

## TRUMP DELIVERS HIS NEWS TO NEWSPAPER REPORTERS

**NEW YORK:** US President Donald Trump went old school on Friday, calling reporters from The Washington Post and The New York Times to announce that he had ordered a bill to repeal and replace Obamacare pulled from consideration in the House when it became clear there weren't enough votes for passage. One of those reporters - Robert Costa of the Post - tweeted news from the surprise phone call a minute after getting it while the president was still talking.

Trump's phone calls came amid a day of drama that played out on television screens leading up to an anticipated afternoon vote on one of the Republicans' enduring campaign promises, to get rid of the insurance law enacted by former President Barack Obama. Congress was debating the measure when it was taken back before a vote. The calls to Costa and Maggie Haberman of the New York Times were surprising given the newspapers' aggressive coverage of the president. He has consistently derided their "fake news" and mocked the "failing" Times,



**INDIANAPOLIS:** In this Dec 1, 2016, file photo, US President-elect Donald Trump speaks at the Carrier Corp. factory. — AP

which has been seeing an increase in subscriptions.

Costa wrote in a first-person piece posted on the Post's web site that when

his cell phone rang at 3:31 p.m. EDT, he thought it was a reader complaint because it was a blocked number. "Hello, Bob," came the president's voice.

"So, we just pulled it." Costa multitasked, interviewing Trump while posting several updates on Twitter. "President Trump just called me, still on phone," he posted at 3:32. "We just pulled it," he tells me.

Costa, a national political reporter for the Post, tweeted a stream of updates: "I don't blame Paul, Trump tells me" and "What a convo. I'll type it up quick." CNN ran a screen grab of Costa's Twitter feed, even though he's nominally a competitor: Costa also works as an NBC News analyst. Before 5 pm, he had posted a first-person account of the conversation under the headline: "Hello, Bob: President Trump called my cellphone to say that the health care bill was dead."

Haberman's first tweet came at 3:52 pm: "TRUMP tells me in interview this is now the Democrats' fault, and that he anticipates that when Obama 'explodes,' they will be ready to deal." She quickly corrected her typo, meaning Obamacare instead of Obama.

She wrote on Twitter that Trump had shown uncharacteristic discipline in

saying it was the Democrats who had let him down. Besides Twitter, a quote from her interview appeared in the Times' online coverage of the events. Trump spoke before cameras in the Oval Office about an hour after the phone conversations. It wasn't Haberman's first phone interview with the president. She wrote a piece shortly after his inauguration about life in the White House.

Later, Haberman offered a Twitter observation about the president: "Trump is not going away this weekend. He was deeply disciplined in phone interviews. The big question is what happens now when he sits in the White House residence and watches television coverage of the bill's failure." Based on the media coverage, it won't be an easy aftermath.

"Is there a sense of how ignominious this defeat is?" CNN's Jake Tapper asked correspondent Dana Bash, calling it an embarrassment for House Republicans and the White House. "The president just suffered a terrible defeat," said MSNBC's Brian Williams. — AP

## MURDER BY BERKELEY ACTIVIST RENEWS DEBATE OVER NEW 'GENDER' PRONOUNS

**BERKELEY:** Pablo Gomez Jr was a University of California, Berkeley, senior majoring in Latino studies and a prominent campus activist when authorities say he stabbed to death a popular elementary-school teacher. Soon, the crime that police described as "very brutal and unusual" in a city that reported just two homicides last year was sucked up into the debate over gender identity when it was reported that Gomez preferred to be called "they" rather than "he."

Even in famously liberal Berkeley, with its long history of protest, the uproar came as a surprise, overwhelming the online news site, www.berkeleyside.com, that first reported on Gomez's preference. "I didn't see it as something that would anger anyone," reporter Emilie Raguso said. After Raguso's report, conservative commentator Ann Coulter ridiculed the pronoun change and mocked Gomez's activist background. Breitbart.com and other conservative political websites picked up the story.

