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## BANNON ROLE SETS OFF CRITICAL FIRESTORM

White supremacists and neo-Nazis have rarely, if ever, in recent history been so enthusiastic about a presidential appointment as Donald Trump's choice of Steve Bannon to be his chief White House strategist. Before he took over as chief executive of Trump's campaign in August and led it to victory last week, Bannon headed Breitbart News, a website and voice for the alt-right movement, a loose right-wing confederation that includes hardcore nationalists, neo-Nazis, white supremacists and anti-Semites.

Five days after Trump defeated Democrat Hillary Clinton, Trump rewarded Bannon, 62, a former Goldman Sachs banker and a Navy veteran, by appointing him senior counselor and chief strategist - jobs not subject to US Senate confirmation. Democrats, rights activists and minority groups were outraged and said Trump, himself accused of racism and misogyny during the campaign, had just flung open the White House doors to hatemongers. Many urged him to reconsider.

"Bringing Steve Bannon into the White House is an alarming signal that President-elect Trump remains committed to the hateful and divisive vision that defined his campaign," House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi said in a statement on Monday. "There must be no sugar-coating the reality that a white nationalist has been named chief strategist for the Trump administration," Pelosi said. The Southern Poverty Law Center, the Anti-Defamation League and the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) also denounced Bannon.

### Nazi, KKK Support

Bannon, who grew up in a Democratic family, has a reputation of trying to tear down a Republican Party establishment that he deemed too soft and too entrenched. As a senior adviser to the Republican Trump, Bannon will be expected by far-right groups to champion their views and make sure that Trump, who takes office on Jan 20, keeps such campaign promises as building a wall on the southern US border, cracking down on Muslims entering the country and restricting the influx of Syrian war refugees.

"Perhaps 'The Donald' is for real," Rocky Suhayda, chairman of the American Nazi Party, told CNN. David Duke, a longtime leader of Ku Klux Klan movements, and Richard Spencer, a white nationalist who runs the National Policy Institute, were among the leading alt-right figures to praise Bannon's appointment. In remarks published in the New York Times on Tuesday, Bannon ascribed his interest in populism and American nationalism to a desire to curb what he views as the corrosive effects of globalization. He rejected what he called the "ethno-nationalist" tendencies of some in the movement. "It's not that some people on the margins, as in any movement, aren't bad guys - racists, anti-Semites. But that's irrelevant," he told the Times.

Political commentator Armstrong Williams, a close associate of former Republican presidential candidate Ben Carson, said Bannon was "one of the

finest and most honorable people I've ever met" and not bigoted in any way. The Trump campaign had been struggling to manage Trump's unconventional candidacy when Bannon took over. He stayed behind the scenes and devised the strategy for the final days of the campaign that kept Trump on message and enabled him to upset Clinton in crucial states such as Michigan.

It was Bannon and Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law, who invited three women who accused Bill Clinton of sexual assault to attend a presidential debate in hopes of unnerving Hillary Clinton. Bannon, looking typically unkempt with mussed hair and stubble chin, grinned from the back of the room as Trump and the women held their pre-debate news conference. "Bannon is a legitimately sinister figure," Ben Shapiro, who had been editor-in-chief of Breitbart under Bannon, wrote in August on the dailywire.com conservative news website which he founded. "He is a vindictive, nasty figure... He will attempt to ruin anyone who impedes his unending ambition and he will use anyone bigger than he is - for example, Donald Trump - to get where he wants to go," Shapiro wrote.

### Anti-Semitism Accusations

While Bannon was at Breitbart, it had stories with headlines such as "Birth control makes women unattractive and crazy," "Political correctness protects Muslim rape culture" and "Hoist it high and proud: The Confederate flag proclaims a glorious heritage." The site's pro-Trump agenda featured speculative stories questioning Hillary Clinton's health and accusing her close aide Huma Abedin of being a Saudi spy.

Bannon was charged with domestic violence and battery in 1996 after his then-wife, Mary Louise Piccard, said he grabbed her by the throat and arm during an argument. The case was dropped when she did not appear in court. In 2007 Piccard said in court documents Bannon did not like the school the girls attended because it had too many "whiny brat" Jewish students.

