

THE POWER TRIP

Top Goon Kristi Noem is the face of Trump's police state. Corey Lewandowski is the muscle.

Who really runs DHS?



By Ben Terris, New York's Washington correspondent

SEPT. 22, 2025

SAVE



Kristi Noem speaks at the "Louisiana Lockup" facility in Angola. Photo: Kathleen Flynn for New York Magazine

This article was featured in [One Great Story](#), New York's reading recommendation newsletter. [Sign up here](#) to get it nightly.

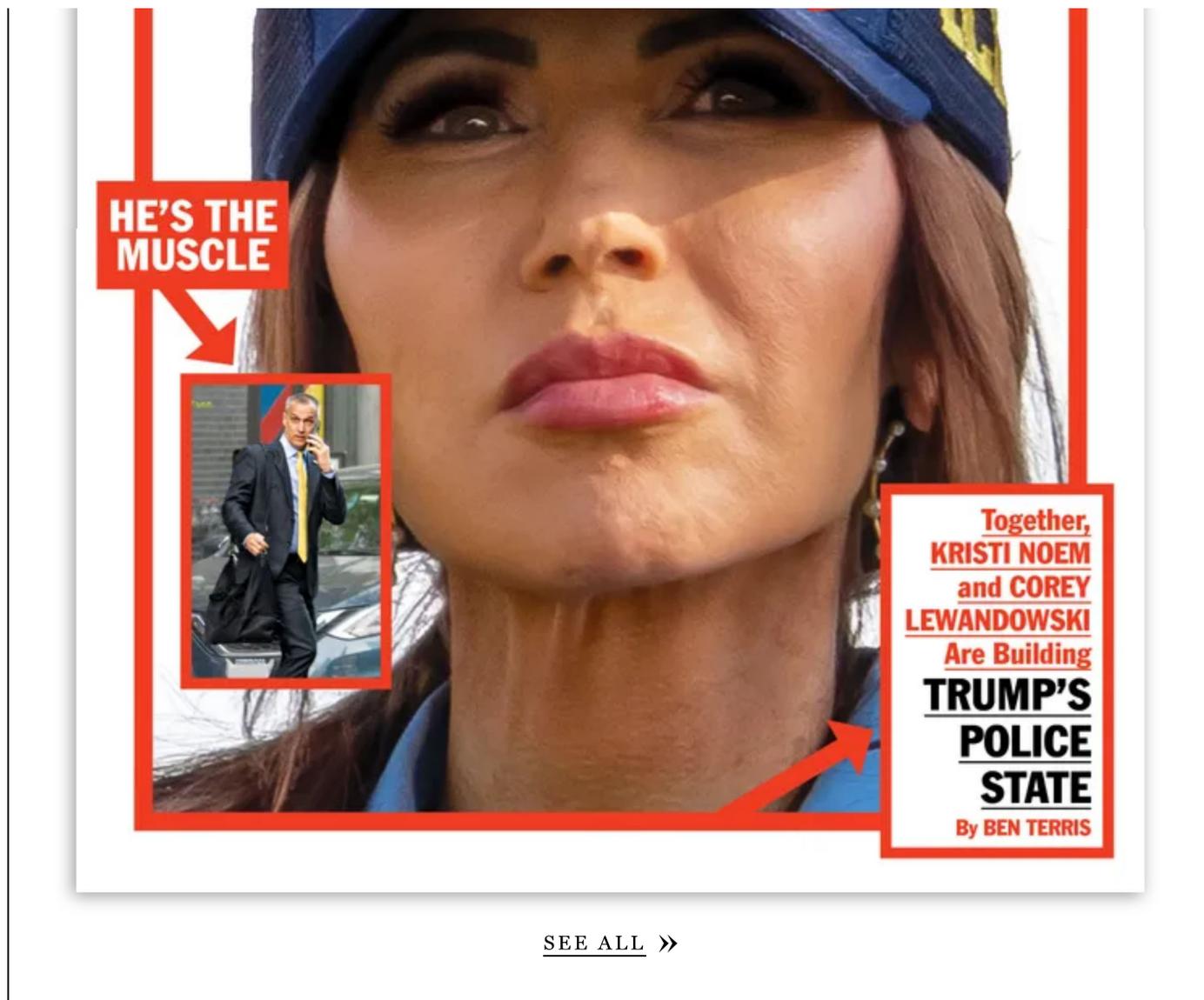
On the morning of May 7, before making his way to Capitol Hill to testify in front of Congress, Cameron Hamilton, then the acting administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, packed up his office. He assumed his boss, Department of Homeland Security Secretary [Kristi Noem](#), would fire him once she got wind of what he planned on telling lawmakers. It turned out he was right about getting fired but wrong about who would deliver the blow.

Hamilton is a former Navy SEAL with a close-cropped beard and perfect posture. He is a MAGA true believer who served in the State Department during Donald Trump's first administration and ran for Congress in Virginia with the backing of the conservative Freedom Caucus super-PAC in 2024. He lost his primary, but after Trump won the presidency, Noem offered him the opportunity to run FEMA. He soon found himself crosswise with not only Noem but also her de facto chief of staff, [Corey Lewandowski](#), a combative veteran of Trumpworld's internecine battles.

