Trump's presidency promised to be momentous and one year on, he has delivered, causing upheaval at home and putting the rest of the world on edge. Deborah Snow reports...
Fire, fury & fallout

As the Trump presidency approaches its 12-month anniversary, Deborah Snow reports on the ongoing tensions among the top advisers in defence and foreign affairs, and the instability this has created.

The first year of the Trump presidency is littered with political corpses. But no demise has been more emblematic – poetic, even – than the downfall of Donald Trump's onetime svengali and former chief strategist, Steve Bannon.

Bannon was toppled on Tuesday from his last position of influence, as chair of far-Right media outfit Breitbart News. The move came in apparent retaliation for comments he made about the President's son, Donald jnr, held with a Russian lawyer who offered to dish dirt on Hillary Clinton during the presidential campaign. Ignoring Bannon's attempt to make amends this week, Trump swiped back, branding him "Sloppy Steve" and saying he'd "lost his mind" after being ousted from the White House last August (when he was fired by incoming chief of staff, John Kelly). The former whisper-in-chief now looks a distinctly lonely figure. It's part of a familiar pattern: Trump and his family walk away unscathed from the ashes as others around them burn.

Ironically, Bannon prefigured his own fate in an earlier interview with Wolff in November 2016, soon after Trump won the election. "I am Thomas Cromwell in the court of the Tudors", he told Wolff then, invoking parallels with the legendary British courtier who helped Henry VIII defy Rome, ditch the old rules and draw up new ones (conveniently including the right to take more wives). Bannon, it appears, overlooked the end of that tale: Cromwell fell out of favour with the king and lost his head.

Much as some media critics are now accusing Wolff (whose methods are faster and looser than those of most professional journalists) of varnishing his tale, the long list of casualties from the first year of the Trump presidency tells its own story, as does the constant stream of unsettling and at times near-delirious tweets from the presidential phone.

And the infighting apparently...
continues. Several well-sourced articles from the quality US press in recent weeks reflect ongoing tensions among Trump’s top advisers in the defence and foreign affairs sphere. Trump’s National Security adviser, the hawkish HR McMaster, seems often pitted against the more cautious duo of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis. Trump contributes to the confusion by playing the camps off each other, often out of sheer inattention and the ingrained habit of trusting his own gut above all else, or sheer inattention and the ingrained habit of trusting his own gut above all else, or leaving the last person he spoke to with the impression that he agrees with them, only to change his mind with the next conversation.

Writing in Politico magazine, respected international affairs columnist Susan B Glasser reports a senior Republican source telling her: “It’s a snake pit. There are personality tensions between the President and Tillerson, between the President and McMaster, between McMaster and Tillerson. It’s broken and its going to have to be fixed one way or another [because] it can’t go on like this.”

Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, whom the President appointed his Middle East peace envoy prior to his inauguration, is also in the mix. According to Glasser, Mattis and Tillerson “begged” Trump not to overturn decades of policy by unilaterally recognising Jerusalem as Israel’s capital – an incendiary move the President made last December 6, heavily encouraged by Kushner.

In Australia, as with other US allies, analysts are watching on anxiously. There are three issues that most concern Canberra, according to Professor Simon Jackman, head of Sydney University’s United States Studies Centre: the still-looming threat of a trade feud with China, the war of words with North Korea, and the twists and turns that may yet come out of special counsel Robert Mueller’s probe into Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential campaign.

So far Mueller’s team is not leaking. But Jackman says what emerges from that inquiry through the course of this year could still “literally start to shake the future course of the presidency, up to and including how long Trump remains president”.

Jackman, who previously held a long tenure at Stanford University, believes the high turnover inside the White House in Trump’s first year was predictable, given the sheer inexperience of the Trump team, and its unpreparedness for winning (something that emerges strongly from the Wolff book).

“Don’t forget that the last person to become president of the United States [without previously having held the office] was Dwight Eisenhower, and his previous job was commander of all allied forces in Europe in World War Two,” Jackman points out. “Eisenhower knew what organisation and discipline and a chain of command looked like. Trump comes from a very different background. Not having any idea of how Washington works, irrespective of his personal characteristics – the lack of attention to detail, lack of intellectual curiosity, his work ethic – that lack of experience was a huge handicap and sets the stage for so much of what we have observed in the last 12 months.”

