

U.S. NEWS

Lawyer hired to prosecute Trump in Georgia is thrust into the spotlight over affair claims

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ATLANTA (AP) — Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis hired attorney Nathan Wade to lead the [Georgia prosecution of Donald Trump](#) and 18 others over efforts to overturn the 2020 election. Now, allegations of a romantic relationship between Willis and Wade are raising questions about his past work and qualifications and threaten to taint one of [four criminal cases against the former president](#).

She [has defended her hiring of Wade](#) — who has little prosecutorial experience — and has not directly denied a romantic relationship. The claim surfaced last week in a motion filed by a defense attorney representing a former Trump campaign staffer, who did not provide concrete proof. The lawyer is seeking to get the indictment tossed and to remove Willis and Wade from the case.

The district attorney's relative silence for over a week has allowed Trump and other critics to exploit the claims as the former president vies to win back the White House. But while it's created a political storm, the legal implications are less clear.

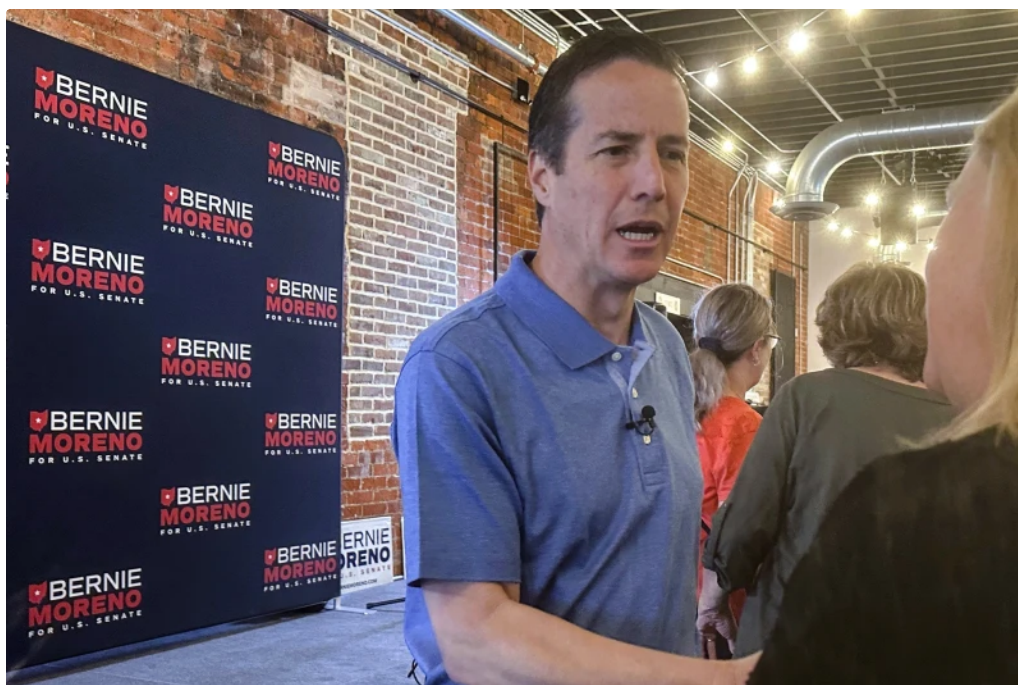
"It's certainly a huge political problem, it is certainly scandalous and salacious, if true," said Anthony Michael Kreis, a Georgia State University law professor who is following the case. But he questioned whether it affects prosecutors' ability to handle the case professionally.

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“Where is the line between an ethical lapse or a political misjudgment and something that kind of taints this office?” he asked.

Outside of any effect on this case, Willis, an elected Democrat, is up for reelection this year, and this could become a campaign issue depending on how she ultimately responds.

The [motion filed last week](#) by lawyer Ashleigh Merchant, who represents former Trump campaign staffer and onetime White House aide Michael Roman, alleges that Willis paid Wade large sums and benefitted personally when he, in turn, used his earnings to take her to Napa Valley, Florida and the Caribbean. Wade has been paid more than \$650,000 at a rate of \$250 an hour since his hiring, according to records Merchant cited.

Wade did not respond to an email seeking comment.

The judge has [scheduled a Feb. 15 hearing](#) on the matter and ordered prosecutors to file a response by Feb. 2.

Merchant has not provided proof of a romantic relationship. She wrote that filings in Wade's pending divorce are sealed. She also cited “sources close” to the two without elaborating. She is now seeking to unseal Wade's divorce case. The Associated Press and other news organizations have also filed to unseal the case.

Wade's wife has subpoenaed Willis for a deposition in the divorce case. In a filing Thursday [seeking to quash that subpoena](#), a lawyer for Willis accused Joycelyn Wade of trying to obstruct and interfere with the criminal election interference case.