IN THIS ISSUE

NEW YORK

SHE'S THE FACE



When Hamilton interviewed for the job during the transition, Noem had expressed no interest in eliminating FEMA. But as Trump's second administration got underway, it became clear that DHS, a sprawling entity with more than 260,000 employees across various agencies, was being utilized to counter seemingly a single threat: illegal immigration. Noem joined Trump's call to shutter FEMA, which seemed like a bad idea to Hamilton as wildfires and tornadoes took an unprecedented toll on states from California to Arkansas. He was vocal enough about this belief that when CNN reported in March on a meeting about the agency's future — a meeting that included Hamilton, Lewandowski, and Noem — Lewandowski accused Hamilton of being the source. Hamilton was in a classified briefing when he got a "furious" call from Lewandowski.

"Somebody needs to be fired for this," Lewandowski told him.

"I'm not a leaker," Hamilton said.

“Well, if you didn’t leak it, you’ll have no problem submitting to a polygraph,” Lewandowski said.

Hamilton, who said he took the job out of patriotic duty, was incensed by the insinuation that he had snitched. “I wanted to choke some people,” he said. The polygraph was an “exhaustive process” that ended with him being cleared, but he believed his days were numbered: Lewandowski was lobbying to replace him with David Richardson, who had no experience managing natural disasters. (Lewandowski had blurbed Richardson’s 2019 novel, *War Story*, as “brutal, funny in places, unapologetic. Will make liberals cringe!”) On the day Hamilton testified to the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security, he declared, “I do not believe it is in the best interest of the American people to eliminate the Federal Emergency Management Agency,” an opinion whose merits were borne out by disasters like the catastrophic floods in Texas later that summer.

“I got a call the next morning saying I had 30 minutes to report to DHS headquarters,” he said. Once there, Hamilton was escorted to the office of the secretary. But when he walked in, Noem wasn’t behind her desk. Lewandowski was. “He said, ‘You are losing your access,’” Hamilton told me. Lewandowski smirked as he offered Hamilton “an opportunity” to work at the Department of Education, perhaps one of the only departments more scorned by the Trump administration than FEMA. The message to Hamilton: Take the new position or be terminated.

Hamilton said it wasn’t a surprise that Lewandowski was the messenger, even if Lewandowski, technically an unpaid and temporary special government employee, wasn’t his boss. Lewandowski has long served as Noem’s gatekeeper, described to me by DHS staff as her “handler,” her “bulldog,” and the “shadow secretary.” They are also widely understood by those who work with them to be romantically attached. (Noem and Lewandowski have both denied this.) In April, the *Daily Mail* snapped photographs of Lewandowski outside her Navy Yard complex with a duffel bag slung over his shoulder, and partly in response to the presence of the *Mail*’s paparazzi, which a DHS spokesperson said had led to threats and safety concerns, she moved into military housing usually reserved for the top admiral of the Coast Guard, which is under DHS’s purview. This has only fueled the rumors surrounding Noem. “They’ve sent no three- or four-stars in the Coast Guard up for confirmation,” a top administration official told me, “because she doesn’t want to get kicked out of the commandant’s house.”

Noem, 53, is the public face of the department, bringing reality-star energy to an office that

was created in the aftermath of 9/11 to coordinate America's preparedness for a terrorist attack. She has hopped across the country in various uniforms — as a Border Patrol agent, in an Immigration and Customs Enforcement flak jacket, as a Coast Guard firefighter — mean-mugging her way onto television screens and decorating the halls of DHS buildings with action shots of her in the field. Most notoriously, when the U.S. sent 238 migrants to El Salvador's Terrorism Confinement Center — described as a “hell on earth,” where alleged human-rights abuses are rampant — she filmed a video in front of a cage of inmates wearing a \$50,000 Rolex. “We looked at her and we thought we were going to get out,” Edicson Quintero Chacón, a detainee at the time, told me. “I mean, we had a sense of joy.” Her reasons for visiting CECOT were more self-interested. She is so skilled at getting in front of the camera that the New York *Times* has called her the head of the “Department of Homeland Publicity,” while her liberal detractors have taken to calling her “ICE Barbie.”

Since the passage of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act in July, she has been overseeing a massive influx of some \$170 billion that Republicans set aside for combating illegal immigration, money that will go toward expanding DHS's detention capacity to 100,000 beds (ICE is currently holding more than 58,000 detainees), increasing the size of ICE (in part by offering up to \$50,000 in signing bonuses and eliminating the age cap on new hires), bolstering law-enforcement border support, and underwriting a propaganda campaign that has clogged social media with everything from *Zero Dark Thirty*-style PSAs to paeans to white-nationalist mythology. Under Noem, it is DHS, not the Justice Department, that has emerged as Trump's most devastating and visible weapon against the right's perceived enemies. “She's going to play a key role in advancing Donald Trump's effort to consolidate the powers of the presidency,” a former DHS official told me. “I think by the end of this administration, if she stays the whole time, she's likely to become the warden of the police state.”

On paper, Noem sits at the top of this empire. In practice, power over immigration policy is fractured, shaped by competing factions, starting with deputy chief of staff Stephen Miller, who has vowed in the wake of Charlie Kirk's assassination to destroy nameless forces that have conspired against the right — the long arm of law enforcement, he warned them, “will be used to find you, will be used to take away your money, take away your power, and, if you've broken the law, to take away your freedom.” Noem will be among those at the forefront of any such effort, surrounded by a tight inner circle that can be difficult to penetrate and often impossible to work with. “The culture over there is terrible,” the administration official told me. “People are scared shitless of Corey.”

