

NEWS & POLITICS

A devout Christian with failed ambitions and an arsenal of firearms who chose 'war'

JUNE 21, 2025



The senior photo of Vance Boelter in a 1985 yearbook at the Sleepy Eye Public School in Sleepy Eye, Minn. He participated in basketball, baseball, yearbook, stage crew, football and chorus, and was named to Snow Week Royalty. (Elizabeth Flores/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

Vance Boelter had visions of business success at home and abroad. But in the words of one acquaintance, he was “living a double life.”

By **Andy Mannix, Jeffrey Meitrodt and Deena Winter**
The Minnesota Star Tribune



Vance Boelter wasn't acting like a man ready to go to war.

On the afternoon of June 11, the barrel-chested 57-year-old sat with his wife, Jenny, and sister watching family members play softball, his casual demeanor belying what brewed behind his dark eyes.

“Everything seemed fine,” said Mary Kavan, a longtime friend of Boelter's family. “He didn't seem a little off or anything.”

Yet Boelter had already taken the first steps in a plan to assassinate Minnesota politicians and abortion advocates, according to federal and state charging documents. Two days earlier, he'd gone to Fleet Farm and bought a tactical rifle case, ammunition, a flashlight and lettering to make the license plate on his black Ford Explorer read "POLICE."

Early on June 14, Boelter used these tools to carry out his plan. Disguised as a police officer, he traveled to the suburban homes of Minnesota lawmakers, knocked on their doors and opened fire, charges say.

Sen. John Hoffman and his wife, Yvette, survived with serious injuries from a total of 17 bullets; former House Speaker Melissa Hortman and her husband, Mark, were killed.

Boelter had already been preparing his family for a major catastrophe, prosecutors say. In a subsequent text message that he sent his wife fleeing to northern Minnesota, Boelter nodded to a belief he was part of a greater cause.

"Dad went to war last night," he wrote, according to prosecutors.

The unprecedented act of political violence is fueling calls for more security measures for public officials, along with pleas to turn down the temperature on the national discourse.

Interim U.S. Attorney Joseph Thompson said police found in Boelter's car and house "voluminous writings" about his plans that dated back months. A letter found after the shootings included ramblings about a plan to kill U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar so Gov. Tim Walz could run for her seat, according to two people familiar with the document.

"In terms of the why," Thompson said, "it's unclear."

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Cones and "Keep Out" and "No Trespassing" signs block the driveway to Boelter's home near Green Isle, Minn. (Alex Kormann/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

What is known is that throughout his life, Boelter was drawn to big ideas and fixations that drove him to extremes.

Federal and state court records released Friday revealed Boelter had amassed dozens of weapons at his rural home near Green Isle, Minn., and described him and his wife as “preppers,” a growing group of Americans who stockpile food and supplies out of fear of an imminent cataclysm.

Boelter’s text apparently triggered a “bailout plan” he and his wife had discussed in the past. When police pulled her over after the shootings, they found her with passports, multiple guns – including a pistol stored in a cooler – and \$10,000 in cash.

Friends, co-workers and neighbors of Boelter say they were floored to learn he has been implicated in the attacks, describing him as a “godly” and generous man who showed no signs of radicalization or a mental breakdown.

“We’re all shocked,” said Clinton Wolcyn, a member of Boelter’s church. “Obviously he was living a double life.”

The Vance Boelter they thought they knew was a devout evangelical Christian, educated at religious institutions and St. Cloud State University, and a family man from a small Minnesota farming town. He has no criminal record, and as recently as a couple of years ago preached peace as a response to violence.

A Republican who supported President Donald Trump, Boelter also talked about his opposition to abortion. He liked guns and listened to “Infowars,” the show hosted by right-wing conspiracy theorist Alex Jones – who has already called the attacks on Minnesota politicians a “false flag” operation.

By this spring, Boelter was struggling. He quit his job transporting corpses for funeral homes and was trying to get a job in the food business. A lofty farming and security business in central Africa flopped. His Minnesota security company had cars and weapons but no clients.

Friends said he had become more withdrawn and secretive, though as recently as May he was talking about going back to Africa to revive his business.

“He didn’t seem like someone who was planning something,” said McNay Nkashama, a native of the Democratic Republic of Congo, which Boelter visited frequently to try to strike fishing and farming deals. “When he fired the first bullet, that bullet did not just kill the lawmaker, it killed the man I knew.”



Boelter's childhood home in Sleepy Eye, Minn. (Elizabeth Flores/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

A religious awakening

In the days following Boelter’s arrest, residents of Sleepy Eye, a southern Minnesota town of fewer than 4,000, were trying to understand how the skinny boy who was once named “most courteous” by his classmates had grown into the person they now saw pictured on the news in handcuffs.

