

Groton Daily Independent

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Wednesday, Jan. 22

Senior Menu: Roast beef, mashed potatoes with gravy, corn, fruit cocktail, whole wheat bread.
School Breakfast: Muffins.
School Lunch: Chicken Lo Mein, mixed vegetables.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation, 4 p.m.;
League, 6:30 p.m.
Groton United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.

Groton Daily Independent
PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445
Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460



Groton C&MA: Kid's Club, Youth Group, Adult Bible Study, 7 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.

Thursday, Jan. 23

Senior Menu: Baked pork chop, creamy noodles, normandy blend, pineapple, whole wheat bread.
School Breakfast: Breakfast pizza.
School Lunch: Beef sticks, baby bakers.
Basketball Double Header at Milbank (Boys C/ Girls JV at 4 p.m.; Boys JV/Girls C at 5:15 p.m.; Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity to follow)

Friday, Jan. 24

Senior Menu: Beef stew, Waldorf salad, peas, whole wheat bread.
HOSA Winter Formal, GHS Gym
No School (Staff Development Day)
Boys JH Basketball hosts Redfield, 7th at 4 p.m., 8th at 5 p.m.
Girls Wrestling at Pierre, 4 p.m.
Boys Varsity Wrestling hosts Deuel, 6 p.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.

Historic Snowstorm

A rare winter storm swept across the southern US yesterday, bringing record-breaking snowfall to multiple states along the Gulf Coast and prompting first-ever blizzard warnings in areas like Lake Charles, Louisiana. As of this writing, at least 10 people have died from exposure to the cold or crashes on icy roads.

The highest snowfall total recorded was 10.5 inches in Rayne, Louisiana, a modern-day record (though the area may have received 20 inches in 1895). New Orleans received its biggest snowfall based on modern records; and both Pensacola, Florida, and Mobile, Alabama, shattered 130-year records. The storm caused widespread travel disruptions, with airports in Houston halting operations and more than 2,200 flights canceled across the country. States of emergency have been declared in Louisiana, Georgia, Alabama, Florida, and Mississippi as the region battles dangerous travel conditions and power outages.

Winter weather events in the region are rare, typically occurring only once or twice per generation, and require a specific meteorological combination: an Arctic jet stream positioned over the Plains and a low-pressure system in the Gulf of Mexico.

Birthright Citizenship

Twenty-two attorneys general and a group of immigration organizations led by the American Civil Liberties Union have filed lawsuits challenging an executive order that attempts to ban birthright citizenship.

President Donald Trump signed the order Monday to end the 157-year-old immigration practice that has granted US-born children citizenship regardless of their parents' legal status. The lawsuits argue Trump's order violates a longstanding interpretation of the US Constitution's 14th Amendment, formed in an 1898 Supreme Court decision. The US is one of 33 countries and two territories providing unrestricted birthright citizenship. Legal analysts say Trump's order is unlikely to take effect next month as planned with the measure tied up in court.

Separately, Enrique Tarrio, former leader of the alt-right Proud Boys, and Stewart Rhodes, founder of the antigovernment Oath Keepers militia group, were released from prison yesterday. The two are among more than 1,500 people Trump pardoned in connection with the Jan. 6, 2021, US Capitol storming.

Meanwhile, a judge blocked the Justice Department from releasing the portion of special counsel Jack Smith's report related to Trump's classified documents case.

Depression Nasal Spray

The Food and Drug Administration approved pharma giant Johnson & Johnson's nasal spray Spravato yesterday, making it the first approved standalone drug therapy for treatment-resistant depression.

Roughly a third of the 21 million American adults diagnosed with major depressive disorder do not respond to at least two standard treatments for the condition. Participants in clinical trials of Spravato showed relief from symptoms—including persistent sadness, low energy, and suicidal ideation—as quickly as 24 hours after receiving the drug, weeks faster than typical oral antidepressants. The nasal spray—approved in 2019 for use in tandem with oral drugs—saw over \$750M in sales last year, and Johnson & Johnson expects that number to approach \$5B annually.

Because the drug—whose generic name is esketamine—is derived from ketamine, a hallucinogen used for anesthetic purposes, its use is restricted to clinics where the patient is monitored for two hours. More than 3,000 treatment centers in the US are currently certified to dispense it.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Ichiro Suzuki, CC Sabathia, and Billy Wagner voted into 2025 class of the National Baseball Hall of Fame; Suzuki becomes first Japanese-born player elected to Hall of Fame.

Novak Djokovic tops Carlos Alcaraz to reach Australian Open men's semifinals.

Jules Feiffer, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright, screenwriter, and cartoonist, dies at age 95.

Garth Hudson, Rock & Roll Hall of Famer and last surviving member of The Band, dies at age 87.

Comedian Trevor Noah tapped to host Grammy Awards (Feb. 2) for a fifth consecutive time.

Netflix adds record-breaking 19 million subscribers in Q4; platform raises prices for ad-support tier to \$7.99, standard tier to \$17.99, and premium tier to \$24.99.

Science & Technology

Chinese AI lab DeepSeek releases large language model it says rivals OpenAI's o1 model in reasoning and performance; model released under MIT license, allowing commercial use.

Engineers develop desalination technology to create safe drinking water from salt water at a 15% reduction in cost from current approaches.

Transplant of fibers from the soles of patients' feet makes areas like the thighs more resistant to rashes and wounds; technique may eliminate contact damage for people with prosthetics.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close higher (S&P 500 +0.9%, Dow +1.3%, Nasdaq +0.6%) as investors digest President Donald Trump's first policy moves.

Reddit shares rise over 7% to record high after analysts reiterate "strong buy" rating.

Trump announces \$500B in infrastructure investments for artificial intelligence through new partnership formed by OpenAI, Oracle, and SoftBank.

Smithfield Foods—largest US pork producer—sets initial public offering terms, targeting up to \$10.7B valuation; expects to raise up to \$940M in biggest food company listing in the US since oat milk maker Oatly raised \$1.4B in 2021.

Politics & World Affairs

Israeli military chief to resign in March, citing failure to prevent Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack.

Israeli forces launch operation in West Bank city of Jenin.

Taliban frees two Americans held in Afghanistan in prisoner swap.

At least 76 people killed, 51 injured in ski resort fire in northwestern Turkey; hotel owner and eight others arrested as authorities investigate cause of blaze.

New fires break out in San Diego area, including Lilac Fire, which has burned 85 acres and is 50% contained as of this writing.

Palisades Fire and Eaton Fire in Los Angeles are so far 65% and 89% contained, respectively.

City Council approves mower purchase, adjusts water and sewer rates by Elizabeth Varin

Tuesday's Groton City Council meeting was brief, lasting about 15 minutes before going into executive session.

Despite its short length, the council addressed topics including purchasing new equipment and adjusting utility rates.

The council unanimously approved the purchase of three new mowers, two small and one larger, for the city's public works department. Though slightly higher in price, the council approved bids from Fliehs Sales & Service over Bobcat of Aberdeen. Finance Officer Douglas Heinrich said Fliehs Sales & Service is not only the more local business, but they have also been good about going over to the city shop if there are any problems.

The city will purchase two Bobcat ZT2000, one with a bagger, for \$9,070 and one Bobcat ZT7061SP with a bagger and bumper kit for \$11,502.

Two ordinances were also approved following their second readings. The first adjusted the city's bulk water rate, which applies to large-scale water usage rather than regular residential water services.

The second ordinance updated how sewer fees are calculated. Previously, sewer rates were based on average water usage during November through April. Under the new ordinance, the average will now include October.

Those changes come as the city prepares for utility rate increases in the next few years. The council has indicated wanting to increase the sewer rate as that would help the city qualify for potential grant funding for water system improvements. The council has also discussed possible increases to electric rates due to rising wholesale electricity prices.

- The city is accepting applications for summer recreational positions, including baseball coordinator, softball coordinator, legion coach, junior legion coach, junior teenager coach, girls softball coaches, day baseball/softball coach, concessions manager and swimming pool manager.

- The council held off on discussing the city's airport, though a standing agenda item has been "Airport Discussion."

Power blink yesterday

Some residents in Groton experienced a power blink Tuesday morning. The incident occurred when someone backed into a panel causing a momentary short that led to the blink on a circuit. No major damage happened.

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Wrestlers beat Hamlin, lose to Clark/Willow Lake

Groton Area's wrestling squad split a pair of matches at Clark Tuesday night, beating Hamlin, 78-6, and losing to Clark/Willow Lake 54-24.

In the Clark/Willow Lake match, Donavon Block had the lone mat win defeating his opponent with a pin. Groton Area picked up points from forfeits in three weight classes.

In the Hamlin match, only four matches were wrestled with Groton Area winning three of them. The remaining 10 matches were forfeit wins.

Clark-Willow Lake 54, Groton Area 24

- 113: Cade Gaikowski (Clark/Willow Lake) over Keegan Kucker (Groton Area) (MD 16-2)
- 120: Kaden Wookey (Clark/Willow Lake) over Kyson Kucker (Groton Area) (Fall 0:47)
- 126: Cooper Pommer (Clark/Willow Lake) over Noah Scepaniak (Groton Area) (Fall 1:19)
- 132: Donavon Block (Groton Area) over Mason Severson (Clark/Willow Lake) (Fall 3:55)
- 138: Isaac Johnson (Clark/Willow Lake) over Grayson Flores (Groton Area) (TF 19-3 2:55)
- 144: Damian Severson (Clark/Willow Lake) over Kason Oswald (Groton Area) (TF 15-0 2:31)
- 150: Austin Vig (Clark/Willow Lake) over Chris Schwab (Groton Area) (Fall 2:36)
- 157: Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) over Unknown (For.)
- 165: Elliot Bratland (Clark/Willow Lake) over Unknown (For.)
- 175: Korbin Kucker (Groton Area) over Unknown (For.)
- 190: Riley Popp (Clark/Willow Lake) over Layne Johnson (Groton Area) (Fall 2:28)
- 215: Josh Kannegieter (Clark/Willow Lake) over Charlie Frost (Groton Area) (Fall 0:28)
- 285: Gavin Englund (Groton Area) over Unknown (For.)
- 106: Benny Pommer (Clark/Willow Lake) over Wyatt Hagen (Groton Area) (MD 10-0)

Groton Area 78, Hamlin 6

- 106: Wyatt Hagen (Groton Area) over Unknown (For.)
- 113: Keegan Kucker (Groton Area) over Justin Goens (Hamlin/Castlewood) (Fall 2:47)
- 120: Kyson Kucker (Groton Area) over Unknown (For.)
- 126: Noah Scepaniak (Groton Area) over Unknown (For.)
- 132: Grayson Flores (Groton Area) over Unknown (For.)
- 138: Donavon Block (Groton Area) over Preston Roberts (Hamlin/Castlewood) (Fall 0:41)
- 144: Kason Oswald (Groton Area) over Unknown (For.)
- 150: Tate Everson (Hamlin/Castlewood) over Chris Schwab (Groton Area) (Fall 3:30)
- 157: Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) over Zachary Fisher (Hamlin/Castlewood) (Fall 1:30)
- 165: Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) over Unknown (For.)
- 175: Korbin Kucker (Groton Area) over Unknown (For.)
- 190: Layne Johnson (Groton Area) over Unknown (For.)
- 215: Charlie Frost (Groton Area) over Unknown (For.)
- 285: Gavin Englund (Groton Area) over Unknown (For.)

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GDILIVE.COM



Groton Area
Tigers

**Text Paul at
605-397-7460**

Any interest in any of
these basketball games on
GDILIVE.COM?
They are \$25 each.

Roncalli JV Boys

Roncalli Boys JV

Roncalli Boys C

Deuel Girls C (livestream with no commentary
but with scoreboard - but that could change!)

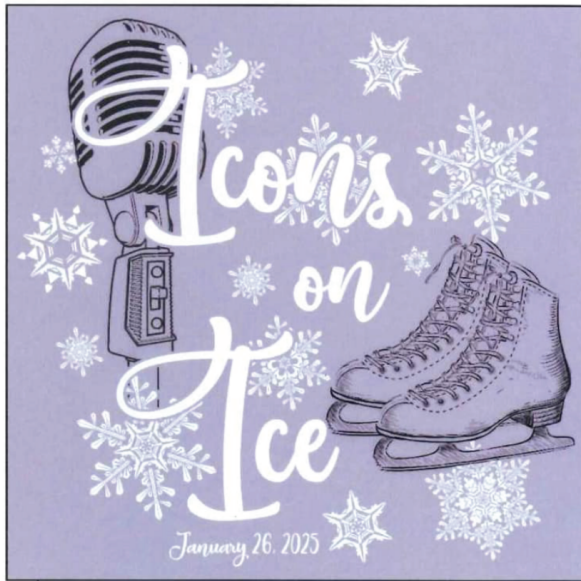
Deuel Boys C (livestream with no commentary
but with scoreboard - but that could change!)