Lewandowski has been integral to Noem's rise, her right hand as they run roughshod over the rule of law and, like so many in Trump's Cabinet, position themselves for a post-Trump future. Lewandowski is not only surreptitiously co-leading DHS without congressional approval but has brought Trumpworld's manically pugnacious style to the department and drawn out some of Noem's own pugnacious predilections, too. After all, Trump's immigration policies, while broadly unpopular with those who oppose masked men snatching people off the streets and spiriting them away to brutal foreign prisons, remain popular among Republicans. Frank Luntz, the veteran political consultant, thinks this is at least partly owed to Noem, who adds the necessary stage presence to Lewandowski's muscle and Miller's brain. "She is probably the administration's best spokeswoman," he told me. "The only thing that bothers me is that her name is not mentioned as a potential 2028 Republican Party leader. She's underestimated."

Corey Lewandowski outside Noem's apartment building in Washington, D.C., in April. Photo: DailyMail.com

he story of Noem and Lewandowski goes back to 2019 on a remote Pacific island off

T Post, “I’m like a robot. I literally have no emotions.”

Lewandowski had come to Trump’s 2016 campaign with an unconventional résumé: real-estate agent, New Hampshire marine-patrol officer, Koch Brothers operative, congressional aide who once brought a gun to the Capitol. His longtime political ally David Bossie told the *Times* in 2015 that Lewandowski was “as anti-Establishment” as Trump. “Corey is driven by an incredible desire to please and be loved by those in positions of power, all while fighting against convention and normal ways of operating,” a campaign operative who worked with Lewandowski told me. He quickly became known for two things: getting arrested after grabbing the arm of a female reporter at a press conference (charges were dropped) and a political strategy that amounted to “Let Trump be Trump.” He lost his job after allies and donors complained he was running an undisciplined campaign.

In the years that followed, Lewandowski would float in and out of Trumpworld but never fall completely out of Trump’s orbit. “The president has always been loyal to people he connects with successful phases of his life,” former Trump adviser Jason Miller told me. Lewandowski’s aggression was also useful. “He is not intimidated by the prospect of a fight and will work doggedly to achieve his pursuits,” a different campaign operative told me. “He is a one-of-a-kind operator, for better or worse.” In response to a request for comment, Lewandowski wrote, “Instead of reviewing the newest wine bar in Chelsea the New York Magazine has degraded itself.”

At the time he met Noem, Lewandowski was casting a line for another project. “I think he saw potential in her,” said Lynn Friess, who was married to Foster until his death in 2021. The fishing trips were an excellent way for people to get to know one another, as they spent hours on end in small boats, then returned to camp to talk about everything from politics to family life. Friess remembers Noem being an excellent angler, hauling in fish after fish. “I quite frankly don’t remember what he did,” she said about Lewandowski. Later, Friess emailed an update: After asking around, she was told Lewandowski had caught one of the biggest fish in the group.

Noem stayed close with Lewandowski after the trip and eventually brought him on as an adviser. He was, according to a former staffer from the time, “intimately involved in her governorship.” He helped decide which television shows to go on and encouraged her never to do panels with other guests because she was too big of a star to share the spotlight. He joined her on phone calls with senior staff, dictating which events she should attend in the

state. “It bothered people because what did he even know about South Dakota?” the former staffer said.

But Lewandowski seemed like he was already thinking beyond state politics. Early on in their relationship, Lewandowski brought Noem on a swing through New York to talk to financiers who might be helpful were she ever to run for higher office. In one meeting, they appeared to have such a close connection that their millionaire host called a mutual acquaintance afterward to ask if the two were dating. The mutual acquaintance called around and reported back it appeared that they were. They both were, and remain, married, though Noem’s husband, Bryon Noem, lives in South Dakota. Over the years, there have been plenty of tabloid reports about Noem and Lewandowski’s relationship. “Everybody knows they’re together. Can I prove it? No, but they’re together,” the administration official said. A FEMA official called it the “worst-kept secret in D.C.” In 2019, after a conservative conference in Doral, Florida, a bunch of VIPs were on the patio smoking cigars and drinking. Then Noem came out and sat on Lewandowski’s lap. “I remember it being just very romantic,” said a person present. “Interactions that you would expect of a romantic couple, not of a political consultant and the client.” They added, “It was very clear that they were together.”

Ideologically, Noem was difficult to pin down. She worked on her family farm before Democratic senator Tom Daschle appointed her to the state board of the Farm Service Agency in 1997. When she ran for the statehouse as a Republican, she said some conservatives doubted her credentials. “People wondered for years if maybe I switched to the Democrat Party to serve,” Noem wrote in her book, *Not My First Rodeo*. “Of course, I never did, and to his credit Senator Daschle never asked.” After serving in the state legislature, she ran with tea-party support for Congress in 2010, only to disappoint some of her bomb-throwing compatriots by becoming a lieutenant for House leadership. As governor, she championed legislation to keep transgender athletes out of women’s sports but vetoed the bill under pressure, in part, from the NCAA. Then, like most Republicans looking to move up within the party, she fully leaned in as a MAGA loyalist.

