

'A president unhinged': With stabilisers gone, Trump is calling his own shots

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Palm Beach, Florida: US President Donald Trump began the past work week cutting into steaks at the White House residence on Monday night with his political soldiers, including former advisers Corey Lewandowski and David Bossie, strategist Brad Parscale, and son-in-law and senior adviser Jared Kushner.

He ended it dining on the gilded patio of his Mar-a-Lago estate with eccentric boxing promoter Don King, who said he vented to the President about the Stormy Daniels saga. "It's just utterly ridiculous," King said he told a nodding Trump on Thursday evening as the President began his holiday weekend in Palm Beach, Florida.

President Donald Trump said Mexico needed to help the US stop people from flowing through the US-Mexico border and he also said in a tweet that the DACA deal was off.

Nowhere to be seen was John Kelly, the beleaguered White House chief of staff and overall disciplinarian - nor were the handful of advisers regarded as moderating forces eager to restrain the President from acting impulsively, who have resigned or been fired.

The gatherings neatly illustrated an inflection point for the Trump presidency. Fourteen months into the job, Trump is increasingly defiant and singularly directing his administration with the same rapid and brutal style he honed leading his real estate and branding empire.

Trump is making hasty decisions that jolt markets and shock leaders and experts - including those on his own staff. Some confidants expressed concern about the situation, while others, unworried, characterised him as unleashed.

The President is replacing aides who have tended toward caution and consensus with figures far more likely to encourage his more rash instincts and act upon them, and he is frequently soliciting advice from loyalists outside the government.

As he shakes up his administration, Trump is prioritising personal chemistry above all else, as evidenced by his controversial selection of Navy Rear Admiral Ronny Jackson, the White House physician, to lead the Department of Veterans Affairs.

"The President is in an action mood and doesn't want to slow-roll things, from trade to the border to staffing changes," White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said. "He wants to make things that he's been discussing for a while happen. He's tired of the wait game."

This dynamic - detailed in interviews with 23 senior White House officials and outside advisers, many of whom spoke on the condition of anonymity to offer candid assessments - is evident in multiple realms.

Trump is domineering his strategy regarding the expanding investigation into Russia's interference in the 2016 election, in effect acting as his own lawyer. He is clamouring to reject the counsel of his attorneys and sit for an interview with special counsel Robert Mueller and malign him by name.

On policy, Trump is making sudden decisions without much staff consultation, wagering that they will pay dividends - including accepting North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's invitation for a face-to-face meeting and threatening to veto before ultimately signing the most recent government spending bill.

On the stump, Trump is an improvisational showman. He swooped into the working-class Ohio town of Richfield on Thursday to pitch his infrastructure plan but diverged from his script to deliver surprise commentary on a medley of issues. He threatened to delay a newly renegotiated trade deal with South Korea and announced that the United States may soon withdraw troops from Syria.

The President's unbridled eruptions continued Saturday in a pair of tweets hammering Amazon and falsely stating that "the Fake Washington Post" was acting as a lobbyist for the retail behemoth. The Washington Post operates independently of Amazon, though the newspaper is owned by Jeff Bezos, the founder and chief executive of Amazon.

All the while, Trump is trying to keep in touch with the cultural zeitgeist. Trump phoned Roseanne Barr to congratulate her on the success of ABC's Roseanne revival. "Look at Roseanne!" Trump bellowed in Ohio. "Look at her ratings!"

Rudolph Giuliani, a former New York mayor and longtime Trump friend, said the President is entering a new phase: "It took time for the President to discover how far he could move things and find the pieces that fit. Now he sees he has an open field."

To many in the outside world, the Trump White House appears dangerously dysfunctional. Theodore Olson, a Republican former solicitor general, declined to join Trump's legal team in the Russia matter.

"I think everybody would agree this is turmoil, it's chaos, it's confusion, it's not good for anything," Olson recently told anchor Andrea Mitchell on MSNBC. "We always believe that there should be an orderly process, and of course government is not clean or orderly - ever. But this seems to be beyond normal."

'It really is a president unhinged'

But people close to the President offer a different spin.

"I don't see anything under siege; I see it as the Big Red Machine," incoming National Economic Council director Larry Kudlow said, referring to the championship Cincinnati Reds baseball teams from the 1970s. "The only people under siege are reporters who don't like President Trump - and those guys need some significant therapy. I could recommend some awful good people in New York."

A quartet of senior West Wing aides who spent several hours a day with the President and were considered stabilising forces are gone. Hope Hicks's last day as communications director was Thursday. Gary Cohn was replaced as chief economic adviser by Kudlow. HR McMaster was

dismissed as national security adviser. And Rob Porter departed as staff secretary amid allegations of spousal abuse.

Outside the West Wing, Rex Tillerson often challenged Trump as secretary of state, but the President fired him and nominated as his successor CIA Director Mike Pompeo. He is known for agreeing with Trump, as is John Bolton, the incoming national security adviser.

