



Katie Miller and Elon Musk near the White House earlier this month. ALEX BRANDON/AP

## **The Trump Staffers Who Get Paid by Private Clients**

‘Special government employees,’ including many who drive policy, aren’t required to publicly disclose potential conflicts or give up outside work or investments

By Josh Dawsey, C. Ryan Barber and Katherine Long  
Feb. 25, 2025

Katie Miller, a top aide to Elon Musk at the Department of Government Efficiency, spends much of her time on White House grounds, helping Musk plan and communicate his efforts to slash the federal government.

But she also spends time working for P2 Public Affairs, a major Republican consulting firm in Washington, which pays her full salary. She has continued to work for Fortune 100 clients, including Apple, offering public relations advice, according to people familiar with the matter. Since starting at the White House, Miller has also helped P2’s leaders pitch the firm to new clients for lucrative contracts, offering her guidance about Washington in this moment. Her husband is White House Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller, among the most powerful advisers in the administration, controlling all domestic policy.

She's one of a set of influential Trump employees who are working for the administration while simultaneously doing private-sector work.

They carry a three-letter designation that allows them to wear both hats: "SGE," or special government employee. It's a status under federal ethics laws that permits private-sector employees to work inside the government without having to relinquish their outside salaries or investments. Only a sliver of cases must publicly disclose clients or potential conflicts of interest. While the rules limit work to up to 130 days in any given year, it can be extended if the administration desires.

Others with the status include Steve Witkoff, who is handling peace talks between Ukraine and Russia and in the Middle East, Corey Lewandowski, now a top aide at the Department of Homeland Security, and Musk himself. Top officials such as Musk, Miller and Witkoff aren't receiving government pay, and it wasn't known if any SGEs are.

SGEs have been around since the early 1960s, when Congress first enabled administrations to bring in outside experts without requiring them to leave their positions in academia or the private sector. The designation has typically been used to allow subject matter experts to sit on advisory boards or serve in narrow, specialized roles without giving up their jobs, as regular government employees are required to do.

But the Trump administration has used the status in a way never before seen, installing multiple people at top levels who are setting U.S. policy.

Some ethics experts have accused the administration of using the loophole to permit enormously powerful government workers to shield their finances from public scrutiny. They say that presents opportunities for corruption, and threatens to blur the line between private enrichment and public service.

"This is just taking this loophole to an extreme," said Richard Painter, a University of Minnesota law professor who served as a top ethics lawyer for President George W. Bush. "Special government employees hide their finances from the public, so people can't find out about the extent of their potential conflicts of interest."

The special government status is more appropriately used for part-time service on government boards and commissions, he said, or for expertise on a narrow subject area. "This is a false use of the SGE status," he said.

The clients of P2, Miller's firm, include some of the world's most powerful technology companies and other businesses, along with LIV Golf, the Saudi Arabia-backed golf league that plays tournaments at Trump courses. Apple CEO Tim Cook recently met with President Trump in the Oval Office, and LIV Golf chairman Yasir Al-Rumayyan called in for a meeting with Trump and the head of the PGA Tour.

Miller is also working for Jeff Miller, who isn't related, another prominent Washington lobbyist who represents a swath of corporate America and was a major fundraiser for Trump's 2024 campaign. He has paid Katie Miller through P2 to handle his publicity, the people said.

Karoline Leavitt, the White House press secretary, said it was "standard practice" to hire special government employees "based on their outside experience, for a limited period of time."

"President Trump's SGE's are highly-talented and well-respected businessmen and women, policy experts and communications professionals who are bringing a depth of experience and knowledge to help the president implement his agenda," Leavitt said, adding that they are "abiding by all applicable federal laws."

Miller declined to comment on her specific clients and work in the Trump administration. P2 declined to comment. Apple and LIV didn't respond to requests for comment.

### **Key policymakers**

A White House official said there are 13 SGE employees working within the White House, along with others across the federal government.

Other SGEs include David Sacks, who advises Trump on cryptocurrency and AI policy and is co-founder and partner of Craft Ventures, a venture-capital firm. Trump's faith adviser, Paula White, has the status while running her ministry and giving speeches. Senior digital adviser Ory Rinat, who helped create the Trump White House's website and still works for the administration, has had a wide-ranging career as a digital communications consultant for corporate and political clients.

The government doesn't release regular data on how many employees are SGEs, but a 2016 Government Accountability Office report found that from 2005 and 2014, the federal government employed an average of around 2,000 SGEs a year, excluding those serving on federal boards.

Previous administrations have also been criticized for relying on SGEs. Huma Abedin, Hillary Clinton's deputy chief of staff at the State Department, was an SGE for a time while she worked for Teneo, a consulting firm. That arrangement drew the ire of Republican Sen. Chuck Grassley, who said at the time that the designation is for "technical outside expertise rather than for a current government employee's convenience or desire for outside employment." Abedin didn't respond to a request for comment.

Anita Dunn, a top aide to President Joe Biden, held the title while keeping her ties to SKDK, a Democratic consulting and lobbying firm, drawing some criticism from ethics experts.

"I entered the Administration on a temporary basis to help with the transition and the beginning of the government. When I returned to the government in May 2022, I did so as a full time employee and not as an SGE," Dunn wrote in an email.

In the Trump administration, SGEs have extensive ties in the corporate sector and are driving some of the country's most important policies.

Musk embodies the overlap between the administration and the private sector. The world's richest person continues to helm Tesla and SpaceX while simultaneously serving as a special government employee advising the president, a role the White House confirmed in a legal filing.

As the driving force behind DOGE, he wields unprecedented power to overhaul the executive branch with few restrictions. At the same time, his space company has extensive government contracts, and Trump's policies on electric vehicles could have a significant impact on Tesla's profits.

Amid questions about Musk's official role, the White House on Tuesday identified Amy Gleason as acting administrator of DOGE. Trump signed an executive order on his first day in office saying his administration would name a DOGE administrator who would report to the White House chief of staff.

Witkoff is negotiating with Russia over the Ukraine war—which could include mineral rights for the U.S. valued at billions of dollars—and is also working on a Middle East peace plan.

He has kept his vast real-estate portfolio while planning a major summit of real-estate developers at the White House to rebuild Gaza.

