

# Inquiring Minds Topic – 3 March 2017

Bruce McNaughton, Moderator

## What About Steve Bannon?

Participants should know this is meant to be a open freewheeling discussion of a key political operator, pro and con. Read the materials sent completely and not just before the session. To fully effectively present your viewpoints on Mr. Bannon will require you doing some critical thinking before the meeting.

### Some questions to ponder:

Is he the intellectual wellspring for Trump as Goebbels was for Hitler?  
Is he like Karl Rove was for George W Busch, his brain? - or  
Harry Hopkins was for FDR, the trusted advisor who had the ear of the president last.

Is he like Cromwell, the Lord Protector Of England  
or like Cardinal Richelieu in France?

Is it possible he is the living embodiment of Machiavelli's The Prince?

The moderator will allow strong rational well thought out opinions on Mr. Bannon. Emotional lamentations for the fate of our political system and our political parties will be firmly ruled out of order.

Through thoughtful discussion, we can ascertain what we think this man's influence is, and will be, on the government and our country for good or bad. Please no anecdotal stories unless they are about Bannon. That type of talking device will earn a quick gavel.

As moderator I will have no comments. If the discussion flags I may ask a question to rekindle the discourse. Otherwise I am a traffic cop. This is your discussion. I urge all attendees to speak. The more varied the thinking the better the discussion.

# President Bannon?

 The New York Times, 30 January 2017 – by the Editorial Board

Plenty of presidents have had prominent political advisers, and some of those advisers have been suspected of quietly setting policy behind the scenes (recall Karl Rove or, if your memory stretches back far enough, Dick Morris). But we've never witnessed a political aide move as brazenly to consolidate power as Stephen Bannon — nor have we seen one do quite so much damage so quickly to his putative boss's popular standing or pretenses of competence.

Mr. Bannon supercharged Breitbart News as a platform for inciting the alt-right, did the same with the Trump campaign and is now repeating the act with the Trump White House itself. That was perhaps to be expected, though the speed with which President Trump has moved to alienate Mexicans (by declaring they would pay for a border wall), Jews (by disregarding their unique experience of the Holocaust) and Muslims (the ban) has been impressive. Mr. Trump never showed much inclination to reach beyond the minority base of voters that delivered his Electoral College victory, and Mr. Bannon, whose fingerprints were on each of those initiatives, is helping make sure he doesn't.

But a new executive order, politicizing the process for national security decisions, suggests Mr. Bannon is positioning himself not merely as a Svengali but as the de facto president.

In that new order, issued on Saturday, Mr. Trump took the unprecedented step of naming Mr. Bannon to the National Security Council, along with the secretaries of state and defense and certain other top officials. President George W. Bush's last chief of staff, Joshua Bolten, was so concerned about separating politics from national security that he barred Mr. Rove, Mr. Bush's political adviser, from N.S.C. meetings. To the annoyance of experienced foreign policy aides, David Axelrod, President Barack Obama's political adviser, sat in on some N.S.C. meetings, but he was not a permanent member of the council.

More telling still, Mr. Trump appointed Mr. Bannon to the N.S.C. "principals' committee," which includes most of those same top officials and meets far more frequently. At the same time, President Trump downgraded two senior national security officials — the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, a role now held by Gen. Joseph Dunford Jr., and the director of national intelligence, the job that Dan Coats, a former member of the Senate Intelligence Committee and former ambassador to Germany, has been nominated to fill.

All this may seem like boring bureaucratic chart-making, but who sits at the National Security Council table when the administration debates issues of war and peace can make a real difference in decisions. In giving Mr. Bannon an official role in national security policy making, Mr. Trump has not simply broken with tradition but has embraced the risk of politicizing national security, or giving the impression of doing so.

Mr. Trump's order says that the chairman of the Joint Chiefs and the director of national intelligence will attend the principals' committee meetings only "where issues pertaining to their responsibilities and expertise are to be discussed." Could there be any national security discussions when input from the intelligence agencies and the military will not be required? People in those jobs are often the ones to tell presidents hard truths, even when they are unwelcome.

As his first week in office amply demonstrated, Mr. Trump has no grounding in national security decision making, no sophistication in governance and little apparent grasp of what it takes to lead a great diverse nation. He needs to hear from experienced officials, like General Dunford. But Mr. Bannon has positioned himself, along with Mr. Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, as the president's most trusted aide, shutting out other voices that might offer alternative views. He is now reportedly eclipsing the national security adviser, retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn.

