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Democracy Dies in Darkness

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AMERICAN ICON A series examining the AR-15, a weapon with a singular hold on a divided nation



TOP PHOTO: CHET STRANGE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST; BOTTOM PHOTOS: MATT MCCLAIN/THE WASHINGTON POST

BY PETER WALLSTEN
AND PAUL KANE

Just a few months had passed since Ben Wheeler was slaughtered by a gunman with an AR-15 at Sandy Hook Elementary School, and his mother was on Capitol Hill pleading with a U.S. senator to understand her grief.

Francine Wheeler wanted to know what Sen. Heidi Heitkamp would do if it had been her 6-year-old child who was murdered.

“She would not look at me,” Wheeler recalled recently about the April 2013 encounter with the newly elected Democrat from North Dakota, a conservative state with deep support for gun rights. Heitkamp was “defensive, unkind, and not interested in helping or listening to the stories of our loved ones.”

Hearts have changed on guns since Sandy Hook

A decade of mass killings later, senators recant earlier positions

When the session ended, Heitkamp stayed in her office “sitting at the table with her head down,” recalled David Thomas, a lobbyist who escorted Wheeler and other Sandy Hook parents to the meeting. As the entourage left, Lara Berghold, another consultant helping the families, said she heard the senator “break out into sobs.”

Over the course of nine wrenching days that spring, mothers, fathers, siblings and other loved ones touched by the Sandy Hook massacre shared their raw feelings with senator after senator. They exhorted lawmakers to expand the federal background check system — a measure that would not have stopped the Sandy Hook assailant, a mentally disturbed 20-year-old who stole guns his mother had legally purchased, but that

SEE AR-15 ON A8

Four current senators and three former senators, including, clockwise from top, former senator Mark Udall (D-Colo.), Sen. Mark R. Warner (D-Va.) and Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-N.M.), described to The Post their changed perspectives on gun policy since 2013.

Young journalist captured Gaza’s beauty, then its ruin

BY KEVIN SIEFF

Before the war, Plestia Alaqad didn’t think much about her Instagram feed. She posted a few photos of herself next to the Mediterranean, holding her friend’s son, petting her dog, Luki. She uploaded a photo of herself sitting in a cafe (“Happy and carefree era,” the caption read) and one from an early-morning bike ride (“Catch sunrises, not feelings”).

When she imagined her future as a journalist, which was constantly, she thought about ways to bring the world’s attention to the Gaza she loved. But there was no

rush. She was 21. There was time to figure out her career.

Then she woke up on Oct. 7. On her phone, she scrolled through news stories and posts about Hamas’s attack in southern Israel.

She considered how Israel might react, and what she should do next. She had graduated with a degree in new media and journalism in Cyprus a few months earlier. On Oct. 8, she was meant to start a job as a content creator for a Palestinian nongovernmental

Little relief: Short on space and food, Rafah braces for refugees. A4



KRISTEN NORMAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Shortly after Adeline Hambley, right, was named Ottawa County’s health officer, new conservative commissioners tried to oust her.

A Michigan community, torn apart by a job dispute

BY GREG JAFFE

WEST OLIVE, MICH. — All year, the new conservative Christian majority on the Ottawa County Board of Commissioners had been searching for a way to get rid of Adeline Hambley, who ran the west Michigan county’s health department. It wasn’t as easy as it seemed.

They had discussed firing Hambley, whom they saw as an instrument of government tyranny. But her job came with protections, written into state law, that

were intended to insulate her from political influence or retribution.

They had proposed paying Hambley \$4 million to leave. She accepted in early November. But the commissioners backed out a few days later when they learned that the payment could damage the county’s bond rating and tank its finances.

Now it was Nov. 14. The commissioners huddled with their lawyers in a windowless conference room at the county’s boxy,

SEE OTTAWA ON A6

ELECTION 2024

Trump barred from primary ballot in Maine

SECOND STATE CITES HIS ACTIONS ON JAN. 6

Secretary of state’s decision is sure to be appealed

BY PATRICK MARLEY

Maine barred Donald Trump from the primary ballot Thursday, becoming the second state to block the former president from running again because of his actions before and during the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol.

