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# 'Bloody Saturday' at Voice of America and other U.S.-funded networks

UPDATED MARCH 15, 2025 · 4:46 PM ET

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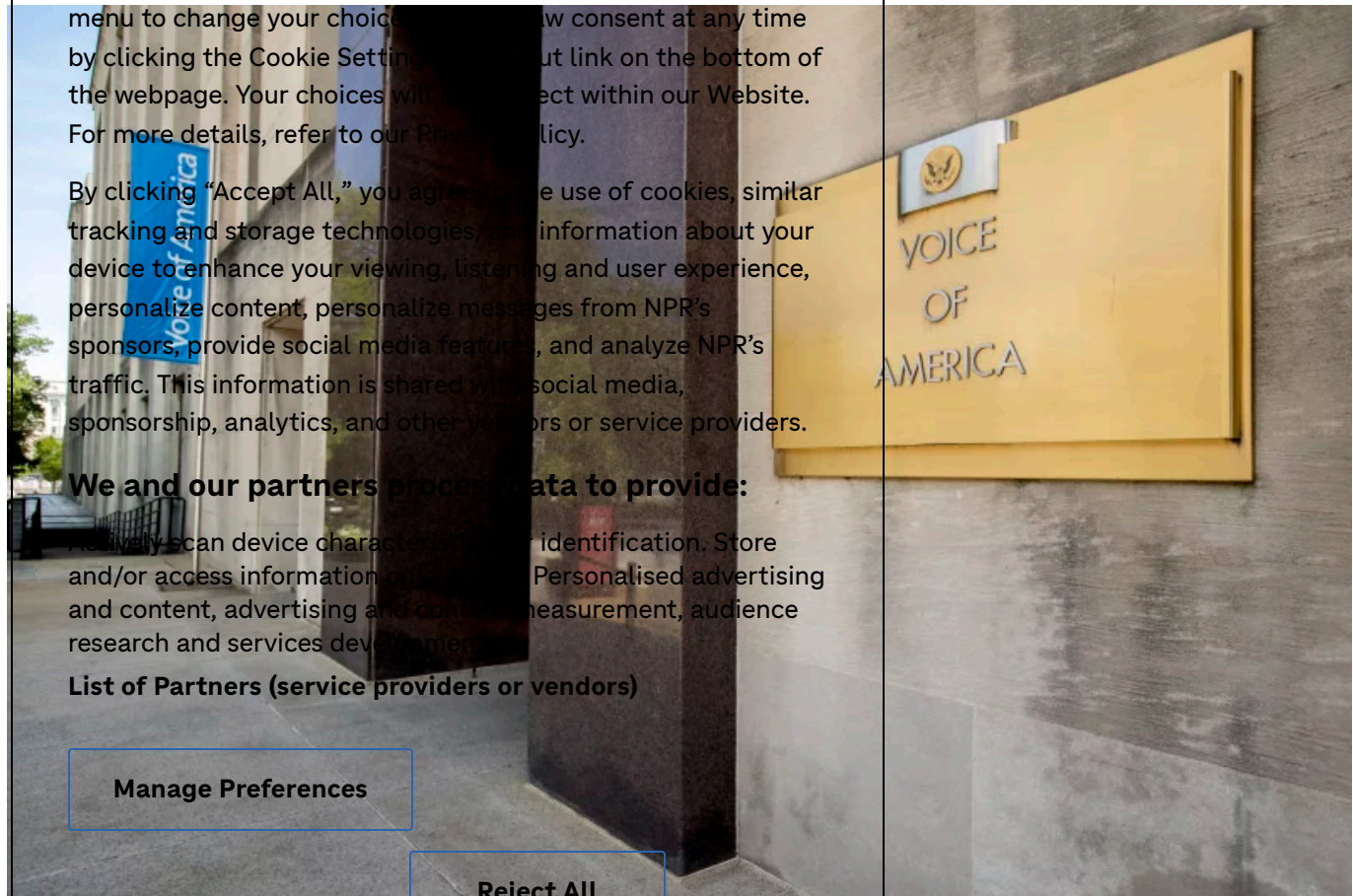
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President Trump's late-night decree Friday led to orders gutting the Voice of America and other U.S.-funded international broadcasters.

Andrew Harnik/AP

Journalists showed up at the Voice of America today to broadcast their programs only to be told they had been locked out: Federal officials had embarked on indefinite mass suspensions.

All full-time staffers at the Voice of America and the Office for Cuba Broadcasting, which runs Radio and Television Martí, were affected – more than 1,000 employees. The move followed a late Friday night edict from President Trump that its parent agency, called the U.S. Agency for Global Media, must eliminate all activities that are not required by law.

In addition, under the leadership of Trump appointees, the agency has severed all contracts for the privately incorporated international broadcasters it funds, including Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia and the Middle East Broadcasting Networks.

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The termination notices for grants for the funded networks, two of which were reviewed by NPR, carried the signature of Trump's senior adviser Kari Lake, whom he placed at USAGM, not the agency's acting chief executive. Lake does not appear in her current job to have the statutory authority to carry out that termination.

"I am deeply saddened that for the 1st time in 83 years, the storied Voice of America is being silenced," the network's director, Michael Abramowitz, said in a statement posted on his personal Facebook account. "VOA needs thoughtful

reform and we have made progress in that regard. But today's action will leave Voice of America unable to carry out its vital mission." He wrote that he was among those 1,300 journalists, producers and support staff put on leave.

Grant Turner, the former chief financial officer at the U.S. Agency for Global Media, called it "Bloody Saturday" for the agency and its networks.

### 'Arsonists just set fire to it'

"From what I hear, this is shaping up to be a really sad day. USAGM networks share important news, information and American values around the world," Turner said. "It took decades to build this goodwill and an audience of hundreds of millions every week. Seeing arsonists just set fire to it all is awful."

