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How Corey Lewandowski's power at the Department of Homeland Security keeps growing

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Corey Lewandowski speaks during the Conservative Political Action Conference at the Exhibition and Congress Centre of the Podkarpackie Voivodeship near Rzeszow-Jasionka airport, Poland, on May 27. *(Wojtek Radwanski/AFP/Getty Images)*

As Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem jetted across South America last week, there was one familiar face from President Donald Trump's orbit frequently at her side: Corey Lewandowski.

Lewandowski has become a fixture at the Department of Homeland Security, serving as Noem's chief adviser. But on paper, he was originally tapped to serve as a special government employee, a unique role meant to span a limited number of days. He's not included on the department's **leadership list**, but in **other DHS materials** he's been described as chief adviser to the secretary.

A senior Homeland Security official, speaking on behalf of the department in response to questions from CNN, said Lewandowski remains a special government employee — **a status** that typically lasts up to 130 days in a yearlong period — and his time “is kept by a career DHS employee who submits the paperwork on a bi-weekly basis.” He isn’t paid by DHS and doesn’t receive federal government benefits, the official said.

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Lewandowski — who has previously worked as **a lobbyist, strategic adviser** and campaign operative — has filed a financial disclosure, the DHS official said. CNN has asked for a copy of the disclosure form.

Last week, Lewandowski was pictured at Noem’s side during meetings in Argentina, the first stop of the secretary’s South America swing, and later participated in a bilateral meeting with Chilean and Ecuadorian officials, along with senior Homeland Security officials.

It’s indicative of the enormous power Lewandowski has amassed during his time at DHS.



US Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem, second from right, meets with Chilean Minister of Public Security Luis Cordero, left, at the Security Ministry on July 30, in Santiago, Chile. Corey Lewandowski is seen next to Noem. *(Alex Brandon/Pool/Getty Images)*

Lewandowski has directed the firings of personnel, requested employees be put on administrative leave, called agency leaders “to hold them accountable,” and in at least one instance, signed off on billions of dollars in **FEMA grant funding**, according to multiple sources and documents viewed by CNN.

“He’s the de facto chief of staff in the department. Everyone is terrified of him because he has almost singular authority to fire people,” a source familiar with the dynamic told CNN. Homeland Security officials told CNN Lewandowski is viewed as Noem’s gatekeeper. Asked about his role, the senior DHS official described him as an adviser.

Long history with Trump

Lewandowski joined the department on a temporary basis in mid-February after floating in and out of Trump's world over several years.

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He served as Trump's campaign manager from June 2015 until he was fired a year later, amid a series of negative stories and internal tensions with other advisers and some of Trump's children.

Lewandowski was formally brought on to staff Trump's 2024 campaign just months before Election Day, with the candidate telling his former campaign manager he missed the old days of his first run for the White House.



Donald Trump talks with Corey Lewandowski at an airport in Asheboro, North Carolina, on August 21, 2024. *(Doug Mills/The New York Times/Redux)*

But his addition — which came in the midst of a tumultuous time for Trump's political operation as it sought to adapt to their new opponent, then-Vice President Kamala Harris — quickly led to internal drama.

Trump's co-campaign managers at the time, Susie Wiles and Chris LaCivita, were irked by Lewandowski's efforts to constantly assert himself in high-level decisions, often taking his opinions directly to Trump, sources familiar with the discussions told CNN at the time. His actions, they felt, threatened to subvert a carefully crafted dynamic that Wiles and LaCivita cultivated for the previous two years.

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Those clashes quickly spread throughout much of the senior campaign team, the sources said, many of whom continued working for Trump throughout his presidential transition and accompanied him to the White House.

Lewandowski was sidelined before the campaign ended, and he didn't score a top position in the West Wing. Many people considered core members of Trump's inner circle, who are not only fiercely loyal to Trump but also to Wiles and each other, continue to view Lewandowski with a dose of skepticism.

In a statement, White House spokesperson Abigail Jackson called Lewandowski "one of President Trump's longest and most trusted advisers."

"The tremendous results coming from the Department of Homeland Security – a historically secure border, safer American communities, and successful deportations of criminal illegal aliens – speak for themselves," Jackson said.

