



How Steve Bannon guided the MAGA movement's rebound from Jan. 6



By [Isaac Arnsdorf](#)

April 4, 2024 at 5:00 a.m. EDT

A shroud of black mesh fence closed around the bright marble colonnades of the U.S. Capitol campus. The twelve-foot barrier, topped with razor wire and guarded by troops in combat fatigues with flak vests and long rifles, had sprung up to secure the seat of government after it was overrun by a mob of Trump's supporters trying to stop the formal certification of his electoral defeat. Whether the fortifications were too much or too little, they were clearly too late. Their effect now was to sever the federal office buildings from the adjacent neighborhood of Capitol Hill, a picturesque historic district of low, colorful row homes. In the basement of one of these townhouses, Stephen K. Bannon was about to take to the airwaves.

'Finish What We Started: The MAGA Movement's Ground War to End Democracy'

This is an excerpt from ["Finish What We Started,"](#) by Isaac Arnsdorf, which will publish next Tuesday, April 9.

The author will be discussing this book during a [Washington Post Live event](#) on April 9 at 11 a.m.

Seated in his podcast studio, Bannon looked, as usual, under-slept and over-caffeinated, but on this morning, the first Saturday in February 2021, his beady eyes were bright with excitement. He wore chunky black headphones that swept back his long gray mane until the tips grazed the epaulets of an olive-green field jacket. This MAGA Che Guevara look was new for Bannon, a transformation from the preppy layered collars that he used to wear in 2017 to his West Wing office, which he'd called "the War Room."

If White House strategist to podcast host sounded like a fall from grace, for Bannon it was more of a return to form. He was in his natural mode, playing a role that came easily to him: the outside agitator with a huge online following. This same basement, years earlier, had been the headquarters of Breitbart News, the rising voice of reactionary right-wing nationalism, rebranded for an online generation as “the alt-right.” Official Washington, Democrat or Republican, didn’t know what to do with Bannon when he showed up, with his scruffy neck and multiple shirts. Bannon relished that air of foreignness, dubbing this townhouse the “Breitbart Embassy.” Fittingly, the upstairs rooms were decorated as if for a state visit, with yellow brocade curtains, crystal chandeliers, filigree mirrors and white stars dotting a dark-blue rug running up the stairs to a Lincoln-themed bedroom. It was in those rooms, during a book party in November of 2013, that Bannon had once announced, “I’m a Leninist.”

“What do you mean?” asked his shocked interlocutor, a historian at a conservative think tank across town. The historian, Ronald Radosh, was all too familiar with Lenin’s contributions to the ledger of human suffering. Lenin’s most influential and enduring innovation, laid out in his 1902 treatise, “What Is To Be Done?,” was the revolutionary party: an institution for organizing society not according to competition or merit, but rather based on adherence to an ideology.

“Lenin wanted to destroy the state, and that’s my goal too,” Bannon answered. “I want to bring everything crashing down, and destroy all of today’s establishment.”

Bannon’s Manichaeian worldview started young. At a Catholic military school in Richmond, Virginia, he learned about the 1492 reconquest of Spain as the turning point in an ongoing clash of civilizations between the Christian West and the Muslim world. As an adult, he devoured books on Attila the Hun and great military campaigns. He was obsessed with history, specifically the concept of historical cycles — the idea that time was not, as Americans usually learned, a linear march of progress, but rather, more like the view of ancient traditions, a recurring pattern of distinct phases. Bannon especially liked the version of this theory in “The Fourth Turning,” a 1997 book by historians Neil Howe and William Strauss, which ordered American history into generation-long periods of highs, awakenings, unravelings and crises. The book predicted a coming rise of nationalism and authoritarianism, across the world and in America.

Bannon was not merely a student or passive observer of this prophecy; he wanted to be an agent of it, and an architect of the era that came next. So when he watched Trump glide down a golden escalator to announce his campaign for president, in 2015, his first thought was, “That’s Hitler!” By that he meant someone who intuitively understood the aesthetics of power, as in Nazi propaganda films. He saw in Trump someone who could viscerally connect with the general angst that Bannon was roiling and make himself a vessel for Americans’ grievances and desires.

