

ELECTION 2024

DeSantis’s funding experiment is in tatters

Super PAC collapsing just weeks before the critical Iowa caucuses

BY MICHAEL SCHERER, HANNAH KNOWLES AND JOSH DAWSEY

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis entered the Republican presidential race with an unmatched war chest and a \$269 million plan to change how campaigns are usually funded.

His first campaign manager, Generra Peck, developed the strategy and selected the people to lead a massive new super PAC called Never Back Down. Lawyer-supervised meetings between the campaign-in-waiting and the super PAC’s team fine-tuned the mission — setting the stage for a historic paid door-knocking effort in early states.

Under campaign finance rules, the two operations could not privately coordinate most of their spending. But they aimed to function as an integrated whole — built with the candidate’s approval, advised by a single law firm, overseen by a board that included DeSantis confidants and seeded with \$82.5 million that DeSantis had raised for his gubernatorial reelection. It was the first time a major campaign ceded so much of its operations to an entity it could not legally control.

With just weeks to go before the Iowa caucuses, the experiment is now in tatters. The super PAC that funded almost all of the DeSantis advertising and field programs and much of the candidate’s travel and events has been sidelined by the people who created it.

Five senior officials have left Never Back Down since late November: Three top officials were fired, and the board chairman and the founding chief executive both resigned, amid internal concerns about legal compliance. A verbal conflict from inside

SEE DESANTIS ON A6

Florida: Sex scandal tarnishes a GOP power couple and the party. **A3**

Lawsuit: CPAC accused of knowing of past claims of misconduct. **A3**

MEMORY INC.



NICK HAGEN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

A resident walked out of a secured dementia unit of Franklin Terrace, outside of Detroit, and was found dead in a river in 2019.

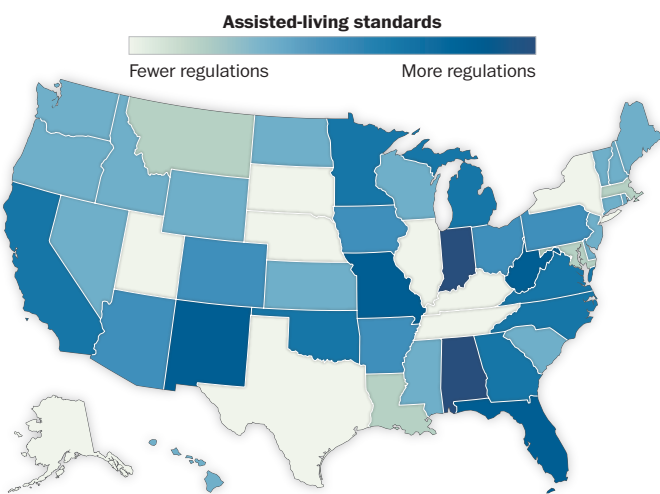
ASSISTED-LIVING RESIDENTS DIE AFTER WANDERING OFF

Every day, patients exit unnoticed from senior-care facilities paid to protect them

Story by Christopher Rowland, Todd C. Frankel, Yeganeh Torbati, Julie Zauzmer Weil, Peter Whoriskey and Steven Rich

Standards for assisted-living facilities vary by state

Thirteen states and D.C. have none of the safety requirements the Post tracked, such as minimum staff-to-resident ratios or mandated dementia training.



Pressure on profits: Senior homes are left dangerously understaffed amid boom. **A14**

Choosing a facility: What to look for, some questions to ask and pointers on safety. **A15**

No federal oversight: See how your state regulates assisted-living facilities. **A16**

of an on-call nurse and the facility’s director. The warnings repeated every few minutes.

Though local temperatures were plunging toward minus-11, no one responded. The on-call nurse told investigators she ignored the door alerts because she was with her family. The caretakers said they didn’t see them on their iPads. And they never followed through with hourly safety checks on memory-care residents.

At 6 a.m. — more than eight hours later — staff finally went looking for Lynne Stewart, a 77-year-old Alzheimer’s patient with a history of wandering. They found her collapsed on the frozen ground near the exit, ice covering her body. She soon died at a nearby hospital from prolonged exposure.

“The thing I grieve the most is I tried everything I could for her to be safe,” said Stewart’s granddaughter, Kaylynne Van Rooy. “That’s why she was there.”

