

Trump's First Weeks Leave Washington— and the White House Staff—Panting

President's freewheeling style and a torrent of meetings and executive orders created turmoil, forcing him to clarify staff roles; 'we're cracking some eggs here'



President Donald Trump spoke on the phone Jan. 28 with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

PHOTO: DREW ANGERER/GETTY IMAGES

By Peter Nicholas and Carol E. Lee

Feb. 3, 2017 6:08 p.m. ET

President Donald Trump wasn't happy. Sitting behind his desk in the Oval Office, he looked at the top aides assembled around him and said: "This has to go better."

As they spoke last weekend, protests were mushrooming at airports around the country, prompted by travel restrictions imposed by executive order on seven Muslim-majority countries deemed to pose terrorist threats.

The temporary ban had morphed into a public-relations debacle. Lawmakers were blindsided. Government agencies puzzled over its meaning. Travelers were plucked from lines as they were boarding airplanes.

In the weekend meeting and another one on Monday, Jan. 30, Mr. Trump sought to avoid a similar misstep by clarifying the roles of senior staff members who had been jockeying for position since Election Day.

Reince Priebus was chief of staff, and aides shouldn't circumvent him, Mr. Trump told his staff. Steve Bannon was chief strategist and shouldn't veer too far into foreign policy. Senior adviser Kellyanne Conway, his campaign manager, would shift her focus to communications.

Mr. Trump's first week in office stunned Washington with a torrent of meetings and executive orders aimed at delivering on his campaign promises, including one intended to set in motion construction of a barrier on the border with Mexico.

Some Republicans he will need to pass legislation were infuriated, though, when their offices were inundated with constituent queries and complaints about the rushed travel order. His newly minted Homeland Security secretary went before media cameras to give reassurance that the travel restrictions would be implemented in compliance with several weekend federal court orders that blunted its impact.

A more subdued White House had its best day Tuesday when it largely abandoned Mr. Trump's flamboyant style and held a staid ceremony to announce his nominee for the Supreme Court. "There's been a chastening," one official said.

How much of the first two weeks' tumult was strategic and how much was a result of infighting, inexperience or simple disorganization is hard to pinpoint. This account—based on interviews with White House officials, lawmakers, federal officials, people close to the White House and others who have met with the president in his time in office—shows Mr. Trump has work to do before his White House is running at peak performance. It shows, too, that while he might try to impose more discipline among his staff, his own freewheeling style drives some of the turmoil.

Mr. Bannon and policy director Stephen Miller favor a rapid-fire series of executive orders and pronouncements that leaves opponents off-balance.

"Trump's running a shock-and-awe presidency," said historian Douglas Brinkley. "You take advantage of your opponent that underestimated your strength."

Another White House wing that includes Mr. Priebus and Ms. Conway prefers to move more deliberately, seeing pitfalls in trying, as one aide put it, to squeeze "the first 100 days into the first 100 hours."

The Real Clear Politics average of approval-rating surveys shows that about 46% approve of Mr. Trump's performance, compared with 49% who disapprove.

The White House isn't discouraged by the results. Press Secretary Sean Spicer said in a press briefing Friday: "The president understands this is a marathon, not a sprint. As he continues to get people back to work, protect this country, I think the poll numbers will act in accord."

Watching the launch of the Trump presidency, many of his supporters say they welcome the jolt of adrenaline he's delivering.

One Trump ally, Sen. David Perdue (R., Ga.), said in an interview: "We're cracking some eggs here, and some of it is going to be messy."

As Mr. Trump's White House settled in, some rank-and-file staff in the executive branch were still working to understand his agenda. His arrival has generated unease among career foreign-policy experts at the National Security Council, many left out of the policy process, leading some to submit plans to leave earlier than scheduled, people familiar with the matter said.

National Security Adviser Mike Flynn and top deputies held a meeting for the NSC staff this past week, at which one person in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building auditorium sought an explanation of Mr. Trump's call for an America-first foreign policy. A deputy offered an answer: Just as other countries like China put their interests first, so should America.

Asked about it later, another NSC staffer who was in the room said, "Everything is tweets and outrageous statements, so you have all these career people trying to figure out how to make sense of it."

Atop the pyramid, Mr. Trump is hewing to the same improvisational and intuitive style that produced his unexpected victory in November. During the transition, Mr. Trump's team, flummoxed by how he came up with certain ideas, would search for clues by checking his call sheets to see whom he was consulting.

Aides say he won't stop tweeting, nor stop reaching outside the White House for ideas and feedback from old friends. Amid the furor over the travel ban, Mr. Trump spoke on the phone to Thomas Barrack, a former official from the Reagan administration and chairman of the Trump inaugural committee, to ask how he thought the new policy might be received in the Arab world. Earlier this week, Mr. Trump called House Speaker Paul Ryan at 11 p.m. to ask questions about tax legislation, said a person familiar with the call.

"As we see it, he sees the big picture, but decisions are not linear—he bounces around a lot. He is constantly asking questions and seeking many people's opinions," said a Republican congressional aide.

