

OPINION  
DAVID BROOKS

# My Unsettling Interview With Steve Bannon

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Damon Winter/The New York Times

**By [David Brooks](#)**

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I felt like I was talking with Leon Trotsky in the years before the Russian Revolution.

I was sitting in Steve Bannon's Washington living room in 2019. His stint in Donald Trump's White House had ended ingloriously, but he had resumed his self-appointed role as populism's grand strategist, its propagandist, its bad-boy visionary. He sat there that day sketching out his plans for how MAGA-type movements could take over the world.

By then populists had already racked up some big wins — Brexit in Britain, Trump’s victory in 2016. Right-wing populists were in power in Hungary and Poland, Giorgia Meloni’s Brothers of Italy party was surging and populists were rising across Latin America. Bannon knew I opposed him in every particular and abhorred much of what he said, but he laid out his grand vision cheerfully, confidently. He didn’t seem concerned about old-fashioned conservatives, moderates and classical liberals like me; we were destined for the ash heap of history.

I decided to check in with Bannon again about a week ago. This year, populists have scored yet another string of triumphs and a second Trump victory is possible or even probable this November. I found Bannon, currently the host of the podcast “War Room,” to be embroiled and embattled as usual. He’s going to prison Monday, to begin serving a four-month sentence for contempt of Congress. If anything, he is more confident than ever.

What follows is a transcript of our conversation, edited for clarity and length — and to remove the F-bombs that Bannon dropped with machine gun regularity. I should emphasize that I wasn’t trying to debate Bannon or rebut his beliefs; I wanted to understand how he sees the current moment. I wanted to understand the global populist surge from the inside. What he told me now seems doubly terrifying, given Joe Biden’s performance at the first presidential debate.

*DAVID BROOKS: Since we last spoke, in fact in just the past few months, there have been populist victories in the Netherlands, with Geert Wilders. We have the Chega movement doing well in Portugal, with the young especially. In Germany, the ultra-right-wing Alternative for Germany surged in last month’s European parliamentary elections. In France, Marine Le Pen’s populist party also triumphed in the European election, a result that prompted President Emmanuel Macron to call new national elections and throw the entire French political system into meltdown. In the U.K.’s forthcoming national elections, Nigel Farage’s Reform Party is on pace to win seats for the first time. So if you’re a historian telling the big story of what’s happening, what would it be? What’s the core narrative here?*

STEVE BANNON: Well, I think it’s very simple: that the ruling elites of the West lost confidence in themselves. The elites have lost their faith in their countries. They’ve lost faith in the Westphalian system, the nation-state. They are more and more detached from the lived experience of their people.

On our show “War Room,” I probably spend at least 20 percent of our time talking about international elements in our movement. So we’ve made Nigel a rock star, Giorgia Meloni a rock star. Marine Le Pen is a rock star. Geert is a rock star. We talk about these people all the time.

*Do you see yourself in the same business that Fox News’s Roger Ailes was in, sort of right-wing journalism?*

I’m not a journalist. I’m not in the media. This is a military headquarters for a populist revolt. This is how we motivate people. This show is an activist show. If you watch this show, you’re a foot soldier. We call it the Army of the Awakened.

I mean, Murdoch is a bigger enemy of ours than MSNBC. Because he’s the epitome of neoliberal neocon. And they’re the opiate of the masses. They’re the controlled opposition, right? They’re never going to want fundamental change. They’ll throw some shiny toys — Obama’s a Muslim, the kind of issues which we mock all the time.

*Let’s get back to the big narrative. Do you think immigration is the core issue here? That seems to be one issue that drives populist support everywhere.*

Immigration, spending — it’s the lack of confidence and self-loathing of their own civilization and their own culture. That’s the spiritual part that’s at the base. Immigration is just the manifestation of a loss of self-confidence. And it’s shocking.

