



ALEPPO COMES BACK TO LIFE

Syrian women take pictures as they ride a train travelling through Aleppo's devastated eastern districts for the first time in more than four years, on Wednesday. Life in Aleppo is slowly coming back to normalcy despite been ravaged by the country's nearly six-year war.

PHOTO: AFP

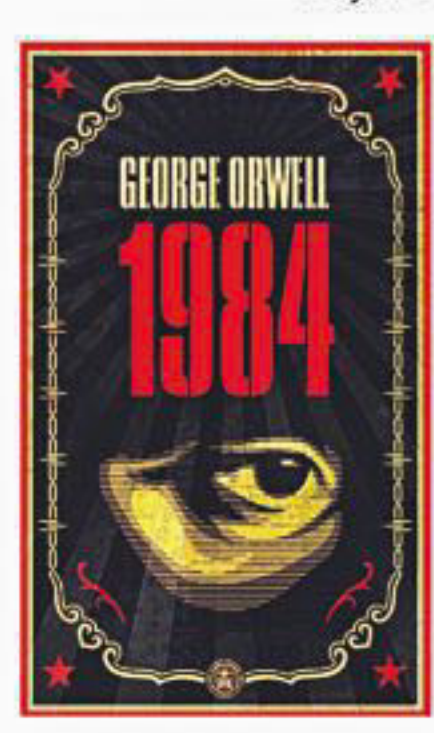
US no longer a 'full democracy'

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
The US now no longer qualifies as a 'full democracy' because of a rapid erosion of trust in elected officials, according to a UK-based think tank.
The Economist Intelligence Unit creates an annual report ranking countries on their adherence to 60 distinct democratic values, including electoral processes and recognition of civil liberties.
In 2016, the US dropped into the 'flawed democracy' category for the first time, earning a rating of 7.98 out of 10 - placing it below Japan, Uruguay and Mauritius.
France, Italy, Greece and India also lie in the same category, with question marks raised over the functioning of governments in these countries. The number of 'full democracies' slipped from 20 in 2015 to 19 in 2016, while 72 countries recorded a decline in their score.
'The US, a standard-bearer of democracy for the world has become a 'flawed democracy', as popular confidence in the functioning of public institutions has declined," the think tank said.
'The downgrade [in the US rating] was not a consequence of Donald Trump. Rather, it was caused by the same factors that led Trump to the White House: a continued erosion of trust in government and elected officials, which the index measures using data from global surveys.
'This has been a long-term trend and one that preceded the election of Trump. By tapping a deep strain of political disaffection with the functioning of democracy, Trump became a beneficiary of the low esteem in which US voters hold their government.
In his departing speech at the White House, outgoing president Barack Obama warned: "Democracy can buckle when it gives into fear. So just as we as citizens must remain vigilant against external aggression, we must guard against a weakening of the values that make us who we are."

Orwell's '1984' back as bestseller amid focus on 'alternative facts'

AFP, New York
George Orwell's "1984" novel about a dystopian future under an authoritarian regime is back as a bestseller and being reprinted decades after it was written as readers grapple with Donald Trump administration's defense of "alternative facts."
The book, first published in 1949, features a devious "Big Brother" government that spies on its citizens and forces them into "doublethink," or simultaneously accepting contradictory versions of the truth.
Sales spiked after a senior White House official, Kellyanne Conway, used the term "alternative facts" on NBC's "Meet the Press" on Sunday during a discussion about the size of the crowd at Trump's inauguration.
Some commentators denounced her expression as "Orwellian."
By Monday, the novel by the late British author hit Amazon's list of top 10 bestsellers, which is updated hourly. On

Wednesday, it was No. 1.
Responding to the renewed interest, its publisher ordered a 75,000-copy reprint this week, Signet Classics said in a statement. A company spokesman told CNN late on Tuesday that was more than would normally be reprinted.
The West Virginia chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, which has vowed to "resist" the president's policies on immigration and other issues, said on Twitter it picked "1984" as the read of the month for its book club.
Conway was responding to accusations that the Trump administration was fixated on the size of his inauguration crowds, saying: "We feel compelled to go out and clear the air and put alternative facts out there."
Amid widespread criticism of the expression, even Merriam-Webster chimed in to challenge Trump's former campaign manager. "A fact is a piece of information presented as having objective reality," the dictionary publisher tweeted.