The decision by Maine Secretary of State Shenna Bellows (D) is sure to be appealed. The Colorado Supreme Court last week found Trump could not appear on the ballot in that state under a part of the U.S. Constitution that prevents insurrectionists from holding office. The Colorado Republican Party has asked the U.S. Supreme Court to review the case, which could resolve for all states whether Trump can run again.

Both states have temporarily put their decisions on hold so Trump can pursue appeals.

In 1868, three years after the end of the Civil War, the United

States adopted the 14th Amendment to the Constitution to provide legal protections to those who had formerly been enslaved. Section 3 of the amendment barred those who had sworn an oath to the Constitution from holding office if they engaged in insurrection. That provision was used at the time to keep former Confederates out of office but has rarely been mentioned in recent decades.

Trump’s critics cited that section of the Constitution after the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol, arguing Trump had incited and participated in an insurrection through his actions before and during the riot. They submitted challenges to his candidacy around the country.

So far, only Colorado and Maine have sided with those challenging his ability to run

SEE TRUMP ON A16

‘About slavery’: Nikki Haley acknowledges root of Civil War. A2

ISING INDIA, TOXIC TECH

Apple’s hacking alerts anger Modi government

Delhi responds with attempts to pressure, discredit digital giant

BY GERRY SHIH
AND JOSEPH MENN

NEW DELHI — A day after Apple warned independent Indian journalists and opposition party politicians in October that government hackers may have tried to break into their iPhones, officials under Prime Minister Narendra Modi promptly took action — against Apple.

Officials from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) publicly questioned whether the Silicon Valley company’s internal threat algorithms were faulty and announced an investigation into the security of Apple devices.

In private, according to three people with knowledge of the matter, senior Modi administration officials called Apple’s India representatives to demand that the company help soften the

political impact of the warnings. They also summoned an Apple security expert from outside the country to a meeting in New Delhi, where government representatives pressed the Apple official to come up with alternative explanations for the warnings to users, the people said. They spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive matters.

“They were really angry,” one of those people said.

The visiting Apple official stood by the company’s warnings. But the intensity of the Indian government effort to discredit and strong-arm Apple disturbed executives at the company’s headquarters in Cupertino, Calif., and illustrated how even Silicon Valley’s most powerful tech companies can face pressure from the increasingly assertive leadership of the world’s most populous country — and one of the most critical technology markets of the coming decade.

The recent episode also exemplified the dangers facing government critics in India and the lengths to which the Modi administration

SEE INDIA ON A12

IN THE NEWS

Carrying the fight A decade after her brother died in police custody, Tawanda Jones pushes for justice at her weekly protests. B1

A history of misses The Commanders’ recent track record of underwhelming first-round draft picks has been a big reason for the team’s struggles this season. D1

THE NATION Politicians are seeing an increase in fake 911 calls targeted toward them. One official estimates that there have been at least 20,000 of these “swattings” in the past 20 years. A3

THE WORLD In a rich musical tradition, Arabs sing songs of grief and defiance for the Palestinians. A11

An activist convicted by China under a security law has fled Hong Kong for Britain. A14

THE ECONOMY Taking down photos of children online can help limit the risks of “deep fakes” and other dangers posed by AI. A15

A modest U.S. weapons package, probably the last one before Congress approves new funding, got a tepid response in Ukraine. A16

THE REGION Implementation of a D.C. Council directive to boost food assistance benefits by nearly \$40 million remains an open question. B1

Cases of syphilis have risen dramatically among Virginia women and have led to more infections in babies. B1

STYLE It was a year of seeing what accountability means to people in power. Here’s a week-by-week breakdown of 2023. C1

WEEKEND The Weekend section is taking a break for the holidays and will return on Jan. 5.

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