

Loyalty looms large for Trump’s picks

Nominees, mirroring president-elect’s own unorthodox rise, face headwinds as they bid to join administration.

BY KEVIN RECTOR

For weeks, President-elect Donald Trump has faced a barrage of criticism over his nomination of Pete Hegseth for Defense secretary.

Hegseth, an Army National Guard major and co-host of “Fox & Friends Weekend,” is a staunchly conservative combat veteran who has defended Trump’s “America First” policies and called for an end to decades of progress in the U.S. military, including the deployment of women in fighting roles.

He also has little leadership experience and a raft of personal baggage that has dripped out steadily since Trump selected him — from sexual assault allegations in California to accusations of financial mismanagement at two veterans groups to widespread claims of severe alcohol abuse going back years, including in work settings.

Those issues have sparked concern among senators who would need to confirm Hegseth to the Pentagon post, and reports swirled Thursday that the nomination was doomed and Trump was considering withdrawing it.

Trump, however, swung back sharply Friday, defending Hegseth as a “WINNER” who was still in the fight.

“Pete Hegseth is doing very well,” Trump posted on his social media platform Truth Social. “His support is strong and deep, much more so than the Fake News would have you believe.”

The pitched battle over Hegseth is one piece of a broader fight among Trump, his critics on the left and a handful of Senate Republicans who have shown a willingness to block the president-elect’s most un-

[See Nominees, A9]



OMAR SANADIKI Associated Press

REBEL fighters celebrate the Assad government’s collapse in Damascus on Sunday. The coalition hailed “the start of a new era for Syria.”

Insurgents seize Damascus; Assad reported to have fled to Moscow

Syrian president’s overthrow ends a half-century dynasty known for brutal rule. His allies Iran and Russia plan troop exit; U.S. says its forces will stay.

BY NABIH BULOS

DOHA, Qatar — Rebel fighters all but sealed their control of Syria on Sunday, storming the capital as army troops melted away. President Bashar Assad was reported to have fled to Russia, a close ally, and been given asylum.

The insurgents’ sweep into power concludes an astonishing Turkish-backed offensive that saw them overturn a years-long stalemate to overrun major cities in less than two weeks. The lightning changes raised uncertainty about the future of the civil war-ravaged country and the balance of power in the Middle East.

Early Sunday, the rebel coalition, led by the group Hayat Tahrir al Sham, declared Damascus, the capital, “free of the tyrant Bashar” and hailed the day



HUSSEIN MALLA Associated Press

A BUST of late Syrian leader Hafez Assad, the father of President Bashar Assad, is vandalized in Damascus. The presidential palace was reportedly ransacked.

as “the start of a new era for Syria.” Syrians alternated between expressions of panic and celebration.

Later in the morning, a group of bearded men in hoodies and puffer jackets appearing on state television declared that the Syrian government had been overthrown.

Before dawn, bewildered residents drove near military installations around the capital, noting that no soldiers appeared to be manning the gates and that posts seemed abandoned. Unconfirmed reports emerged of soldiers casting away their uniforms and running off in civilian clothing.

Video showed residents rushing to mosques to announce from minarets that “the dog Bashar has fallen.” Others showed rebel fighters gathering in squares and

[See Syria, A6]

Schiff really not interested in talking about Trump

Senator-elect wants to focus on the economy instead

BY KEVIN RECTOR

Sen.-elect Adam B. Schiff doesn’t really want to talk about President-elect Donald Trump. He wants to talk about the economy.

“The issue of the last election — which we didn’t satisfactorily answer, which we’re going to need to answer as a country — is if you’re working hard in America, can you still earn a good living?” Schiff said in a recent interview. “For too many people, that’s not the case.”

Yes, California’s incoming senator is “sadly confident” that Trump is “going to abuse his office” during his second term, and promised to call out such abuses if they occur. He believes several of Trump’s Cabinet picks are unqualified, and

[See Schiff, A14]



IRFAN KHAN Los Angeles Times

SEN.-ELECT Adam B. Schiff is tackling the issues analysts say undergirded Donald Trump’s victory.

Who are Syria’s new leaders?

The rebels who ousted dictator Assad trace roots to terror groups, but they say they have changed. **WORLD, A3**

Southeast Asian voices in focus

A new, optional school curriculum hopes to address erasure and trauma in communities. **CALIFORNIA, B1**

USC returns to Vegas for finale

Trojans to close season against Texas A&M. Unbeaten Oregon sits back for Tennessee vs. Ohio State. **SPORTS, D1**

Weather

Mostly sunny. L.A. Basin: 66/47. **B6**

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Bird flu may be only one mutation from human transmission

Virus could have a much shorter path to becoming more of a threat, study says.

BY SUSANNE RUST

California researchers say the world may be just one genetic tweak away from human-to-human transmission of the H5N1 bird flu virus — a worrisome mutation that could open the door to widespread human infections and possibly even a pandemic, according to some experts.

In a study published Thursday in the journal Science, Scripps Research Institute biologists determined that a single mutation of the hemagglutinin

protein — the “H” in H5N1 — could transform a virus that has sickened or killed mostly birds and cows into a pathogen that targets cells in human beings.

The finding comes amid a growing number of H5N1 outbreaks among California dairy cows, as well as a state-ordered recall of raw milk products. Since the virus began infecting the nation’s dairy stock in March, infectious-disease experts have warned that unprotected contact between dairy workers and infected cows could enable the virus to evolve in a manner that threatens humans.

Now, Scripps researchers suggest the path for such a genetic change may be much shorter than health officers anticipated.

[See Bird flu, A14]



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