

The world in brief, July 13th 2024



Joe Biden reportedly arranged virtual meetings with congressional groups one day after delivering a [closely watched press conference](#). Twenty Democrats in the House of Representatives and one senator have publicly called on him to step aside. In Thursday's news conference Mr Biden combined verbal gaffes with a firm grasp of foreign policy. He promised to stay in the [presidential race](#) and "complete the job".

China's trade surplus rose to \$99bn in June, an all-time high. The government is throwing cash at manufacturing firms, propelling exports. At the same time weak domestic demand has depressed imports. The figures will spook China's trading partners, who complain that the subsidies have allowed it to flood their markets with goods, including electric cars, at cut-throat prices. In response, America and the EU are hiking up [tariffs](#) on Chinese products.

America's most closely-watched index of consumer sentiment, published by the University of Michigan, plunged to its lowest reading in eight months in July, according to preliminary data. Although **inflation** is easing, high prices are eroding living

standards, weighing on consumers' views of the [economy](#). Meanwhile, the producer-price index, a leading indicator of inflation, rose 0.2% last month, more than analysts were expecting.

Russia denied that it had conspired to assassinate Armin Papperger, the boss of [Rheinmetall](#), Germany's biggest arms-maker. Earlier American intelligence reportedly announced it had discovered a plan to assassinate him, according to CNN. Germany said that it would not be "intimidated by Russia". The company has supplied the [Ukrainian army](#) since Russia's invasion; it recently opened an armoured-vehicle factory in Ukraine.

AT&T, an American [telecommunications company](#), said that nearly 110m people—virtually all of its cellular clientele—were affected by a **cyber-attack** that exposed customers' phone records but not the content of calls or texts. The incident, the second the firm has disclosed this year, largely took place over the course of more than a week in April. The Department of Justice is investigating.

Pushpa Kamal Dahal, **Nepal's** prime minister, stepped down after losing a vote of confidence. A former guerilla, he had been in office since 2022 and previously served two terms. Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli, who leads the Nepal Communist Party and [has ruled before](#), is set to take over. Amid its government shakeup, Nepal is tackling a dangerous monsoon season; earlier a landslide left more than 60 people missing.

A [SpaceX Falcon 9](#) rocket malfunctioned during a routine mission—the first failure by the model in eight years. The **rocket** disintegrated in orbit. The incident may impact upcoming Falcon 9 missions, including one to take four astronauts to the International Space Station in August. America's Federal Aviation Administration will launch an investigation to determine the cause.

Word of the week: RuWiki, the Kremlin's project to rewrite Wikipedia. [Read the full story.](#)

In the run-up to America's presidential election, we've launched The US in brief—a daily update to help you keep on top of the political stories that matter. Sign up here to receive it as a newsletter, each weekday, in your inbox.

India's biggest-ever wedding



[The Ambanis](#), who run Reliance Industries, a giant Indian conglomerate, are Asia's richest family. And they are not afraid to show it. Take the wedding of Anant Ambani, the youngest son, to Radhika Merchant. The ceremonies, which run from Friday and to Sunday, will be opulent. They will reportedly feature performances from Adele and Drake. Guests will include world leaders, sports stars and global corporate bosses—many of whom will be ferried over by privately hired Falcon 2000 jets.

The wedding is an extreme example of a broader trend. As Indians get richer, they are splurging on nuptials. According to Jeffries, a brokerage, Indians shell out \$15,000 on average on weddings, double the amount they spend on education. The government is hoping to harness that expenditure to boost the economy. Last year it announced a “Wed in India” campaign to encourage rich Indians to eschew destination weddings and party at home instead.

