel-held town of Khan Sheikhoun with chemical weapons. Scores of children were killed. It was the first time a major outside event had intruded into the Trump presidency.

Most presidencies are shaped by external crises. The presidency, in its most critical role, is a reactive job. Much of the alarm about Donald Trump came from the widespread conviction that he could not be counted on to be cool or deliberate in the face of a storm. He had been lucky so far: ten weeks in, and he had not been seriously tested. In part this might have been because the crises generated from inside the White House had overshadowed all outside contenders.

Even a gruesome attack, even one on children in an already long war, might not yet be a presidential game changer of the kind that everyone knew would surely come. Still, these were chemical weapons launched by a repeat offender, Bashar al-Assad. In any other presidency, such an atrocity would command a considered and, ideally, skillful response. Obama's consideration had in fact been less than skillful in proclaiming the use of chemical weapons as a red line—and then allowing it to be crossed.

Almost nobody in the Trump administration was willing to predict how the president might react—or even whether he would react. Did he think the chemical attack important or unimportant? No one could say.

If the Trump White House was as unsettling as any in American history, the president's views of foreign policy and the world at large were among its most random, uninformed, and seemingly capricious aspects. His advisers didn't know whether he was an isolationist or a militarist, or whether he could distinguish between the two. He was enamored with generals and determined that people with military command experience take the lead in foreign policy, but he hated to be told what to do. He was against nation building, but he believed there were few situations that he couldn't personally make better. He had little to no experience in foreign policy, but he had no respect for the experts, either.

Suddenly, the question of how the president might respond to the attack in Khan Sheikhoun was a litmus test for normality and those who hoped to

represent it in Trump's White House. Here was the kind of dramatic juxtaposition that might make for a vivid and efficient piece of theater: people working in the Trump White House who were trying to behave normally.

* * *

Surprisingly, perhaps, there were quite a few such people.

Acting normal, embodying normality—doing things the way a striving, achieving, rational person would do them—was how Dina Powell saw her job in the White House. At forty-three, Powell had made a career at the intersection of the corporate world and public policy; she did well (very, very well) by doing good. She had made great strides in George W. Bush's White House and then later at Goldman Sachs. Returning to the White House at a penultimate level, with at least a chance of rising to one of the country's highest unelected positions, would potentially be worth enormous sums when she returned to the corporate world.

In Trumpland, however, the exact opposite could happen. Powell's carefully cultivated reputation, her brand (and she was one of those people who thought intently about their personal brand), could become inextricably tied to the Trump brand. Worse, she could become part of what might easily turn into historical calamity. Already, for many people who knew Dina Powell—and everybody who was anybody knew Dina Powell—the fact that she had taken a position in the Trump White House indicated either recklessness or seriously bad judgment.

"How," wondered one of her longtime friends, "does she rationalize this?" Friends, family, and neighbors asked, silently or openly, *Do you know what you're doing? And how* could *you? And why* would *you?*

Here was the line dividing those whose reason for being in the White House was a professed loyalty to the president from the professionals they had needed to hire. Bannon, Conway, and Hicks—along with an assortment of more or less peculiar ideologues that had attached themselves to Trump and, of course, his family, all people without clearly monetizable reputations before their association with Trump—were, for better or worse, hitched to him. (Even among dedicated Trumpers there was always a certain amount of holding their breath and constant reexamination of their options.) But those within the larger circle of White House influence, those with some stature or at least an imagined stature, had to work through significantly more complicated contortions of personal and career justification.

Often they wore their qualms on their sleeves. Mick Mulvaney, the OMB director, made a point of stressing the fact that he worked in the Executive Office Building, not the West Wing. Michael Anton, holding down Ben Rhodes's former job at the NSC, had perfected a deft eye roll (referred to as the Anton eye roll). H. R. McMaster seemed to wear a constant grimace and have perpetual steam rising from his bald head. ("What's wrong with him?" the president often asked.)

There was, of course, a higher rationale: the White House needed normal, sane, logical, adult professionals. To a person, these pros saw themselves bringing positive attributes—rational minds, analytic powers, significant professional experience—to a situation sorely lacking those things. They were doing their bit to make things more normal and, therefore, more stable. They were bulwarks, or saw themselves that way, against chaos, impulsiveness, and stupidity. They were less Trump supporters than an antidote to Trump.

"If it all starts going south—more south than it is already going—I have no doubt that Joe Hagin would himself take personal responsibility, and do what needed to be done," said a senior Republican figure in Washington, in an effort at self-reassurance, about the former Bush staffer who now served as Trump's deputy chief of staff for operations.

But this sense of duty and virtue involved a complicated calculation about your positive effect on the White House versus its negative effect on you. In April, an email originally copied to more than a dozen people went into far wider circulation when it was forwarded and reforwarded. Purporting to represent the views of Gary Cohn and quite succinctly summarizing the appalled sense in much of the White House, the email read:

> It's worse than you can imagine. An idiot surrounded by clowns. Trump won't read anything—not one-page memos, not the brief policy papers; nothing. He gets up halfway through meetings with world leaders because he is bored. And his staff is no better. Kushner is an entitled baby who knows nothing. Bannon is an arrogant prick who thinks he's smarter than he is. Trump is less a person than a collection of terrible traits. No one will survive the first year but his family. I hate the work, but feel I need to stay because I'm the only person there with a clue what he's doing. The reason so few jobs have been filled is that they only accept people who pass ridiculous purity tests, even for midlevel policy-making jobs where the people will never see the light of day. I am in a constant state of shock and horror.

Still, the mess that might do serious damage to the nation, and, by association, to your own brand, might be transcended if you were seen as the person, by dint of competence and professional behavior, taking control of it.

Powell, who had come into the White House as an adviser to Ivanka Trump, rose, in weeks, to a position on the National Security Council, and was then, suddenly, along with Cohn, her Goldman colleague, a contender for some of the highest posts in the administration.

At the same time, both she and Cohn were spending a good deal of time with their ad hoc outside advisers on which way they might jump out of the White House. Powell could eye seven-figure comms jobs at various Fortune 100 companies, or a C-suite future at a tech company—Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg, after all, had a background in corporate philanthropy and in the Obama

administration. Cohn, on his part, already a centamillionaire, was thinking about the World Bank or the Fed.

Ivanka Trump—dealing with some of the same personal and career considerations as Powell, except without a viable escape strategy—was quite in her own corner. Inexpressive and even botlike in public but, among friends, discursive and strategic, Ivanka had become both more defensive about her father and more alarmed by where his White House was heading. She and her husband blamed this on Bannon and his let-Trump-be-Trump philosophy (often interpreted as let Trump be Bannon). The couple had come to regard him as more diabolical than Rasputin. Hence it was their job to keep Bannon and the ideologues from the president, who, they believed, was, in his heart, a practical-minded person (at least in his better moods), swayed only by people preying on his short attention span.

In mutually codependent fashion, Ivanka relied on Dina to suggest management tactics that would help her handle her father and the White House, while Dina relied on Ivanka to offer regular assurances that not everyone named Trump was completely crazy. This link meant that within the greater West Wing population, Powell was seen as part of the much tighter family circle, which, while it conferred influence, also made her the target of ever sharper attacks. "She will expose herself as being totally incompetent," said a bitter Katie Walsh, seeing Powell as less a normalizing influence than another aspect of the abnormal Trump family power play.

And indeed, both Powell and Cohn had privately concluded that the job they both had their eye on—chief of staff, that singularly necessary White House management position—would always be impossible to perform if the president's daughter and son-in-law, no matter how much they were allied to them, were in de facto command whenever they wanted to exert it.

Dina and Ivanka were themselves spearheading an initiative that, otherwise, would have been a fundamental responsibility of the chief of staff: controlling the president's information flow.

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The unique problem here was partly how to get information to someone who did not (or could not or would not) read, and who at best listened only selectively. But the other part of the problem was how best to qualify the information that he liked to get. Hope Hicks, after more than a year at this side, had honed her instincts for the kind of information—the clips—that would please him. Bannon, in his intense and confiding voice, could insinuate himself into the president's mind. Kellyanne Conway brought him the latest outrages against him. There were his after-dinner calls—the billionaire chorus. And then cable, itself programmed to reach him—to court him or enrage him.

The information he did not get was formal information. The data. The details. The options. The analysis. He didn't do PowerPoint. For anything that smacked of a classroom or of being lectured to—"professor" was one of his bad words, and

he was proud of never going to class, never buying a textbook, never taking a note—he got up and left the room.

This was a problem in multiple respects—indeed, in almost all the prescribed functions of the presidency. But perhaps most of all, it was a problem in the evaluation of strategic military options.

The president liked generals. The more fruit salad they wore, the better. The president was very pleased with the compliments he got for appointing generals who commanded the respect that Mattis and Kelly and McMaster were accorded (pay no attention to Michael Flynn). What the president did not like was *listening* to generals, who, for the most part, were skilled in the new army jargon of PowerPoint, data dumps, and McKinsey-like presentations. One of the things that endeared Flynn to the president was that Flynn, quite the conspiracist and drama queen, had a vivid storytelling sense.

By the time of the Syrian attack on Khan Sheikhoun, McMaster had been Trump's National Security Advisor for only about six weeks. Yet his efforts to inform the president had already become an exercise in trying to tutor a recalcitrant and resentful student. Recently Trump's meetings with McMaster had ended up in near acrimony, and now the president was telling several friends that his new National Security Advisor was too boring and that he was going to fire him.

McMaster had been the default choice, a fact that Trump kept returning to: Why had he hired him? He blamed his son-in-law.

After the president fired Flynn in February, he had spent two days at Mar-a-Lago interviewing replacements, badly taxing his patience.

John Bolton, the former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations and Bannon's consistent choice, made his aggressive light-up-the-world, go-to-war pitch.

Then Lt. Gen. Robert L. Caslen Jr., superintendent of the United States Military Academy at West Point, presented himself with what Trump viewed positively as old-fashioned military decorum. *Yes, sir. No, sir. That's correct, sir. Well, I think we know China has some problems, sir*. And in short order it seemed that Trump was selling Caslen on the job.

"That's the guy I want," said Trump. "He's got the look."

But Caslen demurred. He had never really had a staff job. Kushner thought he might not be ready.

"Yeah, but I liked that guy," pressed Trump.

Then McMaster, wearing a uniform with his silver star, came in and immediately launched into a wide-ranging lecture on global strategy. Trump was soon, and obviously, distracted, and as the lecture continued he began sulking.

"That guy bores the shit out of me," announced Trump after McMaster left the room. But Kushner pushed him to take another meeting with McMaster, who the next day showed up without his uniform and in a baggy suit.

"He looks like a beer salesman," Trump said, announcing that he would hire McMaster but didn't want to have another meeting with him.

Shortly after his appointment, McMaster appeared on *Morning Joe*. Trump

saw the show and noted admiringly, "The guy sure gets good press."

The president decided he had made a good hire.

* * *

By midmorning on April 4, a full briefing had been assembled at the White House for the president about the chemical attacks. Along with his daughter and Powell, most members of the president's inner national security circle saw the bombing of Khan Sheikhoun as a straightforward opportunity to register an absolute moral objection. The circumstance was unequivocal: Bashar al-Assad's government, once again defying international law, had used chemical weapons. There was video documenting the attack and substantial agreement among intelligence agencies about Assad's responsibility. The politics were right: Barack Obama failed to act when confronted with a Syrian chemical attack, and now Trump could. The downside was small; it would be a contained response. And it had the added advantage of seeming to stand up to the Russians, Assad's effective partners in Syria, which would score a political point at home.

Bannon, at perhaps his lowest moment of influence in the White House—many still felt that his departure was imminent—was the only voice arguing against a military response. It was a purist's rationale: keep the United States out of intractable problems, and certainly don't increase our involvement in them. He was holding the line against the rising business-as-usual faction, making decisions based on the same set of assumptions, Bannon believed, that had resulted in the Middle East quagmire. It was time to break the standard-response pattern of behavior, represented by the Jarvanka-Powell-Cohn-McMaster alliance. Forget normal—in fact, to Bannon, normal was precisely the problem.

The president had already agreed to McMaster's demand that Bannon be removed from the National Security Council, though the change wouldn't be announced until the following day. But Trump was also drawn to Bannon's strategic view: Why do anything, if you don't have to? Or, why would you do something that doesn't actually get you anything? Since taking office, the president had been developing an intuitive national security view: keep as many despots who might otherwise screw you as happy as possible. A self-styled strongman, he was also a fundamental appeaser. In this instance, then, why cross the Russians?

By the afternoon, the national security team was experiencing a sense of rising panic: the president, in their view, didn't seem to be quite registering the situation. Bannon wasn't helping. His hyperrationalist approach obviously appealed to the not-always-rational president. A chemical attack didn't change the circumstances on the ground, Bannon argued; besides, there had been far worse attacks with far more casualties than this one. If you were looking for broken children, you could find them anywhere. Why these broken children?

The president was not a debater—well, not in any Socratic sense. Nor was he in any conventional sense a decision maker. And certainly he was not a student

of foreign policy views and options. But this was nevertheless turning into a genuine philosophical face-off.

"Do nothing" had long been viewed as an unacceptable position of helplessness by American foreign policy experts. The instinct to do something was driven by the desire to prove you were not limited to nothing. You couldn't do nothing and show strength. But Bannon's approach was very much "A pox on all your houses," it was not our mess, and judging by all recent evidence, no good would come of trying to help clean it up. That effort would cost military lives with no military reward. Bannon, believing in the need for a radical shift in foreign policy, was proposing a new doctrine: Fuck 'em. This iron-fisted isolationism appealed to the president's transactional self: What was in it for us (or for him)?

Hence the urgency to get Bannon off the National Security Council. The curious thing is that in the beginning he was thought to be much more reasonable than Michael Flynn, with his fixation on Iran as the source of all evil. Bannon was supposed to babysit Flynn. But Bannon, quite to Kushner's shock, had not just an isolationist worldview but an apocalyptic one. Much of the world would burn and there was nothing you could do about it.

The announcement of Bannon's removal was made the day after the attack. That in itself was a rather remarkable accomplishment on the part of the moderates. In little more than two months, Trump's radical, if not screwball, national security leadership had been replaced by so-called reasonable people.

The job was now to bring the president into this circle of reason.

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As the day wore on, both Ivanka Trump and Dina Powell were united in their determination to persuade the president to react . . . normally. At the very minimum, an absolute condemnation of the use of chemical weapons, a set of sanctions, and, ideally, a military response—although not a big one. None of this was in any way exceptional. Which was sort of the point: it was critical not to respond in a radical, destabilizing way—including a radical nonresponse.

Kushner was by now complaining to his wife that her father just didn't get it. It had even been difficult to get a consensus on releasing a firm statement about the unacceptability of the use of chemical weapons at the noon press briefing. To both Kushner and McMaster it seemed obvious that the president was more annoyed about having to think about the attack than by the attack itself.

Finally, Ivanka told Dina they needed to show the president a different kind of presentation. Ivanka had long ago figured out how to make successful pitches to her father. You had to push his enthusiasm buttons. He may be a businessman, but numbers didn't do it for him. He was not a spreadsheet jockey—his numbers guys dealt with spreadsheets. He liked big names. He liked the big picture—he liked *literal* big pictures. He liked to see it. He liked "impact."

But in one sense, the military, the intelligence community, and the White House's national security team remained behind the times. Theirs was a data

world rather than a picture world. As it happened, the attack on Khan Sheikhoun had produced a wealth of visual evidence. Bannon might be right that this attack was no more mortal than countless others, but by focusing on this one and curating the visual proof, this atrocity became singular.

Late that afternoon, Ivanka and Dina created a presentation that Bannon, in disgust, characterized as pictures of kids foaming at the mouth. When the two women showed the presentation to the president, he went through it several times. He seemed mesmerized.

Watching the president's response, Bannon saw Trumpism melting before his eyes. Trump—despite his visceral resistance to the establishment ass-covering and standard-issue foreign policy expertise that had pulled the country into hopeless wars—was suddenly putty. After seeing all the horrifying photos, he immediately adopted a completely conventional point of view: it seemed inconceivable to him that we couldn't do something.

That evening, the president described the pictures in a call to a friend—the foam, all that foam. *These are just kids*. He usually displayed a consistent contempt for anything but overwhelming military response; now he expressed a sudden, wide-eyed interest in all kinds of other military options.

On Wednesday, April 5, Trump received a briefing that outlined multiple options for how to respond. But again McMaster burdened him with detail. He quickly became frustrated, feeling that he was being manipulated.

The following day, the president and several of his top aides flew to Florida for a meeting with the Chinese president, Xi Jinping—a meeting organized by Kushner with the help of Henry Kissinger. While aboard Air Force One, he held a tightly choreographed meeting of the National Security Council, tying into the staff on the ground. By this point, the decision about how to respond to the chemical attack had already been made: the military would launch a Tomahawk cruise missile strike at Al Shayrat airfield. After a final round of discussion, while on board, the president, almost ceremonially, ordered the strike for the next day.

With the meeting over and the decision made, Trump, in a buoyant mood, came back to chat with reporters traveling with him on Air Force One. In a teasing fashion, he declined to say what he planned to do about Syria. An hour later, Air Force One landed and the president was hustled to Mar-a-Lago.

The Chinese president and his wife arrived for dinner shortly after five o'clock and were greeted by a military guard on the Mar-a-Lago driveway. With Ivanka supervising arrangements, virtually the entire White House senior staff attended.

During a dinner of Dover sole, haricots verts, and thumbelina carrots—Kushner seated with the Chinese first couple, Bannon at the end of the table—the attack on Al Shayrat airfield was launched.

Shortly before ten, the president, reading straight off the teleprompter, announced that the mission had been completed. Dina Powell arranged a for-posterity photo of the president with his advisers and national security team in

the makeshift situation room at Mar-a-Lago. She was the only woman in the room. Steve Bannon glowered from his seat at the table, revolted by the stagecraft and the "phoniness of the fucking thing."

It was a cheerful and relieved Trump who mingled with his guests among the palm trees and mangroves. "That was a big one," he confided to a friend. His national security staff were even more relieved. The unpredictable president seemed almost predictable. The unmanageable president, manageable.

# 15

## MEDIA

On April 19, Bill O'Reilly, the Fox anchor and the biggest star in cable news, was pushed out by the Murdoch family over charges of sexual harassment. This was a continuation of the purge at the network that had begun nine months before with the firing of its chief, Roger Ailes. Fox achieved its ultimate political influence with the election of Donald Trump, yet now the future of the network seemed held in a peculiar Murdoch family limbo between conservative father and liberal sons.

A few hours after the O'Reilly announcement, Ailes, from his new oceanfront home in Palm Beach—precluded by his separation agreement with Fox from any efforts to compete with it for eighteen months—sent an emissary into the West Wing with a question for Steve Bannon: *O'Reilly and Hannity are in, what about you?* Ailes, in secret, had been plotting his comeback with a new conservative network. Currently in internal exile inside the White House, Bannon —"the next Ailes"—was all ears.

This was not just the plotting of ambitious men, seeking both opportunity and revenge; the idea for a new network was also driven by an urgent sense that the Trump phenomenon was about, as much as anything else, right-wing media. For twenty years, Fox had honed its populist message: liberals were stealing and ruining the country. Then, just at the moment that many liberals—including Rupert Murdoch's sons, who were increasingly in control of their father's company—had begun to believe that the Fox audience was beginning to age out, with its anti-gay-marriage, anti-abortion, anti-immigrant social message, which seemed too hoary for younger Republicans, along came Breitbart News. Breitbart not only spoke to a much younger right-wing audience—here Bannon felt he was as much in tune with this audience as Ailes was with his—but it had turned this audience into a huge army of digital activists (or social media trolls).

As right-wing media had fiercely coalesced around Trump—readily excusing all the ways he might contradict the traditional conservative ethos—mainstream media had become as fiercely resistant. The country was divided as much by media as by politics. Media was the avatar of politics. A sidelined Ailes was eager to get back in the game. This was his natural playing field: (1) Trump's election proved the power of a significantly smaller but more dedicated electoral base—just as, in cable television terms, a smaller hardcore base was

more valuable than a bigger, less committed one; (2) this meant an inverse dedication by an equally small circle of passionate enemies; (3) hence, there would be blood.

If Bannon was as finished as he appeared in the White House, this was his opportunity, too. Indeed, the problem with Bannon's $1.5 million a year Internetcentric Breitbart News was that it couldn't be monetized or scaled up in a big way, but with O'Reilly and Hannity on board, there could be television riches fueled by, into the foreseeable future, a new Trump-inspired era of right-wing passion and hegemony.

Ailes's message to his would-be protégé was plain: Not just the rise of Trump, but the fall of Fox could be Bannon's moment.

In reply, Bannon let Ailes know that for now, he was trying to hold on to his position in the White House. But yes, the opportunity was obvious.

* * *

Even as O'Reilly's fate was being debated by the Murdochs, Trump, understanding O'Reilly's power and knowing how much O'Reilly's audience overlapped with his own base, had expressed his support and approval—"I don't think Bill did anything wrong. . . . He is a good person," he told the *New York Times*.

But in fact a paradox of the new strength of conservative media was Trump himself. During the campaign, when it suited him, he had turned on Fox. If there were other media opportunities, he took them. (In the recent past, Republicans, particularly in the primary season, paid careful obeisance to Fox over other media outlets.) Trump kept insisting that he was bigger than just conservative media.

In the past month, Ailes, a frequent Trump caller and after-dinner adviser, had all but stopped speaking to the president, piqued by the constant reports that Trump was bad-mouthing him as he praised a newly attentive Murdoch, who had, before the election, only ever ridiculed Trump.

"Men who demand the most loyalty tend to be the least loyal pricks," noted a sardonic Ailes (a man who himself demanded lots of loyalty).

The conundrum was that conservative media saw Trump as its creature, while Trump saw himself as a star, a vaunted and valued product of all media, one climbing ever higher. It was a cult of personality, and he was the personality. He was the most famous man in the world. Everybody loved him—or ought to.

On Trump's part this was, arguably, something of a large misunderstanding about the nature of conservative media. He clearly did not understand that what conservative media elevated, liberal media would necessarily take down. Trump, goaded by Bannon, would continue to do the things that would delight conservative media and incur the wrath of liberal media. That was the program. The more your supporters loved you, the more your antagonists hated you. That's how it was supposed to work. And that's how it was working.

But Trump himself was desperately wounded by his treatment in the

mainstream media. He obsessed on every slight until it was overtaken by the next slight. Slights were singled out and replayed again and again, his mood worsening with each replay (he was always rerunning the DVR). Much of the president's daily conversation was a repetitive rundown of what various anchors and hosts had said about him. And he was upset not only when he was attacked, but when the people around him were attacked. But he did not credit their loyalty, or blame himself or the nature of liberal media for the indignities heaped on his staffers; he blamed them and their inability to get good press.

Mainstream media's self-righteousness and contempt for Trump helped provide a tsunami of clicks for right-wing media. But an often raging, self-pitying, tormented president had not gotten this memo, or had failed to comprehend it. He was looking for media love everywhere. In this, Trump quite profoundly seemed unable to distinguish between his political advantage and his personal needs—he thought emotionally, not strategically.

The great value of being president, in his view, was that you're the most famous man in the world, and fame is always venerated and adored by the media. Isn't it? But, confusingly, Trump was president in large part because of his particular talent, conscious or reflexive, to alienate the media, which then turned him into a figure reviled by the media. This was not a dialectical space that was comfortable for an insecure man.

"For Trump," noted Ailes, "the media represented power, much more so than politics, and he wanted the attention and respect of its most powerful men. Donald and I were really quite good friends for more than 25 years, but he would have preferred to be friends with Murdoch, who thought he was a moron —at least until he became president."

* * *

The White House Correspondents' Dinner was set for April 29, the one hundredth day of the Trump administration. The annual dinner, once an insiders' event, had become an opportunity for media organizations to promote themselves by recruiting celebrities—most of whom had nothing to do with journalism or politics—to sit at their tables. This had resulted in a notable Trump humiliation when, in 2011, Barack Obama singled out Trump for particular mockery. In Trump lore, this was the insult that pushed him to make the 2016 run.

Not long after the Trump team's arrival in the White House, the Correspondents' Dinner became a cause for worry. On a winter afternoon in Kellyanne Conway's upstairs West Wing office, Conway and Hope Hicks engaged in a pained discussion about what to do.

The central problem was that the president was neither inclined to make fun of himself, nor particularly funny himself—at least not, in Conway's description, "in that kind of humorous way."

George W. Bush had famously resisted the Correspondents' Dinner and suffered greatly at it, but he had prepped extensively, and every year he pulled

out an acceptable performance. But neither woman, confiding their concerns around the small table in Conway's office to a journalist they regarded as sympathetic, thought Trump had a realistic chance of making the dinner anything like a success.

"He doesn't appreciate cruel humor," said Conway.

"His style is more old-fashioned," said Hicks.

Both women, clearly seeing the Correspondents' Dinner as an intractable problem, kept characterizing the event as "unfair," which, more generally, is how they characterized the media's view of Trump. "He's unfairly portrayed." "They don't give him the benefit of the doubt." "He's just not treated the way other presidents have been treated."

The burden here for Conway and Hicks was their understanding that the president did not see the media's lack of regard for him as part of a political divide on which he stood on a particular side. Instead, he perceived it as a deep personal attack on him: for entirely unfair reasons, ad hominem reasons, the media just did not like him. Ridiculed him. Cruelly. Why?

The journalist, trying to offer some comfort, told the two women there was a rumor going around that Graydon Carter—the editor of *Vanity Fair* and host of one of the most important parties of the Correspondents' Dinner weekend, and, for decades, one of Trump's key tormentors in the media—was shortly going to be pushed out of the magazine.

"Really?" said Hicks, jumping up. "Oh my God, can I tell him? Would that be okay? He'll want to know this." She headed quickly downstairs to the Oval Office.

