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POLITICS

Zelenskyy's visit to the White House ends abruptly after Oval Office spat

FEBRUARY 28, 2025 · 6:07 PM ET

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Zelenskyy was at the White House to finalize a deal on minerals, which Trump has said is critical to ward setting up peace deal the is trying to broker. But no deal was signed and the visit was cut short.

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PLAYLIST TRANSCRIPT

AILSAL CHANG, HOST:

There was an extraordinary scene in the Oval Office today - President Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy openly fighting about how to end Russia's war in Ukraine.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: Your country's in big trouble.

PRESIDENT VOLODYMYR ZELENSKYY: Can I answer?

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TRUMP: Wait a minute. No, no.

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ZELENSKYY: Can I answer?

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TRUMP: You're doing a lot of talking. Your country is in big trouble.

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ZELENSKYY: I know. I know.

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TRUMP: You're not winning. You're not winning this.

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ZELENSKYY: I...

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TRUMP: You have a damn good chance of

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ZELENSKYY: We are staying...

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TRUMP: ...Coming out OK because of us.

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CHANG: Zelenskyy was at the White House to finalize a deal on minerals, a deal that Trump has said is a step towards the broader peace deal that he's trying to

broker. But no deal was signed. The visit was cut short, lunch called off, a joint

press conference canceled, and Zelenskyy left the White House. NPR White House

correspondent Asma Khalid joins us now with more. Hi, Asma.

ASMA KHALID, BYLINE: Hi, Ailsa.

ASMA KHALID, BYLINE: Hi, Ailsa.

CHANG: OK, what happened exactly during this meeting?

KHALID: Well, this was, in theory, supposed to be the beginning of some sort of peace deal as Trump had envisioned it. And it actually began as a rather warm meeting. Trump praised Ukrainian fighters for being tough. And I will say, Ailsa, it initially seemed liked this meeting was going just akin to sort of any diplomatic meeting that Trump has had with a foreign leader in the Oval Office. But then, near the end of a really lengthy question-and-answer session, things unraveled.

CHANG: Clearly.

KHALID: The cameras were rolling, and a contentious argument erupted between Trump and Zelenskyy. Vice President Vance then joined into the back and forth, and he chastising Ukraine's president, telling him that he has been unthankful for American support. And, Ailsa, it is the type of diplomatic public spat that you

don't usually see in public. There was lots of shouting, crosstalk, pointing fingers. And I think to fully understand just how heated the meeting became, you've got to

listen to it. And this is long, but take a listen.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

TRUMP: You're not in a good position.

ZELENSKYY: I was.

TRUMP: You don't have the cards right now. With us, you start having cards.

ZELENSKYY: I'm not playing cards.

TRUMP: Right now you don't - yeah, you're playing cards.

ZELENSKYY: I'm very serious, Mr. President.

TRUMP: You're playing cards.

ZELENSKYY: I'm very serious.

TRUMP: You're gambling...

ZELENSKYY: I'm the president in a war.

TRUMP: ...With the lives of millions of people.

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ZELENSKY: You think...

TRUMP: You're gambling with World War III.

ZELENSKY: What do you think about?

TRUMP: You're gambling with World War III.

ZELENSKY: What are you thinking about?

TRUMP: And what you're doing is very disrespectful to the country, this country...

ZELENSKY: I'm with all respect to your country.

TRUMP: ...That's backed you far more than a lot of people said they should have.

ZELENSKY: I'm very respectful.

VANCE: Have you said thank you once this entire meeting?

ZELENSKY: A lot of times.

VANCE: No, in this...

ZELENSKY: Even today...

VANCE: Entire meeting, have you said thank you?

ZELENSKY: Even today...

VANCE: You went to Pennsylvania and campaigned for the opposition in October.

Offer some words of appreciation for the United States of America...

ZELENSKY: What are you speaking about?

VANCE: ...And the president who's trying to save your country.

CHANG: Whoa. OK, Asma, can you just step back and explain what they were fighting about right there?

KHALID: So simply put, Ukraine has been pushing for security guarantees from the United States to prevent Russia from coming back in and seizing more

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territory if there is indeed a ceasefire. Trump has been reluctant to commit to that. He feels the United States has already spent a lot of money on this foreign war. And today, I mean, the leaders basically stated really fundamentally different positions. Trump said the U.S. has been overly generous in helping Ukraine. And Zelenskyy made it clear that he sees Ukraine's fight as an existential battle for the survival of his nation.

CHANG: OK. Well, how did Vice President Vance suddenly get involved in this conversation?