Boelter grew up in a white Victorian house, one of five kids in a well-liked family in the tight-knit farming community. The Boelters were a baseball family; his father, Donald, coached the varsity team and taught social studies, and his brother went on to play for several Twins farm teams.

Vance Boelter made captain of the varsity baseball team his senior year, part of an active social calendar. At the annual Snow Dance, he was named royalty.

“He got along with everybody,” said Ron Havemeier, who graduated with Boelter in 1985. “He wasn’t strange – he was a smart guy.”

Yet he was no conventional teenager. At 17, Boelter became a born-again Christian, a decision that would change the course of his life. He burned his belongings and started living in a tent in a town park so he could share the word of Jesus with the people of Sleepy Eye, said David Carlson, who says Boelter has been his best friend since grade school.



A photo of Vance Boelter, sixth from left, in a 1985 Sleepy Eye yearbook. Boelter grew up in Sleepy Eye, Minn. (Photos by Elizabeth Flores/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

The epiphany came while working at a vegetable canning factory, Boelter said years later. A co-worker “talked about God all the time,” and Boelter yearned for the same kind of faith. He said he had an encounter with God in his house and asked for forgiveness.

“The presence of God came in that room, and I knew I was right with God,” Boelter said in a sermon. “And he changed that selfish person into a person who cared about other people first. ... There became a fire in my heart to live for God.”

His newfound faith compelled him to study practical theology at a charismatic Bible college in Dallas called Christ for the Nations Institute. Charismatic Christians believe in supernatural, spiritual gifts of the Holy Spirit such as speaking in tongues, prophets and divine healing.

While studying international relations later at St. Cloud State, Boelter developed a reputation for arguing with speakers and delivering sermons on campus, earning him the nickname “The Preacher,” Carlson said.

“He didn’t believe anything that was strange,” Carlson said. “He was just charismatic about it. It wasn’t like he was sacrificing cats or anything.”

He obtained a doctorate in leadership from a now-closed Catholic university in Milwaukee, and thereafter sometimes put “Dr.” before his name.



One of Vance Boelter's personal vehicles, closely resembling a police squad car, is towed from his residence on Fremont Avenue N. in Minneapolis. (Alex Kormann/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

Big dreams

Boelter spent most of his professional life in the food industry, working for producers and distribution companies, including Gold 'n Plump, Johnsonville, the sausage company, and Del Monte Foods.

He rose to plant manager of Lettieri's food distribution center in Shakopee, a major supplier of food-to-go items such as breakfast sandwiches to convenience stores around the United States. According to his LinkedIn profile, Boelter left Lettieri's after nearly five years in 2016.

He tried to reinvent himself as an entrepreneur, but nothing worked out.

In 2018, Boelter and his wife started Praetorian Guard Security Services – named after the Imperial Roman army guard – with the help of a cousin, Todd Boelter, who spent 28 years in law enforcement before retiring in 2013, according to an employment history he submitted to the state. Jenny Boelter was listed as the owner and their oldest daughter, Grace, was the chief financial officer. None could be reached for comment.

On the company's website, Vance Boelter boasted that his experience included being "involved with security situations in Eastern Europe, Africa, North America and the Middle East, including the West Bank, Southern Lebanon and the Gaza Strip." Boelter also claimed to have received training by both private security firms and people in the U.S. military.

The company offered residential security patrols and uniformed security, and was about to move into event security services, according to the website, which has since been taken down.

"We only offer armed security," the website said. "If you are looking for unarmed guards, please work with another service to meet your needs better."

In a 2023 letter to the state board that oversees private security firms, Jenny Boelter said the firm was never able to land any clients. She blamed the government for not offering any pandemic relief and the banking industry for being unwilling to help fund the startup.

One of the black SUVs bought for Praetorian was used on the night of the shootings, according to police.

Failed ambitions

Vance Boelter's other big venture involved the Democratic Republic of Congo, one of the largest countries in Africa that has been wracked for years by corruption and civil wars.

In 2019, Boelter started the Red Lion Group, which tried to lure American investors to Congo. In a 2022 video, he claimed he was working with 400 farmers and 500 fishermen and hoped to develop a network of 1,000 female motorcycle taxis in Congo.

"They're looking for business partners who are willing to partner with them, and Red Lion Group is trying to find the formulas," Boelter said. He was confident he could help make Congo the "breadbasket" of Africa.

Boelter visited the country at least four times over the next five years, but he failed to accomplish much besides filming promotional videos, said Nkashama, who accompanied him on the trips.

Nkashama said he tried to talk Boelter into giving up on the Congo venture this year, saying he didn't want to give small-business owners in Africa "false hope." But he said his longtime friend was "insistent" his idea would pan out.

"For me he did not come across as grandiose," Nkashama said. "I would say he was a very passionate person about what he wanted to do."

While in Africa, Boelter often engaged in missionary work. Several videos show Boelter preaching to Congolese congregations, with all the trappings of a televangelist – waving a Bible, railing about the American church's drift, dancing at one point.

