



ADAM GRAY/REUTERS

Celebrating the Year of the Snake
More than a billion people around the world, including in New York’s Chinatown, above, welcomed the arrival of the Lunar New Year.

Legal Battles Over His Purge Might Be What Trump Wants

By CHARLIE SAVAGE

WASHINGTON — President Trump abruptly fired dozens of officials in the past few days — including inspectors general, a member of the National Labor Relations Board and career prosecutors — in ways that apparently violated federal laws, setting up the possibility of lawsuits.

But the prospect of getting dragged into court may be exactly what Mr. Trump’s lawyers are hoping for. There is a risk that judges may determine that some of the dismissals were illegal, but any rulings in the president’s favor would establish precedents that would expand presidential power to control the federal government.

Some legal experts say the purges underway appear to be custom-made opportunities for the Supreme Court’s Republican-appointed majority to strike down the statutes any legal challenges would be based on, furthering its trend in recent years of expanding presidential authority.

“On one level, this seems designed to invite courts to push back because much of it is illegal and the overall message is a boundless view of executive authority.”

SHAKE-UP Elon Musk and his associates have moved fast to cut the size of government. **PAGE A18**

On Deportees’ Flight to Brazil, Desperation, Chains and Fear

By JACK NICAS

RIO DE JANEIRO — Temperatures were rising inside the plane. Eighty-eight Brazilian deportees, most of them handcuffed and shackled, were getting restless on Friday under the watch of U.S. immigration agents. The passenger jet, dealing with repeated technical problems, was stuck on the tarmac in a sweltering city in the Amazon rainforest.

Then the air conditioning broke — again.

There were demands to stay seated, shoving, shouting, children crying, passengers fainting and agents blocking exits, according to interviews with six of the deportees aboard the flight. Finally, passengers pulled the levers to release two emergency exits, and shackled men poured out onto the plane’s wing, shouting for help.

The Brazil federal police quickly arrived and, after a brief standoff, told the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents to release the deportees, though they had not yet reached their scheduled destination.

President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva ordered that a Brazilian Air Force aircraft pick up the deportees and take them the rest of the way. His government’s ministers then publicly slammed the Trump administration’s handling of the deportees as “unacceptable” and “degrading.”

It was those complaints about the Brazilian flight that President

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Kennedy Faces Senate Grilling And Misgivings

Pressed on His Shifting Health Care Stances

This article is by Sheryl Gay Stolberg, Noah Weiland and Michael Levenson.

WASHINGTON — Robert F. Kennedy Jr., whose antipathy toward vaccines and messages about healthy living helped him build a large national following, faced bruising questions from Democratic senators in his first confirmation hearing on Wednesday. He displayed limited knowledge of critical programs at times and struggled to convince skeptical lawmakers that he was not “anti-vaccine.”

“I am pro-safety,” Mr. Kennedy, President Trump’s nominee for health secretary, declared in his opening remarks, insisting that he had been mistakenly labeled anti-vaccine in news reports, despite years of comments raising suspicions about the safety of inoculations. He was quickly interrupted by a protester in the audience who shouted, “He lies!”

Mr. Kennedy’s contentious appearance before the Senate Finance Committee, his first of two confirmation hearings, was filled with angry, argumentative exchanges with Democrats on the panel who read many of his old comments back to him, their voices raised. Mr. Kennedy insisted that many of the statements had been taken out of context and that he had been called a conspiracy theorist “mainly to keep me from asking difficult questions of powerful interests.”

Republicans, and Mr. Kennedy himself, sought to put the spotlight on issues that have bipartisan consensus, such as his pledge to reverse the chronic-disease epidemic and his commitment to promoting nutrition and healthy eating. When the hearing was over, the chairman of the committee, Senator Mike Crapo, Republican of Idaho, said Mr. Kennedy had “done well” and deserved to be confirmed.

The hearing was a remarkable moment for adherents of the so-called medical-freedom movement, an odd right-left coalition of “crunchy granola moms” and lib-

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ADMINISTRATION LIFTS AID FREEZE AFTER AN UPROAR

CONCESSION BY TRUMP

Review on Spending Cuts for ‘Woke’ Ideologies Will Proceed

This article is by Zolan Kanno-Youngs, Maggie Haberman and Annie Karni.

WASHINGTON — The White House on Wednesday rescinded a directive that froze trillions of dollars in federal grants and loans after the order led to mass confusion and legal challenges that accused the Trump administration of violating the law.

