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SPOTLIGHT

Cleared Runways in North Carolina for a Pricey Race

The fight for the First in Flight State is set more than a year before the general election.

By Kirk A. Bado

This morning, former Rep. Wiley Nickel (D-NC) dropped his bid for North Carolina's open Senate seat after former Gov. Roy Cooper (D) launched his highly anticipated campaign yesterday.

Cooper, a popular two-term governor who has won four statewide campaigns, is Democrats' dream recruit in the swing state. He has near universal name ID and the fundraising chops to put Republicans on defense and keep any Democratic challengers on the sidelines.

In the first few hours after launching his bid, Cooper's campaign claimed they raised more than \$1 million—nearly double what Nickel raised all last quarter, according to *Hotline's* Q2 fundraising chart.

On the other side of the aisle, the GOP primary is clear for RNC Chairman Michael Whatley thanks to a promise of a "complete and total endorsement" from President Trump. Whatley, the former state party chair, is expected to formally enter the race in the coming days and most of his nominal competition should bow out shortly afterward. Thus, the matchup in pivotal North Carolina will be set more than a year before the general election.

The nascent race in North Carolina parallels the Senate race in Pennsylvania last year. That campaign between then-Sen. Bob Casey (D) and 2022 nominee Dave McCormick (R) was also set more than a year out from the general election. The clear runway allowed both candidates to go on offense much earlier than other states and run up a pricey tab. Pennsylvania was the second-most-expensive Senate contest of the cycle, with a \$289 million price tag.

Casey, a close ally of former President Biden, was constantly on defense as voters turned on the president and the Democratic Party. While there's no incumbent in North Carolina, Whatley will have to defend the Trump administration in a midterm cycle that traditionally favors the party out of power.

Democrats will prioritize flipping the open seat in North Carolina. Expect Whatley and his GOP allies to come out of the gates swinging as well as they litigate Cooper's tenure as governor. More than \$165 million was spent in the last North Carolina open seat Senate race in 2022, and strategists in the state predicted to *Hotline* that this year's race could top more than \$215 million.

— *Kirk A. Bado*

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Quote of the Day

" I feel like Trump has endorsed me already, and he does that every day when his administration moves out and does great conservative actions that are reflected in Project 2025. " — Project 2025 architect Paul Dans (R) on President Trump endorsing Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) over him, NBC News, 7/28

HOTLINE LATEST EDITION

JD Vance praises OBBB in Ohio

By Erika Filter

DEMOCRATS: Focus Groups Find Young Men Disillusioned with Democrats

Focus groups conducted with men who voted for former President Biden "ages 18 to 29 from swing states including Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina, Nevada, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin" showed young men say the Democratic Party abandoned them amid rising prices and diminishing job prospects.

- **OBAMA'S PARTY.** Former President Obama "was the only Democrat whom focus group participants could name as a masculine role model from the party."
- **INAUTHENTICITY.** "Focus group participants said Democratic messaging, especially to young Black and Latino men, felt like pandering to their race." (*Washington Post*)

REPUBLICANS: Trump Denies Visiting Epstein's Island

President Trump said he "never had the privilege" of visiting convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein's island, simultaneously baselessly accusing former President Clinton of visiting the island.

- **REASONS CHANGE.** He said his eventual falling out with Epstein was because the disgraced New York financier “stole people that worked for” him, contradicting aides’ claim that Trump barred Epstein from Mar-a-Lago for “being a creep.” (*New York Times*)
- **IMPEACHMENT COULD DELIVER IN 2026.** “Republican strategists suggest emphasizing that Trump could be impeached if Democrats regain control of the House as one angle to win in the midterms.”
- **THREAT LIKELY UNFULFILLED.** Democrats, on the other hand, have “concluded impeachment is a losing issue.” (NBC News)

TECH CORNER: NRSC Warns of Fundraising Losses from iOS Update

In a new memo, the NRSC warns that Apple’s newest update to its operating system “introduces aggressive message filtering” that will mark political fundraising texts “as spam by default.”

