



## Donald Trump Didn't Want to Be President

One year ago: the plan to lose, and the administration's shocked first days.

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Election Night: It "looked as if he had seen a ghost."

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n the afternoon of November 8, 2016, [Kellyanne Conway](#) settled into her glass office at Trump Tower. Right up

until the last weeks of the race, the campaign headquarters had remained a listless place. All that seemed to distinguish it from a corporate back office were a few posters with right-wing slogans.

Conway, the campaign's manager, was in a remarkably buoyant mood, considering she was about to experience a resounding, if not cataclysmic, defeat. Donald Trump would lose the election — of this she was sure — but he would quite possibly hold the defeat to under six points. That was a substantial victory. As for the looming defeat itself, she shrugged it off: It was [Reince Priebus](#)'s fault, not hers.

She had spent a good part of the day calling friends and allies in the political world and [blaming Priebus](#), the chairman of the Republican National Committee. Now she briefed some of the television producers and anchors whom she had been carefully courting since joining the Trump campaign — and with whom she had been actively interviewing in the last few weeks, hoping to land a permanent on-air job after the election.

Even though the numbers in a few key states had appeared to be changing to Trump's advantage, neither Conway nor Trump himself nor his son-in-law, [Jared Kushner](#) — the effective head of the campaign — wavered in their certainty: Their unexpected adventure would soon be over. Not only would Trump *not* be president, almost everyone in the campaign agreed, he should probably not be. Conveniently, the former conviction meant nobody had to deal with the latter issue.

As the campaign came to an end, Trump himself was sanguine. His ultimate goal, after all, had never been to win. "I can be the most famous man in the world," he had told his aide Sam Nunberg at the outset of the race. His longtime friend [Roger Ailes](#), the former head of Fox News, liked to say that if you want a career in television, first run for president. Now Trump, encouraged by Ailes, was floating rumors about a Trump network. It was a great future. He would come out of this campaign, Trump assured Ailes, with a far more powerful brand and untold opportunities.

“This is bigger than I ever dreamed of,” he told Ailes a week before the election. “I don’t think about losing, because it isn’t losing. We’ve totally won.”

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*Watch*

## The Postelection Chaos at Trump Tower



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**From the start**, the leitmotif for Trump about his own campaign was how crappy it was, and how everybody involved in it was a loser. In August, when he was trailing [Hillary Clinton](#) by more than 12 points, he couldn’t conjure even a far-fetched scenario for achieving an electoral victory. He was baffled when the right-wing billionaire Robert Mercer, a Ted Cruz backer whom Trump barely knew, offered him an infusion of \$5 million. When Mercer and his daughter Rebekah presented their plan to take over the campaign and install their lieutenants, [Steve Bannon](#) and Conway, Trump didn’t resist. He only expressed vast incomprehension about why anyone would want to do that. “This thing,” he told the Mercers, “is so fucked up.”

Bannon, who became chief executive of Trump’s team in mid-August, called it “the broke-dick campaign.” Almost immediately,

he saw that it was hampered by an even deeper structural flaw: The candidate who billed himself as a billionaire — ten times over — refused to invest his own money in it. Bannon told Kushner that, after the first debate in September, they would need another \$50 million to cover them until Election Day.

“No way we’ll get 50 million unless we can guarantee him victory,” said a clear-eyed Kushner.

“Twenty-five million?” prodded Bannon.

“If we can say victory is more than likely.”

In the end, the best Trump would do is to loan the campaign \$10 million, provided he got it back as soon as they could raise other money. Steve Mnuchin, the campaign’s finance chairman, came to collect the loan with the wire instructions ready to go so Trump couldn’t conveniently forget to send the money.

Most presidential candidates spend their entire careers, if not their lives from adolescence, preparing for the role. They rise up the ladder of elected offices, perfect a public face, and prepare themselves to win and to govern. The Trump calculation, quite a conscious one, was different. The candidate and his top lieutenants believed they could get all the benefits of *almost* becoming president without having to change their behavior or their worldview one whit. Almost everybody on the Trump team, in fact, came with the kind of messy conflicts bound to bite a president once he was in office. [Michael Flynn](#), the retired general who served as Trump’s opening act at campaign rallies, had been told by his friends that it had not been a good idea to take \$45,000 from the Russians for a speech. “Well, it would only be a problem if we won,” Flynn assured them.

