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EXCLUSIVE POLICY

Powerful Trump Allies Aided a Chinese Vape Operation

Chris LaCivita and his son are helping importer for Geek Bar capitalize on the administration's loosening of tobacco regulations

By Liz Essley Whyte and Michelle Hackman
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Varieties of disposable flavored electronic cigarette devices displayed at a Florida store in 2023.
ASSOCIATED PRESS

The White House ordered federal officials late this summer to approve the release of tens of millions of dollars worth of detained illegal Chinese vapes into the U.S. market after conversations with Trump administration political adviser Chris LaCivita and his son, people familiar with the matter said.

The move came amid a broader loosening of tobacco regulations during President Trump's second term that has resulted in more favorable treatment for the industry. Although it is illegal to sell unauthorized tobacco products in the U.S., the Trump administration earlier this year created a special carve-out for certain unauthorized vapes, saying it wouldn't enforce laws against them.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials in Chicago earlier this year detained shipments of Geek Bar vapes, according to people familiar with the matter. Officials believed at least some of the items were misdeclared as another product, people familiar with the matter said. The Food and Drug Administration hasn't authorized any vapes from Geek Bar, a Chinese manufacturer, for sale in the U.S.

LaCivita, Trump's 2024 co-campaign manager and a close associate of the president, told The Wall Street Journal that he reached out to top White House aides to tell them that Geek Bar's U.S. importer, New York-based Hillfield, was "onshoring" by making a $1 billion investment in a U.S. manufacturing facility. He said his role was limited to offering advice to Hillfield to help them align their business strategy with the Trump administration's priorities, and that he didn't discuss detained vapes with the White House.

"The notion that I had the ability to direct anyone in government to do anything is laughable and categorically false," LaCivita said.

His son Chris LaCivita Jr., who is a registered lobbyist for Hillfield, told the Journal he was also in touch with White House and other federal officials to advocate for letting the company's vapes onto the market. LaCivita Jr. said Hillfield was following the rules and was working with FDA officials to make sure their products weren't improperly delayed at the border. LaCivita Jr. said none of Hillfield's shipments were misdeclared, and that they qualify for entry under the new carve-out.

After their conversations, White House officials in late August made clear to FDA officials that they needed to sign off on letting the detained shipments into the country, people familiar with the matter said.

Federal health officials were told by people familiar with the issue that customs officials subsequently released the vapes into the U.S. market, other people familiar with the matter said. Hillfield managing partner Ben Zhang said some of the company's first shipments earlier this year were held and that customs and FDA officials cleared some of them for release into the U.S. market.

Zhang said Hillfield followed rules for imports and had paid more than $30 million in tariffs. Its approach, he said, “will help eliminate the counterfeit and deceptively imported products that unfortunately flood the market.”

A CBP spokeswoman declined to answer specific questions concerning detained shipments but said the agency has worked to prevent unregulated nicotine products from reaching Americans.

White House spokeswoman Allison Schuster said the Trump administration is working to keep nicotine out of the hands of children and to keep counterfeit vapes off the streets, while expanding access to more authorized products for adults. “The only special interest guiding President Trump’s decision-making is the best interest of the American people,” she said.

Hundreds more Hillfield shipments, representing millions of vapes, have since been held in Chicago this fall and await a decision from the FDA on whether they can be allowed to enter the U.S., people familiar with the matter said.

Geek Bar didn’t respond to requests for comment. Geek Bar vapes are widely available at retailers and smoke shops throughout the country as regulators have been unable to stem the tide of unlawful imports. A 2024 analysis by the Truth Initiative, a public health nonprofit, found that 86% of e-cigarette retail sales in the U.S. were for illegal products.

An about face

At issue is an about-face by the Trump administration on how it regulates illegal Chinese products that for years have dominated the vape market.

The first Trump administration cracked down on flavored vapes of almost all sorts, worried about their effects on youth, and as recently as last year led an operation seizing millions of dollars of illegal Chinese vapes. American tobacco companies with legal products as well as public health activists have urged the federal government to step up enforcement to stem the flood of Chinese vapes that haven’t been approved for sale in the U.S. by federal regulators but that nonetheless circulate inside the country through unofficial channels.

