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POLITICS

Ethics experts worry about the implications of Trump accepting Qatar's luxury plane

MAY 12, 2025 · 2:58 PM ET

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By Rachel Treisman

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President Trump walks off Air Force One on April 29 at Selfridge Air National Guard Base, Michigan. Qatar has offered to replace Air Force One with a luxury Boeing 747 jet.

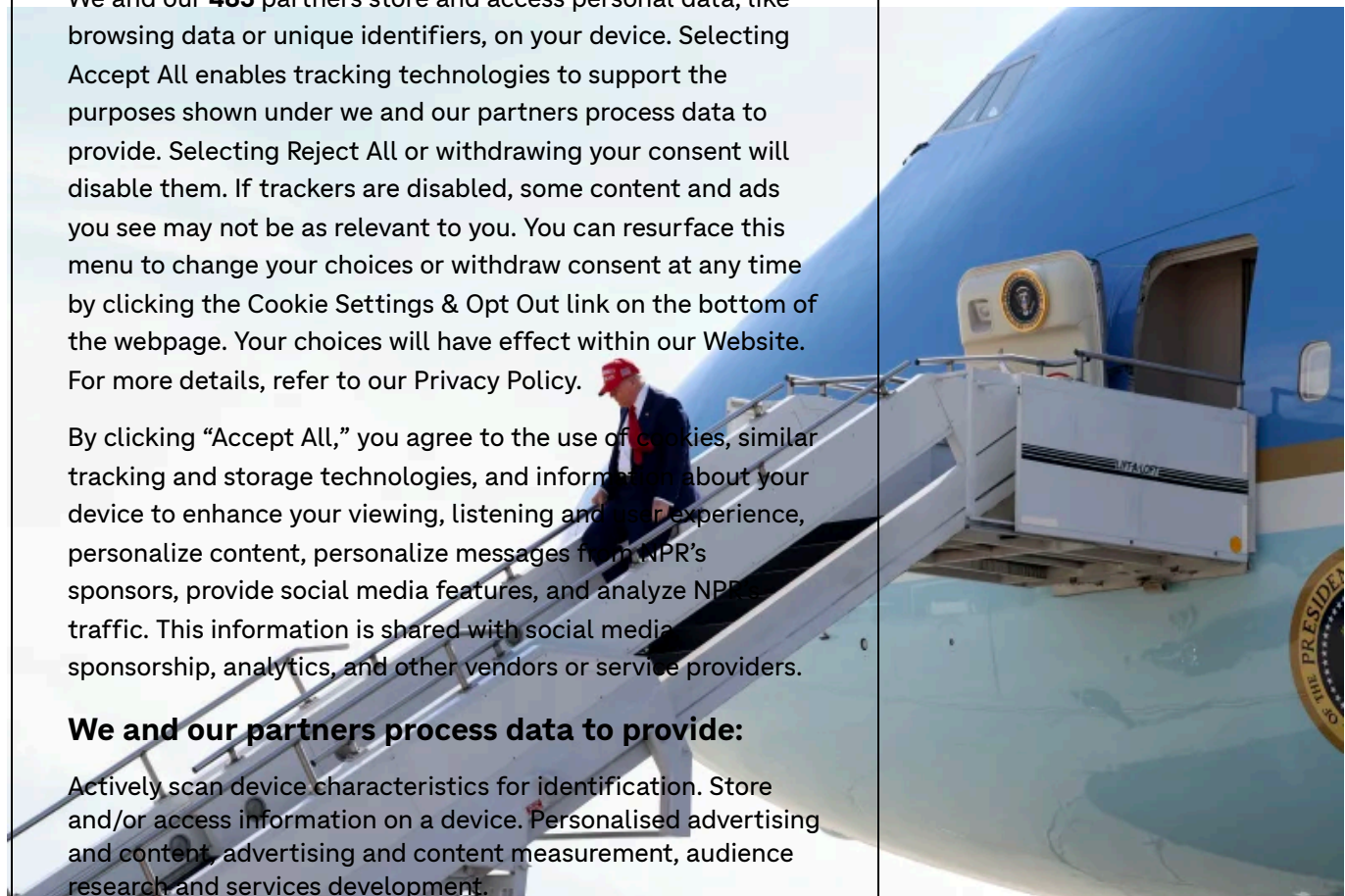
Scott Olson/Getty Images

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While not yet finalized, the Trump administration's plan to accept a luxury plane from the Qatari government to serve as Air Force One has already drawn fierce criticism from Democratic lawmakers and independent watchdogs who say such a move violates the Constitution.



The White House confirmed on Sunday that Qatar had offered to donate a plane to the Department of Defense, but that it will not be presented or accepted during President Trump's visit to the Middle East this week.

The president has expressed frustration about the long-delayed delivery of two upgraded Air Force One jets from Boeing, dating back to a 2018 contract. On Monday, he told reporters that Qatar had offered a replacement to use in the meantime.

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"I mean, I could be a stupid person and say, 'No, we don't want a free, very expensive airplane,' Trump said. "But I thought it was a great gesture."

The Boeing 747 plane — which industry groups say could be worth around \$400 million — would be one of the biggest foreign gifts ever received by the U.S. government. That's controversial because the Constitution's Foreign Emoluments Clause forbids public office holders from accepting a present "of any kind whatever, from any King, Prince, or foreign State."

Trump said Monday that the plane isn't a gift to him, but to the Department of Defense. He added that it will be decommissioned after his term for his

Trump says he'd be 'stupid' to turn down Qatar's offer of a new plane

presidential library, and that he will not use it after leaving office.

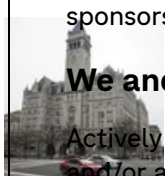
Richard Briffault, a Columbia Law School professor who specializes in government ethics, says that distinction doesn't matter: If the plane goes to Trump's presidential library after he leaves office, "then it's not really a gift to the United States at all."

Briffault says accepting the plane would constitute a personal gift and a "pretty textbook case of a violation of the Emoluments Clause." Like other ethics experts, he worries it could lead to Trump feeling beholden to the Qatari government.