Not only did Trump disregard the potential conflicts of his own business deals and real-estate holdings, he audaciously [refused to release his tax returns](#). Why should he? Once he lost, Trump would be both insanely famous and a martyr to Crooked Hillary. His daughter Ivanka and son-in-law Jared would be international celebrities. Steve Bannon would become the de facto head of the

tea-party movement. Kellyanne Conway would be a cable-news star. Melania Trump, who had been assured by her husband that he wouldn't become president, could return to inconspicuously lunching. Losing would work out for everybody. Losing was winning.

Shortly after 8 p.m. on Election Night, when the unexpected trend — Trump might actually win — seemed confirmed, Don Jr. told a friend that his father, or DJT, as he calls him, looked as if he had seen a ghost. Melania was in tears — and not of joy.

There was, in the space of little more than an hour, in Steve Bannon's not unamused observation, a befuddled Trump morphing into a disbelieving Trump and then into a horrified Trump. But still to come was the final transformation: Suddenly, Donald Trump became a man who believed that he deserved to be, and was wholly capable of being, the president of the United States.

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**From the moment** of victory, the Trump administration became a looking-glass presidency: Every inverse assumption about how to assemble and run a White House was enacted and compounded, many times over. The decisions that Trump and his top advisers made in those first few months — from the slapdash transition to the disarray in the West Wing — set the stage for the chaos and dysfunction that have persisted throughout his first year in office. This was a real-life version of Mel Brooks's *The Producers*, where the mistaken outcome trusted by everyone in Trump's inner circle — that they would lose the election — wound up exposing them for who they really were.

On the Saturday after the election, Trump received a small group of well-wishers in his triplex apartment in Trump Tower. Even his close friends were still shocked and bewildered, and there was a dazed quality to the gathering. But Trump himself was mostly looking at the clock. [Rupert Murdoch](#), who had promised to pay a call on the president-elect, was running late. When some of the guests made a move to leave, an increasingly agitated Trump assured them that Rupert was on his way. "He's one of the greats,

the last of the greats,” Trump said. “You have to stay to see him.” Not grasping that he was now the most powerful man in the world, Trump was still trying mightily to curry favor with a media mogul who had long disdained him as a charlatan and fool.

Few people who knew Trump had illusions about him. That was his appeal: He was what he was. Twinkle in his eye, larceny in his soul. Everybody in his rich-guy social circle knew about his wide-ranging ignorance. Early in the campaign, Sam Nunberg was sent to explain the Constitution to the candidate. “I got as far as the Fourth Amendment,” Nunberg recalled, “before his finger is pulling down on his lip and his eyes are rolling back in his head.”

The day after the election, the bare-bones transition team that had been set up during the campaign hurriedly shifted from Washington to Trump Tower. The building — now the headquarters of a populist revolution — suddenly seemed like an alien spaceship on Fifth Avenue. But its otherworldly air helped obscure the fact that few in Trump’s inner circle, with their overnight responsibility for assembling a government, had any relevant experience.

Ailes, a veteran of the Nixon, Reagan, and Bush 41 administrations, tried to impress on Trump the need to create a White House structure that could serve and protect him. “You need a son of a bitch as your chief of staff,” he told Trump. “And you need a son of a bitch who knows Washington. You’ll want to be your own son of a bitch, but you don’t know Washington.” Ailes had a suggestion: [John Boehner](#), who had stepped down as Speaker of the House only a year earlier.

“Who’s that?” asked Trump.

As much as the president himself, the chief of staff determines how the Executive branch — which employs 4 million people — will run. The job has been construed as deputy president, or even prime minister. But Trump had no interest in appointing a strong chief of staff with a deep knowledge of Washington. Among his early choices for the job was Kushner — a man with no political

experience beyond his role as a calm and flattering body man to Trump during the campaign.

It was [Ann Coulter](#) who finally took the president-elect aside. “Nobody is apparently telling you this,” she told him. “But you can’t. You just can’t hire your children.”

Bowing to pressure, Trump floated the idea of giving the job to Steve Bannon, only to have the notion soundly ridiculed. Murdoch told Trump that Bannon would be a dangerous choice. [Joe Scarborough](#), the former congressman and co-host of MSNBC’s *Morning Joe*, told the president-elect that “Washington will go up in flames” if Bannon became chief of staff.