Leavitt, the White House spokeswoman, said Witkoff will soon divest from his entire real-estate portfolio to avoid any conflicts in his new role.

Lewandowski, who has consulted for an array of private-sector clients, joined Homeland Security last month as an SGE. Lewandowski is personally close to Kristi Noem, the secretary, and has sat in on her hiring interviews and in policy meetings. Lewandowski didn't respond to a request for comment.

The SGE designation is ultimately approved by the White House chief of staff's office, according to people familiar with the matter. The office has been generous in granting approvals in the Trump administration, particularly with many Trump advisers not wanting to divest from companies, divulge their private-sector ties or take a large pay cut, the people said.

While SGEs aren't generally required to file public financial disclosures, federal law still compels them to privately disclose potential conflicts of interest to the Office of Government Ethics. That office earlier this month issued a legal advisory reminding non-SGE presidential appointees they aren't legally allowed to receive outside compensation.

Five days later, Trump fired the ethics director, David Huitema, who had been confirmed last year under the Biden administration for a five-year term.

A White House official said the White House Counsel's Office vetted the SGE hires for potential conflicts and said the counsel's office has instructed the employees that they can't participate in White House discussions that affect their private business.

### **Clustered in DOGE**

Many SGEs are clustered around Musk and his cost-cutters in DOGE, which isn't an actual department but is rather a White House initiative to cut spending and increase efficiency. Musk recruited business associates and employees of his own firms for the effort, some of whom continue to work for Musk in the private sector as they work for him as government employees.

Steve Davis, a longtime Musk deputy at SpaceX who now serves as the president of Musk's underground tunneling and transportation firm The Boring Company, is leading DOGE's cost-cutting initiatives. Earlier this month—while in the midst of DOGE initiatives—The Boring Company signed an agreement with Dubai's transit authority to begin work on an underground shuttle system in that city. Davis and The Boring Company didn't respond to requests for comment.

Another longtime Musk associate at The Boring Company, Riccardo Biasini, who works as a senior adviser in the Office of Personnel Management, has been copied on emails from his Boring Company colleagues as recently as Feb. 14, according to documents received in response to a Nevada public records request. Biasini didn't respond to a request for comment.

James Burnham, who founded King Street Legal, is a top lawyer at DOGE and an SGE. He has been in charge of vetting DOGE's moves into government agencies and occasionally has told DOGE employees what they can't legally do, according to people familiar with the matter.

Burnham, who served as a top Justice Department official in Trump's first term, has withdrawn from cases while on leave from his law firm, court filings showed.

Tom Krause, the CEO of Cloud Software Group, is working with DOGE as a fiscal assistant secretary in the Treasury Department, overseeing a system that processes trillions of dollars in payments annually.

Krause has flown across the country, meeting with Treasury officials and overseeing cuts, according to people familiar with the meetings.

"I want to share with you that in addition to my duties as CEO of Cloud Software Group, I am advising the US Department of Treasury as a 'special government employee,'" Krause wrote in an email to employees in early February. "I am honored to serve our country. Let me be clear—as CEO of Cloud Software Group, I am committed to our company and you, our employees."

Krause didn't respond to a request for comment. A spokesperson for Cloud said Krause and the company are "committed to upholding the highest ethical standards and are operating

consistent with the strict provisions in place for special government employees to ensure there are no conflicts of interest.”

### **Deep ties**

Miller has floated in and out of Trump’s orbit since 2017, when her husband became Trump’s top immigration guru and speechwriter in the White House. She worked previously as a spokeswoman for Vice President Mike Pence and worked at Homeland Security in the first administration. During the transition, she helped Robert F. Kennedy Jr. in his confirmation process. Trump advisers said she has become a powerful figure in the administration.

When she and Stephen Miller were married at the Trump International Hotel in Washington in March 2020, the president attended the wedding, along with cabinet secretaries and top Trump administration officials.

P2, the firm that Katie Miller works for, is headed by two prominent Republicans, Phil Cox and Generra Peck. The firm touts itself to potential clients as a Republican powerhouse with deep ties in the White House, Congress and elite Washington circles. The firm has offices across the country.

The firm’s top operatives began working with Musk last year to boost Trump’s bid for the presidency, orchestrating the moves of Musk’s political group, America PAC. Miller became the main interlocutor between Musk and his team and Trump’s campaign, developing a relationship with Musk in the process.

After Trump’s win, Miller became a hot commodity as an employee in Washington. She had ties to the White House through her husband; to Musk, the world’s wealthiest man; and also to Kennedy, who would become the Secretary of Health and Human Services.

She decided to stay at P2, after discussing jobs with other lobbying firms. The firm’s leaders have often touted Miller’s work for the firm to clients and potential clients. Miller is listed as a principal on the firm’s website.

When Musk came into the administration, Miller followed. She was with him on Inauguration Day and has frequently been with him since, sitting in the Oval Office and smiling as Musk talked on a recent afternoon about his work, his young son accompanying him.

The firm, people close to its leaders said, is busier than ever.



Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick boarding Air Force One last month. BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

## **Lutnick's Strategy Flummoxes Business Leaders and White House Aides**

Some executives have come away from meetings with the commerce secretary confused and exasperated

By Josh Dawsey  
April 7, 2025

WASHINGTON—Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick has tried to sell President Trump's trade agenda to American companies for months. Business leaders say they are often confused about what he wants.

Lutnick has played a supersize role in Trump's first months in office, driving tariff discussions, meeting with dozens of business leaders, appearing on television and often standing alongside Trump.

The former Cantor Fitzgerald chief executive has come to frustrate executives and senior White House officials, who have come away from interactions with Lutnick exasperated, according to roughly a dozen people who have interacted with him.

In private meetings with business leaders, Lutnick has browbeat executives to support Trump's tariffs, while at other times expressing sympathy and telling them he wants to help their companies. Lutnick has taken contradictory positions on key issues, including on whether certain imports should be exempted from tariffs, executives say.

Lutnick, 63 years old, is running point on Trump's disruptive and combative trade agenda, which has rocked the stock market and unsettled governments around the world. When Trump unveiled his far-reaching tariffs last week it was Lutnick standing next to him in the Rose Garden, holding the large chart that explained the punitive measures against dozens of countries. It will also be Lutnick attempting to manage the economic fallout, Trump aides say, amid growing predictions that Trump's trade agenda could tip the U.S. into a recession.