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"[Gifts are] designed to create good feelings for the recipient and to get some kind of reciprocity," Briffault says. "But the thing that [Trump] can give, of course, is public policy — weapons deals or whatever. And then, of course, it's an incentive to other countries to give similar gifts as another way of influencing presidential decision-making."

Jordan Libowitz, vice president in communications for the nonprofit watchdog Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW), told NPR that the

gift is especially concerning because of Trump's personal business dealings in the Gulf and in Qatar specifically.

The Trump Organization — of which Trump handed formal control to his sons in 2017 — did not pledge to avoid making deals with private companies abroad during his second term, unlike his first. In late April, the company announced a deal to build a luxury golf resort in Qatar.

"Clearly he is trying to make money there, and that puts us in an uncomfortable situation," Libowitz says. "Is America's best interest being served, or is it the best interests of the Trump Organization?"

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The Qatar-owned jet, which Trump toured at Palm Beach International Airport, in West Palm Beach, Fla., in February.

Ben Curtis/AP

Experts say the gift is unprecedented

Presidents typically receive gifts like cufflinks and bottles of wine, Libowitz says, and are required to turn such gifts over to the U.S. government — generally the National Archives — unless they pay fair market value to keep them.

"We have never seen something on this level before, and especially when you add in his government or his personal business in the country, it raises significant red flags," he says.

CREW sued Trump during his first term, arguing that he was illegally "getting cash and favors from foreign governments, through guests and events at his hotels, leases in his buildings, and valuable real estate deals abroad." The case made its way to the Supreme Court, but was dismissed as moot after he left office in 2021.

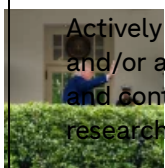
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Trump, responding to Democratic critics on Sunday, wrote on Truth Social that the plane would replace the 40-year-old Air Force One, temporarily, in a very public and transparent transaction.

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Why Trump is focusing on business deals on his Middle East trip

But Libowitz says "a lot of things can be public without being ethical."

Much is still unknown about the deal and the discussions behind it, as well as the particulars of the plane. For example, it's not clear when the transaction would happen or how long it would take for the plane to be ready for the president's use. Both Briffault and Libowitz said it would presumably need to be checked in great detail, both for structural integrity and potential tracking or listening devices.

"This is a process that could take years before it's ready, and at that point, he won't be president anymore," Libowitz says.

Trump says he will be following in the footsteps of former President Ronald Reagan, who has a decommissioned Air Force One plane at his presidential library in California. The Associated Press reported in March that Trump's team was scouting Florida locations for a potential presidential library.

Challenges — and consequences — seem unlikely

Ali Al-Ansari, Qatar's media attaché to the U.S., told NPR in a statement on Monday that the possible transfer of the aircraft from Qatar's Ministry of Defense to the U.S. Department of Defense remains under review by the respective legal departments.

Trump's plans have been roundly criticized by various prominent Democrats, including Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, who called it "premium foreign influence with extra legroom."

Rep. Ritchie Torres, D-N.Y., wrote a letter asking the U.S. Government Accountability Office, the acting Department of Defense inspector general and the Office of Government Ethics to conduct an immediate review.

"The American people are witnessing, in real time, what can only be described as a flying gift," he wrote. "If we fail to draw the line here, there may soon be no line left to draw."

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Torres is asking them to issue a formal advisory opinion on whether the gift violates federal ethics regulations, and to recommend policy reforms "to prevent the conversion of foreign gifts into private property" by any president.



POLITICS

Trump uses mass firing to remove inspectors general at a series of agencies

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But, while details of the potential transaction haven't been disclosed, experts doubt there is an authority that can actually stop it from happening.

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Rep. Jamie Raskin, D-Md., a former constitutional law professor, posted on X that "Trump must seek Congress consent to accept the gift, citing the language of the Foreign Emoluments Clause."

But Briffault says the only way Congress can prevent the gift — or reprimand Trump afterward — is by impeaching him, which seems unlikely given Republicans' control of both chambers.

"It's not clear what they can do," he says. "I mean, there's not much control on the president."

Briffault says Trump has ignored many of the existing guardrails on the presidency — from firing over a dozen inspectors general of federal agencies to ousting the head of the Office of Government Ethics.

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"I'm not sure what there is, frankly, other than public reaction and maybe his reaction to public reaction," he adds.

qatar air force one emoluments clause trump administration

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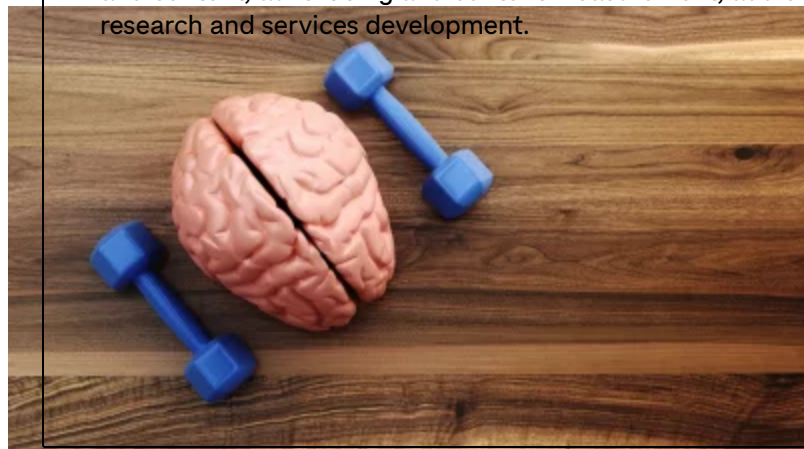
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TECHNOLOGY

