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POLITICS | POLICY

A Pilot Fired Over Kristi Noem's Missing Blanket and the Constant Chaos Inside DHS

Secretary, with close adviser Corey Lewandowski, faces fire for confrontational immigration crackdown and self-promotional style; White House to wind down Minnesota operations



Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem spoke Jan. 24 about the shooting of Alex Pretti by federal officers. AL DRAGO/GETTY IMAGES

By [Michelle Hackman](#) [Follow](#) , [Josh Dawsey](#) [Follow](#) and [Tarini Parti](#) [Follow](#)

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Kristi Noem knew she needed a reset.

It was two days after federal agents had shot and killed Alex Pretti, and Noem was facing fire from all sides. Even some inside the administration were pushing President Trump to remove her from her position for her handling of the chaotic immigration enforcement operation in Minneapolis and comments she'd made saying Pretti committed an act of domestic terrorism.

So [Noem's top adviser, Corey Lewandowski](#), messaged Trump's pollster with a request: They needed to cut an ad to help her, according to two people familiar with the episode. The pollster, Tony Fabrizio, who worked on Trump's 2024 re-election campaign, ignored the entreaty, the people said.

Throughout her tenure as secretary of Homeland Security, a sprawling agency charged with carrying out Trump's central campaign promise of a mass deportation, Noem has attempted to [burnish her personal stardom](#) at every turn. With Lewandowski, Trump's former campaign manager, at her side, she has staged a headline grabbing immigration crackdown while sidelining rivals and dissenters.

She's carried out confrontational operations [over the objections of longtime immigration officials](#) who warned such flashy displays would discredit the department's ultimate mission, according to two dozen current and former administration officials. Instead, she's made the case that her approach would lead to more arrests as well as induce more people to leave on their own.

She has donned flak jackets on ICE raids, posed toting a large gun and recorded messages urging immigrants to self-deport. In one, she stood before a group of imprisoned men with shaved heads packed into tight rows in a notorious El Salvadoran prison. And she has done it all with an eye to her style, with TV-ready hair and makeup.



Noem at the prison in El Salvador in March. ALEX BRANDON/AP



Noem at the prison in El Salvador in March. ALEX BRANDON/AP

Within DHS, Noem and Lewandowski frequently berate senior level staff, give [polygraph tests to employees](#) they don't trust and have fired employees—in one incident, Lewandowski fired a U.S. Coast Guard pilot after Noem's blanket was left behind on a plane, according to people familiar with the incident.

Simmering criticism over the past year for Noem's policies and publicity moves exploded in Minneapolis, jeopardizing her grip over DHS and putting her standing with Trump on thin ice. Though some in Trump's inner circle have tried to persuade the president to fire Noem and Lewandowski, according to administration officials, he has so far resisted, saying publicly [he has no plans to dismiss her](#). Lawmakers from [both parties have been critical](#), and Democrats in Congress are demanding changes to the department's enforcement methods, [threatening to withhold DHS funding](#).

Eventually, the president put White House border czar Tom Homan in charge in Minnesota. Homan has long advocated a less conspicuous approach to immigration enforcement, and on [Thursday, he said he would be winding down the immigration operation there](#).

Now, Noem and Lewandowski have embarked on a rehabilitation tour.

The pair worked to hastily solidify their relationship with the president, successfully requesting [an Oval Office meeting with Trump](#) two days after the Pretti shooting. Noem's team quickly scheduled a series of press conferences on other matters, including an event highlighting airport security in Miami and an announcement about the border wall in Arizona.

