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Congress questions Pentagon head over drug boat

BY STEPHEN GROVES AND LISA MASCARO THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Pete Hegseth barely squeaked through a grueling Senate confirmation process to become secretary of defense earlier this year, facing lawmakers wary of the Fox News Channel host and skeptical of his capacity, temperament and fitness for the job. Just three months later, he quickly became embroiled in Signalgate as he and other top U.S. officials used the popular Signal messaging application to discuss pending military strikes in Yemen. A Pentagon inspector general's report delivered to lawmakers Wednesday found his actions posed a risk to personnel and mission. And now, in what may be his most career-defining moment yet, Hegseth is confronting questions about the use of military force and demands he release the videotapes after a special operations team reportedly attacked survivors of a strike on an alleged drug boat off the coast of Venezuela. Some lawmakers and legal experts say the second strike would have violated the laws of armed conflict. “These are serious charges, and that’s the reason we’re going to have special oversight,” said Sen. Roger Wicker of Mississippi, the Republican

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Somalia’s top official mum after ‘insults’

BY AMELIA NIERENBERG AND HUSSEIN MOHAMED NEW YORK TIMES NEWS SERVICE

MOGADISHU, Somalia — Somalia’s leader said Wednesday that it was “better not to respond” a day after President Donald Trump called Somali immigrants “garbage” during a xenophobic tirade. “We are not the only country that Trump insults,” Prime Minister Hamza Abdi Barre told an audience at an innovation summit in Mogadishu, the Somali capital, in response to a question about Trump’s comments, according to video published by Shabelle TV, a local media network. “Sometimes it’s better not to respond,” he said. Somalia, a nation of 19 million people in the Horn of Africa, has long regarded the United States as a key ally in the fight against the al-Shabab terrorist group. Though the Trump administration has slashed foreign aid budgets in recent months, the United States gave around \$128 million to Somalia

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Tow company owner has history of trouble

Public records reveal past bankruptcy, defaults, guilty pleas

BY MASON EDWARDS STAFF WRITER

The Chattanooga tow truck company owner accused of illegally selling vehicles across the Southeast has pleaded guilty to thefts in the past and is connected to a trail of bankruptcy, debt and property foreclosures in several states, public records show. Benjamin Wade Elliott Duvall, 43, faces 28 charges after the Chattanooga Police Department and the Hamilton County Sheriff’s Office executed search warrants at his home and business Tuesday. The arrest at his car lot on Daisy Dallas Road in Hixson was not Duvall’s first encounter with law enforcement, according to public records. Duvall’s bond was set at \$280,000, according to Hamilton County General Sessions court clerks. He remained at the Hamilton County jail as of Wednesday night.

PUBLIC RECORDS

Duvall pleaded guilty to felony theft between \$2,500 and \$10,000 in Franklin County, Tennessee, on Oct. 11, 2022, court

Pending charges against Ben Duvall

Racketeering enterprise  
Operation of an unlawful chop shop  
Theft of services  
Harassment  
Criminal conspiracy  
Two counts of forgery

Two counts of altering, falsifying or forging evidence of titles  
Six counts of theft of property  
Six counts of criminal simulation  
Seven counts of fraudulent transfer of a motor vehicle

Source: Hamilton County District Attorney’s office

Benjamin Wade Elliott Duvall

records show. He was charged by a grand jury with six crimes related to stealing motor vehicles and cash. Those charges included four counts of theft of property and two counts of hindering a secured creditor. He was ordered to pay restitution, avoid contact with his victims and placed on probation for two years, ending in 2024, Franklin County Circuit Court records said. He previously pleaded guilty to theft of property in Hamilton County in 2021, a case for which he still owes court fees, according to online Hamilton County General Sessions Court records. He was placed on probation, ordered to stay out

of Walmart and was required to complete 40 hours of community service. Duvall has been associated with more than 20 business entities since the early 2000s, including companies involved in towing, consulting, credit services and promotional work. He’s listed as the chief executive officer, owner or authorized representative for businesses in Atlanta and Woodstock, Georgia, Huntsville, and one company in Starke, Florida. Public records show at least seven judgments or liens against Duvall. Southeast Bank filed a lien on Duvall and Choo Choo Towing & Recovery for \$6,314 in Hamilton County General Sessions Court on Aug. 25. A \$92,000 federal tax lien was filed against him in 2007 by the IRS in Fulton County (Georgia) Superior Court,

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East Ridge murderer fights impending death sentence

BY SOFIA SARIC STAFF WRITER

An East Ridge man who raped and murdered a local woman continues to fight against his impending sentence — death by lethal injection — citing “the transformation that he has demonstrated over the last 35 years,” according to a clemency petition. Harold Wayne Nichols pleaded guilty in May 1990 to first-degree felony murder, aggravated rape and first-degree burglary in connection

with Karen Pulley’s death. Nichols, now 64, broke into the 20-year-old Chattanooga woman’s house Sept. 30, 1988, to rape her, according to court records. “He did not enter her home intending to kill anyone but, nevertheless,

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Chattanooga Police Department Investigator Kevin Orsburn, left, and Hamilton County Sheriff’s Office Detective Sarah Long bag evidence at Benjamin Wade Elliott Duvall’s house.

STAFF PHOTO BY MASON EDWARDS

Chattanooga News-Free Press Archives

In 1989, Harold Wayne Nichols, facing murder and rape charges, is shown by then-District Attorney Gary Gerbitz a form Nichols signed that waived the use of an attorney during questioning by police. At left is Dot Rogers, court reporter Judge Doug Meyer’s courtroom.

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TODAY  
HIGH 50  
LOW 38  
Evening rain showers

FRIDAY  
HIGH 48  
LOW 39  
Morning rain showers

See B8 for full weather reports  
Source: WRCB-TV Channel 3