

Retropolis

# Mandatory immunization for the military: As American as George Washington

Listen to article 3 min



George Washington on an engraving from 1859. (iStock)

By Gillian Brockell

August 26, 2021 at 5:37 p.m. EDT



On a trip to Barbados in his late teens, George Washington caught one of the luckiest breaks of his life: Smallpox.

It probably didn't seem like good fortune just then. It was a deadly disease, and even survivors suffered miserably from fever, vomiting, headaches and pus-filled pox. But after convalescing for a month at a rented house, young Washington had lifelong immunity — a [rare gift](#) at the time for a Virginian, and one that would come in handy decades later.

By 1776, he was the commander in chief of the Continental Army in the Revolutionary War, and his protection from smallpox was a factor in his getting the job. When an outbreak of smallpox devastated the young nation, he made a bold decision to require his troops to be immunized.

[\[Ben Franklin's bitter regret that he didn't immunize his 4-year-old son against smallpox\]](#)

It was an act that has been repeated by presidents and military leaders throughout American history, including Monday, when the [Defense Department announced](#) it would require service members to get a [coronavirus vaccine](#).



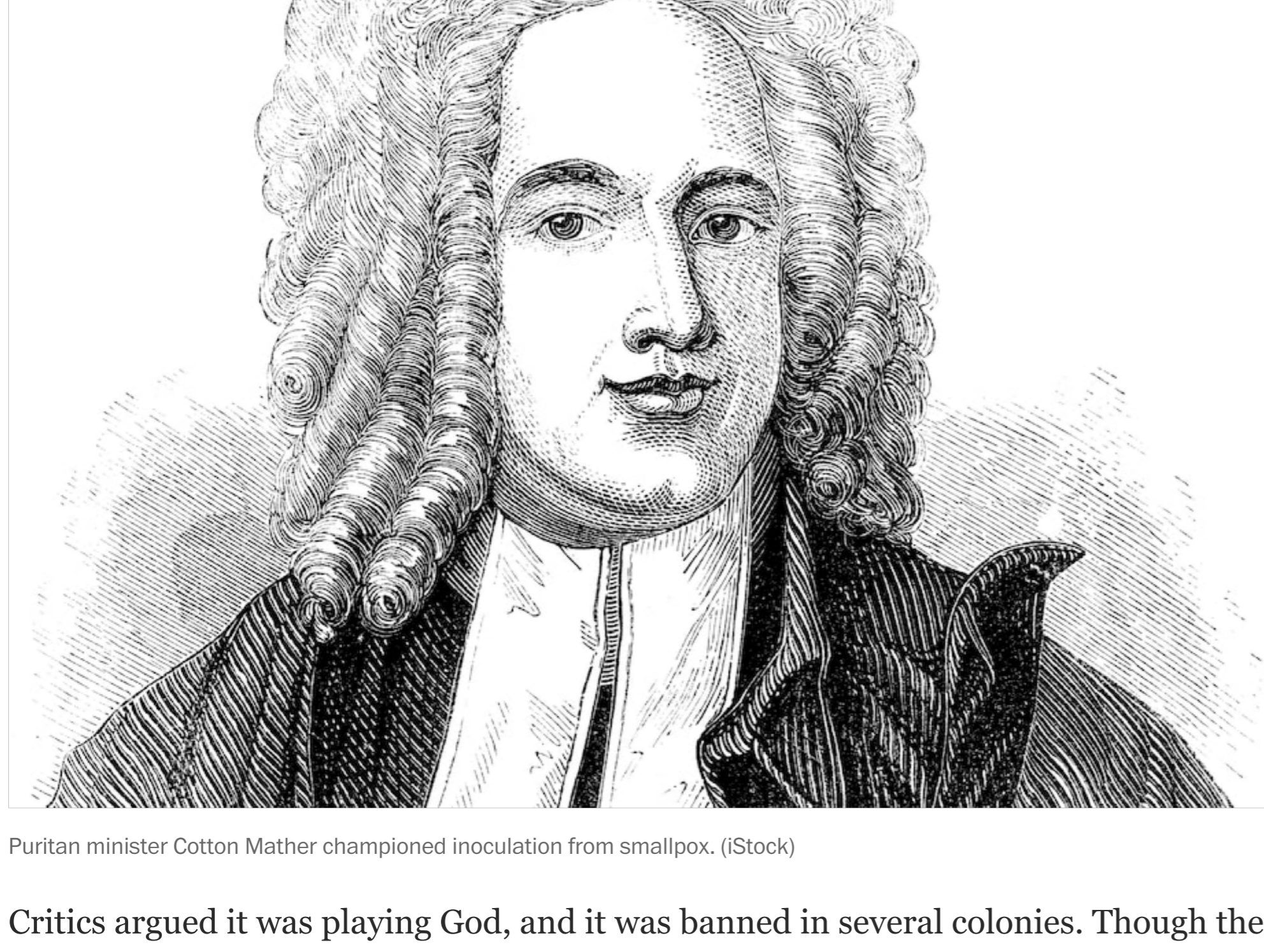
George Washington knew the threat smallpox posed to the new nation, calling it

