

Fraud Hunters Earn Windfalls Tied to Covid

Private Citizens Set Up Their Own Inquiries

By MADELEINE NGO

When J. Bryan Quesenberry first learned that the federal government was sending out hundreds of billions of dollars to help businesses survive during the Covid-19 pandemic, he thought: "There's going to be fraud here. There just has to be."

A few months later, Mr. Quesenberry started sifting through a list of businesses that received Paycheck Protection Program loans, which were intended to help small businesses ravaged by the pandemic continue paying their employees. The Oregon lawyer said he knew businesses were not allowed to receive more than one loan during a single round, so he searched for "double dippers."

He soon found dozens of businesses across the country that appeared to improperly obtain P.P.P. loans. During the summer of 2020, Mr. Quesenberry started suing those firms to try to help the government recover funds.

"It just blows my mind," Mr. Quesenberry said. "That's tax money that comes out of your pocket and that comes out of my pocket."

As federal officials try to retrieve billions in stolen pandemic relief funds, private citizens are scouring public data, company websites and social media pages to help identify potential cases. Those who have filed suits say they are motivated by the desire to root out wrongdoers and expose corporate fraud.

But there is also a strong financial incentive. Under the False Claims Act, private citizens can file lawsuits on behalf of the federal government against those who may have defrauded the United States. If the government recovers funds, those citizens can typically earn between 15 and 30 percent of that amount.

That has allowed some private citizens to earn hundreds of thousands of dollars, or in some cases more than \$1 million, for chasing pandemic relief fraud.

The practice has stirred up some controversy. Some argue that the provision was meant to encourage whistle-blowers with

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SAMAR ABU ELOUF FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

SURVIVING GAZA

By SAMAR ABU ELOUF and ERIC NAGOURNEY

Amputations. Disfigurement. Brain damage. Their injuries are life-changing. Mahmoud Ajjour is among the relatively small number of badly wounded Gazans who have survived a war that has killed tens of thousands.

The 9-year-old boy lost his arms as his family was fleeing Israeli shelling, his mother, Noor Ajjour, says. Now, he can do little for himself.

"Mama, scratch my hair, scratch my nose," he asks.

Mahmoud made it out for medical treatment in Qatar, where The New York Times photographed and interviewed him and other patients.

They are alive — even if some are not sure they still want to be.

The war in the Gaza Strip began after

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REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Love and Hate In Hometown Leans ... Love?

City Thaws for Trump, a Guy From Queens

By SHAWN MCCREESH

Even though Donald J. Trump is cloistered in Florida and planning his return to Washington, it seems like he has been stuck in a New York state of mind.

He went out of his way to throw rallies in the Bronx, Nassau County and at Madison Square Garden, and then, after winning the election, he went right back to the Garden to watch a fight there. He has been uncharacteristically friendly toward the governor and both of the state's senators (and they have been uncharacteristically friendly back). He keeps talking about how he wants to fix the subways and rebuild Penn Station. The Trump Organization just announced it is trying to get back control of Wollman Rink in Central Park. And he has been stocking his new administration with New Yorkers (Elise Stefanik, Lee Zeldin, Howard Lutnick).

This thaw follows a decade-long freeze in which Mr. Trump was reviled in his hometown. During his presidency, his very name became tantamount to a curse in Manhattan. He could barely set foot on the island without protests erupting. In 2019, he and his wife, Melania, officially switched their residence to Palm Beach, Fla. But those who know him say he never really became a Florida man.

"He's a New Yorker — that's what he is, that's the first thing he is," said Cindy Adams, a longtime New York Post columnist and Trump confidante. The president-elect is such a New Yorker, she said, that he even has a special phone line that can be reached only by "a few super New Yorkers" he trusts. Naturally, she is one of them. "I just talked to him on his private number," she said. "I call him, and he answers it automatically. Nobody else answers that phone."

John Catsimatidis, the billionaire owner of the Gristedes grocery store chain who has known Mr. Trump for many years, said simply: "I think he misses New York."

He pointed out that Mr. Trump's son Barron just started school in the city. "He could have sent him to the University of Miami," Mr. Catsimatidis said. "Why did he send him to N.Y.U.?" He said that becoming such a hated figure in the city definitely got to Mr. Trump. "He

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TRANSITION FUND FOR TRUMP KEEPS DONORS CLOAKED

RISK OF ETHICS BREACH

He Has Not Signed Usual Pact That Requires Disclosures

By KEN BENSINGER and DAVID A. FAHRENTHOLD

President-elect Donald J. Trump is keeping secret the names of the donors who are funding his transition effort, a break from tradition that could make it impossible to see what interest groups, businesses or wealthy people are helping launch his second term.

Mr. Trump has so far declined to sign an agreement with the Biden administration that imposes strict limits on that fund-raising in exchange for up to \$7.2 million in federal funds earmarked for the transition. By dodging the agreement, Mr. Trump can raise unlimited amounts of money from unknown donors to pay for the staff, travel and office space involved in preparing to take over the government.

Mr. Trump is the first president-elect to sidestep the restrictions, provoking alarm among ethics experts.

Those seeking to curry favor with the incoming administration now have the opportunity to donate directly to the winning candidate without their names or potential conflicts ever entering the public sphere. And unlike with campaign contributions, foreign citizens are allowed to donate to the transition.

