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POLITICS

# Stephen K. Bannon's CPAC Comments, Annotated and Explained

The Interpreter

By MAX FISHER FEB. 24, 2017

WASHINGTON — In just a few comments during a question-and-answer session this week at the Conservative Political Action Conference, Stephen K. Bannon named many of the concepts that, though unfamiliar to many Americans, have animated his tenure as the president's chief strategist.

Ideas like “economic nationalism” and “corporatist media” have become central to the ideology that Mr. Bannon has carried to the White House from his time running Breitbart News.

Daniel Kreiss, a University of North Carolina professor who studies political language, said Mr. Bannon's phrases emerge from “a very defined cultural and ideological movement” that has grown out of populist online communities like Breitbart.

That vernacular, he said, is used to articulate a “very coherent story about what America is, and what it should be, that is not reducible to a set of policy positions” — but only if you know how to hear it.

Here are a few of Mr. Bannon's phrases from his comments and what they convey.

6

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## 'Economic Nationalism'

*"If you look at the lines of work, I would break it up into three verticals or three buckets. The first is kind of national security and sovereignty. ... The second line of work is what I refer to as **economic nationalism**."*

Economic nationalism is formally defined as encompassing domestic control of the economy, protectionist policies such as tariffs and opposition to trade and immigration.

But Mr. Kreiss said that, after months of studying Breitbart, he concluded that it was seen "less as a proscribed set of policies" than as a way to declare opposition to the long-held bipartisan consensus that favors trade and immigration.

The Breitbart site often describes an all-encompassing clash between "nationalists" and "globalists."

In this worldview, American interests are assumed to be at odds with those of the rest of the world, and immigration is seen as undercutting the national identity — with "globalists" the enemy within.

## 'Deconstruction of the Administrative State'

*"The third, broadly, line of work is **deconstruction of the administrative state**. ... If you look at these cabinet appointees, they were selected for a reason and that is the deconstruction. The way the progressive left runs, is if they can't get it passed, they're just going to put in some sort of regulation in an agency. That's all going to be deconstructed and I think that that's why this regulatory thing is so important."*

Republicans have long warned against overregulation. Mr. Bannon portrays the problem as flowing from something deeper: a shadowy "administrative state" engineered by the left to advance its agenda.

The state, in this view, is not an instrument of the American electorate, nor even a hurdle to be overcome as mainline conservatives often see it, but rather an adversary innately hostile to the people.

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This is a core argument of populist leaders, who typically rise by promising to oppose institutions, which are blamed for society's problems. But in practice, they often consolidate power away from those institutions for themselves.

## 'Our Sovereignty'

*"That got us out of a trade deal and let **our sovereignty** come back to ourselves."*

Mr. Bannon often cites sovereignty to argue that trade deals or other forms of cooperation will necessarily suborn American interests.

This is different from isolationism, which argues that the United States should withdraw from the world. Rather, it is nationalism, which demands engagement but on ruthlessly competitive terms.

This flows from an idea that the world's natural state is of clashing civilizations, an idea popularized by the scholar Samuel P. Huntington.

*"Rule of law is going to exist when you talk about **our sovereignty** and you talk about immigration."*

When Mr. Bannon cites sovereignty — in this case, to increase deportations — he conveys a need to assert control against a vaguely defined enemy.

Breitbart and like-minded websites often describe sovereignty as rooted in the nationalist premise that any nation-state is built around a core cultural identity that it must protect.

The word "sovereignty," Mr. Kreiss said, asserts "a defense of protecting an idea of what America is and should be." He said the "symbolic core of the nation" is being defined as white and Christian and seen itself as "under threat by cosmopolitanism and globalism."

## 'Corporatist, Globalist Media'

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*“They’re **corporatist, globalist media** that are adamantly opposed to an economic nationalist agenda like Donald Trump has.”*

In Mr. Bannon’s populist worldview, the United States’ traditional embrace of globalism is so clearly against American interests that it could only have been orchestrated by powerful elites.

Those elites include, in his telling, the news media — “globalist” for their embrace of trade and immigration, and “corporatist” for serving the business interests that are presumed to benefit at Americans’ expense.

Mr. Bannon has called the news media the “opposition party,” characterizing it as innately hostile to the Trump administration and therefore deserving of neither trust nor transparency.

Here, Mr. Bannon also portrays it as representing elites, and therefore in natural opposition to populist sites like Breitbart, which he has characterized as representing the people. This is reflected in President Trump’s assertions that the news media is the “enemy of the American people.”

## ‘The Center Core of What We Believe’

*“The center core of what we believe, that we’re a nation with an economy. Not an economy just in some global marketplace with open borders, but **we are a nation with a culture and a reason for being.**”*

Mr. Bannon is articulating a central idea of nationalists the world over: that the nation-state is the fundamental building block of humanity, with each nation defined by a fixed cultural identity.

In this view, countries are in a natural state of permanent competition. Any international integration suborns the identity that is a nation’s most important asset.

Immigration is also seen as threatening that identity. This helps explain why Mr. Bannon portrays “open borders” as a danger to America’s “culture” and “reason

for being.”  
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Of course, every nation's identity and demographics change over time. But opposing those changes, Mr. Kreiss said, has proved powerful at mobilizing a community.

"It's a very defined cultural and ideological movement that's giving voice to this and creating a framework for this," he said. "It's powerful for a lot of people."

A version of this article appears in print on February 25, 2017, on Page A13 of the New York edition with the headline: Bannon's Vision for a 'Deconstruction of the Administrative State'.

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**6**  
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