



## ACCOUNTABILITY

# Foreigners broke feds' firewalls for COVID aid

### Business fund lost \$1.3 billion to fraud

By **STEPHEN DINAN**  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Foreign criminal syndicates are estimated to have stolen tens of billions of dollars in pandemic relief money, and an inspector general's report is shedding light on how some of that happened.

The Small Business Administration's watchdog says the agency tried to block foreign applications to its Economic Injury Disaster Loans (EIDL), one of two major programs activated to prop up businesses during the early COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns.

Still, thousands of applications filed from foreign Internet Protocol addresses got through the SBA's firewall. As a result, the agency doled out about \$1.3 billion in payments that the inspector general deemed at severe risk of being fraudulent.

Filing from overseas isn't an automatic signal of fraud or illegality, but it is a red flag, the Office of the Inspector General said.

"The numerous applications submitted from foreign IP addresses are an indication of potential fraud that may involve international criminal organizations," the inspector general said in announcing the investigation Monday evening. "OIG has ongoing investigations into international organized crime operations that applied for and stole pandemic relief funds."

The audit didn't expand on those investigations, but overseas criminal syndicates have been identified in massive amounts of fraud related to U.S. pandemic spending.

There were three major relief programs: expanded unemployment benefits, which totaled about \$900 billion; the SBA's Paycheck Protection Program, which extended about \$800 billion in forgivable loans to small businesses to keep them afloat; and the EIDL, with roughly \$342 billion in loans, grants and advance payments to businesses.

Unemployment benefits were particularly vulnerable, with few controls early on to weed out bogus applications. One estimate puts total unemployment fraud at more than \$200 billion, with international criminal syndicates likely accounting for well more than \$100 billion. Much of that went to organizations tied to U.S. adversaries in Iran and Russia.

The SBA programs were tougher to scam, though early estimates still run to tens of billions of dollars. The inspector general's report captures some of that activity.

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**BLOWING THE HORN:** Major freight railroads are putting pressure on Washington to help derail a union strike before midnight Thursday. A shutdown of rails could affect commuters who use Maryland's MARC train and Virginia's VRE.

## TRANSPORTATION

# Economy running on weak track about to get hit by railroad strike

By **DAVE BOYER**  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

President Biden is scrambling to avert a massive railroad strike as soon as Friday that would worsen supply chain shortages, inflame high inflation and add to the rising number of walkouts under his labor-friendly administration.

The White House wouldn't commit Tuesday to legislation to prevent a strike, despite acknowledging that a rail shutdown would cause "tremendous" harm to the economy.

"We are going to encourage them to stay at the negotiation table,"

## INSIDE

### Grim economy

Report on inflation prompts stock market plummet as Biden celebrates passage of tax, spending bill. **A4**

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said of the major railroad companies and two holdout unions. "They've come to a resolution in the past, and that's what we're going to focus on."

She called a strike "not acceptable."

Even a partial shutdown of rail traffic would compound the nation's economic woes, including persistently high inflation that fueled a massive sell-off Tuesday on Wall Street. The Dow Jones Industrial Average fell nearly 1,276 points, or just shy of 4%, its worst day since June 2020.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce said a rail shutdown would cause "economic disaster."

Union leaders have warned the White House and Congress not to

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## AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

# Lawsuits challenge fairness of Biden's 'equity'

By **ALEX SWOYER**  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The infrastructure law Congress enacted last year includes \$37 billion for small "disadvantaged" businesses — a way of getting more money into the hands of companies owned by women and racial or ethnic minorities.

Christian Bruckner, a disabled Romanian immigrant, calls it unconstitutional discrimination, and he has gone to court to try to unwind the preference program. It's just one of the challenges to

## Whites, Asians increasingly feel left out

President Biden's "equity" agenda, which is testing the boundaries of affirmative action.

Mr. Bruckner's case is being fought by the Equity Under the Law Project, which has battled affirmative action programs in President Biden's 2021 coronavirus relief package. In one case, a federal appeals court halted funding set aside for minority-owned restaurants. In another case, a federal judge upended a plan

to forgive debts rung up by minority farmers.

Benefits for minorities via government contracts have been on the books for decades, but critics say the Biden administration and the Democratic-controlled Congress are increasing disparities.

"Racial equity includes racial discrimination against Whites and Asians," said Daniel Lenington, deputy counsel

at the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty, which runs the Equity Under the Law Project.