Don't visit if you don't pay

Trump issues ultimatum to Mexican leader over border wall

AGENCIES
US President Donald Trump yesterday told Mexico's president to cancel an upcoming visit to Washington if he is unwilling to foot the bill for a border wall.
Escalating a cross border war of words, Trump took to Twitter to publicly upbraid Enrique Pena Nieto.
"If Mexico is unwilling to pay for the badly needed wall, then it would be better to cancel the upcoming meeting."
Talks have been scheduled to take place at the White House next week.
On Wednesday, the mercurial US leader ordered officials to begin to "plan, design and construct a physical wall" along the 2,000-mile (3,200-kilometer) US-Mexico border.
Lawmakers are pressuring President Enrique Pena Nieto to scrap Tuesday's talks in Washington after Trump made good on his campaign pledge to quickly order the construction of the barrier.
In an executive order titled "Border Security and Immigration Enforcement Improvements", Trump on Wednesday signed into law many of the pledges he made during his election cam-

paign. These include building a wall along the US-Mexico border, deporting illegal immigrants, establishing new immigration detention centres and hiring 5,000 more Border Patrol agents.
"I regret and condemn the decision of the United States to continue construction of a wall that, for years, has divided us instead of uniting us," Pena Nieto said in a nationally televised message.
"I have said it time and again: Mexico will not pay for any wall," he said, referring to Trump's vow to make the southern neighbor pay for the barrier.
Pena Nieto said he would wait for a report from a high-level Mexican delegation holding meetings in the US capital this week and consult



with governors and lawmakers before deciding on "the next steps to take."
Foreign Minister Luis Videgaray, who was in Washington, told the Televisa network that Pena Nieto will weigh whether to travel to Washington but that "the meeting stands for now."
Pena Nieto is under pressure to avoid meeting Trump again, with Senator Miguel Barbosa, of the leftist Democratic Revolution Party (PRD), saying Pena Nieto should not let Trump "impose his conditions" in negotiations.
Margarita Zavala, a potential 2018 presidential candidate of the conservative National Action Party (PAN), wrote on Twitter that Trump's announcement was "an affront to Mexico" and that Pena Nieto must reconsider his trip.
Other political stalwarts urged Pena Nieto to stand up to Trump during his visit.
Two-time presidential election runner-up Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador exhorted Pena Nieto to lodge a complaint against the US government at the United Nations for "violation of human rights and racial discrimination."
He said Pena Nieto should go to Washington to deliver the complaint to Trump and to "fight for freedom, not beg for it."



UK publishes draft bill on triggering Brexit

AFP, London
Britain's government yesterday published a draft law that would authorise Prime Minister Theresa May to begin the procedure for leaving the European Union in an important milestone towards Brexit.
The British people have made the decision to leave the EU... so today we have introduced a bill in parliament which will allow us to formally trigger Article 50 by the end of March," said Brexit minister David Davis.
The two clause "European Union Notification of Withdrawal Bill" asks parliament to give May authority to start the formal mechanism by which Britain will leave the bloc.
The government said MPs would get their first chance to debate and vote on it Tuesday and Wednesday next week.
May's government was forced to go to parliament following a landmark Supreme Court ruling this week that rejected its argument that executive powers allowed it to proceed.
The ruling Conservatives have a small majority in the House of Commons and the bill is expected to get the go-ahead from MPs, although opposition parties have said they plan put forward amendments that could slow it down.
Davis said he hoped that parliament would "respect the decision taken by the British people and pass the legislation quickly," arguing that MPs had supported holding the referendum in the first place.
House of Commons leader David Lidington told parliament that the bill's third and final reading in the House of Commons - followed by a final vote by MPs - would be on February 8.
The bill will then pass to the upper House of Lords, where progress is less certain as the government has no majority there and no control over the timing.
If approved by the House of Lords, the bill would then have to be signed off by Queen Elizabeth II before May can trigger Article 50 of the EU's Lisbon Treaty -- the formal process for leaving the bloc.
May has said she is confident she will be able to stick to her timetable of triggering Article 50 by the end of March at the latest and the government has said it hopes to start Brexit talks before the summer.
Britain voted to leave the European Union in a referendum on June 23 last year following a bitter campaign and divisions have persisted since then.
A majority of Britain's 11 Supreme Court judges on Tuesday ruled that withdrawing from the EU meant there would have to be changes in Britain's domestic laws and therefore parliament had to be involved.

Tortures 'absolutely' work

Says Trump on waterboarding and other torture techniques

AFP, Washington
US President Donald Trump said Wednesday he thinks waterboarding and other interrogation techniques widely seen as torture -- and prohibited by law -- "absolutely" work, but would defer to his CIA and Pentagon chiefs on whether to reinstate them.
When asked about waterboarding in an interview with ABC News at the White House, Trump said it was necessary to "fight fire with fire" in the face of the beheadings of Americans and other atrocities by Islamic State militants.
The comments from the new Republican president -- which echo statements he made on the campaign trail -- come as reports suggest his administration may be considering the reinstatement of secret CIA "black site" prisons overseas.
"When they're chopping off the heads of our people, and other people... when ISIS is doing things that nobody has ever heard of since medieval times, would I feel strongly about waterboarding? As far as I'm concerned, we have to fight fire with fire," he said.
But he said he would rely on the advice of Pentagon chief James Mattis and Central Intelligence Agency director Mike Pompeo.