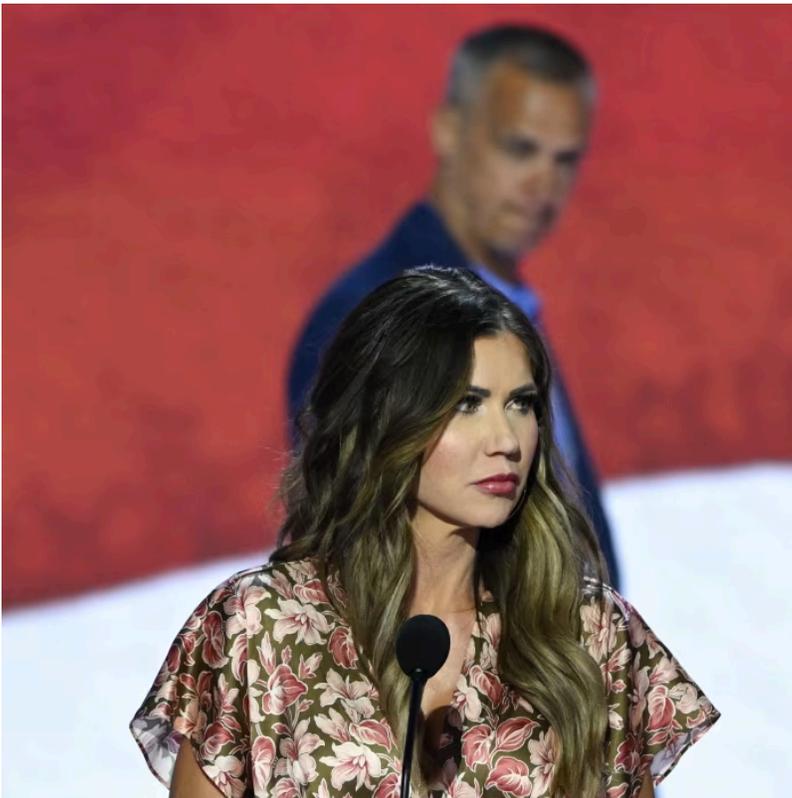
Days after Pretti's shooting, the pair were spotted sitting together at the Mar-a-Lago wedding of Dan Scavino, a longtime political adviser to Trump, and the president also attended the wedding. Noem and Lewandowski mingled with top administration officials at the reception.

A DHS spokeswoman said Noem serves at the pleasure of the president and has successfully clamped down on inefficiencies to save billions of dollars, calling her efforts "a roaring success." She said all officials are on the same page and in agreement on the president's immigration crackdown. She also said Lewandowski's Jan. 26 text to Fabrizio was about "messaging."

Noem and Lewandowski's close relationship had already made Trump and his top advisers uncomfortable. Lewandowski had initially wanted to formally serve as Noem's chief of staff, but Trump rejected the idea due to reports of a romantic relationship between the two—which he has continued to bring up, officials say.



Noem and Lewandowski at an event before the Republican National Convention in 2024. ANDREW CABALLERO-REYNOLDS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



Noem and Lewandowski at an event before the Republican National Convention in 2024. ANDREW CABALLERO-REYNOLDS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

After photos in the Daily Mail showed Lewandowski going back and forth between his apartment and Noem's across the street last year, the secretary moved into a government-owned waterfront house on a military base in Washington that is provided to the leader of the U.S. Coast Guard. The Coast Guard falls under Noem's purview at DHS during peacetime. Lewandowski also spends time at the house.

The DHS spokeswoman said Noem moved to the house for increased security and pays rent.

Lewandowski and Noem, who are both married, have publicly denied the reports of an affair, but people said they do little to hide their relationship inside the department. The DHS spokeswoman said the department "doesn't waste time with salacious, baseless gossip."

The pair have lately been using a luxury 737 MAX jet, with a private cabin in back, for their travel around the country, according to people familiar with the matter. DHS is leasing the plane but is in the process of acquiring it for approximately \$70 million. DHS has previously used other planes through the Coast Guard or other agencies for the secretary's use.

The purchase would be double the cost of each of seven other commercial planes the department is also buying at the pair's direction to carry out deportations. In official documents, the luxury plane

is earmarked for “high-profile deportations,” the people said. Staff have jokingly started referring to it as the secretary’s “big, beautiful jet,” after the bill that provided the funding for it.

