



MAHMOUD ISSA/REUTERS

The Game Goes On
A well-manicured soccer field stands in civilized contrast with buildings destroyed during the two-year Israeli offensive in Gaza City.

Senator With Trump’s Ear, and a Quiet Strategy

By CAROLINE KITCHENER
MONTGOMERY, Ala. — Her son had been at the orthodontist for 45 minutes when Katie Britt saw the picture of the boy in the bunny hat.
Waiting in her car for her son's appointment to finish, the Republican senator from Alabama could not look away from the photo on her phone that had just gone viral: The agent's hands on the boy's Spider-Man backpack. The icy black vehicle. The flash of terror in those 5-year-old eyes.
“Can you look into this?” Ms. Britt texted her team from a Montgomery parking lot on a Thursday morning in late January, afraid to believe that this could happen in America. She had read reports that agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement had used the boy as a “pawn,” sending him to knock on the door of his home in hopes of luring out others.
Ms. Britt's 15-year-old son climbed into the car, his teeth checked and braces adjusted. He

would sit for an A.P. World History test later that day, and compete in a speech and debate tournament over the weekend.
The boy in the bunny hat would be sitting in an ICE detention facility over a thousand miles away from his home.
This was not the first time Ms. Britt had been disturbed by something she heard about the second Trump administration. She felt that way when Mr. Trump flirted with an invasion of Greenland. When his officials slashed funding for research into childhood cancers. When the Pentagon purged photos and videos of Alabama's
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Israel Asserts More Control Of West Bank

By DAVID M. HALBFINGER and ISABEL KERSHNER
JERUSALEM — Israel's government has taken unilateral steps to give itself greater control over the occupied West Bank, challenging President Trump's opposition to Israeli annexation of the territory and possibly violating international law.
The measures, which make it easier for Jewish settlers to buy land and undercut the Palestinian Authority in parts of the West Bank that it administers, appear to flout important agreements that Israel signed under the Oslo peace process decades ago.
The changes were made by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's security cabinet at a closed-door meeting on Sunday.
By enhancing Israel's control over West Bank territory the Palestinians want for a future state, they effectively advance the cause of annexation by degrees, continuing a strategy that the government has been pursuing for years.
But they come after Mr. Trump's recent, explicit rejection of annexation, his acknowledgment of the Palestinians' aspirations to statehood — made explicit in his peace plan for Gaza — and his support for political talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians.
Mr. Netanyahu, who is set to travel to Washington to meet with Mr. Trump on Wednesday, did not announce the changes. Instead, they were detailed after Sunday's meeting by two government ministers who oversee West Bank policy.
One was Bezalel Smotrich, the far-right finance minister, who has pushed through a host of other measures extending Israel's footprint in the West Bank.
“We are deepening our roots in all parts of the Land of Israel and burying the idea of a Palestinian state,” Mr. Smotrich said in a statement.
Mr. Netanyahu is presiding over the most right-wing government in the country's history. It has hardened its stance against the Palestinians since the Hamas-led attack against Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, which set off a two-year war in Gaza.
With international attention largely focused there, Israel has
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LARGEST DONORS TO EVENTS GROUP GET TRUMP ACCESS

CELEBRATION OF 250TH

Organizer Tied to Allies Edges Aside Official National Panel

This article is by **Kenneth P. Vogel, Lisa Friedman and David A. Fahr-enthold**.
WASHINGTON — President Trump's allies are offering access to him and other perks to donors who give at least \$1 million to a new group supporting flashy initiatives he is planning around the nation's 250th birthday, according to documents and interviews.
The group, Freedom 250, is threatening to overshadow years of plans meant to reach the broadest cross section of Americans for semiquincentennial celebrations. They are now taking on a Trumpian flair, replete with marble and machismo.
But Freedom 250 has also emerged as another vehicle, akin to the White House ballroom



A presentation at a Florida fair by the Freedom 250 group.

project, through which people and companies with interests before the Trump administration can make tax-deductible donations to gain access to, and seek favor with, a president who has maintained a keen interest in fund-raising, and a willingness to use the levers of government power to reward financial supporters.
When Mr. Trump announced the creation of Freedom 250 in a social media post in December, he promised that it would give the nation “the most spectacular birthday party you’ve ever seen.”
Several of Freedom 250's planned events and monuments lack obvious connections to the Boston Tea Party, the signing of the Declaration of Independence or other seminal moments in the nation's founding. Rather, they are tailored to Mr. Trump's political agenda and his penchant for spectacle, personal branding and legacy. They include the construction of an arch overlooking Washington, an IndyCar race through the nation's capital, a national prayer event and an Ultimate Fighting Championship match on the
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PHOTOGRAPHS BY LUCIA BURICELLI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

In Milan, the carbohydrate options, like lobster pasta, left, or pasta all’arrabbiata, are nearly endless.