Frustration with Lutnick is spilling over into public view as the stock market plummets, with hedge-fund manager Bill Ackman, a Trump ally, criticizing him on social media. The irritation at Lutnick partially reflects the challenge of representing a president known for making last-minute policy U-turns.

Lutnick has been responsible for several of the administration's most unorthodox ideas—some of them unvetted by staff—and his TV appearances have proven so challenging to White House officials that he was asked to curb them last month, according to senior administration officials.

He has openly mused about wanting to run for elected office himself, people who have spoken to him say.

Trump has asked why Lutnick is at the White House so often, and he has grown frustrated with his commerce secretary at times, advisers said, particularly when Lutnick grows emotional in White House meetings. White House officials said he is at the White House more than any other cabinet secretary.

"Secretary Lutnick has always been a staunch defender of President Trump's America First agenda, and his immensely successful private-sector career makes him an integral member of and communicator for the President's trade and economic team," said Kush Desai, a White House spokesman. "The entire Trump administration is playing from the same playbook—President Trump's playbook—to restore American Greatness from Main Street to Wall Street."

Benno Kass, a Lutnick spokesman, declined to comment.

Lutnick, who has long been an associate of Trump's on Wall Street, frequently touts his relationship with the president, telling associates they once caroused at Studio 54 in Manhattan, according to people who have heard his comments. Some White House advisers say he has exaggerated their closeness.

Lutnick has hosted fundraisers for Trump in the Hamptons and he co-chaired Trump's presidential transition team, helping to identify personnel for hundreds of open jobs across the government. In the weeks before Trump took office, Lutnick lobbied to become Treasury secretary, but lost out to investor Scott Bessent. During the transition, he clashed behind the scenes with some senior advisers to Trump, people familiar with the matter said.

He often speaks like Trump, saying what is on his mind with a New York brashness. "We are the sumo wrestler of this world," Lutnick said on CNN last week, explaining how the U.S. wouldn't be bullied by other nations.

"Lutnick has sent the message that he is going to amplify the message of everything Trump says and serve as an ambassador to the public of the Trump brand. The broader view is he's amplifying Trump, not curbing him," said Kevin Madden, a longtime Republican strategist.

Asked if that is working, Madden pointed to the stock market: "You see the Dow ticker today."

### **Mangoes and lilies**

Business executives have left their interactions with Lutnick wondering whether he adequately understands Trump's thinking. Last month, Lutnick met with oil executives who were concerned about how the tariffs might be designed and wanted exemptions from Trump's duties. But Lutnick said he didn't want industry-specific exemptions, people at the meeting said. It would be like picking one lily from a field of lilies, Lutnick said, according to an attendee.

In the same meeting, he said there would be some exemptions on imports of products like mangoes that couldn't be domestically produced at the level needed to meet U.S. demand, the people said. When Trump rolled out the tariff plan on Wednesday, there were no exemptions for mango imports. And Trump did give an exemption to the oil industry.

Before a call between Trump and American auto executives last month, Lutnick told the executives they needed to be supportive of Trump and not critical of his policies or antagonistic in their questions, according to people with knowledge of the call. After delaying a meeting with top automaker CEOs earlier this year, Lutnick asked them to get on a video call so he could show them he was traveling with Trump on Air Force One, people briefed on the call said.

He has repeatedly told executives that he is in charge of the tariff portfolio and that they don't need to deal with others in the administration, industry officials say. Lutnick often dominates the calls with long riffs, people on the calls say. At times, some executives say, Lutnick has been aggressive on calls.

At one point, he told steel executives that he wanted to help push through a deal for U.S. Steel to be bought by a foreign company. But later, he said he no longer could help make the deal happen, frustrating some involved, according to people familiar with the matter.

Those who have observed him say Lutnick has a knack for telling people what they want to hear.

In meetings with senators ahead of his confirmation, he sometimes delivered conflicting messages about trade. If a senator expressed concerns about tariffs and local industries that could be hurt, Lutnick told them not to worry about it, the people said. Tariffs are going to be used sparingly and would be targeted. In meetings with more Trump-aligned senators, he praised tariffs and stressed how important they were, people familiar with the meetings said.

Lutnick has told associates he joined the government out of a desire to help the president, noting that he could afford to leave his lucrative private-sector job because he has already amassed vast wealth.

The night he was confirmed, he threw a party at his opulent Washington mansion, complete with a putting and chipping green, a heated pool, a floor-to-ceiling wine display and a spa. He bought the house for \$25 million from Fox News anchor Bret Baier.

### **'Like President McKinley'**

At a reception with executives last month, Lutnick said he came up with the idea for the Department of Government Efficiency and encouraged Trump to be more expansionist "like President McKinley," a person who heard his comments said. Trump has mused about acquiring Greenland, taking back control of the Panama Canal and making Canada the 51st U.S. state.

People close to Trump have sometimes been annoyed by Lutnick's propensity for proposing ideas to the president that haven't yet been vetted, according to three White House officials.

White House aides grew frustrated when Lutnick went on television and called for eliminating income taxes for those making under \$150,000 a year. White House staff later learned that he had talked about the idea at a private dinner with Trump, and the president seemed to like it, officials said. Members of Congress flooded the White House with questions: Was this going to be a new policy? It wasn't, White House aides assured them.

White House staffers were also stunned when Lutnick went on Fox News in February and said the administration wanted to abolish the Internal Revenue Service. Several Trump aides said Lutnick hadn't seemed to think through how the public might interpret the commerce secretary calling for the closing of the IRS in the middle of tax season.

Lutnick has promoted the idea of a "gold card," which would grant wealthy foreigners permanent U.S. residency for \$5 million. Lutnick said the idea came out of a call between Trump, investor John Paulson and himself. Some in the White House have privately raised concerns that the idea is unworkable or potentially violates the law, but Trump loves the cards, which are emblazoned with his face. Lutnick has said he is already selling them.

He has weighed in on topics far afield from commerce, particularly on immigration, senior administration officials said.

Trump so far seems to be sticking by him. As the president flew on Air Force One to Florida late last week, Lutnick appeared with Trump during a question-and-answer session with reporters.

“The tariffs give us great power to negotiate,” the president said. “They always have.”