So Trump turned to Reince Priebus, the RNC chairman, who had become the subject of intense lobbying by House Speaker Paul Ryan and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. If congressional leaders were going to have to deal with an alien like Donald Trump, then best they do it with the help of one of their own kind.

Jim Baker, chief of staff for both Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush and almost everybody’s model for managing the West Wing, advised Priebus not to take the job. Priebus had his own reservations: He had come out of his first long meeting with Trump thinking it had been a disconcertingly weird experience. Trump talked nonstop and constantly repeated himself.

“Here’s the deal,” a close Trump associate told Priebus. “In an hour meeting with him, you’re going to hear 54 minutes of stories, and they’re going to be the same stories over and over again. So you have to have one point to make, and you pepper it in whenever you can.”

But the Priebus appointment, announced in mid-November, put Bannon on a co-equal level to the new chief of staff. Even with the top job, Priebus would be a weak figure, in the traditional mold of most Trump lieutenants over the years. There would be one chief of staff in name — the unimportant one — and others like Bannon

and Kushner, more important in practice, ensuring both chaos and Trump's independence.

Priebus demonstrated no ability to keep Trump from talking to anyone who wanted his ear. The president-elect enjoyed being courted. On December 14, a high-level delegation from Silicon Valley came to Trump Tower to meet him. Later that afternoon, according to a source privy to details of the conversation, Trump called Rupert Murdoch, who asked him how the meeting had gone.

“Oh, great, just great,” said Trump. “These guys really need my help. Obama was not very favorable to them, too much regulation. This is really an opportunity for me to help them.”

“Donald,” said Murdoch, “for eight years these guys had Obama in their pocket. They practically ran the administration. They don't need your help.”

“Take this [H-1B visa issue](#). They really need these H-1B visas.”

Murdoch suggested that taking a liberal approach to H-1B visas, which open America's doors to select immigrants, might be hard to square with his promises to build a wall and close the borders. But Trump seemed unconcerned, assuring Murdoch, “We'll figure it out.”

“What a fucking idiot,” said Murdoch, shrugging, as he got off the phone.

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**Steve Bannon**, suddenly among the world's most powerful men, was running late. It was the evening of January 3, 2017 — a little more than two weeks before Trump's inauguration — and Bannon had promised to come to a small dinner arranged by mutual friends in a Greenwich Village townhouse to see Roger Ailes.

Snow was threatening, and for a while the dinner appeared doubtful. But the 76-year-old Ailes, who was as dumbfounded by his old friend Donald Trump's victory as everyone else, understood that he was passing the right-wing torch to Bannon. Ailes's Fox

News, with its \$1.5 billion in annual profits, had dominated Republican politics for two decades. Now Bannon's Breitbart News, with its mere \$1.5 million in annual profits, was claiming that role. For 30 years, Ailes — until recently the single most powerful person in conservative politics — had humored and tolerated Trump, but in the end Bannon and [Breitbart](#) had elected him.

At 9:30, having extricated himself from Trump Tower, Bannon finally arrived at the dinner, three hours late. Wearing a disheveled blazer, his signature pairing of two shirts, and military fatigues, the unshaven, overweight 63-year-old immediately dived into an urgent download of information about the world he was about to take over.

“We’re going to flood the zone so we have every Cabinet member for the next seven days through their confirmation hearings,” he said of the business-and-military, 1950s-type Cabinet choices. “Tillerson is two days, Sessions is two days, Mattis is two days ...”

Bannon veered from [James “Mad Dog” Mattis](#) — the retired four-star general whom Trump had nominated as secretary of Defense — to the looming appointment of Michael Flynn as national-security adviser. “He’s fine. He’s not Jim Mattis and he’s not John Kelly ... but he’s fine. He just needs the right staff around him.” Still, Bannon averred: “When you take out all the Never Trump guys who signed all those letters and all the neocons who got us in all these wars ... it’s not a deep bench.” Bannon said he’d tried to push John Bolton, the famously hawkish diplomat, for the job as national-security adviser. Bolton was an Ailes favorite, too.

“He’s a bomb thrower,” said Ailes. “And a strange little fucker. But you need him. Who else is good on Israel? Flynn is a little nutty on Iran. Tillerson just knows oil.”

“Bolton’s mustache is a problem,” snorted Bannon. “Trump doesn’t think he looks the part. You know Bolton is an acquired taste.”

“Well, he got in trouble because he got in a fight in a hotel one night and chased some woman.”