“the most dangerous Enemy” in a July 1776 letter to John Hancock. He described how, as recruits joined up, “I have been particularly attentive to the least Symptoms of the small Pox” and so far they had quarantined anyone with symptoms so soon “as not only to prevent any Communication [contagion], but any Alarm or Apprehension it might give in the Camp.” If people worried smallpox was spreading in the camp, they might abandon their posts, he was saying.

In one early action in Boston, where the disease was raging, Washington [sent a force](#) comprising 1,000 men who had previously had smallpox. In another, an invasion of Quebec was called off because so many of the soldiers had become ill.

By early 1777, Washington knew a more dramatic measure was needed. A method of immunization called inoculation had existed in the colonies since the 1720s, but it was controversial. With inoculation, pus from an infected person was gathered, either in a small vial or by passing a string through one of the sores, and then passed through an open cut in a healthy subject. The subject became ill with smallpox, though generally with a milder case. When they recovered, they were immune.

[\[A Puritan minister incited fury by pushing inoculation against a smallpox epidemic\]](#)

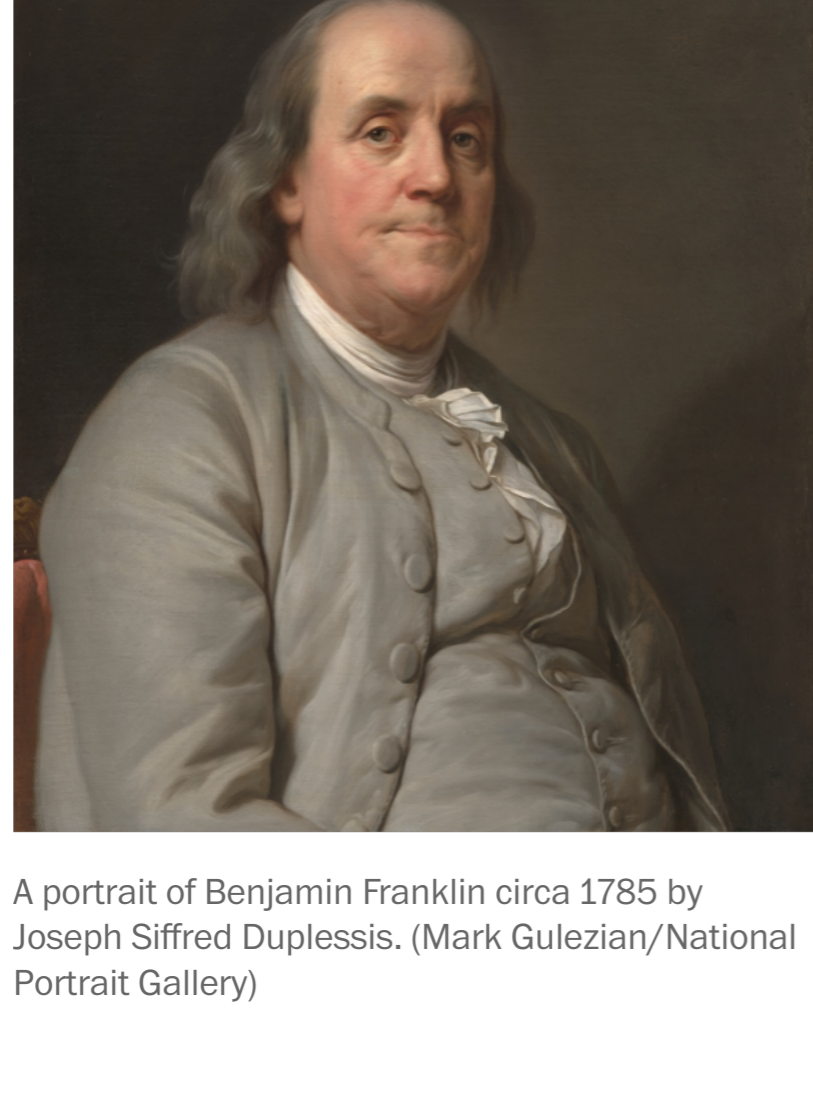


Puritan minister Cotton Mather championed inoculation from smallpox. (iStock)

Critics argued it was playing God, and it was banned in several colonies. Though the death rate was much lower than “natural” infection, it was still dangerous and patients did occasionally die. (The much safer vaccination method using cowpox — the word vaccine derives from the Latin word for cow — would not be developed until 1796.) Plus, because the idea had come from [an enslaved African](#), some alleged it was a trick to get White masters to kill themselves.

