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Chris Buck for The Atlantic

POLITICS

AMERICAN RASPUTIN

Steve Bannon is still scheming. And he's still a threat to democracy.

By Jennifer Senior
Photographs by Chris Buck

JUNE 6, 2022

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I SOMETIMES LOOK at the long ribbons of texts I've gotten from Steve Bannon and wonder whether they couldn't tell the whole story all on their own.

There are certainly enough of them. He says he has five phones, two encrypted, and he's forever pecking away, issuing pronunciamentos with incontinent abandon—after midnight; during commercial breaks for his show, *War Room*; sometimes while the broadcast is still live.



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You can discern much of Bannon's mad character and contradictions in these exchanges. The chaos and the focus, the pugnacity and the enthusiasm, the transparency and the industrial-grade bullshit. Also, the mania: logomania, arithmomania, monomania (he'd likely cop to all of these, especially that last one—he's the first to say that one of the features of his show is "wash rinse repeat"). Garden-variety hypermania (with a generous assist from espressos). And last of all, perhaps above all else, straight-up megalomania, which even those who profess affection for the man can see, though it appears to be a problem only for those who believe, as I do, that he's attempting to insert a lit bomb into the mouth of American democracy.

March 28, 9:49 a.m.

I'm taking out Murkowski today and forcing her to vote NO on judge Jackson

He's talking about the Senate confirmation vote on Ketanji Brown Jackson's Supreme Court nomination, and uncertainty about whether Lisa Murkowski, the senior Republican senator from Alaska, will vote yes. I tell him I'll be interested to see if Murkowski responds.

After today she's a NO

Murkowski did not vote no. I sent him a [New York Times story](#) on April 4 to tweak him. Wasn't your show supposed to flip her? I asked.

Please

Goalposts. They're always movable.

This is a huge issue that I'm about to make toxic

Standby

And so it went that day: *The work before us is to weaponize this vote*. Twice he used this word, *weaponize*, in talking about his plan to flip Senate seats in Nevada and Arizona—adding, *I can clearly see how to win*.

There were times when my text interactions with Bannon felt like one prolonged Turing test. There were times when he almost resembled a regular human. He would talk about missing his father, who died in January at 100, and how strange it was to be in

RECOMMENDED READING



Raiders of the Lost Web
ADRIENNE LAFRANCE



Dear Therapist: I Don't Approve of My Daughter-in-Law's Parenting
LORI GOTTLIEB



98 Million TikTok Followers Can't Be Wrong
RACHEL MONROE



I'm impressed by my photo!!

Can u see the photo?

You don't like it?

I don't look so (Covid 19) UNKEMPT

Of course it doesn't!

Stop

You've watched the debates

Did he care to name names?

Henry Levi in Athens.

Blood on the floor.

Bernard-Henri Lévy, he meant, the famous French intellectual.

Biggest disappointment of my life

Made him eat this

He sent me a picture of Lévy's book *The Empire and the Five Kings*.

I watched that debate. This was not at all my impression. But winning is certainly an all-consuming preoccupation for Bannon, just as it is for his former boss. Winning debates. Winning elections—in France, in Hungary, in South Texas, where Hispanic voters are migrating into the R column with impressive speed. One night, as I was reading in bed, I heard the *ping* of my phone: Bannon had sent me a story from a Rio Grande Valley website, reporting that Republican turnout at early-voting polls was up up up.

Kaboom

And good night

It was 11:37 p.m. Never too late to own the libs.

ONE OF THE surest ways to get under Bannon's skin is to call *War Room* a podcast. It is not a podcast, he is always telling me; it is a TV show, with tons of visual components that listeners-only miss—the charts explaining economics, the montages of news clips that form his cold opens, the live shots of his correspondents. He broadcasts from the ground floor of a Washington, D.C., townhouse, and there are cameras, bright lights, a backdrop that devoted viewers know well: a fireplace mantel displaying a gold-framed picture of Jesus and a black-and-white poster saying THERE ARE NO CONSPIRACIES, BUT THERE ARE NO COINCIDENCES. — STEPHEN K BANNON.



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falsehoods about the 2020 election, viewing *War Room* has become harder to do. It's still available in the far-right online ecosphere, and it's streamable on various TV platforms, including Channel 240 of Pluto TV, but that seems like its own sad metaphor—*War Room* as a small, demoted planetoid, available mainly in the icier regions of the broadcast cosmos. The whole operation has an amusing shoestring quality to it. The audio occasionally cuts out or sounds like it's bubbling through a fish tank; two of Bannon's phones buzz throughout the show; the segment openers aren't always ready when he needs them. It's a bit like Father Coughlin stumbled into Wayne and Garth's basement.

Bannon started *War Room* in October 2019, initially to fight Donald Trump's first impeachment; in January 2020, the show morphed into *War Room: Pandemic*. But over time, the show became a guided tour through Bannon's gallery of obsessions: the stolen election, the Biden-family syndicate, the invaders at the southern border, the evil Chinese Communist Party, the stolen election, draconian COVID mandates, the folly of Modern Monetary Theory, the stolen election.

David Frum: Steve Bannon knows exactly what he's doing

But Bannon is more than just a broadcaster. He's a televangelist, an Iago, a canny political operative with activist machinations. With almost every episode, he hopes to transform his audience into an army of the righteous—one that will undo the “illegitimate Biden regime” and replace the current GOP infrastructure, still riddled with institutionalist RINO pushovers, with adamant Trumpists who believe that 2020 rightfully belonged to them. “The show's not about entertainment,” he told his audience in one of his typical pep talks. “That's not us. This is for the hard-cores, okay? ... The people who say, ‘No no no no no, not on our watch.’” He goads his followers into action with a combination of praise, flattery, and drill-sergeant phrases he repeats like a catechism: *Put your shoulder to the wheel! Be a force multiplier!* And especially: *Use your agency!*

This is the Democratic Party's nightmare scenario, the hobgoblin that visits at 4 a.m.

And how, specifically, does Bannon propose that his audience *use its agency*? By taking back their government from the ground up—as election inspectors, as school-board members, and, most practically of all, as precinct-committee members. Bannon may be the country's biggest exponent of the “precinct strategy,” first developed by the Republican lawyer Dan Schultz, which encourages interested citizens to sign up for the grunt work of elections, because it can lead to the big stuff, like helping decide who oversees them. *War Room* regularly features citizen activists who have figured out how to work the system. After each segment, Bannon asks: “How can people get to you? How do they find out more about what you're doing?” And they provide Twitter and Gettr handles, websites, on occasion even a cellphone number.

Why do you do that? I once asked him.

“It's a force multiplier,” he answered.

Right right right.

This is the Democratic Party's nightmare scenario, the hobgoblin that visits at 4 a.m.: The infrastructure of civil servants on the state level, which barely held

the United States together in the aftermath of the 2020 election, comes entirely undone through democratic means. As it is, the Republicans are poised in the 2022 midterms to take back the House in a potential rout, a prospect that fills Bannon with inexpressible glee, and for which he seems to take partial credit. He's hoping for a 60-, 70-, 80-seat loss for the Democrats—something that will set the party back for generations.

