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Meet the ‘Alt-Right’, the radical movement that fueled Trump to the White House

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Lounging at the back of his tour bus in a parking lot behind the Springhill Suites, Milo Yiannopoulos, the flamboyant right-wing British provocateur known for his bleach-blond frosted tips and relentless campaign against Islam, munched on a whole cucumber protruding from a paper bowl of raw vegetables and made plans for a party. He had just been asked to host “DeploraBall,” an unofficial celebration planned for the presidential inauguration weekend. Yiannopoulos described his vision for the event: As guests entered the National Press Club, shirtless Mexican laborers would be building a physical wall around them. Instead of doves, Yiannopoulos would release 500 live frogs in honor of Pepe, the cartoon mascot of pro-Donald Trump internet trolls. The room would be lined with oil portraits in gilt frames, each depicting a celebrity who had vowed to leave the country in the event of Trump’s election. At the end of the night, the portraits would be thrown into a bonfire and burned. Yiannopoulos would send a bill for the party to the Mexican Embassy.

The party is unlikely to proceed in exactly that way, or really anything like it. But the ball is real—a month ahead of the inauguration, the organizers had already booked the room and sold all 1,000 tickets—and it marks a kind of gala debut of a new clique in Washington.

Known until recently as the “alt-right,” it is a dispersed movement that encompasses a range of right-wing figures who are mostly young, mostly addicted to provocation and mostly have made their names on the internet. On the less extreme end, they include economic nationalists and “Western chauvinists” like Yiannopoulos, who wants to purge Islam from the United States and Europe; the movement also encompasses overt white nationalists, committed fascists and proponents of a host of other ideologies that were thought to have died out in American politics not long after World War II. Over the course of Trump’s campaign, these ideas came back to life in chat rooms, on Twitter and on the fringes of the internet—driven by supporters united by their loathing of progressives and their feeling of alienation from the free market Republican Party as it defined itself before Trump’s takeover.

This “new right” is now enjoying something of a moment. It’s not clear whether the movement helped fuel Trump’s rise or just rode its coattails. But energized by his success, this loose confederacy of meme-generating internet trolls, provocateurs and self-appointed custodians of Trumpism has begun making plans to move into Washington’s corridors of power, or at least shoulder their way into the general vicinity. When they look at Washington—a besuited city that moves to the rhythm of lobbying and legislative calendars and carefully worded statements—they see an opportunity for total disruption, the kind of overthrow the movement already takes credit for visiting on American politics.

So what, exactly, is the capital in for? In the weeks after the election, I tracked down the movement's standard-bearers in Washington, New York, California and Michigan to find out what they had in mind for changing the culture of D.C., and from there the rest of the Western world. They don't lack for grandiose ambition: Disdaining the traditional Washington think tanks as passé, they're taking aim straight at America's sense of its own identity, with plans for "culture tanks" to produce movies that make anti-immigrant conservatism look cool, and advocacy arms that resemble BuzzFeed more than The Heritage Foundation. They talk elliptically about internet memes replacing white papers as the currency of the policy realm, pushed out by "social media strike forces" trained in the ways of fourth-generation, insurgency-style warfare. There's the idea of taking over the Republican Party with a wave of Tea Party-style primary challenges in 2018 that will rely on novel campaign tactics like flash mobs and 24/7 streaming video of candidates' lives. There's even a new right-wing hipster fraternal organization started by *Vice* co-founder Gavin McInnes, the Proud Boys (motto: "The West Is the Best"), which promises to serve as an amateur security force at political events, including the Inauguration.

Of course, coming in from the cold can also bring financial rewards, and some in the movement have a more old-fashioned ambition: that their coziness with the new administration will result in government contracts, and friendly regulators who won't interfere with planned business ventures like a social media platform for people with high IQs.

For a movement that feeds on outsider energy, its members already enjoy surprising access to the inside of the incoming White House. Yiannopoulos' official title is technology editor of Breitbart, the website formerly run by top Trump adviser Steve Bannon, with whom both Yiannopoulos and internet troll Charles Johnson say they keep in touch. Yiannopoulos and Johnson also both say they know Trump's most influential megadonor, Rebekah Mercer. While I was spending time with another movement figure in California, he took a phone call from the son of Trump's incoming national security adviser. (A shared spokeswoman for Bannon and Mercer did not respond to requests for comment about their relationships with Johnson and Yiannopoulos.)

