

The wrath of Stephen Miller

Story by Ashley Parker

Stephen Miller runs his daily 10 a.m. conference calls—yes, even on Saturdays—less like a government adviser and more like a wartime general. His is the dominant voice, as he plays the role of browbeater, inquisitor, and bully. He accepts no excuses, entertains no dissent.

Donald Trump’s deputy chief of staff for policy ruthlessly pursues the president’s vision, especially when it comes to pushing immigrants out of the country, and he runs a tight, efficient meeting. Consensus is not the goal.

Instead, Miller demands progress reports on his mass-deportation campaign and issues orders to the full alphabet soup of federal enforcement agencies, including the FBI, CBP, ICE, HHS, and the DOD. One senior official who has participated in the calls told us that the intensity and urgency often veer into hectoring. “He pushes everybody to the absolute limit because he knows that the clock is ticking,” this person said. “He gets on the phone and he yells at everybody. Nobody is spared from his wrath.”

In May, Miller told Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials that he wanted 3,000 immigration arrests a day, a nearly tenfold increase over the number they’d arrested on U.S. streets in 2024. He demands daily updates on the ICE [hiring surge](#) too; the administration had pledged to deploy 10,000 new deportation officers by this month—more than doubling the agency’s workforce. And Miller expects regular updates on detention capacity, [deportation flights](#), and border crossings.

Miller publicly shames bureaucrats he feels are falling short or resisting orders. “If there’s a problem and you’re the owner, you have to fix it quickly,” another frequent conference-call participant told us. “It’s not a place where you can say, ‘I have to get back to you.’”

A third official told us that the calls are unlike any other government meetings they’ve attended. “If you say something stupid, he’ll tell you to your face. You are expected to perform at a certain level, and there’s no excuse for not meeting those expectations,” this person said.

In Trump’s inner circle—even with the president himself—Miller is known as a dogmatic force whose ideas are sometimes too extreme for public consumption. “I’d love to have him come up and explain his true feelings—maybe not his *truest* feelings,” the president joked at an Oval Office briefing in October. But in Trump’s second term, Miller finds himself at the height of his powers—the pulsing human id of a president who is already almost pure id.

Miller has tried to recast the nation’s partisan political disagreements as an existential conflict, a battle pitting “forces of wickedness and evil” against the nation’s noble, virtuous people—a mostly native-born crowd that traces its lineage and legacy “back to Athens, to Rome, to Philadelphia, to Monticello.” He accuses federal judges of “legal insurrection” for ruling against Trump’s policies, describes the Democratic Party as a “domestic extremist organization,” and

dismisses the results of even legal immigration programs as “the Somalification of America.” And he has declared an end to the post–World War II order of “international niceties” in favor of a world that rebukes the weak, “that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power,” as he put it this week when discussing recent military action against Venezuela.

Along with Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Miller was the chief force behind Trump’s decision to capture the Venezuelan strongman Nicolás Maduro. “We are a superpower, and under President Trump, we are going to conduct ourselves as a superpower,” Miller told CNN’s Jake Tapper on Monday, articulating a worldview that started with the fear of immigration but has gradually expanded to a broader national-security and rule-of-law argument. (In this Darwinian vein, Miller also declared that the U.S. military could seize Greenland without a fight, echoing a social-media post that his wife, Katie Miller, had made two days earlier, showing an American flag superimposed on a map of the icy landmass alongside the word: SOON. NATO leaders have nervously affirmed Denmark’s claim to the territory.)

Miller’s official titles—he is also the director of the interagency Homeland Security Council—understate the full sweep of his purview. Steve Bannon, a former Trump adviser and a Miller ally, describes him as Trump’s “prime minister.” Miller has a role in nearly every area about which he cares deeply: immigration and border security, yes, but also national security, foreign policy, trade, military action, and policing. He may draft a flurry of executive orders one day, lead a meeting on lowering domestic beef prices the next, and travel to deliver a fiery speech of his own—think Trump at his angriest and most dystopian, without any of the president’s impish humor—the following week. (Miller declined to comment for this story.)

