



Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem films an ad at Mount Rushmore. Tia Dufour/Department of Homeland Security

Trump Administration

Firm Tied to Kristi Noem Secretly Got Money From \$220 Million DHS Ad Contracts

The company is run by the husband of Noem’s chief DHS spokesperson and has personal and business ties to Noem and her aides. DHS invoked the “emergency” at the border to skirt competitive bidding rules for the taxpayer-funded campaign.

by **Justin Elliott**, **Joshua Kaplan** and **Alex Mierjeski**

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On Oct. 2, the second day of the government shutdown, Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem arrived at Mount Rushmore to shoot a television ad. Sitting on horseback in chaps and a cowboy hat, Noem addressed the camera with a stern message for immigrants: “Break our laws, we’ll punish you.”

Noem has hailed the more than \$200 million, taxpayer-funded ad campaign as a crucial tool to stem illegal immigration. Her agency invoked the “national emergency” at the border as it awarded contracts for the campaign, bypassing the normal competitive bidding process designed to prevent waste and corruption.

The Department of Homeland Security has kept at least one beneficiary of the nine-figure ad deal a secret, records and interviews show: a Republican consulting firm with long-standing personal and business ties to Noem and her senior aides at DHS. The company running the Mount Rushmore shoot, called the Strategy Group, does not appear on public documents about the contract. The main recipient listed on the contracts is a mysterious Delaware company, which was created days before the deal was finalized.

No firm has closer ties to Noem’s political operation than the Strategy Group. It played a central role in her 2022 South Dakota gubernatorial campaign. Corey Lewandowski, her top adviser at DHS, has worked extensively with the firm. And the company’s CEO is married to Noem’s chief spokesperson at DHS, Tricia McLaughlin.

The Strategy Group’s ad work is the first known example of money flowing from Noem’s agency to businesses controlled by her allies and friends.

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Government contracting experts said the depth of the ties between DHS leadership and the Strategy Group suggested major potential violations of ethics rules.

“It’s corrupt, is the word,” said Charles Tiefer, a leading authority on federal contract law and former member of the Commission on Wartime Contracting in Iraq and Afghanistan. He said that the Strategy Group’s role should prompt investigations by both the DHS inspector general and the House Oversight Committee.

“Hiding your friends as subcontractors is like playing hide the salami with the taxpayer,” Tiefer added.

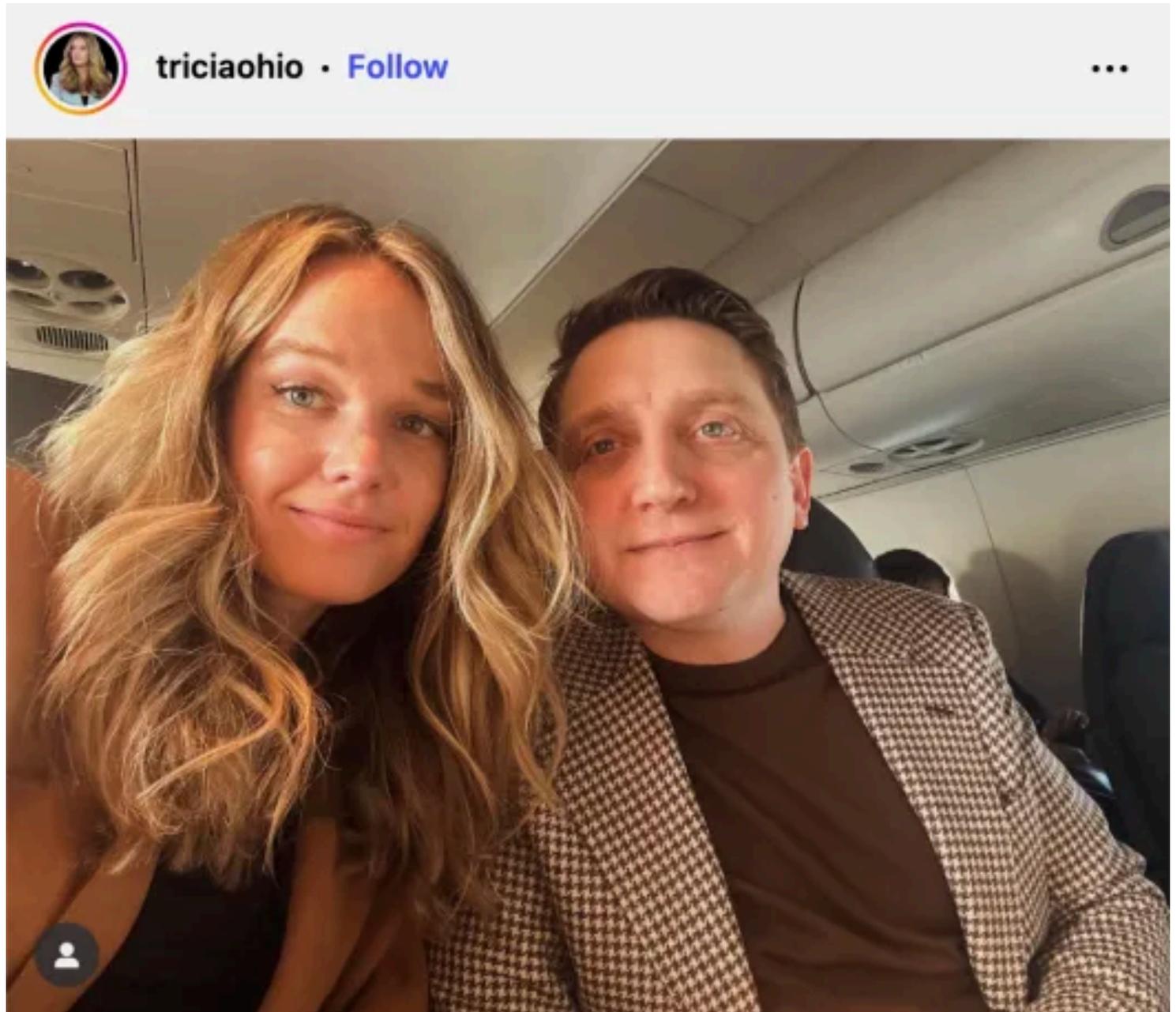
Federal regulations forbid conflicts of interest in contracting and require that the process be conducted “with complete impartiality and with preferential treatment for none.”

