



February 7, 2017

## Don't overlook Trump's permanent partner

By JOSHUA SPIVAK

The early days of the Trump administration have already seen reports of internal skirmishes among his team of advisers. Cabinet members have been left in the dark on major policy changes, and the early stories suggest that his former campaign CEO, Steve Bannon, has established a dominant position, with the inaugural address and many other actions aligning with Bannon's previous statements.

While Bannon's success in the campaign has earned him a key role in the White House, Trump is well-known for quickly switching advisers, looking for the hot hand — he went through three campaign managers last year. With that in mind, it may be that anyone who has Trump's ear may only keep it for a short time before they are ignored or cast aside.

Therefore, it pays to consider a key fact about his team when looking at which adviser may have the longest and impact: Save one, he can fire every of them, at any time. And that one unfireable official is Vice President Mike Pence.

The power of a VP is not just in his or her permanent role. A split with the VP would be politically embarrassing for any president, as it would show a significant divide in the party and the leadership. For Donald Trump, who has not established himself as a party unifier, it would especially be damaging. Pence is a well-liked former member of the House Republican leadership team, as well as a former governor. Any separation between Trump and Pence could reverberate against Trump in Congress.

Vice presidents also have an independent role, even if it is frequently maligned — they preside over the Senate, which may seem to be a formality, but in the right hands it could be more than that. The VP also breaks tie votes in the Senate, and with the chamber closely divided, Pence is likely to have to use that power.

His decisive vote in favor of Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, the first time that a VP has ever provided the key vote for a cabinet nominee, will likely be repeated on critical legislation down the line.

Most reports on Trump's team have focused on the core team credited with getting him to the White House, like Bannon, Kellyanne Conway and Reince Preibus. All three, and hundreds of others, can be fired at a moment's notice. Even if they stay in his good graces, past precedent suggests that most of these advisers will burn out and leave the White House within two years.

Trump's Cabinet picks get a lot of press, but not only can they be fired at will, as we've repeatedly seen from other presidents and seen in the early goings of the Trump term, they are likely to be ignored while in office. Presidents have long treated cabinet members as gloried administrators rather than critical members of the policy team. To think that a cabinet member will have great influence on a president's overarching strategy is to ignore recent history.

Family is of course a different story, and Trump is portrayed as a big family man. Early reports cited his son-in-law Jared Kushner as having a special place in terms of advisers. But children and spouse (and especially children-in-law) can easily fall from grace and be ignored, divorced or disowned.

All of these people show how unique the vice president is. The president cannot remove the vice president. Barring death, resignation or impeachment, Trump must live with Pence. Throughout much of US history, the VP was seen as a nearly worthless position — his superfluous excellence, in the words of John Adams —serving as a political death sentence, unless the president happened to die.

But those days are long over. Seven of the last 12 vice presidents have gone on to win their party's nomination for the presidency — Pence almost certainly wants to be on that list himself. The vice president is now considered a major figure, and the last three, Al Gore, Dick Cheney and Joe Biden, were each viewed as among the most important people in the White House.

For Trump, there is a warning from the past about the price of failing to stay on good terms with his VP. The last New York native to be elected president also liked having a team of diverse advisers who jostled for their place. That was Franklin Roosevelt.

Roosevelt's first vice president was John Nance Garner, who famously said the VP was "not worth a bucket of warm spit" — well, he actually said something a bit more salty. Garner, a former speaker of the House, retained influence on Congress. And in 1937, Garner split with FDR over the second New Deal and the Supreme Court packing plans. The result was no end of trouble for Roosevelt: the death of one of his big initiatives, a big electoral setback in 1938 and a significant opponent in his quest for a third term.

As he adjusts to the presidency, Trump is likely to continue his pattern of working with and discarding advisers. But throughout his term, it pays to watch the one adviser who he can't get rid of, the one who has the most to gain from Trump's success and the one who can cause the most damage with a split.

Mike Pence is not just the vice president — he is likely to be the most important person outside of the President in the Trump White House.

*Joshua Spivak is a senior fellow at the Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform at Wagner College in New York. He blogs at the Recall Elections Blog. The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely his.*