Beth Hollatz, a senior adviser during Noem’s governorship and a close friend, said Noem was driven by religious faith and love of her family. “People think she’s coldhearted,” she said. “But she’s not at all.” Others said Noem was virtually an empty vessel. “Beyond just basic conservative principles, she never had an original policy idea or thought at all,” a former campaign aide told me. “She never read books or newspapers or newsmagazines, had zero interest in policy.” Like Trump, her management style, the aide said, “revolves

around whoever is the last person to speak to her.” She had a nickname among staff, “Governor Text Message,” because she did much of her managing via phone.

Noem could be warm and friendly only to turn it off moments later. Once, a former staffer recalled, a supporter brought Noem flowers, which Noem pretended to love but then had a staffer throw in the trash as soon as her constituent left. “She was rolling her eyes and said, ‘Ugh, I can’t stand these people,’” she said. “It made me wonder whether she was bad-mouthing me behind my back.”

Noem’s tenure as governor was dotted with oddities. She was found by South Dakota ethics board to have intervened in her daughter’s application to become a state-sanctioned real-estate appraiser. She came up with the idea for a \$1.4 million anti-drug campaign that resulted in the tagline “Meth. We’re on it.” She earned a reputation among lawmakers for enjoying the perks of office a little too much, traveling often on the state’s plane and spending taxpayer money on a hunting trip to Canada and a trip to Las Vegas, among other destinations with no obvious bearing on state business. Taffy Howard, a Republican state senator who clashed with Noem over the years, said she and some of her fellow lawmakers tried to force Noem to reveal how much money was being spent on her travel but were told revealing that information would be a security issue. “You could not oppose her without her taking it personally,” Howard said.

Once, Noem hitched a ride on My Pillow CEO Mike Lindell’s plane to a conference in Tennessee. “She was never here,” said Ryan Maher, a Republican who served in state-senate leadership while Noem was governor. Noem declined a request for an interview. In response to a list of questions about Noem, DHS said, “This NYMag hit piece reads like a preteen rage-scrolling, then prompting ChatGPT for a screed on misogyny — complete with zero substance and maximum bullshit.”

Still, as a telegenic communicator and Trump loyalist, Noem remained a popular governor. She earned credit from Republicans at home and across the country for how she handled the COVID pandemic (namely, by keeping the state mostly open while other states shut down) and for sending members of the South Dakota National Guard to the southern border.

By the time the 2024 election cycle began, Noem was being talked about as a possible vice-presidential pick for Trump. In South Dakota political circles, her higher ambitions were not a surprise. “Every decision she makes is to help her, help her career, help her get a better job down the road,” said Tom Brunner, a conservative who used to serve with Noem in the

state legislature. “She would sell her soul in a heartbeat to get a better job.” Howard said, “She’s a petty, vindictive person who is only ever out for herself. She doesn’t do anything unless it’s calculated to better her political aspirations.”

In February 2024, Noem met with Trump to make her case to join the ticket. She was accompanied by Lewandowski, who came prepared with polling data showing how popular she was in midwestern swing states, according to the book *Revenge*, by the journalist Alex Isenstadt. But there were obstacles to her getting the job — the foremost being Lewandowski himself. People close to Trump worried about their alleged romantic involvement, Isenstadt wrote. Trump’s advisers had witnessed Lewandowski slapping Noem on the butt, and Trump would slyly refer to Noem as Lewandowski’s “girlfriend.” Noem’s chances at securing the No. 2 spot were ultimately buried by the publication of her second memoir, *No Going Back*, in which she told the unfortunate story of shooting a disobedient puppy named Cricket on the family farm. “That’s not good at all,” Trump told his son Don Jr., according to *Revenge*. “Even you wouldn’t kill a dog, and you kill everything.”

