

GOP silent as Trump sounds off on abortion

Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — Frustrated Republicans grappled with new fears about Donald Trump's impact on their party Wednesday, as the billionaire businessman's campaign rivals targeted his punitive plan for fighting abortion and extraordinary defense of his campaign manager, who police say assaulted a female reporter.

Concern rippled through Republican circles nationwide, yet few dared criticize the GOP front-runner directly when pressed, leery of confronting the man who may well lead their election ticket in November.

Their silence underscored the deep worries plaguing the party's leaders — particularly its most prominent women — who are growing increasingly concerned that a Trump presidential nomination could not only cost the 2016 election but also tarnish the party brand for a generation of women and young people.

"A nominee who cannot speak to women cannot win," New Hampshire party chairwoman Jennifer Horn said, though declining to rebuke Trump by name.

Trump added to his challenge when asked to explain his prescription to fight abortion, a subject that remains highly controversial decades after the Supreme



AP Photo/Nam Y. Huh
Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump reacts as he speaks at a campaign stop Wednesday in Appleton, Wis.

Court legalized it.

He told MSNBC during the taping of a town hall-style event in Wisconsin that abortions should be banned and, if they are, women who get them should receive "some form of punishment." That sparked an immediate backlash from both sides of the debate, and Trump's campaign quickly backtracked, releasing a statement that sought to take back his words. It said that

only those who perform abortions would be "held legally responsible, not the woman."

"The woman is a victim in this case as is the life in her womb," the new Trump statement said.

The abortion comments came as Trump questioned the findings of Jupiter, Florida, police, who charged his closest political adviser, Corey Lewandowski, with misdemeanor battery on

Tuesday after examining surveillance video of an incident in which a reporter said she was grabbed and shoved. The police report said the woman's arm revealed "bruising from what appeared to be several finger marks indicating a grabbing-type injury."

"I don't know who created those bruises," Trump said Wednesday.

The Republican front-runner suggested his campaign manager was simply trying to protect him from Michelle Fields, a reporter for Breitbart News at the time, who was trying to ask him a question after a March 8 campaign appearance.

"She's got a pen in her arm which she's not supposed to have and it shows that she's a very aggressive person who's grabbing at me and touching me," Trump said. "Maybe I should file charges against her."

As Trump assailed Fields from a television studio, Republican rival Ted Cruz surrounded himself with women as he courted Wisconsin voters ahead of the state's high-stakes primary next Tuesday. Cruz leads the state by 9 points among likely voters, according to a Marquette University Law School poll released Wednesday.

Cruz campaigned in Madison with his wife,

mother, two daughters and even their nanny in what he called a "celebration of women."

"We're here because we love our families," Cruz declared, declining to repeat his harsh criticism of Trump from the day before. "Women are not a special interest. Women are a majority of the United States of America. And every issue is a women's issue."

Women favored President Barack Obama by 11 points over GOP nominee Mitt Romney in 2012, a divide highlighted in the Republican National Committee's post-election study. "Our inability to win their votes is losing us elections," the report's authors wrote.

Yet Trump is poised to fare worse among women than Romney in a general election, according to recent polls that put his negative ratings nearing or even eclipsing 70 percent among women.

The RNC recommended that prominent female elected leaders be featured to promote the Republican brand, listing several, including South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley.

Haley's office said she was "unavailable for comment" Wednesday, among other female Republican officeholders who didn't respond to AP requests for comment. They included Sens. Susan Collins of Maine and Lisa

Murkowski of Alaska and Reps. Kristi Noem of North Dakota and Mia Love of Utah.

Liz Johnson, communications director for Sen. Kelly Ayotte of New Hampshire, who is in a tough re-election fight, issued this statement: "As a longtime prosecutor, Kelly believes Mr. Trump should leave this case to the criminal justice system, instead of wrongly trying it in the media."

The Trump campaign was in discussion with the Republican National Committee about arranging a meeting with Chairman Reince Priebus on Thursday.