Bannon's thinking on building a mass movement was shaped by Eric Hoffer, "the longshoreman philosopher," so called because he had worked as a stevedore on the San Francisco docks while writing his first book, "The True Believer." The book caused a sensation when it was published in 1951, becoming a manual for comprehending the age of Hitler, Stalin and Mao. Hoffer argued that all mass movements — nationalist, communist, or religious — shared common characteristics and followed a discernible path. "The preliminary work of undermining existing institutions, of familiarizing the masses with the idea of change, and of creating a receptivity to a new faith, can be done only by men who are, first and foremost, talkers or writers and are recognized as such by all." (How about a reality TV star?) But such leaders cannot alone create the conditions that give rise to mass movements. "He cannot conjure a movement out of the void," Hoffer wrote. "There has to be an eagerness to follow and obey, and an intense dissatisfaction with things as they are, before the movement and leader can make their appearance."

Rather than focusing on movement leaders, Hoffer's inquiry concerned the followers — how ordinary people became fanatics. Successful, well-adjusted people did not become zealots. Sometimes they glommed onto mass movements to serve their own ambitions, but that came later. The true believers were seeking not self-advancement but rather "self-renunciation" — swapping out their individual identities, with all their personal disappointments, for "a chance to acquire new elements of pride, confidence, hope, a sense of purpose and worth by an identification with a holy cause." The kinds of people who were most susceptible to becoming true believers were, in Hoffer's idiom, poor, struggling artists, misfits, unusually selfish, or just plain bored. "When our individual interests and prospects do not seem worth living for, we are in desperate need of something apart from us to live for," Hoffer wrote. "All forms of dedication, devotion, loyalty and self-surrender are in essence a desperate clinging to something which might give worth and meaning to our futile, spoiled lives."

For Bannon, as he was building Breitbart's audience, the ready supply of true believers came from disaffected young men. Bannon had first discovered this untapped resource in, of all places, Hong Kong, while working with a company that paid Chinese workers to play the video game World of Warcraft, earning virtual commodities that the company could flip to Western gamers for real money. The business collapsed, but not before introducing Bannon to an online subculture of young gamers and meme creators, whose energies he learned to draw out and redirect toward politics.

Breitbart's traffic figures confirmed Bannon's hunch that candidate Trump was catching fire in 2015, and Bannon positioned the site as the Trump campaign's unofficial media partner in thrashing the Republican primary field. By the time Bannon officially took over Trump's ragtag campaign, in the wake of a chaotic convention and spiraling Russia scandal, he supplied a closing message that, if not exactly lucid, did have a kind of coherence. The message was that Trump, the "blue-collar billionaire," was here to blow up the established political order that was plainly failing to serve the needs and interests of the common public, and would be a champion for the forgotten and left-behind Americans. Bannon was not alone in seeing Hoffer's influence on what he was doing: Trump's opponent, Hillary Clinton, dusted off "The True Believer" and shared it with her campaign staff, recognizing in those pages the description of a destructive energy that she concluded she was powerless to subdue.

In the White House, as Trump's chief strategist, Bannon heralded the dawn of a "new political order," but he lasted only seven months. Trump threw him out after white supremacists and neo-Nazis marched in Charlottesville, Virginia, against removing a statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee, and one of them drove a car into a crowd of counterprotesters, killing a young woman. Trump was the one who defended the torch-carrying mob as including "very fine people," but Bannon, as the face of right-wing nationalism inside the White House (and what a face it was), made a fitting scapegoat. Though the dismissal set Bannon, temporarily, at odds with Trump, it did not shake his commitment to their shared political project. Bannon moved back into the Breitbart Embassy to plot his comeback.