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Lewandowski also previously advised Noem when she was South Dakota governor. But both Noem and a pro-Trump super PAC cut ties with him in 2021 following allegations that he made unwanted sexual advances toward a GOP donor, accusations Lewandowski denied. Lewandowski later made a deal with Las Vegas prosecutors to resolve a misdemeanor battery charge stemming from the allegations.

Lewandowski eventually returned to Noem's orbit and is now often spotted at the secretary's side as she mounts an aggressive public relations strategy to advance Trump's immigration agenda.

"Everything he's doing is to increase (Noem's) profile," a DHS official said, referring to Lewandowski.

The Trump administration has leaned heavily on staunch allies serving in temporary roles — and extended immense authority to those people. Elon Musk, who similarly held special government employee status until departing the administration, attempted to reshape the federal government by slashing the workforce and cutting billions in funding.

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It's not unusual for secretaries to lean on people outside government for advice or for senior Homeland Security officials to be intimately involved in day-to-day

business. But Lewandowski appears to be somewhere in between, raising questions internally, primarily: How long can he continue to call the shots in a position meant to be temporary?

Special government employees are subject to less stringent ethics requirements and as a result, are generally allowed to serve 130 days in a yearlong period, which don't have to be consecutive. But if their time is expected to span longer and they're taking on more responsibilities, then they would face higher requirements, according to experts. Federal agencies typically estimate how long an SGE will stay on board.

“Previously, SGEs primarily served in advisory and technical positions that required expertise, and their outside conflicts of interest were less of a concern because they weren't involved in funding and personnel decisions in the same way as a senior career employee,” said Cristin Dorgelo, a former Office of Management and Budget official during the Biden administration. “The management of core government functions has not been something that SGEs have commonly filled roles around.”

Lewandowski's straddling of senior government functions at DHS and service as a special government employee is another example of uncharted territory.

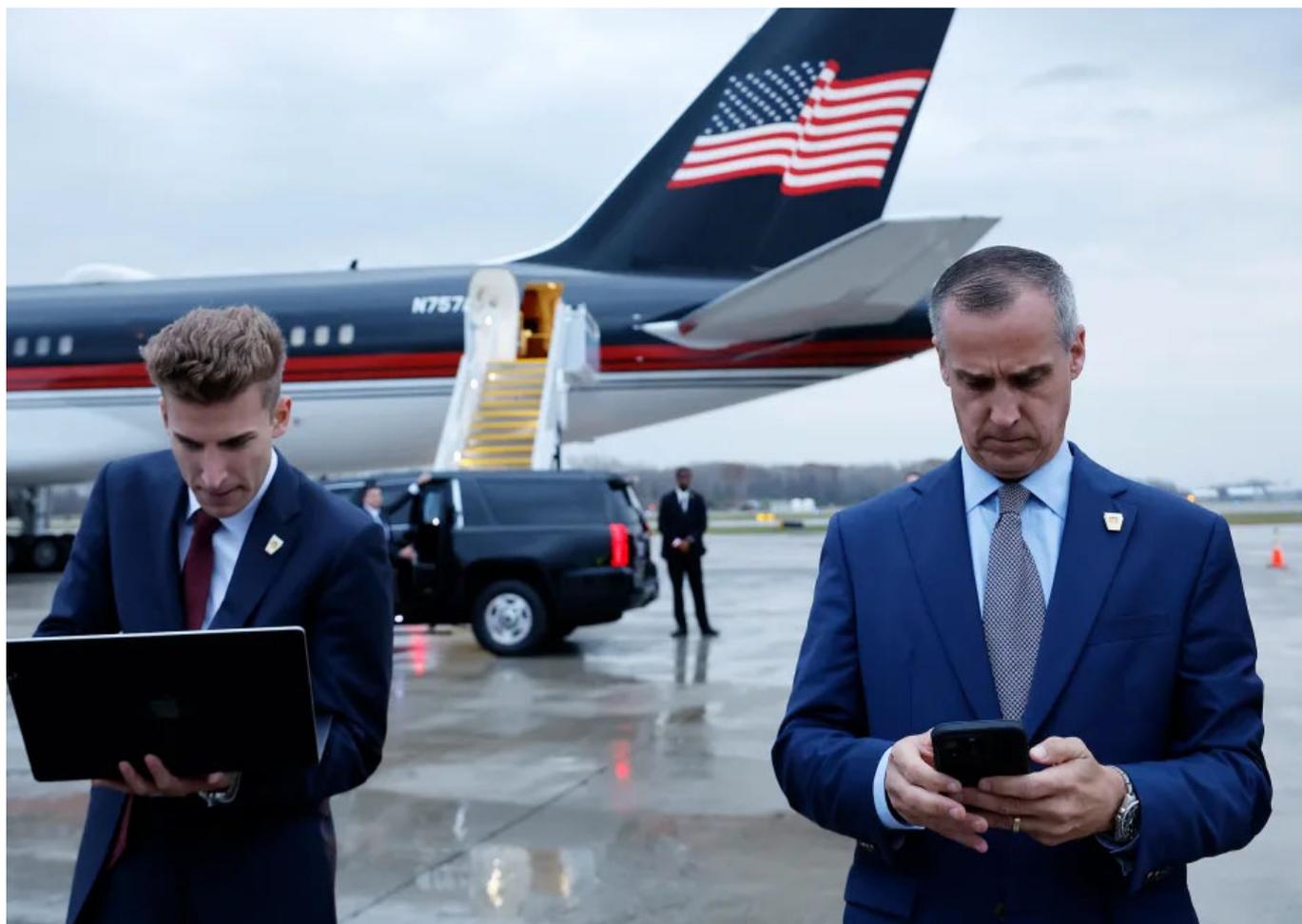
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“This is not what this authority was intended for,” said Sam Berger, a former OMB official and senior fellow at the left-leaning Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

