

PREMIUM REPORTS

‘Weaponized Migration,’ a Coordinated Effort Playing Out Deep in the Panama Jungle

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Save



An aerial view of the Lajas Blancas migrant camp in the Darien Gap. Buses transport migrants to the border with Costa Rica. (The Epoch Times)

By Darlene McCormick Sanchez

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DARIEN GAP, Panama—The ripe smell of garbage baking in the tropical sun mixed with the stench of human waste is one of the first things visitors notice at Bajo Chiquito, one of four large migrant camps in the Darién Gap.

The next is a sea of weary migrants, who hiked from Colombia along the infamous jungle trail, lined up to be processed by Panamanian officials.

One young boy in line with a furrowed brow seems worried. Others stare blankly at ramshackle buildings slapped together with wood, tin, and cinder blocks. They wait patiently in the brutal heat and humidity.

Most of them are coming to the United States aided by the United Nations, its nongovernmental partners, and regimes hostile to the United States.

Experts have said the migrants are being used as a weapon, just as deadly as a missile aimed straight at the United States.

Mass migration is being “weaponized” to overwhelm and destabilize the United States and ultimately break it apart, according to Joseph Humire, who studies unconventional warfare and is the executive director of the Center for a Secure Free Society.

“That’s why I think the term ‘invasion’ is appropriate,” Mr. Humire told The Epoch Times.

Migrant Pawns

Last year, a record 500,000 migrants traveled through the Darién Gap, documents show.

In February, The Epoch Times visited all four migrant camps in Panama: Lajas Blancas, Bajo Chiquito, San Vicente, and Canaán Membrillo.



A canoe operated by the Embera arrives at Bajo Chiquito in Panama on Feb. 18, 2024. The town is a transit point for migrants arriving from the Darién jungle and moving farther into Panama. (The Epoch Times)

The United Nations and related nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which receive millions of U.S. taxpayer dollars, have made mass migration easier by facilitating and augmenting migrant movement with food, shelter, and water.

Reporters spoke with migrants from China, Somalia, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Colombia and others who hiked out of the treacherous jungle leading from Colombia into Panama.

Many at the camps suffered from injuries and illnesses such as trench foot and broken limbs. Several complained that the water was

untreated at the camps run by the NGOs and that they lacked essential items such as diapers. One migrant told The Epoch Times that food supplied at the camps was stale or spoiled, so he spent \$7 to buy a meal from a local vendor.

Others said they were stranded at the camps because they were robbed during their journey or couldn't pay the \$60 needed for the bus ride north.



U.N. refugee agency personnel arrive at the San Vicente migrant camp in the Darien Gap, Panama, on Feb. 20, 2024. (Bobby Sanchez for The Epoch Times)

The number of illegal immigrants entering the United States has surged under the Biden administration as policies from the Trump era have been reversed or eliminated.

Illegal immigrant encounters at U.S. borders in fiscal 2022 totaled more than 2.7 million nationwide, according to CBP [data](#).

3.2

MILLION

Illegal immigrant encounters at U.S. borders in fiscal year 2023 topped 3.2 million nationwide, according to CBP data.

By 2023, that number topped 3.2 million.

The numbers also correspond with President Joe Biden’s renewed pledge to support the U.N.’s Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration—a 2018 plan to manage global migration that was [approved](#) by 152 nations.

“The Biden–Harris Administration is committed to safe, orderly, and humane migration around the world, including to the United States,” a government [statement](#) in December 2021 read. The United States had voted against the compact under President Donald Trump.

Most migrants are oblivious to their role as human ammunition, according to Trevor Loudon, an expert on communist regimes and host of EpochTV’s “Counterpunch.”

The U.N. and NGO workers at the City of Knowledge in Panama—which was once part of the U.S. military base given to Panama—have exposed migrants to violence, injury, death, and disease, he said.

“These bureaucrats with fat salaries, eating at nice local restaurants, are having a great old time facilitating one of the biggest crimes against humanity that’s ever been perpetrated,” Mr. Loudon said.



(Top L) An aerial view of the Lajas Blancas migrant camp in the Darien Gap. Buses transport migrants to the border with Costa Rica. (Top R) A family from Venezuela treks from Bajo Chiquito to Lajas Blancas, Panama, on Feb. 18, 2024. (Bottom) Men bathe in the Chucunaque River after trekking through the Darien Gap from Colombia, at Lajas Blancas, Panama, on Feb. 17, 2024. (Bobby Sanchez for The Epoch Times)

Panama's former border director Oriel Ortega told The Epoch Times the NGOs should be educating and helping migrants in their own countries instead of facilitating migration.