[\[Enslaved African Onesimus taught Cotton Mather how to inoculate against smallpox\]](#)

But inoculation had its supporters, too. Benjamin Franklin [supported it](#) constantly in his Philadelphia newspaper. John Adams went through it in 1764; his wife and children [followed suit](#) in the summer of 1776. Even Martha Washington underwent the procedure that summer, further convincing her husband of its efficacy.



A portrait of Benjamin Franklin circa 1785 by Joseph Siffred Duplessis. (Mark Gulezian/ National Portrait Gallery)

In February of 1777, from his winter headquarters in Morristown, N.J., Washington [wrote](#) to one of his army doctors in Philadelphia:

“I have determined that the troops shall be inoculated ... Necessity not only authorizes but seems to require the measure, for should the disorder infect the Army in the natural way and rage with its usual virulence we should have more to dread from it than from the Sword of the Enemy.”

He then instructs the doctor on how to administer it to the troops there, and to keep his order “as secret as possible.”

Why keep it secret? He doesn't say in the letter, but [another letter](#) he wrote the day before gives us a hint. To Maj. Gen. Horatio Gates he said he was “at a loss” about what to do regarding smallpox, and worried that if the army underwent mass inoculation and the British found out, the enemy might attack while they were in a weakened state.

[\[Abigail Adams had her children inoculated against smallpox in 1776 centuries before covid-19\]](#)

The measure was not popular among the soldiers, according to the [Library of Congress](#). Not unlike the military today, in which [vaccine misinformation and resistance festers](#), Continental Army soldiers came from all over the country, including places unfamiliar with or suspicious of inoculation. Still, there is no evidence of mass refusal; soldiers are trained to obey their commanding officers.

Military leaders are counting on that training again. Earlier this month, when asked if service members might refuse, Defense Department spokesman [John Kirby said](#), “Members of the military understand when you sign up for the military that there are requirements laid upon you.”

So did it work? Did mandatory immunization help America win the Revolutionary War? It is impossible to prove the cause of something that *didn't* happen, like, say, a hypothetical smallpox outbreak among American troops right before the decisive Battle of Yorktown. Still, we know the 1775-1782 smallpox epidemic killed more than 100,000 people, and we know that Washington's scrappy army won the war by the skin of its teeth.

**Read more Retropolis:**

[Ben Franklin's bitter regret that he didn't immunize his 4-year-old son against smallpox](#)

[The mandatory vaccinations that triggered a riot in Montreal in 1885](#)

[Smallpox 'virus squads' and the mandatory vaccinations upheld by the Supreme Court](#)

[‘The 1918 flu is still with us’: The deadliest pandemic ever is still causing problems today](#)

93 Comments

Gift Article

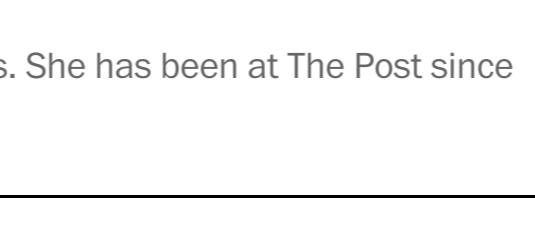
By Gillian Brockell

Gillian Brockell is a staff writer for The Washington Post's history blog, Retropolis. She has been at The Post since 2013 and previously worked as a video editor. [Twitter](#)

## MORE FROM THE POST

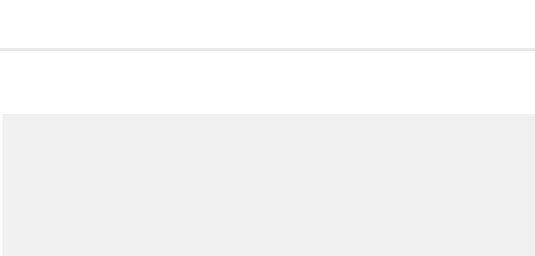
### Kim Kardashian West breathes life into SNL

Analysis · Today at 12:11 p.m. EDT



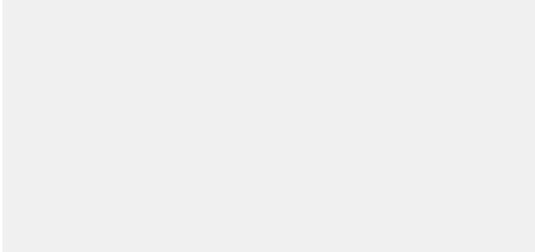
### Tesla tempted drivers with ‘insane’ mode and now is tracking them to judge safety. Experts say it’s ludicrous.

