

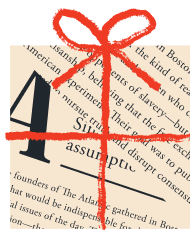
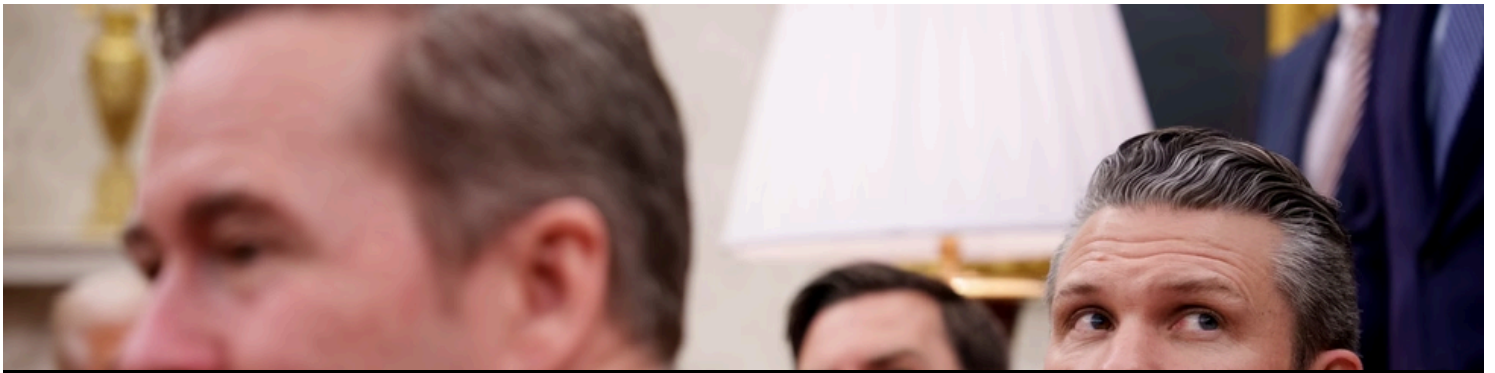
The Trump administration planned its strikes on the Houthis using a group chat—and accidentally included  
The Atlantic's Jeffrey Goldberg:

POLITICS

# The Trump Administration Accidentally Texted Me Its War Plans

U.S. national-security leaders included me in a group chat about upcoming military strikes in Yemen. I didn't think it could be real. Then the bombs started falling.

By Jeffrey Goldberg



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The world found out shortly before 2 p.m. eastern time on March 15 that the United States was bombing Houthi targets across Yemen.

I, however, knew two hours before the first bombs exploded that the attack might be coming. The reason I knew this is that Pete Hegseth, the secretary of defense, had texted me the war plan at 11:44 a.m. The plan included precise information about weapons packages, targets, and timing.

This is going to require some explaining.

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The story technically begins shortly after the Hamas invasion of southern Israel, in October 2023. The Houthis—an Iran-backed terrorist organization whose motto is “God is great, death to America, death to Israel, curse on the Jews, victory to Islam”—

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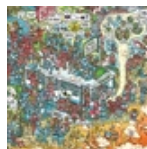
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coordinate with over the next couple days and over the weekend. Thx.”

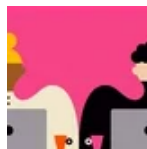
The term *principals committee* generally refers to a group of the senior-most national-security officials, including the secretaries of defense, state, and the treasury, as well as the director of the CIA. It should go without saying—but I’ll say it anyway—that I have never been invited to a White House principals-committee meeting, and that, in my many years of reporting on national-security matters, I had never heard of one being convened over a commercial messaging app.