The DHS spokeswoman said the plane was used for both deportations and cabinet-level travel. She said it was cheaper than military aircraft for deportations and saved American taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars.

The department [rarely uses military flights for deportations](#) because they are instead using chartered planes.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said the president continues to have full confidence in Noem. “President Trump and Secretary Noem have ensured the most secure border in our Nation’s history, and our homeland is undoubtedly safer today than it was when the President took office last year,” she said.

On Friday, the day after this article was published, Trump said he still has confidence in Noem in response to a reporter’s question. “Yeah, I do,” he said. “We have safe borders, we have low crime numbers. The answer is yeah.”

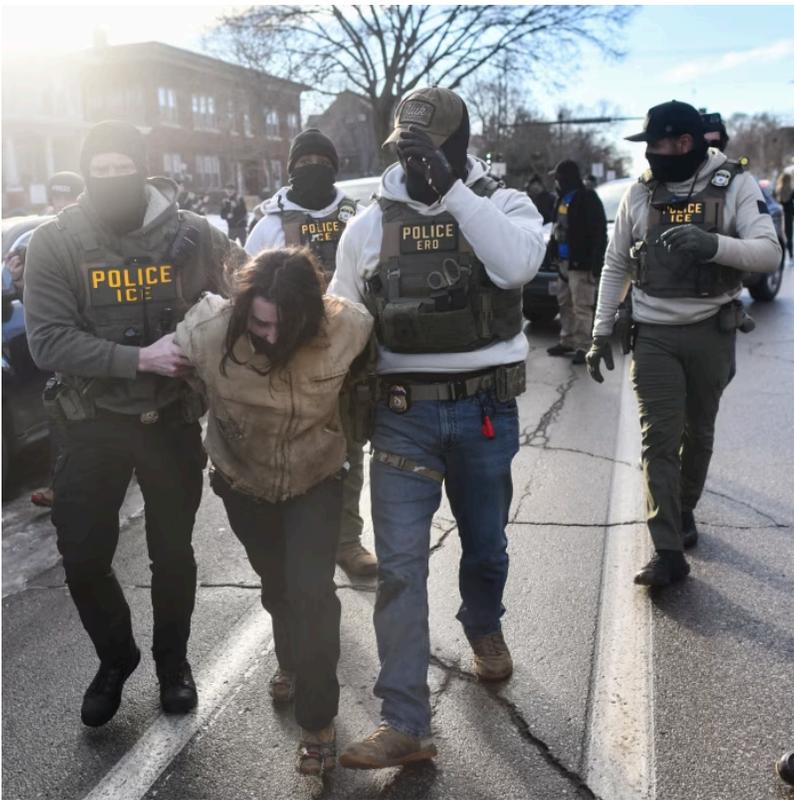
An outsize role

Behind the scenes, Noem and Lewandowski have attempted to curry favor with Trump and box out rivals, including Homan.

For months, Noem and Lewandowski had demanded that ICE capture its arrests on video for social media—the more dramatic, the better. But more than a week after Pretti’s shooting, Noem and Lewandowski berated Todd Lyons, the acting ICE director, for videos that emerged in Minnesota showing federal officers continuing to tangle with protesters, according to people familiar with the conversation.



ICE and other federal officers detained a person during protests in Minneapolis on Jan. 13. OCTAVIO JONES/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



ICE and other federal officers detained a person during protests in Minneapolis on Jan. 13. OCTAVIO JONES/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

The [president hated the continued stream of videos](#), they told Lyons, whom they pinned the blame on. They demanded that he draw up a new plan for ICE to carry out targeted enforcement, an approach Lyons had been advocating all along, according to ICE officials, but that the pair had previously eschewed.

Noem, who previously served as governor of South Dakota and had little experience in immigration policy before becoming secretary, got the job in part because of a quiet lobbying effort by

Lewandowski, who began advising her in 2019 and helped build her national profile.