Today at 6:00 a.m. EDT



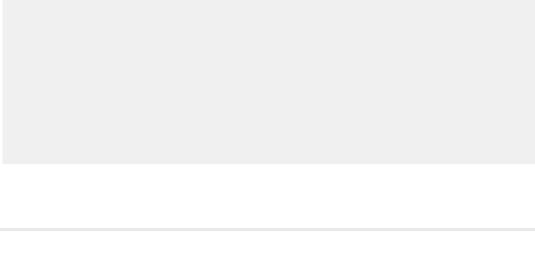
### Liberal Democrats have become the mainstream of the party and less willing to compromise with dwindling moderates

Today at 6:09 p.m. EDT



### Taiwanese president responds to Xi’s call for peaceful reunification: Island will not ‘bow to pressure’

Today at 9:14 a.m. EDT



### The first Columbus Day was born of violence — and political calculation

Today at 8:20 a.m. EDT



## PAID PROMOTED STORIES

Recommended by @utbrain

**1 in 2 Mac Users Are Unaware Of This Mac Trick**  
MacKeeper

**[Pics] Cher's Son Is Probably The Most Handsome Man To Ever Exist**  
Crowdflynn

**How Much Does It Cost To Hire A 24-Hour Live-In Carer in Brossard? The Price Might Surprise You**  
Caregiver | Search Ads

**Dental Implants For Seniors Are Paid By Medicare in Brossard. (See How)**  
Dental Implants | Search Ads

**New Senior Apartments Coming to Brossard (Take A Look at The Prices)**  
Senior Homes | Search Ads

**This is how people in Brossard are dodging funeral cost**  
Funeral Expenses | Sponsored

## Company

About The Post  
Newsroom Policies & Standards  
Diversity and Inclusion

Careers

Media & Community Relations  
WP Creative Group  
Accessibility Statement

## Get The Post

Become a Subscriber  
Gift Subscriptions  
Mobile & Apps

Newsletters &amp; Alerts

Washington Post Live  
Reprints & Permissions  
Post Store

Books & E-Books  
Newspaper in Education  
Print Archives (Subscribers Only)