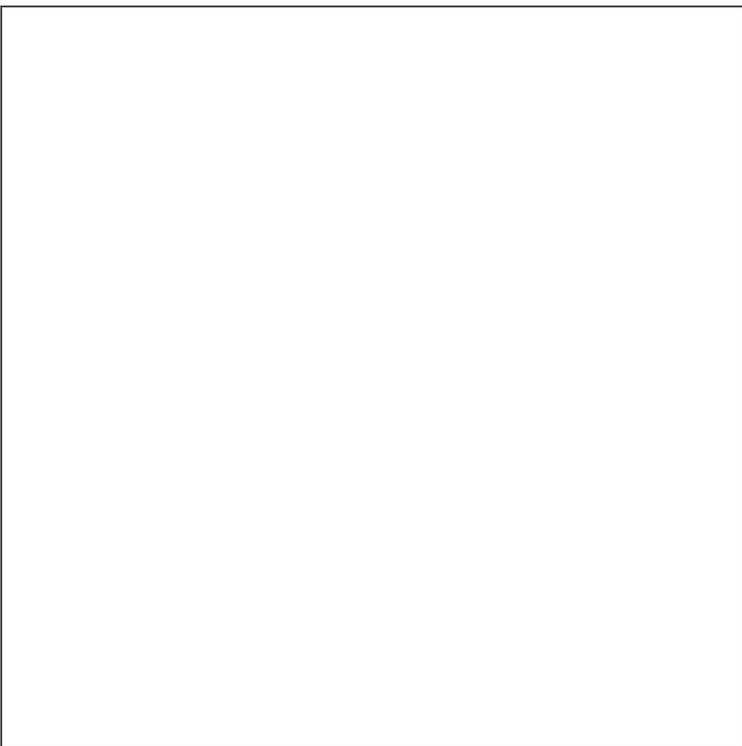
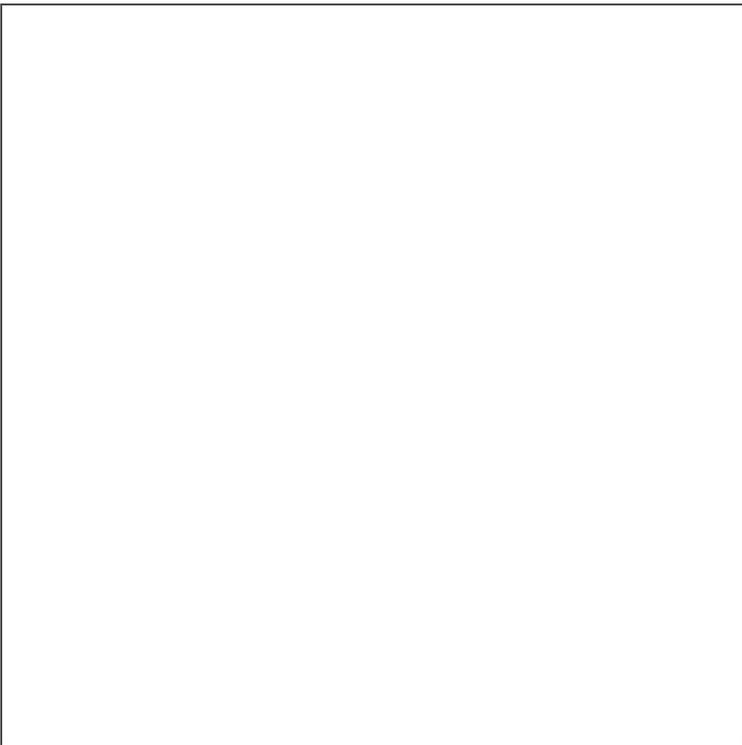
With the VP job now off the table, Lewandowski and Noem had another idea: Perhaps she could be the general in charge of immigration. By August, Trump had brought Lewandowski back to his campaign, but he lost a power struggle with co-campaign managers Chris LaCivita and Susie Wiles and was demoted to surrogate work. In the meantime, he mounted a whisper campaign on behalf of Noem, enlisting the help of people like Tom Homan, who would go on to become Trump’s border czar, to talk up her campaign to lead DHS. After Trump won the election, he asked Noem if she might be interested in a Cabinet position, perhaps with the Department of Interior or Agriculture. “I said, ‘Sir, I’d like to be considered for Homeland Security,’” Noem recalled during a speech this summer on Capitol Hill. “And he said, ‘Why would you want to do that?’” The answer she gave: “Because it’s your No. 1 priority.” Noem was easily confirmed on a 59-34 vote.

Noem returned to Washington having gone through a near-complete physical transformation. Long, curled hair had replaced her layered bobs, and the topography of her face had been smoothed. Before moving out of the governor’s mansion, Noem flew to Texas to have her teeth done, after which she filmed what appeared to be an infomercial-style social-media video for the dentist. Once in Washington, Noem and Lewandowski seemed to always be around each other. “He had a seat at the vice-president’s inauguration dinner,” an attendee told me, “where he was looking directly at her at all times.”

When Trump picked Noem for DHS, Lewandowski hoped he would be named chief of staff. It wasn't in the cards. *The Wall Street Journal* reported earlier this year that the tabloid reports of his romantic relationship with Noem were a sticking point. But apparently there were other issues as well. In September, the *Daily Mail* reported the existence of a memo written by Richard McComb, the chief security officer at DHS at the time, containing a litany of concerns regarding Lewandowski and questioning whether he should have a top-secret security clearance. Lewandowski had, according to the memo, been accused of receiving \$50,000 directly from the Chinese Communist Party as well as money from Israel's Likud Party without disclosing the payments on his DHS background form. (A DHS official denied these claims.)

The memo also detailed known instances of Lewandowski's entanglements with the law, including an alleged incident of unwanted sexual contact. In 2021, a woman accused Lewandowski of touching her inappropriately and relentlessly making sexually explicit comments at a charity dinner in Las Vegas. Lewandowski was charged and cut a plea deal in 2022 that resulted in eight hours of impulse-control counseling and 50 hours of community service. In exchange, Lewandowski did not have to admit guilt. The same month he issued the memo, McComb resigned from DHS.

After losing out on the chief-of-staff job, Lewandowski finagled the special-government-employee designation, which allowed him to work 130 days a year for the DHS while maintaining a business with outside clients. Best of all, he wouldn't have to disclose those clients, making it difficult to determine if they might present a conflict of interest with the work he was doing for the government. There have been red flags. In March, DHS skipped a fully competitive bidding process for the first part of a \$200 million ad campaign, giving part of the contract to a firm run by a person with close professional ties to Lewandowski. Furthermore, few people in the administration believe he was keeping an accurate tally of the days he worked. In mid-August, after months of working closely with Noem, *Axios* reported that Lewandowski wasn't even close to his 130-day allotment. The report said that he was believed to be entering buildings with other staffers so he wouldn't have to swipe himself in and that he didn't always use his government email or phone so that his digital trail was harder to follow. The number he gave — precisely 69 days — was like a bad joke conjured up by Elon Musk. "That number was Corey's way of saying, 'Fuck you,'" a former DHS official said.



curity Secretary Kristi Noem Tours Notorious
; Trip To El Salvador



Barbie | *Clockwise from top left*: Piloting a Coast Guard boat in San Diego; in a firefighting drill in Kodiak, Alaska; painting the wall; on an ICE operation in Los Angeles; visiting the CECOT prison in El Salvador; as depicted on South Park, which focused on her for the camera and her glam look. Photo: Alex Brandon/AP; Alex Brandon/AFP/Getty Images; South Park Studios via YouTube; Tialamy.