"The left in the media ... *they're* all about democracy?" he ranted to me one day. Then he broke into a smile. "On November 8, the *War Room* and the *War Room* posse and all the little people at the school boards and things—we're gonna give you democracy shoved up your ass. Okay? We're gonna give you a democracy *suppository*."

All bluster, you might say. Showmanship. Bannon is merely jumping on bandwagons that were already rolling. Murkowski hardly seemed moved by his efforts.

Anne Applebaum: The MyPillow guy really could destroy democracy

"Bannon? Please," says John Podhoretz, the old-school conservative editor of *Commentary*. "He was a third-rate banker who got a tiny slice of an enormous pie." He's referring to the piece of *Seinfeld* profits that Bannon got when he helped orchestrate a deal between Ted Turner and Castle Rock Entertainment. "He ended up taking over *Breitbart* because Andrew Breitbart suddenly died. If Paul Manafort weren't a criminal, he and Kellyanne Conway wouldn't have taken over the Trump campaign. He's not an emperor *and* he has no clothes."

Bannon, according to this theory, is a fundamentally unsuccessful guy who has failed ever upward—one of those strange id creatures who's come to sudden prominence in this id-favorable internet age, but is too undisciplined to hang on to any power for very long. He lasted in the White House for, what, seven months?

The problem is, there's now loads of room for those id creatures in American politics and culture, and they can accumulate considerable influence. Last September, ProPublica contacted GOP leaders in 65 key counties around the country and discovered that 41 of them "reported an unusual increase in sign-ups since Bannon's campaign began," with at least 8,500 new precinct officers joining their ranks. And Bannon is now on *Axios's* list of the Republicans' new kingmakers, compiled this year based on interviews with top GOP consultants and operatives around the country, in part because his show is "a goldmine" for primary candidates who are fundraising online.

Reports of Bannon's influence would be far less alarming if his show were a reliable source of news and information. But [an analysis by the Brookings Institution](#) found that *War Room* had more episodes containing falsehoods about election fraud than any other popular political podcast in the months leading up to January 6. And January 6 is the stench that hangs over this discussion, is it not? Not that he necessarily coordinated the logistics of that day in any significant way (he's such a dervish of chaos that I wouldn't trust him to organize so much as a birthday party). But the energy behind January 6? Especially given the size and commitment of his citizen army, and how relentless he is in firing up his troops? *That* he does seem to have helped marshal.

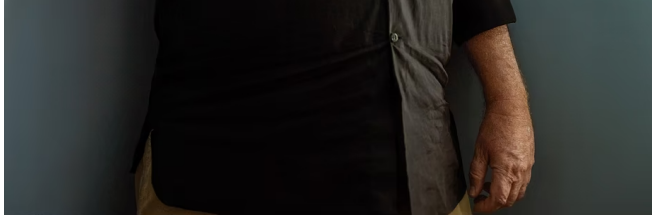
There's a scene I keep looping back to in Errol Morris's 2018 documentary about Bannon, *American Dharma*. Bannon is recalling his Hong Kong days in the 2000s, when he was working for Internet Gaming Entertainment. He notes how stunned he was to discover how many people played multiplayer online games, and how intensely they played them. But then he breaks it down for Morris, using the example of a theoretical man named Dave in Accounts Payable who one day drops dead.

"Some preacher from a church or some guy from a funeral home who's never met him does a 10-minute eulogy, says a few prayers," Bannon says. "And that's Dave."

But that's *offline* Dave. *Online* Dave is a whole other story. "Dave in the *game* is Ajax," Bannon continues. "And Ajax is, like, *the man*." Ajax gets a caisson when he dies and is carried off to a raging funeral pyre. The rival group comes out and attacks. "There's literally thousands of people there," Bannon says. "People are home playing the game, and guys are not going to work. And women are not going to work. Because it's *Ajax*."

"Now, who's more real?" Bannon asks. Dave in Accounting? Or Ajax?





Steve Bannon in Washington, D.C., in May (Chris Buck for *The Atlantic*)

Ajax, Bannon realized. Some people—particularly disaffected men—actively prefer and better identify with the online versions of themselves. He kept this top of mind when he took over *Breitbart News* in 2012 and decided to build out the comments section. “This became more of a community than the city they live in, the town they live in, the old bowling league,” he tells Morris. “The key to these sites was the comment section. This could be weaponized at some point in time. The angry voices, properly directed, have latent political power.”

I mentioned this moment to Bannon the second time we spoke. On *War Room*, he frequently talks about three levels of participation: the posse, the cadre, and the vanguard. It sounded to me like the gamification of politics. Yes, he told me. That’s just it: “I want Dave in Accounting to be Ajax *in his life*.”

But that’s precisely what happened on January 6. The angry, howling hordes arrived as real-life avatars, cosplaying the role of rebels in face paint and fur. They stormed the Capitol while an enemy army tried to beat them away. They carried their own versions of caissons. They skipped a day of work. And then they expressed outrage—and utter incredulity—when they got carted away.

The fantasy and the reality had become one and the same.

A FEW HOURS into my first interview with Bannon, he tells me the story of how he became a father of two more kids than he’d planned. It was the mid-’90s, and he was already a once-divorced dad of a little girl, when he began to casually date a “knockout” he met at a photo shoot. At the time, he had his own boutique investment bank, Bannon & Co., in Beverly Hills, but in April 1994, he went off to Arizona to manage the quixotic eco-experiment Biosphere 2—one of the odder aspects of Bannon’s already unlikely biography (but typical in that it resulted in a lawsuit)—and decided one weekend to have her come visit. She flew in, she flew out, and he assumed that that was that. But a month or two later, he says, she contacted him, asking if they could get together when he was next in L.A.

“So we go to a restaurant and we’re having a great conversation,” he tells me. “I’m just kind of in listen mode, because she had a tendency to go into talk mode.” Bannon himself is in storytelling mode—relaxed, sunny, nothing at all like the tightly wound belligerent howling into the mic. “Finally, because I

had to go to another meeting, I said, ‘You know, I gotta bounce.’ And she goes, ‘Um, can we order a couple of espressos or some coffee?’” He sensed exactly where the discussion was headed. “And my heart’s like”—he starts pounding his chest—“*boom boom boom*.”

She was pregnant. With twins. “I knocked her up at the Biosphere,” he says, shaking his head. “We were watching ... who was that old crazy guy with the TV show?”

John McLaughlin?

“John McLaughlin. It was whatever show he hosted.”

That would be *The McLaughlin Group*. Was there ever any question of not marrying her?

“No. I had to. Knowing my mom, there was just no chance. The girls could not be illegitimate. I retained a lawyer and we had a prenu.”

