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# 70% of the DOJ's Civil Rights Division lawyers are leaving because of Trump's reshaping

MAY 19, 2025 · 5:00 AM ET

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Ryan Lucas

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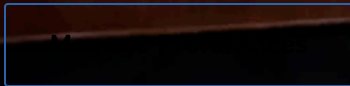
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Harmeet Dhillon, far right, is sworn in during confirmation hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee in February 2025 in Washington, D.C.

Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

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The Justice Department's Civil Rights Division is in upheaval amid a mass exodus of attorneys as the Trump administration moves to radically reshape the division, shelving its traditional mission and replacing it with one focused on enforcing the president's executive orders.

Some 250 attorneys — or around 70% of the division's lawyers — have left or will have left the department in the time between President Trump's inauguration and the end of May, according to current and former officials.

It marks a dramatic turn for the storied division, which was created during the civil rights movement and the push to end racial segregation. For almost 70 years, it has sought to combat discrimination and to protect the constitutional rights of all Americans — everything from voting and housing to employment, education and policing.

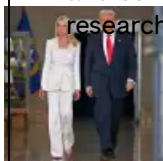
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**Critics warn DOJ is being politicized despite vows to end its purported weaponization**

Now, the administration is redirecting the division to enforce Trump's executive orders, including ending the alleged radical indoctrination in schools, defending women from "gender ideology extremism," and combatting antisemitism and purported anti-Christian bias.

Five current or former department officials, most of whom spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retribution, say the current effort amounts to the dismantling of the division and its traditional mission.

"The Civil Rights Division exists to enforce civil rights laws that protect all Americans," said Stacey Young, a former division attorney who left the department in late January. "It's not an arm of the White House. It doesn't exist to enact the president's own agenda. That's a perversion of the separation of powers and the role of an independent Justice Department."

It is normal for the division's priorities to shift from administration to administration, particularly from one party to another. But the changes underway now are far beyond the normal recalibration, current and former employees and outside observers say.

The changes are being implemented by the division's new head, Harmeet Dhillon, a conservative attorney whom Trump appointed in April.

Speaking at a recent Federalist Society event, Dhillon likened the division's work under Democratic administrations to a speeding train. She said Republican administrations typically try to "just slow the train down."

"There really hasn't been a focus on turning the train around and driving it in the opposite direction. And that's my vision of the DOJ civil rights [division]," she said.

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"We don't just slow down the woke. We take up the cause to achieve the executive branch's goals. This is the opportunity where we can ensure that our nation's civil rights laws benefit all Americans, not just a select few."



**POLITICS**

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**180-degree turn**

Already, the administration has started to execute that 180-degree turn. Under the new leadership, the department has dropped investigations, and withdrawn statements of interest or amicus briefs in some 30 cases, according to public court records. These include cases related to voting rights, alleged racial discrimination in hiring and civil actions against anti-abortion activists.

Dhillion has issued new mission statements for the division's 11 sections that push Trump's priorities and redirect resources to enforcing his executive orders. Those missions include "Protecting Children from Chemical and Surgical Mutilation," "Keeping Men Out of Women's Sports," "Eradicating Anti-Christian Bias" and

"Additional Measures to Combat Antisemitism." Young said the changes amount to the destruction of the division and its traditional work. The division fight now is being decimated," said Young, who now runs Justice Connection, a group of department alumni that provides support to DOJ employees. The head of the division and the Justice Department have decided that the division is going to enforce laws only with respect to favored communities of people.

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Craig Futterman, a professor at the University of Chicago Law School, said the changes underway "are turning the Civil Rights Division on its head." The Trump administration, he added, "is using a division that has a history of protecting the

most vulnerable among us to actually wage an all-out assault on the civil rights of vulnerable people, including Black people, brown people, women, LGBTQIA folk."

"I grew up in the wake of the civil rights movement where we celebrated all the heroes in the progress and the gains, and knowing that there's still so much work that needs to be done in this country. And this is the most dramatic backward turn that I've experienced in my lifetime," Futterman said.

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### Attorneys quitting en masse

The changes being imposed under the Trump administration have prompted attorneys in the division to leave en masse. Certain sections have been particularly hard hit by departures, including voting, education and special litigation.

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### Under Trump, the Justice Department is stepping away from some voting rights cases

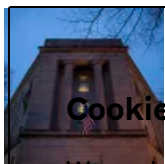
Some of those who have left have quit, while others have taken the administration's deferred resignation program or retired early.