I came up in the golden age of Pax Americana, a working-class dad who had a housewife and five kids. All went to Catholic schools. I mean, a guy who was a foreman and then lower-level white-collar management. That’s the kind of thing we aspire to have in this country. If you look at it country by country, it’s all the same. The lack of jobs, the lack of opportunities, the lack of self-confidence.

What we should be doing is cutting the number of foreign students in American universities by 50 percent immediately, because we’re never going to get a Hispanic and Black population in Silicon Valley unless you get them into the engineering schools. No. 2, we should staple an exit visa to their diploma. The foreign students can hang around for a week and party, but then they got to go home and make their own country great.

Our movement is metastasizing to something that's different than America First; it's American Citizens First.

*What does that mean?*

It means Americans have to get a better deal. Right now, the American citizen has all the obligations of serving in the military, of paying taxes, of going through this grind that is American late-stage technofeudal capitalism. But tell me what the bonus is.

*Like everybody, I've been trying to figure out why populism is having this broad resurgence. My story may be a little different from yours. My quick story is that 20 percent of Americans go to nice colleges and get professional-type jobs. They marry each other. They move into cities like Washington, Denver, Austin, San Francisco. They invest in their kids, who get into the same colleges, who then get good jobs. The people who are not in this hereditary educated elite conclude that it has too much cultural power, media power and now financial power, so much of the rest of the country says: Enough is enough.*

Well, they have power. But we're going to win. We're ascendant in Europe. We're ascendant here. We've had no money. We're not organized. It's self-organizing. But our enemies — and they are enemies — continue to overplay their hand, and so we continue to rise.

*After the financial crisis I thought it would be a great time to be a leftist. You've got a financial crisis caused by irresponsible capitalism, wages are stagnant, inequality is rising. Heck, even I almost turned into a Marxist. But somehow this has been a better era for the populist right than the populist left.*

You're seeing America First Democrats. Look at John Fetterman. Fetterman and Steve Bannon are closer in their economics than Steve Bannon and the Republican establishment. The left didn't have what it took because of the cultural issues and the issues of race, all that madness that they're embedded in. They had to have open borders. They had to have D.E.I.

The historical left is in full meltdown. They always focus on noise, never on signal. They don't understand that the MAGA movement, as it gets momentum and builds, is moving much farther to the right than President Trump. They will look back fondly at Donald Trump. They'll ask: Where's Trump when we need him?



Credit...Damon Winter/The New York Times

*You said something I've got to ask you about, that Trump's a moderate. In what areas is the MAGA movement farther right than Trump?*

I think farther right on radical cuts of spending, No. 1. I think we're much more hard-core on things like Ukraine. President Trump is a peacemaker. He wants to go in and negotiate and figure something out as a deal maker. I think 75 percent of our movement would want an immediate, total shutdown — not one more penny in Ukraine, and massive investigations about where the money went. On the southern border and mass deportations, I don't think President Trump's close to where we are. They all got to go home.

Also, on artificial intelligence, we're virulently anti-A.I. I think big regulations have to come.

President Trump is a kindhearted person. He's a people person, right? On China, I think he admires Xi Jinping. But we're super-hawks. We want to see an elimination of the Chinese Communist Party.

*What do you think a second Trump administration would look like in the first few weeks? Months?*

Project 2025 and others are working on it — to immediately focus on immigration, the forever wars and on the fiscal and the financial. And simultaneously the deconstruction of the administrative state, and going after the complete, total destruction of the deep state.

In the first 100 days — this is going to be different than '16 — we will have 3,000 political appointees ready to go.

*Have those people been selected and trained? When Trump came in, in '17, you guys had a lot of the Republican holdovers —*

We had nothing. You have five or six groups that are building up subject matter expertise, laying out position papers. They're vetting people right now.

So you're going to go to war with the existing administrative state and the Praetorian Guard deep state. My point is, let's, in the transition, get all the federal contracts. Close them all down. Let's get MAGA in there. Right. Let's get our guys in on the contracts. It'll be a hostile takeover of the apparatus.

