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EXCLUSIVE POLICY

# How Corey Lewandowski Became Kristi Noem's Gatekeeper at DHS

Trump's former campaign chief is working as her de facto chief of staff despite White House concerns about their relationship

By [Tarini Parti](#) [Follow](#), [Michelle Hackman](#) [Follow](#), [Josh Dawsey](#) [Follow](#) and [Jack Gillum](#) [Follow](#)

April 17, 2025 9:09 pm ET



Corey Lewandowski arriving for the White House's 'Liberation Day' tariff announcement early this month. ANDREW HARNIK/GETTY IMAGES

WASHINGTON—Last month, Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem toured a new high-tech hub for monitoring immigrants with executives from the tech company [Palantir](#). The walk-through was orchestrated by a well-placed booster: Corey Lewandowski, President Trump's early campaign manager who is now Noem's close adviser.

An assistant working on behalf of Lewandowski had sought a "significant block of time" for the tour that included Palantir's chief technology officer, according to emails reviewed by The Wall Street Journal. In other meetings, Lewandowski told

officials at the Department of Homeland Security to give the firm additional work, according to people familiar with the matter.

Weeks after the tour, the company co-founded by Peter Thiel would get an additional \$29.9 million from the agency under an existing contract—specifically to deploy its powerful software for immigration “targeting and enforcement” and “self-deportation tracking,” records show.

The episode highlighted Lewandowski’s unusual and outsize role at DHS, where administration officials, agency staff and Trump allies say he has used his close relationship with Noem to wield power—though he has no formal role at the agency. He has emerged as a gatekeeper for Noem, counseling her during her travels to meet with world leaders, weighing in on personnel decisions and advising on DHS contracts.

Lewandowski is serving as a special government employee, a status under federal ethics laws that permits private-sector employees to work inside the government without having to relinquish their outside salaries or investments. He is often the only person who accompanies her to meetings, according to people familiar with the department.

For the Palantir tour, the assistant, who said he was working with Lewandowski, sent emails scheduling the visit—including who would come from the company, when they would arrive and how much time they would need.



Lewandowski, second from left, visited Colombia in March with Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem, at the head of the table. ALEX BRANDON/AP

Lewandowski said in an interview that he didn't play any role in Palantir's getting the contract, adding that he happened to be at the building when the tour occurred. When asked about the emails discussing the tour, he said anyone at the department could send emails requesting meetings on his behalf.

"It's astonishing that you're writing a story about a volunteer," Lewandowski said.

A spokesperson for DHS said that Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency handles contracts and that Lewandowski executed the tour on its behalf. The spokesperson also said he had "nothing to do" with the contracts. Palantir declined to comment.

Though Lewandowski had initially wanted to serve as Noem's chief of staff, President Trump and his top advisers were uncomfortable with Lewandowski in that role, owing to tabloid reports of a romantic relationship between Lewandowski and Noem over the years, according to people familiar with the president's thinking.

Lewandowski and Noem, who are both married, have publicly denied the reports of the affair. Trump and Lewandowski settled on the special government employee job, according to people familiar with the discussions. Lewandowski denied he was having an affair with Noem, and the spokesperson for DHS said the department "doesn't waste time with salacious, baseless gossip."

Nearly three months into the administration, Noem's chief of staff role remains vacant, and Lewandowski has established himself as a constant presence by the secretary's side.

Lewandowski said he decided to work for the department, which was created in the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks, as the husband of a 9/11 widow. He also said he has been fully briefed by government ethics attorneys on what he is allowed to do in the position.

The spokesperson for DHS added: "As the husband of a 9/11 widow, the mission of DHS and securing the homeland is of utmost importance to Mr. Lewandowski."

### **'Shadow secretary'**

Lewandowski has traveled to El Salvador, Mexico and Colombia with Noem and advised her in high-level policy and personnel meetings, becoming so vital at DHS that some employees refer to him as the de facto chief of staff or even the "shadow

secretary.” Homeland Security officials and lobbyists say meetings with Noem are routed through Lewandowski.

