

The Trump Staffers Who Get Paid by Private Clients

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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.
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