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POLITICS

Trump firings cause chaos at agency responsible for America's nuclear weapons

FEBRUARY 14, 2025 · 8:05 PM ET


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 Geoff Brumfiel

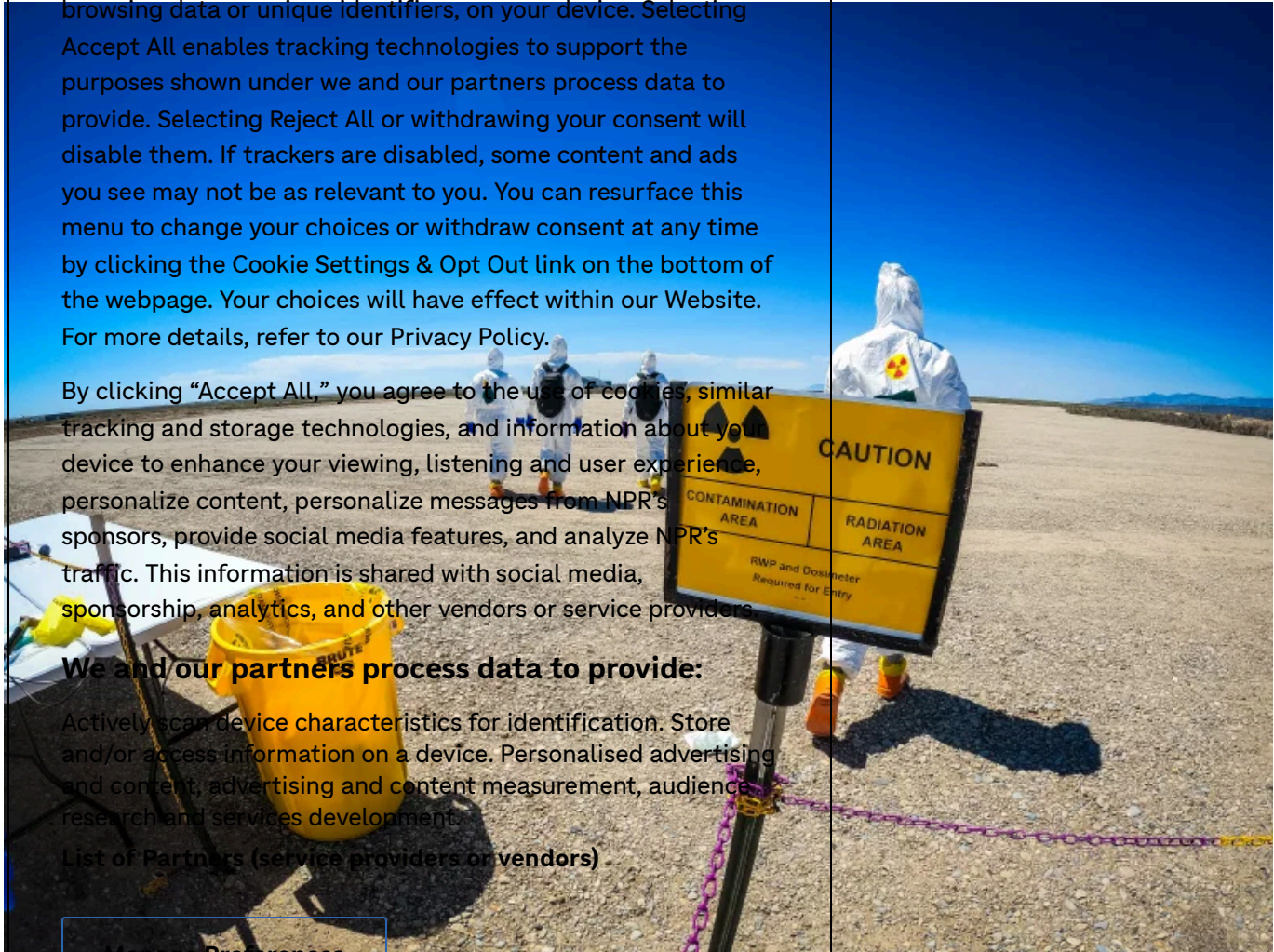
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Members of the Nuclear Emergency Support Team training for a radiological contamination scenario. National Nuclear Security Administration

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Scenes of confusion and chaos unfolded over the last two days at the civilian agency that oversees the nation's nuclear weapons stockpile, as the Trump

administration's mass firings were carried out before being "paused" on Friday.

This account of firings at the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) is based on interviews with several current and former NNSA employees who asked to remain anonymous, fearing retribution from the Trump administration.

Officials were given hours to fire hundreds of employees, and workers were shut out of email as termination notices arrived. The terminations were part of a broader group of dismissals at the Department of Energy, where reportedly more than a thousand federal workers were terminated. It was all a result of Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) initiative to slash the federal workforce and what Musk and President Trump characterize as excessive government spending.

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The NNSA is a federal agency within the Department of Energy that oversees the U.S. stockpile of thousands of nuclear weapons. Despite having the words "National" and "Security" in its title, it was not getting an exemption for national security, managers at the agency were told last Friday, according to an employee at NNSA who asked not to be named, fearing retribution from the Trump administration. Just days before, officials in leadership had scrambled to write descriptions for the roughly 300 probationary employees at the agency who had joined the federal workforce less than two years ago.

