

STATEMENT OPPOSING THE APPOINTMENT OF STEPHEN BANNON TO SENIOR WHITE HOUSE POST

M. PRESIDENT, I rise today to address President-Elect Donald Trump's selection of Stephen Bannon, a divisive figure and former head of the alt-right website Breitbart, to serve as chief strategist and senior counsel to the president.

In the early hours of November 9th, after it became clear that he had officially won the race for the White House, President-Elect Trump appeared before his supporters to deliver a victory speech. He said, quote "Now it's time for America to bind the wounds of division. To all Republicans and Democrats and independents across this nation, I say it is time for us to come together as one united people." After a long and contentious campaign, it seemed to me that the president-elect implicitly acknowledged that some of the rhetoric used during the race had alienated and offended many of our communities. He said, quote "I pledge to every citizen of our land that I will be president for all Americans."

Now, M. PRESIDENT, it's no secret that I did not support President-Elect Trump during the campaign. But despite the fact that I disagree passionately with our president-elect about the best way to approach many, if not most, of the challenges facing our nation, I truly believe that there are places where we can find some common ground. We both understand the need to rebuild our nation's crumbling infrastructure, and to send Americans back to work repairing our roads and bridges and schools. Both President-Elect Trump and I support closing the carried interest loophole, which allows private equity and hedge fund managers to avoid paying their fair share of taxes. These are issues on which I look forward to working with the next administration. So you can understand, M. PRESIDENT, why I was encouraged by President-Elect Trump's call for unity. Because once an election is over and the heat of the campaign has subsided, the American people expect our leaders to come together, find common cause, and get to work solving the nation's problems.

So I was disappointed when, just a few days later, I learned that the president-elect had selected former Trump campaign CEO Stephen Bannon to serve as his chief strategist and senior counsel, a position the president-elect described as an “equal partner” to his incoming White House chief of staff. The selection of Mr. Bannon to serve at the very highest level of our government does not signal a willingness to set aside our differences and embrace unity. Far from it. You see, M. PRESIDENT, before Mr. Bannon joined the Trump campaign, where he was widely credited as the chief architect of its most corrosive tactics, Mr. Bannon was the executive chairman of Breitbart News.

Now, Breitbart News, for those who are not familiar with it, is a conservative website founded by the late Andrew Breitbart. Even from its inception, Breitbart was a bastion of far-right ideology whose writers and editors unapologetically courted controversy. But the site took a darker turn shortly after Mr. Bannon took over in 2012.

“I think anger is a good thing,” Mr. Bannon is quoted as telling a gathering of conservative activists, and it shows. Mr. Bannon guided Breitbart away from more mainstream conservative opinion to instead traffic in an ideology of racism, misogyny, xenophobia, homophobia, and anti-Semitism. Even a former Breitbart editor, who has lamented the site’s hard shift to the extreme right, described its comment section as, quote “turning into a cesspool for white supremacist mememakers.” M. PRESIDENT, I think it’s important for the American public to understand exactly how Mr. Bannon’s Breitbart describes its fellow citizens. Here are just a few of the articles Breitbart published under Mr. Bannon’s direction:

- “Gabby Giffords: The Gun Control Movement’s Human Shield,” includes the line, quote, “Giffords is their human shield — the gun control representative who could do and say what she wanted without facing any real pressure to prove her claims were true.”

- Two weeks to the day after nine people were murdered at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, Breitbart published “Hoist it High and Proud: The Confederate Flag Proclaims a Glorious Heritage.” In the article, the writer asks, quote “Barack, you might just want to remind us again which state of the Union, north or south, your ancestors resided in during the traumatic years 1861-1865? Or did Kenya not have a dog in that fight?”
- In “Political Correctness Protects Muslim Rape Culture,” the author describes cases of sexual assault in Europe but warns, quote “you won’t hear much about it in the U.S. mainstream media because the epidemic is a byproduct of the influx into Europe of a million, mostly Muslim, migrants.”

- “Mexico is Sending us Colonists, Not Immigrants” is a story in which readers are warned that quote, “Mexico sees Mexicans in the United States as strategic assets in every sense of that word. They are seen as extensions of the Mexican state and partners in Mexico’s plans.”

This is nasty stuff. It's vile. And it comes all the way from the top—from Mr. Bannon himself. In July, Mr. Bannon wrote a piece for Breitbart in which he accused his political opponents of a quote “plot to take down America” by focusing on the need to improve the relationship between law enforcement and communities of color. The article opened with Mr. Bannon explicitly and baselessly linking the man responsible for shooting police officers in Dallas, Texas to the Black Lives Matter Movement. Mr. Bannon wrote, quote “Five police officers are murdered in Dallas by a [hashtag] Black Lives Matter-type activist-turned-sniper.” There's no question that the Dallas shooter was a troubled man who harbored hate in his heart, a man who investigators determined was himself motivated by racist ideologies. But there is no evidence suggesting that the shooter was a member of Black Lives Matter, a movement born in opposition to violence and hate. He was not a quote “activist-turned-sniper,” a turn of phrase Mr. Bannon crafted to suggest that the two roles exist along a continuum, to suggest that it's only a matter of time before the peaceful protester takes up arms.