One minute later, a person identified only as “MAR”—the secretary of state is Marco Antonio Rubio—wrote, “Mike Needham for State,” apparently designating the current counselor of the State Department as his representative. At that same moment, a Signal user identified as “JD Vance” wrote, “Andy baker for VP.” One minute after that, “TG” (presumably Tulsi Gabbard, the director of national



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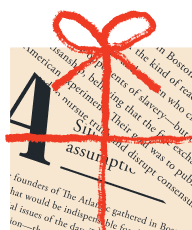
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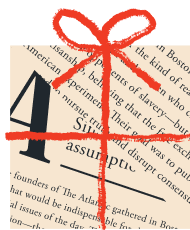
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The principals had apparently assembled. In all, 18 individuals were listed as members of this group, including various National Security Council officials; Steve Witkoff, President Trump’s Middle East and Ukraine negotiator; Susie Wiles, the White House chief of staff; and someone identified only as “S M,” which I took to stand for Stephen Miller. I appeared on my own screen only as “JG.”

That was the end of the Thursday text chain.

After receiving the Waltz text related to the “Houthi PC small group,” I consulted a number of colleagues. We discussed the possibility that these texts were part of a disinformation campaign, initiated by either a foreign intelligence service or, more likely, a media-gadfly organization, the sort of group that attempts to place journalists in embarrassing positions, and sometimes succeeds. I had very strong doubts that this text group was real, because I could not believe that the national-security leadership of the United States would communicate on Signal about imminent war plans. I also could not believe that the national security adviser to the president would be so



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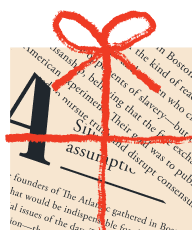
am a more specific sequence of events in the coming days and we will work w DOD to ensure COS, OVP and POTUS are briefed.”

At this point, a fascinating policy discussion commenced. The account labeled “JD Vance” responded at 8:16: “Team, I am out for the day doing an economic event in Michigan. But I think we are making a mistake.” (Vance was indeed in Michigan that day.) The Vance account goes on to state, “3 percent of US trade runs through the suez. 40 percent of European trade does. There is a real risk that the public doesn’t understand this or why it’s necessary. The strongest reason to do this is, as POTUS said, to send a message.”

The Vance account then goes on to make a noteworthy statement, considering that the vice president has not deviated publicly from Trump’s position on virtually any issue. “I am not sure the president is aware how inconsistent this is with his message on Europe right now. There’s a further risk that we see a moderate to severe spike in oil prices. I am willing to support the consensus of the team and keep these concerns to myself. But there is a strong argument for delaying this a month, doing the messaging work on why this matters, seeing where the economy is, etc.”

A person identified in Signal as “Joe Kent” (Trump’s nominee to run the National Counterterrorism Center is named Joe Kent) wrote at 8:22, “There is nothing time sensitive driving the time line. We’ll have the exact same options in a month.”

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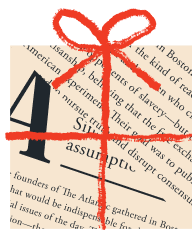
The Hegseth message goes on to state, “Waiting a few weeks or a month does not fundamentally change the calculus. 2 immediate risks on waiting: 1) this leaks, and we look indecisive; 2) Israel takes an action first – or Gaza cease fire falls apart – and we don’t get to start this on our own terms. We can manage both. We are prepared to execute, and if I had final go or no go vote, I believe we should. This [is] not about the Houthis. I see it as two things: 1) Restoring Freedom of Navigation, a core national interest; and 2) Reestablish deterrence, which Biden cratered. But, we can easily pause. And if we do, I will do all we can to enforce 100% OPSEC”—operations security. “I welcome other thoughts.”

A few minutes later, the “Michael Waltz” account posted a lengthy note about trade figures, and the limited capabilities of European navies. “Whether it’s now or several weeks from now, it will have to be the United States that reopens these shipping lanes. Per the president’s request we are working with DOD and State to determine how to compile the cost associated and levy them on the Europeans.”

The account identified as “JD Vance” addressed a message at 8:45 to @Pete Hegseth: “if you think we should do it let’s go. I just hate bailing Europe out again.” (The administration has argued that America’s European allies benefit economically from the U.S. Navy’s protection of international shipping lanes.)

The user identified as Hegseth responded three minutes later: “VP: I fully share your

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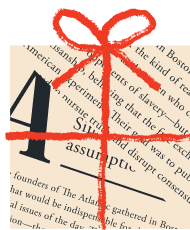
@Pete Hegseth if you think we should do it let's go.

