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Democracy Dies in Darkness

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How Leonsis decided to move his D.C. teams to Va.

Frustrated owner held months of secret talks on both sides of Potomac

This article is by Jonathan O'Connell, Sam Fortier, Teo Armus, Meagan Flynn, Gregory S. Schneider and Laura Vozzella

The offer from the mayor was just what Ted Leonsis had been looking for.

For months, the billionaire owner of the Washington Wizards and Capitals had been pressing the D.C. government to pay at least half the cost of modernizing his aging downtown arena. Now, in an email on Dec. 10, a Sunday

afternoon, Mayor Muriel E. Bowser was offering just that — \$500 million toward an \$800 million project to keep his basketball and hockey teams playing in the city for decades to come.

Leonsis responded two hours later, saying he would review the proposal right away and suggesting they meet. On Tuesday morn-

ing, the mayor presented her offer at Leonsis's corporate offices at Capital One Arena, in a conference room with windows overlooking the street below.

They spoke for an hour before the Democratic mayor brought up the elephant in the room. She said she had heard chatter that Republican Virginia Gov. Glenn

Youngkin was about to announce a deal to build an arena for the teams on the other side of the Potomac River. She asked Leonsis if it was true.

Leonsis spun 360 degrees in his chair. Nothing had been signed, he said, but he acknowledged he would be joining Youngkin for an

SEE ARENA ON A10

Kremlin disinfo chips at Ukraine

A COVERT EFFORT TO CRIPPLE ZELENSKY

Troll farms storm social media to drive a wedge

BY CATHERINE BELTON

When news first emerged last month that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was preparing to fire his top military commander, Gen. Valery Zaluzhny, officials in Moscow seemed jubilant. They had been trying to orchestrate just such a split for many months, documents show.

"We need to strengthen the conflict between Zaluzhny and Zelensky, along the lines of 'he intends to fire him,'" one Kremlin political strategist wrote a year ago, after a meeting of senior Russian officials and Moscow spin doctors, according to internal Kremlin documents.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's administration ordered a group of Russian political strategists to use social media and fake news articles to push the theme that Zelensky "is hysterical and weak ... He fears that he will be pushed aside, therefore he is getting rid of the dangerous ones."

The Kremlin instruction resulted in thousands of social media posts and hundreds of fabricated articles, created by troll farms and circulated in Ukraine and across Europe, that tried to exploit what were then rumored tensions between the two Ukrainian leaders, according to a trove of Kremlin documents obtained by a European intelligence service and reviewed by The Washington Post. The files, numbering more than 100 documents, were shared with The Post to expose for the first time the scale of Kremlin propaganda targeting Zelensky with the aim of dividing and destabilizing Ukrainian society — efforts that Moscow dubbed "information psychological operations."

Ukrainian society, however, has so far remained remarkably united since Russia's invasion, according to opinion polls, and officials in Moscow, the documents show, sometimes expressed frustration

SEE UKRAINE ON A23

Putin basks in his power
Rides high after Navalny death. **A19**

Withdrawal from Avdiivka
Russia takes strategic city. **A22**

Zelensky pleads in Munich
Asks U.S., others to stay true. **A22**

ELECTION 2024

A changed Trump on approach to judiciary

Frayed alliances, anger at courts could upend any 2nd-term nominations

BY JOSH DAWSEY AND MARIANNE LEVINE

Donald Trump's once-transactional relationship with the conservative legal establishment has splintered in recent years, and his frustration toward the court system has grown — potentially heralding more volatility in how he would navigate judicial issues in a second term.

Now the dominant front-runner for his party's presidential nomination, Trump has broken with many of the leaders and allies of the Federalist Society, a powerful conservative legal organization that boosted his campaign eight years ago and helped him stock the federal bench with their preferred picks. It is unclear how he would seek to fill judicial vacancies and make other related decisions should he win a second term, and he has not offered such a potential list of potential judicial nominees as he did eight years ago.

Trump has complained publicly and privately that his first-term Justice Department leaders were too weak, that his Supreme Court picks have tried to come across as too "independent" and that the court system has broadly been biased against him, as he faces 91 felony charges. Trump told donors in meetings in late 2023 that one of his only mistakes as president was that he did not pick the right people to lead the Justice Department, according to people who attended, and he regularly discusses plans for the department in a second term. In some ways, the handshake agreement he once held with the traditional conservative legal movement has evaporated.