In a response filed Friday, a lawyer for Joycelyn Wade wrote that Nathan Wade has taken trips to San Francisco and Napa Valley, Florida, Belize, Panama and Australia, as well as taking Caribbean cruises since filing for divorce and that Willis “was an intended travel partner for at least some of these trips as indicated by flights he purchased for her to accompany him.”

The filing includes credit card statements that show Wade — after he had been hired as special prosecutor — purchased plane tickets in October 2022 for him and Willis to travel to Miami and bought tickets in April to San Francisco in their names.

Joycelyn Wade's filing says she is seeking to question Willis about “her romantic affair” with Nathan Wade, saying there “appears to be no reasonable explanation for their travels apart from a romantic relationship.”

Willis spokesperson Jeff DiSantis declined to comment Friday on Joycelyn Wade's filing.

Willis vigorously defended Wade's credentials at a church service on Sunday and suggested the questioning of his hiring was rooted in racism. She has three special prosecutors working on the election case — a white woman, a white man and a Black man — “they only attacked one,” she said, referring to Wade.

The other special prosecutors are John Floyd, a nationally recognized expert on anti-racketeering laws, and Anna Cross, who worked for two decades as a prosecutor and handled numerous high-profile cases.

Willis cited Wade's 10 years as a municipal court judge and more than 20 years in private practice. But Wade's prosecutorial experience is thin. He worked for the Cobb County solicitor general's office, which handles misdemeanor cases, for less than a year in the late 1990s, a county spokesperson said.

In a December 2010 letter, then-Attorney General Thurbert Baker designated Wade a special assistant attorney general. Baker left office the next month. A spokesperson for the attorney general's office said they “have not found any information to confirm that Mr. Wade has served as a Special Assistant Attorney General.”

It's not the first time Wade's qualifications have been challenged.

After his firm [was tapped in 2020](#) by then-Cobb County Sheriff Neil Warren to review operations at the local jail, a TV news station [sued the sheriff](#), alleging the investigation was a sham designed to prevent the release of records about inmate deaths. The lawsuit said Wade had “no apparent experience, qualifications, or training in conducting jailhouse investigations.”

Months into the investigation, [Wade told the TV station's lawyer that](#) he had no notes or other written documentation of his work, saying he had only “what's going on in my mind about it.”

Records obtained by the AP through an open records request indicate that Wade billed the sheriff's office \$44,000 for 80 hours of work, or \$550 an hour, in November and December 2020. The sheriff's office said it had no report or other documents produced from that investigation.

Wade was also very involved with the special grand jury investigation that preceded Trump's indictment. That panel's foreperson told the AP that Wade generally led those proceedings, describing him as “very much a prosecutor.” Since Trump and the others were indicted, Wade has been a near-constant presence in the courtroom during hearings. But it's generally other prosecutors who argue motions, cross-examine witnesses or write briefs.

The Trump team — including outside Georgia — is following the fracas. Defense lawyers in the federal classified documents case have demanded any records related to 2022 meetings between Wade and White House staff. Records show Wade billed for what he described as “travel to Athens; conf with White House Counsel” in May 2022. There's another charge for “Interview with DC/White House.”

A review of visitor logs at the White House did not turn up any meeting with Wade. There was a conference call in May 2022 between Willis' team and the White House counsel's office to ask whether investigators could interview former White House officials, or whether they would be bound by federal rules that prohibit unauthorized disclosures of official information, according to a person familiar with the call who spoke to the AP on the condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to speak publicly about it. But it wasn't immediately clear whether Wade was on that call.

It's not surprising that Trump has seized on the Willis and Wade allegations.

Trump took a similar tack during the FBI's investigation into Russian election interference amid revelations that the lead agent in that probe had had an extramarital relationship with a lawyer for the bureau. The two had traded anti-Trump texts, including messages calling him an “idiot” and “loathsome human” and describing the prospect of a Trump victory in 2016 as “terrifying.”

Trump used the texts to try to undermine the investigation and to paint the FBI as politically biased against him. The agent, Peter Strzok, was later fired, though a subsequent Justice Department inspector general report did not find evidence that investigative steps during the Russia probe had been taken for partisan or political reasons.

Robert James, who was previously district attorney in DeKalb County, Georgia, said if Wade and Willis are romantically involved, it's an optics problem, but he doesn't see anything inherently improper about a

relationship. Even if Wade spends money on Willis, that's likely not an issue unless there's evidence of some sort of conspiracy to profit, he said.

"I have no belief, unless something different than what I've heard comes out, that Fani Willis is going to be disqualified from this case," James said.

Richer reported from Boston. Associated Press reporters Eric Tucker and Colleen Long contributed from Washington.



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