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Saturday, Jan. 18

Girls Basketball at the Hanson Classic at the Corn Palace, Mitchell, 4 p.m., vs. Dakota Valley.

Boys Basketball at Dakota Valley (C game at 2 p.m. followed by JV and Varsity)

Girls and Boys Varsity Wrestling and JV./JH Wrestling at Gettysburg, 10 a.m.

Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., 209 N Main

Groton Daily Independent

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Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460

It's Saturday Good Morning

Today is
going to be
a good day
simply
because
God made it.



Have a wonderful weekend!

Sunday, Jan. 19

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.

United Methodist: Conde worship, 8:15 a.m.; Groton worship, 9:30 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:30 a.m.; Coffee Time, 10:30 a.m.; Britton worship, 11:15 a.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m.; SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.

Groton CM&A: Sunday School, 9:15 a.m.; worship, 10:30 a.m.;

St. John's Lutheran: Worship with communion at St. John's, 9 a.m.; at Zion, 11 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:45 a.m.

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1440

Why 1440? The printing press was invented around the year 1440, spreading knowledge to the masses and changing the course of history. More facts: In every day, there are 1,440 minutes. We're here to make each one count.

TikTok's Legal Limbo

The Supreme Court yesterday unanimously upheld a federal law that could ban TikTok in the US unless ByteDance, its Chinese parent company, sells the video-sharing platform.

The justices (read the ruling) rejected TikTok's free speech challenge, allowing the law to take effect tomorrow—the deadline for ByteDance to divest its ownership. Congress passed the bipartisan legislation last year because of concerns about Chinese government influence, including potential manipulation of user content and sensitive data collection from more than 170 million American users of the app.

TikTok's future remains uncertain, though the Biden administration has suggested it will not enforce the law immediately. If enforced, app stores will be barred from letting users download or update TikTok, and web hosting services won't be able to support it. Using TikTok won't be illegal, but the platform could become inoperable.

President-elect Donald Trump, who takes office Monday, attempted to ban TikTok in his first term but has since softened his stance and signaled he may try to keep it operational.

Polar vortex set to freeze the US as far as the Deep South.

An arctic blast from a polar vortex is set to bring dangerously cold temperatures to the US this weekend, with wind chills reaching a minimum of minus 30 degrees to minus 50 degrees in some areas. About 120 million people—more than one-third of the US population—are expected to experience subzero conditions, particularly in the Northern Plains and Midwest. See a visual explainer on the polar vortex [here](#).

Ohio Lt. Gov. Jon Husted to fill JD Vance's senate seat.

Ohio Governor Mike DeWine (R) appointed Husted (R) over other potential candidates, including Vivek Ramaswamy (R), a former presidential candidate and incoming colead of President-elect Donald Trump's Department of Government Efficiency. Husted, 57, will serve until a special election in November 2026.

Separately, Trump's inaugural ceremony has been moved inside the US Capitol due to freezing temperatures. The last time a similar move occurred was in 1985 for Ronald Reagan's second inauguration.

Israel approves Gaza ceasefire and hostage-release deal.

Israel's full cabinet approved the agreement a little over two days after Hamas and Israel had struck the deal. The plan will temporarily pause fighting in the Gaza Strip and release dozens of hostages held by Hamas as well as hundreds of Palestinians imprisoned in Israel. The deal—facilitated by the US, Egypt, and Qatar—goes into effect tomorrow. See full details [here](#).

Biden commutes sentences of nearly 2,500 nonviolent drug offenders.

The recent round of clemency follows President Joe Biden's commutations last month of the sentences of roughly 1,500 people and the pardoning of 39 nonviolent offenders. That round, at the time, was the largest single-day act of clemency by a US president since records began in 1900. Biden holds the presidential record for most individual pardons and commutations issued.

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Joan Plowright, Tony Award-winning British actress, dies at 95.

Plowright's career spanned over 70 years in theater and film, including on Broadway. Her achievements included winning a Tony Award in 1961 for her role in "A Taste of Honey," in which she played a troubled teenager, and two Golden Globes in 1993, for her roles in the film "Enchanted April" and the HBO TV movie "Stalin." Plowright was also made a dame in 2004. She was married to fellow renowned British actor Laurence Olivier for 28 years, until his death in 1989.

Lavish bathhouse unearthed from ancient Rome's Pompeii. (w/photos)

Archaeologists in Pompeii have uncovered a private spa complex built more than 2,000 years ago, featuring thermal rooms capable of hosting 30 guests. The discovery, connected to an elegant black-walled banquet hall, offers a rare insight into how wealthy Romans used architectural spaces to showcase their culture, social status, and political ambition.

Humankind(ness)

Today, we're sharing a story from reader Richard S. in Delphos, Ohio.

"It was in 1970, and I was on leave from Vietnam. I was visiting a friend in New York City. I was in uniform and on my way home; I needed to take a bus to get to a train station. As I got onto the bus with change in hand for the fare, the bus driver put his hand over the collector and said with a smile, you don't have to pay. I thanked him and sat down, thinking, 'Wow, what a nice gesture for a soldier in uniform.' It is one of my most treasured memories of the Vietnam War and made up for all the negatives that we endured. Sometimes, the smallest acts can mean so much."

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Black Hills Snowmobiling Season Underway

PIERRE, S.D. – After a slow start to the season, the snowmobile trails in the northern Black Hills are in good shape, according to South Dakota Game, Fish, and Parks.

Officials in the Black Hills say snow conditions are good, and grooming is happening in the northern Hills. However, the southern Hills will require more snow before grooming can start.

“It’s important that snowmobilers pick up a 2024-25 trail map,” reminds Black Hills trails manager Shannon Percy. “The trail system incurs several re-routes each year, and having a current map helps ensure snowmobilers are on public trails.”

Snowmobile trail maps are available at various businesses along the trails. Riders can request a copy by calling 605.584.3896 or 605.773.2885.

East River trails have not yet received enough snow to groom.

Trail condition updates are posted to X accounts dedicated to both the Black Hills and the East River trails (x.com/SDsnowBHills and x.com/SDsnowEast). Current images of snow conditions can be found on the interactive map online at gfp.sd.gov/snowmobiling.

The snowmobile season runs until March 31.

Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling League Week #9 Results

Team Standings: Shihtzus 7, Chipmunks 6, Jackelopes 3, Cheetahs 3, Foxes 3, Coyotes 2

Men’s High Games: Tony Waage 206, Butch Farmen & Lance Frohling 205, John Sippel 203 & 200

Women’s High Games: Michelle Johnson 181, Hayley Johnson 178, Brenda Waage 166

Men’s High Series: John Sippel 563, Butch Farmen 559, Lance Frohling 532

Women’s High Series: Michelle Johnson 497, Vicki Walter & Sue Stanley 422, Hayley Johnson 419

Week 9 Fun Game – Most 6 Spares: Tie - Cheetahs and Jackelopes with 4!

Queen of Hearts

Week number 13 of the Groton Queen of Hearts was held Thursday night. The jackpot was \$10,892. Ticket sales for the week was \$915. The name of Dick Kolker was drawn and he picked Card #5 which was the 2 of Diamonds. Kolker won the consolation prize of \$91.

Coming up on GDILIVE.COM

Groton Area
Tigers

GT



Saturday, Jan. 18

**Boys Basketball
at Dakota Valley**

2:00 C Game

Sponsored by Larry & Val Flihs

3:00 JV Game

Sponsored by Ed & Connie Stauch

Followed by Boys Varsity

Sponsored by Agtegra, Avantara Groton, Bierman Farm Service, BK Custom T's & More, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, Groton Subway, John Sieh Agency, Jungle Lanes & Lounge, Locke Electric, Krueger Brothers, R&M Farms/Rix Farms, The Meat-house in Andover

\$5 ticket or

GDI Subscription

required to watch the games.

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Groton Area C Basketball Jamboree

Date: Saturday, January 25th, 2025

Place: Groton Area High School Arena

Time: 10:00AM

Teams: Groton, Oakes, ~~Tiospa~~ Zina, Warner, Webster

Spectator Admission: Adults \$5, Students \$3 – Good for all day!



	HOME (white)		AWAY (dark)
10:00 AM	Webster	vs	Warner
11:00 AM	Groton	vs	Oakes
12:00 PM	Warner	vs	TZ
1:00 PM	Webster	vs	Oakes
2:00 PM	Groton	vs	TZ

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NSU Women's Basketball

Wolves' Late Rally Falls Short Against No. 23 Mustangs

Marshall, M.N. – A slow start left the Northern State University women's basketball team trailing, as they fell short against #23 Southwest Minnesota State, 82-72. Madelyn Bragg led the Wolves with 20 points, while Michaela Jewett recorded her third double-double of the season.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 72, SMSU 82

Records: NSU 10-7 (NSIC 7-4), SMSU 15-2 (NSIC 9-2)

Attendance: 917

HOW IT HAPPENED

Northern State posted 17 points in the first, 10 in the second, 24 in the third, and 21 in the fourth, outscoring Southwest Minnesota State in the last two quarters.

The Wolves shot 34.9 percent from the floor compared to the Mustangs' 50.8 percent.

They tallied 42 points in the paint, 20 second-chance points, 20 points off the bench, and 18 points off turnovers.

Madelyn Bragg led the way with 20 points and seven rebounds, adding two blocks and one steal.

With 17 points and 12 rebounds, Michaela Jewett notched her third double-double of the season while shooting 53.3 percent from the floor.

First off the bench was Izzy Moore, who contributed 12 points, hitting 5-of-10 shots from the floor, and added two assists.

Rianna Fillipi led the team with five assists and contributed 13 points.

NORTHERN STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Madelyn Bragg: 20 points, 7 rebounds, 2 assists, 2 blocks, 1 steal

Michaela Jewett: 17 points, 12 rebounds, 3 assists, 3 blocks, 53.3 FG%

Rianna Fillipi: 13 points, 5 assists, 2 rebounds

Izzy Moore: 12 points, 3 rebounds, 2 assists, 50.0 FG%

UP NEXT

Northern State continues on the road to take on Sioux Falls to close out the weekend. Tip-off is set for 5:30 p.m. on Saturday, January 18, from Sioux Falls, SD, against the Cougars.

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NSU Men's Basketball

Burks Leads Three in Double Figures Against No. 22 Southwest Minnesota State

Marshall, Minn. – The Northern State University men rallied back in the second half Friday, but ultimately fell to No. 22 Southwest Minnesota State. The Wolves tallied 42 points in the final 20 minutes, following a slow start in the first.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 60, SMSU 79

Records: NSU 1-16 (0-11 NSIC), SMSU 14-3 (9-2 NSIC)

Attendance: 1005

HOW IT HAPPENED

Southwest led 41-18 at the half, however Northern out-scored their opponents 42-38 in the second. The Wolves led the contest with eight 3-pointers and eight steals, while adding 25 rebounds, 11 assists, and one block.

Northern shot 37.5% from the floor, 32.0% from the 3-point line, and 71.4% from the foul line.

They scored 24 points off turnovers, 18 points in the paint, and 15 points off the bench.

The Mustangs were efficient, shooting 53.4% from the floor, 42.9% from beyond the arc, and 11-of-11 from the free throw line.

Marcus Burks led three Wolves in double figures with 19 points, six rebounds, four assists, and three steals.

James Glenn followed with 14 points and a team best five assists.

Ethan Russell was the final Wolf in double figures, leading the team off the bench with ten points, hitting 4-of-8 from the floor.

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Marcus Burks: 19 points, 6 rebounds, 4 assists, 3 steals

James Glenn: 14 points, 5 assists, 1 rebound, 1 steal

Ethan Russell: 10 points, 50.0 field goal%, 2 steals, 1 rebound

UP NEXT

The Wolves travel to Sioux Falls today for a 3:30 p.m. match-up against the Cougars. Northern then returns to Wachs Arena the next weekend for the annual I Hate Winter festivities.



Bill to protect farms from spying could limit access to CAFO data

Bart Pfankuch

South Dakota News Watch

Proposed legislation aimed at protecting South Dakota farmers from potential "agro-terrorism" activities could have a secondary effect of limiting access to information about the state's largest animal feeding operations.

Senate Bill 14 seeks to strengthen a set of existing laws that make it a crime for anyone to steal farm animals, release animals, trespass on farms or interfere with farm operations.

As written, the bill also would add criminal penalties for using deception to enter or gain employment at an agricultural operation or to use cameras or other surveillance methods to spy on a farm or agricultural research facility. The bill also would make it a crime to interfere with or destroy crops or structures at farms and agricultural research facilities.

"Essentially, it's a property protection, property rights bill for farmers and ranchers," the bill's lead sponsor, Sen. Casey Crabtree (R-Madison), told News Watch.

The measure, Crabtree said, is similar to laws passed over roughly the past 15 years in Iowa that sought to prevent animal-rights activists or anyone else from entering or recording activities at farms in order to find evidence of possible animal mistreatment or abuse.

Dubbed "ag-gag" laws by opponents, the laws were challenged in court on First Amendment grounds. Despite some lower court rulings, the Iowa laws most similar to Crabtree's proposal were upheld as constitutional by a federal appeals court in 2024.

Crabtree said he hasn't heard of widespread efforts to infiltrate or interfere with South Dakota farm operations, but a mink farm in Arlington has experienced problems in the past.

Operators of that farm did not return a call seeking comment.

The intent of the bill is to stop "bad actors" from using deception or technology to possibly paint an unfair picture of what is happening on South Dakota farms, Crabtree said.

"We've got reports back about environmentalist groups that are attacking production facilities, or that they might be using drones and cameras, is really where this comes from," he said.

Ag groups push for Senate Bill 14

The drafting of SB 14 was aided by a number of farm groups that gathered last summer to identify ways to help agricultural producers in the 2025 legislative session, said Matthew Bogue, public policy director for the South Dakota Farm Bureau Federation.

South Dakota farmers deserve protection from anyone who may have "intent to cause physical or economic harm" to a farmer or farm operation, he said.

State farm groups have heard concerns from producers that people could break into their farms or trespass with ill intent, Bogue said.

"It's never a bad time to be proactive," he said. "In our opinion, this modernizes the existing statutes."

Bill would limit information on CAFOs

But the bill also would add a new section to state law that would make it more difficult for the public, the press and even local governments from obtaining information about the state's largest animal operations.

Concentrated animal feeding operations, or CAFOs, are large livestock operations where several hundred or even tens of thousands of cattle, hogs, chickens and turkeys are fed within a single farm, often in enclosed structures.

CAFOs are heavily regulated in South Dakota, and operators must obtain a permit and undergo inspection of their operations and their records to ensure proper waste management and protection of water

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resources.

Section 6 in SB 14 would bar the state Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources – which oversees CAFO permitting and inspection – from releasing a list of permitted CAFOs and their locations in South Dakota to anyone unless required by federal law.

The bill also would provide DANR discretion on whether to release a list of CAFOs to any "South Dakota state agency or local government for information regarding a permitted operation in the jurisdiction of the agency or local government."

Crabtree said an individual or government entity could still obtain a list of CAFOs and their locations by making an in-person request at the offices of DANR in Pierre.

The restriction on obtaining information about CAFOs worries Jay Gilbertson, manager of the East Dakota Water Development District, which promotes conservation and management of water resources in eastern South Dakota.

The reason CAFOs are permitted in the first place is to maintain oversight of their operations and to allow for the state and others to ensure the large farms are not polluting the land and water, he said.

Restricting public access to CAFO permits could make it more likely that large livestock operators would cut corners or avoid expensive waste management or water protection systems without anyone knowing, Gilbertson said.

"The permits are pretty explicit and contain all sorts of things 'thou shall or shan't do,' which makes it easy to adhere to because the operator knows exactly what is expected," he said.

"At the same time, if I'm somebody who is concerned about a facility, I can look at the permit requirements and it will tell me, 'This is exactly what is supposed to be going on.' And if it is, fine. But if it isn't, there isn't any debate that there's a problem."

CAFOs expanding in South Dakota

State officials said CAFOs are generally well operated and follow state laws. But problems do occur and fines have been levied against permit violators.

According to prior research by News Watch, permitted CAFOs in South Dakota violated state regulations 217 times from October 2009 to August 2019. The state received, on average, about two complaints about CAFOs from the public each month, and animal wastes from CAFOs leaked into state waterways on nine occasions during that time period, according to state records.

The number of animals raised and fed in CAFOs has increased steadily over the past decade.

The state and lawmakers have taken steps in recent years to make it easier for development of CAFOs and harder for residents and local governments to fight them. The state also has offered financial incentives to livestock producers to expedite development of new CAFO operations.

Brian Walsh, deputy secretary of DANR, wrote in an email to News Watch that the department already denies release of CAFO information to some who request it.

"DANR reviews and considers each individual request for information on Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) as they are submitted. DANR has received requests for an aggregated listing of all CAFOs including specific location information (addresses, geographic coordinate systems locations, or legal locations) with the express purpose of sharing those locations online," Walsh wrote. "DANR has denied such requests in the past due to the issue of biosecurity and agro-terrorism risks. The bill as drafted would not change how DANR currently responds to requests for CAFO records requests."

But Gilbertson said it seems odd that language in the bill could prevent the public or local governments from knowing where CAFOs are located.

"The department (DANR) has the tools to allow people to look things up for all the permits they issue," he said. "But when it comes to animal feeding operations, if you really want to know, you have to go to Pierre, and try to get in the DANR building and dig through the paper files? That would just be silly."

This story was produced by South Dakota News Watch, an independent, nonprofit organization. Read more stories and donate at sdnewswatch.org and sign up for an email to get stories when they're published. Contact Bart Pfankuch at bart.pfankuch@sdnewswatch.org.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Noem pledges to secure border as DHS chief, will shut down mobile app for migrants

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - JANUARY 17, 2025 3:34 PM

WASHINGTON — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem told members of the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Friday that she will be “vigilant and proactive and innovative to protect the homeland” as she carries out President-elect Donald Trump’s immigration crackdown.

“The challenges in front of us are extremely significant, and we must secure our borders against illegal trafficking and immigration,” Noem, Trump’s nominee for DHS secretary, said in her opening statement. She said she will get rid of a mobile app used by migrants to make appointments with asylum officers to plead their cases that’s been criticized by Republicans.

Noem’s nomination hearing was one of the last before Monday’s Inauguration Day. Most were tame, save for the hearing for the Defense secretary nominee, Fox News personality Pete Hegseth. Most nominees appeared on their way to easy confirmations in the GOP-controlled Senate.

Senators this week held hearings for U.S. attorney general pick Pam Bondi of Florida; Office of Management and Budget nominee Russ Vought; former North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgum, nominated as Interior secretary; Department of Housing and Urban Development nominee Eric Scott Turner; and Scott Bessent, a hedge fund manager tapped to run the Treasury Department.

Noem’s hearing was mainly friendly, with Democrats concerned about the U.S.-Canada border, assistance for natural disasters, cybersecurity and domestic terrorism.

The top Democrat on the committee, Sen. Gary Peters of Michigan, asked Noem about domestic terrorism and how she would address it, pointing to the recent terrorist attack in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Noem said that the number one threat to the U.S. is immigration at the southern border, but noted that “homegrown terrorism is on the rise.”

Senate Republicans, such as the chair of the committee, Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky, heavily focused on border security and reimplementing of Trump-era immigration policies, as well as curtailing humanitarian parole and temporary legal immigration programs like Temporary Protected Status.

McCook Lake flooding

Noem said that she would draw on her experience as South Dakota’s governor if she is confirmed as DHS secretary. Some of that includes cybersecurity and the management of natural disasters, such as the recent June flooding in her state that affected McCook Lake property owners.

However, the state of South Dakota received notice that it could be sued by those property owners, who argue their community suffered catastrophic damage as a direct result of flood diversion efforts carried out by state and local officials. Residents said they were not properly warned about the flooding by officials, especially by Noem, who conducted a press conference prior to the flood but then flew out of state for a political fundraiser in Tennessee while the flood was occurring.

Peters, while not mentioning McCook Lake, pointed out DHS is often the first line of defense when it comes to natural disasters.

“The Federal Emergency Management Agency must continue to work hard to address the increasing number of natural disasters affecting our communities as a result of climate change,” Peters said, “from violent storms like hurricanes that brought destruction to states across the South to the devastating wildfires in California and countless other severe storms and flooding events all across our country.”

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Congress recently included \$100 billion in disaster aid in a stopgap spending bill in December. Democratic Sen. Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut said he was deeply disappointed with Trump's response to the fires in California, and noted that during the first Trump administration, requests for disaster aid from Washington state and other blue states were brushed off.

Noem said that under her leadership "at the Department of Homeland Security there will be no political bias to how disaster relief is delivered to the American people."

Blumenthal asked her if she would follow Trump's orders to withhold disaster assistance to blue states, noting the \$100 billion in funds Congress recently passed.

Noem said she would not answer a question about a hypothetical scenario.

"It's more than a hypothetical, with all due respect," Blumenthal said. "It's based on experience with President Trump withholding money from Washington state and elsewhere. I need to know from you, will you stand up to the president?"

Noem said that she will "deliver the programs according to the law."

Resignation, divestment

In Noem's ethics agreement, she noted she plans to resign as South Dakota's governor as soon as she's confirmed as Trump's DHS secretary, something that could happen as soon as next week.

She added that she plans to divest from a company where she is a manager, Ashwood Strategies LLC.

As part of her financial disclosure to the U.S. Office of Government Ethics, Noem said she made almost \$140,000 in a book advance for a 2024 memoir where she admitted to shooting and killing her 14-month-old dog, Cricket, due to behavioral issues. The revelation drew bipartisan backlash, but she's mainly defended it.

She also received about \$40,000 for an advance for her first book, published in 2022, "Not My First Rodeo: Lessons from the Heartland."

As part of the disclosure, she said her husband makes a little over \$1 million at his insurance firm. It is noted in the form that he is the sole owner.

Northern border

Peters also said DHS does not have enough resources at the northern border to facilitate trade. He added that there has been an increase in unauthorized crossings.

Noem said that in addition to focusing on the southern border, her goal is to have the northern border properly staffed, for both trade and security.

Sen. Maggie Hassan, Democrat of New Hampshire, said in her state she has seen an increase in unauthorized crossings.

"There's real concern in New Hampshire and all along the northern border that we strengthen the border and have the resources we need," Hassan said. "We also have a really strong economic relationship with our partner, our friends to the north, and a lot of family relationships. We don't want to impede that flow of economy and people that's lawful, but we do want to make sure that we have the resources we need."

She asked if Noem would consider upgrading the equipment at the northern border, along with more staff.

"That's something I want to work with Congress, with the Senate and the House on, to ensure that the resources are there to meet the challenges at the border," Noem said.

Biden immigration policies

GOP Sens. Josh Hawley of Missouri and James Lankford of Oklahoma said they want DHS to roll back several Biden-era immigration policies, such as the use of the mobile app by migrants and humanitarian parole.

Noem said if she's confirmed, the shutdown of what's known as the CBP One app will be one of her first directives, and while the app will be gone, she said DHS will preserve the data. Noem said she doesn't believe the tool should be used to process asylum seekers into the country.

Trump's Vice President, Ohio's J.D. Vance, has also criticized the use of the app, writing on social me-

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diathat the use of the app is “the most underreported scandal of the Biden admin.”

“They made an application to facilitate illegal immigration,” he said. “It boggles the mind.”

Lankford also asked if construction of the border wall would continue, and Noem said it would.

Hawley asked if Noem would work to reinstate the so-called Remain in Mexico policy, which requires asylum seekers to often stay in dangerous parts of Mexico and wait while their asylum cases are pending, something that can take months or years.

“The president and I have talked extensively about this, and (I) will 100% partner with him to reinstate the Remain in Mexico policy and make sure that it’s in place,” she said.

Noem added that she also wants to increase the number of immigration judges and courts. However, the Department of Justice holds jurisdiction over immigration courts, not DHS.

Ohio freshman GOP Sen. Bernie Moreno asked about Temporary Protected Status, which allows people to remain in the United States and work temporarily if their home country is deemed too dangerous for return due to war, natural disasters or violence. There are roughly 1 million people in the TPS program, which does not provide a pathway to citizenship and typically has to be reauthorized every 18 months or so.

“This program has been abused and manipulated by the Biden administration, and that will no longer be allowed,” Noem said.

There are 17 countries under TPS, such as Ukraine, Afghanistan, Sudan, El Salvador and Venezuela.

The White House this month redesignated TPS for Ukraine, Venezuela, Sudan and El Salvador. Of those redesignations, Noem said she specifically disagreed with the one for Venezuela.

During Trump’s first term, he tried to end the TPS designation for Haiti, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Sudan, but was blocked by the courts in 2018.

Mass deportations

Freshman Democratic Sens. Andy Kim of New Jersey and Ruben Gallego of Arizona, both former House lawmakers, pressed Noem on how she would carry out mass deportations of people in the country without legal status.

Kim asked what kind of authority border czar Tom Homan would have in immigration policy and if Homan would be giving direct orders to Immigration and Customs Enforcement or U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

“If he is going to be making decisions, then he should come before this committee as well,” Kim said.

Noem said that she would be working with Homan daily and that “there’s no authorities being planned to be taken away from the department or myself in the role.”

“But it sends some mixed signals,” Kim said. “People in my home state, maybe around the country, when they hear Mr. Homan saying, ‘I’m making the decisions,’ when they hear President-elect Trump say ‘He’s in charge of our border.’”

Gallego asked Noem what her plan was to ensure there is a safe and legal process for agricultural workers, who he said are concerned about what Trump’s mass deportations plans could mean for them.

“You know, talking to my agricultural community, my dairy community, they have concerns that this approach will lead to workforce shortages that will further drive up the costs of everything,” Gallego said.

Noem said that Trump “has been very clear that his priority is going to be deporting criminals, those who have broken our laws and perpetuated violence in our communities.”

She added that his next priority for deportations will be those who have removal orders.

Iowa GOP Sen. Joni Ernst also asked Noem how she plans to detain immigrants, and not allow those who have been charged with a crime to be allowed bond.

“The number one priority of the president is to secure the border and to deport these criminal actors immediately and as soon as possible. They will be the number one priority to make our communities safer and so that we don’t have this kind of situation going forward,” Noem said.

Separately, the U.S. Senate early Friday also voted on a bipartisan basis to move forward with a bill that would greatly expand mass detention of immigrants arrested or charged with a property crime.

The measure was written in response to the murder of a 22-year-old nursing student, Laken Riley, in Georgia. A man from Venezuela who was in the U.S. without proper authorization has been convicted of the crime.

Ariana covers the nation's capital for States Newsroom. Her areas of coverage include politics and policy, lobbying, elections and campaign finance.

Age verification bill for adult websites passes committee of SD lawmakers

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - JANUARY 17, 2025 4:29 PM

PIERRE — A committee of South Dakota lawmakers endorsed a bill Friday that would require pornographic websites to implement age verification measures.

The House State Affairs Committee passed the measure 11-2, with all yes votes from Republicans and the two no votes from Democrats. It now goes to the full House of Representatives.

The legislation would require pornographic websites to ensure users are at least 18 years old by verifying their identification, via means that could include submitting an image of an identification card. The bill would also prohibit the websites and any third parties conducting age verification from retaining users' identifying information post-verification.

Non-compliance by websites would result in a misdemeanor for the first offense and escalate to a felony for subsequent violations. The bill contains lengthy definitions for pornographic content harmful to children.

Rep. Bethany Soye, R-Sioux Falls, is the prime sponsor of the bill. She said it's essential to protect minors from exposure to explicit online content.

Hollie Strand is a forensic examiner with the Pennington County Sheriff's Office who said she was testifying on her own behalf. She said children as young as kindergarten students are being exposed to pornography, whether parents take measures to protect their kids or not.

"I had a kindergartener ask me what to do when his friend showed him porn and he asked him to stop," she said.

The state Attorney General's Office endorsed the bill.

The American Civil Liberties Union of South Dakota testified in opposition and said that while the intention is to safeguard minors, the legislation could undermine the First Amendment rights of adults who might be deterred by age-verification privacy concerns from accessing legal content.

"Allowing the government to restrict access to sexual content will inevitably lead to more censorship and a more restricted internet for everyone," said Samantha Chapman, ACLU of South Dakota advocacy manager. "Young people deserve our protection and support, but age-gating the internet is not the answer."

The legislative effort follows similar, failed legislation from last year.

In response, an interim study committee was established to examine the issue further. A separate, similar bill also addresses the issue this session in the Senate but hasn't had a hearing yet.

Sen. David Wheeler, R-Huron, a sponsor of the Senate bill, said it's modeled after Texas legislation that's under consideration by the U.S. Supreme Court. The bill would only take effect if the Texas law is upheld. Wheeler said that would prevent South Dakota from having to face litigation and pay legal fees for its own law.

The other difference is the Senate bill would only require age verification for sites where at least one-third of the content is harmful to minors, to more clearly distinguish between pornographic sites and sites that merely contain some adult content. In response to a South Dakota Searchlight question, Wheeler acknowledged that pornographic sites could transition two-thirds of their content to non-harmful material to avoid being age-gated.

"That just illustrates the difficulty of regulating this stuff," Wheeler said.

Joshua Haiar is a reporter based in Sioux Falls. Born and raised in Mitchell, he joined the Navy as a public af-

fairs specialist after high school and then earned a degree from the University of South Dakota. Prior to joining South Dakota Searchlight, Joshua worked for five years as a multimedia specialist and journalist with South Dakota Public Broadcasting.

Homeland Security nomination is latest leap in a life of risks for Kristi Noem

Confirmation hearing for Republican South Dakota governor comes just nine months after widespread predictions of her political demise

BY: SETH TUPPER - JANUARY 17, 2025 3:48 PM

South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem's advancement to the cusp of confirmation as a Trump cabinet secretary probably surprised some people who thought her career ended nine months ago with a notoriously disastrous book release.

It's no surprise to Noem, who's been thwarting predictions of her demise since her first statewide race 15 years ago.

The biggest story of that campaign was a revelation of 20 speeding tickets on her driving record. It turned out to be the first of many scandals, controversies and negative headlines Noem would overcome on her climb to national prominence.

Following two hours of questioning Friday in a U.S. Senate committee hearing, all that stands between Noem and her appointment as secretary of Homeland Security is a vote by the full Senate. That's anticipated sometime soon after President-elect Donald Trump's Monday inauguration.