Lewandowski took Noem to functions with Republican kingmakers, introducing her as a rising star in the party. He suggested her to others as Trump's vice president in 2024. After failing at that, Lewandowski pushed for her to get the [DHS post](#), a role viewed as central to Trump's agenda and one he believed could be a launchpad for a potential 2028 presidential bid.

Officials at DHS said they believe the pair see DHS as a steppingstone to an even bigger perch.

As Trump's first campaign manager in the 2016 election, Lewandowski has a long-term relationship with the president, who values his loyalty and considers him a friend. Though White House officials have been frustrated with Noem and Lewandowski's leadership, they know his closeness with the president makes it hard for them to make changes at DHS, officials said.



Lewandowski with Donald Trump during the campaign in 2015. CHARLIE NEIBERGALL/AP



Lewandowski with Donald Trump during the campaign in 2015. CHARLIE NEIBERGALL/AP

After he was denied the job of Noem's chief of staff, Lewandowski settled on a role as a special government employee, a designation under federal ethics law that allows private-sector employees to take advisory roles in government without relinquishing their outside salaries and investments, but caps government service at 130 days in a year, and generally is used for experts working on a specific project.

Lewandowski has taken on a much more expansive role than the status typically allows, directing personnel and contracting and handling classified information. In emails and on other paperwork, he uses the title chief adviser to the secretary.

Lewandowski's outside role at the department drew enough concern from administration officials that the White House Counsel's Office opened an inquiry into Lewandowski's potential abuse of the special government employee role last year.

Officials reported a much lower number of days that Lewandowski had worked to the counsel. Lewandowski was avoiding swiping into the building to stay under his service limit, according to department officials. No action was ultimately taken, and Lewandowski's SGE status was renewed for this year, according to administration officials.

Department spending

Noem and Lewandowski's management of DHS resources in particular has caused concern inside and outside the administration. Noem has put all department spending over \$100,000 under an approval process that has held up contracts across DHS, which is flush with recently appropriated billions from the president's major legislative package last year, the "one big, beautiful bill."

The approval process has given Noem and Lewandowski an opportunity to play a bigger role in the department's spending decisions than is typical for a secretary. Given Lewandowski's continuing business interests in the private sector, his role in awarding contracts has raised alarm bells inside the White House and DHS.

Several officials inside the department said contracts and grants are being awarded in an opaque and arbitrary manner, and some are being held up without explanation.

Lewandowski has urged officials to move away from continuing long-term contracts with companies toward new ones. Some said allies of Noem and Lewandowski also instructed high-level staff to meet with particular companies for services that other contractors have previously carried out.

Lewandowski is in full compliance with the Office of Government Ethics forms, and Noem's contract approval process has helped root out waste, fraud and abuse, the DHS spokeswoman said.

In Georgia, top officials in Republican Gov. Brian Kemp's office had to call top DHS aides to get money approved for disaster aid, according to a person familiar with the matter, who said White House officials and others in the administration said they didn't know why money was being held up.

Florida officials have also struggled to secure money for months for their work building "Alligator Alcatraz," a tent camp built on a swamp in the Florida Everglades, where ICE has been detaining several thousand immigrants, lobbyists and officials said. Lawmakers from both parties have complained repeatedly about Noem not returning calls, White House officials said.



Trump and Noem at the 'Alligator Alcatraz' detention center in July. ANDREW CABALLERO-REYNOLDS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

The DHS spokeswoman said Noem hadn't missed any calls from the governors of Georgia or Florida.

Rodney Scott, the commissioner of the U.S. Customs and Border Protection, has told administration officials that Noem and Lewandowski have mismanaged the construction of the border wall, another of Trump's top immigration priorities, according to people familiar with the matter. The project received a \$46.5 billion infusion from Congress in 2025 that must be spent by 2029.

One of the contracts, for bulk steel, sat on Noem's desk for approval for so long that from the time the deal was struck in December until it was signed Feb. 10, the price of steel went up more than \$100 million, some of the people said. A senior administration official said Noem blamed Scott for the wall's delay in a conversation with Trump earlier this year.

