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Democracy Dies in Darkness

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2026 • \$4

Swarm of U.S. craft shifted to near Iran

Arsenal of military forces in region as sides work on a nuclear agreement

BY MEG KELLY AND IMOGEN PIPER

The U.S. military has rapidly increased its presence near Iran, shifting more than 150 aircraft to bases in Europe and the Middle East since a second round of nuclear talks between the United States and Iran ended without a breakthrough on Feb. 17, according to publicly available flight tracking data and satellite imagery reviewed by The Washington Post.

The current presence of U.S. military forces in the region is among the largest in more than two decades, since before the Iraq war in 2003. The buildup comes after President Donald Trump threatened to attack Iran unless a deal can be reached to restrict Iran's nuclear program, although he has not indicated the goals of such an attack. Iranian officials have said a deal is possible but that reaching one will take time.

Experts who reviewed the deployment said it has surpassed the military buildup that was seen before the U.S. strikes against the Iranian nuclear program in June of last year. They said the assets being assembled are indicative of a multiday campaign without a ground invasion.

Dozens of additional planes are aboard the warship USS Gerald R. Ford, which was spotted off the coast of the Greek island of Crete on Monday. The Ford is the second aircraft carrier sent to the Middle East, and its arrival means roughly a third of all

SEE IRAN ON A9

Trump speech previews midterm message



ANDREW HARNIK/GETTY IMAGES

President Donald Trump speaks Tuesday night, flanked by Vice President JD Vance and House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-Louisiana).

STARTS OUT SUNNY, THEN THE BARBS FLY

He hammers on themes of economy, immigration

BY ISAAC ARNSDORF

President Donald Trump's State of the Union address took a turn about an hour in.

Until that point, Trump largely stuck to a positive message — reciting improving economic indicators, showcasing the Olympic men's hockey team and invoking the nation's 250th birthday. The country was "the hottest," everyone was "winning."

Then he asked for a demonstration to show the television audience where everyone stood — or sat.

"If you agree with this statement," he said, "then stand up and show your support: The first duty of the American government is to protect American citizens, not illegal aliens." For more than a minute, Republicans stood and applauded, while Trump shook his head and sighed at the Democratic side of the chamber.

The consciously made-for-TV moment from the reality star turned president was destined for shareable online clips and campaign attack ads. It also marked an inflection point in Tuesday's speech, from a first hour whose sunny optimism was more characteristic of Ronald Reagan than Trump, to a second hour that returned the president to the familiar, darker territory of partisan barbs and graphic descriptions of violence.

The time for policy disagreements was over. The opposition was "crazy," "sick" and "destroying our country." His microphone was too hot, repeatedly giving static feedback when he raised his voice.

SEE ADDRESS ON A3

Takeaways: Four insights into Trump's State of the Union. A3

Epstein survivors: Several invited to speech as Democrats' guests. A3

President's newest tariffs may face legal challenge

BY DAVID J. LYNCH

President Donald Trump's new tariffs are not legally justified, according to several prominent economists and trade experts, who say there is no sign of the profound international financial problems that such measures were intended to remedy.

Hours after the Supreme Court invalidated the emergency tariffs that he imposed last year, Trump on Friday invoked a 1974 law to

Critics say 1974 law was improperly used as basis for a new 15% global levy

announce a new 10 percent global import tax, later raising it to 15 percent. The president cited a provision known as Section 122 that authorizes temporary restrictions on imports to deal with "funda-

mental international payments problems."

In an official proclamation, the president said the nation's "balance of payments," a comprehensive account of Americans' financial transactions with foreigners, was suffering "a large and serious deficit." And he listed a number of metrics reflecting a deteriorating U.S. financial posture.

The law does not define "balance-of-payments deficit," and economists disagree about what

should be included in the term. But several critics, including the International Monetary Fund's former chief economist and a prominent conservative legal commentator, disputed the president's claim. Trump wrongly conflated an alleged payments deficit with the merchandise trade deficit that he targeted last year with his first set of comprehensive tariffs under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act

SEE TARIFFS ON A6

Judge: No search of reporter's seized gear

DOJ can't be trusted, opinion says, and request undercuts press freedom

BY PERRY STEIN

A federal judge in Virginia rejected the Justice Department's request to search through a Washington Post reporter's electronic devices as part of a national security leak investigation, ruling that the court would instead be responsible for conducting the search.

