

Inside Stephen Miller's hostile takeover of immigration policy

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The 33-year-old policy adviser has made unprecedented power grabs as he seeks to slash immigration to America.



One major reason Stephen Miller remains a powerful player on immigration is that he's so close to the president. But the White House adviser also has managed to set the agenda on Donald Trump's signature campaign issue through another quality: sheer bureaucratic cunning. | Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

When the White House held a series of meetings last year to discuss how to deal with nations that refuse to take back their citizens whom the U.S. is trying to deport, one voice in the room was louder than all the others: Stephen Miller.

It was odd that Miller, a powerful senior policy adviser to President Donald Trump focused on slashing immigration to America, was even there.

The issue of so-called recalcitrant countries has traditionally been handled by the National Security Council, in part because it overlaps with sensitive foreign relations matters, such as fighting terrorism — and Miller is not a part of the NSC.

But, Miller, who recently turned 33, led several of the meetings. And he would launch the sessions with horror stories about Americans being victimized by noncitizens, such as a 25-year-old Connecticut woman [stabbed](#) to death by a Haitian man who

should have been deported earlier. The tone left some in the room feeling anxious about trying to argue against him, according to current and former U.S. officials.

“What are we doing to save American lives? We must save American lives! We must save Americans from these immigrant criminals!” a former NSC official recalled Miller saying in one session. “He would tell these stories to make it clear there was no room for anything other than to come down hard on these countries, even if we had other national security interests to consider.”

Miller’s hard-charging approach to the discussion offers a glimpse into just one of the many tactics — psychological and otherwise — he has used to secure an iron grip on Trump’s immigration policies, surviving blowups such as the initial blowback over the president’s travel ban and the more recent fracas over the migrant family separation policy.

One major reason Miller remains a powerful player on immigration is that he’s so close to Trump, who agrees with many of his hard-line views. But according to nearly a dozen current and former U.S. officials and others who deal with migration, Miller also has managed to set the agenda on Trump’s signature campaign issue through another quality: sheer bureaucratic cunning.

He has installed acolytes across key U.S. agencies, such as the State Department. He has inserted himself into NSC deliberations to an extraordinary degree for someone not in that elite group’s ranks. He takes care to limit his paper trail, avoiding email and keeping his name off documents when possible. He has cajoled and bullied some career staffers into implementing his vision of radically tighter U.S. borders — a vision that, according to a former White House official, even Trump has privately suggested can be extreme. Even when he doesn’t get everything he wants, such as with the recalcitrant countries, he manages to dramatically alter the boundaries of the debate.

The latest test of Miller’s power is underway, as he tries to slash the number of refugees the U.S. accepts next year to 25,000 or fewer, according to former officials and advocates for refugees. That’s even lower than the historic nadir of 45,000 he helped pull it down to last year, and Miller is playing a major role as the State Department, Pentagon and other agencies try to reach a consensus before Sept. 30.

Miller also is behind other immigration-related policy initiatives in the works, including ways to make it harder for people to obtain legal status in the United States.

The White House did not make Miller available for an interview, but deputy press secretary Hogan Gidley defended Miller as just doing what his boss wants. “Everything Stephen Miller does is the result of first asking the question: What does President Donald Trump want done?” Gidley said.

Others, however, said Miller is a gifted behind-the-scenes operator whose obsession with immigration is shaping Trump's agenda.

"We thought good policy arguments, good bureaucratic arguments — that if we just did the right thing and told the truth, that we would win," the former NSC official said of the bureaucratic wrangling with Miller. "But he was playing a totally different game than we were."

'An intimidation session'

Miller's combative style quickly spilled into public view within days of Trump's inauguration, when he, working with a coterie of like-minded colleagues, rolled out Trump's infamous travel ban: an executive order barring from U.S. soil the citizens of several Muslim-majority countries.

The order had not gone through the usual interagency review, leading to widespread confusion about its implementation. The result: scenes of refugees, elderly women and even children detained at U.S. airports as protests emerged nationwide.

In the days afterward, as the travel ban hit obstacles in the courts, Miller publicly and forcefully defended it, bolstering his national notoriety in the process. "There is no constitutional right for a citizen in a foreign country who has no status in America to demand entry into our country. Such a right cannot exist. Such a right will never exist," Miller said on [ABC News](#). "This is an ideological disagreement between those who believe we should have borders and should have controls and those who believe there should be no borders and no controls."