As soon as Trump entered office, Noem & Co. went to work forming a new anti-immigration regime, transforming DHS into the country's most fearsome law-enforcement arm. It is now endangering the constitutional rights of citizens and noncitizens alike — and it is doing so openly, even proudly. During his first two weeks on the job, Trump signed an order that attempted to end birthright citizenship and another to begin preparing Guantánamo Bay to detain tens of thousands of undocumented immigrants. In March, the administration invoked the Alien Enemies Act of 1798, claiming it could deport migrants without a hearing owing to an “invasion” of gang members from Venezuela. Later, a federal judge ordered planes carrying detainees to El Salvador to be returned to the U.S., but the planes continued on their flight in defiance of the judge's ruling. On one of these flights was Kilmar Abrego Garcia, a Maryland man who had been granted legal protection because of legitimate concerns for his safety. The Trump administration admitted Garcia's deportation was a mistake but claimed there was nothing it could do about it now that he was no longer in U.S. custody; Garcia later claimed he was beaten and psychologically tortured, while other deportees have said they were sexually assaulted.

Back home, ICE grabbed Palestinian green-card holder Mahmoud Khalil and kept him for

more than 100 days in a detention center in Jena, Louisiana. A judge later ruled his capture unconstitutional, and other detainees at Jena have complained of overcrowding, cells contaminated with feces, and being denied medication. DHS detained Mohsen Mahdawi, also a Palestinian green-card holder, at his citizenship interview; nabbed Rümeysa Öztürk, a Turkish Ph.D. student, off the streets in Massachusetts; and held an Irish tourist for more than three months after he overstayed his visa by three days. “Nobody is safe,” he told the *Guardian*. The DHS X account has encouraged Americans to “Report Foreign Invaders,” and cities including Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and Chicago have become staging grounds for militarized immigration raids. “They are grabbing people who have brown skin or who speak with an accent or who speak another language and not people who are guilty of or are accused of perpetrating a crime,” Illinois governor J. B. Pritzker said in September.

New detention centers with macabre nicknames have started to spring up across the country: Alligator Alcatraz in Florida, the Cornhusker Clink in Nebraska, the Speedway Slammer in Indiana. ICE’s own inspectors found that migrants housed in a detention center in Fort Bliss in Texas had been subject to conditions that violated at least 60 federal standards, according to a report by the *Washington Post*, including many of the detainees being unable to contact their lawyers for weeks. South Korean workers detained in a raid on a Hyundai-LG factory in Georgia described being crammed into windowless rooms with few bathrooms and moldy beds, while ICE guards mocked them for being from “North Korea.” Democratic senator Jon Ossoff says his office has compiled credible reports of more than 500 human-rights abuses in immigration detention centers since the beginning of Trump’s term.

The Trump-friendly Supreme Court, in part through the use of its so-called shadow docket, has given DHS a green light to run rampant. The Court even reversed a judgment that blocked ICE agents from stopping people and questioning them solely based on factors like their ethnicity. As a result of all these changes, the number of illegal border crossings has plummeted, the number of detentions has hit record highs, and, according to DHS, 2 million undocumented immigrants have either left the country or been deported (though the number has not been independently verified) — and ICE hasn’t even fully utilized the funding increase that makes its annual budget larger than the FBI’s.

Noem leaped on to this agenda, developing a reputation as a ruthless enforcer. A *South Park* episode devoted to Noem showed her raiding Heaven for undocumented immigrants and, in a callback to poor Cricket, gunning down

several dogs. But her efforts put her in good stead with the Trump administration. “Secretary Noem is returning America to the American People,” Stephen Miller said in an email. By all accounts, the president likes Noem, describing her as both “elegant” and “tough as hell.” It helps that Noem and Lewandowski have their own fiefdom, since getting too much attention can be a dangerous game in Trump’s Washington, where no one is allowed to overshadow the boss. “They sort of avoid being at the White House,” the administration official told me. “And I think they do that because they don’t want to be overexposed.” Lewandowski, he said, knows better than anybody that “one of the best ways to survive is to stay off the radar.”

At the same time, Noem wants to be as closely associated with Trump’s draconian regime as possible. Once, according to a former DHS official, Noem grew angry with Homan after he went on television to discuss immigration news, believing that he had “gotten out front” of her on the issue. “She tried to put a comms blackout on him,” another administration official told me. “She ordered that he not go on TV; she ordered that basically no one go on TV in the entire Homeland lane.” Noem tried to tell Homan that he worked for her. He told her he worked for the White House. Her relationship with Homan got so sour that, at a meeting earlier this year, Trump asked Homan whether he needed to intervene. “No, sir, we can work this out,” Homan responded. The White House told me, “The President’s entire team — including Border Czar Tom Homan and Secretary Noem — are all in lockstep.”