Deuel Boys JV

Vermillion Boys C

Vermillion Boys JV

Leola-Frederick Boys JV



Free Viewing
sponsored by the
Carnival of Silver
Skates.

Free livestream
internet provided by
Midco

Sunday, Jan. 26
2 p.m. and 6:30 p.m.

GDILIVE.COM

Groton Area Lady Tigers Claim Victory Over Northwestern Area with Strong Second Half

The Groton Area Lady Tigers triumphed over the Northwestern Area Wildcats in a hard-fought 42-30 victory on Tuesday night. The win was powered by a dominant fourth-quarter performance, securing Groton's 8th win of the season and setting the stage for their upcoming matchup against Milbank.

First Quarter: Wildcats Edge Ahead

The game started with both teams battling for momentum. The first quarter featured two lead changes and two ties, as the teams traded baskets in a tight contest. Northwestern's Adriana Rattigan led the charge with six points in the quarter, helping the Wildcats to a slim 11-9 lead. Northwestern shot an efficient 50% from the field, converting 5 of their 10 attempts, while Groton struggled at 31%, making 4 of 13.

Second Quarter: Groton Grabs the Lead

The defensive intensity ramped up in the second quarter. Both teams struggled to find the basket, but Groton outscored Northwestern 6-3 in the period. The Tigers' relentless defense limited Northwestern to just 1-of-9 shooting for an 11% field goal percentage. Despite shooting only 13% themselves (2-of-15), Groton managed to secure a 15-14 lead at halftime.

Third Quarter: Tigers Start to Pull Away

The second half began with the game tied at 16, but Groton took control midway through the third quarter. A key three-point shot by Rylee Dunker gave the Tigers a 19-16 advantage, and they extended their lead to 25-20 by the end of the quarter. Groton's improved shooting (30%, 3-of-10) and aggressive defense held Northwestern to just 14% from the field (2-of-14).

Fourth Quarter: Groton Dominates

Groton saved their best for last, unleashing a 13-point run to open the fourth quarter and build a commanding 40-25 lead. Their offense clicked as they attacked the basket and capitalized on turnovers. The Wildcats attempted to mount a comeback but could not overcome the deficit. Groton sealed the 42-30 victory, showcasing their depth and teamwork in the final stretch.

Player Highlights

- Rylee Dunker led Groton with 10 points and was a force on the boards, grabbing 7 of the team's 29 rebounds. She also added a block to her stat line.
- Kennedy Hansen orchestrated the offense with 3 of the team's 10 assists and contributed 2 steals.
- Faith Traphagen and Taryn Traphagen added to the defensive effort, each recording a block and combining for 4 steals.
- Northwestern's Adriana Ratigan paced her team with 10 points, including 6 in the first quarter.

Looking Ahead

With this win, Groton Area improves to 8-3 on the season and will face Milbank on Thursday. Meanwhile, Northwestern, now 6-2, will look to rebound in their next matchup.

- Story compiled by ChatGPT

Groton Area

Rylee Dunker: 10 points, 7 rebounds, 2 fouls, 1 block.

Faith Traphagen: 7 points, 3 rebounds, 2 assists, 2 steals, 2 fouls, 1 block.

Laila Roberts: 6 points, 2 rebounds, 2 assists, 1 steal, 1 foul.

Taryn Traphagen: 6 points, 4 rebounds, 1 assist, 1 block.

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Kennedy Hansen: 5 points, 5 rebounds, 3 assists, 2 steals, 1 foul.
Jaedyn Penning: 3 points, 2 rebounds, 2 fouls.
Brooklyn Hansen: 3 points, 2 rebounds, 1 assist.
Chesney Weber: 2 points, 4 rebounds, 1 assist, 1 foul.
Totals: 2-Pointers: 8-28 29%, 3-pointers: 6-19 32%, Free Throws: 8-12 67%, 29 rebounds, 13 turnovers, 10 assists, 5 steals, 9 fouls, 3 blocks.

Northwestern: Adriana Ratigan 10, Tara Blachford 6, Ashley Haven 6, Sophie Troske 6. Field Goals: 11-38 29%, Free Throws: 4-8 50%, Fouls: 16, Turnovers: 14.

Groton Area won the junior varsity game, 42-8, leading at the quarterbreaks at 17-1, 23-2 and 33-4. McKenna Tietz led Groton Area with 14 points followed by Chesney Weber with 11, Makenna Krause and Talli Wright each had four, Tevan Hanson had three and Sydney Locke, Kella Tracy and Mai Crank each had two points. Kylee Henjum led Northwestern with three points while Lilly Haven had two and adding one point apiece were Breelyn Satter, Kyara Ratigan and Teresa Melius.

Both games were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM. The varsity sponsors were 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 Meathouse in Andover. Weber Landscaping sponsored the junior varsity game. Shane Clark provided the play-by-play with Jeslyn Kosel running the camera and Paul Kosel the technology.



The Sugar Babes and Sweet Sensations performed at halftime of the varsity game. (Photos by Paul Kosel)

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Robots running to the Championships in the Weekend Doubleheader!

An exciting run for Groton Robotics this past weekend! Both days the Gladiators & Galaxy teamed up in the finals and made it to the championship round in both Valley City & at Home! Exciting for the Groton teams, they are now working on final tweaks these next few weeks; a tournament in Spearfish on the horizon on Saturday, February 15th and a 2-day High School State Robotics championship on February 28th-March 1st. Thank you to the Groton Community for your support!



From left to right Ayce Warrington, Corbin Weismantel,, Axel Warrington, Garrett Schultz, Jameson Penning, Hayden Harder. Not pictured. Illyanna Dallaire and Rylee Hofer. (Courtesy Photo)

9050F – Gladiators: Garrett Schultz, Lead; Rylee Hofer, Jameson Penning and Haden Harder

Valley City Frozen Classic: Qualifier Rank 3rd out of 16 (6 wins/2 loss). Won Quarter Finals, Semi Finals, Loss in the Championship 18 to 24.

Groton Tournament: Qualifier Rank 3rd out of 15 (5 wins/1 loss). Won Quarter Finals, Semi Finals, Loss of the Championship 15 to 49.

9050E – Galaxy: Axel Warrington and Corbin Weismantel, Co-Lead; Illyanna Dallaire and Ayce Warrington

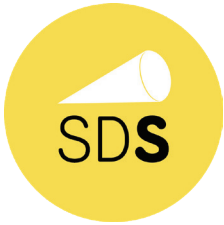
Valley City Frozen Classic: Qualifier Rank 9th out of 16th. (4 wins/4 loss) Won Quarter Finals, Semi Finals, Loss in the Championship 18 to 24.

Groton Tournament: Qualifier Rank 5th out of 15. (4 wins/2 losses) Won Quarter Finals, Semi Finals, Loss of the Championship 15 to 49.

9050B – Gearheads: Logan and Kira Clocksene, Co-Lead; Peyton Padfield and Emmett Zoellner

Valley City Frozen Classic: Qualifier Rank 5th of out 16. (5 wins/3 loss) Won Quarter Finals, Loss in Semi Finals 24 to 36.

Groton Tournament: Qualifier Rank 13th out of 15 (2 wins, 4 losses). Loss in Quarter Finals, 15 to 26.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

U.S. Senate Republicans, including Thune, have little to say about Trump pardons of Jan. 6 defendants

Majority leader from SD: 'We're not looking backwards, we're looking forward'

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - JANUARY 21, 2025 5:39 PM

WASHINGTON — Barring a few exceptions, Senate Republicans on Tuesday largely deflected or altogether avoided questions about President Donald Trump's broad clemency for over 1,500 defendants who stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021 — including many who beat police officers, smashed windows and trashed offices as lawmakers hid in designated safe areas.

Just hours into his second term Monday, Trump commuted the sentences of 14 felons, including leaders of the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers.

The president granted a "full, complete and unconditional pardon to all other individuals convicted of offenses related to events that occurred at or near the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021." He also dismissed any pending indictments.

The pardons did not come as a surprise. As Senate Republicans were cheering for Trump on his march to electoral victory, the former and now current president exalted the "hostages" and "patriots" who injured more than 140 law enforcement officers and caused

north of \$2.8 million in damage to the Capitol, according to the Department of Justice.

Oath Keepers founder and Jan. 6 ringleader Stewart Rhodes told reporters Tuesday that it was "a good day for America." Rhodes, who was released from federal prison in Cumberland, Maryland, faced an 18-year sentence for seditious conspiracy, among other crimes.

But Trump allies had earlier raised questions about releasing some defendants, including Vice President J.D. Vance, who told Fox News on Jan. 12 that "If you committed violence on that day, obviously you shouldn't be pardoned."

As of early January the government had charged just over 1,580 people for crimes related to the riot, 608 of whom were charged with assaulting, resisting or impeding law enforcement. Nearly a third of those charged with assaulting officers used a dangerous or deadly weapon, according to the Justice Department.



Stewart Rhodes, Oath Keepers founder, speaks with the press in Washington, D.C., on Jan. 21, 2025, after being released after spending the past three years in Cumberland, Maryland, at the Federal Correctional Institution. On Jan. 20, President Donald Trump pardoned around 1,500 criminal defendants who were charged in the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol. (Photo by Kayla Bartkowski/Getty Images)

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Investigations uncovered that weapons brought onto Capitol grounds included firearms, tasers, chemical sprays; edged weapons, including a sword, axes, hatchets, and knives; and makeshift weapons, including broken office furniture, fencing, bike racks, stolen riot shields, baseball bats, hockey sticks, flagpoles, PVC piping and reinforced knuckle gloves.

States Newsroom asked over 20 Republican senators if they are comfortable with Trump's clemency orders, and followed up with some of the lawmakers who were willing to speak.

Trump 'keeps his campaign promises'

Sen. Thom Tillis of North Carolina said he wasn't comfortable with "any that involved an assault on a police officer."

Sen. Lisa Murkowski told a group of journalists that she was "disappointed."

"I do fear the message that is sent to these great men and women that stood by us," the Alaska Republican said as she gestured toward the Capitol Police officers posted outside the Senate Republicans' weekly luncheon.

Sen. Susan Collins of Maine said there's a "distinction to be made between providing clemency for individuals who may have been caught up in the crowd that day and did not commit any violent act, versus those who assaulted police officers with their fists, with flag poles, with pepper spray, and destroyed property, broke into the Capitol by breaking windows."

"I do not believe those individuals warrant clemency," she said. Collins also released a written statement.

Sen. Josh Hawley of Missouri, who was photographed raising his fist in solidarity with Trump supporters as he exited the Capitol on Jan. 6, said "If you're asking me if it's what I would have done, what I've said is, is that for folks who committed violence, I wouldn't commute their sentence or pardon."

Hawley, who can be seen on security video running for safety during the attack, said the pardons send a signal that Trump "keeps his campaign promises."

Biden pardons

When States Newsroom asked Sen. Deb Fischer if she was comfortable with the broad pardons, the Nebraska Republican responded, "I'm looking forward to getting some great opportunities and getting good things done."

In response to a follow-up question on whether she condoned political violence, Fischer, who was on her way into Majority Whip John Barrasso's office, said, "Ma'am, no one would ever condone political violence."

As Sen. Markwayne Mullin walked by an entrance to the Senate chamber he greeted and shook the hands of Capitol Police officers posted at the doors.

The Oklahoma Republican refused to talk specifically about the Jan. 6 pardons, saying he didn't get "near this many questions" about pardons issued by former President Joe Biden in his final hours in office.

"Here's my thing on pardons, I'm not any more comfortable with Biden releasing and pardoning his whole family too," Mullin said. "When you all want to cover both, come talk to me."

States Newsroom reported Monday Biden preemptively pardoned lawmakers who served on the congressional committee to investigate the Capitol attack, as well as police officers who testified before the panel.

He also preemptively pardoned former administration officials who've been the target of death threats, as well as five of his family members — roughly a month-and-a-half after he pardoned his son, Hunter. Major news outlets published numerous articles covering Biden's pardons.