“It’s worthy of an investigation to ferret out how these decisions were made, and whether they were made legally and without bias,” said Scott Amey, a contracting expert and general counsel at the watchdog group Project on Government Oversight.

The revelations come as the amount of money at Noem’s disposal has skyrocketed. The so-called Big Beautiful Bill granted DHS more than \$150 billion, and Noem has given herself an unusual degree of control over how that money is spent. This summer, she began requiring that she [personally approve](#) any payment over \$100,000.

Asked about the Strategy Group’s work for DHS, McLaughlin, the agency spokesperson, said in an interview, “We don’t have visibility into why they were chosen.”

“I don’t know who they’re a subcontractor with, but I don’t work with them because I have a conflict of interest and I fully recused myself,” she said. “My marriage is one thing and work is another. I don’t combine them.” Her husband, Strategy Group CEO Ben Yoho, didn’t respond to questions.



“My marriage is one thing and work is another. I don’t combine them,” said DHS Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Tricia McLaughlin, who is married to Strategy Group CEO Ben Yoho. Tricia McLaughlin via Instagram

In a written statement, DHS said, “DHS has no involvement with the selection of subcontractors.” They added that the Strategy Group does not have a direct contract with the agency, saying “DHS cannot and does not determine, control, or weigh in on who contractors hire.”

Contracting experts said that agencies can and do sometimes require that subcontractors be approved by officials. It’s not clear how much the Strategy Group has been paid.

This is not the first time that the Strategy Group has gotten public money through a Noem contract. As governor of South Dakota in 2023, her administration [set off a scandal](#) by hiring the Ohio-based company to do a different ad campaign, paying it \$8.5 million in state funds. While the state said the contract was done by the book, a former Noem administration official told ProPublica that Noem quietly intervened to ensure the Strategy Group got the deal. ProPublica granted some people anonymity to discuss the deals because of their sensitivity.

The firm also paid up to \$25,000 to one of Noem's closest advisers in South Dakota, previously unreported records show. (The adviser, 28-year-old Madison Sheahan, now serves at DHS as the second-in-command of Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Sheahan didn't respond to questions about why she was paid.)

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The DHS ad that the company filmed at Mount Rushmore has aired during "Fox & Friends" in recent days. Executives [from the Strategy Group traveled to the shoot](#) and hired subcontractors to fill out the film crew, according to records and a person involved in the campaign. The ad's aesthetic sits somewhere between a political campaign ad and a Jeep commercial as Noem tells would-be immigrants to "come here the right way."

"From the cowboys who tamed the West to the titans who built our cities," Noem says, as images of Trump Tower in Chicago and Trump raising his fist after the assassination attempt last year flash on the screen, "America has always rewarded vision and grit." Noem continues: "You cross the border illegally, we'll find you."

Watch the DHS Ad Filmed at Mount Rushmore

0:00 / 1:00

Obtained by ProPublica

The ad is the latest in a campaign that Noem debuted in February, just a few weeks after she took charge of DHS. "Any delay in providing these critical communications to the public will increase the spread of misinformation, especially misinformation by smugglers," the agency wrote, explaining why it was skipping the competitive bidding process normally required for government contracts. The initial ads featured Noem thanking Trump for securing the border.

The contracts total \$220 million so far, leading the DHS ad budget to triple in the most recent fiscal year, according to [Bloomberg](#). The lion's share of ad contracts is typically used to buy TV airtime or spots on social media. Advertising firms make money by taking an often-hefty commission. Federal records show the contracts have gone to two firms. One is a Republican ad company in Louisiana called People Who Think, which has been awarded \$77 million. But the majority of the money — \$143 million — has gone to a mysterious LLC in Delaware. The company was created just days before it was awarded the deal.