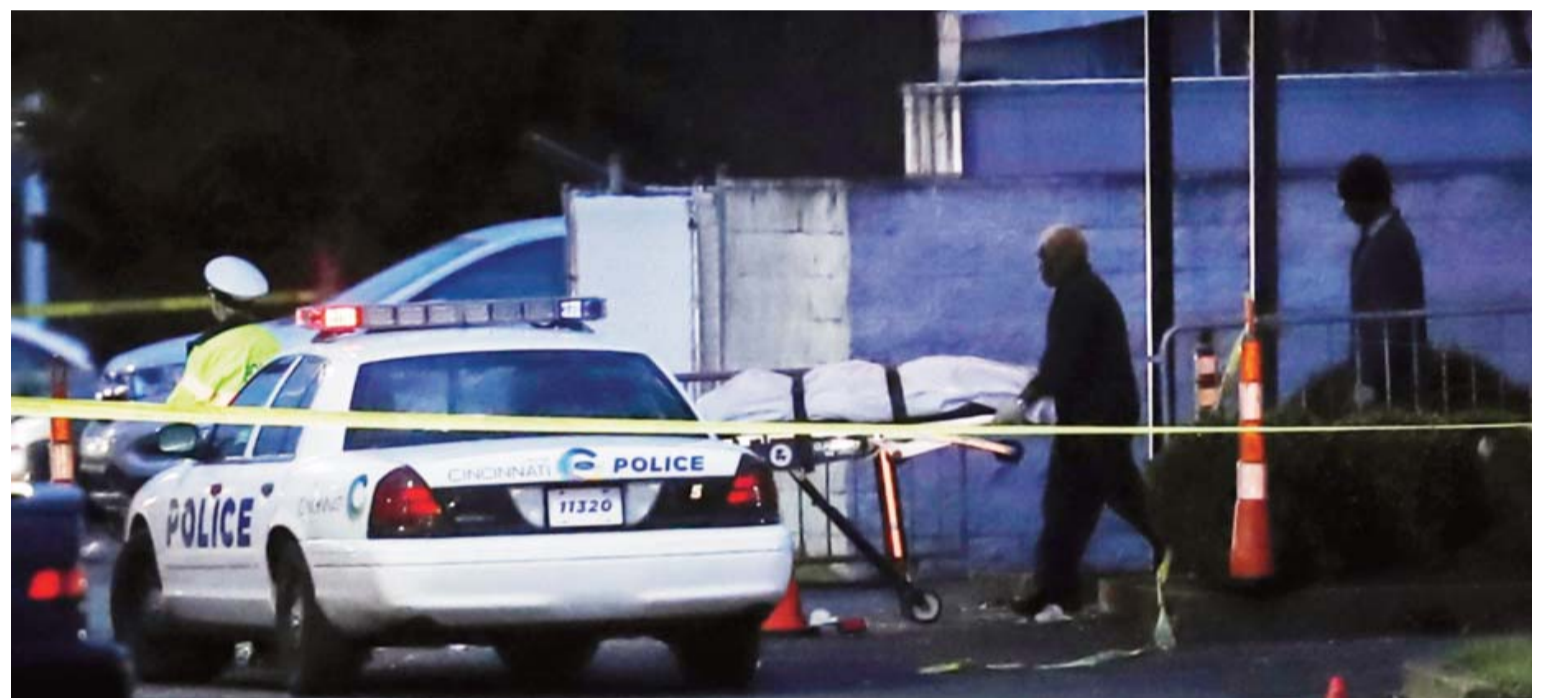
On the university campus, where the debate over nontraditional pronouns has simmered, some students said Gomez's case is different. "I think you give away your right to make a demand like that when you are arrested for killing somebody," said junior Jonathan Chow, a member of the College Republicans.

Representatives of UC Berkeley's Gender Equity Resource Center, where Gomez was a member, declined requests

to comment on the controversy, as did other gay rights activist groups in Berkeley. Victim Emile Inman, a 27-year-old native of France, was found in her home in January with a "We Stand with Standing Rock" sign in the front window she shared with other young roommates a few miles from campus.

Hours earlier on Jan 6, police found Kiana Schmitt, 24, seriously injured outside an apartment just north of campus. Police have declined to say how Schmitt was connected to Gomez. Gomez was arrested Jan 7 at a Burbank hospital near the Southern California home of Gomez's parents. Gomez is being held in jail and is accused of killing Inman and assaulting Schmitt.

A young woman who answered the door this week at Inman's home declined to comment, and her family also has refused requests from The Associated Press and other media to comment on her death. Gomez's attorney, George Arroyo, declined to comment and Gomez's parents did not respond to email requests for comment. Their telephone listing in Los Angeles appears disconnected. The judge in the case ordered a mental health evaluation after Gomez was removed from a Feb 1 court hearing to enter a plea to charges of murder, attempted murder, assault with a deadly weapon and robbery. Deputies led a kicking and screaming Gomez from the courtroom after a brief meeting with Arroyo. — AP



**CINCINNATI:** A body is removed as police work at the Cameo club after a fatal shooting. — AP

## ONE KILLED, 14 WOUNDED IN OHIO NIGHTCLUB SHOOTING

### SHOOTER STILL AT LARGE, NO SIGNS OF TERRORISM

**WASHINGTON:** Gunfire erupted in a crowded Ohio nightclub early yesterday after a personal dispute boiled over, killing one person and leaving 14 wounded as partygoers scattered into the night, authorities said. The gunman remained at large following the shooting at early yesterday at the Cameo nightclub in Cincinnati that assistant police chief Paul Neudigate said was packed with revellers. "There are no indications this incident is terrorism related," he said on Twitter.