While Mr. Trump long ago embraced Mr. Bannon's politics, he would be wise to reconsider allowing him to run his White House, particularly after the fiasco over the weekend of the risible Muslim ban. Mr. Bannon helped push that order through without consulting Mr. Trump's own experts at the Department of Homeland Security or even seeking deliberation by the N.S.C. itself. The administration's subsequent modifications, the courtroom

reversals and the international furor have made the president look not bold and decisive but simply incompetent. As a candidate, Mr. Trump was immensely gratified by the applause at his rallies for Mr. Bannon's jingoism. Yet now casually weaponized in executive orders, those same ideas are alienating American allies and damaging the presidency.

Presidents are entitled to pick their advisers. But Mr. Trump's first spasms of policy making have supplied ample evidence that he needs advisers who can think strategically and weigh second- and third-order consequences beyond the immediate domestic political effects. Imagine tomorrow if Mr. Trump is faced with a crisis involving China in the South China Sea or Russia in Ukraine. Will he look to his chief political provocateur, Mr. Bannon, with his penchant for blowing things up, or will he turn at last for counsel to the few more thoughtful experienced hands in his administration, like Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and General Dunford?



## What Steve Bannon really wants

 [qz.com/898134/what-steve-bannon-really-wants](http://qz.com/898134/what-steve-bannon-really-wants)

If there is a political vision underlying Trumpism, however, the person to ask is not Trump. It's his éminence grise, Stephen K. Bannon, the chief strategist of the Trump administration.

Bannon transcended his working-class Virginia roots with a stint in the Navy and a degree from Harvard Business School, followed by a career as a Goldman Sachs financier. He moved to Los Angeles to invest in media and entertainment for Goldman, before starting his own investment bank specializing in media. Through a combination of luck (a fallen-through deal left him with a stake in a hit show called *Seinfeld*) and a knack for voicing outrage, Bannon remade himself as a minor luminary within the far edge of right-wing politics, writing and directing a slew of increasingly conservative documentaries.

Bannon's influence reached a new high in 2012 when he took over Breitbart News, an online news site, following the death of creator Andrew Breitbart. While at Breitbart, Bannon ran a popular talk radio call-in show and launched a flame-throwing assault on mainstream Republicans, embracing instead a fringe cast of ultra-conservative figures. Among them was Trump, a frequent guest of the show. They established a relationship that eventually led Bannon to mastermind Trump's populist romp to the White House, culminating in his taking the administration's most senior position (alongside the chief of staff, Reince Priebus).

It's impossible to know for sure what Bannon will do with his newfound power; he honors few interview requests lately, ours included. (The White House did not respond to our request to speak with Bannon.) But his time as a conservative filmmaker and head of Breitbart News reveals a grand theory of what America should be. Using the vast amount of Bannon's own publicly available words—from his lectures, interviews, films and more—we can construct elements of the vision for America he hopes to realize in the era of Trump.

## The three tenets of Bannonism

Bannon's political philosophy boils down to three things that a Western country, and America in particular, needs to be successful: Capitalism, nationalism, and "Judeo-Christian values." These are all deeply related, and essential.

America, says Bannon, is suffering a "crisis of capitalism." (He uses the word "crisis" a lot—more on that later.) Capitalism used to be all about moderation, an entrepreneurial American spirit, and respect for one's fellow Christian man. In fact, in [remarks](#) delivered to the Vatican in 2014, Bannon says that this "enlightened capitalism" was the "underlying principle" that allowed the US to escape the "barbarism" of the 20th century.

Since this enlightened era, things have gradually gotten worse. (Hence the "crisis.") The downward trend began

with the 1960s and '70s counterculture. “The baby boomers are the most spoiled, most self-centered, most narcissistic generation the country’s ever produced,” says Bannon in a [2011 interview](#).

He takes on this issue in more detail in *Generation Zero*, a 2010 documentary he wrote and directed. The film shows one interviewee after another laying out how the “capitalist system” was slowly undermined and destroyed by a generation of wealthy young kids who had their material needs taken care of by hardworking parents—whose values were shaped by the hardship of the Great Depression and World War II—only to cast off the American values that had created that wealth in the first place. This shift gave rise to socialist policies that encouraged dependency on the government, weakening capitalism.