But the new young nationalists also have a problem: They need to re-brand, urgently. In the *first* theatrical arrival of the alt-right in Washington, days after Trump's election, Richard Spencer, the originator of the term "alt-right" and an open white nationalist, held a conference at the Ronald Reagan building, a couple of blocks from the White House. After dinner, once most of the national media had departed, Spencer rose to deliver a speech that crescendoed with him raising his glass in a kind of toast. As he held his arm up, he proclaimed, triumphantly, "Hail Trump, hail our people, hail victory!" In response, several attendees erupted in Nazi salutes, indelibly associating the alt-right with jackbooted white supremacy and provoking an instant schism in the movement. In a [video](#) produced from the conference, the *Atlantic* blurred out attendees' faces, as if the footage had been smuggled out of a criminal enterprise. Soon, the Associated Press and the *New York Times* issued memos that officially defined alt-righters as white nationalists.

Now, as its members move on Washington, an already fragmented movement is further split between those who embrace Spencer's racial politics and those who, for reasons of pragmatism or principle, reject the "alt-right" label for its associations. Said Paul Ray Ramsey, a blogger who

flirts with white nationalism but found the Nazi associations a bridge too far, even for him: “You don’t want to tie your brand to something that’s ultimate evil.”

Spencer has become the poster boy of the alt-right, appearing on NPR and CNN to defend what he calls “European identitarianism,” and what others call, with less varnish, racism. He sports the alt-right’s signature shaved-side haircut—the “fashy,” as in fascist—and leads the benignly named National Policy Institute, a think tank with an office in Arlington, Virginia, to push his vision for “peaceful ethnic cleansing.”

He isn’t the first American figure to put a fresh face on old-school Klan-style racism, but he’s far more open about his ambitions than the generation that preceded him. I also visited Jared Taylor, 65, who is publisher of the white nationalist web outlet *American Renaissance* and has been called the “intellectual godfather of the alt-right”; although Taylor welcomed me to his home in Oakton, Virginia, he declined to give any hint of his plans. He cited fear of sabotage, comparing himself to a Soviet dissident. “I won’t even talk about them in the vaguest of terms,” he said, surrounded by framed Confederate bond certificates and a bonsai tree. (Taylor, who was born in Japan to Christian missionaries, can’t precisely be classified a white supremacist: He believes Asians are superior to whites.)

Spencer expressed no such hesitation. In mid-December, he announced he was considering running for Ryan Zinke’s House seat in Montana, where he lives part-time in a ski house owned by his mother. And three days before that, he took a break from scouting a new Washington-area headquarters to eat lunch at Café Milano in Georgetown and lay out his vision in detail. The last time Spencer dined at the restaurant, a decade ago, he found himself the odd man out. He recalled that Martina Hingis was playing one of the Williams sisters in a tennis match on the televisions at the bar, and that everyone else in the restaurant was rooting for the African-American player. Spencer’s loyalties, though, were racial. “I was like, ‘I’m on the side of the German,’” he told me. (Hingis, for the record, is a Swiss citizen from what is now Slovakia.)

A month after Trump’s election, Spencer, in a sweater, collared shirt and newsboy cap, was fitting right in at the tony eatery. He had just returned from Texas A&M, where he delivered a speech that had created a predictable uproar, with protests, state police in riot gear and pro-diversity counterprogramming put on by the university’s president at the school’s football stadium. Spencer is planning a national tour of campuses in 2017 and considering calling it the Dangerous White Heterosexual Tour, a nod to Yiannopoulos’ Dangerous Faggot Tour.

Spencer is now looking for a donor to finance his efforts to push white nationalism out of the shadows of the internet. “We need to enter the world,” he said. “We’ve hit our limit in terms of being a virtual institution.” To that end, midway through lunch, he took a call to arrange his next stop, Old Town Alexandria, where he was touring a prospective location for his new headquarters. Like many on the alt-right, his vision of a political movement blurs the line between politics, culture and media: In addition to office space, he was looking for a studio to launch a media operation that could field a daily news show, as well as perhaps a morning show that would be more “fun.”