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"The cancellation of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's grant agreement would be a massive gift to America's enemies," Steve Capus, the president of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, said in a statement today shared with NPR. "The Iranian Ayatollahs, Chinese communist leaders, and autocrats in Moscow and Minsk would celebrate the demise of RFE/RL after 75 years. Handing our adversaries a win would make them stronger and America weaker. We've benefitted from strong bipartisan support throughout RFE/RL's storied history. Without us, the nearly 50 million people in closed societies who depend on us for accurate news and information each week won't have access to the truth about America and the world."

This story is based on interviews with 16 current and former employees of the U.S. Agency for Global Media and the networks it funds. Almost all spoke on condition they not be named due to fear of professional retribution. NPR has reviewed internal notifications about the suspensions and the killed contracts. Similar notices reviewed by NPR have been received by hundreds of contractors at the Voice of America as well today.

USAGM and the White House did not reply to requests for comment. A deputy White House spokesperson tweeted "Goodbye" in 20 languages over a link to a story from 2023 over a controversy at the Voice of America about how to characterize Hamas.

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Taken together, the federally-funded broadcasters and their sister networks covering the Middle East and Cuba reach 420 million people in 63 languages and more than 100 countries each week, according to the agency. They are fully funded by federal dollars.  
The networks' mission is to deliver news coverage and cultural programming to places where a free press is threatened or doesn't exist. They are also designed as a form of safe diplomacy, providing independent journalism that incorporates dissent from government policy.

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**Trump's friends in Moscow and Budapest aggrieved by network coverage**

The Voice of America sparked Trump's ire in his first term in office over reporting on Covid-19. His appointee as chief executive for U.S. Agency for Global Media embarked on a series of suspensions, visa revocations and investigations that were found, in some instances, to violate the law and federal policy.

This time, Trump's budget-slashing adviser, Elon Musk, and other administration officials have called for Voice of America and some of the sister networks to be shut down. The scope and legality of these acts are not yet in full focus, but they appear to be designed to gut them and place whatever coverage survives under tighter control of politically appointed officials.

Trump placed Lake, a two-time unsuccessful MAGA candidate, as his senior adviser over USAGM. She did not reply to a detailed request for comment for this story. USAGM's media relations team has not replied to NPR's repeated and detailed requests for comment about developments at the networks in recent days, including today. Trump's pick to lead the agency will be permanently, the conservative media critic L. Brent Bozell III, has not yet been scheduled for confirmation hearings in the U.S. Senate.

Voice of America and its sister networks have come in for criticism on specific editorial judgments. The U.S. Agency for Global Media, wrote Dan Robinson, a retired 34-year veteran of Voice of America and the agency, "has essentially become a hubris-filled rogue operation often reflecting a leftist bias aligned with partisan national media."

"It has sought to avoid a court challenge for violations of journalistic standards and mismanagement," he continued in his essay, published in November in the conservative Washington Post.

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The broadcaster's reporting has a record of powerful figures abroad, including those who have close links to Trump.

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The broadcaster's reporting has a record of powerful figures abroad, including those who have close links to Trump.

The reporting of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, for example, has vexed autocratic-minded leaders in Russia and Hungary, as well as their allies. The network's journalists have been imprisoned or detained in Russian-controlled Crimea, Belarus, Azerbaijan and Russia itself.

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Trump has strained relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Hungarian Premier Viktor Orban.

**A service with some bipartisan support**

Similarly, Radio Free Asia's reports on the oppression of Uighur Muslims by Chinese authorities helped to bring their plight to international attention. In 2020, North Korean officials executed the owner of a fishing fleet for secretly listening to broadcasts by Radio Free Asia while at sea, the network reported. Authorities brought in 100 of his peers to watch the execution as a warning of the dangers of tuning in.

For more details, [Read the Full Story](#) on our website.

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A reporter for the English language *Shanghai Daily*, controlled by the Chinese Communist party, exulted at the developments: "EXCELLENT NEWS," Andy Borenham tweeted. He called Radio Free Asia "one of the US's most insidious anti-Chinese propaganda outlets."

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Despite strong criticism from Trump administration officials and their allies on Capitol Hill, the networks have largely won strong bipartisan support over the years.

U.S. Rep. Michael McCaul, the Republican former chairperson of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, said in a statement to NPR earlier this week that he appreciated the ability of USAGM networks to disseminate information in China that the ruling Chinese Communist party censors sought to block there.

"That's why I strongly support many of its programs," McCaul said. "Programs like [Radio Free Asia] provide day-to-day updates on far-off regions, uphold a free

press even in authoritarian countries, and ensure Americans—and people everywhere—are not subject to our adversaries' propaganda."

## Officials put pressure on networks after DOGE aides dig in

The suspended staffers include reporters, editors, managers — journalists in the English-language core newsroom in Washington D.C. and those offering coverage and programs in dozens of languages serving audiences across the globe. The memos informing recipients that they can no longer perform their jobs say the

action was not being done "for any disciplinary purpose."

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Employees at the U.S. Agency for Global Media also received the notification, technically an indefinite leave "with full benefits until otherwise notified," ordering the cessation of all work related activities and the surrender of all government property, including devices and records.

Three staffers for DOGE, the government cost-slashing initiative led by Musk, have been camped out at the agency gaining access to its budget, social media and other activities, according to several people with knowledge. (They spoke anonymously due to potential professional repercussions.)

In recent days, administration officials had already taken actions that placed severe pressure on the ability of the networks to function.

The agency had cut contracts with major news services, including the Associated Press, Agence France Presse, and Reuters, which is used to supplement the broadcasters' reporting.

It had withheld money needed by Radio Free Asia to meet payroll, triggering the prospect of furloughs there, as first reported by Politico. Freelancers tell NPR they haven't been paid since last month because the aides assigned to USAGM from DOGE have frozen funds.

And Lake ratcheted up the pressure with her own rhetoric.

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**Lake's claims of waste on new HQ challenged**

We and our 483 partners store and access personal data, like Friday evening, before Trump's order, Lake posted a video of the new headquarters for USAGM and the Voice of America to argue that it's an exemplar of profligate spending. "I'm sitting here on the 13th floor of a shiny, brand-new beautiful skyscraper building that is costing you, the taxpayer, a fortune," Lake said, as camera footage lingered over features including glass walls, interior waterfalls, and modern conference rooms. "Here's the kicker: They already have a building that they're located in, that is paid off, that they could have renovated or updated."

