NEW YORK — A lawyer for U.S. Sen. [*Bob Menendez*](https://apnews.com/hub/robert-menendez) blamed the politician’s wife Wednesday for his legal problems, telling a jury at the start of a corruption trial that the Democrat wasn’t aware his spouse had taken gifts from a trio of businessmen and didn't know about cash and gold bars hidden in a closet at their New Jersey home.

“She kept him in the dark about what she was asking others to give her,” defense lawyer Avi Weitzman said, portraying it as a desperate search for funds from relatives and friends. “She wasn’t going to let Bob know that she had financial problems.”

Jurors began hearing opening statements Wednesday in a trial in which Menendez is accused of accepting lavish bribes in exchange for a variety of corrupt favors, including taking actions as a senator that benefited the government of Egypt.

Prosecutors portrayed Menendez as someone who had betrayed his country.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Lara Pomerantz told the jury the senator’s wife, Nadine Menendez, did play a central role in her husband’s corruption, but said he hid behind her while using her as a conduit to the businessmen who delivered bribes.

“He was careful not to send too many texts,” she said. “He used Nadine as his go-between to deliver messages to and from the people paying bribes.”

Nadine Menendez is charged in the case as well, but her trial has been postponed until at least July because a recently discovered serious medical condition requires surgery. She has pleaded not guilty. The couple began dating in early 2018. They married two years later and moved into her Englewood Cliffs home.

Senator Menendez faces charges of bribery, fraud, extortion, obstruction of justice and acting as a foreign agent of Egypt. The evidence includes gold bars and over $400,000 in cash that the FBI found during a search of the couple's house, which Pomerantz said was tucked inside “a safe, in jacket pockets, in shoes, all over the house.”

Menendez, 70, quit his powerful post as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee after his arrest, but he resisted calls for his resignation. He skipped the Democratic primary but said he might run as an independent this year if he is acquitted.

Menendez has held public office continuously since 1986, serving as a state legislator before 14 years as a U.S. congressman. In 2006, then-Gov. Jon Corzine appointed Menendez to the Senate seat he vacated when he became governor.

In her remarks to the jury, Pomerantz called Menendez a public official "who put his own interests above his duty to the people.”

“This is Robert Menendez, U.S. senator from New Jersey," Pomerantz said, pointing at him. “And he was entrusted with making big decisions, including decisions that affected this country’s national security. He was also corrupt.”

In return for bribes, Pomerantz said, the senator took official acts to aid Fred Daibes, a New Jersey real estate developer; and two other businessmen: Wael Hana and Jose Uribe. Daibes and Hana, who are on trial with Menendez, have pleaded not guilty. Their lawyers will deliver opening statements Thursday. Uribe recently pleaded guilty and is expected to testify.

Pomerantz said Menendez also tried to corrupt the U.S. justice system by using his influence to push to nominate a federal prosecutor in New Jersey who might protect Daibes from a criminal prosecution.

“This was not ***politics*** as usual,” she told the jury. “This was ***politics*** for profit, a U.S. senator on the take. ... Menendez put his power up for sale. And Hana and Daibes were more than happy to buy from him.”

Pomerantz said Daibes, in part, delivered gold bars and cash to Menendez and his wife to get the senator to help him secure a multimillion-dollar deal with a Qatari investment fund by acting in ways favorable to Qatar’s government.

She also said Menendez did things benefiting Egyptian officials in exchange for bribes from Hana as the businessman secured a lucrative deal with the Egyptian government to certify that imported meat met Islamic dietary requirements, even though he had no experience in the business.

The defense lawyer, Weitzman, called Menendez “an American patriot” and prosecutors “dead wrong.”

He said Menendez “took no bribes and did not accept any cash, or gold, or a car.”

“He was never and is not a foreign agent of the government of Egypt. He did not violate the law, period,” Weitzman said.

Weitzman said there was nothing unusual or wrong about Menendez’s dealings with Egypt and Qatar because senators must engage in diplomacy and help constituents. He noted that Menendez was tough on Egypt, including its president, over its human rights record.

While prosecutors say the three businessmen showered Menendez and his wife with gifts, Weitzman told the jury Daibes’ fingerprint was found on only one of hundreds of envelopes belonging to the senator, and was not surprising given the decades that Menendez had known him. All the rest of the fingerprints, he added, were found on envelopes of cash belonging to Nadine Menendez.

“You will not see any fingerprints and any DNA on the senator’s cash. Every fingerprint and DNA was found in his wife’s closet or in her safe deposit box at a bank,” Weitzman said.

The lawyer said the gold bars were in the home because of a “cultural” practice by Nadine Menendez, who was raised in a family from Lebanon that kept gold for financial safety and to give as gifts.

Weitzman also said that the senator’s family, which fled Cuba before he was born, had lost its life savings except for cash hidden in their home. As a result, he said, Menendez had been storing hundreds of dollars in cash a week for decades to store at home, keeping much of it in bags in the home’s basement.

After the jury went home, the defense requested a mistrial, claiming the government went too far in its opening statement. The judge denied it.

The trial represents the second time Menendez has been criminally charged in a federal court in the last decade.

In 2017, a federal [*jury deadlocked*](https://apnews.com/article/8cbd42f68583431381c6d01de928d47e) on corruption charges brought in New Jersey, and prosecutors did not seek to retry him.