Trump is the undisputed GOP front-runner in the nomination fight, but should he lose Wisconsin, his foes would have a realistic chance of denying him the delegate majority he needs to claim the nomination before the July convention. In such a scenario, Republican delegates would select their presidential nominee in what would likely be a messy televised gathering.

Leading Democrat Hillary Clinton, meanwhile, attacked Trump's rhetoric on women and minorities as she campaigned in New York.

"Just listen to Donald Trump. He plays coy with white supremacists. He says demeaning and degrading things about women," she declared.

BRIEFLY

Paris prosecutor: Suspect charged with terrorism offenses

PARIS (AP) — Paris authorities filed preliminary terrorism charges Wednesday against a 34-year-old Frenchman for allegedly plotting an imminent attack and operating an explosives arsenal of what prosecutors called "unprecedented scale."

Paris Prosecutor Francois Molins said Wednesday that the suspect, Reda Kriket, is accused of participating in a terrorist group with plans for at least one attack, possessing and transporting arms and explosives, and holding fake documents, among other charges. Kriket will stay in custody while magistrates continue investigating the case and determine whether to send him to trial.

Kriket is believed to have traveled to Syria in 2014 and 2015 and made several trips between France and Belgium and the Netherlands, Molins said.

At least three other people are in custody in the case in Belgium and the Netherlands.

Molins did not say whether Kriket's purported plot was linked to the Islamic State network behind last week's attacks in Brussels and last November's attacks in Paris.

The prosecutor said no target for Kriket's thwarted attack has been identified, and Kriket has given limited explanation to investigators in his six days in detention.

Top aide to Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley resigns amid scandal

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — A top political aide to Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley resigned Wednesday, a week after he publicly admitted making inappropriate remarks to her but denied the two ever had an affair.

Soon after, a GOP lawmaker said he planned to introduce a resolution to begin impeachment proceedings against the Republican governor.

Rebekah Caldwell Mason announced her resignation in a statement sent by the governor's office, saying she would no longer serve as Bentley's senior political adviser and would no longer be paid by his campaign fund or work for a nonprofit formed to promote his agenda.

"My only plans are to focus my full attention on my precious children and my husband who I love dearly. They are the most important people in my life," she said.

As Bentley's confidante, sounding board, adviser and message molder, Mason has been there for the biggest moments of his political career, from his improbable 2010 election to the development of his major policy initiatives. More recently, she has been at the center of the lowest moment of his political career.

Last week, Mason was thrust into the spotlight when former Law Enforcement Secretary Spencer Collier — a day after being fired by Bentley — accused the 73-year-old governor of having an inappropriate relationship with Mason. The scandal has engulfed Bentley, a mild-mannered dermatologist and former Baptist deacon whose political ascendancy was based partly on his morally upright, honest reputation.

Dianne Bentley, the governor's ex-wife, filed for divorce in 2015 saying their 50-year marriage had suffered an irreparable breakdown.

Recordings obtained by The Associated Press purportedly show the governor — before his divorce — professing love to someone named Rebecca or Rebekah and telling her how much he enjoyed kissing and touching her.

The recordings were provided by a former administration member who did so on condition of anonymity to avoid angering powerful former associates.

No charges for 2 Minneapolis officers in fatal shooting

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Two white police officers involved in the fatal shooting of a black man last fall will not face criminal charges, a prosecutor announced Wednesday in a decision that drew outrage from community members who said the move showed the legal system is rigged against African-Americans.

Hennepin County Attorney Mike Freeman said his decision not to charge the officers in the death of 24-year-old Jamar Clark was based on forensic evidence that showed Clark was not handcuffed, as claimed by some people who said they saw the shooting, and had attempted to grab an officer's weapon, which made them fear for their lives and justified use of deadly force.

Clark ignored warnings to take his hands off Mark Ringgenberg's gun before he was shot and told Ringgenberg and officer Dustin Schwarze: "I'm ready to die," the prosecutor said.

Freeman painstakingly described his decision, starting with police reports and witnesses. Community members who attended the presentation said the prosecutor relied too heavily on police accounts and disregarded what others said they saw.