* * *

Curiously, Conway and Hicks each portrayed a side of the president's alter ego media problem. Conway was the bitter antagonist, the mud-in-your-eye messenger who reliably sent the media into paroxysms of outrage against the president. Hicks was the confidante ever trying to get the president a break and some good ink in the only media he really cared about—the media that most hated him. But as different as they were in their media functions and temperament, both women had achieved remarkable influence in the administration by serving as the key lieutenants responsible for addressing the president's most pressing concern, his media reputation.

While Trump was in most ways a conventional misogynist, in the workplace he was much closer to women than to men. The former he confided in, the latter he held at arm's length. He liked and needed his office wives, and he trusted them with his most important personal issues. Women, according to Trump, were simply more loyal and trustworthy than men. Men might be more forceful and competent, but they were also more likely to have their own agendas. Women, by their nature, or Trump's version of their nature, were more likely to focus their purpose on a man. A man like Trump.

It wasn't happenstance or just casting balance that his *Apprentice* sidekick

was a woman, nor that his daughter Ivanka had become one of his closest confidants. He felt women understood him. Or, the kind of women he liked—positive-outlook, can-do, loyal women, who also looked good—understood him. Everybody who successfully worked for him understood that there was always a subtext of his needs and personal tics that had to be scrupulously attended to; in this, he was not all that different from other highly successful figures, just more so. It would be hard to imagine someone who expected a greater awareness of and more catering to his peculiar whims, rhythms, prejudices, and often inchoate desires. He needed special—extra special—handling. Women, he explained to one friend with something like self-awareness, generally got this more precisely than men. In particular, women who self-selected themselves as tolerant of or oblivious to or amused by or steeled against his casual misogyny and constant sexual subtext—which was somehow, incongruously and often jarringly, matched with paternal regard—got this.

* * *

Kellyanne Conway first met Donald Trump at a meeting of the condo board for the Trump International Hotel, which was directly across the street from the UN and was where, in the early 2000s, she lived with her husband and children. Conway's husband, George, a graduate of Harvard College and Yale Law School, was a partner at the premier corporate mergers and acquisitions firm Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen & Katz. (Though Wachtell was a Democratic-leaning firm, George had played a behind-the-scenes role on the team that represented Paula Jones in her pursuit of Bill Clinton.) In its professional and domestic balance, the Conway family was organized around George's career. Kellyanne's career was a sidelight.

Kellyanne, who in the Trump campaign would use her working-class biography to good effect, grew up in central New Jersey, the daughter of a trucker, raised by a single mother (and, always in her narrative, her grandmother and two unmarried aunts). She went to George Washington law school and afterward interned for Reagan's pollster, Richard Wirthlin. Then she became the assistant to Frank Luntz, a curious figure in the Republican Party, known as much for his television deals and toupee as for his polling acumen. Conway herself began to make appearances on cable TV while working for Luntz.

One virtue of the research and polling business she started in 1995 was that it could adapt to her husband's career. But she never much rose above a midrank presence in Republican political circles, nor did she become more than the also-ran behind Ann Coulter and Laura Ingraham on cable television—which is where Trump first saw her and why he singled her out at the condo board meeting.

In a real sense, however, her advantage was not meeting Trump but being taken up by the Mercers. They recruited Conway in 2015 to work on the Cruz campaign, when Trump was still far from the conservative ideal, and then, in August 2016, inserted her into the Trump campaign.

She understood her role. "I will only ever call you Mr. Trump," she told the

candidate with perfect-pitch solemnity when he interviewed her for the job. It was a trope she would repeat in interview after interview—Conway was a catalog of learned lines—a message repeated as much for Trump as for others.

Her title was campaign manager, but that was a misnomer. Bannon was the real manager, and she was the senior pollster. But Bannon shortly replaced her in that role and she was left in what Trump saw as the vastly more important role of cable spokesperson.

Conway seemed to have a convenient On-Off toggle. In private, in the Off position, she seemed to regard Trump as a figure of exhausting exaggeration or even absurdity—or, at least, if you regarded him that way, she seemed to suggest that she might, too. She illustrated her opinion of her boss with a whole series of facial expressions: eyes rolling, mouth agape, head snapping back. But in the On position, she metamorphosed into believer, protector, defender, and handler. Conway is an antifeminist (or, actually, in a complicated ideological somersault, she sees feminists as being antifeminists), ascribing her methods and temperament to her being a wife and mother. She's instinctive and reactive. Hence her role as the ultimate Trump defender: she verbally threw herself in front of any bullet coming his way.

Trump loved her defend-at-all-costs shtick. Conway's appearances were on his schedule to watch live. His was often the first call she got after coming off the air. She channeled Trump: she said exactly the kind of Trump stuff that would otherwise make her put a finger-gun to her head.

After the election—Trump's victory setting off a domestic reordering in the Conway household, and a scramble to get her husband an administration job—Trump assumed she would be his press secretary. "He and my mother," Conway said, "because they both watch a lot of television, thought this was one of the most important jobs." In Conway's version, she turned Trump down or demurred. She kept proposing alternatives in which she would be the key spokesperson but would be more as well. In fact, almost everyone else was maneuvering Trump around his desire to appoint Conway.

Loyalty was Trump's most valued attribute, and in Conway's view her kamikaze-like media defense of the president had earned her a position of utmost primacy in the White House. But in her public persona, she had pushed the boundaries of loyalty too far; she was so hyperbolic that even Trump loyalists found her behavior extreme and were repelled. None were more put off than Jared and Ivanka, who, appalled at the shamelessness of her television appearances, extended this into a larger critique of Conway's vulgarity. When referring to her, they were particularly partial to using the shorthand "nails," a reference to her Cruella de Vil-length manicure treatments.

By mid-February she was already the subject of leaks—many coming from Jared and Ivanka—about how she had been sidelined. She vociferously defended herself, producing a list of television appearances still on her schedule, albeit lesser ones. But she also had a teary scene with Trump in the Oval Office, offering to resign if the president had lost faith in her. Almost invariably, when

confronted with self-abnegation, Trump offered copious reassurances. "You will always have a place in my administration," he told her. "You will be here for eight years."

But she had indeed been sidelined, reduced to second-rate media, to being a designated emissary to right-wing groups, and left out of any meaningful decision making. This she blamed on the media, a scourge that further united her in self-pity with Donald Trump. In fact, her relationship with the president deepened as they bonded over their media wounds.

* * *

Hope Hicks, then age twenty-six, was the campaign's first hire. She knew the president vastly better than Conway did, and she understood that her most important media function was not to be in the media.

Hicks grew up in Greenwich, Connecticut. Her father was a PR executive who now worked for the Glover Park Group, the Democratic-leaning communications and political consulting firm; her mother was a former staffer for a democratic congressman. An indifferent student, Hicks went to Southern Methodist University and then did some modeling before getting a PR job. She first went to work for Matthew Hiltzik, who ran a small New York-based PR firm and was noted for his ability to work with high-maintenance clients, including the movie producer Harvey Weinstein (later pilloried for years of sexual harassment and abuse—accusations that Hiltzik and his staff had long helped protect him from) and the television personality Katie Couric. Hiltzik, an active Democrat who had worked for Hillary Clinton, also represented Ivanka Trump's fashion line; Hicks started to do some work for the account and then joined Ivanka's company full time. In 2015, Ivanka seconded her to her father's campaign; as the campaign progressed, moving from novelty project to political factor to juggernaut, Hicks's family increasingly, and incredulously, viewed her as rather having been taken captive. (Following the Trump victory and her move into the White House, her friends and intimates talked with great concern about what kind of therapies and recuperation she would need after her tenure was finally over.)

Over the eighteen months of the campaign, the traveling group usually consisted of the candidate, Hicks, and the campaign manager, Corey Lewandowski. In time, she became—in addition to an inadvertent participant in history, about which she was quite as astonished as anyone—a kind of Stepford factotum, as absolutely dedicated to and tolerant of Mr. Trump as anyone who had ever worked for him.

Shortly after Lewandowski, with whom Hicks had an on-and-off romantic relationship, was fired in June 2016 for clashing with Trump family members, Hicks sat in Trump Tower with Trump and his sons, worrying about Lewandowski's treatment in the press and wondering aloud how she might help him. Trump, who otherwise seemed to treat Hicks in a protective and even paternal way, looked up and said, "Why? You've already done enough for him. You're the best piece of tail he'll ever have," sending Hicks running from the

room.

As new layers began to form around Trump, first as nominee and then as president-elect, Hicks continued playing the role of his personal PR woman. She would remain his constant shadow and the person with the best access to him. "Have you spoken to Hope?" were among the words most frequently uttered in the West Wing.

Hicks, sponsored by Ivanka and ever loyal to her, was in fact thought of as Trump's real daughter, while Ivanka was thought of as his real wife. More functionally, but as elementally, Hicks was the president's chief media handler. She worked by the president's side, wholly separate from the White House's forty-person-strong communications office. The president's personal message and image were entrusted to her—or, more accurately, she was the president's agent in retailing that message and image, which he trusted to no one but himself. Together they formed something of a freelance operation.

Without any particular politics of her own, and, with her New York PR background, quite looking down on the right-wing press, she was the president's official liaison to the mainstream media. The president had charged her with the ultimate job: a good write-up in the *New York Times*.

That, in the president's estimation, had yet failed to happen, "but Hope tries and tries," the president said.

On more than one occasion, after a day—one of the countless days—of particularly bad notices, the president greeted her, affectionately, with "You must be the world's worst PR person."

* * *

In the early days of the transition, with Conway out of the running for the press secretary job, Trump became determined to find a "star." The conservative radio host Laura Ingraham, who had spoken at the convention, was on the list, as was Ann Coulter. Fox Business's Maria Bartiromo was also under consideration. (This was television, the president-elect said, and it ought to be a good-looking woman.) When none of those ideas panned out, the job was offered to Fox News's Tucker Carlson, who turned it down.

But there was a counterview: the press secretary ought to be the opposite of a star. In fact, the entire press operation ought to be downgraded. If the press was the enemy, why pander to it, why give it more visibility? This was fundamental Bannonism: stop thinking you can somehow get along with your enemies.

As the debate went on, Priebus pushed for one of his deputies at the Republican National Committee, Sean Spicer, a well-liked forty-five-year-old Washington political professional with a string of posts on the Hill in the George W. Bush years as well as with the RNC. Spicer, hesitant to take the job, kept anxiously posing the question to colleagues in the Washington swamp: "If I do this, will I ever be able to work again?"

There were conflicting answers.

During the transition, many members of Trump's team came to agree with Bannon that their approach to White House press management ought to be to push it off—and the longer the arm's length the better. For the press, this initiative, or rumors of it, became another sign of the incoming administration's antipress stance and its systematic efforts to cut off the information supply. In truth, the suggestions about moving the briefing room away from the White House, or curtailing the briefing schedule, or limiting broadcast windows or press pool access, were variously discussed by other incoming administrations. In her husband's White House, Hillary Clinton had been a proponent of limiting press access.

It was Donald Trump who was not able to relinquish this proximity to the press and the stage in his own house. He regularly berated Spicer for his ham-handed performances, often giving his full attention to them. His response to Spicer's briefings was part of his continuing belief that nobody could work the media like he could, that somehow he had been stuck with an F-Troop communications team that was absent charisma, magnetism, and proper media connections.

Trump's pressure on Spicer—a constant stream of directorial castigation and instruction that reliably rattled the press secretary—helped turn the briefings into a can't-miss train wreck. Meanwhile, the real press operation had more or less devolved into a set of competing press organizations within the White House.

There was Hope Hicks and the president, living in what other West Wingers characterized as an alternative universe in which the mainstream media would yet discover the charm and wisdom of Donald Trump. Where past presidents might have spent portions of their day talking about the needs, desires, and points of leverage among various members of Congress, the president and Hicks spent a great deal of time talking about a fixed cast of media personalities, trying to second-guess the real agendas and weak spots among cable anchors and producers and *Times* and *Post* reporters.

Often the focus of this otherworldly ambition was directed at *Times* reporter Maggie Haberman. Haberman's front-page beat at the paper, which might be called the "weirdness of Donald Trump" beat, involved producing vivid tales of eccentricities, questionable behavior, and shit the president says, told in a knowing, deadpan style. Beyond acknowledging that Trump was a boy from Queens yet in awe of the *Times*, nobody in the West Wing could explain why he and Hicks would so often turn to Haberman for what would so reliably be a mocking and hurtful portrayal. There was some feeling that Trump was returning to scenes of past success: the *Times* might be against him, but Haberman had worked at the *New York Post* for many years. "She's very professional," Conway said, speaking in defense of the president and trying to justify Haberman's extraordinary access. But however intent he remained on getting good ink in the *Times*, the president saw Haberman as "mean and horrible." And yet, on a near-weekly basis, he and Hicks plotted when next to

have the *Times* come in.

* * *

Kushner had his personal press operation and Bannon had his. The leaking culture had become so open and overt—most of the time everybody could identify everybody else's leaks—that it was now formally staffed.

Kushner's Office of American Innovation employed, as its spokesperson, Josh Raffel, who, like Hicks, came out of Matthew Hiltzik's PR shop. Raffel, a Democrat who had been working in Hollywood, acted as Kushner and his wife's personal rep—not least of all because the couple felt that Spicer, owing his allegiance to Priebus, was not aggressively representing them. This was explicit. "Josh is Jared's Hope," was his internal West Wing job description.

Raffel coordinated all of Kushner and Ivanka's personal press, though there was more of this for Ivanka than for Kushner. But, more importantly, Raffel coordinated all of Kushner's substantial leaking, or, as it were, his off-the-record briefings and guidance—no small part of it against Bannon. Kushner, who with great conviction asserted that he never leaked, in part justified his press operation as a defense against Bannon's press operation.

Bannon's "person," Alexandra Preate—a witty conservative socialite partial to champagne—had previously represented Breitbart News and other conservative figures like CNBC's Larry Kudlow, and was close friends with Rebekah Mercer. In a relationship that nobody seemed quite able to explain, she handled all of Bannon's press "outreach" but was not employed by the White House, although she maintained an office, or at least an officelike presence, there. The point was clear: her client was Bannon and not the Trump administration.

Bannon, to Jared and Ivanka's continued alarm, had unique access to Breitbart's significant abilities to change the right-wing mood and focus. Bannon insisted he had cut his ties to his former colleagues at Breitbart, but that strained everybody's credulity—and everybody figured nobody was supposed to believe it. Rather, everybody was supposed to fear it.

There was, curiously, general agreement in the West Wing that Donald Trump, the media president, had one of the most dysfunctional communication operations in modern White House history. Mike Dubke, a Republican PR operative who was hired as White House communications director, was, by all estimations, from the first day on his way out the door. In the end he lasted only three months.

* * *

The White House Correspondents' Dinner rose, as much as any other challenge for the new president and his team, as a test of his abilities. He wanted to do it. He was certain that the power of his charm was greater than the rancor that he bore this audience—or that they bore him.

He recalled his 2015 *Saturday Night Live* appearance—which, in his view, was

entirely successful. In fact, he had refused to prepare, had kept saying he would "improvise," no problem. Comedians don't actually improvise, he was told; it's all scripted and rehearsed. But this counsel had only marginal effect.

Almost nobody except the president himself thought he could pull off the Correspondents' Dinner. His staff was terrified that he would die up there in front of a seething and contemptuous audience. Though he could dish it out, often very harshly, no one thought he could take it. Still, the president seemed eager to appear at the event, if casual about it, too—with Hicks, ordinarily encouraging his every impulse, trying not to.

Bannon pressed the symbolic point: the president should not be seen currying the favor of his enemies, or trying to entertain them. The media was a much better whipping boy than it was a partner in crime. The Bannon principle, the steel stake in the ground, remained: don't bend, don't accommodate, don't meet halfway. And in the end, rather than implying that Trump did not have the talent and wit to move this crowd, that was a much better way to persuade the president that he should not appear at the dinner.

When Trump finally agreed to forgo the event, Conway, Hicks, and virtually everybody else in the West Wing breathed a lot easier.

* * *

Shortly after five o'clock on the one hundredth day of his presidency—a particularly muggy one—while twenty-five hundred or so members of news organizations and their friends gathered at the Washington Hilton for the White House Correspondents' Dinner, the president left the West Wing for Marine One, which was soon en route to Andrews Air Force Base. Accompanying him were Steve Bannon, Stephen Miller, Reince Priebus, Hope Hicks, and Kellyanne Conway. Vice President Pence and his wife joined the group at Andrews for the brief flight on Air Force One to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, where the president would give a speech. During the flight, crab cakes were served, and *Face the Nation*'s John Dickerson was granted a special hundredth-day interview.

The first Harrisburg event was held at a factory that manufactured landscaping and gardening tools, where the president closely inspected a line of colorful wheelbarrows. The next event, where the speech would be delivered, was at a rodeo arena in the Farm Show Complex and Expo Center.

And that was the point of this little trip. It had been designed both to remind the rest of the country that the president was not just another phony baloney in a tux like those at the White House Correspondents' Dinner (this somehow presupposed that the president's base cared about or was even aware of the event) and to keep the president's mind off the fact that he was missing the dinner.

But the president kept asking for updates on the jokes.

# 16

## COMEY

"It's impossible to make him understand you can't stop these investigations," said Roger Ailes in early May, a frustrated voice in the Trump kitchen cabinet. "In the old days, you could say leave it alone. Now you say leave it alone and you're the one who gets investigated. He can't get this through his head."

In fact, as various members of the billionaires' cabinet tried to calm down the president during their evening phone calls, they were largely egging him on by expressing deep concern about his DOJ and FBI peril. Many of Trump's wealthy friends saw themselves as having particular DOJ expertise. In their own careers, they had had enough issues with the Justice Department to prompt them to develop DOJ relationships and sources, and now they were always up on DOJ gossip. Flynn was going to throw him in the soup. Manafort was going to roll. And it wasn't just Russia. It was Atlantic City. And Mar-a-Lago. And Trump SoHo.

Both Chris Christie and Rudy Giuliani—each a self-styled expert on the DOJ and the FBI, and ever assuring Trump of their inside sources—encouraged him to take the view that the DOJ was resolved against him; it was all part of a holdover Obama plot.

Even more urgent was Charlie Kushner's fear, channeled through his son and daughter-in-law, that the Kushner family's dealings were getting wrapped up in the pursuit of Trump. Leaks in January had put the kibosh on the Kushners' deal with the Chinese financial colossus Anbang Insurance Group to refinance the family's large debt in one of its major real estate holdings, 666 Fifth Avenue. At the end of April, the *New York Times*, supplied with leaks from the DOJ, linked the Kushner business in a front-page article to Beny Steinmetz—an Israeli diamond, mining, and real estate billionaire with Russian ties who was under chronic investigation around the world. (The Kushner position was not helped by the fact that the president had been gleefully telling multiple people that Jared could solve the Middle East problem because the Kushners knew all the best people in Israel.) During the first week of May, the *Times* and the *Washington Post* covered the Kushner family's supposed efforts to attract Chinese investors with the promise of U.S. visas.

"The kids"—Jared and Ivanka—exhibited an increasingly panicked sense that the FBI and DOJ were moving beyond Russian election interference and into

finances. "Ivanka is terrified," said a satisfied Bannon.

Trump turned to suggesting to his billionaire chorus that he fire FBI director Comey. He had raised this idea many times before, but always, seemingly, at the same time and in the same context that he brought up the possibility of firing everybody. *Should I fire Bannon? Should I fire Reince? Should I fire McMaster? Should I fire Spicer? Should I fire Tillerson?* This ritual was, everyone understood, more a pretext to a discussion of the power he held than it was, strictly, about personnel decisions. Still, in Trump's poison-the-well fashion, the should-I-fire-so-and-so question, and any consideration of it by any of the billionaires, was translated into agreement, as in: *Carl Icahn thinks I should fire Comey (or Bannon, or Priebus, or McMaster, or Tillerson).*

His daughter and son-in-law, their urgency compounded by Charlie Kushner's concern, encouraged him, arguing that the once possibly charmable Comey was now a dangerous and uncontrollable player whose profit would inevitably be their loss. When Trump got wound up about something, Bannon noted, someone was usually winding him up. The family focus of discussion—insistent, almost frenzied—became wholly about Comey's ambition. He would rise by damaging them. And the drumbeat grew.

"That son of a bitch is going to try to fire the head of the FBI," said Ailes.

During the first week of May, the president had a ranting meeting with Sessions and his deputy Rod Rosenstein. It was a humiliating meeting for both men, with Trump insisting they couldn't control their own people and pushing them to find a reason to fire Comey—in effect, he blamed them for not having come up with that reason months ago. (It was their fault, he implied, that Comey hadn't been fired right off the bat.)

Also that week, there was a meeting that included the president, Jared and Ivanka, Bannon, Priebus, and White House counsel Don McGahn. It was a closed-door meeting—widely noted because it was unusual for the Oval Office door ever to be closed.

*All the Democrats hate Comey*, said the president, expressing his certain and self-justifying view. *All the FBI agents hate him, too—75 percent of them can't stand him.* (This was a number that Kushner had somehow alighted on, and Trump had taken it up.) *Firing Comey will be a huge fundraising advantage*, declared the president, a man who almost never talked about fundraising.

McGahn tried to explain that in fact Comey himself was not running the Russia investigation, that without Comey the investigation would proceed anyway. McGahn, the lawyer whose job was necessarily to issue cautions, was a frequent target of Trump rages. Typically these would begin as a kind of exaggeration or acting and then devolve into the real thing: uncontrollable, vein-popping, ugly-face, tantrum stuff. It got primal. Now the president's denunciations focused in a vicious fury on McGahn and his cautions about Comey.

"Comey was a rat," repeated Trump. There were rats everywhere and you had to get rid of them. *John Dean, John Dean*, he repeated. "Do you know what John Dean did to Nixon?"

Trump, who saw history through personalities—people he might have liked or disliked—was a John Dean freak. He went bananas when a now gray and much aged Dean appeared on talk shows to compare the Trump-Russia investigation to Watergate. That would bring the president to instant attention and launch an inevitable talk-back monologue to the screen about loyalty and what people would do for media attention. It might also be accompanied by several revisionist theories Trump had about Watergate and how Nixon had been framed. And always there were rats. A rat was someone who would take you down for his own advantage. If you had a rat, you needed to kill it. And there were rats all around.

(Later, it was Bannon who had to take the president aside and tell him that John Dean had been the White House counsel in the Nixon administration, so maybe it would be a good idea to lighten up on McGahn.)

As the meeting went on, Bannon, from the doghouse and now, in their mutual antipathy to Jarvanka, allied with Priebus, seized the opportunity to make an impassioned case opposing any move against Comey—which was also, as much, an effort to make the case against Jared and Ivanka and their allies, "the geniuses." ("The geniuses" was one of Trump's terms of derision for anybody who might annoy him or think they were smarter than him, and Bannon now appropriated the term and applied it to Trump's family.) Offering forceful and dire warnings, Bannon told the president: "This Russian story is a third-tier story, but you fire Comey and it'll be the biggest story in the world."

By the time the meeting ended, Bannon and Priebus believed they had prevailed. But that weekend, at Bedminster, the president, again listening to the deep dismay of his daughter and son-in-law, built up another head of steam. With Jared and Ivanka, Stephen Miller was also along for the weekend. The weather was bad and the president missed his golf game, dwelling, with Jared, on his Comey fury. It was Jared, in the version told by those outside the Jarvanka circle, that pushed for action, once more winding up his father-in-law. With the president's assent, Kushner, in this version, gave Miller notes on why the FBI director should be fired and asked him to draft a letter that could set out the basis for immediate dismissal. Miller—less than a deft drafting hand—recruited Hicks to help, another person without clearly relevant abilities. (Miller would later be admonished by Bannon for letting himself get tied up, and potentially implicated, in the Comey mess.)

The letter, in the panicky draft assembled by Miller and Hicks, either from Kushner's directions or on instructions directly coming from the president, was an off-the-wall mishmash containing the talking points—Comey's handling of the Hillary Clinton investigation; the assertion (from Kushner) that the FBI itself had turned against Comey; and, the president's key obsession, the fact that Comey wouldn't publicly acknowledge that the president wasn't under investigation—that would form the Trump family's case for firing Comey. That is, everything but the fact that Comey's FBI was investigating the president.

The Kushner side, for its part, bitterly fought back against any

characterization of Kushner as the prime mover or mastermind, in effect putting the entire Bedminster letter effort—as well as the determination to get rid of Comey—entirely on the president's head and casting Kushner as passive bystander. (The Kushner side's position was articulated as follows: "Did he [Kushner] support the decision? Yes. Was he told this was happening? Yes. Did he encourage it? No. Was he fighting for it [Comey's ouster] for weeks and months? No. Did he fight [the ouster]? No. Did he say it would go badly? No.")

Horrified, McGahn quashed sending it. Nevertheless, it was passed to Sessions and Rosenstein, who quickly began drafting their own version of what Kushner and the president obviously wanted.

"I knew when he got back he might blow at any moment," said Bannon after the president returned from his Bedminster weekend.

* * *

On Monday morning, May 8, in a meeting in the Oval Office, the president told Priebus and Bannon that he had made his decision: he would fire Director Comey. Both men again made heated pleas against the move, arguing for, at the very least, more discussion. Here was a key technique for managing the president: delay. Rolling something forward likely meant that something else—an equal or greater fiasco—would come along to preempt whatever fiasco was currently at hand. What's more, delay worked advantageously with Trump's attention span; whatever the issue of the moment, he would shortly be on to something else. When the meeting ended, Priebus and Bannon thought they had bought some breathing room.

Later that day, Sally Yates and former director of National Intelligence James Clapper appeared before the Senate Judiciary Committee's Crime and Terrorism subcommittee—and were greeted by a series of furious tweets from the president.

Here was, Bannon saw again, the essential Trump problem. He hopelessly personalized everything. He saw the world in commercial and show business terms: someone else was always trying to one-up you, someone else was always trying to take the limelight. The battle was between you and someone else who wanted what you had. For Bannon, reducing the political world to face-offs and spats belittled the place in history Trump and his administration had achieved. But it also belied the real powers they were up against. Not people—institutions.

To Trump, he was just up against Sally Yates, who was, he steamed, "such a cunt."