Bannon had a varied and profitable career before joining Breitbart. He earned degrees from Virginia Tech, Georgetown University and Harvard Business School and served four years in the Navy. It was his Navy experience, he said, that led him to shed his family's Democratic allegiance and become an admirer of Republican Ronald Reagan.

He was at Goldman Sachs before starting his own investment firm, which specialized in media. Through negotiating a studio sale, he obtained a stake in the royalties for the popular television show "Seinfeld," a money-making powerhouse in syndication. He was an executive producer of the feature movies "Titus" and "The Indian Runner" before producing, directing or writing conservative-oriented documentaries such as "Clinton Cash" about the Clinton Foundation, "Generation Zero" about the global economic crisis of 2008-2009 and "The Undeclared" on former vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin. —Reuters

## KUSHNER TO WIELD CLOUT

After winning a primary election that effectively clinched the Republican presidential nomination, Donald Trump paused to laud a boyish-looking 35-year-old who ultimately proved to be an indispensable figure on the path to the White House. "Honestly, Jared is a very successful real estate person. But I actually think he likes politics more than he likes real estate," Trump said of his son-in-law Jared Kushner, standing to his right during a victory speech after the Indiana party primary election in May. "But he's very good at politics."

Kushner, the slender, clean-cut New Jersey real estate scion who married Trump's daughter Ivanka in 2009, helped guide the Republican Trump to victory last week over Democrat Hillary Clinton and is poised to remain an influential adviser during his presidency. Kushner emerged as an important voice early in Trump's campaign, launched in June 2015. He was involved in almost every aspect of Trump's campaign, offering advice on key personnel decisions, strategy, speeches, fundraising and other areas.

Late in the campaign, he began laying the groundwork for a possible Trump-run television network, in the event his father-in-law lost, according to a person familiar with the matter. Kushner spearheads his family's real estate development company, Kushner Companies, and is the publisher of the New York Observer weekly newspaper, which he acquired at age 25. While a federal anti-nepotism law prohibits a president from hiring family members to serve in his administration, Kushner is set to remain a key insider and trusted confidant.

Reince Priebus, appointed Trump's White House chief of staff on Sunday, told NBC's "Today" show on Monday that Kushner "obviously" will be very involved in decision-making. Kushner serves on Trump's transition executive committee.

### Following Father's Footsteps

Kushner is a Harvard graduate with a New York University law degree and a master's in business administration. Like Trump, Kushner followed in the footsteps of a real estate powerhouse father. His father, Charles Kushner, is a real estate developer, philanthropist and major Democratic donor whose reputation was left in tatters after a lurid criminal case. He was sentenced to two years in prison after pleading guilty in 2004 to 18 counts of tax evasion, witness tampering and making unlawful campaign donations.

During the case, he admitted to smearing

his brother-in-law, who had cooperated with prosecutors, by hiring a prostitute to have sex with him in a motel room, then sending a secretly recorded video of the encounter to the man's wife, Charles Kushner's own sister. In an unusual twist, the man who prosecuted Charles Kushner was Chris Christie, now the governor of New Jersey, who also has served as an adviser to Trump. Kushner is an Orthodox Jew whose wife, Ivanka, converted to Judaism before they married. The family keeps kosher, observes the Sabbath and attends an upscale synagogue on New York's Upper East Side.

### Anti-Semitism Controversy

Steve Bannon, former head of the right-wing Breitbart News website, took a leadership post in the campaign in August after it became clear that Trump, his children and Kushner trusted his advice and analysis, a source said at the time. Breitbart News is closely associated with the "alt-right" movement, a loose online group of white supremacists, anti-Semites and others opposed to multiculturalism.

Trump, who takes office on Jan 20, named Bannon as chief strategist and senior counselor on Sunday. Dana Schwartz, a Jewish reporter for Kushner's newspaper, in July criticized Trump for his Twitter post accusing Clinton of corruption using a Star of David image and a background of \$100 bills. Schwartz then wrote an open letter to Kushner after being deluged with anti-Semitic tweets. Schwartz asked Kushner, "how do you allow this? Because, Mr Kushner, you are allowing this... When you stand silent and smiling in the background, his Jewish son-in-law, you're giving his most hateful supporters tacit approval."