KHALID: Well there was this moment near the end of their meeting when Trump defended his approach with Russia's President Vladimir Putin. He said that he is not aligned with Putin. He is aligned, Trump said, with the United States, and he just wants this war to be over with. Vice President Vance jumped in to defended Trump's approach, and Zelenskyy had a really strong reaction. He said that Putin has broken agreements in the past and that he is not a trustworthy partner. And, you know, this mineral deal that we mentioned at the outset - Zelenskyy and Trump were expected to sign that deal today. It would give the United States access to minerals in Ukraine.

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KHALID: It was supposed to be a step forward. But at the very end of this heated meeting, Trump seemed to have this threat for Ukraine's president.

TRUMP: The problem is I've empowered you to be a tough guy, and I don't think you'd be a tough guy without the United States. And your people are very brave, but you're either...

ZELENSKYI: Thank you.

TRUMP: ...Going to make a deal or we're out. And if we're out, you'll fight it out. I don't think it's going to be pretty, but you'll fight it out. But you don't have the cards. But once we sign that deal, you're in a much better position. But you're not acting at all thankful, and that's not a nice thing. I'll be honest. That's not a nice thing.

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CHANG: Wow, OK. Well, then after all of this shouting and lecturing, what happened next?

KHALID: Well, the two men were supposed to have lunch. That did not happen. They were then supposed to have a joint press conference. That also got canceled. And then, of course, there is that mineral deal that was supposed to be signed. It was not signed today. And, Ailsa, it is not clear when and if it will actually be signed.

The White House says Zelenskyy was told to leave. A White House official told me that Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Trump's national security adviser conveyed that message to the Ukrainian delegation. And later this afternoon,

Trump and our reporters that he thinks Zelenskyy wants to keep fighting, that he does not want to make peace and that he feels like Zelenskyy overplayed his hand today.

CHANG: Well, what did President Zelenskyy have to say after all of this happened?

KHALID: Well after he left the White House, he went on to do an interview with Fox News' Bret Baier. And the Fox host explicitly asked Zelenskyy if the public spat in front of the press today served Ukrainians well. And take a listen to Zelenskyy's answer.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

ZELENSKYY: This is not good for both sides anyway. And I will - I very open. But I can't you know, change our Ukrainian attitude to Russia.

KHALID: Zelenskyy said he understands that Trump is trying to be neutral, but he wants him to be more on the side of Ukraine. He also repeatedly insisted that Ukraine wants peace and that's why he's here in the United States. He also said he's grateful for America's help, but he did not apologize to Trump.

CHANG: And real quick, Asma, I mean, what does this all mean for Ukraine? Like, what sort of reaction are you hearing from people outside the White House?

KHALID: I mean, the reaction depends on where you fall on the political spectrum, right? I mean, I think it's to be expected amongst Republicans and Democrats. I will say that some reactions from Europe today made it clear that they are standing with Ukraine.

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And here at home in the United States, America's support for the war has been divisive. Polling shows that a sizable number of Americans, particularly Republicans, feel the U.S. has provided too much money to Ukraine. Ailsa, I will say in closing though, if today was intended to kick off some road to peace, it certainly seems like the moment for that to happen, at this moment, it seems like that goal is shattered.

CHANG: That is NPR's Asma Khalid. Thank you so much, Asma.

KHALID: Good to speak with you.