A spokesperson for the Justice Department did not respond to a request for comment.

Mr. Bruckner owns the contracting firm Project Management Corp. in Tampa, Florida. His lawsuit says the administration's set-aside of funds in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act is unlawful because it must be used for

» see **BIDEN** | **A6**

## LABOR

# Half of U.S. workers admit 'quiet quitting'

### Pandemic changes job interest

By **SEAN SALAI**  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Half of U.S. workers responding to a recent Gallup survey consider themselves "quiet quitters," doing the minimum necessary to keep their jobs.

The percentage of disengaged workers has risen steadily since 2019, according to Gallup.

Analysts attribute the spike to large numbers of managers quitting during the pandemic, a struggling job market and young people's unhappiness with remote work.

"Life changed dramatically with COVID, and now, as employees are returning to the physical workspace, they are having to learn how to reengage socially while having the stress of paying more for clothes, gas and food," said Karen S. Elliott, a labor and employment lawyer at Richmond, Virginia-based Eckert Seamans.

The concept is also known as "working your wage" or "phoning it in." Some analysts call it the "80/20 rule," stating that 20% of

» see **WORK** | **A10**



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**ON HOME GROUND:** A Russian flag was in tatters Tuesday after Ukrainian fighters pressed retreating forces deeper into occupied territory, inflicting a stunning blow to Moscow's military prestige.

## UKRAINE

# Routs over Russians raise hopes in Kyiv

### Military restraint now advised

By **BEN WOLFGANG**  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Ukraine's stunning successes on the battlefield in recent days have sparked renewed optimism in Kyiv that a lasting, decisive victory over Russia may be within reach.

Still, the rapid pace of the Ukrainian counteroffensive comes with high-stakes questions. Military analysts openly cautioned Kyiv on Tuesday to slow its attacks or risk overextending its forces and giving the shellshocked Russian army an

opportunity to regain its footing.

Striking the right balance between pressing its advantage and exercising strategic restraint will be the key challenge to Ukrainian military leaders — and their U.S. and other Western military advisers — over the coming days and weeks. After months of defense against relentless Russian ground attacks and artillery barrages, Ukraine's counteroffensive campaign has quickly retaken ground, including the strategically vital northeastern city of Kharkiv, with

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## POLITICS

Twitter whistleblower details infiltrations, ignored warnings. **A4**

## NATION

California mudslides damage homes, carry away automobiles. **A8**

## WORLD

Armenia, Azerbaijan trade deadly fire as fighting erupts. **A11**

## REGION

Virginia Republican's House run inspired by Youngkin platform. **A12**

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**CAMPAIGN 2022**

## Republicans push midterm battles into Biden districts

### Stung by endorsement of Ohio candidate, 'original' supporters write letter to Trump

By **SETH McLAUGHLIN**  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Former President Donald Trump's endorsement of J.D. Vance's bid for the Republican nomination for the U.S. Senate in Ohio has left some "original and proud Trumpers" feeling so betrayed that they are calling on him to rescind his support.

More than half of the Ohio delegates who represented Mr. Trump at the 2015 Republican National Convention have signed an open letter urging him to withdraw his



ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTOGRAPHS

**BAD ADVICE?** Former President Donald Trump is supporting onetime critic J.D. Vance in a Senate primary.

support for Mr. Vance. "We would respectfully request you reconsider your endorsement of JD Vance

to show your supporters in Ohio and across our great states why we first believed in you back in 2016," reads the letter, released Wednesday. "That it really was about the We the People, America First and Making America Great Again not supporting a political chameleon and snake oil salesman like JD Vance!"

The Vance campaign dismissed the letter. "Conservative outsiders like Donald Trump and JD Vance will always be fought

» see **OHIO** | **A4**



STAR TRIBUNE VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

**OPTIMISTIC:** Rep. Tom Emmer, chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee, is confident of winning a seat in New England.

► Biden, Democrats losing grip on young voters. **A3**

► Election forecasters shift 16 House races to GOP. **A3**

### Election forecasts boost hopes for flipping seats in Congress

By **SUSAN FERRECHIO**  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

House and Senate Republicans are increasingly confident that a predicted red wave in November will sweep into blue districts that supported President Biden in 2020.

Bolstering that optimism, two prominent election forecasters on Wednesday shifted 16 congressional races across the nation toward Republicans' favor.