The Epoch Times knocked on multiple U.N. agency doors at the City of Knowledge complex while in Panama in an unsuccessful attempt to interview officials with the U.N. and HIAS, founded as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society.

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'Cash in Envelopes': How the US and UN Are Funding the Border Crisis



Former Panama Border Chief: UN Is Behind the Chaos at US-Mexico Border

At one U.N. office, reporters could see workers through blinds scrambling to hide after The Epoch Times knocked and rang the doorbell repeatedly.

Migrants said the trek through dense rainforest, steep mountains, thick mud, and swamps was exhausting and dangerous.

They told stories of murder, rape, and desperation.

Estimates of deaths reported by NGOs are probably low. The American Red Cross reported that 60 people died crossing the Darién Gap during the first half of 2023, but anecdotal information from people who have been in the jungle put that number in the hundreds or thousands each year.

Michael Yon, a war correspondent who has been reporting on the flood of migrants moving through the jungle into Panama, told The Epoch

Times he estimates that about 1 percent of those making the journey die.

At the Bajo Chiquito camp on Feb. 18, one Venezuelan migrant sitting under the shade of a tin roof shelter counted himself as lucky.

He was only robbed during the journey through the Darién Gap that he described as “hell” through an interpreter.

He witnessed a man who was stoned and then shot in the head for trying to protect his wife from being gang raped, he said.

“He went to go defend the girl,” he said.

Close by, a Venezuelan woman, Fabiola Suarez, appeared despondent. She had hiked through the Darién Gap to reunite with her husband in Colorado.



A family from Venezuela rests at Lajas Blancas after crossing the Darien Gap to Panama on Feb. 17, 2024.
(Bobby Sanchez for The Epoch Times)

She, too, counted herself as lucky.

She was almost raped by criminals preying on migrants, but there were enough people in her group to stave off an attack, she said.

“There was a lot in the group, so they didn’t,” she said through an interpreter.

Everyone had cell phones, a lifeline for many at the camps.

Dripping with sweat, Gustavo Toala emerged from the Darién jungle trail on Feb. 17 with only the clothes on his back—and a cellphone in his hand.

Everyone had cellphones, a lifeline for many at the camps.

He and two companions from Ecuador trudged over a rudimentary bridge into Lajas Blancas camp, looking exhausted after a five-hour walk from camp Bajo Chiquito.

Mr. Toala said through an interpreter that he and his two companions started as a group of 12, but they got separated during the journey.

He had been traveling for almost two weeks, hoping for a better life in the United States.

He left because of the high crime rate in Ecuador and the inability of small business owners to make a living due to extortion, he said.

With no map and little water, he blindly followed other migrants through the Darién Gap, where robbery, rape, and death await many.

He hoped to catch a bus to Costa Rica next.

At Lajas Blancas, migrants have access to a number of large maps provided by NGOs that display detailed migration routes heading to the United States.

One map is from HIAS, which recently received \$11 million from the U.S. in two grants awarded specifically to go to Latin American migrants.

One HIAS map shows the migration route from Colombia to Costa Rica, including detailed bus stops, temperatures, altitudes, and “migration kiosk” locations.



A migrant sits under a detailed migration map provided by a non-government organization at a migrant camp in the Darien Gap, Panama, on Feb. 18, 2024. (Darlene McCormick Sanchez/The Epoch Times.)

The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and its immigration arm, the International Organization for Migration, posted signs throughout the camps.

Under the Biden administration, funding from U.S. taxpayers to the U.N. jumped to more than \$1 billion in 2023.

Migrants said it takes thousands of dollars to make it to the United States, but many were vague when questioned how they could raise what would translate into large amounts of money in their native countries where wages are low. Some said they got money from relatives or friends already in the United States or in their native countries.

\$15,000

PRICE

Omar Ayub, a 20-year-old Somali at camp San Vicente, said it cost about \$15,000 to migrate to America.

Omar Ayub, a 20-year-old Somali at camp San Vicente, said it cost about \$15,000 to migrate to the United States.

Mr. Ayub left his mother and brother behind in Somalia. He wanted to escape terrorism, he said, adding that his uncle was killed by Al-Shabaab militants.

He said he plans to go to Minneapolis, where his fellow Somali, Rep. Ilhan Omar, serves as a Democratic congresswoman.

“I want to be like her,” Mr. Ayub said.