PUBLIC HEALTH



Staff at CDC and NIH are reeling as Trump administration cuts workforce

Managers were given just 200 characters to explain why the jobs these workers did mattered.

It was a tall order for the relatively obscure civilian agency that conducts a wide variety of nuclear security missions, including servicing the nation's nuclear weapons when they're not on missiles and bombers, and making extensive safety and security upgrades of the warheads. Some workers were responsible for

making sure emergency response plans were in place at sites like a giant facility in Texas, where thousands of dismantled warheads are stored. Others worked to prevent terrorists and rogue nations from acquiring weapons-grade plutonium or uranium. Many had "Q" clearances, the highest level security clearance at the

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The Department of Energy's press office did not respond to repeated requests by NPR for comment.

In the final days leading up to the firings, managers drew up lists of essential workers and pleaded to keep them.

In the end, it didn't matter. On Thursday, officials were told that the vast majority of the exemptions they had asked for were denied by the Trump administration. Multiple current and former employees at the agency told NPR that scores of people were notified verbally they were fired. Many had to clear out their desks on the spot. "It broke my heart," says one employee who was among those who left the agency's Washington, D.C., headquarters.



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Two employees from the National Nuclear Security Administration use gamma detectors to test the outside of a container of highly-enriched uranium for surface contamination at the Charleston Weapons Station near Goose Creek, South Carolina. **We and our partners process data to provide:**

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But what followed was even more confusing. Employees were told they would receive a letter confirming their termination.

POLITICS

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Liz Goggin, a licensed clinical social worker with the Veterans Health

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Some did, a letter seen by NPR came late at night, and minutes later their work email ceased to function. "Per OPM [Office of Personnel Management] instructions, DOE finds that your further employment would not be in the public interest," it read in part. The text matched other letters seen by NPR that were sent to employees throughout the Department of Energy. The NNSA termination letter did not appear to make any specific reference to the highly-classified nuclear mission conducted by the agency.

But others at the agency who were told they were terminated never received written notification.

Amid the confusion, employees reached by NPR on Friday were unsure whether they still worked at the agency. "Nobody knows if they're fired or not," said an employee. Two employees still had work laptops and equipment. The laptops did not contain any classified information.

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On Friday, an employee still at NNSA told NPR that the firings are now "paused," in part because of the chaotic way in which they unfolded. Another employee had been contacted and told that their termination had been "rescinded." But some worried the damage had already been done. Nuclear security is highly specialized, high-pressure work, but it's not particularly well paid, one employee told NPR. Given what's unfolded over the past 24 hours, "why would anybody want to take these jobs?" they asked.

trump nuclear weapons

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U.S. and Iran agree to 2-week ceasefire, suspending Trump's threat to annihilate Iran

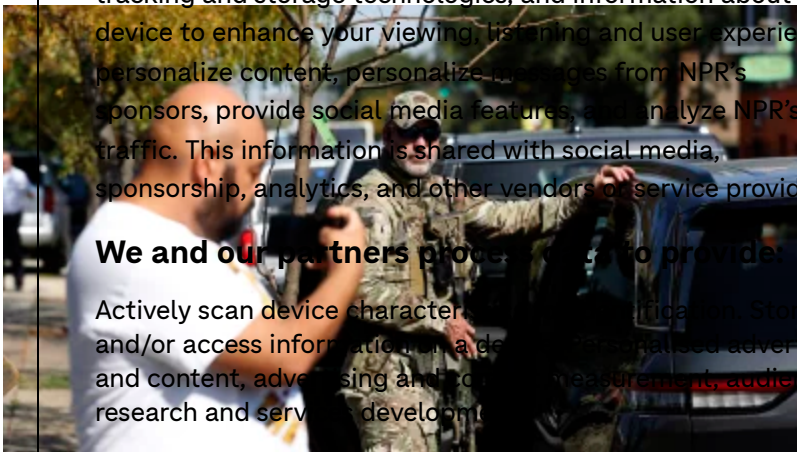
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SPACE

The Artemis II crew saw parts of the moon never seen before. Here's what they said