Noem will then resign as South Dakota's governor and head to Washington, D.C., to lead an agency that oversees two of the most important issues to Trump and his millions of supporters: border security and immigration enforcement.

It's a high-risk appointment that could end in failure, or serve as a launching pad for a Republican presidential primary run in 2028 when Trump will be unable to seek office again due to term limits.

In other words, it's the kind of leap that the 53-year-old Noem has been taking ever since a family tragedy sparked her interest in politics more than three decades ago.

"My whole life," Noem said in her infamous book last year, "is about taking risks."

Defined by death and taxes

Noem inherited much of her risk-taking personality from her late father, Ron Arnold, a lifelong farmer and rancher. She remembers him as a hard-charging man of action, like a John Wayne movie character come to life.

"Ever since I was a little girl, I wanted to be just like him," she wrote in her earlier book, "Not My First Rodeo."

One day in 1994, Arnold climbed to the top of a grain bin to break up a moldy crust atop the grain. An unseen cavity under the crust gave way, and he was sucked under multiple tons of corn. He suffocated while rescuers made frantic efforts to save him.

As Noem's family grieved, they were confronted with a federal estate tax of about \$170,000 on her father's \$2 million estate. Much of the estate's value was tied up in land, cattle, stored grain and equipment, plus loan debt, making it difficult for the family to pay the bill.

Tax experts said Arnold could've avoided that outcome with an appropriately structured will. Noem called that "fake news" in 2017, telling a Courthouse News reporter, "For a decade after a tragic farming accident took my dad's life, the death tax impacted nearly every decision our family made."

Noem's anger about the estate tax eventually motivated her to enter politics. She won a seat in the state House of Representatives in 2006 and served from 2007 until 2010.

That year, she entered a crowded Republican U.S. House field and won the primary election. She went

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on to beat incumbent Democratic U.S. Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin by 2 percentage points in the general election, overcoming the speeding-ticket revelation along the way.

In Congress, Noem voted for legislation to weaken the estate tax, including the Tax Cut and Jobs Act that passed during Trump's first term in 2017. Among the law's provisions is a doubled estate tax exemption, so that individual estates worth up to \$13.99 million can now avoid the tax. The law is scheduled to expire at the end of this year, but Trump and congressional Republicans hope to extend it.

Noem said she was "instrumental" in crafting the 2017 legislation. The impact on her political stature was evident in a photo of a White House event celebrating the bill's passage. Among dozens of members of Congress standing behind Trump, she scored a prime spot near the middle of the frame, over the shoulders of the vice president and the Senate majority leader.

To Congress and back

After four terms in the U.S. House, Noem turned her attention back to South Dakota in 2018, where the state's then-governor was term-limited. Noem's husband, Bryon, and her three children had remained in South Dakota throughout her time in Congress, while she flew back and forth frequently and slept on a pullout bed in her congressional office.

"Whenever Bryon and the kids were in town, we blew up air mattresses and threw down quilts and basically had slumber parties as a family," Noem wrote in her first book.

She defeated South Dakota's attorney general in a Republican gubernatorial primary, and then attracted Trump to the state for a fundraiser in the fall. That helped propel her to a three-point general election victory over Democratic legislator Billie Sutton, a popular former rodeo cowboy.

Noem took office in January 2019 as South Dakota's first female governor. A little more than a year into her first term, South Dakota detected its first COVID-19 cases.

Noem often says, as she did last week in her State of the State speech, that South Dakota was "the only state that never forced a business or church to close." That simple description obscures a complicated reality.

In the early weeks of the pandemic, Noem advised South Dakota schools to close for the remainder of the 2020 school year, and they complied.

Beyond that, her early approach to pandemic restrictions was ambiguous. In March 2020, she issued an executive order listing 20 things South Dakotans "should" do: People "should" engage in social distancing, businesses "should" prevent customers from congregating in close quarters, health-care facilities "should" postpone elective surgeries, and so on.

Reporters asked Noem to explain whether she was issuing orders or making suggestions. She refused to clarify and fell back on the word "should" 13 times during a 12-minute press conference.

"I am telling them what they should be doing in this state," she said during one exchange.

Pandemic fame

As the pandemic wore on and the country fractured over conflicting views about the usefulness of shut-downs and mask mandates, Noem grew vocally opposed to both and became a national lightning rod. She racked up social media followers and began appearing on right-leaning news talk shows, where she boasted about the comparative strength of South Dakota's economy thanks to her hands-off approach. Meanwhile, the state's COVID-19 death rate soared so high that it briefly ranked among the world's worst.

In July 2020, Noem leveraged her relationship with Trump to win authorization for a fireworks show at Mount Rushmore National Memorial. The National Park Service had stopped allowing fireworks there more than a decade earlier, due in part to concerns about embers sparking wildfires in the surrounding forest.

Trump flew in and spoke at the event, which was attended by thousands of people and was broadcast live by national media outlets. The event drew praise as a defiant example of resistance to pandemic restrictions, and criticism as an irresponsibly large gathering at a time when health officials were encouraging social distancing.

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Noem doubled down a month later by encouraging people from around the country to attend the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally, which ignited a similarly divisive response and more national coverage.

By the fall of 2020, Noem's national profile had risen so much that she was traveling the country campaigning for Trump's reelection. He lost, but she went on to win her own reelection in 2022 by a comfortable margin, setting the stage for yet another Trump visit to South Dakota in 2023. Noem announced her endorsement of Trump at that rally, fueling speculation that she could be his running mate in 2024.

Book debacle

Talk of Noem as a vice presidential candidate ended abruptly in April. The Guardian obtained an advance copy of her second book, "No Going Back," and revealed passages she wrote about fatally shooting a misbehaving hunting dog and an unruly goat. The Dakota Scout, a South Dakota media outlet, challenged Noem's claim in the book that she had met North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un, and she retracted it.

Noem became a subject of national scorn and ridicule for weeks. In interview after interview during a national book tour, she said her decisions to shoot the dog and the goat were evidence that she could do difficult things. She said the "fake news" was leaving out important facts and spinning the stories in a negative light.

"Most politicians will run from the truth," Noem told Fox News. "They will shy away and hide from making tough decisions. I don't do either of those."

When pressed to explain how an ultimately retracted anecdote about meeting Kim Jong Un got into her book, she repeatedly said she took it out "as soon as it was brought to my attention" (she'd been assisted by a ghostwriter). When pressed further, she refused to elaborate, saying she wouldn't discuss her conversations with world leaders.

Late-night television hosts had a field day cracking jokes about Noem in their monologues. "Saturday Night Live" mocked her. Yet, less than three months later, she was given a speaking slot during the Republican National Convention.

No surrender

The week after Trump won the general election, he announced Noem as his pick to lead the Department of Homeland Security. She'd spent much of the prior year positioning herself as an outspoken critic of the Biden administration's border policies.

That included deploying National Guard troops to assist Texas with border security and calling a joint session of the Legislature to deliver a speech about it. In that speech last year, Noem claimed Mexican drug cartel activity was rampant on Native American reservations in South Dakota. Her repeated use of similar rhetoric eventually motivated leaders of all nine Native American tribes in the state to ban her from their lands (at least one tribe recently retracted its ban).

The tribal banishments were among many controversies Noem endured during her time as governor. Other memorable dustups included accusations that she misused a state airplane for personal and political purposes, improperly intervened to help her daughter obtain an appraiser's license, and mismanaged a flood that ravaged a small community while she flew away to a political fundraiser. She also suffered multiple published allegations of an extramarital affair with former Trump adviser Corey Lewandowski, which she denied.

Her first book included a statement of the philosophy that's gotten her through those and other difficulties, and the attitude she'll bring to Washington.

"My mom will tell you that from the time I was a little girl, every battle I got in was an epic struggle for victory," Noem wrote. "Surrender was not an option."

Seth is editor-in-chief of South Dakota Searchlight. He was previously a supervising senior producer for South Dakota Public Broadcasting and a newspaper journalist in Rapid City and Mitchell.

GOP-led Laken Riley Act on track to be first immigration bill signed into law by Trump

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - JANUARY 17, 2025 6:46 PM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Senate Friday voted to advance a bill that would require the expansion of mass detention for immigrants charged or arrested for property crimes, setting it up to be one of the first measures signed into law by incoming President-elect Donald Trump.

In a 61-35 procedural vote, 10 Senate Democrats joined with all Republicans to limit debate on S. 5, known as the Laken Riley Act, named after a 22-year-old nursing student who was murdered by man who immigration authorities say entered the country illegally and was previously charged with shoplifting.

If signed into law, the bill — already passed by the House — would be an early win for Trump, who campaigned on his plans to enact harsh immigration policies, including mass deportations, and often blamed Riley's death on the immigration policies of the Biden administration.

A final vote in the Senate is set for Monday, after which the legislation will be sent back to the House due to an amendment from Texas GOP Sen. John Cornyn that would add the assault of a law enforcement officer as requiring mandatory detention. It was agreed to on a bipartisan 70-25 vote.

The Senate is also teed up to vote on another amendment Monday, one from Iowa GOP Sen. Joni Ernst that would also include mandatory detention requirements for "any crime that results in death or serious bodily injury to another person."

One amendment Democrats submitted, brought to the floor by Sen. Chris Coons of Delaware, would have stricken a section in the bill that grants broad legal standing to state attorneys generals to challenge federal law, as well as the bond decisions of immigration judges.

It was rejected on a party-line vote of 46-49, but it's an amendment that mirrors one submitted by Republican Sen. Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee.

Schumer unhappy with lack of debate

Ahead of the vote, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer said he would not be voting for the measure, criticizing Senate Republicans for not allowing more amendment votes.

"We told Republicans we wanted to have a serious and productive and fruitful debate on this legislation, with the chance to vote on amendments (to) modify the bill," the New York Democrat said. "Unfortunately, without more changes to address deficiencies in the bill, I will be voting no."

Immigration attorneys and experts have raised major concerns with the bill. They argue it would not only affect undocumented people, but would ensnare some immigrants with legal status, lead to the detainment of children and compel the U.S. State Department to halt issuing visas to a country that refused to accept nationals eligible for deportation.

Additionally, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement has estimated that the cost of enforcing the law at \$26.9 billion in its first year, according to NPR. The budget for ICE for fiscal year 2024 is about \$9 billion.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune said before the vote that if ICE doesn't have the capacity to carry out the law, "the answer is to provide those resources."

The South Dakota Republican added that Senate Republicans are "currently working on a bill that will provide ICE with additional agents and additional detention capacity."

Ariana covers the nation's capital for States Newsroom. Her areas of coverage include politics and policy, lobbying, elections and campaign finance.

Lawmakers consider higher bar for constitutional amendments and a trigger to end Medicaid expansion

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - JANUARY 17, 2025 2:15 PM

PIERRE — A committee of South Dakota lawmakers endorsed two resolutions Friday that would ask voters to approve a higher vote threshold for constitutional amendments and allow the state to end Medicaid expansion if federal support for it declines.

The committee's 11-2 approval of both measures was the first step in the legislative process. If the measures pass the full House and Senate, they'll go to voters in 2026. The resolutions don't require the governor's signature to be placed on the ballot.

One of the resolutions would raise the threshold for amending the state constitution from a simple majority to a three-fifths vote, which equates to 60%. Constitutional amendments must go to a vote of the people.

The other resolution would end the state's expansion of Medicaid eligibility if the federal funding share for the expansion falls below 90%.

Medicaid expansion amendment

Rep. Tony Venhuizen, R-Sioux Falls, is the prime sponsor of the Medicaid expansion amendment. He also supported a resolution last year that voters approved in November, which will allow legislators to consider placing work requirements on Medicaid expansion enrollees if the federal government allows it.

Medicaid is a federal-state health insurance program for people with low incomes. In the past, Medicaid was not available to able-bodied adults younger than 65, unless they were below the poverty line and had young children. In 2022, South Dakota voters expanded Medicaid eligibility to adults with incomes up to 138% of the poverty level. The expansion is now part of the state constitution and can only be altered by voters.

States that adopt Medicaid expansion receive 90% federal funding to cover the costs for newly eligible enrollees.

Venhuizen said that President-elect Donald Trump's administration might reduce that funding.

"All along there has been an assumption that the 90-10 share is not going to go anywhere, but I no longer think that's a safe assumption," Venhuizen said. "We all know that since the election, there has been a lot of talk about getting federal spending under control."

Supporters of the proposal also argued that South Dakota should safeguard its budget from potential federal funding cuts.

The most recent Medicaid data from the Legislative Research Council says there were 28,726 Medicaid expansion enrollees as of November. Total Medicaid enrollment was 148,303. The state's current, total Medicaid budget is about \$2 billion, with the federal government covering about \$1.4 billion.

Venhuizen said if voters approve the measure, it would remove Medicaid expansion from the constitution, but legislators could still decide to continue it.

Opponents said the Legislature declined Medicaid expansion for over a decade before voters approved it, making them skeptical legislators would keep the expansion program.

"The intent of the voters was to provide affordable health care for people," said Rep. Erin Healy, D-Sioux Falls.

60% amendment proposal

Rep. John Hughes, R-Sioux Falls, introduced the proposal to set a 60% vote threshold for constitutional amendments. He said voters are tired of wealthy, out-of-state interest groups trying to mess with their constitution.

The resolution follows other recent attempts to raise the approval threshold for certain ballot measures.

In 2022, voters rejected Constitutional Amendment C, which sought to require a three-fifths vote for the approval of ballot measures that would increase taxes or fees or require the state to appropriate \$10 million or more in the first five fiscal years after a measure's passage. The measure was defeated, with 67% voting against it.

Additionally, South Dakota voters rejected Constitutional Amendment X in 2018, which would have raised the approval requirement for constitutional amendments to 55%. It was defeated with 54% voting against it.

Supporters of the current proposal argued that a higher threshold is necessary to protect the state constitution from frequent changes and to ensure that only amendments with broad public support are adopted.

Opponents said voters have spoken on the matter, and there's no need to ask them again.

Chase Jensen, of the family agriculture and conservation advocacy group Dakota Rural Action, noted there is already a higher barrier for constitutional amendments, in the form of a higher petition signature requirement for citizens to place them on the ballot. Last year, constitutional amendments initiated by citizens required 35,017 signatures, while while other initiated measures or referred laws required 17,508 signatures.

"I find agreement with many of the facts about huge money interests flowing into our state around our constitutional amendments," Jensen said. "However, I would propose the very clear and self-apparent solution to this issue would be reforming our campaign finance laws."

Hughes told South Dakota Searchlight he's open to that, but has not seen a proposal he thinks would hold up against Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission, a landmark 2019 U.S. Supreme Court decision that reversed longstanding campaign finance restrictions and enabled corporations and other outside groups to spend unlimited amounts on elections.

The 11-2 votes on each resolution split along partisan lines, with all 11 yes votes from Republicans and the two no votes from Democrats.

Joshua Haiar is a reporter based in Sioux Falls. Born and raised in Mitchell, he joined the Navy as a public affairs specialist after high school and then earned a degree from the University of South Dakota. Prior to joining South Dakota Searchlight, Joshua worked for five years as a multimedia specialist and journalist with South Dakota Public Broadcasting.

Biden commutes sentences of nearly 2,500 people with nonviolent drug convictions

BY: SHAUNEEN MIRANDA - JANUARY 17, 2025 11:07 AM

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden announced Friday that he would commute the sentences of nearly 2,500 people convicted of nonviolent drug offenses.

Biden — who has just three days left in the Oval Office — has granted a sweeping number of pardons and commutations throughout his term. With Friday's total, he has now issued more individual pardons and commutations than any other U.S. president, according to the White House.

The commutations are aimed at people who are serving longer sentences than they would receive today under current law and practice.

Biden said the clemency actions offer relief for people who were given "lengthy sentences based on discredited distinctions between crack and powder cocaine, as well as outdated sentencing enhancements for drug crimes," per a Friday statement.

"This action is an important step toward righting historic wrongs, correcting sentencing disparities, and providing deserving individuals the opportunity to return to their families and communities after spending far too much time behind bars," Biden said.

He also said he would continue to review additional commutations and pardons.

In December, Biden commuted the sentences of 37 people on federal death row, reclassifying their sentences to life without the possibility of parole. Three men who were charged with hate-motivated mass shootings and terrorism were kept on death row.

Earlier that month, Biden commuted the sentences of roughly 1,500 people placed in home confinement during the coronavirus pandemic. He also granted pardons for 39 people who were convicted of nonviolent crimes.

Biden faced criticism for issuing a full and unconditional pardon in December to his son, Hunter Biden,

over federal gun and tax crimes. The move was a sharp reversal of his previous position on the matter. *Shauneen Miranda is a reporter for States Newsroom's Washington bureau. An alumna of the University of Maryland, she previously covered breaking news for Axios.*

U.S. Supreme Court upholds ban on TikTok unless it's sold as deadline nears

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY AND JENNIFER SHUTT - JANUARY 17, 2025 10:09 AM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Supreme Court on Friday left in place a law that would ban TikTok, the popular social media app that for years has raised national security concerns, unless its parent company sells it.

"There is no doubt that, for more than 170 million Americans, TikTok offers a distinctive and expansive outlet for expression, means of engagement, and source of community," the court wrote in its ruling. "But Congress has determined that divestiture is necessary to address its well-supported national security concerns regarding TikTok's data collection practices and relationship with a foreign adversary. For the foregoing reasons, we conclude that the challenged provisions do not violate petitioners' First Amendment rights."

A bipartisan law enacted last year requires ByteDance, TikTok's parent company, to sell the platform by Sunday or face exclusion from U.S.-based app stores.

TikTok fought the law all the way to the Supreme Court, arguing First Amendment rights, but did not prevail and now faces a choice of whether to sell the app.

Trump's move next

The 27-page ruling created a bit of a dilemma for President-elect Donald Trump, who now supports TikTok staying on Americans' cell phones despite wanting to ban it during his first administration.

Trump wrote Friday in a post on his social media site, Truth Social, that he will address the issue once he takes office on Monday.

"I just spoke to Chairman Xi Jinping of China. The call was a very good one for both China and the U.S.A.," Trump wrote. "It is my expectation that we will solve many problems together, and starting immediately. We discussed balancing Trade, Fentanyl, TikTok, and many other subjects. President Xi and I will do everything possible to make the World more peaceful and safe!"

Trump issued an executive order in 2020 to ban the video platform unless it broke from ByteDance, but reversed his position last year.

Trump's attorney general nominee, Pam Bondi, cited "pending litigation" and declined to directly answer a question about whether she would direct the Justice Department to enforce the TikTok ban during her confirmation hearing Wednesday.

TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew is expected to attend Trump's inauguration Monday, according to a source familiar with the planning.

Chew will not be the only tech executive sitting nearby as Trump takes the oath of office. Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg and Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, who also owns The Washington Post, are expected to be in attendance. Both donated \$1 million to Trump's inaugural.

Chew posted a video on social media Friday after the ruling was released thanking Trump "for his commitment to work with us to find a solution that keeps TikTok available in the United States."

"This is a strong stand for the First Amendment and against arbitrary censorship," he said. "As we've said, TikTok is a place where people can create communities, discover new interests and express themselves, including over 7 million American businesses."

The director of national intelligence released a report in February 2024 stating that "TikTok accounts run by a (People's Republic of China) propaganda arm reportedly targeted candidates from both political parties during the U.S. midterm election cycle in 2022."

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Bipartisan backing for law

The law requiring TikTok's parent company to sell the app or lose access to the American social media market received bipartisan support in the House last year, following a 352-65 vote in March. The measure cleared Congress as part of a larger supplemental package a month later.

President Joe Biden signed it into law. However he is leaving the Trump administration the choice of whether to enforce the law.

"President Biden's position on TikTok has been clear for months, including since Congress sent a bill in overwhelming, bipartisan fashion to the President's desk: TikTok should remain available to Americans, but simply under American ownership or other ownership that addresses the national security concerns identified by Congress in developing this law," White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre wrote in a statement.

"Given the sheer fact of timing, this Administration recognizes that actions to implement the law simply must fall to the next Administration, which takes office on Monday."

Congress and the Biden administration pointed to warnings from national security officials about ByteDance's ties to China's government as the top reason to force its parent company to sell the app.

TikTok maintains that it is majority owned by global investors, including the Susquehanna International Group and Blackrock, though roughly 20% remains in the hands of its Chinese founders.

Democratic senators made an eleventh-hour pitch on Wednesday to extend ByteDance's deadline to divest from TikTok, but Republicans blocked the effort.

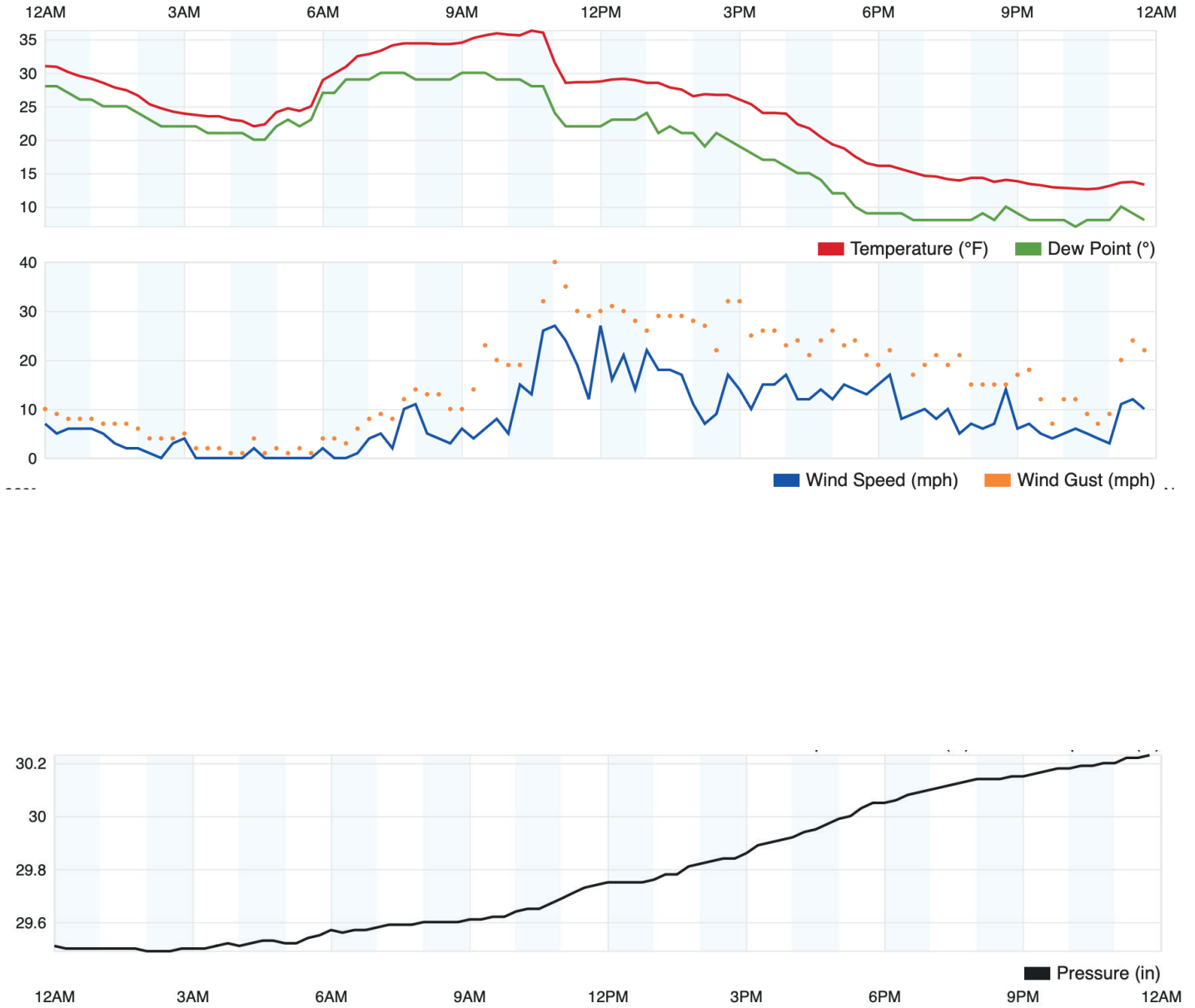
Ashley Murray covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include domestic policy and appropriations.

Jennifer covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Cold Weather Advisory

Saturday

Saturday Night

Sunday

Sunday Night

M.L.King Day



High: 9 °F

Low: -12 °F

High: 4 °F

Low: -15 °F

High: -4 °F

Partly Sunny
then Partly
Sunny and
Blustery

Partly Cloudy

Cold

Partly Cloudy

Cold



Key Messages & Minimum Wind Chills

January 17, 2025
3:12 PM

Key Messages Concerning Upcoming Cold Snap

- Blustery winds (25 to 35 mph gusts) continue into Saturday
- Core of coldest air Saturday night through Tuesday morning
- Dangerous wind chills and cold - be prepared if headed outside this weekend/next week

Minimum Wind Chill Forecast (°F) ←

	1/18 Sat			1/19 Sun				1/20 Mon				1/21 Tue															
	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm								
Aberdeen	-20	-27	-32	-35	-35	-34	-30	-20	-16	-22	-26	-31	-36	-39	-39	-33	-27	-26	-26	-26	-27	-31	-30	-15	-6	-6	-5
Miller	-10	-17	-25	-31	-32	-33	-29	-20	-15	-18	-23	-28	-33	-35	-34	-31	-26	-25	-29	-29	-30	-30	-26	-14	-3	-2	-2
Mobridge	-14	-23	-26	-29	-33	-33	-29	-18	-13	-18	-25	-31	-36	-39	-37	-30	-23	-22	-23	-25	-25	-25	-22	-8	3	2	3
Murdo	-6	-14	-21	-29	-33	-34	-29	-20	-13	-16	-21	-26	-33	-35	-35	-31	-25	-24	-26	-26	-30	-30	-26	-10	3	4	4
Ortonville	-20	-26	-30	-31	-32	-32	-31	-24	-19	-21	-24	-28	-32	-33	-33	-32	-29	-27	-26	-27	-27	-27	-25	-16	-8	-9	-8
Pierre	-8	-11	-18	-25	-28	-29	-25	-16	-9	-13	-18	-24	-30	-32	-33	-28	-23	-19	-19	-21	-22	-22	-21	-8	2	5	5
Sisseton	-23	-30	-34	-37	-39	-39	-34	-28	-23	-25	-29	-33	-37	-38	-39	-36	-32	-31	-32	-34	-34	-32	-31	-19	-12	-12	-11
Watertown	-19	-25	-32	-33	-36	-38	-35	-26	-21	-23	-27	-32	-36	-37	-37	-34	-30	-29	-31	-31	-31	-31	-30	-19	-11	-11	-10



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

25 to 35 mph wind gusts are expected to continue into Saturday when the core of coldest air arrives. This cold air will remain in place through Tuesday morning. Wind chills this low can cause frostbite in just a few minutes so be prepared and bundle up if headed outside this weekend/next week.

Broton Daily Independent

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Upcoming Highs/Lows

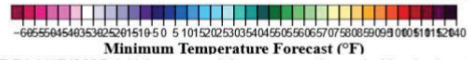
January 17, 2025
3:25 PM

Maximum Temperature Forecast (°F)

Minimum Temperature Forecast (°F)

	1/18	1/19	1/20	1/21	1/22	1/23	1/24
	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri
Aberdeen	6	4	-5	11	29	24	31
Miller	10	5	-3	17	30	25	32
Mobridge	10	8	-1	20	32	27	35
Murdo	13	6	-2	19	30	26	35
Ortonville	7	0	-7	11	27	19	27
Pierre	16	8	-1	20	32	27	35
Sisseton	8	-2	-9	11	26	19	27
Watertown	7	-1	-8	10	26	19	27

	1/18	1/19	1/20	1/21	1/22	1/23	1/24
	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri
Aberdeen	-8	-13	-17	-16	12	11	13
Miller	-3	-14	-14	-14	15	14	15
Mobridge	-4	-15	-15	-9	17	15	17
Murdo	1	-12	-14	-14	13	12	17
Ortonville	-7	-14	-15	-15	10	8	13
Pierre	2	-11	-12	-12	16	16	17
Sisseton	-9	-16	-18	-14	11	8	13
Watertown	-9	-18	-18	-18	9	7	11



Created: 2 pm CST Fri 1/17/2025 | Values are maximums over the period beginning at the time shown. Created: 2 pm CST Fri 1/17/2025 | Values are minimums over the period beginning at the time shown.



