



President Biden at the Tribal Nations Summit in Washington last week. Even on the political sideline, his schedule can be intense.

ERIC LEE/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Trump Attacks All but Doom Spending Bill

By CATIE EDMONDSON and CARL HULSE

WASHINGTON — A bipartisan spending deal to avert a shutdown was on life support on Wednesday after President-elect Donald J. Trump condemned it, leaving lawmakers without a strategy to fund the government past a Saturday morning deadline.

Mr. Trump issued a scathing statement ordering Republicans not to support the sprawling bill, piling on to a barrage of criticism from Elon Musk, who spent Wednesday trashing the measure on social media and threatening any Republican who supported it with political ruin.

It was not yet clear how Speaker Mike Johnson planned to proceed as the package, which was stuffed full of unrelated policy measures as well as tens of billions of dollars in disaster and agricultural aid, appeared to be hemorrhaging support. Some Republicans suggested he was mulling stripping the bill of everything but the spending extension and putting it to a vote, but the fate of such a measure was also very much in doubt.

The blowback from Republicans to the agreement underscored the complications top G.O.P. leaders will have to manage next year when they control all of Congress and face a president with a penchant for blowing up political compromises. It also showed the power of a circle of influential outside players in Mr. Trump’s orbit who appeared willing to punish Republicans if they failed to accede to his wishes.

Even before Mr. Musk began making noise, a swell of Republican lawmakers — both ultraconservatives and some mainstream members — had been furious about the funding measure, which was rolled out on Tuesday night. It began as a simple spending bill to keep government funds flowing past a midnight deadline and into mid-March, but it emerged from bipartisan negotiations laden with \$100 billion in disaster aid and dozens of other, unrelated policies.

The G.O.P. resistance meant that in order to pass the bill, Mr. Johnson was going to have to rely, yet again, on Democratic votes to pass it, using a special procedure that requires the support of two-thirds of those voting. But by Wednesday afternoon, the back-

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Biden, Wearied and Stinging, Prepares to Exit

By PETER BAKER and ZOLAN KANNO-YOUNGS

WASHINGTON — It was a long day in Angola. President Biden had already visited a port facility bracketed with cranes and toured a factory filled with conveyor belts. So by the time he sat down at a large wooden circular table in a warm, stuffy room with African leaders, he put his head in his hand and briefly closed his eyes as the speeches droned on.

Flying across the world would have tired even a president younger than 82. But the point, as he saw it, was that he came. He traveled thousands of miles to highlight a new U.S.-backed railway that could transform the economies of Africa and supply resources for America. He came. He did not have to. He insisted on

Pushing Himself With Global Travels and Securing Policy

it and was proud to be the first president to come.

This is the twilight of Mr. Biden’s presidency, the final days of the final chapter of an epic half-century political journey that has had more than its share of twists and turns. Time is catching up with Mr. Biden. He looks a little older and a little slower with each passing day. Aides say he remains plenty sharp in the Situation Room, calling world leaders to broker a cease-fire in Lebanon or deal with the chaos of Syria’s rebellion. But it is hard to imagine

that he seriously thought he could do the world’s most stressful job for another four years.

That does not make it any easier as Mr. Biden heads toward the exit. Nothing that has happened since he was forced to drop out of the race in July has made that decision look wrong, yet Donald J. Trump’s victory over Vice President Kamala Harris has been interpreted as a repudiation of Mr. Biden. It stung. It still stings. But unlike Mr. Trump four years ago, he accepts the outcome.

“Yes, this is hard,” said Ted Kaufman, his longtime friend, aide and successor in the Senate. “But he has been through tougher things than this. He has a long list of things he wants to do, and he is focused on getting them accomplished.”

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ARLETTE BASHIZI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Mourners at the coffin of Olive, a 5-year-old who died at a measles treatment center in Congo.

A Stubborn Enemy Stalks the Children of Congo

By STEPHANIE NOLEN and ARLETTE BASHIZI

BIKORO, Democratic Republic of Congo — Werra Maulu Botey could not bear to close his daughter’s coffin. Waiting to bury her, he slid the rough wooden lid back, again and again, to adjust her small head and smooth the cloth that cradled it away from her cheeks.

Olive died of measles, at the age

Thousands Die Without Measles Vaccine

of 5, the evening before. She was the first child to die that weekend in an emergency measles treatment center in the town of Bikoro, in the northwest Democratic Republic of Congo. The second was her cousin, a 1-year-old girl.

Measles is sweeping through the children of Bikoro, as it does every couple of years, creeping, then flaring, across this vast country.

It is on the rise in other parts of the world, too — including in some communities in the United States — though the measles vaccine has been in use since 1963 and is believed to have saved more lives than any other childhood immunization.

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Secret Payments Allowed Opioid Pills to Flow Freely

Drug Manufacturers Cut Deals With Benefit Managers, a Times Inquiry Finds

By CHRIS HAMBY

In 2017, the drug industry middleman Express Scripts announced that it was taking decisive steps to curb abuse of the prescription painkillers that had fueled America’s overdose crisis. The company said it was “putting the brakes on the opioid epidemic” by making it harder to get potentially dangerous amounts of the drugs.