“If we had a studio,” he asked rhetorically, “could we start to enter the world in the way the Young Turks does stuff? In the way Infowars does stuff?”

Spencer believes the answer is yes, and that the National Policy Institute could occupy a marquee headquarters in downtown Washington within 10 years. “Maybe Cato will go under,” he said, one of many digs at the old free market institutions of the Republican Party. “Maybe we’ll take over that facility.” In the short term, Spencer, 38, plans to capitalize on what he saw as the PR success of the November event with another meeting and news conference in Washington in the first quarter of 2017. If he doesn’t make it to Congress—and if former Ku Klux Klan grand wizard David Duke’s 3 percent showing in Louisiana’s December Senate race is any indication of the electorate’s appetite for undisguised racism, he won’t—Spencer believes he can use publicity to maneuver himself closer to influence.

As he tries, one of his obstacles will be the very movement he helped spawn. Other young figures of the anti-immigrant right have been distancing themselves from Spencer and his hard-core racial ideas; he wasn’t invited to DeploraBall, and the anti-immigration Trump adviser Stephen Miller, who knew Spencer when both were members of the Conservative Union at Duke University a decade ago, has condemned him.

Spencer, for his part, says he still supports the more moderate figures who have disowned him and doesn’t mind that they’re trying to keep their distance. In their popularity, he sees a gateway for new followers to come around to his views, and he doesn’t want his presence to become a distraction. “I want there to be an alt-light,” he said, using a common nickname for the less extreme threads of the new nationalism.

The feeling does not appear to be mutual. Many figures in the movement now disdain the term “alt-right,” refuse to consider themselves “alt-light” and wish Spencer would just go away. “Not interested in appearing in any piece alongside Spencer et al.,” wrote Yiannopoulos in a text message rebuffing an interview request. “We have nothing in common.”

Yiannopoulos’ caginess about the interview was not unusual. For a bunch of media-driven provocateurs, members of the new nationalist right can be highly particular about their interactions with the mainstream press. Longtime bloggers Vox Day and Steve Sailer agreed to answer questions for this story only in writing. Charles Johnson agreed to an interview on the condition that he would also record it, a tactic more commonly employed by prominent politicians. He also declined to be photographed, explaining that only one photographer is allowed to take his picture for publication. After asking some pointed questions about the direction of this article, Yiannopoulos’ publicist said he wouldn’t be participating in it.

But his brand is built on visibility, and Yiannopoulos, who said he was in talks with a number of major production companies about a television project, ultimately yielded when I showed up in Lansing, where he was preparing for an appearance at a lecture hall on the campus of Michigan State University. (Yiannopoulos later canceled a photo shoot for this article after learning that I had called Bannon and Mercer’s spokeswoman to ask if they would like to comment on his work.) I had last seen him at Trump’s election night party at the midtown Hilton, where Yiannopoulos posed for glam shots and paused briefly to harangue a gaggle of reporters about the evils of the mainstream media while they held recording devices up to his face.

In the past, he had identified as a “fellow traveler” of the alt-right, but by the time I showed up at his tour bus—this was two weeks after Salutegate—things had changed. “The small contingent

of distasteful people in the alt-right became so territorial about the expression that they scared off moderate right-wingers,” he said. “And that’s what they did to me.”

Sporting black nail polish and black sequined pants with a black shawl, Yiannopoulos, 32, huddled at a standing desk with his young roadies, who dressed and looked like college sophomores, to plan the night’s show. On a laptop, the roadies presented to him a split-screen image to project behind his speech: Istanbul’s Blue Mosque on the left and a missile launcher, its warheads aimed away from the mosque, on the right. This was not what Yiannopoulos had in mind. “It looks like Istanbul is shooting us,” he complained. “And there’s no fucking American flag on it.” By the time Yiannopoulos appeared in the lecture hall that night, a revised image was being projected onto a screen at the front of the room: A bomb with an American flag on it had been superimposed to look like it was falling directly on the mosque.

The atmosphere around the speech reproduced the dynamics of a Trump campaign event in miniature. In the crisp air outside, mostly white attendees in Make America Great Again hats queued up at the door amid a heavy police presence, while mostly nonwhite protesters stood off to the side chanting, “No Trump. No KKK. No racist USA.” Seven arrests were made.