At one point last year, Scott grew so frustrated that he told Lewandowski he wouldn't take any more orders from him, since Lewandowski's 130 days had passed, the people familiar said.

The DHS spokeswoman said such a conversation didn't happen, and she said Noem has awarded more than \$12 billion in contracts for border wall construction.

Sidelining rivals

Around Christmas, Noem and Lewandowski retaliated against Scott. They reassigned his chief of staff and pressured his deputy to resign, replacing both with officials close to them. They didn't give explanations for the moves.

Scott told advisers he saw the moves as an effort to make him so uncomfortable that he would leave his post, since, as a Senate-confirmed official, he wasn't able to be fired directly by Noem, according to people familiar with the conversations.



Rodney Scott, the commissioner of the U.S. Customs and Border Protection, spoke with Noem present at the U.S.-Mexico border in Arizona on Feb. 4. OLIVIER TOURON/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Scott had also tangled with Noem and Lewandowski over their elevation of Greg Bovino, a Border Patrol official who led the combative operations in Minneapolis and Chicago, and who, on paper, should have reported to him. Scott objected to being cut out of the process—and warned them Bovino's brash tactics would backfire on the whole department. The entire unit reported directly to Noem.

After the Pretti shooting, Bovino was sent back to his posting in El Centro, Calif., and Scott was one of the officials sent to Minneapolis to help lower the temperature.

When he arrived in Minneapolis, Noem called Scott again and reiterated her policy. Nothing had changed, she said. He had no power over day-to-day decision-making at the agency, and could do nothing other than be in Minnesota, she told him, according to people familiar with the matter.

Since taking office, the secretary has also closely monitored how her national profile compared with other administration officials. Top of her list was Homan, Trump's border czar, with whom she has been in a battle for power and influence inside the administration.

Noem routinely berated staff if she saw Homan on TV and kept track of both their appearances to make sure she was on TV more than him, according to people familiar with the matter. On at least one occasion, she asked aides to ensure she drew a bigger crowd at a conference than Homan, who was speaking on a different day, one of the people said.

The DHS spokeswoman said this was false.



White House border czar Tom Homan spoke in Minnesota on Jan. 29. BEN BREWER/BLOOMBERG NEWS



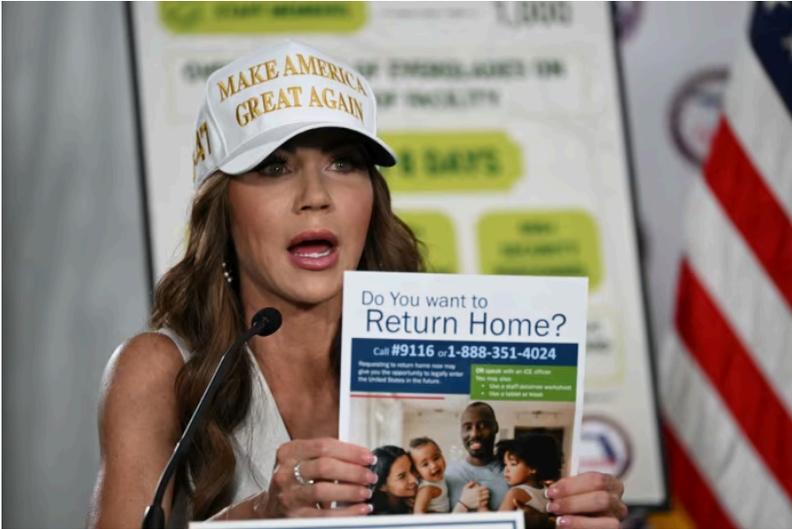
White House border czar Tom Homan spoke in Minnesota on Jan. 29. BEN BREWER/BLOOMBERG NEWS

Homan rarely speaks to the secretary and has complained repeatedly to White House officials about her and Lewandowski.