Early in Trump’s second term, he invoked the Alien Enemies Act of 1798 to treat migrants as part of a [foreign invasion](#), directed Congress to pass [\\$150 billion](#) in new funding for homeland-security enforcement, and captained the administration’s assault on elite universities such as Harvard and Columbia. Late last year, he helped orchestrate Trump’s authorization of [military strikes](#) on suspected drug-smuggling boats in the Caribbean Sea and eastern Pacific Ocean, setting the stage for the military operation against Maduro.

The force behind Miller’s directives became clear during [Signalgate](#)—in which the Trump administration accidentally included *The Atlantic*’s editor in chief, Jeffrey Goldberg, on a private Signal chat about a [bombing campaign](#) in Yemen. It was Miller—not Trump’s national security adviser, Pentagon chief, or even vice president—who ended the debate and directed the group to move forward with the strikes. Trump has described Miller as sitting “at the top of the totem poll” inside the White House.

“He oversees every policy the administration touches,” White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt told us. “I can’t tell you the number of times a policy matter is discussed in the Oval and Trump will say, ‘Where’s Stephen? Tell him to get that done.’”

To critics, Miller is the smirking embodiment of everything they view as dangerous and authoritarian about the Trump administration. He has been called a Nazi, a neo-Nazi, a white supremacist, a kapo, and Lord Voldemort. Posters of Miller—pursed lips, furrowed brow—have

been plastered around the nation's capital, stamped with CREEP and FASCISM AIN'T PRETTY. His own uncle has denounced him, writing at one point that if Miller's immigration policies had been implemented a century ago, their family—which fled anti-Jewish pogroms in Europe—[“would have been wiped out.”](#)

Yet if Miller has internalized any of the criticism, or acknowledged the parallels to his own lineage, he has not shown it, even among friends or colleagues. Miller is now acting as an accelerant for the president's most incendiary impulses and shaping the lives of individual Americans in nearly every realm. He has demonstrated neither the interest nor the ability to moderate his views—even for tactical purposes. He is apt to overreach. And he has shown that he's not afraid to use the power of the government to go after those who try to stand in his way—even his liberal neighbors, whom he has accused of threatening his family.

During Trump's first term, Miller pushed the [family-separation policy](#) at the southern border, a measure long considered too extreme to implement. It triggered such a massive backlash that Trump's wife and eldest daughter urged him to stop it. The separations became the defining immigration policy of Trump's first term, undermining his ability to run on the issue in 2020. Now that he's back in office, the latest polling shows eroding support for the president's immigration crackdown, especially among the [Latino voters](#) who helped carry him to victory in 2024.

But Miller has continued to push not just for the deportation of people in the country illegally but also for narrowing or closing legal immigration pathways, especially for people from poor, not-majority-white, non-Christian nations. His actions have struck many Americans as racist and xenophobic. (In 2019, for instance, [the Southern Poverty Law Center reported](#) on leaked emails in which Miller urged the conservative *Breitbart News* to promote ideas from *The Camp of the Saints*, a [1973 French novel](#) popular in white-nationalist and neo-Nazi circles.) Colleagues who have worked with him for years say they have never heard him utter a racist slur, even in private. His devotion is not to white supremacy per se, they insist, but to the political and intellectual thesis he has been pushing since before he arrived in Washington. He wants to halt and reverse America's post-1960s immigration boom, and he pursues that goal with a fervor that has made him the public face of Trump's restrictionist immigration policies.

During debate prep for the 2024 campaign, Miller found himself in a contentious back-and-forth over immigration with a more moderate Trump ally. Finally, a frustrated Trump interrupted the two men: *Stephen*, he said, *if you had it your way, everyone would look exactly like you*, someone familiar with the exchange told us.

“That's correct,” Miller said, before turning back to continue sparring.

The nexus of Miller's power is a vestige of President George W. Bush's War on Terror. Weeks after the attacks of September 11, 2001, Bush established the Homeland Security Council to coordinate the government's domestic response to the new threats from abroad. More than two and a half decades later, Miller has attached that rubric of national emergency to a new target, turning the council into a daily war room to track and fine-tune Trump's campaign to [deport 1 million people](#) a year.

The September murder of the right-wing activist Charlie Kirk, who was [close to many](#) in the administration, including Miller, plunged Trump's already single-minded martinet into a maximalist frenzy. A portrait of Ronald Reagan hangs prominently in the Oval Office—just over Trump's left shoulder when he's seated at the Resolute Desk—but Miller has made it abundantly clear that this is no longer Reagan's Republican Party.

