

Partly sunny, windy 60/39 • Tomorrow: Sunny 60/39 B6

Democracy Dies in Darkness

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 18, 2023 • \$3

Clash with strip club set speaker on his path

Johnson failed to block business, but the dispute sparked a political career

BY ISAAC STANLEY-BECKER

SHREVEPORT, LA. — Mike Johnson was an eager young lawyer, four years out of law school, when he stayed up until 5 a.m. one night poring over the details of a controversy roiling his hometown: the opening of a new strip club.

By the morning, he was so worked up about the issue, he said, that he appeared later that day at a Shreveport City Council meeting to implore city leaders to block the Deja Vu club from moving in downtown.

“I have done an exhaustive legal research on this matter, probably more than anyone,” he told municipal lawmakers in April 2002, according to minutes of the meeting. He argued that the arrival of another “sexually oriented business,” or “SOB” as he called it, would spread sexually transmitted diseases and other social ills.

Johnson’s pitch failed, and the club opened early the following year. But the dispute over Deja Vu proved to be a turning point for him. It marked the end of his short-lived career as a general practice lawyer and the beginning of his single-minded focus on the culture wars. The shift put him on the path to elected office, first in the Louisiana legislature and then in Congress, and ultimately last month to the House speakership.

The fight over the Deja Vu club also reveals deeper transformations in Johnson’s hometown that enhanced the power of religious conservatives and propelled his political career. Shreveport is Louisiana’s third-largest city and anchors the state’s 4th Congressional District, which covers the northwest quadrant of the state. Once solidly Democratic, the district began to change as industry contracted or left Shreveport in the 1980s. The downsizing of an AT&T plant left deep scars.

In the following decade, the

SEE JOHNSON ON A5

Shutdown planning: Washington tires of repeated crisis cycles. **A15**



PHOTOS BY SALWAN GEORGES/THE WASHINGTON POST

Weeks old, and separated by war

Gazan babies in incubators in the West Bank or Israel wait to be reunited with their mothers

BY LOUISA LOVELUCK, SUFIAN TAHA AND HAJAR HARB

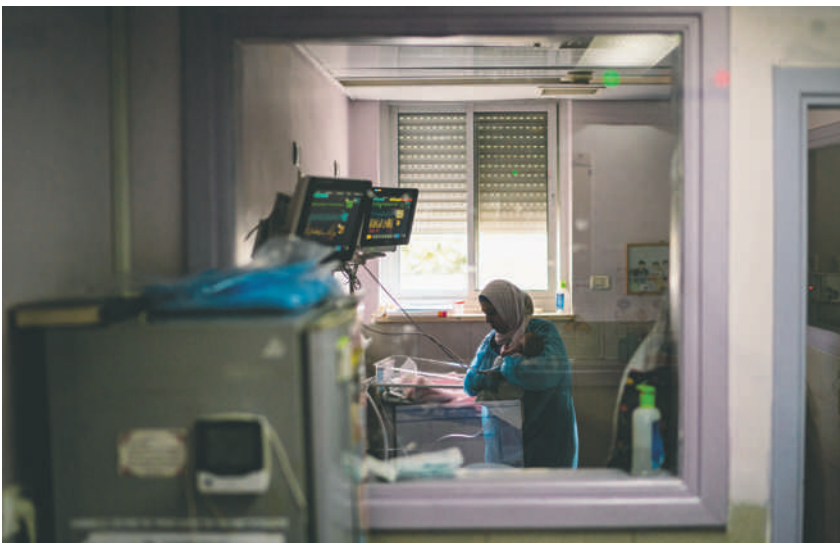
NABLUS, WEST BANK — The tiny twins didn’t cry like the other babies did. Their small sounds and snuffles were barely audible above the lilting bleeps of the incubators in the neonatal ward. It wasn’t normal, the staff agreed, but no one had been able to reach their mother.

Her phone number was scrawled on a Post-it note tacked to the inside of 3-month-old Muayyed’s plastic cot — so that the nurses could keep sending her pictures of the babies, could keep calling until someone picked up. The silences lasted days, sometimes longer.

“To be separated like that,” a nurse murmured as she smoothed a pink blanket around the sleeping child. “It’s a terrible thing.”

When Israel sealed its border with the Gaza Strip after Hamas’s deadly assault on Oct. 7, Muayyed and Mahmoud were among several dozen premature babies receiving care at neonatal wards in Israel and the occupied West Bank. Now, a war that has claimed the lives of more than 11,000 Gazans and erased

SEE BABIES ON A12



TOP: Saaidah at a hospital in Israel. At one point, doctors had to decide whether to operate without being able to reach her family in Gaza. **ABOVE:** A nurse in the unit. Women leave Gaza for special care, but if travel permits expire, they may have to leave their babies. Now, war is an obstacle as well.