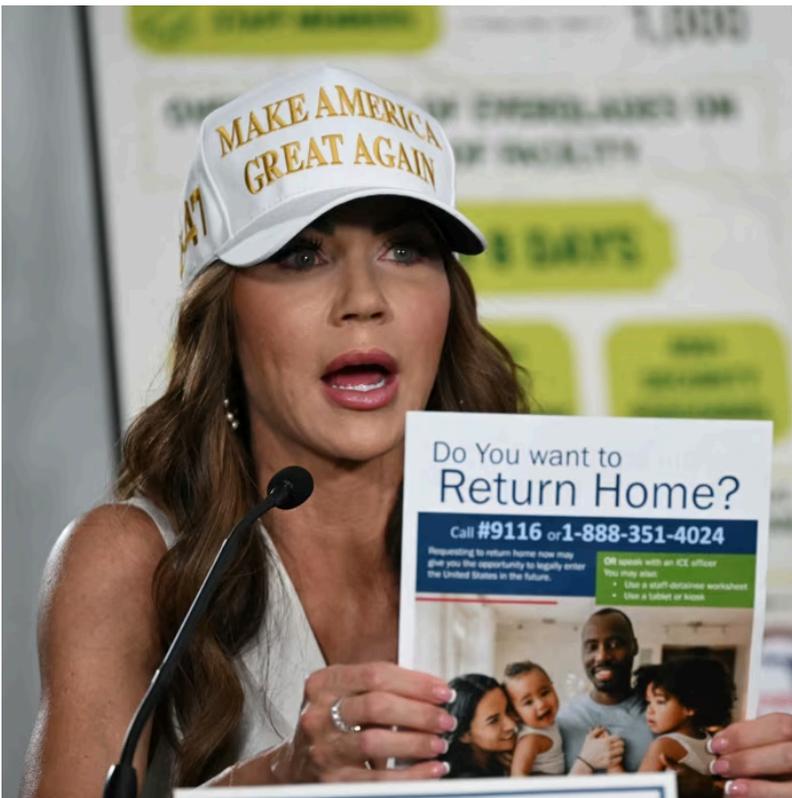
White House officials have grown angry that Noem and Lewandowski have declined to take guidance on events, messaging and management of the agency. Several senior administration officials described DHS as the biggest headache thus far of the second term.

Early in the administration, Noem allotted \$200 million from the department’s budget to air an ad campaign featuring her warning immigrants in the country illegally—in English—to “leave now.”

The campaign annoyed Trump, who questioned White House staff about where the secretary found the money for the barrage of ads, according to a person familiar with the discussions.



Noem encouraged migrants to ‘self-deport’ in July. ANDREW CABALLERO-REYNOLDS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



Noem encouraged migrants to ‘self-deport’ in July. ANDREW CABALLERO-REYNOLDS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

The ads rankled many inside the administration because they believed the campaign was more focused on her than the administration’s message, and signaled Noem’s own presidential

aspirations.

The secretary refers to internal meetings at DHS with subagency heads as “cabinet meetings,” which some staff see as further evidence, according to people familiar with the meetings.

The DHS spokeswoman said it was correct to call the meetings “DHS component cabinet meetings” and said the ad campaign was coordinated with the White House and has been “tremendously successful.”

Crisis management

As the operation in Minneapolis grew more tense, Noem began to look for ways to emphasize her leadership of agencies within DHS that are unrelated to immigration enforcement.

Noem, a staunch critic of FEMA who has advocated for the disaster-response agency to be drastically downsized, shocked the agency’s staff when she showed up to its Washington headquarters for her first in-person briefing on Jan. 23, staff said.

At one point early last year, Lewandowski had screamed at Cameron Hamilton, the FEMA administrator at the time, for not supporting Noem’s efforts to dismantle the agency more quickly, people who heard the comments said.

Noem walked in and demanded a full-throttle response to an approaching winter storm that threatened to blanket much of the country, which was unusual given her hands-off approach to every other storm, the staff said.