Inside, Yiannopoulos stood between plaster Doric columns and sipped Budweiser through a straw. Wearing black lipstick and a crown of faux gold laurels, he stood before a crowd of a couple hundred college students and painted Islam as a totalitarian political ideology and an existential threat to Western freedoms. A Cambridge University dropout who describes himself as a free speech absolutist, Yiannopoulos is doubly hostile to Muslims because of his homosexuality and Greek heritage. “I have family in Cyprus,” he lamented. “They took our fucking orange groves.”

In front of the crowd, he called Jill Stein a “crazy old cunt” and Lena Dunham a “disgusting fat cunt,” prompting raucous laughter and applause.

Lambasting Islam for the benefit of college students is not new to the Trump era: The Los Angeles-based conservative agitator David Horowitz brought his “Islamofascism awareness” talks to campuses a decade ago. But Yiannopoulos is a different creature, a sort of 21st-century Islamophobic Oscar Wilde. His events are well-attended and entertaining. He believes he has the formula to turn the cultural tide of the West away from progressivism, a mix of erudition, flamboyance and charisma that puts an amusing, unthreatening front on a worldview that feeds the America-first, Christian-capitalist prejudices of his largely young male college audiences.

Yiannopoulos has retained his title as Breitbart’s tech editor, where his output is reportedly supplemented by the labors of more than 40 interns, and he views social media platforms as the next battlefield in the culture war. In July, he was banned from Twitter after trashing the work of the African-American comedian Leslie Jones, tweeting that she looked like a man and calling her “barely literate,” in response to a tweet she sent him that contained a typo.

Yiannopoulos, Johnson and a number of white nationalists have switched to an upstart rival called Gab that promises not to ban users for any speech so long as it is legal. Down the road, Yiannopoulos plans to take on what he sees as the liberal biases of other social media networks, but not yet. “I need to be too big to ban before I can start going for the people who have enabled my popularity,” he said. “I will pick that fight when I know I can win it.”

Yiannopoulos has a number of personal ties to the Trump administration: Bannon hired him to work for Breitbart, and his tour bus is Breitbart-branded. He also knows the father-daughter pair of Bob and Rebekah Mercer, Breitbart investors who are Trump's most influential megadonors and the dominant patrons of the anti-establishment right. He would not reveal who was financing his tour other than to say his funding includes money from Hollywood. When I suggested to Yiannopoulos that the Mercers and Silicon Valley billionaire Peter Thiel—another deep-pocketed figure with ties to both Trump and a number of alt-light figures—might be chipping in, he responded only that Thiel would be more inclined to sponsor a highbrow cultural pursuit, like a literary journal, than a vulgar lecture tour. "Peter's a snob," he said. "In a good way."

Yiannopoulos said he still talks to Bannon, but he declined to say about what. He disavowed any interest in Washington past the inaugural festivities. "Everybody in politics is a cunt," he said. "They're boring, untalented, unattractive people." The real fight, he thinks, is the culture war he's waging on college campuses. Yiannopoulos said he will leave Washington after Trump's inauguration weekend with no desire to return.

"I'm like Cincinnatus," he said, comparing himself to the 5th century B.C. patrician who was appointed dictator of Rome to repel an invasion and promptly returned to civilian life after the crisis passed. "I want to go do this shit and go back to my fucking farm."

Blogger Mike Cernovich has no such misgivings about D.C. Holed up in the living room of his modest home in Orange County, California, on a Monday afternoon in December, he crossed his legs and laid out his immodest vision for taking over the capital.

A former lawyer, Cernovich began blogging about gender dynamics, among other topics, in 2004. A year earlier, he had been charged with raping a woman he knew, but the charge was dropped and a judge instead sentenced him to community service for battery. Ever since, Cernovich, now 39, has preached the gospel of masculinity, teaching readers how to become "a dominant man" through mindset adjustments and bodybuilding. He once tweeted "date rape does not exist" and advised readers, in a blog post about household finance, that "Hot girls are better to rent than buy."