Since her firing on January 30, Yates had remained suspiciously quiet. When journalists approached her, she, or her intermediaries, explained that per her lawyers she was shut down on all media. The president believed she was merely lying in wait. In phone calls to friends, he worried about her "plan" and "strategy," and he continued to press his after-dinner sources for what they thought she and Ben Rhodes, Trump's favorite Obama plotter, had "up their sleeves."

For each of his enemies—and, actually, for each of his friends—the issue for him came down, in many ways, to their personal press plan. The media was the battlefield. Trump assumed everybody wanted his or her fifteen minutes and that everybody had a press strategy for when they got them. If you couldn't get press directly for yourself, you became a leaker. There was no happenstance news, in Trump's view. All news was manipulated and designed, planned and planted. All news was to some extent fake—he understood that very well, because he himself had faked it so many times in his career. This was why he had so naturally cottoned to the "fake news" label. "I've made stuff up forever, and they always print it," he bragged.

The return of Sally Yates, with her appointment before the Senate Judiciary Committee, marked the beginning, Trump believed, of a sustained and well-organized media rollout for her. (His press view was confirmed later in May by a lavish, hagiographic profile of Yates in the *New Yorker*. "How long do you think she was planning this?" he asked, rhetorically. "You know she was. It's her payday.") "Yates is only famous because of me," the president complained bitterly. "Otherwise, who is she? Nobody."

In front of Congress that Monday morning, Yates delivered a cinematic performance—cool, temperate, detailed, selfless—compounding Trump's fury and agitation.

* * *

On the morning of Tuesday, May 9, with the president still fixated on Comey, and with Kushner and his daughter behind him, Priebus again moved to delay: "There's a right way to do this and a wrong way to do this," he told the president. "We don't want him learning about this on television. I'm going to say this one last time: this is not the right way to do this. If you want to do this, the right way is to have him in and have a conversation. This is the decent way and the professional way." Once more, the president seemed to calm down and become more focused on the necessary process.

But that was a false flag. In fact, the president, in order to avoid embracing conventional process—or, for that matter, any real sense of cause and effect—merely eliminated everybody else from *his* process. For most of the day, almost no one would know that he had decided to take matters into his own hands. In presidential annals, the firing of FBI director James Comey may be the most consequential move ever made by a modern president acting entirely on his own.

As it happened, the Justice Department—Attorney General Sessions and Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein—were, independent of the president's own course, preparing their case against Comey. They would take the Bedminster line and blame Comey for errors of his handling of the Clinton email mess—a problematic charge, because if that was truly the issue, why wasn't Comey dismissed on that basis as soon as the Trump administration took office? But in fact, quite regardless of the Sessions and Rosenstein case, the president had determined to act on his own.

Jared and Ivanka were urging the president on, but even they did not know that the axe would shortly fall. Hope Hicks, Trump's steadfast shadow, who otherwise knew everything the president thought—not least because he was helpless not to express it out loud—didn't know. Steve Bannon, however much he worried that the president might blow, didn't know. His chief of staff didn't know. And his press secretary didn't know. The president, on the verge of starting a war with the FBI, the DOJ, and many in Congress, was going rogue.

At some point that afternoon Trump told his daughter and son-in-law about his plan. They immediately became coconspirators and firmly shut out any competing advice.

Eerily, it was a notably on-time and unruffled day in the West Wing. Mark Halperin, the political reporter and campaign chronicler, was waiting in the reception area for Hope Hicks, who fetched him a bit before 5:00 p.m. Fox's Howard Kurtz was there, too, waiting for his appointment with Sean Spicer. And Reince Priebus's assistant had just been out to tell his five o'clock appointment it would be only a few more minutes.

Just before five, in fact, the president, having not too long before notified McGahn of his intention, pulled the trigger. Trump's personal security guard, Keith Schiller, delivered the termination letter to Comey's office at the FBI just after five o'clock. The letter's second sentence included the words "You are hereby terminated and removed from office, effective immediately."

Shortly thereafter, most of the West Wing staff, courtesy of an erroneous report from Fox News, was for a brief moment under the impression that Comey had resigned. Then, in a series of information synapses throughout the offices of the West Wing, it became clear what had actually happened.

"So next it's a special prosecutor!" said Priebus in disbelief, to no one in particular, when he learned shortly before five o'clock what was happening.

Spicer, who would later be blamed for not figuring out how to positively spin the Comey firing, had only minutes to process it.

Not only had the decision been made by the president with almost no consultation except that of his inner family circle, but the response, and explanation, and even legal justifications, were also almost exclusively managed by him and his family. Rosenstein and Sessions's parallel rationale for the firing was shoehorned in at the last minute, at which point, at Kushner's direction, the initial explanation of Comey's firing became that the president had acted solely on their recommendation. Spicer was forced to deliver this unlikely rationale, as was the vice president. But this pretense unraveled almost immediately, not least because most everyone in the West Wing, wanting nothing to do with the decision to fire Comey, was helping to unravel it.

The president, along with his family, stood on one side of the White House divide, while the staff—mouths agape, disbelieving and speechless—stood on the other.

But the president seemed also to want it known that he, aroused and dangerous, personally took down Comey. Forget Rosenstein and Sessions, it *was*

personal. It was a powerful president and a vengeful one, in every way galled and affronted by those in pursuit of him, and determined to protect his family, who were in turn determined to have him protect them.

"The daughter will take down the father," said Bannon, in a Shakespearian mood.

Within the West Wing there was much replaying of alternative scenarios. If you wanted to get rid of Comey, there were surely politic ways of doing it—which had in fact been suggested to Trump. (A curious one—an idea that later would seem ironic—was to get rid of General Kelly at Homeland Security and move Comey into that job.) But the point really was that Trump had wanted to confront and humiliate the FBI director. Cruelty was a Trump attribute.

The firing had been carried out publicly and in front of his family—catching Comey entirely off guard as he gave a speech in California. Then the president had further personalized the blow with an ad hominem attack on the director, suggesting that the FBI itself was on Trump's side and that it, too, had only contempt for Comey.

The next day, as though to further emphasize and delight in both the insult and his personal impunity, the president met with Russian bigwigs in the Oval Office, including Russia's Ambassador Kislyak, the very focus of much of the Trump-Russia investigation. To the Russians he said: "I just fired the head of the FBI. He was crazy, a real nut job. I faced great pressure because of Russia. That's taken off." Then, to boot, he revealed information supplied to the United States by Israel from its agent in place in Syria about ISIS using laptops to smuggle bombs onto airlines—revealing enough information to compromise the Israeli agent. (This incident did not help Trump's reputation in intelligence circles, since, in spycraft, human sources are to be protected above all other secrets.)

"It's Trump," said Bannon. "He thinks he can fire the FBI."

* * *

Trump believed that firing Comey would make him a hero. Over the next forty-eight hours he spun his side to various friends. It was simple: he had stood up to the FBI. He proved that he was willing to take on the state power. The outsider against the insiders. After all, that's why he was elected.

At some level he had a point. One reason presidents don't fire the director of the FBI is that they fear the consequences. It's the Hoover syndrome: any president can be hostage to what the FBI knows, and a president who treats the FBI with something less than deference does so at his own peril. But this president had stood up to the feds. One man against the unaccountable power that the left had long railed against—and that more recently the right had taken as a Holy Grail issue, too. "Everybody should be rooting for me," the president said to friends, more and more plaintively.

Here was another peculiar Trump attribute: an inability to see his actions the way most others saw them. Or to fully appreciate how people expected him to

behave. The notion of the presidency as an institutional and political concept, with an emphasis on ritual and propriety and semiotic messaging—statesmanship—was quite beyond him.

Inside the government, the response to Comey's firing was a kind of bureaucratic revulsion. Bannon had tried to explain to Trump the essential nature of career government officials, people whose comfort zone was in their association with hegemonic organizations and a sense of a higher cause—they were different, very different, from those who sought individual distinction. Whatever else Comey might be, he was first and foremost a bureaucrat. Casting him ignominiously out was yet another Trump insult to the bureaucracy.

Rod Rosenstein, the author of the letter that ostensibly provided the justification for firing Comey, now stood in the line of fire. The fifty-two-year-old Rosenstein, who, in rimless glasses, seemed to style himself as a bureaucrat's bureaucrat, was the longest-serving U.S. attorney in the country. He lived within the system, all by the book, his highest goal seeming to be to have people say he did things by the book. He was a straight shooter—and he wanted everyone to know it.

All this was undermined by Trump—trashed, even. The brow-beating and snarling president had hectored the country's two top law enforcement officials into an ill-considered or, at the very least, an ill-timed indictment of the director of the FBI. Rosenstein was already feeling used and abused. And then he was shown to have been tricked, too. He was a dupe.

The president had forced Rosenstein and Sessions to construct a legal rationale, yet then he could not even maintain the bureaucratic pretense of following it. Having enlisted Rosenstein and Sessions in his plot, Trump now exposed their efforts to present a reasonable and aboveboard case as a sham—and, arguably, a plan to obstruct justice. The president made it perfectly clear that he hadn't fired the director of the FBI because he did Hillary wrong; he fired Comey because the FBI was too aggressively investigating him and his administration.

Hyper-by-the-book Rod Rosenstein—heretofore the quintessential apolitical player—immediately became, in Washington eyes, a hopeless Trump tool. But Rosenstein's revenge was deft, swift, overwhelming, and (of course) by the book.

Given the decision of the attorney general to recuse himself from the Russia investigation, it fell under the authority of the deputy attorney general to determine whether a conflict existed—that is, whether the deputy attorney general, because of self-interest, might not be able to act objectively—and if, in his sole discretion, he judged a conflict to exist, to appoint an outside special counsel with wide powers and responsibilities to conduct an investigation and, potentially, a prosecution.

On May 17, twelve days after FBI director Comey was fired, without consulting the White House or the attorney general, Rosenstein appointed former FBI director Robert Mueller to oversee the investigation of Trump's, his campaign's, and his staff's ties to Russia. If Michael Flynn had recently become

the most powerful man in Washington for what he might reveal about the president, now Mueller arguably assumed that position because he had the power to make Flynn, and all other assorted Trump cronies and flunkies, squeal.

Rosenstein, of course, perhaps with some satisfaction, understood that he had delivered what could be a mortal blow to the Trump presidency.

Bannon, shaking his head in wonder about Trump, commented drily: "He doesn't necessarily see what's coming."

# 17

## ABROAD AND AT HOME

On May 12, Roger Ailes was scheduled to return to New York from Palm Beach to meet with Peter Thiel, an early and lonely Trump supporter in Silicon Valley who had become increasingly astonished by Trump's unpredictability. Ailes and Thiel, both worried that Trump could bring Trumpism down, were set to discuss the funding and launch of a new cable news network. Thiel would pay for it and Ailes would bring O'Reilly, Hannity, himself, and maybe Bannon to it.

But two days before the meeting, Ailes fell in his bathroom and hit his head. Before slipping into a coma, he told his wife not to reschedule the meeting with Thiel. A week later, Ailes, that singular figure in the march from Nixon's silent majority to Reagan's Democrats to Trump's passionate base, was dead.

His funeral in Palm Beach on May 20 was quite a study in the currents of right-wing ambivalence and even mortification. Right-wing professionals remained passionate in their outward defense of Trump but were rattled, if not abashed, among one another. At the funeral, Rush Limbaugh and Laura Ingraham struggled to parse support for Trumpism even as they distanced themselves from Trump himself.

The president had surely become the right wing's meal ticket. He was the ultimate antiliberal: an authoritarian who was the living embodiment of resistance to authority. He was the exuberant inverse of everything the right wing found patronizing and gullible and sanctimonious about the left. And yet, obviously, Trump was Trump—careless, capricious, disloyal, far beyond any sort of control. Nobody knew that as well as the people who knew him best.

Ailes's wife, Beth, had militantly invited only Ailes loyalists to the funeral. Anyone who had wavered in her husband's defense since his firing or had decided that a better future lay with the Murdoch family was excluded. This put Trump, still enthralled by his new standing with Murdoch, on the other side of the line. Hours and then days—carefully tracked by Beth Ailes—ticked off without a condolence call from the president.

The morning of the funeral, Sean Hannity's private plane took off for Palm Beach from Republic Airport in Farmingdale, Long Island. Accompanying Hannity was a small group of current and former Fox employees, all Ailes and Trump partisans. But each felt some open angst, or even incredulity, about Trump being

Trump: first there was the difficulty of grasping the Comey rationale, and now his failure to give even a nod to his late friend Ailes.

"He's an idiot, obviously," said the former Fox correspondent Liz Trotta.

Fox anchor Kimberly Guilfoyle spent much of the flight debating Trump's entreaties to have her replace Sean Spicer at the White House. "There are a lot of issues, including personal survival."

As for Hannity himself, his view of the right-wing world was shifting from Foxcentric to Trumpcentric. He did not think much more than a year would pass before he, too, would be pushed from the network, or find it too inhospitable to stay on. And yet he was pained by Trump's slavish attentions to Murdoch, who had not only ousted Ailes but whose conservatism was at best utilitarian. "He was for Hillary!" said Hannity.

Ruminating out loud, Hannity said he would leave the network and go work full time for Trump, because nothing was more important than that Trump succeed —"in spite of himself," Hannity added, laughing.

But he was pissed off that Trump hadn't called Beth. "Mueller," he concluded, drawing deeply on an electronic cigarette, had distracted him.

Trump may be a Frankenstein creation, but he was the right wing's creation, the first, true, right-wing original. Hannity could look past the Comey disaster. And Jared. And the mess in the White House.

Still, he hadn't called Beth.

"What the fuck is wrong with him?" asked Hannity.

* * *

Trump believed he was one win away from turning everything around. Or, perhaps more to the point, one win away from good press that would turn everything around. The fact that he had largely squandered his first hundred days—whose victories should have been the currency of the next hundred days —was immaterial. You could be down in the media one day and then the next have a hit that made you a success.

"Big things, we need big things," he said, angrily and often. "This isn't big. I need big. Bring me big. Do you even know what big is?"

Repeal and replace, infrastructure, true tax reform—the rollout Trump had promised and then depended on Paul Ryan to deliver—was effectively in tatters. Every senior staff member was now maintaining that they shouldn't have done health care, the precursor to the legislative rollout, in the first place. Whose idea was that, anyway?

The natural default might be to do smaller things, incremental versions of the program. But Trump showed little interest in the small stuff. He became listless and irritable.

So, okay, it would have to be peace in the Middle East.

For Trump, as for many showmen or press release entrepreneurs, the enemy of everything is complexity and red tape, and the solution for everything is cutting corners. Bypass or ignore the difficulties; just move in a straight line to

the vision, which, if it's bold enough, or grandiose enough, will sell itself. In this formula, there is always a series of middlemen who will promise to help you cut the corners, as well as partners who will be happy to piggyback on your grandiosity.

Enter the Crown Prince of the House of Saud, Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, age thirty-one. Aka MBS.

The fortuitous circumstance was that the king of Saudi Arabia, MBS's father, was losing it. The consensus in the Saudi royal family about a need to modernize was growing stronger (somewhat). MBS—an inveterate player of video games—was a new sort of personality in the Saudi leadership. He was voluble, open, and expansive, a charmer and an international player, a canny salesman rather than a remote, taciturn grandee. He had seized the economic portfolio and was pursuing a vision—quite a Trumpian vision—to out-Dubai Dubai and diversify the economy. His would be a new, modern—well, a bit more modern—kingdom (yes, women would soon be allowed to drive—so thank God self-driving cars were coming!). Saudi leadership was marked by age, traditionalism, relative anonymity, and careful consensus thinking. The Saudi royal family, on the other hand, whence the leadership class comes, was often marked by excess, flash, and the partaking of the joys of modernity in foreign ports. MBS, a man in a hurry, was trying to bridge the Saudi royal selves.

Global liberal leadership had been all but paralyzed by the election of Donald Trump—indeed, by the very *existence* of Donald Trump. But it was an inverted universe in the Middle East. The Obama truculence and hyperrationalization and micromanaging, preceded by the Bush moral militarism and ensuing disruptions, preceded by Clinton deal making, quid pro quo, and backstabbing, had opened the way for Trump's version of realpolitik. He had no patience with the our-hands-are-tied ennui of the post-cold war order, that sense of the chess board locked in place, of incremental movement being the best-case scenario—the alternative being only war. His was a much simpler view: Who's got the power? Give me his number.

And, just as basically: The enemy of my enemy is my friend. If Trump had one fixed point of reference in the Middle East, it was—mostly courtesy of Michael Flynn's tutoring—that Iran was the bad guy. Hence everybody opposed to Iran was a pretty good guy.

After the election, MBS had reached out to Kushner. In the confusion of the Trump transition, nobody with foreign policy stature and an international network had been put in place—even the new secretary of state designate, Rex Tillerson, had no real experience in foreign policy. To bewildered foreign secretaries, it seemed logical to see the presidentelect's son-in-law as a figure of stability. Whatever happened, he would be there. And for certain regimes, especially the familycentric Saudis, Kushner, the son-in-law, was much more reassuring than a policy person. He wasn't in his job because of his ideas.

Of the many Trump gashes in modern major-power governing, you could certainly drive a Trojan horse through his lack of foreign policy particulars and

relationships. This presented a do-over opportunity for the world in its relationship with the United States—or it did if you were willing to speak the new Trump language, whatever that was. There wasn't much of a road map here, just pure opportunism, a new transactional openness. Or, even more, a chance to use the powers of charm and seduction to which Trump responded as enthusiastically as he did to offers of advantageous new deals.

It was Kissingeresque realpolitik. Kissinger himself, long familiar with Trump by way of the New York social world and now taking Kushner under his wing, was successfully reinserting himself, helping to organize meetings with the Chinese and the Russians.

Most of America's usual partners, and even many antagonists, were unsettled if not horrified. Still, some saw opportunity. The Russians could see a free pass on the Ukraine and Georgia, as well as a lifting of sanctions, in return for giving up on Iran and Syria. Early in the transition, a high-ranking official in the Turkish government reached out in genuine confusion to a prominent U.S. business figure to inquire whether Turkey would have better leverage by putting pressure on the U.S. military presence in Turkey or by offering the new president an enviable hotel site on the Bosporus.

There was something curiously aligned between the Trump family and MBS. Like the entire Saudi leadership, MBS had, practically speaking, no education outside of Saudi Arabia. In the past, this had worked to limit the Saudi options—nobody was equipped to confidently explore new intellectual possibilities. As a consequence, everybody was wary of trying to get them to imagine change. But MBS and Trump were on pretty much equal footing. Knowing little made them oddly comfortable with each other. When MBS offered himself to Kushner as his guy in the Saudi kingdom, that was "like meeting someone nice at your first day of boarding school," said Kushner's friend.

Casting aside, in very quick order, previously held assumptions—in fact, not really aware of those assumptions—the new Trump thinking about the Middle East became the following: There are basically four players (or at least we can forget everybody else)—Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. The first three can be united against the fourth. And Egypt and Saudi Arabia, given what they want with respect to Iran—and anything else that does not interfere with the United States' interests—will pressure the Palestinians to make a deal. Voilà.

This represented a queasy-making mishmash of thought. Bannon's isolationism (a pox on all your houses—and keep us out of it); Flynn's anti-Iranism (of all the world's perfidy and toxicity, there is none like that of the mullahs); and Kushner's Kissingerism (not so much Kissingerism as, having no point of view himself, a dutiful attempt to follow the ninety-four-year-old's advice).

But the fundamental point was that the last three administrations had gotten the Middle East wrong. It was impossible to overstate how much contempt the Trump people felt for the business-as-usual thinking that had gotten it so wrong. Hence, the new operating principle was simple: do the opposite of what they (Obama, but the Bush neocons, too) would do. Their behavior, their

conceits, their ideas—in some sense even their backgrounds, education, and class—were all suspect. And, what's more, you don't really have to know all that much yourself; you just do it differently than it was done before.

The old foreign policy was based on the idea of nuance: facing an infinitely complex multilateral algebra of threats, interests, incentives, deals, and ever evolving relationships, we strain to reach a balanced future. In practice, the new foreign policy, an effective Trump doctrine, was to reduce the board to three elements: powers we can work with, powers we cannot work with, and those without enough power whom we can functionally disregard or sacrifice. It was cold war stuff. And, indeed, in the larger Trump view, it was during the cold war that time and circumstance gave the United States its greatest global advantage. That was when America was great.

* * *

Kushner was the driver of the Trump doctrine. His test cases were China, Mexico, Canada, and Saudi Arabia. He offered each country the opportunity to make his father-in-law happy.

In the first days of the administration, Mexico blew its chance. In transcripts of conversations between Trump and Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto that would later become public, it was vividly clear that Mexico did not understand or was unwilling to play the new game. The Mexican president refused to construct a pretense for paying for the wall, a pretense that might have redounded to his vast advantage (without his having to actually pay for the wall).

Not long after, Canada's new prime minister, Justin Trudeau, a forty-five-year-old globalist in the style of Clinton and Blair, came to Washington and repeatedly smiled and bit his tongue. And that did the trick: Canada quickly became Trump's new best friend.

The Chinese, who Trump had oft maligned during the campaign, came to Mar-a-Lago for a summit advanced by Kushner and Kissinger. (This required some tutoring for Trump, who referred to the Chinese leader as "Mr. X-i"; the president was told to think of him as a woman and call him "she.") They were in an agreeable mood, evidently willing to humor Trump. And they quickly figured out that if you flatter him, he flatters you.

But it was the Saudis, also often maligned during the campaign, who, with their intuitive understanding of family, ceremony, and ritual and propriety, truly scored.

The foreign policy establishment had a long and well-honed relationship with MBS's rival, the crown prince, Mohammed bin Nayef (MBN). Key NSA and State Department figures were alarmed that Kushner's discussions and fast-advancing relationship with MBS would send a dangerous message to MBN. And of course it did. The foreign policy people believed Kushner was being led by MBS, whose real views were entirely untested. The Kushner view was either, naïvely, that he wasn't being led, or, with the confidence of a thirty-six-year-old assuming the

new prerogatives of the man in charge, that he didn't care: let's embrace anybody who will embrace us.

The Kushner/MBS plan that emerged was straightforward in a way that foreign policy usually isn't: If you give us what we want, we'll give you what you want. On MBS's assurance that he would deliver some seriously good news, he was invited to visit the White House in March. (The Saudis arrived with a big delegation, but they were received at the White House by only the president's small circle—and the Saudis took particular note that Trump ordered Priebus to jump up and fetch him things during the meeting.) The two large men, the older Trump and much younger MBS—both charmers, flatterers, and country club jokers, each in their way—grandly hit it off.

It was an aggressive bit of diplomacy. MBS was using this Trump embrace as part of his own power play in the kingdom. And the Trump White House, ever denying this was the case, let him. In return, MBS offered a basket of deals and announcements that would coincide with a scheduled presidential visit to Saudi Arabia—Trump's first trip abroad. Trump would get a "win."

Planned before the Comey firing and Mueller hiring, the trip had State Department professionals alarmed. The itinerary—May 19 to May 27—was too long for any president, particularly such an untested and untutored one. (Trump himself, full of phobias about travel and unfamiliar locations, had been grumbling about the burdens of the trip.) But coming immediately after Comey and Mueller it was a get-out-of-Dodge godsend. There couldn't have been a better time to be making headlines far from Washington. A road trip could transform everything.

Almost the entire West Wing, along with State Department and National Security staff, was on board for the trip: Melania Trump, Ivanka Trump, Jared Kushner, Reince Priebus, Stephen Bannon, Gary Cohn, Dina Powell, Hope Hicks, Sean Spicer, Stephen Miller, Joe Hagin, Rex Tillerson, and Michael Anton. Also included were Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the deputy press secretary; Dan Scavino, the administration's social media director; Keith Schiller, the president's personal security adviser; and Wilbur Ross, the commerce secretary. (Ross was widely ridiculed for never missing an Air Force One opportunity—as Bannon put it, "Wilbur is Zelig, every time you turn around he's in a picture.") This trip and the robust American delegation was the antidote, and alternate universe to the Mueller appointment.

The president and his son-in-law could barely contain their confidence and enthusiasm. They felt certain that they had set out on the road to peace in the Middle East—and in this, they were much like a number of other administrations that had come before them.

Trump was effusive in his praise for Kushner. "Jared's gotten the Arabs totally on our side. Done deal," he assured one of his after-dinner callers before leaving on the trip. "It's going to be beautiful."

"He believed," said the caller, "that this trip could pull it out, like a twist in a bad movie."

* * *

On the empty roads of Riyadh, the presidential motorcade passed billboards with pictures of Trump and the Saudi king (MBS's eighty-one-year-old father) with the legend TOGETHER WE PREVAIL.

In part, the president's enthusiasm seemed to be born out of—or perhaps had caused—a substantial exaggeration of what had actually been agreed to during the negotiations ahead of the trip. In the days before his departure, he was telling people that the Saudis were going to finance an entirely new military presence in the kingdom, supplanting and even replacing the U.S. command headquarters in Qatar. And there would be "the biggest breakthrough in Israel-Palestine negotiations ever." It would be "*the* game changer, major like has never been seen."

In truth, his version of what would be accomplished was a quantum leap beyond what was actually agreed, but that did not seem to alter his feelings of zeal and delight.

The Saudis would immediately buy $110 billion's worth of American arms, and a total of $350 billion over ten years. "Hundreds of billions of dollars of investments into the United States and jobs, jobs, jobs," declared the president. Plus, the Americans and the Saudis would together "counter violent extremist messaging, disrupt financing of terrorism, and advance defense cooperation." And they would establish a center in Riyadh to fight extremism. And if this was not exactly peace in the Middle East, the president, according to the secretary of state, "feels like there's a moment in time here. The president's going to talk with Netanyahu about the process going forward. He's going to be talking to President Abbas about what he feels is necessary for the Palestinians to be successful."