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

DRESSING FOR COLD WEATHER

CHILLY

- 1-2 layers
- long layer
- outer layer to keep out wind, rain
- warm shoes water proof

COLD

- 2-3 layers
- gloves
- warm hat
- outer layer to keep out wind, wet snow
- boots water proof
- 1-2 layers

EXTREME COLD

- 3+ layers 1 insulating
- gloves
- warm hat
- face mask
- outer layer to keep out wind
- boots water proof
- 2+ layers

weather.gov/safety

With another blast of arctic air featuring dangerously cold temperatures and wind chills this weekend, ensure your car can handle the cold and dress appropriately before you head out... don't get caught unprepared

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 36 °F at 10:35 AM

Low Temp: 12 °F at 10:34 PM

Wind: 40 mph at 11:02 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 9 hours, 17 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 51 in 1944

Record Low: -34 in 1970

Average High: 23

Average Low: 1

Average Precip in Jan.: 0.35

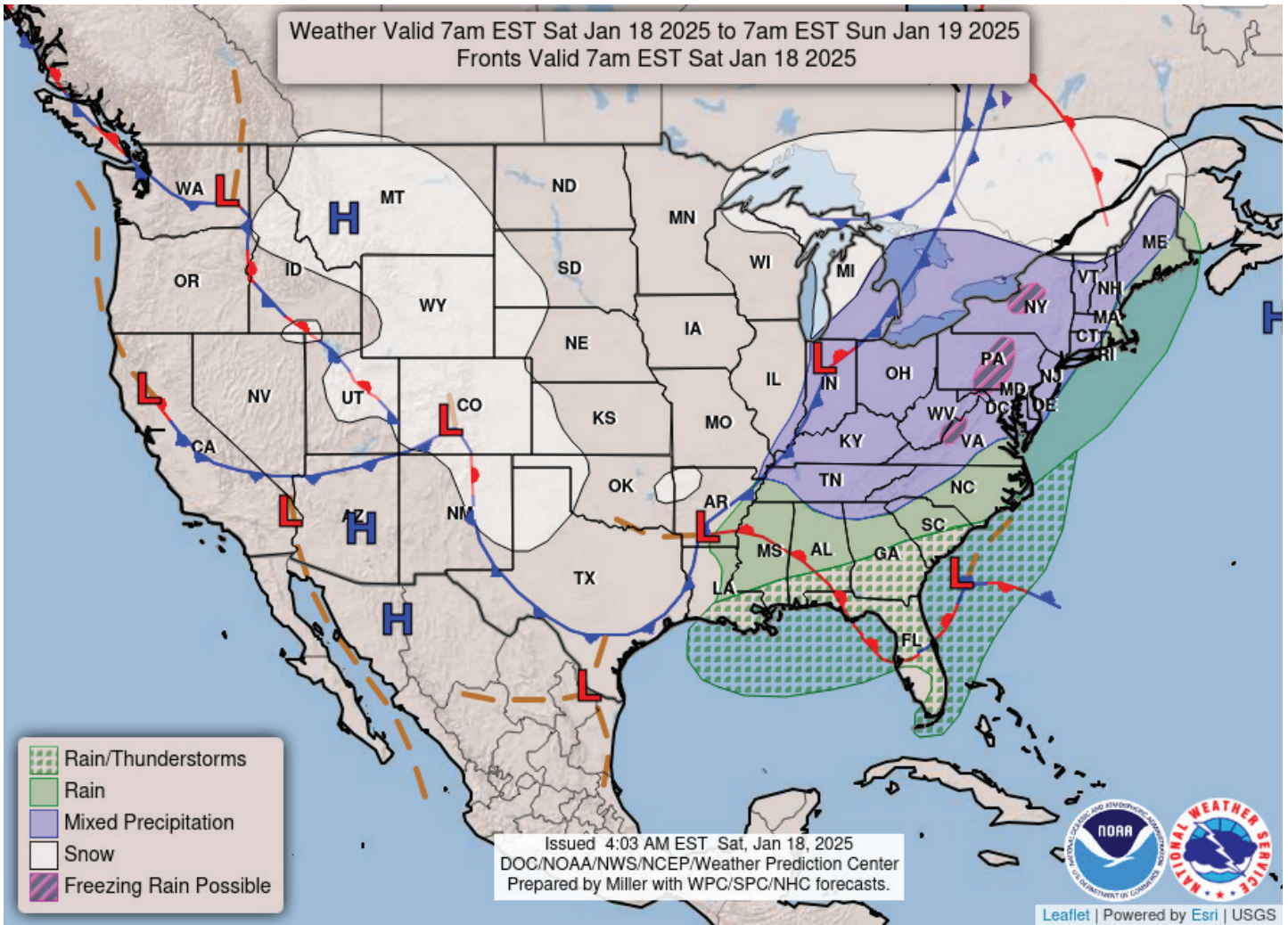
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 0.35

Precip Year to Date: 21.71

Sunset Tonight: 5:21:32 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:03:39 am



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Today in Weather History

January 18, 1979: An area of low pressure moving across the region brought widespread snow of 5 to 10 inches to much of Minnesota from the 18th through the 20th. Travel was difficult, if not impossible, in many areas where there were near blizzard conditions. Schools and businesses closed, along with many flights canceled.

January 18, 1999: One to 4 inches of snowfall combined with winds of 30 to 45 miles an hour brought blizzard conditions to part of northeast South Dakota. Highway 12 and Interstate 29 were most affected by the low visibilities. There was a seven-car pileup on Highway 12 near Andover with minor injuries. As a result, traffic was shut off in the westbound lanes for a few hours. Over 200 people were stranded overnight at a restaurant near Summit. There was also a rollover north of Summit, which resulted in minor injuries. One traveler said the visibility was frequently near zero.

January 18, 2014: A strong Alberta Clipper low-pressure system moved over the Northern Plains Friday night and Saturday morning. Anywhere from a trace to just near 3 inches of fresh snowfall accompanied this low-pressure system. Over this area, strong northwest winds of 25 to 40 mph developed by late Friday night with gusts of 45 to 55 mph. A few areas even experienced gusts to 58 mph or higher again. This system packed such a wallop that a couple of instances of thundersnow occurred, as evidenced by the cloud to ground lightning strikes showing up in southwestern Day County and northwestern Clark County early Saturday morning.

Numerous reports of visibility reduced to one-quarter mile or less across northeast South Dakota, specifically on or just to the east of the Glacial Lakes region, were received.

1857 - A great cold storm swept across the Atlantic Seaboard. Snowfall totals of 12 inches were common, whole gales caused shipwrecks and damage property on islands, and temperatures near zero prevailed from Virginia northward. Great drifts of snow blocked transportation. Richmond VA was cut off from Washington DC for a week. (David Ludlum)

1943: Idaho's coldest night on record occurred as the low temperature dropped to 60 degrees below zero at Island Park Dam.

1950: Oregon continued in the grips of one of its worst winter months ever. A significant winter storm brought a thick glaze of ice to Columbia River Gorge, stopping automobile traffic in its tracks. Hundreds of motorists were stranded and had to be rescued by train. Even that wasn't easy with the coating of ice. The storm caused widespread power outages.

1971: A warm Santa Ana condition brought a 95 degree reading to Los Angeles, the highest January temperature on record. It was 95 degrees in Palm Springs, the highest temperature on record for January as well.

1973: The first tornado death of the year has been registered north of Corey, Louisiana, during the afternoon hours. Although a girl was killed when a tenant farm was destroyed, a baby received only minor injuries when it was carried 300 to 400 yards by the tornado.

1980: A tropical depression that developed on January 15th became Tropical Storm Hyacinthe on the 18th. From the 18th through the 27th, this storm produced a world-record rainfall amount of 223.5 inches at Cratère Commerson on La Réunion.

1987 - A storm in the south central U.S. blanketed Oklahoma City with eight inches of snow, their highest total since 1948. Snowfall totals in Oklahoma ranged up to 13 inches at Gage, with drifts five feet high. Roof collapses across the state resulted in seven million dollars damage. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - A winter storm produced heavy snow and high winds across the southwestern U.S. Snowfall totals ranged up to 18 inches at Lake Arrowhead CA and Ashford AZ. High winds in New Mexico gusted to 100 mph east of Albuquerque. Unseasonably warm weather continued from Texas to the Atlantic coast. Twenty cities reported record high temperatures for the date including Roanoke VA with a reading of 71 degrees. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)



LIFELONG LEARNING

Oswald Avery and a group of biologists were looking for a method to cure pneumonia. While doing their research they accidentally discovered the properties of DNA – a unique gift from God that gives each person a unique identity. It has had and will have a direct impact on each of our lives as scientists expand its usefulness. It has the potential to assist physicians in diagnosing illnesses and in prescribing medications that will increase the healing process.

Avery did not have the discovery of DNA as a lifetime goal or objective. In fact, he worked in the laboratories of the Rockefeller Institute Hospital in New York City for many years and many of his research efforts failed.

But there was one standard in his life that kept him motivated. Each time he failed in one of his experiments, he took great pride in saying, "Whenever you fall, pick up something!"

Paul had that attitude. In his second letter to the Corinthians he wrote that God's "gracious favor is all you need. My power works best in your weakness."

Paul wrote those words when God refused to remove his "affliction." Yet, through his "affliction" he understood and saw God at work in his life.

How? God gave Paul His courage and strength, and His power to overcome his doubts and weaknesses.

Prayer: When life seems to be crumbling all around us, Lord, help us to look to You in faith, believing that You have a gift for us in the midst of life's "afflictions." In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today : Each time he said, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. 2 Corinthians 12:9

We all need the encouragement, comfort, and peace that comes through God's grace. Our daily devotionals, known as Seeds of Hope, have been a means through which thousands of people have experienced this grace. Each devotional comes from God's Word and we pray this good "seed" finds good soil in your heart. Our aim is that the Seeds of Hope will be a great source of daily encouragement to you and that God will use them to draw you near to Him

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.17.25

8 10 37 54 69 22

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$20,000,000

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.15.25

2 11 28 40 47 3

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$22,020,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 41 Mins 11 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.17.25

1 4 6 9 46 4

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 56 Mins 11 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.15.25

13 18 20 27 33

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 56 Mins 11 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.15.25

11 15 25 51 54 15

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 25 Mins 10 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.15.25

8 41 52 53 58 7

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$331,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 25 Mins 10 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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Upcoming Groton Events

- 01/05/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 01/26/2025 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed at the Community Center 10am-1pm
- 01/26/2025 87th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm
- 02/02/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 02/05/2025 FB Live Electronic Hwy 12 Sign Drawing City Hall 12pm
- 03/02/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 03/22/2025 Spring Vendor Fair at the GHS Gym 10am-2pm
- 04/05/2025 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39, 6-11:30pm
- 04/06/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 04/12/2025 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt at the City Park 10am Sharp
- 05/03/2025 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
- 05/26/2025 Memorial Day Services Groton Union Cemetery with lunch at Legion Post #39, 12pm
- 06/07/2025 Day of Play
- 07/04/2025 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 07/13/2025 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm
- 07/09/2025 Legion Auxiliary #39 Salad Buffet & Dessert Bar at the Groton Legion 11am-1pm
- 08/09/2025 2nd Annual Celebration in the Park/Rib Cook-Off 1-9:30pm
- 09/06/2025 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
- 10/31/2025 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
- 11/27/2025 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1:30pm

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News from the **AP** Associated Press

Friday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Andes Central/Dakota Christian 57, Scotland/Menno 29
Brandon Valley 76, Spearfish 61
Clark-Willow Lake 62, Deuel 19
Colman-Egan 45, Garretson 37
Dell Rapids St Mary 87, Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 49
Edgemont def. Oelrichs, forfeit
Florence-Henry 69, Warner 50
Freeman Academy-Marion 49, Flandreau Indian 15
Harrisburg 58, Douglas 25
Huron 54, Sioux Falls Lincoln 26
Ipswich 43, Waubay/Summit 37
McLaughlin 63, Timber Lake 33
Mitchell 56, Brookings 28
New Underwood 45, Moorcroft, Wyo. 20
Omaha Nation, Neb. 70, Marty 34
Platte-Geddes 45, Tripp-Delmont-Armour 42
Sioux Falls Washington 54, Sioux Falls Jefferson 39
St Thomas More 29, West Central 22
Sturgis Brown High School 42, Rapid City Central 33
Tiospa Zina 51, Langford 48
Upton, Wyo. 37, Hot Springs 26
Wakpala 57, Little Wound 43
Watertown 58, Yankton 46
Webster 59, Wilmot 48

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Bennett County 53, Philip 43
Brandon Valley 53, Spearfish 43
Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 64, Lakota Tech 57
Clark-Willow Lake 59, Deuel 34
Corsica/Stickney 56, Kimball-White Lake 48
Custer 65, Mahpiya Lúta Red Cloud 35
Edgemont def. Oelrichs, forfeit
Elkton-Lake Benton 71, Arlington 24
Ethan 58, Canistota 46
Faith 63, Newell 12
Flandreau 60, Madison 46
Freeman Academy-Marion 63, Flandreau Indian 29
Garretson 52, Colman-Egan 47
Gregory 96, Burke 20
Harrisburg 47, Douglas 23
Ipswich 47, Waubay/Summit 42
Iroquois-Lake Preston 68, James Valley Christian School 64

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Jones County 40, White River 37
Kadoka 63, Lyman 39
Little Wound 57, Wakpala 51
McCook Central-Montrose 52, Sioux Valley 47
Mitchell 59, Brookings 33
New Underwood 71, Moorcroft, Wyo. 43
Omaha Nation, Neb. 71, Marty 48
Potter County 62, North Central 40
Rapid City Central 58, Sturgis Brown High School 35
Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 62, Highmore-Harrold 33
Scotland/Menno 67, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 65
Sioux Falls Lincoln 71, Huron 61
Sioux Falls Washington 65, Sioux Falls Jefferson 62
Stanley County 67, Crazy Horse 32
Tea 50, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 32
Tripp-Delmont-Armour 47, Platte-Geddes 45
Upton, Wyo. 51, Hot Springs 45
Watertown 56, Yankton 54
Webster 54, Wilmot 38
Wessington Springs 69, Hitchcock-Tulare 35
Wolsey-Wessington 77, Sunshine Bible Academy 29

Some high school basketball scores provided by Scorestream.com, <https://scorestream.com/>

Key moments from Kristi Noem's hearing for Homeland Security chief

By REBECCA SANTANA and STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem, Donald Trump's pick to lead the agency central to his vision of cracking down on illegal immigration, faced senators Friday at a confirmation hearing and promised to be a tough hand in carrying out the president's vision for the sprawling Department of Homeland Security.

Noem, a two-term governor and former U.S. congresswoman, was chosen by the Republican president-elect to lead the department responsible for immigration and border-related actions that will be central to his plans for mass deportations and tightened access at the border.

She would replace outgoing Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, who was so vilified by Republicans angry at the number of migrants crossing the country's southern border that they impeached him in early 2024.

Some takeaways from Noem's confirmation hearing:

Immigration agenda

Noem pledged a complete turn from Mayorkas' policies, saying she was determined to carry out Trump's plans to choke off illegal immigration and deport millions of migrants.

She committed to ending CBP One, a phone app the Democratic Biden administration has used to process asylum-seekers' entry into the country. She also pledged to scale back the use of humanitarian parole, curtail the use of temporary immigration relief for migrants from countries experiencing unrest, and reinstate a Trump-era policy of requiring asylum-seekers to wait in Mexico for hearings in U.S. immigration court.

Noem said she would prioritize deporting migrants with criminal records once in office, then turn to those who have received final deportation orders.

The immigration and border-related agencies Noem would oversee include U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Citizenship and Immigration Services. Beyond those agencies, the department is also responsible for securing airline transportation, protecting dignitaries, responding to natural disasters and more.

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Why would she want the job?

Noem acknowledged that her nomination as DHS secretary was "a bit of surprise" to many but said she asked for the job because "it was the president's number one priority."

"I knew that it needed to have someone in the position that would do what the president promised the American people," Noem said, someone "strong enough to do it and follow through to make sure that we're protecting our communities and America."

She appears to have strong backing from GOP senators who will be crucial to her confirmation.

Sen. Rand Paul, the Republican chair of the Senate Homeland Security Committee, said he would be looking for Noem "to lead an agency that has lost its way."

Her supporters said Friday that Noem's background of growing up on a farm and governing a rural state would give her the skills needed to implement Trump's plans.

Democrats questioned whether she is qualified to lead a department crucial to the country's safety.

Sen. Richard Blumenthal, a Connecticut Democrat on the committee, said he had "serious doubts" about her ability to manage "this huge organization of such serious consequence to national security."

California wildfires and FEMA

At the hearing, Blumenthal insisted that Noem clarify whether she would stand up to Trump if he asked her to withhold disaster relief money from certain states.

While Noem avoided saying that she would defy the president, she told the senators, "I will deliver the programs according to the law and that it will be done with no political bias."

"Every American deserves to be there and have disaster relief, the same as their neighbors," Noem added.

She pointed to her experience as governor responding to natural disasters, saying it was important to ensure "no community is left behind and that life saving services like electricity and water are quickly restored."

Leading federal disaster responses, Noem also plans to streamline communications at the Federal Emergency Management Agency, including putting out "blueprints" for potential action following a disaster as well as ending work from home policies for employees.

Little known but controversial agency

There was pointed discussion about the future of the nation's cybersecurity agency amid Republican claims that it has strayed from its mission. Some Republican lawmakers and conservative groups have called for the U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency to be eliminated or have its election responsibilities significantly reduced for engaging in efforts to counter misinformation.

Formed in 2018 under legislation signed by Trump, CISA is an independent agency that falls under the Department of Homeland Security and is charged with helping protect the nation's critical infrastructure, ranging from power plants and banks to dams and election systems. The agency has drawn fierce criticism with conservatives alleging it pushed social media platforms to unconstitutionally squelch conservative points of view.

Sen. Ron Johnson, a Wisconsin Republican, on Friday asked Noem to help him investigate the agency.

Noem said she would work with Johnson "should you wish to rein them in" and criticized the agency's work during the coronavirus pandemic.

CISA Director Jen Easterly has defended the agency's work, saying it "does not censor, has never censored."

Protecting the president

The Secret Service falls under the purview of Homeland Security and has been under intense scrutiny since the July 13 assassination attempt against Donald Trump at a rally in Butler, Pennsylvania.

The agency is responsible for protecting high-level dignitaries, but it also has a branch that focuses on financial crimes. While many in the agency say those investigative skills build better agents, Noem said they needed to focus on their primary protective duties.

"The Secret Service is in need of dramatic reforms," she said.

She said the agency is understaffed and plans to refocus it on a core mission of "addressing national

security events with the protocols that are necessary and protecting the individuals that they're charged with."

Noem also told senators she would work with them to turn over information they have been seeking about the attempted assassination attempt.

While Noem was testifying, Trump's son Donald Trump Jr. said his father will be naming Sean Curran to be Secret Service director. Curran currently heads the president-elect's personal detail as special agent in charge and was one of the agents who covered him after a gunman opened fire at the Butler rally.

Russian attack kills 4 people in Kyiv as Ukrainian drone strikes set Russian fuel stores alight

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia attacked the Ukrainian capital with a barrage of drones and missiles Saturday, leaving at least four people dead, while industrial sites in Russia were set ablaze by Ukrainian strikes.

Russia launched 39 Shahed drones, other simulator drones and four ballistic missiles in the early hours of Saturday morning, according to Ukraine's Air Force. Ukrainian air defense forces shot down two missiles and 24 drones. A further 14 drone simulators were lost in location, the statement said.

Four people were killed after a shot-down missile fell over the Shevchenkivskiy district, said Kyiv City Military Administration head Timur Tkachenko. There was also falling debris in the Desnyansky district, he said.

Kyiv's mayor, Vitali Klitschko, said that in the Shevchenkivskiy district, windows were broken and there was smoke at the entrance of a residential building, adding that a water supply pipeline was also damaged.

AP journalists at the scene saw a man lying dead amid the debris in a pool of blood. Water flooded the streets as firefighters put out the blaze from the attack.

Klitschko also said the Lukyanivska metro station was shuttered after the attacks damaged its glass entrance.

The office of Ukraine's general prosecutor said in a statement that an investigation has been launched into the missile attack. The victims were a security guard at a food establishment and three people who were in a minibus on the street, it said.

Drones and missiles were shot down across Ukraine, in the Poltava, Sumy, Kharkiv, Cherkasy, Chernihiv, Kyiv, Khmelnytskyi, Zhytomyr, Kirovohrad, Dnipropetrovsk, Kherson and Donetsk regions.

Elsewhere, industrial sites in Russia's Kaluga and Tula regions were set ablaze by Ukrainian drone attacks, local officials said Saturday.

Russia's Defense Ministry said that 46 Ukrainian drones had been destroyed across the country overnight.

In the Kaluga region, a drone strike sparked a fire in the town of Lyudinovo, Gov. Vladislav Shapsha wrote on Telegram. Residents said on social media that the attack had targeted a local oil depot.

A fire was also reported in Tula region, where Gov. Dmitry Milyaev said a fuel storage tank had been set alight. He warned residents to stay away from fallen drone debris.

No casualties were reported in either case.

Qatar says ceasefire between Israel and Hamas will go into effect at 8:30 a.m. on Sunday

By SAMY MAGDY and SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — The ceasefire between Hamas and Israel will go into effect in less than 24 hours, said Qatar's foreign ministry on Saturday.

In a post on X, Qatar's foreign minister Majid al-Ansari, said the ceasefire will start at 8:30 a.m. (0630 GMT) Sunday. He advised people to exercise caution when the agreement goes into effect and wait for directions from officials.

Early Saturday morning, Israel's Cabinet approved the deal for a ceasefire in Gaza that would release dozens of hostages and pause the 15-month war with Hamas, bringing the sides a step closer to ending

their deadliest and most destructive fighting ever.

Despite the ceasefire news, sirens sounded across central Israel on Saturday, with the army saying it intercepted projectiles launched from Yemen. The Iran-backed Houthis have stepped up their missile attacks, in recent weeks. The group says the attacks are part of their campaign aimed at pressuring Israel and the West over the war in Gaza.

Under the first phase of the ceasefire, 33 hostages are set to be released over the next six weeks, in exchange for hundreds of Palestinians imprisoned by Israel. The remainder, including male soldiers, are to be released in a second phase that will be negotiated during the first. Hamas has said it will not release the remaining captives without a lasting ceasefire and a full Israeli withdrawal.

Key questions remain about the ceasefire, however — the second achieved during the war — including the names of the 33 hostages who are to be released and who among them is still alive.

Hamas has agreed to free three female hostages on Day 1 of the deal, four on Day 7 and the remaining 26 over the following five weeks.

Palestinian detainees are to be released as well. Israel's justice ministry published a list of more than 700 who are to be freed in the deal's first phase and said the release will not begin before 4 p.m. local time Sunday. All people on the list are younger or female.

Also during the first phase, Israeli troops are to pull back into a buffer zone about a kilometer (0.6 miles) wide inside Gaza, along its borders with Israel.

That will allow displaced Palestinians to return to their homes, including in Gaza City and northern Gaza. With most of Gaza's population driven into massive, squalid tent camps, Palestinians are desperate to get back to their homes, even though many were destroyed or heavily damaged by Israel's campaign.

The largely devastated territory should also see a surge in humanitarian aid. Trucks carrying aid lined up Friday on the Egyptian side of the Rafah border crossing into Gaza. On Saturday, two Egyptian government ministers arrived in the northern Sinai Peninsula to oversee the preparations for the delivery of aid and to receive the evacuation of wounded patients, the health ministry said.

Hamas triggered the war with its Oct. 7, 2023, cross-border attack into Israel that killed some 1,200 people and left some 250 others captive. Nearly 100 hostages remain in Gaza.

Israel responded with a devastating offensive that has killed more than 46,000 Palestinians, according to local health officials, who do not distinguish between civilians and militants but say women and children make up more than half the dead.

Navajo Nation firefighters battle wildfires in Los Angeles

By JOHN LOCHER Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Firefighters from the Navajo Nation worked tirelessly through a haze of dust to cut away dirt from a narrow road at the side of a mountain struck by a landslide in Southern California, coughing and sneezing amid the backbreaking work.

It was the Navajo Scouts' eighth straight day battling the Eaton Fire outside Los Angeles and their assignment Friday morning was two-fold: restore vehicle access to the mountain on the outskirts of Altadena and check on the fire damage to structures at the top.

The team of 23 crew members had traveled for two days to Southern California from the Navajo Scouts' headquarters along the Arizona-New Mexico state line at Fort Defiance to join the fight against wildfires that have killed at least 27 people, destroyed more than 12,000 structures and put more than 80,000 under evacuation orders. The crew is one of several firefighting teams from Native American tribes and the Bureau of Indian Affairs battling the blazes.

The Navajo Scouts' "initial attack" crew, which includes several elite hotshot-certified firefighters, have helped Los Angeles residents cut through landslides and mangled trees and worked to snuff out lingering "hot spot" fires.

"We all feel like we're giving back to the people," said Brian Billie, an emergency coordinator for the Navajo Scouts. "Just talking to the locals, some of them have been here ever since childhood and they

lost their homes.”

Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren praised the crew for “answering the call” to protect people in Los Angeles, including the diaspora of Navajo people who live there.

“Let us send them our heartfelt wishes for protection, so that they may return home safely,” he said of the Navajo Scouts in a post on the social platform X.

Eleven electric utility journeymen from the Navajo Tribal Utility Authority also have deployed to Los Angeles to assist in the wildfire response and recovery, with qualifications to work on both new construction and “hot” lines.

They’re repaying a debt of gratitude after utility workers from the Los Angeles Department of Water & Power traveled to the Navajo Nation repeatedly in recent years on a training mission and helped extend power to 170 Navajo households that didn’t have service previously, said Deenise Becenti, a spokesperson for the Navajo utility.

More than 10,400 families live without electricity across the Navajo Nation — which spans an area the size of West Virginia — a lingering legacy of gaps in the U.S. rural electrification efforts of the 1930s.

Becenti said that Navajo utility crews are accustomed to living away from home periodically to complete major construction projects on the vast reservation, but the deployment to Los Angeles marks the first participation in a major mutual aid project beyond that homeland.

“There’s a deep sense of pride not only for our utility employees here but people throughout the Navajo Nation ... in sending firefighters and now utility workers to help an area that’s been just hit severely by a force of nature,” said Becenti, noting that Los Angeles is home to many Navajo citizens. “As far as we know we’re the only tribal utility that is sending crews” to Los Angeles.

Trump’s influence spreads through state capitols in both substance and symbolism

By DAVID A. LIEB Associated Press

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (AP) — A new year of lawmaking and politicking is underway in U.S. statehouses. Governors are acting quickly to outline their agendas. And in many cases, the influence of President-elect Donald Trump already is rippling through states in both symbolic and substantive ways.

Some state officials are trying to tackle concerns that propelled Trump to office such as the economy, affordable living and immigration. Some are mimicking Trump’s government efficiency panel, though they lack a headlining billionaire like Elon Musk to lead it. And many have waded into the debate about whether U.S. flags should fly high on Inauguration Day to honor the new president or remain low to honor a deceased predecessor.

Those themes were prominent over the past two weeks as state legislatures convened, new governors took the oath of office and incumbent governors laid out their agendas in formal “state of the state” addresses.

Some Trump-like policy, quickly!

Just as Trump plans an array of actions on Day 1, some governors were quick to sign various proclamations and declarations.

Within minutes of taking office, Republican Missouri Gov. Mike Kehoe issued several anti-crime orders, including Trump-themed moves requiring training for state troopers to aid federal immigration authorities and requiring law enforcement agencies to document the immigration status of people they arrest.

Republican Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis announced a special legislative session to begin Jan. 27, the week after Trump is sworn in, to ensure the state can “help the Trump administration enforce our nation’s immigration laws.” Republican Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee announced a special session to start that same day with an agenda including “public safety measures related to illegal immigration.”

In West Virginia, new Republican Gov. Patrick Morrisey issued numerous orders on his first day, including one ending diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives at state agencies and institutions. Trump also wants to abolish diversity and inclusion offices.

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Another of Morrisey's orders allows families to receive religious exemptions from required school vaccinations. Trump's nominee for secretary of Health and Human Services, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., a lawyer with no medical or public health degrees, has long questioned some vaccines.

Democrats recalibrate for Trump's term

Some Democratic governors are adjusting their approach to Trump in the hopes of having a working relationship with his administration and in recognition of his party's success in November. Others are preparing a defense against his potential policies.

Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, a Democrat facing a split legislature and a potential 2028 presidential candidate, said she wants to work with Trump but also has concerns about his proposed tariffs, asserting: "We certainly shouldn't use them to punish our closest trading partners."

In her State of the State address, Democratic New York Gov. Kathy Hochul echoed Trump's focus on inflation and tax cuts by outlining an "affordability" plan that would cut income taxes for most people, expand the child tax credit and send New Yorkers up to \$500 as an "inflation refund." She also pledged more police in New York City's subways, among other crime-fighting initiatives.

Democratic Massachusetts Gov. Maura Healey hardened her stance on immigration this week, proposing that at least one member of a family staying in emergency shelters be in the country legally. The state's shelter system for homeless families has been overwhelmed by a surge in migrants.

In New Jersey, Democratic Gov. Phil Murphy announced he will join California, Massachusetts and Washington in stockpiling the abortion pill mifepristone. Though Trump hasn't announced plans to restrict abortion drugs, some Democrats are concerned about the possibility.

A power struggle in Minnesota

The U.S. House is closely divided, with Republicans holding a 219-215 majority over Democrats, with one vacancy.

The Minnesota House is even more closely divided. Republicans hold a temporary 67-66 majority until a special election can be held to fill a vacant seat in a heavily Democratic district. That is expected to yield a tied chamber.

So far, things are off to a rocky start. Democrats have boycotted floor sessions to prevent a quorum while Republicans have plowed ahead by electing their top leader as speaker and appointing committee chairs. The state Supreme Court is expected to hear arguments Thursday on whether the GOP's moves are legal.

The parties will eventually need to cooperate if they are to reach the 68-vote threshold needed to pass bills under their rules.

Trump's 'Department of Government Efficiency' goes stateside

Trump turned heads when he named Musk and fellow entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy to lead a new "Department of Government Efficiency," a task force that is not actually a government agency but is meant to shrink the federal government.

Some governors and state legislative leaders have imitated the effort, minus the famous co-chairs. Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds this week announced "our own State DOGE" led by an attorney for Sukup Manufacturing, which makes grain storage bins.

In Missouri, new House Speaker Jon Patterson announced a Republican lawmaker to chair the Committee on Government Efficiency. The first thing cut was the panel's name, which was previously called the Committee on Government Efficiency and Downsizing.

Republican Wisconsin Assembly Speaker Robin Vos last month announced the GOAT: not the greatest of all time, but rather the Government Operations, Accountability and Transparency committee.

Officials also are forming government efficiency panels in Arizona, Kansas, Louisiana and New Hampshire.

Flags for Trump

Across the U.S., many flags have been flying at half staff in honor of former President Jimmy Carter, who died Dec. 29. Outgoing President Joe Biden directed flags to remain lowered for 30 days.

But Trump was upset that flags wouldn't be high when he is inaugurated Monday. "No American can be happy about it," he posted on his social media platform.

Some governors apparently agreed. Republican governors in more than 20 states have ordered Old Glory to fly high on Trump's inauguration day. So, too, has Washington's new Democratic governor and Democratic California Gov. Gavin Newsom, a frequent Trump critic and common target of Trump's derision.

Flags also will fly at full staff at the U.S. Capitol under an order from Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson.

Merrick Garland exits with his record under scrutiny and the Justice Department bracing for upheaval

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER, ERIC TUCKER and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — During hearings on Merrick Garland's nomination to be President Joe Biden's attorney general, the longtime federal appeals court judge told senators in 2021 that he hoped to "turn down the volume" on the public discourse about the Justice Department and return to the days when the agency was not the "center of partisan disagreement."

It didn't go as planned.