8:45 AM ⌚

8:46 AM 

VP: I fully share your loathing of

That message from “S M”—presumably President Trump’s confidant Stephen Miller, the deputy White House chief of staff, or someone playing Stephen Miller—effectively shut down the conversation. The last text of the day came from “Pete Hegseth,” who wrote at 9:46 a.m., “Agree.”



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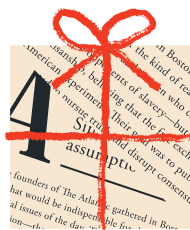
A screenshot from the Signal group shows debate over the president's views ahead of the attack.

At 11:44 a.m., the account labeled “Pete Hegseth” posted in Signal a “TEAM UPDATE.” I will not quote from this update, or from certain other subsequent texts. The information contained in them, if they had been read by an adversary of the United States, could conceivably have been used to harm American military and intelligence personnel, particularly in the broader Middle East, Central Command’s area of responsibility. What I will say, in order to illustrate the shocking recklessness of this Signal conversation, is that the Hegseth post contained operational details of forthcoming strikes on Yemen, including information about targets, weapons the U.S. would be deploying, and attack sequencing.

The only person to reply to the update from Hegseth was the person identified as the vice president. “I will say a prayer for victory,” Vance wrote. (Two other users subsequently added prayer emoji.)

According to the lengthy Hegseth text, the first detonations in Yemen would be felt two hours hence, at 1:45 p.m. eastern time. So I waited in my car in a supermarket parking lot. If this Signal chat was real, I reasoned, Houthi targets would soon be bombed. At about 1:55, I checked X and searched *Yemen*. Explosions were then being heard across Sanaa, the capital city.

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Yemeni health ministry reported that at least 53 people were killed in the strikes, a number that has not been independently verified.



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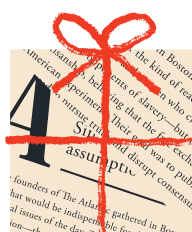
back-and-forth—what ultimately proved to be feckless attacks,” he said. “This was an overwhelming response that actually targeted multiple Houthi leaders and took them out.”

The Signal chat group, I concluded, was almost certainly real. Having come to this realization, one that seemed nearly impossible only hours before, I removed myself from the Signal group, understanding that this would trigger an automatic notification to the group’s creator, “Michael Waltz,” that I had left. No one in the chat had seemed to notice that I was there. And I received no subsequent questions about why I left—or, more to the point, who I was.

Earlier today, I emailed Waltz and sent him a message on his Signal account. I also wrote to Pete Hegseth, John Ratcliffe, Tulsi Gabbard, and other officials. In an email, I outlined some of my questions: Is the “Houthi PC small group” a genuine Signal thread? Did they know that I was included in this group? Was I (on the off chance) included on purpose? If not, who did they think I was? Did anyone realize who I was when I was added, or when I removed myself from the group? Do senior Trump-administration officials use Signal regularly for sensitive discussions? Do the officials believe that the use of such a channel could endanger American personnel?

Brian Hughes, the spokesman for the National Security Council, responded two hours later, confirming the veracity of the Signal group. “This appears to be an

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All of these lawyers said that a U.S. official should not establish a Signal thread in the first place. Information about an active operation would presumably fit the law's definition of "national defense" information. ~~The Signal app is not approved by the~~



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There was another potential problem: Waltz set some of the messages in the Signal group to disappear after one week, and some after four. That raises questions about whether the officials may have violated federal records law: Text messages about official acts are considered records that should be preserved.

“Intentional violations of these requirements are a basis for disciplinary action. Additionally, agencies such as the Department of Defense restrict electronic messaging containing classified information to classified government networks and/or networks



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All along, members of the Signal group were aware of the need for secrecy and operations security. In his text detailing aspects of the forthcoming attack on Houthi targets, Hegseth wrote to the group—which, at the time, included me—“We are currently clean on OPSEC.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jeffrey Goldberg is the editor in chief of *The Atlantic* and the moderator of



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