During the same tour with Palantir, an incensed Lewandowski also pushed to fire the immigration official leading the tour, because that official had briefly turned his back on Noem while answering a question from another person in the group, according to people familiar with the incident. Lewandowski argued it was grounds for dismissal. Days later, the official was demoted to a less-prominent position, the people said.

Lewandowski and a spokesperson for DHS denied that the incident occurred.

Noem has cultivated a public-facing approach to her job, donning Immigration and Customs Enforcement uniforms, posing in the cockpit of a Coast Guard plane and allotting \$200 million to air an advertising campaign. The ads feature Noem as she warns immigrants in the country illegally to self-deport. But her approach is rankling some White House officials, who have sent around clips of [Noem’s TV hits](#) mockingly.

Some Trump advisers have also grown concerned about Lewandowski’s outside role at DHS, including his involvement in contracting, given his continuing business interests in the private sector, people familiar with their thinking said. White House officials are concerned because they don’t know what private interests he might be representing—his special government employee status means he doesn’t have to disclose that publicly—or who is checking his power, given his close relationship with Noem.

The White House didn’t respond to requests for comment.

Lewandowski told the Journal he doesn’t engage in private businesses related to the department. He declined to disclose if he had private clients.

Federal records show DHS fast-tracked the \$200 million ad contract in part to People Who Think LLC. The firm is owned by Jay Connaughton, a Louisiana-based political consultant who worked with Lewandowski on Louisiana Gov. Jeff Landry’s 2023 campaign.

The contract didn’t follow an open and competitive process, which the department justified in a publicly available notice by citing Trump’s national emergency at the border. “To reduce any delays to the rapid release of these critical communications, a limiting competition is needed,” the notice said.

Connaughton didn’t respond to requests for comment.

The company hadn't previously received any government contracts, according to public records.

The name of another firm that was listed in the government's notice was redacted, which has prompted skepticism among department employees about the need for secrecy, given that the contract is for an ad campaign and isn't related to national security.

Lewandowski and the DHS spokesperson said Lewandowski wasn't involved in the ad contract. He also said he didn't think the other firm's name should be redacted.

The ads, which [started airing in February](#), show Noem as she thanks Trump for his border policies. "President Trump has a clear message: If you are here illegally, we will find you and deport you," Noem says in the ad, in English. "You will never return."



Lewandowski, right, at the airport in Green Bay, Wis., during the final weeks of the 2024 presidential campaign. CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY IMAGES

## Personal ties

Lewandowski began advising Noem after they both attended a deep-sea fishing trip organized by the late billionaire and GOP donor Foster Friess in 2019. Noem brought Lewandowski on as a political adviser but briefly cut ties with him in 2021, when he was accused of sexual misconduct. Lewandowski, who was charged with misdemeanor battery, made a deal with Las Vegas prosecutors under which he didn't have to admit guilt, his lawyers said at the time.

Lewandowski helped Noem build a national profile and brought her into Trump's orbit, introducing her to major donors and politicians at events across the country. In

2021, he introduced her as a “rising star of the Republican Party” to a group assembled at the Ritz Carlton in Amelia Island, Fla., for the GOP’s annual meeting.

Both Noem and Lewandowski tried to stay close to Trump throughout the 2024 campaign, and Trump campaign aides say Noem often delivered messages to Trump that were similar to what Lewandowski was saying behind the scenes.

Lewandowski also played a role in the secretary’s getting the job, according to people familiar with the matter. After failing to persuade Trump and his advisers to select Noem as his running mate, Lewandowski pushed for Noem to get the [Homeland Security post](#), according to people familiar with the matter, a role viewed as central to Trump’s agenda and a launchpad for a potential 2028 presidential bid. As South Dakota governor, Noem had limited experience with immigration issues.

When Trump announced Noem as his pick, he surprised some of his top advisers who thought the choice was abrupt, those people said.

Lewandowski also denied having a role in Noem’s selection. “The president makes his own decisions,” he said.

The day after Trump won a second term, Lewandowski and Noem were spotted celebrating poolside in West Palm Beach, Fla. Less than a week later, she was picked for the job.

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