The latest round of mass departures occurred in recent weeks as the leadership began reassigning managers — widely seen as a push to have them quit — and

forcing attorneys to work on task forces dedicated to certain Trump priorities like antisemitism or transgender issues.

Dhillon, in her remarks at the Federalist Society event, acknowledged the departures.

"We wish them well in their future endeavors and their passions," she said. "They need to pursue them elsewhere. That's not going to be happening at the DOJ."



POLITICS

Justice Department changes rattle current and former agency veterans

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Different from first Trump term

By and large, attorneys in the division feel like they can no longer do the work they've always been able to do, including during the first Trump administration.

Then, there was no mass exodus, department veterans say. Attorneys stayed put and managed their normal work. The administration scaled back — but did not end — work in a few priority areas, like policing.

But now, current and former officials say, there's a sense that the division is weaponizing the country's civil rights laws against populations it's supposed to be protecting. They say the abandonment of the traditional mission has been devastating. One official recalled attorneys walking around the hallways in tears or sobbing through meetings.

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"The division has a few hundred lawyers who were diligent in making sure that people were held accountable for discrimination," Young said. "Without that enforcement, without the knowledge that unlawful discrimination can be tamped down through the division's work, we're going to see, I think, a whole lot more unlawful discrimination."

justice department civil rights trump administration pam bondi legal affairs

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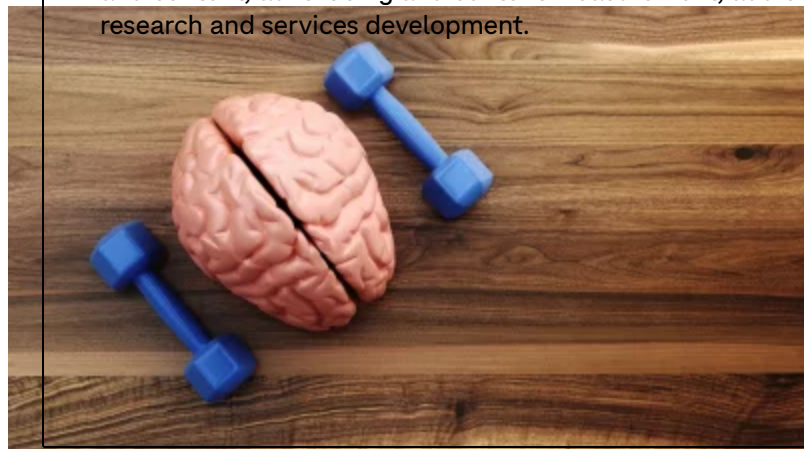
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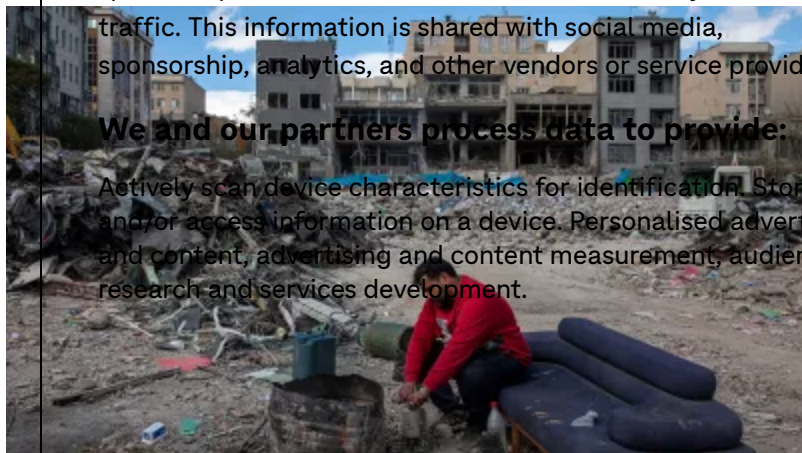