It was all a Trumpian big deal. Meanwhile, the First Family—POTUS, FLOTUS, and Jared and Ivanka—were ferried around in gold golf carts, and the Saudis threw a $75 million party in Trump's honor, with Trump getting to sit on a thronelike chair. (The president, while receiving an honor from the Saudi king, appeared in a photograph to have bowed, arousing some right-wing ire.)

Fifty Arab and Muslim nations were summoned by the Saudis to pay the president court. The president called home to tell his friends how natural and easy this was, and how, inexplicably and suspiciously, Obama had messed it all up. There "has been a little strain, but there won't be strain with this administration," the president assured Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, the king of Bahrain.

Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the Egyptian strongman, ably stroked the president and said, "You are a unique personality that is capable of doing the impossible." (To Sisi, Trump replied, "Love your shoes. Boy, those shoes. Man. . . .")

It was, in dramatic ways, a shift in foreign policy attitude and strategy—and its effects were almost immediate. The president, ignoring if not defying foreign policy advice, gave a nod to the Saudis' plan to bully Qatar. Trump's view

was that Qatar was providing financial support to terror groups—pay no attention to a similar Saudi history. (Only *some* members of the Saudi royal family had provided such support, went the new reasoning.) Within weeks of the trip, MBS, detaining MBN quite in the dead of night, would force him to relinquish the Crown Prince title, which MBS would then assume for himself. Trump would tell friends that he and Jared had engineered this: "We've put our man on top!"

From Riyadh, the presidential party went on to Jerusalem, where the president met with Netanyahu and, in Bethlehem, with Abbas, expressing ever greater certainty that, in his third-person guise, "Trump will make peace." Then to Rome to meet the pope. Then to Brussels, where, in character, he meaningfully drew the line between Western-alliance-based foreign policy, which had been firmly in place since World War II, and the new America First ethos.

In Trump's view, all this should have been presidency-shaping stuff. He couldn't believe his dramatic accomplishments weren't getting bigger play. He was simply in denial, Bannon, Priebus, and others noted, about the continuing and competing Comey and Mueller headlines.

One of Trump's deficiencies—a constant in the campaign and, so far, in the presidency—was his uncertain grasp of cause and effect. Until now, whatever problems he might have caused in the past had reliably been supplanted by new events, giving him the confidence that one bad story can always be replaced by a better, more dramatic story. He could always change the conversation. The Saudi trip and his bold campaign to upend the old foreign policy world order should have accomplished exactly that. But the president continued to find himself trapped, incredulously on his part, by Comey and Mueller. Nothing seemed to move on from those two events.

After the Saudi leg of the trip, Bannon and Priebus, both exhausted by the trip's intense proximity to the president and his family, peeled off and headed back to Washington. It was now their job to deal with what had become, in the White House staff's absence, the actual, even ultimate, presidency-shaping crisis.

* * *

What did the people around Trump actually think of Trump? This was not just a reasonable question, it was the question those around Trump most asked themselves. They constantly struggled to figure out what they themselves actually thought and what they thought everybody else was truly thinking.

Mostly they kept their answers to themselves, but in the instance of Comey and Mueller, beyond all the usual dodging and weaving rationalizations, there really wasn't anybody, other than the president's family, who didn't very pointedly blame Trump himself.

This was the point at which an emperors-new-clothes threshold was crossed. Now you could, out loud, rather freely doubt his judgment, acumen, and, most of

all, the advice he was getting.

"He's not only crazy," declared Tom Barrack to a friend, "he's stupid."

But Bannon, along with Priebus, had strongly opposed the Comey firing, while Ivanka and Jared had not only supported it, but insisted on it. This seismic event prompted a new theme from Bannon, repeated by him widely, which was that every piece of advice from the couple was bad advice.

Nobody now believed that firing Comey was a good idea; even the president seemed sheepish. Hence, Bannon saw his new role as saving Trump—and Trump would always need saving. He might be a brilliant actor but he could not manage his own career.

And for Bannon, this new challenge brought a clear benefit: when Trump's fortune sank, Bannon's rose.

On the trip to the Middle East, Bannon went to work. He became focused on the figure of Lanny Davis, one of the Clinton impeachment lawyers who, for the better part of two years, became a near round-the-clock spokesperson and public defender of the Clinton White House. Bannon judged Comey-Mueller to be as threatening to the Trump White House as Monica Lewinsky and Ken Starr were to the Clinton White House, and he saw the model for escaping a mortal fate in the Clinton response.

"What the Clintons did was to go to the mattresses with amazing discipline," he explained. "They set up an outside shop and then Bill and Hillary never mentioned it again. They ground through it. Starr had them dead to rights and they got through it."

Bannon knew exactly what needed to be done: seal off the West Wing and build a separate legal and communications staff to defend the president. In this construct, the president would occupy a parallel reality, removed from and uninvolved with what would become an obvious partisan blood sport—as it had in the Clinton model. Politics would be relegated to its nasty corner, and Trump would conduct himself as the president and as the commander in chief.

"So we're going to do it," insisted Bannon, with *joie de guerre* and manic energy, "the way they did it. Separate war room, separate lawyers, separate spokespeople. It's keeping that fight over there so we can wage this other fight over here. Everybody gets this. Well, maybe not Trump so much. Not clear. Maybe a little. Not what he imagined."

Bannon, in great excitement, and Priebus, grateful for an excuse to leave the president's side, rushed back to the West Wing to begin to cordon it off.

It did not escape Priebus's notice that Bannon had in mind to create a rear guard of defenders—David Bossie, Corey Lewandowski, and Jason Miller, all of whom would be outside spokespeople—that would largely be loyal to him. Most of all, it did not escape Priebus that Bannon was asking the president to play a role entirely out of character: the cool, steady, long-suffering chief executive.

And it certainly didn't help that they were unable to hire a law firm with a top-notch white-collar government practice. By the time Bannon and Priebus were back in Washington, three blue-chip firms had said no. All of them were

afraid they would face a rebellion among the younger staff if they represented Trump, afraid Trump would publicly humiliate them if the going got tough, and afraid Trump would stiff them for the bill.

In the end, nine top firms turned them down.

# 18

## BANNON REDUX

Bannon was back, according to the Bannon faction. According to Bannon himself: "I'm good. I'm *good*. I'm back. I said don't do it. You don't fire the director of the FBI. The geniuses around here thought otherwise."

*Was Bannon back?* asked the worried other side of the house—Jared and Ivanka, Dina Powell, Gary Cohn, Hope Hicks, H. R. McMaster.

If he was back, that meant he had successfully defied the organizational premise of the Trump White House: the family would always prevail. Steve Bannon had, even in his internal exile, not stopped his running public verbal assault on Jared and Ivanka. Off the record became Bannon's effective on the record. These were bitter, sometimes hilarious, denunciations of the couple's acumen, intelligence, and motives: "They think they're defending him, but they are always defending themselves."

Now he declared they were finished as a power center—destroyed. And if not, they would destroy the president with their terrible and self-serving advice. Even worse than Jared was Ivanka. "She was a nonevent on the campaign. She became a White House staffer and that's when people suddenly realized she's 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. Once you expose that, you lose such credibility. Jared just kind of flits in and does the Arab stuff."

The folks on the Jarvanka side seemed more and more genuinely afraid of what might happen if they crossed the Bannon side. Because the Bannonites, they truly seemed to fear, were assassins.

On the flight to Riyadh, Dina Powell approached Bannon about a leak involving her to a right-wing news site. She told him she knew the leak had come from Julia Hahn, one of Bannon's people and a former Breitbart writer.

"You should take it up with her," said an amused Bannon. "But she's a beast. And she will come at you. Let me know how it works out."

Among Bannon's many regular targets, Powell had become a favorite. She was often billed as Deputy National Security Advisor; that was her sometime designation even in the *New York Times*. Actually, she was Deputy National Security Advisor *for Strategy*—the difference, Bannon pointed out, between the COO of a hotel chain and the concierge.

Coming back from the overseas trip, Powell began to talk in earnest to friends about her timetable to get out of the White House and back into a private-sector job. Sheryl Sandberg, she said, was her model.

"Oh my fucking god," said Bannon.

On May 26, the day before the presidential party returned from the overseas trip, the *Washington Post* reported that during the transition, Kushner and Sergey Kislyak, the Russian ambassador, had, at Kushner's instigation, discussed the possibility of having the Russians set up a private communications channel between the transition team and the Kremlin. The *Post* cited "U.S. officials briefed on intelligence reports." The Jarvanka side believed that Bannon was the source.

Part of the by now deep enmity between the First Family couple and their allies and Bannon and his team was the Jarvanka conviction that Bannon had played a part in many of the reports of Kushner's interactions with the Russians. This was not, in other words, merely an internal policy war; it was a death match. For Bannon to live, Kushner would have to be wholly discredited—pilloried, investigated, possibly even jailed.

Bannon, assured by everyone that there was no winning against the Trump family, hardly tried to hide his satisfied belief that he was going to outplay them. In the Oval Office, in front of her father, Bannon openly attacked her. "You," he said, pointing at her as the president watched, "are a fucking liar." Ivanka's bitter complaints to her father, which in the past had diminished Bannon, were now met by a hands-off Trump: "I told you this is a tough town, baby."

* * *

But if Bannon was back, it was far from clear what being back meant. Trump being Trump, was this true rehabilitation, or did he feel an even deeper rancor toward Bannon for having survived his initial intention to kill him? Nobody really thought Trump forgot—instead, he dwelled and ruminated and chewed. "One of the worst things is when he believes you've succeeded at his expense," explained Sam Nunberg, once on the inside of the Trump circle, then cast to the outside. "If your win is in any way perceived as his loss, phew."

For his part, Bannon believed he was back because, at a pivotal moment, his advice had proved vastly better than that of the "geniuses." Firing Comey, the solve-all-problems Jarvanka solution, had indeed unleashed a set of terrible consequences.

The Jarvanka side believed that Bannon was in essence blackmailing the president. As Bannon went, so went the virulence of right-wing digital media. Despite his apparent obsession with the "fake news" put out by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and CNN, for the president the threat of fake news was actually greater on the right. Though he would never call out fake news on Fox, Breitbart, and the others, these outlets—which could conceivably spew a catchall of conspiracies in which a weak Trump sold out to a powerful

establishment—were potentially far more dangerous than their counterparts on the left.

Bannon, too, was seen to be rectifying an earlier bureaucratic mistake. Where initially he had been content to be the brains of the operation—confident that he was vastly smarter than everybody else (and, indeed, few tried to challenge him for that title)—and not staff up, now he was putting his organization and loyalists firmly in place. His off-balance-sheet communications staff—Bossie, Lewandowski, Jason Miller, Sam Nunberg (even though he had long fallen out with Trump himself), and Alexandra Preate—formed quite a private army of leakers and defenders. What's more, whatever breach there had been between Bannon and Priebus came smoothly together over their mutual loathing of Jared and Ivanka. The professional White House was united against the amateur family White House.

Adding to Bannon's new bureaucratic advantage, he had maximum influence on the staffing of the new firewall team, the lawyers and comm staff who would collectively become the Lanny Davis of the Trump defense. Unable to hire prestige talent, Bannon turned to one of the president's longtime hit-man lawyers, Marc Kasowitz. Bannon had previously bonded with Kasowitz when the attorney had handled a series of near-death problems on the campaign, including dealing with a vast number of allegations and legal threats from an ever growing list of women accusing Trump of molesting and harassing them.

On May 31, the Bannon firewall plan went into effect. Henceforth, all discussion related to Russia, the Mueller and congressional investigations, and other personal legal issues would be entirely handled by the Kasowitz team. The president, as Bannon described the plan in private and as he urged his boss, would no longer be addressing any of these areas. Among the many, many efforts to force Trump into presidential mode, this was the latest.

Bannon then installed Mark Corallo, a former Karl Rove communications staffer, as the firewall spokesperson. He was also planning to put in Bossie and Lewandowski as part of the crisis management team. And at Bannon's prompting, Kasowitz attempted to further insulate the president by giving his client a central piece of advice: send the kids home.

Bannon was indeed back. It was his team. It was his wall around the president—one that he hoped would keep Jarvanka out.

Bannon's formal moment of being back was marked by a major milestone. On June 1, after a long and bitter internal debate, the president announced that he had decided to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement. For Bannon, it was a deeply satisfying slap in the face of liberal rectitude—Elon Musk and Bob Iger immediately resigned from Trump's business council—and confirmation of Trump's true Bannonite instincts.

It was, likewise, the move that Ivanka Trump had campaigned hardest against in the White House.

"Score," said Bannon. "The bitch is dead."

* * *

There are few modern political variables more disruptive than a dedicated prosecutor. It's the ultimate wild card.

A prosecutor means that the issue under investigation—or, invariably, cascading issues—will be a constant media focus. Setting their own public stage, prosecutors are certain leakers.

It means that everybody in a widening circle has to hire a lawyer. Even tangential involvement can cost six figures; central involvement quickly rises into the millions.

By early summer, there was already an intense seller's market in Washington for top criminal legal talent. As the Mueller investigation got under way, White House staffers made a panicky rush to get the best firm before someone else got there first and created a conflict.

"Can't talk about Russia, nothing, can't go there," said Katie Walsh, now three months removed from the White House, on advice of her new counsel.

Any interviews or depositions given to investigators risked putting you in jeopardy. What's more, every day in the White House brought new dangers: any random meeting you might find yourself in exposed you more.

Bannon kept insisting on the absolute importance of this point—and for him the strategic importance. If you didn't want to find yourself getting wrung out in front of Congress, your career and your net worth in jeopardy, be careful who you spoke to. More to the point: you must not under any circumstances speak to Jared and Ivanka, who were now Russia toxic. It was Bannon's widely advertised virtue and advantage: "I've never been to Russia. I don't know anybody from Russia. I've never spoken to any Russians. And I'd just as well not speak to anyone who has."

Bannon observed a hapless Pence in a lot of "wrong meetings," and helped to bring in the Republican operative Nick Ayers as Pence's chief of staff, and to get "our fallback guy" out of the White House and "running around the world and looking like a vice president."

And beyond the immediate fears and disruption, there was the virtually certain outcome that a special prosecutor delegated to find a crime would find one—likely many. Everybody became a potential agent of implicating others. Dominos would fall. Targets would flip.

Paul Manafort, making a good living in international financial gray areas, his risk calculation based on the long-shot odds that an under-the-radar privateer would ever receive close scrutiny, would now be subjected to microscopic review. His nemesis, Oleg Deripaska—still pursuing his $17 million claim against Manafort and himself looking for favorable treatment from federal authorities who had restricted his travel to the United States—was continuing his own deep investigation into Manafort's Russian and Ukrainian business affairs.

Tom Barrack, privy to the president's stream of consciousness as well as his financial history, was suddenly taking stock of his own exposure. Indeed, all the

billionaire friends with whom Trump got on the phone and gossiped and rambled were potential witnesses.

In the past, administrations forced to deal with a special prosecutor appointed to investigate and prosecute matters with which the president might have been involved usually became consumed by the effort to cope. Their tenure broke into "before" and "after" periods—with the "after" period hopelessly bogged down in the soap opera of G-man pursuit. Now it looked like the "after" period would be almost the entirety of the Trump administration.

The idea of formal collusion and artful conspiracy—as media and Democrats more or less breathlessly believed or hoped had happened between Trump and the Russians—seemed unlikely to everybody in the White House. (Bannon's comment that the Trump campaign was not organized enough to collude with its own state organizations became everybody's favorite talking point—not least because it was true.) But nobody was vouching for the side deals and freelance operations and otherwise nothing-burger stuff that was a prosecutor's daily bread and the likely detritus of the Trump hangers-on. And everybody believed that if the investigation moved into the long chain of Trump financial transactions, it would almost certainly reach the Trump family and the Trump White House.

And then there was the president's insistent claim that he could do something. *I can fire him*, he would say. Indeed, it was another of his repetitive loops: I can fire him. I *can* fire him. Mueller. The idea of a showdown in which the stronger, more determined, more intransigent, more damn-the-consequences man prevails was central to Trump's own personal mythology. He lived in a mano a mano world, one in which if your own respectability and sense of personal dignity were not a paramount issue—if you weren't weak in the sense of needing to seem like a reasonable and respectable person—you had a terrific advantage. And if you made it personal, if you believed that when the fight really mattered that it was kill or be killed, you were unlikely to meet someone willing to make it as personal as you were.

This was Bannon's fundamental insight about Trump: he made *everything* personal, and he was helpless not to.

* * *

Dissuaded by everyone from focusing his anger on Mueller (at least for now), the president focused on Sessions.

Sessions—"Beauregard"—was a close Bannon ally, and in May and June the president's almost daily digs against the attorney general—beyond even his loyalty and resolve, Trump issued scathing criticism of his stature, voice, and dress—provided a sudden bit of good news for the anti-Bannon side of the house. Bannon, they reasoned, couldn't really be on top if his key proxy was now being blamed for everything bad in Trump's life. As always, Trump's regard or scorn was infectious. If you were in favor, then whatever and whomever he associated with you was also in favor. If you weren't, then everything associated

with you was poisonous.

The brutality of Trump's dissatisfaction kept increasing. A small man with a Mr. Magoo stature and an old-fashioned Southern accent, Sessions was bitterly mocked by the president, who drew a corrosive portrait of physical and mental weakness. Insult trauma radiated out of the Oval Office. You could hear it when passing by.

Bannon's efforts to talk the president down—reminding Trump of the difficulties they would encounter during another attorney general confirmation, the importance of Sessions to the hard conservative base, the loyalty that Sessions had shown during the Trump campaign—backfired. To the anti-Bannon side's satisfaction, they resulted in another round of Trump's dissing Bannon.

The attack on Sessions now became, at least in the president's mind, the opening salvo in an active effort to replace Sessions as attorney general. But there were only two candidates to run the Justice Department from whom Trump believed he could extract absolute loyalty, Chris Christie and Rudy Giuliani. He believed they would both perform kamikaze acts for him—just as everyone else knew they would almost certainly never be confirmed.

* * *

As James Comey's testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee approached—it would take place on June 8, twelve days after the presidential traveling party returned home from the long trip to the Middle East and Europe—there began among senior staffers an almost open inquiry into Trump's motives and state of mind.

This seemed spurred by an obvious question: Why hadn't he fired Comey during his first days of office, when it would likely have been seen as a natural changing of the guard with no clear connection to the Russian investigation? There were many equivocal answers: general disorganization, the fast pace of events, and a genuine sense of innocence and naïveté about the Russian charges. But now there seemed to be a new understanding: Donald Trump believed he had vastly more power, authority, and control than in fact he had, and he believed his talent for manipulating people and bending and dominating them was vastly greater than it was. Pushing this line of reasoning just a little further: senior staff believed the president had a problem with reality, and reality was now overwhelming him.

If true, this notion directly contravened the basic premise of the support for Trump among his staff. In some sense, not too closely questioned, they believed he had almost magical powers. Since his success was not explainable, he must have talents beyond what they could fathom. His instincts. Or his salesman's gifts. Or his energy. Or just the fact that he was the opposite of what he was supposed to be. This was out-of-the-ordinary politics—shock-to-the-system politics—but it could work.

But what if it didn't? What if they were all profoundly wrong?

Comey's firing and the Mueller investigation prompted a delayed reckoning

that ended months of willing suspension of disbelief. These sudden doubts and considerations—at the highest level of government—did not quite yet go to the president's ability to adequately function in his job. But they did, arguably for the first time in open discussions, go to the view that he was hopelessly prone to self-sabotaging his ability to function in the job. This insight, scary as it was, at least left open the possibility that if all the elements of self-sabotage were carefully controlled—his information, his contacts, his public remarks, and the sense of danger and threat to him—he might yet be able to pull it together and successfully perform.

Quite suddenly, this became the prevailing view of the Trump presidency and the opportunity that still beckoned: you can be saved by those around you or brought down by them.

Bannon believed the Trump presidency would fail in some more or less apocalyptic fashion if Kushner and his wife remained Trump's most influential advisers. Their lack of political or real-world experience had already hobbled the presidency, but since the Comey disaster it was getting worse: as Bannon saw it, they were now acting out of personal panic.

The Kushner side believed that Bannon or Bannonism had pushed the president into a harshness that undermined his natural salesman's abilities to charm and reach out. Bannon and his ilk had made him the monster he more and more seemed to be.

Meanwhile, virtually everybody believed that a large measure of the fault lay in Reince Priebus, who had failed to create a White House that could protect the president from himself—or from Bannon or from his own children. At the same time, believing that the fundamental problem lay in Priebus was easy scapegoating, not to mention little short of risible: with so little power, the chief of staff simply wasn't capable of directing either Trump or those around him. Priebus himself could, not too helpfully, argue only that no one had any idea how much worse all this would have been without his long-suffering mediation among the president's relatives, his Svengali, and Trump's own terrible instincts. There might be two or three debacles a day, but without Priebus's stoic resolve, and the Trump blows that he absorbed, there might have been a dozen more.

* * *

On June 8, from a little after ten in the morning to nearly one in the afternoon, James Comey testified in public before the Senate Intelligence Committee. The former FBI director's testimony, quite a tour de force of directness, moral standing, personal honor, and damning details, left the country with a simple message: the president was likely a fool and certainly a liar. In the age of modern media politesse, few presidents had been so directly challenged and impugned before Congress.

Here it was, stark in Comey's telling: the president regarded the FBI director as working directly for him, of owing his job to him, and now he wanted something back. "My common sense," said Comey, "again, I could be wrong, but

my common sense told me what's going on here is he's looking to get something in exchange for granting my request to stay in the job."

In Comey's telling, the president wanted the FBI to lay off Michael Flynn. And he wanted to stop the FBI from pursuing its Russia-related investigation. The point could hardly have been clearer: if the president was pressuring the director because he feared that an investigation of Michael Flynn would damage him, then this was an obstruction of justice.

The contrast between the two men, Comey and Trump, was in essence the contrast between good government and Trump himself. Comey came across as precise, compartmentalized, scrupulous in his presentation of the details of what transpired and the nature of his responsibility—he was as by-the-book as it gets. Trump, in the portrait offered by Comey, was shady, shoot-from-the-hip, heedless or even unaware of the rules, deceptive, and in it for himself.

After the hearing ended, the president told everybody he had not watched it, but everybody knew he had. To the extent that this was, as Trump saw it, a contest between the two men, it was as direct a juxtaposition as might be imagined. The entire point of the Comey testimony was to recast and contradict what the president had said in his angry and defensive tweets and statements, and to cast suspicion on his actions and motives—and to suggest that the president's intention was to suborn the director of the FBI.

Even among Trump loyalists who believed, as Trump did, that Comey was a phony and this was all a put-up job, the nearly universal feeling was that in this mortal game, Trump was quite defenseless.

* * *

Five days later, on June 13, it was Jeff Sessions's turn to testify before the Senate Intelligence Committee. His task was to try to explain the contacts he had had with the Russian ambassador, contacts that had later caused him to recuse himself—and made him the president's punching bag. Unlike Comey, who had been invited to the Senate to show off his virtue—and had seized the opportunity—Sessions had been invited to defend his equivocation, deception, or stupidity.

In an often testy exchange, the attorney general provided a squirrelly view of executive privilege. Though the president had not in fact evoked executive privilege, Sessions deemed it appropriate to try to protect it anyway.

Bannon, watching the testimony from the West Wing, quickly became frustrated. "Come on, Beauregard," he said.

Unshaven, Bannon sat at the head of the long wooden conference table in the chief of staff's office and focused intently on the flat-screen monitor across the room.

"They thought the cosmopolitans would like it if we fired Comey," he said, with "they" being Jared and Ivanka. "The cosmopolitans would be cheering for us for taking down the man who took Hillary down." Where the president saw Sessions as the cause of the Comey fiasco, Bannon saw Sessions as a victim of

it.

A sylphlike Kushner, wearing a skinny gray suit and skinny black tie, slipped into the room. (Recently making the rounds was a joke about Kushner being the best-dressed man in Washington, which is quite the opposite of a compliment.) On occasion the power struggle between Bannon and Kushner seemed to take physical form. Bannon's demeanor rarely changed, but Kushner could be petulant, condescending, and dismissive—or, as he was now, hesitating, abashed, and respectful.

Bannon ignored Kushner until the younger man cleared his throat. "How's it going?"

Bannon indicated the television set: as in, *Watch for yourself*.

Finally Bannon spoke. "They don't realize this is about institutions, not people."

"They" would appear to be the Jarvanka side—or an even broader construct referring to all those who mindlessly stood with Trump.

"This town is about institutions," Bannon continued. "We fire the FBI director and we fire the whole FBI. Trump is a man against institutions, and the institutions know it. How do you think that goes down?"

This was shorthand for a favorite Bannon riff: In the course of the campaign, Donald Trump had threatened virtually every institution in American political life. He was a clown-prince version of Jimmy Stewart in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. Trump believed, offering catnip to deep American ire and resentment, that one man could be bigger than the system. This analysis presupposed that the institutions of political life were as responsive as those in the commercial life that Trump was from—and that they yearned to meet the market and find the Zeitgeist. But what if these institutions—the media, the judiciary, the intelligence community, the greater executive branch itself, and the "swamp" with its law firms, consultants, influence peddlers, and leakers—were in no way eager to adapt? If, by their nature, they were determined to endure, then this accidental president was up against it.

Kushner seemed unpersuaded. "I wouldn't put it like that," he said.

"I think that's the lesson of the first hundred days that some people around here have learned," said Bannon, ignoring Kushner. "It's not going to get better. This is what it's like."

"I don't know," said Kushner.

"Know it," said Bannon.

"I think Sessions is doing okay," said Kushner. "Don't you?"

# 19

## MIKA WHO?

The media had unlocked the value of Donald Trump, but few in the media had unlocked it more directly and personally than Joe Scarborough and Mika Brzezinski. Their MSNBC breakfast show was an ongoing soap-opera-ish or possibly Oprahesque drama about their relationship with Trump—how he had disappointed them, how far they had come from their original regard for him, and how much and how pathetically he regularly embarrassed himself. The bond he once had with them, forged through mutual celebrity and a shared proprietary sense of politics (Scarborough, the former congressman, seemed to feel that he ought reasonably to be president as much as Donald Trump felt he should be), had distinguished the show during the campaign; now its public fraying became part of the daily news cycle. Scarborough and Brzezinski lectured him, channeled the concerns of his friends and family, upbraided him, and openly worried about him—that he was getting the wrong advice (Bannon) and, too, that his mental powers were slipping. They also staked a claim at representing the reasonable center-right alternative to the president, and indeed were quite a good barometer of both the center-right's efforts to deal with him and its day-to-day difficulties of living with him.