e-Replica  
Today's Paper

## Contact Us

Contact the Newsroom  
Contact Customer Care  
Contact the Opinions team

Advertise & Syndication  
Request a Correction  
Send a News Tip

Report a Vulnerability

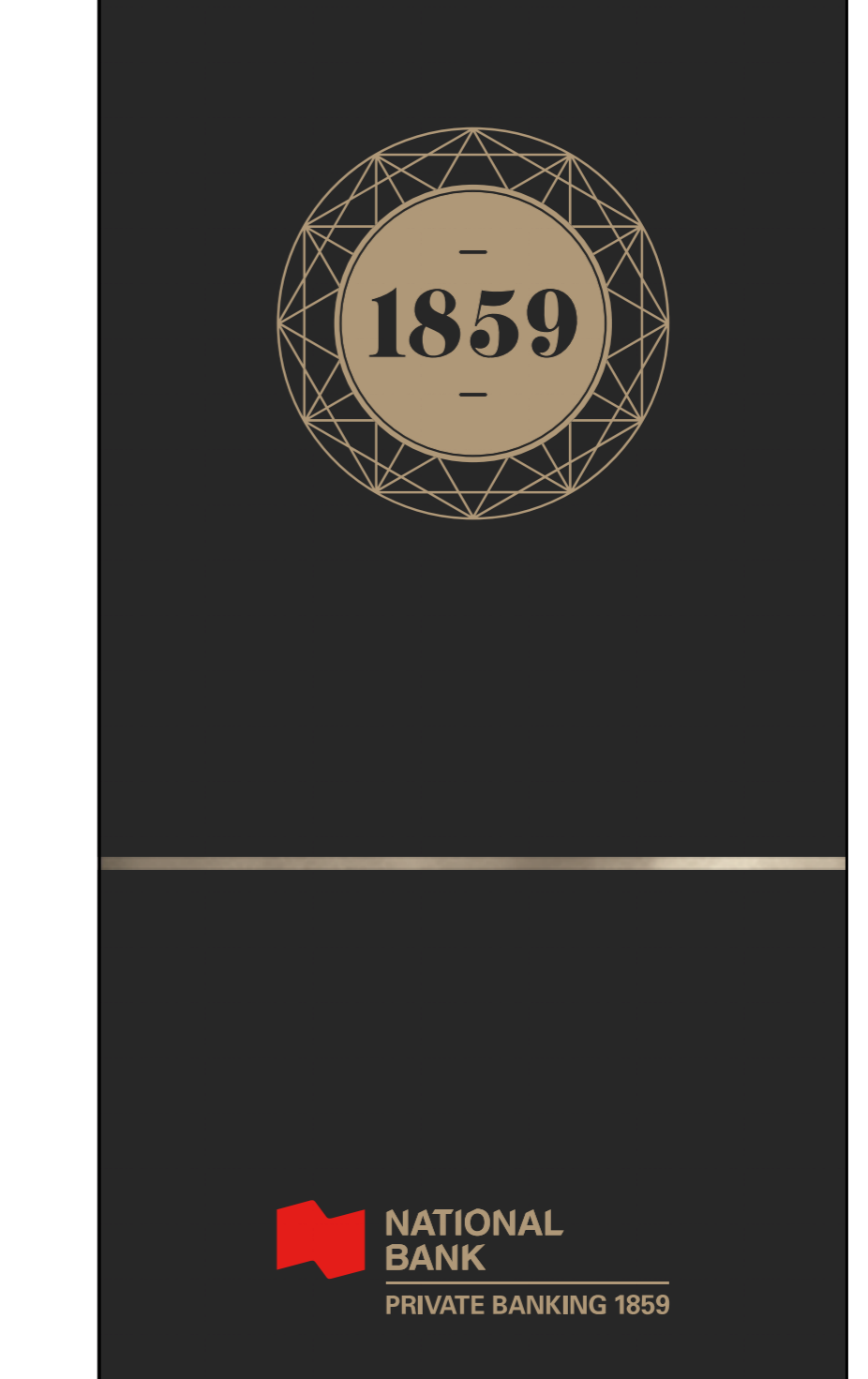
## Terms of Use

Digital Products Terms of Sale  
Print Products Terms of Sale  
Terms of Service

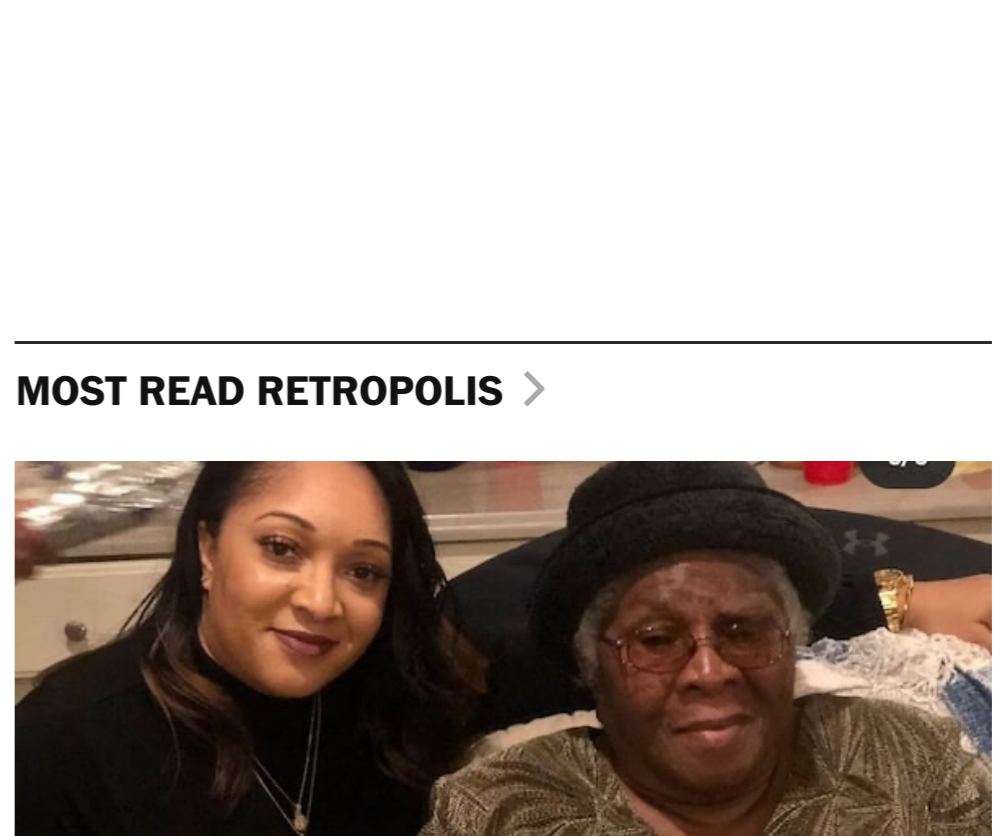
Privacy Policy

Cookie Settings  