The order, issued Monday night, was an attempt to purge the government of what President Trump has called a “woke” ideology. A federal judge in the District of Columbia temporarily blocked it Tuesday afternoon, but the lack of clarity sent schools, hospitals, nonprofits and other organizations scrambling to understand if they had lost their financial support from the government.

On Wednesday, Matthew J. Vaeth, the acting director for the Office of Management and Budget, told federal agencies that the memo freezing aid had been “rescinded.”

In a brief notice, Mr. Vaeth said: “If you have questions about implementing the president’s executive orders, please contact your agency general counsel.”

The decision to pull the directive was a significant reversal and the first major capitulation by Mr. Trump since returning to the White House. Less than two weeks into his term, he has not hesitated to use his executive power to reshape the federal government in his image and rid the work force of any dissent.

Karoline Leavitt, the White House press secretary, wrote on social media that “This is NOT a rescission of the federal funding freeze.” She said the president’s executive orders on federal funding “remain in full force and effect, and will be rigorously implemented.”

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DON GRIFFIN



ANDY TANGALIN



MARINA SOLIS/@MARINAASOLIS VIA TIKTOK

The 24 Hours When Los Angeles Went Up in Flames

Firefighters futilely called for reinforcements. Hydrants went dry. And looming over it all was a nearly unprecedented weather challenge: a lethal confluence of wind and drought that might have doomed any response. **Pages A11-13.**

Electric Drivers, Off the Gas Tax Hook, May Still Owe a Premium

By JACK EWING

Owners of electric cars in Vermont recently got a letter from the Department of Motor Vehicles with some bad news. Starting Jan. 1, they would have to pay \$178 a year to register their cars, twice as much as owners of vehicles with internal combustion engines.

In imposing the higher fee, Vermont became the latest state to make people pay a premium for driving electric. At least 39 states charge such annual fees, including \$50 in Hawaii and \$200 in Texas, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. That’s up from no states a few years ago.

Now, as President Trump rolls

back Biden administration measures to promote electric vehicles, Republicans in Congress are considering imposing a national fee to bolster the fund used to finance roads and bridges, a fund that is in dire shape.

The fees are an attempt to make up for declining revenue from gasoline taxes that electric cars, for obvious reasons, don’t pay.

They’re an example of how governments are struggling to adjust to technological upheaval in the auto industry.

Environmentalists and consumer groups agree that electric vehicle owners should help pay for road maintenance and construction. But they worry that Re-

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Tearful Menendez Gets 11 Years In Bribery and Corruption Case

By TRACEY TULLY and BENJAMIN WEISER

Robert Menendez, New Jersey’s disgraced former senator who was once one of the most powerful Democrats in Washington, was sentenced on Wednesday to 11 years in prison for his central role in an audacious international bribery scheme.

The courtroom in Lower Manhattan was packed but silent as the judge imposed one of the longest sentences ever issued for a federal official in the United States.

“You were successful, powerful,” the judge, Sidney H. Stein of Federal District Court, said before announcing the penalty. “You stood at the apex of our political system.”

“Somewhere along the way — I don’t know where it was — you lost your way,” he added. “Working for the public good became working for your good.”

Mr. Menendez, a skilled orator known for holding forth on the Senate floor, wept intermittently as he addressed the court before



HIROKO MASUIKE/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Former Senator Robert Menendez asked for mercy.

the sentence was announced. He has said that he planned to appeal the conviction, but told Judge Stein that he stood before him a “chastened man” who had suffered the ignominy of a guilty verdict and the resignation of his Senate seat.

“Every day I’m awake is a punishment,” Mr. Menendez, 71, said.

“I ask you to temper your sword of justice with mercy for a lifetime of duty,” he added.

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INTERNATIONAL A4-9

Pilgrimage Turns Deadly

At least 30 people died at Hinduism’s Maha Kumbh Mela, one of the world’s biggest gatherings, where the Ganges and Yamuna Rivers meet. **PAGE A5**

BUSINESS B1-5

DeepSeek Jubilation in China

Chinese social media exploded in celebration after the news that a local start-up had made an A.I. tool more efficient than any in the United States. **PAGE B1**

NATIONAL A10-21

Adams Case May Be Dropped

Justice Department officials are said to have talked with Manhattan prosecutors about abandoning the corruption case against Mayor Eric Adams. **PAGE A20**

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And the Winner Might Be . . .

Who will take home the Academy Award in the best actress category? Every one of the nominees has a solid shot at earning the honor. **PAGE C1**

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Nicholas Kristof

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