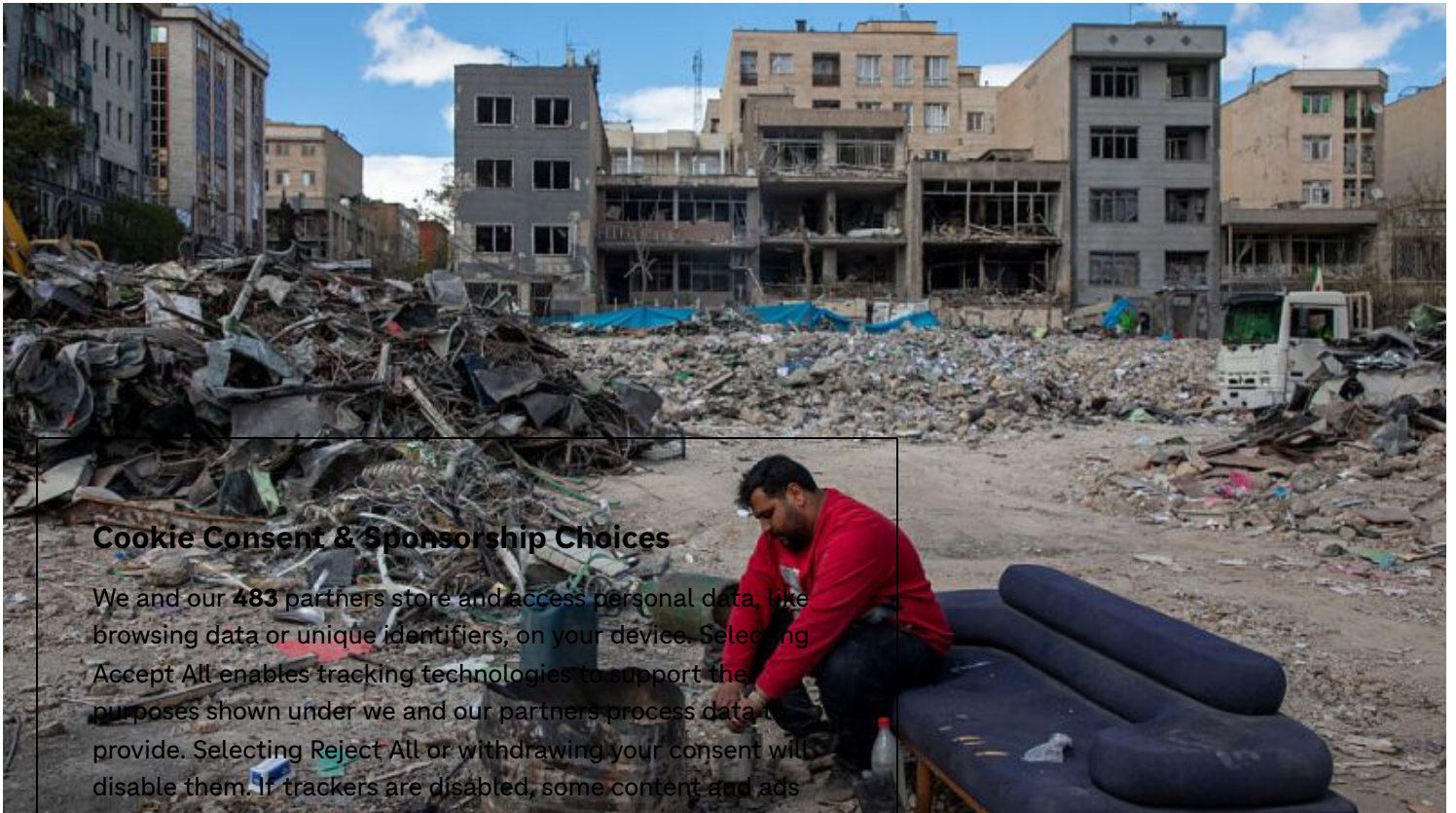
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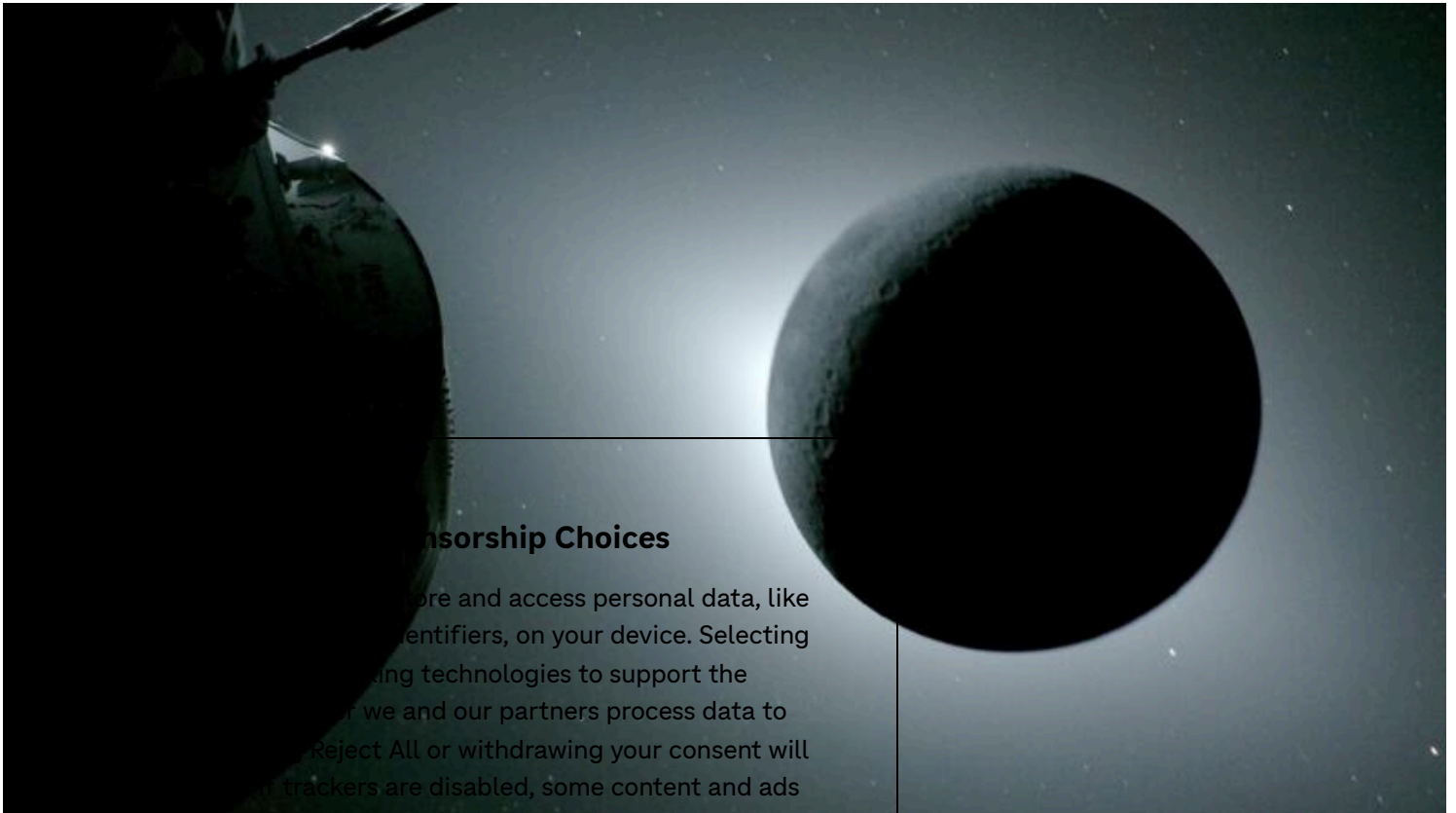