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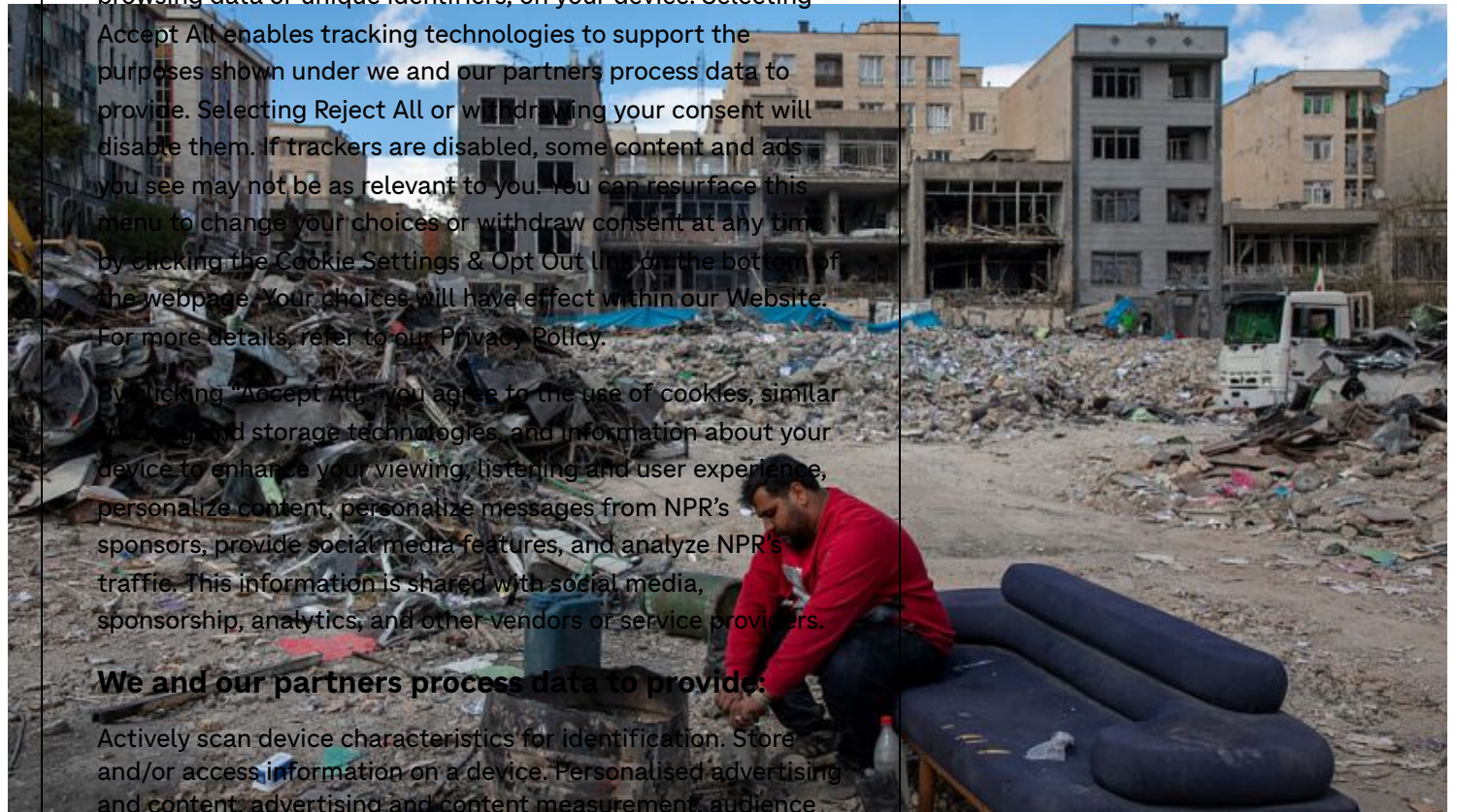
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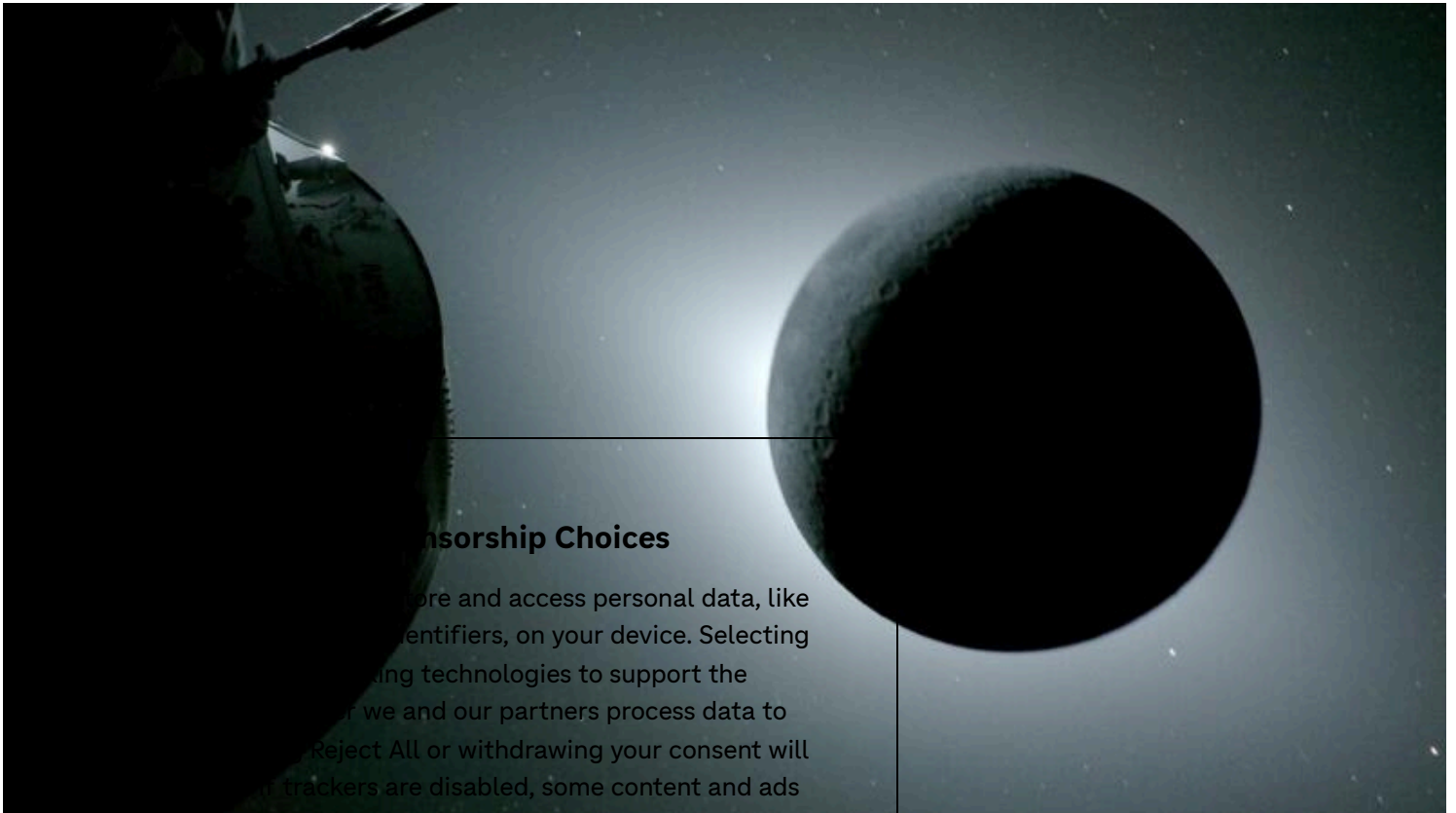
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MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT

U.S. and Iran agree to 2-week ceasefire, suspending Trump's threat to annihilate Iran





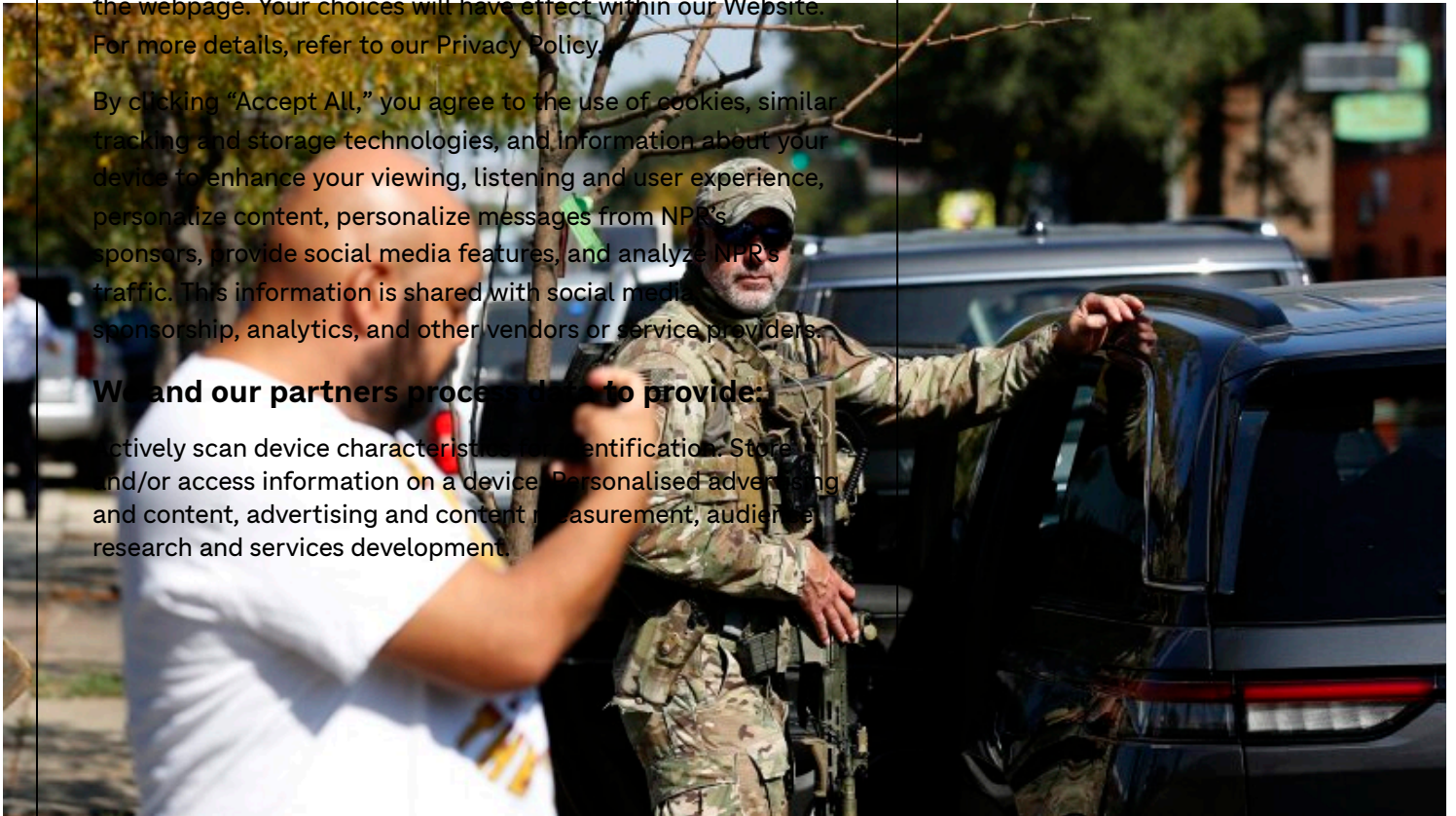