But the last year has also shown that “American institutions are pretty resilient”, Jackman adds. “The courts are rebuffing Trump frequently,” as they’ve done on his several attempts to implement tough travel bans on visitors from Muslim majority countries.

Meanwhile, the world is also nervously waiting to see if Trump’s belligerent impulses towards North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un (or “rocket man”, as Trump dubs him) can be reined in long enough for tougher sanctions to bite. The Wall Street Journal reported this week that US officials were “quietly debating” whether a limited military strike against North Korea was possible without inviting massive retaliation – a prospect that horrifies most of the rest of the world.

Australia’s former Ambassador to Washington, Kim Beazley, told Fairfax recently that Trump “really is prepared to go to war” and that Mattis and Tillerson were doing all they can to play for time. This week’s talks between North and South Korea are a breathing space, but no one’s sure for how long. There is apprehension too around Trump’s desire to walk away from the Obama-era nuclear containment deal with Iran, something, again, that American allies do not want to see. “Wars are like fish traps,” says Professor Michael Wesley, an eminent foreign policy analyst at the Australian National University. “They are very easy to get into but hard to get out of. When you have the military size and capability of the United States, you only tend to think about the start of the war rather than the end.”

Wesley predicts the remainder of the Trump presidency is “going to be a very tense period and the likelihood of a significant war happening with the US involved is a pretty serious one … war against North Korea or Iran would be bigger than Iraq.” He does, however, draw consolation from the fact that the bluster has been worse than reality during the first 12 months of Trump. “Will the adults keep Trump on the straight and narrow? We will have to wait and see on a case-by-case basis”, Wesley says. “It appears that on some issues he does listen, and on others he does not, but it’s very hard to pick exactly which ones he listens on … I’m hoping it is when significant [numbers of] lives are at stake.”

Wesley judges the first year to have “not been as bad as people were thinking it might be, particularly on the China front. There is enormous variation between what he says he will do on China and what he has actually done.” But Jackman says the tom-toms in Washington are beating a message that Trump could finally move to take trade action against China in the next month or two – a scenario that will worry the Turnbull government.

The Brookings Institution’s Thomas Wright says many analysts remain stumped by the gap between the formal National Security Strategy document launched by Trump on December 18, and the launch speech given by the President. Trump’s speech was “inward looking and isolationist” and “ignored geopolitics entirely”, paying only lip service to the threat from Moscow, Wright wrote recently. “The main lesson of the launch of the National Security Strategy is that US foreign policy is still in crisis and will remain so for the duration of the Trump presidency.”
The possibility of collusion being discovered between the Kremlin and Trump’s campaign continues to hang like an evil-smelling miasma over the presidency.

Trump’s denials are fierce and frequent: it’s all in the fevered collective mind of the mainstream “fake news” media, he insists. But the Russia question has been a major factor in the body count during the first year of his administration, starting early with General Mike Flynn.

Flynn was Trump’s first pick as national security adviser but was forced to resign in mid-February, just 24 days into the job, following revelations about his phone contacts with Russian ambassador Sergei Kislyak. The following month then FBI director James Comey confirmed the agency was investigating possible interference by Moscow in the presidential election, including “the nature of any links between individuals associated with the Trump campaign and the Russian government”.

Trump’s Attorney-General Jeff Sessions was forced to “recuse” himself from the investigation because of his own meetings with Ambassador Kislyak. By April, Steve Bannon had been removed from the National Security Council (an appointment which had outraged the intelligence community and State Department professionals) and by May 9, Trump had fired Comey too.

Comey bluntly told the Senate Intelligence Committee in June that “I know I was fired because of something about the way I was conducting the Russian investigation.” And if Trump thought firing Comey would take the pressure off, he reckoned without the Deputy Attorney-General, Rod Rosenstein, who in late May appointed former FBI director Robert Mueller as special counsel to take over the Russia campaign probe.

In July came the news that Don Jnr, Kushner and Trump’s former campaign chairman Paul Manafort had met the Russian lawyer trying to peddle dirt on chairman Paul Manafort had met the Russian lawyer trying to peddle dirt on Reince Priebus.

By August, Bannon had gone, elbowed out by Kelly (reflecting Trump’s resentment at Bannon’s growing profile as the President’s puppet master). Despite his departure from White House staff, Trump and Bannon are said to have remained on good terms until this week’s catclysm. By October, Paul Manafort had been indicted as a result of Mueller’s investigation, and in December Flynn pleaded guilty to making false statements to the FBI.

