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EPA's Pruitt basks in Trump glow after Paris pullout

By Alex Guillén

06/02/2017 06:45 PM EDT

Scott Pruitt's victory in vanquishing the Paris climate agreement has given him a status few of his predecessors enjoyed — an EPA chief who is clearly his administration's public face in driving environmental policy.

Pruitt's move into the spotlight comes after weeks of White House infighting over whether to reject the global climate pact, and shows that though the the former Oklahoma attorney general isn't a member of Trump's inner circle, he's got the president's ear on energy and environmental issues.

Typically, the head of the Environmental Protection Agency toils away crafting air and water regulations and defending the administration's policies in Congress, while more prominent officials lead the charge on the grand policy vision. Those more high-profile roles went to people like John Kerry, who served as a kind of global climate ambassador when he was Barack Obama's secretary of State, or former Vice Presidents Dick Cheney and Al Gore.

But when President Donald Trump announced the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris agreement Thursday, Pruitt was the one joining him at the podium in the Rose Garden — while Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who'd wanted to stick with the deal, was nowhere to be seen. Pruitt repeated his victory lap at Friday's White House press briefing, beaming as he jostled with reporters over whether he or Trump believes that climate change is real.

Pruitt's prominence is a byproduct of how Trump views the Paris deal, former Obama climate negotiator Jonathan Pershing said Friday — through the lens of the U.S. economy, not as a worldwide fight against a common threat.

"It was a domestic agenda and not an international agenda that was dictating the policy" this week, Pershing said. "That's consistent with the way [Trump] characterized it as protecting American jobs. It was not characterized in the terms of American security being at risk because of climate change."

At Friday's press briefing, Pruitt praised Trump once again for the Paris decision, saying he had the courage to withdraw from a pact that would have benefited other countries as the expense of the U.S. economy.

"We owe no apologies to other nations for our environmental stewardship," said Pruitt, who had celebrated his win Thursday night with a dinner with staffers at the French-themed D.C. bistro Le Diplomate.

Tillerson, meanwhile, declined to endorse Trump's move at a separate press appearance Friday, calling it "a policy decision."

Despite months of behind-the-scenes debating over Paris that pitted Pruitt and Trump adviser Steve Bannon against Tillerson, Ivanka Trump and top economic adviser Gary Cohn, Pruitt sought to downplay his own influence over the president, saying he won on the merits.

In an appearance on Fox News Thursday evening, Pruitt dismissed the idea there had been an epic struggle as "simply legend."

"What happened in this process is what happens with every decision the president makes," Pruitt said. "He had advisers around him informing, equipping, helping him make a decision. The debate was good and strong and meaningful amongst all voices and the president made an informed decision."

But Pruitt has emerged as a power player inside the administration who appears to have the confidence of the president.

"It's all eyes on Pruitt because there's a lot of big issues regarding how the Trump administration addresses climate change," said Nick Loris, an economist at the conservative Heritage Foundation.

Pruitt's prominence is at least partly due to the fact that climate change isn't a top issue in the administration.

"There's just fewer cooks in the kitchen because addressing climate change is clearly not a priority for Trump," Loris said. And given how he fought against the Obama climate agenda while serving as Oklahoma's attorney general, "I'm not surprised he's spreading his wings to the international stage," he added.

Pruitt has already proven himself a successful operator in carrying out Trump's deregulation agenda.

He has had significant early success in pausing several key Obama-era regulations that were still in court, including a sweeping carbon regulation for power plants, ozone pollution limits and the Waters of the U.S. rule that defines which wetlands, streams and rivers fall under federal rules. The repeal process for those rules could take years, but Pruitt is well positioned to succeed in the task.

And in the meantime, Pruitt has canceled an EPA information request that would have set the stage for methane pollution limits for oil and gas wells, re-opened emissions standards for future vehicles and taken steps to modify other Obama-era regulations.

With his Paris win, Pruitt is positioning himself as the administration's leading voice on the international issues surrounding climate change.

On Fox News, Pruitt downplayed the potential diplomatic harm of the Paris decision, noting that the U.S. pulled out of the Kyoto Protocol in 2001 but weathered criticisms over that as well.

"If you go back and read, in March and April of 2001, the criticisms that was being led against President Bush, you can read the comments from the German chancellor, they're almost identical to the ones today."

However, Bush administration officials at the time found themselves surprised by other nations' strong reactions.

Then-Secretary of State Colin Powell said in 2002 that the "blowback" from Europe "was a sobering experience that everything the American president does has international repercussions." And Condoleezza Rice, at the time George W. Bush's national security adviser, wrote in a 2011 memoir that the Kyoto withdrawal was "a self-inflicted wound that could have been avoided."

Pruitt may soon find out just how angry his international counterparts are.

He will head to Italy on June 11 and 12 for an environmental ministerial meeting connected to the G-7 summit Trump recently attended. Italy, along with Germany and France, said in a statement Thursday that there is no re-negotiating the Paris agreement, despite what Trump promised Thursday.

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