Mullin walked away from a follow-up question highlighting violent acts committed by those who received Trump's clemency.

Collins similarly said the press "ought to be paying attention" to Biden's pardons as well, especially the commutation of indigenous activist Leonard Peltier.

Iowa's Sen. Chuck Grassley, the most senior member of the Senate and the body's president pro tempore, said, "Hey, everybody's asked me about J6. None of you guys are asking about the Biden pardons."

Sen. John Cornyn of Texas said "Congress doesn't have a role to play in pardons" and walked away from

further questions on the topic.

No response at all

Many GOP senators did not respond to clearly shouted, and many times repeated, questions from journalists Tuesday afternoon about the pardons.

They included Mike Crapo of Idaho, Barrasso of Wyoming, Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee, John Curtis of Utah, Lindsey Graham and Tim Scott of South Carolina, James Lankford of Oklahoma, Cindy Hyde-Smith of Mississippi, Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia, Tommy Tuberville of Alabama and Joni Ernst of Iowa.

Blackburn and Curtis specifically said they don't speak to reporters in the hallways of Congress.

Some GOP senators said they hadn't yet seen Trump's Monday night order.

"I haven't looked at it yet," said Sen. Rick Scott of Florida.

When States Newsroom summarized the 334-word proclamation and underscored that it was highly publicized by major news outlets, Scott replied "I haven't looked at the executive order yet."

Sen. John Kennedy of Louisiana said: "I don't have anything for you."

"You don't have anything about people who came here with weapons and beat police officers?" States Newsroom pressed as Kennedy walked away.

Murkowski's fellow Alaska senator, Dan Sullivan, stopped to speak to reporters about the "grand slam home run" executive order from Trump that expands energy development in his state, but he would not comment on the president's clemency for Jan. 6 defendants.

"I need to read the order first," he said.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune's office did not respond to requests for comment. The South Dakota Republican briefly told reporters outside of a committee room, "We're not looking backwards, we're looking forward."

States Newsroom reached out to all members of Senate and House Republican leadership for comment, including House Speaker Mike Johnson, a Louisiana Republican, but did not receive any response.

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

COMMENTARY

State cut could hurt local library resources ranging from dishwasher research to genealogy

by Mary Garrigan

My dishwasher is on its deathbed, so I did what I always do when I need to purchase a new household appliance. I went to my local library, logged into the Consumer Reports online database and researched which dishwashers get top ratings.

I don't pay for a subscription to Consumer Reports magazine, but the Rapid City Public Library does. Since I'm a Pennington County taxpayer with a library card, I can browse its digital version whenever I want to make an important consumer purchase. It's just one of the many things I love about the Rapid City library. (I could even choose to read about dishwasher ratings from the comfort of my home computer armed only with my library card number, but I really like libraries, so I use any excuse to visit mine.)

Like most library lovers in South Dakota, I don't much care for Gov. Kristi Noem's recent proposal to cut the South Dakota State Library's 2026 fiscal year budget by \$1 million (more than \$2 million, if you count the \$1.3 million in federal funding that the State Library may lose if it is unable to leverage federal grants with the required local match.) If the budget reduction is approved, more than half of its staff would be cut.

With the 2025 legislative session underway in Pierre, I'm counting on the fact that there are lots of other public library patrons who will let legislators know that they don't like Noem's cuts either.

South Dakota has about 130 libraries, branch libraries and bookmobiles (not counting school libraries)

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that serve the public in communities large and small. About 90% of all South Dakotans have access to a local library, even if only about 40% of us bother to register for a library card, according to 2023 statistics gathered by the State Library. Plenty more visit their local library without bothering to get a card.

Libraries are typically funded by local governments, but every single one of them benefits from the resources and services that the South Dakota State Library and its staff provides thanks to state funding. Chief among those benefits are the approximately 50 online databases whose subscriptions are paid for with State Library funds. Access to these databases is free of charge to all public and school libraries in our state, regardless of whether they are located in Sioux Falls or Sturgis, Bison or Beresford.

They provide a vast array of information to users: educational research, recreational reading and viewing, historical data, job training, financial literacy, public records, art, music and language resources, consumer information — the list goes on and on. With these digital resources, you can write a school term paper, study for your driver's license or the college SAT, learn the basics of starting a small business, find simple legal forms, research your family's genealogy — or even find the best new dishwasher. In other words, if you have a question, the State Library probably has an electronic database that can help you find the answer.

A recently retired middle school librarian I know is aghast at how the loss of database access will affect public schools. It would gut the educational resources that she used regularly to teach her students.

Subscriptions to these databases are not cheap. With an annual budget of about \$4 million, my library can afford to purchase some of its own database subscriptions, supplementing the state list with another 25 subscriptions that it pays for out of its own budget — including my beloved Consumer Reports.

But most South Dakota libraries are small, with small budgets, says Tina Hamlin, director of the Hyde County Library in Highmore. I grew up in that library, back when it was open all day and on Saturdays, too. With an annual budget of about \$80,000, it's all Hamlin can do to keep the library doors open 25 hours a week now. The library's card catalog is still maintained by hand, not computer, and there's no room in her limited budget for any database subscriptions. Even the library's website, where patrons currently access these databases, was created with funding and tech support from the State Library, so she also worries about paying to maintain that in the future.

If the State Library staff is slashed, Hamlin will miss the trainings and resources that jumpstart the children's reading program each summer. But the biggest impact could be losing access to the interlibrary loan services that the state staff coordinates through its Share It program. "We can request any book that a reader wants, as long as it's not a brand new copyright," Hamlin said.

Highmore readers borrow about 70 books per year through interlibrary loan, she estimates. That saves the library the cost of adding those requested books to its own collection, especially if they are of limited interest.



The library at Lakota Tech High School on the Pine Ridge Reservation. (John Hult/South Dakota Searchlight)

Larger libraries, which move hundreds of books each month through interlibrary loan, will face huge increases in postage costs if the courier service paid for by the State Library ends.

I assume that the State Library, like every government agency, has some fat in its budget. Some of its databases may not be used enough to justify their expense, and an annual review of those subscriptions is a good idea. But to gut the staff and budget of an agency that does so much to support these essential communal spaces throughout South Dakota seems cruel to me.

Public libraries are on the frontlines of many social issues today, from childcare shortages to homelessness to mental health challenges to rural isolation. They deserve more taxpayer support, not less. What does it say about a state that can find \$825 million, ready and waiting in a fund, to pay for a new prison, but is too short-sighted to spend \$1 million to keep information, education and entertainment available to all of its citizens through libraries? It says, sadly, get ready to fund even more prisons in the future.

As Gov. Noem exits state government soon for national duties, the South Dakota Legislature and its new governor should re-evaluate this unwise policy decision.

Mary Garrigan lives in Rapid City and served on the Rapid City Public Library's board of directors from 2019 through 2024.

SD Medicaid officials say enrollments will decline as they cross-reference for eligibility

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - JANUARY 21, 2025 3:31 PM



South Dakota Department of Social Services Secretary Matt Althoff presents the department's budget to the Legislature's Joint Committee on Appropriations on Jan. 21, 2025. (Makenzie Huber/South Dakota Searchlight)

PIERRE — South Dakota officials expect Medicaid enrollment will decrease this year as the state uses a new method to identify applicants who are no longer eligible for the state-federal health care insurance.

The state Department of Social Services began cross-referencing Medicaid enrollees with other welfare programs in December, Secretary Matt Althoff told the Legislature's Joint Appropriations Committee on Tuesday.

The method, called *ex parte* or automated renewal, will allow the state to identify enrollees who are no longer eligible, Althoff said. At the same time, it allows states to simplify Medicaid renewals, eliminating the need for people to resubmit eligibility information to the state.

The department expects Medicaid enrollment will decrease by nearly

10,000 between the end of 2024 and mid-2025. Enrollment numbers are projected to return to late-2024 levels by July 2026, according to the department's presentation.

Officials also expect expansion enrollment numbers to plateau in the next couple of years.

South Dakota voters approved expanded Medicaid income eligibility in 2022. The Department of Social Services planned and staffed for 57,000 expansion enrollees, but enrollment has been slower than pro-

jected. Gov. Kristi Noem's budget for the next fiscal year predicts expansion enrollment to reach 32,296. She's proposing the elimination of 27 state positions due to that slow pace.

"Time is showing we were overprepared," Althoff said. "I'd rather be, in that regard."

Despite the lower-than-anticipated growth in Medicaid expansion numbers, the demographic adds significant costs to the state budget, Althoff said. Medicaid expansion clients, who account for 13% of Medicaid enrollees, often don't enroll until they need medical care, rather than enrolling and seeking preventative services.

The state's cost per Medicaid expansion enrollee for fiscal year 2025 is \$11,605 – about \$3,600 more than a traditional Medicaid enrollee.

Meanwhile, the future of Medicaid expansion could be affected by a resolution that passed the state House of Representatives on Tuesday. The resolution would ask voters to authorize ending Medicaid expansion if the federal government reduces its 90% funding share. If adopted by the Senate, the measure would go to voters in 2026.

Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan who regularly reports on the intersection of politics and policy with health, education, social services and Indigenous affairs. Her work with South Dakota Searchlight earned her the title of South Dakota's Outstanding Young Journalist in 2024, and she was a 2024 finalist for the national Livingston Awards.

GOP congressional leaders and Trump stalled on how best to pass big policy package

Thune says 'theories' abound but no consensus yet on translating them into action

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - JANUARY 21, 2025 7:16 PM

WASHINGTON — Republican congressional leaders huddled with President Donald Trump on Tuesday in search of a clear path forward to make sweeping changes to the country's border security, energy policy and tax code, though they remained stuck on a question they've been mulling for weeks.

Republicans secured unified control of government by promising voters they'd pass new laws addressing major policy areas, but aren't yet aligned over whether to bundle all the various changes together in an omnibus measure, or to pass them in two separate packages.

GOP leaders also still need to determine where far-right members and centrists overlap in dozens of areas, since votes from nearly every Republican in Congress will be necessary to get any bill to Trump's desk.



U.S. President-elect Donald Trump and wife Melania Trump arrive at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 8, 2025 in Washington, D.C. Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., walks in back of them. (Photo by Tasos Katopodis/Getty Images)

Senate Majority Leader John Thune said after arriving back at the Capitol that negotiators had yet to

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reach consensus on how to package their policy proposal. It was Trump's second day in office and the first gathering of top Republicans at the White House with him.

"Well, I think that discussion is always predicated on what we can get done and we're obviously all interested in getting to the same destination," Thune said.

The South Dakota Republican said in addition to working out agreement amongst themselves on reconciliation, GOP leaders need to figure out how to fund the government ahead of a March 14 deadline and how to address the country's debt limit prior to a default date that's expected to take place later this year.

Both of those issues will require Republicans to reach agreement with Democrats to avoid a partial government shutdown starting less than 100 days into Trump's presidency, or a first-ever default on the country's debt, which would likely trigger a global financial crisis.

"So there's a lot to do and part of it is just figuring out how to stage it and what's the best way to get all those results," Thune said, adding with a bit of a laugh that there are a lot of "great theories" about how to get it all done this year.

"But, you know, it's always different when you have to translate that into practice," he said, previewing the complicated and rocky path that accompanies writing campaign promises into law.

Trump said during a press conference at the White House after the meeting that he believed the House, Senate and White House had "pretty much" figured out a strategy.

"I think we have a good situation now," Trump said.

Tricky process

Republicans are planning to use the complex budget reconciliation process to pass their border security, energy and tax proposals without needing Democratic support to move past the Senate's 60-vote legislative filibuster.

The process requires every part of the package to impact federal revenue or spending in a way that is not deemed "merely incidental" by the Senate parliamentarian.

That could cause some challenges for the committees tasked with drafting various sections of the package in the months ahead, especially on immigration policy, which might not have the price tags that typically go along with the reconciliation process.

Democrats, for example, tried to raise the federal minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$15 per hour in a coronavirus relief bill they moved through the reconciliation process in 2021. But the Senate parliamentarian ruled its impact on the federal budget was "merely incidental," leading Democrats to remove that provision from the larger bill.

South Carolina Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham, ranking member on the Budget Committee at the time, released a written statement in February 2021 praising the parliamentarian's ruling on the minimum wage language.