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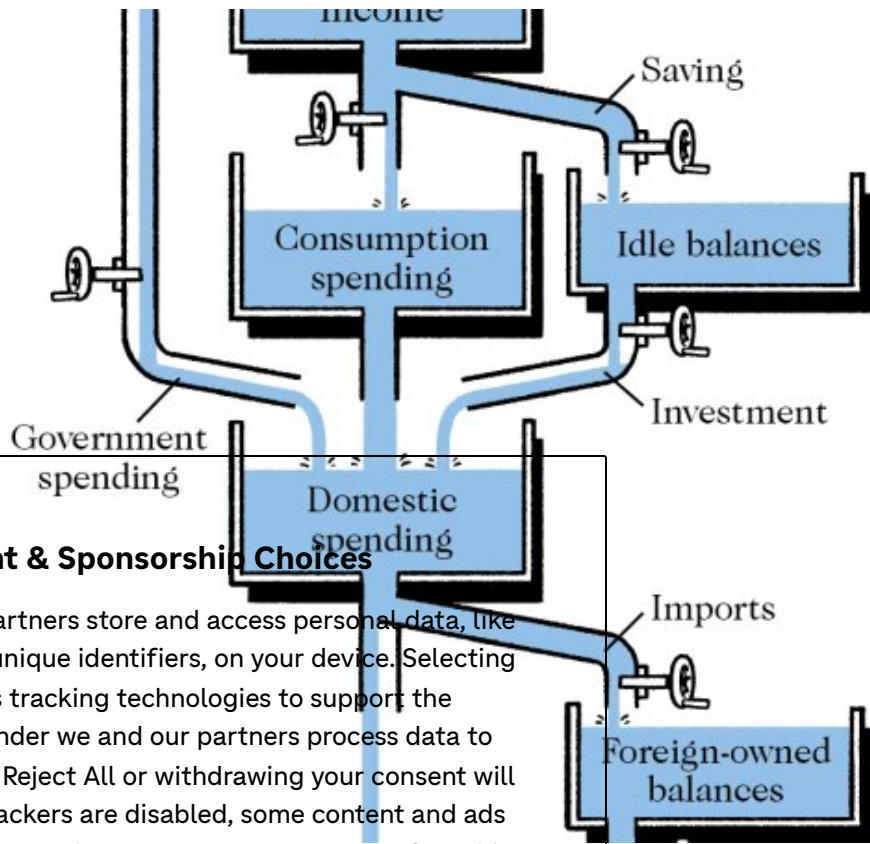
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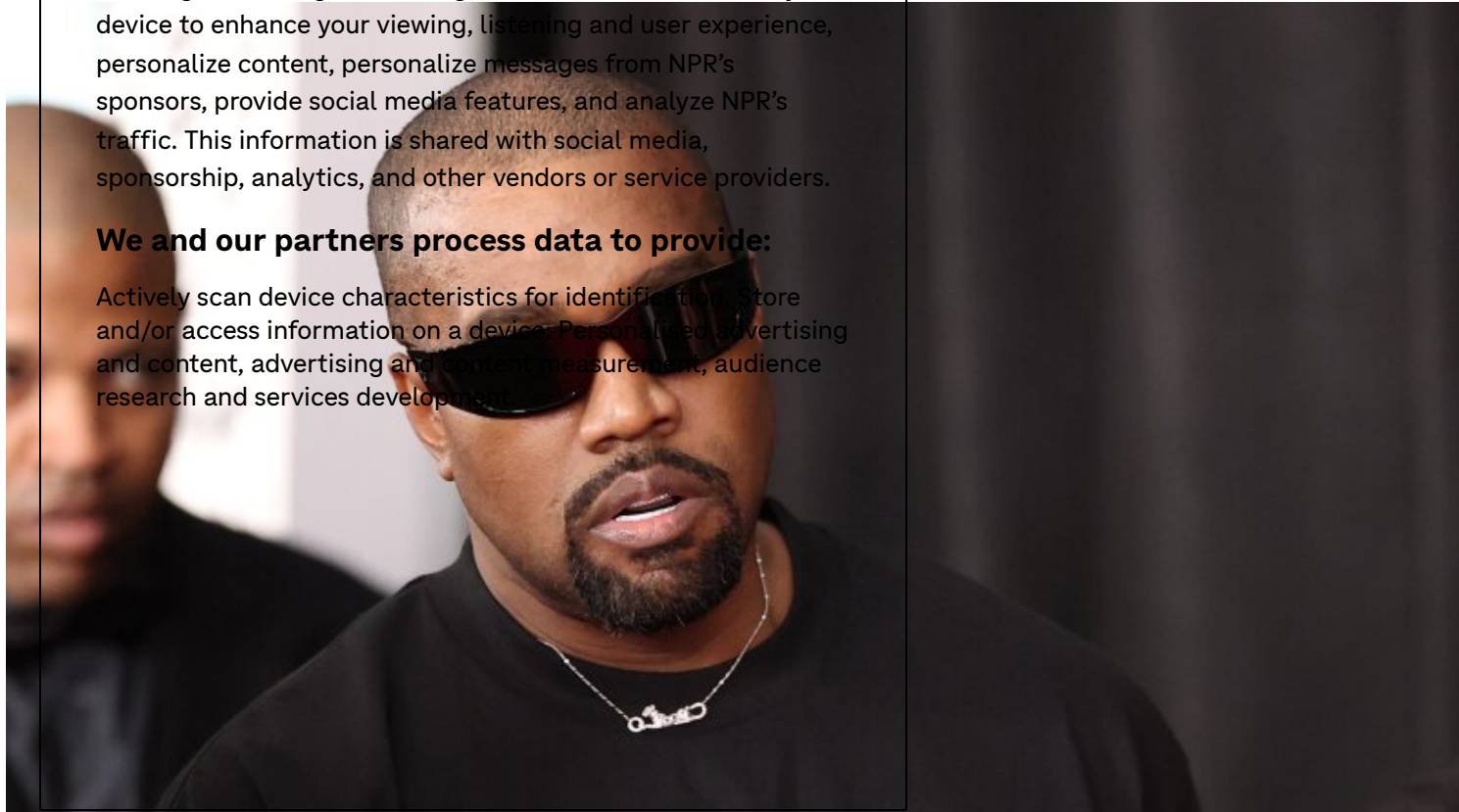