The Cradle of Pasta Is Heaven for Olympians

By ANDREW KEH
MILAN — The Olympic Games have only just begun, but already the athletes of the world owe the host nation a debt of gratitude.
More than a thousand years ago, the people of Italy developed a taste for the dried wheat noodles introduced to the region by Arab traders. Over the next several centuries, the Italians cultivated them into the globally beloved foodstuff known as pasta.
Today, Olympic athletes are among pasta's most voracious consumers and foremost appreciators, leaning on the carbohydrate-rich staple to fuel their performance goals. Even as the science around nutrition continues to evolve, pasta remains as omnipresent in sports as spandex, as crucial to competitors as any en-
ergy drink.
It comes as no surprise, then, that the prospect of carbo-loading this month at a Winter Games in pasta's spiritual home has left many Olympians' mouths watering.
“I’m a pasta girl, so I’m hyped,” said Mystique Ro, 31, an American skeleton racer. “Spaghetti is my go-to. Then there's gnocchi. I'm also a fettuccine person.”
Oh, to be blessed with a hyper-active metabolism and a mandate
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A Perfect Match of Dish and Dietary Desires
The sentence for Jimmy Lai, the media mogul, shows how Hong Kong enforces red lines with a new severity.
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OBITUARIES B15
Bassist Who Left Blondie
Calling the band a sinking ship, Fred Smith joined Television, a fundamental early punk act. He was 77.
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A Powerful Ally Hailed Epstein As a ‘Blessing’

Billionaire Hid Affinity as They Made Deals

By DEBRA KAMIN
The billionaire exchanged nearly 2,000 emails with the sex offender Jeffrey Epstein over more than a decade, revealing deeply personal thoughts about life, loneliness and growing old.
He kept their relationship from his investors, apparently confident that all the links between Mr. Epstein and himself, including the business they were partners in and the trips he had made to visit Mr. Epstein in jail, would never be disclosed.
But the release of three million additional pages of the Epstein files on Jan. 30 has made it clear that the billionaire, the New York real estate mogul Andrew Farkas, had a profound friendship with Mr. Epstein, whom he called “one of the blessings” in his life and “one of the bravest men I’ve ever known.”
Their relationship played out in the trading of deep confidences, swapped introductions to powerful people and visits to Mr. Epstein's island, the documents show, and their business partnership was a mutually beneficial real estate deal that helped Mr. Epstein save millions of dollars in taxes.
In an emailed statement on Friday, Mr. Farkas issued no denials about the nature of the two men's connection.
“I deeply regret ever associating with Jeffrey Epstein,” he said. But he disputed that he had kept secret that they owned a marina in St. Thomas together, saying that he was under no obligation to disclose the partnership.
Over the weekend, Mr. Farkas sent over a second statement noting that his 15 years of exchanges with Mr. Epstein could “be mischaracterized” if they were “taken out of context or without understanding my broader communication style.” He added, “At no time have I conducted myself inappropriately.”
Mr. Farkas has not been charged with any crime or accused of any impropriety.
The emails between the two men, peppered with crude misogyny and casually dropped names of power players, show that Mr. Epstein's and Mr. Farkas's business ties were the byproduct of friendship. Seeming eager to stay in Mr. Epstein's good graces, Mr. Farkas often appeared willing to cut him in on deals. Mr. Epstein, in turn, seemed happy to be Mr. Farkas's connector to political figures, influential bankers and others.
Mr. Farkas, 65, the scion of a family that built the department store chain Alexander's, is the founder of Island Capital, a New York-based merchant bank, whose real estate acquisitions include the \$373 million Sheraton
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DAVID L. RYAN/THE BOSTON GLOBE VIA GETTY IMAGES

Danger in Calling Dibs

Laying claim to a parking spot you shoveled after a blizzard is a respected tradition in northern cities, until it isn't. *PAGE A20.*

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