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Meet Donald Trump's Controversial Flack

Katrina Pierson had her critics in the political world long before she went to work for the GOP presidential frontrunner.

S.V. Dátc

@SVDATC

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While it may seem difficult to top Donald Trump's remarks in their constant potential for controversy, it turns out the candidate may be exceeded on that front by a member of his own presidential campaign staff.

When Trump called for a ban on Muslims entering the country, saying "we have no choice" given the threat of terrorism, newly hired "national-campaign spokeswoman" Katrina Pierson on CNN refuted (<http://www.cnn.com/videos/tv/2015/12/08/trump-ban-muslims-cupp-pierson-politics-panel-lead.cnn>) the argument that it was discriminatory this way: "So what? They're Muslim."

After Trump during the last GOP debate seemed not to understand the nuclear "triad" concept, Pierson told a Fox News audience (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-E4JFFpfNIY>): "What good does it do to have a good nuclear triad if you're afraid to use it?"

Sally Bradshaw, a top aide to former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, responded on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/sallybradshaw/status/678051988257513472>) to the nuclear triad remark this way: "No words."

Pierson did not respond to *National Journal's* requests for an interview. Campaign manager Corey Lewandowski answered a *National Journal* query about the nuclear weapons remark with "Never saw it," and about the Muslim comment by suggesting coverage of a new Iowa poll showing Trump in the lead. On Monday, Lewandowski said of Pierson: "Katrina Pierson has our full confidence."

Pierson is certainly not new to controversy. Born to an unmarried teen and growing up poor in Texas, Pierson became a teenage mother herself. She credits a shoplifting arrest (<http://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/headlines/20140214-sessions-rival-katrina-pierson-says-1997-shoplifting-charge-helped-turn-life-around.ece>) at age 20 (she says she was talked into it by a friend to steal clothes nice enough to wear to a job interview) for turning around her life. Pierson, now 38, went on to earn an associate's degree at a community college and then a bachelor's in biology at the University of Texas at Dallas.

Not long after President Obama took office, she became active in tea-party politics, where she disowned her "redistribution of wealth" upbringing and bought into the movement's values, she told a Republican website in 2011. "When I found the tea party here in Dallas, I went to one meeting, and I just knew that these were my people," she told *Texasgopvote.com* (<http://www.texasgopvote.com/de-bunking-tea-party-myths-interview-katrina-pierson-003325>). "These were the people who thought the way that I did, that felt the way that I felt, and even though I had not been politically involved but for two months, I could tell that that's where I belonged."

That political conversion, though, did not stop her from proceeding with two un-tea-party moves in her personal life. In 2010, she unsuccessfully sued the personnel company Inventive for laying her off from her job marketing the drug Ambien to doctors in the Dallas area because she was African-American. (The company responded in its U.S. District Court filing that the 2008 recession forced it to eliminate half its sales force, and that Pierson had received a poor performance review in the months leading up to the layoffs.)

And in 2012-13, Pierson received \$11,440 in unemployment benefits (http://clerk.house.gov/public_disc/financial-pdfs/2013/8213491.pdf), even though that was the time she was volunteering (http://quorumreport.com/quorum_report_daily_buzz_2014/exclusive_tea_party_challen) for Ted Cruz's long-shot U.S. Senate campaign and laying the groundwork for her own

congressional run against incumbent Rep. Pete Sessions. (Sessions won the 2014 primary handily, despite Pierson's endorsement from former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin and Cruz's father, Rafael. Ted Cruz himself called Pierson "a principled conservative fighter who is utterly fearless," at a 2014 rally, but did not formally endorse her against Sessions.) Under Texas Workforce Commission rules (<http://www.aboutunemployment.org/texas-unemployment/>), recipients are supposed to be seeking paid employment during the time they are collecting benefits.

"She has a lot of baggage," said Jonathan Neerman, former chair of the Dallas County Republican Party. "How has she managed to bullshit an entire segment of the Republican Party for five years? That's a great question."

One GOP consultant who has on occasion sparred with Pierson on cable TV shows says the unemployment benefits and the discrimination lawsuit don't bother him nearly as much as her work with the Tea Party Leadership Fund—one of the several dozen political groups that sprang up after Obama's election that raise many millions in small donations but then spend the majority of it on political consultants.

"She's part of one of these scam PACs," said Rick Wilson, who lives in Tallahassee.

On Oct. 26, for example, just 14 days before joining the Trump campaign, a solicitation email from the Tea Party Leadership Fund to "draft" South Carolina congressman Trey Gowdy for House speaker went out under Pierson's name (<http://www.redstate.com/2015/10/26/bogus-tea-party-groups-emails/>)—even though Gowdy had a month earlier had stated definitively that he wasn't even interested (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2015/09/29/the-roller-coaster-rise-and-fall-of-trey-gowdy-for-house-speaker/>) in running for House majority leader.

Monday morning, Pierson, now working for Trump, sent out a Tweet disparaging Gowdy (<https://twitter.com/KatrinaPierson/status/681855654881931264>) following his weekend endorsement of Florida Sen. Marco Rubio: "FTR, Trey Gowdy lost all credibility when he nominated John Boehner for Speaker so he's perfect for Marco Rubio. #Amnesty & #Shamnesty"

(Former speaker Boehner last stood for that position in January—nearly 10 months before Pierson's fundraising email.)

In the 2014 election cycle, the Tea Party Leadership Fund (<http://www.theteapartyleadershipfund.com/>) raised and spent \$6 million, but only \$575,000—less than 10 percent—went to candidates or for election ads, according to Federal Election Commission data compiled by the Center for Responsive Politics (<http://www.opensecrets.org/pacs/lookup2.php?strID=C00520825&cycle=2014>). The rest went to consultants, including \$22,000 to Pierson over four months for “Iowa Political Consulting.” So far in the 2016 cycle, Pierson has received \$21,000 from the group, and another \$10,000 for attending events such as the Conservative Political Action Conference. Which means that this cycle, Pierson has personally received 15 times the amount the group has given to political candidates.

In the Nov. 9 press release announcing Pierson's hiring, Trump said: “Katrina understands the need for real change in Washington, D.C. and the importance of competence in the next election.”