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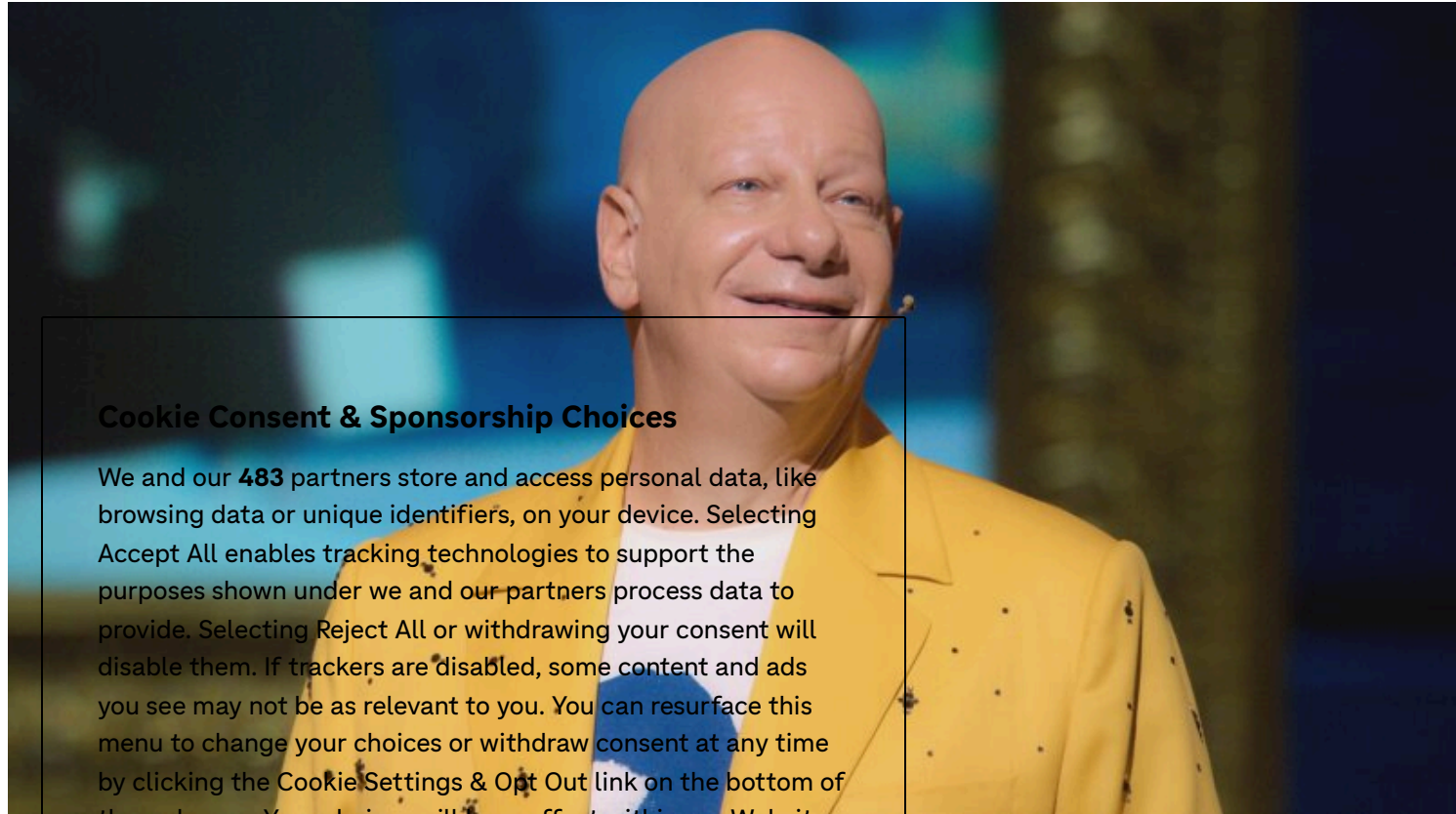
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