Trump, believing he had been used and abused by Scarborough and Brzezinski, claimed he'd stopped watching the show. But Hope Hicks, every morning, quaking, had to recount it for him.

*Morning Joe* was a ground-zero study in the way the media had over-invested in Trump. He was the whale against which media emotions, self-regard, ego, *joie de guerre*, career advancement, and desire to be at the center of the story, too, all churned in nearly ecstatic obsession. In reverse regard, the media was the same whale, serving the same function, for Trump.

To this Trump added another tic, a lifelong sense that people were constantly taking unfair advantage of him. This perhaps came from his father's cheapness and lack of generosity, or from his own overawareness of being a rich kid (and, no doubt, his insecurities about this), or from a negotiator's profound understanding that it is never win-win, that where there is profit there is loss. Trump simply could not abide the knowledge that somebody was getting a leg up at his expense. His was a zero-sum ecosystem. In the world of Trump, anything that he deemed of value either accrued to him or had been robbed from him.

Scarborough and Brzezinski had taken their relationship with Trump and amply monetized it, while putting no percentage in his pocket—and in this instance, he judged his commission should be slavishly favorable treatment. To say this drove him mad would be an understatement. He dwelled and fixated on the perceived injustice. *Don't mention Joe or Mika to him* was a standing proscription.

His wounded feelings and incomprehension at the failure of people whose embrace he sought to, in return, embrace him was "deep, crazy deep," said his former aide Sam Nunberg, who had run afoul of his need for 100 percent approbation and his bitter suspicion of being profited from.

* * *

Out of this accumulated rage came his June 29 tweet about Mika Brzezinski.

It was classic Trump: there was no mediation between off-the-record language and the public statement. Referring to "low I.Q. Crazy Mika" in one tweet, he wrote in another that she was "bleeding badly from a facelift" when she and Scarborough visited Trump at Mar-a-Lago on the previous New Year's Eve. Many of his tweets were not, as they might seem, spontaneous utterances, but constant ones. Trump's rifts often began as insult comedy and solidified as bitter accusations and then, in an uncontainable moment, became an official proclamation.

The next step, in his tweet paradigm, was universal liberal opprobrium. Almost a week of social media fury, cable breast-beating, and front-page condemnation followed his tweet about Brzezinski. That was accompanied by the other part of the Trump tweet dynamic: by unifying liberal opinion against him, he unified its opposite for him.

In truth, he was often neither fully aware of the nature of what he had said nor fully cognizant of why there should be such a passionate reaction to it. As often as not, he surprised himself. "What did I say?" he would ask after getting severe blowback.

He wasn't serving up these insults for effect—well, not entirely. And his behavior wasn't carefully calculated; it was tit for tat, and he likely would have said what he'd said even if no one was left standing with him. (This very lack of calculation, this inability to be political, was part of his political charm.) It was just his good luck that the Trumpian 35 percent—that standing percentage of people who, according to most polls, seemed to support him no matter what (who would, in his estimation, let him get away with shooting someone on Fifth Avenue)—was largely unfazed and maybe even buoyed by every new expression of Trumpness.

Now, having expressed himself and gotten in the last word, Trump was cheery again.

"Mika and Joe totally love this. It's big ratings for them," said the president, with certain satisfaction and obvious truth.

* * *

Ten days later, a large table of Bannonites was having dinner at the Bombay Club, a high-end Indian restaurant two blocks from the White House. One of the group—Arthur Schwartz, a PR consultant—asked a question about the Mika and Joe affair.

Perhaps it was the noise, but it was also a fitting measure of the speed of events in the Trump era: Bannon lieutenant Alexandra Preate replied, with genuine fogginess, "Who?"

The operetta of the Mika tweets—the uncouthness and verbal abuse demonstrated by the president, his serious lack of control and judgment, and the worldwide censure heaped upon him for it—had already far receded, wholly overshadowed by more Trump eruptions and controversy.

But before moving on to the next episode of ohmygodness, it is worth considering the possibility that this constant, daily, often more than once-a-day, pileup of events—each one canceling out the one before—is the true aberration and novelty at the heart of the Trump presidency.

Perhaps never before in history—not through world wars, the overthrow of empires, periods of extraordinary social transformation, or episodes of government-shaking scandal—have real-life events unfolded with such emotional and plot-thickening impact. In the fashion of binge-watching a television show, one's real life became quite secondary to the public drama. It was not unreasonable to say *Whoa, wait just a minute: public life doesn't happen like this*. Public life in fact lacks coherence and drama. (History, by contrast, attains coherence and drama only in hindsight.)

The process of accomplishing the smallest set of tasks within the sprawling and resistant executive branch is a turtle process. The burden of the White House is the boredom of bureaucracy. All White Houses struggle to rise above that, and they succeed only on occasion. In the age of hypermedia, this has not gotten easier for the White House, it's gotten harder.

It's a distracted nation, fragmented and preoccupied. It was, arguably, the peculiar tragedy of Barack Obama that even as a transformational figure—and inspirational communicator—he couldn't really command much interest. As well, it might be a central tragedy of the news media that its old-fashioned and even benighted civic-minded belief that politics is the highest form of news has helped transform it from a mass business to a narrow-cast one. Alas, politics itself has more and more become a discrete business. Its appeal is B-to-B—business-to-business. The real swamp is the swamp of insular, inbred, incestuous interests. This isn't corruption so much as overspecialization. It's a wonk's life. Politics has gone one way, the culture another. The left-right junkies might pretend otherwise, but the great middle doesn't put political concerns at the top of their minds.

And yet, contravening all cultural and media logic, Donald Trump produced on a daily basis an astonishing, can't-stop-following-it narrative. And this was not

even because he was changing or upsetting the fundamentals of American life. In six months as president, failing to master almost any aspect of the bureaucratic process, he had, beyond placing his nominee on the Supreme Court, accomplished, practically speaking, nothing. And yet, *OMG!!!* There almost was no other story in America—and in much of the world. That was the radical and transformational nature of the Trump presidency: it held everybody's attention.

Inside the White House, the daily brouhaha and world's fascination was no cause for joy. It was, in the White House staff's bitter view, the media that turned every day into a climactic, dastardly moment. And, in a sense, this was correct: every development cannot be climactic. The fact that yesterday's climax would soon, compared to the next climax, be piddling, rather bore out the disproportion. The media was failing to judge the relative importance of Trump events: most Trump events came to naught (arguably all of them did), and yet all were greeted with equal shock and horror. The White House staff believed that the media's Trump coverage lacked "context"—by this, they meant that people ought to realize that Trump was mostly just huffing and puffing.

At the same time, few in the White House did not assign blame to Trump for this as well. He seemed to lack the most basic understanding that a president's words and actions would, necessarily, be magnified to the nth power. In some convenient sense, he failed to understand this because he wanted the attention, no matter how often it disappointed him. But he also wanted it because again and again the response surprised him—and, as though every time was the first time, he could not modify his behavior.

Sean Spicer caught the brunt of the daily drama, turning this otherwise reasonable, mild-mannered, process-oriented professional into a joke figure standing at the White House door. In his daily out-of-body experience, as a witness to his own humiliation and loss for words, Spicer understood after a while—although he began to understand this beginning his first day on the job when dealing with the dispute about the inaugural audience numbers—that he had "gone down a rabbit hole." In this disorienting place, all public artifice, pretense, proportion, savvy, and self-awareness had been cast off, or—possibly another result of Trump never really intending to be president—never really figured into the state of being president.

On the other hand, constant hysteria did have one unintended political virtue. If every new event canceled out every other event, like some wacky news-cycle pyramid scheme, then you always survived another day.

* * *

Donald Trump's sons, Don Jr., thirty-nine, and Eric, thirty-three, existed in an enforced infantile relationship to their father, a role that embarrassed them, but one that they also professionally embraced. The role was to be Donald Trump's heirs and attendees. Their father took some regular pleasure in pointing out that they were in the back of the room when God handed out brains—but, then again, Trump tended to scorn anyone who might be smarter than he

was. Their sister Ivanka, certainly no native genius, was the designated family smart person, her husband Jared the family's smooth operator. That left Don and Eric to errands and admin. In fact, the brothers had grown into reasonably competent family-owned-company executives (this is not saying all that much) because their father had little or no patience for actually running his company. Of course, quite a good amount of their professional time was spent on the whims, projects, promotions, and general way of life of DJT.

One benefit of their father's run for president was that it kept him away from the office. Still, the campaign's administration was largely their responsibility, so when the campaign went from caprice to a serious development in the Trump business and family, it caused a disruption in the family dynamic. Other people were suddenly eager to be Donald Trump's key lieutenants. There were the outsiders, like Corey Lewandowski, the campaign manager, but there was also the insider, brother-in-law Jared. Trump, not unusually for a family-run company, made everybody compete for his favor. The company was about him; it existed because of his name, personality, and charisma, so the highest standing in the company was reserved for those who could best serve him. There wasn't all that much competition for this role before he ran for president, but in early 2016, with the Republican Party collapsing and Trump rising, his sons faced a new professional and family situation.

Their brother-In-law had been slowly drawn into the campaign, partly at his wife's urging because her father's lack of constraint might actually affect the Trump business if they didn't keep an eye on him. And then he, with his brothers-in-law, was pulled in by the excitement of the campaign itself. By late spring 2016, when the nomination was all but clinched, the Trump campaign was a set of competing power centers with the knives out.

Lewandowski regarded both brothers and their brother-in-law with rolling-on-the-floor contempt: not only were Don Jr. and Eric stupid, and Jared somehow both supercilious and obsequious (the butler), but nobody knew a whit about politics—indeed, there wasn't an hour of political experience among them.

As time went on, Lewandowski became particularly close to the candidate. To the family, especially to Kushner, Lewandowski was an enabler. Trump's worst instincts flowed through Lewandowski. In early June, a little more than a month before the Republican National Convention, Jared and Ivanka decided that what was needed—for the sake of the campaign, for the sake of the Trump business—was an intervention.

Making common cause with Don Jr. and Eric, Jared and Ivanka pushed for a united front to convince Trump to oust Lewandowski. Don Jr., feeling squeezed not only by Lewandowski but by Jared, too, seized the opportunity. He would push out Lewandowski and become his replacement—and indeed, eleven days later Lewandowski would be gone.

All this was part of the background to one of the most preposterous meetings in modern politics. On June 9, 2016, Don Jr., Jared, and Paul Manafort met with a movieworthy cast of dubious characters in Trump Tower after having

been promised damaging information about Hillary Clinton. Don Jr., encouraged by Jared and Ivanka, was trying to impress his father that he had the stuff to rise in the campaign.

When this meeting became public thirteen months later, it would, for the Trump White House, encapsulate both the case against collusion with the Russians and the case for it. It was a case, or the lack of one, not of masterminds and subterfuge, but of senseless and benighted people so guileless and unconcerned that they enthusiastically colluded in plain sight.

* * *

Walking into Trump Tower that June day were a well-connected lawyer from Moscow, who was a likely Russian agent; associates of the Azerbaijani Russian oligarch Aras Agalarov; a U.S. music promoter who managed Agalarov's son, a Russian pop star; and a Russian government lobbyist in Washington. Their purpose in visiting the campaign headquarters of a presumptive major party nominee for president of the United States was to meet with three of the most highly placed people on the campaign. This meeting was preceded by an email chain addressed to multiple recipients inside the Trump campaign of almost joyful intent: the Russians were offering a dump of negative or even incriminating information about their opponent.

Among the why-and-how theories of this imbecilic meeting:

- The Russians, in organized or freelance fashion, were trying to entrap the Trump campaign into a compromising relationship.
- The meeting was part of an already active cooperation on the part of the Trump campaign with the Russians to obtain and distribute damaging information about Hillary Clinton—and, indeed, within days of the Don Jr. meeting, WikiLeaks announced that it had obtained Clinton emails. Less than a month later, it started to release them.
- The wide-eyed Trump campaign, largely still playacting at running for president—and with no thought whatsoever of actually winning the election—was open to any and all entreaties and offers, because it had nothing to lose. Dopey Don Jr. (Fredo, as Steve Bannon would dub him, in one of his frequent *Godfather* borrowings) was simply trying to prove he was a player and a go-to guy.
- The meeting included the campaign chairman, Paul Manafort, and the campaign's most influential voice, Jared Kushner, because: (a) a high-level conspiracy was being coordinated; (b) Manafort and Kushner, not taking the campaign very seriously, and without a thought of any consequence here, were merely entertained by the possibility of dirty tricks; (c) the three men were united in their plan to get rid of Lewandowski—with Don Jr. as the hatchet man—and, as part of this unity, Manafort and Kushner need to show up at Don Jr.'s silly meeting.

Whatever the reason for the meeting, no matter which of the above scenarios most accurately describes how this comical and alarming group came together, a year later, practically nobody doubted that Don Jr. would have wanted his father to know that he seized the initiative.

"The chance that Don Jr. did not walk these jumos up to his father's office on the twenty-sixth floor is zero," said an astonished and derisive Bannon, not long after the meeting was revealed.

"The three senior guys in the campaign," an incredulous Bannon went on, "thought it was a good idea to meet with a foreign government inside Trump Tower in the conference room on the twenty-fifth floor—with no lawyers. *They didn't have any lawyers*. Even if you thought that this was not treasonous, or unpatriotic, or bad shit, and I happen to think it's all of that, you should have called the FBI immediately. Even if you didn't think to do that, and you're totally amoral, and you wanted that information, you do it in a Holiday Inn in Manchester, New Hampshire, with your lawyers who meet with these people and go through everything and then they verbally come and tell another lawyer in a cut-out, and if you've got something, then you figure out how to dump it down to Breitbart or something like that, or maybe some other more legitimate publication. You never see it, you never know it, because you don't need to. . . . But that's the brain trust that they had."

All of the participants would ultimately plead that the meeting was utterly inconsequential, whatever the hope for it might have been, and admit that it was hapless. But even if that was true, a year later the revelation of the meeting had three profound and probably transformational effects:

First, the constant, ever repeated denials about there having been no discussion between campaign officials and the Russians connected to the Kremlin about the campaign, and, indeed, no meaningful contact between campaign officials and the Russian government, were exploded.

Second, the certainty among the White House staff that Trump himself would have not only been apprised of the details of this meeting, but have met the principals, meant that the president was caught out as a liar by those whose trust he most needed. It was another inflection point between hunkered-in-the-bunker and signed-on-for-the-wild-ride, and get-me-out-of-here.

Third, it was now starkly clear that everyone's interests diverged. The fortunes of Don Jr., Paul Manafort, and Jared Kushner hung individually in the balance. Indeed, the best guess by many in the West Wing was that the details of the meeting had been leaked by the Kushner side, thus sacrificing Don Jr. in an attempt to deflect responsibility away from themselves.

* * *

Even before word of the June 2016 meeting leaked out, Kushner's legal team—largely assembled in a rush since the appointment of Mueller, the special counsel—had been piecing together a forensic picture of both the campaign's Russian contacts and Kushner Companies' finances and money trail. In January, ignoring

almost everybody's caution against it, Jared Kushner had entered the White House as a senior figure in the administration; now, six months later, he faced acute legal jeopardy. He had tried to keep a low profile, seeing himself as a behind-the-scenes counselor, but now his public position was not only endangering himself but the future of his family's business. As long as he remained exposed, his family was effectively blocked from most financial sources. Without access to this market, their holdings risked becoming distress debt situations.

Jared and Ivanka's self-created fantasylike life—two ambitious, well-mannered, well-liked young people living at the top of New York's social and financial world after having, in their version of humble fashion, accepted global power—had now, even with neither husband nor wife in office long enough to have taken any real action at all, come to the precipice of disgrace.

Jail was possible. So was bankruptcy. Trump may have been talking defiantly about offering pardons, or bragging about his power to give them, but that did not solve Kushner's business problems, nor did it provide a way to mollify Charlie Kushner, Jared's choleric and often irrational father. What's more, successfully navigating through the eye of the legal needle would require a careful touch and nuanced strategic approach on the part of the president—quite an unlikely development.

Meanwhile, the couple blamed everyone else in the White House. They blamed Priebus for the disarray that had produced a warlike atmosphere that propelled constant and damaging leaks, they blamed Bannon for leaking, and they blamed Spicer for poorly defending their virtue and interests.

They *needed* to defend themselves. One strategy was to get out of town (Bannon had a list of all the tense moments when the couple had taken a convenient holiday), and it happened that Trump would be attending the G20 summit Hamburg, Germany, on July 7 and 8. Jared and Ivanka accompanied the president on the trip, and while at the summit they learned that word of Don Jr.'s meeting with the Russians—and the couple kept pointedly presenting it as Don Jr.'s meeting—had leaked. Worse, they learned that the story was about to break in the *New York Times*.

Originally, Trump's staff was expecting details of the Don Jr. meeting to break on the website *Circa*. The lawyers, and spokesperson Mark Corallo, had been working to manage this news. But while in Hamburg, the president's staff learned that the *Times* was developing a story that had far more details about the meeting—quite possibly supplied by the Kushner side—which it would publish on Saturday, July 8. Advance knowledge of this article was kept from the president's legal team for the ostensible reason that it didn't involve the president.

In Hamburg, Ivanka, knowing the news would shortly get out, was presenting her signature effort: a World Bank fund to aid women entrepreneurs in developing countries. This was another instance of what White House staffers saw as the couple's extraordinarily off-message direction. Nowhere in the

Trump campaign, nowhere on Bannon's white boards, nowhere in the heart of this president was there an interest in women entrepreneurs in developing countries. The daughter's agenda was singularly at odds with the father's—or at least the agenda that had elected him. Ivanka, in the view of almost every White House staffer, profoundly misunderstood the nature of her job and had converted traditional First Lady noblesse oblige efforts into White House staff work.

Shortly before boarding Air Force One for the return trip home, Ivanka—with what by now was starting to seem like an almost anarchic tone deafness—sat in for her father between Chinese president Xi Jinping and British prime minister Theresa May at the main G20 conference table. But this was mere distraction: as the president and his team huddled on the plane, the central subject was not the conference, it was how to respond to the *Times* story about Don Jr.'s and Jared's Trump Tower meeting, now only hours away from breaking.

En route to Washington, Sean Spicer and everybody else from the communications office was relegated to the back of the plane and excluded from the panicky discussions. Hope Hicks became the senior communications strategist, with the president, as always, her singular client. In the days following, that highest political state of being "in the room" was turned on its head. *Not* being in the room—in this case, the forward cabin on Air Force One—became an exalted status and get-out-of-jail-free card. "It used to hurt my feelings when I saw them running around doing things that were my job," said Spicer. "Now I'm glad to be out of the loop."

Included in the discussion on the plane were the president, Hicks, Jared and Ivanka, and their spokesperson, Josh Raffel. Ivanka, according to the later recollection of her team, would shortly leave the meeting, take a pill, and go to sleep. Jared, in the telling of his team, might have been there, but he was "not taking a pencil to anything." Nearby, in a small conference room watching the movie *Fargo*, were Dina Powell, Gary Cohn, Stephen Miller, and H. R. McMaster, all of whom would later insist that they were, however physically close to the unfolding crisis, removed from it. And, indeed, anyone "in the room" was caught in a moment that would shortly receive the special counsel's close scrutiny, with the relevant question being whether one or more federal employees had induced other federal employees to lie.

An aggrieved, unyielding, and threatening president dominated the discussion, pushing into line his daughter and her husband, Hicks, and Raffel. Kasowitz—the lawyer whose specific job was to keep Trump at arm's length from Russian-related matters—was kept on hold on the phone for an hour and then not put through. The president insisted that the meeting in Trump Tower was purely and simply about Russian adoption policy. That's what was discussed, period. Period. Even though it was likely, if not certain, that the *Times* had the incriminating email chain—in fact, it was quite possible that Jared and Ivanka and the lawyers *knew* the *Times* had this email chain—the president ordered that no one should let on to the more problematic discussion about Hillary

Clinton.

It was a real-time example of denial and cover-up. The president believed, belligerently, what he believed. Reality was what he was convinced it was—or should be. Hence the official story: there was a brief courtesy meeting in Trump Tower about adoption policy, to no result, attended by senior aides and unaffiliated Russian nationals. The crafting of this manufactured tale was a rogue operation by rookies—always the two most combustible elements of a cover-up.

In Washington, Kasowitz and the legal team's spokesperson, Mark Corallo, weren't informed of either the *Times* article or the plan for how to respond to it until Don Jr.'s initial statement went out just before the story broke that Saturday.

Over the course of next seventy-two hours or so, the senior staff found itself wholly separate from—and, once again, looking on in astonishment at—the actions of the president's innermost circle of aides. In this, the relationship of the president and Hope Hicks, long tolerated as a quaint bond between the older man and a trustworthy young woman, began to be seen as anomalous and alarming. Completely devoted to accommodating him, she, his media facilitator, was the ultimate facilitator of unmediated behavior. His impulses and thoughts —unedited, unreviewed, unchallenged—not only passed through him, but, via Hicks, traveled out into the world without any other White House arbitration.

"The problem isn't Twitter, it's Hope," observed one communication staffer.

On July 9, a day after publishing its first story, the *Times* noted that the Trump Tower meeting was specifically called to discuss the Russian offer of damaging material about Clinton. The next day, as the *Times* prepared to publish the full email chain, Don Jr. hurriedly dumped it himself. There followed an almost daily count of new figures—all, in their own way, peculiar and unsettling—who emerged as participants in the meeting.

But the revelation of the Trump Tower meeting had another, perhaps even larger dimension. It marked the collapse of the president's legal strategy: the demise of Steve Bannon's Clinton-emulating firewall around the president.

The lawyers, in disgust and alarm, saw, in effect, each principal becoming a witness to another principal's potential misdeeds—all conspiring with one another to get their stories straight. The client and his family were panicking and running their own defense. Short-term headlines were overwhelming any sort of long-term strategy. "The worst thing you can do is lie to a prosecutor," said one member of the legal team. The persistent Trump idea that it is not a crime to lie to the media was regarded by the legal team as at best reckless and, in itself, potentially actionable: an explicit attempt to throw sand into the investigation's gears.

Mark Corallo was instructed not to speak to the press, indeed not to even answer his phone. Later that week, Corallo, seeing no good outcome—and privately confiding that he believed the meeting on Air Force One represented a likely obstruction of justice—quit. (The Jarvanka side would put it out that

Corallo was fired.)

"These guys are not going to be second-guessed by the kids," said a frustrated Bannon about the firewall team.

Likewise, the Trump family, no matter its legal exposure, was not going to be run by its lawyers. Jared and Ivanka helped to coordinate a set of lurid leaks—alleging drinking, bad behavior, personal life in disarray—about Marc Kasowitz, who had advised the president to send the couple home. Shortly after the presidential party returned to Washington, Kasowitz was out.

* * *

Blame continued to flow. The odor of a bitter new reality, if not doom, that attached to the Comey-Mueller debacle was compounded by everyone's efforts not to be tagged by it.

The sides in the White House—Jared, Ivanka, Hope Hicks, and an increasingly ambivalent Dina Powell and Gary Cohn on one side, and almost everyone else, including Priebus, Spicer, Conway, and most clearly Bannon, on the other—were most distinguished by their culpability in or distance from the Comey-Mueller calamity. It was, as the non-Jarvanka side would unceasingly point out, a calamity *of their own making*. Therefore it became an effort of the Jarvankas not only to achieve distance for themselves from the causes of the debacle—such involvement as they had they now cast as strictly passive involvement or just following orders—but to suggest that their adversaries were at least equally at fault.

Shortly after the Don Jr. story broke, the president not unsuccessfully changed the subject by focusing the blame for the Comey-Mueller mess on Sessions, even more forcefully belittling and threatening him and suggesting that his days were numbered.

Bannon, who continued to defend Sessions, and who believed that he had militantly—indeed with scathing attacks on the Jarvankas for their stupidity—walled himself off from the Comey smashup, was now suddenly getting calls from reporters with leaks that painted him as an engaged participant in the Comey decision.

In a furious phone call to Hicks, Bannon blamed the leaks on her. In time, he had come to see the twenty-eight-year-old as nothing more than a hapless presidential enabler and poor-fish Jarvanka flunky—and he believed she had now deeply implicated herself in the entire disaster by participating in the Air Force One meeting. The next day, with more inquiries coming from reporters, he confronted Hicks inside the cabinet room, accusing her of doing Jared and Ivanka's dirty work. The face-off quickly escalated into an existential confrontation between the two sides of the White House—two sides on a total war footing.

"*You don't know what you're doing*," shouted a livid Bannon at Hicks, demanding to know who she worked for, the White House or Jared and Ivanka. "*You don't know how much trouble you are in*," he screamed, telling her that if

she didn't get a lawyer he would call her father and tell him he had better get her one. "*You are dumb as a stone!*" Moving from the cabinet room across the open area into the president's earshot, "a loud, scary, clearly threatening" Bannon, in the Jarvanka telling, yelled, "*I am going to fuck you and your little group!*" with a baffled president plaintively wanting to know, "What's going on?"

In the Jarvanka-side account, Hicks then ran from Bannon, hysterically sobbing and "visibly terrified." Others in the West Wing marked this as the high point of the boiling enmity between the two sides. For the Jarvankas, Bannon's rant was also a display that they believed they could use against him. The Jarvanka people pushed Priebus to refer the matter to the White House counsel, billing this as the most verbally abusive moment in the history of the West Wing, or at least certainly up among the most abusive episodes ever.

For Bannon, this was just more Jarvanka desperation—they were the ones, not him, saddled with Comey-Mueller. They were the ones panicking and out of control.

For the rest of his time in the White House, Bannon would not speak to Hicks again.