Former Senator Jeff Flake, the Arizona Republican who retired during Trump's first term, told us that he has noticed a clear shift from one Trump administration to the next. "Before, it was more subtle, more nuanced, but now it's pretty plain. He wants to see more immigration from the Nordic countries, and not so much from the Third World countries. It's just a clear break from the huddled masses yearning to breathe free," said Flake, who, as a senator, worked unsuccessfully to pass a bipartisan immigration overhaul. "It's not the Reagan vision. It's not the traditional Republican vision."

Flake said that although the immigration system has serious problems, Trump and Miller's goal seems to be "to change the nature of who we are as a country."

Beyond immigration, Miller specializes in turning the president's whims and rantings into government policy. As Trump griped about the homeless encampments near the State Department one day, Leavitt recalled that he turned to Miller and said: "Get it done." "And within six hours," she said, "I looked at Twitter, and there were cranes cleaning them up."

"Stephen is the most effective political aide of this generation—and probably since James Baker," the former Trump adviser Cliff Sims told us in a text. "No one is more deft at moving the levers of government to turn the President's policies into action."

May Mailman, who last year worked closely with Miller to [punish elite universities](#) that the administration claims are rife with anti-Semitism and "woke" ideology, explained to us how Miller approaches a problem. In March, for instance, upset with [Columbia University](#) for several reasons—including prominent pro-Palestinian protests on campus—Trump posted a message on social media that began, "All Federal Funding will STOP for any College, School, or University that allows illegal protests." Miller told Mailman to come up with some options, but, with Trump's buy-in, Miller was ultimately the one who approved pulling federal funding from the school.

Then he carefully watched for the reaction. "If taking money from Columbia was a bad idea and backfired in some way, then Stephen would be the one to demand a course correction," said Mailman, who first worked with Miller during Trump's first term. "But because that worked out pretty well, he then tries to figure out: How can we use that tool in other areas?"

Close observers of Miller say that his total command is a marked contrast to his role during the first Trump term, when, despite being a senior adviser, he was limited in his ability to direct others. David Lapan, a retired Marine Corps colonel and aide to former Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly, told us that he remembers attending a 2017 meeting at which Miller urged officials to send him examples of crimes committed by immigrants so he could publicize them. The difference then, Lapan said, is that Miller had an advisory role, and the other meeting

attendees could disregard requests that they felt were too outlandish. “We came out of that meeting and said, *Yeah, we’re not doing that*,” Lapan recalled. “We knew that Kelly would cover for us.”

“Are there stories like that out there? Sure,” Lapan said. “But they’re the exception, not the rule. Cherry-picking a few bad cases to paint all immigrants in a negative light is not something that we were willing to do.”

Although Miller views himself as the president’s loyal servant, Trump’s stances appear to have shifted under Miller’s direction. The president used to speak favorably about certain immigrant groups he liked, such as [DACA recipients](#) and the employees at his golf resorts. But lately, his occasional pro-immigrant chatter has quieted. “‘America First’ is becoming ‘Americans Only,’” Lapan said.

Illustration by Ben Kothe. Sources: Getty; Jim Watson / AFP / Getty.

Miller turned 40 in August and celebrated with a surprise party at the Ned, a chic members-only club blocks from the White House. The president did not show up, but just about everyone else did: White House Chief of Staff [Susie Wiles](#), House Speaker Mike Johnson, conservative influencers, nearly every Cabinet secretary. Miller did not have a speech prepared but spoke self-deprecatingly, thanking Wiles for putting up with his ideas and suggestions. The turnout was a show of not just Miller’s immense power but also his popularity in an administration that has been rife with infighting and backstabbing, especially during Trump’s first term.

The gleeful brawler Miller plays on TV is no act, his colleagues told us, and he behaves similarly in private (although often with a dash of deadpan humor). Several people told us that they appreciate how dogmatic he is, for a possibly surprising reason: They always know where he stands on the issues, and where they stand with him. As Trump’s speechwriter during the first administration, he built goodwill with colleagues by warning them when the president was about to say something contrary to their plans, so they had time to try to convince him otherwise.