Eventually, this socialist vision succeeded in infiltrating the very highest levels of institutional power in America. “By the late 1990s, the left had taken over many of the institutions of power, meaning government, media, and academe,” says Peter Schweizer, a writer affiliated with Bannon’s Government Accountability Institute, a conservative think tank, in *Generation Zero*. “And it was from these places and positions of power that they were able to disrupt the system and implement a strategy that was designed to ultimately undermine the capitalist system.” (As he says “undermine the capitalist system,” the film zooms in on the word “Lucifer” in that now-infamous [epigraph](#) from Saul Alinsky.)

Underlying all of this is the philosophy of Edmund Burke, an influential 18th-century Irish political thinker whom Bannon occasionally references. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke presents his view that the basis of a successful society should not be abstract notions like human rights, social justice, or equality. Rather, societies work best when traditions that have been shown to work are passed from generation to generation. The baby boomers, Bannon says in [a lecture](#) given to the Liberty Restoration Foundation (LRF), failed to live up to that Burkean responsibility by abandoning the tried-and-true values of their parents (nationalism, modesty, patriarchy, religion) in favor of new abstractions (pluralism, sexuality, egalitarianism, secularism).

For both Burke and Bannon, failure to pass the torch results in social chaos.

## The new liberal order

Once in power, the liberal, secular, global-minded elite overhauled the institutions of democracy and capitalism to tighten its grip on power and the ability to enrich itself. The “party of Davos,” as Bannon long ago dubbed this clique, has warped capitalism’s institutions, depriving middle classes everywhere of the wealth they deserve.

This pattern of exploitation came to a head in the 2008 global financial and economic crisis. Wall Street—enabled by fellow global elites in government—spun profits out of speculation instead of investing their wealth in domestic jobs and businesses. When the resulting bubble finally burst, the immoral government stuck hardworking American taxpayers with the bailout bill.

This is the kind of thing that led Bannon to say in that 2011 LRF lecture that there is “socialism for the very wealthy.” The rest of the country, he says, is “common sense, practical, middle-class people.”

There is also “socialism for the very poor,” he adds. “We’ve built a welfare state that is completely and totally unsupportable, and now this is a crisis.”

Bannon wants all of this liberal-sponsored “socialism” to end. He celebrates CNBC host Rick Santelli’s famous 2009 tirade about “those who carry the water and those who drink the water,” which sparked what became the Tea Party, a populist movement focused on tax cuts, fiscal scrimping, and a narrow interpretation of constitutional rights. Channeling the spirit of the Tea Party, Bannon blames Republicans as much as Democrats for taking part in cronyism and corruption at the expense of middle class families.

“We don’t really believe there is a functional conservative party in this country and we certainly don’t think the Republican Party is that,” says Bannon in a [2013 panel](#) in which he discusses Breitbart’s vision. “We tend to look at this imperial city of Washington, this boomtown, as they have two groups, or two parties, that represent

the insiders' commercial party, and that is a collection of insider deals, insider transactions and a budding aristocracy that has made this the wealthiest city in the country.”

In short, in Bannanism, the crisis of capitalism has led to socialism and the suffering of the middle class. And it has made it impossible for the current generation to bequeath a better future to its successors, to fulfill its Burkean duty.

## Judeo-Christian values

So what exactly are these traditions that Americans are meant to pass along to future generations? In addition to “crisis of capitalism,” one of Bannon’s favorite terms is “Judeo-Christian values.” This is the second element of his theory of America.

*Generation Zero*, Bannon’s 2010 documentary, has a lot to say about “American values,” and a lot of this matches closely the ideals of the Tea Party. But since 2013 or 2014, Bannon’s casual emphasis on American values has swelled to include a strong religious component. The successful functioning of America—and Western civilization in general—depends on capitalism, and capitalism depends on the presence of “Judeo-Christian values.”

For Bannon, capitalism was not only responsible for bringing the US out of the war successfully; it also brought about the restoration of Europe and the Pax Americana that followed, he explains in his 2014 speech to the Vatican conference. But capitalism alone is not enough. Unmoored from a Judeo-Christian moral framework, capitalism can be a force of harm and injustice—exemplified by the US’s economic decline.