He advocates IQ-testing all immigrants and ending federal funding of universities, and describes himself as an economic nationalist primarily concerned with the welfare of average Americans. He has some economic ideas that veer toward the wonky—he said he would like median GDP to replace GDP growth as the lodestar of economic policy, for instance. As machines displace a greater share of labor, he is intrigued by the possibility of introducing a universal basic income, an idea supported by Martin Luther King Jr., conservative economist Milton Friedman and Bill Clinton's labor secretary, Robert Reich. Cernovich is also an avid consumer and progenitor of conspiracy theories, such as his claim that there was more than one shooter at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando and that the government is covering this up to avoid panic.

Those predilections made him an early Trump supporter, and over the course of the election he shot to internet notoriety by his monomaniacal focus on Hillary Clinton's allegedly failing health and his online feuds with Trump detractors. He has become huge in the world of pro-Trump Twitter, known as #MAGA Twitter, for Make America Great Again. In October, a Finnish publishing house specializing in science fiction and fantasy released his latest book, *MAGA Mindset: Making YOU and America Great Again*.

His new plan is to take his brand of self-help from the home to the House by running the “Big Brother” of congressional bids, renting out a five-bedroom campaign pad, living in it with his staff and streaming the whole thing 24/7 on YouTube. There are other plans for the campaign—flash mobs, loyal readers with Go-Pros confronting and humiliating his opponents live on Periscope. “The savagery that I would bring to a campaign would be like nothing anyone had ever seen in a congressional election,” said Cernovich, the day before the birth of his first child, a girl.

That vision is contingent on Cernovich’s congressman, Dana Rohrabacher, vacating his seat to, say, join the Trump administration. If that does not happen, Cernovich still plans to recruit acolytes from across the country to deploy those tactics next year in primary challenges to establishment Republicans, a scheme he has dubbed #Revolution2018. If he can pick off just a handful of incumbents next year, Cernovich believes the entire Republican conference will come to fear, and heed, his movement. “That’s what you learn from—” he said, before catching himself. “I’m going to choose my words carefully, because I don’t want to call it ‘terrorism.’”

For a man who until recently was best known for hawking his self-published books and intentionally offending people on the internet, these are grand designs. And Cernovich acknowledges they’ll require some maturation. To that end, Cernovich has condemned Richard Spencer and disassociated himself from the “alt-right” label, even though he believes the Nazi saluters at his conference were leftist plants sent to make the alt-right look bad. (Spencer himself, it should be noted, rejects this conspiracy theory, as well as Cernovich’s claim that the CIA may be propping him up. “He needs to calm down,” Spencer told me.) The hard-core alt-right, in response, has turned on Cernovich and begun calling him “Cuck-ovich,” a play on the movement’s dreaded “cuckservative” insult.

Cernovich now uses the label “new right” to describe himself. To refute those who lump him in with white nationalists, he pointed to his second wife, Shauna, a secular Muslim of Persian descent, who lounged behind us on a couch and jumped in and out of our conversation. (The non-European partner, for what it’s worth, has become a frequent defense among the more moderate alt-righters: Charles Johnson points to his Asian wife to counter charges of racism; Gavin McInnes points to his Native American wife; Yiannopoulos says he prefers to date black men.) Cernovich’s newborn daughter is named Cyra, after the Persian emperor Cyrus (a stocking with her name on it already hung over the fireplace). When a question arose about the birthplace of conspiracy theorist Alex Jones’ sidekick Paul Joseph Watson, Cernovich told his wife “Google it.” Then he backtracked. “Will you please Google it? I don’t just bark orders at you.” (“Northern Britain,” she chimed in later.)

Cernovich does not view himself as a “troll” per se, because he views trolling as amoral, but instead refers to himself as a “rhetorician”—a provocateur who doesn’t literally mean what he says. Whatever he calls it, the rhetoric clearly has real-world consequences. He was a chief pusher of the #pizzagate hashtag on Twitter, the wacky conspiracy theory that Hillary Clinton was part of a child sex trafficking ring being run out of the back of a Washington restaurant called Comet Ping Pong. The scandal began as a rumor on Twitter, jumped to message boards like 4Chan, was pushed by Cernovich and other much higher-profile agitators, and came to be taken quite seriously by some of the internet’s more impressionable users, including the North Carolina man who drove to Washington and fired shots with a real assault rifle at the real pizza joint in a misguided attempt to free the nonexistent sex slaves.