“If I told Trump that,” Bannon said slyly, “he might have the job.”

Bannon was curiously able to embrace Trump while at the same time suggesting he did not take him entirely seriously. Great numbers of people, he believed, were suddenly receptive to a new message — the world needs borders — and Trump had become the platform for that message.

“Does *he* get it?” asked Ailes suddenly, looking intently at Bannon. Did Trump get where history had put him?

Bannon took a sip of water. “He gets it,” he said, after hesitating for perhaps a beat too long. “Or he gets what he gets.”

Pivoting from Trump himself, Bannon plunged on with the Trump agenda. “Day one we’re [moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem](#). Netanyahu’s all-in. Sheldon” — Adelson, the casino billionaire and far-right Israel defender — “is all-in. We know where we’re heading on this ... Let Jordan take the West Bank, let Egypt take Gaza. Let them deal with it. Or sink trying.”

“Where’s Donald on this?” asked Ailes, the clear implication being that Bannon was far out ahead of his benefactor.

“He’s totally onboard.”

“I wouldn’t give Donald too much to think about,” said an amused Ailes.

Bannon snorted. “Too much, too little — doesn’t necessarily change things.”

“What has he gotten himself into with the Russians?” pressed Ailes.

“Mostly,” said Bannon, “he went to Russia and he thought he was going to meet Putin. But Putin couldn’t give a shit about him. So he’s kept trying.”

Again, as though setting the issue of Trump aside — merely a large and peculiar presence to both be thankful for and to have to abide — Bannon, in the role he had conceived for himself, the auteur of

the Trump presidency, charged forward. The real enemy, he said, was China. China was the first front in a new Cold War.

“China’s everything. Nothing else matters. We don’t get China right, we don’t get anything right. This whole thing is very simple. China is where Nazi Germany was in 1929 to 1930. The Chinese, like the Germans, are the most rational people in the world, until they’re not. And they’re gonna flip like Germany in the ’30s. You’re going to have a hypernationalist state, and once that happens, you can’t put the genie back in the bottle.”

“Donald might not be Nixon in China,” said Ailes, deadpan.

Bannon smiled. “Bannon in China,” he said, with both remarkable grandiosity and wry self-deprecation.

“How’s the kid?” asked Ailes, referring to Kushner.

“He’s my partner,” said Bannon, his tone suggesting that if he felt otherwise, he was nevertheless determined to stay on message.

“He’s had a lot of lunches with Rupert,” said a dubious Ailes.

“In fact,” said Bannon, “I could use your help here.” He then spent several minutes trying to recruit Ailes to help kneecap Murdoch. Since his ouster from Fox over allegations of sexual harassment, Ailes had become only more bitter toward Murdoch. Now Murdoch was frequently jawboning the president-elect and encouraging him toward Establishment moderation. Bannon wanted Ailes to suggest to Trump, a man whose many neuroses included a horror of senility, that Murdoch might be losing it.

“I’ll call him,” said Ailes. “But Trump would jump through hoops for Rupert. Like for Putin. Sucks up and shits down. I just worry about who’s jerking whose chain.”

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Trump holed up in his White House bedroom in February 2017.  
Illustration: Jeffrey Smith

**Trump did not** enjoy his own inauguration. He was angry that A-level stars had snubbed the event, disgruntled with the accommodations at Blair House, and visibly fighting with his wife, who seemed on the verge of tears. Throughout the day, he wore what some around him had taken to calling his golf face: angry and pissed off, shoulders hunched, arms swinging, brow furled, lips pursed.

The first senior staffer to enter the White House that day was Bannon. On the inauguration march, he had grabbed 32-year-old Katie Walsh, the newly appointed deputy chief of staff, and together they had peeled off to inspect the now-vacant West Wing. The carpet had been shampooed, but little else had changed. It was a warren of tiny offices in need of paint, the décor something like an admissions office at a public university. Bannon claimed the nondescript office across from the much grander chief of staff's suite and immediately requisitioned the whiteboards on which he

intended to chart the first 100 days of the Trump administration. He also began moving furniture out. The point was to leave no room for anyone to sit. Limit discussion. Limit debate. This was war.

Those who had worked on the campaign noticed the sudden change. Within the first week, Bannon seemed to have put away the camaraderie of Trump Tower and become far more remote, if not unreachable. “What’s up with Steve?” Kushner began to ask. “I don’t understand. We were so close.” Now that Trump had been elected, Bannon was already focused on his next goal: capturing the soul of the Trump White House.

