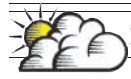


The Washington Post

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Partly sunny 64/47 • Tomorrow: Partly sunny 69/49 C8

Democracy Dies in Darkness

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 2024 • \$5

Larry Clay Jr. was 'the law' in a West Virginia town. Then he was charged with child sex trafficking — and trying to cover it up.



ABUSED BY THE BADGE

The police chief who was accused of raping a teen

The jury had reached a verdict, and the former chief of police still seemed relaxed. He leaned back in his chair. He nodded to his supporters. He was facing up to life in prison, but during the four-day trial, he never looked rattled by the testimony against him.

His attorney had made his position clear: Chief Larry Clay Jr. wasn't the type of guy to be involved in child sex trafficking.

Clay, the jury learned, was an HVAC tradesman who'd left his family business in his 40s to fulfill a lifelong ambition of becoming a law enforcement officer. He was a sheriff's deputy in Fayette County, West Virginia, and also served as the police chief in one of its small towns: Gauley Bridge, population 550, a poor community nestled on a

STORY BY JESSICA CONTRERA AND JENN ABELSON WITH PHOTOGRAPHY BY CAROLYN VAN HOUTEN IN CHARLESTON, W.VA.

picturesque river. Clay was frequently the only man on duty, cruising the town's hills with a gold badge on his chest.

"In Gauley Bridge," prosecutors told the jury, "Larry Clay was the law."

Clay was the law until one day in the fall of 2020, when a teenage girl made a startling report to the sheriff's department. In the federal courtroom, she would be called by her initials, C.H.

C.H. was also known in Gauley Bridge. The town had watched her barefoot, blissful childhood come to an end when, at 13 years old, she learned the lump on her mother's collarbone was a fast-growing lung cancer. Within a year, her mom was gone, leaving C.H. with her stepfather. He soon found a new wife, who moved into C.H.'s house.

SEE ABUSED ON A12

ABOVE: C.H. stands outside a former school in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, where, she said, she was taken to meet the police chief.

Trump hews to his own script in naming Cabinet

Behind closed doors, much is not going to plan

BY JACQUELINE ALEMANY, MICHAEL SCHERER, JOSH DAWSEY AND ASHLEY PARKER

PALM BEACH, FLA. — Former congressman Matt Gaetz greeted his admirers Thursday night on the lawn outside Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort, freshly named as the president-elect's pick to be the nation's top law enforcement officer despite an outstanding House investigation into allegations that he engaged in sexual misconduct with a 17-year-old girl.

"A colonoscopy feels great," he joked about the new attention.

The second Trump administration was blossoming to life around him, dressed in black tie and glittery dresses. Action star Sylvester Stallone would soon speak. The richest man in the world, Elon Musk, made the rounds, along with Robert F. Kennedy Jr. SEE TRANSITION ON A8

Hegseth denies assault, admits to secret payment

BY MICHAEL KRANISH, JOSH DAWSEY AND JONATHAN O'CONNELL

Pete Hegseth, President-elect Donald Trump's pick for secretary of defense, paid a woman who accused him of sexual assault as part of a nondisclosure agreement, though he maintained that their encounter was consensual, according to a statement from his lawyer Saturday and other documents obtained by The Washington Post.

Hegseth's attorney, Timothy Parlatore, said that Hegseth was "visibly intoxicated" at the time of the incident, and maintained that police who were contacted a few days after the encounter by the woman concluded that "the Complainant had been the aggressor in the encounter." Police have not confirmed that assertion.

Hegseth agreed to pay an undisclosed amount to the woman SEE HEGSETH ON A20

The Sunday Take: Trump's goals seem to be disruption, retribution. A2

HHS shake-up: A look at the many changes RFK Jr. could usher in. A10

'Insider threat': After Jan. 6, Hegseth's tattoos spurred concern. A20

Trump's win has crypto soaring. Now, the 'normies' are knocking.

BY LISA BONOS

Daniel Manson had been hesitant to put his money into cryptocurrency. The 21-year-old New Jersey college student watched friends dabble in digital assets, but he felt it was too risky.

Manson changed his mind after a small wager on an online prediction market that former president Donald Trump would win reelection netted a \$6,200 windfall. He poured his winnings into bitcoin.

"I might as well put some money in it and see what happens," Manson said in a phone interview Wednesday.

Manson is among the first-time bitcoin investors jumping

into the market since Trump's win. The value of a single unit of the cryptocurrency has soared to all-time highs and is nearing a milestone \$100,000.

Trump has promised to create a more friendly regulatory environment for the industry and said he will make the United States into the "crypto capital of the planet." Crypto investors and businesses are welcoming new converts or "normies" like Manson, who in the past week has been glued to his account balance.

"It definitely becomes obsessive," Manson said, estimating that he checks it about 50 times daily. Cryptocurrency social me-

SEE BITCOIN ON A7

A deadly campaign to prevent an owl's extinction

To hold the line against an encroaching rival, scientists in Northern California turn to hunting

BY JOSHUA PARTLOW

ARCATA, CALIF. — The hooting had died down and the two bird lovers faced the immensity of the dark forest.

Scanning his light among the redwoods, Danny Hofstadter listened. The distant ocean sounded like wind. There was nothing more from the barred owl that he and his colleague, Madeleine Cameron, had been stalking.

"I hate the silent treatment," Hofstadter said.

They slung their shotguns over their shoulders and hiked on.

Here among the world's tallest trees, Hofstadter and Cameron are part of a tiny band of biologists holding the line against an invasion that threatens to push the northern spotted owl, an icon of the Pacific Northwest, into extinction. The birds' decline,

accelerated by an encroaching rival, has become so dire that it led the scientists here: Four nights a week, they strap on headlamps and slip into the forests of Northern California to kill barred owls.

Their work is part of an ongoing study by the University of Wisconsin to assess whether removing the barred owl, a species spreading with abandon down the West Coast, will help the spotted owl survive and protect the wider ecosystem. But these nocturnal hunts are now expanding beyond research. The federal government in August approved a plan to kill up to nearly half a million barred owls over the next three decades.

This effort is one of the country's most audacious attempts to stop the spread of a species the

SEE OWLS ON A6



HANNAH FOSLIEN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

One win to go

From left, the Washington Spirit's Tara McKeown, Casey Krueger and Trinity Rodman mob goalkeeper Aubrey Kingsbury after Saturday's semifinal victory over Gotham FC, advancing to next week's NWSL title game. **Sports, D1** In the D.C. region, elated fans ride the wave. **Metro, C1**

Democrats point fingers as factions fight for party reins

BY MERYL KORNFIELD

Two weeks removed from a set of losses that sent Democratic leaders into a tailspin, the years-long ideological battle between the progressive left and centrists has once again come to a head as both sides fight to shift blame and take the reins of the future direction of the party.

With the party grappling with how to prepare for midterm elections in two years, uncertainty about who will take over the Democratic National Committee, and expected internal debates over how to handle complete Republican control in the White House and on Capitol Hill, Democrats don't have much time to find consensus on their path forward.

"The question is: Do you want to be the least progressive outside

SEE DEMOCRATS ON A19

METRO
A yawning deficit looms as Maryland leaders weigh cuts and tax hikes.

SPORTS
The sad, silly spectacle of Netflix's Jake Paul vs. Mike Tyson charade.



ARTS & STYLE
Hollywood flipped the May-December romance so older women rule.

BOOK WORLD
Joan Didion and Eve Babitz, celebrity writers whose friendship soured.



BUSINESS
A family picnic shows how Trump's tariffs could affect prices for you.

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These 20th-century rentals predicted the rise of today's Airbnbs.

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