In a 22-page opinion, Magistrate Judge William Porter admonished the Justice Department, saying the government could not be trusted to conduct the search on its own and that prosecutors' actions in obtaining a search warrant for reporter Hannah Natanson's home had shaken the deference and latitude that judges typically afford to government attorneys.

The ruling Tuesday afternoon is a victory, at least in part, for The Post and Natanson, who said that allowing the government to search through her phone and

SEE SEARCH ON A10



RYAN MURPHY/GETTY IMAGES

Officers lacerated as N.Y. pastime turns bloody

What started as a joyous snowball fight Monday in New York City morphed into a political storm after residents began pelting police officers with snow and ice, sending four to hospitals. Story, A5

FEMA's crisis guardrail at dire risk, email warns

The office ensures that executive branch keeps running in a catastrophe

BY BRIANNA SACKS

One of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's most critical but lesser-known functions — keeping the government running during a national emergency — is "significantly constrained" amid the partial government shutdown, according to an email sent to the agency's leader and four people with knowledge of the situation.

The email was sent Sunday to interim FEMA leader Karen Evans as the Office of National Continuity Programs prepares for President Donald Trump's State of the Union address Tuesday.

FEMA is integral in making sure all federal agencies and departments can still function and respond if a major emergency occurs while many of the country's leaders are at the Capitol for the event.

"If a national emergency were to occur during a lapse in appropriations, the nation's continuity posture would be at a heightened risk," said the email, obtained by The Washington Post.

In a statement, Department of Homeland Security spokesperson Tricia McLaughlin said that "operations for the State of the Union Address (SOTUA) remain unaffected."

"While non-essential training travel is paused, FEMA continues to authorize all travel necessary for national security," the statement said.

The agency's Office of National Continuity Programs plays a key

SEE FEMA ON A7

Why some baby boomers are talking about physician-assisted suicide

BY SHANNON NAJMABADI

Pat Ames is 71 and healthy, and expects to stay that way for years to come. But she's put a lot of thought into how she wants to die — and when: "If I can't care for myself," the Idaho resident said, "I want to be gone long before then." Ames has signed papers direct-

ing medical providers not to resuscitate her if she stops breathing or her heart gives out. She's told her younger brother of her plans. And she's got a passport and money she set aside years ago so that if it comes down to it, she can travel to a country where physician-assisted suicide is legal, even when death is not imminent.

"I will hop on a plane and end it under my conditions," she said. "Looking out a window at a forest."

More U.S. states are making physician-assisted suicides available — although only under narrow circumstances — and both defenders and critics of the practice say they see a growing discus-

sion among baby boomers, who are mostly in their 60s and 70s, about what role, if any, it should play in end-of-life decision-making.

Oregon, the first state to enact an assisted-suicide law in 1997, extended the practice to nonresidents in 2023. Delaware, Illinois and New York legalized assisted

suicide in recent months. And at least 15 states are expected to weigh similar legislation this year, although it is permitted only when people are terminally ill with just six months or less to live. They also must be mentally competent — disqualifying anyone with advanced dementia — and be

SEE AID ON A2

IN THE NEWS

Ballroom project A Republican lawmaker privately warned the White House last year that he had "substantial concerns" over the "disturbing" East Wing demolition. A4

No charge, still banned A probe of the labor secretary's husband on a sexual assault claim was closed after police found no evidence. A7

THE NATION
Pentagon chief Pete Hegseth has threatened Anthropic, saying officials could invoke powers to force the AI firm to share its novel technology in the name of national security. A2

THE WORLD
Tariff chaos gives China a win weeks ahead of an expected meeting between Trump and Xi. A8
Hungary vetoed European aid for Ukraine on the war's fourth anniversary. A11

THE ECONOMY
The FTC has warned of a "big wave" of phone scams in which fraudsters claim to be from the IRS to steal money from taxpayers. A12
U.S. stocks largely rebounded from a sharp drop after nervous investors were reminded of AI's upsides. A12

STYLE
A Petworth-area community group was vibrant with parenting discussions, until politics created a schism. B1

SPORTS
Tiger Woods is keeping everyone guessing over whether he'll play in the Masters and be Ryder Cup captain. B7

THE REGION
Congress missed the deadline in its resolution to block D.C. tax policy, the city's top legal officer argued. B11

FOOD
The world's biggest fast-food chain has landed in the U.S., offering \$1.19 soft-serve with a side of despair.

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