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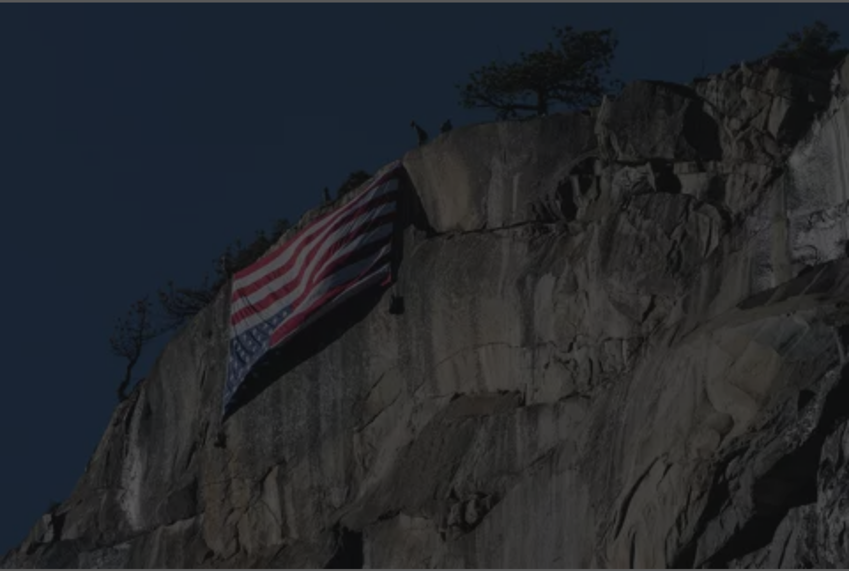
Photos: 'Distress flag' towers over Yosemite to protest cuts as crowds view firefall

By **Gregory Thomas**, Travel & Outdoors Editor

Updated Feb 22, 2025 11:05 p.m.



An upside-down American flag hangs from El Capitan near

Tracy Barbutes/Special to the Chronicle

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A group of frustrated Yosemite National Park staffers hoping to draw attention to the federal government’s sweeping workforce cuts hung an upside-down American flag Saturday thousands of feet off the ground on the side of El Capitan.

The 3,000-foot granite cliff looms above Yosemite Valley, and thousands of eyes were on it Saturday evening for the dramatic stunt: It’s the last weekend of the annual firefall spectacle, which brings scores of onlookers to Yosemite.

Dozens, if not hundreds, of large telephoto cameras set up by visitors Saturday in a viewing area on the valley floor were trained high on El Capitan to capture the ephemeral moments when the day’s last light illuminates Horsetail Fall as if it were a cascade of lava pouring over the cliff.

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The upside-down flag — traditionally a symbol of distress or a national threat — was strung near the falls and clearly visible.

“We’re bringing attention to what’s happening to the parks, which are every American’s properties,” Gavin Carpenter, a maintenance mechanic with Yosemite and disabled military veteran who supplied the flag and helped hang it Saturday, told the Chronicle. “It’s super important we take care of them, and we’re losing people here, and it’s not sustainable if we want to keep the parks open.”

An upside-down American flag hangs from El Capitan near

Yosemite National Park’s Horsetail Fall on Saturday to protest the thousands of federal job cuts made by President Donald Trump’s administration.

Tracy Barbutes/Special to the Chronicle

Eleven of Yosemite’s full-time staff members, including the park’s sole locksmith, a biologist, an HVAC specialist and others, received a termination email on Feb. 14 — as did thousands of federal lands workers across the country, some of whom have spoken out about the pain and dejection they feel being summarily dismissed from jobs they love.

Yosemite staffers typically live in employer-provided housing in the park, so a termination can carry the added burden for many of losing their residence.

“Since these cuts came, a lot of people are really uneasy and worried about what’s going to happen to them,” Carpenter said.

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Yosemite visitors offered mixed reactions to the flag Saturday.

Renis and Rebecca Harvey of Greeley Hill (Mariposa County) set up their cameras Saturday to capture Yosemite National Park’s firefall on Horsetail Fall at El Capitan. “I did see the flag,” Rebecca Harvey said. “I would rather see nature — no hand of man.”

Tracy Barbutes/Special to the Chronicle

“At first, I thought the upside-down flag was for Trump support, but then realized it was to support the national parks, and I was for it,” said Tina Alidio, visiting from Las Vegas.

“If the flag is for national parks, I am all for it,” said Joe Amaral, also from Las Vegas. “We have been to 32 national parks. We think they are short on resources as it is, and now you want to take away more? It isn’t right.”

But Rebecca Harvey of Greeley Hill (Mariposa County) said: “I would rather see nature — no hand of man.”

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Separate from the flag demonstration Saturday afternoon, Jackson Fitzsimmons, who said he was

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Demonstrators protest sweeping federal job cuts Saturday outside Yosemite National Park’s visitor center.

Tracy Barbutes/Special to the Chronicle

The group of six flag demonstrators rigged ropes at the top of El Capitan and rappelled down the cliff face to unfurl the flag, which measures 30 by 50 feet. Carpenter said they would leave it up for a few hours until around the time of the firefall event, then roll it back up and leave — enough time for it to register with viewers in the valley but not so long that it would ruin the photos they came to take of the famous natural spectacle.

Shortly after hanging the banner, the group sent out a statement:

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“The purpose of this exercise of free speech is to disrupt without violence and draw attention to the fact that public lands in the United States are under attack,” it reads. “The Department of the Interior issued a series of secretarial orders that position drilling and mining interests as the favored uses of America’s public lands and threaten to scrap existing land protections and conservation measures. Firing 1,000s of staff regardless of position or performance across the nation is the first step in destabilizing the protections in place for these great places."

Saturday’s last light illuminates Horsetail Fall on El Capitan in Yosemite National Park, a phenomenon known as the firefall because it resembles a cascade of lava over the cliff.

Tracy Barbutes/Special to the Chronicle

The statement continued:

“These losses, while deeply personal and impactful, may also be invisible to visitors and members of the public — we are shining a spotlight on them by putting a distress flag on El Capitan in view of Firefall. Think of it as your public lands on strike.”

It’s uncommon that people use El Capitan to deliver such messages, in part because of the technical know-how required to access the sheer cliff face. But it has happened a couple of times in recent years.

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Last summer, a group of demonstrators temporarily hung a banner reading "Stop the genocide" from the cliff in an effort to bring awareness to the Israeli offensive in Gaza.

Freelance photographer Tracy Barbutes contributed to this report.

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Feb 22, 2025 | Updated Feb 22, 2025 11:05 p.m.

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TRAVEL & OUTDOORS EDITOR

Gregory Thomas is The Chronicle's Editor of Travel and Outdoors, focusing on California activities and destinations. Before that, he served as Senior Editor at Outside Magazine in New Mexico where he edited news, enterprise stories, and features in print and online. He’s worked at a tech-media startup, reported for major metro newspapers, written features for national magazines, and done his share of internships. He holds a Master’s degree in journalism from UC Berkeley.

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