OpenAI ousts CEO Altman in surprise to tech industry

BY GERRIT DE VYNCK AND NITASHA TIKU

SAN FRANCISCO — OpenAI CEO Sam Altman, who has emerged as the face of the artificial intelligence revolution, was ousted Friday after the board said it had lost confidence in his ability to lead the company, which built the pioneering AI chatbot ChatGPT.

Altman’s ouster, which is effective immediately, follows “a deliberative review process by the board, which concluded that he was not consistently candid in his communications with the board, hindering its ability to exercise its responsibilities,” the board said in a blog post Friday.

Chief Technology Officer Mira Murati will serve as interim CEO, and a search is underway to identify a permanent successor,

SEE OPENAI ON A16

From Sin City to global sports capital

Grand Prix and Super Bowl have helped Las Vegas reinvent itself once again

BY KENT BABB

LAS VEGAS — Steve Hill was once the best concrete man in the Valley, and years after he climbed out of a cement silo for the last time, his skin burning and hair caked with powder and sweat, he still finds something almost spiritual about the smell of diesel fuel at sunrise.

It’s late August, sweltering even at 6 a.m. This used to be when the city was winding down. Daybreak meant shift change, bars closing just long enough to clean up, tourists cashing out or cutting losses.

But now it’s coming alive.

A mixer truck is whirring a few blocks from the Strip; construction workers are chattering as they step off the 119 bus. This is the morning crew, clocking in for a 10-hour shift, building the largest paddock on the Formula One calendar and elevating Las Vegas, of all places, into the sports capital of the world.

Not long ago, none of this seemed possible. In 2015, Tony Romo tried to hold his fantasy



CAROLINE BREHMAN/EPA-EFE/SHUTTERSTOCK

Tickets for this weekend’s Las Vegas Grand Prix range from \$500 for standing room only to Caesars’ \$5 million “Emperor Package.”

football convention here, but the NFL shut it down. Now the Raiders play here, the NFL has branded slot machines, and two stadiums have sportsbooks inside. Two decades after the league spiked a Su-

per Bowl commercial for Las Vegas, the Super Bowl itself will be played here in February, the Oakland Athletics are slated to move here, and the city is on the shortlist

SEE LAS VEGAS ON A4

Oligarch underwrote Putin book, files reveal

Journalist says secret payment had no effect on independence of writing

This article is by Elahe Izadi, Timo Schober, Bastian Obermayer, Frederik Obermaier and Kate Brady

After President Biden made international news for agreeing in a 2021 televised interview that Vladimir Putin was “a killer,” a German news service asked journalist Hubert Seipel for his expert take.

Seipel, who happened to have just published a book about Russia, agreed to share his opinion.

What was not disclosed at the time — either to his readers or the fellow journalists who turned to Seipel as a Putin pundit — is that one of Russia’s wealthiest oligarchs had directed hundreds of thousands of dollars to under-

write Seipel’s book, according to secret corporate documents obtained by an international consortium of news organizations, including The Washington Post.

The revelations suggest that Russia has continued to rely on an old-fashioned tactic — cultivating opinion-makers with an eye to generating positive news coverage — to promote its world-view overseas.

In his interview that day, the Hamburg-based author expounded that the Russian president “is considered the epitome of evil in the United States.”

Democrats, Seipel said, liked to blame Putin for Donald Trump’s 2016 election victory, while Republicans had designated him as the external enemy “who can also be blamed for [their] own mistakes.”

Seipel’s German publisher bills him as “the only Western journalist to have direct, personal access” to Putin. The award-winning reporter spent extensive

SEE PUTIN ON A9

IN THE NEWS

Rosalynn Carter The former first lady has entered hospice care, nine months after her husband, former president Jimmy Carter. **A7**

U-Va. fatal-shooting report Citing a pending criminal case, the school said it will delay the release of its findings from the November 2022 attack on campus that left three dead. **B1**

THE NATION **The CDC announced** the release of 77,000 more doses of RSV antibody therapy. **A2** **Thanksgiving** could yield one of the busiest travel periods on record, experts said. **A3**

THE WORLD **Ukrainians** see their existential fight in a historical drama that’s a box office smash. **A8** **In Argentina**, priests sounded the alarm over a Donald Trump-like presidential hopeful. **A13**

THE ECONOMY **College football’s** Colorado Buffaloes have scored big online and become a social media phenomenon. **A14** **Tech leaders** are hailing the thaw in U.S.-China relations, but a disagreement over artificial intelligence systems continues. **A15**

THE REGION **Maryland** plans to deploy more state troopers in highway work zones after a crash in March that killed six. **B1** **A recount is likely** in a Virginia House race for a Petersburg-area seat in which the candidates were separated by 74 votes. **B1**

STYLE **Sean Combs** was accused in a lawsuit of rape and sex trafficking by R&B singer Cassie. **C1** **SPORTS** **Maryland** will honor superfan “Special K,” who died this week, at its football game Saturday against Michigan. **D1**

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