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WHITE HOUSE

Stephen Miller roiling nation with back-channel immigration meetings

The president's senior policy adviser owns immigration. And he isn't interested in sharing it.

By ELIANA JOHNSON | 06/26/2018 10:20 PM EDT | Updated 06/27/2018 07:54 AM EDT



"He finds his coterie of people, he runs a separate process, and he goes straight to the president," a former administration official said of Stephen Miller (pictured). "He knows the issue backwards and forwards and the president looks to Stephen as his chief immigration adviser." | Win McNamee/Getty Images

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Led by Miller, President Donald Trump's senior policy adviser and the architect of his hard-line approach to immigration, the meetings have replaced the usual interagency process involving key agency officials and remained largely out of view to the rest of the administration.

The gatherings, described by a half-dozen administration officials and Republicans close to the administration, have taken shape over time, from loosely structured meetings and conference calls among like-minded officials early in the administration to more formal meetings in recent months. And they have produced the president's two most controversial policies — the January 2017 travel ban, which the Supreme Court let stand Tuesday, and the more recent decision to send adults caught crossing the border illegally for criminal prosecution, which resulted in thousands of children being separated from their parents and warehoused in government shelters.

The secretive nature of the effort was born of Miller's assumption that hostile bureaucrats would try to undermine the administration's aggressive policies before they got off the ground, by leaking to the news media or pushing alternative proposals to senior officials.


But the opacity has had a ripple effect throughout the administration, causing consternation and confusion within the government agencies that have to carry out the policies. Without an organized policy and communications strategy integrating the input of key agencies, senior administration officials have been caught unaware by major policy announcements, and confusion has ensued about how to carry them out, according to administration officials and outside advisers who support Trump's immigration agenda.

"You can't implement big policies from the White House without working with the agencies that are going to be carrying it out," said Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies and a leading immigration hawk. "You've got to make the case and persuade people before you do some big significant thing."

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That confusion dates back to the announcement in January 2017 of the initial travel ban, which caught senior administration officials, including John Kelly, then the secretary of

homeland security, by surprise. Miller told associates at the time that he had worked with a handful of loyal associates, including Steve Bannon, then Trump's chief strategist, outside the traditional system because of a sluggish bureaucracy that was incapable of producing the sorts of radical changes he had envisioned as Jeff Sessions' right hand in Congress.

Together, Miller and Bannon favored an approach that would "shock and awe" the federal government and the American people, avoiding the legislative process and instead leaning on executive orders Trump could sign himself.

The initial travel ban was struck down in federal court, a result of the hasty process by which it was produced. The version the Supreme Court upheld Tuesday was a revised version of the ban, handing Trump one of his most significant policy victories.

The decision, in which the court ruled 5-4 that the administration was within its rights to enforce restrictions against visitors from five majority-Muslim countries, focused heavily on the president's powers. Suspending entry of foreigners into the U.S. "is well within executive authority," wrote Chief Justice John Roberts, adding that the justices "express no view on the soundness of the policy."


Trump, however, was quick to claim vindication and tied the ruling to his so-called zero-tolerance policy, which drew harsh criticism last week over the separation of children from their families.

"The ruling shows that all of the attacks from the media and the Democrat politicians are wrong, and they turned out to be very wrong," Trump told Republican lawmakers over lunch on Tuesday. "And what we're looking for, as Republicans, I can tell you, is strong borders, no crime. What the Democrats are looking at is open borders, which will bring tremendous crime. It'll bring MS-13 and lots of others that we don't want to have in our country."

GOP flails ahead of immigration vote

By **RACHAEL BADE** and **JOHN BRESNAHAN**

The court's ruling was also a major victory for Miller, who has been the chief architect of Trump's immigration policies.

Though he initially was given responsibility for overseeing all domestic policy, Miller quickly struck an unspoken truce with the rest of Trump's domestic policy advisers, according to  out more about the cookies we use.

two former administration officials: Don't mess with him on immigration, and he would stay out of their way on other domestic issues he cared — and knew — less about.

“He finds his coterie of people, he runs a separate process, and he goes straight to the president,” a former administration official said of Miller. “He knows the issue backwards and forwards, and the president looks to Stephen as his chief immigration adviser.” But, this person explained, only on immigration: “Not on anything else.”

The back-channel immigration meetings include several alumni from the office of former Sen. Jeff Sessions, who was for years the leading immigration hawk on Capitol Hill before becoming attorney general. Miller is the most prominent, but others include Gene Hamilton, now a senior adviser to Sessions at the Department of Justice, and John Walk, a lawyer in the White House counsel's office and Sessions' son-in-law. Julia Hahn, a junior White House communications aide who previously worked for Bannon at Breitbart, also attends.

Miller's hawkish huddles have undergirded all of the administration's immigration policies, including the termination of protected status in May for refugees from a half-dozen nations; the president's positions vis a vis Congress on the Obama-era Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, offering protections to undocumented migrants who came to the U.S. as children; ending the diversity visa lottery; and, most recently, the zero-tolerance policy that, like the travel ban, caught many administration officials off guard.

What Miller didn't foresee, the officials said, was the difficulty of implementing a controversial policy without a coordinated message among administration officials who hadn't been a part of the policymaking process or briefed on it thoroughly before its announcement.

On television, White House officials contradicted each other about whether or not the policy was a deterrent; whether it could be rolled out through an executive order; and whether it was White House policy in the first place.

SUPREME COURT

Supreme Court upholds Trump's travel ban

By JOSH GERSTEIN and TED HESSON

That left surrogates struggling to help the president — and worried about what might come next.

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“They have a pretty good case, but why was I making the case for them?” Krikorian said. “In looking back, I think it’s important to make the case before you pull the trigger.”

The resulting uproar and the ultimate retreat via executive order left Trump angry at Miller, whom the president felt had pushed an unpopular policy on him and then made him look weak, according to two Republicans close to the White House.

But these Republicans noted that the travel ban, too, generated public outrage amid widespread chaos at airports and a short-term loss for the administration — but nonetheless ultimately turned into a win for Trump, 18 months later. The same may be true of the immigration enforcement policy, these Republicans said, which was botched out of the gate but may yet produce political results down the line.

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