- **LOSSES ON THE HORIZON.** The memo states that the NRSC could stand to lose more than \$25 million in revenue, and “the macro effect could be over \$500M in lost GOP revenues.”
- **SOFT POWER.** A decline in political texts could also hamper get-out-the-vote operations and rapid response messaging, the memo states. (*Punchbowl News*)
- **HOTLINE ANALYSIS.** The NRSC says it has spent years complying with rigorous standards for its fundraising texts, but voters might think these standards don’t go far enough. The 2022 cycle reportedly saw more than 15 billion political texts sent, and the return on investment for those texts is high. ActBlue estimates 90% of fundraising during big political moments comes from mobile devices. But voters express irritation with the deluge of texts in the leadup to an election. And text campaigns often target elderly donors with dementia, leading them to unwittingly donate more than they might like. Political campaigns stand to lose a golden opportunity with a heightened spam filter—but it may be to voters’ benefit.

WHITE HOUSE: Vance Touts OBBB in Ohio

Vice President JD Vance promoted the OBBB in a visit to Canton, Ohio, highlighting the bill’s tax deductions on tips and overtime and the funds allocated to Republicans’ immigration agenda. (*Cleveland.com*) He also defended the administration’s decision not to release files related to convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

- **BALANCING ACT.** “The stakes are high for” Vance “as he seeks simultaneously to demonstrate his allegiance to the president and to position himself as his natural successor.”
- **STILL WAITING.** So far, President Trump “has repeatedly declined to endorse his vice president—or anyone else, for that matter—as worthy of inheriting his political movement.”
- **CZAR OF NOTHING.** Vance “faces the same challenge that has long bedeviled vice presidents: There is little room to carve out one’s own independent positions.” (*New York Times*)
- **MORE TO COME.** Vance is headlining fundraisers for the RNC today in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and Big Sky, Montana, with each event reportedly raising over \$2 million. (*Axios*)
- **TRUMP ADJUSTS TONE ON GAZA.** Trump “acknowledged starvation in Gaza after largely deflecting on the issue, even as world leaders and humanitarian organizations warned that more than 20 months of Israeli bombardment and aid restrictions had left nearly two million Palestinians in a hunger crisis.”

- **NO DEAL.** For Trump, “who boasts about his transactional approach to deal-making on the world stage, the starvation unfolding in Gaza is a test of whether an America First foreign policy can confront one of the biggest humanitarian catastrophes of the 21st century.” (*New York Times*)
- **ECONOMIC PLAN COMING INTO PLACE.** “There’s no guarantee that Trump’s radical overhaul of U.S. trade policy will deliver the happy ending he’s promised.” (AP)
- **DETAILS LACKING.** “Trump’s ‘announce first, details later’ approach to trade deals has caught some global leaders off guard and led to contradictions about the billions of dollars the administration says foreign nations have pledged.” (*Axios*)

2028 WATCH: Ruben Gallego Heading to New Hampshire

Sen. Ruben Gallego (D-AZ) “is scheduled to visit New Hampshire on Aug. 22 and is expected to make multiple stops, including a Politics & Eggs address to the New England Council, a town hall with” Rep. Maggie Goodlander (D-NH 02), and a fundraiser for Rep. Chris Pappas (D-NH 01). (WMUR)

HOTLINE LATEST EDITION

Dems optimistic Janet Mills will challenge Susan Collins

By Nicholas Anastácio

ENDORSEMENT ROUNDUP: Pro-Life Group Backs John Cornyn Over Ken Paxton

The Texas Alliance for Life Fed PAC, an anti-abortion group in the Lone Star State, endorsed Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX) as he faces a primary challenge from Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton (R).

- **PICKING SIDES.** “The group has supported Paxton in various abortion-focused lawsuits,” but also has a “longstanding relationship with Cornyn.” (*Texas Tribune*)
- **ALABAMA.** Fifty law enforcement officials, including 27 sheriffs and 23 district attorneys representing 33 counties, endorsed state Attorney General Steve Marshall (R) to succeed Sen. Tommy Tuberville (R) as he runs for governor. (*Alabama Daily News*)
- **HOTLINE ANALYSIS.** Ten of the officials that backed Marshall represent counties within Rep. Barry Moore’s (R-01) district. Moore is considering a run for the seat, teasing a “BIG announcement” on August 15.
- **MICHIGAN.** House GOP Conference Chair Lisa McClain, representing MI-09, endorsed 2024 nominee Mike Rogers (R) to replace retiring Sen. Gary Peters (D). (release)

MAINE: Dems Optimistic About Janet Mills

Democrats are optimistic that Gov. Janet Mills (D) is increasingly considering a challenge against Sen. Susan Collins (R).