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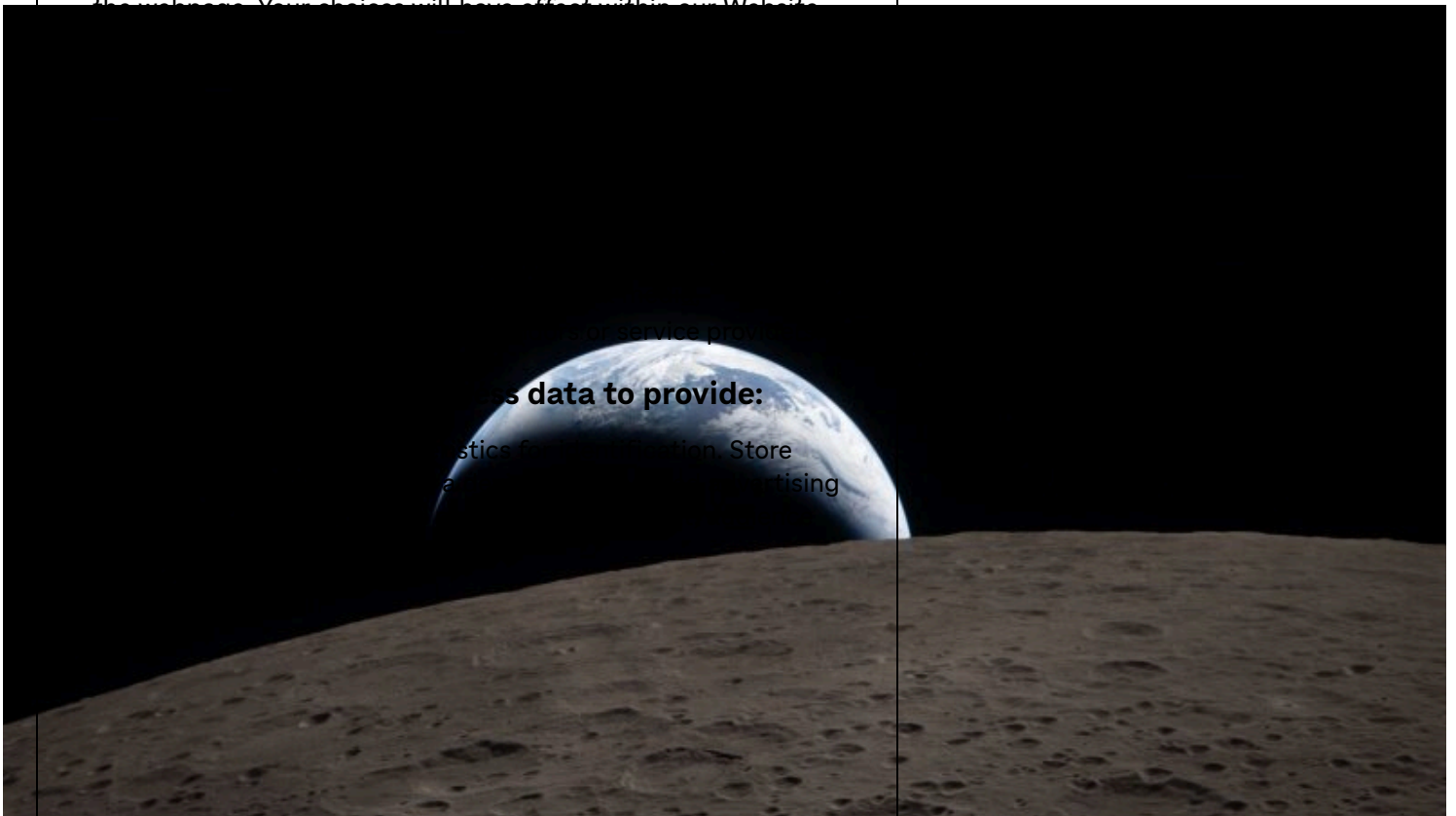
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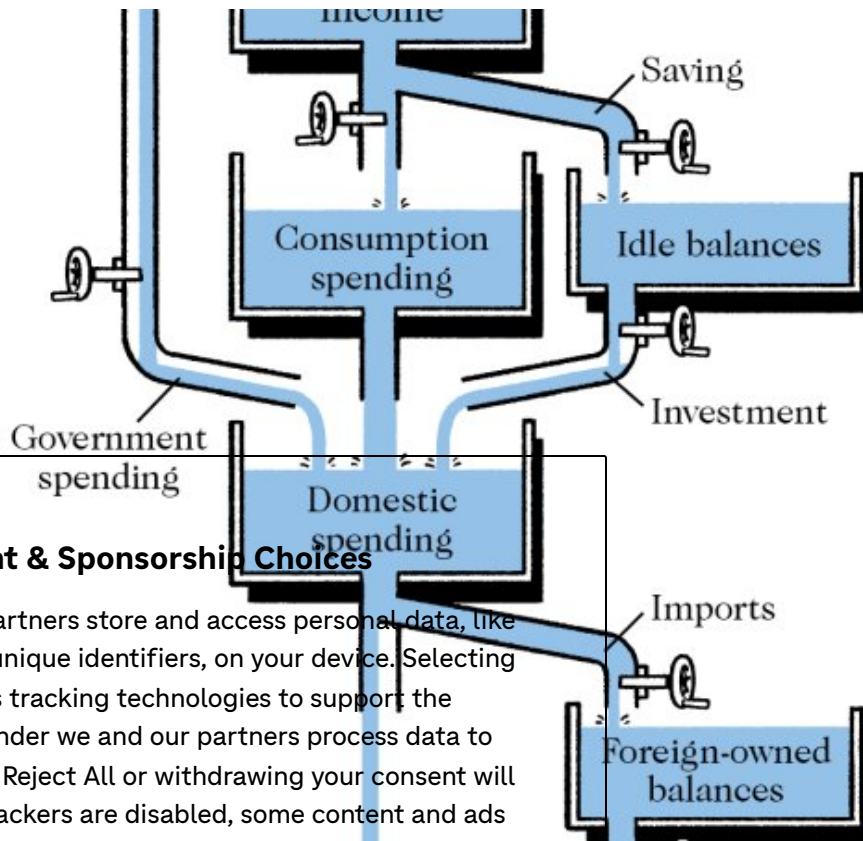