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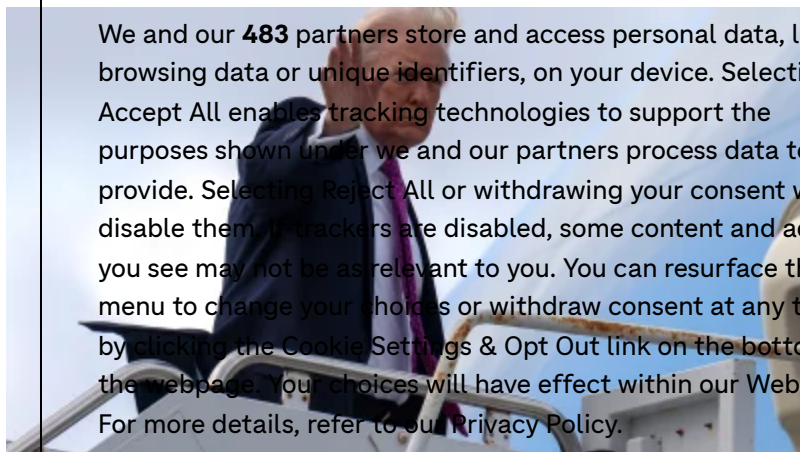
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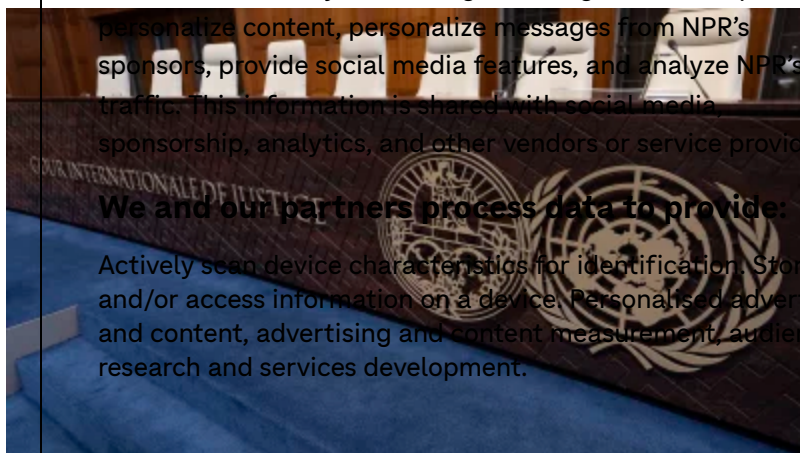
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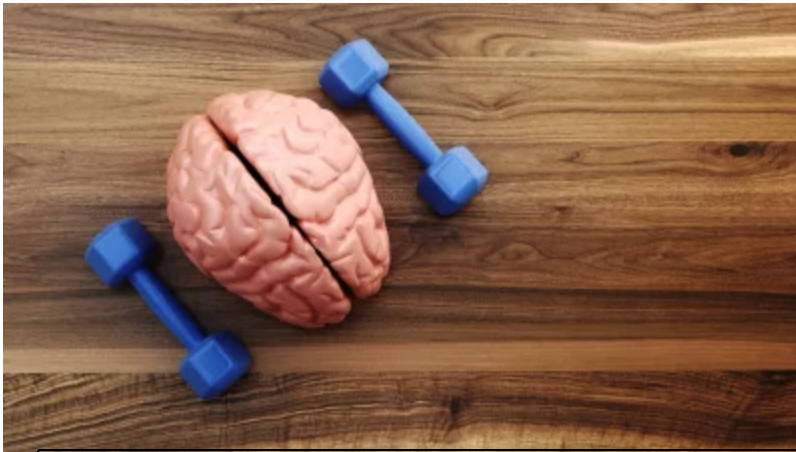