Somehow, this story came up a few weeks later, when I was chatting on the phone with one of Bannon’s former colleagues. I heard an audible scoff. “He’s using you. He knows that story makes him look good. Like he’s responsible.”

He’s using you. It’s a refrain I will hear over and over again on this strange odyssey. Bannon’s the guy with a perpetual meta-motive, always working an angle. He’s extremely skilled at getting others to do what he wants them to do. He speaks openly, almost exuberantly, about his talent for thought-puppetry. When I asked him why Democrats are terrible at talk radio, he had an immediate reply: Democrats are masters of the cool mediums, like TV. “But radio is theater of the mind,” he said. “*Hot* and theater of the mind. I can fuck with your mind so badly if you’re just hearing my voice, right? It’s a much more powerful medium.”

No one disputes that Bannon is very smart. He sweeps in information quickly, has a file-cabinet memory, can keep multiple tabs open in his brain. It’s how he *uses* his brain that horrifies people—and I’m talking not just about Democrats, but about many of his former colleagues, who see in him a disordered, nefarious kind of brilliance. Stephanie Grisham, who worked both on the Trump campaign and in the Trump White House in various press jobs (including nearly a year as communications director), called him a con man when we chatted on the phone.

“Your subject is a very sick megalomaniac,” wrote Anthony Scaramucci, who for a brief 11 days was also Trump’s communications director, when I emailed and asked him about Bannon. “Study Ullrich, a great biographer (Hitler). We have seen his sinister form before. We are ready.”

“Steve may well be mentally unstable, in a frightening, disturbing kind of way. He was certainly a cancer in the Administration,” wrote yet another former White House colleague, and not a low-ranking one, in an email when I sent a query about Bannon.

Care to elaborate? I wrote back. The reply:

He immersed himself in an office covered, literally wall-to-wall, with whiteboards filled with his various musings and plans and accomplishments—which I found just bizarre. In conversations with him, I got the very distinct impression that he was a very ends-justify-the-means kind of person. And way too many conversations ended with “then we burn it all down ... just burn it down.” It was never clear as to what “it” was. Congress? The “establishment?” DC? The country as he perceived it? The “world order?”

A con man, a cancer, *Hitler*. Did people speak about even Richard Nixon in this way?

He is Schrödinger’s bullshitter, at once of his nonsense and above it.

Yet here’s the dirty secret about Bannon: Many liberals who have met him are disarmed by how charming he is. (*He’s using you.*) When Bannon isn’t in full gladiatorial mode, he is upbeat, good company, almost *clubbable*. “He’s a lot like his mother,” his old friend and Navy pal Sonny Masso told me. “Never met a stranger.” He called me “ma’am” and “kid.”

White House reporters were fond of him. In a leaky White House, Bannon was a gusher. (And often with the dirtiest dish.) He’s quite capable of code-switching into the patois and patter of the coastal elite, probably because he’s a card-carrying member, whether he likes it or not: an alumnus of Harvard Business School, Georgetown School of Foreign Service, Goldman Sachs, Hollywood. But his actual beliefs are hard to discern. Michael Wolff’s entertaining anthology, *Too Famous*, includes an astute essay about Bannon, noting that he “could seem like a person both professing quite an extraordinary level of bullshit, and yet, as dramatically, not believing any of it at all.” He is Schrödinger’s bullshitter, at once of his nonsense and above it.

This ambiguity—this doubleness—extends to the Big Lie, the notion that the 2020 election was stolen from Donald Trump. The number of people who know Bannon and say he doesn’t believe it is surprising. But think about it,

many of them say: Did he really have a choice? Just months before the election, Bannon was arrested for allegedly defrauding investors in “We Build the Wall,” a crowdsourced project to erect a barrier on the southern border. Faced with a potential future in orange pajamas, Bannon insinuated himself back in Trumpworld, helping the president sell his message that the election was stolen—and that he had to fight back by any means possible. “Steve was in on the joke,” says Sam Nunberg, one of the first hires of the 2016 Trump campaign, now a political consultant. “He never believed that the election would be overturned. Steve needed a pardon.”

“That’s absurd,” Bannon says. I tell him many people he knows are convinced that he sells this dangerous message for sport. He waves it off. “’Cause *they* don’t believe it,” he says. “Doesn’t mean *I* don’t believe it. I absolutely believe it, to the core of my being.”

“I have a very big soft spot for Steve,” a former colleague and senior political operative tells me. “I really think he believes he’s fighting for the greater good. But I definitely get frustrated with him sometimes, and I definitely disagree with him sometimes”—particularly about his unflagging, crackbrained message to his audience that the election was stolen. “I think it’s very dangerous for democracy. And I’ve *said* this to Steve.”

What does he say back?

“He just starts talking about Confucius and Alexander and all this fucking shit.”

“His old life, as he knows it, is gone,” says Grisham, who recently wrote a memoir about her chaotic time in the White House, *I’ll Take Your Questions Now*. “He has gone in sooooo deep on the Big Lie of this election being stolen—he’s not gonna go back to, I don’t know, doing whatever it was he did before.” She points out that very few former aides can achieve the escape velocity required to make it out of Trump’s world. They’re stuck in low orbit.

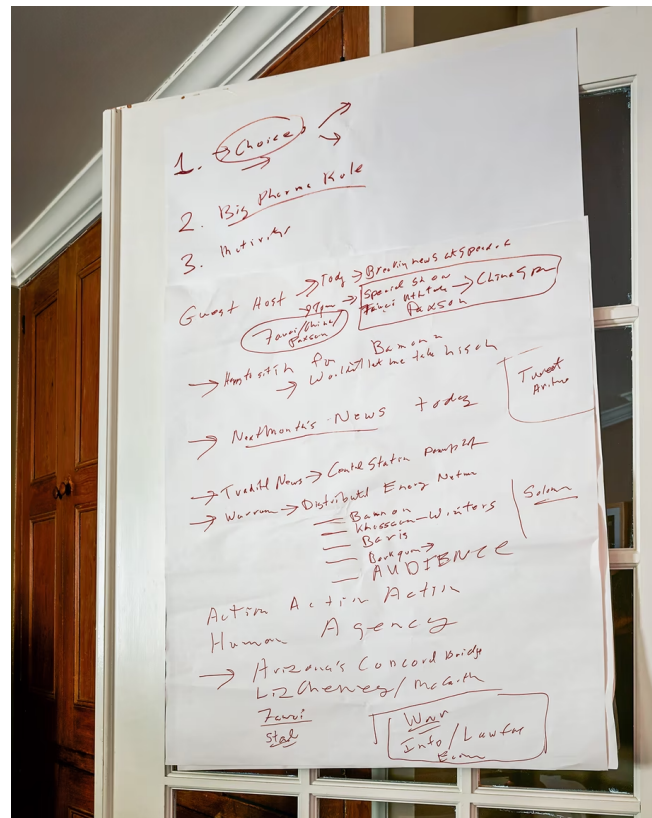
“The tragedy of Steve Bannon,” Nunberg tells me, “is that when he leaves the White House, he’s known as the great manipulator, the intellectual heavy of the international populist uprising. But *still* he ends up in the fetal position at Donald Trump’s feet.”

