

# Conservative PAC leader's meeting with white supremacist Nick Fuentes leads to condemnations, escalates GOP infighting

House Speaker Dade Phelan called on Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and other officials to redirect any money they received from the PAC. Patrick called on Phelan to resign.

BY **ROBERT DOWNEN** OCT. 9, 2023 UPDATED: 6 PM CENTRAL

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The revelation that an influential conservative PAC leader hosted a white supremacist at his office last week unleashed extraordinary criticism and infighting among Texas Republicans on Monday, calls by the House speaker and a majority of his caucus to return political donations, and a defiant demand from the lieutenant governor that the speaker resign.

The recriminations further exposed the intensifying civil war within the Texas GOP and almost entirely overshadowed the first day of a special session called by Gov. Greg Abbott to give parents vouchers to send their children to private school. By day's end, the only thing Texas Republicans appeared to agree on was to condemn antisemitism as well as the militant group Hamas' deadly assault on Israel on Saturday.

The day began with House Speaker Dade Phelan responding to The Texas Tribune's reporting that Defend Texas Liberty PAC President Jonathan Stickland hosted antisemitic white supremacist Nick Fuentes at his office building for nearly seven hours on Friday. "This [is] not just a casual misstep," Phelan said in a statement. "It's indicative of the moral, political rot that has been festering in a certain segment of our party for far too long. Anti-Semitism, bigotry and Hitler apologists should find no sanctuary in the Republican Party. Period. We cannot – and must not – tolerate the tacit endorsement of such vile ideologies."

Phelan invoked the Hamas attack while pointing out Fuentes' history of being a "Nazi sympathizer." Fuentes has praised Hitler, called for "holy war" against Jews and said that "all I want is revenge against my enemies and a total Aryan victory."

Phelan demanded that elected officials — notably Lt. Gov. [Dan Patrick](#), who recently received \$3 million from Defend Texas Liberty in loans and donations — give all money they received from the PAC to charity. Later Monday, 60 members of the Texas House Republican Caucus released a similar statement calling for elected officials to return or donate money from Defend Texas Liberty.

“The honor and integrity of our offices should never be compromised by the shadow of hate or revisionism,” the caucus letter said.

Shortly after Phelan released his statement, Patrick denounced Fuentes and antisemitism, but saved his sharpest repudiation for Phelan, whom he accused of exploiting the war for “his own political gain.” He called on Phelan to resign as speaker before 1 p.m. on Monday, when the Texas House was scheduled to convene for a special session on school vouchers and other contentious legislation. The lieutenant governor made no mention of Stickland or Defend Texas Liberty PAC.

“Nick Fuentes and his antisemitic rhetoric have no place in the United States,” Patrick said. “Those who spew such vile, loathsome, abominations will have to answer for it. For anyone to try to use these invectives for their own political gain is below contempt.”

Patrick appeared to have set the tone for the playbook employed by others in the hot seat on Monday. Throughout the day, Defend Texas Liberty PAC and recipients of its funds issued statements taking aim at Phelan and calling for his resignation. They condemned Fuentes, but none of them addressed whether they would return the Defend Texas Liberty money, nor did they criticize Stickland for hosting the meeting.

“We reject Speaker Phelan’s effort to combine Defend Texas Liberty PAC with Nick Fuentes,” the PAC said in a two-sentence statement addressing the report. “We oppose Mr. Fuentes’ incendiary views.”

The statement did not explain why Fuentes was at their office. Stickland did not respond to questions Sunday or Monday.

Acting on a tip, a Tribune reporter and photographer on Friday observed Fuentes and others — including [Kyle Rittenhouse](#), who was acquitted of homicide after killing two men at a Black Lives Matter protest in 2020 — enter the one-story office of Pale Horse Strategies outside of Fort Worth. Pale Horse Strategies is a consulting firm owned by Stickland to advise far-right candidates; it has received hundreds of thousands of dollars from Defend Texas Liberty PAC, where he also serves as president.

Republican Party of Texas Chair Matt Rinaldi also was also observed visiting the office for about 45 minutes while Fuentes was there, though Rinaldi told the Tribune on Sunday that he had no idea that Fuentes was inside, condemned him and said he wouldn't meet with him "in a million years."

Phelan, in his statement, also went after Rinaldi, an ally of Stickland's, noting that the Texas GOP has taken \$132,500 from the group this election cycle. He called on the state party to return the funds even "if doing so would take the party into the red."