"Very pleased the Senate Parliamentarian has ruled that a minimum wage increase is an inappropriate policy change in reconciliation," Graham wrote at the time. "This decision reinforces reconciliation cannot be used as a vehicle to pass major legislative change — by either party — on a simple majority vote. This decision will, over time, reinforce the traditions of the Senate."

Budget resolution

Republicans need to be on the same page about one rather than two reconciliation bills and generally about how to change U.S. law before they can officially begin the reconciliation process.

The House and Senate must vote to approve a budget resolution with reconciliation instructions before they can unlock the reconciliation process. That will require leaders to at least have some outline of what they plan to do, how much they expect it will cost and which committees hold jurisdiction over those policy areas.

House Republican leaders hope to vote on that budget resolution in February, draft the legislation in March, hold a floor vote in that chamber in early April and work out any disagreements with the Senate

before late May, at which point they hope to send the entire package to Trump.

Ashley Murray and Ariana Figueroa contributed to this report.

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.

Former secretaries dissect Trump plans to abolish Department of Education

BY: SHAUNEEN MIRANDA - JANUARY 21, 2025 6:02 PM

WASHINGTON — Three former secretaries of the U.S. Department of Education took to a Brookings Institution panel on Tuesday to offer more perspective on President Donald Trump's calls to dismantle the federal agency, among other education-related priorities of the new administration.

Trump — who repeatedly pledged to get rid of the department throughout his campaign — has vowed to “save American education” with a focus on parental rights, universal school choice and funding preferences for states and school districts that adhere to his sweeping education vision.

In his inaugural address on Monday, Trump said “we have an education system that teaches our children to be ashamed of themselves, in many cases, to hate our country despite the love that we try so desperately to provide to them.”

“All of this will change starting today, and it will change very quickly,” Trump said, going on to enact a barrage of executive orders later on Monday and undo some of former President Joe Biden's most consequential efforts in protecting LGBTQ+ students.

Trump's pick for Education secretary, Linda McMahon, could be pivotal to making more of his education vision a reality.

McMahon, who has yet to sit before a U.S. Senate panel for her confirmation hearing, is a former World Wrestling Entertainment executive, the prior head of the Small Business Administration during Trump's first administration and a wealthy donor.

She is likely to be confirmed in the GOP-controlled Senate.

In the meantime, Trump named Denise Carter as acting secretary of Education. Prior to stepping into the post, she was the acting chief operating officer of the department's Office of Federal Student Aid —



The Lyndon Baines Johnson Department of Education Building pictured on Nov. 25, 2024. (Photo by Shauneen Miranda/States Newsroom)

the largest student financial aid provider in the country.

'Kind of an old saw'

Trump's vow to abolish the department is one that experts have viewed with skepticism over the complex logistics, the need for bipartisan congressional approval and the redirection of federal programs that would be necessary.

Margaret Spellings, who was Education secretary under then-President George W. Bush, said the push for abolishing the department is "kind of an old saw that has been around for a long time."

"Obviously, there's maybe more seriousness around it this time as we think about slicing and dicing and relitigating the federal role, and I think that's an appropriate conversation, I mean, we ought to do that," Spellings said.

Arne Duncan, Education secretary under then-President Barack Obama, compared Trump's promise to get rid of the department to his "saying he's going to build a wall and get Mexico to pay for it, which is stuff he says."

"No one ever seems to hold him accountable for lies, false promises, but that's what's going to happen," he said.

'Sex' rather than 'gender' order

On his first day back in office, Trump also issued a slew of wide-ranging executive orders including that the federal government should only recognize "two sexes: male and female," and that federal agencies should use the term "sex" and not "gender" in all federal policies and documents.

The order also calls for federal agencies to "end the Federal funding of gender ideology."

He also rescinded a series of Biden-era executive orders, including certain directives regarding LGBTQ+ students.

"I think about LGBTQ students and how they might feel based on the statements from the administration so far and the executive order yesterday," said former Education Secretary John B. King Jr., who also served under the Obama administration.

King said he worries about "low-income students, about students of color, where we still see huge opportunity gaps, and so all of us need to be asking, 'Who's championing the needs of those most vulnerable students?'"

King said he also thinks about "the impact on undocumented students or students from mixed-status families, of the conversation about mass deportation and the fear that that instills in them and their families."

Trump's deluge of executive orders signified his immigration crackdown, including a move to end birth-right citizenship in the United States, which has already drawn legal challenges.

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.

SD House approves age verification bill; some Democrats raise censorship concerns

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - JANUARY 21, 2025 5:53 PM

Some Democrats raised concerns over privacy, censorship and government overreach Tuesday as the South Dakota House of Representatives voted 61-5 to advance an age verification requirement for pornographic websites.

Critics of the bill, including Rep. Erin Healy, D-Sioux Falls, said they are concerned about children accessing pornographic material. But Healy worries the measure could create a "gold mine of personal data."

"I think it sets a dangerous precedent of increased government control over the internet," she said.

Rep. Kady Wittman, D-Sioux Falls, said the bill's definition of pornography, including a reference to

content that's harmful to children, could be interpreted more broadly than intended.

"We should be extremely wary of bills like this that place pressure on platforms to police their content out of fear for legal consequences," Wittman said.

The bill, introduced by Rep. Bethany Soye, R-Sioux Falls, would require adult websites to verify users are at least 18 through measures such as uploading an image of an ID card. It would prohibit websites from retaining personal information post-verification. Noncompliance would result in escalating penalties for the sites, including misdemeanors for first offenses and felonies for repeated violations.

Soye said the bill is an important step in protecting minors from exposure to explicit online material.

"I think most people today, especially older people, don't understand just how violent and misogynistic porn has become," she said. "This isn't your old girly magazine."

The bill now moves to a Senate committee.

The Senate, meanwhile, has its own age-verification bill. It's modeled after Texas legislation that's under consideration by the U.S. Supreme Court. The Senate bill would only take effect if the Texas law is upheld.

The other difference is that 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.

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.



State Rep. Kady Wittman, D-Sioux Falls, speaks on the South Dakota House floor on Jan. 21, 2025.

(Makenzie Huber/South Dakota Searchlight)

Lab-grown meat should be clearly labeled, panel of SD lawmakers decides

BY: SETH TUPPER - JANUARY 21, 2025 11:48 AM

A committee of South Dakota legislators advanced a bill Tuesday at the Capitol in Pierre that would define lab-grown meat and require it to be clearly labeled.

The state Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources proposed the legislation. Cheyenne Tant, a policy adviser for the department, explained it to legislators.

"South Dakota consumers deserve transparency when deciding whether to purchase a product grown in a lab versus products grown by our hardworking farmers and ranchers," Tant said.

The House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee voted 13-0 to send the bill to the full House of Representatives.

The legislation describes lab-grown meat as "cell-cultured protein" and defines it as "a product that is produced for use as human food, made wholly or in part from any cell culture or the DNA of a host animal, and grown or cultivated outside a live animal."

The bill also says any product that contains cell-cultured protein without being clearly labeled as "cell-

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cultured" or "lab-grown" would be considered misbranded. That provision builds on a state law adopted in 2019 that prohibits the mislabeling of meat. Enforcement would fall to the state Animal Industry Board, Tant said, which could work with companies to change their labels or take steps to remove noncompliant products from South Dakota shelves.

Nobody testified against the bill, and supporters represented diverse interests.

Hunter Roberts, secretary of the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources, called lab-grown meat "gross." Several groups representing farmers and ranchers said they want transparency in labeling to differentiate their traditionally raised meat from lab-grown versions.

Good Food Institute, a group that works to advance innovation in alternative proteins, also supported the bill. The nonpartisan, nonprofit organization was represented at the committee meeting by Erin Rees Clayton, a Pierre-based senior scientific adviser for the institute.

She said producers of alternative proteins also want to differentiate their products.

"Just as South Dakota farmers and ranchers are proud of their products, cultivated meat producers are proud of their products, too," Rees Clayton said. "They want to celebrate the innovation and production processes behind the meat they produce."

She said lab-cultivated meat has existed for a little more than a decade. It starts from a small sample of animal cells that are fed the sugars, water, proteins and vitamins needed to grow into muscle and fat.

"Cultivated meat is meat at the cellular level, offering similar taste, texture and safety profiles," Rees Clayton said. "It's just produced in a different way."

She said the fledgling industry may someday be able to help satisfy the rising global population's demand for protein. It could also add resiliency to food supply chains, she said, because it's less vulnerable to natural disasters and other unpredictable events that can affect traditional meat production.

For now, Rees Clayton said, federal regulators have approved only two U.S. companies to produce and sell cultivated meat, and neither company has brought a product to the market yet.

Rees Clayton failed to convince legislators to consider what she described as a "minor" amendment. It would add terms such as "cell-cultivated" or "cultivated" to the bill's definition of lab-grown meat, which she said would better align the legislation with industry standards.

Some other states, including Florida and Alabama, have banned lab-grown meat. Nebraskais considering a ban.

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.

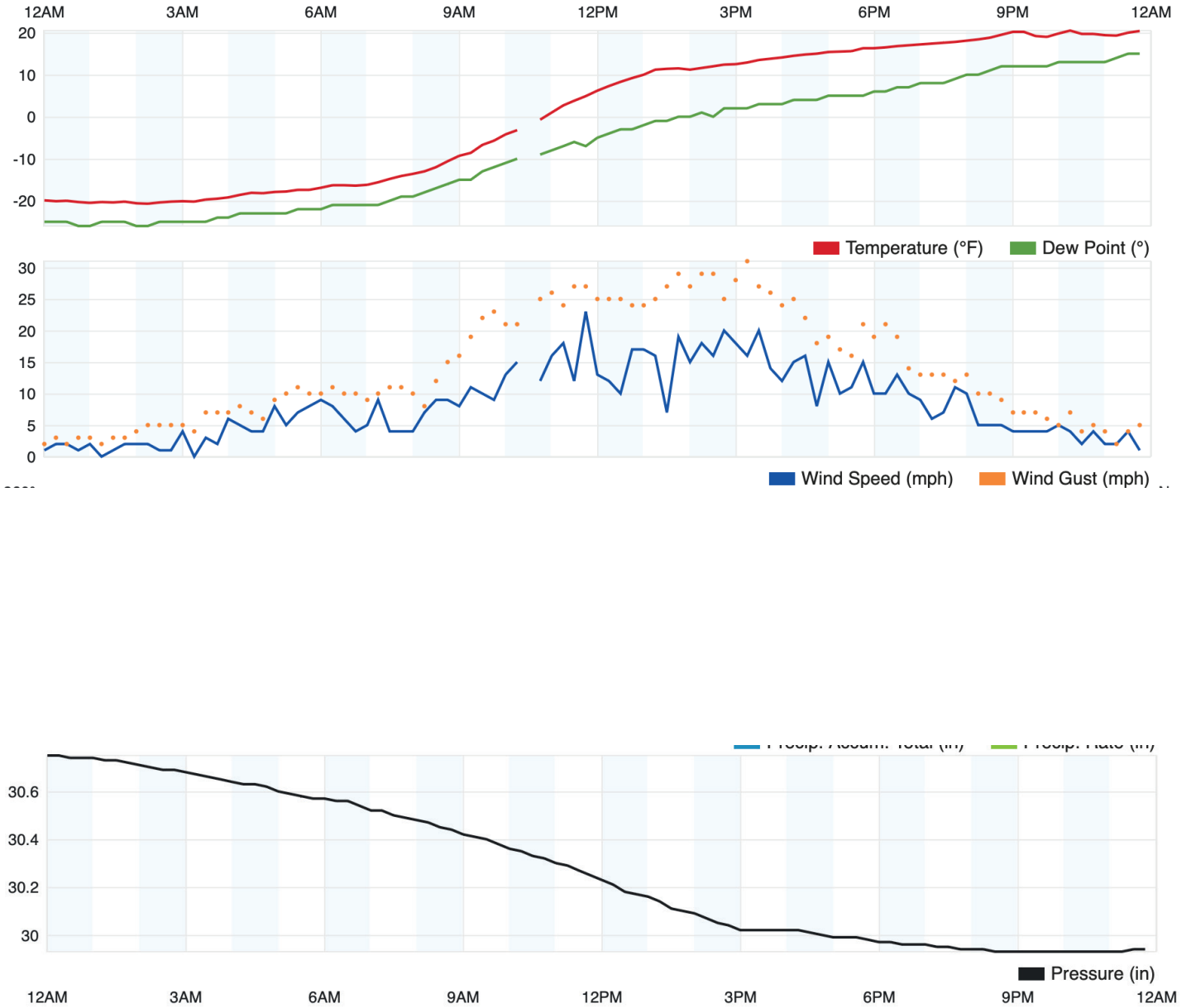


A hamburger made with cultivated meat, served at a 2013 tasting in London. (Courtesy of Mosa Meat)