Garland came in with a mission to calm the waters and restore the department's reputation for independence after four turbulent years under Republican President Donald Trump, who fired one attorney general and feuded with another. Now the soft-spoken Garland, who was denied a seat on the Supreme Court by the Republican-led Senate before Trump's 2016 election, is leaving with the department under siege on all sides and his own legacy in question.

Those on the right are incensed over the department's effort to hold Trump criminally responsible for his failed effort to overturn his 2020 election loss, and have accused prosecutors of going too easy on Biden's son Hunter. Democrats have claimed Garland failed to pursue Trump aggressively enough immediately after the Capitol riot on Jan. 6, 2021, and have criticized Garland's reliance on a special counsel, who, they thought, took gratuitous swipes at Biden.

Some senior Biden aides have said privately that Garland was the wrong choice for the job and they believe he bent too far backward to show he wasn't protecting the Democratic president.

Garland must now hand the department back to Trump, who has suggested he'll try to use the executive agency to exact revenge against his perceived enemies. Trump has nominated his personal lawyers and loyalists to run the Cabinet department, and they have promised to clean house of officials they consider part of the "deep state" working against Trump.

People close to Garland say he was dealt a monumentally difficult hand, taking over at a deeply divisive political time after the riot and inheriting a department shaken to its core during Trump's first term. Garland faced one politically sensitive matter after another.

"What Merrick Garland had to deal with: confronting Jan. 6 and its aftermath, the investigations into the president's son ... it's just a series of almost impossible decisions that were going to have huge ramifications for the country and the body politic," said Vanita Gupta, the third-highest ranking Justice Department official under Garland until leaving government last year. "I just don't think any AG in recent time has had to confront that constellation of really, really difficult questions."

The Justice Department declined to make Garland available for an interview with The Associated Press.

His defenders say that despite the political pressures, he stood firm in his commitment to independence and impartiality.

"What the AG brought is energetic and compassionate leadership — leadership that was about reinvigorating the institution as an institution," said Marshall Miller, principal associate deputy attorney general before recently leaving the department. "I think that's critically important to the longevity of the institution — to have attorneys general who understand its history and its norms and buttress those."

Yet in a hyperpartisan era, Garland's approach managed to anger just about everyone outside the department. Garland pushed back forcefully at times, such as when he told lawmakers during a congressional hearing, "I will not be intimidated."

"The story that has been told by some outside of this building about what has happened inside of it is

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wrong," he told employees Thursday during an emotional farewell address inside the Justice Department's Great Hall. "You have worked to pursue justice — not politics. That is the truth and nothing can change it."

But Garland never seemed fully comfortable in the media spotlight, and some wonder whether he should have made clearer to the country why the department did what it did. There were not only attacks from Republicans alleging "weaponization" of the department for political purposes and but also claims by the president who had picked him about a politicized justice system.

"Merrick Garland has not, I think, been a very effective public defender of the integrity and impartiality of the Department of Justice," Andrew Kent, a Fordham University law school professor, said in an email. Given the issues the department faced, Garland needed "to explain to the public more frequently and more specifically how the Department's actions are consistent with a commitment to nonpartisan and impartial justice."

From judge to the Justice Department

Garland was the chief judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, where presidents have often searched for Supreme Court justices, when he was nominated by President Barack Obama in March 2016. But in a stunning display of partisanship, Republican senators led by Majority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky refused to vote on the nomination, saying it had come too close to the November election and the next president should make the choice.

Garland told CBS' "60 Minutes" years later that it was an "enormous honor" to be chosen. "So I was of course, a human being, very disappointed," he said. But, quoting Taylor Swift, he said, "As you know my favorite poet says — you got to shake it off."

Garland remained on the appeals court until he was nominated by Biden as attorney general.

A detail-oriented leader known for asking probing questions in meetings, Garland spent much of his career as a Justice Department lawyer and worked under five attorneys general. He burnished his reputation as a hard-charging prosecutor supervising the case against Timothy McVeigh for the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing that killed 168 people. Garland has called his work on the investigation "the most important thing" he has ever done. On the wall in his Justice Department office is a framed photo of the destroyed Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building.

Those close to Garland say he has been a fierce defender of the department and has not been afraid to take arrows, such as when he announced — amid heavy criticism of the FBI — that he had personally approved the decision to seek a warrant to search Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida in 2022 for classified documents. Inside the department, Garland's allies say, he succeeded in restoring calm and strengthening morale after years of firings and other scandals under Trump.

While Garland's predecessor, William Barr, publicly criticized career prosecutors, Garland praised department lawyers as the "heart and soul" of the workforce. A steadfast institutionalist, Garland would often get emotional when talking publicly about the department's work and its staff.

"He did so much to restore the morale of career folks in the department, to restore normal order of decision making," said Gupta, the former associate attorney general.

On civil rights matters, the Justice Department under Garland undertook a dozen investigations into law enforcement agencies, uncovering widespread abuse and misconduct — work that had been curtailed under Trump's first term. The department was also aggressive in its antitrust enforcement, bringing cases against Google, Apple and others.

But it always came back to political investigations.

Garland was hardly the first attorney general to find himself mired in politically sensitive investigations. Prosecutors in the Obama era investigated both the Democratic presidential nominee, Hillary Clinton, and the Trump campaign in 2016. Trump's Justice Department, through a special counsel, investigated him.

But the confluence of investigations on his desk at once presented arguably the biggest test in the Justice Department's 150-year history.

Political investigations swirled, especially around the Capitol riot

The department, at one point, was investigating Joe Biden for his handling of classified documents,

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Hunter Biden for tax and gun offenses, and Trump — the president's chief political rival. To do this, Garland appointed special counsels in an effort to remove any whiff of political bias.

Yet no event shaped Garland's tenure more than the Capitol riot, which unfolded on live TV on the same day news broke that Biden had picked Garland for the job.

By the time Garland was sworn in as attorney general in March 2021, the Justice Department had begun charging rioters, building what would become the largest investigation in its history.

Garland would not say publicly whether the department was investigating Trump, but insisted investigators were pursuing Jan. 6 perpetrators "at any level." In November 2022 — days after Trump formally launched his 2024 candidacy — Garland announced he had appointed special counsel Jack Smith to lead the investigation and a separate inquiry into Trump's retention of classified documents.

The classified documents investigation was seen as more straightforward, given the breadth of evidence that prosecutors said they had accumulated. Yet that case, too, stalled amid a series of rulings from the trial judge that delayed its progression before its ultimate dismissal last July.

Critics, meanwhile, fretted about the pace.

"What should have happened in real time was a special counsel should have been appointed to investigate January 6th with more urgency than we now know happened," said Jed Shugerman, a Boston University law professor.

Garland's defenders reject any suggestion the attorney general dragged his feet. Long before Smith was appointed, the department in 2021 launched an investigative unit looking at Trump allies who were at Washington's Willard Hotel around Jan. 6, 2021. Investigators searched for financial ties between Trump allies and the rioters — which, if found, officials believed could have allowed them to bring a more straightforward case. But that hit a dead end.

The investigation got bogged down in court fights around executive privilege and other matters. The Supreme Court tied up Smith's case for months before granting former presidents broad immunity from prosecution and sending the case back to the trial court. It likely would have gone back to the high court at least once or twice before it could reach trial, making a trial before November's election unlikely, even if the charges had come months earlier.

"Jan. 6 was one of the most polarizing events in our nation's history," said Jamie Gorelick, a close friend of Garland's who was deputy attorney general in the Justice Department under former President Bill Clinton. "I think he did as well as he could, but institutionally, it has been a tremendously challenging matter to deal with ... and it has been a tremendously challenging fact of life in our society."

But while the cases against Trump moved through the courts, Trump was surging back to political prominence. He had been convicted in New York City in a state hush-money trial and still would go on to seize the nomination, casting himself as the victim of a politically motivated justice system and pledging to seek revenge on his enemies.

"For too long, the partisan Department of Justice has been weaponized against me and other Republicans — Not anymore," Trump said when announcing that he would nominate former Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi to lead the department.

Some in the White House sour on the attorney general

Inside the White House, frustration mounted over Garland. Biden felt hemmed in by his choice, particularly as the Justice Department investigated both him and Hunter.

White House officials were particularly dismayed at special counsel Robert Hur's report on his investigation into Biden's handling of classified documents. That report portrayed the president as a "well-meaning elderly man with a poor memory," and White House officials said it was inappropriate to include such "prejudicial" language in a report explaining why no criminal charges were warranted.

The report was released just as Biden's age (he turned 82 in November) and mental acuity were becoming major political liabilities that would eventually, following his disastrous debate performance in June, sink his reelection effort.

Garland said the idea that he would edit or censor Hur's report was "absurd." That may have frustrated the White House but it also spared Garland the groundswell of criticism he would have encountered from

the right had he stepped in to shade the special counsel's findings.

By releasing the entire document in unedited form, Garland reflected his determination not only to avoid the appearance of being the president's protector but also to turn the page from his predecessor. Barr was castigated by the left after he issued his own four-page summary of special counsel Robert Mueller's report on Russian election interference that was seen as glossing over some of the document's more damning assessments.

Republicans in the House, angry over what they viewed as the Biden Justice Department's unfair treatment of Trump, later voted to hold Garland in contempt of Congress for refusing to turn over audio of Biden's interview with Hur.

The unraveling of years of work

Garland is about to see years of work dismantled when the new administration takes over.

The cases against Trump have unraveled. The Justice Department has decided to withhold from the public for now the section of Smith's final report on Trump's classified documents case because an appeal involving Trump's co-defendants is pending. It's possible that will never be seen by the public because Trump's Justice Department almost certainly will not release it.

The future of the Jan. 6 investigation, which has resulted in more than 1,200 convictions against rioters, is in peril. Trump has said he plans to pardon many of them.

Biden, too, pardoned his son after Hunter's trial conviction and guilty plea. Justice Department officials were surprised and frustrated by Biden's statement claiming the case against his son had been politicized, especially after the president's repeated vows to respect the rule of law.

Justice Department staff lined up Friday to cheer for Garland as he left the building. Several employees wiped tears and hugged as the SUV he climbed into drove off.

In his final speech to the workforce, Garland made no overt mention of Trump or the president-elect's suggestions that he might use the agency's powers to go after his foes. But Garland warned that "the same powers that enable the federal prosecutor to pursue justice also create the potential for grave injustice."

"We must understand that there is a difference between what we can do — and what we should do," Garland said.

The rise - and potential fall - of TikTok in the US

By HALELUYA HADERO Associated Press

The possibility of the U.S. outlawing TikTok kept influencers and users in anxious limbo during the four-plus years that lawmakers and judges debated the fate of the video-sharing app. Now, the moment its fans dreaded is here, but uncertainty over TikTok's future lingers.

On Friday, the Supreme Court upheld a federal law that bans the immensely popular, trend-setting social media platform starting Sunday unless its China-based parent company, ByteDance Ltd., sells to an approved buyer.

The unanimous decision ended a legal battle that pitted national security concerns against free speech rights. TikTok, ByteDance and some of the devoted users who rely on the platform for entertainment, income and community argued the statute violated the First Amendment. The Biden administration sought to show ByteDance's ownership and control of TikTok posed an unacceptable threat.

The Supreme Court ruling, however, is not guaranteed to end the TikTok saga, which has become enveloped in the wider battle between Beijing and Washington. A Biden administration official told The Associated Press on Thursday that the outgoing administration would leave the law's implementation — and potential enforcement — to President-elect Donald Trump.

Trump, who is set to return to the White House the day after the ban takes effect, has credited TikTok with helping him win the support of more young voters in last year's election. A Trump adviser said this week that the incoming administration would "put measures in place to keep TikTok from going dark." What those measures will look like — and if they can withstand legal scrutiny — remained unknown Saturday.

Here's a look at how TikTok became a global cultural phenomenon and the political wrangling that fol-

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lowed the app's commercial success:

The rise of TikTok

TikTok is one of more than 100 apps developed in the past decade by ByteDance, a technology firm founded in 2012 by Chinese entrepreneur Zhang Yiming and headquartered in Beijing's northwestern Haidian district.

In 2016, ByteDance launched a short-form video platform called Douyin in China and followed up with an international version called TikTok. It then bought Musical.ly, a lip-syncing platform popular with teens in the U.S. and Europe, and combined it with TikTok while keeping the app separate from Douyin.

Soon after, the app boomed in popularity in the U.S. and many other countries, becoming the first Chinese platform to make serious inroads in the West. Unlike other social media platforms that focused on cultivating connections among users, TikTok tailored content to people's interests.

The often silly videos and music clips content creators posted gave TikTok an image as a sunny corner of the internet where users could find fun and a sense of authenticity. Finding an audience on the platform helped launch the careers of music artists like Lil Nas X.

TikTok gained more traction during the shutdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic, when short dances that went viral became a mainstay of the app. To better compete, Instagram and YouTube eventually came out with their own tools for making short-form videos, respectively known as Reels and Shorts. By that point, TikTok was a bona fide hit.

TikTok encounters critics

Challenges came in tandem with TikTok's success. U.S. officials expressed concerns about the company's roots and ownership, pointing to laws in China that require Chinese companies to hand over data requested by the government. Another concern became the proprietary algorithm that populates what users see on the app.

During his first term in office, Trump issued executive orders in 2020 banning TikTok and the Chinese messaging app WeChat, moves that courts subsequently blocked. India banned TikTok — along with other Chinese apps — the same year following a military clash along the India-China border that killed 20 Indian and four Chinese soldiers.

In 2021, the Biden administration dropped the Trump-era orders but left in place a national security review of TikTok by a little-known government agency known as Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States, or CFIUS.

Negotiations falter

Between January 2021 and August 2022, representatives for TikTok engaged in serious negotiations with the Biden administration about the app's future in the U.S. The talks resulted in a 90-page draft security agreement that the company presented to CFIUS in August 2022. The two sides then ceased substantive negotiations, according to TikTok's attorneys, though some meetings also took place in following months.

A copy of the draft agreement submitted in court showed that it would have opened up TikTok's U.S. platform for security inspections and blocked access of U.S. user data from China. The company says it has already implemented some provisions of the agreement, including routing U.S. user data to servers operated by software giant Oracle.

In its lawsuit to overturn the sell-or-ban law, the company said it spent more than \$2 billion to implement aspects of its appeasement plan, which it calls Project Texas.

But the Department of Justice and administration officials argued in court documents that the proposal failed to create sufficient separation between TikTok's U.S. operations and China. They also said the opacity of TikTok's algorithm, coupled with the size and technical complexity of the platform, made it impossible for the U.S. government — or its technology provider, Oracle — to effectively guarantee compliance with the proposal.

In February 2023, the White House directed federal agencies to remove TikTok from government-issued devices, mirroring some other countries that also prohibited the use of the app on official devices.

The following month, lawmakers grilled TikTok CEO Shou Chew during an hours-long hearing in which he sought to reassure a tense House committee that the platform prioritized user safety and should not

be banned due to its Chinese connections.

According to court documents, TikTok's representatives had their last meeting with CFIUS in September 2023. Later that year, criticism against the platform increased in volume among Republicans in Washington who claimed the platform amplified pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel content, an accusation the company vigorously denied.

Ban-or-sale law

Efforts to ban TikTok resurfaced in Congress early last year, and quickly gained bipartisan support among lawmakers who voiced about the potential for the platform to surveil and manipulate Americans.

The legislation the Supreme Court upheld passed the House and the Senate in April after it was included as part of a high-priority \$95 billion package that provided foreign aid to Ukraine and Israel. President Joe Biden quickly signed it, and the two companies and a group of content creators quickly sued.

A lower court upheld the statute in early December. The legislation gave ByteDance nine months from the enactment date to sell TikTok, and a possible three-month extension if a sale was in progress.

The deadline's arrival the day before Trump's inauguration makes things tricky. Only the sitting president can issue a 90-day stay on the ban and can do so only if a buyer has taken concrete steps toward a purchase.

Although experts have said the app would not disappear from existing users' phones Sunday, new users won't be able to download it and updates won't be available. That will eventually render the app unworkable, the Justice Department has said in court filings.

Judges allow some Capitol riot defendants to return to DC for Trump's inauguration

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Thousands of Donald Trump supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol after he lost the 2020 presidential election. Four years later, some of them are allowed to return to the nation's capital so they can celebrate Trump's return to the White House.

At least 20 defendants charged with or convicted of joining the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol have asked federal judges for permission to attend President-elect Trump's second inauguration Monday in Washington, D.C., according to an Associated Press review of court records.

The majority can go. Several others cannot.

In most cases, Justice Department prosecutors have argued that Capitol riot defendants shouldn't be able to return to the scene of their crimes while they're under the court's supervision.

"What's past is prologue, and the defendants could easily find themselves in another situation where they engage in mob violence," a prosecutor wrote in opposing a New York couple's travel request.

At least 11 defendants have received the court's permission to attend the inauguration, a day when Trump may issue mass pardons to Capitol rioters. Judges have denied requests made by at least seven others.

Many other convicted Capitol rioters may be free to attend if they have completed their sentences. Typically, those who remain under the court's supervision after an arrest, a probation sentence or release from prison must get a judge's approval to travel outside their home district.

Among those who can attend is Deborah Lynn Lee, a Pennsylvania woman accused of posting social media messages calling for the execution of her political opponents in the days leading up to the riot. Lee was charged in August 2021, was convicted of four misdemeanors after a trial in October and is scheduled to be sentenced Jan. 27.

Justice Department prosecutor Carlos Valdivia argued that Lee's return to Washington would endanger Capitol police officers and "create an absurd situation."

"Lee's presence in D.C. was restricted for years to keep the community safe, but in a few days, she would be allowed to return to attend a ceremony that demands heightened security," Valdivia wrote.

Magistrate Judge Zia Faruqui approved Lee's request, noting that she isn't accused of engaging in vio-

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lence and has complied with her release conditions. The magistrate said Lee “is coming to celebrate, not demonstrate” this time.

“While the Court is tasked with predicting the future, this is not ‘Minority Report.’ There has to be credible evidence of future danger to justify related release conditions,” Faruqui wrote.

District Judge John Bates agreed to let a New York couple, Carol Moore and Kevin Moore, attend the inauguration while awaiting a trial in April. Prosecutors argued that police officers could be “retraumatized” by the Moores’ presence, but Bates said it was unlikely that any officers at the inauguration would recognize them.

“First, past is not prologue here,” the judge wrote. “The nature of the inauguration is wholly different from the last event the Moores attended that involved the transition of power. Put simply, the inauguration will involve a crowd largely supporting the peaceful transition of power, not opposing it.”

The couple’s attorney said the Moores plan to join others in displaying signs reading “Day One” — an appeal for Trump to make good on a campaign promise to pardon Capitol rioters on his first day back in office. Trump repeatedly has referred to Jan. 6 defendants as “hostages” and “patriots.”

The list of Jan. 6 riot defendants allowed to be in Washington on Monday also includes a New Jersey man who reported himself to the FBI, a New Hampshire woman who must serve a four-month prison sentence and a New Jersey man accused of using a bullhorn to encourage other rioters.

Prosecutors didn’t object to allowing Colorado bed-and-breakfast operator Rebecca Lavrenz — the self-described “J6 praying grandma” — to attend the inauguration while she is on probation. Lavrenz said her daughter is serving as the deputy director of Monday’s swearing-in ceremony after working on Trump’s campaign last year.

Among those barred from attending the inauguration are Jared Miller, a Virginia man charged with assaulting police. Miller’s attorney, Stephen Brennwald, said Monday’s inauguration presents a “completely different scenario” than the 2021 riot. The lawyer also argued that his client’s conduct that day is irrelevant to his travel request.

“No longer will the participants and observers be in the District out of anger, ready to fight to try to wrest back the power they felt had been unjustly taken from them. Rather, they will be cheering the person they support, and law enforcement will not be in an antagonistic position to those attending the event,” Brennwald wrote.

District Judge Rudolph Contreras denied Miller’s request, pointing to his assault charges.

Russell Taylor, a California man who had a knife and a hatchet in his possession when he helped other rioters overrun a police line outside the Capitol, said he was invited to attend the inauguration by former U.S. Rep. Chris Stewart, a six-term Utah Republican who resigned in 2023.

District Judge Royce Lamberth, who sentenced Taylor to six months of home detention, said it wouldn’t be appropriate to allow somebody who tried to thwart the last presidential inauguration to attend “such a hallowed event.”

“To attend the Presidential Inauguration, which celebrates and honors the peaceful transfer of power, is an immense privilege,” Lamberth wrote.

Judges also rejected the travel requests made by a North Carolina man who participated in the first act of violence against Capitol police on Jan. 6, a Mississippi man charged with assaulting officers with a flagpole and a Maine man accused of attacking police with bear spray.

Tens of thousands are expected to converge on Washington for a march days before Trump takes office

WASHINGTON (AP) — Eight years since its historic first march, the Women’s March is returning Saturday to the nation’s capital just before President-elect Donald Trump’s inauguration.

Rebranded and reorganized, the rally has a new name — the People’s March — as a means to broaden support, especially during a reflective moment for progressive organizing after Trump’s decisive win in

November. The Republican takes the oath of office Monday.

Women outraged over Trump's 2016 presidential win flocked to Washington in 2017 and organized large rallies in cities throughout the country, building the base of a grassroots movement that became known as the Women's March. The Washington rally alone attracted over 500,000 marchers, and millions more participated in local marches around the country, marking one of the largest single-day demonstrations in U.S. history.

This year, the march is expected to be about one-tenth the size of the first one and comes amid a restrained moment of reflection as many progressive voters navigate feelings of exhaustion, disappointment and despair after Vice President Kamala Harris' loss. The comparative quiet contrasts sharply with the white-knuckled fury of the inaugural rally as massive crowds shouted demands over megaphones and marched in pink pussyhats in response to Trump's first election win.

"The reality is that it's just hard to capture lightning in a bottle," said Tamika Middleton, managing director at the Women's March. "It was a really particular moment. In 2017, we had not seen a Trump presidency and the kind of vitriol that that represented."

The movement fractured after that hugely successful day of protests over accusations that it was not diverse enough. This year's rebrand as a People's March is the result of an overhaul intended to broaden the group's appeal. Saturday's demonstration will promote themes related to feminism, racial justice, anti-militarization and other issues and will end with discussions hosted by various social justice organizations.

The People's March is unusual in the "vast array of issues brought together under one umbrella," said Jo Reger, a sociology professor who researches social movements at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan. Women's suffrage marches, for example, were focused on a specific goal of voting rights.

For a broad-based social justice movement such as the march, conflicting visions are impossible to avoid and there is "immense pressure" for organizers to meet everyone's needs, Reger said. But she also said some discord isn't necessarily a bad thing.

"Often what it does is bring change and bring in new perspectives, especially of underrepresented voices," Reger said.

Middleton, of the Women's March, said a massive demonstration like the one in 2017 is not the goal of Saturday's event. Instead, it's to focus attention on a broader set of issues — women's and reproductive rights, LGBTQ rights, immigration, climate and democracy — rather than centering it more narrowly around Trump.

"We're not thinking about the march as the endgame," Middleton said. "How do we get those folks who show up into organizations and into their political homes so they can keep fighting in their communities long term?"

Trump will arrive in Washington Saturday for inaugural celebrations to mark his return to power

By MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Donald Trump will return to Washington Saturday to kick off days of pageantry to herald his second inauguration as president, four years after he departed the city under the shadow of an attack by his supporters on the U.S. Capitol.

The ritualistic changing of power will get underway as Washington's solemn pomp is paired with Trump's brand of party: a fireworks showcase at one of his luxury golf properties, guests including tech industry titans, friends from the business world and conservative media stars, and thousands of his supporters streaming in from around the country.

With a blast of Arctic air expected to leave the nation's capital facing frigid temperatures on Inauguration Day, organizers were also scrambling to move inside most of Monday's outdoor events, including the swearing-in ceremony.

Trump, a Republican, left office in 2021 as a political pariah after his refusal to accept his loss led a mob to overrun the U.S. Capitol. He then broke tradition by skipping Democrat Joe Biden's inauguration as his

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successor.

In a stark contrast with Trump, Biden will adhere to one of the most potent symbols of the democratic handover, welcoming Trump to the White House and joining him on the ride to the Capitol before he takes the oath of office.

The first time Trump was sworn into office eight years ago, the former reality TV star billionaire came in as an outsider disrupting Washington's norms, delivering a dark inaugural address as his swearing-in drew large protests and some clashes in the street.

This time, the protests are expected to be far less noticeable, eclipsed by the ceremonies and celebrations around Trump's taking power. As one more marker of Trump's remarkable comeback, the events surrounding his inauguration will be more celebrity-studded than the last time, along with a noticeable turnout by a cadre of tech-world billionaires.

Country music stars Carrie Underwood, Billy Ray Cyrus and Jason Aldean, disco band the Village People, rapper Nelly and musician Kid Rock are all scheduled to perform at inauguration-related ceremonies and events. Actor Jon Voight and wrestler Hulk Hogan are also expected to make appearances, as are a crew of Trump-embracing business executives: Tesla and X CEO Elon Musk, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg and TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew.

The pageantry begins Saturday, when the president-elect leaves his Florida home to head to Washington. Trump's advisers have not detailed how he will spend the first part of the day, and the only public event on Trump's schedule is an evening reception and fireworks show at Trump National Golf Club in Sterling, Virginia, outside the city.

While Trump holds court at his club, Vice President-elect JD Vance will attend a reception for Cabinet members and host a dinner in Washington.

On Sunday, the eve of his inauguration, Trump is scheduled to participate in a wreath-laying ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery before heading to a rally at Capital One Arena in Washington. The rally will be followed by a private dinner.

On Inauguration Day, Trump will start with the traditional prayer service at St. John's Episcopal Church before heading to the White House for a customary tea with the outgoing president and first lady.

Trump then heads to the Capitol, where his ceremony has been moved indoors as temperatures are set to plummet and make it the coldest Inauguration Day in 40 years. It's not quite clear how the ceremony will be adapted to the Capitol Rotunda, but only a fraction of the original crowd will be allowed in.

Eight years ago, Trump's critics were wrestling with whether to attend his inauguration, contemplating whether to buck long-standing practice and send a signal to the divisive new president. This year, much outspoken resistance to Trump has faded away, though there will be two notable absences: former first lady Michelle Obama and former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Neither gave an explanation as to why she was skipping the ceremony.

After Trump takes the oath of office and delivers his inaugural address, there will be a ceremonial farewell to Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris. As the new Republican government takes power, Trump will head to a signing ceremony at the Capitol to approve some of his first official acts, followed by a congressional luncheon and review of U.S. troops.

The planned traditional parade down Pennsylvania Avenue has morphed into an indoor event because of the cold, with Trump again planning to speak to his gathered supporters before he heads to the White House for a signing ceremony in the Oval Office. A trio of glitzy balls will follow in the evening, punctuated by musical performances.

Trump's arrival in Washington will once again be accompanied by protests and vigils on issues such as abortion, immigration rights and, this time, the Israel-Hamas war, but the feel and the force of those demonstrations are expected to be different from the outset of his first term.

The Women's March, spurred by women outraged over Trump's win in 2017, drew more than 500,000 people to Washington and millions more in cities around the country, marking one of the largest single-day demonstrations in U.S. history.

The march is returning Saturday, rebranded as the People's March, with organizers saying their focus

will be less on Trump and more on broader goals around women's and reproductive rights, LGBTQ rights, immigration, climate and democracy. It is expected to draw about 50,000 people, far fewer than eight years ago.

Impeached South Korean president arrives at court to argue against his arrest

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea's impeached president arrived at a Seoul court for a hearing on Saturday to oppose a formal arrest over last month's imposition of martial law.

Yoon, who has been in detention since he was apprehended on Wednesday in a massive law enforcement operation at his residence, faces potential rebellion charges linked to his declaration of martial law on Dec. 3, which set off the country's most serious political crisis since its democratization in the late 1980s.

The Corruption Investigation Office for High-Ranking Officials, which is leading a joint investigation with police and the military, requested the Seoul Western District Court to grant a warrant for Yoon's formal arrest. Yoon is expected to argue that there's no need for him to be in custody during an investigation at a hearing set for 2 p.m. this afternoon. The judge is anticipated to make a decision by late Saturday or early Sunday.

Yoon was transported from a detention center in Uiwang, near Seoul, in a blue Justice Ministry van escorted by police and the presidential security service.

The motorcade entered the court's basement parking space as hundreds of Yoon's supporters rallied in nearby streets amid a heavy police presence, waving banners and shouting slogans calling for his release.

Yoon did not speak to reporters before heading to the hearing.

After meeting Yoon at the detention center, Yoon Kab-keun, one of the president's lawyers, said in a text message that Yoon had accepted his legal team's advice to appear personally before the judge. The president plans to argue that his decree was a legitimate exercise of his powers and that accusations of rebellion would not hold up before a criminal court or the Constitutional Court, which is reviewing whether to formally remove him from office or reinstate him, his lawyer said.

If Yoon is arrested, investigators can extend his detention to 20 days, during which they will transfer the case to public prosecutors for indictment. If the court rejects the investigators' request, Yoon will be released and return to his residence.

Nine people, including Yoon's defense minister, police chief, and several top military commanders, have already been arrested and indicted for their roles in the enforcement of martial law.

The crisis began when Yoon, in an attempt to break through legislative gridlock, imposed military rule and sent troops to the National Assembly and election offices. The standoff lasted only hours after lawmakers who managed to get through a blockade voted to lift the measure. The opposition-dominated assembly voted to impeach him on Dec. 14.

If Yoon is formally arrested, it could mark the beginning of an extended period in custody for him, lasting months or more.

If prosecutors indict Yoon on rebellion and abuse of power charges, which are the allegations now being examined by investigators, they could keep him in custody for up to six months before trial.

Under South Korean law, orchestrating a rebellion is punishable by life imprisonment or the death penalty.

Yoon's lawyers have argued that there is no need to detain him during the investigation, saying he doesn't pose a threat to flee or destroy evidence.

Investigators respond that Yoon ignored several requests to appear for questioning, and that the presidential security service blocked an attempt to detain him on Jan. 3. His defiance has raised concerns about whether he would comply with criminal court proceedings if he's not under arrest.

Trump vowed to end the war in Ukraine quickly but Moscow and Kyiv are digging in before any talks

By The Associated Press undefined

President-elect Donald Trump has pledged to broker a peace deal in Ukraine, but as he prepares to take office, peace seems as elusive as ever.