He seemed aware of U.S. politics and said of President Biden: “He’s a good president, too. He’s trying to make it easier for migrants to come to America.”

Wolves at the Door

The repercussions from weaponized illegal immigration have already rippled across the U.S. landscape, Mr. Loudon said.



Immigration is being used to destroy the United States politically, culturally, economically, and even geographically.

Trevor Loudon, communism expert

(Brendon Fallon/The Epoch Times)

“These people are being used to turn America into what they’ve fled—or even worse,” he said.

“Immigration is being used to destroy the United States politically, culturally, economically, and even geographically.

“So yes, it’s 100 percent a communist program to bring this country to its knees.”

The economic effects are being seen across the United States.

Cities and states have declared disasters as their social services have become overwhelmed. In Denver, Denver Health hospital is struggling financially because of an unpaid tab of \$136 million stemming from 20,000 unpaid hospital visits by 8,000 illegal immigrants. The city is now facing cuts to its public safety budget, and its 2024 plan has a whole team of city staff set aside to handle the “newcomer influx.”

On Feb. 27, California Sen. Laphonza Butler, a Democrat, [requested](#) more money from the Biden administration to provide more shelter beds in San Diego through the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s Shelter and Services Program.

The Biden administration has already submitted to Congress a supplemental request for an additional \$1.4 billion in Shelter and Services Program grants.

The Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), an immigration reform nonprofit group, calculated that illegal aliens cost

each American taxpayer \$1,156 per year.

\$182

BILLION

Illegal immigration
cost the American
taxpayer
approximately
\$182 billion in 2023,
estimated FAIR.

Overall, illegal immigration cost the American taxpayer more than \$182 billion in 2023, FAIR [estimated](#).

One of the more dramatic examples of an overwhelmed system is New York City.

Democrat Mayor Eric Adams has begged the federal government in vain for more money to handle the onslaught within the city that has prided itself as a sanctuary for illegal aliens.

He has also [asked](#) state leaders for help in resettling 68,000 illegal immigrants in the city's care as of December 2023.

Last summer, the city faced a multi-billion budget gap due to the growing crisis and initiated cuts to police and fire departments, according to a New York City press release.

During a December 2023 press conference, Mr. Adams acknowledged that “residents are angry” and tired of the crisis.

“It is clear that for the time being this crisis is going to be carried by the cities,” he said.

Mr. Adams has been a fierce critic of Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, who has been busing tens of thousands of illegal immigrants to sanctuary cities around the country, particularly New York City.

But Texas is facing its own issues from the border crisis. Aside from being on the front line of the influx, the federal government has lodged several lawsuits against Texas for its actions to secure its border.



Panama's SENAFRONT border police stage their equipment outside their barracks in Bajo Chiquito, Panama, on Feb. 18, 2024, as they prepare for a deployment in the Darien Gap. (Bobby Sanchez for The Epoch Times)

Ammon Blair, a former U.S. Border Patrol agent, told The Epoch Times that the United States is in uncharted waters because it is being attacked externally and from within.

That puts immense pressure on border states such as Texas, which is trying to protect its own citizens from weaponized migration while the U.S. government facilitates it, he said. He now works as a senior fellow

for the Texas Public Policy Foundation's Secure & Sovereign Frontier initiative.

Texas has had to bear the financial brunt of trying to stop the flow of illegal immigrants on its own.

“The federal government is colluding with other nations to eradicate the sovereignty of not just the state, but the sovereignty of the individual and the Constitution itself,” Mr. Blair said.

Texas has had to bear the financial brunt of trying to stop the flow of illegal immigrants on its own, budgeting billions of dollars for securing the border, which has included installing shipping containers and razor wire at border hotspots.

“The Texas Legislature has stepped up to make sure we continue to robustly respond to President Biden's growing border crisis, including allocating \$5.1 billion for border security,” Mr. Abbott said in a June 2023 press release.

Politically, the United States shouldn't dismiss the role of homegrown socialists, such as the Communist Party USA, or even unions controlled by Democrats that support open borders, Mr. Loudon said.

He noted that the Freedom Road Socialist Organization, which was aligned with Black Lives Matter, has sent delegations to Venezuela seven times in the past two years.

“They say in the publications, the southern border is the road to the American Revolution,” he said.

30,000

CHINESE

An uptick of Chinese nationals crossing the border, some 30,000 in the past four months, is not an accident, Mr. Blair said.

In a recruitment [post](#) on Dec. 31, 2022, Freedom Road noted that the divisions within the United States were growing more profound.

“Conditions for revolutionaries to organize and fight back are good,” the group stated.