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Wednesday

Wednesday
Night

Thursday

Thursday
Night

Friday



High: 31 °F

Low: 0 °F

High: 20 °F

Low: 6 °F

High: 34 °F

Slight Chance
Snow and
Blustery

Partly Cloudy

Mostly Sunny

Mostly Cloudy

Slight Chance
Snow then
Mostly Cloudy

Wednesday



Looking Ahead

Thursday



Highs: 11 to 25°F
Lows: -2 to 13°F

Friday



Highs: 29 to 37°F
Lows: 2 to 11°F

Light snow/flurries possible with little accumulation expected

Warmer temperatures will be around today with scattered snow showers and flurries possible, though there will only be a few tenths of an inch in accumulation. The rest of the work week will have a chance for light snow flurries as temperatures will be warming through Friday.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 21 °F at 10:08 PM

Low Temp: -21 °F at 2:09 AM

Wind: 31 mph at 3:07 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 9 hours, 25 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 58 in 1942

Record Low: -30 in 1937

Average High: 24

Average Low: 1

Average Precip in Jan.: 0.41

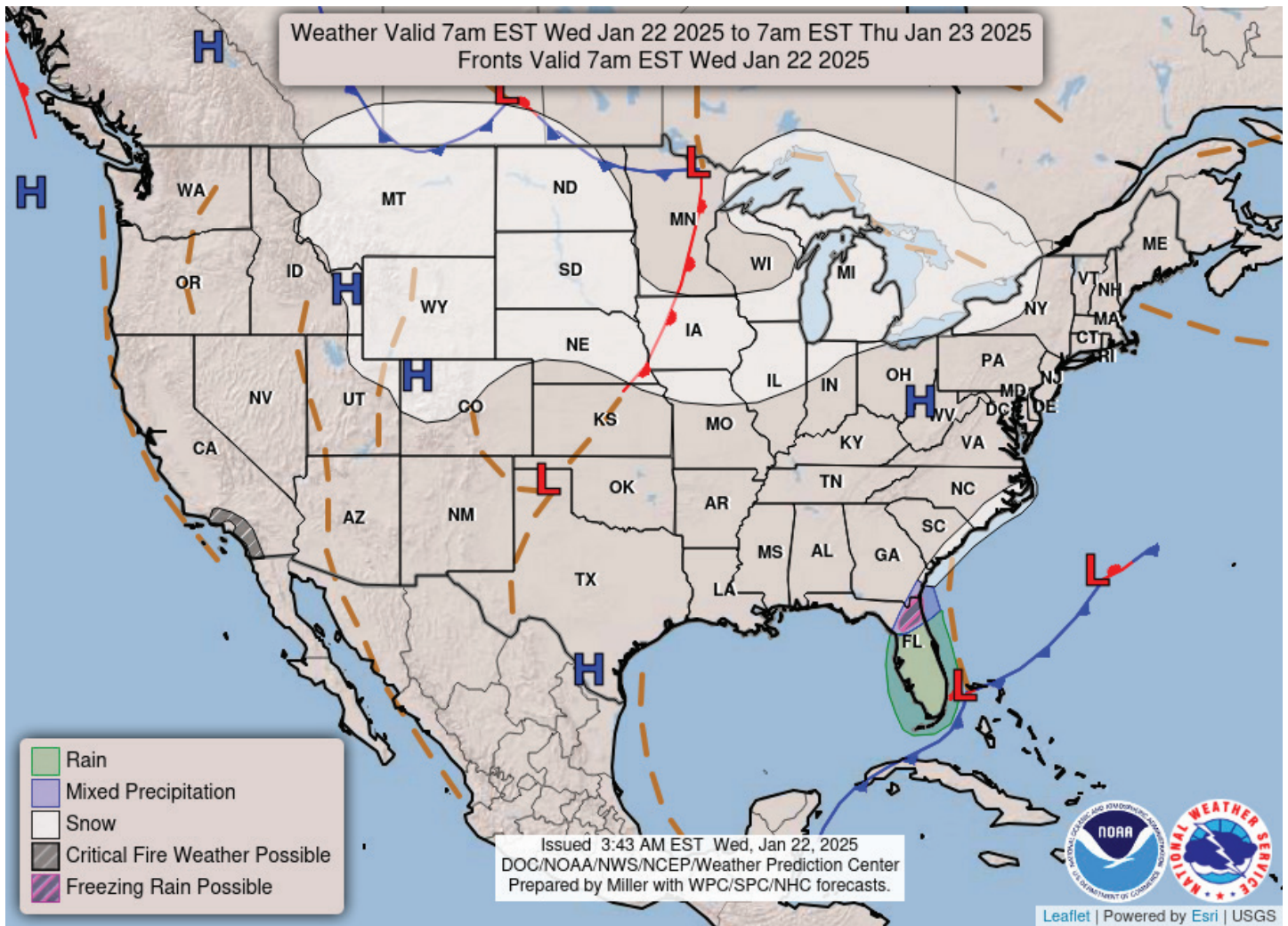
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 0.41

Precip Year to Date: 21.71

Sunset Tonight: 5:26:57 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:00:21 am



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Today in Weather History

January 21-22, 1952: A significant winter storm impacted South Dakota, bringing snow, bitter cold temperatures, snow with snowdrifts of 10 to 15 feet. The cold temperatures and drifting snow claimed eight lives. At least 2,500 cattle were lost. Many roads were blocked for three to five days.

January 22, 1973: During the early morning hours, Chinook winds caused the temperature at Spearfish, South Dakota, to rise from 4 below zero to 45 above in just two minutes, the most dramatic temperature rise in the world. An hour and a half later, the mercury plunged from 54 above to 4 below zero in 27 minutes.

January 22, 1982: A winter storm lasting three days from the 22nd to the 24th virtually paralyzed South Dakota with snowfall of 6 to 20 inches. Subzero temperatures statewide coupled with strong winds of 30 to 50 mph brought wind chills of 50 to 70 below zero. One woman died of exposure near her home in Aurora County. Snow drifted as high as 15 feet. Blowing snow caused a reduction in visibility to near zero for most of the duration of the storm. Hundreds of motorists were stranded. Numerous traffic accidents occurred due to near zero visibilities. Some power outages occurred. Major highways, interstates, and airports were closed. Multiple businesses and schools were closed for several days.

January 22, 2010: A powerful mid-season winter storm moved northeast out of the four corners region of the United States and into the Northern Plains. Ahead of this system, warm and moist air streamed northward, creating widespread fog and freezing fog conditions during the days leading up to the event. Heavy rime frost began to accumulate on power lines and tower guide wires, placing a heavy strain on them when the freezing rain arrived in the late morning and afternoon hours on Friday, January 22nd. Along with the freezing rain, southeast winds gusting to 30 mph also strain sagging power lines. Scattered power outages were reported as early as Tuesday, January 19th, due to the frost-covered lines. Still, most of the power lines and power pole damage occurred during the evening of the 22nd and the morning of the 23rd. The freezing rain that arrived during the afternoon and evening of the 22nd was the proverbial "straw that broke the camel's back." By the time the rain, freezing rain, and snow ended Saturday morning, January 23rd, nearly every power cooperative across central and northeast South Dakota suffered large power pole and power line damage. Also, several radio and television towers were downed by the icing and strong winds. The heavy icing and strong winds downed over 5000 power poles and 21,000 miles of power lines across South Dakota, leaving thousands of households without power. Several homes sustained substantial damage caused by broken water pipes. Power was still not restored for many customers until several weeks after the event. Power line crews from Minnesota, Kansas, and Oklahoma were called upon to help restore power. Several counties, along with the state emergency operations center, opened emergency shelters for people to stay. Forty-one National Guard members were on active duty across the state, helping to restore power. Many flights were delayed or canceled at several airports. The ice and the wind also helped topple a canopy at a truck stop at Highway 20 and 212. On January 23rd, a radio and television transmission tower northwest of South Shore was downed along with a tower north of Reliance and a radio tower southwest of Marvin. The hardest-hit area with this storm was the Cheyenne River and Standing Rock Sioux reservations in central and north-central South Dakota. With no electricity, residents depended on donations of food, bottled water, blankets, heat and light sources, toiletries, and cots. The rural water system serving the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe was shut down, resulting in the state EOC shipping water to the reservation. The Governor asked for a presidential disaster declaration for most of the counties and three reservations. The request was for both public and individual assistance for total damages estimated over 20 million dollars for the state.

1904: An unusual estimated F4 tornado leveled the northern part of Moundville, Alabama, just after midnight, killing 37 people. The tornado reportedly had a phosphorescent glow. An engineer on a northbound Great Southern train saw the destruction right after it occurred and backed his train 12 miles in reverse to the town of Akron, where he sent a telegram for help.

1937: Low of 9 degrees above zero in Las Vegas froze many pipes. Schools had trouble keeping warm, and coal was in short supply in the city. January 1937 was the coldest month on record for Las Vegas, with an average temperature of 31.2 degrees, 17.5 degrees below normal.



PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF GOD

Lord Moynihan is recognized as one of the world's greatest surgeons. Physicians came from distant places to observe his techniques and procedures.

One day after he finished operating before a gallery of other surgeons a reporter asked, "How can you work so calmly with such a famous crowd present?"

After pausing for a moment, he calmly replied, "There are just three people in the operating room when I operate – the patient, myself and God."

In Joshua we read, "I will not fail you or abandon you." In Hebrews we read, "I will never fail you, I will never forsake you!"

One thing is certain: Wherever Christians find themselves they can know with certainty that God is with them, will never fail, abandon nor forsake them!

How marvelous is that.

When we learn to accept the reality of God's presence in our lives and come to depend on His strength and power rather than our own, we will begin to recognize the sufficiency of His grace and mercy. Once we make the transition from depending on ourselves to complete dependency upon God, our fears will be relieved, our anxieties overcome, and our lives endowed with a "peace that passes all understanding."

God wants to do more than care for us, He wants to take care of us. And He will if we trust Him!

Prayer: We are grateful Lord, for Your promises and presence, Your power and protection and Your desire to give us whatever wisdom we need if we use it to honor You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Keep your lives free from the love of money. Be happy with what you have. God has said, "I will never leave you or let you be alone. Hebrews 13:5

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: 01.21.25

27 30 56 64 65 22

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$28,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 28 Mins 3 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.20.25

2 4 22 23 32 5

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$22,120,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 43 Mins 3 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.21.25

18 27 30 40 44 15

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 58 Mins 3 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.18.25

8 11 19 20 34

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 58 Mins 3 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.20.25

10 23 33 38 54 17

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 27 Mins 3 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.20.25

15 16 32 47 54 6

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$31,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 27 Mins 3 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

Tuesday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Andes Central/Dakota Christian 53, Corsica/Stickney 46
Belle Fourche 41, Hill City 27
Bennett County 106, Crazy Horse 17
Beresford 56, Madison 21
Bon Homme 47, Tripp-Delmont-Armour 37
Bridgewater-Emery 51, Kimball-White Lake 35
Burke 62, Platte-Geddes 18
Canistota 32, Freeman Academy-Marion 21
Canton 58, Elkton-Lake Benton 25
Centerville 73, Freeman 58
Chadron, Neb. 39, Custer 35
Dell Rapids St Mary 78, Castlewood 35
Elk Point-Jefferson 57, Vermillion 39
Estelline-Hendricks 63, Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 56
Faulkton 55, Aberdeen Christian 17
Flandreau 50, Deuel 25
Flasher, N.D. 51, Lemmon High School 42
Garretson 54, Alcester-Hudson 36
Great Plains Lutheran 61, Waverly-South Shore 20
Gregory 49, Chamberlain 31
Groton 42, Northwestern 30
Hamlin 59, DeSmet 34
Harrisburg 48, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 33
Herreid-Selby 71, South Border, N.D. 63
Hettinger-Scranton, N.D. 62, Faith 59, OT
Howard 50, Hanson 38
Huron 49, Brookings 38
Jones County 49, Stanley County 37
Kadoka 54, Wall 34
Lakota Tech 74, Todd County 34
Lyman 46, White River 31
Mahpiya Lúta Red Cloud 59, Spearfish 49
McLaughlin 72, Dupree 42
Milbank 67, Waubay/Summit 36
Miller 62, Crow Creek Tribal School 43
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 45, Redfield 25
North Central 50, Ipswich 42
O'Neill, Neb. 55, Wagner 46
Philip 55, New Underwood 48
Sioux Falls Jefferson 66, Yankton 39
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 71, Aberdeen Central 56
Sioux Valley 52, Chester 40
St Thomas More 61, Lead-Deadwood 23

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T F Riggs High School 62, Douglas 19
Tea 49, Watertown 47
Timber Lake 39, Sully Buttes 38
Tri-State, N.D. 53, Wilmot 51
Tri-Valley 58, Deubrook 39
Viborg-Hurley 52, Avon 46
West Central 63, Dell Rapids 46
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=
Aberdeen Roncalli vs. Tiospa Zina, ppd. to Feb 3rd.