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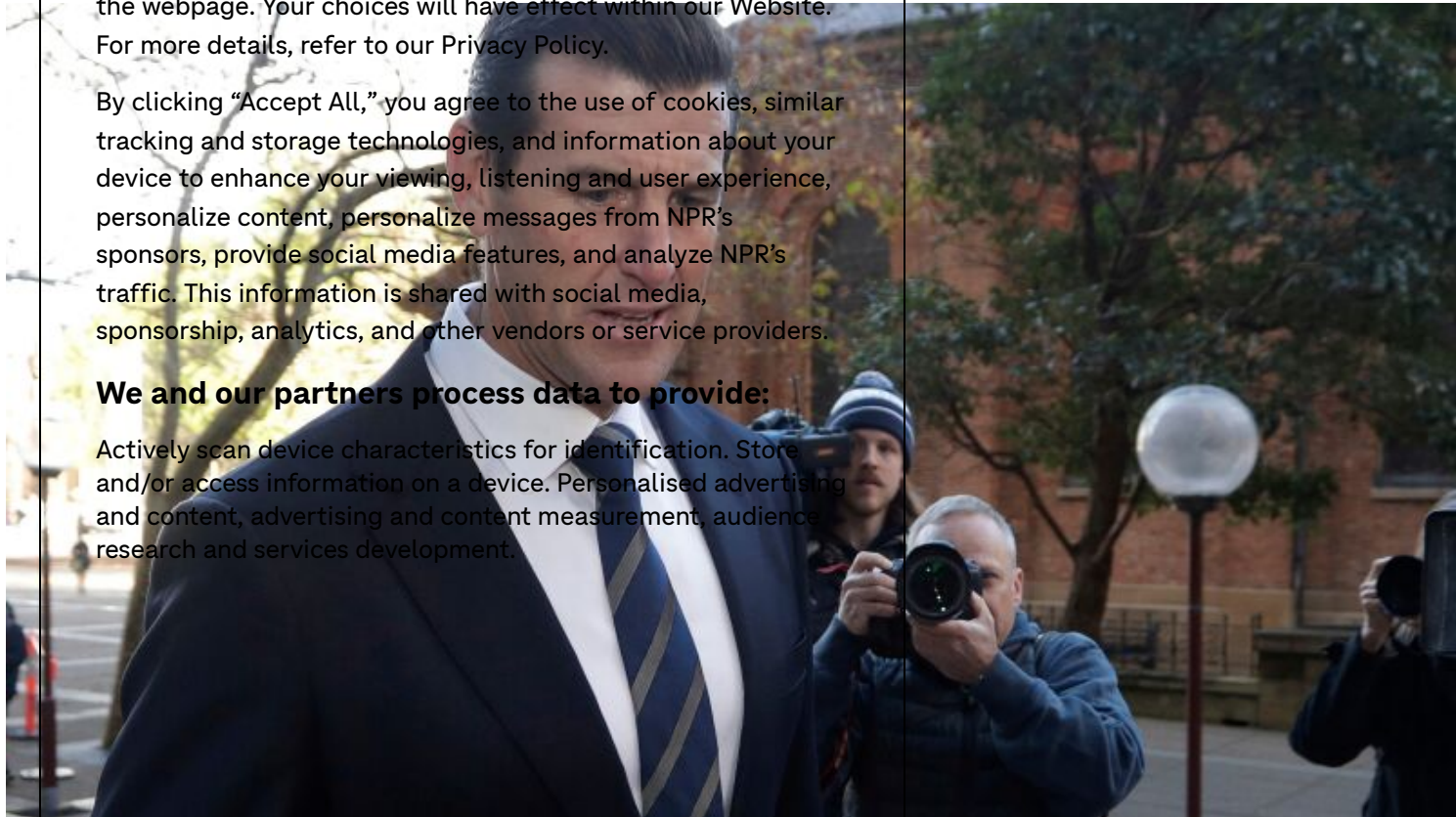
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