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AG candidate, in feud with former ally, says text not racist, leaked to damage her



Attorney Sigal Chattah, Republican attorney general candidate, in a campaign photo.



By Bill Dentzer Las Vegas Review-Journal
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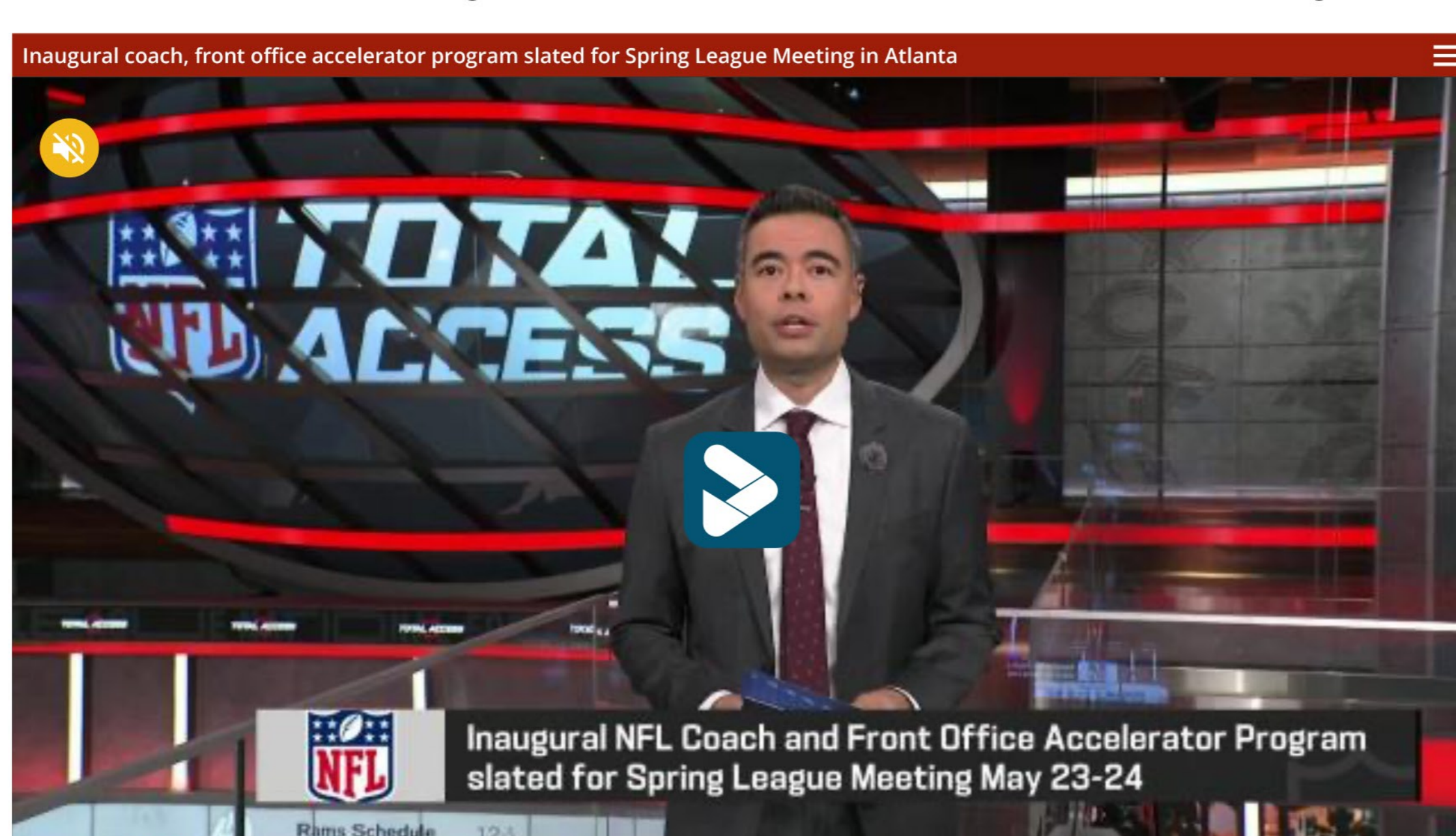
The date, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, was chosen for maximum impact.

On that Monday, Jan. 17, an unapologetically left-leaning blogger with improbably close ties to certain Republican interests in Las Vegas posted a screenshot of a private text exchange between herself and a onetime friend and political ally.

Her correspondent in the April 2021 exchange was a Republican attorney general candidate with a penchant for blunt, salty language. Over the months of their short acquaintance, the two had exchanged thousands of texts. This particular one, posted on the holiday honoring the slain civil rights leader, was n't unique in tone, only in subject.