Lutnick had put it differently one day earlier during a televised interview: “The president is not going to back off,” he said.



Stephen Miller spoke at an April event in Warren, Mich., marking President Trump's first 100 days in office. JEFF KOWALSKY/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

## **Stephen Miller's Fingerprints Are on Everything in Trump's Second Term**

The deputy chief of staff has played an outsize role in immigration—and amassed more power than almost anyone else at the White House

By Josh Dawsey and Rebecca Ballhaus  
June 20, 2025

Stephen Miller wanted to keep the planes in the air—and that is where they stayed.

When a federal judge in March told the Trump administration to turn around flights of deported migrants headed to El Salvador, senior officials hastily convened a Saturday evening conference call to figure out what to do.

If they didn't return the passengers, they would be defying a court order, some administration officials worried. Miller, who is President Trump's deputy chief of staff, pushed for the planes to keep flying, which they ultimately did. The judge would later say that allowing officials to defy court judgments would make a "solemn mockery" of the Constitution.

The 39-year-old immigration hawk, who has been by Trump's side since the 2016 campaign, has emerged as a singular figure in the second Trump administration, wielding more power than almost any other White House staffer in recent memory—and eager to circumvent legal limitations on his agenda.

He has his own staff of about 30 and a Secret Service detail, which White House officials said was because he had received death threats and serves as homeland security adviser. He has been responsible for the administration's broadsides against universities, law firms and even museums. He has written or edited every executive order that Trump has signed.

Miller had considerable sway in Trump's first term. But when aides at the time suggested promoting Miller to a leadership role at the Department of Homeland Security, Trump declined, according to a former administration official, telling aides he thought Miller wasn't leader material.

His influence has expanded sharply since, thanks largely to his steadfast loyalty to Trump. This account of Miller's tenure is based on interviews with current and former White House officials, Trump advisers and other prominent Republicans.

Some of Miller's colleagues said they were alarmed by some of the legal maneuvers that Miller has proposed for executing the administration's anti-immigrant agenda, and Trump has gently ribbed him for being too "happy" about deportations.

Miller, who isn't a lawyer, is the official who first suggested using the wartime Alien Enemies Act to deport migrants, which the Justice Department pursued. He also privately, then publicly, floated suspending habeas corpus, or the right for prisoners to challenge their detention in court, which the administration hasn't tried. That prompted pushback from other senior White House and Justice Department officials.

His orders to increase arrests regardless of migrants' criminal histories set off days of protests in Los Angeles. Miller coordinated the federal government's response, giving orders to agencies including the Pentagon, when Trump sent in the Marines and the National Guard, according to officials familiar with the matter.

Miller's portfolio covers almost every issue Trump is interested in. In recent months, he talked to CEOs about a coming tariff announcement; joined a meeting between Meta Chief Executive Mark Zuckerberg and Trump about the company's antitrust case; and met with other tech companies on artificial intelligence.

Even some posts at cabinet agencies have been described by administration officials as reporting directly to Miller, effectively bypassing cabinet secretaries.

There are some limits to his influence. He was supportive of Meta's push to settle its antitrust case, which fell flat. Trump last week signaled concerns that the administration's deportation

policies were too aggressive, calling for a pause in some deportations that he has since rolled back. Trump, asked how Miller's directives on deportations squared with his own, declined to put distance between the two of them. "We have a great understanding," Trump said.

The aggressive posture has started to spark some voter backlash, with polls showing Trump's approval rating on immigration and deportations has turned negative.

Several White House staffers said Miller always takes the most "extreme" view of any issue, and his positions have cost the administration in court. In Trump's first 100 days back in office, courts issued nationwide injunctions in 25 cases against the federal government, compared with six in his entire first term and four during the Biden administration, according to a report by the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service. Several cases have already reached the Supreme Court, which has ruled against Trump on some immigration cases.

"I think the administration has miscalculated and overstepped," said Skye Perryman, who leads Democracy Forward, an organization that has repeatedly sued Trump.

Miller has responded to the courts' intervention by denouncing it as "judicial tyranny." His allies argue illegal border crossings are down to almost zero because his aggressive proposals are deterring migrants.

"Stephen Miller is one of President Trump's most trusted and longest serving aides for a reason—he delivers," said Karoline Leavitt, the White House press secretary.

### **In the wilderness**

Miller stuck by Trump when many staffers quit their jobs after the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol. He had helped draft Trump's speech that morning, and worked until 12 p.m. on Jan. 20—the day Trump's first term ended—telling the officer taking his badge he would be back in four years.

"Sixteen Hundred Pennsylvania Avenue is the greatest address in the world, and though we now leave these gates, rest assured, this is not goodbye," he wrote to colleagues.

Three months later, Miller launched a nonprofit, America First Legal, aimed at countering what Miller described as a "years-long, one-sided legal assault" by the left. "Now, we must turn the tables," he said at the time.

Over the next four years, it filed dozens of lawsuits, many of which are ongoing, categorized on its website under topics including "DEI," "Woke Corporations" and "Women's Sports." The group's targets are now under fire from the Trump administration, too.

In 2022, the group called on the Education Department to stop distributing federal funds to universities where it alleged antisemitism was festering. Three years later, the Trump administration would do just that at universities including Harvard, Columbia and Northwestern.

In 2024, Miller's group helped 16 Republican-led states sue the Biden administration over a policy that protected illegal immigrants married to U.S. citizens from deportation. A judge ruled in the states' favor, and the Trump administration overturned the policy this year.

By the time Trump returned to the White House, the group had about two dozen lawyers on staff and had raised more than \$60 million from donors, whose identities it doesn't disclose. The group paid Miller more than \$500,000 last year, according to his financial disclosure.

Meanwhile, Miller continued to play an active role across the Republican Party, even if his outreach wasn't always welcome.

Congressional aides fielded lengthy calls from Miller about illegal immigration, often without any specific requests. One likened him to a grandmother who wouldn't stop talking and said his calls were akin to listening to a podcast. Others said he would call to scold aides about how they had framed a social-media post on a particular issue or criticizing the way they had worded a press release.

As a House committee prepared for then-Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas to testify, Miller came to the Hill to play the role of Mayorkas, aides said. During the prep, he answered questions as the secretary—but also chimed in to give lawmakers advice on questions.