“The lazy and clearly false hit on him is to call him these disgusting names,” White House Communications Director Steven Cheung told us, about the accusations that Miller is a Nazi or a fascist. “If you dig deeper and aren’t suffering from Trump Derangement Syndrome, he’s not what the media portrays him as. He’s actually a very nice and cordial person who cares about this country and wants to do a good job. He’s very easy to work with. I’ve been in Trump world a long time, and he’s probably the easiest to work with.”

Several people described Miller as an exacting boss, even a micromanager, but one who looks out for his team—including younger aides. In Trump’s first term, he was not yet married, and he spent many of his nights out, grabbing drinks or dinner with everyone from Cabinet secretaries to more junior staff, who were eager to get time with him. When Trump’s first term wound down, Miller helped ensure that everyone on his staff (and even some not on his team) had a job lined up.

Friends and colleagues say he has rarely seemed hurt by the criticism and caricatures. But he can be vain about his appearance; in Trump's first term, he once showed up to *Face the Nation* with what was roundly mocked as spray-on hair. (In Trump's second term, the hair is gone.) And after a recent [Vanity Fair photo shoot](#) of senior West Wing staff, the photographer—whose close-up, often unflattering photos went viral—[recounted to The Washington Post](#) that Miller “was perhaps the most concerned about the portrait session,” asking whether or not he should smile. Colleagues also describe a proud sartorialist who regularly debated fashion and traded menswear tips with another West Wing fashionista, Hogan Gidley, a deputy press secretary during Trump's first term.

“We would talk about the difference in fabrics for seasons, and lapel size and width of ties and these types of things,” Gidley told us, before describing Miller's style as “sophisticated and smart and chic but also daring at times.”

In a recently resurfaced 2003 video, a 17-year-old Miller—prominent sideburns and tightly coiled brown hair—sits in the back of a moving school bus, opining on the war in Iraq. In the video, Miller smirkingly suggests that the “ideal solution” for “Saddam Hussein and his henchmen” would be “to cut off their fingers”; he argues that torture is the proper punishment in a nonbarbaric society. (In a barbaric society, he implies, death would be the appropriate punishment.) “Torture is a celebration of life and human dignity,” he continues, briefly unable to hide his delight as his latest outlandish proclamation illicitly titters from his peers—his mouth widens into a toothy grin, and he emits an audible chuckle before taking a breath and continuing.

This is [Miller the troll](#), who has confided in friends that he enjoys starting a fire, then dousing it with gasoline. But after more than two decades relishing his role as the gleeful contrarian, the persona has now become more true character than occasional outlandish caricature. “He has a flair for the dramatic, and you can tell that now with the way he comports himself on TV,” Bannon told us. “He plays the character well, knowing he always wants to have the libs’—the progressives’—heads blow up.”

After graduating from Duke in 2007—where he [vigorously defended](#) white lacrosse players who were falsely accused of rape by a Black stripper—Miller landed a job with newly elected Republican Representative Michele Bachmann of Minnesota. As young Capitol Hill aides, he and Sergio Gor—who recently became Trump's ambassador to India—helped launch the supernova ambitions of Bachmann, a right-wing darling whose then-fringe ideology presaged the rise of MAGA. By the time Bachmann's 2012 presidential bid flamed out, Miller was already firmly ensconced with then-Senator Jeff Sessions of Alabama, who shared his hard-line obsession with immigration, and Bannon, who provided a broader nationalist, populist scaffolding.

As Sessions's aide-de-camp, Miller helped his boss sabotage the bipartisan “Gang of Eight” immigration bill, which passed the Senate by a wide margin in 2013. At the time, a post-2012 Republican autopsy was calling for a gentler, more inclusive GOP, and the proposed immigration overhaul had the support of business and tech leaders, interest groups, and wealthy donors. But Miller was undaunted, buttonholing reporters in the hallways of Congress to press his anti-immigrant case, and calling them later at home to talk—for hours, if they'd let him—

about the bill's minutiae and why it would harm American workers. The bill died in the House, where it never came up for a vote.

Miller pushed colleagues to keep the same round-the-clock hours as he did, including calling meetings on Friday afternoons, when most Hill staffers were eager to skip out early to happy hours. Instead, Republican staffers sullenly reported to messaging meetings to talk about immigration.

