

Trump removes Bannon from National Security Council



FILE - In this March 23, 2017 file photo, White House chief strategist Steve Bannon, left, walks on Capitol Hill in Washington. President Donald Trump removed Bannon from the National Security Council, reversing an earlier controversial decision to give Bannon access to the high-level meetings. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon, File)

[Read More](#)

BY VIVIAN SALAMA

Published 1:40 PM PDT, April 5, 2017

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump has removed chief strategist Steve Bannon from the National Security Council, reversing an earlier, controversial decision to give Bannon access to the group's high-level meetings.

A new memorandum about the council's composition was published Wednesday in the Federal Register. The memo no longer lists the chief strategist as a member of the Principals

Committee, a group of high-ranking officials who meet to discuss pressing national security priorities.

A senior White House official said Wednesday that Bannon was initially placed on the National Security Council after Trump's inauguration as a measure to ensure implementation of the president's vision, including efforts to downsize and streamline operations at the NSC.

Bannon's addition to the NSC sparked criticism that it was inappropriate for the political adviser to play a role in national security matters.

Trump's first national security adviser, Michael Flynn, was heading the NSC at the time, but the official said Bannon's role had nothing to do with the troubles facing Flynn, who was asked to resign in early February for misleading the administration about his communications with Russian officials.

A senior administration official said that Flynn reluctantly agreed to have Bannon join the NSC. The official said that Trump's chief of staff, Reince Priebus, and chief counsel Don McGahn rewrote the original NSC memo with Flynn to include Bannon.

The official said the move reflected Trump's dwindling faith in his national security adviser and that Flynn's daily presentations to the president were seen as disorganized and not up to par.

Flynn's replacement, Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, was allowed to reorganize the NSC as he saw fit. McMaster immediately expressed a desire to run a less hierarchical organization and be more accessible to his staff. Lack of access to Flynn when he was in charge created widespread frustration, according to current and former administration officials familiar with the changes.

Tom Bossert, the assistant to the president for homeland security and counterterrorism, also had his role downgraded as part of the changes. The White House official said Bossert's change in status is simply a result of efforts to streamline the NSC.

Bossert joined Trump's team having previously served as deputy homeland security adviser to President George W. Bush.

In an interview with Fox News Wednesday, Vice President Mike Pence dismissed the notion that the changes reflect a demotion.

"These are very highly valued members of this administration," he said. "They are gonna continue to play important policy roles."

“This is just a natural evolution to ensure the National Security Council is organized in a way that best serves the president in resolving and making those difficult decisions,” Pence said.

As a participant of the Principals Committee, Bannon would have had the authority to call a vote if the president’s vision for the NSC was not being implemented. The committee, which includes top officials from various government agencies, meets regularly to address important policy issues.

One of the officials said Bannon’s removal from the NSC was not a reflection of any change in his standing as one of Trump’s closest advisers. Bannon will maintain his security clearance as is standard for most top West Wing officials.

Trump’s White House is facing allegations that it funneled secret intelligence reports to a Republican congressman leading an investigation into his campaign’s possible ties to Russian officials as well as Moscow’s interference in the 2016 election.

The New York Times last week identified two NSC officials as having helped House intelligence committee Chairman Devin Nunes view secret reports. A U.S. official confirmed to The Associated Press that Ezra Cohen-Watnick had access to those kinds of intelligence materials, but maintained he did not play a role in helping the California congressman gain access to the documents. The official pointed instead to the other official named in The New York Times report, Michael Ellis, a White House lawyer who previously worked for Nunes on the House committee.

Senior administration officials said McMaster was out of town when these revelations occurred.

The senior White House official would not comment on who was responsible for the changes, but said they were a reflection of the confidence the president has in McMaster and were not in response to the recent controversy linked to the NSC.

All the officials spoke anonymously because they were not authorized to discuss the changes or other details that have not been formally announced.

The new memo also restores the director of national intelligence and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as well as the energy secretary, to the principals committee.

The National Security Council was formed in 1947 to advise the president on foreign, military and domestic policies related to the country’s security and to enhance cooperation among departments on all such matters.

By law, the president, vice president, secretary of state, defense secretary — and, since 2007, the energy secretary — are members. Also by law, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the national intelligence director are advisers to the council.

Rep. Adam Schiff, the senior Democrat on the House intelligence committee, called Bannon's departure from the NSC "a positive step by Gen. McMaster to gain control over a body that was being politicized by Bannon's involvement."

Associated Press White House Correspondent Julie Pace, Ken Thomas and Matthew Daly contributed to this report.