The announcement, which came after pressure from federal health regulators, was followed by

The details of these backroom deals — laid out in hundreds of documents, some previously confidential, reviewed by The Times — expose a mostly untold chapter of the opioid epidemic and provide a rare look at the modus operandi of the companies at the heart of the prescription drug supply chain.

The P.B.M.s exert extraordinary control over what drugs people can receive and at what price. The three dominant companies — Express Scripts, CVS Caremark and Optum Rx — oversee prescriptions for more than 200 million people and are part of health care conglomerates that sit near the top of the Fortune 500 list.

The P.B.M.s are hired by insurers and employers to control their drug costs by negotiating discounts with pharmaceutical manufacturers. But a Times investigation this year found that they often pursue their own financial interests in ways that increase costs for patients, employers and government programs, while driving independent pharmacies out of business. Regulators have accused the largest P.B.M.s of anti-competitive practices.

The middlemen’s dealings with opioid makers reveal a lesser-known consequence of this pay-to-play system: Seemingly everything — including measures meant to protect patients and curtail abuse — can be up for negotiation.

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In Trump Orbit, A Clash of Ideas To Curb Obesity

By GINA KOLATA

For Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the activist whom President-elect Donald J. Trump will nominate to serve as the secretary of health and human services, the solution to obesity in America — now at 40 percent of adults — is straightforward: “The first line of response should be lifestyle,” he told Jim Cramer in a Dec. 12 interview on CNBC.

Elon Musk, the technology billionaire who advises the president-elect, sees things differently: “Nothing would do more to improve the health, lifespan and quality of life for Americans than making GLP inhibitors super low cost to the public,” he wrote on X, referring to the new class of drugs that cause weight loss, including Ozempic. “Nothing else is even close.”

And there, with the contrasting views of two men in Mr. Trump’s ear, lie two sides of an issue that is plaguing health and nutrition researchers. Is it even possible to change lifestyles and the food environment enough to solve America’s obesity problem? And, if not, do we really want to solve it by putting millions of people on powerful drugs? What is the right balance between the two approaches?

Many people find that eating well is easier said than done. Food companies have saturated the United States and other nations with seductively cheap and tasty things to eat, available seemingly everywhere and around the clock. Obesity researchers suspect that the current food environment has allowed many Americans to be as overweight as they possibly can be.

But for the first time, there is an effective countervailing force — powerful new obesity drugs like

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FINE ART IMAGES/HERITAGE IMAGES, VIA GETTY

The elusive painting is a portrait of the artist’s physician.

A Top van Gogh Is Out of View. The Hunt Is On.

This article is by Michael Forsythe, Graham Bowley and Elisabetta Povoledo.

When the hammer fell at Christie’s in Manhattan on May 15, 1990, a Vincent van Gogh painting, “Portrait of Dr. Gachet,” set the record at the time for the most expensive work of art ever sold at auction, going to a Japanese paper magnate for \$82.5 million.

Painted in the garden of the artist’s physician in June 1890, it was completed just weeks before van Gogh’s suicide by gunshot. The sense of melancholy radiating from the doctor conveys, van Gogh wrote to his friend Paul Gauguin, the “heartbroken expression of our time.” Considered to be among his masterpieces, it may now be worth \$300 million, or more, experts say.

For much of the 20th century, “Portrait of Dr. Gachet” was prominently displayed at the Städel Museum in Frankfurt and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, to which it was lent by a private collector before the

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Landing Safely in Aleppo

A Syrian Air flight’s arrival from Damascus has put a spotlight on a country’s transitional government. PAGE A9

France’s Infamous Predator

Judges and lawyers have tried to grasp the true nature of Dominique Pelicot, who let others rape his wife. PAGE A4

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Trump Allies vs. Cheney

Donald J. Trump has never shied from his desire to see his enemies punished. Now, House Republicans have laid out a map to go after Liz Cheney. PAGE A14

Admission Based on Wealth?

Georgetown, Penn and M.I.T. are accused of giving special treatment to wealthy students who might not otherwise have been admitted. PAGE A15

Porsche Loan Leads to Charges

A car loan for the son of Ingrid Lewis-Martin, a former top adviser to New York’s embattled mayor, is at the center of an expected bribery case. PAGE A14



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Leaps, Bounds and Laughs

Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo opened its season with a performance of Durante Verzola’s “Symphony.” PAGE C8

A Cosmetics Heir’s Gifts

Leonard Lauder created the model for the headline-grabbing donation that museums dream of today. PAGE C1

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A Rate Cut, With Fewer Ahead

The markets shuddered after Federal Reserve officials projected two cuts in 2025, making clear reductions would hinge on inflation progress. PAGE B1

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‘No Friends on the Floor’

By following the example set by their Coach, Ime Udoka, the Houston Rockets are feisty and unapologetic, and winning basketball games. PAGE B5

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Making a Move Offline

Hungry for in-person interaction, Gen Z and millennial players have been joining old-fashioned chess, mahjong and backgammon groups. PAGE D5



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