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## The mess that Kristi Noem made

Story by Hady Mawajdeh • 1w • [7 min read](#)



 Kristi Noem at a podium with flags and people behind her  
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There's a mess at the Department of Homeland Security right now.

The [rumors](#) that the agency's top boss, Kristi Noem, [is about to be fired](#) won't go away. Not to mention the various [reports](#) of DHS workers describing a "[culture of fear](#)" because of staffing upheavals throughout the department's agencies. And on top of all of that, funding for DHS has expired, causing a partial government shutdown that is going to affect airport security, disaster relief from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and [more](#).



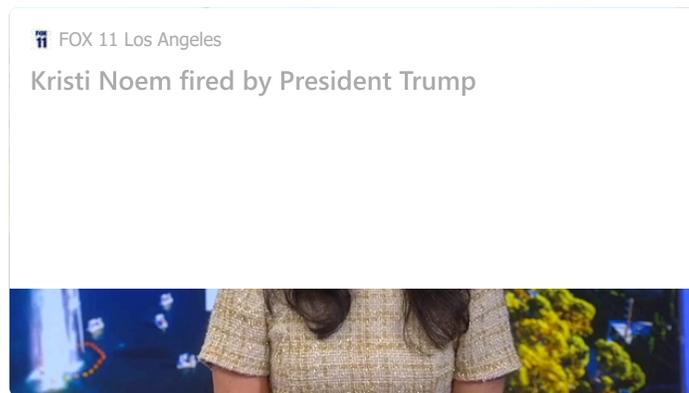
Recent polling shows that a majority of likely midterm voters support Democrats' [demands for reforms to ICE](#) and are in favor of blocking DHS funding unless those reforms are adopted. [Polling](#) also shows that most Americans believe Noem should be removed from her job.

The Wall Street Journal went digging into some of Noem's decision-making at DHS. Immigration reporter Michelle Hackman, one of the authors behind a viral story detailing the [firing of a Coast Guard pilot](#), joined co-host Noel King on *Today, Explained* to talk to us about the drama at DHS.

Below is an excerpt of their conversation, edited for length and clarity. There's much more in the full podcast, so listen to [Today, Explained](#) wherever you get podcasts, including Apple Podcasts, Pandora, and Spotify.

**I want to start where you began your blockbuster new piece for the Wall Street Journal. So it's two days after Alex Pretti was shot and killed in Minneapolis, and what is happening with Kristi Noem?**

[▶ Related video](#): Kristi Noem fired by President Trump (FOX 11 Los Angeles)



Kristi Noem is realizing that she is taking the blame for what happened in Minneapolis, that suddenly the mood has shifted even inside the administration. And she's basically thinking she needs to do something to save herself, she needs to salvage her image.

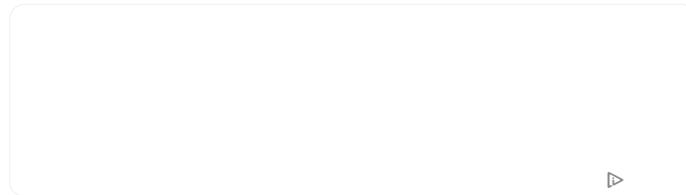
And her top adviser, Corey Lewandowski, reaches out to Trump's pollster and says, *Can you cut an ad for us?* The idea was basically to

cut some kind of ad that would make her look good, make her look strong, try to change the narrative away from these two killings in Minneapolis that she was basically taking the blame for.

She was met basically with silence. Tony Fabrizio, Trump's pollster, didn't even respond to them, but he went and told other people that this happened.

**Why did Tony Fabrizio ignore the message? Why didn't he do anything?**

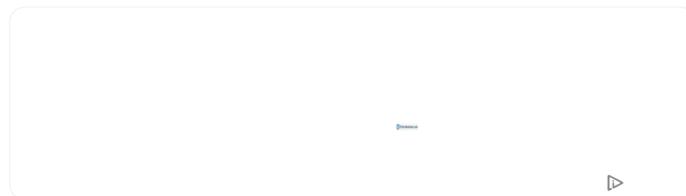
Tony Fabrizio is very attuned to President Trump and his desires. And in that moment, Trump was feeling fed up with Kristi Noem. The president had seen Kristi Noem on TV over the weekend, basically comparing Alex Pretti and what Alex Pretti had done to an act of terrorism. He'd seen the really negative coverage of it, and he, in that moment, was really unhappy with her. He wasn't quite ready to fire her yet, but he wasn't in a mood to help her.