*Who's the inner circle? Who is the chief of staff?*

I think you're going to have somebody that knows what's going on. Guys like Dr. Kevin Roberts and others. Also, I strongly believe that right after The Associated Press calls the election that Jerome Powell will tender his resignation. And so you'll pick a new Federal Reserve chief. And you'll pick a Treasury secretary and attorney general.

*Would you like to have some role?*

No, no, no, no. We run this like a military command post. So I would only be giving up power. I went there before. I wanted out. I'm not a staff guy. I can't do it. And also that's not where the center of power is. It's not how President Trump thinks. A big center of power is just media.

I call Trump a Marshall McLuhanesque figure. [McLuhan](#) called it, right? He says this mass thing called media, or what [Pierre Teilhard de Chardin](#) said of the [noosphere](#), is going to so overwhelm evolutionary biology that it will be everything. And Trump understands that. That's why he watches TV.

He understands that to get anything done, you have to make the people understand. And so therefore, constantly, we're in a battle of narrative.

Unrestricted narrative warfare. Everything is narrative. And in that regard, you have to make sure you forget about the noise and focus on the signal.

And remember, our audience is virtually all activists. So even though it may not be the biggest, it doesn't have to be. It's the people that are out there in the hinterland that are on the school boards. They now control so many state parties. Our mantra is you must use your agency. It's a spiritual war. The divine providence works through your agency.

*I remember a precinct captain strategy: You called on people to get active on that level to monitor elections and gain control of the G.O.P. from the ground up.*

The Republican Party is structured as basically a grass-roots party. But they've never filled the precincts. And that's where we fill them, just with our guys. That's how we control all these political parties, from Utah to Arizona to Georgia. Governor Brian Kemp doesn't control that. It's all controlled by the grass roots.

*The Republican establishment never was interested?*

No, hated it. Not just not interested. The Republican establishment is all guys in blue blazers and khakis going to the club. These are the unclubbable people.

And think about what this movement did. It did three things that have never been done before, with no money. It removed a sitting speaker of the House for the first time in history. It removed the minority leader, who I would argue is the most powerful Republican you've had in 50 years, Mitch McConnell. And then we removed the entire R.N.C. Think about it. Ronna McDaniel and all her people.

These guys are never going home unless you beat them.

Victory begets victory.

*Do you know the demographics of these activists? Education? Race? Income?*

First off, I would say 60 percent female. Female and over 40 years old. A lot of that, a third of them brought in by the pandemic, and the Moms for America. A ton of moms, women who didn't read a lot of books in college. They're not politically active. They had no interest. It was only later in life, as they became the C.O.O. of the American family, they realized how tough it was to make ends meet.

And then they saw the lack of education, and it was really the pandemic when they walked by the computer and saw what the kids are doing. They're now at the tip of the spear.

*Do you worry that your broader movement will be fatally poisoned by antisemitic elements, the conspiracy crazies?*

We're the most pro-Israel and pro-Jewish group out there. What I say is that not just the future of Israel but the future of American Jews, not just safety but their ability to thrive and prosper as they have in this country, is conditional upon one thing, and that's a hard weld with Christian nationalism.

*If I can make one comparison: Early in my career, I worked for Bill Buckley. His manner at National Review reminds me a little of some of the things you do. He created an intense sense of belonging: We're the conservative movement. We're all in this together. Every day we're marching forward. But he also had a strong sense of who was a wack job, a conspiracist. And he was going to draw a line. Pat Buchanan was on the other side of the line.*

So what I admire about Buckley is obviously the intense thing of belonging. What I don't admire is the no fight. It's very much an intellectual debating society, right?

I use you and George Will as examples of this all the time. Brilliant guys, but this is a street fight. We need to be street fighters. This is going to be determined on social media and getting people out to vote. It's not going to be debated on the Upper East Side or Upper West Side.

*I've found that most people are pretty reasonable. You can have a conversation, and you'll at least see where they're coming from.*

I think you're dead [expletive] wrong.

