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The 'Deplorables' Called Into Battle Again

As midterms near, President Trump's former political guru Steve Bannon rallies the troops

[Gerald F. Seib](#) Aug. 27, 2018 9:25 [REDACTED] ET

 In 19 months as president, Mr. Trump has hardened his grip on his base of supporters.

By

Gerald F. Seib

Steve Bannon doesn't do subtle. So it's no surprise that there's nothing subtle about the new movie President Trump's onetime political guru has produced to energize the Trump base for this year's midterm elections.

It's entitled "Trump at War," and it's an hour and 15 minutes of pure Trumpian adrenaline. It opens with a series of shots of Trump supporters being attacked by angry opponents, shifts to outtakes of Trump supporters proudly accepting the "deplorables" label bestowed by Hillary Clinton during the 2016 presidential campaign, runs through a long series of angry ripostes at Trump detractors and praise of administration policy moves, and closes with dire warnings of the need to vote for Republicans in 2018 to head off efforts by liberals to impeach the president.

Mr. Bannon previewed the film for some Republican supporters in Dallas recently, but the big premiere is scheduled for Sept. 9—chosen because it is the second anniversary of the speech in which Mrs. Clinton used the "basket of deplorables" phrase. The location? The very club in Manhattan where Mrs. Clinton made the speech, which has been rented for the occasion.

Aside from what they say about Mr. Bannon as a political provocateur, the film and its unveiling also reveal a lot about how people in the president's circle increasingly see this year's midterm election: Its importance is growing every day; Republican success starts with turning out core Trump supporters; and the best way to motivate them is by brandishing the fear of impeachment proceedings if Democrats win control of Congress.

 Steve Bannon believes the specter of impeachment will motivate mainstream Republicans as well as core Trump backers.

Steve Bannon believes the specter of impeachment will motivate mainstream Republicans as well as core Trump backers. Photo: J. Scott Applewhite/Associated Press

“This is all grass roots,” Mr. Bannon says. “It’s 2016 all over again... This is Trump’s first re-election.”

The political calculus behind such thinking is pretty simple: In 19 months as president, [Mr. Trump has hardened his grip on his base of supporters and the GOP overall](#), but has done little to expand that base.

Meanwhile, as the Labor Day kickoff of the fall campaign approaches, Republicans face a Democratic party whose activists appear exceptionally motivated—to campaign, donate money and turn out in November.

Republicans need something to match that fervor. That something is the Trump base—and the best motivating tools are anger and fear.

In this case, that means specifically the fear that Special Counsel Robert Mueller, New York prosecutors and a Democratic Congress will conspire to kick Mr. Trump out of office. That’s why Republicans are talking about the specter of impeachment, not Democrats. Democrats know impeachment talk is a surefire way to motivate the other side.

But there’s a problem in this GOP formula: A motivated Trump base is necessary for Republicans to head off disaster in November, but it’s not sufficient, at least not if Democrats remain as energized as they appear today. The Trump base has to be married with more mainstream Republicans—the kind hardcore activists refer to as RINOs, or “Republicans In Name Only”—and with some independent voters.

Right now, independent voters are hard to read. Their sentiments have been shifting around a lot in Wall Street Journal/NBC News polling in recent months. As a general rule, they have a low regard for Mr. Trump personally and appear weary of the atmosphere of constant crisis around him. But the polling also indicates they increasingly like how Republicans are handling the economy, appreciate the GOP tax cut and think the party is changing the way things work in Washington.

That leaves moderate Republicans, of whom Mr. Bannon says simply: “We need RINOs.”

 Supporters of President Trump cheer before a rally in Lewis Center, Ohio, earlier this month.

Supporters of President Trump cheer before a rally in Lewis Center, Ohio, earlier this month. Photo: Carolyn Kaster/Associated Press

The Bannon calculation is that the specter of impeachment will motivate these soft Republicans as well as core Trump backers. More conventional Republicans may be disdainful of Mr. Trump personally, but they also think the tax cuts, deregulatory policies and judicial nominations they like are imperiled if he goes down.

So, impeachment-scare talk, Mr. Bannon is calculating, is effective for RINOS too, simply for different reasons. For the Trump base, impeachment talk is a source of outrage. Soft Republicans dislike it for less emotional, more practical reasons.

All this means Republican candidates have a dual mission right now: Keep motivating those base Trump voters, who want full-throated defenses of the president and odes to his hard-line immigration policies, while also luring out to the polls mainstream Republicans and independents who dislike the president but like lower taxes and less regulation.

And if political advertising is any indication, candidates appear to be embracing both messages with nearly equal fervor. Data compiled by CMAG Kantar Media on all political ads run so far this year show that a pro-Trump message is the most common element of GOP ads. Next in line? Mentions of the tax cut Republicans pushed through Congress last year.

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