

# The Washington Post

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Partly sunny 46/38 • Tomorrow: Partly sunny 47/30 B20

Democracy Dies in Darkness

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TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2026 • \$4

A beautiful game among the ruins



OMAR AL-QATTAQ/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Palestinians gather to watch a five-a-side soccer match being played Monday amid the rubble of destroyed buildings in Gaza City. Despite a United States-brokered truce that entered its second phase last month, violence has continued in the Palestinian territory, with Israel and Hamas trading accusations over ceasefire violations and breaches in the deal.

## Maxwell declines to answer lawmakers

Ex-Epstein companion asks for presidential clemency at deposition

BY JEREMY ROEBUCK AND ANNA LISS-ROY

Jeffrey Epstein's longtime companion Ghislaine Maxwell declined to answer lawmakers' questions and invoked her Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination during a deposition before the House Oversight Committee on Monday.

But her lawyer said she was "prepared to speak fully and honestly" if she was first granted clemency by President Donald Trump.

Maxwell, who was convicted on sex trafficking charges in 2021, was set to face the committee's questioning via videoconference from the federal prison camp in Texas where she's serving her 20-year sentence. Instead, lawmakers emerged from the closed-door session less than an hour after it began. They said Maxwell had declined to engage with their inquiries, citing her ongoing legal efforts to have her conviction overturned.

"This, obviously is very disappointing," the committee's chairman, Rep. James Comer (R-Kentucky), told reporters afterward. "We had many questions to ask about the crimes she and Epstein committed, as well as questions about potential co-conspirators."

Videos of the deposition, released by the committee later Monday, showed Maxwell seated at a conference room table in a khaki prison jumpsuit. She repeatedly said she would like to answer lawmakers' questions but was invoking her "right to silence."

SEE MAXWELL ON A2

## Ruling is near on ballroom challenge

BY DAN DIAMOND, AARON SCHAFFER AND JONATHAN EDWARDS

A federal judge is expected to soon rule on whether President Donald Trump's planned \$400 million White House ballroom project can proceed, zeroing in on whether the administration's plan to rely on private donations allows it to bypass congressional approval.

Trump has argued that the approach spares taxpayers the expense, but the dispute has instead highlighted a lack of transparency over how the project is being financed. U.S. District Judge Richard Leon, congressional Democrats and watchdog groups have questioned an ar-

Judge weighs legality of White House project's reliance on private donors

angement that relies on donations from corporations with business before the federal government, funneled through a nonprofit intermediary that stands to collect millions of dollars in fees, to fund the most significant alteration to the White House in decades.

Leon has said he may rule this month on the National Trust for Historic Preservation's challenge to the project. As the decision approaches, watchdog groups

have scrutinized the administration's fundraising effort, arguing that it exploits gaps in federal disclosure rules that Congress should tighten.

Trump and White House officials have publicly identified about two dozen companies and about a dozen individual donors they say have already contributed hundreds of millions of dollars for the project, including major corporations such as Amazon, Google and Palantir that collectively have billions of dollars in contracts before the administration. (Amazon founder Jeff Bezos owns The Washington Post.)

Most of the donors have declined to specify to reporters and lawmakers how much they have

SEE BALLROOM ON A2

ing already been impeached twice and indicted four times, Trump is less afraid of being impeached again than he is determined not to let a Democratic-controlled House halt his policy agenda, a White House official said. The official and others spoke to The Washington Post on the condition of anonymity to detail private conversations.

But a White House official said Trump is excited to get more engaged in midterm strategy and looking forward to increasing his travel this month, including a campaign-style event outside of Washington this week. An Oval Office meeting to go over a handful of House endorsements Wednesday night turned into a five-hour gabfest on the midterms, according to two people present. Trump said he wants to defy the tendency of the president's party losing seats in Congress in the midterms, one of the people said.

"We'll spend whatever it takes," SEE MIDTERMS ON A9

## Trump is unclear on midterm plans

REPUBLICANS LEFT GUESSING AS HOPES DIM

Endorsements, PAC spending strategy still unsettled

BY ISAAC ARNSDORF AND LIZ GOODWIN

Republicans looking to the White House to lead in the face of the party's dimming prospects for November's midterms are facing a crucial hang-up: the president.

The party's flagship campaign committee and super PACs have no indication of how President Donald Trump will deploy his \$300 million-plus war chest because he has not approved a spending plan. Republican donors are funding expensive Senate primaries in Texas and Georgia because Trump has not cleared the field with his endorsement, or, in the case of Louisiana, endorsed a challenger to the incumbent Republican.

People who have spoken with Trump about these obstacles said he at times can sound detached and noncommittal about his plans for spending and endorsements. One person close to the White House said some days the president seems not to care. Hav-

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## Republican Massie faces biggest Trump clash yet

Reelection bid by Kentucky congressman is seen as test of the president's hold on GOP base

BY HANNAH KNOWLES

MAYSVILLE, KY. — Candidate after candidate pledged their allegiance to President Donald Trump at the local GOP dinner. Then Republican Rep. Thomas Massie took the mic.

