

Ballot

Big-business acts

Pushback against voting 'measures' gains motion

WASHINGTON, April 15, (AP) — Big business has ratcheted up its objections to proposals that would make it harder to vote, with several hundred companies and executives signing a new statement opposing "any discriminatory legislation."

The letter, published Wednesday in The New York Times and The Washington Post, was signed by companies including Amazon, Google, Starbucks and Bank of America, and individuals such as Warren Buffett and Michael Bloomberg, plus law firms and nonprofit groups.

It was the largest group yet to join protests against Republican efforts to change election rules in states around the country.

"Voting is the lifeblood of our democracy and we call upon all Americans to join us in taking a nonpartisan stand for this most basic and fundamental right of all Americans," the letter reads. "We all should feel a responsibility to defend the right to vote and oppose any discriminatory legislation or measures that restrict or prevent any eligible voter from having an equal and fair opportunity to cast a ballot."

Many of the signers have been loyal donors to Republican political campaigns.

The letter is a direct challenge to Republican officials who have pushed for changes in state voting laws, citing former President Donald Trump's false claim that he lost the November election because of fraud. At the same time, Democrats in Congress propose to overhaul federal voting law in a way that Republicans argue would interfere with state control of elections and hurt the GOP.

There were some notable absences from Wednesday's letter, including Walmart, Delta Air Lines and the Coca-Cola Co.

A Delta spokeswoman declined to comment beyond pointing to a March 31 statement in which CEO Ed Bastian called the Georgia law unacceptable. A Coca-Cola spokeswoman said the company had not seen the letter but that it stands by its support for "free and fair elections." Walmart CEO Doug McMillon has stated that the nation's largest retailer is against legislation that unnecessarily restricts voting rights.

Steered

The business community traditionally has steered clear of taking public positions on political or social issues but that has been changing recently, with many of them putting out statements after the police killing of George Floyd last year.

Over the weekend, Yale University management professor Jeffrey Sonnenfeld helped organize a call with more than 100 corporate executives, academics and legal experts to discuss restrictive voting proposals, including the Georgia law. They talked about withholding campaign contributions to elected officials who try to restrict voting, and even withholding investment from states that adopt such laws - although the latter seemed to draw less support, he said.

Earlier this month, 72 Black business leaders signed a letter published in the New York Times that urged corporate leaders to publicly oppose laws that restrict voting by Blacks.

This week, the leaders of three dozen major Michigan companies, including General Motors and Ford, objected to Republican-sponsored election bills that would make it harder to vote in Michigan and other states.

Dennis Archer Jr. is the first signature on the statement. The son of a former Detroit mayor who runs a small consulting firm, he knows there's less risk of backlash for him than for large multinational companies. But there's also a risk that Black people and others will stop buying goods from companies that don't take stands on issues like this.

"I think those companies that take that kind of passive position are really going to feel it in their pocketbook," said Archer, who is Black.

It remains to be seen whether corporate activism will extend to political donations.

After a mob of Trump supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 to stop Congress from certifying Joe Biden's win over Trump, many companies said they would stop contributing to lawmakers voted to reject the outcome of the election or pause all giving to review their donation policies. The freeze has begun to thaw.

A political action committee controlled by AT&T, which pledged to cut off lawmakers who objected to certifying the election, cut a \$5,000 check in February to House Conservatives Fund, a leadership PAC led by Indiana Rep. Jim Banks, who voted to object to the election results, records show. JetBlue Airways, which said it would pause donations after Jan. 6 - and signed Wednesday's letter - recently gave \$1,000 to New York Republican Rep. Nicole Malliotakis, who also voted to object to the election outcome.

Some are donating to committees controlled by party leaders that spend big to boost the chances of all Republican candidates in the House and the Senate.

Donations

Most companies have not said whether they will withhold donations from lawmakers who are pushing the new voting laws.

"I'm dubious they will go that far. It's easy to make political statements and continue to give money," said Lawrence Glickman, a Cornell University history professor who wrote a book about the influence of business on U.S. politics. "It makes front-page news when Coca Cola, Delta or another big corporation says something about voting-rights laws, but how often does it make front-page news when they make a campaign contribution?"

Companies have a natural fear of antagonizing politicians whose help they might need in the future. Or to avoid retribution.

Georgia lawmakers voted in 2018 to strip a tax break that Delta enjoyed on jet fuel after the airline ended a discount program for National Rifle Association members, although the then-governor restored the benefit. The Georgia House voted again to kill the tax break two weeks ago after the Delta CEO criticized the voting law, but the Senate adjourned without taking action.

More than 350 different voting bills are under consideration in dozens of states, according to a tally from the Brennan Center for Justice, a public-policy think tank. On Tuesday Arkansas was among the latest to approve changes to its election laws, including restrictions on outside polling places and on absentee ballots.

The pushback against GOP-backed voting laws drew a warning this month from Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell, who told business leaders to "stay out of politics." He warned companies not to get involved in upcoming debates in Congress over environmental policy and gun violence. McConnell backtracked a few days later, admitting "I didn't say that very artfully." Instead, he accused business leaders of not reading the Georgia bill before condemning it.