"This is now a president a little bit alone, isolated and without any moderating influences - and, if anything, a president who is being encouraged and goaded on by people around him," one Trump confidant said. "It really is a president unhinged."

Other than Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, the lone remaining enforcer is Kelly. But his power as chief of staff has been diminished. Officials said the days of Kelly hovering in the Oval Office morning to night and screening the President's calls are over. Trump is largely circumventing Kelly's strict protocols.

The President recently reached out to some people Kelly had sought to excommunicate, calling former communications director Anthony Scaramucci to banter about politics and inviting Lewandowski and Bossie to dinner in the residence.

"He's rotating back to the people who actually like him and is more willing to take advice from those people," Scaramucci said. "They're more honest with him, and he's more comfortable with them."

Allies said Trump is reverting to the way he led the Trump Organisation from his 26th-floor office suite at Trump Tower in Manhattan. There, staffers were functionaries or lawyers, and many of his advisers were outside the company - rival business leaders, media figures and bankers. Back then, Trump controlled his orbit himself from behind his cluttered desk, relying on assistant Rhona Graff to field calls.

Trump has welcomed friends to the White House recently, including former House speaker Newt Gingrich, who visited Tuesday and met with Bolton, among others. And the President has turned to outside surrogates to carry his messages. After consulting with Trump, Newsmax chief executive Christopher Ruddy went on ABC's *This Week* on March 25 and revealed that Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin was expected to be removed. Trump fired him three days later.

"It was the direction [Trump] was always bound to take," said Michael Caputo, a former Trump campaign official. "The phone book at the White House was filled by complete strangers. . . . But now he knows how the White House operates, and he'll operate it himself."

The rising West Wing players

Ascendant in the West Wing are advisers who play to Trump's gut: Kudlow on tax cuts and deregulation, Bolton on a muscular approach to foreign affairs, Peter Navarro on protectionist trade policies, Stephen Miller on crackdowns on undocumented immigrants, and Kellyanne Conway on an open press strategy and tangling with reporters.

Like Conway, Bolton and Kudlow are seasoned cable news commentators who share Trump's hard-charging instincts and have no illusions about his governing style. Officials said they are expected to cater to the President's wishes and seek to avoid the internal knife fights that have befallen many a Trump aide.

Kudlow has told Cohn's top deputies that he would like them to stay on in their posts, a gesture that West Wing aides described as a reflection of Kudlow's respect for Cohn's operation as well as his understanding of the difficulties he would probably encounter if he attempted an overhaul.

Kudlow, 70, is a generational peer of Trump and a staple of the New York business elite to which Trump has long aspired. Kudlow has privately told associates that the President has asked him to be an energetic salesman on television - by acting as a principal, with speeches and road trips - for the Republican-authored tax law ahead of the midterm elections, as opposed to functioning as a behind-the-scenes manager, according to people who have spoken with him.

"He's squaring up his economic policy with the right adviser for him," Giuliani said. "Gary was really good, but I don't know if Gary ever embraced the Trump economic ideas. He was more of a traditional Democrat or moderate Republican. Kudlow is a real cheerleader for the tax cuts in a way Gary never was, although he helped get them passed."

Bolton, meanwhile, has told allies that he may make major changes on the National Security Council staff but has been careful not to reveal his plans until he formally takes over later this month. He has been working to appear as a team player - touting his bond with Pompeo and lunching Tuesday with McMaster - despite his reputation as a sharp-elbowed bureaucratic brawler, officials said. 'Who cares what he does with some lady?'

Trump has been frustrated by news stories of White House tumult and has ordered aides to contest the notion that there is chaos. He also has vented frequently about the \$US1.3 trillion omnibus spending bill, griping that Congress did not fully fund his promised US-Mexico border wall and labelling Republican congressional leaders "weak negotiators."

Meeting with advisers Monday in the Oval Office, Trump was alerted to a new CNN poll that showed his approval rating at 42 per cent nationally, up 7 percentage points since February. Trump joked that CNN, which he generally views as hostile to him, paid for a survey that pleased him, according to officials briefed on the conversation.

Another issue that has drawn Trump's ire - although he has not engaged publicly - is Daniels, the adult-film actress who alleged having a sexual encounter with Trump in 2006 and was paid \$US130,000 to sign a nondisclosure agreement shortly before the 2016 election. She and her attorney have not kept their silence, however, and the President has been bothered by the headlines they have generated.

The Daniels saga came up as Trump ate dinner Thursday night at Mar-a-Lago with his wife, Melania, and other family members. King - who is so controversial because of his 1967 manslaughter conviction (he was later pardoned) that he was barred from speaking at the 2016 Republican National Convention - joined the President and griped about the media.

"The top story, number one, is Stormy Daniels," King said he told Trump. "I told him it's utterly ridiculous. I just came back from Hamburg, Germany, and they were just laughing at us."

King said that Trump nodded in approval and told him, "It's meaningless."

"If he denies it happened, that's what it is," King said. "Who cares what he does with some lady?"