"This is a fairy tale. None of this happened," said Mel Reeves, an organizer for a group called Twin Cities Coalition 4 Justice 4 Jamar Clark. "It's not justice. It sends us a clear message that the police are above the law."

Police union head Bob Kroll said the public should accept the results of the investigation. He appealed for calm.

Protesters, who demonstrated peacefully across the city after the announcement, had demanded that the case not go to a grand jury, which operates in secret. Freeman decided the issue on his own.

Police encountered Clark early on Nov. 15 after paramedics called for help from a scene where they were attempting to treat Clark's girlfriend after she was assaulted. The paramedics said Clark, the assault suspect, was interfering with their work, and they feared for their safety, Freeman said.

Court sentences Latinos to costly English classes

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — A suburban New Orleans court discriminates against Latinos by charging them for inadequate English interpreters and making them attend overpriced, ineffective English classes as a condition of probation, the Southern Poverty Law Center said Wednesday in a letter to the U.S. Justice Department.

The SPLC complaint centers on practices in 1st Parish Court of Jefferson Parish, which handles traffic and misdemeanor cases in a part of Louisiana that has seen an influx of Spanish speakers in the years since Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005. The complaint cites the experience of four people with limited English speaking abilities who said interpreters rushed them through proceedings and failed to adequately explain their cases — including what they were charged with and, in at least one case, what they were pleading guilty to.

As a condition of probation, many were ordered to attend expensive, unhelpful English classes.

"The court's English class costs approximately \$300 for 10 weeks, while the local Catholic Charities charges approximately \$25 for a semester of English classes," the complaint says.

After Brussels attack, leaders tackling threat of nuclear terrorism

WASHINGTON (AP) — Still reeling from attacks in Brussels and Paris, world leaders are wrestling this week with the chilling prospect of the Islamic State group or other extremists unleashing a nuclear attack on a major Western city.

Preventing terrorists from obtaining nuclear materials is the central focus as President Barack Obama hosts leaders from roughly 50 countries for a nuclear security summit starting Thursday. Despite three previous summits and six years of Obama's prodding, security officials warn that the ingredients for a nuclear device or a "dirty bomb" are alarmingly insecure.

"We know that terrorist organizations have the desire to get access to these raw materials and to have a nuclear device," said Ben Rhodes, Obama's deputy national security adviser. Still, the White House said there was no indication of an imminent plot.

Decades after the Cold War, the threat of a nuclear war between superpowers has given way to growing concerns about non-state actors, including Islamic State and al-Qaida offshoots operating in North Africa and in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Although the U.S. and its allies still worry about North Korea, Obama believes the threat posed by Iran has subsided due to the nuclear deal, leaving extremist groups among the likeliest perpetrators.

The havoc such an attack could wreak in an urban area like New York or London is concerning enough that leaders scheduled a special session on the threat during the two-day summit. U.S. officials said the leaders would discuss a hypothetical

scenario about a chain of events that could lead to nuclear terrorism.

Those concerns have taken on heightened significance following the March 22 attacks at a Brussels airport and subway station. Last year, authorities searching the apartment of two brothers linked to earlier attacks in Paris found video of a senior official at a Belgian nuclear waste facility. The brothers were part of the Islamic State cell that went on to strike Brussels; both died in the attacks.

On the summit's sidelines, Obama planned to meet with the leaders of China, South Korea and Japan, who all share U.S. concerns about North Korea's nuclear program.

Yet other key players will be missing. Russian President Vladimir Putin refused to attend, as Moscow scoffed at what it deemed U.S. efforts to take control of the process. Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif canceled his trip following an Easter bombing that killed 72 people.

Some 2,000 metric tons of highly enriched uranium and separated plutonium being used in civilian or military programs could be turned into a nuclear bomb if stolen or diverted, the White House said. And fewer than half of the countries participating in the summit have even agreed to secure their sources of radiological material, needed for a dirty bomb.

"The policies are moving in the right direction," said Joe Cirincione, who runs the nuclear security group Ploughshares Fund. "But when you're fleeing a forest fire, it's not just a question of direction, it's a question of speed."



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