- **I’M JUST THINKING ABOUT IT.** “The governor has signaled a greater openness to a bid in recent conversations with people in the state, according to a Maine Democratic operative ... Democrats in Washington are similarly growing more optimistic that Mills will run for Senate.” (*NOTUS*)

- **OTHERS TO LOOK AT.** Former congressional staffer Jordan Wood (D) is currently running for the seat, but other Democrats could join if the governor passes on a bid. State House Speaker Ryan Fecteau, state Attorney General Aaron Frey, former state Sen. Cathy Breen, and brewer Dan Kleban are considering runs. (Maine Public Radio)

NORTH CAROLINA: Wiley Nickel Suspends Campaign, Endorses Roy Cooper

Former Rep. Wiley Nickel (D) is suspending his bid to replace retiring Sen. Thom Tillis (R), endorsing former Gov. Roy Cooper (D) for the Democratic nomination. Nickel is expected to run for Wake County district attorney.

- **NICKEL SAYS:** “We started this campaign to send Thom Tillis packing. Well, mission accomplished I guess!” (release)
- **STEERING CLEAR.** Rep. Don Davis (D-01) is likely to pass on a Senate bid with Cooper in the race. A person close to Davis’ thinking said the congressman “is very glad to see someone from eastern North Carolina getting in the Senate race.” (*Politico*)
- **WORK CUT OUT.** Amid Cooper’s entry into the open race, Tillis isn’t doubting the former governor’s ability to flip his seat.
- **TILLIS SAYS:** “I don’t think he’s invulnerable but he’s got a good track record as governor. ... It’s probably a smart call. We just gotta match up and beat him. I don’t want this seat to be taken by a Democrat.” (*Politico*)

OHIO: Schumer Pays Sherrod Brown (Another) Visit

Minority Leader Chuck Schumer and former Sen. Sherrod Brown (D) met in Ohio this weekend as Brown considers a Senate or gubernatorial bid next year. “Schumer has lobbied Brown for months to run” after his 2024 loss to Sen. Bernie Moreno (R).

- **A BETTER LOSER.** Democrats view Brown as their best chance to defeat Sen. Jon Husted (R) in the special election. Brown lost to Moreno last year by less than 4 points; former Vice President Kamala Harris lost the state by more than 10 points.
- **BACK-TO-BACK.** If Brown is elected in 2026, he would be up for election two years later—a third Senate race in a row for the 72-year-old. (*Axios*)

HOTLINE LATEST EDITION

NRCC wants to set narrative on reconciliation bill

By James A. Downs and Amelia Monroe

RACE FOR THE HOUSE: NRCC Outlines Plan to Win on Budget Bill

An NRCC memo outlines how the committee wants its members to sell the GOP reconciliation bill during the August recess. “The best offense is a good defense,” the document reads, and says Republicans should portray the bill’s cuts to Medicaid as an “overhaul that will strengthen the program.”

- **HIGHLIGHT REEL.** The memo says Republicans should also discuss “tax relief, immigration, business reforms, and ‘holding elites accountable.’”
- **STAY WOKE.** The committee urges members to do local media interviews and be leery of trackers, who are hired to follow members around and record them.

- **THE DEM MESSAGE.** DCCC spokesman Viet Shelton previewed the Democratic messaging in a response to this memo. He said the bill is a “giveaway to billionaires that’s paid for by ripping away health care from millions and jacking up folks’ energy costs.” (*Politico*)

REDISTRICTING ROUNDUP: Big Donors Plot to Back Texas Dems

Democratic donors are gearing up to cover Texas Democrats’ \$500 per day fine if they leave the state to deny the Legislature a quorum. “But first, the donors and absconding members would need to figure out how to skirt a potential roadblock: Texas House rules prohibit lawmakers from dipping into their campaign coffers to pay the fines.”