To restore the health of America’s economy and patch its shredded social fabric, Bannon wants capitalism to be re-anchored by the Judeo-Christian values he believes made the country great throughout its history. This shared morality ensures that businesses invest not just for their own benefit, but also for the good of native workers and future generations.

As in Burke’s view, human rights and civil society do not come from anything abstract, but from tradition. For Bannon, this tradition is God; nation-states that establish people as the arbiters of truth and justice will ultimately give way to tyranny. The “ultimate check on the power of the state is God’s teaching,” says Duck Dynasty’s Phil Robertson in *Torchbearer*, the 2016 documentary that Bannon co-wrote, directed and produced. The film is full of Robertson offering similar aphorisms about how society falls apart without a religious foundation.

It’s important to note that “Judeo-Christian values” does not necessarily seem to require that all citizens believe in Christianity. Bannon doesn’t appear to want to undo the separation of church and state or freedom of religion enshrined in America’s constitution. After all, both of these are traditions that have led America to success in the past. What he believes is that the founding fathers built the nation based on a set of values that come from the Judeo-Christian tradition.

In order to make sure the whole country is on board with these values, it must limit or halt the influx of people who do not share them by rallying around nationalism. And it is through this final ingredient—the primacy of the nation-state’s values and traditions—that America can drive a stake through the heart of the global, secular “establishment.”

## Nationalism

In addition to enriching themselves and encouraging dependency among the poor, global elites also encourage immigrants to flood the US and drag down wages. Immigrant labor boosts the corporate profits of globalists and their cronies, who leave it to middle-class natives to educate, feed, and care for these foreigners. The atheistic, pluralist social order that has been allowed to flourish recoils at nationalism and patriotism, viewing them as intolerant and bigoted. Without the moral compass of our forefathers, the system is so adrift in relativism that it

champions the “rights” of police-hating deadbeats, criminal aliens, and potential terrorists over ordinary Americans, turning cities into hotbeds of violence and undermining national security. As one interviewee declares in [Border War: The Battle over Illegal Immigration](#), another of Bannon’s documentaries, “The right sees [undocumented immigrants] as cheap labor, the left sees this as cheap votes.”

Mired in near-zero growth and financial chaos, the European Union epitomizes the catastrophic fate of a globalist system governed by elites who are not accountable to the citizens that elected them.

“[P]eople, particularly in certain countries, want to see the sovereignty for their country, they want to see nationalism for their country,” Bannon says in the Vatican speech. “They don’t believe in this kind of pan-European Union or they don’t believe in the centralized government in the United States.”

Nationalism, then, is the mechanism through which Judeo-Christian traditions and values become part of society. That’s because nationalism is fully inclusive, in the sense that it invites people of different backgrounds to unite under a common “American” sense of self. It dissolves minority identities—leading to the emphasis on “colorblindness” of “all lives matter” and opposition to affirmative action. This shared set of Judeo-Christian, nationalist values prevents minorities from claiming special rights. For instance, *Generation Zero* blames the 2007 housing collapse on “black victimization” that undermined capitalism and encouraged dependency on the government. At the same time, *Torchbearer* celebrates Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as a paragon of traditional American morality because his view of human rights was based in Christianity.

The liberal elite’s pervasive emphasis on pluralism and minority rights—and its financial and political support of these groups—constrains shared American-ness. This erosion of Judeo-Christian nationalism weakens the country. Again, this applies not just to America, but also to other Western countries. As Bannon [declares](#) at a 2016 South Carolina Tea Party convention, the “swells, the investment bankers, the guys from the EU” are the “same guys who have allowed the complete collapse of the Judeo-Christian West in Europe.”

People who do not sign off on this set of shared values should not be welcome in the US. This logic forms the basis of Bannon’s opposition to immigrants, whose lack of democratic “DNA,” he believes, will harm society.

“These are not Jeffersonian democrats,” Bannon said last year, referring to immigrants heading from Muslim majority countries to Europe, [USA Today reported](#). “These are not people with thousands of years of democracy in their DNA coming up here.” That rationale might justify closing the borders to immigrants from Latin America, even though they are [usually](#) devout Catholics.

## A theory of generations

The crisis of capitalism and the undermining of the Judeo-Christian West that Bannon proclaims in his Vatican lecture is not an isolated event. It is, in his view, one of a repeated cycle of crises that occurs periodically, each of which inevitably culminates in war and conflict on a grand scale.