# 20

## MCMASTER AND SCARAMUCCI

Trump was impetuous and yet did not like to make decisions, at least not ones that seemed to corner him into having to analyze a problem. And no decision hounded him so much—really from the first moment of his presidency—as what to do about Afghanistan. It was a conundrum that became a battle. It involved not only his own resistance to analytic reasoning, but the left brain/right brain divide of his White House, the split between those who argued for disruption and those who wanted to uphold the status quo.

In this, Bannon became the disruptive and unlikely White House voice for peace—or anyway a kind of peace. In Bannon's view, only he and the not-too-resolute backbone of Donald Trump stood between consigning fifty thousand more American soldiers to hopelessness in Afghanistan.

Representing the status quo—and, ideally, a surge on top of the status quo—was H. R. McMaster, who, next to Jarvanka, had become Bannon's prime target for abuse. On this front, Bannon forged an easy bond with the president, who didn't much hide his contempt for the Power-Point general. Bannon and the president enjoyed trash-talking McMaster together.

McMaster was a protégé of David Petraeus, the former CENTCOM and Afghanistan commander who became Obama's CIA director before resigning in a scandal involving a love affair and the mishandling of classified information. Petraeus and now McMaster represented a kind of business-as-usual approach in Afghanistan and the Middle East. A stubborn McMaster kept proposing to the president new versions of the surge, but at each pitch Trump would wave him out of the Oval Office and roll his eyes in despair and disbelief.

The president's distaste and rancor for McMaster grew on pace with the approaching need to finally make a decision on Afghanistan, a decision he continued to put off. His position on Afghanistan—a military quagmire he knew little about, other than that it was a quagmire—had always been a derisive and caustic kiss-off of the sixteen-year war. Having inherited it did not make his feelings warmer or inspire him to want to dwell on it further. He knew the war was cursed and, knowing that, felt no need to know more. He put the responsibility for it on two of his favorite people to blame: Bush and Obama.

For Bannon, Afghanistan represented one more failure of establishment thinking. More precisely, it represented the establishment's inability to

confront failure.

Curiously, McMaster had written a book on exactly this subject, a scathing critique of the unchallenged assumptions with which military leaders pursued the Vietnam War. The book was embraced by liberals and the establishment, with whom, in Bannon's view, McMaster had become hopelessly aligned. And now —ever afraid of the unknown, intent on keeping options open, dedicated to stability, and eager to protect his establishment cred—McMaster was recommending a huge troop surge in Afghanistan.

* * *

By early July, the pressure to make a decision was approaching the boiling point. Trump had already authorized the Pentagon to deploy the troop resources it believed were needed, but Defense Secretary Mattis refused to act without a specific authorization from the president. Trump would finally have to make the call—unless he could find a way to put it off again.

Bannon's thought was that the decision could be made for the president—a way the president liked to have decisions made—if Bannon could get rid of McMaster. That would both head off the strongest voice for more troops and also avenge Bannon's ouster by McMaster's hand from the NSC.

With the president promising that he would make up his mind by August, and McMaster, Mattis, and Tillerson pressing for a decision as soon as possible, Bannon-inspired media began a campaign to brand McMaster as a globalist, interventionist, and all around not-our-kind-of-Trumper—and, to boot, soft on Israel.

It was a scurrilous, albeit partly true, attack. McMaster was in fact talking to Petraeus often. The kicker was the suggestion that McMaster was giving inside dope to Petraeus, a pariah because of his guilty plea regarding his mishandling of classified information. It was also the case that McMaster was disliked by the president and on the point of being dismissed.

It was Bannon, riding high again, enjoying himself in a moment of supreme overconfidence.

Indeed, in part to prove there were other options beyond more troops or humiliating defeat—and logically there probably weren't more options—Bannon became a sponsor of Blackwater-founder Erik Prince's obviously self-serving idea to replace the U.S. military force with private contractors and CIA and Special Operations personnel. The notion was briefly embraced by the president, then ridiculed by the military.

By now Bannon believed McMaster would be out by August. He was sure he had the president's word on this. Done deal. "McMaster wants to send more troops to Afghanistan, so we're going to send *him*," said a triumphal Bannon. In Bannon's scenario, Trump would give McMaster a fourth star and "promote" him to top military commander in Afghanistan.

As with the chemical attack in Syria, it was Dina Powell—even as she made increasingly determined efforts to get herself out of the White House, either

on a Sheryl Sandberg trajectory or, stopping first at a way station, as ambassador to the United Nations—who struggled to help support the least disruptive, most keep-all-options-open approach. In this, both because the approach seemed like the safest course and because it was the opposite of Bannon's course, she readily recruited Jared and Ivanka.

The solution Powell endorsed, which was designed to put the problem and the reckoning off for another year or two or three, was likely to make the United States' position in Afghanistan even more hopeless. Instead of sending fifty or sixty thousand troops—which, at insupportable cost and the risk of national fury, might in fact win the war—the Pentagon would send some much lower number, one which would arouse little notice and merely prevent us from losing the war. In the Powell and Jarvanka view, it was the moderate, best-case, easiest-to-sell course, and it struck just the right balance between the military's unacceptable scenarios: retreat and dishonor or many more troops.

Before long, a plan to send four, five, six, or (tops) seven thousand troops became the middle-course strategy supported by the national security establishment and most everyone else save for Bannon and the president. Powell even helped design a PowerPoint deck that McMaster began using with the president: pictures of Kabul in the 1970s when it still looked something like a modern city. It could be like this again, the president was told, if we are resolute!

But even with almost everyone arrayed against him, Bannon was confident he was winning. He had a united right-wing press with him, and, he believed, a fed-up, working-class Trump base—its children the likely Afghanistan fodder. Most of all, he had the president. Pissed off that he was being handed the same problem and the same options that were handed Obama, Trump continued to heap spleen and mockery on McMaster.

Kushner and Powell organized a leak campaign in McMaster's defense. Their narrative was not a pro-troops defense; instead, it was about Bannon's leaks and his use of right-wing media to besmirch McMaster, "one of the most decorated and respected generals of his generation." The issue was not Afghanistan, the issue was Bannon. In this narrative, it was McMaster, a figure of stability, against Bannon, a figure of disruption. It was the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, who came to the defense of McMaster, against Breitbart and its cronies and satellites.

It was the establishment and never-Trumpers against the America-first Trumpkins. In many respects, Bannon was outgunned and outnumbered, yet he still thought he had it nailed. And when he won, not only would another grievously stupid chapter in the war in Afghanistan be avoided, but Jarvanka, and Powell, their factotum, would be further consigned to irrelevance and powerlessness.

* * *

As the debate moved toward resolution, the NSC, in its role as a presenter of

options rather than an advocate for them (although of course it was advocating, too), presented three: withdrawal; Erik Prince's army of contractors; and a conventional, albeit limited, surge.

Withdrawal, whatever its merits—and however much a takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban could be delayed or mitigated—still left Donald Trump with having lost a war, an insupportable position for the president.

The second option, a force of contractors and the CIA, was largely deep-sixed by the CIA. The agency had spent sixteen years successfully avoiding Afghanistan, and everyone knew that careers were not advanced in Afghanistan, they died in Afghanistan. So please keep us out of it.

That left McMaster's position, a modest surge, argued by Secretary of State Tillerson: more troops in Afghanistan, which, somehow, slightly, would be there on a different basis, somewhat, with a different mission, subtly, than that of troops sent there before.

The military fully expected the president to sign off on the third option. But on July 19, at a meeting of the national security team in the situation room at the White House, Trump lost it.

For two hours, he angrily railed against the mess he had been handed. He threatened to fire almost every general in the chain of command. He couldn't fathom, he said, how it had taken so many months of study to come up with this nothing-much-different plan. He disparaged the advice that came from generals and praised the advice from enlisted men. If we have to be in Afghanistan, he demanded, why can't we make money off it? China, he complained, has mining rights, but not the United States. (He was referring to a ten-year-old U.S.-backed deal.) This is just like the 21 Club, he said, suddenly confusing everyone with this reference to a New York restaurant, one of his favorites. In the 1980s, 21 closed for a year and hired a large number of consultants to analyze how to make the restaurant more profitable. In the end, their advice was: Get a bigger kitchen. *Exactly what any waiter would have said*, Trump shouted.

To Bannon, the meeting was a high point of the Trump presidency to date. The generals were punting and waffling and desperately trying to save face—they were, according to Bannon, talking pure "gobbledygook" in the situation room. "Trump was standing up to them," said a happy Bannon. "Hammering them. He left a bowel movement in the middle of their Afghan plans. Again and again, he came back to the same point: we're stuck and losing and nobody here has a plan to do much better than that."

Though there was still no hint of a viable alternative strategy in Afghanistan, Bannon, his Jarvanka frustration cresting, was sure he was the winner here. McMaster was toast.

* * *

Later on the day of the Afghanistan briefing, Bannon heard about yet another harebrained Jarvanka scheme. They planned to hire Anthony Scaramucci, aka "the Mooch."

After Trump had clinched the nomination more than a year before, Scaramucci—a hedge funder and go-to Trump surrogate for cable business news (mostly Fox Business Channel)—had become a reliable presence at Trump Tower. But then, in the last month of the campaign, with polls predicting a humiliating Trump defeat, he was suddenly nowhere to be seen. The question "Where's the Mooch?" seemed to be just one more indicator of the campaign's certain and pitiless end.

But on the day after the election, Steve Bannon—soon to be named chief strategist for the forty-fifth president-elect—was greeted as he arrived midmorning in Trump Tower by Anthony Scaramucci, holding a Starbucks coffee for him.

Over the next three months, Scaramucci, although no longer needed as a surrogate and without anything else particularly to do, became a constant hovering—or even lurking—presence at Trump Tower. Ever unflagging, he interrupted a meeting in Kellyanne Conway's office in early January just to make sure she knew that her husband's firm, Wachtell, Lipton, was representing him. Having made that point, name-dropping and vastly praising the firm's key partners, he then helped himself to a chair in Conway's meeting and, for both Conway's and her visitor's benefit, offered a stirring testimonial to the uniqueness and sagacity of Donald Trump and the working-class people—speaking of which, he took the opportunity to provide a résumé of his own Long Island working-class bona fides—who had elected him.

Scaramucci was hardly the only hanger-on and job seeker in the building, but his method was among the most dogged. He spent his days looking for meetings to be invited into, or visitors to engage with—this was easy because every other job seeker was looking for someone with whom to chat it up, so he soon became something like the unofficial official greeter. Whenever possible, he would grab a few minutes with any senior staffer who would not rebuff him. As he waited to be offered a high White House position, he was, he seemed personally certain, reaffirming his loyalty and team spirit and unique energy. He was so confident about his future that he made a deal to sell his hedge fund, Skybridge Capital, to HNA Group, the Chinese megaconglomerate.

Political campaigns, substantially based on volunteer help, attract a range of silly, needy, and opportunistic figures. The Trump campaign perhaps scraped lower in the barrel than most. The Mooch, for one, might not have been the most peculiar volunteer in the Trump run for president, but many figured him to be among the most shameless.

It was not just that before he became a dedicated supporter of Donald Trump, he was a dedicated naysayer, or that he had once been an Obama and Hillary Clinton supporter. The problem was that, really, nobody liked him. Even for someone in politics, he was immodest and incorrigible, and followed by a trail of self-serving and often contradictory statements made to this person about that person, which invariably made it back to whatever person was being most negatively talked about.

He was not merely a shameless self-promoter; he was a *proud* self-promoter. He was, by his own account, a fantastic networker. (This boast was surely true, since Skybridge Capital was a fund of funds, which is less a matter of investment acumen than of knowing top fund managers and being able to invest with them.) He had paid as much as half a million dollars to have his firm's logo appear in the movie *Wall Street 2* and to buy himself a cameo part in the film. He ran a yearly conference for hedge funders at which he himself was the star. He had a television gig at Fox Business Channel. He was a famous partier every year at Davos, once exuberantly dancing alongside the son of Muammar Gaddafi.

As for the presidential campaign, when signing on with Donald Trump—after he had bet big against Trump—he billed himself as a version of Trump, and he saw the two of them as a new kind of showman and communicator set to transform politics.

Although his persistence and his constant on-the-spot personal lobbying might not have endeared him to anybody, it did prompt the "What to do with Scaramucci?" question, which somehow came to beg an answer. Priebus, trying to deal with the Mooch problem and dispose of him at the same time, suggested that he take a money-raising job as finance director of the RNC—an offer Scaramucci rebuffed in a blowup in Trump Tower, loudly bad-mouthing Priebus in vivid language, a mere preview of what was to come.

While he wanted a job with the Trump administration, the Mooch specifically wanted one of the jobs that would give him a tax break on the sale of his business. A federal program provides for deferred payment of capital gains in the event of a sale of property to meet ethical requirements. Scaramucci needed a job that would get him a "certificate of divestiture," which is what an envious Scaramucci knew Gary Cohn had received for the sale of his Goldman stock.

A week before the inaugural he was finally offered such a job: director of the White House Office of Public Engagement and Intergovernmental Affairs. He would be the president's representative and cheerleader before Trump-partial interest groups.

But the White House ethics office balked—the sale of his business would take months to complete and he would be directly negotiating with an entity that was at least in part controlled by the Chinese government. And because Scaramucci had little support from anybody else, he was effectively blocked. It was, a resentful Scaramucci noted, one of the few instances in the Trump government when someone's business conflicts interfered with a White House appointment.

And yet with a salesman's tenacity, the Mooch pressed on. He appointed himself a Trump ambassador without portfolio. He declared himself Trump's man on Wall Street, even if, practically speaking, he wasn't a Trump man and he was exiting his firm on Wall Street. He was also in constant touch with anybody from the Trump circle who was willing to be in touch with him.

The "What to do with the Mooch" question persisted. Kushner, with whom

Scaramucci had exercised a rare restraint during the campaign, and who had steadily heard from other New York contacts about Scaramucci's continued loyalty, helped push the question.

Priebus and others held Scaramucci at bay until June and then, as a bit of a punch line, Scaramucci was offered and, degradingly, had to accept, being named senior vice president and chief strategy officer for the U.S. Export-Import Bank, an executive branch agency Trump had long vowed to eliminate. But the Mooch was not ready to give up the fight: after yet more lobbying, he was offered, at Bannon's instigation, the post of ambassador to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. The job came with a twenty-room apartment on the Seine, a full staff, and—Bannon found this part particularly amusing—absolutely no influence or responsibilities.

* * *

Meanwhile, another persistent question, "What to do with Spicer," seemed to somehow have been joined to the disaster involving the bungled response to the news of the June 2016 meeting between Don Jr., Jared, and the Russians. Since the president, while traveling on Air Force One, had actually dictated Don Jr.'s response to the initial *Times* report about the meeting, the blame for this should have been laid at the feet of Trump and Hope Hicks: Trump dictated, Hicks transcribed. But because no disasters could be laid at the president's feet, Hicks herself was spared. And, even though he had been pointedly excluded from the Trump Tower crisis, the blame for the episode was now put at Spicer's feet, precisely because, his loyalty in doubt, he and the communications staff *had* to be excluded.

In this, the comms team was judged to be antagonistic if not hostile to the interests of Jared and Ivanka; Spicer and his people had failed to mount an inclusive defense for them, nor had the comms team adequately defended the White House. This of course homed in on the essential and obvious point: although the junior first couple were mere staffers and not part of the institutional standing of the White House, they thought and acted as if they were part of the presidential entity. Their ire and increasing bitterness came from some of the staff's reluctance—really, a deep and intensifying resistance—to treat them as part and parcel of the presidency. (Once Priebus had to take Ivanka aside to make sure she understood that in her official role, she was just a staffer. Ivanka had insisted on the distinction that she was a staffer-slash-First Daughter.)

Bannon was their public enemy; they expected nothing of him. But Priebus and Spicer they regarded as functionaries, and their job was to support the White House's goals, which included their goals and interests.

Spicer, ever ridiculed in the media for his cockamamie defense of the White House and a seeming dumb loyalty, had been judged by the president, quite from the inauguration, to be not loyal enough and not nearly as aggressive as he should be in Trump's defense. Or, in Jared and Ivanka's view, in his family's

defense. "What does Spicer's forty-member comm staff actually *do*?" was a persistent First Family question.

* * *

Almost from the beginning, the president had been interviewing potential new press secretaries. He appeared to have offered the job to various people, one of whom was Kimberly Guilfoyle, the Fox News personality and cohost of *The Five*. Guilfoyle, the former wife of California Democrat Gavin Newsom, was also reported to be Anthony Scaramucci's girlfriend, a rumor he denied. Unbeknownst to the White House, Scaramucci's personal life was in dramatic free fall. On July 9, nine months pregnant with their second child, Scaramucci's wife filed for divorce.

Guilfoyle, knowing that Spicer was on his way out but having decided not to take his job—or, according to others in the White House, never having been offered it—suggested Scaramucci, who set to work convincing Jared and Ivanka that theirs was largely a PR problem and that they were ill served by the current communications team.

Scaramucci called a reporter he knew to urge that an upcoming story about Kushner's Russian contacts be spiked. He followed up by having another mutual contact call the reporter to say that if the story was spiked it would help the Mooch get into the White House, whereupon the reporter would have special Mooch access. The Mooch then assured Jared and Ivanka that he had, in this clever way, killed the story.

Now Scaramucci had their attention. *We need some new thinking*, the couple thought; *we need somebody who is more on our side*. The fact that Scaramucci was from New York, and Wall Street, and was rich, reassured them that he understood what the deal was. And that he would understand the stakes and know that an aggressive game needed to be played.

On the other hand, the couple did not want to be perceived as being heavy-handed. So, after bitterly accusing Spicer of not defending them adequately, they suddenly backed off and suggested that they were just looking to add a new voice to the mix. The job of White House communications director, which had no precise purview, had been vacant since May, when Mike Dubke, whose presence at the White House had hardly registered, resigned. Scaramucci could take this job, the couple figured, and in that role he could be their ally.

"He's good on television," Ivanka told Spicer when she explained the rationale for hiring a former hedge fund manager as White House communications director. "Maybe he can help us."

It was the president who, meeting with Scaramucci, was won over by the Mooch's cringeworthy Wall Street hortatory flattery. ("I can only hope to realize a small part of your genius as a communicator, but you are my example and model" was one report of the gist of the Scaramucci supplication.) And it was Trump who then urged that Scaramucci become the true communications chief, reporting directly to the president.

On July 19, Jared and Ivanka, through intermediaries, put a feeler out to Bannon: What would he think about Scaramucci's coming on board in the comms job?

So preposterous did this seem to Bannon—it was a cry of haplessness, and certain evidence that the couple had become truly desperate—that he refused to consider or even reply to the question. Now he was sure: Jarvanka was losing it.

# 21

## BANNON AND SCARAMUCCI

Bannon's apartment in Arlington, Virginia, a fifteen-minute drive from downtown Washington, was called the "safe house." This seemed somehow to acknowledge his transience and to nod, with whatever irony, to the underground and even romantic nature of his politics—the roguish and *joie de guerre* alt-right. Bannon had decamped here from the Breitbart Embassy on A Street on Capitol Hill. It was a one-bedroom graduate-student sort of apartment, in a mixed-use building over a mega-McDonald's—quite belying Bannon's rumored fortune—with five or six hundred books (emphasis on popular history) stacked against the wall without benefit of shelving. His lieutenant, Alexandra Preate, also lived in the building, as did the American lawyer for Nigel Farage, the right-wing British Brexit leader who was part of the greater Breitbart circle.

On the evening on Thursday, July 20, the day after the contentious meeting about Afghanistan, Bannon was hosting a small dinner—organized by Preate, with Chinese takeout. Bannon was in an expansive, almost celebratory, mood. Still, Bannon knew, just when you felt on top of the world in the Trump administration, you could probably count on getting cut down. That was the pattern and price of one-man leadership—insecure-man leadership. The other biggest guy in the room always had to be reduced in size.

Many around him felt Bannon was going into another bad cycle. In his first run around the track, he'd been punished by the president for his *Time* magazine cover and for the *Saturday Night Live* portrayal of "President Bannon"—that cruelest of digs to Trump. Now there was a new book, *The Devil's Bargain*, and it claimed, often in Bannon's own words, that Trump could not have done it without him. The president was again greatly peeved.

Still, Bannon seemed to feel he had broken through. Whatever happened, he had clarity. It was such a mess inside in the White House that, if nothing else, this clarity would put him on top. His agenda was front and center, and his enemies sidelined. Jared and Ivanka were getting blown up every day and were now wholly preoccupied with protecting themselves. Dina Powell was looking for another job. McMaster had screwed himself on Afghanistan. Gary Cohn, once a killer enemy, was now desperate to be named Fed chairman and currying favor with Bannon—"licking my balls," Bannon said with a quite a cackle. In return for supporting Cohn's campaign to win the Fed job, Bannon was extracting fealty

from him for the right-wing trade agenda.

The geniuses were fucked. Even POTUS might be fucked. But Bannon had the vision and the discipline—he was sure he did. "I'm cracking my shit every day. The nationalist agenda, we're fucking owning it. I'll be there for the duration."

Before the dinner, Bannon had sent around an article from the *Guardian*—though one of the leading English-language left-leaning newspapers, it was nevertheless Bannon's favorite paper—about the backlash to globalization. The article, by the liberal journalist Nikil Saval, both accepted Bannon's central populist political premise—"the competition between workers in developing and developed countries . . . helped drive down wages and job security for workers in developed countries"—and elevated it to the epochal fight of our time. Davos was dead and Bannon was very much alive. "Economists who were once ardent proponents of globalization have become some of its most prominent critics," wrote Saval. "Erstwhile supporters now concede, at least in part, that it has produced inequality, unemployment and downward pressure on wages. Nuances and criticisms that economists only used to raise in private seminars are finally coming out in the open."

"I'm starting to get tired of winning" was all that Bannon said in his email with the link to the article.

Now, restless and pacing, Bannon was recounting how Trump had dumped on McMaster and, as well, savoring the rolling-on-the-floor absurdity of the geniuses' Scaramucci gambit. But most of all he was incredulous about something else that had happened the day before.

Unbeknownst to senior staff, or to the comms office—other than by way of a pro forma schedule note—the president had given a major interview to the *New York Times*. Jared and Ivanka, along with Hope Hicks, had set it up. The *Times*'s Maggie Haberman, Trump's bête noire ("very mean, and not smart") and yet his go-to journalist for some higher sort of approval, had been called in to see the president with her colleagues Peter Baker and Michael Schmidt. The result was one of the most peculiar and ill-advised interviews in presidential history, from a president who had already, several times before, achieved that milestone.

In the interview, Trump had done his daughter and son-in-law's increasingly frantic bidding. He had, even if to no clear end and without certain strategy, continued on his course of threatening the attorney general for recusing himself and opening the door to a special prosecutor. He openly pushed Sessions to resign—mocking and insulting him and daring him to try to stay. However much this seemed to advance no one's cause, except perhaps that of the special prosecutor, Bannon's incredulity—"Jefferson Beauregard Sessions is not going to go anywhere"—was most keenly focused on another remarkable passage in the interview: the president had admonished the special counsel not to cross the line into his family's finances.

"*Ehhh . . . ehhh . . . ehhh!*" screeched Bannon, making the sound of an emergency alarm. "Don't look here! Let's tell a prosecutor what *not* to look at!"

Bannon then described the conversation he'd had with the president earlier

that day: "I went right into him and said, 'Why did you say that?' And he says, 'The Sessions thing?' and I say, 'No, that's bad, but it's another day at the office.' I said, 'Why did you say it was off limits to go after your family's finances?' And he says, 'Well, it is . . . .' I go, 'Hey, they are going to determine their mandate. . . . You may not like it, but you just guaranteed if you want to get anybody else in [the special counsel] slot, every senator will make him swear that the first thing he's going to do is come in and subpoena your fucking tax returns.' "

Bannon, with further disbelief, recounted the details of a recent story from the *Financial Times* about Felix Sater, one of the shadiest of the shady Trump-associated characters, who was closely aligned with Trump's longtime personal lawyer, Michael Cohen (reportedly a target of the Mueller investigation), and a key follow-the-money link to Russia. Sater, "get ready for it—I know this may shock you, but wait for it"—had had major problems with the law before, "caught with a couple of guys in Boca running Russian money through a boiler room." And, it turns out, "Brother Sater" was prosecuted by—"wait"—*Andrew Weissmann*. (Mueller had recently hired Weissmann, a high-powered Washington lawyer who headed the DOJ's criminal fraud division.) "You've got the LeBron James of money laundering investigations on you, Jarvanka. My asshole just got so tight!"

Bannon quite literally slapped his sides and then returned to his conversation with the president. "And he goes, 'That's not their mandate.' Seriously, dude?"

Preate, putting out the Chinese food on a table, said, "It wasn't their mandate to put Arthur Andersen out of business during Enron, but that didn't stop Andrew Weissmann"—one of the Enron prosecutors.

"You realize where this is going," Bannon continued. "This is all about *money laundering*. Mueller chose Weissmann first and he is a money laundering guy. Their path to fucking Trump goes right through Paul Manafort, Don Jr., and Jared Kushner . . . It's as plain as a hair on your face. . . . It goes through all the Kushner shit. They're going to roll those two guys up and say play me or trade me. But . . . *'executive privilege!'* " Bannon mimicked. " 'We've got executive privilege!' There's no executive privilege! We proved that in Watergate."

An expressive man, Bannon seemed to have suddenly exhausted himself. After a pause, he added wearily: "They're sitting on a beach trying to stop a Category Five."

With his hands in front of him, he mimed something like a force field that would isolate him from danger. "It's not my deal. He's got the five geniuses around him: Jarvanka, Hope Hicks, Dina Powell, and Josh Raffel." He threw up his hands again, this time as if to say *Hands off*. "I know no Russians, I don't know nothin' about nothin'. I'm not being a witness. I'm not hiring a lawyer. It is not going to be my ass in front of a microphone on national TV answering questions. Hope Hicks is so fucked she doesn't even know it. They are going to lay her out. They're going to crack Don Junior like an egg on national TV. Michael Cohen, cracked like an egg. He"—the president—"said to me everybody would

take that Don Junior meeting with the Russians. I said, 'Everybody would *not* take that meeting.' I said, 'I'm a naval officer. I'm not going to take a meeting with Russian nationals, and do it in headquarters, are you fucking insane?' and he says, 'But he's a good boy.' There were no meetings like that after I took over the campaign."