As part of DHS’s advertising blitz, Noem filmed a series of ads thanking Trump for “securing our border and putting America first,” while urging undocumented immigrants to self-deport. “We will hunt you down,” she said. The TV spots looked, even to some members of Noem’s team, like the start of a state-sponsored presidential campaign. “They were running on Fox News and everywhere in places they would run if she were running for president, not places where illegal aliens might see them,” a DHS employee told me. “It was a taxpayer-dollar-funded ad for her to position herself.”

None of this is to say that Noem is fully in charge of Trump’s immigration policy. Deputy chief of staff Miller, an immigration obsessive, is Trump’s most trusted policy adviser. It was Miller who reportedly set a 3,000-deportations-a-day goal for ICE early in the administration, a number so high that it remains elusive today, and it’s Miller who speaks with DHS most days to get reports on how things are going. Miller has also been one of the most outspoken administration officials in calling for a crackdown on the “radical left” in the aftermath of Kirk’s assassination, though Noem herself also mentioned her connection to the former campus activist, telling conservative media that one of his last text messages

to her called for mayors and governors to be held accountable for overseeing high levels of crime.

Noem's belligerent approach is reflected within the department, where she is an isolated and isolating figure. She has, according to a person close to the administration, gone to the White House multiple times to try to replace Troy Edgar, one of her deputies. A very tight circle of aides runs day-to-day operations. Lewandowski, in particular, was described to me as a micromanager who will approve and deny travel requests made by ICE employees. He has been responsible for firing and reassigning dozens of people within the agency, and they are afraid to push back because he might call and "rip their heads off," according to the person close to the administration.

Another person close to the administration told me that Lewandowski once called a DHS employee with marching orders. The employee replied that he didn't take instruction from Lewandowski but from Noem. "All of a sudden, you hear the secretary say, 'It's coming from me,'" the person familiar told me. "She was on the call, in the background, not saying anything." Matt Strickland, a former contractor who worked at DHS headquarters, told me that all the major decisions in the Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Office had to be run by Lewandowski. "Corey Lewandowski is running DHS. Kristi Noem is just the face of it," he said. After tweeting in support of FEMA's Hamilton, Strickland says he was warned he could be fired. When the order finally came down, he was told that it was from Lewandowski and a member of a group of senior officials Lewandowski has dubbed "the Four Horsemen."

Another of Noem's deputies is Madison Sheahan, 28, who just six years ago was the captain of the rowing team at Ohio State University and who now is the deputy director of ICE. "For the most part, every entity in ICE reports to me," Sheahan told me in an interview at ICE headquarters in southwest Washington. Sheahan is broad-shouldered with a punishing handshake. She told me she doesn't sweat the controversial parts of her job. "I understand that everyone wants to poke holes and say we aren't perfect, and we aren't," she said. "But we'll never know how much ICE prevented — the number of kids that we've saved and families that we've saved."

She first began working for Noem pretty much right out of college, as a body woman and policy aide when Noem was governor. "She genuinely believes she was called to serve by God," she said of Noem. They grew close enough to consider each other friends. Once, Noem invited Sheahan to run a half-marathon with her. When Sheahan asked her boss if

she needed Gatorade about a mile from the finish line, Noem said “yes,” only to sprint ahead when Sheahan popped over to a hydration table. Noem beat her by about ten feet. “That really describes her,” Sheahan told me. “She’s gonna have fun. She’s gonna do her job. But she’s gonna win, too.”

Some ICE officials call Sheahan “Fish Cop” behind her back because of her previous stint running the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries in Louisiana. Sheahan knows there are people who think that, without any law-enforcement background, she isn’t qualified for a job usually occupied by veteran ICE officials. “I absolutely think I’m qualified for the job,” she told me. “Because at the end of the day, what really makes anybody qualified for any job?”

If Miller sets the policies, Noem and Lewandowski have nevertheless centralized power at DHS to an unprecedented degree. In June, a memo from Noem went out saying secretarial approval was needed for all payments above \$100,000, superseding a previous threshold of \$25 million. This was, in theory, a way to make sure the secretary could be a better steward of the taxpayer dollar. In practice, it meant chaos. “*I can’t make a phone call for under a hundred grand,*” a former top FEMA official remembered thinking when the memo landed in his inbox. There are thousands of contracts worth \$100,000 or more, and a backlog was inevitable.

“They almost had their utilities shut off at the building because the bill wasn’t paid,” the former FEMA official told me. A government-mandated return-to-office policy meant that the FEMA building went from having hundreds of staffers to thousands but saw no corresponding increase in janitorial services. It could feel, the official said, “like you needed an appointment” to use a restroom. Another former FEMA official told me that FEMA headquarters came within hours of having the lights turned off.

The bottleneck affected mission-critical work as well. Two days after catastrophic floods inundated Central Texas this summer, FEMA did not answer nearly two-thirds of calls to its disaster-assistance line, the *New York Times* reported, because Noem had not renewed a contract for hundreds of workers at call centers. And in September, Ted Budd, a Republican senator from North Carolina, threatened to filibuster Homeland Security nominees until the department stops “stonewalling” payments for the recovery efforts stemming from Hurricane Helene last year.

In July, FEMA created a task force of about 30 employees to compile a list of crucial contracts that are soon to expire. Many of these employees were taken off their day jobs to work on this task force, where they spent upwards of 15 hours a day in a windowless room, poring over paperwork. “She’s supposed to be the one cutting red tape, not creating it,” a former FEMA official familiar with the process told me. “It feels like intentional busywork, like a way to destroy the agency from the inside.”

