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Body

Takeaways: Warren under fire, 70s club ignores the age issue

A dozen Democratic presidential candidates participated in a spirited debate over health care, taxes, gun control and impeachment. Takeaways from the three-hour forum in Westerville, Ohio:

WARREN'S RISE ATTRACTS ATTACKS

Sen. Elizabeth Warren found Tuesday that her rise in the polls may come with a steep cost. She's now a clear target for attacks, particularly from more moderate challengers, and her many plans are now being subjected to much sharper scrutiny.

Minnesota Sen. Amy Klobuchar and South Bend, Indiana, Mayor Pete Buttigieg slammed her for not acknowledging, as Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders has, that middle-class taxes would increase under the single-payer health plan she and Sanders favour.

"At least Bernie's being honest with this," Klobuchar said.

Analysis: Elizabeth Warren growing into front-runner status

WESTERVILLE, Ohio (AP) - The question was inevitable. Elizabeth Warren's answer was the same. And her rivals seized on it.

For the second consecutive debate, Warren refused to say whether middle-class Americans would pay higher taxes under her proposed "Medicare for All" plan. It was a glaring dodge for a candidate who has risen to the top of the Democratic field by unveiling detailed policy proposals and selling them with a folksy flair.

And it was one of nearly half a dozen issues on which Warren found herself defending the broad ambition she has laid out to remake the American economy and rebalance the nation's wealth. More moderate candidates, including Joe Biden, Pete Buttigieg and Amy Klobuchar, cast Warren as unrealistic and vague.

How Warren handles that criticism, which was abundant Tuesday and is likely to escalate in the coming weeks, will be a central test of whether she can maintain her standing.

AP News in Brief at 6:04 a.m. EDT; AP News in Brief at 6:04 a.m. EDT

"Warren has done a good job at remaining steady despite the arrows in her direction, but she is still missing answers to core questions about her plans," said Bill Burton, a Democratic strategist who worked for former President Barack Obama.

House Democrats not easing up on impeachment probe

WASHINGTON (AP) - The impeachment inquiry is revealing vivid new details about the high-level unease over President Donald Trump's actions toward Ukraine, and those of his personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, as the swift-moving probe by House Democrats showed no signs of easing.

The testimony from the witnesses, mainly officials from the State Department and other foreign policy posts, is largely corroborating the account of the government whistleblower whose complaint first sparked the impeachment inquiry, according to lawmakers attending the closed-door interviews.

One witness, former White House aide Fiona Hill, testified that national security adviser John Bolton was so alarmed by Giuliani's back-channel activities in Ukraine that he described him as a "hand grenade who is going to blow everybody up."

Another, career State Department official George Kent, testified Tuesday he was told by administration officials to "lay low" on Ukraine as "three amigos" tied to the White House took over U.S. foreign policy toward the Eastern European ally.

Speaker Nancy Pelosi, despite intensifying calls from Trump and Republicans to hold a formal vote to authorize the impeachment inquiry, showed no indication she would do so. She said Congress will continue its investigation as part of the Constitution's system of checks and balances of the executive.

Turkey defies its NATO allies in Syria, as Russia steps in

AKCAKALE, Turkey (AP) - Russia said it was working to prevent a conflict between advancing Turkish and Syrian government forces on Wednesday, as Turkey's president defied growing pressure and sanctions from Western allies for a cease-fire in northern Syria.

Russia has moved quickly to further entrench its leadership role in the region after U.S. President Donald Trump ordered the pullout of American forces in northeastern Syria. The American move effectively abandoned the Kurdish fighters who were allied with the U.S. and cleared the way for Turkey's invasion aimed at crushing them.

America's abrupt reversal pushed the Kurds to strike a deal with the Russia-backed government of Syrian President Bashar Assad, inviting its forces to return to regions of northern Syria it had abandoned at the height of the eight-year-old civil war.

On Wednesday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that Russia is committed to ensuring security in the region as it works to mediate between the Syrian government and Turkey.

Russia already announced that it had deployed troops to the flashpoint town of Manbij to keep apart advancing Syrian government and Turkish-led forces.

Brexit talks don't get breakthrough, continue on summit eve

BRUSSELS (AP) - European Union and British negotiators failed to reach a breakthrough in Brexit talks during a frantic all-night session and will continue seeking a compromise on the eve of Thursday's crucial EU summit.

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An EU official, who asked not to be identified because the negotiations were still ongoing, said Wednesday that "discussions continued until late in the night and will continue today."

Both sides were hoping that after more than three years of false starts and sudden reversals, a clean divorce deal for Britain leaving the bloc might be sketched out within the coming hours.

Even though many questions remain, diplomats made it clear that both sides were within touching distance of a deal for the first time since a U.K. withdrawal plan fell apart in the British House of Commons in March.

But talks saw no deal materializing between experts from both sides holed up late into the night at EU headquarters in Brussels.

Toxic PCBs linger in schools; EPA, lawmakers fail to act

MONROE, Wash. (AP) - At first, teachers at Sky Valley Education Center simply evacuated students and used fans to clear the air when the fluorescent lights caught fire or smoked with noxious fumes. When black oil dripped onto desks and floors, they caught leaks with a bucket and duct-taped oil-stained carpets.

Then came the tests that confirmed their suspicions about the light ballasts.

"Sure enough ... it was PCB oil," said Cynthia Yost, who was among teachers who sent pieces of carpet and classroom air filters to a lab. Tests found elevated levels of the toxic chemicals, used as coolant in the decades-old ballasts that regulated electrical current to the lamps.