Moscow and Kyiv are seeking battlefield gains to strengthen their negotiating positions ahead of any prospective talks to end the 3-year-old war.

In the past year, Russian troops have slowly but steadily advancing through Ukrainian defenses, seeking to establish full control of the four regions in the east and south that Moscow illegally annexed early in the war but never completely captured. It's also launching waves of missiles and drones to try to cripple Ukraine's energy network and other vital infrastructure.

Ukraine, in turn, has tried to secure and extend its incursion into Russia's Kursk region. Kyiv's missiles and drones also have struck Russian oil facilities and other key targets important for Moscow's war machine.

Both sides have taken tough negotiating postures that leave little room for compromise.

Trump, who vowed during his campaign to settle the war in 24 hours, changed that time frame earlier this month, voicing hope that peace could be negotiated in six months. His nominee for envoy to Ukraine, Keith Kellogg, says a deal could be brokered in 100 days.

The views from Moscow and Kyiv

Russian President Vladimir Putin has declared Moscow's readiness for talks but emphasized that any peace deal should respect the "realities on the ground," a not-so-subtle way of saying it must take into account Russia's land gains.

He emphasized in June that Ukraine must also renounce its NATO bid and fully withdraw its forces from Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson — the regions Russia annexed in September 2022 — demands that Ukraine and the West have rejected. Moscow also wants the West to lift its sanctions that has limited Moscow's access to global markets and dealt a heavy blow to Russia's economy.

Massive military spending has bolstered Russian economic output that grew by nearly 4% last year, but the weakening ruble and labor shortages fueled high inflation and increasingly destabilized the economy. Last week, President Joe Biden sharpened the pain for Moscow by expanding sanctions on Russia's vital energy sector, including its shadow shipping fleet used to bypass earlier restrictions.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's initial "peace formula" demanded Russia's full withdrawal from all occupied territories, but he later softened his position as Moscow continued to make gains, and he is no longer making that retreat a condition for talks. Zelenskyy has faced reluctance from some allies to offer Kyiv quick membership in NATO, but he insists on strong security guarantees from the U.S. and other Western partners as the key element of any prospective peace deal.

Zelenskyy has emphasized the need for a comprehensive agreement, not a temporary halt to hostilities that would only allow Russia to replenish its arsenal. He has pushed for the deployment of Western troops to Ukraine as peacekeepers.

Putin has similarly rejected a temporary truce, pointing out that Russian troops are pressing an offensive and any break in the fighting would allow Ukraine to get reinforcements and supplies.

"The Russians are seeing that Trump is going to push for some kind of resolution or some kind of settlement, and they want to grab as much as they can," said Kurt Volker, who served as special representative for Ukraine in Trump's first term.

Ukraine's manpower shortages and a surprise attack

Russia controls about a fifth of Ukrainian territory, including the Crimean Peninsula that was annexed illegally in 2014. It held the battlefield initiative for most of 2024, pressing offensives in several sections of the over 1,000-kilometer (600-mile) front line. Moscow's gains in the fall were the largest since the opening stage of the invasion.

Ukraine has faced dire manpower shortages as it struggles to mobilize enough recruits to compensate for its losses and increasing desertions.

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Michael Kofman, a senior fellow with Carnegie Endowment, observed that “stabilizing the front line is essential to buying time and forcing Moscow to reassess.” He noted that Ukraine’s mobilization rates fell considerably since summer and “manning levels continued to decline, especially among infantry units holding the front lines.”

Moscow-based military analyst Sergei Poletaev noted that even though Russia lacks resources for a major breakthrough, it has refined the tactic of small-scale, slow advances in multiple sectors.

“Moscow is betting on the physical exhaustion of the Ukrainian armed forces and the Ukrainian state’s meltdown,” Poletaev wrote recently.

Kyiv sought to change its fortunes by launching an incursion into Russia’s Kursk region in August, aiming to distract Moscow’s forces in eastern Ukraine and strengthen its hand in negotiations. Russia, initially caught by surprise, intensified efforts to drive out the Ukrainian forces. The U.S., Ukraine and South Korea said North Korea sent 10,000- 12,000 troops to Russia to fight in the Kursk region.

How peace talks could evolve

Kellogg, the new administration’s nominee for Ukraine envoy, dismissed European fears that Trump could reduce support for Kyiv, saying “he’s not trying to give something to Putin or to the Russians, he’s actually trying to save Ukraine and save their sovereignty.”

Volker predicted Trump would urge Putin to end hostilities and warn him that he would sharply increase pressure on Moscow if the Russian leader fails to heed the demand.

If Putin refuses to halt the fighting, Volker said Trump would “open up the spigot” and allow Ukraine to borrow as much money as it wants and buy whatever military equipment it wants while toughening sanctions on Russian oil and gas sector.

“I think those things would be aimed at driving Putin to conclude, ‘OK, it’s time to stop,’” Volker said.

Other observers warn that Putin would be unlikely to compromise on his war goals, particularly while Russian troops have the upper hand in Ukraine, and the Russian economy has so far survived ongoing Western sanctions.

While seeking to cement his gains and win Western guarantees that Ukraine will never be invited to join NATO, Putin also wants Kyiv to accept a set of language, education and cultural policies to ensure its friendly policies toward Moscow.

“Putin has tied his war to achieving this and is unlikely to retreat,” Tatyana Stanovaya of the Carnegie Russia and Eurasia Center wrote in a commentary. “Instead, he will likely intensify efforts.”

She added that Russia’s demand for Ukraine’s “demilitarization” implies not only deep cuts in its armed forces but also seeks Western guarantees it won’t rearm its ally.

“Moscow views any military support for Ukraine as inherently hostile,” she said.

Putin is unlikely to walk back his annexation of the four Ukrainian regions, a seizure that already has been written into the Russian constitution.

“Moscow believes that a recognition of Russia’s new borders by Ukraine is necessary to preclude the basis for a military revanche,” political analyst Vladimir Frolov said in a commentary.

Many Moscow analysts are skeptical of prospects for a peace deal, noting the widely divergent positions on both sides. Some say a failure in the talks could put Russia and the U.S. on the brink of a direct conflict if Trump decides to ramp up military support for Ukraine.

“They tend to think in the West that Putin will get scared and agree to a ceasefire,” wrote Poletaev, the Moscow-based analyst. “Just the opposite. Putin will likely opt for an escalation and fight fire with fire.”

A train station was once the pride of Syria’s capital.

Some see it as a symbol of revival after war

By KAREEM CHEHAYEB Associated Press

DAMASCUS, Syria (AP) — A train station in Damascus was once the pride of the Syrian capital, an essential link between Europe and the Arabian Peninsula during the Ottoman Empire and then a national transit hub. But more than a decade of war left it a wasteland of bullet-scarred walls and twisted steel.

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The Qadam station's remaining staff say they still have an attachment to the railway and hope that it, like the country, can be revived after the swift and stunning downfall of leader Bashar Assad last month.

On a recent day, train operator Mazen Malla led The Associated Press through the landscape of charred train cars and workshops damaged by artillery fire. Bullet casings littered the ground.

Malla grew up near the station. His father, uncles and grandfather all worked there. Eventually he was driving trains himself, spending more than 12 hours a day at work.

"The train is a part of us," he said with a deep, nostalgic sigh, as he picked up what appeared to be a spent artillery shell and tossed it aside. "I wouldn't see my kids as much as I would see the train."

The Qadam station was the workhorse of the iconic Hejaz Railway that was built under the Ottoman Empire's Sultan Abdulhamid II in the early 1900s, linking Muslim pilgrims from Europe and Asia via what is now Turkey to the holy city of Medina in present-day Saudi Arabia. The line also transported troops and equipment for the empire that controlled large swaths of the Arabian Peninsula.

That glory was short-lived. The railway soon became a target of Arab fighters in an armed uprising during World War I backed by Britain, France and other Allied forces that eventually took down the Ottoman Empire.

In the following decades, Syria used its section of the railway to transport people between Damascus and its second city of Aleppo, along with several towns and neighboring Jordan. While the main station, still intact a few miles away, later became a historical site and events hall, Qadam remained the busy home of the workshops and people making the railway run.

As train cars were upgraded, the old wooden ones were placed in a museum. The Qadam station, however, retained its structure of Ottoman stone and French bricks from Marseille.

But war tore it apart after Assad's crackdown on protesters demanding greater freedoms.

"The army turned this into a military base," Malla said. Workers like him were sent away.

Qadam station was too strategic for soldiers to ignore. It gave Assad's forces a vantage point on key rebel strongholds in Damascus. Up a flight of stairs, an office became a sniper's nest.

Slogans praising Assad and the Lebanese Hezbollah militant group, a key ally of the ousted leader, can still be seen on the walls.

"We will kneel and kiss wherever Assad walks," one says.

The nearby neighborhood of Al-Assali is now mostly in ruins after becoming a no man's land between the station and the Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk that became a rebel stronghold and was besieged and bombarded for years by government forces.

The fighting entered the railway station at least once, in 2013. Footage widely circulated online showed rebels firing assault rifles and taking cover behind trains.

Malla and his family fled their home near the station to a nearby neighborhood. He heard the fighting but prayed that the station that had long been his family's livelihood would be left unscathed.

Assad's forces cleared the rebels from Damascus in 2018. The train station, though badly wrecked, was opened again, briefly, as a symbol of triumph and revival. Syrian state media reported that trains would take passengers to the annual Damascus International Fair. It broadcast images of happy passengers by the entrance and at the destination, but not of the station's vast damage.

Syria's railway never returned to its former prosperity under Assad, and Malla stayed away as the military maintained control of much of Qadam. After Assad was ousted and the insurgents who forced him out became the interim administration, Malla returned.

He found his home destroyed. The station, which he described as "part of my soul," was badly damaged.

"What we saw was tragic," he said. "It was unbelievable. It was heartbreaking."

The train cars were battered and burned. Some were piles of scrap. The museum had been looted and the old trains had been stripped for sale on Syria's black market.

"Everything was stolen. Copper, electric cables and tools — they were all gone," Malla said.

The trains' distinctive wooden panels had disappeared. Malla and others believe that Assad's fighters used them as firewood during the harsh winters.

In the former no man's land, packs of stray dogs barked and searched for food. Railway workers and families living at the train station say an urban legend spread that the dogs ate the bodies of captives that Assad's notorious web of intelligence agencies killed and dumped late at night.

Now Malla and others hope the railway can be cleared of its rubble and its dark past and become a central part of Syria's economic revival after war and international isolation. They dream of the railway helping to return the country to its former status as a key link between Europe and the Middle East.

There is much work to be done. About 90% of Syria's population of over 23 million people live in poverty, according to the United Nations. Infrastructure is widely damaged. Western sanctions, imposed during the war, continue.

But already, neighboring Turkey has expressed interest in restoring the railway line to Damascus as part of efforts to boost trade and investment.

That prospect excites Malla, whose son Malek spent much of his teenage years surviving the war. At his age, his father and uncle were already learning how to operate a steam engine.

"I hope there will soon be job opportunities, so my son can be employed," Malla said. "That way he can revive the lineage of his grandfather, and the grandfather of his grandfather."

TikTok says it will 'go dark' unless it gets clarity from Biden following Supreme Court ruling

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — TikTok said it will have to "go dark" this weekend unless the outgoing Biden administration assures the company it won't enforce a shutdown of the popular app after the Supreme Court on Friday unanimously upheld the federal law banning the app unless it's sold by its China-based parent company.

The Supreme Court in its ruling held that the risk to national security posed by TikTok's ties to China overcomes concerns about limiting speech by the app or its 170 million users in the United States.

The decision came against the backdrop of unusual political agitation by President-elect Donald Trump, who vowed that he could negotiate a solution, and the administration of President Joe Biden, which has signaled it won't enforce the law — which was passed with overwhelming bipartisan support — beginning Sunday, his final full day in office.

"TikTok should remain available to Americans, but simply under American ownership or other ownership that addresses the national security concerns identified by Congress in developing this law," White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in a statement, noting that actions to implement the law will fall to the new administration.

TikTok released a statement late Friday saying "statements issued today by both the Biden White House and the Department of Justice have failed to provide the necessary clarity and assurance to the service providers that are integral to maintaining TikTok's availability to over 170 million Americans."

"Unless the Biden Administration immediately provides a definitive statement to satisfy the most critical service providers assuring non-enforcement, unfortunately TikTok will be forced to go dark on January 19," the statement said.

A sale does not appear imminent and, although experts have said the app will not disappear from existing users' phones once the law takes effect, new users won't be able to download it and updates won't be available. That will eventually render the app unworkable, the Justice Department has said in court filings.

Trump, mindful of TikTok's popularity and his own 14.7 million followers on the app, finds himself on the opposite side of the argument from prominent Senate Republicans who fault TikTok's Chinese owner for not finding a buyer before now. Trump said in a Truth Social post shortly before the decision was issued that TikTok was among the topics in his conversation Friday with Chinese leader Xi Jinping.

TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew, who is expected to attend Trump's inauguration, used the app to thank the incoming president for "his commitment to work with us to keep TikTok available."

It's unclear what options are open to Trump, a Republican, once he is sworn in as president Monday. The

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law allowed for a 90-day pause in the restrictions on the app if there had been progress toward a sale before it took effect. Solicitor General Elizabeth Prelogar, who defended the law at the Supreme Court for the Democratic Biden administration, told the justices last week that it's uncertain whether the prospect of a sale once the law is in effect could trigger a 90-day respite for TikTok.

The decision explores the intersection of the First Amendment and national security concerns in the fast-changing realm of social media, and the justices acknowledged in their opinion that the new terrain has been difficult to navigate given they know relatively little about it.

"Congress has determined that divestiture is necessary to address its well-supported national security concerns regarding TikTok's data collection practices and relationship with a foreign adversary," the court said in an unsigned opinion, adding that the law "does not violate petitioners' First Amendment rights."

Justices Sonia Sotomayor and Neil Gorsuch filed short separate opinions noting some reservations about the court's decision but going along with the outcome.

"Without doubt, the remedy Congress and the President chose here is dramatic," Gorsuch wrote. Still, he said he was persuaded by the argument that China could get access to "vast troves of personal information about tens of millions of Americans."

Some digital rights groups slammed the court's ruling shortly after it was released.

"Today's unprecedented decision upholding the TikTok ban harms the free expression of hundreds of millions of TikTok users in this country and around the world," said Kate Ruane, a director at the Washington-based Center for Democracy & Technology, which has supported TikTok's challenge to the federal law.

Content creators who opposed the law also worried about the effect on their business if TikTok shuts down. "I'm very, very concerned about what's going to happen over the next couple weeks," said Desiree Hill, owner of Crown's Corner mechanic shop in Conyers, Georgia. "And very scared about the decrease that I'm going to have in reaching customers and worried I'm going to potentially lose my business in the next six months."

At arguments, the justices were told by a lawyer for TikTok and ByteDance Ltd., the Chinese technology company that is its parent, how difficult it would be to consummate a deal, especially since Chinese law restricts the sale of the proprietary algorithm that has made the social media platform wildly successful.

The app allows users to watch hundreds of videos in about half an hour because some are only a few seconds long, according to a lawsuit filed last year by Kentucky complaining that TikTok is designed to be addictive and harms kids' mental health. Similar suits were filed by more than a dozen states. TikTok has called the claims inaccurate.

The dispute over TikTok's ties to China has come to embody the geopolitical competition between Washington and Beijing.

"ByteDance and its Chinese Communist masters had nine months to sell TikTok before the Sunday deadline," Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., wrote on X. "The very fact that Communist China refuses to permit its sale reveals exactly what TikTok is: a communist spy app. The Supreme Court correctly rejected TikTok's lies and propaganda masquerading as legal arguments."

The U.S. has said it's concerned about TikTok collecting vast swaths of user data, including sensitive information on viewing habits, that could fall into the hands of the Chinese government through coercion. Officials have also warned the algorithm that fuels what users see on the app is vulnerable to manipulation by Chinese authorities, who can use it to shape content on the platform in a way that's difficult to detect.

TikTok points out the U.S. has not presented evidence that China has attempted to manipulate content on its U.S. platform or gather American user data through TikTok.

Biden signed the legislation it into law in April. The law was the culmination of a yearslong saga in Washington over TikTok, which the government sees as a national security threat.

TikTok, which sued the government last year over the law, has long denied it could be used as a tool of Beijing. A three-judge panel made up of two Republican appointees and a Democratic appointee unanimously upheld the law in December, prompting TikTok's quick appeal to the Supreme Court.

Without a sale to an approved buyer, the law bars app stores operated by Apple, Google and others from

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offering TikTok beginning Sunday. Internet hosting services also will be prohibited from hosting TikTok. ByteDance has said it won't sell. But some investors have been eyeing it, including Trump's former Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and billionaire businessman Frank McCourt. McCourt's Project Liberty initiative has said it and its unnamed partners have presented a proposal to ByteDance to acquire TikTok's U.S. assets. The consortium, which includes "Shark Tank" host Kevin O'Leary, did not disclose the financial terms of the offer.

McCourt, in a statement following the ruling, said his group was "ready to work with the company and President Trump to complete a deal."

Prelogar told the justices last week that having the law take effect "might be just the jolt" ByteDance needs to reconsider its position.

What will happen to TikTok on Apple and Google's app store on Sunday?

By HALELUYA HADERO The Associated Press

With President-elect Donald Trump adding uncertainty around whether a TikTok ban will go into effect, the focus is now turning to companies like Google and Apple that are expected to take the popular video sharing app off their platforms in just two days.

Though the Supreme Court on Friday unanimously upheld a federal law that could ban TikTok nationwide, it's unclear how a shutdown of the popular social media platform will play out and what Americans will see when the clock strikes midnight on Sunday.

The court decision comes against a backdrop of unusual political agitation by Trump, who vowed that he could negotiate a solution after he takes office, and the administration of President Joe Biden, which has signaled it won't enforce the law beginning Sunday, his final full day in office. Now, tech observers — and some users — are intently watching to see what happens over the weekend and beyond.

"We're really in uncharted territory here in terms of tech policy," said Sarah Kreps, the director of Cornell University's Tech Policy Institute.

Under the law, mobile app stores — like the ones operated by Apple and Google — and internet hosting services will face major fines if they continue to distribute the platform to U.S. users beyond the deadline for divestment from ByteDance, TikTok's China-based parent company. The companies could pay up to \$5,000 for each user who continues to access TikTok, meaning penalties could total to a large sum.

Late Friday night, TikTok posted a statement on X saying that "the Biden White House and the Department of Justice have failed to provide the necessary clarity and assurance to the service providers that are integral to maintaining TikTok's availability to over 170 million Americans."

"Unless the Biden Administration immediately provides a definitive statement to satisfy the most critical service providers assuring non-enforcement, unfortunately TikTok will be forced to go dark on January 19," it said.

Experts have noted TikTok's app should remain available for current users, but existing ones will no longer be able to update it, making it unusable in the long term.

Trump's national security adviser has signaled this week that the incoming administration may take steps to "keep TikTok from going dark," though what that looks like — and if any of those steps can withhold legal scrutiny — remains unclear.

"My decision on TikTok will be made in the not-too-distant future, but I must have time to review the situation," Trump said Friday in a post on Truth Social after the court's ruling. Earlier in the day, he said in another post that TikTok was among the topics in his conversation with Chinese leader Xi Jinping.

In the meantime, some of the attention has turned to tech companies, such as Apple, Google and Oracle, who currently offer TikTok on their app stores or host company data on their servers.

Tech CEOs have been attempting to forge friendlier ties with Trump, who wants to put the TikTok ban on hold, since he was elected in November. But Kreps said it would "defy credulity" for them to continue to offer TikTok, even if they want to please Trump, since it would open them up to punitive fines.

Tech companies are also used to removing apps at the behest of governments. In 2023, Apple says it

removed nearly 1,500 apps globally. Nearly 1,300 of the apps were taken down in China.

"Penalties for companies like Apple and Google could run as high as \$850 billion," Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., wrote on X on Thursday, while referring to the U.S. TikTok law. "Not sure I'd take a politician's word if I ran those companies."

Meanwhile, David Choffnes, executive director of the Cybersecurity and Privacy Institute at Northeastern University in Boston, said he believes there's a "small chance" that nothing happens to TikTok, but acknowledged that would require "enormous risk on the on the part of the companies that support them."

Apple, Google and Oracle did not respond to questions sent this week about their plans on TikTok.

In a video after the court ruling, TikTok CEO Shou Chew, who is expected to attend Trump's inauguration and be granted a prime seating location on the dais, thanked the president-elect for "his commitment to work" with TikTok to "find a solution" that keeps the platform available.

"We are grateful and pleased to have the support of a president who truly understands our platform — one who has used TikTok to express his own thoughts and perspectives, connecting with the world and generating more than 60 billion views of his content in the process," Chew said.

Earlier this week, TikTok told its U.S. employees that its offices would remain open for work even if the "situation" won't be resolved by Sunday. In the memo, which was first reported by The New York Times and confirmed by the company, TikTok told workers that their "employment, pay and benefits" were secure, adding that the law was written in a way that impacts the U.S. user experience, not the entities that employ them.

Meanwhile, in a letter sent Friday to Biden and Attorney General Merrick Garland, an attorney for TikTok creators who sued the government asked the administration to pause enforcement of the law "until there is further definitive guidance."

"In addition, we request that you clarify that no app store, internet hosting service, or other provider faces any risk of enforcement or penalties with respect to TikTok, CapCut, or any other ByteDance apps, until such further guidance has been issued," said the letter by attorney Jeffrey Fisher.

For TikTok users, mourning, frustration and clinging to hope as TikTok ban looms

By WYATTE GRANTHAM-PHILIPS and MAE ANDERSON AP Business Writers

NEW YORK (AP) — The U.S. is inching closer and closer to a potential TikTok ban — with the nation's highest court upholding a law that's set to halt new downloads of the app starting Sunday. But many questions around what exactly this ban will look like, and whether it will actually be enforced, remain.

That puts millions of users and content creators in limbo — particularly influencers and small business owners who have come to rely on the mega-popular social media platform as a source of income.

Among those individuals is Terrell Wade, a comedian, actor and content creator with 1.5 million followers on TikTok under the handle @TheWadeEmpire. Wade, who has turned his TikTok presence into a full-time job, said he expects "two days of chaos" as the Sunday deadline nears.

"At this point, I really don't know what to believe," Wade told The Associated Press.

In a unanimous decision on Friday, the Supreme Court upheld a federal law that will ban TikTok unless it's sold by its China-based parent company before Jan. 19 — ruling that a risk to national security posed by the platform's ties to China overcomes First Amendment concerns about limiting free speech on and by the app.

A sale does not appear imminent, meaning the ban should go into effect Sunday. But the ruling also arrives just days before the inauguration of a new president.

President Joe Biden's administration has maintained that TikTok must change its ownership to address national security concerns, but signaled that it won't enforce the law on Sunday, the Democrat's final full day in office. On Friday, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said that actions to enforce the law will fall to the new administration due to "the sheer fact of timing." Meanwhile, Republican President-elect Donald Trump, who once also tried to ban TikTok, has now vowed to preserve access to the platform.

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But what his options will be following Monday's inauguration remains unclear.

Late Friday night, TikTok posted a statement on X saying that "the Biden White House and the Department of Justice have failed to provide the necessary clarity and assurance to the service providers that are integral to maintaining TikTok's availability to over 170 million Americans."

"Unless the Biden Administration immediately provides a definitive statement to satisfy the most critical service providers assuring non-enforcement, unfortunately TikTok will be forced to go dark on January 19," it said.

Among other points of confusion is what a ban on TikTok will look like. Experts have said the app will not disappear from existing users' devices once the law takes effect. But new users won't be able to download it and updates will not be available. That will eventually render the app unworkable, the Justice Department said in court filings.

All of this is "a reminder to the creator community that social media platforms can come and go," notes Kelsey Chickering, a principal analyst at Forrester, stressing the disruptions TikTok creators and influencers will feel if the ban takes effect. If access is lost, she adds, many will have to pivot and re-build their presence on other platforms.

While bracing for a potential Sunday ban, Wade is among creators who hope that something happens to avert the shutdown, although he thinks he has enough followers on other platforms to stay afloat.

"I'm still remaining optimistic," he said.

Still, many continue to express fears over the potential of losing TikTok.

Janette Ok, a full-time content creator based in Los Angeles, says TikTok is the primary platform she uses today. As an influencer and also an artist, she says the platform has helped her make brand deals and promote her music — bringing "opportunities that I never believed I could experience in my lifetime."

Ok was also among influencers who TikTok brought to Washington in 2023 to lobby for the preservation of the app, and remembers a ban being discussed as far back as 2020. And as someone who is Asian, the efforts to ban TikTok over the years have also felt "a little xenophobic," she added.

"I hear all these different things, and I don't know what to believe — so that's where I'm very frustrated. I'm confused. I'm disappointed," Ok said. "It's a beautiful app, it's brought so many people together, it's changed a lot of people's lives, and for it to just be taken away like that feels ... so not American."

Jordan Smith, a former WNBA player who operates The Elevated Closet in Austin, Texas — a clothing brand for tall women — depends on TikTok and TikTok Shop to find customers that fit her niche demographic that's difficult to specifically market to otherwise.

"On TikTok I've just been able to find that audience so much easier," she said.

She fears losing TikTok will hurt her business, and she'll miss it personally, too. So she's following what people are saying will happen on Sunday and hopes a ban might be diverted.

"It kind of seems like Biden's kind of pushing it off to Trump," she said. "So people have hopes that maybe we have a few more days and it won't go dark on Sunday, but I don't really know."

Alejandro Flores-Munoz owns a catering business in the Denver area called Combi Taco, or @combicafe on TikTok. TikTok helped him reach customers without spending money on marketing, he said. He was optimistic that TikTok would stick around until he heard Friday's Supreme Court decision.

"Up until today, I was extremely optimistic. And after today's Supreme Court decision to uphold the ban or the sale of TikTok, I weigh my options," he said. "But honestly, it's very disheartening, specifically because I truly did rely on the app for my business and my growth of my business."

Going viral on TikTok helped Ruben Trujillo market his Cafe Emporos Coffeograms, a card that includes coffee, tea or hot chocolate. He said he's growing frustrated with the ever-evolving politics surrounding the ban.

"It's kind of like they keep putting the ball in each other's court, but who's going to make the decision?" he said. He said small business owners are told to "be creative, pull yourself up by the bootstraps," he said. "And a lot of people did that, and it's like those bootstraps are being cut now."

Homes were burning and roads already jammed when Pacific Palisades evacuation order came, AP finds

By REBECCA BOONE, GENE JOHNSON, CHRISTOPHER L. KELLER, CLAUDIA LAUER and AMY TAXIN
Associated Press

The first evacuation order covering neighborhoods closest to the start of the devastating Pacific Palisades wildfire didn't come until about 40 minutes after some of those homes were already burning, according to an Associated Press analysis of emergency communications and interviews with survivors.

The wildfire, which would become one of the most destructive in California history, was spreading rapidly in ornamental plantings and burning homes by 11:27 a.m. on Jan. 7, recordings of scanner traffic reveal. So many people fled on their own, as wind-whipped flames raced over the nearby hills, that by the time officials issued the order to evacuate at 12:07 p.m., traffic was gridlocked.

Authorities would eventually urge people to exit their cars and leave on foot, and then used a bulldozer to clear away abandoned vehicles and make way for fire crews.

Despite the timing of the order, nearly all the residents of Pacific Palisades made it to safety — a relief that some attributed to the hyper-awareness of fire danger in a region frequently scarred by it, the efforts of first responders, the initiative that many took to evacuate on their own, and the fact that the fire broke out in broad daylight, when those nearby were awake to notice it.

Relying on other alert systems

The time lag is one of several issues that may have complicated the fire response. With the severe winds preventing aerial firefighting, water hydrants ran dry amid unprecedented demand. A reservoir near Pacific Palisades was empty because it needed repairs. Top Los Angeles Fire Department commanders decided not to deploy roughly 1,000 available firefighters and dozens of water-carrying engines in advance, the Los Angeles Times has reported.

It also could undermine public confidence in public alert systems, which were beset with erroneous or outdated notifications later in the week. Many residents have instead been relying on Watch Duty, a non-profit app that provides real-time updates on wildfire activity, evacuations and shelters.

The fire annihilated much of the Palisades, an affluent Los Angeles community tucked into the foothills of the Santa Monica Mountains, and killed at least 10 people. That evening another fire erupted and destroyed much of Altadena, leaving at least 17 people dead. More than 80,000 people are still under evacuation orders, and many do not know what, if anything, is left of their houses, apartments and possessions. A monumental firefighting effort continues.

Deciding to evacuate on their own

Darrin Hurwitz and his wife, alarmed by the astonishing speed of the flames in the nearby hills, left their home more than an hour before his phone buzzed with the evacuation order. Their house, at the end of a cul-de-sac bordering Topanga State Park, burned down.

"This would have been a different situation if it had been in the middle of the night," Hurwitz said. "If it had taken 30 to 45 minutes to get our phones buzzing, it would have been a potentially big issue."

Los Angeles city fire and emergency management officials declined to immediately address questions related to the timing of the evacuation order. Spokesperson Karla Tovar said in an email that the fire department is focusing its resources on responding to the disaster.

In a statement, the Los Angeles County Office of Emergency Management noted that officials had issued preemptive warnings about severe fire weather, notified residents of the wildfire and urged them to be prepared to evacuate and to follow instructions from emergency personnel in the field.

"These alerts were sent as timely as possible and were intended to wake up people if they were sleeping or draw their attention to the fire so that they could determine their level of risk, take necessary action, and be ready for the next communication," the statement said.

Crews began responding to the Eaton fire, which leveled Altadena, at 6:25 p.m. By 6:57, air support recommended evacuating an area near a golf course. That order went out to residents just 15 minutes later.

By contrast, officials were discussing preparations for evacuating Pacific Palisades over an hour before

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the order went out.

The fire breaks out

On Jan. 6, the day before fires raging around LA destroyed much of the Palisades and Altadena, the National Weather Service issued a red-flag warning alerting the public to severe fire danger as the region's Santa Ana winds were forecast to reach up to 100 mph (161 kph). Los Angeles emergency management officials warned of a "destructive, widespread and potentially life-threatening windstorm starting Tuesday morning."