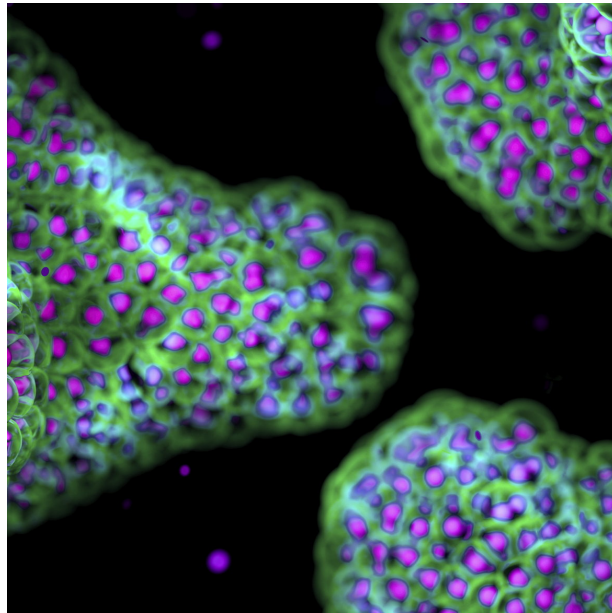
Donald Trump's post-debate strategy



Since his debate with Joe Biden on June 27th, Donald Trump has been uncharacteristically content to cede the spotlight. Democrats have dominated headlines over the past few weeks, fretting about Mr Biden's fitness for office and wondering if a different candidate would [stand a better chance](#) of beating Mr Trump. The former president's fund-raising emails less frequently decry the "SICK" Democrats who want to jail him. Instead they attack Kamala Harris, who as vice-president is probably Mr Biden's most natural replacement.

Republicans would prefer their opponents to keep their candidate. On average, Mr Biden's polling deficit has increased by 1.7 points since the debate. [Mr Trump's lead](#) now equals the largest he has had in any of his three presidential campaigns. He will be sure to hammer that point at a rally in Pennsylvania, a battleground, on Saturday. He may also announce his vice-presidential pick, ahead of the Republican National Convention, which starts on Monday.

Scientists take stock of stem-cell research



At the turn of the century, breakthroughs in stem-cell research seemed to promise a revolution, one that would transform medicine. That has not quite materialised. But a quarter-century later, stem-cell research is riding a second wave. The International Society for Stem Cell Research's (ISSCR) annual conference, which concludes in Hamburg on Saturday, has showcased the best of this rapidly advancing field.

A big focus has been [miniature model organs](#) made of stem cells, called organoids, which could someday be implanted to heal or even replace sick organs. In clinical trials, organoids already let doctors test drugs on patients outside their bodies. Embryo models, or embryoids, are now taking a turn in the spotlight. On Saturday the conference will convene a panel on the ethics of embryoids, which [increasingly resemble the real thing](#). The panellists will discuss the need for regulations to build trust and give researchers clarity. With a field moving so quickly, scientists must think ahead.

Faye Dunaway bares a lot, but not all



The actress Faye Dunaway has a reputation for being difficult to work with. But in “Faye”, a documentary streaming on HBO from Saturday, the 83-year-old Oscar-winner is a charmingly frank and good-humoured interviewee.

Ms Dunaway discusses her roles in such classic films as “Bonnie and Clyde”, “[Chinatown](#)” and “Network”, as well as the notorious flop, “Mommie Dearest”. (The melodrama—about another Hollywood icon, Joan Crawford—has become a camp cult favourite.) She talks about how her itinerant army-brat childhood taught her to view all relationships as temporary, including a two-year affair with Marcello Mastroianni, the Italian star she considers the love of her life. She even talks about her alcoholism and her bipolar disorder.

As co-operative as Ms Dunaway is, though, this brisk, reverential profile does not quite manage to pierce her elegant facade. For a career as eventful as hers, a 90-minute documentary just isn’t enough.

Weekend profile: Gretchen Whitmer, the Midwestern governor with star power



Gretchen Whitmer was the top Democrat in Michigan’s state senate when she first came to America’s attention. It was December 2013, and Republicans were pushing to pass a law that would have required women to buy a separate health-insurance policy to cover abortions. Ms Whitmer was arguing that the move would in effect force women to buy “rape insurance” when she paused. “I am about to tell you something that I have not shared with many people in my life. But over 20 years ago I was a victim of rape”, she said, her voice cracking.

Ms Whitmer, now 52, has been a relentless advocate of [abortion rights](#) since her first state House campaign in 2000. Her speech on the state senate floor failed to change a single Republican vote, but she has clocked major successes since. In 2022, pushing simple, pragmatic messages—abortion access, jobs and infrastructure—Ms Whitmer won re-election as governor and helped Democrats gain control of both houses of the legislature for the first time in four decades.