At a church in the Congo city of Matadi in February 2023, he condemned American churches that support homosexuality and abortion.

"There's people, especially in America, they don't know what sex they are," he thundered. "They don't know their sexual orientation. They're confused. The enemy has gotten so far in their mind and their soul."

In a video posted online, Boelter said he supported himself during those ventures by working two jobs hauling cadavers. He also lived part of the time with Carlson in a rented home in north Minneapolis.

Records show Boelter and his wife made about \$300,000 by selling their home in Inver Grove Heights in 2022. It's not clear how much of that money he might have used to fund his business ventures.



Vance Boelter's longtime friend David Carlson tears up as he talks about Boelter outside their shared residence on Fremont Avenue in north Minneapolis. Boelter stayed at the house once or twice a week so he could live closer to his work in the Twin Cities. (Alex Kormann/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

'The gun type'

When he was staying in Minneapolis, Boelter and Carlson would watch "Game of Thrones" and play military games and a first-person shooter video games.

"We're into military equipment," Carlson said. "We thought guns and weapons were cool. As children we were like that, and it kind of stuck with us."

He described Boelter as "the gun type," saying he liked to go shooting at the range. But he said he never thought he would use guns to hurt people.

Carlson said he found it odd that when Boelter got home from work, he made several trips to his car, bringing his laptop and folders with him rather than leaving them at the house – as if he were hiding something.

In the past year, Carlson said that Boelter seemed to withdraw and "stopped having fun."

When he wasn't in Minneapolis, Boelter lived with his family and two German shepherds in a \$520,000 farmhouse he bought less than two years ago near the bucolic town of Green Isle. Current and former neighbors described the family as reclusive, noting the children were homeschooled and the parents rarely socialized. Green Isle Mayor Shane Sheets said he has yet to meet anybody who knows Boelter personally.



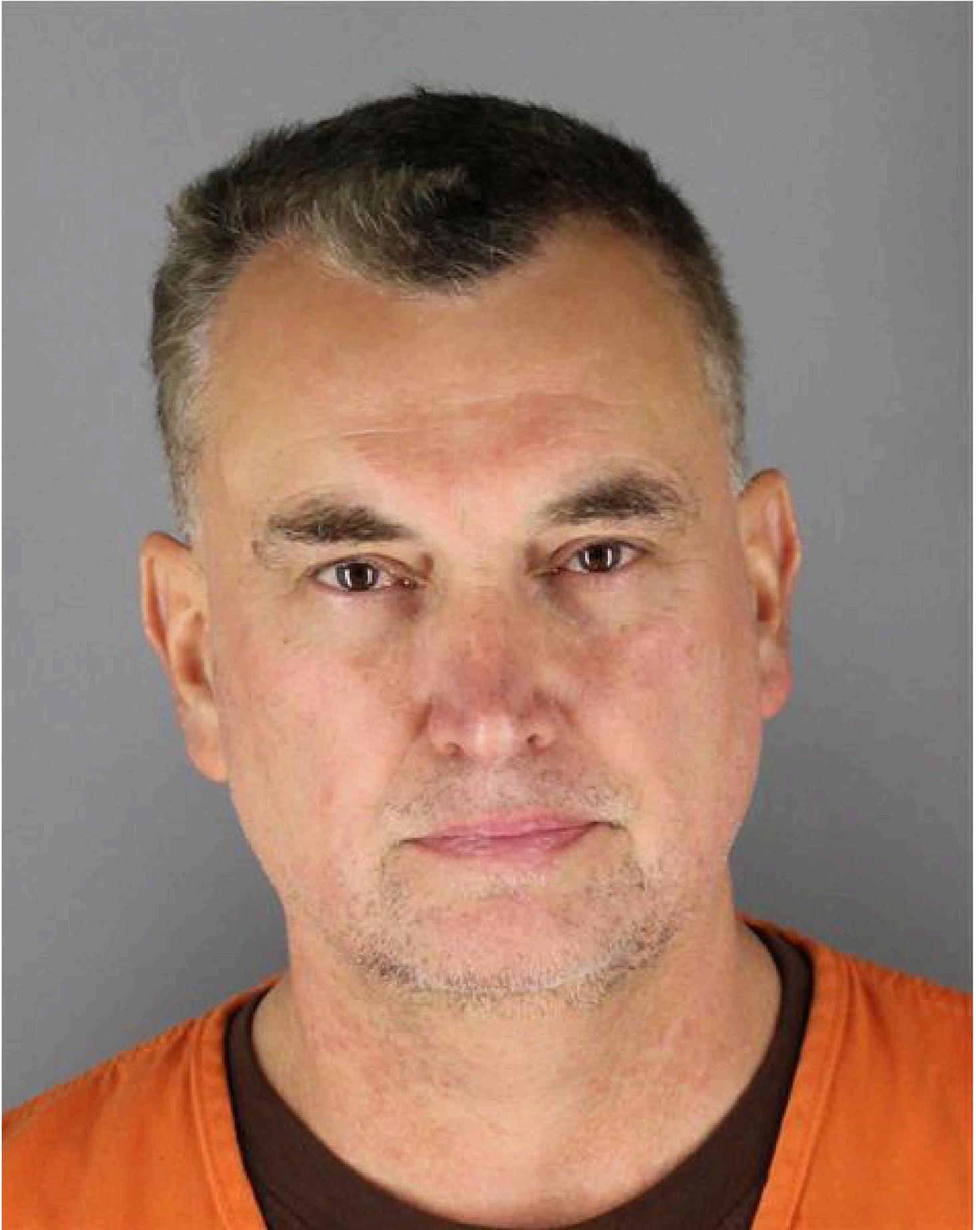
Harold Jackson, a former neighbor of the Boelters at their previous home in Gaylord, Minn., talks about his few interactions with the family. (Alex Kormann/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