Bloomberg



In this Sept. 11, 2011 file photo, US soldiers sit beneath an American flag just raised to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks at Forward Operating Base Bostick in Kunar province, Afghanistan. The Biden administration's surprise announcement in April 2021, of an unconditional troop withdrawal from Afghanistan by Sept. 11, 2021, appears to strip the Taliban and the Afghan government of considerable leverage, pressuring them to reach a peace deal. (AP)

Troops

Bid to end 'forever war'

US to pull troops from Afghanistan

WASHINGTON, April 15, (AP) — President Joe Biden said Wednesday he will withdraw remaining U.S. troops from the "forever war" in Afghanistan, declaring that the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks of 20 years ago cannot justify American forces still dying in the nation's longest war.

His plan is to pull out all American forces - numbering 2,500 now - by this Sept. 11, the anniversary of the attacks, which were coordinated from Afghanistan. Soon after Biden made his announcement, NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg in Brussels said the alliance had agreed to withdraw its roughly 7,000 forces from Afghanistan, matching Biden's decision to begin a final pullout by May 1.

The U.S. cannot continue to pour resources into an intractable war and expect different results, Biden said.

The drawdown would begin rather than conclude by May 1, which has been the deadline for full withdrawal under a peace agreement the Trump administration reached with the Taliban last year.

"It is time to end America's longest war," Biden said, but he added that the U.S. will "not conduct a hasty rush to the exit."

"We cannot continue the cycle of extending or expanding our military presence in Afghanistan hoping to create the ideal conditions for our withdrawal, expecting a different result," said Biden, who delivered his address from the White House Treaty Room, the same location where President George W. Bush announced the start of the war. "I am now the fourth United States president to preside over an American troop presence in Afghanistan. Two Republicans. Two Democrats. I will not pass this responsibility to a fifth."

Biden's announcement, which he followed with a visit to Arlington National Cemetery, marks perhaps the most significant foreign policy decision in the early going of his presidency.

He's long been skeptical about the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. As Barack Obama's vice president, Biden was a lonely voice in the administration who advised the 44th president to tilt towards a smaller counterterrorism role in the country while military advisers were urging a troop buildup to counter Taliban gains. Biden has also made clear he wants to recalibrate U.S.

foreign policy to face bigger challenges posed by China and Russia.

Withdrawing all U.S. troops comes with clear risks. It could boost the Taliban's effort to claw back power and undo gains toward democracy and women's rights made over the past two decades. It also opens Biden to criticism, from mostly Republicans and some Democrats, even though former President Donald Trump had also wanted a full withdrawal.

"This administration has decided to abandon U.S. efforts in Afghanistan which have helped keep radical Islamic terrorism in check," said Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell. "And bizarrely, they have decided to do so by September 11th."

While Biden's decision keeps U.S. forces in Afghanistan four months longer than initially planned, it sets a firm end to two decades of war that killed more than 2,200 U.S. troops, wounded 20,000, and cost as much as \$1 trillion.

Spoke

Biden spoke with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani on Wednesday ahead of his speech. The White House said in a statement that Biden told Ghani the United States would continue to support the Afghan people through development, humanitarian and security assistance.

"The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan respects the U.S. decision, and we will work with our U.S. partners to ensure a smooth transition," Ghani said in a Twitter posting.

Biden spoke, too, with former President Bush ahead of announcing his decision. He also spoke with allies, military leaders, lawmakers and Vice President Kamala Harris to help make his decision, according to the White House. Bush, through his spokesman, declined to comment about his conversation with Biden.

Biden emphasized that his administration will continue to support peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban and assist international efforts to train the Afghan military.

He noted that the "forever war" has led to service members who weren't even alive at the time of the Sept. 11 attacks serving, as well as young troops following in the steps of their mothers and fathers in deploying to Afghanistan.

"The war in Afghanistan was never

meant to be a multigenerational undertaking," Biden said.

Obama, who had hoped but ultimately failed to end the war during his time in office, said in a statement that he supported Biden's decision, that "it is time to recognize that we have accomplished all that we can militarily, and that it's time to bring our remaining troops home."

Following his speech, Biden visited Arlington National Cemetery to honor those who died in recent American conflicts. After paying his respects, Biden told reporters it was "absolutely clear" to him that ending the war was the right decision. Biden, in his speech and during his visit to the hallowed cemetery, reflected on his own late son Beau Biden's service. The president's son, who died of cancer in 2015, had deployed to Iraq with the Delaware Army National Guard.

"I'm always amazed that generation after generation, women and men give their lives to this country," Biden said. "It means I have trouble these days showing up to this cemetery and not thinking about my son."

CIA Director William Burns acknowledged at a hearing Wednesday that America's ability to contain the terrorist threat from Afghanistan has benefited from the military presence there, and that when that presence is withdrawn, "the U.S. government's ability to collect and act on threats will diminish."

