



Steve Bannon's own words show sharp break on security issues

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Steve Bannon, who has ascended in just months from relative obscurity to become one of President Trump's most influential advisors, has said that Islam is "the most radical" religion in the world and the U.S. is engaged in a civilizational struggle potentially leading to "a major shooting war in the Middle East again."

Trump installed Bannon this week as a member of his National Security Council, taking the unusual step of installing a political adviser on the powerful White House body responsible for shaping security and foreign policy.

Far more significant may be the views he brings to that table, which represent a sharp break from how previous administrations approached security issues, particularly around Islamic terrorism.

In dozens of hours of audio recordings reviewed by USA TODAY of his Breitbart News Daily radio show in 2015 and 2016, Bannon told his listeners that the United States and the Western world are engaged in a "global existential war," and he entertained claims that a "fifth column" of Islamist sympathizers had infiltrated the U.S. government and news media. Those recordings, preserved online, offer an often unfiltered window into the thinking of Trump's interview-averse senior adviser.

The views mark a stark shift from foreign policy doctrine under the previous two administrations.

In the days after the Sept. 11 attacks, President George W. Bush was cautious in his public statements and gave a speech in which he said, "Islam is peace." In a radio show last May, Bannon said those were "the dumbest" comments made by Bush during his presidency. On his radio show, Bannon repeatedly made sarcastic references to Islam as a "religion of peace."

University of Texas law professor Stephen Vladeck said it's "unprecedented to have someone who doesn't just harbor those views but seems to have no compunction basing decisions on those views" as a member of the National Security Council.

“It seems like we’re headed for more of the jaw-dropping steps like the immigration order,” he said.

Bannon left a position as the executive chairman of the right-wing news organization Breitbart in August 2016 to become chief executive of Trump’s presidential campaign, and after the election, he was named the president’s chief strategist and senior counsel — a position equal in rank to the chief of staff.

His role in shaping Trump’s domestic and foreign policy has grown increasingly apparent in the early days of the administration. Bannon played a role in shaping a flurry of executive orders, including one that temporarily blocks immigration from seven majority-Muslim nations.

“He’s got a tremendous understanding of the world and the geopolitical landscape that we have now,” White House spokesman Sean Spicer said on ABC’s *This Week* on Sunday, defending Bannon’s place on the security post.

Diverging from longtime foreign policy

While hosting his radio program, Bannon made statements that diverged from decades of U.S. foreign policy.

“We’re going to war in the South China Sea in five to 10 years, aren’t we?” he said in March 2016. “There’s no doubt about that. They’re taking their sandbars and making basically stationary aircraft carriers and putting missiles on those. They come here to the United States in front of our face — and you understand how important face is — and say it’s an ancient territorial sea.”

The United States and China have a tenuous relationship in part because China is entangled in a dispute with Japan and other Asian nations in the region over an important trade channel in the South China Sea and the country’s attempts to assert its dominion by building islands topped with military installations.

During an interview in February 2016, Bannon expressed alarm about China and Islam as he talked about a Breitbart story proclaiming a mosque at the North Pole, although it was actually in a northern Canadian village hundreds of miles away.

“You have an expansionist Islam and you have an expansionist China. Right? They are motivated. They’re arrogant. They’re on the march. And they think the Judeo-Christian West is on the retreat,” he said. “Talk to us about this mosque on the North Pole.”

In January 2016, Bannon discussed various threats facing Europe in the late 1930s and evaluated Islam alongside fascism and Nazism.

“This is when Europe’s looking down the barrel of fascism — the rise of Mussolini in Italy, Stalin and the Russians and the communist Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union. And obviously Hitler and the Nazis,” he said. “I mean you’re looking at fascism, you’re looking at communism. And to say that — what so blows me away is the timing of it. You could look in 1938 and say, ‘Look,

it's pretty dark here in Europe right now, but there's something actually much darker. And that is Islam.' ”

Emma Ashford, a research fellow at the Cato Institute, said public statements by other members of Trump's National Security Council indicate their views are not in alignment with Bannon's, setting the stage for debate on the council.

“I think it's very good that there is internal dissent on these issues — particularly when you look at how unorthodox, and frankly repulsive, some of these ideas that Bannon expresses are,” she said. “I think the fact that there's opposition can only be a good thing.”