Former USAGM CFO Grant Turner says she's gone backwards. According to the USAGM's announcement last September, the lease, thanks to a slow real estate market caused by the pandemic, stands to save the federal government \$150 million over 15 years.

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"That's a bunch of lies and misinformation coming out of her mouth," said Turner, who left the agency in January. "In fact, it's probably one of the best deals struck by a tenant in D.C. history."

Four USAGM and Voice of America staffers backed up Turner's account on condition of anonymity, citing fears of retribution in the current climate. For one thing, they note, the new building is not new. It's nearly two decades old — built in 2006, according to the general contractor on the project. For another, the old building wasn't paid off — the agency doesn't own it. The agency got three years in free rent at the new headquarters, and was drawing staffers out of the old Wilbur J. Cohen building, they said, thus sizeably reducing its footprint and rent paid to the federal government.

And the new building's landlord gave \$27 million toward the construction of state-of-the-art studios. That would have been necessary in the technologically archaic Cohen building — absent the existential question now hovering over the networks.

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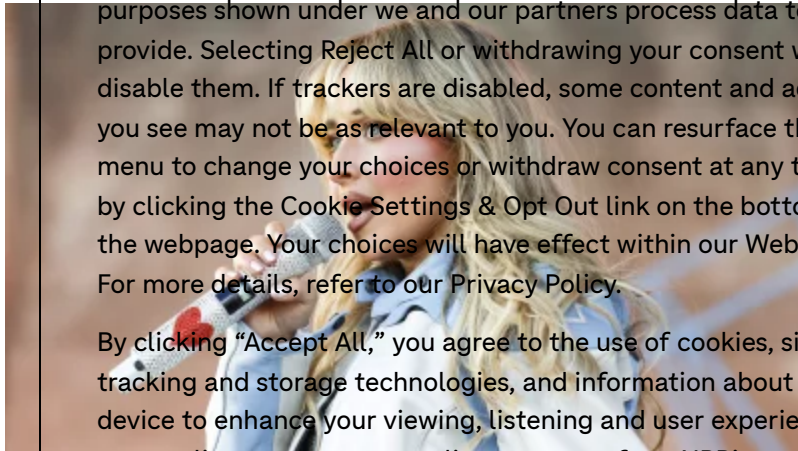
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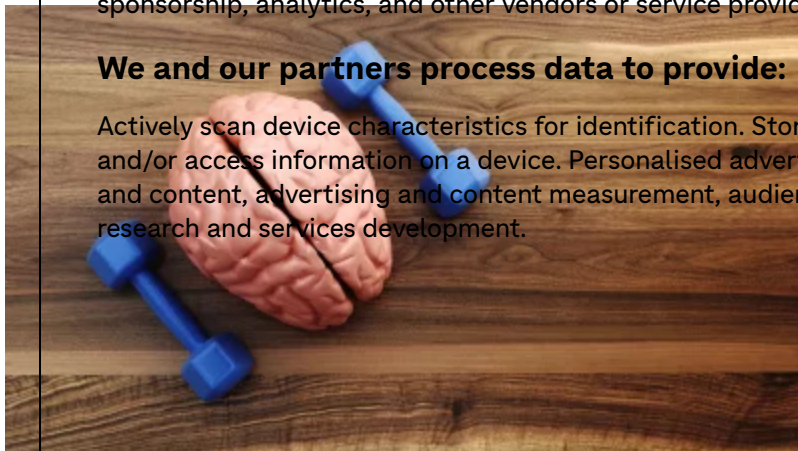
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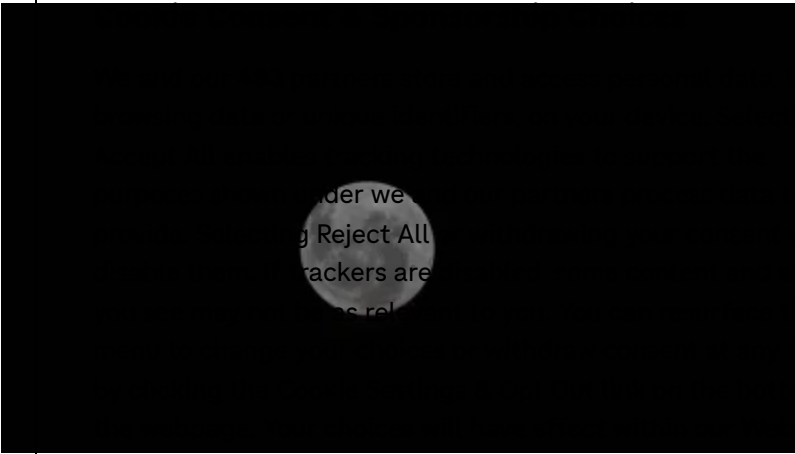
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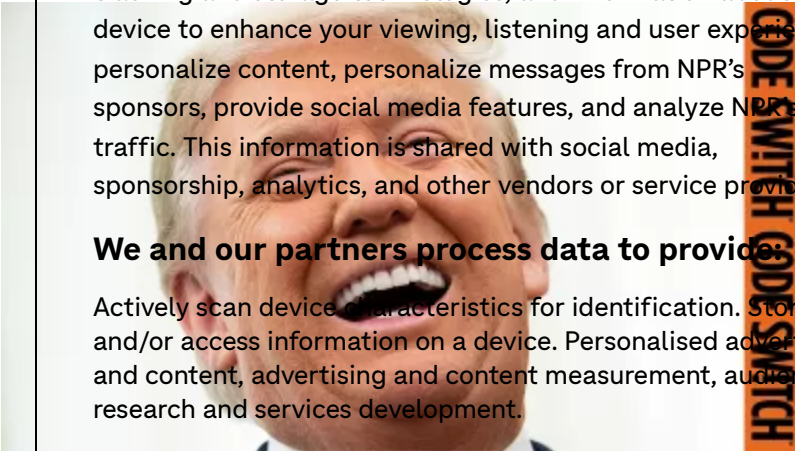