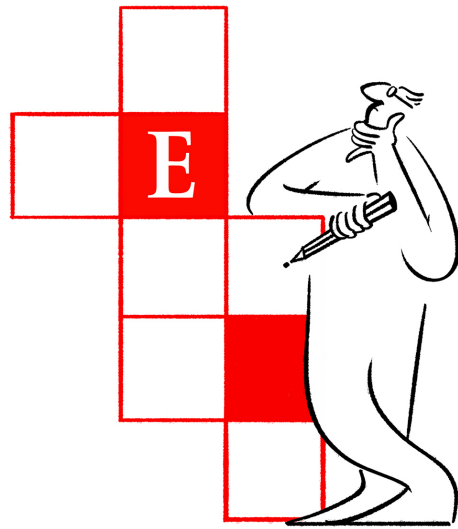
Her motto, as she writes in a memoir published this week, is “get shit done”. The book’s publication was announced several months ago, but the timing could hardly be better. With a growing number of Democrats calling on President Joe Biden to [step aside](#), Ms Whitmer is seen as one of the best [alternative candidates](#) to take on Donald Trump in November.

For now, she is not having it, accusing people who are suggesting alternatives to Mr Biden of “playing fantasy football.” But she also suggested it “wouldn’t hurt” if the 81-year-old president took a cognitive test (which he has refused to do). Her ambitions are clear enough—even if they are not put into action until 2028. She has her own national political action committee, which has almost \$2m on hand.

A big part of Ms Whitmer’s appeal is her willingness to go after Donald Trump. At the start of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, she accused him of withholding aid to Michigan. He began referring to her as “that woman from Michigan” (a label she embraced). That April hundreds of his fans stormed the state capitol to protest against her lockdown policy. Mr Trump tweeted “LIBERATE MICHIGAN” in support. Nine men were later separately convicted of plotting to kidnap her.

She and the current president share a contempt for the former one. If Mr Biden chooses not to step aside, Ms Whitmer is unlikely to knife him. But if she can be drafted, her relative youth, energy and love of fuschia power suits make for a stark contrast with the doddering Mr Biden.

Weekly crossword



Our crossword has two sets of clues, one for seasoned cruciverbalists and the other for less experienced solvers. Both give the same answers, all of which feature in articles in this week's edition of *The Economist*:

Cryptic clues

1 down Brains of clientele scrambled with gin (12)

1 across An inappropriate relationship among prince's tutors (6)

2 across Look! Regularly unseen type of parasite (5)

3 across Region has line after endless feud (6)

Factual clues

1 down What is highly dependent on nutrition after conception (12)

1 across One of crimes for which Anne Boleyn was beheaded (6)

2 across A foe of salmon (5)

3 across Where is preparing for a mighty trade war (6)

Email all four answers, along with your home city and country, by 9am BST on Monday to crossword@economist.com. We will pick randomly from those with the right answers and crown three winners in next week's edition.

The winners of this week's quiz



Thank you to everyone who took part in this week's quiz. The winners, chosen at random, were:

Kate Daly, Yardley, Pennsylvania, America

Katie King, Vancouver, Canada

Francois de Repentigny, Singapore

They all gave the correct answers of a yard, slap shot, chop suey, lip sync and drum. The theme is words that end in stick: yardstick, slapstick, chopstick, lipstick and drumstick.

The questions were:

Monday: In the imperial system, what measurement equals 0.9144 metres?

Tuesday: Which term in ice hockey was used as the title of the 1977 film about the sport, starring Paul Newman?

Wednesday: Which Chinese-American dish which consists of meat, eggs and mixed vegetables may owe its name to a term for “miscellaneous leftovers”?

Thursday: What two-word term refers to the practice of pretending to sing a song by mouthing the words?

Friday: Bass, snare and toms are all types of which musical instrument?

RuWiki

*the Kremlin's project to rewrite Wikipedia.
Read the full story*

**All that separates, whether of race, class,
creed, or sex, is inhuman, and must be
overcome**

Kate Sheppard