

POLITICS

The First Couple of a Dysfunctional DHS

A forthcoming book reveals new details about Kristi Noem and Corey Lewandowski.

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On a winter night last year, shortly after Donald Trump was sworn into office, senior officials at the Department of Homeland Security assembled discreetly at a private home in Washington, D.C., to discuss what they saw as a gathering crisis inside the agency: the relationship between their new boss, Kristi Noem, and Corey Lewandowski, her adviser, enforcer, and rumored boyfriend.

The officials were under enormous pressure. Trump had recaptured the presidency amid a popular backlash against illegal immigration, and had promised a shock-and-awe program of mass deportations once he returned to power. Now DHS—conceived after 9/11 to protect the country from terrorist attacks—was being ordered to shift its focus and resources toward delivering on the president’s campaign pledge. This project, already controversial and logistically fraught, was being complicated by Lewandowski—a menacing, omnipresent operator who had no experience in immigration enforcement, but who was nonetheless quickly consolidating power at

the agency. The officials had gathered that night to map the ways his relationship with Noem could destabilize the department. The conversation ran six hours.

The secret meeting, which has not been previously reported, is described in *Undue Process: The Inside Story of Trump's Mass Deportation Program*, a forthcoming book by the NBC News reporter Julia Ainsley. The book is set to be published in early May, but *The Atlantic* obtained portions of it early.

The book, based on extensive reporting, depicts the Department of Homeland Security as a dysfunctional fiefdom in Trump's Washington empire—tasked with carrying out the most aggressive immigration crackdown in U.S. history even as the agency's internal culture is warped by the relationship between an ambitious, attention-thirsty secretary and her domineering right-hand man and alleged paramour. In Ainsley's account, Lewandowski is involved in nearly every aspect of the agency: who gets heard in meetings, what information reaches Noem's desk, which contractors get hired, and even what kind of detention facilities are built to hold arrested migrants.

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Noem and Lewandowski, both of whom are married with children, have denied a romantic relationship. "It's bullshit," Lewandowski told *The Atlantic* in October. A spokesperson for DHS said, "This Department doesn't waste time with salacious, baseless gossip."

But their rumored affair has been widely treated as an open secret in Washington—first whispered about in political and media circles, then chronicled in tabloids such as the *Daily Mail*, and, more recently, making its way into *The Wall Street Journal*, which reported that the pair flies around the country together in a luxury 737 with a private cabin in the back, and that the president frequently asks about the relationship. In *Undue Process*, Ainsley quotes unnamed officials describing the alleged affair as common knowledge. "They don't hide it," says one Customs and Border Protection official who interacted with them regularly. A member of Trump's transition team,

Ainsley writes, put it more crassly to her in January 2025: “Oh yeah, they’re still fucking.”

The reported affair has caused tension with the West Wing: When Noem tried to install Lewandowski as her chief of staff, the White House vetoed the move. Rumors about their relationship were already circulating too widely—and Stephen Miller, Trump’s deputy chief of staff and most influential immigration hawk, was personally repelled by their apparent infidelity, according to Ainsley’s book. (Miller, Ainsley writes, is a “hard-liner when it comes to monogamy in marriage,” though a quick survey of the White House org chart surfaces at least one exception to his purported no-adulterers rule.) When a CBP official sought Miller’s advice on how to navigate the new terrain at DHS, Ainsley writes, he warned, “Stay away from Corey.” Reached for comment, a White House official disputed this account, saying “Stephen has never had any conversations about these rumors nor expressed any thoughts or feelings on them” and “Stephen has never told anyone to stay away from Corey.”

Instead, Lewandowski was hired as a “special government employee,” similar to Elon Musk’s arrangement as the head of DOGE. The designation is supposed to cap government work at 130 days a year, but according to Ainsley, Lewandowski seemed to disregard the rule. Inside DHS headquarters, he began referring to himself as “chief adviser” to the secretary. (According to the DHS spokesperson, Lewandowski worked 115 days last year as a special government employee.)

Lewandowski was a relative no-name in Republican politics when he was hired in 2015 to serve as Trump’s first campaign manager. He developed a reputation for vindictiveness and bullying; his brief tenure was marked by multiple physical confrontations with reporters and protesters. He was also accused of making sexually suggestive comments and unwanted romantic advances toward female journalists covering the 2016 campaign. (Lewandowski denied these allegations at the time.)

But his loyalty earned him a permanent place in Trump’s orbit, which Lewandowski has used in recent years to advance Noem’s political career—introducing her to key Trump-world figures and shaping her public image. Noem’s rise from governor of South Dakota to MAGA political celebrity was also abetted by her own refashioning. As Ainsley writes, Noem underwent an extensive physical transformation to conform to a certain MAGA aesthetic—including dental surgery and other apparent cosmetic enhancements—and, by 2024, she was traveling with a personal makeup artist. (The DHS spokesperson noted that Noem has not traveled with a makeup artist as secretary.)

She also has a flair for the theatrical. Shortly after she was installed in the Cabinet, she attended a pre-raid briefing for ICE officers in New York City. As career officials looked on in bewilderment, Noem walked onstage—in TV-ready makeup, coiffed curls, and a Kevlar vest—to a country song by Trace Adkins called “Hot Mama.” (“And you’re one hot mama / You turn me on. Let’s turn it up, and turn this room,

into a sauna.”) The surreal spectacle helped earn Noem the nickname “ICE Barbie.”

Trump had reportedly considered tapping Noem to be his running mate in 2024. But her name was crossed off the short list after she disclosed in a memoir that she had shot an “untrainable” family dog years earlier. The story prompted widespread outrage and ridicule, and many observers assumed it sank her prospects of an administration post. But Ainsley reports that Trump actually saw this particular biographical detail as an asset in his homeland-security secretary—it was one of the reasons he chose her.

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While Noem played to the cameras, Ainsley writes, Lewandowski was busy accumulating an “unchecked level of power” inside DHS. Officials were reluctant to question him out of fear that they’d be terminated by Noem, and a chill settled over any meetings that he attended. “She would ask, ‘Why is everyone so quiet?’ when it was plain to see people were afraid to speak up in front of Corey,” one of the CBP officials told Ainsley. “What are you going to do? Make an accusation? They’ll tear you apart,” the official said.

One policy that Lewandowski took a particular interest in, according to *Undue Process*, was migrant-detention centers. Inside the administration, Ainsley writes, a divide had formed over how to house the millions of immigrants Trump wanted to arrest. One group, which included “border czar” Tom Homan, favored scaling up the construction of traditional brick-and-mortar facilities. But Lewandowski was dead set on a cheaper, more austere solution: He envisioned shuttling detained migrants to tent cities in punishing locations. His lobbying ultimately led to the creation of the notorious “Alligator Alcatraz” facility in the Florida Everglades as well as a tent compound in Guantánamo Bay.

Lewandowski also took a heavy-handed approach to distributing DHS contracts, Ainsley writes, insisting that any expenditure over \$100,000 be signed off by himself and Noem. Previously, a secretary’s sign-off was required only for expenditures of \$25 million or more. The new policy prompted contractors to complain to the White House.

But even those within the administration who objected to his management of the department were reluctant to challenge him without a “smoking gun,” Ainsley reports. As one White House official put it, Lewandowski was like a cockroach who’d grown immune to insecticide—getting rid of him was easier said than done.

Undue Process: The Inside Story of Trump’s Mass Deportation Program

By Ainsley, Julia

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