Is that on the record? I ask.

“Fuck yeah.”

The first afternoon I visit, Bannon is doing segment Tetris, shuffling his A, B, C, and D blocks for the afternoon show. Though he has a handful of employees cycling through his home, he does an awful lot by himself, often on the fly, including many preinterviews.

Bannon hangs up and describes the “order of battle” to his producer Cameron, a young fellow with an unflappable demeanor and a Phish sticker on his laptop. “I’ll go right to Corman, I’ll do a Pillows read”—MyPillow, one of his sponsors—“I’ll go to Tina.” That’s Tina Peters, a Mesa County, Colorado, clerk, whom he describes as his show’s Joan of Arc. “Let me have Tina?”



Peters will eventually be indicted by a grand jury for a long and impressive list of allegations concerning election-security breaches, including aiding an unauthorized individual in making copies of Dominion's voting-machine hard drives. A judge will also rule that she cannot oversee the 2022 elections. (Peters has denied wrongdoing, and insists the investigation of her was politically motivated.)

At a disinformation conference at Stanford in April, Barack Obama told an audience: "People like Putin—and Steve Bannon, for that matter—understand it's not necessary for people to believe disinformation in order to weaken democratic institutions. You just have to flood a country's public square with enough raw sewage." This was an echo of what Bannon had told the journalist Michael Lewis in 2018, that his preferred media strategy was to "flood the zone with shit."

From the April 2020 issue: George Packer on how to destroy the American government

Roughly 2,000 episodes in, Bannon's show has produced a mighty river of ordure. Every state official, no matter how marginal or ostracized (or indicted), gets a chance to recite what they deem evidence of a stolen election—harvested ballots! hinky machines! lapses in signature matches!—and other assorted crimes committed by Democrats. His show is ground zero for epistemological warfare, and he recruits all kinds of fringe combatants to the cause, including the Mos Eisley Cantina caucus of Congress (Matt Gaetz, Mo Brooks, and, for a long while, with alarming regularity, Marjorie Taylor Greene). And if they say something truly off-the-wall, even by *War Room* standards, well ... there's always plausible deniability. Bannon wasn't doing the talking. He only hands his guests the mic, right? How could he know they were lousy at karaoke?

I will say that the *War Room* is, in its own frantic way, more varied and ambitious than the other shows of its kind, lurching between republic-endangering lies and granular wonkery, especially when it comes to polls and economics. (There's a lot of talk about wage-price spirals and quantitative easing.)

But the motto that sits on Bannon's mantel—THERE ARE NO CONSPIRACIES, BUT THERE ARE NO COINCIDENCES—is quite apt. It's perfect doublespeak, a formula that allows his viewers to embrace a conspiracy without calling it a conspiracy, to believe a lie while claiming it isn't one. His show positively burbles with conspiracies, or at least darkly hints at doings within doings, grimy wheels within wheels. Before the Olympics in China, Bannon suggested that something was terribly suspicious about the lockdowns happening there—it couldn't just be Omicron that was spooking the Chinese government.

So what's your theory? I asked.

"Some people think it's a combination of Ebola and hemorrhagic fever," he answered. "I don't know."

That would mean China successfully concealed an Ebola outbreak.

Early in the Ukraine conflict, Bannon took Vladimir Putin's latest propaganda out for a spin, repeating more than any other far-right broadcast (again, according to Brookings) that Ukraine was developing bioweapons with funding from the United States. Even his own expert, the virologist Steven Hatfill, slapped him down on the air for repeating that one: "*Russia's* the one with a biological-weapons program in this area."

And don't get Bannon started on the COVID vaccines. They're an experimental gene therapy! Shots that kill 15 people for every person they might save! (Well, he didn't say that. A *guest* did—Steve Kirsch, the head of something called the Vaccine Safety Research Foundation.) Naomi Wolf, who suggested on Twitter (before getting kicked off) that COVID vaccines were a "software platform that can receive uploads," is one of his most popular regulars. He insists on calling her *Doctor* Naomi Wolf every time she comes on the show, pausing and then leaning hard on the word *Doctor*. I point out that this is rather deceptive.

"She's a Ph.D. from Yale, isn't she?"

Oxford, I say. In *philosophy*.

"I rest my case. It's good enough for me."

"YOU ALLOWED IT to happen, you stupid motherfucker!"

This is what Bannon sounds like when he loses it. I had heard about his famous temper, but had yet to witness it in real time.

"You know why? 'Cause you don't *give a shit*."

The target of his pique is one of his employees. I will later feel terrible about this and apologize. He is yelling at the employee based on a mistake I made—I'd been pestering Bannon about a bizarre newsletter that I thought was issued by *War Room* but in fact came from a fan site. Bannon thought the employee was to blame.

"If I didn't give a shit, I wouldn't be here doing this stuff," the employee replies.

“Bullshit,” Bannon says. “You’re doing this for a fucking paycheck. Go fuck yourself.” He then calmly turns to Cameron, the producer. “Do we have Ben at the border?” Suddenly the tantrum has the quality of WWE wrestling—dialed up for my benefit, a performance.

Was it for my benefit? I ask the employee.

He shakes his head. *No*. He stares at his computer, grim-faced.

Bannon’s blood is still up about half an hour later, when I ask him why he thinks his Apple podcast rankings dipped shortly after the start of the Ukraine invasion. They did *not* dip, he says, and starts punching his phone, this time to yell at his publicist. “Why did you not send her the Chartable chart every day?”

I get it every day, I interrupt.

“Stop,” he snaps at me. “Am I asking you?”

No, I say.

He continues giving a heated lecture to his publicist. “Are we the No. 1 or 2 podcast every day in politics on Chartable?” Pause. “Have we had any dips since the war started?” Pause. “Thank you. All 30 days you send me, I want you to send her, and I want you to copy me on it.”

I get it later. The chart shows a clear dip—with the show sliding to third, fourth, fifth place in the politics category—around the beginning of the war.

Bannon gets off the phone, perfectly cheerful.

When you were married, I ask, did you yell at your wives like this?

“Was I yelling?”

Yes, I tell him. What would his ex-wives say about him?

“They’d say, ‘Another day at the Bannon ranch.’”

Did any of his ex-wives ever drag him to therapy?

“Stop.” He starts laughing.

Look, if you want to stay married—

“Marriage to me *was* therapy.”

But did any of them ever take him to a shrink?

“Never mentioned it. Are you nuts? I’m an Irishman.”

I know, I say. Famously unanalyzable. Still, your personality is not garden-variety—

“That’s so not true.”

But of course it is true. The charisma, the quick temper, the overt delight in manipulating people ...