Behind the scenes, Miller was surprising and rankling his colleagues.

The day after the ban was unveiled, a Saturday, NSC staffers were asked to convene a "principals committee" meeting to discuss the fallout. Such meetings are attended by Cabinet secretaries and other specially designated U.S. officials who deal with national security, and they are typically chaired by the national security adviser. But the team that assembled that day was a mix of officials at varying ranks — and it was Miller who chaired the meeting. (A White House official pushed back on this, arguing that because Miller chaired the gathering, by definition that made it not a meeting of the "principals committee.")

After spending a few minutes leading a discussion of murky legal issues around the travel ban, Miller pivoted to what one senior administration official said felt like "an intimidation session." "Stephen was like, 'This is the way it's going to be. This is the president's will.' That Trump was 'heartened, encouraged,' something like that, by what's happening at the airports," the official said.

"That really set the tone," the official added. "Stephen just had this aura about him. People realized at that point this guy — Stephen — is the president of immigration."

‘You’re so tough on this stuff, Stephen’

Miller’s fixation on immigration is something of a mystery to many people who know him.

He has often been described as a contrarian who rebelled against his liberal upbringing in Santa Monica, California. He has been a conservative activist since at least his high school days, and his writings portray a young person deeply shaken by the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. He grew his reputation for antagonism at Duke University, where — as a columnist for the student newspaper — he defended lacrosse players falsely accused of rape and warned that multiculturalism poses a threat to American identity.

Miller later worked as a communications aide to Jeff Sessions, then a Republican senator from Alabama whose far-right anti-immigration views Miller shared.

Miller joined the Trump campaign in early 2016, finding in the president a fellow anti-immigration crusader. Their relationship is what some of Miller’s defenders point to when discussing his tactics.

“He has been very effective at navigating the office politics of the West Wing, but the idea that Stephen is some Svengali is ridiculous,” said Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, which seeks more restrictions on immigration. “Part of his success is that he’s *simpatico* with Trump — there’s nothing he’s promoting that the president is actually against.”

Over time, though, even Trump has become aware of how far to the right Miller is on the issue, and he listens to other voices, a former White House official said. “Trump will sometimes say, ‘Well, yeah, but you’re so tough on this stuff, Stephen,’” the former official said. Still, Trump also sees how well the hard-line stance plays with his Republican base, and he relies on Miller to flesh out much of his immigration policy.

Despite his high rank of assistant to the president and broad title of senior policy adviser, it quickly became clear to people in Trump’s orbit that immigration wasn’t just the singular issue Miller truly cared about, it was also, by far, the subject he knew the most about. Other officials couldn’t keep up with his grasp of the details.

The backlash over the travel ban didn’t deter Miller from pursuing seismic immigration policy changes in the weeks that followed, officials said. Instead, he learned that he needed the stamp of the interagency process to successfully implement and validate the changes he sought.

So he looked for ways to gain more control of that process.

Without a trace

Because of his mind-meld with Trump, Miller from the start wielded tremendous sway over the Domestic Policy Council, a White House-based forum of top U.S. officials and staffers who deal with issues such as health care, education and other domestic topics aside from the economy.

Some elements of immigration policy are among the DPC's portfolios. But there are other aspects of immigration that have been traditionally dealt with by the NSC, such as refugee resettlement and recalcitrant countries. According to multiple former officials, under Miller, the DPC proposed that it take the lead on all immigration matters, including what was supposed to be handled by the NSC.

NSC staffers raised concerns. But Miller pushed then-national security adviser H.R. McMaster and Tom Bossert, the homeland security adviser at the time, to effectively cede control of immigration policy to him, two former officials said, saying that in exchange, he wouldn't get in their way on other matters. (Bossert declined comment, and McMaster did not reply to a request for comment.)

"He's willing to cut deals implicitly and explicitly with people: If you give me free rein on immigration, I will leave you alone on a bunch of other stuff," the former White House official said.

Due to his machinations, Miller began unofficially co-chairing meetings on refugees, recalcitrant countries and other topics that used to be in the NSC's domain, but in which the DPC was now given a major role. An NSC unit known as BATS — Border and Transportation Security — largely came under Miller's control, current and former officials said.

Miller's bureaucratic coup also meant that he was part of the clearance process for many papers generated by units within the NSC. That infuriated lower-level NSC staffers who found that Miller would often misrepresent data about refugees or other types of immigrants, former and current U.S. officials said. (Miller has been [accused](#) of suppressing information about the overall net benefits of refugees on the economy during the administration's debate last year over how many refugees to admit to the U.S.)

