

Bannon tries to make amends as aides defend Trump's fitness

By JILL COLVIN

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Steve Bannon is trying to make amends.

Faced with a growing backlash, President Donald Trump's former chief strategist released a statement Sunday reaffirming his support for the commander in chief and praising Trump's eldest son as "both a patriot and a good man."

Bannon infuriated Trump with comments to author Michael Wolff describing a June 2016 meeting at Trump Tower in New York between Donald Trump Jr., Trump campaign aides and a Russian lawyer as "treasonous" and "unpatriotic."

But Bannon said Sunday his description was aimed at former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort, who also attended the meeting, and not Trump's son.

"I regret that my delay in responding to the inaccurate reporting regarding Don Jr has diverted attention from the president's historical accomplishments in the first year of his presidency," Bannon said in the statement, first obtained by the news site Axios. Bannon said his support for Trump and his agenda was "unwavering."

Hours before the statement came out, administration officials used appearances on the Sunday news shows to rally behind Trump and try to undermine Wolff's "Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House," which portrays the 45th president as a leader

who doesn't understand the weight of his office and whose competence is questioned by aides.

Chief policy adviser Stephen Miller, in a combative appearance on CNN, described the book as "nothing but a pile of trash through and through."

He also criticized Bannon, who is quoted at length by Wolff, saying it was "tragic and unfortunate" that Bannon "would make these grotesque comments so out of touch with reality and obviously so vindictive."

CIA Director Mike Pompeo said Trump was "completely fit" to lead the country, pausing before answering because, he said on "Fox News Sunday," it was such "a ludicrous question."

"These are from people who just have not accepted the fact that President Trump is the United States president and I'm sorry for them in that," said Pompeo, who gives Trump his regular intelligence briefings.

Nikki Haley, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, said that she is at the White House once a week, and "no one questions the stability of the president."

"I'm always amazed at the lengths people will go to, to lie for money and for power. This is like taking it to a whole new low," she told ABC's "This Week."

To Miller, "the portrayal of the president in the book is so contrary to reality, to the experience of those who work with him."

Miller's interview on CNN's "State of the Union" quickly grew heated, with Miller criticizing CNN's coverage and moderator Jake Tapper pressing Miller to answer his questions and accusing him of speaking to only one viewer: Trump.

Tapper abruptly ended the interview, saying: "I think I've wasted enough of my viewers' time."

Soon after, Trump tweeted: "Jake Tapper of Fake News CNN just got destroyed in his interview with Stephen Miller of the Trump Administration. Watch the hatred and unfairness of this CNN flunky!"

Trump took to Twitter on Saturday to defend his fitness for office, insisting he is "like, really smart" and, indeed, a "very stable genius." He pressed the case again on Sunday as he prepared to depart Camp David for the White House.

"I've had to put up with the Fake News from the first day I announced that I would be running for President. Now I have to put up with a Fake Book, written by a totally discredited author," he tweeted.

Wolff's book draws a derogatory portrait of Trump as an undisciplined man-child who didn't actually want to win the White House and who spends his evenings eating cheeseburgers in bed, watching television and talking on the telephone to old friends.

The book also quotes Bannon and other prominent advisers as questioning the president's competence.

On Sunday, two days after the book's release, WikiLeaks tweeted a link to an electronic image of the text. Posting the text of a book without permission would violate copyright restrictions and potentially damage sales. Yet, hours after WikiLeaks tweeted the link, "Fire and Fury" remained No. 1 on Amazon's lists of hardcover and ebook bestsellers.

Chatter about Trump's mental fitness for office has intensified in recent months on cable news shows and among Democrats in Congress.

White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders this past week called such suggestions "disgraceful and laughable."

"If he was unfit, he probably wouldn't be sitting there and wouldn't have defeated the most qualified group of candidates the Republican Party has ever seen," she said, calling him "an incredibly strong and good leader."

Trump and some aides have attacked Wolff's credibility, pointing to the fact that the book includes a number of factual errors and denying that the author had as much access as he claimed.

"He said he interviewed me for three hours in the White House. It didn't exist, OK? It's in his imagination," Trump said Saturday.

Wolff told NBC on Sunday that "I truly do not want to say the president is a liar," but that he had indeed spoken with Trump for about three hours during and since the campaign.

Trump has repeatedly invoked Ronald Reagan, tweeting Sunday that the former president "had the same problem and handled it well. So will I!"

Reagan died in 2004, at age 93, from pneumonia complicated by the Alzheimer's disease that had progressively clouded his mind. At times when he was president, Reagan seemed forgetful and would lose his train of thought while talking.

Doctors, however, said Alzheimer's was not to blame, noting the disease was diagnosed years after he left office. Reagan announced his diagnosis in a letter to the American people in 1994, more than five years after leaving the White House.

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Associated Press writer Hope Yen contributed to this report. Follow Colvin on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/colvinj>