

The Knives Are Out for Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster

In the White House "Game of Thrones for morons," Steve Bannon is trying to turn the president against his national security advisor.

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Inside the White House, opponents of Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, President Donald Trump's second national security advisor, want him out. This week, they've made their campaign against him public, leaking to reporters details about the rocky relationship he has with his boss and trying to paint him as someone hellbent on overseas nation-building projects that are doomed to fail. The timing isn't accidental. The effort to damage McMaster comes as the Trump administration decides what its policy should be in Afghanistan, a debate that's pitting McMaster against Steve Bannon, Trump's chief strategist.

"McMaster is pushing this Afghanistan policy through. I think some people are giving him the rope to get it through, hoping he hangs himself with it," one senior intelligence official said.

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The Afghanistan strategy McMaster is pushing, with the support of Defense Secretary James Mattis, would send roughly 3,000-5,000 U.S. and NATO troops to Afghanistan, according to a separate source familiar with the internal deliberations. These troops would be sent to help bulk up the Afghan National Security Forces, which, after years of U.S. assistance, are still struggling against the Taliban, al Qaeda, and a small Islamic State presence in the country.

According to the *Washington Post*, the new strategy “would authorize the Pentagon, not the White House, to set troop numbers in Afghanistan and give the military far broader authority to use airstrikes to target Taliban militants.” The hope is that by increasing pressure on the Taliban, it will force them to the negotiating table with more favorable terms for Kabul and Washington. Sending more U.S. troops to Afghanistan follows a decision made last year by then-President Barack Obama, who **announced** in July that 8,400 U.S. troops would remain in Afghanistan through January 2017 because of the “precarious” security situation there, undoing his previous plan to draw down to 5,500 by the time he left office.

The *Post* reported that “those opposed to the plan have begun to refer derisively to the strategy as ‘McMaster’s War,’” and this particular criticism is repeated in a handful of negative stories about McMaster that have already cropped up this week. For those plugged into the dicey world of Trump administration power plays, this slur has the hallmarks of a hit job by Bannon’s team. (It’s worth noting that the same people who oppose McMaster are no fans of Mattis’s moderating influence on the president, but he’s seen as politically untouchable for now.)

Attack dogs online

The first **story** aimed at weakening McMaster came Sunday from blogger Mike Cernovich, whose reporting has served as a conduit for the alt-right wing of the White House to air its grievances and get ahead of policies it doesn’t like. Cernovich has pushed **conspiracy theories** and threatened to smear members of the Trump White House if Bannon is ever **removed**. Still, the White House has given him press credentials, and he **attended** a White House briefing last month.

In a May 7 blog post, Cernovich suggested McMaster had become too big for his britches and that Trump intended to put him in his place at a meeting between the two on Monday. Trump's daily schedule for Monday included a meeting with McMaster at 10 a.m. in the Situation Room.

Cernovich is intent on portraying McMaster as a crony of retired Gen. David Petraeus, which, in this depiction, means a fan of big counterinsurgency campaigns that require billions of dollars and thousands of ground troops. Cernovich's list of McMaster's wrongs include that he's pushing "for a ground war in Syria and massive new surge in Afghanistan," which, according to the source familiar with the White House's internal deliberations, does not accurately portray the policy option McMaster is proposing. It does, however, reflect Bannon's characterization of it, as well as his own isolationist foreign-policy views.

Cernovich's story also contained a detail about McMaster "falling up" into a four-star job in the military (possibly as vice chief of staff of the Army or as the top commander in Afghanistan) as a way to get him out of the White House. According to the source familiar with White House politics, this comes directly from Bannon's camp.

Bloomberg's Eli Lake had a more devastating (as well as far better sourced) [story](#) on Monday about McMaster's difficult relationship with Trump, who has spoken derisively to McMaster in meetings. According to Lake, Trump screamed at McMaster on a phone call for undercutting the president's effort to get South Korea to pay for a missile defense system for which the United States had already agreed to foot the bill.

Bannon's critique of McMaster also makes a cameo: "On policy, the faction of the White House loyal to senior strategist Steve Bannon is convinced McMaster is trying to trick the president into the kind of nation building that Trump campaigned against."

On Monday night, Cernovich [wrote](#) a second negative post about McMaster; this time, slamming him for supposedly referring to 28-year-old Hope Hicks, the White House director of strategic communications, as a "high schooler."

In response to these stories, MSNBC's Joe Scarborough, who has his own White House [sources](#), [tweeted](#): "Several WH sources say the Gen McMaster stories are coming from Bannon and are false. Trump has full confidence in McMaster. 'He loves him.'"

According to sources inside and out of government, these stories do reflect an effort by McMaster's opponents, including Bannon, to set the stage for McMaster's ouster, but Scarborough gets one thing wrong: They are not entirely false.

The outsider in the White House

It's true that it hasn't always been smooth sailing for McMaster and Trump, but, in many ways, that friction was built into the job from the start.

"[McMaster] will always be on the outside looking in from so many circles," the senior intelligence official said. "He isn't family. He's not a Bannon guy, and he's still surrounded by Flynnstones."

"Flynnstones" is the nickname given to people hand-picked to serve on the National Security Council by McMaster's predecessor, retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn. After Trump reluctantly removed Flynn in February, a handful of Flynn's people also headed for the exits, but plenty still remain in their jobs.