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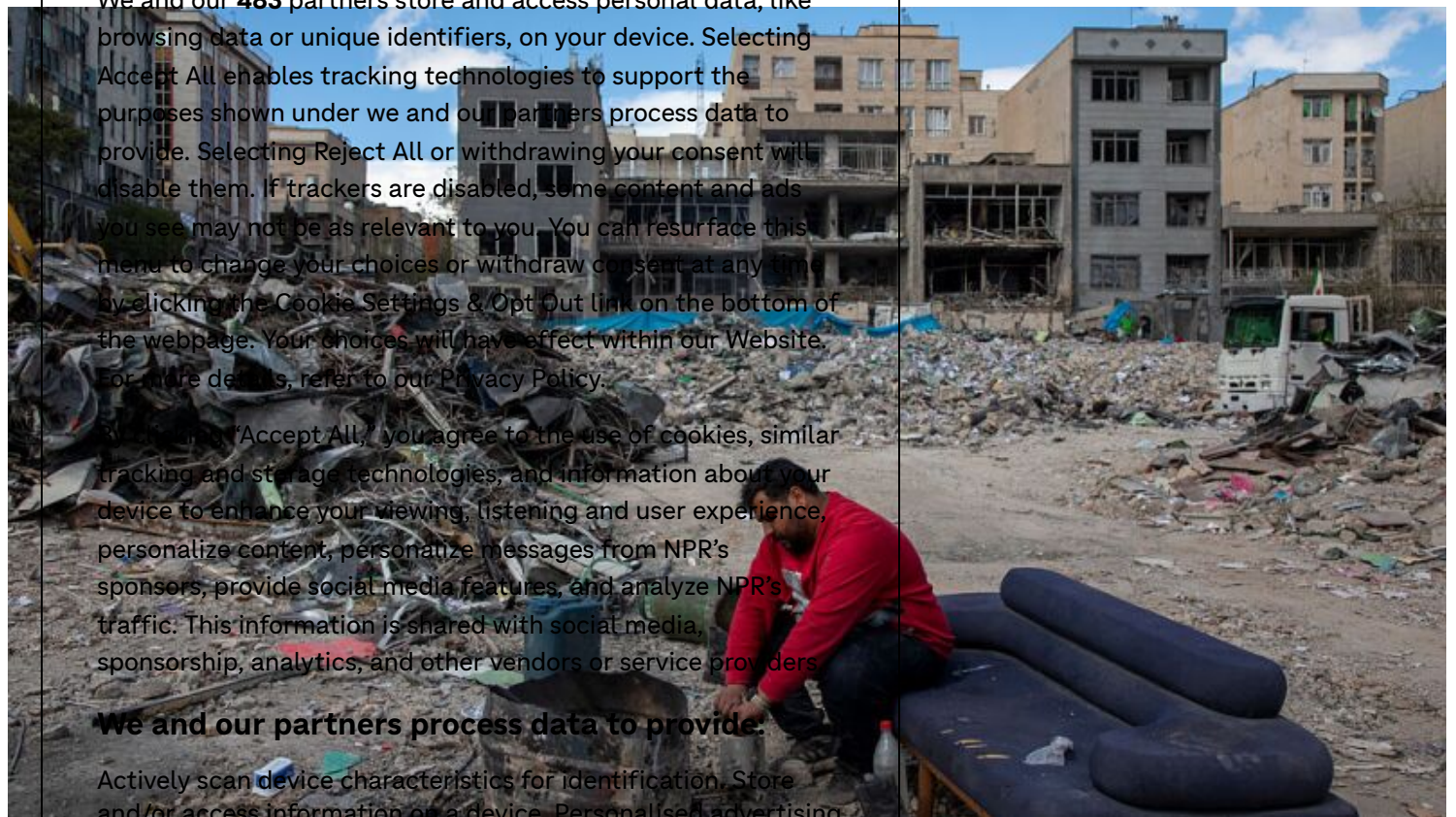
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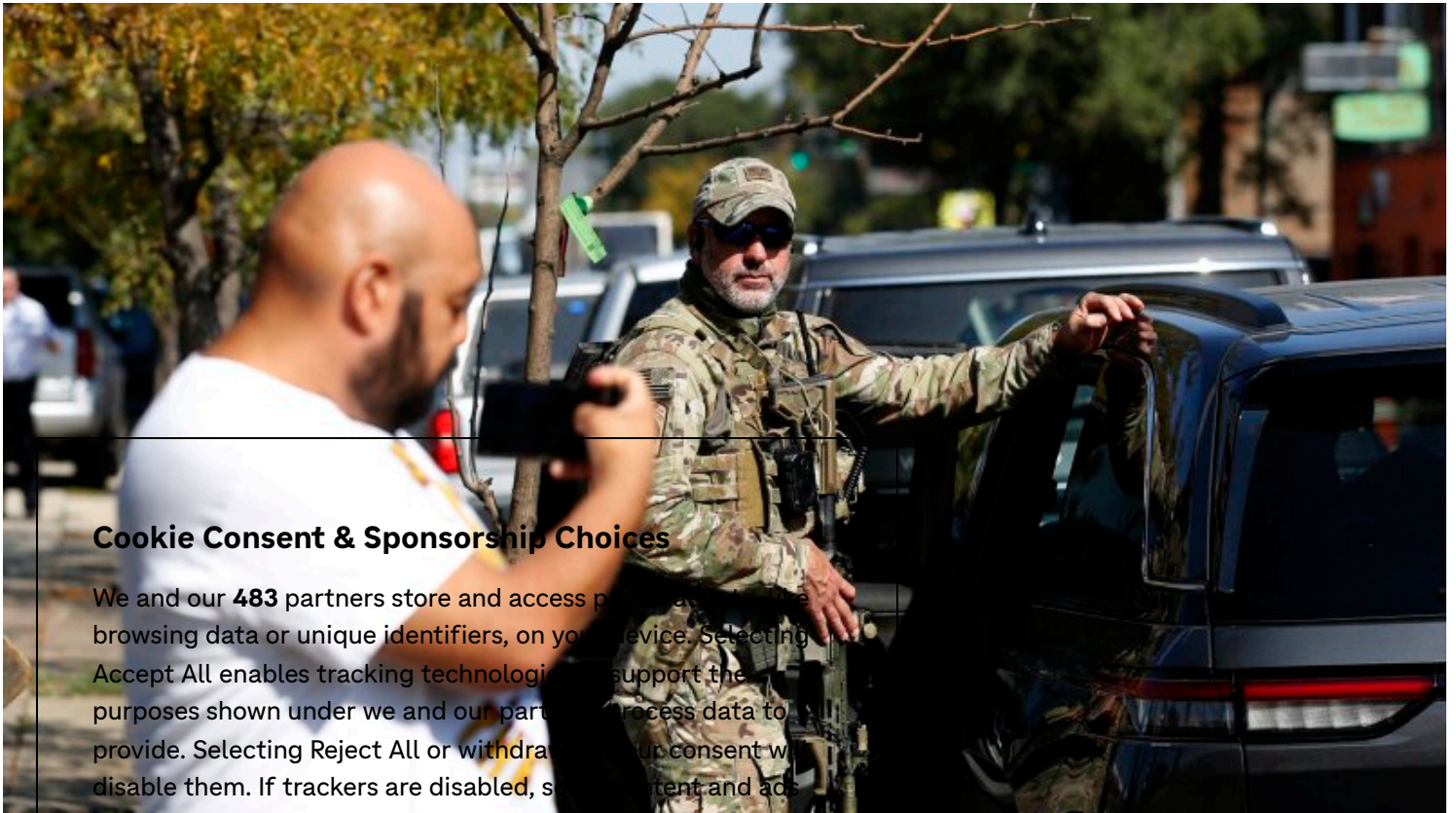
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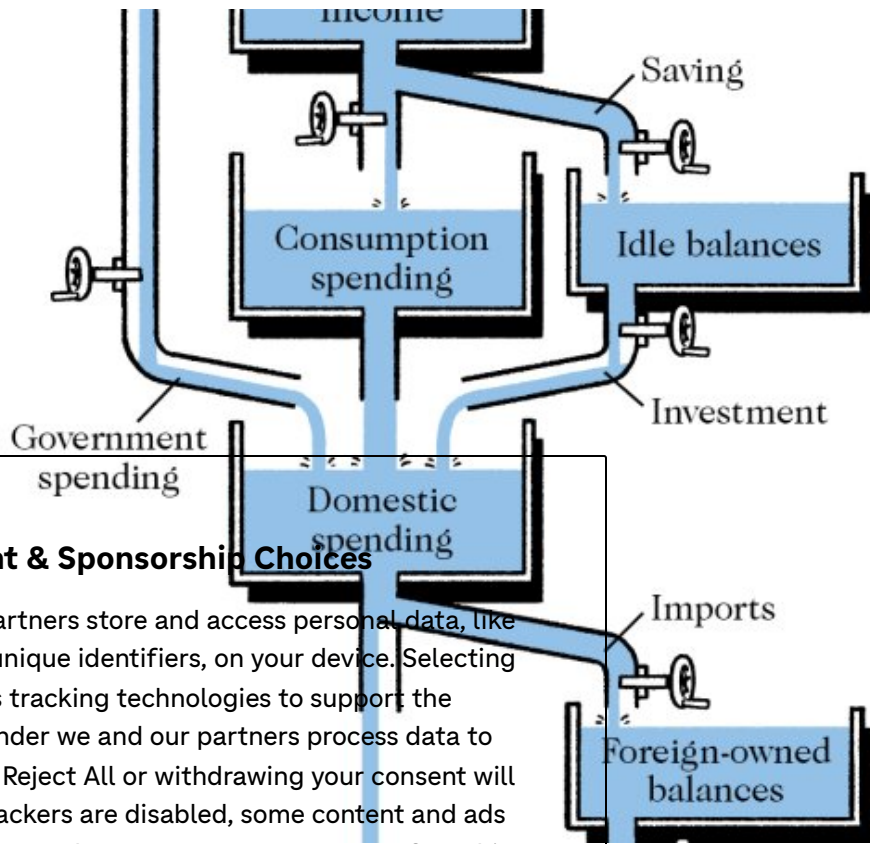
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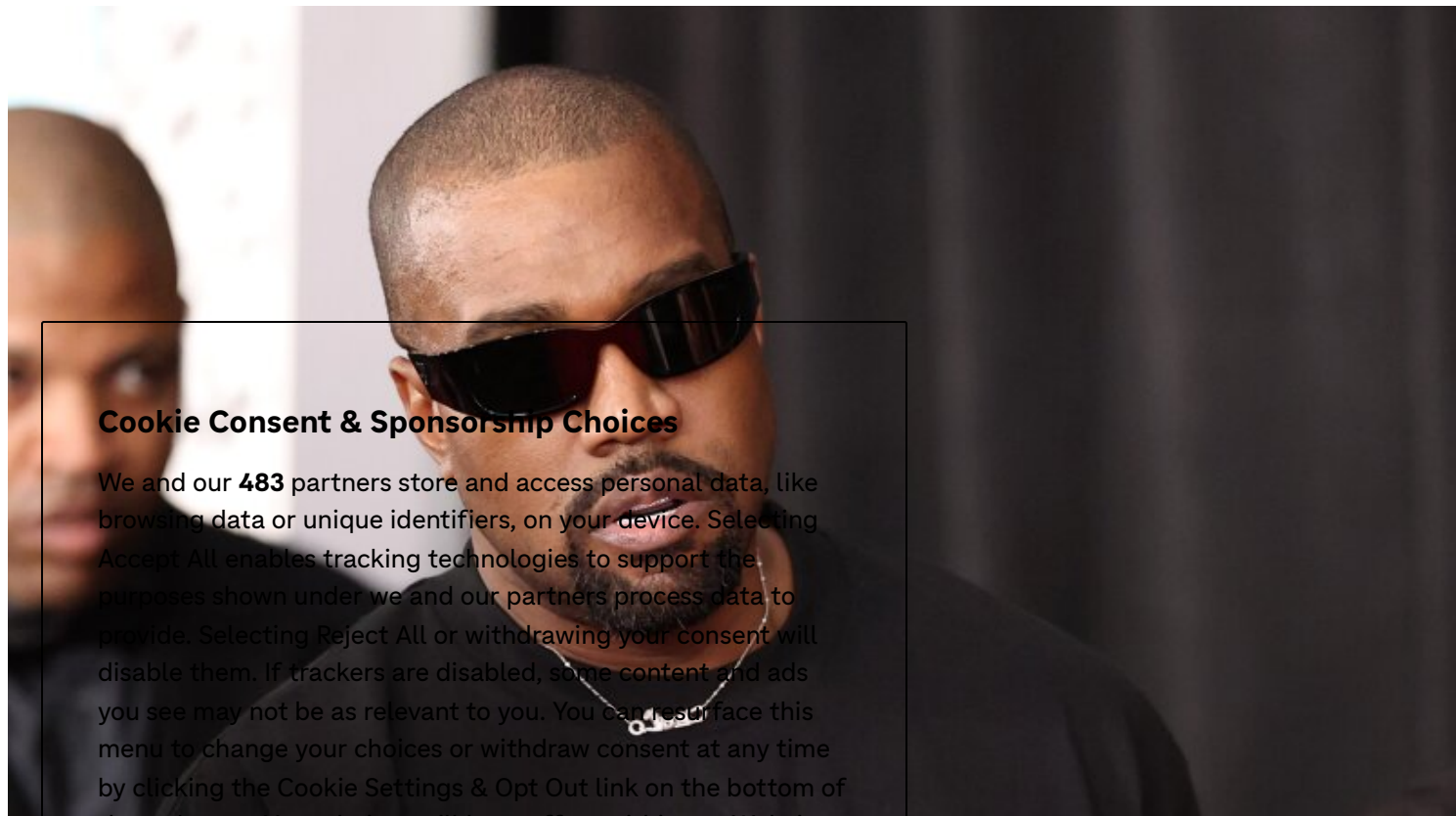