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Christian 65, Faulkton 48
Alcester-Hudson 58, Garretson 57, OT
Andes Central/Dakota Christian 60, Corsica/Stickney 59
Bon Homme 61, Tripp-Delmont-Armour 58
Canistota 65, Freeman Academy-Marion 41
Castlewood 63, Dell Rapids St Mary 59
Centerville 67, Freeman 58
Colman-Egan 70, McCook Central-Montrose 53
Custer 78, Chadron, Neb. 32
Deubrook 53, Tri-Valley 35
Dupree 50, McLaughlin 41
Elkton-Lake Benton 67, Canton 49
Estelline-Hendricks 57, Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 34
Flandreau 63, Deuel 39
Hamlin 88, DeSmet 47
Harrisburg 59, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 56
Hill City 58, Belle Fourche 29
Howard 53, Hanson 39
Huron 52, Brookings 38
Ipswich 46, North Central 28
Lemmon High School 58, Harding County 43
Lyman 65, Winner 63
Milbank 60, Waubay/Summit 57
Miller 73, Crow Creek Tribal School 56
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 57, Redfield 28
New Underwood 84, Oelrichs 34
O'Neill, Neb. 58, Wagner 48
Philip 41, Bison 29
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 61, Aberdeen Central 41
Sioux Valley 65, Chester 49
Sisseton 59, Flandreau Indian 21
Spearfish 70, Mahpíya Lúta Red Cloud 40
St Thomas More 67, Lead-Deadwood 33
Stanley County 60, Jones County 18
Sully Buttes 58, Timber Lake 48
T F Riggs High School 65, Douglas 39
Vermillion 59, Elk Point-Jefferson 25
Viborg-Hurley 65, Avon 12
Waverly-South Shore 49, Great Plains Lutheran 31

Yankton 49, Sioux Falls Jefferson 46
Panhandle Conference Tournament=
Morrill, Neb. 63, Edgemont 25
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=
Aberdeen Roncalli vs. Tiospa Zina, ppd. to Feb 17th.

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

Fire risk and strong winds continue in Southern California with potential rain on the horizon

CHRISTOPHER WEBER Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Parched Southern California was forecast to face more dangerous winds on Wednesday but could get some badly needed rain this weekend, dampening the prospects of another round of killer wildfires though even a small amount of precipitation could create new challenges like toxic ash runoff.

Los Angeles officials were preparing for that prospect even as a small number of residents were allowed to return to the devastated Pacific Palisades and Altadena areas and firefighters quickly controlled small blazes that broke out.

Mayor Karen Bass issued an executive order Tuesday to expedite cleanup efforts in burn areas and mitigate the environmental impacts of fire-related pollutants. She ordered crews to remove vegetation, shore up hillsides, install barriers and reinforce roads ahead of the possible weekend rain, which could create mud and debris flows.

"This is to prevent additional damage to areas already ravaged by fire and also to protect our watershed, beaches and ocean from toxic runoff," Bass said during a news conference.

Los Angeles County supervisors also approved an emergency motion to install flood control infrastructure and expedite and remove sediment in fire-impacted areas.

A 60% to 80% chance of a small amount of rain was forecast for Southern California starting Saturday, with most areas likely getting not more than a third of an inch (0.8 cm), according to Ryan Kittell, a meteorologist for the National Weather Service's office for Los Angeles. However up to an inch (2.5 centimeters) could fall in localized thunderstorms, which would be a worst-case scenario if enough to trigger debris flows on scorched hillsides.

"But even if the rain doesn't materialize this time, it could be a good practice run for those communities because this will be a threat that they'll have to deal with for months or years," Kittell said.

In 2018, Montecito, a town 80 miles (130 kilometers) up the coast from Los Angeles, was ravaged by mudslides after a downpour hit mountain slopes burned bare by a huge wildfire. Twenty-three people died, and hundreds of homes were damaged.

Winds eased somewhat Tuesday afternoon after peaking at 60 mph (96 kph) in many areas, but gusty conditions were expected to return the next two days. Red flag warnings for critical fire risk were extended through 8 p.m. Thursday in LA and Ventura counties.

"Our concern is the next fire, the next spark that causes the next wildfire," said David Acuna, a spokesman with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, or Cal Fire. Another worry was that the two major blazes, the Palisades and Eaton fires, could break their containment lines as firefighters continue to keep watch for hot spots.

Fire engines and water-dropping aircraft allowed crews to swiftly douse several small blazes that popped up in LA and San Diego counties, officials said.

Evacuation orders were lifted for the Friars Fire, which broke out near a San Diego mall, and partially for the Lilac Fire, which burned through dry brush after threatening some structures, Cal Fire said. Nearby crews fully contained the Pala Fire, another small blaze. The Clay fire in Riverside was 40% contained Tuesday night and evacuation orders were lifted.

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Southern California Edison preemptively shut off power to more than 60,000 customers in five counties to prevent new fires from being sparked by winds toppling electrical equipment; electricity was later restored to some. The utility was considering precautionary shutoffs for an additional 160,000 customers.

Authorities urged residents to review evacuation plans, prepare emergency kits and be on the lookout for fires and report them quickly.

Bass also warned that winds could carry ash and advised Angelenos to visit the city's website to learn how to protect themselves from toxic air during the latest Santa Ana wind event.

The low humidity, bone-dry vegetation and strong winds came as firefighters continued to battle the Palisades and Eaton fires, which have killed at least 28 people and destroyed more than 14,000 structures since they broke out Jan. 7. Containment of the Palisades Fire reached 63%, and the Eaton Fire was at 89%.

The federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms is investigating the causes of the fires but has not released any findings.

Several lawsuits have been filed by people who lost their homes in the Eaton Fire, alleging Southern California Edison equipment sparked the blaze. On Tuesday a judge overseeing one of the lawsuits ordered the utility to produce data from circuits in the area where the fire started.

President Donald Trump, who criticized the response to the wildfires during his inaugural address Monday, has said he will travel to Los Angeles on Friday.

China and US partners are moving closer as Trump returns to the White House

By KEN MORITSUGU and DIDI TANG Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — China's relations are starting to improve with Japan, India and other countries that former U.S. President Joe Biden courted, just as Donald Trump brings his more unilateralist approach back to the White House.

The change of leadership in Washington on Monday could be an opportunity for China, which has long railed against Biden's strategy of building partnerships with "like-minded countries" to counter its growing influence.

Biden reinvigorated a grouping known as the Quad — the United States, India, Japan and Australia. China's relations with all three of those U.S. partners are improving, as are its ties with Britain. The durability of Biden's legacy is now in question. During his first term, Trump didn't hesitate to challenge traditional U.S. partners.

"It is possible that Trump may drift away from U.S. allies, making them pay more attention to China's role, and in fact it has provided a chance for China's diplomacy," said Wu Xinbo, dean of the Institute of International Studies at Fudan University in Shanghai. "I think we should grasp the chance."

But U.S. National Security Council spokesperson Brian Hughes said that Trump "has a record of rallying the world toward a more competitive stance with China." Trump agreed to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy that Japan introduced during his first term and he backed excluding Chinese companies from telecom networks in the U.S. and many of its partners.

On Tuesday, Secretary of State Marco Rubio — hours after he was sworn in — met with the foreign ministers of Australia, India and Japan in Washington, a move that suggested engaging the Quad countries and countering China's influence will remain a priority for Trump.

Fence-mending with China has limits

Beijing's rapprochement with the U.K. and Japan is in its early stages, and major differences remain that limit and could derail it.

India turned the page with China on a bitter border dispute last October, but protested when Beijing created two new counties in an area claimed by both nations.

Still, new leaders in Australia, the U.K. and Japan have shown a desire to warm relations with China, the world's largest manufacturer and a source of strategic minerals. The government in Beijing has reciprocated in part because it wants foreign investment to help revive its economy, which could be set back if

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Trump follows through on a threat to impose higher tariffs.

Chinese President Xi Jinping told European Council President Antonio Costa in a phone conversation last week that both sides could bring more "stability and certainty" to the turbulent global situation. China and Britain restarted economic and financial talks after a six-year hiatus when the U.K. Treasury chief visited Beijing this month.

"From China's point of view, improving relations with American allies and increasing economic cooperation will offset the shock to China-U.S. economic relations," Wu said.

Trump's statements agitate U.S. allies

In Washington, there's a strong bipartisan consensus that the U.S. must prevail in its economic and tech rivalry with China to maintain its global leadership.

During his confirmation hearing, Rubio called China "the most potent and dangerous near-peer adversary this nation has ever confronted." Biden kept the tariffs Trump levied on China and imposed more on Chinese electric cars and solar cells.

But unlike Biden, Trump has irked U.S. allies and partners with his recent remarks on possibly annexing Greenland, an autonomous territory of NATO ally Denmark, and making Canada the 51st American state.

Hal Brands, senior fellow at the Washington-based think tank American Enterprise Institute, said he believes some top strategists in Beijing are "salivating at the damage they think Trump is going to do to U.S. alliances and the opportunities this creates for Beijing to resurrect some of its relationships with ... Japan and Europe that had moved in a very sharply anti-China direction since COVID."

Trump's rhetoric and attempts by adviser Elon Musk to interfere in British and German politics, "are certain to have a ripple effect," said Sun Yun, director of the China program at the Stimson Center in Washington.

"Countries want to at the minimum keep their options open," she said. "China is unlikely to be a better choice than the U.S., even under Trump, but it is important to find some counterbalance."

The Philippines isn't mending fences

China's relations aren't improving with every U.S. partner.

The Philippines complained recently about what it called a "monster" Chinese coast guard ship in nearby waters, and the foreign ministers of Japan and the Philippines said last week they would convey to Trump the urgent need for the U.S. to remain engaged in the region.

China and the Philippines did reach a temporary deal last July that has prevented further violent confrontations around Second Thomas Shoal, one of several outcroppings that both countries claim in the South China Sea.

Uncertainty about Trump's policies is prompting both China and Japan to seek a stable relationship, said Taizo Miyagi, an expert on Japanese diplomacy at Chuo University in Tokyo.

A Japanese foreign minister has visited Beijing for the first time in seven years, and Chinese military officials were in Tokyo last week to resume defense exchanges after a five-year hiatus.

"In a way it is a Trump effect," Miyagi said. "Many other countries are likely thinking the same and this could invigorate their diplomatic activities."

Britain steers a new course with China

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer has sought to rebuild ties with Beijing since his Labour Party's election victory last summer. It's a marked shift from predecessor Rishi Sunak, who in 2022 declared an end to his country's "golden era" of friendship with China.

In Britain's case, Trump's return may not be driving the rapprochement.

Many European leaders may not welcome Trump's America-first agenda, "but the idea that as a result they will all kowtow to Beijing for more trade is fanciful thinking on the part of some of our Chinese friends," said Steve Tsang, director of the SOAS China Institute at the University of London.

Most would prefer to remain partners with Washington. French President Emmanuel Macron, outlining his vision for global diplomacy in a New Year's speech, declared that his country was "a solid ally" of Trump.

He and others hope that Trump will respond positively to their outreach. Much will depend on what path the returning U.S. president takes, and how the rest of the world reacts.

Search resumes after deadly flooding and landslides in Indonesia

By NINIEK KARMINI Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — Indonesian rescuers retrieved two more bodies after they resumed their search Wednesday for people missing after floods and landslides on Indonesia's main island of Java, bringing the death toll to 19.

Waters from flooded rivers tore through nine villages in Pekalongan regency of Central Java province and landslides tumbled onto mountainside hamlets after the torrential rains Monday.

