

Give President Trump the Nobel Prize in Economics, Steve Bannon Says

Alexander Nazaryan

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On the December night that Roy S. Moore lost the Alabama special election—handing Democrats their first Senate seat in that state in more than two decades—I sat down with Stephen Bannon in a Montgomery motel room for a wide-ranging conversation that ranged from Silicon Valley to North Korea. Bannon, the former White House chief strategist, supported Moore in the special election, and has vowed to run anti-establishment candidates in the 2018 midterm election. He calls himself a Trump “wingman” waging necessary battle against Republicans disloyal to the president, not to mention Democrats who, in many cases, want Trump removed from office. Others, however, see Bannon as a troublemaker who could squander Republican majorities in both chambers of Congress.

The following are excerpts of that conversation, lightly edited for clarity.

On Trump’s domestic policy: “Look at the Trump agenda. The Trump agenda is working. He is making America great again. He is getting the animal spirits flowing in America.

“This working-class, middle-class program, is a winning program. We’ve proved that. Now you have to deliver on it. That’s why I’m so proud of President Trump. President Trump should be eligible for the Nobel Prize in Economics. He just, he’s proven that economic nationalism works.”

On Trump’s foreign policy: “People understand how judicious he is in the National Security Council. This is a guy who wants to review everything, see everything, sit in meetings and bounce ideas off guys — and then wants more analysis given to him. Afghanistan took six months, that decision [to contain the terrorist threat while handing governance back to Kabul]. That’s because President Trump is very methodical about going back and asking the questions that need to be asked.

“So he’s the exactly opposite from the wild man trigger-puller.”

On serving as the president’s chief political strategist, in what proved to be a contentious seven months at the White House: “I’m so happy since I’ve been out of the White House. I’m just not built to be a staffer, right? In the White House, I had a lot of influence, but at the end of the day, you’re a staffer. It’s just a different thing. It’s very hierarchical, you’ve got your vertical, your lanes you gotta stay in. It’s not the way I roll.

On his “season of war” against the Republican establishment: “I’m 64 years old. I’m dedicating my life to this. To build this movement is my life’s work. And I’m not going to be deterred. I think the country needs this. I’m having a great time.”

On running candidates who embrace his theory of economic nationalism: “Candidates have to get more imbued in that. It’s not going to happen overnight, and here’s one of the reasons: you can’t undo 25 years of [conservative think-tanks] Heritage, Cato, and the American Enterprise Institute, right?”

“One of the things I’m trying to do is get these ideas out to people so they understand them. Judge Moore has never really been an economics guy. He’s more of a social conservative guy.”

On Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, whom Bannon accuses of disloyalty to Trump: “McConnell’s allowed [Senator] Bob Corker [Republican of Tennessee] to come out and criticize the President, say he should be in an adult home with supervision. Tweeting that out. Calling his commander-in-chief a liar. And he doesn’t have his chairmanship stripped from him? He’s not reprimanded. McConnell let him go.”

On the president’s infrastructure proposal: “Infrastructure is going to be very contentious. Infrastructure’s not going to be a singing Kumbaya moment. There’s so many innovative ways you can do it with private equity, private partnerships. I would initially limit the amount of foreign investment and foreign ownership of some of this infrastructure. I think you try to keep this as American made infrastructure.”

On Silicon Valley: “Google and Facebook oughta be public utilities. Like the gas works. They’re too big for control. It’s a common good. I’m an extremist when it comes to big tech. And I think the sooner we take this on, the better.”

On China: “Trump on China, he’s been incredibly consistent for 40 years. And he’s a hawk. Right? He understands the centrality of that issue in everything else. Remember, you had the Bush/Clinton crowd: ‘As China gets more prosperous it’s going to become a liberal democracy.’ They have no intention. They’re a Confucian, mercantilist, authoritative system. That works for them. I mean, it really does.”

On solving the nuclear crisis with North Korea: “I saw today where Secretary [of State Rex W.] Tillerson is prepared to have no conditions upon talks. Bilateral talks between the United States and North Korea. I don’t think that’s the correct solution. North Korea is a client state of China. They don’t exist without China’s agreement. I think the Chinese oughta be forced to do some things. They clearly have a major say in some of the economic well-being of [North] Korea, right? And life is not that bad in North Korea. Right? It’s just not.”

On his state of mind after the Moore defeat: “Totally uncowed.”