Bannon was constantly testing things out. With so many bombastic schemes in motion, it could be hard to tell when Bannon was onto something or when he was just blowing smoke. He looked overseas, finding common cause with rising right-wing authoritarians around the world, from Hungary to Brazil. He went to court against the Italian government over a medieval monastery near Rome where he unsuccessfully tried to start a training academy for European nationalists. He found a new patron, the fugitive Chinese billionaire Guo Wengui, who cast himself as the shadow-boxing action hero in music videos about taking down the Chinese Communist Party. Together, Bannon and Guo landed in the SEC's crosshairs for a cryptocurrency offering, called G-Coins or G-Dollars. (Guo was arrested in 2023 and charged with wire fraud, securities fraud, bank fraud and money laundering amounting to more than \$1 billion.) Bannon started a podcast, calling it "War Room," and playing Guo's music video as the interlude for commercial breaks. And he reunited with some old friends in a bid to crowdsource money for Trump's border wall. More than 250,000 people donated, many saying they could only afford a few bucks but desperately wanted to help fulfill the president's signature campaign promise (never mind that Mexico was originally supposed to foot the bill). Bannon and his buddies dutifully assured the donors, publicly and privately, that they were all volunteers and all the money was for the wall.

By the summer of 2020, it might have been easy to laugh Bannon off as a has-been and a sideshow. There he was, reading a book, having a coffee, relaxing on the deck of Guo's 150-foot superyacht in Long Island Sound, when who showed up but the Coast Guard with federal agents to arrest him. Prosecutors accused Bannon and his friends of misusing the millions they'd raised from Trump supporters, spending the money on their own salary, travel, hotels and credit-card debts. Trump shrugged to reporters in the Oval Office, "I haven't been dealing with him for a very long period of time."

In truth, they had started talking again. Trump was by then running for reelection, and though he'd entered 2020 in a formidable position, the COVID-19 pandemic had paralyzed the economy and showcased a president in ineffectual denial, refusing to wear a mask, demanding to suppress case counts by slowing down testing and musing about injecting bleach. By June, Joe Biden had put up a double-digit lead in national surveys, and Trump was longing to replace his campaign manager (digital strategist Brad Parscale, who was about to have a mental-health crisis) and recapture his 2016 magic. But Bannon turned down the job. Based on how badly the White House was squandering the covid emergency, leaving the response to Jared Kushner, Mike Pence and Dr. Fauci, Bannon thought the race was already over. The Trump campaign was beyond saving. Undermining a Biden presidency, however, was something Bannon said he knew how to do, and he could start laying the groundwork in advance.

On his “War Room” podcast and in speeches to Republican groups around the country, Bannon addressed audiences who were feeling sure that Trump would win, because they’d seen massive boat parades of Trump supporters, and they didn’t personally know anyone who was voting for Biden. Bannon warned them to stay focused, pay attention. Trump had been saying since the summer that the Democrats would use mail ballots to steal the election, using covid as an excuse to change the rules. Bannon explained how it would all play out. The Election Day votes would show Trump ahead, and he would declare victory that night. But the Democrats and the media would cry, No, you have to wait for the mail ballots. The electoral college results would be disputed, and it would be up to Congress to settle the outcome when it met to formally certify the results on Jan. 6, 2021. At that point, Bannon promised, Congress would either return the election to Republican- controlled state legislatures or decide it in the U.S. House of Representatives, where Republicans controlled a majority of state delegations.

Could they really pull it off? Didn’t matter. “I had no downside,” Bannon would later say. His aim was to use the occasion to stage such a spectacle that it would undermine Biden’s legitimacy with millions of Americans — “shred that f---er on national TV,” permanently hobble his ability to govern, “kill the Biden presidency in the crib.” All that mattered was for Trump supporters to believe it was possible for Congress to block the election results that day.

So while Trump was busy calling Republican officials in Georgia, Arizona and Michigan to pressure them to declare him the winner; and while Trump’s lawyers were filing far-fetched lawsuits seeking to invalidate Biden’s victory, and rounding up Republicans to put themselves forward to the electoral college, and lobbying Vice President Pence to accept them as the rightful electors; and while Republican activists around the country organized Stop the Steal rallies to protest the results; and while militia groups bought weapons and drew up attack plans for the biggest rally of all, Bannon kept hyping Jan. 6 to his hundreds of thousands of podcast listeners. “This is more important than November 3, this is more important than even Trump’s presidency,” he’d say on the show. “This is more important than this fight between the nationalists and the globalists. This is more important than the fight between progressives and conservatives. It’s more important than this fight between Republicans and Democrats. This gets to the heart — you go read Roman history, this is like toward how the republic fell, right, and became a totalitarian or authoritarian empire. We’re at that moment.”