"I'm going to go with what they say," Trump told ABC. "And if they don't want to do, that's fine. If they do wanna do, then I will work toward that end. I want to do everything within the bounds of what you're allowed to do legally."
"But do I feel it works? Absolutely, I feel it works."
The New York Times reported on a three-page draft order reauthorising the "black site" prisons where suspects detained after the 9/11 attacks of 2001 were subjected to "enhanced interrogation techniques" -- including waterboarding.
A Trump spokesman said the draft seen by the newspaper did not originate at the White House.
In February 2016, Trump said "torture works" and pledged to bring back waterboarding and "much worse."
However, in December, after meeting with Mattis, Trump said he was "impressed" with Mattis's argument that building trust and rewarding cooperation by detainees worked better than waterboarding.
During his confirmation hearing before a Senate committee, Pompeo promised he would "absolutely not" comply with any order to revive the "enhanced interrogation techniques" employed by the CIA after 9/11.

US officials says the new president may reinstate secret CIA 'black site' prisons around the world



A student walk by a wall riddled with holes caused by shrapnel at a school in Mosul's al-Zuhur neighbourhood. Scores of schools resumed their activities in the areas government forces recently recaptured from the Islamic State (IS) group during the government's ongoing military operation against Islamist jihadists. The photo was taken on Monday.

Germany scraps law that bans insulting foreign leaders

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
Germany has decided to abolish a law which defends the honour of foreign leaders.
International heads of state will no longer be able to ask the German government to prosecute people deemed to have offended them under an obscure passage of German law.
The decision comes just days after Donald Trump's inauguration as US President and a year after Angela Merkel authorised the investigation of a TV comic who wrote a crude poem about Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.
German ministers have agreed to scrap a line of the penal code known as 'lese majeste', which prohibits insulting the representatives of international governments.
Justice Minister Heiko Maas called the law "outdated and unnecessary".
Comic Jan Boehmermann's expletive-filled work, including allusions to bestiality, child sex abuse and ethnic discrimination in relation to Erdogan, sparked a diplomatic row between Ankara and Berlin when it aired on German television last March.

Republicans lay out plans for Obamacare repeal

Pay little attention over Trump's call for polls fraud probe

REUTERS, Philadelphia
US Republican leaders on Wednesday laid out plans for repealing Obamacare by spring, followed by funding the building of a border wall and reforming the tax code by late summer, as lawmakers launched an effort to unify behind a legislative strategy.
But Republicans gathered in Philadelphia for a three-day retreat showed little fervor for President Donald Trump's calls to investigate what he believes was large-scale voter fraud in the Nov 8 election.
Trump said on Wednesday he would seek a voter fraud probe, although there is overwhelming consensus among state officials, election experts and politicians that such fraud is rare in the United States.
At the closed-door retreat, House of Representatives Speaker Paul Ryan laid out a plan of legislative action including repeal of the Affordable Care Act, former President



Barack Obama's signature healthcare law known as Obamacare, by March or April, followed by appropriations for a border wall with Mexico and overhauling the tax code by August, one Republican source said.
Republicans have majorities in both the House and Senate. A senior House Republican, Representative Diane Black, said key House committees would take votes within the next two weeks on draft legislation to repeal the Affordable Care Act.
Representative Chris Collins, a Republican who was an early Trump backer, said on MSNBC that lawmakers were told at the retreat that they would write legislation "in the next two months" to help pay for the border wall that Trump signed directives to build.
British Prime Minister Theresa May will also join lawmakers in Philadelphia on Thursday and is expected to discuss plans for a possible US-UK trade deal.

I would not defend Trump from bullets

Says US Secret Service agent

CNN ONLINE
The Secret Service said Tuesday it is taking "appropriate action" after one of its agents suggested on Facebook that she would not defend President Donald Trump should someone try to shoot him.
Kerry O'Grady, a senior agent in the Denver field office, made a series of now-deleted postings on Facebook during the campaign saying that she supported Democrat Hillary Clinton and that she would not honor a federal law that prevents agents like her from airing their political beliefs publicly. O'Grady deleted the posts shortly after The Washington Examiner reported them on Tuesday.
"As a public servant for nearly 23 years, I struggle not to violate the Hatch Act. So I keep quiet and skirt the median," she wrote in one Facebook post, as reported by the Examiner. "To do otherwise can be a criminal offense for those in my position. Despite the fact that I am expected to take a bullet for both sides."
"But this world has changed and I have changed. And I would take jail time over a bullet or an endorsement for what I believe to be disaster to this country and the strong and amazing women and minorities who reside here. Hatch Act be damned. I am with Her," she wrote.