... And again, the majestically unreliable narration. A few weeks later, I consulted a [report](#) from the Santa Monica Police Department filed on New Year's Day 1996, following a 911 call. It said that Bannon's second wife—the mother of the twins—had had an argument with Bannon so intense that she followed him out to the car, where he'd already climbed into the driver's seat, and spat on him; he reached through the open window and grabbed her by the wrist and neck, leaving red marks.

I remembered the story well, having read it in *Politico* when it first broke, in 2016. Bannon was charged with misdemeanor domestic assault, battery, and dissuading a witness. When the story came out, Bannon told *Politico* through a spokesperson that he'd never been interviewed by the police about the incident. He pleaded not guilty to the charges. The case was later dismissed.

But as I reread the grim police report, something else caught my eye. It was the part that said, *They have been going to counseling.*

He *had* been dragged to a therapist.

"That's not therapy," Bannon says, when I mention this to him a few weeks later. "That's marriage counseling."

I do wonder what that counselor had to say.

I 'VE GOTTEN USED to this strange house. Bannon and I are mid-conversation when my colleague David Frum appears on the flatscreen in the living room. Is that David? I ask, interrupting our conversation. Bannon turns around. He's thrilled. "Ask David Frum how it was to get *crushed*," he tells me. "You heard the story of how I destroyed him in Toronto?"

He's referring to the debate the two had in 2018. It drew lots of publicity at the time. I did, in fact, watch it, and David did not, in fact, get crushed. According to the audience meter, the debate was a draw, the attendees unbudging in their final views—which overwhelmingly corresponded with David's, by a 44-point margin. (David had argued that the future belonged to liberals, in the broad sense of the term; Bannon had argued it belonged to populists.) David [wrote about the experience for *The Atlantic*](#).

"It was *full-spectrum dominance*."

Full-spectrum dominance. It's a staple in Bannon's pantry of war cries. We will show *full-spectrum dominance* in November. We will *run the tables* on those feckless Democrats; we will *fieldstrip* these clowns. Trump was *the tip of the spear, an armor-piercing shell*.

Navy speak, basically, with extra habanero.

A streak of machismo definitely runs through *War Room*. Bannon crows about the new "muscular, ascendant Republican Party." He despises "emotionalism." He's bellicose when it comes to the culture wars, possessed of unerring instincts about what will inflame and polarize. Demagoguing critical race theory? Here for it. Just hours before the invasion of Ukraine, he declared: "[Putin ain't woke](#)." The undocumented immigrants streaming over the border? "An invasion," the *real* invasion, the one Americans should care about, as opposed to what's happening in Ukraine.

[David Frum: The real lesson of my debate with Steve Bannon](#)

Come next January, Bannon hopes the new Republican majority will impeach President Biden for this so-called invasion. The notion strikes me as insane. But he talks about it with metronomic regularity on his show.

"His ability to see the crack, create the wedge, and then deliver a message with emotional impact is second to none," Brad Parscale, a senior campaign

manager for Trump in both 2016 and 2020, told me. “I’ve seen him do it in real time.”

There is no plan. The plan is to leave a smoldering crater where our institutions once were.

But Bannon also has a darker, more oracular message to impart: We are at a historic *inflection point*. It’s *The Fourth Turning*. That’s the title of one of Bannon’s favorite texts, published in 1997. The authors, Neil Howe and William Strauss, take a cyclical view of history, stipulating that we go through four cycles every 80 to 100 years: a High (characterized by order), followed by an Awakening (characterized by questioning, consciousness-raising), followed by an Unraveling (marked by pessimism, selfish pursuits), which culminates in a Crisis (marked by destruction, possibly war).

At some point I ask Bannon: If you use your show to sow doubts about every institution there is—

“That’s good!”

About our media—

“That’s good!”

Then what replaces them?

“People are gonna come in to rejuvenate these things. It’s the cycle! It’s a natural process that has to happen. That’s where Donald Trump comes up.”

He trusts *Donald Trump* to re-sow the soil and build everything back?

“Donald Trump is an armor-piercing shell.”

Which is to say: There is no plan. The plan is to leave a smoldering crater where our institutions once were. Others will eventually fill it.

It must be so intoxicating to be the one in the crane with the wrecking ball.

EARLY ON IN my acquaintance with Bannon, his father died. Our original plan had been for me to meet Marty Bannon—Steve had dinner with him most weekends in Richmond—and we’d even gone some way toward coordinating the logistics. But then I got a text saying he’d died. I went to Martin Bannon’s funeral instead.

You could say that this was one hell of a brazen PR move, having a reporter tag along to your dad’s funeral—and an insensitive guerrilla stunt to pull on your family, too.

And on some level, it was. (*He’s using you.*)

But the Bannons barely blinked when I told them what I was doing there. They seemed to be used to this type of thing from Steve, and basically shrugged it off. (“Anything Steve says, you have to cut in half and divide by two,” one of them said.) His first wife was there, and she seemed to be on pleasant terms with him. His brother Chris, who went out of his way to make sure I didn’t feel marooned or awkward, was especially helpful when I phoned

some weeks later, telling me that Steve had always been a reader and a control freak and “the most competitive guy on the planet.”



Chris Buck for *The Atlantic*

Marty’s story plays a key role in Steve Bannon’s own political transformation. He was a father of five, a man who worked for the phone company his entire life, only to panic and sell off most of what remained of his savings when the market crashed in 2008. That was Steve’s true moment of conversion on the road to Damascus, or so he says—what made him embrace the cause of the forgotten deplorable. “The civic society in our country is predicated upon Marty Bannons,” he told me. “The world *depends* upon the Marty Bannons. And they’re always getting the shit end of the stick.”

Steve was the sole member of his family not to take Communion. (He has a beef with the current pope: “He’s a Marxist.”) But that was the only way he stood out. That was the biggest revelation over those two days at Marty’s funeral: Bannon basically recedes when he’s in the bosom of his family. No one treats him like a celebrity. There’s no gravitational shift when he enters the room. His eulogy was brief, affectionate, appropriate—focused on the living, how the accomplishments of the grandkids had made Marty so proud. In this setting, anyway, Bannon never once stole the show.

Z ELENSKY ... JUST *another degenerate Jew. These Jews keep showing up when societies collapse.*

The Wuhan Lab was a Zionist Lab (Yves Levi, Rothschild)

I will say that Bannon tried to warn me.

Nothing burger with Jew sauce

Jews hate anyone that goes against the world financial machine.

He knew I was Jewish. So when I asked him about *War Room* chat rooms, he told me that some of them got “a little spicy.”

Only a matter of time until the Jews destroying this country get noticed and expelled

At first, I didn’t understand what he meant. Spicy?

There was a long pause. “How much do you drill down on the, on the right?” he finally replied. “Not the conservatives. People who are considered far-right or populist or nationalist. How familiar are you with this ecosphere?”

I told him getting more so, but not very.

“Look, it’s freedom of expression,” he said, “and they’re pretty blunt about what they’re saying.”