“This is the fourth great crisis in American history,” he says in the speech to the LRF. “We had the revolution, we had the Civil War, we had the Great Depression and World War II. This is the great Fourth Turning in American history.”

What he is getting at here is based on the work of Neil Howe and William Strauss, two amateur historians who in the 1990s presented a “generational theory” of American history. The theory views American history through the lens of repeated cycles lasting roughly 80 years, about the length of a single lifetime. Within each 80-year cycle, say Howe and Strauss, are four “turnings”—periods of around 20 years that are characterized by a particular mood. These four moods are the “high,” “awakening,” “unraveling,” and, finally, “crisis.”

The theory is too vague to be proven wrong, and has not been taken seriously by most professional historians. But it is superficially compelling, and plots out to some degree how America’s history has unfolded since its founding.

It's also clear how the generational theory fits with Bannon's view that the slow erosion of Judeo-Christian values has been bad for the country. The most recent cycle, according to Howe and Strauss, went from the "high" of the postwar era—a time of which Bannon is particularly fond—to an "awakening" of activism in the '60s, followed by an "unraveling" of institutions and shared values thanks to the individualism brought on by the preceding "awakening." That brings us to the current crisis, the great "Fourth Turning," following the American Revolution, Civil War, and the Great Depression/World War II.

## How to solve the crisis: Large-scale conflict

"Turnings" feature very heavily in *Generation Zero*. "Turnings are like the seasons—every turning is necessary," says historian David Kaiser in the documentary, over stock footage of clocks ticking, suns rising, and butterflies emerging. "Cities are founded, cities collapse. States rise, states fall," he continues.

What exactly is the current crisis? Bannon's view on it has evolved. In 2010, he appears to have regarded it as the result of the debt racked up in the 2000s and the 2008 financial crisis.

"This accumulated debt at all levels of our society poses an immediate existential threat to America," he says in a [2010 speech](#) in New York City. "Now unlike the manufactured crises of global warming and healthcare, this is a true crisis. This crisis threatens the very sovereignty of our country."

And in the 2011 LRF lecture, when Bannon declares the US faces the "fourth great crisis in American history," he still seems to suggest that it consists largely of the global financial crisis that began in 2008.

But there's more to it than that. Comparing the current crisis to events like the Revolutionary War and World War II, Bannon appears to believe that the US is heading inevitably toward violent conflict. This interpretation is backed up by other statements from and about Bannon.

David Kaiser, the historian interviewed in *Generation Zero* and also a proponent of the Strauss-Howe theory, recently recounted his conversation with Bannon, including Bannon's militaristic interpretation of the theory, [in Time](#):

A second, more alarming interaction didn't show up in the film. Bannon had clearly thought a long time both about the domestic potential and the foreign policy implications of Strauss and Howe. More than once during our interview, he pointed out that each of the three preceding crises had involved a great war, and those conflicts had increased in scope from the American Revolution through the Civil War to the Second World War. He expected a new and even bigger war as part of the current crisis, and he did not seem at all fazed by the prospect.

Let's follow the logic of this generational theory for a second: If a "high" only comes after a "crisis," and if a "crisis" must necessarily be an increasingly large-scale war, Bannon is left searching for a major, existence-level enemy. Does the "Party of Davos" alone qualify? Who else could this war be fought against?

In the 2014 Vatican lecture, Bannon goes further. "I think we are in a crisis of the underpinnings of capitalism, and on top of that we're now, I believe, at the beginning stages of a global war against Islamic fascism," he says. Bannon adds:

"This may be a little more militant than others...I believe you should take a very, very, very aggressive stance against radical Islam.... See what's happening, and you will see we're in a war of immense proportions."

## Bannon's "global war against Islamic fascism"

The fourth great civilizational showdown—a "[global existential war](#)," as Bannon describes it in July 2016—pits the "Judeo-Christian West" against "Islamic fascism"—especially ISIL. But the threat isn't necessarily limited to ISIL.