"A congressman, unlike a soldier, does not work for the commander in chief," Massie said.

The commander in chief had declared Massie a "real loser" and recruited a retired Navy SEAL to challenge him. Now, Massie, 55, was trying to persuade voters in deep-red northern Kentucky to keep him in office, fresh off his biggest showdown yet with the White House — his bill that forced the release of millions of government files on the sex offender

Jeffrey Epstein.

"If you want a rubber stamp, you've got an option this year in this primary," Massie told about 100 people assembled for dinner in Maysville, a town of about 9,000 on the Ohio River. "But if you want somebody who will go up there and try to make the best decision ... then I'm your guy."

Massie's bid for reelection is shaping up as the ultimate test of Trump's clout and the GOP base's tolerance for those who challenge him. In a party defined for the past decade by loyalty to Trump, Massie is clashing openly with him — even mocking him — while arguing that the president has veered from his "America First" campaign promises.

SEE MASSIE ON A4

## Where is it cold enough for the Winter Olympics?

Rising temperatures will cut the number of available host sites

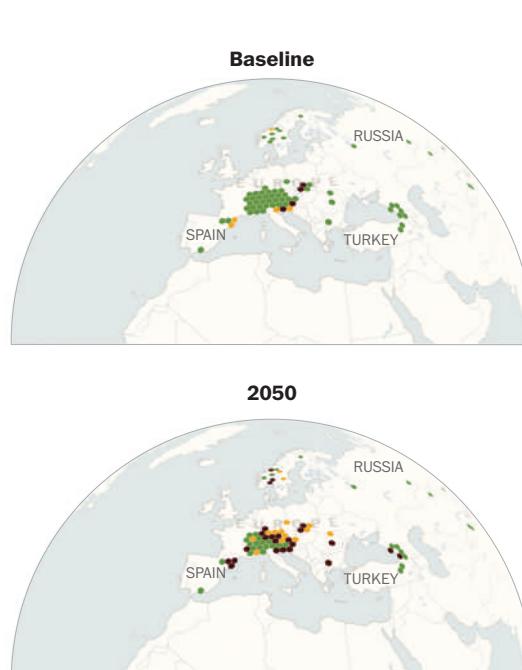
BY JANICE KAI CHEN, N. KIRKPATRICK AND JÚLIA LEDUR

When the Milan-Cortina Winter Games were just weeks away, patches of bare ground peeking through Bormio's downhill ski course had top ski officials worried. With the weather too warm to make snow during the day, the machines had to run at night to create enough snow for the upcoming competitions.

Five thousand miles away from the Italian Alps, the Rocky Mountains were experiencing the warmest winter on record. Snowfall in the early season at Park City, Utah, which will host events for the 2024 Winter Olympic Games, has been dismal.

The warm December weather in both host locations SEE OLYMPICS ON A20

### Climate reliability of Olympic host locations



## Hong Kong dissident Lai sentenced to 20 years

BY SHIBANI MAHTANI

Hong Kong newspaper founder Jimmy Lai, a leading figure in the city's pro-democracy movement and an ardent critic of the Chinese Communist Party, was sentenced Monday to 20 years in prison after being found guilty in December of sedition and collusion with foreign forces.

The heavy sentence means that Lai, 78, who is a British citizen, could spend the rest of his life imprisoned as a martyr-like figure, exemplifying the price nonviolent dissidents are paying for their activism in the once-free-wheeling city. Lai's family and some supporters still hold out hope that Washington or London might secure his release through diplomatic negotiations.

The sentence was not a surprise as Beijing has sought to wipe out the city's few remaining press freedoms and judicial inde-

SEE SENTENCE ON A15

## IN THE NEWS

Quantum future A Maryland lab is developing a powerful computer that could cure cancer but also steal passwords. B13

Views of America At the Olympics, U.S. athletes are sharing their opinions when asked about the issues back home — as they should, Barry Svluga writes. B1

THE NATION Justice officials seek to toss Stephen Bannon's conviction for defying a House subpoena. A3

Democrats hope a left-wing YouTube channel can counter conservative online media. A7

THE WORLD Prince William and Princess Catherine of Wales said they were "deeply concerned" about revelations in the Epstein files involving two high-profile British figures. A14

THE ECONOMY Opening statements began in the first of several trials over claims that tech platforms aim to addict children. A16

SPORTS The Seattle Seahawks' Super Bowl victory was achieved partly through design and mostly through brute force. B1

STYLE Bad Bunny's Super Bowl halftime show turned out to be a joyous party, not a political provocation. B7

Super Bowl ads this year leaned into wackiness, nostalgia and bathroom humor. These were the best, worst and weirdest. B7

THE REGION As Virginia lawmakers join the Spanberger administration, a wave of special elections must fill the empty seats. B13

D.C. health officials are warning of possible exposure to measles after three people with the illness visited the region in recent weeks. B13

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