He didn’t say exactly what everyone was supposed to do once they got to Washington on Jan. 6. His point was that his listeners, the “War Room posse,” needed to show up, they didn’t want to miss this. They had to be there. Their success depended on it. “I know people have work, family, kids, school, everything like that — however, these types of days happen very rarely in the history of our country. This is something you can participate in. This is something they’re gonna be able to tell their kids and their grandkids about, ’cause this is gonna be history. Living history.”

When the day finally dawned, as the crowd he’d conjured took shape, Bannon marveled at how his plan was materializing, like the invisible sound waves of his podcast finding physical, human form. “This is a massive turnout, I think it overwhelms everybody’s — every anticipation of what was going to happen,” he said on the show that cold morning. “Because of this audience. You have brought this to the cusp. We are right on the cusp of victory.”

Behind him in the studio, on a white fireplace mantel lined with MAGA hats, a TV was streaming CNN. The chyron read, SOON: TRUMP TO SPEAK TO SUPPORTERS IN DESPERATE COUP ATTEMPT. Bannon was saying, “This is not a day for fantasy. This is the day for maniacal focus. Focus, focus, focus. We’re coming in right over the target, OK? Exactly. This is the point of attack we always wanted. OK? ... I said from day one, for months and months and months and months — because they’re trying to steal it, they’re gonna be caught trying to steal it — President Trump’s massive victory is going to be affirmed in a contingent election in the House of Representatives ... Today, the trigger can get pulled on that. We are on, and when everybody out there, people getting fired up — we are on the cusp of victory because of you. Don’t ever forget that.”

Soon the lawmakers in the Capitol could hear the crowd roaring outside. The mob broke in and the lawmakers fled. For hours the counting and certification of the electoral votes was stopped. Once police and National Guardsmen secured the Capitol and the lawmakers reconvened, Pence refused to do what Trump demanded, and not enough Republicans objected to the votes to force a contingent election in the House. The massive victory Bannon had promised did not come to pass.

Whose fault was that? Not Bannon’s. Not the “War Room” posse’s. Bannon knew his listeners were angry, he knew they were disappointed. He wanted them to understand: “These were not Democrats that were thwarting us,” he said on the next day’s show. “These were Republicans.”

In the weeks that followed, Bannon’s show got booted from YouTube, Trump was banned from Twitter, rioters started getting arrested, Trump got impeached, Biden got inaugurated, and at the last possible minute before Trump left office, he pardoned Bannon. The pardon did more than rescue Bannon from criminal jeopardy (his co-defendants in the fraud case, by the way, were still on the hook); it also restored Trump’s imprimatur. Whatever their disagreements over the years (“Stephen K. Bannon has nothing to do with me or my presidency,” Trump said in 2018, “he lost his mind”), Bannon must have done something worth rewarding or retained some value to Trump. As Trump skulked off to Mar-a-Lago, Bannon kept rising as the essential voice of the MAGA universe.

The pro-Trump media ecosystem splintered into alternative platforms and fringe websites such as Rumble, Telegram and BitChute. MyPillow sponsorships for all. But Bannon stood out from the pack by any measure: he reached more listeners, had the most in-demand guests, churned out more content, set the agenda. He kept distributing through Apple’s podcast app, repeatedly topping the charts. He also streamed his episodes as videos, and his “War Room” became like a far-right “Meet the Press,” the go-to interview for Trumpworld celebrities and aspiring candidates.

For three hours every weekday, and two on Saturdays, Bannon and his guests developed a canon of the Stolen Election myth. The fraud was just the first part. The Democrats always tried that; it was a given. The second part, the crucial step, was the stab in the back — the Republican election officials and state legislators who knew the election was stolen and let the Democrats get away with it. All the tumult of 2020 had, as Hoffer foretold, done the preliminary work of undermining institutions and creating a receptivity to a new faith. Now it was up to Bannon to transform the defeat of January 6 into the galvanizing moment for the next phase of the MAGA movement.

“OK, live from the nation’s capital, you’re in the War Room,” your host began today’s show. “It’s still an occupied capital. The question still needs to be asked, why are seven thousand National Guard, up-armored National Guard, still in the nation’s capital?” The answer, according to Bannon, was that the show of force was a “psyop” — a form of psychological warfare meant to cow the MAGA movement, to break Trump supporters’ will to resist. That was also the purpose, he would say, of the Democrats’ vote to impeach Trump for inciting the insurrection, and the Senate trial that was about to begin.