Following the forced resignation of Flynn, a Trump die-hard who started advising the president during the campaign, McMaster joined the NSC in February under unusual and difficult circumstances. In selecting McMaster, Trump sidestepped K.T. McFarland, the deputy national security advisor, and retired Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg, the NSC's chief of staff, who served as acting national security advisor after Flynn's firing.

"McMaster is surrounded by people who want him out, at least eventually," said the source with knowledge of internal White House politics.

According to the senior intelligence official, McMaster and Kellogg, an early Trump supporter, "don't see eye to eye." McMaster has also had difficulty in choosing his own second in command. Coming into the job, McMaster naturally wanted to pick his own deputy, but this meant moving McFarland, a former Fox News commentator and Pentagon speechwriter in the Ronald Reagan administration, to a new post.

In early April, she was **offered** the job of U.S. ambassador to Singapore, but a month and a half later, McFarland shows no sign of decamping for Asia. Instead, McFarland still remains in the White House inner circle. As Lake reported, “Over the weekend, McMaster did not accompany Trump to meet with Australia’s prime minister; the outgoing deputy national security adviser, K.T. McFarland, attended instead.”

“We need K.T. to hurry up and get out of the way,” the senior intelligence official said.

But some McMaster allies are urging him to abandon this battle because it’s becoming a liability with Trump, who likes McFarland and has openly questioned why she’s leaving.

Other efforts to build his own trusted team have gone much better for McMaster. He **appointed** Dina Powell, who was already Trump’s senior counselor for economic initiatives, as a deputy national security advisor for strategy. He also brought in Fiona Hill, “**a well-respected scholar and sober critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin,**” as White House senior director for Europe and Russia and Nadia Schadlow to be senior director for strategy.

These appointments, in addition to McMaster’s own professionalism, have improved the functioning of the NSC considerably since the days of Flynn, according to sources inside and outside of government.

A professional among ideologues

But the NSC is not walled off from the internal power politics of the Trump White House, and staffers reading the tea leaves see they still need to curry favor with people like Bannon and Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, if they’re to have their voices heard and survive in what one source described as the White House’s “*Game of Thrones* for morons.”

Being allied to Bannon is what **saved** Ezra Cohen-Watnick, the NSC’s 30-year-old senior director for intelligence, handpicked by Flynn for the job. It also might ultimately save Sebastian Gorka, who doesn’t serve on the NSC staff but as a national security aide to the president. It was widely **reported** that the White House was looking to move Gorka, a former editor at *Breitbart* and friend of Bannon’s, to a new post — if not out of the government completely — but for now he remains in his current job.

Plenty of controversy surrounds Gorka, thanks to his Islamophobic policy prescriptions and reported association with a far-right group in Hungary, but the real issue is his security clearance, said the source familiar with White House discussions about his role. Gorka was granted an interim clearance, but it has always been suspected that the CIA would deny him a permanent one, the source said. If the clearance doesn't come through, the White House has limited options: move him to a job where he doesn't need clearances, leave him in his current post where he can keep being Trump's television bulldog, or the president can intervene and get him clearance, which would allow Gorka to actually work on national security issues behind the scenes.

McFarland, Cohen-Watnick, and Gorka are all still in their jobs despite McMaster's efforts to remove them, thanks to pushback from Bannon and even the president. But McMaster has further made enemies by refusing to fire members of his staff that certain administration officials want gone. Lake reported in his story that Derek Harvey, a Flynnstone and the top Middle East advisor on the NSC, compiled a "list of Obama holdovers at the National Security Council who were suspected of leaking to the press." Bannon and Trump then pushed McMaster to fire them, but he said no, asserting it was ultimately his decision who worked for him.

However, according someone aware of the incident, Harvey's list, which included people who didn't work for him in other directorates, had nothing to do with leaking to the press. Instead, the targeted staff had written a memo on key issues in the counter-Islamic State campaign and sent it directly to McMaster (a "flattening of the process" McMaster encouraged), and Harvey became upset that they didn't run it through him first.

In addition to these cutthroat internal politics, McMaster is "often saddled with impossible tasks," the intelligence official said.

For example, when Trump or White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer says something that infuriates foreign allies, McMaster is left trying to patch things up.

One example of this is the dust-up over the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile defense system, which Lake reported in his Monday column. Trump **stunned** officials in South Korea when he **told** Reuters last month that the South Koreans should pay for the system, ignoring an agreement signed between the two countries that commits the United States to shouldering the cost of deployment after South Korea provides the site and infrastructure. To ease tensions, McMaster quickly **told** his South Korean counterpart that nothing had changed and that Washington would still pay.

A similar situation arose after Spicer **repeated** an allegation that the Obama administration had turned to the British spy agency GCHQ for surveillance of Trump during the campaign. This caused an immediate mini-furor in the United Kingdom and led McMaster to offer an **apology** to the British government for the baseless and harmful allegation. The White House later denied such an apology had been given.

These kinds of situations inevitably put McMaster in an impossible position of trying to mend fences while not being seen as undermining his boss, the president of the United States. Compounding this is the fact that he's an active-duty three-star general, overseeing a cabinet and military full of four-star generals.

“He struggles to stand up to Mattis and the Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Joe Dunford, which further undermines him with the rest of the principals,” the intelligence official said. And if it appears he's always turning to the Defense Department for military solutions to problems, it's largely because the State Department is in disarray and understaffed under Secretary Rex Tillerson, the official added.

Despite these obstacles, McMaster is “holding his own,” the intelligence official said ... for now.

*This article is cross-posted with **Just Security**.*

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