“They weren’t involved with the community at all,” said Harold Jackson, who lived across the street from Boelter’s previous home in Gaylord, Minn. But, Jackson added, Boelter “seemed like a very reasonable guy.”

Former neighbors said Boelter moved from Gaylord to Green Isle to be closer to Jordan Family Church, which holds services in a gleaming new middle school in Jordan, on the southwest outskirts of the metro area.

Family friends said Boelter put religion at the center of his family’s life.

“That is why this just doesn’t make sense,” said Kavan, who befriended the Boelters 15 years ago when both families homeschooled their children. “To say he snapped wouldn’t be accurate either, because this seems like it was well planned out. ... This makes you think you don’t know people after all.”



nce Boelter is accused of shooting two Minnesota legislators and their spouses, killing two of them. He was the subject of an extensive manhunt.

Profile is unusual

The shootings fit into a recent spike in political violence.

In the past decade, there have been at least eight successful or failed assassination attempts on American politicians, including two attempts on Trump's life, according to data tracked by Hamline University's Violence Prevention Project.

Yet even among those who study acts of public gun violence, the up-close-and-personal attacks on legislators by a man showing no apparent warning signs remains confounding.

"To be honest, I have been a bit baffled by this perpetrator," said Violence Prevention Project Executive Director Jillian Peterson. "He does not fit any sort of profile or traditional warning signs that we know of."

Peterson said people who commit public shootings are often trying to be "part of something bigger." Some turn to violence after a significant loss – like a financial one – and exhibit an "aggrieved entitlement," looking outward to place blame. There is also a "social contagion" element, she said, and other assassination attempts may inspire more attacks.

Since Boelter was captured near his home on June 15, after a neighbor spotted him on a trail camera, many of the institutions he belonged to have tried to distance themselves from him.

His church released a statement Sunday after the shootings acknowledging "with deep sadness and concern" that Boelter was a member of the congregation, and saying it was cooperating fully with law enforcement's investigation.

"We're completely opposed to everything ... he did," said Wolcyn, the church member. "It's completely antithetical to our message. Jesus said, 'Love your neighbor.'"

The Christ for the Nations Institute also released a statement denouncing Boelter's actions: "We are absolutely aghast and horrified that a CFNI alumnus is the suspect. This is not who we are. This is not what we teach. This is not what we model. We have been training Christian servant leaders for 55 years and they have been agents of good, not evil."

In speculating about Boelter's motives, social media users pointed to his appointment to workforce development boards under two Democratic governors. But Boelter voted in the March 2024 Minnesota Republican presidential primary, according to records obtained by the Minnesota Star Tribune. And Carlson, his roommate, said Boelter is a Republican who supported Trump.

Boelter's letter confessing to the crime was addressed to the FBI, prosecutors say. He signed it, "Dr. Vance Luther Boelter."

Matt DeLong, Jeff Hargarten, MaryJo Webster, Louis Krauss, Sarah Nelson, Elliot Hughes, Paul Walsh and correspondent Thomas James of the Minnesota Star Tribune contributed to this report.

To see raw video and key documents involving Vance Boelter, [click this link](#).

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Andy Mannix

MINNEAPOLIS CRIME AND POLICING REPORTER

Andy Mannix covers Minneapolis crime and policing for the Minnesota Star Tribune.

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Jeffrey Meitrodt

REPORTER

Jeffrey Meitrodt is an investigative reporter for the Star Tribune who specializes in stories involving the collision of business and government regulation.

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Deena Winter

REPORTER

Deena Winter is Minneapolis City Hall reporter for the Star Tribune.

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Packing winds over 100 mph, the storm topples transformers, trees and street lights in Bemidji. No injuries were reported, but some residents have been displaced.

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