Neither the Communist Party USA nor Freedom Road Socialist Organization responded to a request for comment.

The recently reported uptick of Chinese nationals crossing the border—some 30,000 in the past four months—is not an accident, Mr. Blair said.

The Chinese Communist Party has an iron grip on its citizens, so although some may have been able to slip out of China, Mr. Blair said he believes the CCP facilitated the influx.





said.

The Opium Wars broke out between the United Kingdom and China in the 1800s after China tried to stop the importation of the drug because of widespread addiction.

Mr. Humire said he believes that hostile countries are using illegal immigration to establish networks of communist “saboteurs” within U.S. border states to further erode U.S. sovereignty.

As illegal immigrant numbers have increased over the years, so have left-wing calls for “marginalized” communities to have rights and a voice in government.

Recently, San Francisco appointed a noncitizen from Hong Kong to head up its election board.

The Constitution requires U.S. citizenship to vote, but some liberal cities have allowed noncitizens to vote in local elections.

The District of Columbia and municipalities in three states—California, Maryland, and Vermont—allow noncitizens to vote in local

elections as of June 2023, according to a [report](#) compiled by Ballotpedia.

Recently, San Francisco appointed a noncitizen from Hong Kong to head up its election board.

Kelly Wong, an immigrant rights advocate, was sworn in on Feb. 14, The Epoch Times [reported](#).

In states such as Arizona, noncitizens can register to become “federal-only voters” without needing to provide documented proof of U.S. citizenship. These registrants can vote solely in races for federal office, according to the Arizona Department of State’s [website](#).

Venezuela’s Hybrid Warfare

Weaponized migration is also a tool for weaker Latin American countries such as Venezuela to pressure the United States into lifting sanctions, Mr. Humire said.

The United States sanctioned Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro in 2017, calling him a dictator.

Mr. Humire said he became curious about a caravan of mostly Honduran migrants that formed in 2018. It started with about 180 people but rapidly expanded to 7,000 within 10 days.





Honduran caravan revealed that the left-wing nongovernmental organization Pueblo Sin Fronteras allegedly received “suitcases of cash” from Venezuela’s dictator to facilitate the large caravan.

The migrant rights group denied receiving funds from any government affiliation in news articles at the time.



This caravan was organized by leftist groups in Honduras, financed in part by Venezuela.

Then-Vice President Mike Pence in 2018

(Madalina Vasiliu/The Epoch Times)

Venezuela’s involvement was confirmed by Vice President Mike Pence, who told [Fox News](#) in 2018 that Honduras’s president told him left-wing factions in Latin America were behind the migrant caravan.

“This caravan was organized by leftist groups in Honduras, financed in part by Venezuela,” Mr. Pence said.

Venezuelan nationals now make up one of the largest groups of illegal aliens crossing into America, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) [statistics](#). In the past two years, more than 600,000 Venezuelan nationals have entered the United States illegally.

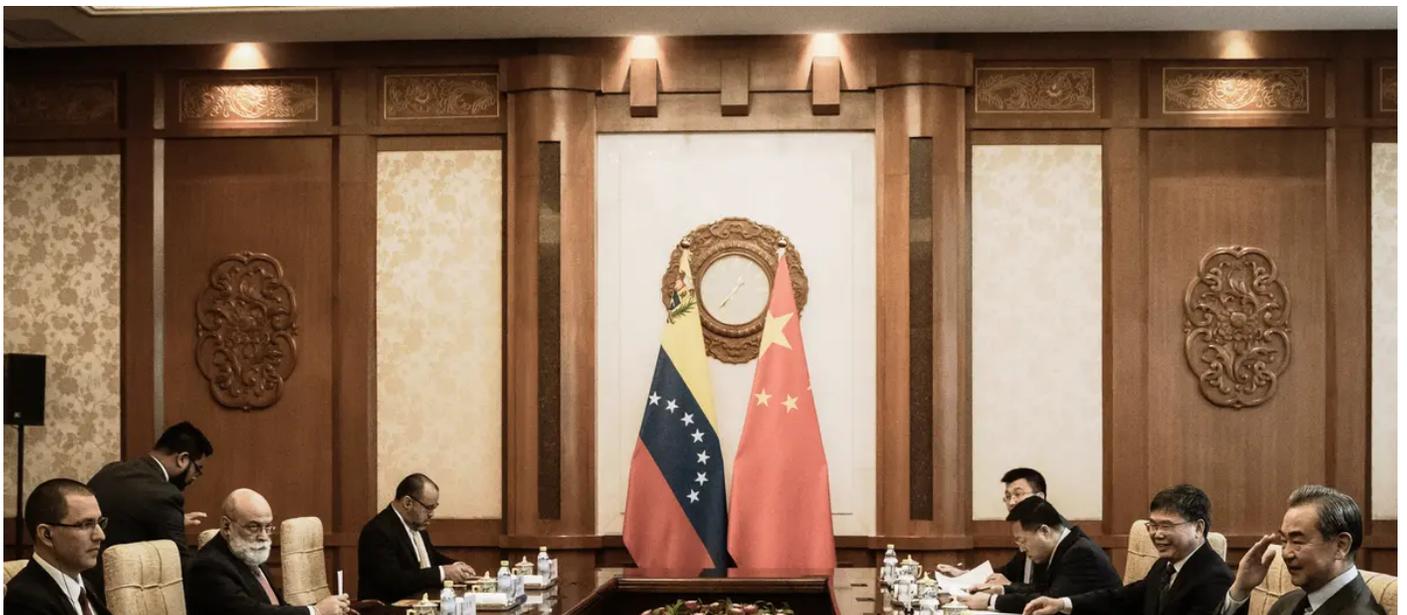
In the fall of 2023, as illegal immigrant numbers surged, the Biden administration loosened sanctions on Venezuela's oil, gas, and gold mining sectors in exchange for Venezuela's cooperation on holding democratic elections.