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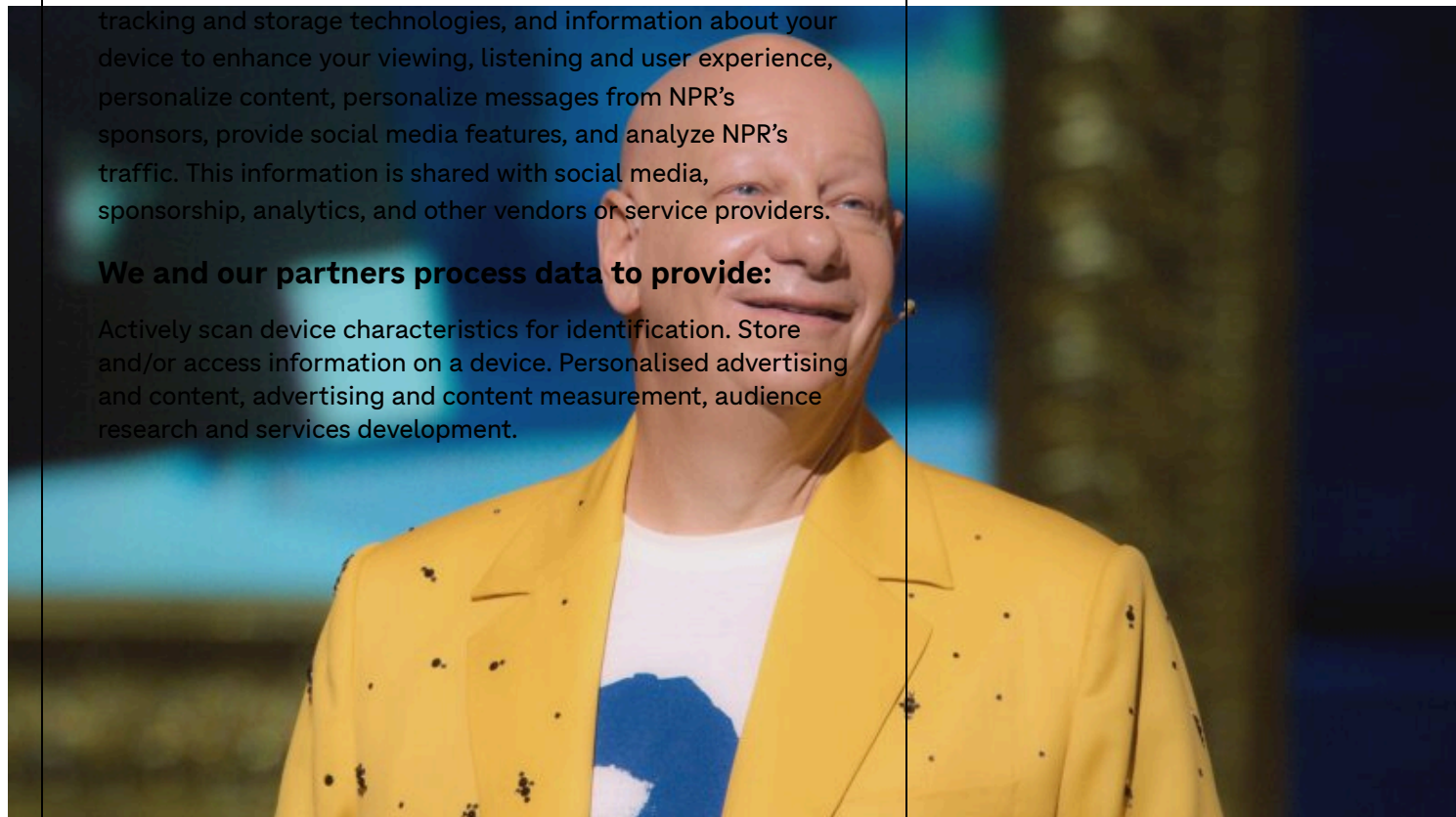
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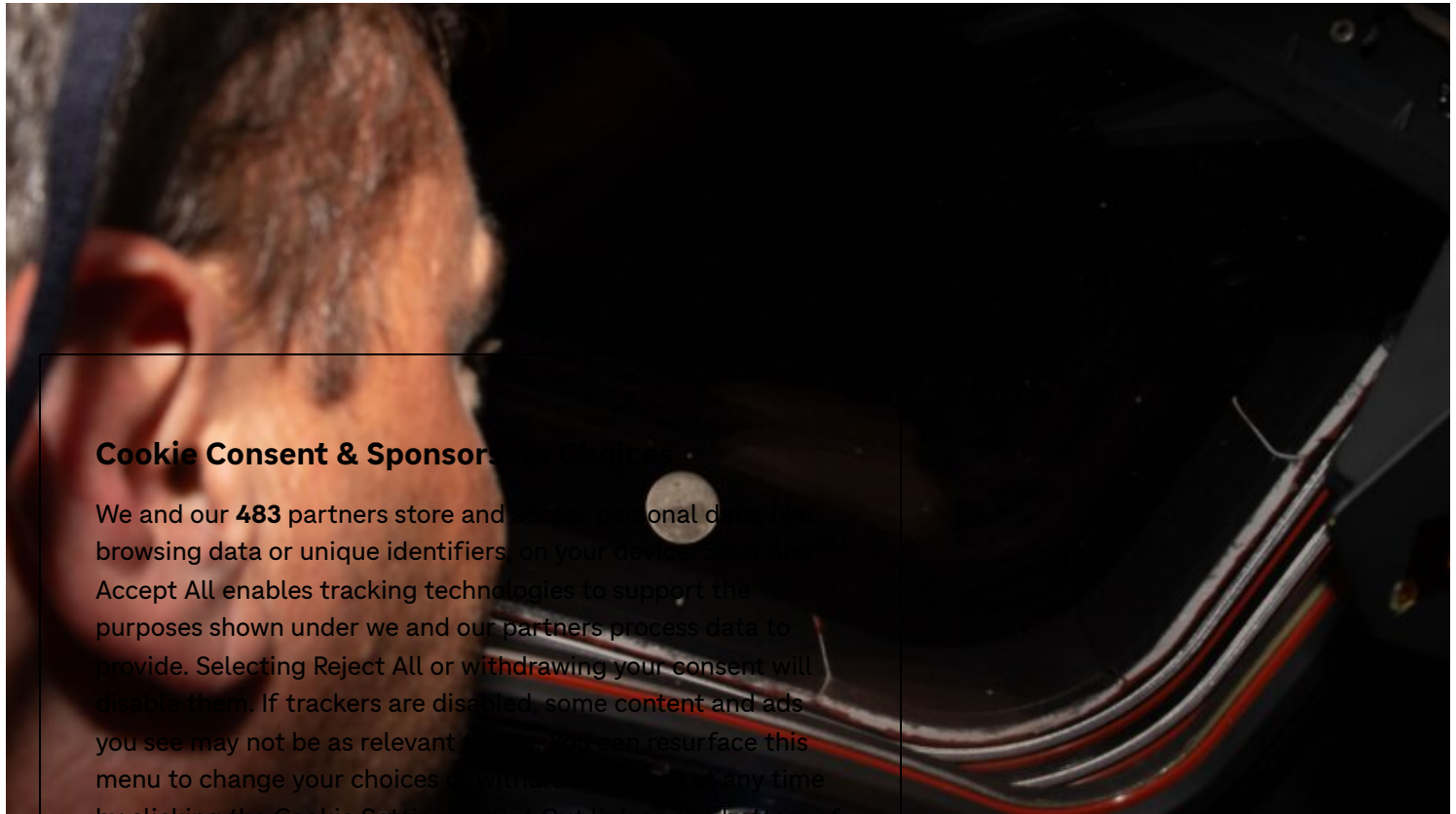
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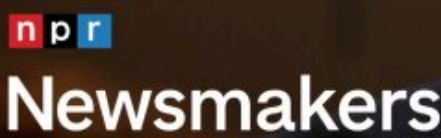
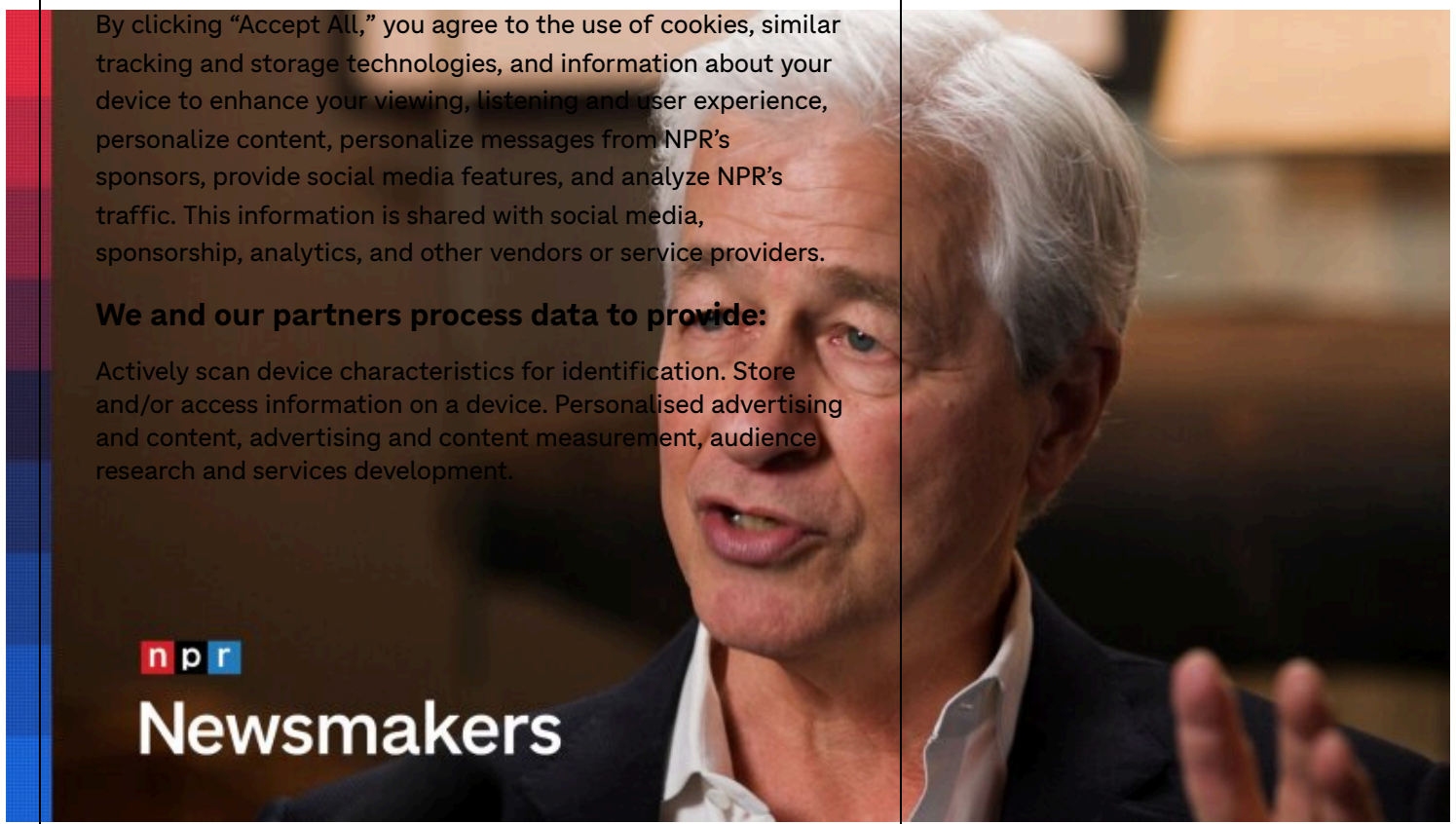
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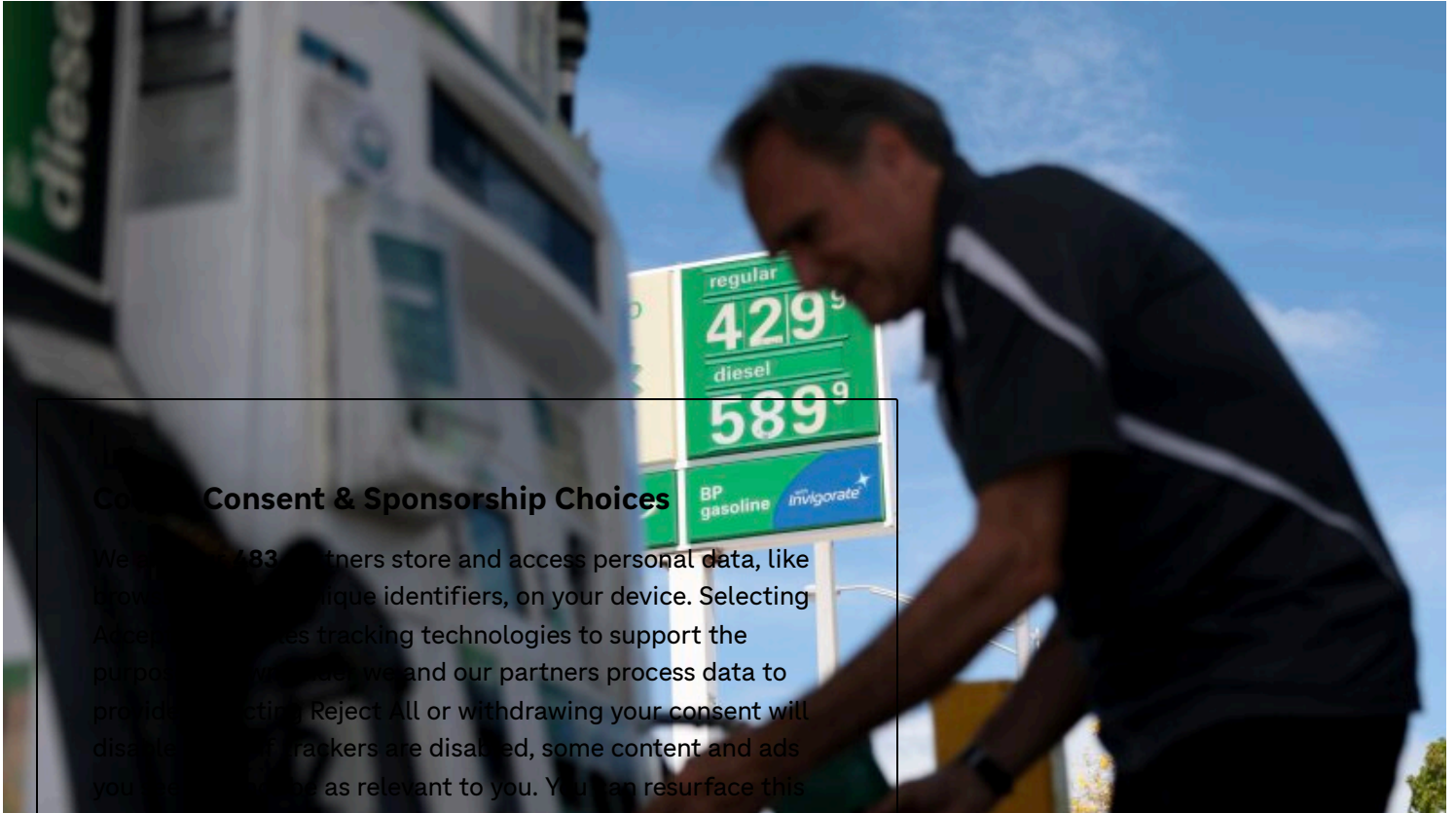
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