Working with Bannon, Miller made *Breitbart News* the communications arm of his effort. And, understanding that data and statistics, however dubious, could lend their cause the sheen of legitimacy, they elevated obscure anti-immigration groups—the Center for Immigration Studies, NumbersUSA—into prominent sources. “The more outrageous the headline, the better,” Bannon said.

By the time Miller joined Trump's 2016 campaign—[officially launched](#) with claims that Mexico was sending “rapists” and criminals across the border—his immigration bona fides were well established, and he learned to channel Trump's voice into policy prescriptions. The baby-faced Miller quickly moved from the back of Trump's plane to the inner circle at the front.

By March 2016, Miller was Trump's opening act, riling up crowds across the country with an anti-immigrant, anti-Washington populism that sometimes threatened to overshadow Trump himself. “I said, ‘Listen, the point of an introduction is that Trump doesn't have to top it,’” Bannon said. “He was so insane over-the-top. But of course the MAGA base can't get enough of him.”

In Trump's first White House, Miller made quick use of the various levers available to him, no matter how buried in the bureaucratic bowels. He took a particular interest in the office of the staff secretary, a little-known but powerful team that vets any memo or speech or policy before it reaches the president. Not a lawyer himself, he nevertheless leaned on creative and expansive interpretations of statutes to push the president's agenda. In the early days of COVID, for instance, he successfully urged the administration to invoke a 1944 emergency public-health law to [shut down the border](#) and rapidly expel migrants to Mexico or their home country. In a White House staffed partly by amateurs, he also benefited from his deep understanding of policy issues, which he'd been honing since high school. He coached Trump and others into even more extreme immigration positions, explaining why, for instance, he believed that giving merit-based green cards to promising foreign students was problematic.

Even his allies find Miller to be something of an “acquired taste,” as one put it. Another quipped that he has the bedside manner of [Heinrich Himmler](#), one of Adolf Hitler's earliest followers and a key architect of the Holocaust. But Mailman said that Miller could be strategic when making a policy pitch. On immigration, he instinctively understood if someone was a “type person” (who cared about the *type* of immigrant coming to the country) or a “numbers person” (who cared simply about the sheer *number* of immigrants) and often tailored his message accordingly. “He thinks about the rationale of how someone is approaching something,” she said.

Because Miller's views—especially on immigration—were so well known, he earned Trump's trust despite also, at times, vigorously disagreeing with him. "Miller is 100 percent firm in every conviction and feeling he has, and he just says it the way he believes it, and if it aligns with what the president wants to do, then great," a first-term Trump aide told us. "And if it's nuanced or different, then Miller stakes out his position—he doesn't care if it's different from what other people think or what the president wants—but then once the president makes his position clear, Miller executes on it, whether or not he agrees with it."

Despite his years as Sessions's protégé, Miller quickly distanced himself from his longtime mentor, several people told us, when Sessions, then Trump's first attorney general, recused himself from the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election, angering the president. In fact, the rupture was more acute than was publicly known; Miller was enraged by what he viewed as Sessions's unforgivable betrayal of Trump.

During the first term, Miller aligned himself with Ivanka Trump and her husband, Jared Kushner, once it became clear that they held tremendous sway with the president. The pairing was unusual, given that the president's daughter and son-in-law were seen as misguided "globalists" by much of the far-right base. One person familiar with the dynamic described Miller spending hours with Ivanka Trump on her key initiatives—paid family leave and tax credits for parents. The charitable explanation, this person continued, is that Miller was being generous with his time and expertise; the more cynical one is that Miller understood that [Ivanka Trump](#) was less likely to complain to her father about Miller's hard-line immigration policies if the two had a good relationship.

"He always understood where power lies," Bannon said. "No matter what—he can be coaching a Little League team—Miller can very quickly analyze."

Miller's fealty to his boss was on display right up until the end of Trump's first term. On [January 6, 2021](#), Miller's wife—who had worked as Vice President Mike Pence's communications director—was on maternity leave but still employed by Pence. But when Trump called Miller that morning to discuss adding lines to his speech attacking Pence, Miller—ever the good soldier—did as he was told.

Later that day, angry Trump supporters marched to the Capitol, calling for the vice president to be hanged for treason.