Bannon's remarks and his affiliations with anti-Muslim activists like Pamela Geller and Robert Spencer leave the impression that the enemy might well be Islam in general. As [Breitbart notes](#) in 2014, the "erudite Bannon" entertains the argument that Islam's "war" against Christianity "originated almost from [Islam's] inception." He endorses the view that, in the lead-up to World War II, Islam was a "[much darker](#)" force facing Europe than fascism. Other ideas he has supported [include](#): a US nonprofit focused on promoting a favorable image of Muslims is a terrorist front; the Islamic Society of Boston mosque was behind the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing; and Muslim-Americans are trying to supplant the US constitution with Shariah law.

Because Islam is rooted in anti-Christian violence, goes the logic, the only way to ensure that Muslims in America don't pose a terrorist threat is to make sure they honor the US constitution as the rule of law and accept Judeo-Christian values.

## "Darkness, Darth Vader, and Dick Cheney"

There are a few loose ends in Bannon's thinking—comments that seem consequential, but are vague or don't fit clearly into any bigger vision.

Consider, for example, his statement that "darkness is good," which he [told](#) Michael Wolff of *Hollywood Reporter*. "Dick Cheney. Darth Vader. Satan. That's power," he continued. Or the statement, [reported](#) by the *Daily Beast*, that Bannon views himself as a "Leninist" who wants to "bring everything crashing down, and destroy all of today's establishment."

The constant repetition of the phrase "Judeo-Christian values" should convince us that Bannon does not worship Satan. "Darkness is good" appears to suggest that the *perception* of being dark is good. The quote continues, "It only helps us when [liberals and the media] get it wrong. When they're blind to who we are and what we're doing." Thus if the perception of him as a Darth Vader-like figure makes it easier for him to create his enlightened capitalist utopia, so be it.

As for the Leninist remark, it seems [pretty consistent](#) with what we know of Bannon thus far: The conservative Burke himself thought that throwing out leaders was justified when "necessary" to restore the old values.

Then again, this delight in being a "dark" oppositional force pairs nicely with his ferocious hatred of the "establishment." In particular, Bannon's diatribes against the media brim with spite toward journalists' arrogance, superiority, and naivety.

On [Breitbart radio](#) in early November, he praised the "insight and savvy" of its callers and website commenters, while ranting about a "smug, smirking" *New York Times* reporter who suggested that Trump rally attendees in Mississippi didn't know who Nigel Farage, a right-wing populist leader in the UK, was. "120% of the people" at the rally knew of Farage, who is "kind of a cult hero in this global populist movement," said Bannon. More recently, he [told the New York Times](#) (paywall) that the media "should be embarrassed and humiliated and keep its mouth shut and just listen for a while." He added: "I want you to quote this. The media here is the opposition party. They don't understand this country. They still do not understand why Donald Trump is the president of the United States."

Some of his hatred of the elite seems rooted in his experiences living and working among the elite. He frequently references his Harvard and Goldman Sachs pedigrees. However, when he describes his time as an elite, it's as an "outsider"—a term he used in the early days to describe the populist movement he represented—passing among the privileged and deciphering their nefariousness for ordinary middle-class Americans. For example, in his 2014 Vatican speech, he says:

I could see this when I worked at Goldman Sachs — there are people in New York that feel closer to people in London and in Berlin than they do to people in Kansas and in Colorado, and they have more of this elite mentality that they’re going to dictate to everybody how the world’s going to be run. I will tell you that the working men and women of Europe and Asia and the United States and Latin America don’t believe that. They believe they know what’s best for how they will comport their lives.

But this cosmic avenger role Bannon seems to claim as voice-giver to the “forgotten” middle-classes hints at a deeper relish of conflict. A fascination with warfare and violence emerges in, for instance, his frequent allusion to the glory of the amphibious invasion at Normandy, or his taking the time out of his duties as Breitbart’s CEO to pen an [obituary](#) for Vo Nguyen Giap, a Vietnamese general who led a war for independence that Bannon described as “one of the bloodiest and hardest fought by all combatants.” In particular, the aesthetic of his documentaries can be nauseatingly violent. *Torchbearer* is a tour de force of gore. (There are at least six separate shots of falling guillotines, as well as lingering footage of nuclear radiation victims, mass burials from Nazi gas chambers, and various ISIL atrocities.)

## What all this means for the Trump presidency

Even before he took charge of Trump’s campaign, in Aug. 2016, Bannon’s philosophies pervaded its rhetoric. If there was any question about the role his views would play in the Trump administration, the last two weeks have made it clear: The president’s leadership hangs from the scaffolding of Bannon’s worldview.