Pacific Palisades resident Robert Trinkkeller, a 68-year-old mortgage broker, said he spotted the fire from his home at 10:27 a.m. on Jan. 7 — it was in the same area where one had burned on New Year's Day — and immediately called 911. After being put on hold, he called the local fire department on Sunset Boulevard, and the person who answered hadn't yet heard about the fire. That was at 10:29, he said.

Trinkkeller had long prepared to defend his property from any blazes, so he got out his fire suit and hoses. Three times his home caught fire, but he saved it, relying on buckets of pool water once the water to the hose ran out. The wind ripped the roof off his patio.

"It was moving pretty quickly, and I knew it was going to be bad, but it's about 1,000 times worse than anything I could have imagined," he said.

'We need to go'

Hurwitz noticed the fire shortly after Trinkkeller did. He and his wife quickly gathered some personal items — including their children's artwork — and their dog and hamster. "We need to go," he recalled telling her.

By 11:03 they were out the door. They headed to a hillside vantage point where they could see all the way to the sea. His wife drove to meet their daughters, who had been picked up from school by another family. Hurwitz returned once to the house to grab a few more things and then remained at the vantage point until he saw huge flames cresting the ridge near the home.

He drove a short distance down the road and stopped again at a spot where a news crew was filming. He and the reporters got the evacuation order simultaneously, and he quickly drove on back roads to a recreation center, where he reunited with his family.

That there were so few casualties was a testament to many people, including first responders and individual residents, taking action on their own, he said.

"I have concerns it took as long as it did to issue an evacuation order," Hurwitz said. "It seemed clear to me by 10:45 that this fire posed an imminent danger to the entire Palisades."

Warning residents to be ready as homes are threatened

Recordings of scanner traffic provided by Broadcastify, a company that monitors emergency communications, show that just before 11 a.m. — half an hour after the fire was reported — firefighters were trying to defend homes in the large Highlands neighborhood of the Palisades, and within 10 minutes, crews to the south were requesting help to protect more than a dozen homes along Floresta Drive.

At 11:02, Los Angeles police units were told to respond to a fire station on Sunset Boulevard to prepare for evacuations, and at 11:12, a wireless emergency alert warned Palisades residents to be ready to evacuate. It would be close to another hour before the first evacuation order went out to those residents.

By 11:27, homes were burning on Lachman Lane.

"We have several homes burning," one request noted at 11:33. "All the ornamental vegetation has taken off."

Experience with fires — and traffic jams

The Palisades, including the Highlands, had prior experience with wildfire evacuations — and ensuing traffic jams. Just two paved roads connect the Highlands to the rest of Los Angeles, the four-lane Palisades Drive and a narrow, two-lane road named Fire Drive. The latter is an emergency route, but it was quickly overrun with flames on Jan. 7, residents said.

In 2020, the Pacific Palisades Community Council wrote to Los Angeles City Council members complaining that in recent wildfire evacuations, traffic backups endangered the public. Residents raised the issue again after seeing images from the 2023 fire that destroyed Lahaina, in Hawaii, where flames overtook

gridlocked cars and 102 people died.

It happened again last week. As people evacuated even before an official order, cars became stuck in traffic shortly after 11:30 a.m. At 1:09 p.m., a panicked police officer radioed that there was a car burning on Palisades Drive: "We need to evacuate all the cars. Get drivers out of the vehicles."

It's imperative for communities to have communication plans for wildfires and other emergencies, said Eric Link, a fire protection engineer at the National Institute of Standards and Technology. But the specifics of any such plans can be overwhelmed by fast-changing circumstances on the ground.

Authorities may consider road capacity and population density as well as fire behavior in assessing how to evacuate a community, he said.

"As much lead time as can be provided to the public is the goal, but in rapidly developing cases, the fire may be there quicker than the information can be transferred," Link said.

Maryam Zar, chair emeritus of the Pacific Palisades Community Council, said residents have long known they live in a place with two tremendous risks — earthquake and fire. Because of the dramatic landscape, she's not sure there's much the city could do to make it easier to evacuate, especially from such a fast-moving fire, she said.

Considering that, it's a relief there were not more lives lost, she said.

"The fact they evacuated the entire community is pretty impressive," Zar said.

Israel prepares for hostages' return with scant knowledge of their condition

By MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Israel is preparing for the return of the hostages from Gaza with the expectation that many are likely to have severe, life-threatening complications after more than a year in captivity in the Gaza Strip.

While it's impossible to know the exact conditions in which hostages have been held, the Health Ministry and the Hostages Family Forum, which represents families of the hostages, are preparing for several different scenarios based on information gathered from hostages previously released or rescued.

Hamas militants abducted about 250 people during a cross-border attack on Oct. 7, 2023, that also left 1,200 people dead. About 100 hostages are still being held, though Israel believes a third of them are no longer alive.

The war that followed the attack has killed more than 46,000 Palestinians, according to Gaza health officials, who do not distinguish between civilians and militants but say women and children make up more than half of those killed.

Hagai Levine, who heads the health team at the Hostages Families Forum, said he expects the hostages to return with cardiovascular and respiratory issues due to lack of ventilation in the tunnels. Among multiple other afflictions Levine expects are vitamin deficiencies, starvation, dramatic weight loss, vision problems due to a lack of sunlight, broken bones, cognitive impairment and mental health trauma.

As a result, doctors are expecting the hostages will require longer and more complex medical and mental health interventions than did those who returned after the last ceasefire in November 2023, said Dr. Einat Yehene, a psychologist at the Hostages Families Forum who oversees the captives' rehabilitation.

Complex medical challenges

Doctors are keenly aware of the challenges they face in treating the surviving hostages. One of them is "refeeding syndrome," when exposure to certain foods or too much food can lead to profound health complications and even death in those with prolonged vitamin and nutritional deficiencies, said Dr. Hagar Mizrahi, head of the Ministry of Health's medical directorate.

The Red Cross team that will transfer the hostages from Gaza to Egypt and the small Israeli military medical team that will meet the hostages at the border as they cross into Israel have strict guidelines for what the hostages can eat in their first few hours, Mizrahi said.

Six hospitals are preparing to receive hostages, including two in the south, closer to Gaza, that will treat those with acute medical issues, health ministry officials said.

Yehene said the public should not expect joyful reunions like those seen following the last ceasefire, when released hostages ran through hospital halls into the ecstatic embraces of their loved ones.

"Given the physical and emotional conditions, we expect emotional withdrawal symptoms, such as maybe exhaustion, fatigue — and some will probably need assistance with their mobility," she said.

Medical officials are also prepared for the possibility that returning hostages will need speech therapy, especially if they have been kept in isolation, Yehene noted. She said some might be so traumatized or in shock from the transfer to Israel that they will be unable to speak at all.

To minimize the hostages' trauma and allow them to acclimate to their new reality, officials will try to limit the number of people who interact with them and have made accommodations to lessen their sensory stimulation, such as stripping down the hospital rooms and changing the lighting.

Israel's Ministry of Social Welfare has also planned temporary housing solutions if hostages feel unable to return directly from the hospital to their home.

'The hostages don't owe you anything'

Experts are pleading with the news media and the public to give the hostages and their families privacy, despite intense interest in their plight.

"The first days back are really holy, when a person finally gets to meet with their family, and everyone else needs to take a step back," said Ofrit Shapira, a psychoanalyst who heads a group of health professionals treating freed hostages, their families, and survivors of the Oct. 7 attack.

Hospital wings housing the hostages are expected to be "sterilized," closed to all but direct family and doctors, to keep the public and news outlets away, medical officials have said.

"It doesn't matter how much we care about them; they're their own people, they're not 'ours,'" Shapira added. She noted that asking the hostages direct questions about their experiences can force them to relive their trauma. She said it's best to allow them to release information at their own pace.

"Our curiosity is really not important compared with what the hostages need," she said. "It doesn't matter how much you volunteered or were active in this fight; they don't owe you anything."

Support for the families

Some of the previously freed hostages and their families have volunteered to help counsel those now going through the same process, Levine said. He noted the strength of the bonds created between the relatives of the hostages, and between the released hostages, who have become like "psychological families" helping each other adapt and heal, he said.

Many released hostages are neglecting their own rehabilitation because they are so wrapped up in the fight to bring the others home, Levine said.

A big priority is also to provide support for the families of hostages who did not survive.

Israel has confirmed the deaths of at least a third of the approximately 90 remaining captives. But Hamas has not confirmed the status of the 33 who are expected to be freed in the first stage of the ceasefire. Some might no longer be alive.

"This moment of the releases is an emotional and psychological trigger for something they were supposed to experience, and they never will experience, because this deal took too long," Yehene said.

Israel's Cabinet approves a deal for a ceasefire in Gaza and the release of dozens of hostages

By SAMY MAGDY, WAFAA SHURAFI and JOSEF FEDERMAN Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel's Cabinet approved a deal early Saturday for a ceasefire in Gaza that would release dozens of hostages held there and pause the 15-month war with Hamas, bringing the sides a step closer to ending their deadliest and most destructive fighting ever.

The government announced the approval after 1 a.m. Jerusalem time and confirmed the ceasefire will go into effect on Sunday. The hourslong Cabinet meeting went well past the beginning of the Jewish Sabbath, a sign of the moment's importance. In line with Jewish law, the Israeli government usually halts all business for the Sabbath except in emergency cases of life or death.

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Mediators Qatar and the United States announced the ceasefire on Wednesday, but the deal was in limbo for more than a day as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu insisted there were last-minute complications that he blamed on the Hamas militant group. On Friday, the smaller security Cabinet recommended approving the deal.

Key questions remain about the ceasefire — the second achieved during the war — including the names of the 33 hostages who are to be released during the first, six-week phase and who among them is still alive.

Netanyahu instructed a special task force to prepare to receive the hostages. The 33 are women, children, men over 50 and sick or wounded people. Hamas has agreed to free three female hostages on Day 1 of the deal, four on Day 7 and the remaining 26 over the following five weeks.

Palestinian detainees are to be released as well. Israel's justice ministry published a list of more than 700 who are to be freed in the deal's first phase and said the release will not begin before 4 p.m. local time Sunday. All people on the list are younger or female.

Israel's Prison Services said it will transport the prisoners instead of the International Committee of the Red Cross, which handled transportation during the first ceasefire, to avoid "public expressions of joy." The prisoners have been accused of crimes like incitement, vandalism, supporting terror, terror activities, attempted murder or throwing stones or Molotov cocktails.

The largely devastated Gaza should see a surge in humanitarian aid. Trucks carrying aid lined up Friday on the Egyptian side of the Rafah border crossing into Gaza.

An Egyptian official said an Israeli delegation from the military and Israel's Shin Bet internal security agency arrived Friday in Cairo to discuss the reopening of the crossing. An Israeli official confirmed a delegation was going to Cairo. Both spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the private negotiations.

Israeli forces will also pull back from many areas in Gaza during the first phase of the ceasefire and hundreds of thousands of Palestinians will be able to return to what's left of their homes.

"Once Sunday comes around, we would be happier, God willing," one of Gaza's displaced people, Ekhlas al-Kafarna, said during the wait for word on the Israeli Cabinet decision.

Israel's military said that as its forces gradually withdraw from specific locations and routes in Gaza, residents will not be allowed to return to areas where troops are present or near the Israel-Gaza border, and any threat to Israeli forces "will be met with a forceful response."

Ceasefire talks had stalled repeatedly in previous months. But Israel and Hamas had been under growing pressure from both the Biden administration and President-elect Donald Trump to reach a deal before Trump takes office on Monday.

Hamas triggered the war with its Oct. 7, 2023, cross-border attack into Israel that killed some 1,200 people and left some 250 others captive. Nearly 100 hostages remain in Gaza.

Israel responded with a devastating offensive that has killed more than 46,000 Palestinians, according to local health officials, who do not distinguish between civilians and militants but say women and children make up more than half the dead.

Fighting continued into Friday, and Gaza's Health Ministry said 88 bodies had arrived at hospitals in the past 24 hours. In previous conflicts, both sides stepped up military operations in the final hours before ceasefires as a way to project strength.

The second — and much more difficult — phase of the ceasefire is meant to be negotiated during the first. The remainder of the hostages, including male soldiers, are to be released during this phase.

But Hamas has said it will not release the remaining captives without a lasting ceasefire and a full Israeli withdrawal, while Israel has vowed to keep fighting until it dismantles the group and to maintain open-ended security control over the territory.

Longer-term questions about postwar Gaza remain, including who will rule the territory or oversee the daunting task of reconstruction.

The conflict has destabilized the Middle East and sparked worldwide protests. It also highlighted political tensions inside Israel, drawing fierce resistance from Netanyahu's far-right coalition partners.

On Thursday, Israel's hard-line national security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, threatened to quit the government if Israel approved the ceasefire. He reiterated that Friday, writing on social media platform X: "If

the 'deal' passes, we will leave the government with a heavy heart."

There was no immediate sign early Saturday that he had done so.

Ben-Gvir's resignation would not bring down the government or derail the ceasefire deal, but the move would destabilize the government at a delicate moment and could eventually lead to its collapse if Ben-Gvir were joined by other key Netanyahu allies.

Appeals court rules against Obama-era policy to shield immigrants who came to US as young children

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — A federal appeals court on Friday ruled against an Obama-era policy to shield immigrants who came to the country illegally as young children, only three days before Donald Trump takes office with pledges of mass deportations.

The unanimous decision by a panel of the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans — two judges appointed by Republican presidents, Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, and one by Democrat Barack Obama — is the latest blow for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, whose beneficiaries have lived in legal limbo for more than a decade.

It signals no immediate change for its more than 500,000 beneficiaries, who can renew temporary permits to live and work in the United States. But the federal government cannot take new applications, leaving an aging and thinning pool of recipients.

The decision may tee up the policy for a third visit to the Supreme Court. Trump sought to end DACA during his first term, but he also occasionally expressed wishes that beneficiaries be allowed to stay.

Obama introduced DACA in 2012, citing inaction by Congress on legislation aimed at giving those brought to the U.S. as children a path to legal status. Legal battles followed, including two trips to the Supreme Court.

This latest case involves a new version of the rule issued by President Joe Biden in 2022. It represented little substantive change from the 2012 memo that created DACA, but it was subject to public comment as part of a formal rule-making process intended to improve its chances of surviving legal muster.

U.S. District Judge Andrew Hanen in Houston said the executive branch had overstepped its authority and barred the government from approving new applications. He left it intact for current beneficiaries while appeals played out in court.

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton, who led the challenge on behalf of Republican-led states, called Friday's ruling "a major victory."

"I look forward to working with President-elect Donald Trump to ensure that the rule of law is restored, and the illegal immigration crisis is finally stopped," Paxton said.

The U.S. Homeland Security Department didn't immediately respond to a message seeking comment late Friday.

In 2016, with one vacancy on the Supreme Court, the justices deadlocked 4-4 over an expanded DACA and a version of the program for parents of DACA recipients, keeping in place a lower court decision for the benefits to be blocked. In 2020, the high court ruled 5-4 that the Trump administration improperly ended DACA by failing to follow federal procedures, allowing it to stay in place.

Attorneys for fire victim say utility may have destroyed evidence of what caused deadly LA-area fire

By JASON DEAREN Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Attorneys for a woman who is among thousands who lost their homes in the Eaton Fire outside Los Angeles say Southern California Edison crews working to repair and restore power in the area may have destroyed evidence that could help determine what sparked the wildfire.

The fire has killed at least 16 people and destroyed more than 7,000 structures in Altadena. Video and photos taken by residents captured flames beneath Edison's electrical towers in the Eaton Canyon area

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in the early minutes of the fire. One resident said he heard a loud pop at the outset of the conflagration.

Now, attorneys for Altadena resident Evangeline Iglesias have asked a judge to order Edison to preserve evidence in the area, concerned that the utility is discarding equipment that may hold clues to the fire's origin.

"SCE's counsel stated in no uncertain terms that SCE planned to destroy 'damaged distribution and related equipment in Altadena' and 'electrical infrastructure'" in Eaton Canyon unless plaintiff's attorneys identified each specific piece of evidence that had to be preserved, attorneys wrote.

Her lawyers say they have received nearly 1,000 inquiries from "residents who will need this very same evidence in order to recover."

Gabriela Ornelas, an Edison spokesperson, wouldn't comment Friday on any lawsuits or the sound heard as the fire ignited because the cause is still under investigation.

"Our hearts remain with our communities during the devastating fires in Southern California, and we remain committed to supporting them through this difficult time," she said.

In a filing to the California Public Utilities Commission, Edison reported two days after the fire started that it had not received any suggestions that its equipment was involved in the ignition.

"Preliminary analysis by SCE of electrical circuit information for the energized transmission lines going through the area for 12 hours prior to the reported start time of the fire shows no interruptions or electrical or operational anomalies until more than one hour after the reported start time of the fire," the utility reported. This assertion was repeated in a Jan. 14 letter written by SCE's attorneys in response to the request to preserve evidence.

Aerial images provided by the Vexcel Data Program show eight work trucks in the area northwest of the Eaton Valley electrical towers four days after the start of the fire. Several trucks matched the type used by Edison work crews but the logos weren't visible in the images. Ornelas said she did not have information about the trucks or their work.

In a filing in response to the request to preserve evidence, Edison lawyers said the utility must "immediately undertake reconstruction work in Altadena to make the area safe for the public and to remove damaged equipment." The filing asked plaintiff attorneys to "inform us immediately if you are in possession of any information or evidence suggesting that SCE's distribution facilities in Altadena are relevant to the Eaton Fire."

One resident of the neighborhood who saw the fire as it began said he heard a loud pop as flames shot up beneath the electrical towers minutes before the wind whipped the blaze into one of the worst in state history.

Matt Logelin, whose backyard overlooks the Eaton Canyon area, was making dinner for his children when he heard the sound. At first, he thought it might be a tree branch that snapped in the strong wind.

"I looked out the window just to kind of watch the wind. And I saw a tiny fire up on the hill," he said. He grabbed his phone and snapped a photo at 6:13 p.m. Twenty-three minutes later, the sky was glowing orange and flames filled the canyon.

Logelin immediately called 911 to report the breakout of the fire and ran to his neighbors to alert them. He snapped another photo at 6:21 p.m. that showed the orange flames had already spread across the hills. By 6:35 p.m. he and his family were in the car driving to safety.

Logelin's house and others on his street survived but he has no idea when he'll be able to move back in.

"It's miraculous," he said. "When I was running out the front door, there were embers flying into the backyard. There are embers flying over the house into the front yard. I thought the house was gone for sure."

Across Los Angeles County in Pacific Palisades, investigators with the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives have taken the lead on finding the cause of that blaze, which started hours before the Eaton. The Palisades Fire killed at least eight people and destroyed thousands of structures.

Los Angeles Fire Department Chief Kristin Crowley told residents at a town hall Thursday that among the possible causes of that fire was a New Year's Day grass fire that might have reignited with the savage

winds of Jan. 7.

"We know everyone wants answers, and the community deserves answers," said Jose Medina, ATF's acting agent in charge in Los Angeles. "ATF will give you those answers but it will be once we complete a thorough investigation."

Trump's swearing-in will move inside the Capitol Rotunda because of intense cold weather

By ZEKE MILLER AP White House Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump will take the oath of office from inside the Capitol Rotunda on Monday due to forecasts of intense cold weather, upending months of meticulous planning for a massive outdoor event with crowds sprawling down the National Mall.

"The weather forecast for Washington, D.C., with the windchill factor, could take temperatures into severe record lows," Trump posted on his Truth Social platform. "There is an Arctic blast sweeping the Country. I don't want to see people hurt, or injured, in any way."

The Rotunda is prepared as an alternative for each inauguration in the event of inclement weather. The swearing-in was last moved indoors in 1985, when President Ronald Reagan began his second term. Monday's forecast calls for the lowest Inauguration Day temperatures since that day.

Outgoing President Joe Biden, members of Congress and some other dignitaries and notable guests will be able to view the ceremony from inside the Capitol Rotunda. But even if they are standing shoulder-to-shoulder packing the Rotunda as in 1985, many will be forced to watch the swearing-in from elsewhere.

Alternate plans were being devised to accommodate as many guests as possible. More than 250,000 guests are ticketed to view the inauguration from around the Capitol grounds and tens of thousands more were expected to be in general admission areas or to line the inaugural parade route from the Capitol to the White House.

Trump said some supporters would be able to watch the ceremony from Washington's Capital One Arena on Monday, a day after he plans to hold a rally there. He said he would visit the arena, which has a capacity of about 20,000, after his swearing-in, and host a modified inaugural parade there.

Trump said other inaugural events, including the Sunday rally and his participation in three official inaugural balls on Monday night, would take place as scheduled.

The U.S. Secret Service, which leads the security planning for the inauguration, said it was working with organizers to "adapt" its plans for the event due to the scheduling changes.

The National Weather Service is predicting the temperature to be around 22 degrees (minus-6 Celsius) at noon during the swearing-in, the coldest since Reagan's second inauguration saw temperatures plunge to 7 degrees (minus-14 Celsius). Barack Obama's 2009 swearing-in was 28 degrees (minus-2 Celsius).

"The Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies will honor the request of the President-elect and his Presidential Inaugural Committee to move the 60th Inaugural Ceremonies inside the U.S. Capitol to the Rotunda," a spokesperson said Friday.

The committee said that with the shift indoors, the "vast majority" of ticketed guests will no longer be able to attend in person.

"While we know this is difficult for many attendees, we strongly suggest people who are in Washington for the event attend other indoor events at indoor venues of their choice to watch the inauguration," the committee said.

The Presidential Inaugural Committee is expected to be designating places to watch and will provide additional information.

The Capitol Rotunda was one of the areas breached during the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection by supporters of Trump trying to block the certification of his 2020 defeat to Biden. The temporary inaugural platform, where Trump was to have been sworn-in outdoors, was the site of some of the most violent clashes between rioters and police officers trying to protect the Capitol complex.

Earlier Friday, Trump's inaugural committee announced that, like his first inauguration, Trump would take the oath of office on a family Bible given to him by his mother as well as the Bible used by President Abraham Lincoln at his first inauguration in 1861. Vice President-elect JD Vance will be sworn in on a family Bible given to him by his maternal great-grandmother.

Fires scorched campuses across Los Angeles. Many schools are seeking places to hold classes

By KRYSTA FAURIA, JOCELYN GECKER and CLAIRE RUSH Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Days after losing her home in the same fire that destroyed her Los Angeles elementary school, third-grader Gabriela Chevez-Muñoz resumed classes this week at another campus temporarily hosting children from her school. She arrived wearing a t-shirt that read "Pali" — the nickname for her Pacific Palisades neighborhood — as signs and balloons of dolphins, her school's mascot, welcomed hundreds of displaced students.

"It feels kind of like the first day of school," Gabriela said. She said she had been scared by the fires but that she was excited to reunite with her best friend and give her hamburger-themed friendship bracelets.

Gabriela is among thousands of students whose schooling was turned upside down by wildfires that ravaged the city, destroying several schools and leaving many others in off-limits evacuation zones.

Educators across the city are scrambling to find new locations for their students, develop ways to keep up learning, and return a sense of normalcy as the city grieves at least 27 deaths and thousands of destroyed homes from blazes that scorched 63 square miles (163 square kilometers) of land.

Gabriela and 400 other students from her school, Palisades Charter Elementary School, started classes temporarily Wednesday at Brentwood Science Magnet, about 5 miles (8 kilometers) away. Her school and another decimated Palisades elementary campus may take more than two years to rebuild, Los Angeles Unified School District Superintendent Alberto Carvalho said.

Students from seven other LAUSD campuses in evacuation zones are also temporarily relocating to other schools.

As Layla Glassman dropped her daughter off at Brentwood, she said her priority after her family's home burned down was making sure her three children feel safe and secure.

"We have a roof over our heads. We have them back in school. So, you know, I am happy," she said, her voice cracking. "But of course, there's a lot of grief."

Many schools have held off on resuming instruction, saying their focus for now has been healing, and trying to restore a sense of community. Some are organizing get-togethers and field trips to keep kids engaged in activities and with each other as they look for new space.

The Pasadena Unified School District kept all schools closed this week for its 14,000 students. It offered self-directed online activities but said the work was optional.

Between 1,200 and 2,000 students in Pasadena Unified School District are known to be displaced but the number could be as high as 10,000 based on heat maps of where families lived, district Superintendent Elizabeth Blanco said Thursday. The district aims to reopen some schools by the end of next week and have all students back in classrooms by the end of the month.

Schools that did not burn down were damaged by falling trees, debris, ash and smoke that requires extensive cleaning and environmental testing, she said. Hundreds of school staff members citywide lost their homes or had to relocate, compounding the challenges.

Some schools are passing on online learning altogether.

"We all did COVID. We did online instruction. We saw the negative impacts," said Bonnie Brimecombe, principal of Odyssey Charter School-South, which burned to the ground. Families have been dropping their children off at the local Boys and Girls Club so students can be with each other, she said.

A total of 850 students attend her school and a sister school in Altadena, Odyssey Charter School-North, which emerged undamaged but is still expected to remain closed for months. At least 40% of the students lost their homes in the fire, she said, making it especially urgent for their well-being to find new space

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and resume school as soon as possible. "At this point we are trying to reopen in-person the very first day that we can," she said.

Over the long term, disruptions can have profound effects on students' learning and emotional stability. Children who experience natural disasters are more prone to acute illness and symptoms of depression and anxiety, research shows.

Keeping students together as the two LAUSD elementary schools are doing is the best approach, said Douglas Harris, a Tulane professor who studied the effects of Hurricane Katrina on schools and academic outcomes. But given how many people are relocating because of the fires, he said it's unlikely all classes will look the same.

"I wonder how many kids are showing up to the new school buildings based on how dispersed they might be," Harris said. "It's going to be difficult and it's going to take a long time."

Among the schools seeking space for temporary classrooms is Palisades Charter High School, which has 3,000 students. Nestled between Sunset Boulevard and the Pacific Coast Highway, "Pali High" is the kind of California school that Hollywood puts on the big screen and has been featured in productions including the 1976 horror movie "Carrie" and the TV series "Teen Wolf."

Most of the buildings are still standing, but about 40% of the campus was damaged, officials said. The school is looking into other campuses, nearby universities and commercial real estate spaces that would allow all its students to stay together until it's safe to return, said principal and executive director Pamela Magee. The school delayed the start of the second semester until Tuesday and will temporarily revert to online learning.

Axel Forrest, 18, a junior on the lacrosse team, is planning to gather with friends for online school. His family home is gone and for now they are at a hotel near the Los Angeles airport.

"I feel so out of it, every day. Do I cry? Do I mourn the loss of my home and school? I am trying not to think about it," he said. The longer school is out, the more idle time his mind has to wander.

"As time is passing I'm realizing this is going to be my reality for the next year or two. I am not going to have anywhere to live permanently for a while," he said. "And what am I going to do for school now? It's going to be online but for how long? Where will the temporary campus be? How far away is it?"

At Oak Knoll Montessori, educators have been holding meetups for its 150 students at locations including museums, parks, and a library in an effort for students to find some joy. The fire destroyed the school and several dozen students lost their homes.

The only thing that survived the fire was the school's chicken coop, and its five chickens.

"The chickens have been a nice beacon of hope," said Allwyn Fitzpatrick, the head of school. "All the buildings blew up. We have nothing. Not one chair."

Fitzpatrick has found a potential new location for the school and hopes to reopen before the end of the month.

"We have been trying to focus all our attention on the children and how we can temporarily help them normalize all this. Which is an insurmountable task," Fitzpatrick said.

How the deal to pause the Israel-Hamas war could unfold

By ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

The Gaza ceasefire and hostage release agreement is expected to take effect as soon as Sunday. But the most significant diplomatic breakthrough in over a year of brutal war between Israel and Hamas is rife with risks and raises more questions than it answers.

The deal presented to the Israeli Cabinet Friday after months of complex negotiations mediated by the United States, Egypt and Qatar is riddled with diplomatic ambiguity, leaving the issues that most inflame tensions between Israel and Hamas up for more negotiation. That has stirred fears that, failing a second agreement, the war could resume within weeks.

In besieged Gaza, the prospect of more humanitarian aid and a respite from constant bombardment still has lifted Palestinians' hopes after 15 months of suffering through an Israeli military campaign that has killed

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over 46,000 people, both civilians and militants.

In Israel, families have eagerly prepared to welcome home relatives Hamas took captive during its Oct. 7 cross-border attack that killed 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and resulted in the abduction of 250 others.

WHAT TO EXPECT IN COMING DAYS?

Even as Israel and Hamas quarreled over final sticking points earlier this week, American and Qatari officials said the first phase of the deal — lasting 42 days — should take hold first thing Sunday.

It involves the release of 33 hostages held by Hamas in Gaza — women, children men over age 50 and sick or wounded people — in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners held in Israel.

Hamas has agreed to free three female hostages on Day 1 of the deal, four more on Day 7 and the remaining 26 over the following five weeks of this first stage.

The first stage also requires that 600 humanitarian relief trucks enter the enclave each day — a significant increase from the current trickle of aid deliveries decried by the United Nations as insufficient to cover people's basic needs.

In Gaza, Palestinians can expect the fighting to stop and the Israeli army to withdraw to the east, away from populated areas, allowing civilians to return to their shattered homes. Around 90% of Gaza's population of 2.3 million people has been displaced.

The majority of Palestinian prisoners slated for release, according to a partial list released by the Israeli Justice Ministry on Friday, are women and minors jailed in the occupied West Bank and east Jerusalem for non-violent offenses.

Diplomats have sketched out further phases of the agreement in hopes that the immediate ceasefire can allow Israel and Hamas to work toward a lasting end to the war and the reconstruction of devastated Gaza.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER?

The second phase of the deal is meant to be worked out before the first one ends. To convince both sides to sign on to the ceasefire, foreign mediators seem to have left that second phase particularly ambiguous.

The broad outline says all remaining hostages in Gaza, both alive and dead, are to be released in return for a complete Israeli withdrawal from the strip and a "sustainable calm."

The talks are bound to be tricky, given the participants' antagonisms and sharply different goals.

Israel says it won't agree to a complete withdrawal until Hamas' military and political capabilities are eliminated, ensuring it can no longer rule.