Jews to the left, Jews to the right, stuck in the middle of Jews.

These comments—all from different handles, by the way—are on Rumble, which carries Bannon’s show live, and usually has tens of thousands of viewers in real time. (I didn’t even venture onto Telegram, where I knew the commentary would be fouler still.) I got used to it after a while. I also came to expect it: Anti-Semitic rhetoric was the most abundant form of ugliness I saw from commenters during his broadcast, even more abundant than anything floridly racist or anti-immigrant.

This hardly seems an accident. Anti-Semitism is the mother of all conspiracy theories. Jews: They’ve rigged everything.

“You cannot possibly—you cannot possibly, possibly watch the *War Room* and think it’s in any way anti-Semitic,” Bannon says to me when I ask him about this. Give me an example of a show segment that’s anti-Semitic, he tells me.

But it’s never as straightforward as that.

For starters, it’s the people he brings on his show. Like Marjorie Taylor Greene, one of his most ubiquitous guests, whom he cast aside only after she spoke at a February conference where the organizer, Nick Fuentes, cheerfully praised Hitler. Her beliefs were hardly a secret before that. In 2018, she shared on Facebook a video claiming that “Zionist supremacists” were trying to displace white Europeans with immigrants (in other words, the “Great Replacement” theory); she also posted a hypothesis that the California wildfires may have been caused by lasers controlled, in part, by a vice chairman at “Rothschild Inc, international investment banking firm.”

Jewish space lasers, I say to him.

“I haven’t really seen that,” he tells me.

But the *War Room* regular who truly gives me the creeps is Jack Posobiec.

“Are you saying Posobiec’s an anti-Semite?” he asks. “Show me any evidence at all that he’s an anti-Semite.”

I’m uncertain how to reply to this. Hatewatch, a blog of the Southern Poverty Law Center, published a detailed account of Posobiec’s anti-Semitic postings on social media. (Posobiec called Hatewatch’s findings “disinformation” and claimed to have filed an FBI report about it.) The crudest evidence was once on Twitter. According to the SPLC, he was part of the crusade to identify Jewish users with three sets of parentheses—the “echoes meme,” as it became known—so that they could be targeted and harassed by white supremacists online. He erased those tweets, but some are still archived.

“Surrounded by (((them))) at Peter Thiel press conference,” Posobiec tweeted in October 2016, accompanied by a selfie with people who I gather are Jews in the background.

“(((WOLF))),” he tweeted in July 2016 above another person’s tweet complaining about Wolf Blitzer’s behavior in a restaurant.

On a January 13 segment of Bannon’s show, Posobiec mentioned Ron Klain. Klain is the White House chief of staff. His name comes up a zillion times a

day on the news. It's *Klain*, rhymes with *rain*; everyone knows how it's pronounced. Posobiec said his name correctly the first time in the segment. He pronounced it correctly the second time too. But then he quickly revised his pronunciation. "Ronald *Klein*," he said.

In case there was any doubt about what sort of fellow was pulling the strings.

Or, hey, maybe he just misspoke.

“No, no,” Bannon says when I press this point. “You can’t. You can’t throw this charge out there. It’s a horrible charge. I consider myself one of the leaders in crushing anti-Semitism in this country.”

He says I should talk to all the Jews with whom he's worked and done business. And it's true, there are a fair number; not one has told me he's said anything that offended them or betrayed any revulsion. (Though in court filings made during their divorce proceedings, his second ex-wife claimed that Bannon said outright that he didn't like Jews, and didn't want his kids attending a school with so many of them, because "they raise their kids to be 'whiny brats.'") His response is adamant. "That's a bald-faced lie," he says, noting that he sent his kids to the school in question.)

During our conversation, Bannon is almost clumsily eager to show that he likes Jews. One evening, he told me that two things shocked him when living in London: “the anti-Semitism and the drinking.” A few minutes later, he mentioned how much he missed his doctors in Los Angeles. “They’re all Persian Jewish. They all look like movie stars. I don’t know if you’ve ever seen these guys. They’re like the most perfect people you’ve ever seen.”

“You should talk to Boris,” he now tells me, meaning Boris Epshteyn, a former Trump aide who is a regular fixture on *War Room*. (I did. “Any notion that Steve Bannon is anything but a great friend to the Jewish people and the state of Israel is a woke liberal lie.”)

I point out that frequently, when Epshteyn is on-screen on Rumble, a little sump collects with anti-Semitic sludge. The commenters love to dump on him. *Boris the vaccinated J-E-W. Boris is a Mossad double agent.*

“On Boris?”

Yes.

He pauses. "There's a little bit. Yup. There's no doubt."

Anti-Semitism isn't only about revulsion. It's a belief system. Bannon and his guests are always invoking George Soros. Soros-backed district attorneys. Soros and the mega-donors. It's code, by now—well-known code for a sinister theory about who's really in control. I note that every time he says "Soros," the anti-Semitic commenters come out, as if on cue.

“They say Soros?”

As if he doesn't know.

Yes, I say. And the Rothschilds, also invoked on his show.

"That's the *Breitbart* comments section," he says dismissively.

But that's just it: He told Errol Morris that the *Breitbart* comments section could be "weaponized at some point in time." Inflaming anti-Semitism is a great way to organize revolts.

"I'm gonna continue to say Soros."

Bannon lectures me that his side is not the problem. Mine is. “The Democratic Party is an anti-Semitic party,” he says. “The progressive left is virulently anti-Israel.” But that’s changing the focus of this discussion; we’re talking about *his* rhetoric.

Peter Navarro, another former Trump White House staffer who is a regular on *War Room*, was much more honest about this problem. When I asked him about the rivers of anti-Semitic slime I saw, he laughed for a moment. Then: “Yeah. You know. It’s a big tent.”

A few days after my conversation with Navarro, Bannon was on another tear about Ukraine on *War Room*, fuming once again that the United States has always been fighting Europe’s wars and bailing it out. Then he brought up Emmanuel Macron. “He’s a great guy. You know, the former *Rothschild’s* banker—”

But then Bannon seemed to catch himself. “Hey, that’s not a code word,” he said. “That’s where he worked. He worked at Rothschild & Company.”

Which is true. But there was no compelling reason for Bannon to say so.

Can I prove, absolutely, that my conversation with Navarro—one of his staunchest allies, with whom he is in constant communication—is what made Bannon catch himself, mid-sentence? I cannot. But I can’t *disprove* it either, and Navarro just happened to be his next guest. *There are no conspiracies, but there are no coincidences.*

ON JANUARY 6, 2021, Maureen Bannon, Steve’s oldest child, was at the president’s rally on the Ellipse, seated in the second row of the section for VVIPs. (Not a misprint: *VVIP* means “very very important person.”) Her plan was to spend most of the day taking photographs for the conservative influencer and *War Room* favorite Maggie McCarthy, better known as Fog City Midge, who was conducting interviews on the Mall. But around 1:50 p.m., Maureen says she got a call from Arizona State Representative Mark Finchem, another *War Room* regular (currently leading the charge to decertify his state’s election results, also running for Arizona’s secretary of state), telling her and her crew to turn around.