It’s not just FEMA. The backlog has affected parts of DHS that the administration cares about. The *Times* reported this summer that the Transportation Security Administration allowed a contract for airport-screening equipment that helps detect fake passports to expire as well as contracts with Customs and Border Protection to help administer polygraph tests to applicants for law-enforcement jobs. And in early September, DHS staff received an email stating that its daily immigration-enforcement report would not be available. “Due to a contracting lapse, we will not be able to update the data today until the issue is resolved,” the email said.

DHS spokeswoman Tricia McLaughlin said the new rules came about after Noem learned about massive contracts getting signed for deals she knew nothing about. Already the DHS has saved taxpayers more than \$10 billion, McLaughlin said. “It’s not just a talking point,” McLaughlin told me.

Lewandowski is intimately involved with contract work. One former DHS official told me he kept a list of vendors that are banned from doing business with the department. And this past summer, Politico reported that Lewandowski had veto power over contracts and is the last stop before they are sent to Noem’s desk. “Everything has to go through Corey,” a lobbyist who has done business with DHS told me. “It’s all based on ‘You’re my buddy, or you’re not my buddy. You hired my friend, or you didn’t hire my friend.’ That place just runs that way.” As one former administration official put it to me, “It’s the Corey show over there.”

In late August, articles in several outlets detailed the delays in contract approvals, which DHS officials denied were happening. They caught the attention of the White House, which is now monitoring Lewandowski’s hours and, according to the administration official, complaining about how difficult Noem can be to reach. In response to the articles, Lewandowski and Noem called various officials in the department to try to speed things up. “They were screaming,” one DHS employee told me about a call with ICE officials. “The level of disrespect and screaming at everybody in that room — I think people were really shocked and taken aback.” Noem “dropped multiple F-bombs,” a former DHS staffer said. It

was clear to everyone that she and Lewandowski had been embarrassed by the bad press and were now feeding off each other's negative energy. They accused the people in the room of "lining their pockets" from government contracts, according to the former staffer, an accusation that struck them as a possible projection. At one point, a member of the team rattled off some acronyms. "Enough with the acronyms," Lewandowski said. "I'll give you an acronym: F-I-R-E-D."

In mid-September, Trump called Noem and Lewandowski into the Oval Office. The president had, according to the administration official, who was briefed on the meeting, heard concerns about their management style. "He was particularly mad at Corey" and about how "he can't get along with anybody," the official said. The two assuaged his concerns and left the meeting with their jobs intact — for now.

The expansion of DHS's gulag archipelago continues apace. In September, Noem held a press conference at the infamous Louisiana State Penitentiary, known as "Angola" for the slave plantation that used to be here. As reporters loaded onto shuttle buses at the gate, an official told us, "Most people who come in here and go down that road never get to come back out."

We parked by an orange roadblock labeled ANGOLA RODEO, the site of the annual exhibition where prisoners participate in a series of events like "Convict Poker" (four inmates play poker seated at a table with a loose bull in the arena, and the last man sitting wins). Looming in front of us: a thicket of barbed wire and two patrol towers guarding a housing unit that was called the Dungeon back when it was used for solitary confinement.

The Dungeon had fallen into desuetude, but the Trump administration has given it a new purpose as a detention center for undocumented immigrants who have committed violent crimes. Fifty-one detainees have already been transferred inside, and there are plans to house as many as 400 in the future. Internally, DHS staff had been referring to the revamped facility as "Camp 47" — an homage to Trump — but its given name is the Louisiana Lockup.

The sky soon filled with military helicopters carrying Noem, Lewandowski, Sheahan, Louisiana governor Jeff Landry, and Attorney General Pam Bondi. Lewandowski, dressed in all black and aviators, hung back with a group of staffers out of sight of the gathered camerapeople, while Landry, Bondi, Sheahan, and Noem approached a podium beside a

parked ICE SUV newly wrapped with the words PROTECT THE HOMELAND.

Landry was dressed in an olive-green hat and matching tactical shirt. The prison, he said in his thick Cajun accent, will be home to criminals who shouldn't even bother trying to escape unless they want to contend with the "swamps filled with alligators and the forests filled with bears."

"What will their day-to-day be like?" a journalist asked.

"What would you expect?" he retorted.

Landry said those who come here will have no interaction with any of the other 4,000 inmates living at Angola, more than 90 percent of whom committed violent crimes. The Louisiana Lockup will be filled with "the worst of the worst," Landry told us. The message to any and all undocumented immigrants living in this country was clear: Get out or they will find you.

For most of the press conference, Noem had stood expressionless, offering steely stares while Landry spoke about the need to get rapists and drug dealers and human traffickers off America's streets. Then a journalist asked, "Every headline about Angola calls it 'notorious.' Was the decision to choose a prison with such a reputation deliberate to get people to self-deport?"

The question seemed to make her giddy. She looked around at her colleagues and then bent forward in laughter. "Absolutely!" she said with a grin.

Want more stories like this one? [Subscribe now](#) to support our journalism and get unlimited access to our coverage. If you prefer to read in print, you can also find this article in the September 22, 2025, issue of New York Magazine.

RELATED

South Park Speaks Only for Itself

TAGS: THE POWER TRIP KRISTI NOEM POLITICS DONALD TRUMP COREY LEWANDOWSKI
NEW YORK MAGAZINE MORE

COMMENT