It is bad enough that Mr. Bannon sought to fan the flames of fear and anxiety, and to turn our communities against Americans peacefully exercising their First Amendment rights. But Mr. Bannon’s article didn’t stop at impugning activists who protest officer-involved shootings. No, Mr. Bannon proceeded to cast suspicion upon an entire race. He wrote, quote “here’s a thought: What if the people getting shot by the cops did things to deserve it? There are, after all, in this world, some people who are naturally aggressive and violent.”

Wild conspiracy theories aside, M. PRESIDENT, there’s a name for that kind of tactic. It’s called a dog whistle. To some, such rhetoric may not appear overtly racist and make no mistake—that’s by design. Not every person who hears that kind of language understands that by saying, quote “some people...are naturally aggressive and violent,” Mr. Bannon is suggesting that black people are naturally aggressive and violent. But to the alt-right, to those who read his website, Mr. Bannon’s meaning is clear.

Now, Mr. Bannon doesn't always attempt to cloak his views. At times, the connecting lines he draws are much more clear. In the very same article, Mr. Bannon suggested that efforts by the Obama administration to pursue gun safety measures in the wake of the Orlando shooting were nothing more than an effort to divert attention away from refugees, never mind that refugees were not involved in the incident. Let's all remember, M. PRESIDENT, that the tragedy at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando—a shooting in which 49 people were murdered and 53 others were wounded—was carried out by an American-born, U.S. citizen. Nonetheless, Mr. Bannon wrote, quote “In the wake of Orlando, the Obama administration, with Hillary Clinton cheering it on, intoned against guns and ‘hate,’ and is now back to importing more hating Muslims.”

To suggest that members of a peaceful protest movement like Black Lives Matter were in league with a cold-blooded killer; that the sympathies of the President of the United States lie not with victims of gun violence, but instead with those who would seek to do us harm; to pit members of vulnerable communities against one another—LGBT people against refugees, peaceful protestors against the cops who rushed to shield them from gunfire—is abhorrent.

And regrettably, M. PRESIDENT, we have no reason to believe that Mr. Bannon would not seek to deploy such tactics from the White House. After all, they featured prominently in the Trump campaign’s final television ad. In the spot, the president-elect’s voice warns that, quote “those who control the levers of power in Washington” and “global special interests” don’t have Americans’ best interests at heart. At the same time, images of George Soros, Federal Reserve Chair Janet Yellen, and Goldman Sachs CEO Lloyd Blankfein—all prominent Jews—flash on the screen. To those who may not know better, such an ad could seem innocuous. But to me, its message is obvious. The ad’s anti-Semitic overtones, which draw on an old and hateful conspiracy theory about Jews controlling banks and financial markets, were obvious to me. I called it a German shepherd whistle designed to be heard in some of the darkest remaining corners of our country and our world. A politics that relies on this type of innuendo—Stephen Bannon’s brand of politics—has no place in a modern presidential campaign, and it certainly has no place in the White House.

Let's be clear, M. PRESIDENT, the use of racially charged rhetoric and innuendo is repulsive. The very purpose of deploying dog-whistle politics in the context of a campaign is to attract the support of people who harbor hateful ideologies without offending the sensibilities of more mainstream voters. Every member of this body should condemn rhetoric that sows the seeds of discord. It is our obligation—not just as senators, but as Americans—to stand up to Mr. Bannon's hateful, divisive brand of politics, and to reject it. Now, we can't change the fact that such strategies played a role in this campaign, but moving forward, M. PRESIDENT, it is imperative that we not allow these corrosive tactics to become normalized. We cannot allow them to become a regular part of our politics. And if President-Elect Trump truly meant what he said during his victory speech—if he truly hopes to be a president for all Americans—he will recognize that such tactics stand in the way of that goal, and he will renounce them.

The women and men a leader chooses to surround himself with show the public what kind of a leader he will be. President-Elect Trump has a choice. Will he truly attempt to quote “bind the wounds of division?” Or will our next president seek counsel from a man who proudly traffics in hatred, half-truths, and pernicious innuendo? Will President-Elect Trump’s administration open its doors to all people, or will it seek to govern by exploiting old prejudices and pitting us against one another?

The campaign is over, M. PRESIDENT. But the wounds inflicted during the long battle remain raw. It’s time to set about the work of healing them. I urge President-Elect Trump to begin that work by surrounding himself with people equal to the task. Mr. Bannon is not one of them, and he should not serve in the next administration. I call on President-Elect Trump to appeal to America’s better angels, and to reject the dark politics represented by Stephen Bannon. Thank you.