**So it was Kristi Noem's adviser, Corey Lewandowski, who reached out to try to help her. Corey Lewandowski and Kristi Noem have a very interesting relationship that I think your reporting shows goes beyond top adviser. Tell me what's going on there.**

Interesting relationship's a good way to put it. Corey Lewandowski is Kristi Noem's top adviser. He signs documents "chief adviser to the secretary," which is not really an official title. We've reported in the past that they have been dating since roughly 2019.

Of course, Corey Lewandowski is Trump's first campaign manager. He is a personal friend of Donald Trump's. And he actually convinced Donald Trump to appoint Kristi Noem as DHS secretary as a favor to him. He has high ambitions for Noem, for her political career, and he saw the DHS secretary role sort of as a stepping stone to future things.



Interestingly, Trump knew about this relationship. He reportedly talks about it. Sources have told us he jokes about it to this day. And he actually had felt uncomfortable with giving Corey Lewandowski the chief of staff jobs, specifically because he felt weird about him dating Noem.

**And not to be indelicate, but both Corey Lewandowski and Kristi Noem are married.**

They both are married. They both publicly deny the fact that they're in a relationship, although sources tell us that inside the department they do very little to hide it. In fact, I went on a trip with them where Lewandowski was on the trip the whole time, and we've been told that he travels everywhere with her. He appears in many photos alongside her. They're basically inseparable. She doesn't do meetings without him.

**Let's pull back for a minute and talk about how Kristi Noem has reshaped the Department of Homeland Security. What would you say her signature moves have been?**

She has done several really major things.

Most visibly with Minneapolis, she has sort of prioritized a style of immigration enforcement that is really flashy. She's [gone on ICE raids](#) where she herself will wear the flack jacket. She will pose in the pilot seat of a Coast Guard plane. She will hold a really heavy automatic weapon.

And she's always also very TV ready. She always has her hair done, her makeup done, and she's brought that style to immigration enforcement where she has pushed agents [to] always make sure that the arrests you're making are on camera — the flashier, the better. She's received a lot of resistance for that internally because people at ICE actually feel like that style is getting in the way, is turning public opinion against them, but also putting their officers at increased risk.

**So she's making herself a main character. And she's made up and the men are just kind of like stacked behind her looking very grim. And yet, a lot of the reaction I saw was like, "Hey, this is really cool. Kristi Noem is like, really doing it. She's a badass." However, this becomes a problem once Minneapolis explodes. Tell me about the pushback both inside and outside the administration as that situation went up in flames.**

So after the first deadly shooting in Minneapolis, people actually rallied around her and her team. But by the time the second shooting happened and people saw that video, people watched that video and they were like, *There is no way that we can justify this*. There wasn't an angle that was flattering to them. They saw public opinion turning against them — immigration is supposed to be Trump's best issue, and suddenly he's negative on immigration. So people really were panicking and they were looking for a scapegoat.

**One thing that surprised me is that it is not just the expected critics who have come after Kristi Noem at this point. Tell me about Rodney Scott, the commissioner of Customs and Border Protection.**

Yeah. One thing I really wanna emphasize is that this is not left-wing criticism of Kristi Noem. These are hardcore Trump supporters inside the administration who are supportive of his immigration agenda and basically feel that she's getting in his way. And I would say Rodney Scott was one of the loudest voices with that view.

Rodney Scott was really upset about a few things. Kristi Noem had elevated a guy in the border patrol. His name is Greg Bovino. He has this very similar view that she does that immigration enforcement should be flashy and confrontational. He's the person who sent the huge groups of roving border patrol agents out on the streets of Los Angeles and Chicago and then Minneapolis.

She was supportive of him to the point where she removed him from the normal chain of command. He normally would have to report up to the Border Patrol chief and then to Rodney Scott. And she said, *No, no, no, you report to me directly.* Rodney Scott was really offended by that, objected vociferously to that, and also said what you guys are doing is going to be a step back for the entire administration because your style is too confrontational.

**Wow. And then how does she respond?**

She responds basically by retaliating against Rodney Scott, firing or reassigning his closest advisers at CBP and installing her personal loyalist to be his chief of staff. And at one point she told him, I have direct communication with your deputy. He is in charge of the agency. You are not in charge.

**Alright. So at this point, President Trump gets to make some decisions, right? It's his prerogative. What do you think — is the White House still behind Kristi Noem?**

We have been told that Trump feels a lot of loyalty to Corey Lewandowski, and is not yet ready to fire Kristi Noem. He's frustrated with her. But the problem is Trump went around after inauguration saying he's appointed the perfect Cabinet. And so part of the problem is if he fires one of his Cabinet secretaries, it's sort of like an admission that he did not pick the perfect Cabinet.

At the same time, pressure on him is really growing. There's a full-court press of Republican senators, outside allies who are trying to make the case to Trump that he can do better — that if he had someone else at the helm of DHS, it would actually be better for his promise of a mass deportation.