“He was like, ‘Do *not* come near the Capitol,’” she told me. From where Finchem was, he could already see it: chaos.

Maureen and her gang made their way back to the Breitbart embassy, where she started calling family while watching the events unfold on the giant TV adjacent to the *War Room* studio. Her father was between shows. (He stops broadcasting at noon and resumes at five.)

The final time I visit Bannon, I ask him what he was doing during the insurrection.

“Watching what was going on.”

Where?

“Downstairs,” he says. We are, for once, on the parlor floor of the Breitbart embassy, which is much more grand, much more Washington. “In the war room. Basically the whole time.”

The problem with this story is that Maureen had told me otherwise. “He was upstairs,” she said to me. “And I was downstairs, in the studio area. We weren’t around each other until close to showtime.” She’d only briefly gone upstairs, to assure her dad that she was okay.

And look: I didn’t expect Steve Bannon to be honest about this. He’s already been charged with two counts of criminal contempt of Congress for failing to respond to a subpoena from the January 6 committee. His first attempt to get

the charge dismissed, based on the bizarre claim of executive privilege, didn't work. His trial starts July 18.

When I asked Maureen what she thought her father was doing upstairs, she told me she wasn't sure, but she believed he was on the phone with the president, urging him to tell the protesters to stand down. "I can't say with absolute certainty, because I did not hear him on the phone. But knowing my dad, I believe that he did tell Trump ... that he needed to put out a statement telling them to stop."

"She's very sweet," Bannon tells me when I relay this to him.

So you're going to tell me you *didn't* call Trump?

He coyly rolls his eyes. "I don't remember."

What?

"Hey, if they come up with it, I'll have to rethink it, but I don't think I did."

I did it if they find it.

He's quick to note that he did phone Trump that morning and evening, which of course I know, because the papers have just reported it, along with the news that more than seven hours of White House phone logs—which happened to encompass the window of the insurrection—were missing. I ask Bannon what might account for the gap.

"During the working day, I don't think Trump takes a lot of calls on the cellphone."

Except we already know that the president tried to reach Senator Tommy Tuberville and accidentally got Senator Mike Lee, I say.

So he really never talked to Trump?

"Talking to Donald J. Trump was not a priority in those hours. What *was* a priority," he says, was getting all dozen Republican senators who'd originally agreed to reject the election results to stay the course. He was "livid" that some of them backed off their objections after the Capitol was breached.

This was not a response I had anticipated.

You wanted to stay the course, I say, even while men in horns and fur were storming the Senate floor? Even though a woman got *shot*?

"I assume that the Capitol Police, they're gonna get good order and discipline, but yes," he says. "As bad as that looks, you still have your duty to do ... And we failed that day. And the failure is on McConnell, and Schumer and Pelosi, and McCarthy, and all of them that wet themselves that day."

Forget about the physical insurrection. He was furious that the legislative insurrection hadn't taken place.

This is what he was talking about with Trump, he says, on the evening phone call. He told Trump it was over. "We had our shot," he says, summarizing his message to the president. "What we now have is: You can have a state legislature go back after the fact and *decertify*. And then you're kind of in uncharted territory. But the process to take the presidency" *before* it got certified was over.

It is hard to know what to make of this, the thinking is so outlandish, and so utterly estranged from the realities on the ground. True, Bannon had been at the Willard Hotel on January 5, along with a ragtag group of misfit lawyers

and advisers, helping cook up a political and messaging strategy to overturn the election.

From the January/February 2022 issue: Barton Gellman on how Trump's next coup has already begun

But he was now fuming over the failure to act on an interpretation of the 1887 Electoral Count Act, one that would have allowed the vice president to refuse to accept states' electoral votes. It's a dangerous interpretation. To embrace it would give our democracy the means to die by its own hand. And introducing it as a viable concept in the run-up to January 6, 2021, is what led to *literal* deaths—and had the Secret Service frantically trying to protect Vice President Mike Pence from grave physical harm.

Yet Bannon bitterly claims that Pence himself was the problem. Which is presumably what the guys with the hangman's noose also thought. "As a gutless coward—and he is a gutless coward—he dropped a thermonuclear weapon on a city that was obviously on edge," he insists, speaking of Pence's failure to reject states' electors. "He's responsible. One thousand percent."

This is the world according to Bannon: Mike Pence is to blame for January 6.

So what most upset you about that day, I ask, was that your legislative machinations were not fully carried out, even though they were never going to succeed?

"We would've lost," he says. "Definitely lost. But you would've had it in an official record, right? That could be debated later on."

Moving the Overton window—the spectrum of political and cultural ideas that a society is willing to countenance—is very important to Bannon. But getting the American public to accept the idea that the vice president can reject the results of a free and fair election—that's more than shifting the window. That's installing a new one.

So whom *did* Bannon call that day?

There's a five-second pause. "I have to think about that. But we worked the phones in the afternoon—where I was told, in no uncertain terms, *This is over*."

So whom did you talk to? I repeat.

"I gotta remember," he says.

I stare at him.

"I blocked that whole thing out ... I was worked up."

He does say one thing: He wasn't in touch with Ginni Thomas. (I asked.)

That, at least, is something. If you can believe it. If you can believe anything.

THE HOUSE NEXT DOOR to the Breitbart embassy is Bannon's now. Purchased for \$2.3 million, according to public records. He hopes it will one day be the headquarters of the nationalist populist movement. "We're gonna have all the lectures here, all the talks, all the cocktail parties," he says as he walks me through it. It's a lovely wedding cake of a place, with ornate molding and twinkly chandeliers. I ask if he sees any irony in its grandeur.

"In revolutionary France, didn't they have the nicest salons?"

True, but didn't Robespierre eventually find his own head in the cradle of the guillotine?

“I didn’t say it worked that well for everyone individually.”

Bannon may have styled himself as the leader of the nationalist populist movement. But he’s completely at home in the system he despises. After leaving the White House, when he was trying to build a continent-wide clearinghouse for the populist movement in Europe, he was partial to staying in luxury hotels. When federal agents came to arrest Bannon in August 2020 for allegedly defrauding investors in “We Build the Wall,” they had to pull him off the yacht of his latest patron, Guo Wengui (also known as Miles Kwok), where he’d been living for weeks.

“This guy stumbled into the MAGA movement as a way to make money and to get fame and fortune,” says another ex-colleague. “He lives off other people’s money—Andrew Breitbart, Bob Mercer, a Chinese billionaire. How is he any different from a kept woman? He’s a 68-year-old kept woman.”

Bannon has answers to this litany, of course, which he’s heard some version of many times before. His stint at Goldman gave him a glimpse inside the beast, how it fed off the little guy. His assorted collaborations with the billionaire Mercer family also served the cause, whether those were creating Cambridge Analytica, the data firm that fed the Trump campaign, or the Government Accountability Institute, whose president wrote the book *Clinton Cash*. His current association with the media mogul Robert Sigg and Miles Kwok has served *War Room*.