When we sat down in California, it was a day after the incident, and Cernovich conceded that he had learned some lessons from the fiasco. For example, although he does believe there is an active pedophile ring in Washington that needs to be investigated, he never believed it was based out of Comet. He also claimed he did not know “Pizzagate” implied that specifically. “Right now we’re going from the underdog to the overdog,” he said. “So I’m still fighting like the underdog. But when I say things, I need to be more careful. When I say things like ‘Pizzagate,’ I need to be more clear.”

In the midst of our discussion about Pizzagate, Cernovich’s phone rang, and when he picked it up, the voice on the other end belonged to Mike Flynn Jr., the son of Trump’s pick for national security adviser. Flynn Jr., who had a transition email address and at one point was up for a national security clearance as part of the presidential transition, was also a Pizzagate conspiracy theorist, explicitly endorsing the idea that Comet could plausibly be the center of a Clinton-connected child sex-trafficking operation. Taking the call from Flynn, Cernovich hurried out onto his back patio, shut the sliding door to the living room and paced around for several minutes out back.

The Flynn’s, father and son, are also big on #MAGA Twitter, and have become fans of Cernovich’s work there. The elder Flynn, who like his son regularly tweets out links to fake news stories, tweeted an endorsement of Cernovich’s *Gorilla Mindset* book; he has also called Yiannopoulos “one of the most brave people that I’ve ever met.” Cernovich declined to comment on his relationship with the Flynn’s, or with almost anyone else. He said he avoids knowing the names of people he communicates with, and tries to forget their names if they tell him, in case he is ever subpoenaed. He consciously models his approach to media and politics on “fourth-generation warfare”—that is, insurgency and counterinsurgency, which includes the use of fluid, ad hoc alliances. “Chuck Johnson doesn’t tell me what to do. Milo doesn’t tell me what to do,” he said. “But we talk, and we’re loosely aligned.” He has become more inclined to believe in conspiracies, he told me, now that he is part of one himself.

If there’s a real alt-right conspiracy in American politics, Charles C. Johnson is an integral part of it. Johnson, a self-described journalist, came up through a series of conservative fellowships and internships as a student at Claremont McKenna College, where he graduated in 2011. From there, he has made a name for himself through a series of controversies as both a debunker and purveyor of false stories.

He contributed to the Daily Caller’s since-debunked story alleging that New Jersey Senator Bob Menendez consorted with prostitutes, and has falsely reported that a *New York Times* reporter had posed for *Playgirl*, mistaking a spoof source article for a genuine one. After striking out with his own website, GotNews, he published the full home addresses of two other *Times* reporters after they published the name of a street that Ferguson, Missouri, police officer Darren Wilson had once lived on. Later, Johnson was among the most prominent skeptics of *Rolling Stone*’s since-debunked article about an alleged gang rape at the University of Virginia. In the process of attacking the story, he revealed the supposed identity of the woman who had been the anonymous source for the story. He also published a book, *Why Coolidge Matters*, in 2013. It received favorable blurbs from Bush administration Justice Department official John Yoo, conservative blogger Michelle Malkin and Texas Senator Ted Cruz.

Like a number of alt-righters, Johnson has been banned from Twitter—in this case for soliciting donations to “take out” a Black Lives Matter activist, phrasing he said referred to opposition research but that the platform interpreted as a threat of physical violence.

If other alt-right figures are plotting some kind of outside route to Washington influence, Johnson, at 28 years old, is already there. When I had last seen him in person, it was at Trump’s election night victory party sometime after 3 a.m., and he was standing about 10 yards from the president-elect. “Chris Christie will not be as powerful as he now appears,” Johnson informed me. Two days later, Christie was demoted from chairman to vice-chairman of the transition, and he has drifted further from the center of Trump’s orbit since then.

“It’s no secret that I’m friendly with people who are now in the government,” Johnson said back in Midtown three weeks later, on the second floor of the swanky Lambs Club. Johnson had returned to New York from his home in California to testify in his settlement with Gawker, which he has sued for libel over its exploration of a rumor that he once defecated on a floor in college.