*That's where we disagree.*

No, it's 100 percent disagree. What are you talking about? They think you're an exotic animal. You're a conservative, but you're not dangerous. You're reasonable. We're not reasonable. We're unreasonable because we're fighting for a republic. And we're never going to be reasonable until we get what we achieve. We're not looking to compromise. We're looking to win.



Now, the biggest element that Buckley had that the book “Bowling Alone” had, and you talk about, is the atomization of our society. There’s no civic bonding. There’s no national cohesion. There’s not even the Lions Club things that you used to have before. People tell me all the time: “You changed my life. I ran for the board of supervisors, and now I’m on the board of supervisors.” They have friends that they never had met before, and they’re in a common cause, and it’s changed their life. They’re on social media. Every day, they have action they have to do.

*This was Hannah Arendt’s point that loneliness is a seedbed for authoritarianism. But you’re not about conversing with the other side, you’re just fighting with the other side.*

What do you mean, not conversing with? There’s nothing to talk about.

*Well, how about you have a conversation with the Biden administration. The Biden administration has spent a lot of money. And now, when I go to Central Ohio, they’ve got an Intel plant coming in. You go to Upstate New York, they’ve got a Micron plant. These are benefits for the working class.*

Some of that stuff’s OK. But on the fundamental direction of the country, we are separate. We are two different worldviews. And those worldviews can’t be bridged.

*That’s not the way George Washington communicated. It’s certainly not the way Abraham Lincoln communicated. I mean, I know that’s cliché, but go to the second inaugural. Slavery is not a North or South problem; it’s an American problem. He was emphasizing national unity.*

Hang on, hang on, hang on. After he had burnt — good god, man, I can’t believe you used that example. After he burned the South to the ground —

*They declared war.*

In fact, let’s go back to the speech. He actually leads, what led up to it, and then that powerful phrase, “the war came.” Basically, we tried to compromise. “The war came.” Columbia, Atlanta. I burned it to the ground. The inherent powers of the Constitution. He was a military dictator because he had to be, right?

Don't sit there and say, Oh, that's all happy-talk language at the end. Remember, in war, take the moral high ground, totally and completely destroy your opponent.

*What does that mean, though? If they have 50 percent of the country, then they have 50 percent of the Congress.*

Well, let's say this. We win, we pick up five or six seats — we have 55 seats in the Senate. We pick up five or six seats in the House, and we have the executive branch. And this time, we have much more savvy and understanding.

*What does the Justice Department look like? What kinds of changes would Trump make?*

I think they'll hit it with a blowtorch.

*When did you come to see the world this way? I mean, obviously, you were at Harvard Business School and Goldman Sachs. Did you have a front-row seat and think, "Oh, this sucks"?*

I took Michael Porter's classes at Harvard back in the '80s, and globalization was—Harvard, at that time, treated this as the second law of thermodynamics. It was a natural property that could not be questioned. And then I went to the M. & A. department at Goldman Sachs and I worked with Hank Paulson. I was put on a lot of things to sell companies. You could just see America was being gutted. You had Mike Milken and the junk bond guys, and they were after these companies. And you go out there, and the companies were not particularly well run.

The guys were always going to the country club, and the management was very detached from labor — you see this evisceration, you saw these jobs going, and they were never coming back.

And then I read [Christopher Lasch](#). I was just doing my thing, had my own finance firm. And then 9/11 happens. And everybody's down singing "God Bless America." And I said, "I wonder how long this 'God Bless America' phase is going to go." I was adamantly opposed to Iraq and Afghanistan. And one of the things that got me the most was I couldn't believe that George W. Bush didn't have his daughters go into the military. How do you do this? I remember reading guys saying we could have much better recruiting if we had those two as symbols.

We're so removed from that kind of Middle America. And my daughter then went to West Point. And when I went up to West Point, when she was there, I was blown away by how working-class West Point was — the students. This is the heart of the country. And these kids are going right into this war.