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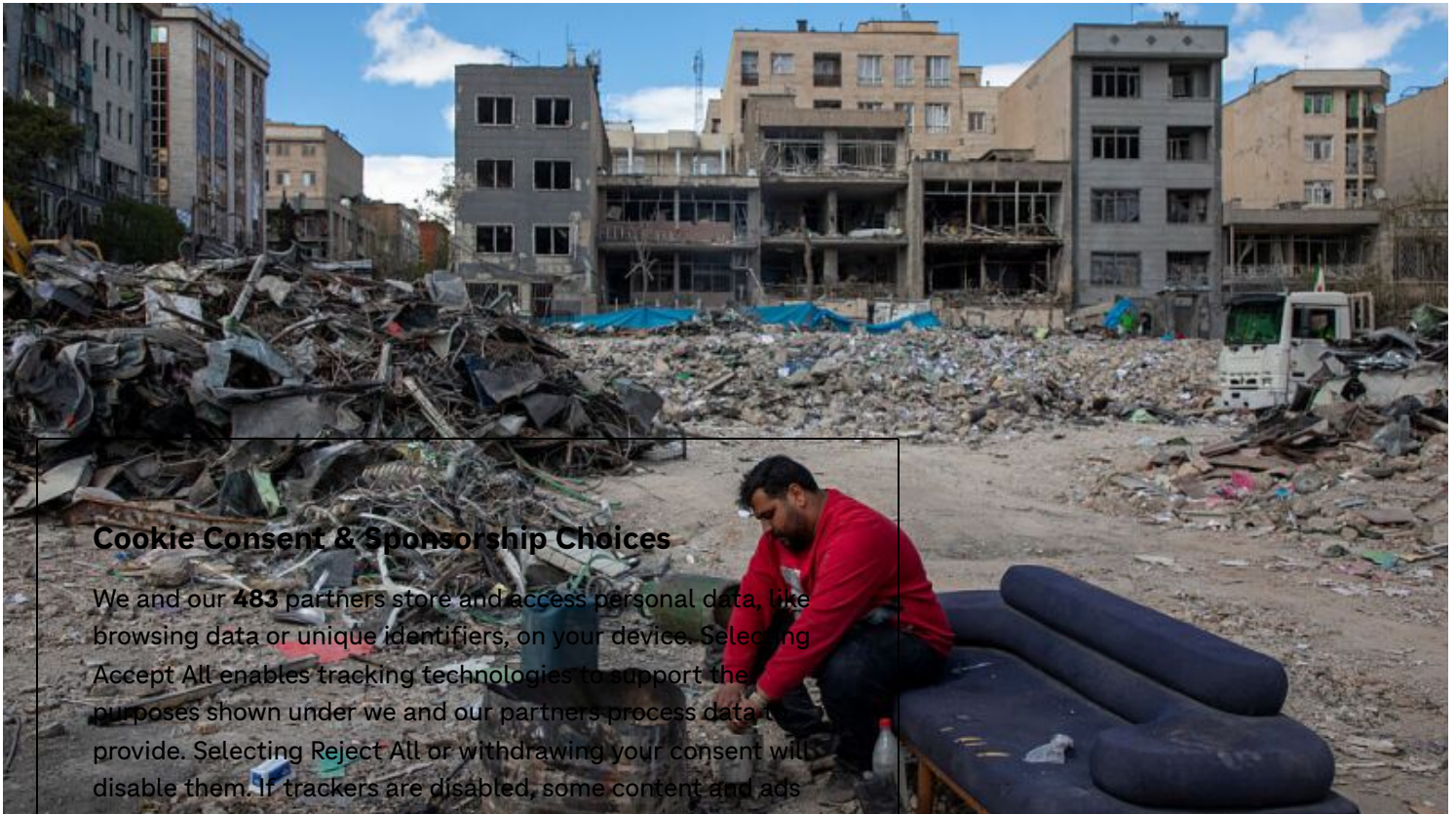
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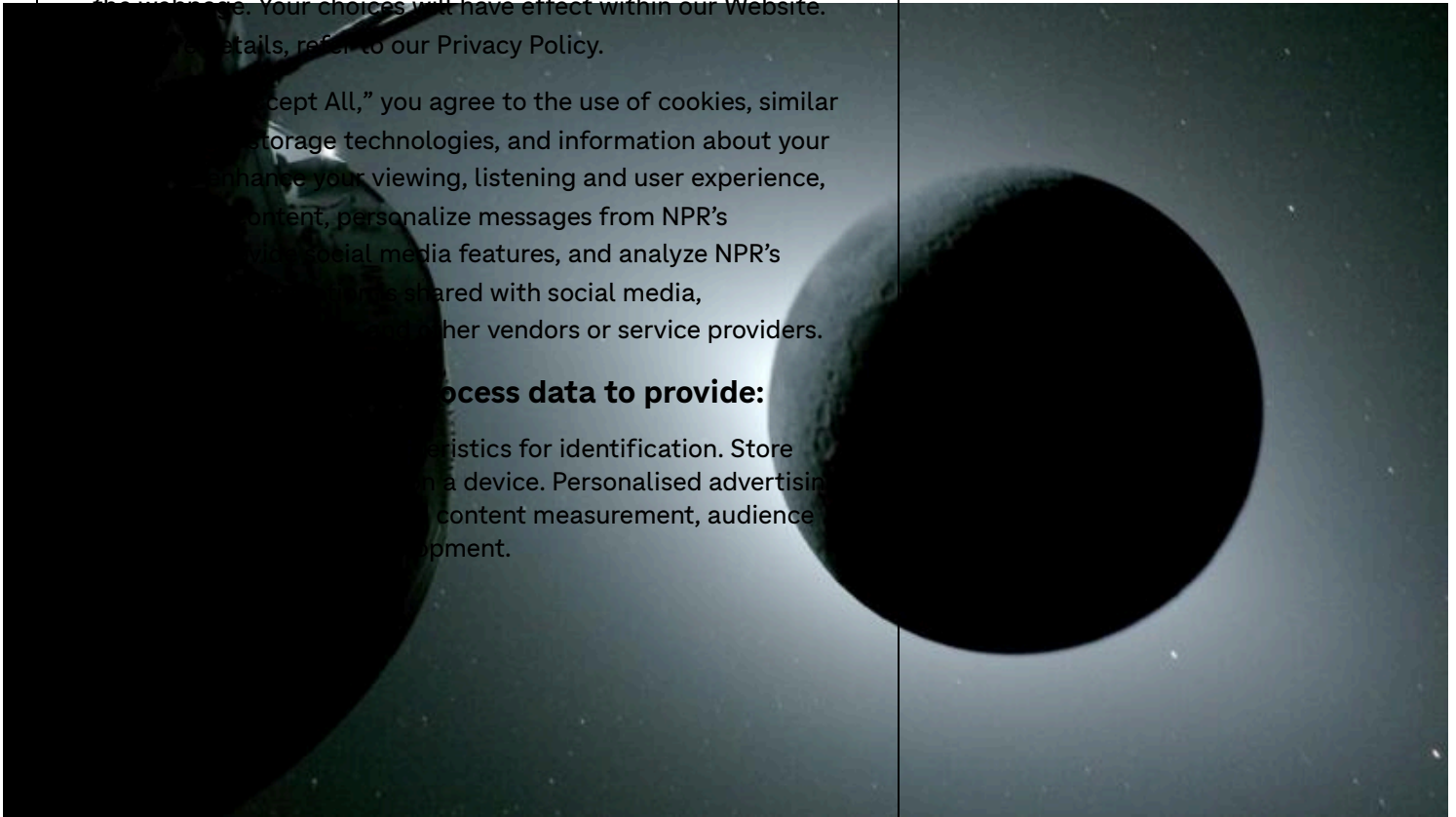
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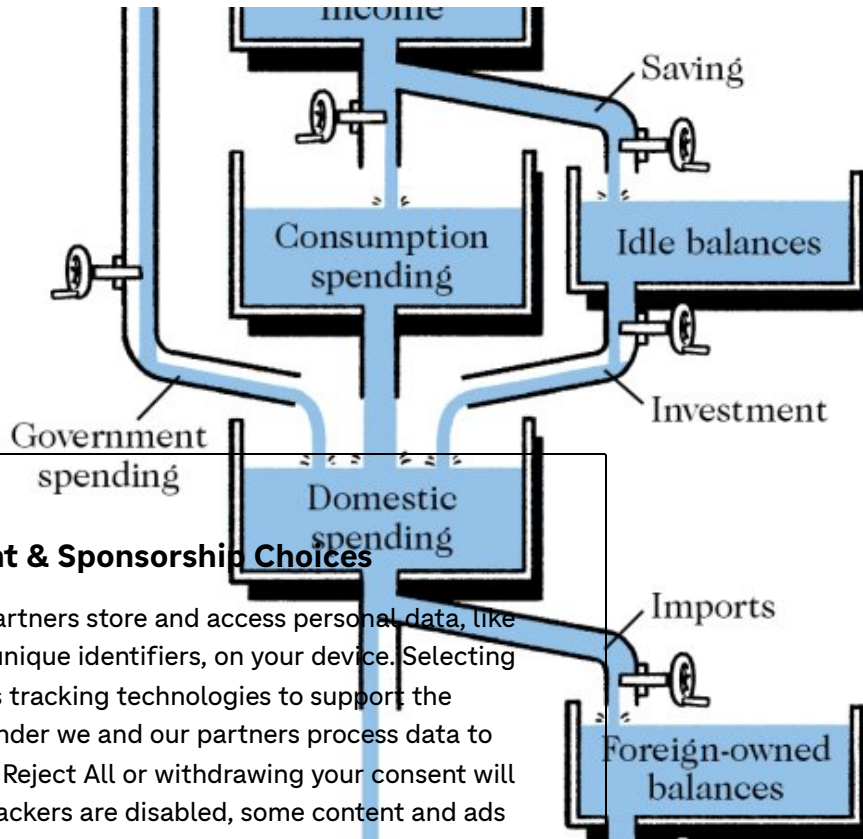
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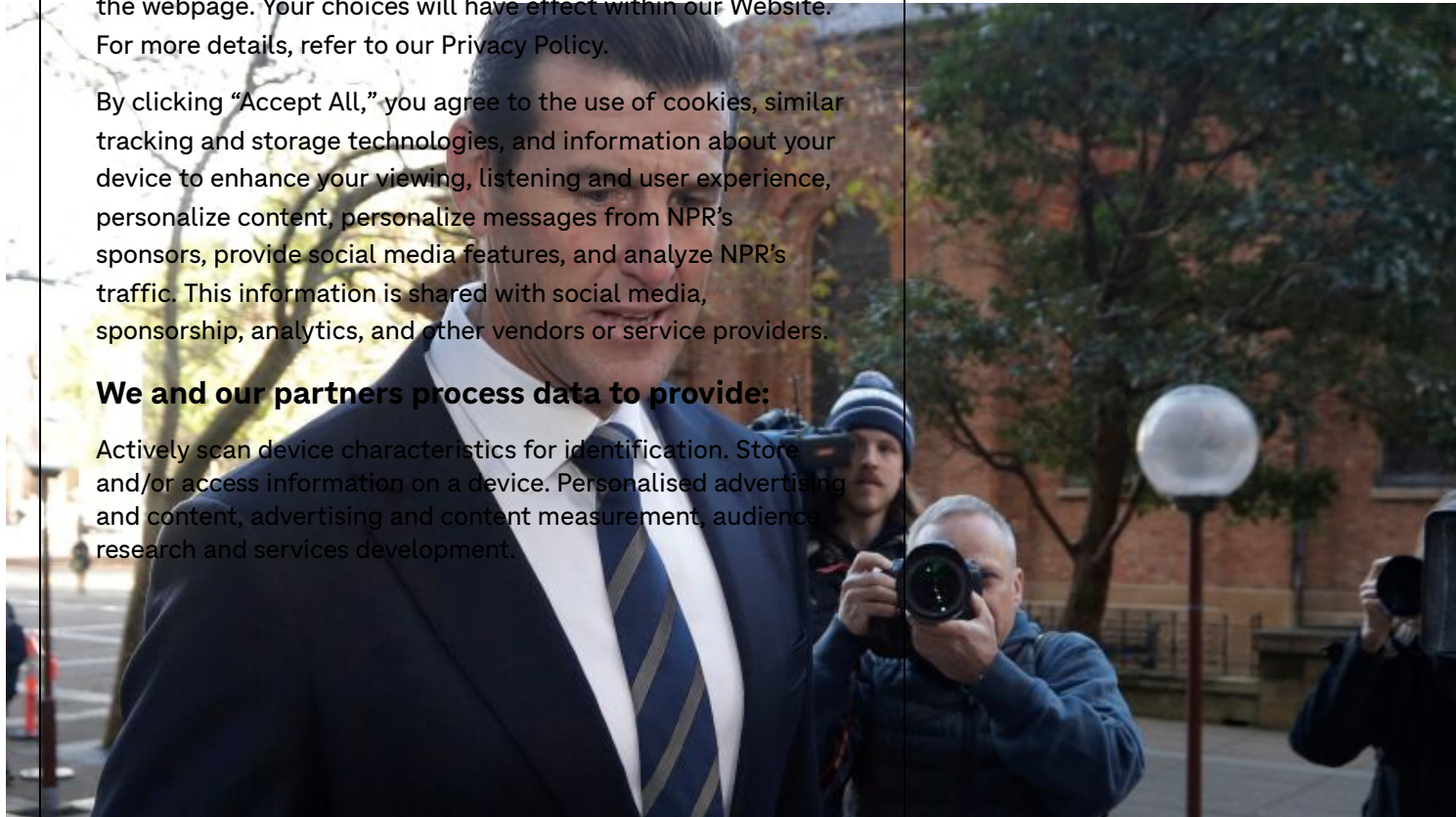
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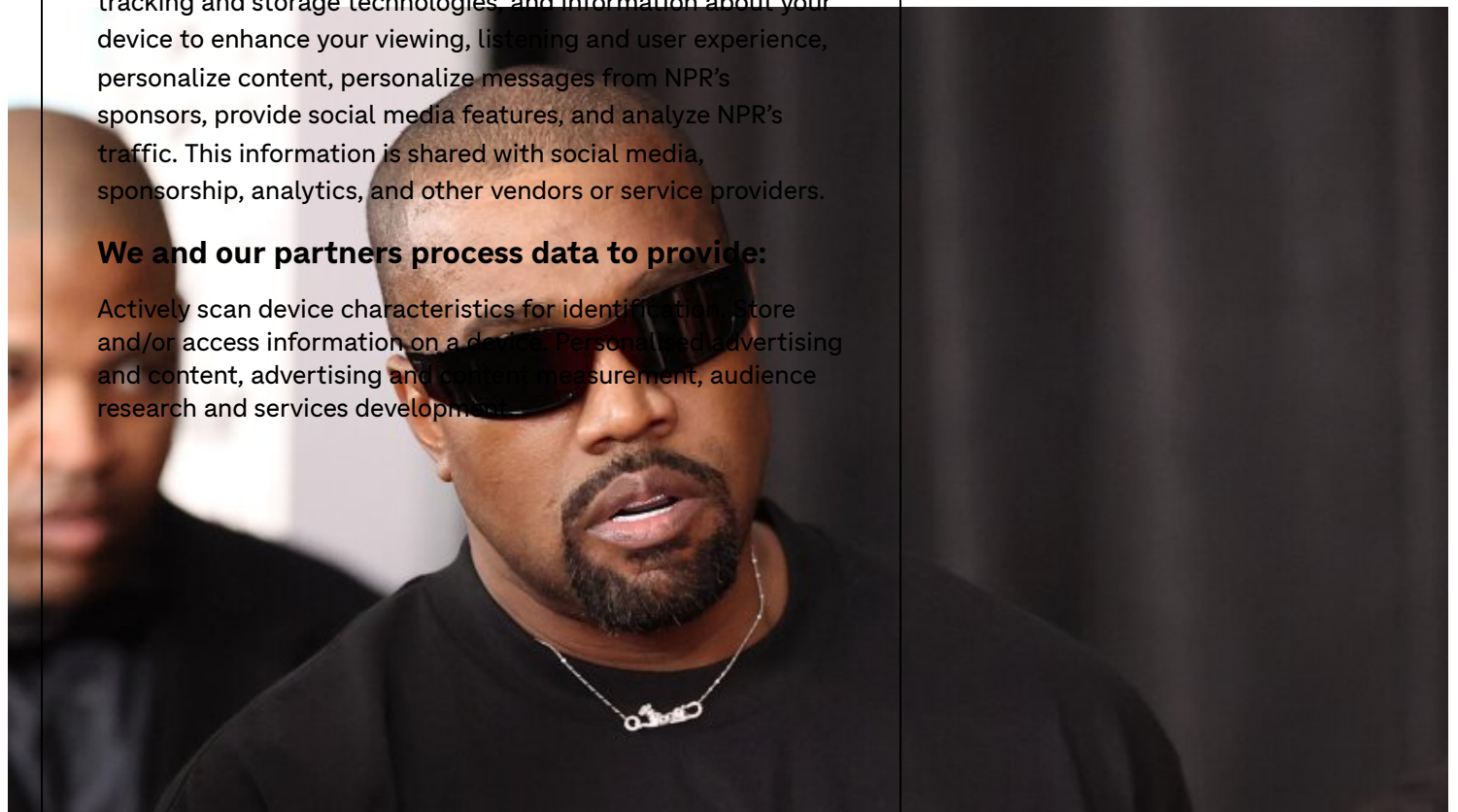
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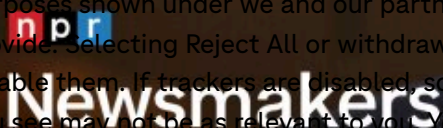