Bannon announced the date, as he usually did at the top of the show, in a grandiose way: “Saturday, the sixth of February, the year of our Lord 2021. The podcast,” he went on, assuring his listeners that they were not alone and that he was not speaking into a void, was “closing in on 34 million downloads.”

Bannon wasn’t messing around with basement kids anymore. The MAGA movement had matured. His audience now was grayer — people in their 50s, 60s and beyond, a lot of empty nesters and retirees — but with a similar need for connection, and perhaps even memories of a gentler time. He was speaking to people who didn’t look like radicals, and certainly didn’t think of themselves as extremists; it was the world around them that had lost its mind. The social critic Christopher Lasch, another Bannon influence, had written about this beginning in the 60s: how liberalism was a failure because people looked at the world that “freedom” got them and decided they didn’t want it. It sucked. Modern life was so fragmented, so disembodied, so alienating. Dealing with that alienation was what War Room was all about. “Action, action, action,” Bannon would say. “This is all about your agency.” He was offering his listeners a path to self-empowerment, and in the dark days that followed Jan. 6, Trump supporters were starving for a sense of direction, a suggestion of where to go next, an idea of what to do with their feelings of shock and disaffection.

One idea that was now generating buzz with Trump supporters was starting a third party, a Patriot Party, to fight for Trump in all the ways the Republican Party had so clearly failed. The source of this proposal was Trump himself, who meant it as a threat to the Republican senators about to try his impeachment. But Trump’s rank-and-file supporters were getting carried away with the third-party idea, and Bannon needed to put a stop to it. He knew a third party would be a fool’s errand, a waste of everyone’s time and money. Even Teddy Roosevelt couldn’t win back the White House on a third-party ticket. All third parties did was help elect someone from the two major parties. George Wallace helped give you Richard M. Nixon. Ross Perot got you Bill Clinton. Bannon had a better idea.

The way Bannon saw it, there already was a third party: that was the establishment he hungered to destroy. The neocons, neoliberals, big donors, globalists, Wall Street, corporatists, elites. He sometimes called them “the uniparty,” because they were the only ones who ever got power, no matter whether Democrats or Republicans won elections. This formulation was not entirely wrong-headed, to the extent that the structure of having two pluralistic, big-tent parties pushed them both toward the center, producing a measure of stability and continuity. Nor was Bannon baseless in believing that this stasis could produce bad outcomes, particularly in foreign affairs, the domain of the so-called Washington Blob. Outside the uniparty, as Bannon saw it, there was the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, which he considered a relatively small slice of the electorate. And the rest, the vast majority of the country, was MAGA. Bannon believed the MAGA movement, if it could break out of being suppressed and marginalized by the establishment, represented a dominant coalition that could rule for a hundred years.

In his confidence that there were secretly millions of Democrats who were yearning to be MAGA followers and just didn't know it yet, Bannon was again taking inspiration from Hoffer, who observed that true believers were prone to conversion from one cause to another since they were driven more by their need to identify with a mass movement than by any particular ideology. Bannon was not, like a typical political strategist, trying to tinker around the edges of the existing party coalitions in the hope of eking out 50 percent plus one. Bannon already told you: he wanted to bring everything crashing down. He wanted to completely dismantle and redefine the parties. He wanted a showdown between a globalist, elite party, called the Democrats, and a populist, MAGA party, called the Republicans. In that matchup, he was sure, the Republicans would win every time.

How to put the Patriot Party idea in its place, and harness the MAGA movement through the Republican Party where it belonged? Bannon had just the man for the job, someone he'd known for years, someone who used to blog for him back at Breitbart. His name was Dan Schultz, and his time had come.

During a break, before bringing Dan Schultz on the air, Bannon asked him, "How should I introduce you?" This was a standard question for any of his guests; usually everyone had a website or a podcast or a book or a PAC or a 501(c)(4) — some hustle to promote. "What organization are you representing?"

But this guest had a different sort of answer. "The Republican Party," Dan Schultz said.

There was a long pause. Then Bannon chuckled. "The Republican Party."