Bannon's tone veered from ad absurdum desperation to resignation.

"If he fires Mueller it just brings the impeachment quicker. Why not, let's do it. Let's get it on. Why not? What am I going to do? Am I going to go in and save him? He's Donald Trump. He's always gonna do things. He wants an unrecused attorney general. I told him if Jeff Sessions goes, Rod Rosenstein goes, and then Rachel Brand"—the associate attorney general, next in line after Rosenstein—"goes, we'll be digging down into Obama career guys. An Obama guy will be acting attorney general. I said you're not going to get Rudy"—Trump had again revived a wish for his loyalists Rudy Giuliani or Chris Christie to take the job—"because he was on the campaign and will have to recuse himself, and Chris Christie, too, so those are masturbatory fantasies, get those out of your brain. And, for anybody to get confirmed now, they are going to have to swear and ensure that things will go ahead and they won't fire anybody, because you said yesterday—*Ehhh . . . ehhh . . . .ehhh!*—'my family finances are off limits,' and they're going to demand that, whoever he is, he promises and commits to make the family finances part of this investigation. I told him as night follows day that's a lock, so you better hope Sessions stays around."

"He was calling people in New York last night asking what he should do," added Preate. (Almost everybody in the White House followed Trump's thinking by tracking whom he had called the night before.)

Bannon sat back and, with steam-rising frustration—almost a cartoon figure—he outlined his Clinton-like legal plan. "They went to the mattresses with amazing discipline. They ground through it." But that *was* about discipline, he emphasized, and Trump, said Bannon, noting the obvious, was the least disciplined man in politics.

It was clear where Mueller and his team were going, said Bannon: they would trace a money trail through Paul Manafort, Michael Flynn, Michael Cohen, and Jared Kushner and roll one or all of them on the president.

*It's Shakespearean*, he said, enumerating the bad advice from his family circle: "It's the geniuses, the same people who talked him into firing Comey, the same people on Air Force One who cut out his outside legal team, knowing the email was out there, knowing that email existed, put the statement out about Don Junior, that the meeting was all about adoptions . . . the same geniuses trying to get Sessions fired.

"Look, Kasowitz has known him for twenty-five years. Kasowitz has gotten him out of all kinds of jams. Kasowitz on the campaign—what did we have, a hundred women? Kasowitz took care of all of them. And now he's out in, what, four weeks? He's New York's toughest lawyer. Mark Corallo, toughest motherfucker I ever met, just can't do it."

Jared and Ivanka believe, said Bannon, that if they advocate prison reform and save DACA—the program to protect the children of illegal immigrants—the liberals will come to their defense. He digressed briefly to characterize Ivanka Trump's legislative acumen, and her difficulty—which had become quite a White House preoccupation—in finding sponsorship for her family leave proposal. "Here's why, I keep telling her: there's no political constituency in it. You know how easy it is to get a bill sponsored, any schmendrick can do it. You know why your bill has no sponsorship? Because people realize how *dumb* it is." In fact, said, Bannon, eyes rolling and mouth agape, it was the Jarvanka idea to try to trade off amnesty for the border wall. "If not the dumbest idea in Western civilization, it's up there in the top three. Do these geniuses even know who we are?"

Just then Bannon took a call, the caller telling him that it looked as if Scaramucci might indeed be getting the job of communications director. "Don't fuck with me, dude," he laughed. "Don't fuck with me like that!"

He got off the phone expressing further wonder at the fantasy world of the geniuses—and added, for good measure, an extra dollop of dripping contempt for them. "I literally do not talk to them. You know why? I'm doing my shit, and they got nothing to do with it, and I don't care what they're doing . . . I don't care. . . . I'm not going to be alone with them, I'm not going to be in a room with them. Ivanka walked into the Oval today . . . [and] as soon as she walked in, I looked at her and walked right out. . . . I won't be in a room . . . don't want to do it. . . . Hope Hicks walked in, I walked out."

"The FBI put Jared's father in jail," said Preate. "Don't they understand you don't mess—"

"Charlie Kushner," said Bannon, smacking his head again in additional disbelief. "He's going crazy because they're going to get down deep in his shit about how he's financed everyfhing. . . . all the shit coming out of Israel . . . and all these guys coming out of Eastern Europe . . . all these Russian guys . . . and guys in Kazakhstan. . . . And he's frozen on 666 [Fifth Avenue]. . . . [If] it goes under next year, the whole thing's cross-collateralized . . . he's wiped, he's gone, he's done, it's over. . . . Toast."

He held his face in his hands for a moment and then looked up again.

"I'm pretty good at coming up with solutions, I came up with a solution for his broke-dick campaign in about a day, but I don't see this. I don't see a plan for getting through. Now, I gave him a plan, I said you seal the Oval Office, you send those two kids home, you get rid of Hope, all these deadbeats, and you listen to your legal team—Kasowitz, and Mark Dowd, and Jay Sekulow, and Mark Corallo, these are all professionals who have done this many times. You listen to those guys and never talk about this stuff again, you just conduct yourself as commander in chief and then you can be president for eight years. If you don't, you're not, simple. But he's the president, he gets a choice, and he's clearly choosing to go down another path . . . and you can't stop him. The guy is going to call his own plays. He's Trump. . . ."

And then another call came, this one from Sam Nunberg. He, too, was calling about Scaramucci, and his words caused something like stupefaction in Bannon: "No fucking, fucking way."

Bannon got off the phone and said, "Jesus. Scaramucci. I can't even respond to this. It's Kafkaesque. Jared and Ivanka needed somebody to represent their shit. It's madness. He'll be on that podium for two days and he'll be so chopped he'll bleed out everywhere. He'll literally blow up in a week. This is why I don't take this stuff seriously. Hiring Scaramucci? He's not qualified to do anything. He runs a fund of funds. Do you know what a fund of funds is? It's not a fund. Dude, it's sick. We look like buffoons."

* * *

The ten days of Anthony Scaramucci, saw, on the first day, July 21, the resignation of Sean Spicer. Oddly, this seemed to catch everyone unawares. In a meeting with Scaramucci, Spicer, and Priebus, the president—who in his announcement of Scaramucci's hire as communications director had promoted Scaramucci not only over Spicer, but in effect over Priebus, his chief of staff—suggested that the men ought to be able to work it out together.

Spicer went back to his office, printed out his letter of resignation, and then took it back to the nonplussed president, who said again that he really wanted Spicer to be a part of things. But Spicer, surely the most mocked man in America, understood that he had been handed a gift. His White House days were over.

For Scaramucci, it was now payback time. Scaramucci blamed his six humiliating months out in the cold on nobody so much as Reince Priebus—having announced his White House future, having sold his business in anticipation of it, he had come away with nothing, or at least nothing of any value. But now, in a reversal befitting a true master of the universe—befitting, actually, Trump himself—Scaramucci was in the White House, bigger, better, and grander than even he had had the gall to imagine. And Priebus was dead meat.

That was the signal the president had sent Scaramucci—deal with the mess. In Trump's view, the problems in his tenure so far were just problems about the team. If the team went, the problems went. So Scaramucci had his marching orders. The fact that the president had been saying the same stuff about his rotten team from the first day, that this riff had been a constant from the campaign on, that he would often say he wanted everybody to go and then turn around and say he *didn't* want everybody to go—all that rather went over Scaramucci's head.

Scaramucci began taunting Priebus publicly, and inside the West Wing he adopted a tough-guy attitude about Bannon—"I won't take his bullshit." Trump seemed delighted with this behavior, which led Scaramucci to feel that the president was urging him on. Jared and Ivanka were pleased, too; they believed they had scored with Scaramucci and were confident that he would defend them against Bannon and the rest.

Bannon and Priebus remained not just disbelieving but barely able not to crack up. For both men, Scaramucci was either a hallucinatory episode—they wondered whether they ought to just shut their eyes while it passed—or some further march into madness.

* * *

Even as measured against other trying weeks in the Trump White House, the week of July 24 was a head-slammer. First, it opened the next episode in what had become a comic-opera effort to repeal Obamacare in the Senate. As in the House, this had become much less about health care than a struggle both among Republicans in Congress and between the Republican leadership and the White House. The signature stand for the Republican Party had now become the symbol of its civil war.

On that Monday, the president's son-in-law appeared at the microphones in front of the West Wing to preview his statement to Senate investigators about the Trump campaign's connections to Russia. Having almost never spoken before in public, he now denied culpability in the Russian mess by claiming feckless naïveté; speaking in a reedy, self-pitying voice, he portrayed himself as a Candide-like figure who had become disillusioned by a harsh world.

And that evening, the president traveled to West Virginia to deliver a speech before the Boy Scouts of America. Once more, his speech was tonally at odds with time, place, and good sense. It prompted an immediate apology from the Boy Scouts to its members, their parents, and the country at large. The quick trip did not seem to improve Trump's mood: the next morning, seething, the president again publicly attacked his attorney general and—for good measure and no evident reason—tweeted his ban of transgender people in the military. (The president had been presented with four different options related to the military's transgender policy. The presentation was meant to frame an ongoing discussion, but ten minutes after receiving the discussion points, and without further consultation, Trump tweeted his transgender ban.)

The following day, Wednesday, Scaramucci learned that one of his financial disclosure forms seemed to have been leaked; assuming he'd been sabotaged by his enemies, Scaramucci blamed Priebus directly, implicitly accusing him of a felony. In fact, Scaramucci's financial form was a public document available to all.

That afternoon, Priebus told the president that he understood he should resign and they should start talking about his replacement.

Then, that evening, there was a small dinner in the White House, with various current and former Fox News people, including Kimberly Guilfoyle, in attendance—and this was leaked. Drinking more than usual, trying desperately to contain the details of the meltdown of his personal life (being linked to Guilfoyle wasn't going to help his negotiation with his wife), and wired by events beyond his own circuits' capacity, Scaramucci called a reporter at the *New Yorker* magazine and unloaded.

The resulting article was surreal—so naked in its pain and fury, that for almost twenty-four hours nobody seemed to be able to quite acknowledge that he had committed public suicide. The article quoted Scaramucci speaking bluntly about the chief of staff: "Reince Priebus—if you want to leak something—he'll be asked to resign very shortly." Saying that he had taken his new job "to serve the country" and that he was "not trying to build my brand," Scaramucci also took on Steve Bannon: "I'm not Steve Bannon. I'm not trying to suck my own cock." (In fact, Bannon learned about the piece when fact-checkers from the magazine called him for comment about Scaramucci's accusation that he sucked his own cock.)

Scaramucci, who had in effect publicly fired Priebus, was behaving so bizarrely that it wasn't at all clear who would be the last man standing. Priebus, on the verge of being fired for so long, realized that he might have agreed to resign too soon. He might have gotten the chance to fire Scaramucci!

On Friday, as health care repeal cratered in the Senate, Priebus joined the president on board Air Force One for a trip to New York for a speech. As it happened, so did Scaramucci, who, avoiding the *New Yorker* fallout, had said he'd gone to New York to visit his mother but in fact had been hiding out at the Trump Hotel in Washington. Now here he was, with his bags (he would indeed now stay in New York and visit his mother), behaving as though nothing had happened.

On the way back from the trip, Priebus and the president talked on the plane and discussed the timing of his departure, with the president urging him to do it the right way and to take his time. "You tell me what works for you," said Trump. "Let's make it good."

Minutes later, Priebus stepped onto the tarmac and an alert on his phone said the president had just tweeted that there was a new chief of staff, Department of Homeland Security chief John Kelly, and that Priebus was out.

The Trump presidency was six months old, but the question of who might replace Priebus had been a topic of discussion almost from day one. Among the string of candidates were Powell and Cohn, the Jarvanka favorites; OMB director Mick Mulvaney, one of the Bannon picks; and Kelly.

In fact, Kelly—who would soon abjectly apologize to Priebus for the basic lack of courtesy in the way his dismissal was handled—had not been consulted about his appointment. The president's tweet was the first he knew of it.

But indeed there was no time to waste. Now the paramount issue before the Trump government was that somebody would have to fire Scaramucci. Since Scaramucci had effectively gotten rid of Priebus—the person who logically should have fired *him*—the new chief of staff was needed, more or less immediately, to get rid of the Mooch.

And six days later, just hours after he was sworn in, Kelly fired Scaramucci.

Chastened themselves, the junior first couple, the geniuses of the Scaramucci hire, panicked that they would, deservedly, catch the blame for one of the most ludicrous if not catastrophic hires in modern White House history.

Now they rushed to say how firmly they supported the decision to get rid of Scaramucci.

"So I punch you in the face," Sean Spicer noted from the sidelines, "and then say, 'Oh my god, we've got to get you to a hospital!' "

# 22

## GENERAL KELLY

On August 4, the president and key members of the West Wing left for Trump's golf club in Bedminster. The new chief of staff, General Kelly, was in tow, but the president's chief strategist, Steve Bannon, had been left behind. Trump was grouchy about the planned seventeen-day trip, bothered by how diligently his golf dates were being clocked by the media. So this was now dubbed a "working" trip—another piece of Trump vanity that drew shrugs, eye rolling, and head shaking from a staff that had been charged with planning events that looked like work even as they were instructed to leave yawning expanses of time for golf.

During the president's absence, the West Wing would be renovated—Trump, the hotelier and decorator, was "disgusted" by its condition. The president did not want to move over to the nearby Executive Office Building, where the West Wing business would temporarily be conducted—and where Steve Bannon sat waiting for his call to go to Bedminster.

He was about to leave for Bedminster, Bannon kept telling everyone, but no invitation came. Bannon, who claimed credit for bringing Kelly into the administration in the first place, was unsure where he stood with the new chief. Indeed, the president himself was unsure about where he himself stood; he kept asking people if Kelly liked him. More generally, Bannon wasn't entirely clear *what* Kelly was doing, other than his duty. Where exactly did the new chief of staff fit in Trumpworld?

While Kelly stood somewhere right of center on the political spectrum and had been a willing tough immigration enforcer at Homeland Security, he was not anywhere near so right as Bannon or Trump. "He's not hardcore" was Bannon's regretful appraisal. At the same time, Kelly was certainly not close in any way to the New York liberals in the White House. But politics was not his purview. As director of Homeland Security he had watched the chaos in the White House with disgust and thought about quitting. Now he had agreed to try to tame it. He was sixty-seven, resolute, stern, and grim. "Does he ever smile?" asked Trump, who had already begun to think that he had somehow been tricked into the hire.

Some Trumpers, particularly those with over-the-transom access to the president, believed that he had been tricked into some form of very-much-not-

Trump submission. Roger Stone, one of those people whose calls Kelly was now shielding the president from, spread the dark scenario that Mattis, McMaster, and Kelly had agreed that no military action would ever be taken unless the three were in accord—and that at least one of them would always remain in Washington if the others were away.

After Kelly dispatched Scaramucci, his two immediate issues, now on the table in Bedminster, were the president's relatives and Steve Bannon. One side or the other obviously had to go. Or perhaps both should go.

It was far from clear whether a White House chief of staff who saw his function as establishing command process and enforcing organizational hierarchy—directing a decision funnel to the commander in chief—could operate effectively or even exist in a White House where the commander in chief's children had special access and overriding influence. As much as the president's daughter and son-in-law were now offering slavish regard for the new command principals, they would, surely, by habit and temperament, override Kelly's control of the West Wing. Not only did they have obvious special influence with the president, but important members of the staff saw them as having this juice, and hence believed that they were the true north of West Wing advancement and power.

Curiously, for all their callowness, Jared and Ivanka had become quite a fearsome presence, as feared by others as the two of them feared Bannon. What's more, they had become quite accomplished infighters and leakers—they had front-room *and* back-channel power—although, with great woundedness, they insisted, incredibly, that they never leaked. "If they hear someone talking about them, because they are so careful about their image and have crafted this whole persona—it's like anyone who tries to pierce it or say something against it is like a big problem," said one senior staffer. "They get very upset and will come after you."

On the other hand, while "the kids" might make Kelly's job all but impossible, keeping Bannon on board didn't make a lot of sense, either. Whatever his gifts, he was a hopeless plotter and malcontent, bound to do an end run around any organization. Besides, as the Bedminster hiatus—working or otherwise—began, Bannon was once more on the president's shit list.

The president continued to stew about *The Devil's Bargain*, the book by Joshua Green that gave Bannon credit for the election. Then, too, while the president tended to side with Bannon against McMaster, the campaign to defend McMaster, supported by Jared and Ivanka, was having an effect. Murdoch, enlisted by Jared to help defend McMaster, was personally lobbying the president for Bannon's head. Bannonites felt they had to defend Bannon against an impulsive move by the president: so now, not only did they brand McMaster as weak on Israel, they persuaded Sheldon Adelson to lobby Trump—Bannon, Adelson told the president, was the only person he trusted on Israel in the White House. Adelson's billions and implacability always impressed Trump, and his endorsement, Bannon believed, significantly strengthened his hand.

But overriding the management of the harrowing West Wing dysfunction, Kelly's success—or even relevance, as he was informed by almost anyone who was in a position to offer him an opinion—depended on his rising to the central challenge of his job, which was how to manage Trump. Or, actually, how to live with not managing him. His desires, needs, and impulses had to exist —*necessarily* had to exist—outside the organizational structure. Trump was the one variable that, in management terms, simply could not be controlled. He was like a recalcitrant two-year-old. If you tried to control him, it would only have the opposite effect. In this, then, the manager had to most firmly manage his own expectations.

In an early meeting with the president, General Kelly had Jared and Ivanka on his agenda—how the president saw their role; what he thought was working and not working about it; how he envisioned it going forward. It was all intended to be a politic way of opening a discussion about getting them out. But the president was, Kelly soon learned, delighted with all aspects of their performance in the West Wing. Maybe at some point Jared would become secretary of state—that was the only change the president seemed to foresee. The most Kelly could do was to get the president to acknowledge that the couple should be part of a greater organizational discipline in the West Wing and should not so readily jump the line.

This, at least, was something that the general could try to enforce. At a dinner in Bedminster—the president dining with his daughter and son-in-law—the First Family were confused when Kelly showed up at the meal and joined them. This, they shortly came to understand, was neither an attempt at pleasant socializing nor an instance of unwarranted over-familiarity. It was enforcement: Jared and Ivanka needed to go through him to talk to the president.

But Trump had made clear his feeling that the roles played by the kids in his administration needed only minor adjustment, and this now presented a significant problem for Bannon. Bannon really had believed that Kelly would find a way to send Jarvanka home. How could he not? Indeed, Bannon had convinced himself that they represented the largest danger to Trump. They would take the president down. As much, Bannon believed that *he* could not remain in the White House if they did.

Beyond Trump's current irritation with Bannon, which many believed was just the usual constant of Trump resentment and complaint, Bannonites felt that their leader had, at least policywise, gained the upper hand. Jarvanka was marginalized; the Republican leadership, after health care, was discredited; the Cohn-Mnuchin tax plan was a hash. Through one window, the future looked almost rosy for Bannon. Sam Nunberg, the former Trump loyalist who was now wholly a Bannon loyalist, believed that Bannon would stay in the White House for two years and then leave to run Trump's reelection campaign. "If you can get this idiot elected twice," Nunberg marveled, you would achieve something like immortality in politics.

But through another window, Bannon couldn't possibly remain in place. He

seemed to have moved into a heightened state that allowed him to see just how ridiculous the White House had become. He could barely hold his tongue—indeed, he couldn't hold it. Pressed, he could not see the future of the Trump administration. And, while many Bannonites argued the case for Jarvanka ineffectiveness and irrelevance—just ignore them, they said—Bannon, with mounting ferocity and pubic venom, could abide them less and less every day.

Bannon, continuing to wait for his call to join the president in Bedminster, decided that he would force the situation and offered his resignation to Kelly. But this was in fact a game of chicken: he wanted to stay. On the other hand, he wanted Jarvanka to go. And that became an effective ultimatum.

* * *

At lunch on August 8, in the Clubhouse at Bedminster—amid Trumpish chandeliers, golf trophies, and tournament plaques—the president was flanked by Tom Price, the secretary of health and human services, and his wife, Melania. Kellyanne Conway was at the lunch; so were Kushner and several others. This was one of the "make-work" events—over lunch, there was a discussion of the opioid crisis, which was then followed by a statement from the president and a brief round of questions from reporters. While reading the statement in a monotone, Trump kept his head down, propping it on his elbows.

After taking some humdrum questions about opioids, he was suddenly asked about North Korea, and, quite as though in stop-action animation, he seemed to come alive.

North Korea had been a heavy-on-detail, short-on-answers problem that that he believed was the product of lesser minds and weaker resolve—and that he had trouble paying attention to. What's more, he had increasingly personalized his antagonism with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, referring to him often with derogatory epithets.

His staff had not prepared him for this, but, in apparent relief that he could digress from the opioid discussion, as well as sudden satisfaction at the opportunity to address this nagging problem, he ventured out, in language that he'd repeated often in private—as he repeated everything often—to the precipice of an international crisis.

"North Korea best not make any more threats to the United States. They will be met with the fire and the fury like the world has never seen. He has been very threatening beyond a normal state, and as I said they will be met with fire and fury and frankly power, the likes of which this world has never seen before. Thank you."

* * *

North Korea, a situation the president had been consistently advised to downplay, now became the central subject of the rest of the week—with most senior staff occupied not so much by the topic itself, but by how to respond to

the president, who was threatening to "blow" again.

Against this background, almost no one paid attention to the announcement by the Trump supporter and American neo-Nazi Richard Spencer that he was organizing a protest at the University of Virginia, in Charlottesville, over the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee. "Unite the Right," the theme of the rally called for Saturday, August 12, was explicitly designed to link Trump's politics with white nationalism.

On August 11, with the president in Bedminster continuing to threaten North Korea—and also, inexplicably to almost everyone on his staff, threatening military intervention in Venezuela—Spencer called for an evening protest.

At 8:45 p.m.—with the president in for the night in Bedminster—about 250 young men dressed in khaki pants and polo shirts, quite a Trump style of dress, began an organized parade across the UVA campus while carrying kerosene torches. Parade monitors with headsets directed the scene. At a signal, the marchers began chanting official movement slogans: "Blood and soil!" "You will not replace us!" "Jews will not replace us!" Soon, at the center of campus, near a statue of UVA's founder, Thomas Jefferson, Spencer's group was met by a counterprotest. With virtually no police presence, the first of the weekend's melees and injuries ensued.

Beginning again at eight o'clock the next morning, the park near the Lee statue became the battleground of a suddenly surging white racist movement, with clubs, shields, mace, pistols, and automatic rifles (Virginia is an "open carry" state)—a movement seemingly, and to liberal horror, born out of the Trump campaign and election, as in fact Richard Spencer intended it to seem. Opposing the demonstrators was a hardened, militant left called to the barricades. You could hardly have better set an end-times scene, no matter the limited numbers of protesters. Much of the morning involved a series of charges and countercharges—a rocks-and-bottles combat, with a seemingly hands-off police force standing by.

In Bedminster, there was still little awareness of the unfolding events in Charlottesville. But then, at about one o'clock in the afternoon, James Alex Fields Jr., a twenty-year-old would-be Nazi, plunged his Dodge Charger into a group of counterprotesters, killing thirty-two-year-old Heather Heyer and injuring a score of others.

In a tweet hurriedly composed by his staff, the president declared: "We ALL must be united & condemn all that hate stands for. There is no place for this kind of violence in America. Lets come together as one!"

Otherwise, however, it was largely business as usual for the president—Charlottesville was a mere distraction, and indeed, the staff's goal was to keep him off North Korea. The main event in Bedminster that day was the ceremonial signing of an act extending the funding of a program that let veterans obtain medical care outside VA hospitals. The signing was held in a big ballroom at the Clubhouse two hours after Alex Field's attack.

During the signing, Trump took a moment to condemn the "hatred, bigotry,

and violence on many sides" in Charlottesville. Almost immediately, the president came under attack for the distinction he had appeared to refuse to draw between avowed racists and the other side. As Richard Spencer had correctly understood, the president's sympathies were muddled. However easy and obvious it was to condemn white racists—even self-styled neo-Nazis—he instinctively resisted.

It wasn't until the next morning that the White House finally tried to clarify Trump's position with a formal statement: "The President said very strongly in his statement yesterday that he condemns all forms of violence, bigotry, and hatred. Of course that includes white supremacists, KKK neo-Nazi and all extremist groups. He called for national unity and bringing all Americans together."

But in fact he hadn't condemned white supremacists, KKK, and neo-Nazis—and he continued to be stubborn about not doing it.

In a call to Bannon, Trump sought help making his case: "Where does this all end? Are they going to take down the Washington Monument, Mount Rushmore, Mount Vernon?" Bannon—still not receiving his summons to Bedminster—urged this to be the line: the president should condemn violence and misfits and also defend history (even with Trump's weak grasp of it). Stressing the literal issue of monuments would bedevil the left and comfort the right.

But Jared and Ivanka, with Kelly backing them, urged presidential behavior. Their plan was to have Trump return to the White House and address the issue with a forceful censure of hate groups and racial politics—exactly the unambiguous sort of position Richard Spencer had strategically bet Trump would not willingly take.

Bannon, understanding these same currents in Trump, lobbied Kelly and told him that the Jarvanka approach would backfire: *It will be clear his heart's not in it*, said Bannon.

The president arrived shortly before eleven o'clock on Monday morning at a White House under construction and a wall of shouted questions about Charlottesville: "Do you condemn the actions of neo-Nazis? Do you condemn the actions of white supremacists?" Some ninety minutes later he stood in the Diplomatic Reception Room, his eyes locked on to the teleprompter, and delivered a six-minute statement.

