

Wrong signal

A shambolic leak reveals Team Trump's contempt for allies

How a magazine editor was accidentally added to a top-secret chat group



Photograph: AFP via Getty Images

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MANY KNOW the mortification of sending the wrong text message to the wrong person. But when the fat thumb is that of America's national security adviser, [Mike Waltz](#), the message is a detailed military plan to [bomb Yemen](#) and the recipient is a prominent journalist, the error is not just a cause of shame but potentially a serious breach of national security.

The White House said the messages inadvertently sent to Jeffrey Goldberg, editor-in-chief of the *Atlantic* magazine, and recounted by him at length in a story published on March 24th, appear to be genuine. Many in Washington expressed dismay at the lax operational security of President Donald Trump's national-security team, as they exchanged classified information over Signal, an encrypted messaging app available to the public, while seemingly unaware they had added a journalist to their chat.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the emoji-laded exchanges is what they reveal about the Trump administration's thinking. Mr Waltz and other cabinet-level officials expressed contempt for Europeans and insisted that allies should foot the bill for American military action, while emphasising the need to look tougher than Joe Biden's administration.

The dialogue suggests political satire—perhaps culled from an episode of the “Veep” television series. Even Mr Goldberg was uncertain about whether he was being had. He wrote:

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.

On March 11th, Mr Goldberg explained, he received a connection request on Signal from a user purporting to be Mr Waltz. This did not in itself seem implausible. The Trump administration may rail against “fake news”, but many members have cosy relations with mainstream journalists. Things took a bizarre turn two days later, when Mr Goldberg was added to a discussion group called “Houthi PC small group”, ostensibly created to coordinate upcoming action against the Iranian-backed Houthi militia in Yemen. The 18 members appeared to include J.D. Vance, the vice-president; Marco Rubio, the secretary of state; Tulsi Gabbard, the director of national intelligence; John Ratcliffe, the CIA director; Mr Hegseth and more.

On March 14th the Trump administration stepped up plans to bomb the Houthis, who had said they would resume firing on ships passing through the Bab al-Mandab, a vital waterway leading to the Suez Canal. The Houthis said they were acting in response to Israel blocking the supply of humanitarian aid to Gaza. In earlier months their attacks forced many ships to take the long route around Africa.

In the Signal group Mr Vance expressed misgivings about the impending operation, noting that Europeans were far more dependent than America was on trade through the Suez Canal. Admitting to a rare disagreement with Mr Trump, he added: “I am not sure the president is aware how inconsistent this is with his message on Europe right now.” Although Mr Trump had apparently approved the strikes, he argued for a delay.

Mr Hegseth seemed sympathetic, noting the “need to stay focused on: 1) Biden failed & 2) Iran funded” if military action took place. He added that waiting carried two risks: “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.” Mr Waltz responded by noting the limitations of European navies, and suggesting that allies will be made to pay the bill.

Mr Vance said, “I just hate bailing Europe out again”, to which the defence secretary replied: “VP: I fully share your loathing of European free-loading. It’s PATHETIC. But Mike is correct, we are the only ones on the planet (on our side of the ledger) who can do this. Nobody else even close. Question is timing. I feel like now is as good a time as any, given POTUS directive to reopen shipping lanes. I think we should go; but POTUS still retains 24 hours of decision space.”

Then “S M”—presumably Stephen Miller, Mr Trump’s deputy chief of staff—closed the discussion by saying Mr Trump had given the green light. But, S M added, they had to make clear to Egypt and Europe what the administration expected to receive for taking action. “If the US successfully restores freedom of navigation at great cost there needs to be some further economic gain extracted in return.”

The next morning Mr Hegseth set out the details of the strikes scheduled for two hours hence. Soon after the first bombs had fallen on Sana’a, the capital of Yemen, the Signal channel came back to life. Mr Waltz hailed the operation as an “amazing job” and posted three emojis: a fist, an American flag and fire. Steve Witkoff, Mr Trump’s envoy to the Middle East and Russia, topped him with five emojis: two hands-praying, a flexed bicep and two American flags.

A spokesman for the National Security Council said a review was under way to find out how “an inadvertent number was added to the chain” but insisted that the thread “is a demonstration of the deep and thoughtful policy co-ordination between senior officials”. Mr Waltz, a traditionalist Republican hawk who has never seemed entirely comfortable in Mr Trump’s entourage, faces much embarrassment but will be hoping for no more serious consequences. Mr Vance, closely associated with the Make America Great Again movement, emerges as a voice of restraint and, once more, a critic of European allies. Mr Hegseth, a champion of restoring the “warrior ethos” at the Pentagon, hovers between them, and comes down on the side of the need to “re-establish deterrence” through a show of force.

There is no sign in these discussions of any debate about whether more bombing in Yemen, a country that has been blasted for years, would do much good; the possibility of escalation with Iran; or the role of Israel as the ceasefire with Hamas appeared on the brink of collapse.

The exchange also underlines the importance of Mr Witkoff, who was treated as a “principal” even though he holds no cabinet position. Before Mr Trump took office, he helped to negotiate the first phase of the Gaza ceasefire, which has broken down. He was also entrusted with negotiating with Russia. On March 21st he gave a revealing interview on the “Tucker Carlson Show”. He seemed enamoured with Vladimir Putin, recounting how the Russian president had commissioned a portrait of Mr Trump as a gift and had gone to church to pray for Mr Trump when he heard he had been shot in the ear at a campaign rally last July.

Mr Witkoff said his aim was not just to end the war in Ukraine, but to forge a [new partnership](#) between America and Russia. They could collaborate on things such as oil and gas production in the Arctic, shipments of liquified natural gas and artificial intelligence. He dismissed the worries of Europeans, who fear that victory in Ukraine

would embolden Russia to attack other countries in Europe. He chastised European countries for thinking “we’ve all got to be like Winston Churchill, the Russians are gonna march across Europe’. I think that’s preposterous.”

Such comments will reinforce European fears that America could fast turn from the protector of Europe into something more like a predator. Far from comical in this respect, the Signal leaks will only heighten the alarm. ■