Larry Sabato's Crystal Ball at the University of Virginia Center for Politics shifted 11 House races toward Republicans. Six of the incumbent House Democrats whose prospects were downgraded by the Cook Political Report and the Crystal Ball were

elected in 2018 or 2020. Growing optimism has propelled House Republicans' campaign effort into New England, whose voters rarely elect Republicans to Congress.

"We're going to get a seat in New England, I'm telling you right now," Rep. Tom Emmer of Minnesota said during a recent briefing with reporters. He is chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee, the House Republicans' campaign arm.

Senate Republicans also are setting an ambitious campaign agenda.

The Senate Leadership Fund, the political action committee

» see **WAVE** | **A4**



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**EYES ON A PRIZE:** After relentless bombardment in a 2-month-old war, the Ukrainian port city of Mariupol is on the brink of falling to Russia.

**UKRAINE**

## Supplies critically low for Mariupol defense

### Putin shows off advanced new weapons system to Ukraine, allies

By **BEN WOLFGANG**  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Defenders in Mariupol are desperately short on supplies and may lose control of the city within days, Ukrainian military officials said Wednesday as Russian invaders ramped up a nonstop bombardment of the strategically vital port city and inched closer to what would be the first major prize in Moscow's 2-month-old war.

Ukrainian troops remained holed up deep inside the city's sprawling steel plant complex and its network of underground tunnels, refusing to surrender despite slim chances for victory. Russian troops pounded the facility throughout the day as President Vladimir Putin issued stark warnings to Ukraine and its Western allies about an intercontinental ballistic missile system that he said is the most advanced in the world.

The stubborn resistance in Mariupol is giving Ukrainian forces time to entrench and reinforce troops in defensive lines in the country's Donbas region, where Ukrainian and pro-Russian separatist forces have been battling to a stalemate for eight years. Russian forces have turned their full attention to the campaign in the south and east of Ukraine. The first forays after the Feb. 24 invasion failed to take the capital of Kyiv or other major urban

targets. Facing the full weight of the Russian war machine, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said his personnel need heavier weapons to stand a fighting chance. Mr. Zelenskyy said there are two ways the standoff

» see **UKRAINE** | **A10**

► Ukraine still transporting Russian gas despite war. **A8**

**FLORIDA**

## DeSantis proposal makes Disney perks magically disappear

### Bill to end special taxing district works way through Legislature

By **SUSAN FERRECHIO**  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The Florida Senate voted Wednesday to end Disney's special taxing district in a battle over the state's new sex education law, pushing the theme park giant a step closer to losing the unique autonomy it has functioned under since the park was built more than five decades ago.

The Republican-led Senate voted to end the Reedy Creek Improvement District just one day after Gov. Ron DeSantis, a Republican, announced he was calling on the Legislature, meeting this week in a special session, to take up a measure.

The Republican-led House is expected to pass the bill Thursday and send it to Mr. DeSantis for his signature.

Disney is in a public battle with the governor over the state's Parental Rights in Education law, which prohibits sex education in early elementary school. Critics call it the "Don't Say Gay" bill. Disney executives, under pressure from park employees and other opponents, urged Mr. DeSantis not to sign it. When the bill became law, Disney responded by pledging to end contributions to Florida political candidates.

The bill approved by the state Senate on Wednesday specifically targets Disney's one-of-a-kind special taxing and governing



ASSOCIATED PRESS

**TO KINGDOM COME:** Disney's fresh paint on Cinderella Castle would be subject to taxes and fees under Florida legislation.

district approved in 1967 at the behest of Walt Disney, who sought independence from state and local governance to build and expand his theme park empire in Central Florida.

Although the governor has authorized many special districts elsewhere in the state, none is controlled by a company.

Disney's Reedy Creek Improvement District, controlled entirely by the theme park, has special autonomy and authority

» see **DISNEY** | **A4**

**EDUCATION**

## Conservatives give woke textbook publishers lessons in subtraction

By **SEAN SALAI**  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Conservatives are fighting to remove "woke" public school textbooks that present mathematics as a tool of White supremacy.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, a Republican, announced Monday that the state Department of

Education had rejected 41% of the math textbooks submitted for its K-12 curriculum next year, including 71% of K-5 math textbooks, because they include "references to critical race theory" or "social emotional learning."

"Reveal Math K-5," one of several textbooks from McGraw Hill that Florida rejected, encourages

students to discuss how they feel about solving problems. Conservatives see the language as a Trojan horse for liberals to revive efforts to "decolonize" mathematics of a perceived bias against multicultural students.