Miller was determined to kill a bipartisan bill pushed by Republican Sen. James Lankford of Oklahoma in 2024 on the border and regularly called House Speaker Mike Johnson.

He also called the Republican National Committee to offer his advice on how the party should communicate on immigration, sometimes offering his thoughts on what the RNC chairman could tweet, people familiar with the discussions said.

He was a regular visitor to Mar-a-Lago during the campaign, meeting with Trump above his ballroom. Campaign aides say Miller always wanted to talk more about immigration. Trump's top pollster, Tony Fabrizio, and his other aides wanted to keep the message on the economy. Trump staffers started displaying ominous photos of migrants at his events.

### **Hundreds of orders**

In the first term, Trump was largely unprepared to govern. Miller regularly complained then that others in the administration tried to block his immigration decisions, and outside lawyers would stymie their efforts. This time, Miller came in determined to correct that.

He brought hundreds of proposed orders to the White House as well as his own staff. Russell Vought, the onetime treasurer of America First Legal, is now the White House budget chief. Reed Rubinstein, the group's senior vice president, was nominated as legal adviser of the State

Department. Matt Whitaker, a board member, is the U.S. permanent representative to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

He now tells other staffers how to behave around Trump, people who have heard his comments say, and upgraded his office from one on a different floor to one steps from the Oval Office.

During the first term, Miller would push for hard-line policies that others blanched at, including advocating for several dozen countries to be added to the travel ban list of seven, a former administration official said. People laughed, but he was serious, the official said. This time, Trump announced a ban that covered a dozen countries.

He keeps in Trump's good graces by giving Trump ideas—but more importantly, helping the president carry his own out.

Administration officials noted how Miller shut down discussion about whether the U.S. should bomb Houthi targets in a Signal chat that was accidentally shared with The Atlantic's editor in chief. As the vice president and top national security officials discussed options, Miller weighed in.

“As I heard it, the president was clear,” Miller said. “Green light,” he added.

Earlier this month, Leavitt, the press secretary, interviewed Miller at a private event for Republican donors at the Four Seasons in Washington.

Miller, who grew up in Santa Monica, Calif., said large swaths of Los Angeles were engaged in a “rebellion,” according to people present.

Los Angeles had become like Cancún, he said—it was fine to visit, but not good for its own citizens. To conclude the event, Leavitt told the crowd that Miller needed to return to his work of deportations.

Miller smiled in response, and then left to return to the White House.



Marine One departing the White House last month. ANDREW LEYDEN/ZUMA PRESS

## **Trump, Feeling Emboldened, Pushes Agenda Into Higher Gear**

Recent moves reflect commander in chief who has seemingly faced little resistance to his ambitious agenda

By Josh Dawsey

Oct. 10, 2025

President Trump began mass layoffs of federal workers. He threatened a dramatic increase in tariffs on China. And he flexed his control over the Justice Department once again, as his newly appointed U.S. attorney in eastern Virginia obtained an unusual indictment against the New York attorney general that Trump had demanded over the objections of career prosecutors.

That was just in the past 48 hours. On Sunday, Trump heads to the Middle East to sign a deal he helped clinch to end the fighting in Gaza.

All of these actions reflect a buoyed commander in chief who feels emboldened to go further after feeling as though he has faced surprisingly little resistance to his ambitious agenda in the

first nine months. He has even remarked to aides that he is shocked how easy it has all proven to be.

While the war in Ukraine continues to bedevil Trump, causing him the most frustrations, he doesn't face the discontent, sniping and disagreements that characterized his first term, said David Urban, a longtime ally. "This time, he's having way more fun," Urban said.

The bespoke gifts from business executives in Trump's White House tell the story of just how different his second term has been from the first: a circular glass plaque from Apple set in a gold base, a gilded TV remote, a General Motors mock-up of the presidential limousine, a large model of a jet fighter, and a gold chain.

"Everyone's on my side now," Trump told advisers this summer. "They were fighting me last time."

It is a sentiment Trump has expressed regularly since taking office in January, according to advisers.

A lot of Trump's agenda so far has been a combination of following his own impulses and surrounding himself with people who won't try to stop him. In the first administration, defense officials dissuaded Trump from sending the military into cities, and Justice Department officials largely kept their distance from the White House and pursued investigations—even into Trump. Business leaders were regularly critical of the administration. A number of senior staffers left and painted a scorching portrait of the White House.

This time, he is attempting to deploy armed forces on U.S. soil to "restore law and order," his Justice Department has charged two of his enemies, and cabinet members and chief executives are going out of their way to praise him regularly, even standing for applause when he enters a room.

Inside the White House, top advisers joke that they are ruling Congress with an "iron fist," according to people who have heard the comments. Steve Bannon, the influential Trump ally, likened Congress to the Duma, the Russian assembly that is largely ceremonial. When senior White House aide Stephen Miller recently held a party at the exclusive Ned's Club to celebrate his 40th birthday, House Speaker Mike Johnson (R., La.) showed up to honor Miller, the people said.

Bannon, who worked in the first Trump administration, attributed some of the faded resistance to Trump's comeback after four years "in the wilderness," a period that he said hardened Trump. "He's doing things now he wouldn't have ever considered the first time," Bannon said. "He's jackhammering away on levels you haven't seen before."

A number of Trump's initiatives are tangled up in court, but that hasn't slowed him. "What he is doing now are things that we warned could happen, but he's taking it to an extreme level more

quickly than most of us imagined he would,” said Adrienne Elrod, a Democratic strategist who worked for Hillary Clinton and Kamala Harris.

Industry executives have flooded the White House with so many meeting requests that sometimes top business officials meet with middle- or junior-level staff. In the first term, administration officials said that some executives wanted to stay away from Trump or meet with him privately.

Trump expressed amazement at times at how many law firms were striking deals with him and how much money he could quickly raise for a White House ballroom from companies that wanted access to his administration, among other things. He is holding a dinner for ballroom donors in the coming days, aides said.

Karoline Leavitt, the White House press secretary, said Trump “has an exceptional cabinet and team of advisers who truly believe in his agenda and are enthusiastic about executing on it.”

She added: “The President clearly has incredible instincts, which helped lead him back to the White House for a second term, and everyone on his team embraces his instincts, decision-making, and the top-down leadership approach that was often wrongly rejected during his first term.”