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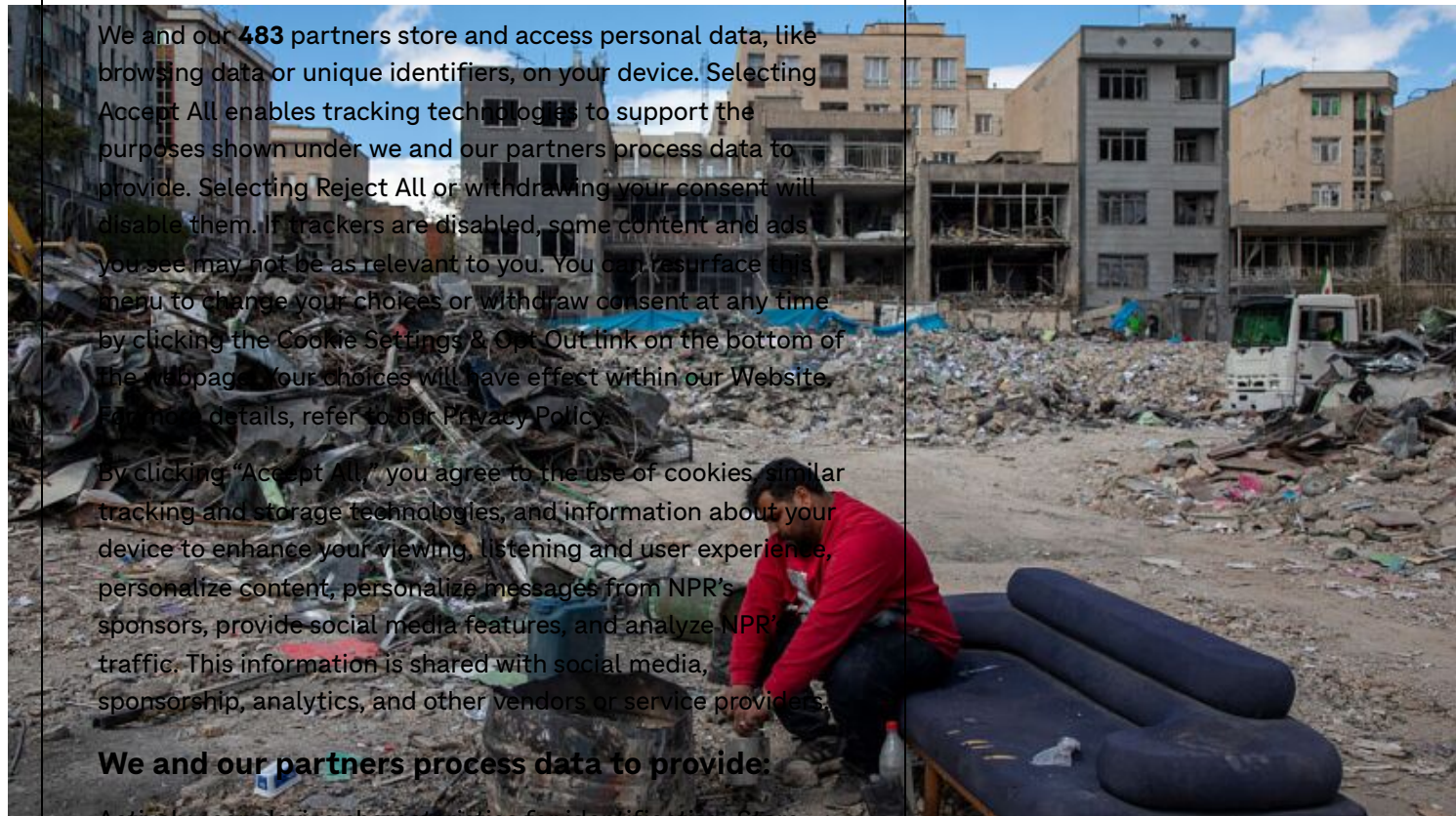
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