Mr. Trump assuaged some Republican angst over the confusing travel-ban rollout with his nomination to fill a Supreme Court vacancy. Many praised the selection of federal appellate-court judge Neil Gorsuch, pointing to the Coloradoan's experience, educational credentials and conservative record on abortion rights and gun control.

While the administration's second week started with the White House coping with the travel-ban backlash, the week is closing with a new furor over Mr. Trump's approach to diplomacy as he challenges adversaries and allies in tweets and phone calls.

Iran sanctions

Every new president is tested early by a foreign power. For Mr. Trump, this has come from Iran in the form of a ballistic-missile test, which the administration viewed as a provocation and in conflict with a United Nations Security Council resolution.

The White House quickly struck a defiant tone. On Wednesday, Mr. Flynn of the NSC said Iran was now officially "on notice." Mr. Trump echoed Mr. Flynn's language in a tweet and told reporters military action was still a response option.

Ali Akbar Velayati, an adviser to Iran's supreme leader, dismissed Mr. Trump as "an inexperienced person" who would learn the pointlessness of threatening Iran, according to the Iranian news agency Fars. Iran denied its test violated a UN resolution.

Then on Friday, the U.S. imposed sanctions on more than two dozen Iranian, Chinese and Emirati businesses and individuals for their alleged roles in supporting Iran's ballistic-missile program. U.S. officials said the sanctions didn't violate the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran, which Mr. Trump has often denounced, because Washington had retained the right to blacklist companies and people involved in missile development or terrorism.

Mr. Trump was also grappling with homegrown adversaries. He was planning to travel Thursday to the Milwaukee area to tour a Harley-Davidson Inc. factory. The visit could show the president emphasizing his commitment to revitalizing manufacturing, at a motorcycle company that symbolizes American muscle.

Randy Bryce, political director of the local ironworkers union, got in the way of the photo-op. He launched a Facebook group called Greet Donald Trump that attracted more than 2,000 RSVPs to demonstrate against Mr. Trump wherever he would appear.

Mr. Bryce learned through labor contacts the Secret Service had done a security check at a Harley factory in Menomonee Falls, Wis. He began organizing car pools and buses to bring demonstrators to

the middle-class suburb in heavily Republican Waukesha County. Also, “we put up phone numbers for the [Harley] public-relations department and pretty much anybody we could get hold of,” Mr. Bryce said.

At Harley, which never acknowledged Mr. Trump planned a visit, executives became nervous about demonstrators, said a person familiar with their thinking. As word spread of the mounting protest, Mr. Trump’s appearance was canceled—at whose behest neither side has said.

Harley didn’t comment on why it was canceled. Mr. Spicer, the White House press secretary, said it was easier for company executives to come to Washington.



President Trump met with Harley Davidson executives and union representatives on the White House South Lawn on Thursday. *PHOTO: PABLO MARTINEZ MONSIVAIS/ASSOCIATED PRESS*

Harley officials instead met with the president at the White House. “We had a great discussion,” said Harley President and Chief Executive Matthew Levatich afterward.

The episode pointed to a potential problem for Mr. Trump: He built his political brand through appeals to middle-class voters at big rallies, but if protesters restrict his movements, he risks losing that connection during his presidency.

Scaramucci’s role

Inside the White House, one flashpoint has been the potential addition of Anthony Scaramucci, an investor tapped to run the Office of Public Engagement and Intergovernmental Affairs.

Messrs. Scaramucci and Trump are longtime friends, and Mr. Scaramucci has become a frequent Trump defender in television interviews. He has already struck a deal to sell his interest in his firm, SkyBridge

Capital, to buyers that include a unit of a Chinese conglomerate. Mr. Scaramucci's arrival, though, is being resisted by Mr. Priebus, who doesn't want to compete with another influential adviser, according to a person familiar with the conversations.

A Trump administration official said Wednesday Mr. Scaramucci would most likely not take a White House position, though the offer hasn't been rescinded. Mr. Scaramucci didn't immediately respond to a request for comment. People close to him say he isn't giving up on his shot at serving in the White House. A White House official disputed that there was any tension between Messrs. Priebus and Scaramucci and said it was possible Mr. Scaramucci could join the administration in the future.

As the week ended, fallout from the travel ban lingered. The president scheduled a meeting on Friday with a group of corporate chief executives. Uber Technologies Inc. CEO Travis Kalanick wasn't there. On Thursday, he quit the president's economic advisory council, saying his participation was being misunderstood as an endorsement of the travel restrictions.

As Mr. Trump prepared to leave the White House Friday for a quick trip to his Mar-a-Lago home in Palm Beach, Fla., one White House official was looking forward to a brief respite. "I'm so excited," the official said, about taking a weekend break.

—Michael C. Bender, Reid J. Epstein and Rebecca Ballhaus contributed to this article.

Write to Peter Nicholas at peter.nicholas@wsj.com and Carol E. Lee at carol.lee@wsj.com