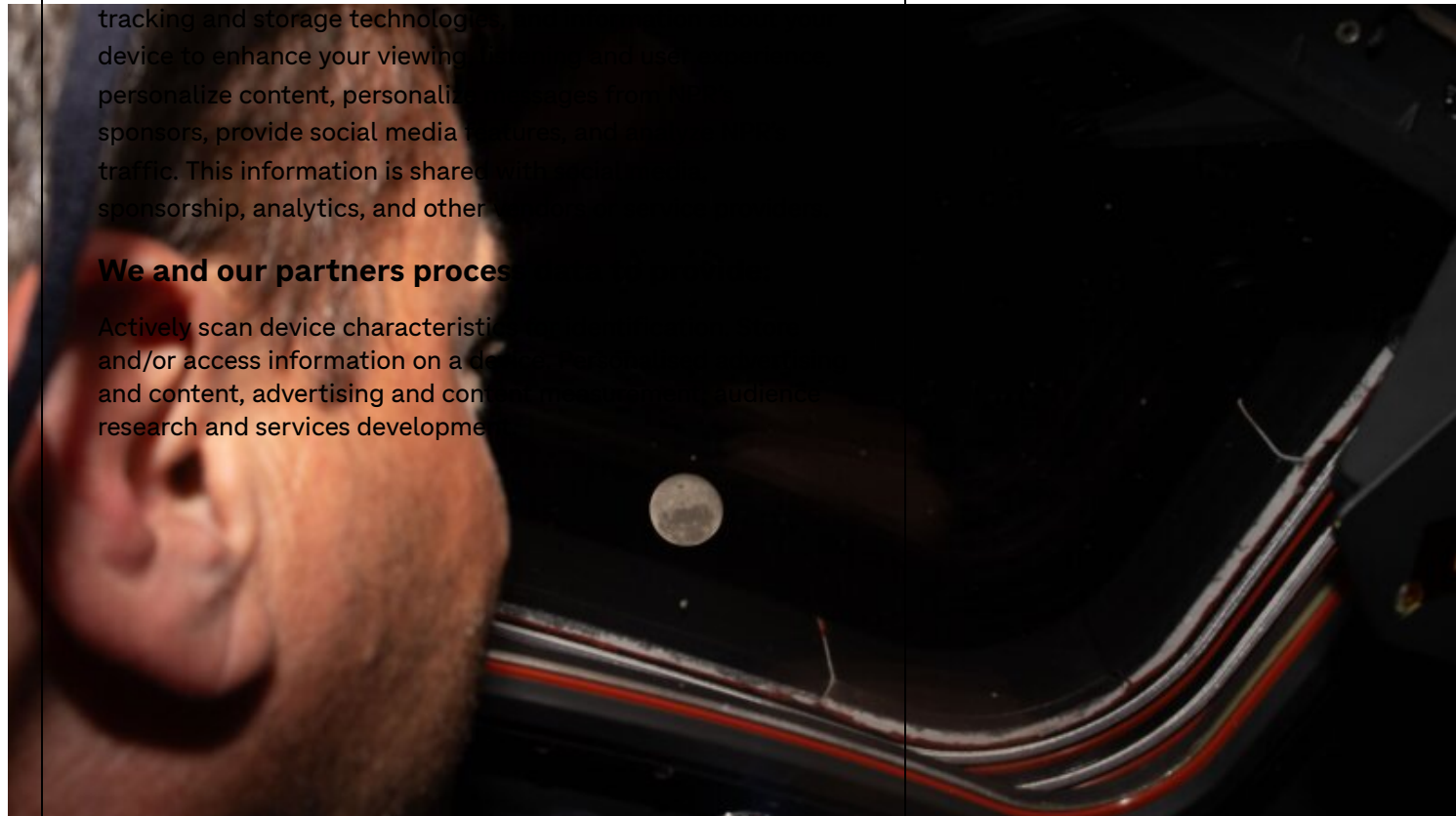
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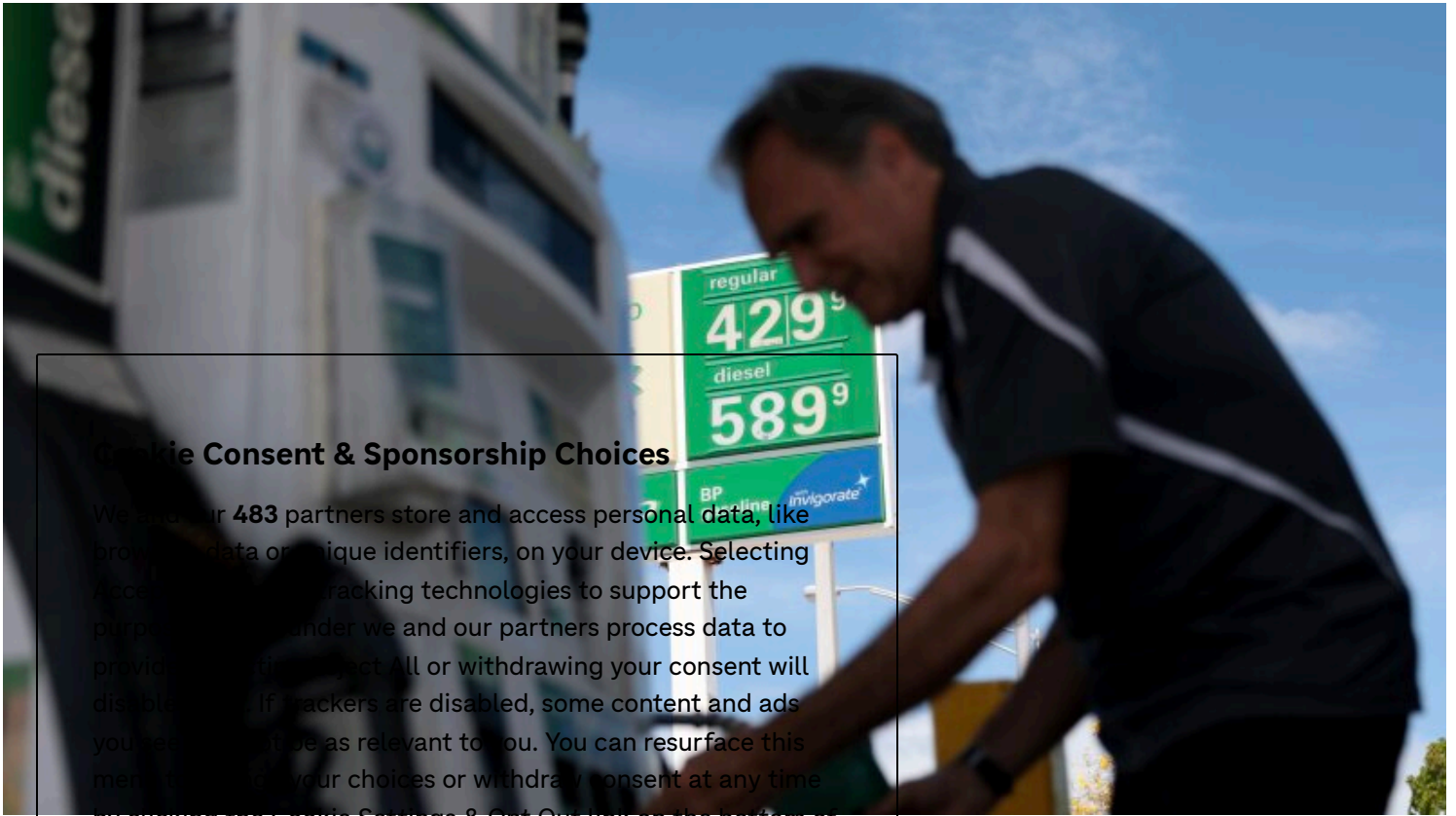