Hamas is badly battered but still controls much of Gaza and has said that it will only agree to a deal that permanently ends the war. It has refused to hand over the last Israeli hostages — around 100 are still in Gaza — until Israel removes all of its troops.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, hoping to persuade his far-right allies to remain in his wobbly governing coalition despite their opposition to a ceasefire, has offered the public no guarantees that Israel will make it to Phase 2. That leaves many families afraid that loved ones still in Gaza will be left behind.

Itamar Ben-Gvir, the hardline minister for national security, announced Thursday night that his ultra-nationalist Jewish Power party would quit the government over the ceasefire, and only return if fighting resumed. Israel's finance minister, Bezalel Smotrich, also demanded that Netanyahu promise to continue the war in Gaza after freeing some of the hostages as a condition of Smotrich's Religious Zionism staying in the government.

Few believe that the ceasefire will address the underlying causes of the war.

"No one can promise that Hamas will keep its word and execute the second stage," Amos Harel, a military affairs columnist for the Israeli paper Haaretz, wrote on Friday. "And many are suspicious of Netanyahu's intentions."

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Biden says the Equal Rights Amendment should be considered ratified

By CHRIS MEGERIAN, DARLENE SUPERVILLE and CLAIRE SAVAGE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden announced Friday that the Equal Rights Amendment should be considered a ratified addition to the U.S. Constitution, making a symbolic statement that's unlikely to alter a decades-long push for gender equality.

"The Equal Rights Amendment is the law of the land," Biden said even though presidents have no role in the constitutional process. He did not direct the leader of the National Archives to certify the amendment, as some activists have called for, sidestepping a legal battle.

It was the latest in a collection of pronouncements that Biden has made in the waning days of his presidency as he tries to tie up loose ends and embroider his legacy despite leaving after only one term. He's also called for a ban on stock trading for members of Congress and proposed term limits for Supreme Court justices — ideas that lingered for years before Biden endorsed them.

With his popularity low and political influence running dry before he's replaced by Donald Trump on Monday, Biden's statements have stirred aggravation among some allies who believe he should have acted more swiftly and spoken out earlier.

The Equal Rights Amendment, which would ban discrimination based on gender, was sent to the states for ratification in 1972. Virginia became the 38th state to ratify it in 2000, although years past the deadline set by Congress, leading to a legal standoff over whether it could be considered valid.

Democrats and activists have long pressed to consider the amendment as ratified, but Biden did not say he agreed until Friday.

"I wish it was done sooner because it's so important," said Christian F. Nunes, leader of the National Organization for Women. "The fact that it's getting done now is more important than the fact that it took long, but we can't continue to delay women's protections and equal rights in this country."

Noreen Farrell, executive director of Equal Rights Advocates, said she wished Biden's statement had come earlier in hopes of influencing the leader of the National Archives, who has declined to certify the amendment because of the expired deadline for ratification.

"But we remain hopeful" that it would help build momentum "even at this late date," Farrell said.

Biden defended his decision not to weigh in until the end of his term by telling reporters that he "needed all the facts."

Earlier in the day, Biden issued a statement saying "it is long past time to recognize the will of the American people."

"In keeping with my oath and duty to Constitution and country, I affirm what I believe and what three-fourths of the states have ratified: the 28th Amendment is the law of the land, guaranteeing all Americans equal rights and protections under the law regardless of their sex."

It's unlikely that Biden's support will have any impact. On Friday, the National Archives reiterated its position by saying "the underlying legal and procedural issues have not changed."

Some activists gathered outside the National Archives to celebrate Biden's statement and call on the archivist to take action.

"Do your job," said Zakiya Thomas, head of the ERA Coalition. "The president has done his."

Claudia Nachega, a leader in the Young Feminist Party, said certifying the Equal Rights Amendment would signal "the beginning of a new American era that gives us a fighting chance of surviving a second Trump presidency."

Los Angeles fires have scorched largest urban area in California in at least 40 years

By MARY KATHERINE WILDEMAN and CHRISTOPHER L. KELLER Associated Press

Two wildfires still burning in Los Angeles have torched more urban area than any other fire in the state since at least the mid-1980s, an Associated Press analysis shows.

The Eaton and Palisades fires that erupted last week have collectively burned almost 4 square miles of

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highly dense parts of Los Angeles, more than double the urban acreage consumed by the region's Woolsey Fire in 2018, according to the AP's analysis of data from the Silvis Lab at the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

Experts say several factors could lead to wildfires reaching cities more often. Urban areas continue to sprawl into wildland. Climate change is raising global temperatures that lead to more severe weather, including droughts, especially in the western United States.

"If these conditions get worse or more frequent in the future, it wouldn't be surprising, in my opinion, if there were more events that threaten densely populated places," said Franz Schug, a researcher studying the boundaries between the wildland and urban areas at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

The Eaton and Palisades fires' rampage through Los Angeles has killed at least 27 people, destroyed more than 12,000 structures and put more than 80,000 under evacuation orders. The fires are likely to be among the most destructive in California history, according to the state agency CalFire.

The Woolsey Fire eventually grew to about twice the current size of the Eaton and Palisades fires but most of the area it burned was uninhabited.

Silvis, and AP, defined urban areas as those that are "high density," where the land has at least 3 housing units for every acre, calculated with U.S. Census data.

The Great Chicago Fire of 1871 burned about 3.3 square miles of the downtown area of the city, according to the Chicago Architecture Center. San Francisco's Great Fire of 1906 destroyed 4 square miles of the city, according to the Museum of the City of San Francisco.

Besides burning the most urban area, the Eaton and Palisades fires are the largest ever for California in January. Alexandra Syphard, a senior research scientist at the Conservation Biology Institute, said their timing and path through the city "may have no precedent in history."

Authorities haven't determined a cause for the major blazes in California. But experts have noted the extreme weather that created more favorable conditions: heavy rains that drove vegetation growth, then extreme drought that turned much of that vegetation into good fire fuel. Scientists say such extreme weather events are a hallmark of climate change.

Then there's the human element.

Across California, about 1.4 million homes were built in areas where residential areas and vegetation intermingle between 1990 and 2020, a 40% increase, the Silvis Lab found.

Fires that begin close to populated areas are often caused by people, and their proximity to people means they are usually extinguished sooner. As David Helmers, a data scientist and geographer at the Silvis Lab, put it, "Humans tend to ignite fires, but they also fight fires."

But that wasn't the case with the Eaton and Palisades fires, which were whipped by fierce Santa Ana winds to overwhelm fire crews.

The 2017 Tubbs Fire in northern California's wine country came under similar high winds. That blaze, sparked by a residential electrical system, tore through suburban areas of Santa Rosa, killing 22 people and destroying more than 5,600 homes, businesses and other structures. Overnight, the rubble of the Coffey Park neighborhood became a symbol for how quickly a wildfire can reach a populated area.

Some 53 years prior, another fire — the Hanly Fire — burned through almost the exact same area. Winds helped it spread with furious speed. But with little development at the time, nobody died and only 100 homes were lost.

The Senate advances a migrant detention bill that could be Trump's first law to sign

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate is heading toward a final vote on legislation that would give states the power to challenge federal immigration policies and require federal authorities to detain migrants accused of theft and violent crimes, setting a new tone on immigration as Donald Trump enters the White House.

Newly in the majority, Senate Republicans have made the so-called Laken Riley Act — named after a

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Georgia student who was killed last year by a Venezuelan man — a top priority, potentially making it the first bill Trump signs as president.

On Friday, it cleared a key procedural hurdle 61-35, with 10 Democrats voting with Republicans to advance it to a final vote. The Senate is set to vote on final passage Monday after Trump's inauguration, but the House will also need to take up changes made to the bill.

Democrats, who last year allowed similar legislation to languish, initially supported opening debate on the bill, signaling a new willingness to consider crackdowns on illegal immigration following their election losses. However, most voted against advancing the bill to a final vote after they were unable to make significant changes to the legislation.

"The American people are rightly concerned about the illegal immigration crisis in this country, and they sent a clear message in November that they want to see it addressed," said Senate Majority Leader John Thune, a South Dakota Republican, who described the bill as "the first of many" on the topic.

In the early days of the new Congress, Republicans have dared Democrats to join them in efforts to restrict illegal immigration and deport migrants who are tied to crimes. In several cases, they have. Most Senate Democrats voted to advance the Laken Riley Act last week as they bartered for changes to the bill.

In the House, all Republicans, as well as 48 Democrats, voted to pass a similar version of the bill this month. And this week, 61 Democrats also voted for a separate bill to require deportation and block entry into the U.S. for foreign nationals who are convicted of physical or sexual abuse.

The votes have given Republicans some early wins as they enjoy a trifecta of power across the House, Senate and White House, though the bills have mostly retread on policy where federal authorities already have discretion to act.

Once Trump enters office and attempts to set up large-scale deportation operations, congressional Republicans will face intense pressure to pay for his priorities while also balancing their pledges to tame budget deficits and concerns about the economic, as well as humanitarian, impacts of mass deportations.

The Laken Riley Act does not have any new funding for immigration officials, but Democratic staff on the Senate Appropriations Committee estimate the bill would cost \$83 billion over the next three years, according to a memo obtained by The Associated Press.

Republicans pushed back on that figure. At the same time, they are debating how to pass a major funding package through a process known as reconciliation that would allow the Trump administration to spend up to \$100 billion on border and immigration enforcement.

Democrats, meanwhile, are searching for a path forward on their approach to immigration. The party is divided between those who now prioritize restrictions on illegal immigration and those who argue the party should also champion help for migrants who are already here or who are seeking relief from violence or persecution in their home countries.

"We Democrats want to see our broken immigration system fixed," said Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., who supported negotiations on the bill but voted against its advance Friday.

He pointed to Democrats working with Republicans on a larger bill last year that would have clamped down on the asylum process. That legislation was rejected by Republicans after Trump came out in opposition to it, but Schumer said he would still "stand ready" to work with the GOP on border security and immigration.

"I think we have to prove that we're the only party serious about border security," said Sen. Chris Murphy, a Connecticut Democrat.

He criticized the Laken Riley Act because it would require immigration authorities to give priority to detaining migrants accused or convicted of crimes like shoplifting, but potentially force authorities to release others convicted of more serious crimes. Murphy said it would just "make the system more convoluted and more chaotic."

The Senate will vote Monday on expanding the bill to also target migrants who assault a police officer or are accused of crimes that kill or seriously injure someone.

The legislation, as well as Riley's name, became a rallying cry for Republicans last year as they spotlighted President Joe Biden's handling of the border. Riley, a Georgia nursing student, was killed in February, and

Jose Ibarra, a Venezuelan man who entered the country illegally and was allowed to stay to pursue his immigration case, was convicted of her murder.

Trump in the campaign repeatedly raised the issue of crimes committed by migrants, but there is no evidence that immigrants are more prone to violent crime. Several studies have found immigrants commit lower rates of crime than those born in the U.S. Groups that advocate for restrictive immigration policies dispute or dismiss those findings.

Ultimately, immigration experts said the most lasting effects of the legislation could be the provision that gives legal standing to state attorneys general to sue the federal government for harm caused by federal immigration policies.

That gives states new power in setting immigration policy when they have already been trying to push back against presidential decisions under both the Trump and Biden administrations. Democrats unsuccessfully pushed to have that provision stripped from the bill, saying it could open the door to major changes in federal policy.

"We have a really overwhelmed and stretched immigration system as it is and additional litigation just adds chaos," said Kathleen Bush-Joseph, a lawyer and policy analyst at the Migration Policy Institute.

3 lawyers for the late Kremlin foe

Alexei Navalny are convicted and sentenced to prison

PETUSHKI, Russia (AP) — Three lawyers who once represented the late Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny were convicted by a court Friday as part of the Kremlin's crackdown on dissent that has reached levels unseen since Soviet times.

Vadim Kobzev, Igor Sergunin and Alexei Liptser were already in custody and were given sentences ranging from 3 1/2 to five years by a court in the town of Petushki, about 100 kilometers (60 miles) east of Moscow. They were arrested in October 2023 on charges of involvement with extremist groups, as Navalny's networks were deemed by authorities.

The case was widely seen as a way to increase pressure on the opposition to discourage defense lawyers from taking political cases.

The U.S. State Department condemned the sentences against the lawyers "who were simply doing their jobs to ensure a political prisoner was afforded his right to legal representation, turning defense lawyers into political prisoners themselves," said spokesman Matthew Miller.

He called it "yet another example of the persecution of defense lawyers by the Kremlin in its effort to undermine human rights, subvert the rule of law, and suppress dissent," and urged the government to release all political prisoners immediately.

At the time of his death last year in an Arctic penal colony, Navalny was serving a 19-year prison term on several criminal convictions, including extremism.

The independent Russian newspaper Novaya Gazeta reported that Kobzev said in his final statement in court on Jan. 10 that "we are being tried for transmitting Navalny's thoughts to other people."

The independent Russian news outlet Mediazona reported three journalists attending the sentencing were detained and taken to a police station.

Navalny's networks were deemed extremist following a 2021 ruling that outlawed his organizations — the Foundation for Fighting Corruption and a network of regional offices — as extremist groups.

That ruling, which exposed anyone involved with the organizations to prosecution, was condemned by Kremlin critics as politically motivated and designed to stifle Navalny's activities.

According to Navalny's allies, authorities accused the lawyers of using their position to pass information from him to his team.

Navalny, an anti-corruption campaigner and outspoken opponent of President Vladimir Putin, was arrested in 2021 upon his return from Germany, where he was recuperating from a nerve agent poisoning he blamed on the Kremlin. He was ordered to serve 2 1/2 years in prison.

After two more trials, his sentence was extended to 19 years. He and his allies said the charges were

politically motivated and accused the Kremlin of seeking to jail him for life.

In December 2023, Navalny was moved from a penal colony in the Vladimir region east of Moscow to one above the Arctic Circle, where he died on Feb. 16, 2024, at the age of 47 under still-unexplained circumstances. His widow, Yulia Navalnaya, and members of his team alleged he was killed on orders from the Kremlin. Officials have rejected the accusation.

Two other Navalny lawyers, Olga Mikhailova and Alexander Fedulov, are on a wanted list but no longer live in Russia. Mikhailova, who defended Navalny for a decade, said she was charged in absentia with extremism.

Kobzev, Liptser and Sergunin have been deemed to be political prisoners, according to human rights advocates from Memorial, Russia's most prominent rights group that won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022. The group demands their immediate release.

Independent Russian media reported Friday that Konstantin Kotov, an activist accused of donating to Navalny's organization, left Russia before he was due to appear in a Moscow court Friday. He told Mediazona he decided to leave after a heart surgeon, Dr. Ivan Tishchenko, was jailed for four years for donating about \$34 to Navalny's organization.

Trump and Chinese leader Xi talk about trade, fentanyl and TikTok

By DIDI TANG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump and Chinese leader Xi Jinping discussed trade, fentanyl and TikTok in a phone call Friday, just days before Trump heads back to the White House with vows to impose tariffs and other measures on America's biggest rival.

Despite that, Xi congratulated Trump on his second term and pushed for improved ties, the Chinese foreign ministry said. The call came the same day that the U.S. Supreme Court backed a law banning TikTok unless it's sold by its China-based parent company.

"We both attach great importance to interaction, hope for a good start of the China-U.S. relationship during the new U.S. presidency and are willing to secure greater progress in China-U.S. relations from a new starting point," Xi said in the call.

Trump confirmed on his Truth Social platform that he had spoken with Xi, saying "the call was a very good one for both China and the U.S.A." They talked about trade, fentanyl and TikTok and more, he said.

"President Xi and I will do everything possible to make the World more peaceful and safe!" Trump wrote. His transition team pointed to the social media post when asked for more details on the call.

The past few days have shown a warmer side of the U.S.-China relationship, which is expected to be one of the main focuses of Trump's second term. In his campaign, Trump threatened to raise tariffs on Chinese goods by as much as 60% and later pledged an additional 10% hike over allegations China has failed to stem the flow of illicit drugs into the United States.

Experts believe that Trump would expand controls on products sold to China, too. But they also have pointed to Trump vowing to "save TikTok" even though he tried to ban the social media platform the last time he was in the White House.

Following the Supreme Court's ruling, Trump said on social media that his "decision on TikTok will be made in the not too distant future, but I must have time to review the situation. Stay tuned!"

Hal Brands, senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, said Trump is siding with TikTok because he believes the social media platform helped him in the 2024 election.

"So I think it is a sign that Trump's own convictions on China are fairly changeable, given what is politically advantageous to him," Brands said. "He certainly isn't a cold warrior at heart. In my view, his goal is to reach some sort of deal or accommodation with Beijing over the long term, even though he may well use confrontational tactics to build the leverage that is needed for that in the short- and medium-term."

Hours before the Trump-Xi call, the Chinese foreign ministry announced that Vice President Han Zheng would attend Trump's swearing-in ceremony as Xi's special representative. Trump extended an unusual invitation to Xi in December, but no head of state has attended a U.S. president's inauguration in the past.

Trump in the past has praised his relationship with Xi and suggested China could help mediate interna-

tional crises such as the war in Ukraine.

Beijing and Washington, however, have been locked in a tense economic competition since Trump's first term, when relations shifted toward a more contentious rivalry. President Joe Biden also has imposed limits on the sale of advanced technology to China and slapped high tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles and solar cells.

Sen. Marco Rubio, Trump's nominee for secretary of state, said at his confirmation hearing this week that China was "the most potent and dangerous near-peer adversary this nation has ever confronted."

In the call Friday, Xi told Trump that differences are inevitable between the two powers, but the key lies with "respecting each other's core interests and major concerns and finding a proper solution," according to the Chinese foreign ministry.

Xi urged Trump to approach the Taiwan issue "with prudence" because it is about China's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

"Confrontation and conflict should not be an option for the two countries," Xi said.

Beijing claims the self-governed island as Chinese territory and vows to annex it by force if necessary. The U.S. is obligated by a domestic law to provide the island with sufficient hardware and technology to fend off any mainland invasion.

Trump has criticized Taiwan for pulling some of the semiconductor industry from the U.S., but U.S.-Taiwan relations also significantly improved during his first term.

Taiwan is sending legislative speaker Han Kuo-yu and seven others to Trump's inauguration, tasked with conveying Taiwan's commitment to democracy and "best wishes" to Trump and his administration.

In their phone call, Xi told Trump that the essence of trade and the overall economic relationship between the two countries is "mutually benefiting and win-win."

The two leaders exchanged views on the war in Ukraine and the Israel-Hamas war and agreed to establish "a channel of strategic communication," according to the Chinese foreign ministry.

Craig Singleton, senior director of the China Program at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, said such leader-to-leader calls are important and noted that Trump and Xi appear to be speaking more frequently.

"Regular communication is critical for advancing U.S. interests while ensuring clarity in competition," Singleton said.

Trump said in a December interview on "Meet the Press" that he had been communicating with Xi since he won the November election. Trump in the interview said he has "a very good relationship" with China's leader. He said they did not discuss Taiwan but other issues.

Russia and Iran sign a partnership treaty to deepen their ties in the face of Western sanctions

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Iranian counterpart, Masoud Pezeshkian, signed a broad cooperation pact Friday as their countries deepened their partnership in the face of stinging Western sanctions.

Russian and Iranian officials say the "comprehensive strategic partnership treaty" covers all areas — from trade and military cooperation to science, education and culture. The 20-year treaty could be extended further.

Putin praised the deal as a "real breakthrough, creating conditions for the stable and sustainable development of Russia, Iran and the entire region."

He said the amount of trade and economic cooperation was still insufficient, voicing hope the new treaty will help clear bureaucratic hurdles and expand ties. The Russian leader added that the countries are trying to resolve technical obstacles to advance planned projects to ship Russian natural gas to Iran via Azerbaijan and build transport corridors to Iranian ports in the Gulf.

Pezeshkian said the projects are feasible, adding that experts were working to resolve remaining obstacles.

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"We witness a new chapter of strategic relations," the Iranian president said, adding that the countries were set to expand trade ties and also boost the "level of security cooperation."

His visit came ahead of Monday's inauguration of President-elect Donald Trump, who has pledged to broker peace in Ukraine and take a tougher stance on Iran, which is grappling with growing economic problems and other challenges, including military setbacks in its sphere of influence across the Middle East.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov dismissed any link with Trump's inauguration, saying that Pezeshkian's visit had been planned long ago.

The signing of the treaty with Iran follows last year's pact with North Korea -- countries once identified by former President George W. Bush, along with Iraq, as "the Axis of Evil."

Unlike the treaty with Pyongyang, the pact with Tehran doesn't envisage mutual assistance in case of aggression. But it does oblige each country not to offer any military or any other aid to an aggressor attacking another party.

Moscow and Tehran, which both have faced massive Western sanctions, agreed in the document to coordinate their response to such restrictions and facilitate payments in national currencies. The pact also envisions the exchange of intelligence information and cooperation on security issues.

Welcoming Pezeshkian as they sat down for talks, Putin said the new treaty will "give an additional impetus to practically all areas of our cooperation."

Pezeshkian, who met Putin for the third time since coming to power in July, said the documents form a "solid foundation for our forward movement."

"We do consider our relations with you as vital, sensitive and strategic, and we are on this path strongly," he said.

The Iranian president emphasized that countries in the region should resolve their own problems themselves, adding in an apparent reference to the U.S. that the presence of outside forces will only exacerbate tensions and destabilize the situation.

"They come from another side of the world to make chaos in the region," he said. "These ties will defuse their plot, definitely."

Russia's ties with Iran have grown closer after Putin sent troops into Ukraine in February 2022. Ukraine and the West have accused Tehran of providing Moscow with hundreds of drones for use to attack Ukraine, which Moscow and Tehran have denied.

Pezeshkian spoke in support of prospective Russia-Ukraine peace talks, saying that "war is not a solution" and urging the West to "avoid imposing excessive demands" and acknowledge others' "security concerns."

Last year, Iran joined the BRICS bloc of developing economies and Pezeshkian attended its summit, which was hosted by Russia in Kazan.

Russia and Iran, which had troubled relations in the past, developed cordial ties after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, with Moscow emerging as a key trade partner and supplier of weapons and technologies for Tehran, which has faced bruising international sanctions.

Russia built Iran's first nuclear plant that was launched in 2013 and is building two more nuclear reactors there.

Russia was part of the 2015 deal between Iran and six nuclear powers offering sanctions relief for Tehran in exchange for curbing its atomic program, and the Kremlin offered political support to Iran when the U.S. unilaterally withdrew from the agreement during Trump's first term.

Russia and Iran also pooled their efforts to shore up Bashar Assad's government during Syria's civil war, but failed to prevent his downfall last month after a lightning offensive by the opposition. Assad and his family fled to Russia.

His ouster dealt another blow to Tehran's self-described "Axis of Resistance" across the region, which had already been pummeled by Israel's offensives against two militant groups backed by Iran -- Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Israel also attacked Iran directly on two occasions.

Tehran increasingly needs Moscow's assistance as it faces economic woes and stinging setbacks across its sphere of influence in the Middle East. The troubles could deepen after Trump returns to the White House with his policy of "maximum pressure" on Iran.

In particular, Iran wants sophisticated Russian weapons like long-range air defense systems and fighter jets to help fend off possible attacks by Israel.

SpaceX launch accident likely caused by fire that sent trails of flaming debris near the Caribbean

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — SpaceX suspects a fire may have caused its Starship to break apart during liftoff and send trails of flaming debris near the Caribbean.

SpaceX's Elon Musk said preliminary indications are that leaking fuel built up pressure in the cavity above the engine firewall. The resulting fire would have doomed the spacecraft.

On Friday, the Federal Aviation Administration ordered SpaceX to investigate what went wrong. The FAA said there were no reports of injuries from Starship debris.

The 400-foot Starship — the world's biggest and most powerful rocket — launched from the southern tip of Texas on a test flight early Thursday evening. The booster made it back to the pad for a catch by giant mechanical arms, only the second time in Starship history. But the engines on the still ascending spacecraft shut down one by one, and communication was lost 8 1/2 minutes into the flight.

Dramatic video taken near the Turks and Caicos Islands showed spacecraft debris raining down from the sky in a stream of fireballs. Flights near the falling debris had to be diverted, the FAA said.

SpaceX said Starship remained in its designated launch corridor over the Gulf of Mexico and then the Atlantic. Any surviving wreckage would have fallen along that path over water, the company said on its website.

Starship had been shooting for a controlled entry over the Indian Ocean, halfway around the world. Ten dummy satellites, mimicking SpaceX's Starlink internet satellites, were on board so the company could practice releasing them.

It was the seventh test flight of a Starship, but it featured a new and upgraded spacecraft. The FAA said it must approve SpaceX's accident findings and any corrective actions.

SpaceX said the booster and spacecraft for the eighth demo are already built and undergoing testing. Musk said on X the loss was "barely a bump in the road" in his plans to build a fleet of Starships to carry people to Mars.

NASA already has booked two Starships to land astronauts on the moon later this decade under its Artemis program, the successor to Apollo.

"Spaceflight is not easy. It's anything but routine," NASA Administrator Bill Nelson posted on X after the accident. "That's why these tests are so important."

Earlier Thursday, Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin company also had mixed results with the debut of its massive New Glenn rocket. It achieved orbit on its first try, putting a test satellite thousands of miles above Earth. But the booster was destroyed after failing to land on a floating platform in the Atlantic.

How to prepare for a TikTok ban, including how to save your content

By HALELUYA HADERO AP Business Writer

TikTok has cemented itself as a quintessential entertainment app, offering everything from funny skits and makeup tutorials to social commentary and news.

Without a sale to an approved buyer, the platform is expected to vanish from U.S. app stores by Sunday now that the Supreme Court unanimously upheld the the ban.

The decision came against the backdrop of unusual political agitation by President-elect Donald Trump, who vowed that he could negotiate a solution. It's unclear what options are open to Trump once he is sworn in as president on Monday. An official in the Biden administration told the Associated Press on Thursday that the outgoing administration was leaving the implementation of the law to the new administration.

TikTok has more than 170 million U.S. users. According to the Pew Research Center, that includes most teens and a third of adults. If you are an avid user, or a creator who relies on the platform for income, here's what you need to know about the ban and how to prepare for it:

What happens on Jan. 19?

A lawyer representing TikTok told Supreme Court justices last week that TikTok will "go dark" on Jan.

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19 if the law isn't struck down.

What that means in practice is unclear currently, but the law bars app stores operated by Apple, Google and others from offering TikTok beginning on Sunday. Internet hosting services also will be prohibited from hosting TikTok.

Users should continue to have access to TikTok if it's already downloaded on their phones, but the app will disappear from Apple and Google's app stores — so new users won't be able to download it.

This would mean that TikTok wouldn't be able to send updates, security patches and bug fixes to users, all of which will degrade the quality of the app and likely lead to security issues. Eventually, the app will become unworkable.

Akin to the app, David Choffnes, executive director of the Cybersecurity and Privacy Institute at Northeastern University in Boston, says the TikTok website should continue to work even after the ban goes into effect.

The statute would prohibit domestic internet hosting providers from hosting the platform, Choffnes said, but companies could theoretically use servers outside of the U.S. That likely will make content on the platform load more slowly and lead to worse performance on the app and the TikTok website, he said.

Are there any workarounds to access TikTok?

Yes, but some tech savviness is required and it's not clear what will and won't work.

The most common workaround that's brought up is a VPN, or virtual private network, that allows users to mask their location. A VPN encrypts your traffic data and then routes it through private tunnels to secure servers around the world, which prevents anyone else from being able to read it.

Lauren Hendry Parsons, the director of communications and advocacy at ExpressVPN, maintains that people could access their TikTok accounts by using a VPN and making some other changes to their phone's settings that would allow them to jump to a nearby country's app store.

If large droves of users do that, it's possible that tech companies, such as Apple or Google, could recognize it as a legal liability and find other ways to clamp down on the app. But they also might avoid going that route since they're trying to forge friendlier ties with Trump, who now wants to "save TikTok" and could potentially direct his Justice Department to abandon enforcement of the law all together.

U.S. TikTok users with Android devices might also be able to continue to update the platform through third-party app stores, a method called sideloading. But bypassing the security protocols that well-known app stores have in place might also leave users more vulnerable to malware, said Gus Hurwitz, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania with expertise in telecommunications and technology.

Would I still have access to my favorite videos?

TikTok allows you to save the videos or photos you've posted, or content from your favorite influencers. Any posts you choose to save will be downloaded and kept on your phone.

Many TikTok creators allow users to download their posts, but it's possible you might not be able to save everything you want since some put limits on their content. Users also can't download content off of private accounts or those registered to anyone under the age of 16.

If you're interested, the platform allows you to request a copy of your TikTok data, which includes things like your comment and video watching history. The company says it may take a few days to prepare that type of file.

Are people going to other apps?

If a TikTok ban occurs, established social media platforms, such as Meta's Instagram, Snapchat and Google's YouTube are expected to benefit from having one of their biggest competitors taken off of the U.S. market.

The rise of the short-form video platform led many others to offer TikTok-like feeds on their own platforms, such as Instagram's Reels and YouTube's Shorts. And if TikTok goes away, it's likely that creators, and small businesses, on the app would more easily switch to Reels and Shorts since they already have large audiences and a user base that overlaps with TikTok, said Jasmine Enberg, an analyst at market research company Emarketer.

TikTok users themselves have tested the waters with several other platforms outside of the established platforms. Among the ones that have received the most buzz: China's Xiaohongshu ("RedNote") and Lemon8.

What is going to happen next?

The TikTok saga will be in the hands of the incoming Trump administration, which has already said that's its exploring options to "preserve" the popular app.

"We will put measures in place to keep TikTok from going dark," Florida Rep. Mike Waltz, Trump's pick for national security adviser, said Thursday during an interview on Fox News' Fox & Friends. Waltz also commented that the law allows for an extension on the ban "as long as a viable deal is on the table."

Trump, mindful of TikTok's popularity, and his own 14.7 million followers on the app, finds himself on the opposite side of the argument from prominent Senate Republicans who fault TikTok's Chinese owner for not finding a buyer before now. Trump said in a Truth Social post shortly before the decision was issued that TikTok was among the topics in his conversation Friday with Chinese leader Xi Jinping.