Kushner responded by writing in the Observer, "In my opinion, accusations like 'racist' and 'anti-Semite' are being thrown around with a carelessness that risks rendering these words meaningless." He went on to write that his grandmother and grandfather survived the Nazi Holocaust while other relatives did not. "I know the difference between actual, dangerous intolerance versus these labels that get tossed around in an effort to score political points," Kushner wrote.

Kushner became a major player in real estate in his mid-20s, after his father's conviction. At 26, he orchestrated what was the most-expensive single-building purchase in US history in 2006 with the \$1.8 billion acquisition of a 41-storey skyscraper at 666 Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. Kushner told The Real Deal trade magazine afterward, "In New York, you have to act quickly, or else you get left in the dust." —Reuters

### Focus

## BIG DREAMS FOR PRO-TRUMP SITE BREITBART

The far-right news site Breitbart helped send Donald Trump to the White House with no-holds barred opinions and incendiary headlines that drew fire from mainstream media and pundits. Now, it seems, it wants to take that movement global. Growing out of its origins as a community of conservative bloggers, Breitbart News Network mirrored the tone of Trump's campaign with provocative and sometimes inaccurate claims, drawing criticism as racist, xenophobic and worse.

Breitbart, whose chairman Steve Bannon has been tapped for a key White House post after helping to mastermind Trump's campaign, outperformed many media outlets to get the fourth largest number of "engagements" by internet users on election night, according to the analytics group NewsWhip. Breitbart has signaled its intention to expand its global footprint, with sites expected in France and Germany after moving into Britain and supporting the Brexit movement.

The site, created by the late conservative commentator Andrew Breitbart, makes its impact with bare-knuckled headlines that mix opinion and sometimes stretched facts. Some examples of Breitbart stories are "Gay rights have made us dumber, it's time to get back in the closet," "There's no hiring bias against women in tech, they just suck at interviews," and "Science proves it: Fat-shaming works." Breitbart was among the outfits cited for the "worst journalism" of 2014 by the Columbia Journalism Review for erroneously reporting that the nominated attorney general Loretta Lynch had been a lawyer for Bill Clinton - and failing to correct the mistaken report that was based on another lawyer named Loretta Lynch.

### Welcome to France

Breitbart did not respond to an AFP interview request or query about its expansion plans. But a leader of France's far-right National Front said Tuesday that she welcomed reported plans by the group to expand and support the party's presidential campaign. "All alternative media are generally positive. Donald Trump is the demonstration of that... they're among the useful tools," said Marion Marechal-Le Pen, whose aunt Marine is the leader of the National Front. Placing Breitbart's chief in the White House could create some awkward situations and potential conflicts of interest, according to some analysts. Former Breitbart spokesman Kurt Bardella - who quit earlier this year - told The New York Times Bannon's role will mean Breitbart will be "as close as we are ever going to have - hopefully - to a state-run media enterprise."

Angelo Carusone of the left-leaning watchdog group Media Matters for America, also predicted Bannon's role will create a difficult diplomatic position for the Trump administration if Breitbart is "supporting foreign movements while his government is engaging with those governments." Ken Paulson, a former USA Today editor-in-chief who is dean of the college of media and entertainment at Middle Tennessee State University, said it's not clear what the rise of Breitbart and other partisan news outlets means for the mainstream media.

"The real question is whether there will continue to be a market for well researched and balanced coverage that doesn't pander to one side or the other," he said. Paulson drew a parallel between Breitbart and early newspapers that were designed "to share a political philosophy and undermine political rivals." The site "feels very 18th century to me," he said.

### 'Masquerading' as Media

Jeff Jarvis, a City University of New York journalism professor who blogs on media, also described Breitbart last month as one of several "political movements masquerading as media." For Carusone, Breitbart appears to be "challenging global power structures, and the way they do that is by preying on racial anxieties." While Breitbart offers a "veneer" of being a media organization, he said, "they have no noticeable editorial standards or journalistic practices, they do function like a political organism." Bardella this year quit the organization, protesting that under Bannon's leadership it became "the de facto propaganda machine for Donald Trump" and filled with "hateful rhetoric." "Steve ran the site and controlled the content as a dictator, not only limiting the expression of his journalists but also purposefully changing the narrative to increase vitriol, playing to the fears of his readers," Bardella wrote in a column in The Hill newspaper.