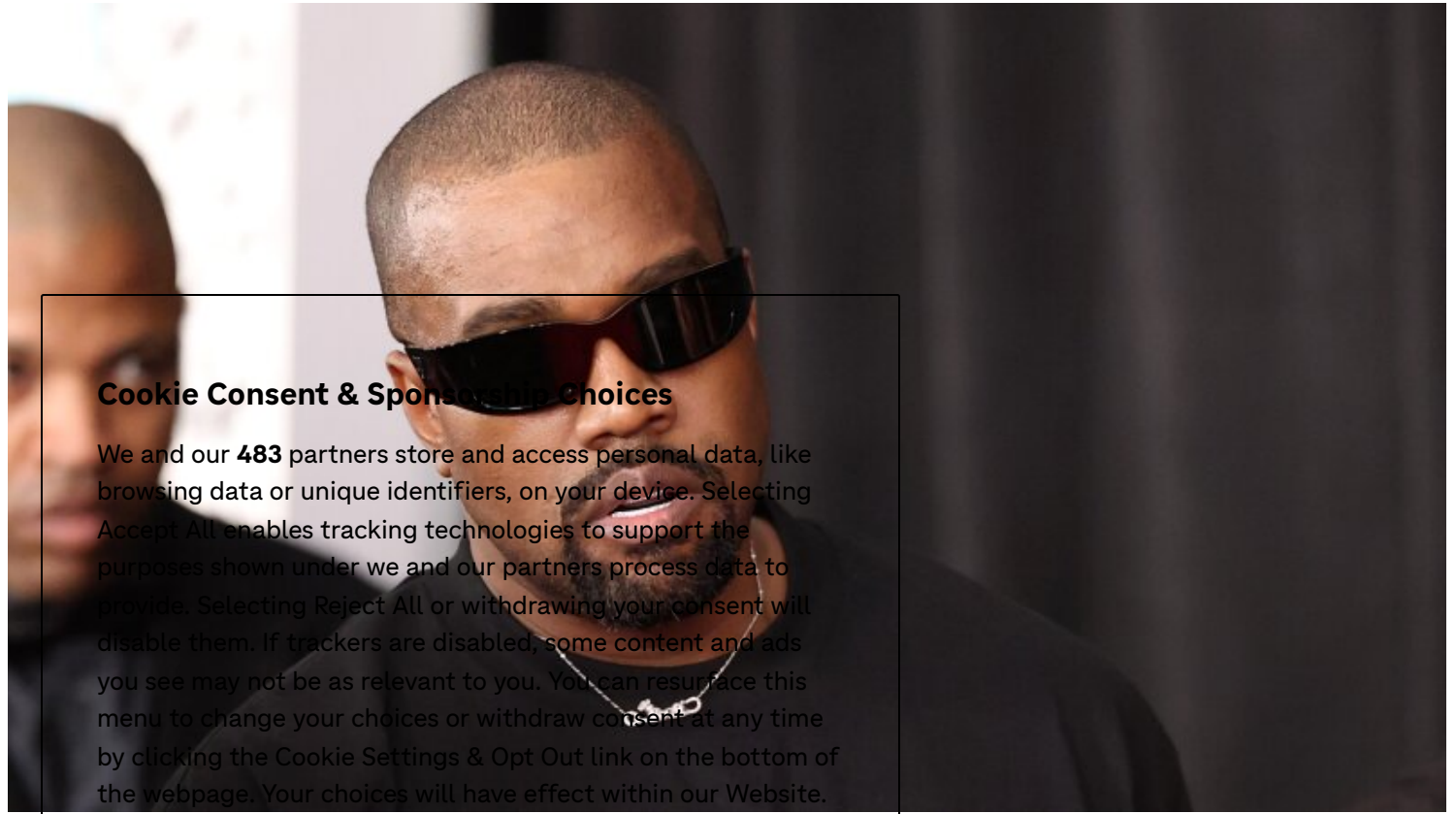
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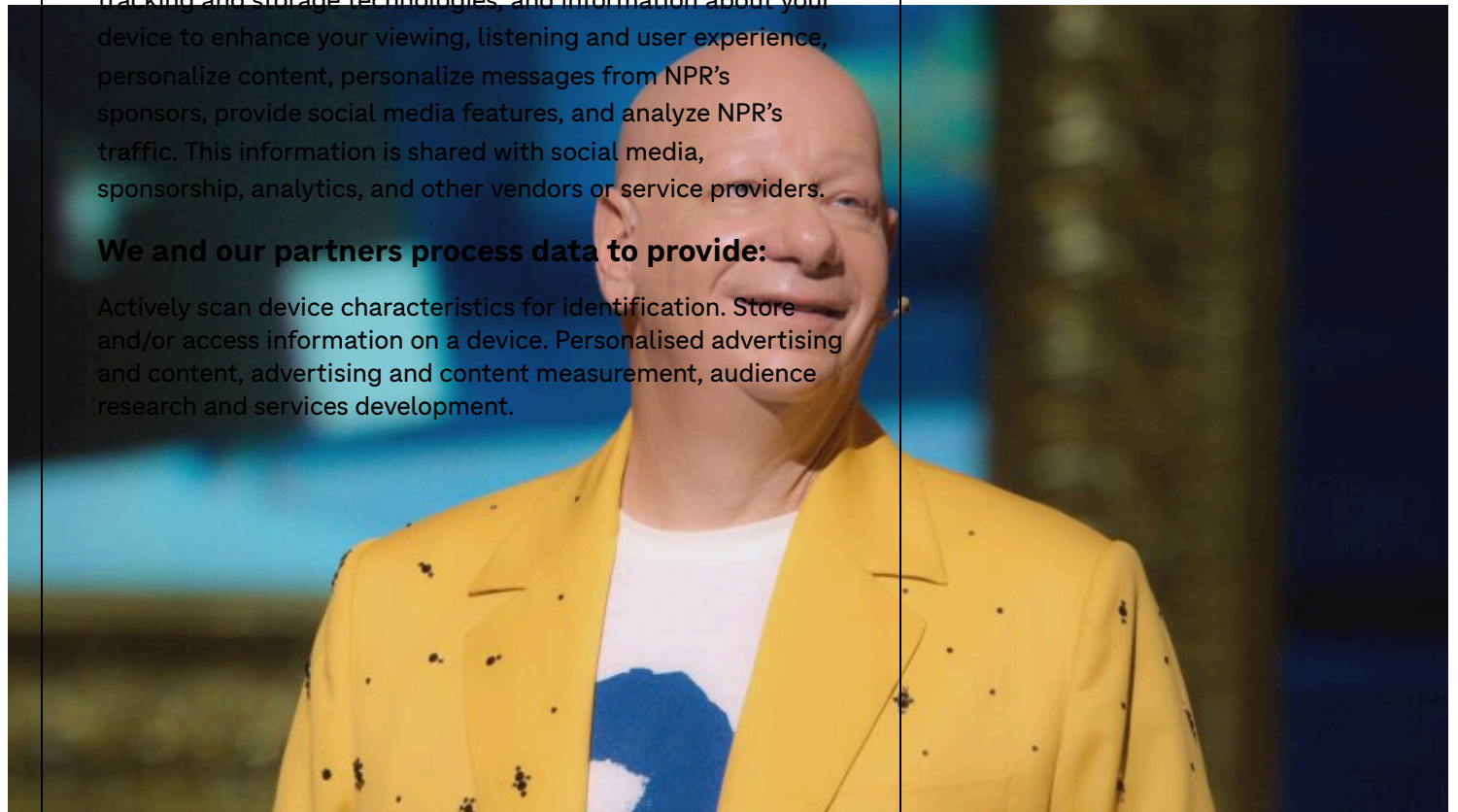