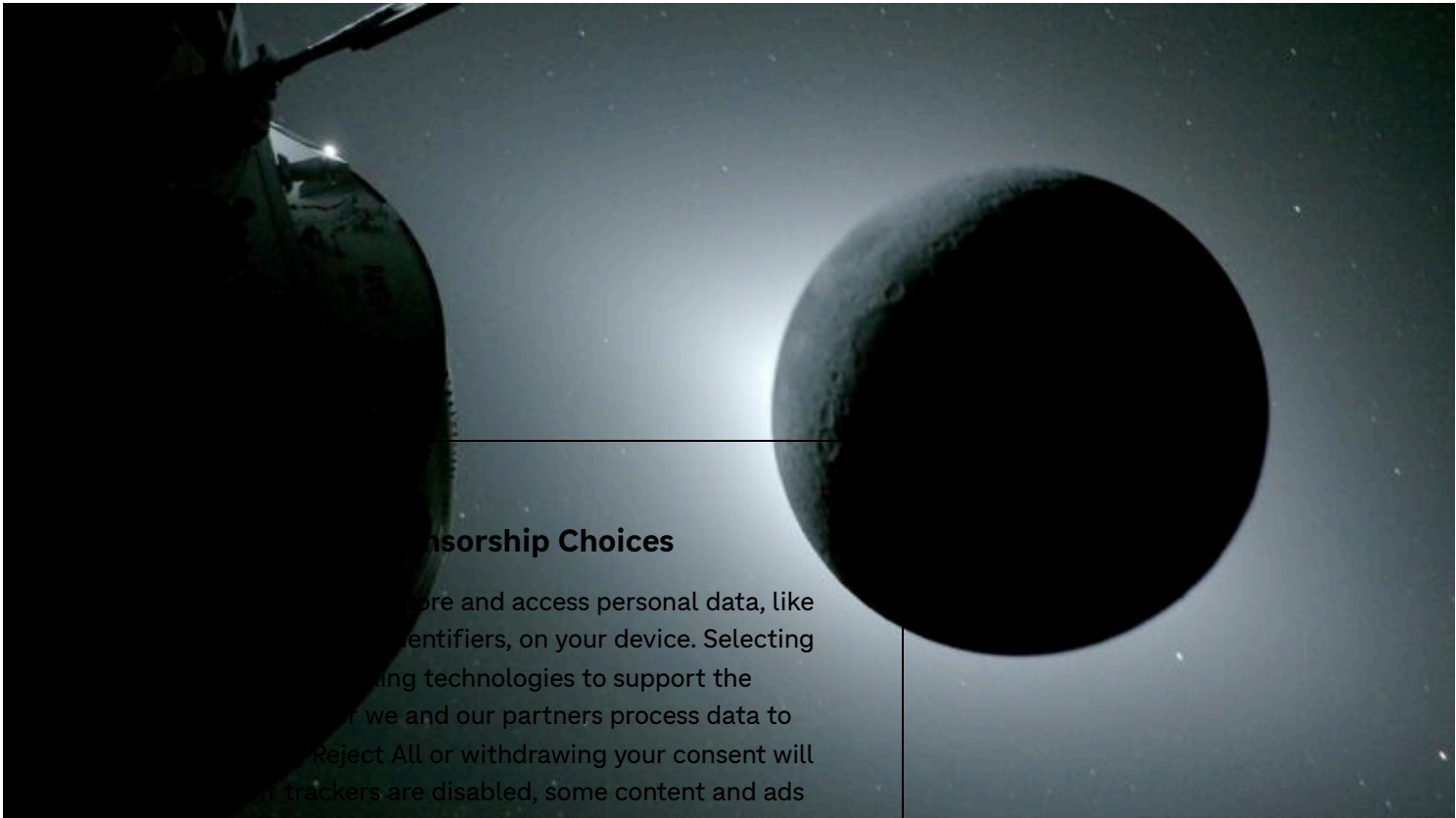
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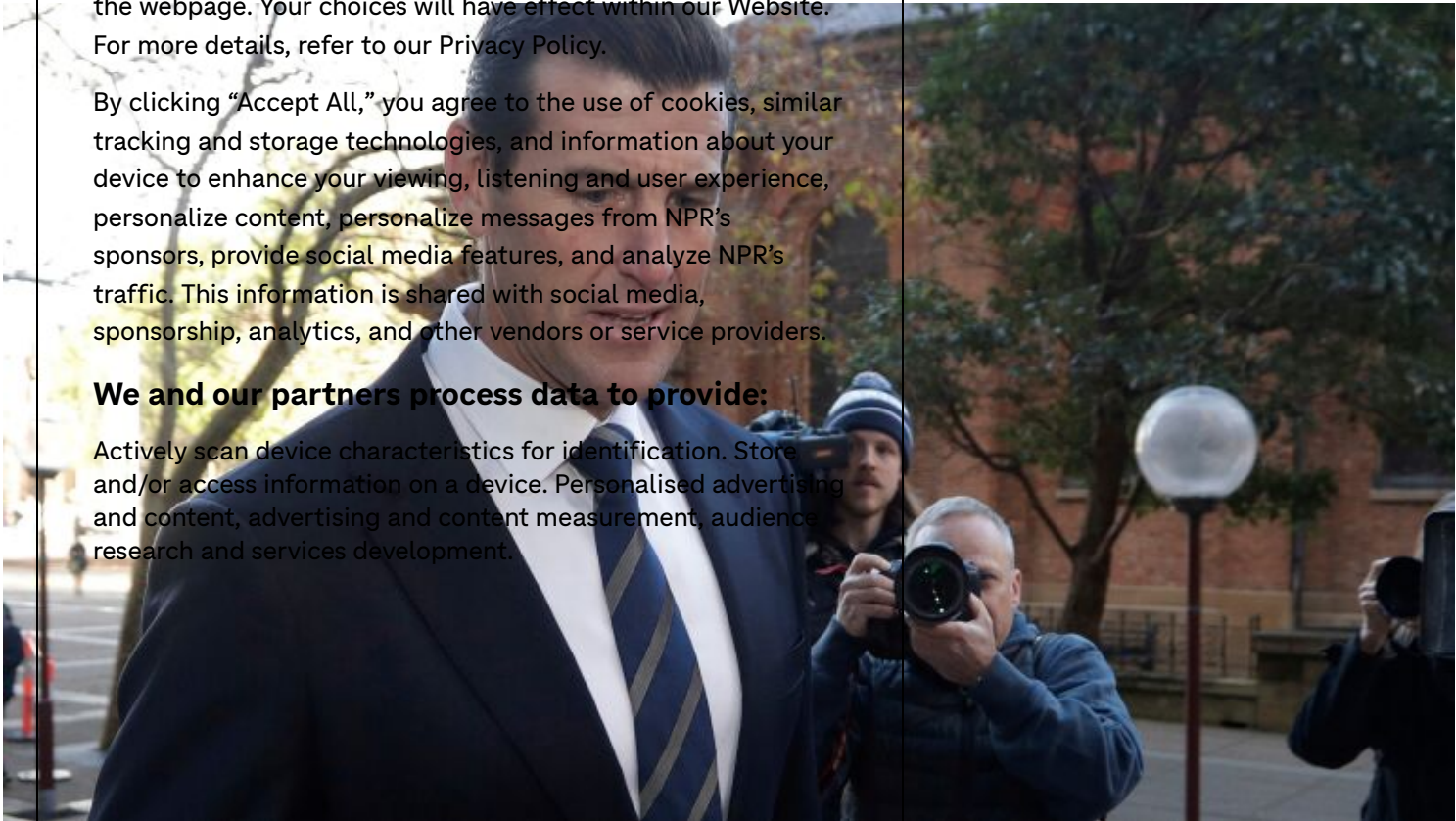