Submissions & Discussion Policy  
RSS Terms of Service

All Choices

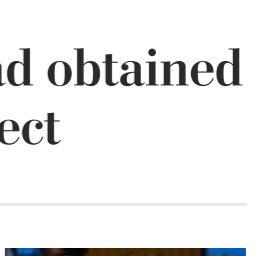


## MOST READ RETROPOLIS



**1** Woman fatally shot in D.C. had obtained protective order against suspect

**2** In scramble for votes in Virginia, emotions flare over Trump, covid and race



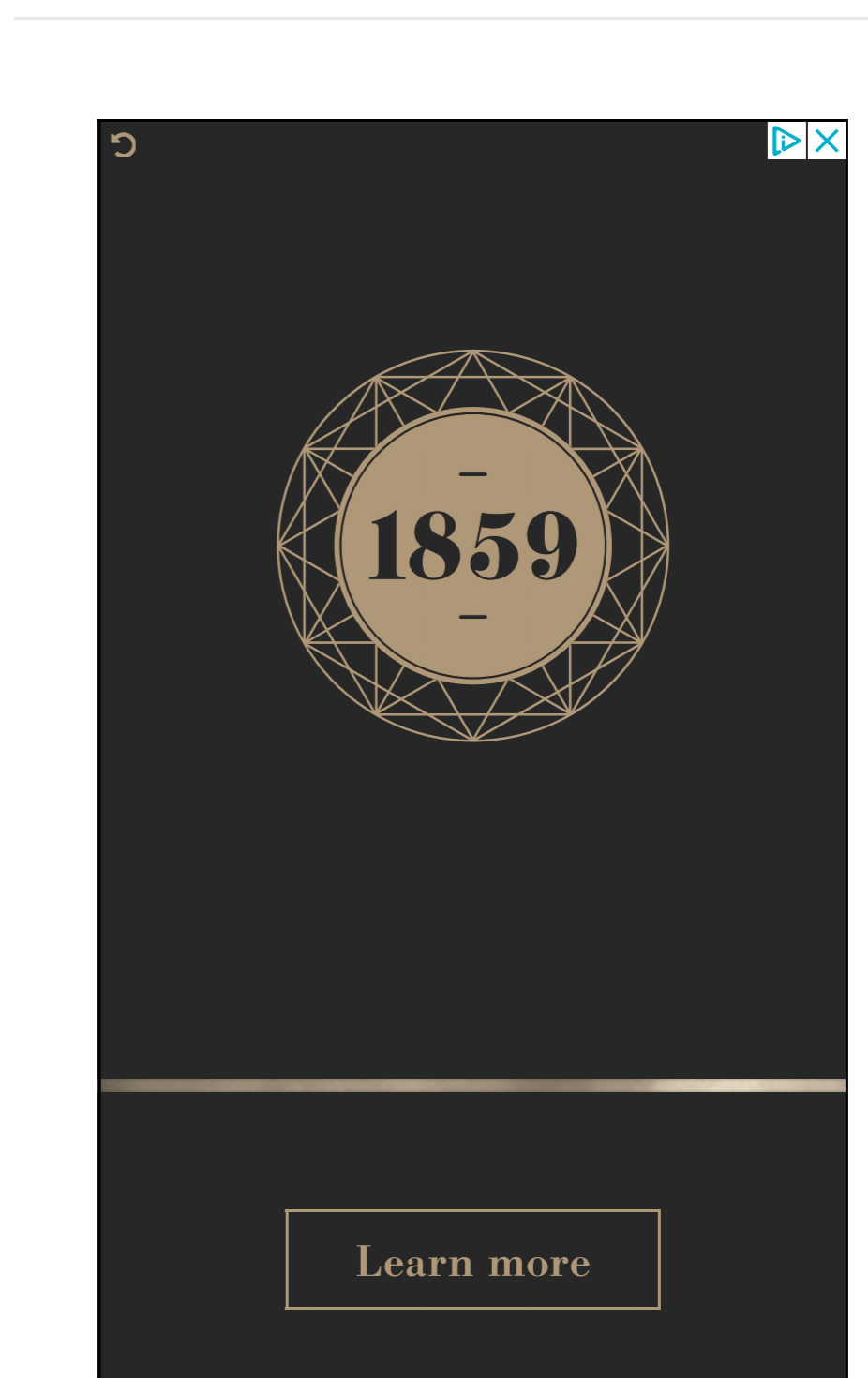
**3** Raymond T. Odierno, Army general who helped devise Iraq War strategy, dies at 67