Little is known about the Delaware company, which is called Safe America Media and lists its address as the Virginia home of a veteran Republican operative, Michael McElwain. McElwain has long had his own advertising company (separate from the Delaware one), but there's little evidence that firm could handle a nine-figure federal contract on its own: It reported just five employees when it received COVID-19 relief money a few years ago.

How, where and to whom Safe America Media doled out the \$143 million is unknown. Any subcontractors hired to do work on the DHS ads are not disclosed in federal contracting databases.

The office funding the ad contracts is listed as the DHS Office of Public Affairs, which is run by McLaughlin, contract records show. McLaughlin married Yoho, the Strategy Group CEO, earlier this year.

In its statement, DHS said the agency does its contracting “by the book” and the process is run by career officials. “It is very sad that Pro Publica would seek to defame these public servants,” DHS added.

Asked about why the agency chose Safe America Media, DHS said, “The results speak for themselves: the most secure border in American history and over 2 million illegal aliens exiting the United States.” McElwain and People Who Think didn't respond to questions.

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Yoho was still in college when he first served as campaign manager for a U.S. congressman. Now, at 38 years old, he's a national player in the cutthroat industry of political advertising. Federal election records show tens of millions in payments to his firm during the 2024 election cycle, coming from dozens of Republican congressional candidates. And Noem has proved a particularly lucrative client.

Lewandowski brought Yoho into Noem's inner circle back in South Dakota, according to two people familiar with the matter, putting the young consultant in charge of the ad side of her 2022 gubernatorial reelection campaign. Noem had a more than \$5 million advertising budget for the race, records show. After she won in a landslide, Yoho, who has called Noem a friend, came to South Dakota to attend her inauguration ceremony. He sat off to the side of the stage, next to Lewandowski. (Lewandowski didn't respond to a request for comment.)



Benjamin Yoho ✓

@BenYoho



America's Governor





Yoho shared a photo of himself with Noem and her husband, Bryon, at Noem's 2023 inauguration in South Dakota. Benjamin Yoho via X

By then, Yoho's next big project with Noem was already in the works. In late 2022, Noem was quietly preparing to launch another sprawling ad campaign — only this time, the money would come from state coffers. The stated goal was to encourage workers to move to South Dakota. The upcoming contract opportunity wasn't public yet, but Yoho was already involved in planning the campaign, according to records [first reported by Sioux Falls Live](#).

Then on Jan. 12, 2023, Yoho's company registered to do business in South Dakota under the name Go West Media. The next day, the contract opportunity went live.

Seven companies submitted proposals for the project. Then the pressure from above set in, according to a former Noem administration official involved in the process.

The former official said a top Noem aide told them the governor would be angry if Yoho's company didn't win the contract. "He was very direct: 'She wants to do it,'" they said. Contemporaneous text messages reviewed by ProPublica corroborate that senior Noem administration officials pushed for Yoho to get the contract. Eventually, he did. (In its statement, DHS denied that Noem influenced the process.)

Noem starred in Yoho's ads herself, [dressing up as a dentist](#), [a plumber](#) and [a state trooper](#) as she touted her state's growing economy. Exactly how much Yoho and the Strategy Group made off the \$8.5 million deal is unclear. Some of the money was used to purchase spots on Fox News, including one during a Republican presidential debate. Some of the money appears to have gone back to South Dakota — into the bank account of another of Noem's top advisers.



Noem in costume in ads she starred in that were produced by the Strategy Group, funded with public money in South Dakota. South Dakota Governor's Office of Economic Development via YouTube

Sheahan, now the second-in-command at ICE, was paid up to \$25,000 by Go West in 2023 for "consulting," according to a [financial disclosure document](#) Sheahan later filed. At the time, Sheahan was serving as both the operations director for Noem as governor and the political director for Noem's campaign work, according to a copy of her 2023 resume obtained by ProPublica. Her responsibilities included coordinating "daily logistics and operations" for Noem and her team, the resume said. She also managed the "relationship with high level donors" to American Resolve, Noem's network of outside political groups.

As his firm received millions from the South Dakota state government, Yoho separately continued to work for Noem in other capacities. He worked under Lewandowski on the publicity campaign for Noem's 2024 memoir, according to a person familiar with the matter. (The book became famous for including an anecdote about Noem shooting her dog.)

The Strategy Group also received a stream of payments for social media consulting and media production work over the last few years from Noem's American Resolve PAC. Federal election records show the PAC made its last payment to Yoho's company this February, a couple weeks after Noem took her post as the head of DHS.

Update, March 4, 2026: At a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on March 3, several senators [pressed Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem](#) about the Strategy Group's work on the DHS ad contracts. Later that day, the Strategy Group for the first time [released a statement](#) detailing payments it received for its work. The firm said it received only a small fraction of the millions DHS spent on the contracts. "Safe America paid us \$226,137.17 total for 5 film shoots, 45 produced video advertisements and 6 produced radio advertisements," the statement said.

Do you have any information we should know about Kristi Noem or DHS contracts? Justin Elliott can be reached by email at justin@propublica.org and by Signal or WhatsApp at 774-826-6240. Josh Kaplan can be reached by email at joshua.kaplan@propublica.org and by Signal or WhatsApp at 734-834-9383.

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