

NATIONAL POLITICS | By Amy Walter, April 14, 2017

## What Matters and What Doesn't in White House Palace Intrigue Stories



There's nothing those inside the beltway love more than a good White House "palace intrigue" story. It's the kind of stuff that DC's gossip driven culture is built for. But, what about folks who don't live here and who have real lives? Do they really care about the Steve Bannon/Jared Kushner battles? Will it matter in the long term? Is it taking a toll on the President and his agenda? Here's what I think matters—and what doesn't.

### **1. Republicans don't like Bannon as much as Democrats detest him.**

In the past, normal people had zero recognition of—nonetheless an opinion about—the top staffers in the White House. But, that has changed in this uber polarized, personality-driven, cable TV era.

A recent SurveyMonkey poll taken March 31-April 5, found Steve Bannon's favorable/unfavorable ratings deep underwater at 20 percent favorable to 42 percent unfavorable. A little more than a third (34 percent) didn't know enough about him to have an opinion. Not surprisingly, Democrats don't like him - he has a 69 percent unfavorable rating to just 5 percent favorable—while Republicans do (49 percent favorable to 13 percent unfavorable). However, Republicans don't like him as much as Democrats detest him. Just 20 percent of Republicans give Bannon a "strong favorable" rating, compared to more than half (56 percent) of all Democrats who give him a "strong unfavorable" rating.

*Why does this matter?* The more Bannon is in the limelight, the more it engages and enrages the Democratic base (think the Saturday Night Live caricature of Bannon as Trump's Angel of Death Svengali). An energized Democratic base is an active base. That's not good for Republicans in 2018.

Meanwhile, there are worries among some GOPers that a disaffected or discarded Bannon is more dangerous outside the White House than in it. After all, this is the guy who used his perch at Breitbart to undermine the GOP establishment. Even so, rank and file Republicans are much more loyal and dedicated to the president than the guy who is sitting across the hall from him.

### **2. It's all about competence—not ideology.**

The focus this week has been on the multiple flip-flops made by President Trump on everything from NATO, to Chinese currency manipulation to involvement in Syria. A sign, many say, of Bannon's decreased influence. But, ideologically consistency has never been an important value to Trump or to his voters. It's hard to flip-flop when you've never had: 1) an ideological core; or 2) a voting record. Democrats couldn't figure out why blue collar voters would support Trump, he of Atlantic City bankruptcies who outsourced his clothing manufacturing. Meanwhile, traditional Republicans convinced themselves that his business background and New York City address meant he was more like them than not. All believed that his "Art of the Deal" background and his outsider profile

would make him uniquely qualified to make DC work.

But, his administration's high profile flubs (travel ban, health care bill) as well as Trump's inability to keep his finger off the Twitter trigger, have taken a toll. He's not acting presidential and, despite the fact that his party has all levers of power in Washington, they aren't effectively using them. This isn't to say that Republicans have abandoned him or given up on him. But, they do want to see more "W's" on the board.

Which leads to point #3

### **3. An undisciplined White House is an unsuccessful White House**

Trump has actually had some wins. A conservative was just sworn into the Supreme Court. He's rolled back or stopped a bunch of regulations. He's given the green light to Keystone and Dakota Access pipeline. Illegal immigration is down at the border. So, why isn't the media writing about those? One big reason: The White House itself. The "lamestream" media would have much less to write about if the folks in the White House would stop talking to them. The latest Washington Post story about the White House infighting had 21 sources. 21! I've seen sieves with fewer holes than this White House.

The place has been described to me as "Lord of the Flies". Forget about message discipline—these guys are literally fighting for their lives (ok, may not their actual lives but their jobs/influence).

Trump's chaotic approach worked in 2016 because the other candidate—while disciplined in her campaigning—was considered as unappealing as he was. Now, the spotlight is on him - all the time. And, the chaos thing isn't working.

#### **Conclusion:**

It's easy to understand why the Bannon/Kushner narrative is so appealing. It is, after all, the story of the modern GOP in the age of Trump. Will this be a populist/nationalist administration, hell bent on breaking norms and shattering the status-quo (a.k.a. Bannon)? Or, will it settle down into the more traditional global/free market agenda of previous GOP presidents (a.k.a. Kushner)? This narrative, however, misses the bigger, more profound point. This is a fight that can't be "won." This tension between these two philosophies - not the outcome - is what will continue to define Trump for the foreseeable future. Maybe it works. Maybe it doesn't. But, these two philosophies are going to be present throughout the Trump era.

However, the actually fighting (and leaking) between the two camps in the White House is taking a serious toll. Voters are more attached to accomplishment than they are to ideology. The more dysfunctional the White House, the harder it is to do—or show—any achievement.