Several executives said they had discussed opposing some of Trump’s policies, including tariffs. Before a meeting with Trump and the Business Roundtable this year, some executives discussed how to quietly confront the president and question his policies, people with knowledge of the discussions said. But when Trump showed up, no one asked tough questions.

This time, officials in the Office of Public Liaison—the group that works with the business community—have told business leaders they are tracking who is being critical, and are grading businesses on how supportive they are to the agenda, people familiar with the comments said.

Business officials frustrated at the administration’s charging \$100,000 for an H-1B visa have largely stayed quiet, lobbyists said, even as they seethe in private.

Trump’s attacks against particular companies, ordering them to fire employees or change policies, have sent shock waves through much of corporate America, said four lobbyists with close ties to the administration.

“I don’t think anyone wants to suffer the consequences of any public comment whatsoever that might be interpreted as an excuse to go after them,” said Kathryn Wylde, the chief executive of the Partnership for New York City, a business group.

In Congress, some lawmakers privately didn’t want to name this year’s spending package the “Big Beautiful Bill,” but agreed to Trump’s demands. When he has called Republicans to tell

them to vote for questionable nominees, they have largely acceded. Some GOP lawmakers who wanted to release the Jeffrey Epstein files backed down after getting calls from top Trump aides.

Members grew increasingly scared of being on Trump's bad side after watching him successfully defeat so many senators and representatives in primaries, and watching him torpedo the speaker bid of Rep. Tom Emmer (R., Minn.) with a single post. He has demanded cuts that curbed Congress's ability to regulate spending, cutting billions that Congress had already approved, to little outcry.

"People laying down their arms on the most jealously guarded power that Congress has tells you a lot about what people think their likelihood is of being successful in fighting back," said Brendan Buck, a political strategist and onetime top aide who served under Speaker Paul Ryan.

In Trump's first term, aides kept Robert F. Kennedy Jr. from working on an antivaccine effort after he met with Trump at Trump Tower. This time, Kennedy is his health and human services secretary, and Trump is willing to go even further.

Minutes before Trump in an Oval Office news conference repeatedly instructed pregnant women not to take Tylenol and offered his thoughts on changing the childhood vaccine schedule, Kennedy tried to talk him out of making such broad proclamations about childhood vaccines, advisers said.

Trump didn't listen and instead said he believed the schedule needed to change. He later posted more thoughts on what vaccines that children should take, startling White House aides and officials at the Department of Health and Human Services who are months away from trying to formalize such changes. The company that makes Tylenol was so taken aback by his comments that executives came to the White House later to present evidence.

Trump has been unmoved. He told aides that his news conference on Tylenol got lots of attention.

White House and health officials sought to delay or limit pharmaceutical tariffs as they negotiated drug-price deals with Pfizer and other companies. But Trump, prodded by a visit from Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick, announced tariffs on pharmaceutical products, surprising economic advisers across the government and top White House officials, people close to Trump said.

A Commerce Department official said Lutnick believed the tariff threat was essential to drug companies' coming to the table on pricing. A spokesman at HHS didn't respond to requests for comment.

Trump has occasionally faced resistance, including on his interior-decorating tastes. When he brought a towering statue of Abraham Lincoln into the Oval Office, he asked aides what they

thought. After facing some criticism, he had it removed. On other fronts, he has laughed at those who question the need for ubiquitous gold—and put more up.

He had a wall torn down near the Oval Office as he redesigned his private space, advisers said.

When he went to dinner for the first time at Joe's Seafood, Prime Steak & Stone Crab near the White House, protesters got into the restaurant and heckled him. Allies had tried to reserve the area around him, blocking any protesters or would-be critics. After the event, White House officials tried to learn how the demonstrators knew to come inside, and came to suspect a staffer at the restaurant.

Trump recently had Joe's again after raving about the steak, officials said. This time he ordered takeout.



James Blair has been described as intense and fiery. AL DRAGO/BLOOMBERG NEWS

## **Trump's Enforcer Is Little-Known White House Aide With Enormous Influence**

James Blair plays role in advancing president's legislative agenda, shaping midterms strategy

By Josh Dawsey  
Dec. 24, 2025

WASHINGTON—President Trump was fed up.

During a meeting with GOP lawmakers at the White House over the summer, Trump berated House Freedom Caucus Chairman Andy Harris for raising concerns about the president's signature tax-and-spending legislation. Trump demanded that Harris fall in line—then the president abruptly left the room, according to people who attended the meeting.

With Trump gone, Harris turned his ire to James Blair, one of the president's top advisers. Harris accused Blair of wanting to find a Republican primary challenger to unseat him.

"I just work for the president, sir," Blair responded, according to the people in the room. It wasn't a denial.

Blair, a bald 36-year-old Florida operative who colleagues describe as intense and fiery, has become a critical figure in Trump's second term—cajoling lawmakers, enforcing loyalty to Trump, shaping the president's messaging on healthcare and the economy, and orchestrating the White House's strategy for next year's midterm elections. His fingerprints are so evident on the GOP's redistricting plan that some White House aides refer to it as "Blairymandering."

Blair's title—deputy chief of staff—belies his influence. He was among seven senior officials, including the vice president and secretary of state, who represented the administration in a recent Vanity Fair photo shoot. He described himself to the publication as a "junkyard dog."

"The president relies on him tremendously," Russell Vought, director of the Office of Management and Budget, said in an interview.

Blair has, so far, mostly kept Republicans in lockstep behind Trump. He helped secure passage of Trump's tax-and-spending package, limiting GOP defections and winning the support of Harris and other conservatives. In a statement, Harris said that "disagreements are not unusual during high-level negotiations," and called Blair's work "commendable." A Harris spokeswoman disputed that the congressman raised the prospect of a primary challenge during the White House meeting.

But there are big challenges ahead. Blair is trying to stave off heavy Republican losses in the midterms amid deep voter frustration over Trump's handling of high prices and resistance from his boss to recalibrating his economic message.

Blair is working to prevent fissures in the Republican Party from deepening. And he will have to persuade skeptical Republicans and courts to buy into his efforts to remake congressional maps.

### **No longer a 'stiff'**

Blair was brought onto Trump's 2024 presidential campaign by then-campaign manager Susie Wiles, who now serves as White House chief of staff.