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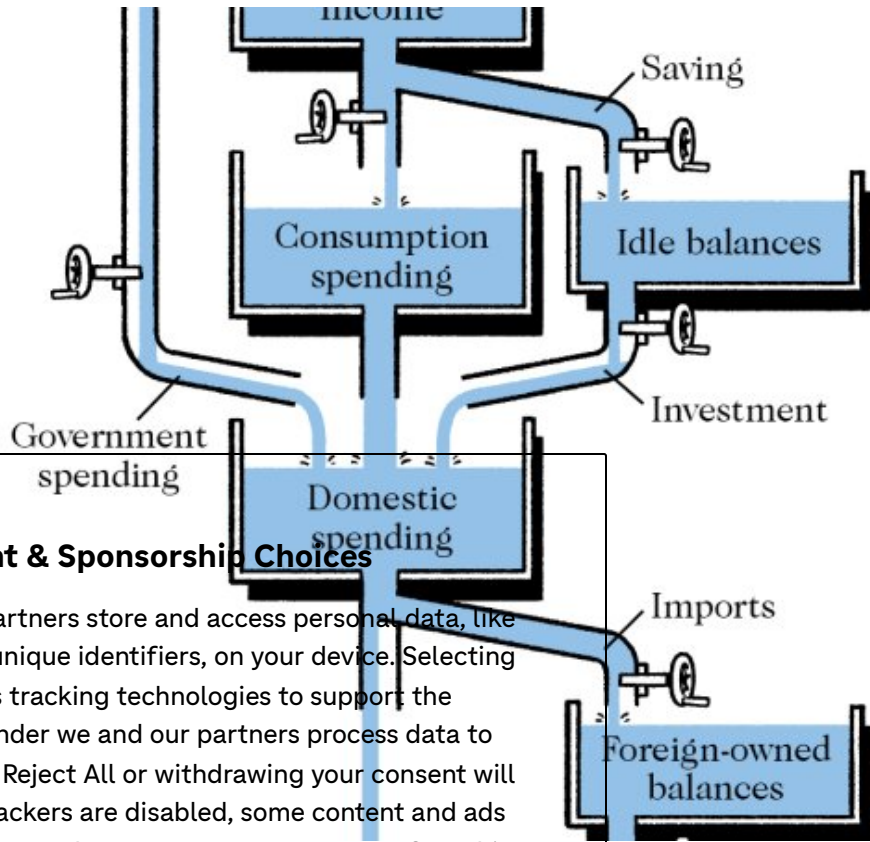
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