Millions of fluorescent light ballasts containing PCBs probably remain in schools and day care centres across the U.S. four decades after the chemicals were banned over concerns that they could cause cancer and other illnesses. Many older buildings also have caulk, ceiling tiles, floor adhesives and paint made with PCBs, which sometimes have been found at levels far higher than allowed by law.

Yet the Environmental Protection Agency has not attempted to determine the scope of PCB contamination or assess potential health risks, in large part because of lack of funding, political pressure and pushback from industry and education groups, according to dozens of interviews and thousands of pages of documents examined by The Associated Press.

Kim rides horse on sacred peak, vows to fight US sanctions

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) - North Korean leader Kim Jong Un vowed to surmount U.S.-led sanctions on his country in state media reports Wednesday alongside evocative propaganda images of him riding a white horse seen as foretelling significant decisions as his own deadline for U.S. movement on nuclear talks is nearing.

The images in his country's official media showed a bespectacled Kim, wearing a long, light-brown coat and riding up snow-covered Mount Paektu on horseback. The location and the animal are symbols associated with the Kim family's dynastic rule. The highest point on the Korean Peninsula is sacred to North Koreans, and Kim has visited it before making major decisions such as the 2013 execution of his powerful uncle and his 2018 entrance into diplomacy with Seoul and Washington.

The images and Kim's comments were released days after his country's first nuclear negotiations with the U.S. in more than seven months fell apart.

South Korean media quickly speculated Kim may be considering a new strategy in his dealings with the U.S. because he's previously demanded Washington come up with new proposals to salvage the stalemated diplomacy by the end of December.

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"He, sitting on the horseback atop Mt Paektu, recollected with deep emotion the road of arduous struggle he covered for the great cause of building the most powerful country with faith and will as firm as Mt Paektu," the North's official Korean Central News Agency said.

Chaos as Hong Kong lawmakers thwart leader's annual address

HONG KONG (AP) - Calling her "the mother of the mafia police," yelling pro-democracy lawmakers twice forced Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam to stop delivering a speech laying out her policy objectives Wednesday and then clamoured for her resignation in chaotic scenes that caused her to walk out of the legislature.

Lam was able to deliver the annual address more than an hour later by video, but the hostile reception inside the Legislative Council marked a slap in the face for the embattled chief executive grappling with anti-government protests now in their fifth month.

When Lam started delivering the speech, she was shouted down by chanting pro-democracy lawmakers who held aloft placards showing her waving with hands colored blood-red. They also used a projector to light up Lam's face and the wall behind her with protesters' key demands.

Lam left the chamber and then came back about 20 minutes later to try again, only to be met with further fury. One legislator brandishing a placard climbed onto a desk. Again, the council president stopped the session and Lam left. One lawmaker wearing a paper mask showing the face of Chinese President Xi Jinping tossed a placard as Lam walked out.

Finally, 75 minutes after the previously scheduled start of the lengthy address, Lam delivered it via video link, with China's yellow-starred red flag to her right and Hong Kong's flag on her left.

Chinese snooping tech spreads to nations vulnerable to abuse

BELGRADE, Serbia (AP) - When hundreds of video cameras with the power to identify and track individuals started appearing in the streets of Belgrade as part of a major surveillance project, some protesters began having second thoughts about joining anti-government demonstrations in the Serbian capital.

Local authorities assert the system, created by Chinese telecommunications company Huawei, helps reduce crime in the city of 2 million. Critics contend it erodes personal freedoms, makes political opponents vulnerable to retribution and even exposes the country's citizens to snooping by the Chinese government.

The cameras, equipped with facial recognition technology, are being rolled out across hundreds of cities around the world, particularly in poorer countries with weak track records on human rights where Beijing has increased its influence through big business deals. With the United States claiming that Chinese state authorities can get backdoor access to Huawei data, the aggressive rollout is raising concerns about the privacy of millions of people in countries with little power to stand up to China.

"The system can be used to trail political opponents, monitor regime critics at any moment, which is completely against the law," said Serbia's former commissioner for personal data protection, Rodoljub Sabic.

Groups opposed to Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic say police are leaking video of protests to pro-government media, which publish the images, along with the identities of participants. Vucic himself has boasted the police have the capability to count "each head" at anti-government gatherings. During a recent rally, protesters climbed up a pole and covered a camera lens with duct tape scrawled with the word "censored."

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Nats sweep Cards; DC in World Series for 1st time since '33

WASHINGTON (AP) - As the Washington Nationals moved a party 86 years in the making from their ballpark's infield to a booze-filled clubhouse, manager Dave Martinez paused near the dugout and thrust the silver NL Championship Series trophy overhead, to the delight of loud, delirious fans still in the stands.

Who would have thought this was possible five months ago, when the team was flailing, trade talk was swirling around Washington and folks figured Martinez's job was in jeopardy?

From 19-31 during a mediocre May to the Fall Classic in an outstanding October - and the city's first World Series appearance since 1933.

Extending their stunning turnaround, the wild-card Nationals got RBIs from middle-of-the-order stars Anthony Rendon and Juan Soto in a seven-run first inning Tuesday night, and Patrick Corbin's 12-strikeout performance plus a trio of relievers helped hold on to beat the St. Louis Cardinals 7-4 in Game 4 to complete a sweep in the NLCS.

"Often, bumpy roads lead to beautiful places," said Martinez, who underwent a heart procedure in September, "and this is a beautiful place."

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