Wiles and Blair previously worked for Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and later grew estranged from him after they were pushed out early in the governor's first year in office. One of Blair's first jobs for Trump during the 2024 primary was to attack DeSantis, often using information about the governor he gleaned from working for him.

After the assassination attempt on Trump in July 2024, Blair sometimes brought a bulletproof vest and gun to work, former campaign aides recalled.

Blair didn't initially have a close relationship with Trump, who told aides at the time that he was a "stiff." But Trump got to know Blair after the election and now talks to him regularly, according to White House officials.

Blair is hard-charging, prone to swearing and constantly on his phone, according to people who know him. Some in Washington call him the “Oracle” because of his encyclopedic knowledge of data. His sentences often begin with: “The president wants...”

“There is a reason that President Trump calls his White House Deputy chief of staff ‘Brilliant James,’” White House spokeswoman Karoline Leavitt said.

Blair has sometimes embraced the role of bad cop, delivering tough-to-swallow news to lawmakers. He told Republicans with concerns about the president’s tax-and-spending package that a vote against the legislation would be a vote against the president and his agenda and it would be treated as such, according to people familiar with the conversations. It was viewed by some lawmakers as a threat.

He often counsels Republican lawmakers about how they should vote, how they should run campaigns, when they shouldn’t seek higher office and when Trump is angry, the people who know him said. He reminds lawmakers that Trump is more popular in their districts than they are, sometimes bringing in polling to bolster his point. As Trump has pushed to nix the filibuster, Blair has privately met with senators in recent weeks to pitch potential changes and see whether they would reconsider, people at the meetings said.

Blair has begun giving advice to members on affordability that doesn’t always square with Trump’s public messaging, saying the issue will be at the center of the midterms.

### **‘Not a lot of deference’**

Blair’s tactics have rankled some on Capitol Hill. Members have privately complained about how the White House doesn’t seem to understand Congress is a coequal branch of government. Some Republicans have announced retirements rather than face re-election, and others are considering retirement, senior Hill Republicans said.

Retiring Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene expressed frustration to White House officials earlier this year that Blair and the White House legislative-affairs team were dismissive toward her, according to a person who heard the complaints. Her office didn’t respond to requests for comment.

“There is not a lot of deference” to Congress, said Erick Erickson, a conservative activist and radio host. “There’s a lot of, ‘Here’s what we are going to do, and you better get on board.’”

In a written statement, Blair quoted from prepared remarks former President John F. Kennedy was set to deliver in Dallas on the day he was assassinated: “There will always be dissident voices heard in the land, expressing opposition without alternatives, finding fault but never favor, perceiving gloom on every side, and seeking influence without responsibility.”

Blair has pressured members in competitive districts to run for re-election after learning that they were planning to retire or seek a different office. At times, the conversations have turned heated.

He discouraged Rep. Mike Lawler, a New York Republican, from running for governor in the state, and he advised Rep. Bill Huizenga against running for Senate in Michigan, according to people familiar with the matter, angering Huizenga. A spokesman for Huizenga declined to comment.

“Is he blunt? Sure. That’s a good thing as far as I’m concerned. One of the problems in Washington is that too many people are meek,” Lawler said. Blair said he was “extremely grateful” that members listened.

In recent months, Blair has turned his focus to the midterms. He delivered a PowerPoint presentation on particular races and strategies to White House aides and Trump advisers at Camp David. And he has interviewed candidates for dozens of potential races, asking questions about their loyalty to Trump, whether they support the president’s agenda, and how they plan to win.

Blair has described himself to associates as “pretty far to the right,” but he sometimes presents the president and his team with data showing the potential political vulnerabilities of the administration’s policies.

He has briefed White House officials on polling that shows immigration raids that focus on deporting criminals would be more popular than far-reaching raids. He gave Trump charts recently that showed how pessimistic many Americans were about the economy and pushed the president to talk about how he could help. He has argued internally that the White House and Trump will pay a political price if they don’t have a plan to take on healthcare costs, according to people who have spoken to him.

In April, Blair presented the president with an aggressive plan to redraw congressional maps in a bid to keep Republican control of the House. The plan was audacious, but Trump liked it and told Blair to go on offense, according to people familiar with the meeting.

Blair has tracked votes across states, kept tabs on court rulings, huddled with lawmakers in various states and worked in his personal time with outside groups to build political support for the president’s plans.

The campaign has had mixed results. In some states such as Kansas, Republican lawmakers have defied the White House, surprising even their Democratic colleagues, according to House Democratic Leader Brandon Woodard. In states such as Texas, Trump has captured a more favorable map. But that spurred states such as California to redraw their maps.

For weeks, Blair pressured Indiana lawmakers, including Republican state Senate leader Rodric Bray, to support a Trump-backed congressional redistricting plan in the state. In a phone call the

night before a vote on the plan, Blair accused Bray of playing games and working against Republicans, according to a person with knowledge of the conversation. Bray told him that redrawing the state's maps wasn't appropriate.

"They have been loyal Trump supporters and when you start threatening them and going after them, it doesn't show an understanding of your audience very well," said Marc Short, a former Trump official turned critic.

Bray wasn't swayed, and Indiana lawmakers rejected the plan. Now, Trump allies are threatening not to back the state's Republican leaders in primaries.



The president agreed to make marijuana a Schedule III drug. EVAN VUCCI/AP

## How Trump Became the Unlikely Champion of Easing Marijuana Restrictions

Concerted lobbying push by a cannabis CEO, a Florida sheriff and a Mar-a-Lago member helped persuade the president

By Josh Dawsey  
Dec. 27, 2025

After a two-hour Oval Office debate about marijuana in December, President Trump overrode some on the religious right, White House aides and senior Republican lawmakers and decided to reschedule the green leaf as a lower-level drug.

Trump watched as Kim Rivers, the CEO of Trulieve, a Florida-based marijuana company, Gordon Smith, a Florida sheriff, and Howard Kessler, a Mar-a-Lago member and longtime Trump friend, argued the president should reschedule marijuana, according to people with knowledge of the meeting. It was time to open the door for medical research and improve access to cannabidiol products, they argued.

House Speaker Mike Johnson (R., La.) on speakerphone urged the president against the decision and senior aides warned the move could be dangerous to some Americans.