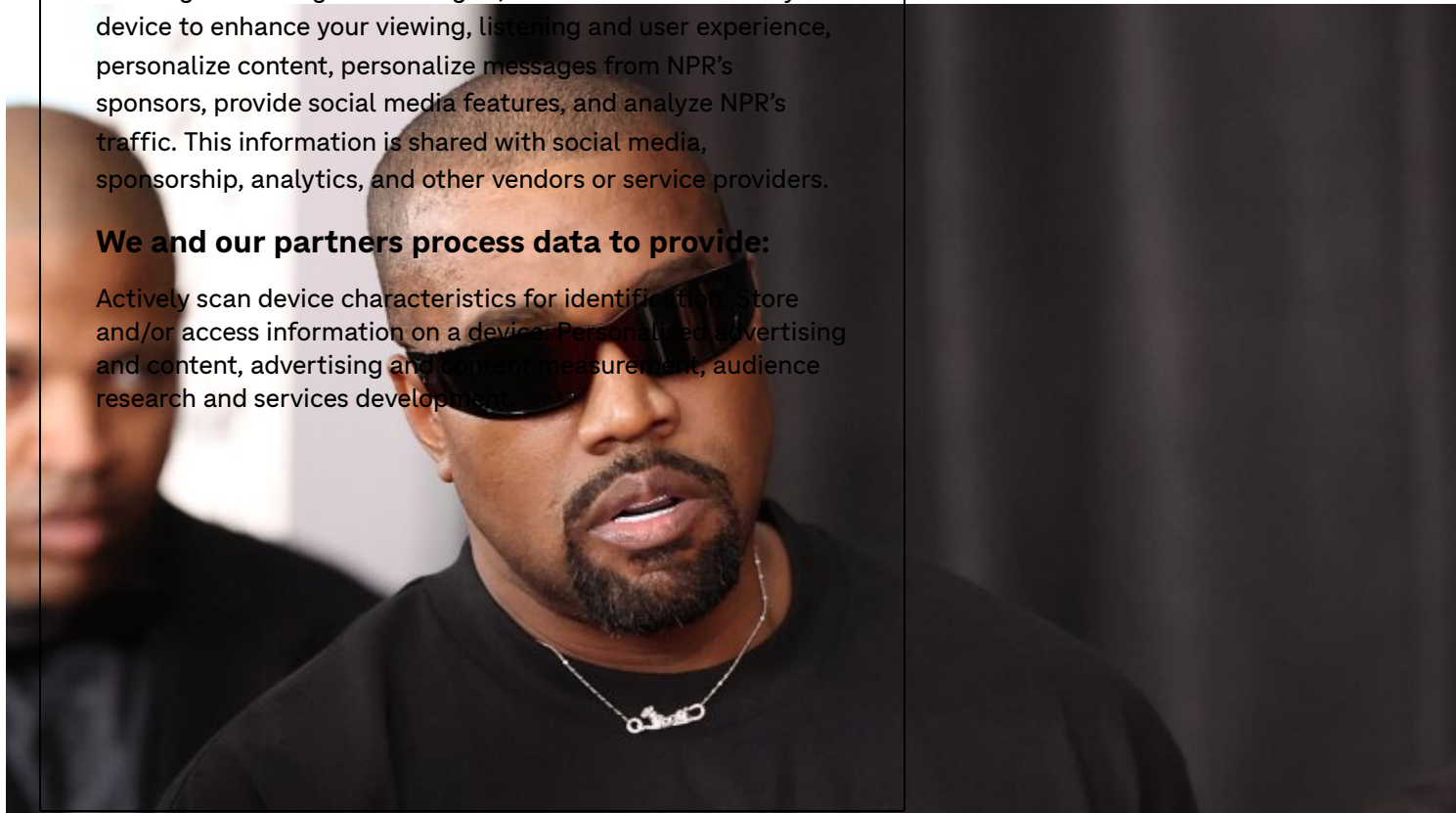
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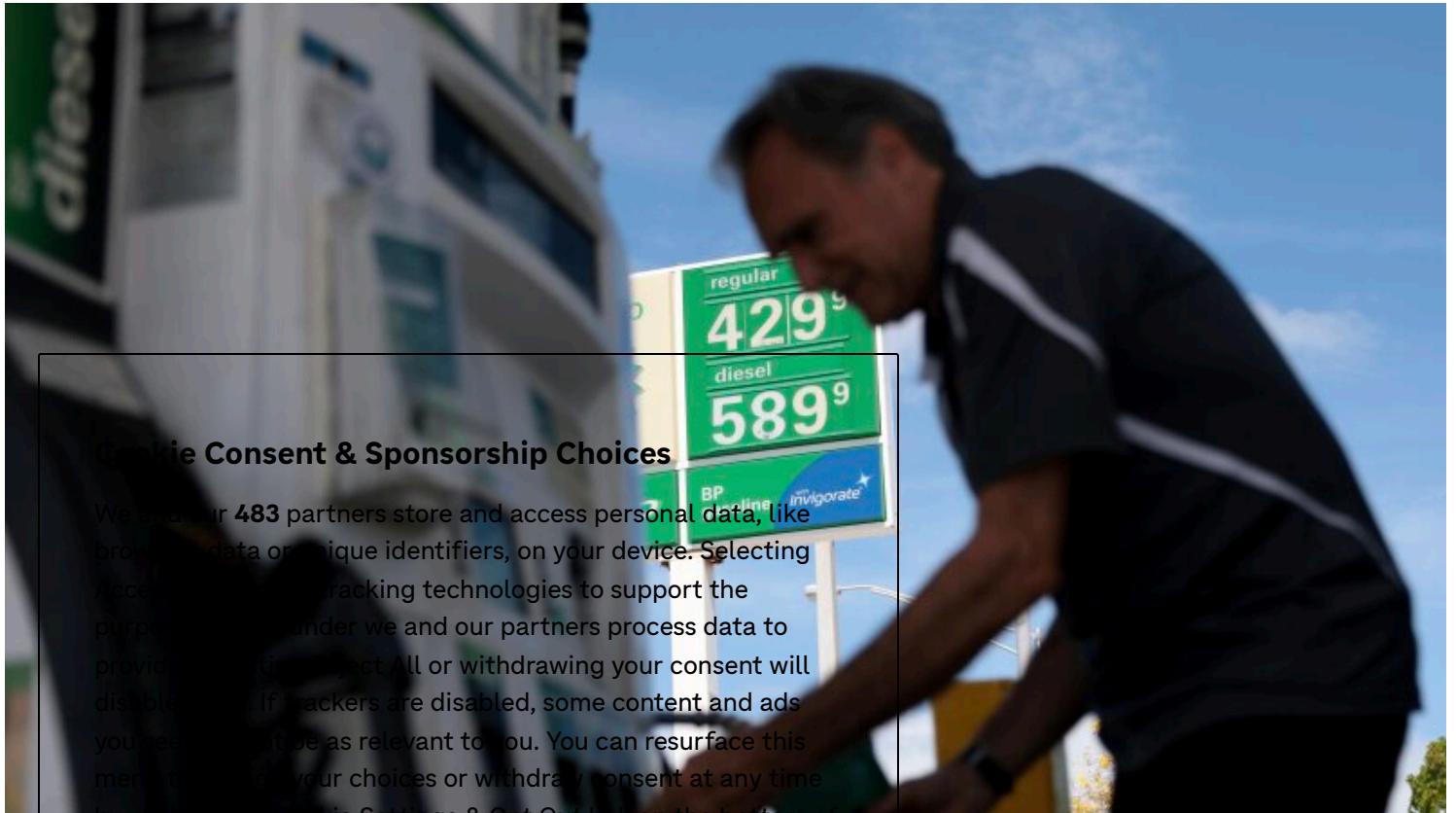