In a mutually derisive exchange, the candidate, attorney Sigal Chattah, excoriated her potential Democratic opponent in the race, incumbent Aaron Ford, tossing out one of her signature insults, invoking a Middle Eastern curse from her Israeli background that references a particularly gruesome way to die.

"This guy should be hanging from a (expletive) crane," she wrote of Ford. "He's like the leader of (H)amas — making tons of money while the People in Gaza are starving."



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Exposed to public scrutiny, the private remark is scandalous enough. To make it all the more damning for Chattah, Ford is Black.

That's where this story of behind-the-scenes political intrigue, shifting alliances, revenge seeking and mischief both begins and ends. The account, based on interviews with the main antagonists, is a side trip through a stormy eddy in the broader stream of bare-knuckles Nevada politics.

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Timed for political damage

Start with this: Chattah's onetime blogger friend, Sarah Ashton-Cirillo, doesn't think Chattah is a racist, or that she made the remark intentionally in a racial context. She acknowledges that she posted the exchange to fatally wound Chattah's candidacy at a time when Chattah was the only announced Republican in the race. Another Las Vegas attorney, Tisha Black, announced her candidacy this week.

"I ran it because I believe that she's unfit from an emotional standpoint, to understand how to interact in a position of that magnitude of being attorney general," Ashton-Cirillo said in a phone interview this week.

She said she waited until after Jan. 15, the deadline for candidates to report their initial round of campaign contributions, wanting "Republicans to realize this is a person so unfit for office, you guys need to do something."

Ashton-Cirillo confirmed what Chattah herself said this week when questioned about making the remark: Chattah uses the expression a lot. In this case, the Israeli-born Chattah said, the context of the exchange came amid talk of Bernie Sanders, whose positions on the conflict between Israel and Palestine Chattah abhors.



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"When I say to my friends, 'I'm going to hang you from a crane,' I don't literally mean I'm going to hang you from a crane," Chattah said in an interview this week, characterizing her use of the "smartass comment" as "tongue-in-cheek." She's even aimed it at her former friend, when Ashton-Cirillo, a transgender woman, tweeted a picture of herself in her pre-transition male persona wearing a Palestinian soccer jersey.

Chattah, who emigrated from Israel with her family as a teenager, said her mother's dark skin, as a Yemenite Jew, invited taunting from other Jews with a Yiddish slur that translates to "black animal." The brutal method of execution she referenced is common in places such as Iran and by groups such as the Taliban.

"I would never attribute a racial context to hanging from a crane," Chattah said, stopping short of expressing regret.

"That is my culture," she added. "That's what is done to people in the Middle East, to traitors. And that's just part of my vernacular."

The Ford campaign had no comment on the matter.

Odd connection

Chattah and Ashton-Cirillo offer broadly matching accounts of how they first connected. Despite her proudly progressive politics, Ashton-Cirillo ran in a circle of politically active Republican women. A real estate property analyst by profession, she worked on opposition research efforts for Republican candidates and was recommended to Chattah for the same in late 2020, as Chattah was weighing her run for office.

Sarah, a trans woman, was embraced by her Republican friends, both recall.

"They did not care that I was trans as long as they saw me as a cog in helping them deliver power to their own people and their own agenda," Ashton-Cirillo said, referring to Republican Party powerbrokers.

"When I first met Sarah, Sarah said she was like a unicorn. She was a Republican transsexual," Chattah said.

Ashton-Cirillo, who also describes her politics as "leftist libertarian," worked with and for these candidates because of personal rather than political connections, bonding over a shared dislike of more entrenched factions within the GOP. In May 2021, when the Review-Journal reported about extremist right-wing elements such as the Proud Boys seeking to influence the state Republican Party, Ashton-Cirillo was in the thick of it, providing information about the attempted infiltration to the Review-Journal and other media, and saying she was collecting information for a book.

But she was still helping her Republican friends.

"This is somebody that is really, like, out there posing as a Republican, helping on Republican campaigns," Chattah said, acknowledging that Ashton-Cirillo's politics and gender transition were novel. "The whole time I'm thinking that this is literally a Republican transsexual. Of course, I'm going to help her! Of course I'm gonna wanna promote that."

Friendship ends

By spring 2021, Ashton-Cirillo, a registered Democrat, had decided to run for Las Vegas City Council, initially against Republican Victoria Seaman. Later, in June, she switched races, deciding instead to challenge Republican Michele Fiore. Here's where Ashton-Cirillo and Chattah's retelling of events start to diverge. Each accuses the other of backstabbing, divulging confidential information they had shared only between themselves.