- **TIGHT LIPPED.** People involved in the strategy say they found a way to skirt the legal prohibition but declined to share any additional details. Rep. Jasmine Crockett (D-TX 30) said Texas legislators can “accept the donations as another salary.”
- **BY THE NUMBERS.** “One person estimated lawmakers would need \$1 million per month to finance the protest.” Those involved in the organizing “are certain” they can reach that goal. (*Texas Tribune*)
- **NY.** State Democrats “are preparing to introduce a concurrent resolution to amend the constitution that would allow New York to redraw its House lines in the middle of the decade if other states move forward with redistricting.” The constitutional amendment process in New York is long, so such a maneuver would have no effect on the 2026 elections. Gov. Kathy Hochul (D) did not rule out pursuing redistricting if Texas goes forward with its plan, though the Empire State has greater legal hurdles to overcome. (*New York Playbook*)
- **BUYING TIME.** Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries will hold a closed-door meeting with Texas Democrats Wednesday to discuss Republicans’ attempts to redraw the state’s congressional map. The meeting comes after Jeffries allegedly told Texas House Democrats “to flee the state to stop redistricting efforts.” For the delay to be successful 51 of the 62 state Democrats would “have to fail to appear,” which would prevent the two-thirds threshold necessary for the House to conduct business.
- **SOFTEN THE BLOW.** If President Trump’s push for Texas redistricting is successful, Republicans could hold a 30-8 majority over Democrats in the state. California Gov. Gavin Newsom (D) and Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker (D) have “discussed the potential of redistricting to offset Republican gains in Texas.” Texas wouldn’t be the only states Democrats could have to compensate for in the midterms: Ohio has to draw a new map this year since the last one wasn’t passed with bipartisan support, and Florida Gov. Ron Desantis (R) has “floated” the idea of redrawing his state map. (KXAN)

PRIMARY ROUNDUP: Ro Khanna Backs an Influencer

Rep. Ro Khanna (D-CA 17) endorsed progressive influencer Kat Abughazaleh (D), marking her first congressional endorsement. Abughazaleh is one of many vying for retiring Rep. Jan Schakowsky’s (D) seat. Khanna called Abughazaleh “the absolute best that the Democratic party has to offer.” (CBS News)

- **GA-10.** Rep. Mike Collins’ (R) decision to run for Senate has left the Republican Party scrambling to find a replacement. The eastern Atlanta district has deep-seeded Republican ties, leaving the real battleground in the upcoming GOP primaries. State Rep. Houston Gaines (R) is the most prominent candidate so far, with a deep allyship to Gov. Brian Kemp (R) and \$900,000 in his state campaign account.
- **ELSEWHERE.** Former Rep. Paul Broun (R), who ran for Senate in 2014 and finished fourth in the 2022 primary behind Collins, is also eyeing the primary race. State Sen. Brian Strickland (R) will not run for the seat. (*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*)

MICHIGAN 10: Former Member Considers Comeback Bid

Former Rep. Mike Bishop (R) announced he's considering a run to replace Rep. John James (R), who's running for governor. Bishop served the old MI-08 from 2015 to 2019, losing to Sen. Elissa Slotkin (D) in 2018.

- **BISHOP SAYS:** "I'm now weighing another call to serve. MI-10 matters. If I step in, it's to win. Stay tuned." (X)

NEBRASKA 02: Internal Poll Shows State Senator Out Front

A GBAO poll (July 21-23; 400 LVs; +/-4.37%) conducted internally for state Sen. John Cavanaugh (D) found Cavanaugh leading the Democratic field with 36%. Douglas County District Court Clerk Crystal Rhoades (D) came in at 15%, political operative Denise Powell (D) was at 9%, retired eye doctor Mark Johnston (D) was at 5%, and Navy veteran Kishla Askins (D) was at 4%. 29% were undecided. (release)

- **HOTLINE ANALYSIS.** Even if this poll is internal, it's not wholly surprising the two elected officials lead the way, as no one has spent significant sums of money to boost their profile. Democrats are salivating at the opportunity to flip this seat after Rep. Don Bacon (R) announced he will retire; it's the best flip opportunity in the country and, because of that, more candidates could be on the way, further fracturing the field.