"Every lesson integrates a social and emotional learning objective along with the math

and language objectives," Reveal Math K-5 states on page 52.

In addition, conservatives objected this week to the Iowa City Community School District's invitation for staff to attend a recent series of "equity courses" on race, gender and sexual orientation. One training session: "Ethnomathematics: The Study of Math

as a Cultural Activity?"

"Educators will approach the mathematics classroom as ethnographers, exploring the origins of our current practices and questioning the hierarchies they produce," a description of the training session states.

Nicole Neily, the founder of the conservative Parents Defending

Education, said the Iowa training series shows how teachers can embrace "toxic ideologies" that impart a victim mentality rather than prepare students to succeed.

"They need to be able to teach students the math they need to know to pursue and succeed in the future, whether in higher ed or career paths that require that knowledge," Ms. Neily said.

Critical race theory has increasingly been covered in the

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**POLITICS**  
DOJ appeals judge's mask mandate ruling at urging of CDC. **A3**

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Milwaukee reimposes school mask mandate as cases increase. **A6**

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Confusion on Army plane leads police to evacuate Capitol. **A12**

**COMMENTARY**  
Gingrich: GOP needs to think broadly about language, actions. **B1**

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**IMMIGRATION**

## Afghanistan evacuees find clashes with U.S. laws

### Records show sex, violence offenses

By **STEPHEN DINAN**  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The 77,000 Afghans evacuated to the U.S. have all been processed and released from military bases, but not before racking up a striking number of criminal entanglements including violence against women and sexual assaults on children.

Federal prosecutors in Virginia charged a man with molesting a 14-year-old girl. As investigators dug into his phone, they said, they found child pornography among thousands of photos he kept. They have now charged him with that offense, too.

Another evacuee stands accused of bashing his wife with a cellphone charger and slashing her wrists with a razor blade. Investigators say he was mad at his wife for taking one of the seats at an evacuee meeting, while his brother had to stand.

Still another evacuee is awaiting sentencing after a jury found him guilty of groping a child. He defended his actions to investigators, saying it was part of his culture to hug and kiss children.

In New Jersey, Khan Wali Rahmani was charged with assault with a dangerous weapon. According to court documents, he became upset when he thought another evacuee was "staring" at him during religious rites. He told investigators he grabbed a metal pipe and smashed the man in the back of the head.

Mr. Rahmani claimed self-defense, though the federal investigator who wrote the criminal complaint dryly noted that he attacked "while Victim #1 knelt in prayer."

» see **EVACUATE** | A6

## BACK TOGETHER IN EASTER PRAYER



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Pope Francis (above) delivered the traditional Easter Sunday Mass as Catholics worldwide celebrated communally for the first time in two years. The pandemic, which erupted just ahead of the holiday in 2020, and a deadly wave of COVID-19 cases last year kept Christian worshippers home watching services on television or online. More churches opened their doors this year with fewer coronavirus restrictions, in line with broader societal trends. Story, A7.

**INVESTIGATION**

## CIA doubts began early on Trump, Russia ties

### Clinton attorney wants evidence out of trial

By **JEFF MORDOCK**  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The CIA concluded in early 2017 that Clinton campaign attorney Michael Sussmann's dirt tying President Trump to Russia was "not technically plausible," special counsel John Durham said in a court filing posted Saturday.

Mr. Durham said Mr. Sussmann met with a second government agency in February 2017 and presented evidence purportedly linking Mr. Trump to Russia. Although Mr. Durham didn't name the agency, reports confirmed that Mr. Sussmann met with the CIA around this time.

During the meeting, Mr. Sussmann presented the CIA with accusations of a secret communications channel between the Trump Organization and Russia's Alfa Bank, according to the court filing. He also passed along information about suspicious internet data related to Russian-made phones used near the White House, Mr. Durham said.

In his filing, Mr. Durham says the CIA concluded that the accusations were untrue.

"Agency 2 concluded in early 2017 that Russian Bank 1 data and Russian Phone Provider 1 data was not 'technically plausible,' did not 'withstand technical scrutiny,' 'contained gaps,' 'conflicted with [itself],' and was 'user-created and not machine/tool generated,'" Mr. Durham wrote.

Both accusations were later debunked, including by special counsel Robert Mueller.

The court document was filed late Friday in response to Mr. Sussmann's bid to exclude evidence from his trial, scheduled to begin on May 16.