Rinaldi responded to Phelan's message by calling on him to resign.

As other Republicans continued to fight into Monday evening, Abbott gave a brief speech at an Austin Jewish community center at an event to support Israel. He did not mention the controversy involving Defend Texas Liberty, which recently funded a primary challenge against him.

Defend Texas Liberty is funded by two West Texas oil billionaires — Tim Dunn and Farris Wilks — who are also Attorney General Ken Paxton's biggest donors. Earlier this year, the group made headlines after it gave \$3 million in loans and donations to Patrick ahead of Paxton's impeachment trial in the Texas Senate, over which Patrick presided. Neither Paxton, who was acquitted, nor Patrick responded to requests for comment.

Dunn and Wilks also could not be reached for comment on Monday. Dunn did, however, post on X, formerly Twitter, that he had been named a "top 50 Christian ally of Israel" and called on "all people to stand with Israel at this time of need." The post linked to a 2022 list of prominent Christians that included John Hagee, the chair of Christians United for Israel, who once said that "God sent Hitler" to drive the Jews out of Europe and into Jerusalem.

Since 2021, Defend Texas Liberty has given nearly \$15 million to ultraconservative candidates as it tries to unseat fellow Republicans, including Phelan, who it argues are not conservative enough. The group is a key part of a network of nonprofits, media companies, campaigns and institutions that Dunn, Wilks and Wilks' brother Dan Wilks have given more than \$100 million to push their ultraconservative religious and anti-LGBTQ+ views.

Campaign finance records show that in 2022, Defend Texas Liberty donated more than \$5 million to candidates who challenged incumbent Republicans. Most of that money went to Don Huffines, a real estate developer and former state senator who unsuccessfully challenged Abbott in the Republican primary.

Defend Texas Liberty has also bankrolled some of the most conservative members of the Legislature, including Tony Tinderholt of Arlington and Bryan Slaton of Royse City. Slaton was

ousted from the Texas House in May after House investigators found that he gave alcohol to a 19-year-old aide and had sex with her.

Tinderholt has received \$123,000 from the PAC, among the most of any elected official other than Patrick and Paxton. Asked for comment on the House floor, Tinderholt referred to a statement he released calling for Phelan to resign, and expressing support for Israel. He did not say whether he'd return the money, nor did he mention Defend Texas Liberty.

“I will never tolerate racism or antisemitism by anyone including Mr. Fuentes,” he said. Alluding to the attack on Israel, he added, “I similarly refuse to allow Dade Phelan to exploit a tragedy of this magnitude against one of our strongest national allies for his own political gain.”

Other Defend Texas Liberty beneficiaries declined or did not respond to requests for comment, including Rep. Matt Schaefer, R-Tyler, and Alexandra del Moral Mealer, who received \$100,000 from the PAC during her unsuccessful 2022 bid for Harris County Judge.

Rep. Nate Schatzline, R-Fort Worth, released a statement Monday in which he called the Tribune's story a “hit piece” and slammed other House Republicans for “attacking a conservative political organization that has consistently opposed” Phelan. Schatzline has received \$174,000 from Defend Texas Liberty.

Fuentes' visit to Pale Horse comes as the far-right of the Texas GOP continues to elevate extreme rhetoric and conspiracy theories amid an ongoing civil with Phelan and other more establishment members, and as antisemitism and hate crimes continue to skyrocket in the state and nationally.

Despite his embrace of Hitler, Fuentes has not been entirely cast out of right-wing circles. Hard-right Republicans, including U.S. Reps. Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia and Paul Gosar of Arizona, have spoken at Fuentes' annual conference alongside avowed white supremacists.

Fuentes' acolytes have also been employed in powerful positions in the GOP. In July, the presidential campaign of Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis fired a staffer after it was revealed that he created and then shared a pro-DeSantis video that featured a Nazi symbol. And, earlier this year, Ella Maulding moved from Mississippi to Fort Worth to work as a social media coordinator for Pale Horse Strategies.

Maulding was observed for several hours at the Friday meeting with Fuentes, and she spent some time outside recording a video for Texans for Strong Borders, an advocacy group, in which she called on Texas lawmakers to crack down on immigration during the special legislative session that began Monday.

The group wants to stem both legal and illegal immigration. Its founder, Chris Russo, was seen driving Fuentes to the Friday meeting at Pale Horse Strategies.