"When the money isn't disclosed, it's not clear how much everybody is giving, who is giving it and what they are getting in return for their donations," said Heath Brown, a professor of public policy at John Jay College of Criminal Justice who studies presidential transitions. "It's an area where the vast majority of Americans would agree that they want to know who is paying that bill."

Mr. Trump's transition team, led by Linda McMahon and Howard Lutnick, both of whom were nominated to cabinet positions last week, has repeatedly said it intends to sign the agreements with the Biden administration, known as memorandums of understanding.

But it blew past deadlines to do so in September and October, and nothing has indicated progress

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DIVIDED FOCUS The three factions of the Trump cabinet each have different missions. PAGE A17

The Jets and Giants Take Different Routes Toward Rock Bottom

By DAVID WALDSTEIN

Misery and gloom are haunting the Giants yet again this football season. But there is one consolation: At least they aren't the Jets.

It is not even Thanksgiving, and it already feels like football season is over in New York. Neither team has been mathematically eliminated from the playoffs yet, but the Jets are 3-8 and the Giants are 2-9.

Jets and Giants fans who had reserved Sunday afternoons for football are now free to head to brunch.

For the Giants, who won only six games last year, the awful season is not completely unexpected. But Jets fans had high hopes this year. With a talented roster and a healthy future Hall of Fame quarterback, the team went into the season with the 10th-best odds of winning the Super Bowl.

But the Jets have long put the "NY" in agony.

"I'm talking about the most beleaguered fan base in professional sports today, and it's not even close," said Joe Benigno, the longtime WFAN radio host and even longer suffering Jets fan. "It's not debatable anymore."

Benigno, 71, has been a devoted fan since 1965, when the Jets acquired Joe Namath out of Alabama and won the Super Bowl



SARAH STIER/GETTY IMAGES

The Jets have not made the playoffs since 2010, the longest streak in the four major U.S. sports.

only four seasons later. But whatever magic they had soon morphed into a half century of torment under a bizarre affliction of incompetence and dysfunction that Benigno sums up as "laughingstock-itis."

Benigno is an expert on all things Jets. The fake spike, the

butt fumble, numerous other awful moments — he's seen them all. But he believes that lifetime of devotion adds up a little differently.

"I'm not an expert on anything except aggravation," he said.

This year's unqualified disaster will almost certainly end up as the Jets' 56th consecutive season

without a Super Bowl appearance. They have not had a winning season since 2015 and have missed the playoffs since 2010, the longest streak of futility in the four major American sports.

But last year, Aaron Rodgers came to the Jets from the Green

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Immigrants Seeking Safeguards As Threat of Deportation Nears

By MIRIAM JORDAN

President-elect Donald J. Trump has vowed to slash immigration — both legal and illegal — and ramp up deportations on Day 1.

Immigrants are racing to get ahead of the crackdown.

Foreign-born residents have been jamming the phone lines of immigration lawyers. They're packing information meetings organized by nonprofits. And they're taking whatever steps they can to inoculate themselves from the sweeping measures Mr. Trump has promised to undertake after he is inaugurated on Jan. 20.

"People that should be scared are coming in, and people that are fine with a green card are rushing in," said Inna Simakovsky, an im-

migration lawyer in Columbus, Ohio, who added that her team has been overwhelmed with consultations. "Everyone is scared," she said.

People with green cards want to become citizens as soon as possible. People who have a tenuous legal status or who entered the country illegally are scrambling to file for asylum, because even if the claim is thin, having a pending case would — under current protocols — protect them from deportation. People in relationships with U.S. citizens are fast-tracking marriage, which makes them eligible to apply for a green card.

In total there are about 13 million who have legal permanent

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NATIONAL A13-19

In Gettysburg, Lincoln Echoes

Two weeks after the election, a gathering commemorated an address meant to heal a divided nation. PAGE A13

A Push Against 'Indoctrination'

Public universities in Florida are removing subjects like sociology from their core requirements. PAGE A14

INTERNATIONAL A4-12

Reggaeton Ode Stirs Debate

A song's explicit lyrics have prompted criticism that the music, created by some of Colombia's biggest stars, promotes harmful stereotypes. PAGE A6

Women Directors Dazzle India

"Laapataa Ladies" and "All We Imagine as Light" have captivated audiences at home and received Oscar buzz. PAGE A6

OBITUARIES A22

1976 Presidential Candidate

Fred R. Harris, a moderate Democratic senator from Oklahoma, took a leftward turn in a failed primary run. He was 94.



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Movies Make a Comeback

Studios spared no expense promoting "Wicked" and "Gladiator II," but the efforts paid off at the box office. PAGE B1

The Way Social Media Was

Looking at Twitter alternatives, Kevin Roose found something unexpected at Bluesky: freedom. PAGE B1

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Running Out of Bananas

Beyond the headline-grabbing sales of the fall auction season, including the fruit that went for \$6.2 million, the art market struggled to wholly emerge from its longstanding slump. PAGE C1

Joined Together for the Bard

For the first time since the pandemic, the Royal Shakespeare Company has returned to the United States, striking up a partnership with the Chicago Shakespeare Theater. PAGE C1

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Joel Grey

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SPORTS D1-8

A Coach of the Classroom

Years before Dan Hurley guided UConn to two straight N.C.A.A. men's basketball titles, he taught history at a high school in Newark. PAGE D1



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