



GOP donor funds South Dakota National Guard deployment to Texas border

Christopher Wilson

June 30, 2021

South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem announced Tuesday that she was deploying 50 members of the National Guard to Texas to help with what she called a “national security crisis” on the southern border.

Noem is one of a number of Republican governors who recently pledged to send troops to the border, but a line in her announcement raised eyebrows: “The deployment will be paid for by a private donation.”

This method of funding is, at the very least, extremely rare. A spokesperson for the National Guard Bureau told Yahoo News they were not aware of any states that have ever claimed to have used private donations to fund a National Guard deployment, but that it was possible it had happened previously.

The money for the deployment is coming from Willis Johnson, a Tennessee billionaire and major GOP donor. It’s unknown how much Johnson, who founded the vehicle auctioning company Copart, gave to South Dakota, but he said he did so to help protect America.

“God gave America to us and God can take it away,” Johnson told Talking Points Memo in an interview. “If our people don’t protect it, then I don’t know what’s gonna happen.”

A spokesperson for Noem said she had the authority to accept Johnson’s money under state law “if she determines doing so is in the best interest of the State.”

When asked when the troops would deploy and what they would be doing at the border, a spokesperson for the South Dakota National Guard said they were not able to provide details due to “operational security.”

State Sen. Reynold Nesiba, the Democratic whip, told Yahoo News Wednesday afternoon that his staff informed him it was a \$1 million donation from the Willis and Reba Johnson's Foundation to cover the troops. Nesiba said it was unclear whether the donation was solicited, if any other promises were made between Noem and Johnson or what would happen if the funding ran out before the deployment was complete. Nesiba said there was "no question" Noem had the ability to deploy the Guard but that the state had enough funds to pay for the deployment without the Johnson donation.

"Whether it was intended to be this way or not, it looks like we're allowing a donor in Tennessee to hire our Guard to go and really pursue a partisan, political endeavor," Nesiba said, adding that he would be proposing legislation to close the loophole that would make it clear the state's troops were "not for sale or rent."

Noem, first elected in 2018 after serving in the U.S. House, has previously clashed with the Biden administration over immigration. When the federal government was looking into foster care programs and shelters to house migrant children, Noem said they wouldn't be welcome in her state, tweeting, "South Dakota won't be taking any illegal immigrants that the Biden Administration wants to relocate. My message to illegal immigrants ... Call me when you're an American."

The border has become a political flashpoint as Republicans blame President Biden for the surge in migrants. Texas Gov. Greg Abbott welcomed former President Donald Trump to the border for a visit on Wednesday. Earlier this month, Abbott announced he would be continuing the construction of a wall along the border, using state funds to start the project but soliciting private donations.

Abbott was joined by fellow Republican Gov. Doug Ducey of Arizona in a June 10 letter calling for support from the other 48 states to address the crisis. "Securing our border with Mexico is the federal government's responsibility," read the letter. "But the Biden Administration has proven unwilling or unable to do the job."

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott and former President Donald Trump during a briefing in Weslaco, Texas, on Wednesday to discuss the southern border wall. (Brandon Bell/Getty Images)

The National Guard Bureau told Yahoo News that while a number of service members have been deployed along the southwest border under control of the Department of Defense, the South Dakota troops that Noem is planning to send will work with the Texas National Guard.

"The South Dakota National Guard is mobilizing a contingency of service members as a force multiplier in support of Operation Lone Star," the Texas Military Department told Yahoo News, referring to an initiative Abbott launched in March.

In the month of May, Border Patrol agents "encountered 180,034 people attempting entry along the Southwest Border," U.S. Customs and Border Protection said on its website. During the Trump administration, border encounters hit a high of 132,856 in May 2019, according to CBP

data. BuzzFeed News reported this week that the number of migrants detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement has grown during Biden's time in office.

The overwhelming majority of migrants who attempted to enter the U.S. this spring were turned away under Title 42 — a health care provision, utilized under Trump and continued during the Biden administration, that justifies the expulsion of migrants seeking asylum on the grounds that they represent a threat to public health.

While Republican officials have blamed immigrants for crime, multiple studies have found that not to be the case, including findings from the University of Wisconsin published in December that found “crime rates among undocumented immigrants are just a fraction of those of their U.S.-born neighbors.” That’s in line with previous research, such as a 2018 Cato Institute report that found “the criminal conviction rate for legal immigrants was about 85 percent below the native-born rate.”

A member of the National Guard stands watch while immigrants wait to be processed in Roma, Texas, on June 16 after crossing the Rio Grande into the U.S. (Brandon Bell/Getty Images)

Noem was not the only governor to answer the request of Abbott and Ducey. Last week, Florida Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis said he'd be sending 50 state law enforcement members to the border but did not say how the operation would be funded.

“That is still a point of discussion,” DeSantis said at a press conference in Pensacola. “Typically, if someone would help us, you know, we would pick up some of their funding, and so that is how we would hope that it goes. But we do not anticipate getting any federal funds.”