He began by going after his enemies. Few fueled his rancor toward the standard-issue Republican world as much as Rupert Murdoch — not least because Murdoch had Trump’s ear. It was one of the key elements of Bannon’s understanding of Trump: The last person the president spoke to ended up with enormous influence. Trump would brag that Murdoch was always calling him; Murdoch, for his part, would complain that he couldn’t get Trump off the phone.

“He doesn’t know anything about American politics, and has no feel for the American people,” Bannon told Trump, always eager to point out that Murdoch wasn’t an American. Yet in one regard, Murdoch’s message was useful to Bannon. Having known every president since Harry Truman — as Murdoch took frequent opportunities to point out — the media mogul warned Trump that a president has only six months, max, to set his agenda and make an impact. After that, it was just putting out fires and battling the opposition.

This was the message whose urgency Bannon had been trying to impress on an often distracted Trump, who was already trying to limit his hours in the office and keep to his normal golf habits. Bannon’s strategic view of government was shock and awe. In his head, he carried a set of decisive actions that would not just mark the new administration’s opening days but make it clear that nothing ever again would be the same. He had quietly assembled a list of more than 200 executive orders to issue in the [first 100 days](#).

The very first EO, in his view, had to be a crackdown on immigration. After all, it was one of Trump's core campaign promises. Plus, Bannon knew, it was an issue that made liberals batshit mad.

Bannon could push through his agenda for a simple reason: *because nobody in the administration really had a job*. Priebus, as chief of staff, had to organize meetings, hire staff, and oversee the individual offices in the Executive-branch departments. But Bannon, Kushner, and Ivanka Trump had no specific responsibilities — they did what they wanted. And for Bannon, the will to get big things done was how big things got done. “Chaos was Steve's strategy,” said Walsh.

On Friday, January 27 — only his eighth day in office — Trump signed an executive order issuing a sweeping exclusion of many Muslims from the United States. In his mania to seize the day, with almost no one in the federal government having seen it or even been aware of it, Bannon had succeeded in pushing through an executive order that overhauled U.S. immigration policy while bypassing the very agencies and personnel responsible for enforcing it.

The result was an emotional outpouring of horror and indignation from liberal media, terror in immigrant communities, tumultuous protests at major airports, confusion throughout the government, and, in the White House, an inundation of opprobrium from friends and family. *What have you done? You have to undo this! You're finished before you even start!* But Bannon was satisfied. He could not have hoped to draw a more vivid line between Trump's America and that of liberals. Almost the entire White House staff demanded to know: Why did we do this on a Friday, when it would hit the airports hardest and bring out the most protesters?

“Errr ... that's why,” said Bannon. “So the snowflakes would show up at the airports and riot.” That was the way to crush the liberals: Make them crazy and drag them to the left.

**On the Sunday** after the immigration order was issued, Joe Scarborough and his *Morning Joe* co-host, Mika Brzezinski, arrived for lunch at the White House. Trump proudly showed them into the Oval Office. “So how do you think the first week has gone?” he asked the couple, in a buoyant mood, seeking flattery. When Scarborough ventured his opinion that the immigration order might have been handled better, Trump turned defensive and derisive, plunging into a long monologue about how well things had gone. “I could have invited Hannity!” he told Scarborough.

After Jared and Ivanka joined them for lunch, Trump continued to cast for positive impressions of his first week. Scarborough praised the president for having invited leaders of the steel unions to the White House. At which point Jared interjected that reaching out to unions, a Democratic constituency, was Bannon’s doing, that this was “the Bannon way.”

“Bannon?” said the president, jumping on his son-in-law. “That wasn’t Bannon’s idea. That was my idea. It’s the Trump way, not the Bannon way.”

Kushner, going concave, retreated from the discussion.

Trump, changing the topic, said to Scarborough and Brzezinski, “So what about you guys? What’s going on?” He was referencing their not-so-secret secret relationship. The couple said it was still complicated, but good.

“You guys should just get married,” prodded Trump.

“I can marry you! I’m an internet Unitarian minister,” Kushner, otherwise an Orthodox Jew, said suddenly.

“What?” said the president. “What are you talking about? Why would they want *you* to marry them when *I* could marry them? When they could be married by the president! At Mar-a-Lago!”