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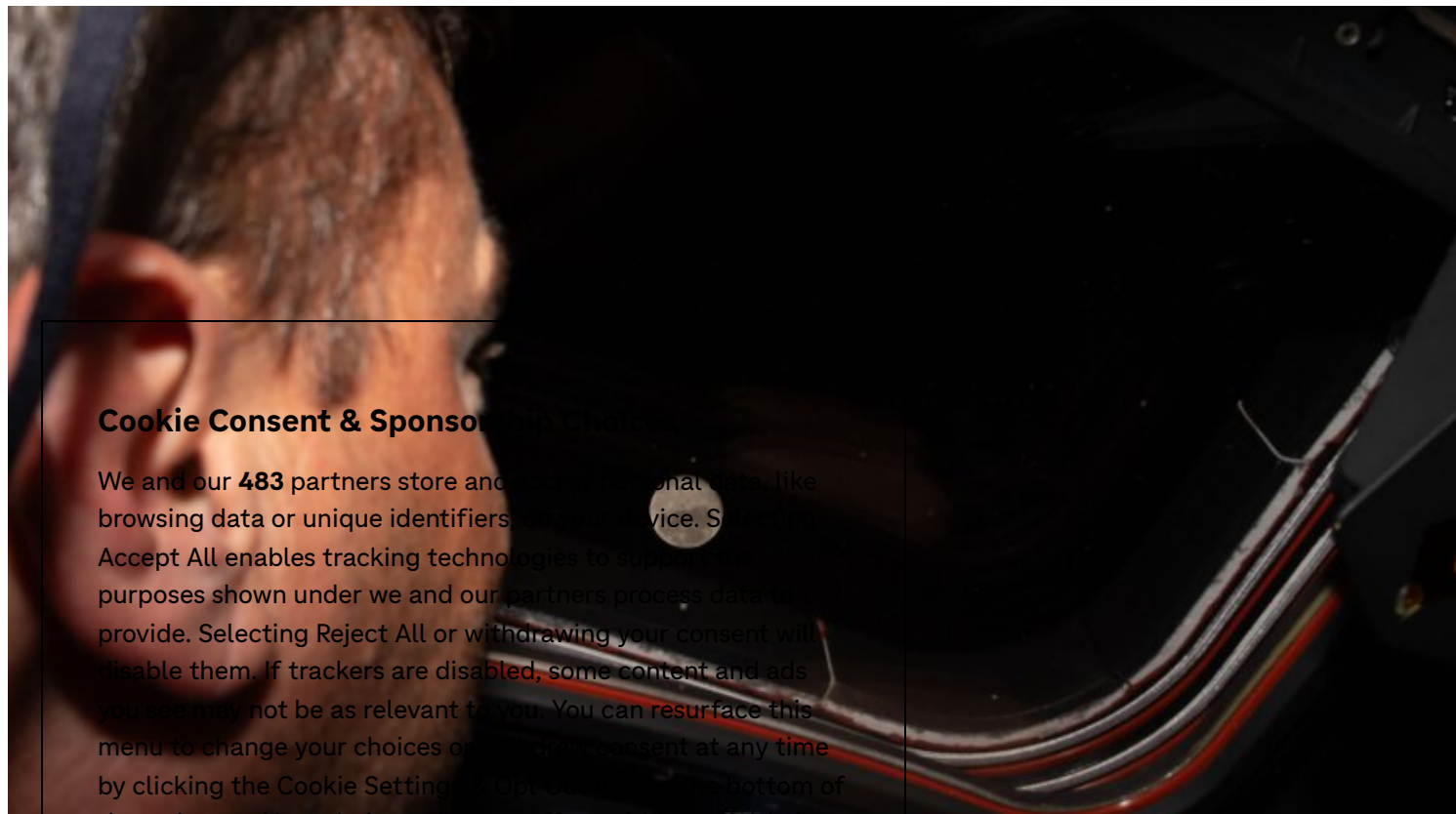
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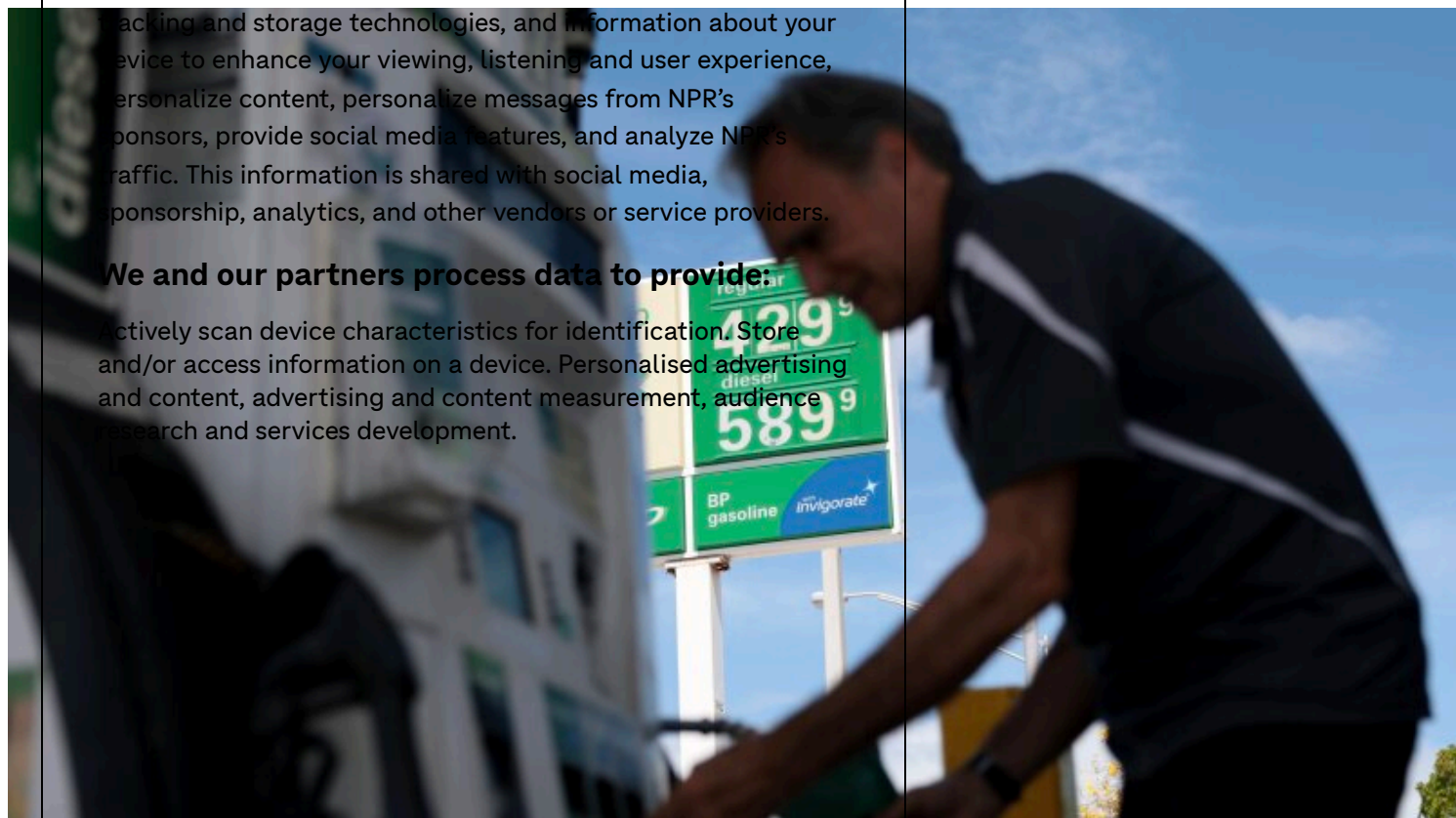