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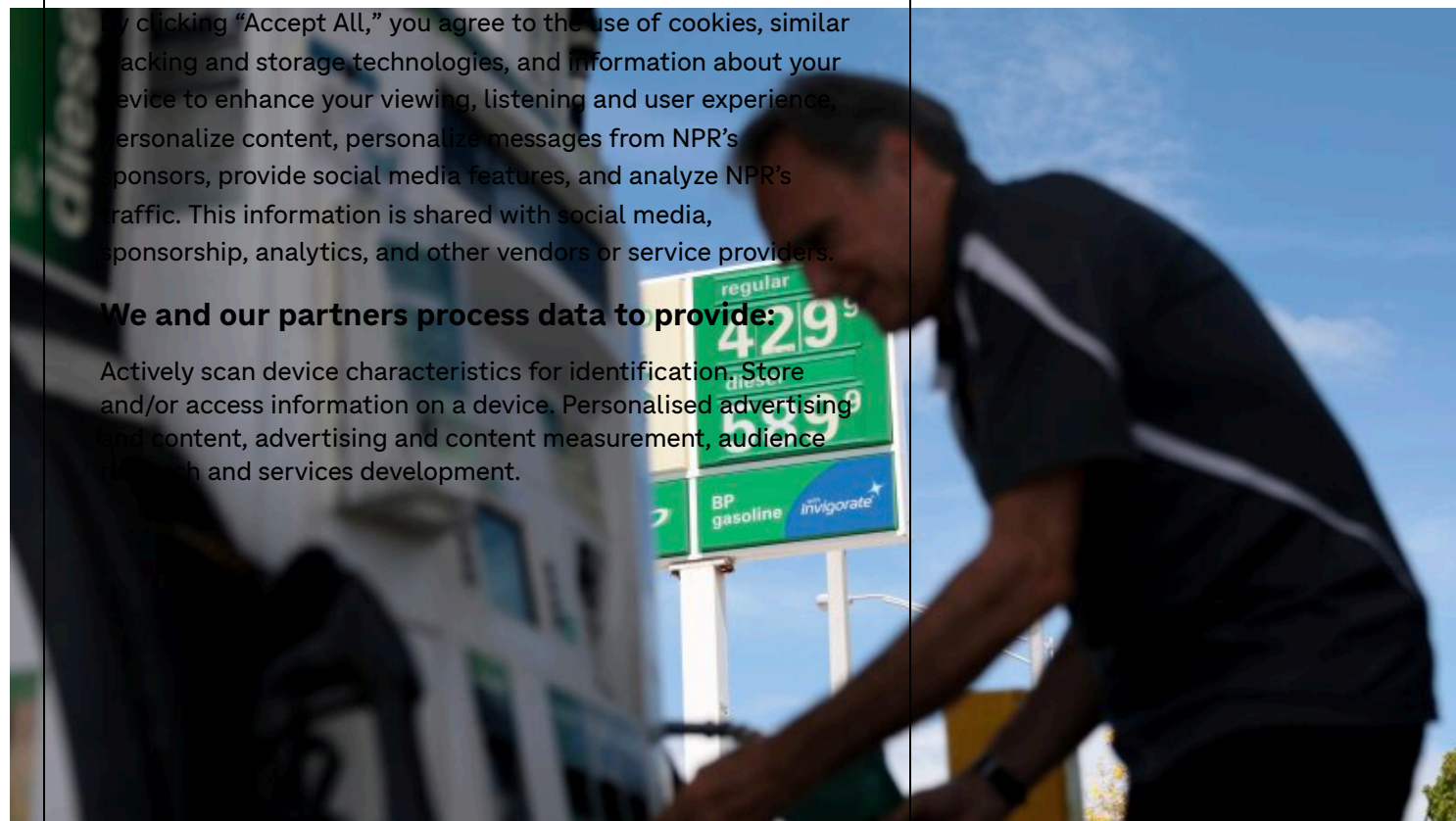
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