The First Children couple were having to navigate Trump’s volatile nature just like everyone else in the White House. And they were willing to do it for the same reason as everyone else — in the hope

that Trump's unexpected victory would catapult them into a heretofore unimagined big time. Balancing risk against reward, both Jared and Ivanka decided to accept roles in the West Wing over the advice of almost everyone they knew. It was a joint decision by the couple, and, in some sense, a joint job. Between themselves, the two had made an earnest deal: If sometime in the future the opportunity arose, she'd be the one to run for president. The first woman president, Ivanka entertained, would not be Hillary Clinton; it would be Ivanka Trump.

Bannon, who had coined the term "Jarvanka" that was now in ever greater use in the White House, was horrified when the couple's deal was reported to him. "They didn't say that?" he said. "Stop. Oh, come on. They didn't actually say that? Please don't tell me that. Oh my God."

The truth was, Ivanka and Jared were as much the chief of staff as Priebus or Bannon, all of them reporting directly to the president. The couple had opted for formal jobs in the West Wing, in part because they knew that influencing Trump required you to be all-in. From phone call to phone call — and his day, beyond organized meetings, was almost entirely phone calls — you could lose him. He could not really converse, not in the sense of sharing information, or of a balanced back-and-forth conversation. He neither particularly listened to what was said to him nor particularly considered what he said in response. He demanded you pay him attention, then decided you were weak for groveling. In a sense, he was like an instinctive, pampered, and hugely successful actor. Everybody was either a lackey who did his bidding or a high-ranking film functionary trying to coax out his performance — without making him angry or petulant.

Ivanka maintained a relationship with her father that was in no way conventional. She was a helper not just in his business dealings, but in his marital realignments. If it wasn't pure opportunism, it was certainly transactional. For Ivanka, it was all business — building the Trump brand, the presidential campaign, and now the White House. She treated her father with a degree of detachment, even irony, going so far as to make fun of his comb-

over to others. She often described the mechanics behind it to friends: an absolutely clean pate — a contained island after scalp-reduction surgery — surrounded by a furry circle of hair around the sides and front, from which all ends are drawn up to meet in the center and then swept back and secured by a stiffening spray. The color, she would point out to comical effect, was from a product called Just for Men — the longer it was left on, the darker it got. Impatience resulted in Trump's orange-blond hair color.

Kushner, for his part, had little to no success at trying to restrain his father-in-law. Ever since the transition, Jared had been negotiating to arrange a meeting at the White House with [Enrique Peña Nieto](#), the Mexican president whom Trump had threatened and insulted throughout the campaign. On the Wednesday after the inauguration, a high-level Mexican delegation — the first visit by any foreign leaders to the Trump White House — met with Kushner and Reince Priebus. That afternoon, Kushner triumphantly told his father-in-law that Peña Nieto had signed on to a White House meeting and planning for the visit could go forward.

The next day, on Twitter, Trump blasted Mexico for [stealing American jobs](#). “If Mexico is unwilling to pay for the badly needed wall,” the president declared, “then it would be better to cancel the upcoming meeting.” At which point [Peña Nieto did just that](#), leaving Kushner's negotiation and statecraft as so much scrap on the floor.

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**Nothing contributed** to the chaos and dysfunction of the White House as much as Trump's own behavior. The big deal of being president was just not apparent to him. Most victorious candidates, arriving in the White House from ordinary political life, could not help but be reminded of their transformed circumstances by their sudden elevation to a mansion with palacelike servants and security, a plane at constant readiness, and downstairs a retinue of courtiers and advisers. But this wasn't that different from Trump's

former life in Trump Tower, which was actually more commodious and to his taste than the White House.

Trump, in fact, found the White House to be vexing and even a little scary. He retreated to his own bedroom — the first time since the Kennedy White House that a presidential couple had maintained separate rooms. In the first days, he ordered two television screens in addition to the one already there, and a lock on the door, precipitating a brief standoff with the Secret Service, who insisted they have access to the room. He reprimanded the housekeeping staff for picking up his shirt from the floor: “If my shirt is on the floor, it’s because I want it on the floor.” Then he imposed a set of new rules: Nobody touch anything, especially not his toothbrush. (He had a longtime fear of being poisoned, one reason why he liked to eat at McDonald’s — nobody knew he was coming and the food was safely premade.) Also, he would let housekeeping know when he wanted his sheets done, and he would strip his own bed.