Stewart’s death in January 2022 was not an isolated tragedy. SEE ASSISTED LIVING ON A12

Allies bristle at policy in Gaza

ISRAEL SUPPORT MAY FRAY RELATIONSHIPS

Biden risks paying price at home and abroad

BY KAREN DEYOUNG

When President Biden cautioned Israel last week that it was losing international support due to the war in Gaza, he could just as well have been warning that his own administration also has a lot to lose.

Elected three years ago as the self-described most experienced foreign policy president in history, Biden promised to reclaim the mantle of global leadership as “a strong and trusted partner for peace, progress and security.” Following the isolationist Trump years, he proclaimed, “America is back.”

There have been ups and downs since then, from the Afghanistan withdrawal fiasco to the return to primacy at NATO, a successful mobilization of aid for Ukraine and a jittery coexistence with China.

Now, there is acknowledgment within Biden’s administration that his unwavering support for Israel’s right to destroy Hamas — even as he acknowledges Israeli excesses and presses the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to be more protective of innocent Palestinian lives — could impose a price on the president’s standing at home and abroad.

“Diplomatic cost can be an intangible thing,” a senior administration official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive matters. “On balance, you want countries to look favorably on the United States, to be willing to support it, to want to cooperate.” But “when public opinion in so many countries is hostile, it makes it harder to win support on issues we care about.”

“This administration has prided itself on repairing ties across the world and working with allies and partners. It’s not something you want to see, being isolated in

SEE DIPLOMACY ON A26

Friendly fire: Slain hostages were holding a makeshift white flag. **A23**

Agony, humanity: A doctor’s 43 days in Gaza

BY SARAH DADOUGH

Ghassan Abu Sitta, a British Palestinian doctor, spent 43 days tending to the wounded in Gaza City before he left — exhausted and carrying a feeling of guilt that he could have done more. A reconstructive plastic surgeon in London, he arrived to volunteer with Doctors Without Borders in Gaza on Oct. 9, in the window after the Hamas assault on Israel and before the Israeli invasion.

As Israeli airstrikes were hitting Gaza City, hundreds of wounded were being brought to al-Ahli and al-Shifa hospitals, where Abu Sitta worked round-the-clock. The bombing seemed to come closer and closer.

“Everything that I had done in my life had led me to this point, and this is where I was meant to be,” Abu Sitta said. “There were several evenings that I went to sleep thinking it was going to be the end of us.”

Those 43 days were among the most challenging and gruesome

SEE DOCTOR ON A23



JAMES FORDE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Ghassan Abu Sitta, a Doctors Without Borders volunteer, at his home in East London this month after several weeks in Gaza hospitals treating casualties of war. Sleep is a problem now, he says.

James Biden’s dealmaking highlighted in his Miss. ties

President’s brother is on FBI tapes in unrelated 2007 bribery probe

BY MICHAEL KRANISH

OXFORD, MISS. — Richard “Dickie” Scruggs, a famed Mississippi trial attorney, was tantalizingly close to a historic deal to force tobacco companies to pay billions of dollars — but there was one last hurdle. A divided Congress had to sign off. And Scruggs had identified one of the most skeptical senators, Joe Biden, as a key to winning the vote.

Scruggs turned to Biden’s younger brother James, an old acquaintance who ran a D.C. consulting firm with his wife, Sara.

Scruggs paid the firm \$100,000 in 1998 for advice on passing the bill, Scruggs said in

an interview at his office here — the first time he has disclosed the amount.

“I probably wouldn’t have hired him if he wasn’t the senator’s brother,” Scruggs said.

Biden eventually backed the bill, which ultimately failed to pass Congress.

“Jim was never untoward about his influence,” Scruggs said. “He didn’t brag about it or talk about it. He didn’t have to. He was the man’s brother.”

Scruggs’s deal with James Biden highlights how President Biden’s brother has for decades benefited financially from his proximity to his powerful sibling, a relationship that is newly relevant today as congressional Republicans investigate whether President Biden assisted his family members’ business deals. During Joe Biden’s 36 years in the Senate, eight years as vice president and now three years as president, James Biden’s private

SEE JAMES BIDEN ON A18

METRO
Race to replace Jennifer Wexton in Northern Virginia gets crowded.

SPORTS
In search for new home, Commanders encounter an unexpected twist.

BUSINESS
🔊 How to say “happy holidays” with a small gift — or none at all.

TRAVEL
After last year’s woes, nine ways to prepare for a holiday travel tailspin.

ARTS&STYLE
🔊 From Gawker blogger to Oscar contender, the rise of Cord Jefferson.

BOOK WORLD
Claire Keegan’s tales of misogyny offer valuable perspective and solace.

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