We will set aside, for now, that Sigg has a criminal record that includes bank fraud and assault, according to *The Washington Post*, and that Kwok is wanted by the Chinese government for fraud, as well as bribery and money-laundering, charges he has denied. And that Kwok not long ago filed for bankruptcy, suggesting that his assets are between \$50,001 and \$100,000 while his liabilities are between \$100 million and \$500 million.

Bannon does have some monastic habits. He’s seldom seen around town. He never discusses his girlfriend—or is she an ex?—and her daughter, who live several states away. He says the last time he had a fancy meal in D.C. was 10 years ago, at Cafe Milano, where the food was merely “fleet average.”

But Bannon is still the king of the side hustle. He is now dabbling in cryptocurrency. (FJB coin. *JB* stands for “Joe Biden.”) He’s partnered with Birch Gold, a sponsor of his show, writing a pamphlet on the demise of the dollar. Most important, he’s partnered with Kwok in ways both conspicuous and obscure: He received \$1 million from Guo Media in 2018 to serve as a consultant to the company, which is dedicated in equal measure to savaging the Chinese government and spreading disinformation in America; he was identified in 2020 as one of the directors of GTV, an alternative news and social-media platform also linked to Kwok.

Last fall, GTV and the other media companies connected to Kwok were fined \$539 million for illegally selling shares. (The companies neither admitted nor denied any wrongdoing; GTV has since shut down.) This spring, two of Bannon’s co-defendants in “We Build the Wall” pleaded guilty to defrauding donors of hundreds of thousands. The fourth co-defendant pleaded not guilty, and as of Friday, June 3, his jury was deadlocked, with a lone juror still holding out for acquittal. Bannon says his arrest was politically motivated. “This was 1,000 percent to keep me off the Trump campaign in 2020.”

“He’s a smart man,” says a former colleague.
“He’s a crafty man. He’s a showman. And
ultimately, he’s a dangerous man.”

For all his big talk, it is unclear how much Bannon is worth or what, in fact, truly belongs to him. The Breitbart embassy is owned by Moustafa El-Gindy, a former member of the Egyptian Parliament. This beautiful new house is owned by an LLC based in Delaware, but there's no way to tell if that LLC is his.

I ask Bannon when he last flew commercial.

He grins. "Oh, years ago."

How many years?

He reconsiders. "Commercial *overseas*, I've flown a bunch. But commercial *domestic*? Hasn't been since before I took over the Trump campaign."

He continues his tour, explaining where and how the two houses will become one. There are at least some walls he's in favor of removing.

"CAN I SAY SOMETHING?" Bannon asks me during our final hours together. "There's not a more sophisticated show on all television than *War Room*."

I don't know about that. He's certainly working very hard at it.

But where, exactly, is the line between mania and desperation?

When I first met Bannon, he was already podcasting three hours per weekday and two hours on Saturdays. In March, he added a fourth hour to his weekday load, *War Room: Battleground*, to focus on local elections. What was already a frenetic schedule got even zanier; a Red Bull habit, which he'd quit, was back.

Bannon and I were originally going to fly out to Arizona for this story. He recently purchased a home there too, and he says its broadcast studio is an exact replica of the one in D.C., so that viewers won't notice the difference. His plan had been to spend the winter and spring out there.

But we never made it. It may have been because his father died, throwing his life into temporary disarray. But I kept wondering if the real reason was something else, possibly financial trouble—maybe that's why he added a fourth hour of programming to his load. But no, he tells me. "The *War Room* is a cash machine because it costs nothing to produce." In fact, he says, he needed that fourth hour to accommodate all of his sponsors.

What's really tying him to Washington, he explains, is a furious desire to keep the momentum going on his show. He's on a roll. There's so much energy now in the MAGA movement. Inflation is soaring; Biden is tanking. "The largest voting bloc in this nation is non-college-educated whites," he tells me. "I have 52/48 of men and I have 50/50 of women that believe he's illegitimate, okay?"

Note the use of the pronoun *I*. He really does see this as his movement. The nearer we get to 2024, the more he seems to feel compelled to stick around.

And you can see it. How *this* will finally be Bannon's moment, when the nationalist populist movement at last takes wing, and he'll be at the center of it all, hosting his salons.

But will he?

I mean: Is this guy Lenin in Zurich, patiently biding his time? Or is he some Estonian anti-Communist émigré from a Le Carré novel, waiting to die in a lonely bedsit in London?

Matthew C. MacWilliams, a public-opinion strategist and the author of *On Fascism*, is guessing the latter. “Trump threw him out. The Europeans kicked him to the curb. His empire crashed and he ended up with a podcast,” he says. “He’s a parasite. A talker. Rasputin with a digital show. Rasputin was *knifed*.”

But others still think he has plenty of influence. “He’s a smart man. He’s a crafty man. He’s a showman. And ultimately, he’s a dangerous man,” says yet another former colleague. And a vindictive man: “He commands a little army of terrifying people who can make life really difficult if you cross him.” Which explains why so many people in this story asked for anonymity.

In this person’s estimation, it would not be giving Bannon too much credit to say that he’s built the ideological foundation for Trumpism in this country. “And frankly, I think that that foundation has formed the basis of the mainstreaming of conspiracy theories, a spike in political violence, and a deep and continuous damage to our democratic institutions.”

On April 25, my phone dinged at 8:39 p.m. A text from Bannon, this time containing a link to a story in *Axios*. It said that 133 House Republicans had sent a letter to Alejandro Mayorkas, Biden’s secretary of homeland security, that essentially laid the groundwork for Mayorkas’s impeachment. “Enthusiasm for impeaching top Biden officials has spread from the fringes of the House Republican conference to its mainstream,” read the lede.

And you doubted WarRoom!!! Bannon texted.

I don’t know if *War Room* was responsible. The *Axios* authors never mentioned it. But Bannon has, as I’ve said, been banging on about impeaching Biden for the southern “invasion” for months. To borrow his former colleague’s term, he has helped mainstream this treacherous idea. And now here is a version of it, embraced by more than half of the House Republicans.

This is going to be so fucking epic.

Two-thirds of House Republicans voted to reject the result of the 2020 election. How long before it’s three-quarters, four-fifths, nine-tenths? How long before one of these people becomes speaker?

Why, I ruefully asked, was he so relentless with his pronunciamientos?

Because like a Kafka novel one can never escape.

Watch me, I wrote. I’m going downstairs and doing a load of laundry.

And I did. But my phone still lights up most nights. Bannon is still texting.

This article appears in the July/August 2022 print edition with the headline “American Rasputin.”

It has been updated to reflect the fact that, after the article went to press, the jury for the “We Build the Wall” co-defendant who pleaded not guilty went into deliberations without Bannon being called to testify.