If he was not having his 6:30 dinner with Steve Bannon, then, more to his liking, he was in bed by that time with a cheeseburger, watching his three screens and making phone calls — the phone was his true contact point with the world — to a small group of friends, who charted his rising and falling levels of agitation through the evening and then compared notes with one another.

As details of Trump’s personal life leaked out, he became obsessed with identifying the leaker. The source of all the gossip, however, may well have been Trump himself. In his calls throughout the day and at night from his bed, he often spoke to people who had no reason to keep his confidences. He was a river of grievances, which recipients of his calls promptly spread to the ever-attentive media.

On February 6, in one of his seething, self-pitying, and unsolicited phone calls to a casual acquaintance, Trump detailed his bent-out-of-shape feelings about the relentless contempt of the media and the disloyalty of his staff. The initial subject of his ire was the New York *Times* reporter Maggie Haberman, whom he called “a nut job.” Gail Collins, who had written a *Times* column unfavorably

comparing Trump to Vice-President [Mike Pence](#), was “a moron.” Then, continuing under the rubric of media he hated, he veered to CNN and the deep disloyalty of its chief, [Jeff Zucker](#).

Zucker, who as the head of entertainment at NBC had commissioned *The Apprentice*, had been “made by Trump,” Trump said of himself in the third person. He had “personally” gotten Zucker his job at CNN. “Yes, yes, I did,” said the president, launching into a favorite story about how he had once talked Zucker up at a dinner with a high-ranking executive from CNN’s parent company. “I probably shouldn’t have, because Zucker is not that smart,” Trump lamented, “but I like to show I can do that sort of thing.” Then Zucker had returned the favor by airing the “unbelievably disgusting” story about [the Russian “dossier”](#) and the “golden shower” — the practice CNN had accused him of being party to in a Moscow hotel suite with assorted prostitutes.

Having dispensed with Zucker, the president of the United States went on to speculate on what was involved with a golden shower. And how this was all just part of a media campaign that would never succeed in driving him from the White House. Because they were sore losers and hated him for winning, they spread total lies, 100 percent made-up things, totally untrue, for instance, the cover that week of *Time* magazine — which, Trump reminded his listener, he had been on more than anyone in history — that showed Steve Bannon, a good guy, saying he was the real president. “How much influence do you think Steve Bannon has over me?” Trump demanded. He repeated the question, then repeated the answer: “Zero! Zero!” And that went for his son-in-law, too, who had a lot to learn.

The media was not only hurting him, he said — he was not looking for any agreement or even any response — but hurting his negotiating capabilities, which hurt the nation. And that went for *Saturday Night Live*, which might think it was very funny but was actually hurting everybody in the country. And while he understood that *SNL* was there to be mean to him, they were being very, very mean. It was “fake comedy.” He had reviewed the treatment of all other presidents in the media, and there was

nothing like this ever, even of Nixon, who was treated very unfairly. “Kellyanne, who is very fair, has this all documented. You can look at it.”

The point is, he said, that that very day, he had saved \$700 million a year in jobs that were going to Mexico, but the media was talking about him wandering around the White House in his bathrobe, which “I don’t have because I’ve never worn a bathrobe. And would never wear one, because I’m not that kind of guy.” And what the media was doing was undermining this very dignified house, and “dignity is so important.” But Murdoch, “who had never called me, never once,” was now calling all the time. So that should tell people something.

The call went on for 26 minutes.

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**Without a strong** chief of staff at the White House, there was no real up-and-down structure in the administration — merely a figure at the top and everyone else scrambling for his attention. It wasn’t task-based so much as response-oriented — whatever captured the boss’s attention focused everybody’s attention. Priebus and Bannon and Kushner were all fighting to be the power behind the Trump throne. And in these crosshairs was Katie Walsh, the deputy chief of staff.

Walsh, who came to the White House from the RNC, represented a certain Republican ideal: clean, brisk, orderly, efficient. A righteous bureaucrat with a permanently grim expression, she was a fine example of the many political professionals in whom competence and organizational skills transcend ideology. To Walsh, it became clear almost immediately that “the three gentlemen running things,” as she came to characterize them, had each found his own way to appeal to the president. Bannon offered a rousing fuck-you show of force; Priebus offered flattery from the congressional leadership; Kushner offered the approval of blue-chip businessmen. Each appeal was exactly what Trump wanted from the presidency, and he didn’t understand why he couldn’t have them all. He wanted to break things, he wanted Congress to

give him bills to sign, and he wanted the love and respect of New York *machers* and socialites.