The enemy arrived at the Millers' doorstep on a warm September morning in the form of a retired gender and peace-studies professor in a loose striped dress. Barbara Wien, who had been protesting the family's presence in Arlington, Virginia, pointed her index and middle fingers at her own eyes, then directed those fingers at Katie Miller, who was on the front porch.

Stephen Miller took the gesture at his wife, which was captured on video, as a call to violence—an offense that he uniquely had the power to punish.

The Millers had already felt under siege, facing threats and fearing that the entire family was being surveilled by sophisticated actors. A Rhode Island man had been indicted in August for

publicly threatening to kill Miller and other officials. A law-enforcement official told us that Katie Miller had been surreptitiously photographed in her neighborhood—while going to the gym, and at least once while walking with her kids—and said that there was a “coordinated” and “malicious” effort to, at the very least, intimidate them. Someone had also posted flyers at neighborhood parks where their kids played, revealing their home address and calling him a Nazi. The Millers had stopped allowing their children to play in front of the house or in the backyard.

But they were not going to be intimidated by a 66-year-old activist.

“You want us to live in fear? We will not live in fear,” Miller said days later, in an appearance on Sean Hannity’s Fox News program. He had gone on the program to discuss the federal response to Kirk’s recent assassination, but although he was focused on “domestic terrorists,” he included doxxing on the list of related offenses. For those familiar with the Millers’ personal lives, it sounded less like he was talking about Kirk’s assassin than about Wien, who’d distributed flyers with his address.

“You will live in exile,” he continued, “because the power of law enforcement under President Trump’s leadership will be used to find you, will be used to take away your money, take away your power, and, if you have broken the law, to take away your freedom.”

Miller set about drafting a series of executive orders, later signed by Trump, that directed federal law enforcement to refocus counterterrorism efforts on people with “anti-fascist” ideas, such as “extremism on migration, race, and gender” and “hostility towards those who hold traditional American views on family, religion, and morality.”

This fall, Miller also began describing a central divide in the country, pitting “legitimate state power” against what he termed left-wing “street violence.” His definition of the latter was broad. He accused Democratic politicians who called him or Trump “authoritarian” of “inciting violence.” (Never mind that he had repeatedly called the Biden administration “fascist.”) He placed doxxing—what his family faced—on the continuum that leads to violence. (Also never mind that [Vice President J. D. Vance](#) encouraged calling out those who celebrated Kirk’s murder, including at their place of employment.)

As Miller announced federal policies aimed at combatting the threat, he was also fighting a private battle against the very enemy he described. In the weeks after Wien made her gesture in front of his wife, the Millers decided that they were no longer safe in their six-bedroom, roughly \$3 million Northern Virginia home. They [sought out military housing](#) at a nearby base, arguing to friends and allies inside the administration that their safety depended on it.

But the legitimate powers of the state repeatedly declined to fully cooperate with the Millers’ attempt to turn their own situation into a catalyst for the sort of crackdown they claimed was necessary. The FBI was initially hesitant to take a major role in the investigation of Wien, prompting the Millers to demand its involvement, according to a person briefed on their efforts. A Democratic Virginia state prosecutor became concerned about the federal involvement in a

search warrant on Wien, and sought to narrow its scope. A federal magistrate judge refused to approve federal search warrants, according to a report by [Axios](#).

Katie Miller, who hosts her own podcast, recently appeared on Piers Morgan's YouTube show and accused a progressive guest, Cenk Uyger, of attacking her Jewish children by merely having a difference of opinion with her. She then offered a veiled threat to have Uyger's citizenship revoked. (Uyger is a naturalized citizen; in a text message, he described Katie Miller's threat as "not an attack on me as much as it's an attack on America.") When the investigation against Wien appeared to stall, Miller's longtime ally Jim Jordan, the House Judiciary Committee chair, announced that he had opened an inquiry into the Democratic prosecutor in Virginia who had sought to narrow the search warrant and raised concerns about federal involvement.

"This is so cool," Katie Miller said on social media. "Thank you."

Days later, the prosecutor said that she would not cooperate with Jordan's inquiry, because the investigation was ongoing and Congress lacked the ability to intervene in a state law-enforcement matter. There were still some powers of the state that Miller did not control.