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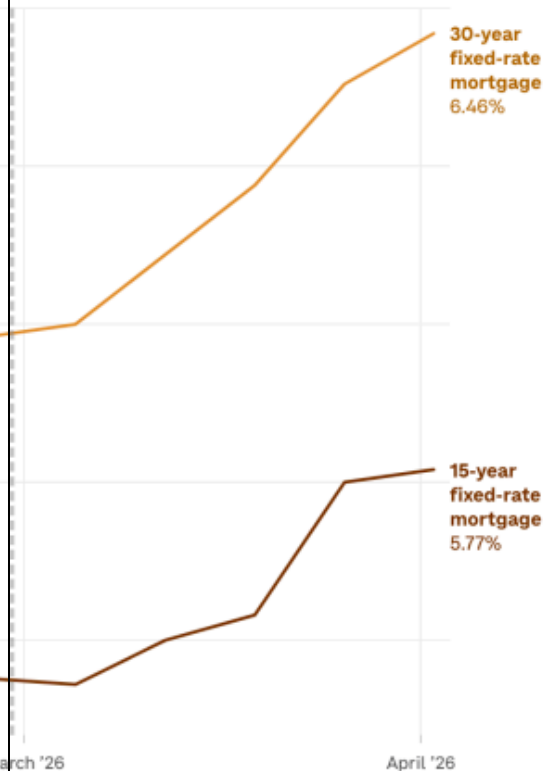
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