NEW YORK — A federal jury was alternately introduced to [*Bob Menendez*](https://apnews.com/hub/robert-menendez) as a bribe-taking U.S. senator who betrayed his country and an American patriot Wednesday as a prosecutor and defense lawyer delivered contrasting visions of the once-powerful Democrat at the start of his New York corruption trial.

Central to the openings from both the government and the senator's advocate in Manhattan federal court was Nadine Menendez, a woman he began dating in early 2018 before marrying her two years later and moving into her Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, home.

“She kept him in the dark about what she was asking others to give her,” defense lawyer Avi Weitzman said of Nadine Menendez's desperate search for funds from relatives and friends as the relationship between the two blossomed. “She wasn’t going to let Bob know that she had financial problems.”

Earlier, Assistant U.S. Attorney Lara Pomerantz assigned Nadine Menendez a central role in her husband's alleged corruption, saying he hid behind her by communicating through her 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 trial stems from charges lodged against the three-term senator last fall when Menendez held a powerful post as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

He was forced to quit as chairman after his arrest, but he resisted calls for his resignation, saying he'll run as an independent this year if he runs at all.

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.

A jury chosen over three days was told by a prosecutor that the trial was about 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 as she pointed to the 70-year-old man. “And he was entrusted with making big decisions, including decisions that affected this country’s national security. He was also corrupt.”

Charges of bribery, fraud, extortion, obstruction of justice and acting as a foreign agent of Egypt were lodged against Menendez after the FBI in 2022 found gold bars and over $400,000 in cash in the Menendez home “in a safe, in jacket pockets, in shoes, all over the house,” the prosecutor said.

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 and their lawyers will deliver openings Thursday. Uribe recently pleaded guilty to charges in a cooperation deal and will testify.

Pomerantz said Menendez also tried to corrupt the U.S. justice system by using his influence to push to nominate a U.S. attorney in New Jersey whom he believed he could influence to 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.

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

During her opening, Pomerantz said Nadine Menendez has known the businessmen for many years. Weitzman said Menendez had known Daibes for decades.

The prosecutor said the corruption scheme began in 2018, soon after the couple began dating.

Pomerantz said Hana recruited the deep-pocketed Daibes because the cash-strapped Hana was unable to quickly afford bribes.

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.”

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

Pomerantz, though, said the businessmen showered Menendez and his wife with gifts to ensure Menendez would help them, and evidence will show Daibes' fingerprints and DNA were on cash found in his home.

Weitzman said 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.

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.

Menendez's family, which fled Cuba before he was born, had lost its life savings except for cash hidden in their home, Weitzman said.

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.

“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.

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.

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.