TikTok CEO Shou Chew is expected to be seated on the dais for the inauguration along with tech billionaires Elon Musk, who is CEO of SpaceX, Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg, OpenAI CEO Sam Altman and Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, according to two people with the matter. The people spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal planning.

Biden got an Oval Office letter from Trump and may leave one in the desk himself. It'd be a first

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Ronald Reagan probably didn't realize he was starting a tradition when he wrote a note congratulating his successor and left it in the Oval Office desk drawer after two terms as president.

He did that for George H.W. Bush, his successor and vice president of eight years. Bush did the same for Bill Clinton, who left a note for Bush's son, George W. The younger Bush left behind written words for Barack Obama, who later put pen to paper for Donald Trump.

Trump curiously continued this rite of presidential passage by writing a letter to Joe Biden, even as he opted out of other traditions, like attending Biden's inauguration.

History and politics now have intertwined to put President Biden in the unique position of writing a letter — if he so chooses — to Trump, his successor and the predecessor who left a note for him.

"This will mark the first time that a president who has received a letter from an outgoing president may well be writing a letter to the same person who's the incoming president," said Mark Updegrove, president and CEO of the LBJ Foundation.

When Trump takes office on Monday, he'll be the first president to serve nonconsecutive terms since Grover Cleveland in the late 1800s, when the letter-writing tradition didn't exist.

"So this is a highly unusual situation, as so many things are in modern day Washington with Donald John Trump," Updegrove said in an interview.

How the note-writing tradition started

Reagan was inspired to write to George H.W. Bush, who had become a friend during their eight-year partnership, Updegrove said.

He chose a sheet of whimsical stationery illustrated by the cartoonist Sandra Boynton with an elephant — also the Republican Party mascot — surrounded by turkeys and the phrase, "Don't let the turkeys get you down."

"Dear George," the 40th president wrote in January 1989, opening the two-paragraph note. "You'll have moments when you want to use this particular stationery. Well, go to it."

Reagan writes that he treasures the memories they share and "wish you all the very best." He closed with, "I'll miss our Thursday lunches," and signed it, "Ron."

The tradition was elevated, Updegrove said, when the elder Bush turned over the presidency after one

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term, denied a second by Bill Clinton in the 1992 election.

Bush used his note to wish Clinton "great happiness here" in the White House. He warned of tough times that will be made more difficult by criticism Clinton will think unfair, and he advised the man who defeated him to "just don't let the critics discourage you or push you off course."

"Your success now is our country's success. I am rooting hard for you," Bush wrote.

"It's just a very bipartisan, genuine reflection of, I think, really, George H.W. Bush's character," Matthew Costello, chief education officer at the White House Historical Association, said during an online program about inaugural traditions.

Letters from Clinton through Obama

At the end of his two terms, Clinton told the younger Bush that the incoming president was embarking on the "greatest adventure, with the greatest honor, that can come to an American citizen" and wished him "success and much happiness."

"The burdens you now shoulder are great but often exaggerated. The sheer joy of doing what you believe is right is inexpressible," Clinton wrote.

Eight years later, Bush congratulated Obama on opening a "fantastic chapter in your life" but warned of the trying moments ahead with critics who "rage" and "friends" who will disappoint.

"But, you will have an Almighty God to comfort you, a family who loves you, and a country that is pulling for you, including me," George W. Bush wrote.

Obama, who had campaigned vigorously against Trump in 2016, congratulated him on a "remarkable run" and offered some reflections from his eight years on the job.

He told Trump they were both blessed with good fortune, that American leadership "really is indispensable" in the world, that they are the "guardians" of democratic institutions and traditions, and that family and friends will see him through the "inevitable rough patches."

"Millions have placed their hopes in you, and all of us, regardless of party, should hope for expanded prosperity and security during your tenure," Obama wrote.

Trump's letter to Biden

What did it say? Hardly anyone knows because the letter has not been shared with the public.

Biden showed the note to some members of his staff after his inauguration in 2021 but didn't let anyone read it. Others described Trump's note as long and handwritten, and Biden is said to have been surprised by how gracious he thought the letter was given the animosity between the political rivals.

Asked about the note later that day, Biden said it was a "very generous letter," but he deemed it private and said he wouldn't discuss it until he had a chance to speak with Trump.

Trump said he thought it was up to Biden to share the letter.

"It was a nice note," he said during a September 2023 interview with NBC's "Meet the Press," adding, "I took a lot of time in thinking about it."

Will Biden reciprocate?

He's expected to, as someone who respects political traditions and institutions. But White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre left open the possibility that he might not.

"That is going to be up to the president," Jean-Pierre told reporters this week. "It's a good question. I'm curious, too."

Letter-writing isn't required but is "based on precedent and whether or not people want to keep a tradition going," Costello said.

He said he was hopeful that Biden would participate.

Earlier notes didn't always say 'congratulations'

Some earlier outgoing presidents wrote letters to their successors, though not on Inauguration Day and not always with congratulations in mind, Costello said.

Earlier notes often were penned with invitations to visit or dine at the White House or to relay information, which is what President John Adams did in a February 1801 letter to inform incoming President Thomas Jefferson about transportation.

"In order to save you the trouble and expence of purchasing horses & carriages, which will not be necessary, I have to inform you that I shall leave in the stables of the United States seven horses and two carriages with harness the property of the United States," Adams wrote. "These may not be suitable for you, but they will certainly save you a considerable expence as they belong to the studd of the Presidents Household," Adams wrote.

"I have the Honor to be with great respect, Sir your most obed. & hum servt."

Ozempic, Wegovy and other drugs are among 15 selected for Medicare's price negotiations

By AMANDA SEITZ Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Popular weight loss and diabetes drugs like Ozempic and Wegovy have been added to Medicare's list of medications that will be negotiated directly between the government and drug manufacturers, the Biden administration said Friday.

The price negotiations for the additional 15 drugs selected will be handled by the incoming Trump administration and, if deals are reached, almost assure billions of dollars in savings for taxpayers.

Besides Ozempic and Wegovy, some of the other medications include Trelegy Ellipta, which treats asthma; Otezla, a psoriatic arthritis drug; and several that treat different forms of cancer.

The list is a first step in negotiations and, given the timing, the details and final pricing will be left to President-elect Donald Trump's administration.

"For some people this is a big deal," U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra said in a call with reporters on Thursday. "Some folks have to skip a dose in their prescription so they can make a prescription last longer."

That brings the total to 25 drugs that will have lower price tags for Medicare enrollees.

Together, those 25 drugs account for a third of Medicare spending on prescriptions, Becerra said. Ozempic and Wegovy, in particular, have been scrutinized for their high out-of-pocket costs.

Medicare enrollees, however, still won't be able to access the drugs for obesity under a federal law that prohibits the program from paying for weight loss treatments. Right now, Medicare will only cover Ozempic and Wegovy when used to treat diabetes or lower blood sugar. A rule the Democratic Biden administration proposed — and the incoming Republican Trump administration will decide whether to implement — would cover the popular anti-obesity medications for weight loss.

The savings on the 25 drugs stem from a new law that allows Medicare to haggle over the price it pays on the most popular and expensive prescription drug scripts filled by older Americans. For years, Medicare had been legally prohibited from such dealmaking. The law, passed by Democrats and signed into law by President Joe Biden, was opposed by Republicans at the time, but it's unclear if they have an interest in trying to repeal or weaken the law now.

Drug companies have sued over the negotiations and remain opposed to the program. On Friday, the top pharmaceutical lobby called on the incoming administration and Congress to "fix" the law.

"In rushing out this list in their final days, the Biden administration once again fails to address the true challenges facing seniors and Medicare," Stephen Ubl, the president and CEO of Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, said in a statement.

Late last year, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services announced it had reached pricing deals with companies for 10 drugs in the inaugural round of negotiations. Under the new deals, list prices were reduced by hundreds — in some cases, thousands — of dollars for 30-day supplies of popular drugs used by millions of people on Medicare. They included popular blood thinners Xarelto and Eliquis and diabetes drugs Jardiance and Januvia. Drug company executives told investors during earnings calls that they did not expect the negotiations to impact their bottom line.

The AARP, one of the most powerful health care interest groups in Washington, said that it would fight any efforts to weaken the law in the GOP-controlled Congress.

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"For too long, big drug companies have padded their profits by setting outrageous prices at the expense of American lives, forcing seniors to skip prescriptions they can't afford," AARP Executive Vice President Nancy LeaMond said in a statement.

The savings from the new list prices for those drugs were expected to generate about \$6 billion for taxpayers and \$1.5 billion for Medicare enrollees.

Negotiated prices for the first 10 drugs don't kick in until 2026. Prices for the 15 additional drugs announced today won't go into effect until 2027. But some Medicare enrollees should see relief from drug prices in a new rule this year that caps annual out-of-pocket costs on prescription drugs to \$2,000.

Under the law, more drugs will be added to the negotiation process in coming years.

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services says the 15 drugs are Ozempic, Rybelsus and Wegovy; Trelegy Ellipta; Xtandi; Pomalyst; Ibrance; Ofev; Linzess; Calquence; Austedo and Austedo XR; Breo Ellipta; Tradjenta; Xifaxan; Vraylar; Janumet and Janumet XR; and Otezla.

Ozempic and Wegovy are made by Novo Nordisk, which is based in Denmark and has U.S. headquarters Plainsboro, New Jersey.

Voice of America is required by law to report the news accurately. Could Donald Trump change that?

By LAURIE KELLMAN and DAVID BAUDER Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — It's called the Voice of America — a storied news outlet that has promised "the truth" since it first broadcast stories about democracy into Nazi Germany during World War II. Now, it's the voice of a country in which a majority of voters chose incoming president Donald Trump, a man famous for insisting the truth is what he says it is.

What VOA will tell the world about the United States and democracy during a second Trump administration depends heavily on the once and future president. Trump has jolted foreign leaders with statements about somehow adding Greenland, Canada and the Panama Canal to the United States. He wants to project America — and himself — as dominant. And fighting independent reporting that conflicts with this goal — what he considers "fake news" — is one of Trump's signatures.

During the first Trump administration, his targets included Voice of America in an ugly chapter that included firings, a lawsuit, whistleblowers and a federal investigation. Media experts and current and former VOA journalists see this history potentially repeating itself in a landscape of creeping autocracy, rampant misinformation and Russian propaganda.

"I expect that VOA will be put under intense pressure to promote the USA. This seems likely to involve ... only selecting news that paints the country in a positive light," Kate Wright, associate professor of media and politics at the University of Edinburgh, wrote in an email. Trump, she predicted, will try to correct supposedly "liberal bias" at VOA. "The risk is that this will push journalists to create false balance — treating perspectives or statements as equally valid when they are not."

This time, Trump knows where the levers of power lie. He is poised to test Voice of America's statutory "firewall" that protects its editorial operations from interference by any government official. Trump and Kari Lake, his choice to lead the newsgathering organization, have been clear about their intent to "reform the media" in a series of statements that have rattled many of VOA's 2,000 employees and delighted Trump's fans.

Lake said in an interview published Thursday that her job won't be to turn VOA into "Trump TV."

"But it's also not our job to go in there and unduly criticize President Trump," she told The Epoch Times. "I just want to see fair coverage."

Already, Trump's nomination of Lake has resurrected a question that has shadowed Voice of America from its founding: Can a \$260 million, government-funded news outlet ever really operate independently?

The law sets it up that way. President Gerald Ford signed VOA's charter in 1976. Congress tightened its editorial protections in 1994 and did so again in 2020, after a federal judge ruled that a Trump appointee

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had infringed on the editorial independence and First Amendment rights of VOA journalists.

That was the clear intent from the first words anyone ever heard from the outlet, when the voice of William Harlan Hale beamed a message into Nazi Germany in 1942. "The news may be good. The news may be bad," Hale announced, in German. "We shall tell you the truth." That approach carried the outlet through World War II. It survived hearings in 1953 on allegations that VOA journalists were communist sympathizers.

"Unlike Soviet broadcasts, the Voice of America is not only committed to telling its country's story, but also remains faithful to those standards of journalism that will not compromise the truth," President Ronald Reagan said at VOA's 40th anniversary celebration in 1982. Within a decade, Voice of America was broadcasting inside Russia 24-7.

"If you were interested in hearing something different from propaganda, you would seek out these voices," said Mark Pomar, head of the Russian Service for VOA in the 1980s and the author of "Cold War Radio."

Trump and Lake, a former Arizona broadcast journalist and a denier of multiple elections, have described a different approach. "Under my leadership," Lake posted in December, "the VOA will excel in its mission: chronicling America's achievements worldwide."

Lake's mission statement is a far cry from what VOA's charter says. But Trump has made his name upending tradition, undermining institutions and seeking to unravel the so-called "deep state." He views the Voice of America as "disgraceful."

Under the charter signed into law by Ford, the Voice of America "will serve as a consistently reliable and authoritative source of news." It goes on: "VOA will represent America, not any single segment of American society, and will therefore present a balanced and comprehensive projection of significant American thought and institutions."

And finally, the broadcaster will present the policies of the US "clearly and effectively, and will also present responsible discussions and opinion on these policies." So by law, Voice of America must broadcast editorials.

There, Wright and others say, lie some potential opportunities for Trump. Leading VOA from the news side of the "firewall," Lake could have wide latitude to appear on air herself, for example, or to steer coverage to topics the administration favors.

Together, those are some of the factors that could open the door to what's known as "government capture" of an independent agency, in which a government controls what is broadcast to domestic audiences. VOA is legally set up to broadcast news to international audiences, but in reality, anyone can access it. That leaves VOA open to transforming into a news-like organization that speaks to Trump's American constituency.

"These provisions always risked opening the door to any administration which wanted to turn the network into a mouthpiece," said Wright, the co-author of the 2024 book "Capturing News, Capturing Democracy: Trump and the Voice of America."

Lake was a broadcast journalist in Arizona for decades, winning two Emmys for her team's coverage of landmine recovery in Cambodia, a Fox News spokeswoman said. Then Lake quit and ran for governor. She's falsely denied two election losses — Trump's loss to Joe Biden in 2020 and her own for governor in 2022. Last year, she ran for Senate in Arizona and lost.

Throughout, Lake built a national profile as an unflinching Trump ally. Her showy on-camera clashes with mainstream reporters — "monsters," she said — got plaudits online and apparently Trump's attention as well.

Spokespersons for Lake and for Trump's transition did not reply to queries about her plans for VOA, including whether Lake intends to appear on air. Current and former VOA journalists who spoke on condition of anonymity to avoid retaliation said there was a sense of resignation that under Trump, Lake could clean house. Many are thought to be looking for other jobs.

South African miner describes horrors for those who spent months underground

By MOGOMOTSI MAGOME Associated Press

STILFONTEIN, South Africa. (AP) — Dozens of men sat and lay together in small caves, some so shallow they couldn't stand up. The air was wet and stuffy, and wracking coughs echoed in the confined space.

Bodies wrapped in fabric and twine were set aside in rows nearby. Bad odors permeated everything, so it was hard to distinguish what smells were coming from the dead versus the unwashed bodies or the damp rock.

The miners were emaciated from lack of food, which was hard to come by since police cracked down on their illegal mining and for a time halted the supply deliveries.

Usually the men would eat meat, bread, and porridge cooked over camp stoves run by propane, but all of these had run out. With no mining work to distract them, they smoked cigarettes and marijuana for a while, when they still had it.

The description, from a miner and from cellphone videos sent to the surface earlier this month, sheds some light on the horror hundreds of men suffered deep underground in an abandoned mine in South Africa, after a police operation cut off food and supplies to "smoke them out" because they were digging illegally for gold. The videos were released publicly by a group representing the miners.

Police finally launched a rescue effort earlier this week, under court order, and said no one was left underground. Dozens of bodies were pulled out and at least 87 confirmed dead.

The miner, who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity out of fear of reprisals, said he surfaced on Christmas Day after entering the shaft in July, spending months underground where he experienced extreme hunger and saw many of his fellow diggers dying from starvation and illnesses.

He is one of nearly 2,000 illegal miners who have surfaced from the mine near the town of Stilfontein since August last year when police targeted it as part of an operation that aims to tackle the widespread illicit mining trade. The trade bled the South African economy of more than \$3 billion last year, according to the mines minister.

At the worst of times, said the miner, they ate rough salt, the only thing leftover to stanch the hunger.

"I felt like I have some bad luck because I had only been underground for two weeks when the operation started. That is when things started going bad, we stopped receiving food and we lost contact with the outside world, that could only mean that the police have arrived and probably arrested or scared off the people lowering the food," he said.

The miner said the months that followed were horrendous.

"By September, things were really bad. People started getting hungry, they started getting sick, some started dying. We started having dead bodies. There is nothing worse than seeing somebody die and there is nothing you can do about it," he said.

The miner, a 40-year-old father of six children, exited the mine in December through a separate shaft that had steel stairs. It is extremely difficult to navigate, and he bruised his hands badly on his way out.

"As we were climbing out, we saw dead bodies of other guys who had attempted to exit the same way. Others had fallen down, others were full corpses but there were also lots of bones, almost like skeletons. It's not easy to exit there, many people died trying to do that," he said.

So why do the miners go into this subterranean purgatory in the first place?

It mostly comes down to money. Illegal mining is one of the biggest sources of income for poor households in townships located near an estimated 6,100 disused mines around the country where illegal mining is rife.

The miner said he was told he could earn about \$5,300 for working for a few weeks to a month in one of the country's deepest gold mines, where there are no longer any official operations. It's a huge sum in South Africa, which has deep inequality and one of the highest unemployment rates in the world.

Many other miners come looking for work from neighboring countries like Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Malawi and Congo, and children are sometimes roped in. There were 13 children among those who came out of the Stilfontein mine last year.

Mmastona Mbizana, a community member of Khumo township, told The Associated Press that two of her sons were involved in illegal mining because of unemployment and poverty.

Her 22-year-old son was arrested after coming out of the mine during the police operation in December and is currently out on bail.

"I heard from somebody in the neighborhood that he had gone underground. His father died last year and he was not even here for the funeral because he was underground for months. They say they are doing it because of the situation here at home, things are tough," said Mbizana.

Mbizana's other son, Lucky, was arrested at the same mine while working as a runner on the surface sending food and other supplies down to the miners. Walking on crutches, he said he had been convicted for involvement in illegal mining.

"Out of the blue the police came, firing rubber bullets and teargas. The teargas blinded me and I fell, broke my leg and collapsed," he said.

Lucky said he used to make \$424 a month for lowering food and other parcels into the shaft daily, including tinned vegetables and fish, loaves of brown bread, porridge, meat, cigarettes and liquor.

Activists blame the South African government for the loss of lives that occurred at Stilfontein, saying authorities should have acted earlier.

However, the government has maintained that while the deaths were a tragedy, illegal mining is a criminal activity that is detrimental to the country's economy.

Illegal mining in South Africa is known to cause far-reaching problems for nearby communities, including violent crime and destruction of community infrastructure.

Community members also speak of hearing gun battles between rival mining groups.

"The people who must take responsibility for the deaths that have happened here are those who are benefitting from illegal mining," Mines Minister Gwede Mantashe said in Stilfontein this week.

According to South African Police Minister Senzo Mchunu, authorities are investigating the entire value chain of illegal mining, including who the main beneficiaries are.

"Where these products go is a subject of our investigation," said Mchunu, adding illegal mining is "robbing South Africa of a lot of money."

Tony Award-winning British actor Joan Plowright, widow of Laurence Olivier, dies at 95

By MARK KENNEDY and PAN PYLAS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Award-winning British actor Joan Plowright, who with her late husband Laurence Olivier did much to revitalize the U.K.'s theatrical scene in the decades after World War II, has died. She was 95.

In a statement Friday, her family said Plowright died the previous day at Denville Hall, a retirement home for actors in southern England, surrounded by her loved ones.

"She enjoyed a long and illustrious career across theatre, film and TV over seven decades until blindness made her retire," the family said. "We are so proud of all Joan did and who she was as a loving and deeply inclusive human being."

Part of an astonishing generation of British actors, including Judi Dench, Vanessa Redgrave, Eileen Atkins and Maggie Smith, Plowright won a Tony Award, two Golden Globes and nominations for an Oscar and an Emmy. She was made a dame by Queen Elizabeth II in 2004.

From the 1950s to the 1980s, Plowright racked up dozens of stage roles in everything from Anton Chekhov's "The Seagull" to William Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice." She stunned in Eugene Ionesco's "The Chairs," and George Bernard Shaw's totemic two female roles "Major Barbara" and "Saint Joan."

"I've been very privileged to have such a life," Plowright said in a 2010 interview with *The Actor's Work*. "I mean it's magic and I still feel, when a curtain goes up or the lights come on if there's no curtain, the magic of a beginning of what is going to unfold in front of me."

The esteem in which Plowright was held in London was evident with the news that theaters across the West End will dim their lights for two minutes at 7 p.m. on Tuesday in her honor.

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Born Joan Ann Plowright in Brigg, Lincolnshire, England, her mother ran an amateur drama group and Plowright was involved in the theater from age 3. She was soon spending school vacations at summer sessions of university drama schools. After high school, she studied at the Laban Art of Movement Studio in Manchester, then won a two-year scholarship to the drama school at the Old Vic Theatre in London.

Following her London stage debut in 1954, Plowright became a member of the Royal Court Theatre in 1956 and gained recognition in dramas written by the so-called Angry Young Men, such as John Osborne, who were giving British theater a thorough airing-out. The new, rough-hewn, working-class actors like Albert Finney, Alan Bates and Anthony Hopkins were her peers.

Plowright made her feature film debut with an uncredited turn in American director John Huston's epic adaptation of Herman Melville's "Moby Dick" in 1956, starring Gregory Peck as the obsessed Captain Ahab.

A year later, she co-starred with her future husband Olivier in the original London production of Osborne's "The Entertainer." She played Olivier's daughter in the work and the two reunited for the 1960 film adaptation.

By then, Plowright's marriage to British actor Roger C. Cage had ended, as had Olivier's 20-year union with Vivien Leigh. Plowright and Olivier were married in Connecticut in 1961, while both were starring on Broadway, he in "Becket" and she in "A Taste of Honey," for which she won a Tony.

One love letter Olivier sent summed up his love: "I sometimes feel such a peacefulness come over me when I think of you, or write to you — a gentle tenderness and serenity. A feeling devoid of all violence, passion or shattering longing... it makes me go out into the street with a smile on my face and in my heart for everybody."

Olivier died in 1989 at the age of 82. After that, Plowright enjoyed a career resurgence at the age of 60, satisfying both upmarket tastes and more commercial fare.

She was in Franco Zeffirelli's version of Charlotte Brontë's "Jane Eyre" in 1996 and the Merchant-Ivory production of "Surviving Picasso," as well as starring as the stalwart nanny in Disney's live-action remake of "101 Dalmatians" in 1996 with Glenn Close.

She starred opposite Walter Matthau in the big screen adaptation of the classic comic strip "Dennis the Menace," and made a brief appearance in the Arnold Schwarzenegger self-referencing satire "Last Action Hero" in 1993.

Plowright became one of only a handful of actors to win two Golden Globes in the same year, in 1993, when she won the supporting actress TV award for "Stalin" and the supporting actress movie award for "Enchanted April." For the latter, which told the story of a group of Britons finding their lives transformed on a vacation to Italy, she received her sole nomination for an Academy Award.

Not all her works were career roses, as with the disastrous "The Scarlet Letter" starring Demi Moore and a pilot that went nowhere for a TV series based on "Driving Miss Daisy." An appearance alongside Chevy Chase in the 2011 holiday family comedy "Goose on the Loose" didn't rouse critics.

A prominent role in later life was keeper of the Olivier flame — bestowing awards, defending her husband in the press and curating his letters.

"That is my choice because I was privileged to live with him," she told The Daily Telegraph in 2003. "When someone who has had such fame and idolatry and worship goes, then there's bound to be a backlash which comes the other way and you get a bit sick of that. Mine was really trying to put things straight."

Plowright is survived by her three children — Tamsin, Richard and Julie-Kate, all actors, and several grandchildren.

Army expects to meet recruiting goals, in dramatic turnaround, and denies 'wokeness' is a factor

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Army expects to meet its enlistment goals for 2025, marking a dramatic turnaround for a service that has struggled for several years to bring in enough young people and has undergone a major overhaul of its recruiting programs.

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In an interview with The Associated Press, Army Secretary Christine Wormuth said the Army is on pace to bring in 61,000 young people by the end of the fiscal year in September and will have more than 20,000 additional young people signed up in the delayed entry program for 2026. It's the second straight year of meeting the goals.

"What's really remarkable is the first quarter contracts that we have signed are the highest rate in the last 10 years," Wormuth said. "We are going like gangbusters, which is terrific."

Wormuth, who took over the Army four years ago as restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic were devastating recruitment across the military, also flatly rejected suggestions that the Army is "woke."

Critics have used the term to describe what they call an over-emphasis on diversity and equity programs. Some Republicans have blamed "wokeness" for the recruiting struggles, a claim repeated by President-elect Donald Trump's nominee for defense secretary, Pete Hegseth, during his confirmation hearing this week.

Wormuth dismissed the claims.

"Concerns about the Army being, quote, woke, have not been a significant issue in our recruiting crisis," she said. "They weren't at the beginning of the crisis. They weren't in the middle of the crisis. They aren't now. The data does not show that young Americans don't want to join the Army because they think the army is woke — however they define that."

Hegseth has vowed to remove "woke" programs and officers from the military. And during his hearing Tuesday, he told senators that troops will rejoice as the Trump administration takes office and makes those changes.

"We've already seen it in recruiting numbers," he said. "There's already been a surge since President Trump won the election."

In fact, according to Army data, recruiting numbers have been increasing steadily over the past year, with the highest total in August 2024 — before the November election. Army officials closely track recruiting numbers.

Instead, a significant driver of the recruiting success was the Army's decision to launch the Future Soldier Prep Course, at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, in August 2022. That program gives lower-performing recruits up to 90 days of academic or fitness instruction to help them meet military standards and move on to basic training.

In the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30, 2024, the Army met its recruiting goal of 55,000 and began to rebuild its delayed entry pool. About 24% of those recruits came out of the prep course. Wormuth said she expects it will contribute about 30% of this year's recruits.

The Army and the military more broadly have struggled with recruiting for about a decade, as the unemployment rate shrank and competition grew from private companies able and willing to pay more and offer similar or better benefits.

Just 23% of young adults are physically, mentally and morally qualified to serve without receiving some type of waiver. Moral behavior issues include drug use, gang ties or a criminal record. And the coronavirus pandemic shut down enlistment stations and in-person recruiting in schools and at public events that the military has long relied upon.

Wormuth said a private survey along with more recent data show that the key impediments to joining the military are concerns "about getting killed or getting hurt, leaving their friends and family, and having a perception that their careers will be on hold."

That survey, done in 2022, found that "wokeness" was mentioned by just 5% of respondents.

Wormuth acknowledged that the latest data show one element mentioned by Hegseth — that the number of white men enlisting is a bit lower. She said the persistent criticism about wokeness could be one reason.

"Any time an institution is being inaccurately criticized and demeaned, it's going to make it harder to recruit. And I think that is what we have seen," she said. "In terms of 'is the Army woke' — which I will take to mean focused on things that don't make us more lethal or effective or better able to defend this nation — I would say the Army is absolutely not woke."

As an example, she said recruits get one hour of equal opportunity instruction in basic training and 95

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hours of marksmanship.

She also said there has been an increase in minority enlistment. The service brought in the highest number ever of Hispanic recruits in 2024 and saw a 6% increase in Black recruiting.

In 2022, the Army fell 15,000 short of its enlistment goal of 60,000. The following year, the service brought in a bit more than 50,000 recruits, widely missing its publicly stated "stretch goal" of 65,000.

The Navy and the Air Force all missed their recruitment targets in 2023, while the Marine Corps and the tiny Space Force have consistently hit their goals.

Critics have also charged that the military has lowered standards under President Joe Biden's administration. Asked if that was true for the Army, Wormuth said the service actually resolved not to do that to meet its recruiting goals. Instead, she said, the prep course helps recruits meet the standards.

Other changes that have helped the recruiting turnaround, she said, include an overhaul of the system used to select recruiters, which now chooses soldiers more suited to the task, as well as an increased use of data analytics to improve marketing and ads.

The Army also increased the number of medical personnel being used to help process routine waivers to move them more quickly through the system. A consistent complaint across the military has been that it took too long to get a waiver approved and that recruits were moving on to other jobs as a result of the delays.

Today in History: January 18 Willie O'Ree becomes first Black NHL player

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Saturday, Jan. 18, the 18th day of 2025. There are 347 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Jan. 18, 1958, Canadian Willie O'Ree became the first Black player in the National Hockey League as he made his debut with the Boston Bruins.

Also on this date:

In 1778, English navigator Captain James Cook reached the present-day Hawaiian Islands, which he dubbed the "Sandwich Islands."

In 1911, the first landing of an aircraft on a ship took place as pilot Eugene B. Ely brought his Curtiss biplane in for a safe landing on the deck of the armored cruiser USS Pennsylvania in San Francisco Harbor.

In 1973, Pink Floyd began recording "Dark Side of the Moon."

In 1977, scientists identified the bacteria responsible for the deadly form of atypical pneumonia known as Legionnaires' disease.

In 1990, Washington, D.C., Mayor Marion Barry was arrested after FBI agents caught him smoking crack cocaine in a D.C. hotel room in a videotaped sting operation.

In 1993, the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday was observed in all 50 states for the first time.

In 1996, Lisa Marie Presley filed for divorce from Michael Jackson after less than two years of marriage.

In 2013, former Democratic New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin was indicted on charges that he'd used his office for personal gain, accepting payoffs, free trips and gratuities from contractors while the city was struggling to recover from the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. (Nagin was later convicted and released from prison in 2020.)

In 2019, Jason Van Dyke, the white Chicago police officer who gunned down Black teenager Laquan McDonald in 2014, was sentenced to nearly seven years in prison.

Today's birthdays: Actor-filmmaker Kevin Costner is 70. Actor Mark Rylance is 65. Hockey Hall of Famer Mark Messier is 64. Actor Dave Bautista is 56. Actor Jesse L. Martin is 56. Rock singer Jonathan Davis (Korn) is 54. Football Hall of Famer Julius Peppers is 45. Actor Jason Segel is 45. Tennis player Angelique Kerber is 37.