Before getting to the point: "Our economy is now strong. The stock market continues to hit record highs, unemployment is at a sixteen-year low, and businesses are more optimistic than ever before. Companies are moving back to the United States and bringing many thousands of jobs with them. We have already created over one million jobs since I took office."

And only then: "We must love each other, show affection for each other and unite together in condemnation of hatred, bigotry and violence. . . . We must rediscover the bonds of love and loyalty that bring us together as Americans. . . . Racism is evil. And those who cause violence in its name are criminals and thugs including the KKK, neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and other hate groups that

are repugnant to everything we hold dear as Americans."

It was a reluctant mini-grovel. It was something of a restaging of the take-it-back birther speech about Obama during the campaign: much distraction and obfuscation, then a mumbled acknowledgment. Similarly, he looked here, trying to tow the accepted line on Charlottesville, like a kid called on the carpet. Resentful and petulant, he was clearly reading forced lines.

And in fact he got little credit for these presidential-style remarks, with reporters shouting questions about why it had taken him so long to address the issue. As he got back on Marine One to head to Andrews Air Force Base and on to JFK and then into Manhattan and Trump Tower, his mood was dark and I-told-you-so. Privately, he kept trying to rationalize why someone would be a member of the KKK—that is, they might not actually believe what the KKK believed, and the KKK probably does not believe what it used to believe, and, anyway, who really knows what the KKK believes now? In fact, he said, his own father was accused of being involved with the KKK—not true. (In fact, yes, true.)

The next day, Tuesday, August 15, the White House had a news conference scheduled at Trump Tower. Bannon urged Kelly to cancel it. It was a nothing conference anyway. Its premise was about infrastructure—about undoing an environmental regulation that could help get projects started faster—but it was really just another effort to show that Trump was working and not just on a holiday. So why bother? What's more, Bannon told Kelly, he could see the signs: the arrow on the Trump pressure cooker was climbing, and before long he'd blow.

The news conference went ahead anyway. Standing at the lectern in the lobby of Trump Tower, the president stayed on script for mere minutes. Defensive and self-justifying, he staked out a contrition-is-bunk, the-fault-lies-everywhere-else position and then dug in deep. He went on without an evident ability to adjust his emotions to political circumstance or, really, even to make an effort to save himself. It was yet one more example, among his many now, of the comic-absurd, movielike politician who just says whatever is on his mind. Unmediated. Crazylike.

"What about the alt-left that came charging at the, as you say, altright? Do they have any semblance of guilt? What about the fact they came charging with clubs in their hands? As far as I'm concerned that was a horrible, horrible day. . . . I think there's blame on both sides. I have no doubt about it, you don't have any doubt about it. If you reported it accurately, you would see."

Steve Bannon, still waiting in his temporary office in the EOB, thought, *Oh my god, there he goes. I told you so.*

* * *

Outside of the portion of the electorate that, as Trump once claimed, would let him shoot someone on Fifth Avenue, the civilized world was pretty much universally aghast. Everybody came to a dumbfounded moral attention. Anybody

in any position of responsibility remotely tied to some idea of establishment respectability had to disavow him. Every CEO of a public company who had associated him- or herself with the Trump White House now needed to cut the ties. The overriding issue might not even be what unreconstructed sentiments he actually seemed to hold in his heart—Bannon averred that Trump was not in fact anti-Semitic, but on the other count he wasn't sure—but that he flat-out couldn't control himself.

In the wake of the immolating news conference, all eyes were suddenly on Kelly—this was his baptism of Trump fire. Spicer, Priebus, Cohn, Powell, Bannon, Tillerson, Mattis, Mnuchin—virtually the entire senior staff and cabinet of the Trump presidency, past and present, had traveled through the stages of adventure, challenge, frustration, battle, self-justification, and doubt, before finally having to confront the very real likelihood that the president they worked for—whose presidency they bore some official responsibility for—didn't have the wherewithal to adequately function in his job. Now, after less than two weeks on the job, it was Kelly's turn to stand at that precipice.

The debate, as Bannon put it, was not about whether the president's situation was bad, but whether it was Twenty-Fifth-Amendment bad.

* * *

To Bannon, if not to Trump, the linchpin of Trumpism was China. The story of the next generation, he believed, had been written, and it was about war with China. Commercial war, trade war, cultural war, diplomatic war—it would be an all-encompassing war that few in the United States now understood needed to be fought, and that almost nobody was prepared to fight.

Bannon had compiled a list of "China hawks" that crossed political lines, going from the Breitbart gang, to former *New Republic* editor Peter Beinart—who regarded Bannon only with scorn—and orthodox liberal-progressive stalwart Robert Kuttner, the editor of the small, public policy magazine *American Prospect*. On Wednesday, August 16, the day after the president's news conference in Trump Tower, Bannon, out of the blue, called Kuttner from his EOB office to talk China.

By this point, Bannon was all but convinced that he was on the way out of the White House. He had received no invitation to join the president in Bedminster, a withering sign. That day, he had learned of the appointment of Hope Hicks as interim communications director—a Jarvanka victory. Meanwhile, the steady whisper from the Jarvanka side continued about his certain demise; it had become a constant background noise.

He was still not sure he would be fired, yet Bannon, in only the second on-the-record interview he had given since the Trump victory, called Kuttner and in effect sealed his fate. He would later maintain that the conversation was not on the record. But this was the Bannon method, in which he merely tempted fate.

If Trump was helplessly Trump in his most recent news conference, Bannon was helplessly Bannon in his chat with Kuttner. He tried to prop up what he

made sound like a weak Trump on China. He corrected, in mocking fashion, the president's bluster on North Korea—"ten million people in Seoul" will die, he declared. And he insulted his internal enemies—"they're wetting themselves."

If Trump was incapable of sounding like a president, Bannon had matched him: he was incapable of sounding like a presidential aide.

* * *

That evening, a group of Bannonites gathered near the White House for dinner. The dinner was called for the bar at the Hay-Adams hotel, but Arthur Schwartz, a Bannonite PR man, got into an altercation with the Hay-Adams bartender about switching the television from CNN to Fox, where his client, Blackstone's Stephen Schwarzman, the chairman of one of the president's business councils, was shortly to appear. The business council was hemorrhaging its CEO members after the president's Charlottesville news conference, and Trump, in a tweet, had announced that he was disbanding it. (Schwarzman had advised the president that the council was collapsing and that the president ought to at least make it look as if shutting it down was his decision.)

Schwartz, in high dudgeon, announced that he was checking out of the Hay-Adams and moving to the Trump Hotel. He also insisted that the dinner be moved two blocks away to Joe's, an outpost of Miami's Joe's Stone Crab. Matthew Boyle, the Washington political editor of Breitbart News, was swept into Schwartz's furious departure, with Schwartz upbraiding the twenty-nine-year-old for lighting a cigarette. "I don't know anyone who smokes," he sniffed. Although Schwartz was firmly in the Bannon camp, this seemed to be a general dig at the Breitbart people for being low-class.

Both dedicated Bannonites debated the effect of Bannon's interview, which had caught everybody in the Bannon universe off guard. Neither man could understand why he would have given an interview.

Was Bannon finished?

*No, no, no*, argued Schwartz. He might have been a few weeks ago when Murdoch had ganged up with McMaster and gone to the president and pressed him to dump Bannon. But then Sheldon had fixed it, Schwartz said.

"Steve stayed home when Abbas came," said Schwartz. "He wasn't going to breathe the air that a terrorist breathed." This was the precise line Schwartz would hand out to reporters in the coming days in a further effort to establish Bannon's right-wing virtue.

Alexandra Preate, Bannon's lieutenant, arrived at Joe's out of breath. Seconds later, Jason Miller, another PR man in the Bannon fold, arrived. During the transition, Miller had been slated to be the communications director, but then it had come out that Miller had had a relationship with another staff member who announced in a tweet she was pregnant by Miller—as was also, at this point, Miller's wife. Miller, who had lost his promised White House job but continued serving as an outside Trump and Bannon voice, was now, with the recent birth of the child—with the recent birth of both of his children by

different women—facing another wave of difficult press. Still, even he was obsessively focused on what Bannon's interview might mean.

By now the table was buzzing with speculation.

How would the president react?

How would Kelly react?

Was this curtains?

For a group of people in touch with Bannon on an almost moment-by-moment basis, it was remarkable that nobody seemed to understand that, forcibly or otherwise, he would surely be moving out of the White House. On the contrary, the damaging interview was, by consensus, converted into a brilliant strategic move. Bannon was not going anywhere—not least because there was no Trump without Bannon.

It was an excited dinner, a revved-up occasion involving a passionate group of people all attached to the man who they believed was the most compelling figure in Washington. They saw him as some sort of irreducible element: Bannon was Bannon was Bannon.

As the evening went on, Matt Boyle got in a furious text-message fight with Jonathan Swan, a White House reporter who had written a story about Bannon being on the losing side in the Bannon-McMaster showdown. Soon almost every well-connected reporter in the city was checking in with somebody at the table. When a text came in, the recipient would hold up his or her phone if it showed a notable reporter's name. At one point, Bannon texted Schwartz some talking points. Could it be that this was just one more day in the endless Trump drama?

Schwartz, who seemed to regard Trump's stupidity as a political given, offered a vigorous analysis of why Trump could not do without Bannon. Then, seeking more proof of his theory, Schwartz said he was texting Sam Nunberg, generally regarded as the man who understood Trump's whims and impulses best, and who had sagely predicted Bannon's survival at each doubtful moment in the past months.

"Nunberg always knows," said Schwartz.

Seconds later, Schwartz looked up. His eyes widened and for a moment he went silent. Then he said: "Nunberg says Bannon's dead."

And, indeed, unbeknownst to the Bannonites, even those closest to him, Bannon was at that moment finalizing his exit with Kelly. By the next day, he would be packing up his little office, and on Monday, when Trump would return to a refurbished West Wing—a paint job, new furniture, and new rugs, its look tilting toward the Trump Hotel—Steve Bannon would be back on Capitol Hill at the Breitbart Embassy, still, he was confident, the chief strategist for the Trump revolution.

# EPILOGUE:
# BANNON AND TRUMP

On a sweltering morning in October 2017, the man who had more or less single-handedly brought about the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris climate accord, stood on the steps of the Breitbart town house and said, with a hearty laugh, "I guess global warming is real."

Steve Bannon had lost twenty pounds since his exit from the White House six weeks before—he was on a crash all-sushi diet. "That building," said his friend David Bossie, speaking about all White Houses but especially the Trump White House, "takes perfectly healthy people and turns them into old, unhealthy people." But Bannon, who Bossie had declared on virtual life support during his final days in the West Wing, was again, by his own description, "on fire." He had moved out of the Arlington "safe house" and reestablished himself back at the Breitbart Embassy, turning it into a headquarters for the next stage of the Trump movement, which might not include Trump at all.

Asked about Trump's leadership of the nationalist-populist movement, Bannon registered a not inconsiderable change in the country's political landscape: "I am the leader of the national-populist movement."

One cause of Bannon's boast and new resolve was that Trump, for no reason that Bannon could quite divine, had embraced Mitch McConnell's establishment candidate in the recent Republican run-off in Alabama rather than support the nat-pop choice for the Senate seat vacated by now attorney general Jeff Sessions. After all, McConnell and the president were barely on speaking terms. From his August "working holiday" in Bedminster, the president's staff had tried to organize a makeup meeting with McConnell, but McConnell's staff had sent back word that it wouldn't be possible because the Senate leader would be getting a haircut.

But the president—ever hurt and confused by his inability to get along with the congressional leadership, and then, conversely, enraged by their refusal to get along with him—had gone all-in for the McConnell-backed Luther Strange, who had run against Bannon's candidate, the right-wing firebrand Roy Moore. (Even by Alabama standards, Moore was far right: he had been removed as chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court for defying a federal court order to take down a monument of the Ten Commandments in the Alabama judicial building.)

For Bannon, the president's political thinking had been obtuse at best. He was unlikely to get anything from McConnell—and indeed Trump had demanded

nothing for his support for Luther Strange, which came via an unplanned tweet in August. Strange's prospects were not only dim, but he was likely to lose in a humiliating fashion. Roy Moore was the clear candidate of the Trump base—and he was Bannon's candidate. Hence, that would be the contest: Trump against Bannon. In fact, the president really didn't have to support anyone—no one would have complained if he'd stayed neutral in a primary race. Or, he could have tacitly supported Strange and not doubled down with more and more insistent tweets.

For Bannon, this episode was not only about the president's continuing and curious confusion about what he represented, but about his mercurial, intemperate, and often cockamamie motivations. Against all political logic, Trump had supported Luther Strange, he told Bannon, because "Luther's my friend."

"He said it like a nine-year-old," said Bannon, recoiling, and noting that there was no universe in which Trump and Strange were actually friends.

For every member of the White House senior staff this would be the lasting conundrum of dealing with President Trump: the "why" of his often baffling behavior.

"The president fundamentally wants to be liked" was Katie Walsh's analysis. "He just fundamentally needs to be liked so badly that it's always . . . everything is a struggle for him."

This translated into a constant need to win something—anything. Equally important, it was essential that he *look* like a winner. Of course, trying to win without consideration, plan, or clear goals had, in the course of the administration's first nine months, resulted in almost nothing but losses. At the same time, confounding all political logic, that lack of a plan, that impulsivity, that apparent *joie de guerre*, had helped create the disruptiveness that seemed to so joyously shatter the status quo for so many.

But now, Bannon thought, that novelty was finally wearing off.

For Bannon, the Strange-Moore race had been a test of the Trump cult of personality. Certainly Trump continued to believe that people were following *him*, that he was the movement—and that his support was worth 8 to 10 points in any race. Bannon had decided to test this thesis and to do it as dramatically as possible. All told, the Senate Republican leadership and others spent $32 million on Strange's campaign, while Moore's campaign spent $2 million.

Trump, though aware of Strange's deep polling deficit, had agreed to extend his support in a personal trip. But his appearance in Huntsville, Alabama, on September 22, before a Trump-size crowd, was a political flatliner. It was a full-on Trump speech, ninety minutes of rambling and improvisation—the wall would be built (now it was a see-through wall), Russian interference in the U.S. election was a hoax, he would fire anybody on his cabinet who supported Moore. But, while his base turned out en masse, still drawn to Trump the novelty, his cheerleading for Luther Strange drew at best a muted response. As the crowd became restless, the event threatened to become a hopeless embarrassment.

Reading his audience and desperate to find a way out, Trump suddenly threw

out a line about Colin Kaepernick taking to his knee while the national anthem played at a National Football League game. The line got a standing ovation. The president thereupon promptly abandoned Luther Strange for the rest of the speech. Likewise, for the next week he continued to whip the NFL. Pay no attention to Strange's resounding defeat five days after the event in Huntsville. Ignore the size and scale of Trump's rejection and the Moore-Bannon triumph, with its hint of new disruptions to come. Now Trump had a new topic, and a winning one: the Knee.

* * *

The fundamental premise of nearly everybody who joined the Trump White House was, *This can work. We can help make this work*. Now, only three-quarters of the way through just the first year of Trump's term, there was literally not one member of the senior staff who could any longer be confident of that premise. Arguably—and on many days indubitably—most members of the senior staff believed that the sole upside of being part of the Trump White House was to help prevent worse from happening.

In early October, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's fate was sealed—if his obvious ambivalence toward the president had not already sealed it—by the revelation that he had called the president "a fucking moron."

This—insulting Donald Trump's intelligence—was both the thing you could not do and the thing—drawing there-but-for-the-grace-of-God guffaws across the senior staff—that everybody was guilty of. Everyone, in his or her own way, struggled to express the baldly obvious fact that the president did not know enough, did not know what he didn't know, did not particularly care, and, to boot, was confident if not serene in his unquestioned certitudes. There was now a fair amount of back-of-the-classroom giggling about who had called Trump what. For Steve Mnuchin and Reince Priebus, he was an "idiot." For Gary Cohn, he was "dumb as shit." For H. R. McMaster he was a "dope." The list went on.

Tillerson would merely become yet another example of a subordinate who believed that his own abilities could somehow compensate for Trump's failings.

Aligned with Tillerson were the three generals, Mattis, McMasters, and Kelly, each seeing themselves as representing maturity, stability, and restraint. And each, of course, was resented by Trump for it. The suggestion that any or all of these men might be more focused and even tempered than Trump himself was cause for sulking and tantrums on the president's part.

The daily discussion among senior staffers, those still there and those now gone—all of whom had written off Tillerson's future in the Trump administration—was how long General Kelly would last as chief of staff. There was something of a virtual office pool, and the joke was that Reince Priebus was likely to be Trump's longest-serving chief of staff. Kelly's distaste for the president was open knowledge—in his every word and gesture he condescended to Trump—the president's distaste for Kelly even more so. It was sport for the president to defy Kelly, who had become the one thing in his life he had never been able to

abide: a disapproving and censorious father figure.

* * *

There really were no illusions at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Kelly's long-suffering antipathy toward the president was rivaled only by his scorn for the president's family—"Kushner," he pronounced, was "insubordinate." Cohn's derisive contempt for Kushner as well as the president was even greater. In return, the president heaped more abuse on Cohn—the former president of Goldman Sachs was now a "complete idiot, dumber than dumb." In fact, the president had also stopped defending his own family, wondering when they would "take the hint and go home."

But, of course, this was still politics: those who could overcome shame or disbelief—and, despite all Trumpian coarseness and absurdity, suck up to him and humor him—might achieve unique political advantage. As it happened, few could.

By October, however, many on the president's staff took particular notice of one of the few remaining Trump opportunists: Nikki Haley, the UN ambassador. Haley—"as ambitious as Lucifer," in the characterization of one member of the senior staff—had concluded that Trump's tenure would last, at best, a single term, and that she, with requisite submission, could be his heir apparent. Haley had courted and befriended Ivanka, and Ivanka had brought her into the family circle, where she had become a particular focus of Trump's attention, and he of hers. Haley, as had become increasingly evident to the wider foreign policy and national security team, was the family's pick for secretary of state after Rex Tillerson's inevitable resignation. (Likewise, in this shuffle, Dina Powell would replace Haley at the UN.)

The president had been spending a notable amount of private time with Haley on Air Force One and was seen to be grooming her for a national political future. Haley, who was much more of a traditional Republican, one with a pronounced moderate streak—a type increasingly known as a Jarvanka Republican—was, evident to many, being mentored in Trumpian ways. The danger here, offered one senior Trumper, "is that she is so much smarter than him."

What now existed, even before the end of the president's first year, was an effective power vacuum. The president, in his failure to move beyond daily chaos, had hardly seized the day. But, as sure as politics, someone would.

In that sense, the Trumpian and Republican future was already moving beyond this White House. There was Bannon, working from the outside and trying to take over the Trump movement. There was the Republican leadership in Congress, trying to stymie Trumpism—if not slay it. There was John McCain, doing his best to embarrass it. There was the special counsel's office, pursuing the president and many of those around him.

The stakes were very clear to Bannon. Haley, quite an un-Trumpian figure, but by far the closest of any of his cabinet members to him, might, with clever political wiles, entice Trump to hand her the Trumpian revolution. Indeed,

fearing Haley's hold on the president, Bannon's side had—the very morning that Bannon had stood on the steps of the Breitbart town house in the unseasonable October weather—gone into overdrive to push the CIA's Mike Pompeo for State after Tillerson's departure.

This was all part of the next stage of Trumpism—to protect it from Trump.

* * *

General Kelly was conscientiously and grimly trying to purge the West Wing chaos. He had begun by compartmentalizing the sources and nature of the chaos. The overriding source, of course, was the president's own eruptions, which Kelly could not control and had resigned himself to accepting. As for the ancillary chaos, much of it had been calmed by the elimination of Bannon, Priebus, Scaramucci, and Spicer, with the effect of making it quite a Jarvanka-controlled West Wing.

Now, nine months in, the administration faced the additional problem that it was very hard to hire anyone of stature to replace the senior people who had departed. And the stature of those who remained seemed to be more diminutive by the week.

Hope Hicks, at twenty-eight, and Stephen Miller, at thirty-two, both of whom had begun as effective interns on the campaign, were now among the seniormost figures in the White House. Hicks had assumed command of the communications operation, and Miller had effectively replaced Bannon as the senior political strategist.

After the Scaramucci fiasco, and the realization that the position of communications director would be vastly harder to fill, Hicks was assigned the job as the "interim" director. She was given the interim title partly because it seemed implausible that she was qualified to run an already battered messaging operation, and partly because if she *was* given the permanent job everyone would assume that the president was effectively calling the daily shots. But by the middle of September, interim was quietly converted to permanent.

In the larger media and political world, Miller—who Bannon referred to as "my typist"—was a figure of ever increasing incredulity. He could hardly be taken out in public without engaging in some screwball, if not screeching, fit of denunciation and grievance. He was the de facto crafter of policy and speeches, and yet up until now he had largely only taken dictation.

Most problematic of all, Hicks and Miller, along with everyone on the Jarvanka side, were now directly connected to actions involved in the Russian investigation or efforts to spin it, deflect it, or, indeed, cover it up. Miller and Hicks had drafted—or at least typed—Kushner's version of the first letter written at Bedminster to fire Comey. Hicks had joined with Kushner and his wife to draft on Air Force One the Trump-directed press release about Don Jr. and Kushner's meeting with the Russians in Trump Tower.

In its way, this had become the defining issue for the White House staff: who had been in what inopportune room. And even beyond the general chaos, the

constant legal danger formed part of the high barrier to getting people to come work in the West Wing.

Kushner and his wife—now largely regarded as a time bomb inside the White House—were spending considerable time on their own defense and battling a sense of mounting paranoia, not least about what members of the senior staff who had already exited the West Wing might now say about them. Kushner, in the middle of October, would, curiously, add to his legal team Charles Harder, the libel lawyer who had defended both Hulk Hogan in his libel suit against Gawker, the Internet gossip site, and Melania Trump in her suit against the *Daily Mail*. The implied threat to media and to critics was clear. Talk about Jared Kushner at your peril. It also likely meant that Donald Trump was yet managing the White House's legal defense, slotting in his favorite "tough guy" lawyers.

Beyond Donald Trump's own daily antics, here was the consuming issue of the White House: the ongoing investigation directed by Robert Mueller. The father, the daughter, the son-in-law, his father, the extended family exposure, the prosecutor, the retainers looking to save their own skins, the staffers who Trump had rewarded with the back of his hand—it all threatened, in Bannon's view, to make Shakespeare look like Dr. Seuss.

Everyone waited for the dominoes to fall, and to see how the president, in his fury, might react and change the game again.

* * *

Steve Bannon was telling people he thought there was a 33.3 percent chance that the Mueller investigation would lead to the impeachment of the president, a 33.3 percent chance that Trump would resign, perhaps in the wake of a threat by the cabinet to act on the Twenty-Fifth Amendment (by which the cabinet can remove the president in the event of his incapacitation), and a 33.3 percent chance that he would limp to the end of his term. In any event, there would certainly not be a second term, or even an attempt at one.

"He's not going to make it," said Bannon at the Breitbart Embassy. "He's lost his stuff."

Less volubly, Bannon was telling people something else: he, Steve Bannon, was going to run for president in 2020. The locution, "If I were president . . ." was turning into, "When I am president . . ."

The top Trump donors from 2016 were in his camp, Bannon claimed: Sheldon Adelson, the Mercers, Bernie Marcus, and Peter Thiel. In short order, and as though he had been preparing for this move for some time, Bannon had left the White House and quickly thrown together a rump campaign organization. The heretofore behind-the-scenes Bannon was methodically meeting with every conservative leader in the country—doing his best, as he put it, to "kiss the ass and pay homage to all the gray-beards." And he was keynoting a list of must-attend conservative events.

"Why is Steve speaking? I didn't know he spoke," the president remarked

with puzzlement and rising worry to aides.

Trump had been upstaged in other ways as well. He had been scheduled for a major *60 Minutes* interview in September, but this was abruptly canceled after Bannon's *60 Minutes* interview with Charlie Rose on September 11. The president's advisers felt he shouldn't put himself in a position where he would be compared with Bannon. The worry among staffers—all of them concerned that Trump's rambling and his alarming repetitions (the same sentences delivered with the same expressions minutes apart) had significantly increased, and that his ability to stay focused, never great, had notably declined—was that he was likely to suffer by such a comparison. Instead, the interview with Trump was offered to Sean Hannity—with a preview of the questions.

Bannon was also taking the Breitbart opposition research group—the same forensic accountant types who had put together the damning *Clinton Cash* revelations—and focusing it on what he characterized as the "political elites." This was a catchall list of enemies that included as many Republicans as Democrats.

Most of all, Bannon was focused on fielding candidates for 2018. While the president had repeatedly threatened to support primary challenges against his enemies, in the end, with his aggressive head start, it was Bannon who would be leading these challenges. It was Bannon spreading fear in the Republican Party, not Trump. Indeed, Bannon was willing to pick outré if not whacky candidates—including former Staten Island congressman Michael Grimm, who had done a stint in federal prison—to demonstrate, as he had demonstrated with Trump, the scale, artfulness, and menace of Bannon-style politics. Although the Republicans in the 2018 congressional races were looking, according to Bannon's numbers, at a 15-point deficit, it was Bannon's belief that the more extreme the right-wing challenge appeared, the more likely the Democrats would field left-wing nutters even less electable than right-wing nutters. The disruption had just begun.

Trump, in Bannon's view, was a chapter, or even a detour, in the Trump revolution, which had always been about weaknesses in the two major parties. The Trump presidency—however long it lasted—had created the opening that would provide the true outsiders their opportunity. Trump was just the beginning.

Standing on the Breitbart steps that October morning, Bannon smiled and said: "It's going to be wild as shit."

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MICHAEL WOLFF has received numerous awards for his work, including two National Magazine Awards. He has been a regular columnist for *Vanity Fair, New York, The Hollywood Reporter*, British *GQ, USA Today*, and *The Guardian*. He is the author of six prior books, including the bestselling *Burn Rate* and *The Man Who Owns the News*. He lives in Manhattan with his husband Carl.

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