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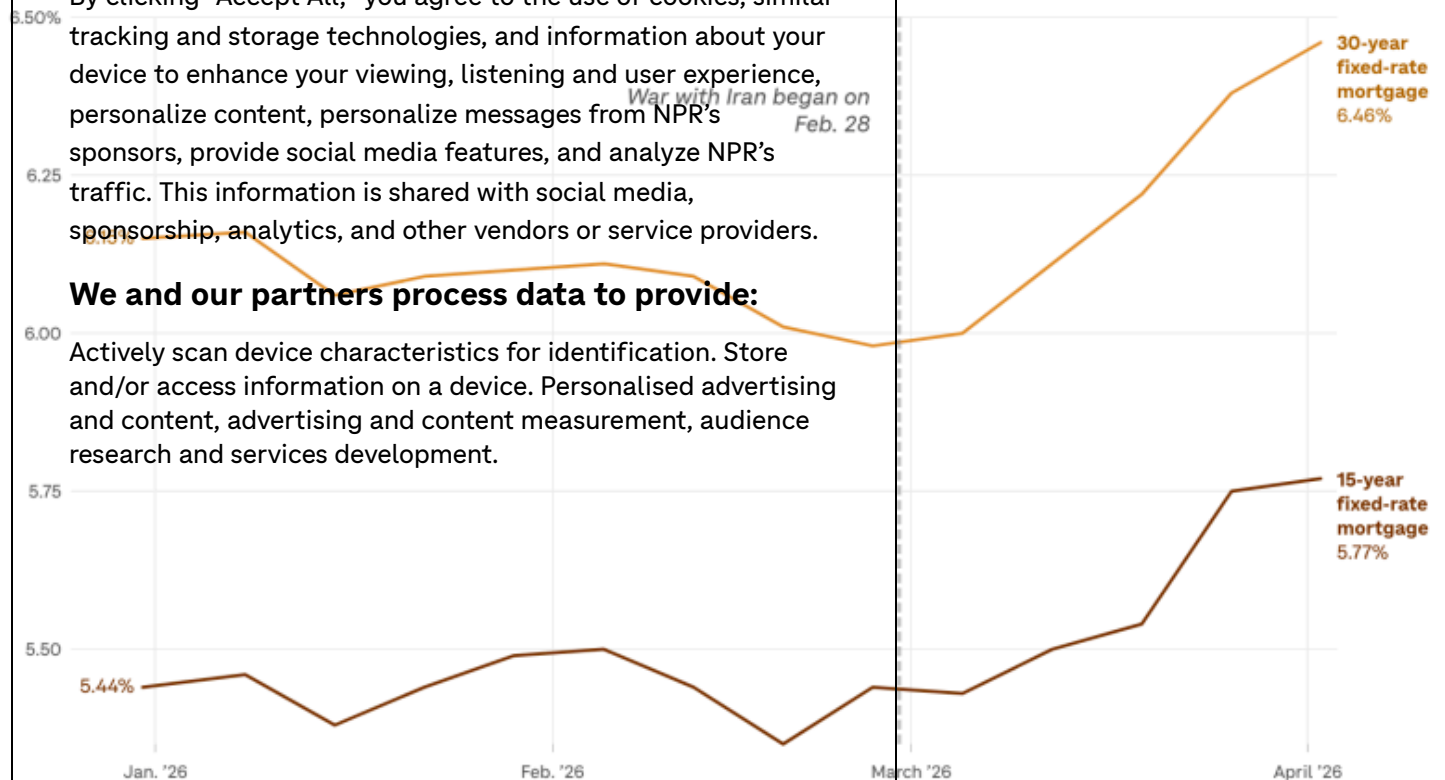
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