"They were intellectually qualified

SEE TRUMP ON A13

Trump's fraud verdict: What to know, and what comes next. **A14**



A battle for souls in the Amazon

The village of São Miguel had long been Catholic, until a mysterious evangelical pastor arrived, set up a church and began converting residents

BY TERRENCE MCCOY
ALONG THE PURUS RIVER, BRAZIL

When the rains finally receded, Father Moisés Oliveira pulled his motorboat out into the swollen Purus River and pointed it downstream. Chugging down muddy waters toward the next community on his schedule, the Catholic priest felt uncertain. He'd heard all about the problems in São Miguel.

Like so many other isolated settlements scattered throughout the Amazon rainforest, São Miguel was historically Catholic. Not that long ago, when Father Moisés would make his annual journey there, his presence was a community event — the only time when the people of São Miguel could attend Mass, have their babies baptized and make confession. The squat church could never fit all the faithful.

But that was before the arrival of an evangelical Protestant pastor in early 2020, before the opening of the com-



PHOTOS BY ALEXANDRE CRUZ-NORONHA FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

TOP: A woman wears a Virgin Mary necklace in the village of São Miguel, Brazil. The historically Catholic village in the Amazon rainforest has seen many convert to evangelical Protestantism.

ABOVE: A storm brews over one of many evangelical churches near the Purus River.

munity's first evangelical church, before a fever of conversions split the community and turned it against itself. Longtime friends stopped talking. Families fractured. Suspicion and rumor spread about the Devil and death. When a 12-year-old girl was found dead in 2020, hanging from her porch rafters, Catholics saw a terrible accident. But evangelicals whispered of suicide and a demon that the pastor said was stalking the community.

The priest looked across the waters and saw São Miguel up ahead, a line of shacks rising upon an escarpment. At the far end, where forest nipped at the village, was one of its newest buildings. Painted white and blue, the pastor's evangelical church gleamed like a beacon in the day's falling light.

Father Moisés hadn't met the pastor, nor heard him preach, but his charisma was no secret. Evangelicals said they'd never heard anyone speak of God as he did. Thin and tanned, hands calloused from years of wielding a

SEE AMAZON ON A16

Sinclair's recipe for TV news: Crime, homelessness, drugs

BY SARAH ELLISON

Every year, local television news stations owned by Sinclair Broadcasting conduct short surveys among viewers to help guide the year's coverage.

A key question in each poll, according to David Smith, the company's executive chairman: "What are you most afraid of?"

The answers are evident in Sinclair's programming. Crime, homelessness, illegal drug use, failing schools and other societal ills have long been core elements of local TV news coverage. But on Sinclair's growing nationwide ros-

ter of stations, the editorial focus reflects Smith's conservative views and plays on its audience's fears that America's cities are falling apart, according to media observers, Smith associates, and current and former staffers who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal company matters.

Smith, an enthusiastic supporter of Republican presidential front-runner Donald Trump who has built Sinclair into one of the largest television station operators in the country, purchased the Baltimore Sun last month. In a

SEE SINCLAIR ON A7



WILLIAM SMITH/AP

University of Maryland men's basketball coach Lefty Driesell, shown in 1974, won 348 games in 17 seasons with the Terrapins.

Perspective: Driesell was a character, a comic and an all-time great. **D1**

LEFTY DRIESELL | 1931-2024

Coach built U-Md. into college basketball power

BY KELYN SOONG

When Lefty Driesell took the job as the University of Maryland's men's basketball coach in 1969, it had been 11 years since the Terrapins had appeared in the NCAA tournament.

The balding, brash-talking Mr. Driesell immediately declared that his team — which had a record of 8-18 the year before he arrived — "has the potential to be the UCLA of the East." At the time, UCLA was in the midst of an unprecedented streak in which the team, coached by John Wooden, won 10 national titles in 12 years.

When people stopped laughing, Mr. Driesell set out to accomplish his lofty goals — and nearly succeeded. In his 17 seasons at Maryland, he won more than 300 games and led his team to Atlantic Coast Conference and National Invitation Tournament titles, even if his

SEE DRIESELL ON A12

SPORTS

NBA kings Kevin Durant, LeBron James and Stephen Curry still rule.

BOOK WORLD

Kirsten Bakis's debut was unforgettable — 27 years later, she's back.



ARTS & STYLE

Spring Arts Preview: The best in theater, art, TV, music and movies.

BUSINESS

Fast food fueled a surge in child labor violations. One teen's story.



METRO

Leaking propane tank suspected in home blast that killed a firefighter.

TRAVEL

Does the biggest cruise ship in the world meet the hype? We tried it.

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