NEVADA: Dems Taking Advantage of Cracks in OBBB

Republicans are trying to utilize President Trump's "big, beautiful bill" as a launching point for their campaigns as they try to flip the three Democratic-held seats. Reps. Dina Titus (D-01), Susie Lee (D-03), and Steven Horsford (D-04) are DCCC "Frontliners," members the committee finds most vulnerable.

- **ON THE OFFENSIVE.** The Ways and Means Committee started floating its messaging campaign on the OBBB, with Rep. Jason Smith (R-MO 08) criticizing "Democrats for voting against tax cuts for tips, overtime, and seniors." But, Democrats were quick to turn the criticism on its head saying the tax cuts didn't go far enough.
- **DIFFICULTIES.** Titus acknowledged the potential challenges in explaining their message on tips to voters, since it might be harder to communicate messages such as lifting the provision's cap. But Democrats "are confident they can win the broader economic argument, particularly amid a slump in Las Vegas tourism." They plan to address cuts to Medicaid and food assistance, housing costs, and tariffs. (*Punchbowl News*)

TEXAS 18 SPECIAL: New Poll Shows Two Candidates Tied for First

A University of Houston poll (July 9-18; 400 LVs; +/-4.9%) of the Nov. 4 special election to replace the late Rep. Sylvester Turner (D) found Harris County Attorney Christian Menefee (D) and 2024 candidate Amanda Edwards (D) locked at 19%. Real estate broker Carmen Maria Montiel (R) and state Rep. Jolanda Jones (D) were at 14%, followed by communications specialist George Foreman IV at 4% and 2024 candidate Isaiah Martin (D) at 3%. 27% were undecided. (Houston Public Media)

- **HOTLINE ANALYSIS.** There's a wide open field, but the two candidates with likely the most name recognition lead the way. Texas state law requires a candidate to clear 50% to avoid a runoff, and a crowded field increases the likelihood of that, which would be some time in early 2026. All candidates—no matter of party—will appear on the same ballot in November. This Houston-based seat is also a potential subject of redistricting, meaning the configuration could look drastically different for the 2026 elections.

VIRGINIA 02: Democratic Veteran Gets In

Marine Corps veteran Mike Williamson (D) jumped in the Democratic primary to take on Rep. Jen Kiggans (R). “Williamson spent 20 years in the Marines, serving six tours overseas and helping evacuate U.S. embassies.”

- **SEE AND HEAR.** Williamson in his launch video says he was motivated by “swamp creatures” voting to cut healthcare and “spineless politicians beholden to their king.”
- **THE FIELD.** He joins Navy veteran James Osyf (D) in the primary. (*Punchbowl News*)

HOTLINE LATEST EDITION

Mikie Sherrill holds single-digit lead over Jack Ciattarelli in new poll

By Abby Turner

STATE OF THE STATES: Kelly Open to Rejoining NGA If Group Shifts Focus

Kansas Gov. Laura Kelly (D), one of two prominent Democrats who are stepping away from the NGA over “the group’s failure to push back against the” Trump administration, said she is “open to rejoining the group once it focuses more on advocating for states.”

- **KELLY SAYS:** “The NGA does some very good things particularly in the area of training for governor’s staff, but there also needs to be a state rights advocate and I think they’ve sort of fallen down on that role.” (KSNT)

FLORIDA: Byron Donalds’ Ad Attacks David Jolly Over Gun Law Stances

Rep. Byron Donalds’ (R-19) campaign “released a digital ad splicing together an MSNBC segment in which” former Rep. David Jolly (D) “was criticizing gun laws.”

- **ON TAPE.** The campaign warned “that Jolly would seek to curb access to firearms. The segment included Jolly saying, ‘We have to crush the culture of guns in the United States’ and ‘take on the Second Amendment.’” (*Politico*)

ILLINOIS: Former State GOP Chair Mulls Gubernatorial Bid

Former state GOP Chair Don Tracy “is considering a run for governor in 2026.” Tracy “said that he would make a decision before the Illinois State Fair, which kicks off Aug. 7 in Springfield. Candidates can begin circulating nominating petitions for the March 17, 2026 primary election on August 5.” Gov. JB Pritzker (D) is running for a third term. (*Journal Gazette & Times-Courier*)

NEW JERSEY: Mikie Sherrill Holds Single-Digit Lead in New Poll

A poll (July 17-23; 806 RVs; +/-3.4%) by Fairleigh Dickinson University found Rep. Mikie Sherrill (D-11) leading 2021 nominee Jack Ciattarelli (R), 45%-37%. 3% said they’d vote for someone else and 16% were undecided.