As soon as the campaign team had stepped into the White House, Walsh saw, it had gone from managing Trump to the expectation of being managed by him. Yet the president, while proposing the most radical departure from governing and policy norms in several generations, had few specific ideas about how to turn his themes and vitriol into policy. And making suggestions to him was deeply complicated. Here, arguably, was the central issue of the Trump presidency, informing every aspect of Trumpian policy and leadership: He didn't process information in any conventional sense. He didn't read. He didn't really even skim. Some believed that for all practical purposes he was no more than semi-literate. He trusted his own expertise — no matter how paltry or irrelevant — more than anyone else's. He was often confident, but he was just as often paralyzed, less a savant than a figure of sputtering and dangerous insecurities, whose instinctive response was to lash out and behave as if his gut, however confused, was in fact in some clear and forceful way telling him what to do. It was, said Walsh, “like trying to figure out what a child wants.”

By the end of the second week following the immigration EO, the three advisers were in open conflict with one another. For Walsh, it was a daily process of managing an impossible task: Almost as soon as she received direction from one of the three men, it would be countermanded by one or another of them.

“I take a conversation at face value and move forward with it,” she said. “I put what was decided on the schedule and bring in comms and build a press plan around it ... And then Jared says, ‘Why did you do that?’ And I say, ‘Because we had a meeting three days ago with you and Reince and Steve where you agreed to do this.’ And he says, ‘But that didn't mean I wanted it on the schedule ...’ It almost doesn't matter what anyone says: Jared will agree, and then it will get sabotaged, and then Jared goes to the president and says, see, that was Reince's idea or Steve's idea.”

If Bannon, Priebus, and Kushner were now fighting a daily war with one another, it was exacerbated by the running disinformation campaign about them that was being prosecuted by the president himself. When he got on the phone after dinner, he'd speculate on the flaws and weaknesses of each member of his staff. Bannon was disloyal (not to mention he always looks like shit). Priebus was weak (not to mention he was short — a midget). Kushner was a suck-up. Sean Spicer was stupid (and looks terrible too). Conway was a crybaby. Jared and Ivanka should never have come to Washington.

During that first month, Walsh's disbelief and even fear about what was happening in the White House moved her to think about quitting. Every day after that became a countdown toward the moment she knew she wouldn't be able to take it anymore. To Walsh, the proud political pro, the chaos, the rivalries, and the president's own lack of focus were simply incomprehensible. In early March, not long before she left, she confronted Kushner with a simple request. "Just give me the three things the president wants to focus on," she demanded. "What are the three priorities of this White House?"

It was the most basic question imaginable — one that any qualified presidential candidate would have answered long before he took up residence at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Six weeks into Trump's presidency, Kushner was wholly without an answer.

"Yes," he said to Walsh. "We should probably have that conversation."

# HOW HE GOT THE STORY

This story is adapted from Michael Wolff's book *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House*, to be published by

Henry Holt & Co. on January 9. Wolff, who chronicles the administration from Election Day to this past October, conducted conversations and interviews over a period of 18 months with the president, most members of his senior staff, and many people to whom they in turn spoke. Shortly after Trump's inauguration, Wolff says, he was able to take up "something like a semi-permanent seat on a couch in the West Wing" — an idea encouraged by the president himself. Because no one was in a position to either officially approve or formally deny such access, Wolff became "more a constant interloper than an invited guest." There were no ground rules placed on his access, and he was required to make no promises about how he would report on what he witnessed.

Since then, he conducted more than 200 interviews. In true Trumpian fashion, the administration's lack of experience and disdain for political norms made for a hodgepodge of journalistic challenges. Information would be provided off-the-record or on deep background, then casually put on the record. Sources would fail to set any parameters on the use of a conversation, or would provide accounts in confidence, only to subsequently share their views widely. And the president's own views, private as well as public, were constantly shared by others. The adaptation presented here offers a front-row view of Trump's presidency, from his improvised transition to his first months in the Oval Office.

*\*Excerpted from Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House by Michael Wolff (Henry Holt and Co., January 9, 2018). This article appears in the January 8, 2018, issue of New York Magazine.*

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*\*This article has been updated to include more information from Wolff's book about the nature of Trump's conversation with the Mercers.*

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