"We would clear a paper that was accurate at the working level with all the relevant experts and stakeholders at the NSC, but then it would go to him before it went to our own leadership," a former administration official said. "He'd make all these changes, and we wouldn't see it or have a chance to ensure the integrity of his edits."

Miller was careful about minimizing his paper trail, current and former officials said. He would edit documents by hand instead of in a digital file. He would make phone calls instead of sending emails.

It's not entirely clear why Miller does this. Some officials who have dealt with him speculate that he did not want his level of influence in the NSC to be too obvious. Others say he may be aware that his name is toxic in certain political circles, including among moderate Republicans who support reforming the immigration system.

"The entirety of my work during my time in the administration was influenced or dictated maybe 90 percent of the time by Miller, but I saw maybe three emails from him," the former administration official said.

Miller often relied on like-minded allies to act as proxies in various settings, communicating with them by phone or in person. Miller also wasn't listed as a co-chair of the meetings on various immigration issues. A Miller ally or some other official with the DPC would be listed as the co-chair, but Miller would come in and take over.

A former West Wing aide said Miller would at times ask people in the White House to send him suggested inserts for the president's speeches that he wanted to include. It seemed to be Miller's way of making it appear the ideas originated from someone besides himself.

"I never understood it," the former aide said. "He had the power to put it in himself."

'The president believes'

Aside from the president, several other top administration officials shared Miller's broad goal of cracking down on immigration.

Sessions, his old boss on Capitol Hill, was named the attorney general. John Kelly, a retired general, defended ramping up deportations as the secretary of homeland security; he later became Trump's chief of staff. Kirstjen Nielsen, Kelly's replacement as homeland security secretary, was also willing to cast her lot with the hard-liners.

But Miller had Trump's ear in a way even some Cabinet secretaries don't, and he didn't let those officials forget it.

One meeting last year demonstrated Miller's savvy, according to a senior immigration security official briefed on what happened.

Then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Kelly, who was the homeland security secretary at the time, were waiting to see Trump. Miller arrived with the president, who was holding a document and seething. The document, apparently given to him by Miller, showed that thousands of Iraqis had visited the United States in the previous year.

The president was furious: Why were they let in?

Kelly and Tillerson pointed out that these were not technically immigrants — merely tourists and other types of short-term visitors. Relatively few overstayed their visas. But Trump was angry anyway, and Miller had scored a psychological victory over the Cabinet officials.

In meetings and other settings, Miller would frequently use phrases such as “We all know the president believes ...” or “The president thinks” Career Civil and foreign service staffers came to view that move as another Miller tactic to restrict genuine and honest debate about the merits of a policy. What staffer, after all, would dare rebuff the president — or the man so close to the president?

Miller has taken the approach of “I will tell you what the outcome is, and we’ll work backward to get there,” the former administration official said.

Some observers also pointed out that, as one of Trump’s main speechwriters, Miller has a lot of control over how Trump articulates his beliefs.

All of Miller’s men

Perhaps Miller’s most important move has been identifying and promoting lower-level staffers who share his anti-immigration views, some of whom he helped place into key agencies, essentially embedding foot soldiers across the federal government.

Three people in particular have proven valuable proxies: John Zadrozny, Andrew Veprek and Gene Hamilton.

In the first months of the Trump administration, Hamilton was a senior counselor at the Department of Homeland Security. He and Miller would attend meetings with NSC staffers having seemingly choreographed what they would say to each other during the gatherings, current and former officials said. Hamilton is now at the Justice Department, where he advises Sessions.

Zadrozny worked for the Domestic Policy Council but recently moved to the State Department — an institution Miller views with deep suspicion — to serve on the Policy Planning Staff. He previously worked for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, a stridently anti-immigration group.

Veprek is a Foreign Service officer who was detailed to the White House but more recently landed a top role in the State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration. He’s also drawn [headlines](#) for trying to water down proposed United Nations language on the need to fight racism.

A White House staffer who admires Miller said the Trump confidant is in contact with many more career staffers across the government who support his views, even lawyers from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Miller has asked

people to look at every policy change possible within the executive branch's authority to be stricter on immigration, the White House staffer said.

The former White House official warned, however, against exaggerating Miller's reach, saying that although he has a solid "kitchen cabinet" of advisers, "there's a mythology that's crept up that overstates their influence." Miller, the former official added, has promoted that "myth."