Videos and photos released by National Search and Rescue Agency showed workers digging desperately in villages where roads and green-terraced rice fields were transformed into murky brown mud and villages were covered by thick mud, rocks and uprooted trees.

National Disaster Management Agency spokesperson Abdul Muhari said flooding triggered a landslide that buried two houses and a cafe in the Petungkriyono resort area. The disasters all together destroyed 25 houses, a dam and three main bridges connecting villages in Pekalongan. At least 13 people injured and nearly 300 people were forced to flee to temporary government shelters.

The search and rescue operation that was hampered by bad weather, mudslides and rugged terrain was halted Tuesday afternoon due to heavy rain and thick fog that made devastated areas along the rivers dangerous to rescuers.

On Wednesday, they searched in rivers and the rubble of villages for bodies and, whenever possible, survivors in worst-hit Kasimpar village, said Budiono, who heads a local rescue office.

Scores of rescue personnel recovered two mud-caked bodies as they searched a Petungkriyono area where tons of mud and rocks buried two houses and a café. Rescuers are still searching for seven people reported missing.

Landslides and floods were also reported in many other provinces, Muhari said. On Monday, a landslide hit five houses in Denpasar on the tourist island of Bali, killing four people and leaving one missing.

Heavy seasonal rain from about October to March frequently causes flooding and landslides in Indonesia, an archipelago of 17,000 islands where millions of people live in mountainous areas or near fertile floodplains.

The British Geological Survey defines a landslide as a mass movement of material, such as rock, earth, or debris moving down a slope. Landslides can happen suddenly or slowly and can be caused by rain, erosion, or changes to the slope's material.

Rain adds weight to the slope, making it more unstable. The slope's steepness or erosion at the base can make landslides more likely. They can be caused by the movement of nearby bodies of water or vibrations from earthquakes, mining or traffic. The types and sizes of the rocks and soils can determine how much water land can absorb before weakening and collapsing.

Studies have found that landslides could become more frequent as climate change increases rainfall.

Trump's immigration crackdown leaves some families weighing the risk of sending kids to school

By OLGA R. RODRIGUEZ, MORIAH BALINGIT, BIANCA VÁZQUEZ TONESS and JOCELYN GECKER Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — As President Donald Trump cracks down on immigrants in the U.S. illegally, some families are wondering if it is safe to send their children to school.

In many districts, educators have sought to reassure immigrant parents that schools are safe places for their kids, despite the president's campaign pledge to carry out mass deportations. But fears intensified for some when the Trump administration announced Tuesday it would allow federal immigration agencies to make arrests at schools, churches and hospitals, ending a decades-old policy.

"Oh, dear God! I can't imagine why they would do that," said Carmen, an immigrant from Mexico, after hearing that the Trump administration had rescinded the policy against arrests in "sensitive locations."

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She plans to take her two grandchildren, ages 6 and 4, to their school Wednesday in the San Francisco Bay Area unless she hears from school officials it is not safe.

"What has helped calm my nerves is knowing that the school stands with us and promised to inform us if it's not safe at school," said Carmen, who spoke on condition that only her first name be used, out of fear she could be targeted by immigration officials.

Immigrants across the country have been anxious about Trump's pledge to deport millions of people. While fears of raids did not come to pass on the administration's first day, rapid changes on immigration policy have left many confused and uncertain about their future.

At a time when many migrant families — even those in the country legally — are assessing whether and how to go about in public, many school systems are watching for effects on student attendance. Several schools said they were fielding calls from worried parents about rumors that immigration agents would try to enter schools, but it was too early to tell whether large numbers of families are keeping their children home.

Tuesday's move to clear the way for arrests at schools reverses guidance that restricted two federal agencies — Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection — from carrying out enforcement in sensitive locations. In a statement, the Department of Homeland Security said: "Criminals will no longer be able to hide in America's schools and churches to avoid arrest."

Daniela Anello, who heads D.C. Bilingual Public Charter School in the nation's capital, said she was shocked by the announcement.

"It's horrific," Anello said. "There's no such thing as hiding anyone. It doesn't happen, hasn't happened. ... It's ridiculous."

An estimated 733,000 school-aged children are in the U.S. illegally, according to the Migration Policy Institute. Many more have U.S. citizenship but have parents who are in the country illegally.

Schools work to reassure parents

Education officials in some states and districts have vowed to stand up for immigrant students, including their right to a public education. In California, for one, officials have offered guidance to schools on state law limiting local participation in immigration enforcement.

A resolution passed by Chicago Public Schools' Board of Education in November said schools would not assist ICE in enforcing immigration law. Agents would not be allowed into schools without a criminal warrant, it said. And New York City principals last month were reminded by the district of policies including one against collecting information on a student's immigration status.

That's not the case everywhere. Many districts have not offered any reassurances for immigrant families.

Educators at Georgia Fugees Academy Charter School have learned even students and families in the country legally are intimidated by Trump's wide-ranging proposals to deport millions of immigrants and roll back non-citizens' rights.

"They're not even at risk of deportation and they're still scared," Chief Operating Officer Luma Mufleh said. Officials at the small Atlanta charter school focused on serving refugees and immigrants expected so many students to miss school the day after Trump took office that educators accelerated the school's exam schedule so students wouldn't miss important tests.

Asked on Tuesday for attendance data, school officials did not feel comfortable sharing it. "We don't want our school to be targeted," Mufleh said.

The new policy on immigration enforcement at schools likely will prompt some immigrant parents who fear deportation to keep their children home, even if they face little risk, said Michael Lukens, executive director for the Amica Center for Immigrant Rights. He said he believes it's part of the administration's goal to make life so untenable that immigrants eventually leave the United States on their own.

Some parents see school as one of the last safe places

For Iris Gonzalez in Boston, schools seem like just about the only safe place for her to go as someone in the country illegally. She's had children in Boston schools for nearly a decade and she doesn't expect anyone there to bother her or her daughters for proof they're here legally. So her children will keep going

to school. "Education is important," she said in Spanish.

Gonzalez, who came to the U.S. from Guatemala illegally 14 years ago, does worry about entering a courthouse or driving, even though she has a license. "What if they stop me?" she wonders.

"I don't sleep," she said. "There's a lot of uncertainty about how to look for work, whether to keep driving and what's going to change."

Carmen, the Mexican grandmother who now lives in California, said returning home is not an option for her family, which faced threats after her son-in-law was kidnapped two years from their home in Michoacan state, an area overrun with drug trafficking gangs.

Her family arrived two years ago under former President Joe Biden's program allowing asylum-seekers to enter the U.S. and then apply for permission to stay. Following his inauguration Monday, Trump promptly shut down the CBP One app that processed these and other arrivals and has promised to "end asylum" during his presidency.

Carmen has had several hearings on her asylum request, which has not yet been granted.

"My biggest fear is that we don't have anywhere to go back to," she said. "It's about saving our lives. And protecting our children."

Trump Administration shuts down White House Spanish-language page, social media

By FERNANDA FIGUEROA The Associated Press

Within hours of President Donald Trump's inauguration, the new administration took down the Spanish-language version of the official White House website.

The site — currently <https://www.whitehouse.gov/es/> — now gives users an "Error 404" message. It also included a "Go Home" button that directed viewers to a page featuring a video montage of Trump in his first term and on the campaign trail. The button was later updated to read "Go To Home Page".

Hispanic advocacy groups and others expressed confusion at the abrupt change and frustration at what some called the administration's lack of efforts to maintain communication with the Latino community, which helped propel him to the presidency.

The Spanish profile of the White House' X, @LaCasaBlanca and the government page on reproductive freedom also were disbanded. Meanwhile, the Spanish versions of other government agencies such as the Department of Labor, Justice and Agriculture remained available for users on Tuesday.

Asked about the changes, White House principal deputy press secretary Harrison Fields responded Tuesday that the administration is "committed to bringing back online the Spanish translation section of the website."

"It's day two. We are in the process of developing, editing and tweaking the White House website. As part of this ongoing work, some of the archived content on the website went dormant. We are committed to reloading that content in a short timeline," he said without elaborating.

Trump removed the Spanish version of the page in 2017. At that time, White House officials said they would reinstate it. President Joe Biden reinstated the page in 2021.

The page's removal coincided with Trump's first-day wave of executive orders highlighted by the launch of an illegal immigration crackdown that was one of his key campaign pledges. Trump on Monday declared a national emergency at the U.S.-Mexico border and announced plans to send U.S. troops to help support immigration agents and restrict refugees and asylum.

According to 2023 Census Bureau estimates, about 43.4 million Americans — 13.7% of the U.S. population age 5 and older — speak Spanish at home. The U.S. has no official language.

Monica Rivera, a brand and communications strategist in New York City of Puerto Rican and Cuban descent, said the shutdown sends a clear signal.

"There are 43 million Latinos who speak Spanish as their first language and removing access to information directly from the White House draws a distinct line as to who they are serving and more dangerously, signals to the administration's MAGA base that we as Latinos are 'other' and a less significant part of this

country," Rivera said.

Anthony Hernandez, a paralegal in the nation's capital, wasn't initially aware of the move and said it suggests what the coming years of a second Trump presidency would look like, with specific issues making headlines while "minor but equally malicious things like that go unnoticed."

"A move like shutting down the Spanish White House page and X profile serves no purpose other than to cut off resources for millions of Hispanic Americans and immigrants attempting to enter the United States legally," Hernandez said. "And it's a slap in the face to the millions of Hispanic voters that supported him in this recent election."

Trump's secretary of state, Marco Rubio, is Cuban American and speaks Spanish. At his swearing-in Tuesday, he gave remarks in Spanish, thanking God, his family and Trump.

Meanwhile, Hispanic leaders and communication strategy experts expressed surprise with the page's removal, given Trump's popularity with certain Latino voters.

"If the White House is seriously interested in engaging with Latinos, the second largest group in this country, then they need to make sure that updates can also be distributed in Spanish, a preferred language for millions in our community," said Frankie Miranda President and CEO of the Hispanic Federation.

He called that a way to ensure "everyone is a part of the civic process."

Kris Klein Hernández, a U.S. historian specializing in race, gender, and sexuality at Connecticut College, said the content removal from official White House websites not only limits the access available to Spanish-speaking U.S. citizens and migrants but leads "some to question which constituencies the administration prioritizes."

Jeff Lee, former deputy cabinet secretary and deputy director of external and international affairs for former California Gov. Jerry Brown, said the move seems counterintuitive given the opportunity to "showcase" policy changes, especially ones related to economics and border security.

"I didn't see any other language mediums that got the kibosh. So I think that's a really interesting thing to single out — if that's the case," Lee said.

AP VoteCast, a nationwide survey of more than 120,000 voters, found Trump won a larger share of Black and Latino voters than he did in 2020, and most notably among men under age 45. Young Latinos, particularly young Latino men, also were more open to Trump than in 2020. Roughly half of young Latino men voted for Democratic Vice President Kamala Harris, compared with about 6 in 10 who went for Biden.

Syria's southern rebels loom large as the country's new rulers try to form a national army

By ABBY SEWELL Associated Press

NAWA, Syria (AP) — As insurgents raced across Syria in a surprise offensive launched in the country's northwest late last year, officials from several countries backing either the rebels or Syria's government met in Qatar on what to do.

According to people briefed on the Dec. 7 meeting, officials from Turkey, Russia, Iran and a handful of Arab countries agreed that the insurgents would stop their advance in Homs, the last major city north of Damascus, and that internationally mediated talks would take place with Syrian leader Bashar Assad on a political transition.

But insurgent factions from Syria's south had other plans. They pushed toward the capital, arriving in Damascus' largest square before dawn. Insurgents from the north, led by the Islamist group Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham, arrived hours later. Assad, meanwhile, had fled.

HTS, the most organized of the groups, has since established itself as Syria's de facto rulers after coordinating with the southern fighters during the lightning-fast offensive.

Wariness among the southern factions since then, however, has highlighted questions over how the interim administration can bring together a patchwork of former rebel groups, each with their own leaders and ideology.

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HTS leader Ahmad al-Sharaa has called for a unified national army and security forces. The interim defense minister, Murhaf Abu Qasra, has begun meeting with armed groups. But some prominent leaders like southern rebel commander Ahmad al-Awda have refused to attend.

Officials with the interim government did not respond to questions.