He told me he had been performing various unspecified tasks for the Trump transition. He took credit for bringing Bill Clinton’s female accusers and Barack Obama’s pro-Trump half-brother Malik to the general election debates. (Malik Obama has referred to Johnson as “my friend” on Twitter.) One person close to Trump’s transition told me that Johnson had participated in some early transition-related meetings and caused headaches when he was accused internally of leaking to the news media. “I haven’t leaked anything without authorization,” Johnson responded. (Trump transition spokesman Jason Miller wrote in an email that Johnson does not have a role on the transition and has not “been tasked with any projects on the team’s behalf.”)

Among his fellow travelers, Johnson is known as a direct line to the donor class. He said he talks to Bannon and knows the Mercers. He knows Thiel. McInnes, the *Vice* co-founder and an acquaintance of Johnson’s, said Johnson and Thiel coordinated their legal assaults on Gawker. Johnson declined to discuss the tech billionaire other than to describe their relationship as a mere “passing acquaintance,” and a spokesman for Thiel did not respond when asked whether the pair had coordinated.

Johnson said he is concerned now with making sure Trump’s government is stocked with Trumpists rather than establishment Republicans and other “cucks,” and his WeSearchr “information marketplace,” a business he started where people can post bounties for specific pieces of information, provides him with the resources to vet potential appointees independently. In the internal struggle over staffing the administration, this aligns him with Bannon. Johnson told me he is soliciting résumés, recommending job candidates and circulating policy memos, but to whom exactly he wouldn’t say.

Despite his proximity to the Trump administration, Johnson is far less squeamish than many of his confederates about Richard Spencer. He makes no bones about knowing him, and offered to give me Spencer’s phone number. He told me he rejects white nationalism as a political philosophy—“I don’t know when something is loving being white and when it’s hating other groups,” he mused—but doesn’t totally reject the idea of applying the alt-right label to himself.

Johnson has personal goals for Washington as well. Some of these have to do with taking revenge on social media platforms that have relegated his ideas to the margins. Johnson said he would like to use his connections to the incoming administration to push for the invocation of antitrust laws to regulate Twitter and Facebook as utilities, in order to prevent what he sees as their unfair treatment of conservatives. And he wants to push the government to ensure federal antidiscrimination rules do not interfere with his plans for a social network restricted to people with IQs above 130. “I just don’t want the government to persecute my businesses,” he said.

Mostly, he said, he is interested in making money. So he will want a friendly ear at the Commodity Futures Trading Commission when he launches a predictions-market business. He is interested in crowd-sourcing cancer research, which will require a friendly Food and Drug Administration. His plans for a crowd-funding business could depend on his relationship with the Federal Trade Commission.

Johnson defends trolling, his preferred mode of political activism, as a tactic that allows a weaker party to force a stronger party to act—and a pedigreed one at that. “Jesus was a troll,” he said. (Cernovich credits the 4th century B.C. philosopher Diogenes the Cynic—who irritated the citizens of Athens and Corinth with stunts like bringing a live, plucked chicken to Plato’s academy to prove a point about taxonomy—as the original troll.) But dissimulation and juvenile humor are not traits that inspire great confidence in leaders, and Johnson conceded that, now that his candidate has won, such tactics would need to evolve. “The trolls in some measure have to grow up,” he said. “Government by meme is kind of a scary idea.”

It’s clear that the alt-right isn’t shy about the sweep of its claims; Yiannopoulos and Spencer, as well as lesser-known figures, tend to talk about their project in world-historical terms, framing it as a civilizational clash, or some kind of new rising tide. What’s far less clear is if the alt-right did make a move on Washington, just how many people would show up.

Before he was banned from Twitter, Yiannopoulos had 300,000 followers. Spencer had more than 30,000 Twitter followers at publication time, and Cernovich had nearly 190,000. But a social media following isn’t the same as votes, or membership, and the numbers question is now tangled in the new ambiguity about who is or isn’t part of the alt-right, or the alt-light, or new right. There is a noisy online white nationalist alt-right core that amplifies its voice by frenetically posting on Twitter, Reddit and 4Chan, often using multiple accounts to inflate its perceived size. The alt-right subreddit has more than 13,000 registered users. At Spencer’s November conference in Washington, about 200 people showed up. Johnson and others have the ear of people in Trump’s orbit, and their online visibility creates a kind of political cover for slightly more moderate versions of nationalism now represented within the White House. But it’s far less clear what kind of political groundswell they could muster if they tried.