At the peak of their friendship, both said, the two were in touch by text or phone a dozen or more times a day, meeting regularly for coffee or dinner, often at the Three Angry Wives pub in Boca Park. Chattah said she thought Ashton-Cirillo's candidacy against Fiore was "a huge joke." She had introduced her to Fiore, even suggesting that Fiore use her as a campaign insider because of the "mind-blowing information" Ashton-Cirillo had provided to Chattah on her potential Republican opponents.

After Ashton-Cirillo launched the campaign against Fiore, Chattah said she began to hear from other people scraps of private conversations she had had with Ashton-Cirillo. She decided to respond in kind and began giving Fiore information. Ashton-Cirillo says it was Chattah, aligned with Fiore, who started with the leaks — including threats of potentially damaging disclosures about Ashton-Cirillo's dating life.

There were additional behind-the-scenes skirmishes. Ashton-Cirillo claims that the threat of disclosure was intended to drive her out of the race. She eventually contacted Chattah and demanded that Chattah intervene to stop the attacks, which Ashton-Cirillo assumed were sanctioned by Fiore's allies in GOP leadership. Chattah said she told Ashton-Cirillo she held no sway to demand anything from the party. The two had a falling-out and ceased contact.

In September, Ashton-Cirillo tweeted support for an independent Palestinian state, a move that Chattah, with her Israeli background, took as a personal affront. Ashton-Cirillo, calling herself "anything but an anti-Semite," said she has long supported the two-state solution in the Palestine-Israel conflict and was reacting at the time to a public position taken by the Nevada State Democratic Party.

In late October, Ashton-Cirillo withdrew from the race against Fiore, saying she wanted to focus her energy on a politics blog she started and other civic activities. But she still had plans for the "hang from a crane" texts with Chattah. She launched her blog in September and has been attacking Chattah on it since November, among other mostly Republican targets.

Ashton-Cirillo says she sent screenshots of the exchange and other damaging information to the state Democratic Party leadership in April 2021, after the party was taken over by its far-left wing. The party appears never to have weaponized the information, to Ashton-Cirillo's disappointment.

"The people who despise Republicans and Sigal found it abhorrent and disgusting," Ashton-Cirillo said of the blog posts disclosing the text. "The people who like to attack me were very, very silent," she said, except for a conservative blogger who defended Chattah. "Because there was no way to refute what was there."

Chattah called the move revenge for her disclosing information to Fiore, "dropped by this blogger on Martin Luther King Jr. Day to try to do the maximum amount of damage and to paint me as a racist."

"It is definitely revenge, because I disclosed information to Michele that in Sarah's mind should never have been discussed," she added. "But Sarah forgets that Sarah disclosed tons of information that should have never been discussed."

This story has been updated to remove an incorrect description of Ashton-Cirillo's gender transition.

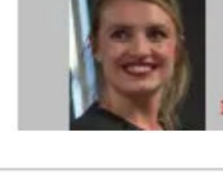
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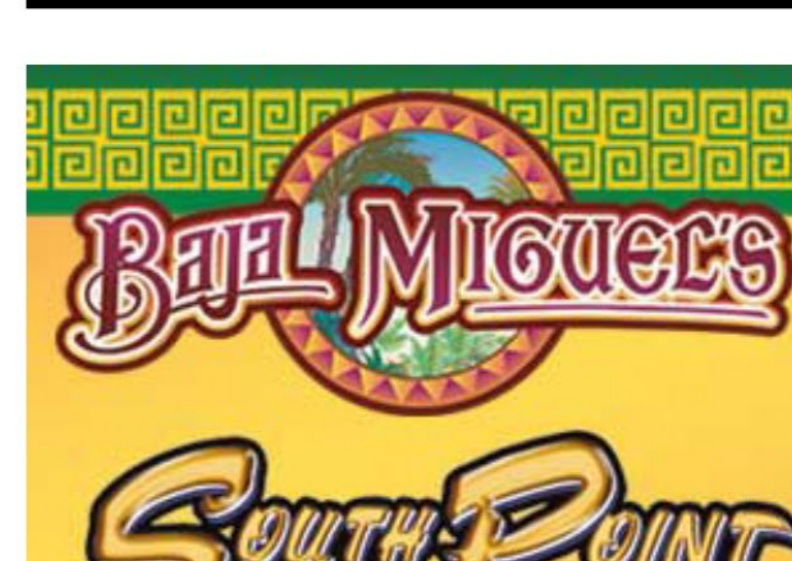
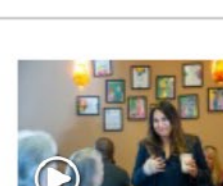
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