The players in the Russian drama make their dizzying exits and entrances, and so far there is no sign of the saga coming to an end.

Will Bannon rise again? When Trump delivered his inauguration speech a year ago on January 20, 2017, it was a dark, Bannon-inspired vision, invoking images of “American carnage” at home, and a weakened United States abroad. Michael Wesley says “in a lot of ways Bannon did craft a lot of the lines that got Trump to the White House, and there may be a stage where Trump comes to rely on him again.”

But Simon Jackman doubts there will be a Bannon renaissance. “The more I read of the Wolff book, the picture of Bannon is of a guy who came from obscurity, had a brief moment of fame and now seems headed back to obscurity.”

Bannon never had a master plan and Trump does not have one now, Jackman believes.

“Trump is an improviser, he has been trading on high tempo chaos as media strategy for decades, keeping people off balance … there is a ton of improvisation and shooting from the hip, there are some big-ticket items he cares about on policy but as for some semblance of strategy for realising those goals, and the order in which he gets to them? I don’t think there is one.”

**THE STORY SO FAR…**

**2017 January**
- Trump inaugurated.
- Withdraws US from the

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**Trans-Pacific Partnership.**
- Signs executive order banning all entry of foreign nationals from seven Muslim-majority countries. Ban blocked by Federal Court.

**February**
- Discusses refugee resettlement deal during a tense phone call with Malcolm Turnbull.
- National security adviser Michael Flynn resigns after it is revealed he lied to government officials about contacts with the Russian ambassador to the US.
- Attorney-General Jeff Sessions recuses himself from investigating links between Trump’s campaign and the Kremlin after it’s confirmed he met twice with Russia’s Ambassador to the US in 2016.

**March**
- Trump accuses former president Obama of having tapped his phones during the campaign.
- Issues a new “Muslim ban” executive order covering six countries. Iraq removed from the list of proscribed nations.
- Republicans in House of Representatives reveal proposal to replace Obamacare.

**April**
- Adviser Steve Bannon is removed from his position on the National Security Council.
- Launches military strikes on the Shayrat Airbase in Homs, Syria, in retaliation for the April 4 chemical weapons attack.
- Pence meets Turnbull and confirms US will honour refugee deal with Australia that Trump previously called “dumb”.
- Outlines tax package (a single-page statement with bullet points) proposing reductions in income tax rates for individuals and businesses.

**May**
- Obamacare repeal bill passes

- House. Moves to Senate.
- Fires FBI Director James Comey.
- Deputy Attorney General Robert Mueller appointed special counsel to investigate possible links between the Trump campaign and Russia.

**June**
- Announces US will pull out of Paris climate deal.
Sean Spicer resigns as White House press secretary. Sarah Huckabee Sanders named as replacement.

July
- Senate plan to repeal and replace Obamacare fails to get the required votes.
- Trump announces a ban on transgender people serving in the US military in any capacity.
- Fires Reince Priebus as the White House chief of staff.
- Fires Anthony Scaramucci as White House communications director.

August
- Warns North Korea that it will be met with “fire and fury” if it threatens the US.
- Condemns the hatred “on many sides” after a violent rally in Charlottesville. Failure to condemn white supremacists leads to further protests.
- Chief strategist Steve Bannon resigns.

September
- Scraps program that protects immigrants brought illegally to the US as children from deportation.
- Slams protesting NFL players who kneel during national anthem.

October
- Announces plan to decertify the Iran nuclear deal reached by his predecessor.
- Is criticised after telling widow of killed US soldier David Johnson that “he knew what he signed up for.”
- Former Trump aides Paul Manafort and Rick Gates indicted on 12 charges by special counsel Robert Mueller.

November
- US imposes more sanctions on North Korea after designating it a state sponsor of terrorism.

December
- Former national security adviser Michael Flynn pleads guilty to the charge of making false statements to the FBI about

‘Trump has been trading on high tempo chaos as a media strategy for decades.’
Simon Jackman, director of US Studies Centre.
From far left: Donald Trump during a meeting with lawmakers on immigration policy on Tuesday; daughter Ivanka with husband Jared Kushner; former national security adviser Michael Flynn leaving federal court on December 1 after pleading guilty to making false statements to the FBI; and former presidential strategist and Breitbart founder Steve Bannon.

Photos: AP