Gidley, the deputy White House press secretary, downplayed Miller's role in placing acolytes across the government. "The president empowers his employees to put people at agencies who agree with the president's policies. That's no surprise," he said.

Criticisms of Miller, Gidley said, aren't really about him. "It seems to me these are attempts by people who don't like the president to attack Stephen Miller, who is loyal to the president," he said.

Multiple people interviewed said Miller enjoys being characterized as some dark, Machiavellian figure, but that he's affable and generous in private, although a bit awkward. "He really gets along with people on a personal level," the admiring White House staffer said. Gidley added: "He's one of the funniest, wittiest people I know."

But Miller has also taken revenge on people he views as hostile to his policy goals.

In the early months of the Trump era, Miller held a meeting with several government employees who dealt with refugees. One attendee was Lawrence Bartlett, a veteran State Department official with extensive experience resettling refugees to the U.S.

The topic centered in part on studying the costs and benefits of refugees. Miller made it clear that he, and the president, saw refugees as a financial drain. Bartlett, however, mentioned a study out of Ohio that showed that refugees could boost local economies.

"From that point, Larry was on all their hit lists," the senior administration official said.

Bartlett, who declined comment, continued advocating for refugees in the months that followed. He was eventually handed new duties: helping process Freedom of Information Act requests. It was like being sent into exile.

Most of the people interviewed for this story requested anonymity for reasons including not wanting to be targeted by Miller.

In recent months, Miller has been [convening side meetings](#) with his clique of allies to come up with new ways to shift immigration rules. The gatherings have evolved from loosely structured conference calls and other connections Miller and his acolytes used earlier. In theory, the proposals the group generates must still go

through the traditional interagency review, but it's not always clear whether that happens.

The informal group devised the basis of the Trump administration's decision to separate undocumented adult migrants from their children at the southern U.S. border, administration officials and Republicans close to the administration previously told POLITICO. That decision spawned images of children held in cages, sparking a public outcry and leading Trump to order an end to the separations.

The fallout from the separation policy hurt Miller's standing with Trump, but not because the president disagreed with the idea behind it, the former White House official said. Rather, Trump was disappointed that Miller hadn't thought through the optics of how people beyond hardcore Republicans would react.

"Even the president realizes that Miller is so far on one end of the spectrum that sometimes he has political blind spots," the former White House official said.

Terms of animosity

Current and former officials say they can't recall any incidents in which Miller used overtly racist language. Instead, they say, his views appeared more nativist — his language loaded with suspicion, if not outright hostility, toward non-Americans, including refugees. Miller and his allies would use terms like "illegals" or "aliens" to describe various immigrants; in one case, a Miller ally said that refugees negatively affected by the travel ban were "hosed."

A White House official defended Miller's language, arguing that he was simply sticking with official legal terms, such as "illegal aliens," and that softer descriptions, such as "undocumented," had no legal basis. But the terminology used to describe non-Americans by Miller and his allies nonetheless weighed on many career staffers.

"He doesn't treat them as human beings. They're animals, or they're a product," the former NSC official said.

On recalcitrant countries, Miller wanted to invoke a U.S. law that would bar citizens of those nations from obtaining American visas. (There was a major exception to this: Miller didn't agitate to punish China, which hasn't taken back tens of thousands of its citizens eligible for deportation.)

NSC staffers argued that it wasn't worth straining relations with some of the countries, especially if, say, America was trying to build a drone base in one of the nations.

But Miller and his allies insisted that the U.S. had to enforce its immigration laws, citing the potential threat to Americans from noncitizens eligible for deportation, some of whom may have simply overstayed a visa.

“They just wouldn’t give equal weight and discussion time and value to things that related to the complex dynamics involved in relations between the U.S. and Cambodia or Chad or South Sudan,” a second former NSC official said.

Miller did not immediately get everything he wanted. He’d hoped to impose visa sanctions on more than a dozen countries considered recalcitrant.

But his agitation helped push the debate to a new place.

By the fall of 2017, the Trump administration had imposed visa sanctions on four offending countries: Cambodia, Eritrea, Guinea and Sierra Leone. Earlier this summer, the administration imposed such sanctions on two more countries: Laos and Myanmar.

In the 16 years before Trump — and Miller — reached the White House, the U.S. had imposed visa sanctions on just two recalcitrant countries.

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