**4** Racist comments at high school sports events lead to effort to 'repair the harm'



**5** **Perspective**  
After 18 months, I went back to my office. It's the best place to get office supplies.

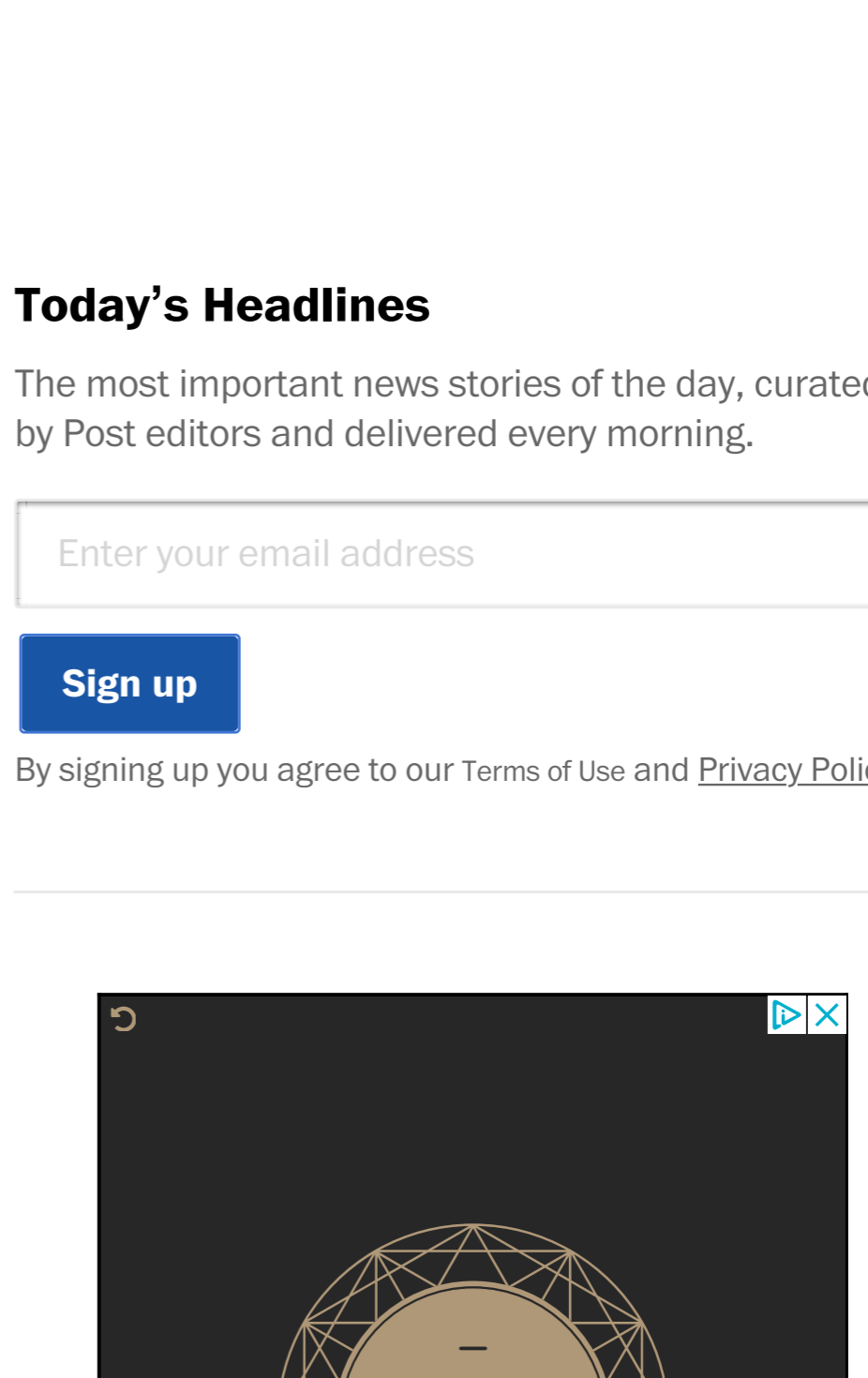


## Today's Headlines

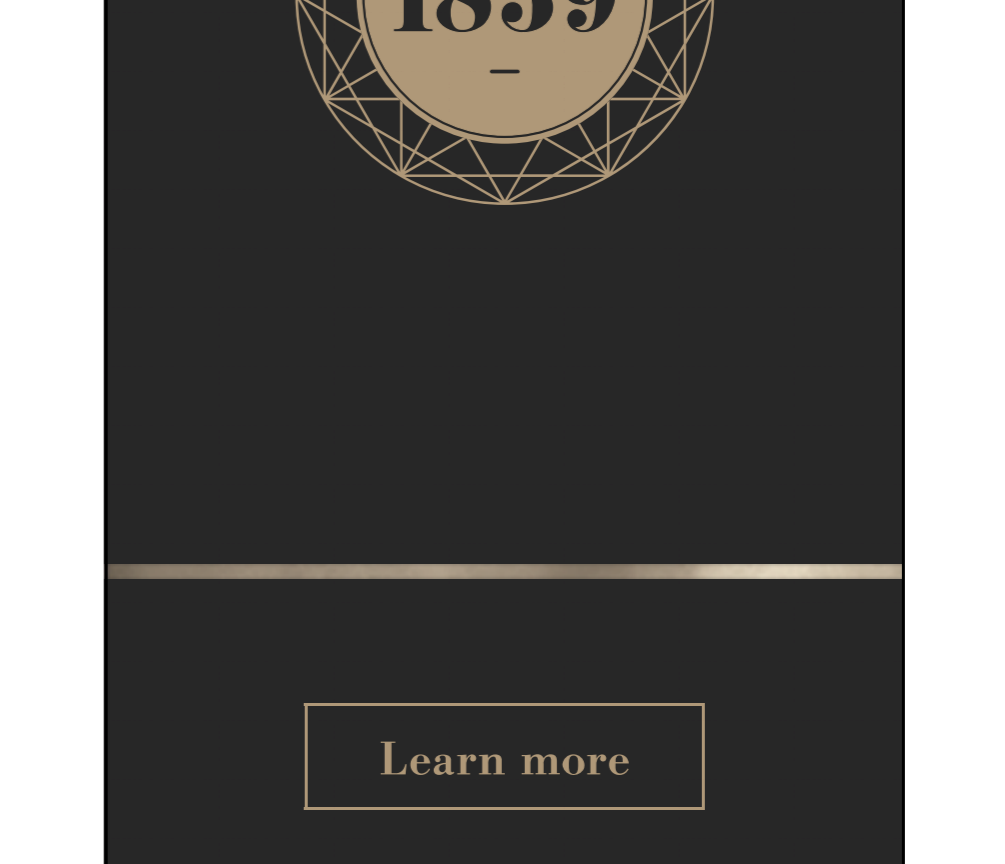
The most important news stories of the day, curated by Post editors and delivered every morning.



By signing up you agree to our [Terms of Use](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).



## MOST READ



**1** Navy nuclear engineer and his wife charged with trying to share submarine secrets with a foreign country

**2** Southwest cancels hundreds of flights over weekend, citing bad weather and air traffic control issues



**3** She was ready to die. Now an 11th-hour decision by health officials has halted her euthanasia bid.



**4** Wisconsin: The incubator for America's tribal politics



**5** Liberal Democrats have become the mainstream of the party and less willing to compromise with dwindling moderates



## Company

About The Post  
Newsroom Policies & Standards  
Diversity and Inclusion

Careers

Media & Community Relations  
WP Creative Group  
Accessibility Statement

## Get The Post

Become a Subscriber  
Gift Subscriptions  
Mobile & Apps

Newsletters &amp; Alerts

Washington Post Live  
Reprints & Permissions  
Post Store

Books & E-Books  
Newspaper in Education  
Print Archives (Subscribers Only)

e-Replica  
Today's Paper

## Contact Us

Contact the Newsroom  
Contact Customer Care  
Contact the Opinions team

Advertise & Syndication  
Request a Correction  
Send a News Tip

Report a Vulnerability

## Terms of Use

Digital Products Terms of Sale  
Print Products Terms of Sale  
Terms of Service

Privacy Policy

Cookie Settings  
Submissions & Discussion Policy  
RSS Terms of Service

All Choices