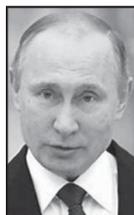
"That's simply a fact," Burns said. "It is also a fact, however, that after withdrawal, whenever that time comes, the CIA and all of our partners in the U.S. government will retain a suite of capabilities, some of it remaining in place, some of them that we will generate, that can help us to anticipate and contest any rebuilding effort."

A senior administration official said the September withdrawal date was an absolute deadline that won't be affected by security conditions in Afghanistan.

The long conflict has largely crippled al-Qaida and led to the death of Osama bin Laden, the architect of the Sept. 11 attacks. But an American withdrawal also risks many of the gains made in democracy, women's rights and governance, while ensuring that the Taliban, who provided al-Qaida's haven, remain strong and in control of large swaths of the country.



U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, (center right), walks with Afghanistan's Foreign Minister Mohammad Haneef Atmar, (center left), at the presidential palace in Kabul, Afghanistan, Thursday, April 15, 2021. Blinken made an unannounced visit to Afghanistan on Thursday to sell Afghan leaders and a wary public on President Joe Biden's decision to withdraw all American troops from the country and end America's longest-running war. (AP)



Putin



Biden

America

US to announce sanctions: The Biden administration is preparing to announce sanctions in response to a massive Russian hacking campaign that breached vital federal agencies, as well as for election interference, a senior administration official said.

The sanctions, foreshadowed for weeks by the administration, would represent the first retaliatory action announced against the Kremlin for last year's hack, familiarly known as the SolarWinds breach. In that intrusion, Russian hackers are believed to have infected widely used software with malicious code, enabling them to access the networks of at least nine agencies in what U.S. officials believe was an intelligence gathering operation aimed at mining government secrets.

Besides that hack, US officials last month alleged that Russian President Vladimir Putin authorized influence operations to help Donald Trump in his unsuccessful bid for reelection as president, though there's no evidence Russia or anyone else changed votes or manipulated the outcome. The measures are to be announced Thursday, according to the official, who was not authorized to discuss the matter by name and spoke on condition of anonymity.

It was not immediately clear what, if any, other actions might be planned. Officials had previously said they expected to take actions both seen and unseen.

President Joe Biden told Putin this week in their second call to "de-escalate tensions" following a Russian military buildup on Ukraine's border, and said the US would "act firmly in defense of its national interests" regarding Russian intrusions and election interference. (AP)

Illegal gaming parlors raided: Law enforcement officers in California raided dozens of illegal gambling dens in San Diego Wednesday, capping a years-long investigation that has resulted in nearly 50 people facing federal gambling, gun and drug charges, authorities said.

More than 450 officers, led by an FBI task force, fanned out in East San Diego in morning raids on two dozen locations that ended with 35 arrests, according to a statement from the US attorney's office.

A total of 47 people are charged in a series of federal indictments unsealed Wednesday. Some were accused of selling methamphetamine to gamblers.

During a two-year investigation, authorities seized more than 12 pounds of

meth, 640 gambling machines, 44 guns and more than \$260,000 in cash, authorities said.

Authorities raided what they say were illegal gambling parlors inside apartments, outbuildings, small businesses and strip malls that took in thousands of dollars a day. (AP)

School replaces KKK chief name: An Atlanta high school that was named after a Ku Klux Klan leader will strip the name

and instead honor the late baseball Hall of Famer Hank Aaron.

The Atlanta Board of Education voted unanimously Monday to change the name of Forrest Hill Academy to Hank Aaron New Beginnings Academy, news outlets reported. The new name is expected to be in place by the time students return to the southwest Atlanta alternative school in August.

Aaron, a former Atlanta Braves baseball player, died in January at the age of 86. Under the nickname "Hammerin'

Hank," he set a wide array of career hitting records during his 23-year span, ultimately breaking Babe Ruth's home run record while enduring racist threats.

Forrest Hill Academy had been named after Nathan Bedford Forrest, a Confederate general and an early leader of the Ku Klux Klan.

"It is very important that we understand our history," Board member Michelle Olympiadis said during the Monday meeting. "It's very important that we understand where we are coming from." (AP)



A demonstrator holds a sign during a protest over Sunday's fatal shooting of Daunte Wright during a traffic stop, outside the Brooklyn Center Police Department on April 14, 2021, in Brooklyn Center, Minn. (AP)

Ship capsizes off Louisiana: Coast Guard boats and aircraft have covered an area larger than the state of Rhode Island to search for 12 people still missing Wednesday off the Louisiana coast after their offshore oilfield vessel capsized in hurricane-force winds.

One worker's body was recovered Wednesday and six people were rescued Tuesday after the Seacor Power overturned Tuesday afternoon in the Gulf of Mexico, the Coast Guard said.

The search, interrupted by darkness and bad weather, has totaled nearly 40 hours and more than 1,440 square miles (3,730 square kilometers) of Gulf waters by Wednesday afternoon, according to a news release. The hunt for the missing continued into the evening, said Petty Officer Carlos Galarza. Coast Guard Capt Will Watson said earlier that winds were 80 to 90 mph (130 to 145 kph) and seas were 7 to 9 feet (2.1 to 2.7 meters) when the lift boat overturned. (AP)