Trump’s [inaugural address](#) was basically a teleprompted Bannon rant. Where inaugural speeches typically crackle with forward-looking optimism, Trump’s was freighted with anti-elite resentment. He described a Bannonic vision in which the “wealth of our middle class has been ripped from their homes and then redistributed all across the world.” The “forgotten men and women of our country”—a [meme that Trump claimed](#), but that appears in *Generation Zero*—had a cameo too.

Trump heaped blame on the “establishment,” which “protected itself” but not American citizens from financial ruin. “And while they celebrated in our nation’s capital, there was little to celebrate for struggling families all across our land,” Trump continued. “We’ve made other countries rich, while the wealth, strength and confidence of our country has dissipated over the horizon.”

“America first” is Bannon’s economic nationalism in slogan form. Trump’s vow to “unite the civilized world against radical Islamic terrorism, which we will eradicate from the face of the Earth” was a mellowed-out version of the West’s battle against “Islamic fascists.”

There’s more. Trump’s remarks that the “Bible tells us how good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity,” that “most importantly, we will be protected by God,” and that children from both Detroit and Nebraska are “infused with the breath of life by the same almighty creator” seemed kind of bizarre coming from a not-very-religious man. They don’t, however, in the context of Bannon’s insistence in *Torchbearer* that a society without God disintegrates.

Within days of the inauguration came the dizzying spurt of executive actions—[written by Bannon and Stephen Miller](#), a White House policy advisor—many of which contained “press release-friendly ‘purpose’ sections making extravagant claims not usually found in executive orders,” [says](#) Andrew Rudalevige, government professor at Bowdoin College.

Bannon’s philosophy toward Islam seems likely to have influenced [the order](#), “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States.” Recalling that line about how immigrants are not “Jeffersonian democrats,” the document prescribes ensuring the allegiance to America’s “founding principles” and the US constitution of anyone admitted to the country, including tourists. Trump also implied in a [TV interview](#) with the Christian Broadcast Network that he wanted to prioritize Christians refugees over Muslims, [accusing the US government](#) of favoring Muslim refugees over Christians in the past (a claim for which [there’s no evidence](#)).

Some argue (fairly convincingly) that Trump’s ban [risks lending credence to ISIL](#) recruitment propaganda claiming that the US is leading the West in a war on all of Islam.

Another of the new administration’s focuses—the danger posed by Mexicans flooding over the border—is also a central theme of Bannon’s vision of America under seige. Trump’s [executive action](#) declares that “many” unauthorized immigrants “present a significant threat to national security and public safety,” though criminology and immigration experts say most evidence suggests immigrants in general [commit crimes at a lower rate](#) than native-born citizens. “Sanctuary” cities—those that voluntarily cooperate with immigration enforcement only on deporting unauthorized immigrants convicted of violent or serious crimes—are also critiqued in Bannonist terms: They have “caused immeasurable harm to the American people and to the very fabric of our Republic.” In other words, they do not share America’s values.

Finally, Trump’s withdrawal of the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a multilateral trade deal supported by what would count as the “elite,” includes a [special shout-out](#) to “the American worker,” the classic Bannon theme.

## **Bannonism begins?**

Bannon savors the power of symbolism. That symbolic power infused Trump’s campaign, and now, apparently, his administration’s rhetoric. After all, as Andrew Breitbart made clear when he famously dubbed him the “Leni Riefenstahl of the Tea Party,” Bannon is a master propagandist. He’s also a master opportunist, going by his fitful shifts in career. So it’s possible that the narrative flowing through Trump’s inaugural address and executive actions is simply what Bannon has calibrated over time to rouse maximum populist fervor—and that it doesn’t reflect plans to upend America.

There’s also, however, the possibility that Bannon is steering Trump toward the “enlightened capitalist,” Judeo-Christian, nationalistic vision that he has come to believe America needs.

Which it is, we can’t know, of course: Only Bannon knows what Bannon really wants. What we do know for sure, though, is that a man who has staked out a deep desire for a violent resurgence of “Western civilization” now has the power to fulfill it.



**For further reading:** TIME magazine 13 February 2017 cover article, “The Great Manipulator – Steve Bannon, Chief White House Strategist”