Mr. Sussmann has been charged with one count of lying to the FBI. He is accused of telling a top FBI

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**IRS**

## Flood of tax returns adds to 2020 backlog, delayed refunds

By **HARIS ALIC**  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The Internal Revenue Service is bracing for a flood of tax returns Monday, the official deadline, in a system beleaguered with delays.

As of March, the IRS had not processed more than 12 million returns from the 2020 tax year. The backlog will significantly hamper the agency's ability to process this year's returns.

IRS Commissioner Charles Rettig warned Congress this month that the

### Agency defends telework, blames staffing and paper filings

agency was laboring with a personnel shortage and a growing document backlog during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The IRS is serving more people and entities in a global environment than ever before while handling new and bigger responsibilities," said Mr. Rettig. "At the same time, we have experienced delays in updating our IT systems, which means the IRS and taxpayers must continue to use certain paper-based

processes." Individuals are likely to face more delays in receiving refunds, and the slowdown may cost taxpayers billions of dollars overall. A Government Accountability Office audit published last week found that the IRS shelled out more than \$3 billion last year in interest payments for delayed refunds.

To reduce the backlog, IRS officials say, they have implemented mandatory

overtime for staff. The agency is also using funding from President Biden's budget to hire an additional 10,000 people to help process returns.

Even with additional staff, however, the IRS does not expect to clear the document backlog until the end of this year.

Republicans say that is simply too long to wait and that a large portion of IRS employees working from home has likely contributed to the delay.

"One of the fastest ways to eliminate the backlog of millions of unprocessed tax returns is to have the IRS bring all of their employees back to the office," said Rep. Mike Kelly, Pennsylvania Republican. "Their telework policy won't end until June — well after [the 2021] tax filing deadline."

IRS officials defended the lenient teleworking guidelines. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, they said, a portion of the agency's workforce was not

» see **TAX** | A6

**FOREIGN RELATIONS**

## War puts Arctic Council decisions in deep freeze

### Russia sits at helm of 8-nation forum

By **BEN WOLFGANG**  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The fallout from Russia's attack on Ukraine has reached the top of the world.

The West's cooperation with Moscow in the Arctic, already strained after years of Russian military buildup, has ground to a halt because of the conflict in Ukraine. The eight-member Arctic Council, which Russia currently chairs, has effectively paused operations, shelving a crucial forum for Washington, Moscow and the six other member nations to tackle and sidestep clashes over issues such as climate change, energy and economic resources, and military

activity in the high north.

Still, Russian President Vladimir Putin said his military campaign in Ukraine wouldn't sidetrack the Kremlin's quickly expanding Arctic ambitions. Long before the unprovoked Feb. 24 invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin saw the region as crucial to Russia's economic development. The crushing Western sanctions imposed on Moscow in response to its invasion of Ukraine have made the Arctic even more pivotal for Russia's financial future.

"Taking into account all kinds of external restrictions and sanctions

» see **ARCTIC** | A6



ASSOCIATED PRESS

'FIGHT TO THE END' Ukrainian troops in Mariupol are refusing to lay down their arms despite a lack of food, water, heat and electricity — and a Russian warning.

**UKRAINE**

## Russians failing to starve troops out of Mariupol

### No surrender after dire ultimatum

By **MIKE GLENN**  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Ukrainian forces inside the besieged city of Mariupol on Sunday rejected an offer from Russian military officials to spare their lives if they lay down their arms and surrender.

The deadline for the surrender-or-die ultimatum passed with no indication that Ukrainian troops in the city were interested in handing over their weapons.

Officials said the situation in Mariupol is dire. A critical port city in southeastern Ukraine along the Sea of Azov, Mariupol has been under bombardment since Russian President Vladimir Putin

launched the invasion in late February.

"The city has not fallen," Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal said on ABC's "This Week." "There is still our military forces — our soldiers — who will fight to the end."

Russian officials claimed to have intercepted radio communications between the defenders inside Mariupol and Ukrainian officials in Kyiv, according to the Russian news agency Tass.

"The militants offering resistance are in a hopeless situation, practically without food and water," said Mikhail Mizintsev, chief of Russia's National

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**POLITICS**

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**Suspect arrested after shopping mall shooting in South Carolina. A7**

**WORLD**

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**SPORTS**

**Backcourt needs put Wall, Westbrook back in mix for Wizards. B10**

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