In the past year, the administration has quietly softened its approach to impeding unapproved Chinese vape products, backing away from large-scale raids led by cabinet officials at the behest of the White House, people familiar with the matter said. In September 2025, Trump administration officials boasted of seizing $86.5 million of illegal e-cigarettes, most of them from China, in an operation in Chicago by customs, FDA and Justice Department officials.

“We will never allow foreign actors to threaten the health of America’s children,” Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. said in a statement at the time.

But following that raid, then-White House deputy chief of staff, James Blair, instructed federal officials to back off such large-scale enforcement efforts, people familiar with the matter said. Kennedy and then-Attorney General Pam Bondi abandoned plans for more raids in North Carolina, Florida and several other states, people familiar with the matter said. Blair said in a statement that he wasn’t privy to specific enforcement action plans and didn’t give any specific instructions about the enforcement.

U.S. vaping policy has frustrated domestic tobacco companies that don’t want overseas competitors taking their market share.



Chris LaCivita MARK SCHIEFELBEIN/AP

Earlier this year, the president dined with Reynolds American executives at his Jupiter, Fla., golf course, and they complained that the FDA hadn’t

approved vaping flavors. Then in May, the FDA loosened regulations on vapes in a way that led to a new regime for illegal vape enforcement at the border, with officials scrambling to figure out which products to allow into the U.S.

The new policy said the FDA wouldn't enforce laws against certain unauthorized vapes and nicotine pouches whose manufacturers had completed initial steps to apply to sell their products in the U.S. legally, even if they hadn't completed a full scientific review. The policy also said the FDA would continue to enforce laws against products that appealed to children with cartoon figures or devices shaped like toys.

Since the summer, Hillfield representatives including the younger LaCivita have argued to federal officials that their Geek Bar products meet the May policy's criteria for nonenforcement and should be allowed into the U.S., while FDA officials have said most Geek Bar products don't meet that criteria, people familiar with the matter said.

The firm LaCivita Jr. works for, Checkmate Government Relations, lobbied the FDA and White House on vape policy and had conversations about why products were being held up, said the firm's managing partner, Ches McDowell. Hillfield has paid Checkmate $860,000 since the end of 2025, according to federal lobbying disclosures.

McDowell said that throughout the summer FDA leaders told the firm Hillfield was "fine to import." He said Hillfield had paid tariffs and declared everything properly. "President Trump made it clear that access to safe, flavored vapes is an administration priority," McDowell said. "Our client checks all the boxes."

Vapes in limbo

Since September, the FDA has had its border patrol partners hold on to hundreds of Hillfield shipments in Chicago, some of which the agency believes don't qualify for lenient treatment, people familiar with the matter said. The FDA is weighing whether to bar those products' entry into the U.S., people familiar with the matter said—in which case Hillfield would have to

destroy the vapes or bear the expense of shipping them back to Asia. The FDA on its own doesn't have the authority to destroy the products, but customs officials do, said Mitch Zeller, a former top tobacco official at the FDA.

Shipments of illegal vapes are often falsely declared to be other products, said Tom Lesnak, a former special agent with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives who consults on illicit tobacco issues—though lying to customs officials about shipments is a crime. Seized vapes are typically later destroyed.

Despite being illegal to sell in the U.S., Geek Bar's brightly colored vapes are popular with young people. Researchers examining data from a 2025 federal survey of more than 20,000 youth found that of those currently using e-cigarettes, 64% used Geek Bar.

Hillfield set up operations in Delaware last year in order to be an official importer of Geek Bar in the U.S. that follows rules and pays tariffs, in anticipation that the Trump administration would change its policy to allow more vapes onto the U.S. market, a person familiar with the company said. Since this summer it has attempted to import roughly 10 to 12 million vapes, handling all the shipments similarly, the person said, but uneven enforcement across ports is one issue Checkmate was hired to address.

About 50% of the company's shipments made it into the U.S. this summer, Zhang said, before having all of its shipments held by the FDA this fall.

Liz Essley Whyte is a health policy reporter in The Wall Street Journal's D.C. bureau, with a special focus on the federal health agencies. Before joining the Journal in 2022, she was an investigative reporter at the Center for Public Integrity, a nonprofit newsroom, where for several years she covered...

Michelle Hackman is a reporter in The Wall Street Journal's Washington bureau, where she covers U.S. immigration policy. Her coverage includes writing about the southern border, legal and employment-based immigration, refugee resettlement, care of unaccompanied children, immigration enforcement...