- **LEADING AGAIN.** Sherrill also led among independents, 30%-23%, with 41% undecided. (*New Jersey Globe*)

- **HOTLINE ANALYSIS.** While Sherrill holds a narrow lead among independents, over a third of those polled remain undecided. Since both Sherrill and Ciattarelli hold strong with their party bases, Ciattarelli will have to win over a sizable chunk of independents to narrow the gap.

NEW MEXICO: Key Indigenous Tribe Snubs Deb Haaland

“A key Indigenous tribe in New Mexico won't support” former Interior Secretary Deb Haaland (D) “in Democratic primary for governor in the state,” signaling “that Haaland, who is Laguna Pueblo, isn't galvanizing New Mexico's Native Americans as she did during her 2021 confirmation hearing for interior secretary, when she rallied Indigenous people in the U.S.”

- **WHO GOT IT.** Sandia Pueblo endorsed her opponent, Bernalillo County District Attorney Sam Bregman (D). (*Axios*)

SOUTH CAROLINA: Majority of GOP Voters Undecided in Primary

A poll (July 21-25; 1,200 RVs; +/-2.77%) sponsored by the South Carolina Policy Council and conducted by Targoz Market Research found the majority of voters, 52%, undecided. Rep. Nancy Mace (R-01) was slightly ahead with 16%, followed by state Attorney General Alan Wilson (R) with 15%, Lt. Gov. Pamela Evette (R) with 8%, Rep. Ralph Norman (R-05) with 6%, and state Sen. Josh Kimbrell (R) with 3%.

- **THE TRUMP FACTOR.** If President Trump endorses a candidate in the Republican primary, 54% said they would be more likely to vote for that candidate. (WCIV)
- **HOTLINE ANALYSIS.** With a majority of those polled still undecided, the Trump endorsement will be key in this race. Expect all but Norman, who earned 2024 presidential candidate Nikki Haley's (R) endorsement, to duke it out for the coveted endorsement.
- **INCHING CLOSER.** Mace appeared once again to tease her anticipated gubernatorial run on social media. She posted a video on X with the caption “Coming soon.” The video asks who can stop “the left” from coming to South Carolina, followed by videos of Trump repeating Mace's name. (X)

WISCONSIN: Sarah Godlewski Considers Lieutenant Governor Run

Wisconsin Secretary of State Sarah Godlewski (D) “doesn't plan to run for governor or for a full term in her current position, but she is considering running for lieutenant governor next year.” She “was one of several Democrats mentioned as a possible contender” after Gov. Tony Evers (D) announced he won't seek a third term.

- **NOT GETTING INVOLVED.** Evers said it is unlikely that he will endorse in the Democratic primary. (AP)
- **A NEW GAME.** “Not having to run against” Evers' “relative popularity—but retaining the ability to attack his record—has left a wide-open race that the state's conservatives hope to capitalize on.”
- **BUT NOT AN EASY WIN.** “Still, Republicans have no reason to believe they can walk right into the governor's mansion. They have struggled recently in statewide elections in Wisconsin, despite the state's purple hue.” President Trump's “victory in November has not necessarily translated to other races, either.” (*NOTUS*)

OVERLOOKED

A Faith-Based Step Forward

By Amelia Monroe

A push for faith-based discussion in the federal government seems to be one of many line items at the top of President Trump's agenda. On July 28, the Office of Personnel Management, which manages the federal civilian workforce, released a memo urging federal employees to practice their religions openly by displaying religious items at work, participate in group prayer, and encourage co-workers to adopt their faith. This agenda doesn't steer far from religious guidance propelled by previous presidents, such as the Clinton administration barring agencies from suppressing employees' private religious speech in the workplace, President Bush promising to restore Christian morality to the White House, and President Obama asserting that religion is a key part of "personal morality" that often injects itself into public policy. But, Trump's encouragement of proselytism, while an attempt to encourage religious conversation, is one of the more aggressive approaches to religion in the workplace.