It was unclear how many shooters were involved. Authorities initially said there were at least two, but Neudigate later tweeted that there was "only one reported shooter at this time, still investigating if others involved." The Cincinnati Police Department said there were "15 gunshot victims, one deceased." The shooting was believed to have stemmed from a dispute "between specific groups of individuals earlier in the day, escalating to the nightclub tragedy," according to a tweet from the government of the midwestern city. Sergeant Eric Franz described the aftermath to ABC News as a "large and complicated homicide scene." Police were interviewing multiple witnesses, he said.

#### 'Grown and sexy'

According to its Facebook page, Cameo admits "grown and sexy" partygoers aged 21 and over on Saturday nights. "It was a young crowd and we have had incidents in the past,

but this is the worst by far," Captain Kimberly Williams, the district's police commander, told CNN. "By the time... the shots were fired, individuals ran outside, so there was not a lot of people inside the club. I believe there was a large crowd earlier this evening, but just a lot of chaos when the shots went off," she said.

Cameo was the site of two shooting investigations in 2015, local news station WLWT reported. Someone was shot in the foot there on New Year's Day, and a shooting victim was found in the parking lot in September, WLWT said. Ohio Governor John Kasich said his office was offering help to local authorities. "You see things like this and you begin to wonder, where is it safe to go?" he said on CNN. "I've offered, of course, all state assistance that is needed in this-you know, in another terrible tragedy in our country."

Although police said there was no evidence of a terrorism connection, the attack inevitably raised memories of last year's rampage at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida. That mass shooting-which left 49 dead and 68 wounded-was the deadliest terror attack in the United States since September 11, 2001. The gunman, Omar Mateen, pledged allegiance to the Islamic State jihadist group in a 911 call to police during the assault on the Pulse nightclub.

#### American gun violence

But shootings have become a common feature of life in America, where the right to bear

arms is protected by the US Constitution. Cincinnati, a city of 300,000 people nestled along the northern banks of the Ohio River, had 66 homicides in 2016, all but nine of them as a result of firearms. This year has seen a spike in gun violence, with 57 victims of shooting so far as of Thursday last week, compared to 31 during the same period last year.

Elsewhere in the United States, a gunman opened fire Saturday on a double-decker bus on the Las Vegas Strip, killing one person and wounding another. Police said the suspect appeared to have "mental issues." On January 6, a 26-year-old Iraq war veteran opened fire in the baggage claim area of the Fort Lauderdale, Florida airport, killing five people.

More notorious gun crimes in recent years include the rampage carried out by 21-year-old white supremacist Dylan Roof, who shot to death nine people during a Bible study session at a historically African American church in Charleston, South Carolina on June 17, 2015. And a massacre at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut on December 14, 2012 claimed the lives of 20 children and six adults. Gunman Adam Lanza, who had a history of mental illness, also killed his mother and went on to commit suicide. The tragedy sparked calls for stricter gun control laws, but bills banning assault weapons and expanding background checks on gun purchases were defeated in the US Congress. — AFP

## PENTAGON ENJOYS MORE FREEDOM UNDER TRUMP

**WASHINGTON:** The Pentagon under US President Donald Trump is enjoying greater freedom to run its wars the way it wants and not constantly seek White House approval on important decisions. Many in the military appreciate this increased autonomy, but critics charge it is raising civilian death rates, puts the lives of US troops at greater risk and leads to a lack of oversight of America's conflicts.

Nowhere has the shift been more visible than in the fight against the Islamic State group in northern Syria, where under Barack Obama even minor tweaks to US plans underwent exhaustive White House scrutiny. Since Trump's inauguration, the Marine Corps has brought an artillery battery into Syria, and the Army has flowed in hundreds of Rangers, bringing the total number of US forces there to almost 1,000.

Commanders are weighing the possibility of deploying hundreds more, and the Pentagon this week announced it had provided artillery support and choppered local forces behind enemy lines in a bid to seize a strategic dam. The greater leeway marks a departure for the National Security Council (NSC), which coordinates foreign and military policy and implements the president's national security agenda.

Under Obama, the NSC oversaw just about every aspect of America's wars in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, with then Pentagon chief Ash Carter was kept on a short leash. Trump, conversely, has repeatedly deferred to his defense secretary, Jim Mattis, on military moves. Mattis, a retired general, has delegated expanded authorities to his battlefield commanders. "Jim Mattis has been given the latitude to conduct military operations in the way he sees best," Pentagon spokesman Chris Sherwood said.