After listening, Trump, a teetotaler who eschews alcohol and drugs, sided with the pro-marijuana camp and delivered the biggest softening of federal cannabis policy since U.S. states began legalizing recreational marijuana in 2012.

“It was a little surreal,” Rivers said in an interview.

The decision to reschedule marijuana from a Schedule I drug to a Schedule III drug followed an aggressive 18-month lobbying campaign by Rivers. The CEO and her company cut large checks to Trump’s political groups, attended at least three fundraisers, repeatedly raised the issue with White House aides and hired influential lobbyists.

Rivers’s efforts delivered the marijuana industry one of its biggest victories. In addition to making medical research easier, the order is expected to eliminate tax burdens that have made profitability an uphill battle for many cannabis companies. Cannabis executives say the order will help normalize the business environment for marijuana sellers and improve access for buyers.

“The president heard from many different people on this issue and ultimately felt it was the best policy and political decision to make for the country. On all issues, the president is the final decision maker,” said White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt.

Conservative and religious leaders, such as the Faith and Freedom Coalition’s Ralph Reed, had asked the White House not to reclassify the drug, saying it could be a gateway to other drugs and didn’t fit with the president’s agenda. Reed and allies argued medical studies had not shown health or medicinal benefits.

Heidi Overton, a top aide on the conservative domestic policy council, repeatedly weighed in against it, including in the meeting where Trump made the decision, people with knowledge of the meeting said. Through a spokeswoman, she declined to comment.

Some White House officials, including deputy chief of staff James Blair, told Trump that many Republicans were opposed, and aides showed him a letter signed by 22 senators urging against it, White House officials said.

“The only winners from rescheduling will be bad actors such as Communist China, while Americans will be left paying the bill,” the senators wrote.

Leavitt, the White House spokeswoman, said that “it’s Blair’s job to convey to the president what the Hill thinks, and what the politics are, on every issue.”

For many months, the policy seemed on hold. Rivers first met with Trump on marijuana in summer 2024, when she cut a seven-figure check to a political group helping him, people

familiar with the meeting said. Trump then supported a referendum allowing recreational marijuana in Florida.

Trump also said on the campaign trail that he would reschedule the drug, but it wasn't in his first slate of executive orders. Some in the industry grew frustrated, believing Trump's staff was stalling.

Rivers hired lobbyists close to Trump, including Brian Ballard and Nick Iarossi. The lobbyists pitched conservatives to write positive op-eds about the marijuana push, among other things, and generate support within the administration. White House officials described Rivers as particularly aggressive in making her case. Trulieve gave another \$750,000 to the inauguration.

After Trump indicated to Rivers and other donors at a New Jersey fundraiser this summer that he would follow through on rescheduling the drug, industry officials were hopeful. That fundraiser was billed at \$1 million a guest. Behind the scenes, White House officials expressed frustration, people familiar with the matter said, and Trump waffled when publicly asked about rescheduling days later.

Rivers didn't give up, and again came to a golf fundraiser for Sen. Lindsey Graham (R., S.C.) in November. She and Trump spoke briefly, and she asked for a White House meeting.

"When I'm there, it's a natural conversation topic—he asks me about business and how things are going," Rivers said of the fundraiser. "The president has been very consistent on this issue."

Rivers's efforts appeared to be bearing fruit when Trump invited her to the Oval Office to make her case. She was met in the Oval by Overton, who disagreed, and Trump didn't make a final decision.

A follow-up meeting was scheduled, and Rivers asked Gordon Smith, the sheriff of Bradford County—a small county in northern Florida between Jacksonville and Tallahassee—to join her. She also brought two cancer survivors and a Duke University professor. Smith had introduced Trump at a rally about a decade ago and had become one of the first conservative sheriffs to endorse recreational marijuana use.

Inside the Oval Office, Trump talked with Kessler, a financial executive who has advocated for medical cannabis, and others about expensive properties in Palm Beach, donations to the White House ballroom and a golf course he wanted to renovate in Washington, Smith recalled. Trump gave opinions on appearances from daughter-in-law Lara Trump on Fox News and talked about Sylvester Stallone's climbing trees and hurting his back.

"Some of the conversation was way above my pay grade," Smith said.

Kessler didn't respond to requests for comment.

Trump reviewed polling on rescheduling and said he had heard from many people—including boxer Mike Tyson—that he should reschedule. He continually reiterated they were not legalizing it. Smith said Dr. Mehmet Oz, who leads Medicaid and Medicare, Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, and White House chief of staff Susie Wiles also watched the debate. Wiles left early. At one point, Trump zeroed in on Smith.

“He turned to me and said, ‘Sheriff, what do you think?’ ” Smith’s brother, a military veteran, had been helped by medical marijuana, he said, and he believed it was safer than alcohol and other substances. The sheriff’s concern, he said, was fentanyl-laced marijuana that killed people.

When Speaker Johnson called in, the president put him on the phone with the sheriff, who tried to persuade Johnson. “It’s a gateway drug,” Johnson argued, according to the sheriff. Smith said Johnson was a “nice guy” and he answered Johnson’s questions. Another person familiar with the meeting said Johnson cited studies and research. Oz argued for rescheduling as Schedule II, Smith and others said.

Johnson declined to comment through a spokesman.

The president said Democrats should have rescheduled the drug “because it was really a Democratic issue.” The Biden administration started the process of reclassifying pot last year, but didn’t finish. After about two hours, Trump said he was going to reschedule the drug and said he wanted to post on Truth Social, the sheriff recalled. Trump said he wanted everyone on board.

“The lawyers and his staff, they started yelling, ‘No sir, you can’t yet; there’s a 30-day period, it’s gotta go through this and that,’ ” Smith said. “They had to stop him from posting.”

Trump then instructed the sheriff and staffers to go into another room and put together an executive order. Trump wanted to put the “real story of why we are doing this in the order,” Smith said.

“I was in awe of the whole thing,” he said.

Trump invited Smith to come back the next week and see him sign the order, but Smith said he couldn’t—he had to attend an execution in Florida that evening. Trump told others that Rivers had pushed him to do it, said people familiar with the matter.

Announcing the order from the White House podium on Dec. 18, Trump thanked Kessler, saying, “We have people begging for me to do this, people that are in great pain. I have probably received more phone calls on this, on doing what we’re doing.”