And when that deal was struck, suddenly, for the first time in years, the United States began deporting illegal immigrants to the South American nation.

But once it became clear the Venezuelan dictator wouldn't allow opposition candidates in a free election, the United States announced in January it would reestablish sanctions on a Venezuelan-owned gold mining firm in February.

And in what appeared to be a tit-for-tat, Venezuela ceased cooperating with U.S. deportation efforts.

Flights from the United States to Venezuela stopped in late January, U.S. officials said.





Ripping the U.S. Apart

The use of migration as a weapon became a more common subject in academia several years ago, Mr. Humire said.

“Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement, Coercion, and Foreign Policy,” an academic [book](#) by Kelly Greenhill, talks about weaker countries using migration to pressure stronger ones.



It’s an asymmetric invasion. That’s a preparatory condition for a conflict and a fight that they’re going to bring to the United States.

Joseph Humire, executive director, Center for a Secure Free Society

(Bobby Sanchez for The Epoch Times)

Ms. Greenhill’s research found 81 instances in which weaker nations used weaponized migration to coerce concessions from stronger nations, such as lifting sanctions, Mr. Humire said.

It is successful 40 percent of the time, giving it a better chance of changing behavior than sanctions, which worked 26 percent of the

time, researchers found. New studies suggest the success rate of weaponized migration might be even higher.

“It’s an asymmetric invasion,” Mr. Humire said. “That’s a preparatory condition for a conflict and a fight that they’re going to bring to the United States.”

He said he believes that the current mass migration is laying the groundwork for the next stage, which will be partly dependent on who wins the Mexican presidential election in June and the U.S. presidency in November.



The presidential campaign launch event of Claudia Sheinbaum at Zocalo Square in Mexico City, Mexico, on March 1, 2024. (Jaime Lopez/Getty Images)

Mr. Humire surmised, after analyzing European countries subjected to weaponized migration, that a secondary phase of attack could entail a

build-up of businesses and infrastructure controlled by Russia and China on the Mexican side of the U.S. southern border.

“That would be able to provide additional augmentation capabilities to further destabilize that border,” he said.

Russia, China, and Iran have all made inroads into Latin America and appear to be working in concert against the United States, Mr. Loudon said.

China, for example, already has a foothold throughout Latin America with its extensive Belt and Road Initiative. It has a stake in multiple ports and railways and has forged military partnerships with several countries. In Mexico, the Chinese have integrated into the cartel’s drug trafficking operations by providing precursor chemicals for fentanyl production and money laundering services on the other end. In Sonora, Mexico, the regime is currently exploring lithium mining.

Propaganda from foreign adversaries suggests the endgame is to break the United States into pieces or revert ownership of U.S. territory to nations such as Mexico as a concession in the name of equity, both experts agreed.

Mr. Humire pointed to the visit from Russian Secretary of Security Council Nikolai Patrushev, who is Russia’s No. 2 behind President Vladimir Putin, to Latin America in 2023.

While Mr. Patrushev visited Cuba and other countries, Russian-controlled social media broadcast a map showing a redrawn U.S. southern border, he said.