But then, it was 2008 when the collapse hit. I mean, for my dad, AT&T stock was right next to the Catholic Church. In fact, it would be like having shares in the Catholic Church. And when Jim Cramer came on that day and said, If you need cash in the next five years, you got to dump. This thing's over. And when my dad notified me a couple of days later he had dumped his AT&T stock, I go, wow.

I said, this is a guy. He has been a systems player the entire time, right? Telephone company, 50 years, the little guy. You can work your whole life and get [expletive] by this. And who's responsible?

We have a capitalist economy that has no capitalists, right? It has hypercapitalists or state capitalism. You've got to not just reallocate income, you have to reallocate assets. People have to have a stake in this. That's all they're asking for.

The MAGA movement controls the Republican Party and backs President Trump. So yes, Trump is a revolution — remember, General Washington, the revolution and the foundation, and then Lincoln, the birth of the new America. And he's the most nationalist guy we've ever had. Remember, fighting the Civil War, as a warlord, to make sure that we were a nation. Remember, he's a nationalist.

I hate to say this, but Trump's the third. Trump is taking America back to its more constitutional Republic for the third time, and that drives the credentialed left nuts because he's not just a class traitor, he's a low-end guy from Queens. He's not up to their social — it's too tacky. It's the gold. It's the Trump stuff. They hate him. They hate him to a passionate level. They look at the noise around Trump and miss the signal of what's really happening, and they can't get past that, and they're blinded by it.

*Finally, I've got to ask you about what's about to happen to you — going to prison.*

I spent my 20s on a Navy ship. If I have to spend my 70s in a prison, I'm still fighting. This show will be bigger. My message will be stronger.

*You're not concerned?*

No. I'll get the message out and fight for this. History is a process. I'm kind of honored, in one way, that they hate me so much they feel they have to put Bannon away. Their thing is that, if we put Bannon in prison or get him away from his microphone, that'll help us win. It will be the exact opposite.

Every day is a fight. People in this movement, when they talk to me, they say they have a purpose. Once they have a purpose, you can't stop this movement. We're not going to win everything. Just like in Europe, you're going to have defeats. Some days are going to be cloudy. But the sunlit uplands are in front of you. Just keep your head down and keep grinding.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/01/opinion/steve-bannon-trump.html>

And we wonder how Joe Biden floundered so badly in the debate with Donald Trump. Reasoning with the unreasonable (who don't fight fair at all, only "reasonable" and "fair" when it fits their larger goal.) If David Brooks can't hold his own in such battlegrounds—he does not "fight" in the way Steve Bannon does—how could an old guy like Biden up against a deaf liar? Do you think Bannon would go into David's lair to hear him out politely? Bannon will be gloating now like Trump after trouncing Biden.

Yet the truth remains, good men and women are going to have to step up and fight, and they need to be tougher than David Brooks's reasonableness.

The American elites—and Canadian, and European, and \_\_\_\_ ones too—are reaping what they have sown, a whirlwind. The Democratic establishment rallying around Biden after his debate debacle makes it clear how insular and bereft of ideas and principles—national interest ones beyond the narcissistic "What's good for me will be good for you. Trust me"—American "leadership" is. Always has been; it got a scare and shakeup in the Sixties and Seventies—how dreadful the Fifties were!—but got its bearings again with Reagan only to now find that that appeasement and control method, co-opting antinomian forces into going along with "Morning in America" neoliberal globalization shibboleths, has run its course and been exposed as a fraud, another one. M. Macron epitomizes this high-IQ obtuseness and bankruptcy of ideas without real, radical courage. Macron thinks he will prevail like he did in wooing a gorgeous wife and mother, his former school teacher, away from her chocolate factory heir husband and children. I suspect all these "statesmen" have motivation rooted and rationalized in much-earlier formative "validating" experiences where they (think they) figured out how to win and set to running with it. TJB