Breitbart has lashed out at critics who allege it has links to extremists, and has threatened to sue one media outlet. In a statement to The Hill, the group said it "is preparing a multimillion dollar lawsuit against a major media company for its baseless and defamatory claim that Breitbart News is a 'white nationalist website'."

On its site, Breitbart also hit back at claims Bannon is anti-Semitic. "The losers of the left have worked themselves into such a bizarre hysteria over the fact that they lost the White House that they have lost all connection to reality," said an article Monday by writer David Horowitz. "I can't think of anything stupider than the charge coming from all quarters of the left - including a headline in the pathetically wretched Huffington Post - that Bannon is an anti-Semite." —AFP

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## MERKEL NEW 'LEADER OF THE FREE WORLD'?

The shock election of Donald Trump as US president has forced greater responsibility for defending Western values and interests onto German Chancellor Angela Merkel's shoulders, analysts say, with some even crowning her the new "leader of the free world". While the last decade has been defined by Britain, France, Germany and the US showing a largely united front on issues ranging from NATO affairs to defense of basic freedoms, the coming four years may present a more fragmented picture.

During his campaign Trump signalled a protectionist and anti-immigration stance, while Britain is preoccupied with securing its future outside the European Union after June's stunning referendum vote to exit the bloc. France's President Francois Hollande is grappling with record low ratings ahead of next May's election that could see far-right Marine Le Pen reaching the second round run-off vote.

Merkel, after 11 years at the helm, now looks increasingly like the only bulwark of stability and liberal freedom among Western allies. "Merkel... has suddenly become the most important leader of the free, democratic and liberal world," said the left-leaning TAZ daily. The historian and columnist Timothy Garton Ash agreed in an editorial for Britain's Guardian newspaper: "I'm tempted to say that the leader of the free world is now Angela Merkel."

Rather than visit Britain - a natural stop for any US leader given the two countries' special relationship, US President Barack Obama was travelling yesterday to Berlin on his last official trip to Europe, in what almost seems like the passing of a baton to Merkel. Ahead of the visit, Obama said Merkel "has probably been my closest international partner these last eight years".

### Countering Putin or Erdogan

Merkel's striking message to Trump after his victory was not lost on observers - where he peers simply pledged close ties, she tied them to democratic values. She said that any "close cooperation" must be on the basis of the "values of democracy, freedom, respect for the rule of law and human dignity, regardless of origin, skin color, religion, gender, sexual orientation or political belief".

The remarks indicated the German leader is likely to accept - perhaps grudgingly - the mantle of "leader of the free world", remaining West and remind Trump of values, said Die Welt daily. "She is more than ever the woman who is countering men like Russian President Vladimir Putin or Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan," said the TAZ. Merkel, 62, does not have Obama's oratorical flourishes but her voice is increasingly forceful on the world stage. She put her fluent Russian to good use in mediating in the Ukraine conflict with Putin.

When most European countries were busy shutting their doors to refugees fleeing war in predominantly Muslim countries, Merkel let in nearly 900,000 people last year - a stance that Trump branded "insane".

### 'Can't Do This Alone'

Trump, who pledged to deport millions of undocumented migrants from the US, made anti-immigrant policies a key plank of his campaign. And few expect him to take the lead in countering Putin, given his open praise for the Russian strongman. If Trump makes good on his promises to rip up deals on free trade, climate change and Iran's nuclear program, as well as reconsider protection for NATO allies that haven't paid their dues, it could spell the end of the United States' post-World War II role as the guarantor of world peace.

Stefani Weiss, an expert on European integration and foreign policies at the Bertelsmann Foundation, said the US had started to retreat as "world police" under Obama and cede more responsibility to Europe. "This is a trend that will likely prevail and intensify with Trump's presidency," she said. It remains to be seen how effectively Merkel can push her agenda on the global stage, if Trump, as leader of the world's biggest economy, adopts contrary policies on migration, climate change and sanctions targeting Russia. —AFP