Further muddying the waters, the alt-light and alt-right are anti-progressive cultural movements as much as political ones. Many of their members knew the late Andrew Breitbart, and they are fond of citing his maxim that “politics is downstream from culture.” The cultural component pops up in odd places: Members of the sketch comedy group Million Dollar Extreme have been called the “court jesters of the alt-right,” and a show created by the group’s leader, Sam Hyde, was canceled in December because Cartoon Network executives deemed it offensive.

In an increasingly image-driven political culture, the alt-righters are doubling down on image. The movement essentially has an official visual chronicler: Peter Duke, the only photographer Johnson allows to take his picture for publication, also shot Cernovich's new softer headshots. Duke has photographed Yiannopoulos, former Breitbart columnist Ben Shapiro, Dilbert creator Scott Adams (a Trump admirer who has feuded with feminists on his blog) and George Zimmerman, the man in Florida who was acquitted in the murder of Trayvon Martin. Duke's aspiration is to create a *Vanity Fair* for the right, to make it more glamorous. "One of the things that the left is really good at it is making people look good, and I mean that literally," he said. "The right in general needs re-branding."

Already, a new aesthetic is taking hold among the alt-light: gayer and more avant-garde. In July, Yiannopoulos hosted a "Gays for Trump" party at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, which included the cognitively dissonant spectacle of anti-Islamic commentator Pamela Geller and far-right Dutch politician Geert Wilders railing against the Muslim threat from a podium flanked by erotic photos of scantily clad young men in "Make America Great Again" hats. In October, Yiannopoulos staged a pro-Trump performance art piece in Manhattan in which he bathed himself in pig's blood to commemorate the victims of Islamic terrorism and crimes committed by undocumented immigrants. At the show, notorious pharma bro Martin Shkreli, an alt-light fellow traveler who is under indictment for alleged securities fraud, exhibited a framed red-and-blue pill. McInnes, who is white, exhibited a photo of himself as an antebellum slave.

This might seem a disorienting new politics and aesthetic for Washington, but the patron behind both events is a figure already in D.C.: Jeff Giese, a little-known entrepreneur. The 41-year-old Giese exudes the air of a West Coast investor; on workdays, he haunts the hip environs of Logan Circle, and he asked to meet me at a coffee house off 14th Street that is very much part of blue, Obama-era Washington. Giese graduated from Stanford in 1997, a year after Rebekah Mercer, though he said he does not know her. He does know fellow Stanford alumnus Thiel, according to a person familiar with their relationship, and Thiel talked him out of attending law school. Instead, Giese went to work for Thiel Capital Management, the magnate's pre-PayPal investment venture, and then for Koch Industries' public affairs office.

In recent years, Giese says, he has become less of a libertarian and more concerned with the fortunes of Middle America. He says his travels in Europe and his homosexuality have made him concerned about Islamic incursions in the West. In February, he published a paper titled "It's Time to Embrace Memetic Warfare" in a NATO-sponsored journal, calling for using the tactics of internet trolls to thwart the Islamic State's online propaganda; the ISIS tactics he studied have informed his own virtual pro-Trump insurgency, which he conducted in conjunction with the likes of Cernovich and Johnson, supplementing the uncoordinated efforts of thousands of anonymous pro-Trump Internet trolls.

Giese confers regularly with Cernovich about taking over the Republican Party and remaking it as pro-worker, perhaps with the help of a BuzzFeed-style think tank that distills policy into memes and makes those memes go viral. He views himself as a mentor and moderating force within the Trumpist movement, and acknowledged that it has some growing up to do. "We need to evolve beyond trolling," he said. The tactic can still be appropriate, but only within certain parameters, he said. "We need to make sure it's used constructively and ethically."

There are other changes in store as well. Giesea is an organizer of DeploraBall, and he invited Yiannopoulos' involvement in the party. But his young comrade's vision of shirtless Mexican laborers will not come to pass, and for a very pre-Trump, non-nationalist reason. "I find that offensive," Giesea said. "My mother is a Mexican citizen."