#### '30-something year olds'

The United States is fighting IS in Iraq and Syria and the Taliban in Afghanistan "by, with and through" local forces backed by US and allied air power. That overall strategy hasn't changed, but commanders now have greater discretion to move troops and equipment around. Troop increases were especially sensitive for Obama, who campaigned on a promise to end America's Middle East wars and not put US boots on the ground.

Senator John McCain, who heads the Senate Armed Services Committee, was a frequent critic of what he calls NSC micromanagement. The veteran lawmaker said he favors battlefield commanders getting greater latitude. "We don't have to ask the 30-something-year-olds for permission to respond to an attack in Afghanistan," he said.

McCain's congressional counterpart Mac Thornberry described a visit he made to Afghanistan under Obama, when he overheard a call from an NSC staffer asking how much fuel was in the planes on the tarmac. "The level of micromanagement was incredible, and of course by the time you work your way through the NSC process your target has moved," he said.

#### Hands off

Trump has also faced criticism for his hands-off approach, especially after he approved a special operations raid in Yemen that went horribly wrong, leading to the death of a Navy SEAL, multiple civilians including children and a crashed helicopter. Though the White House insisted the raid yielded vital intelligence and was a "successful operation by all standards," critics said the military had been rash to execute the mission.

Observers are also calling into question whether the Pentagon is allowing civilian casualties to mount. Military officials vehemently deny this and stress that civilian safety is a top priority in approving any strike. Airwars, a London-based collective of journalists and researchers, said Friday it had become so overwhelmed tracking civilian deaths allegedly caused by US and coalition planes that it has stopped tracking Russian strikes.

"The decision to temporarily suspend our Russia strike assessments has been a very difficult one to take," Airwars director Chris Woods said. "Moscow is still reportedly killing hundreds of civilians in Syria every month. But with coalition casualty claims escalating so steeply-and with very limited Airwars resources-we believe our key focus at present needs to be on the US-led alliance."

The Pentagon has acknowledged at least 220 civilians have been unintentionally killed since operations to defeat IS began in late summer 2014. Airwars estimates the real number to be more than 10 times that. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group said a coalition air strike early Tuesday killed 33 displaced civilians near the town of Al-Mansura west of Raqa.

A US defense official stressed that any extra deaths are a result of fighting occurring in more densely packed urban areas, such as Mosul in Iraq and around Raqa in Syria. "I know for a fact that there is no change in civilian casualties tolerance," the official said. General Thomas Waldhauser, who heads the US Africa Command, said Friday he hopes the White House will loosen restrictions for operations in Somalia, where the US is targeting Shebaab militants. — AFP

## BORDER-WALL PROPOSAL FACES MANY OBSTACLES

**WASHINGTON:** US President Donald Trump has now laid out exactly what he wants in the "big, beautiful wall" that he's promised to build on the US-Mexico border. But his effort to build a huge hurdle to those entering the US illegally faces impediments of its own. It's still not clear how Trump will pay for the wall that, as described in contracting notices, would be 30 feet high and easy on the eye for those looking at it from the north. The Trump administration will also have to contend with unfavorable geography and many legal battles. A look at some of those obstacles:

#### Money

Trump promised that Mexico would pay for his wall, a demand Mexico has repeatedly rejected. Trump's first budget proposal to Congress, a preliminary draft that was light on details, asked lawmakers for a \$2.6 billion down payment for the wall. An internal report prepared for Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly estimated that a wall along the entire border would cost about \$21 billion. Congressional Republicans have estimated a more moderate price tag of \$12 billion to \$15 billion. Trump himself has

suggested a cost of about \$12 billion. It's unclear how much money Congress will approve. Lawmakers have been balking at his plans to sharply cut other federal spending to pay for the wall and other boosts to border security, while increasing military spending. White House spokesman Sean Spicer told reporters this past week that the administration was still looking at how the wall would be funded, adding that it hasn't given up on Mexico footing the bill.

#### Geography

Roughly half of the 2,000-mile US-Mexico border is in Texas and marked by the winding and twisting Rio Grande. A 1970 treaty with Mexico requires that anything built near that river not obstruct its flow. The same treaty applies to a stretch of border in Arizona, where the Colorado River marks the international boundary.

Some fencing that is already in place along the frontier is built well off the river, in some places nearly a mile away from the border. Trump will have to navigate not only the treaty maintained by the International Boundary and Water Commission but also various environmental regulations that protect some stretches of border and restrict what kind of structures can be built and where. The contracting notices of March 17 say the Trump administration wants the wall dug at least 6 feet into the ground. Along parts of the border in California, environmentally sensitive sand dunes required that a "floating fence" was built to allow the natural movement of the sand. — AP



**This March 22, 2017, file photo shows a family having a picnic on the bank of the Rio Grande river in Miguel Aleman, Tamaulipas state, Mexico, located across from Roma, Texas. — AP**