The White House did not answer questions from USA TODAY about Bannon's radio statements.

A native of Richmond, Va., Bannon served as an officer in the U.S. Navy after attending Virginia Tech.

Bannon's [military personnel file](#), obtained by USA TODAY, shows he was regularly promoted during his seven years of service. Senior officers wrote that Bannon had earned their “complete trust” and praised him for his “outstanding performance.” Bannon earned a master's degree in government from Georgetown University and an MBA from Harvard and worked as an investment banker for Goldman Sachs.

Despite that background, the radio shows featured frequent tirades against the “globalist elites” who he said encouraged policies that benefited the wealthy and powerful to the detriment of the working class.

“I'm the [patron saint of commoners](#),” he said in one segment.

Immigration concerns

Bannon often spoke on his radio show about his concerns over immigration from Muslim-majority countries to Europe and the USA. Many of his concerns are rooted in his perception of cultural differences and *sharia*, or Islamic religious law.

“These are not Jeffersonian democrats,” he said of immigrants to Europe from Muslim majority countries [in April of last year](#). “These are not people with thousands of years of democracy in their DNA coming up here.”

“I think that most people in the Middle East, at least 50%, believe in being *sharia*-compliant,” Bannon said in [December 2015](#). “If you're *sharia*-compliant or want to impose *sharia* law, the United States is the wrong place for you.”

Susan Hennessey, a former lawyer for the National Security Agency, said Bannon appears to misunderstand the basic features of *sharia* and seems to use the term “*sharia*-compliant” as shorthand for observant Muslim.

“Listening to his words carefully, he is saying observant Muslims don't belong in the U.S. and isn't modifying that statement to be about immigrants,” she said. “Plenty of natural-born

American citizens are observant Muslims. Those people are every bit as American as Steve Bannon is, and they have real reason to fear his role in the White House.”

On his radio shows, Bannon often provided figures about immigration from Muslim-majority nations that are either exaggerations of disputed numbers or lack basis in fact.

“And some of the statistics are, what, like up to 5-10% believe in radical — in radical jihad. I’m mean you’re talking literally — they said thousands, hundreds (of) thousands are coming in. Say the number is 3 million,” he said in April 2016. “You start to get some pretty big numbers. Particularly if half of these believe in *sharia* law or over 60%. Right? I mean the numbers are staggering.”

During a show in December 2015, Bannon told a guest he heard an additional 1 million Muslim immigrants would enter the USA in each of the next two years.

“If we didn’t hit the pause button today, is it already locked up that we’re going to be importing at least a couple of million Muslims whatever happens?” The guest agreed, “Absolutely.”

In truth, the Pew Research Center estimates the U.S. Muslim population is 3.3 million and forecasts that it will double — over the next 36 years, not the next few years. About 100,000 Muslims arrived in the USA each of the past few years, Pew said.

‘We’re at war’

On Breitbart News Daily, Bannon’s words often centered on the idea of a global clash of civilizations.

“To be brutally frank, I mean Christianity is dying in Europe, and Islam is on the rise,” he said in an interview in January 2016 with a Breitbart reporter.

In November 2015, Bannon told his listeners it was time to have an “adult conversation” about national security.

“Some of these situations may get a little unpleasant,” Bannon said. “But you know what, we’re in a war. We’re clearly going into, I think, a major shooting war in the Middle East again.”

Bannon often criticized elected officials and the media for failing to condemn Islam after terrorist attacks. After the Pulse nightclub attack in June 2016, he lashed out at the media and politicians for not casting blame on the religion and suggested they may be subservient to *sharia*, or Islamic religious law.

“The way the media is presenting this, it’s almost like they’re conforming to blasphemy law,” he said. “They will not criticize Islam, the president of the United States will not criticize Islam. Mrs. Clinton will not criticize Islam. Do you get a sense that the media in the West — and I mean in London and in the United States — is almost working under the precepts of *sharia* law right now?”

Concern about brewing conflict, he said, was a fundamental concept behind Bannon's media enterprise. "Our big belief, one of our central organizing principles at the site, is that we're at war," he said.

"It's war. It's war. Every day, we put up: America's at war, America's at war. We're at war," he said in December 2015. "Note to self, beloved commander in chief: We're at war."