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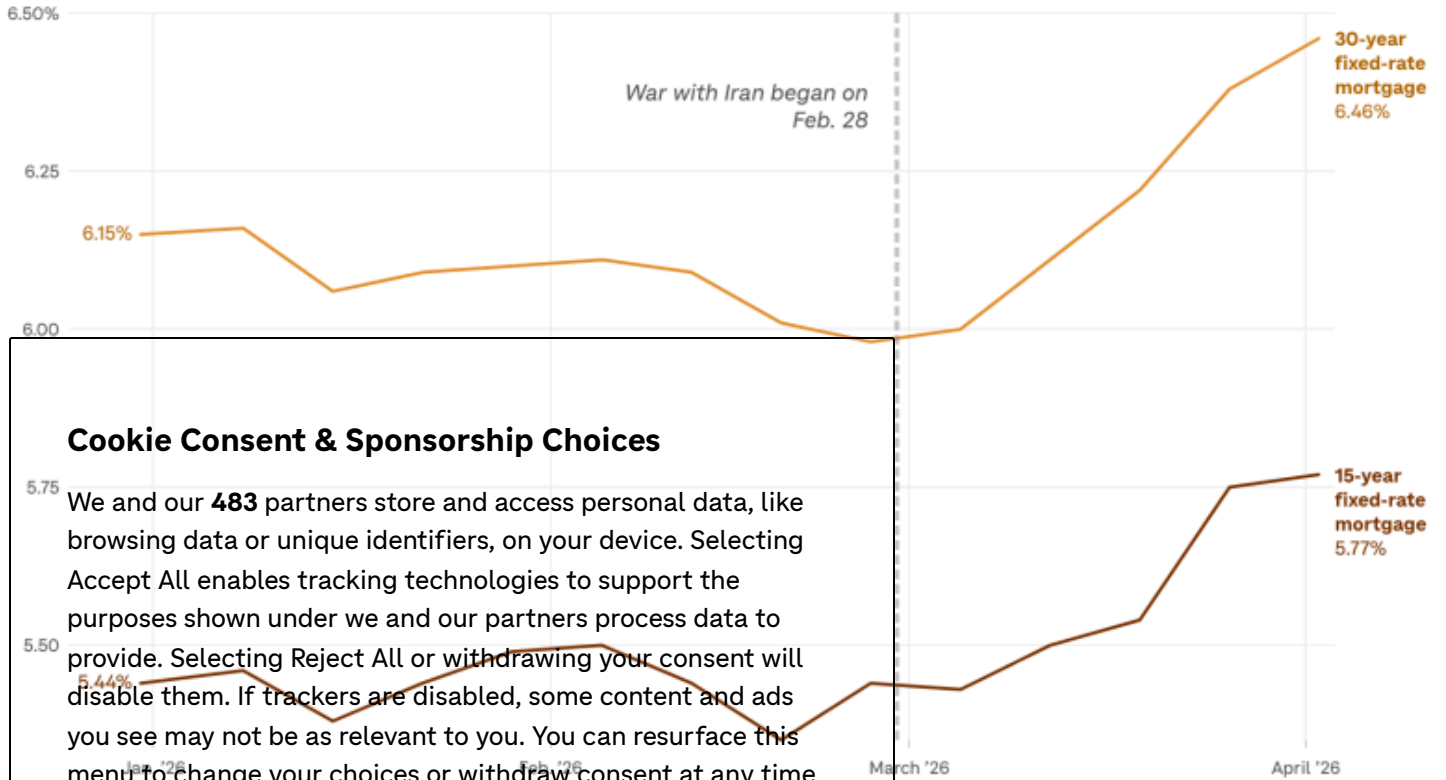
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