Much of 2025 had been dedicated to shifting responsibility to the states for disasters, as the agency reduced its footprint. But suddenly, staff were being instructed to reach out to states and see what they needed.

Staff were also told not to use the word “ice” in any public messaging about the winter storm because they didn’t want any connection to the increasingly unpopular immigration operation in Minnesota, FEMA staff said.

After [holding up funding for various disasters in states for a year](#), Noem quickly approved \$2.2 billion in public assistance in late January, with DHS putting out a press release touting how the secretary had unlocked the money.

On Jan. 24, also at FEMA headquarters, Noem addressed the Pretti shooting that had taken place that day at a press conference, while trying to keep the focus on the storm and her response management. Staff hastily arranged emergency kits and hard hats as props around the lectern ahead of her remarks on the shooting.



Noem spoke at FEMA headquarters on Jan. 24. JULIA DEMAREE NIKHINSON/AP

The DHS spokeswoman said FEMA was now faster at getting funds and assistance to states, communities and survivors. She said the agency uses accurate descriptors of weather conditions to communicate clearly.

In a cabinet meeting at the White House after the Pretti shooting, the president avoided mention of the operation in Minneapolis. Trump, who usually hears from all his cabinet members in a long, freewheeling meeting, bypassed Noem, as he called on others to speak. Noem watched in silence.

In recent days, Noem has made appeals to Republicans to write op-eds backing her, according to people familiar with the matter. In one such op-ed, titled “America Needs Kristi Noem’s Leadership,” published in Newsweek on Jan. 29, Louisiana Gov. Jeff Landry, an ally of Noem’s who attended her swearing-in ceremony, praised the secretary’s role in helping states prepare for the recent winter storm.

The DHS spokeswoman said Noem didn’t ask for supporters to write op-eds.

A blanket and a badge

Within DHS, Noem and Lewandowski have cut employees or put them on administrative leave. The pair have fired or demoted roughly 80% of the career ICE field leadership that was in place when they started.

In the blanket incident, Noem had to switch planes after a maintenance issue was discovered, but her blanket wasn't moved to the second plane, according to the people familiar with the incident. The Coast Guard pilot was initially fired and told to take a commercial flight home when they reached their destination. They eventually reinstated the pilot because no one else was available to fly them home.

The DHS spokeswoman didn't address the episode but said the secretary has "made personnel decisions to deliver excellence."

In an incident last year that rankled some senior staff at the agency, Lewandowski made it known to top ICE officials that he wanted to be issued a law-enforcement badge and a federally issued gun, according to people familiar with his push. Officials are typically only issued a badge and a gun after undergoing law-enforcement training.

The administration was preparing to bring on Tom Feeley, a former top ICE official in New York, as its new director when Lewandowski asked Feeley if he would be willing to issue him and several other political officials badges and guns. Feeley declined, and he was subsequently passed over for the top job at ICE.



Lewandowski at a Pentagon event on Sept. 11, 2025. ANDREW HARNIK/GETTY IMAGES



Lewandowski at a Pentagon event on Sept. 11, 2025. ANDREW HARNIK/GETTY IMAGES

Lewandowski next turned to ICE’s legal office for help writing him a legal justification to be issued the badge and gun. A top ICE lawyer, Ken Padilla, also declined to sign off, and days later he was placed on administrative leave. He was later demoted and moved to FEMA, the people said. Padilla declined to comment.

Lewandowski eventually persuaded other lawyers to sign off. The ICE director’s autopen was used to sign the paperwork, the people said.

The DHS spokeswoman denied that Lewandowski made efforts to secure a federal gun or signed paperwork, adding that Lewandowski didn’t talk to Feeley and that Padilla was put on administrative leave for unrelated reasons. The spokeswoman didn’t address any efforts to get a badge.

Efforts to issue Lewandowski a gun stalled after The Wall Street Journal and other news organizations inquired about the incident last year, the people said. Still, Lewandowski has been spotted by DHS staff sporting a badge, emblazoned with the words “Homeland Security.”

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