A tight grip on FEMA

Lewandowski's growing influence over DHS is strikingly evident in his relentless push to help the Trump administration dismantle the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

On the campaign trail, Trump railed against FEMA for its response to Hurricane Helene, branding it partisan and ineffective – a narrative that grew into calls to eliminate the agency altogether. From the early days of the Trump administration, Lewandowski made his intentions clear: he would be the president's hatchet man, determined to take FEMA apart — no matter who stood in his way.



Corey Lewandowski outside Trump Force One as Trump campaigns in Green Bay, Wisconsin, in October 2024. (Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images)

Lewandowski's hard-charging style quickly set him on a collision course with Cameron Hamilton, Trump's first acting FEMA administrator. The two clashed repeatedly, with Lewandowski ultimately orchestrating Hamilton's abrupt and public downfall, multiple sources told CNN.

Publicly, the Trump administration cast FEMA as a bloated, "woke" bureaucracy in desperate need of a reckoning. Behind closed doors, Hamilton pushed back, arguing that the agency's real challenges stemmed from a barrage of congressional mandates — not from its own staff. He became increasingly insistent that FEMA should not be scrapped, warning that the president and Noem were being led astray by bad advice.

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Lewandowski repeatedly berated Hamilton in front of colleagues, accusing him of losing sight of the administration's mission.

The atmosphere inside FEMA grew increasingly tense. After **CNN reported** details of a high-level meeting about dismantling the agency, Lewandowski ordered staff to **administer a polygraph test to several employees including Hamilton**, seeking to determine whether he had leaked information to the press.

“Under Secretary Noem’s leadership, DHS is unapologetic about its efforts to root out leakers that undermine national security,” the senior DHS official said, adding that the department is “agnostic about your standing, tenure , political appointment, or status as a career civil servant.”

Hamilton’s tenure ended swiftly and unceremoniously. Just hours before he was scheduled to testify before Congress, he was accidentally alerted of his impending termination, after DHS notified FEMA security that his access would soon be shut off. He then broke with the administration, telling lawmakers he could not support the plan to eliminate FEMA. **He was fired the next day.**

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White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt later blamed Hamilton’s testimony for his dismissal, saying, “This individual testified saying something that was contrary to what the president believes and the goals of this administration in regards to FEMA policy.”