“They put this map on all their social media that showed a new border that basically covered all of Arizona, half of Texas, two-thirds of California,” he said.

“There can be no doubt that sooner or later the southern neighbors of the United States will regain the territories stolen from them,” Mr. Patrushev said, according to the government-controlled [Russian News Agency](#).

Mr. Patrushev called the United States “a patchwork quilt that can easily come apart along the seams.”

People may dismiss the notion and laugh, Mr. Humire said.

But with enough pressure and destabilization, the United States could lose control of its border and even be forced to give up territory, he said.

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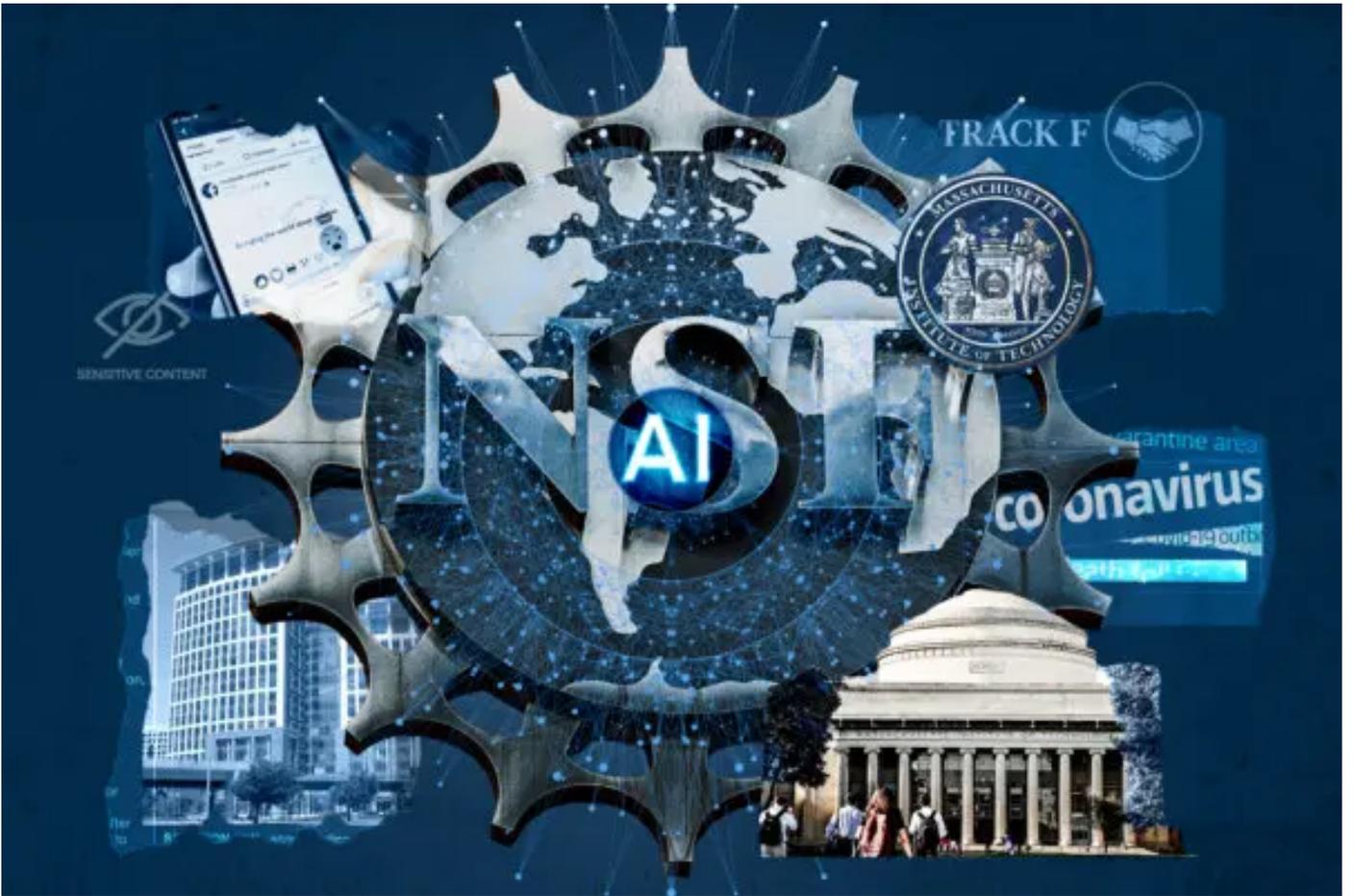
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