In reality, Lewandowski’s plan to remove Hamilton had been weeks in the making, multiple sources told CNN.

According to the sources, Lewandowski pushed to install his own loyalist, David Richardson, as Hamilton’s successor, though the senior DHS official told CNN this is “categorically false.”

Richardson — a personal friend of Lewandowski and DHS official with no prior experience managing natural disasters — had previously received a glowing public review from Lewandowski for **his book**, “War Story,” which Lewandowski described as “brutal, funny in places, unapologetic. Will make liberals cringe!”

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At his first agencywide meeting, Richardson made a point of thanking three people for his new role at FEMA, according to a recording heard by CNN: “I do appreciate that President Trump, Secretary Noem and Corey Lewandowski had the confidence in me to send me here.”

Lewandowski's grip on FEMA has only tightened as **DHS has expanded its reach**, installing more than half a dozen loyalists in FEMA's front office to effectively steer the agency from within. And his authority continues to grow.

Lewandowski routinely overrides the department's Deputy Secretary Troy Edgar, acting as the department's de facto second-in-command. When he wants to kill a proposal, he's been known to scrawl “Denied” or “No” across documents in thick Sharpie, leaving no doubt about who truly holds the reins.

The senior DHS official told CNN that “multiple staff have the ability to provide recommendations and input” and both Edgar and Lewandowski make recommendations to the secretary, “who has the final decision.”

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But sources painted a different picture.

“If you’re not getting through Corey, it’s not getting done,” a source with knowledge of Lewandowski’s influence told CNN. “Noem gives the final thumbs up on the calls, but Corey drives the conversations and the narrative.”

When politics and policy collide, Lewandowski is often at the heart of the action. Earlier this year, as billions in FEMA grant funds were paused for review, **top brass at DHS instructed agency staff to prioritize payments for GOP-led Missouri.** Internal emails obtained by CNN at the time show Lewandowski at the center of these conversations, ensuring FEMA leaders greenlit the payments — even as some officials raised concerns about the optics of favoring certain states.

‘He’s the hammer and you’re the nail’

Current and former Homeland Security officials describe Lewandowski as Noem’s right-hand man who, they say, keeps people in line on behalf of the secretary. That manifests in phone calls and meetings, which can be tense if something has gone awry.

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“He’s the hammer and you’re the nail,” one Homeland Security official said. “He’s the guy that’s going to hold you accountable.”



Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem, right, meets with President of Costa Rica Rodrigo Chaves Robles, left, at the Casa Presidencial on June 25 in San Jose, Costa Rica. Corey Lewandowski, center, joined the meeting. *(Anna Moneymaker/Pool/Getty Images)*

In two instances, one source recalled, Lewandowski directed two people be placed on administrative leave — one for use of gender pronouns in email, the other for a late edit in briefing materials. When asked about those instances, the senior DHS

official said the department's Office of Management is responsible for placing individuals on administrative leave.

When there's been abrupt turnover at Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Lewandowski has joined the all-hands meetings, according to a former Homeland Security official.

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He also often travels with the secretary and was on site during a **high-profile clash** with California Sen. Alex Padilla, who was forcibly removed from a Noem news conference in Los Angeles earlier this year and coerced to the ground after attempting to ask the secretary a question about immigration enforcement operations in the city.

It was Lewandowski who told DHS to remove the handcuffs, according to a Senate aide.

"After the incident, Corey was the one who came down and asked DHS to release the senator and offered the meeting with the secretary," the aide said, adding that Lewandowski offered refreshments and facilitated getting a room for the senator to wait until the secretary was available.

"He seemed to be the one calling all the shots," the aide said, adding that

Lewandowski referred to himself as a “staff guy.”

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Since joining the department, Lewandowski has also been named to other posts. In June, Trump and Noem **announced appointments** to the Homeland Security advisory council, which was first established in 2002 to provide “real-time, real-world and independent advice on homeland security operations” and relies on experts across industries, many of whom hold posts outside of government. Lewandowski was listed as chief advisor to the DHS secretary.

“It’s a privilege to be here and I hope to get to offer some advice and counsel as we go through this very important job,” he said during the council’s first meeting in July, **according to a transcript** .



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