Cradle of the revolution

The southern province of Daraa is widely seen as the cradle of the Syrian uprising in 2011. When anti-government protests were met with repression by Assad's security forces, "we were forced to carry weapons," said Mahmoud al-Bardan, a rebel leader there.

The rebel groups that formed in the south had different dynamics from those in the north, less Islamist and more localized, said Aron Lund, a fellow with the Century International think tank. They also had different backers.

"In the north, Turkey and Qatar favored Islamist factions very heavily," he said. "In the south, Jordanian and American involvement nudged the insurgency in a different direction."

In 2018, factions in Daraa reached a Russian-mediated "reconciliation agreement" with Assad's government. Some former fighters left for Idlib, the destination for many from areas recaptured by government forces, while others remained.

The deal left many southern factions alive and armed, Lund said.

"We only turned over the heavy weapons ... the light weapons remained with us," al-Bardan said.

When the HTS-led rebel groups based in the north launched their surprise offensive last year in Aleppo, those weapons were put to use again. Factions in the southern provinces of Daraa, Sweida and Quneitra reactivated, forming a joint operations room to coordinate with northern ones.

Defying international wishes

On Dec. 7, "we had heard from a number of parties that there might be an agreement that ... no one would enter Damascus so there could be an agreement on the exit of Bashar Assad or a transitional phase," said Nassim Abu Ara, an official with one of the largest rebel factions in the south, the 8th Brigade of al-Awda.

However, "we entered Damascus and turned the tables on these agreements," he said.

Al-Bardan confirmed that account, asserting that the agreement "was binding on the northern factions" but not the southern ones.

"Even if they had ordered us to stop, we would not have," he said, reflecting the eagerness among many fighters to remove Assad as soon as possible.

Ammar Kahf, executive director of the Istanbul-based Omran Center for Strategic Studies, who was in Doha on Dec. 7 and was briefed on the meetings, said there was an agreement among countries' officials that the rebels would stop their offensive in Homs and go to Geneva for negotiations on "transitional arrangements."

But Kahf said it was not clear that any Syrian faction, including HTS, agreed to the plan. Representatives of countries at the meeting did not respond to questions.

A statement released by the foreign ministers of Turkey, Russia, Iran, Qatari, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Iraq after the Dec. 7 meeting said they "stressed the need to stop military operations in preparation for launching a comprehensive political process" but did not give specifics.

The initial hours after armed groups' arrival in Damascus were chaotic. Observers said the HTS-led forces tried to re-impose order when they arrived. An Associated Press journalist saw an argument break out when HTS fighters tried to stop members of another faction from taking abandoned army munitions.

Abu Ara acknowledged that "there was some chaos" but added, "we have to understand that these people were pent-up and suddenly they achieved the joy of victory in this manner."

Waiting for a state

During a visit by AP journalists to the western countryside of Daraa province this month, there was no visible presence of HTS forces.

At one former Syrian army site, a fighter with the Free Syrian Army, the main faction in the area, stood guard in jeans and a camouflage shirt. Other local fighters showed off a site where they were storing tanks abandoned by the former army.

"Currently these are the property of the new state and army," whenever it is formed, said one fighter, Issa Sabaq.

The process of forming those has been bumpy.

On New Year's Eve, factions in the Druze-majority city of Sweida in southern Syria blocked the entry of a convoy of HTS security forces who had arrived without giving prior notice.

Ahmed Aba Zeid, a Syrian researcher who has studied the southern insurgent groups, said some of the factions have taken a wait-and-see approach before they agree to dissolve and hand over their weapons to the state.

Local armed factions are still the de facto security forces in many areas.

Earlier this month, the new police chief in Daraa city appointed by the HTS-led government, Badr Abdel Hamid, joined local officials in the town of Nawa to discuss plans for a police force there.

Hamid said there had been "constructive and positive cooperation" with factions in the region, adding the process of extending the "state's influence" takes time.

Abu Ara said factions are waiting to understand their role. "Will it be a strong army, or a border guard army, or is it for counterterrorism?" he asked.

Still, he was optimistic that an understanding will be reached.

"A lot of people are afraid that there will be a confrontation, that there won't be integration or won't be an agreement," he said. "But we want to avoid this at all costs, because our country is very tired of war."

Winter storm that dropped record-breaking snow in New Orleans spreads into Florida and the Carolinas

By GERALD HERBERT and DAVID J. PHILLIP Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — A major winter storm that slammed Texas and blanketed the northern Gulf Coast with record-breaking snow moved east overnight, spreading heavy snow, sleet and freezing rain across parts of the Florida Panhandle, Georgia and eastern Carolinas.

The weather warning areas included big cities like Jacksonville, Florida, which is expected to see snow, sleet and accumulating ice into Wednesday. The Jacksonville International Airport closed because of the weather Tuesday evening and said it planned to reopen at noon Wednesday. Schools canceled classes, and government offices were closed Wednesday.

"We are expecting some winter weather we're not used to in Northeast Florida," the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office posted on Facebook. "The safest place you can be Tuesday night and Wednesday is at home!"

In eastern North Carolina, drifting snow was expected with near-blizzard conditions in the state's Outer Banks, where up to 8 inches (20.3 centimeters) were predicted to fall.

Dangerous below-freezing temperatures with even colder wind chills were also expected to last over much of the week in the region. Authorities say three people have died in the cold weather.

The heavy snow, sleet and freezing rain hitting parts of the Deep South came as a blast of Arctic air plunged much of the Midwest and the eastern U.S. into a deep freeze.

Record-setting snow days

It had been more than a decade since snow last fell on New Orleans. Tuesday's rare snowfall set a record in the city, where 10 inches (25 centimeters) fell in some places, far surpassing its record of 2.7 inches (6.8 centimeters) set Dec. 31, 1963, the National Weather Service said.

"Wow, what a snow day!," the weather agency said in a social media post. "It's safe to say this was a historic snowfall for much of the area."

Snow closed highways, grounded nearly all flights and canceled school for more than a million students more accustomed to hurricane dismissals than snow days.

Snow fell in Houston and prompted the first ever blizzard warnings for several coastal counties near the Texas-Louisiana border. Snow covered the white-sand beaches of normally sunny vacation spots, including Gulf Shores, Alabama, and Pensacola Beach, Florida.

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"Believe it or not, in the state of Florida we're mobilizing snowplows," said Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis. People made the most of it — from a snowball fight on a Gulf Shores beach to sledding in a laundry basket in Montgomery, Alabama, to pool-tubing down a Houston hill.

In New Orleans, urban skiing was attempted along Bourbon Street, a priest and nuns engaged in a snowball fight outside a suburban church, snowboarders shredded behind a golf cart, and people went sledging down the snow-covered Mississippi River levees on kayaks, cardboard boxes and inflatable alligators.

High school teacher David Delio and his two daughters glided down the levee on a yoga mat and a boogie board.

"This is a white-out in New Orleans, this is a snow-a-cane," Delio said. "We've had tons of hurricane days but never a snow day."

The nuns at St. Catherine of Siena Catholic School near New Orleans encouraged their students last week to pray for the snow day they received Tuesday, the Rev. Tim Hedrick said. The priest said he invited the nuns to make snow angels, and they challenged him to a snowball fight that has since received tens of thousands of views on social media.

"It's a fun way to show that priests and sisters are humans, too, and they can have fun," Hedrick said.

Mobile, Alabama, hit 5.4 inches (13.7 centimeters) Tuesday, topping the city's one-day snowfall record of 5 inches (12.7 centimeters), set Jan. 24, 1881, and nearing its all-time snowfall record of 6 inches (15.5 centimeters) in 1895, the weather service said.

Flight cancellations, states of emergency and fatalities

More than 2,300 flights to, from or within the U.S. were canceled Tuesday, according to online tracker FlightAware.com. Both Houston airports suspended flight operations, and nearly every flight was canceled at New Orleans Louis Armstrong International Airport. Most airlines planned to resume operations Wednesday.

The NWS said up to 4 inches (10 centimeters) of snow fell in the Houston area. Texas transportation officials said more than 20 snowplows were in use across nearly 12,000 lane miles in the Houston area, which lacks its own city or county plows.

Ahead of the storm, governors in Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and even Florida — the Sunshine State — declared states of emergency and many school systems canceled classes Tuesday. School closures were planned in some coastal communities in North and South Carolina.

In the Texas capital, two people died in the cold weather, according to a statement from the city of Austin. No details were provided, but the city said emergency crews had responded to more than a dozen "cold exposure" calls.

Officials said one person has died from hypothermia in Georgia.

A state of emergency was also declared in at least a dozen New York counties with up to 2 feet (60 centimeters) of lake-effect snow and extreme cold expected around Lake Ontario and Lake Erie through Wednesday.

Santa Ana winds expected to return to Southern California

In Southern California, where blazes have killed at least 27 people and burned thousands of homes, dry conditions and strong Santa Ana winds remained a concern.

GOP-led states are emboldened to keep rolling back trans rights. Democrats struggle with a response

By ANDREW DeMILLO, JOHN HANNA and NADIA LATHAN Associated Press

TOPEKA, Kan. (AP) — Republicans and Democrats in Kansas agree that concerns about the economy drove voters to support President Donald Trump by a 16% margin.

They also know that ads from Trump and others targeting transgender rights resonated with voters. So while Kansas Republicans say property tax cuts are their top priority, they also are pushing to ban gender-affirming care for young people, including puberty blockers, hormones and, even though they are rare for minors, surgeries. They say that, too, resonates strongly with voters.

"It carries so much more emotional weight," said Republican state Rep. Ron Bryce, a doctor from south-

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eastern Kansas. "We're talking about children and our future."

As lawmakers have gone into session in many states, Republicans are broadly emboldened by GOP electoral successes to continue pushing state-level bills to curtail transgender rights.

As was the case in 2023 and 2024, dozens of bills are pending in mostly red-state legislatures aimed at issues such as which bathroom transgender people can use in public buildings, whether transgender people can use their gender identity on their driver's licenses and whether transgender girls can play on girls sports teams. In Texas alone, Republicans have filed more than 30 measures.

Democrats are reckoning with voter backlash while not abandoning what they see as a civil rights issue.

Kansas state Rep. John Carmichael, a Wichita Democrat, said it's hard to conclude that Kansas voters favor transgender rights after Republicans picked up three state House seats and two state Senate seats.

Republicans in the state think they'll be able to ban gender-affirming care for young people this year after previously failing because the added Republican members will allow them to override a veto from Democratic Gov. Laura Kelly.

"Transgender people are going to be facing discrimination at the national level for four years," Carmichael said Tuesday. "I'm sure that some of my colleagues in the Kansas Legislature will try to find a way to one-up even what Donald Trump is doing."

Trump's first actions in office

Trump, who made anti-transgender themes central to his campaign, signed executive orders on his first day in office Monday declaring that the federal government would recognize only two sexes: male and female.

Federal prisons and shelters for migrants and rape survivors will be segregated by sex as defined by the order, and federal taxpayer money will not be able to be used to fund "transition services," which would appear to cover people incarcerated in federal prisons.

In the U.S., about 300,000 youths ages 13 to 17, or 1.4%, are transgender, according to estimates by the Williams Institute, an LGBTQ+ research center at the UCLA School of Law. Among adults, the figure is 0.5%, for 1.3 million transgender Americans who are 18 or older.

At the state level, legislators anticipate a U.S. Supreme Court ruling that bans on gender-affirming care are constitutional. The court heard arguments in December on a Tennessee law that prohibits gender-affirming care for minors. The justices appeared likely to uphold the law, though a ruling isn't expected until the summer.

About half of voters in the 2024 election said support for transgender rights in government and society has gone too far, while about 2 in 10 said it's been about right, and a similar share said it hasn't gone far enough, according to AP VoteCast.

Voters were split on at least one specific proposal. AP VoteCast found that slightly more than half of voters opposed laws that ban gender-affirming medical treatment, such as puberty blockers and hormone therapy, for transgender minors, while a little under half were in favor.

Gender-affirming care for young people

At least 26 states have banned or restricted gender-affirming care for people under 18.

Harleigh Walker, a transgender 17-year-old high school senior in Alabama where the care is banned, said it's astounding that states are considering legislation that harms constituents like her. She said she's likely to leave the South for college, and her family is also considering moving.

"We're not hurting anyone," Walker said in a telephone interview. "Our existence and our right to health-care, bathroom use, et cetera, it's not hurting anyone."

Every major U.S. medical group, including the American Medical Association, has opposed the bans and said gender-affirming treatments can be medically necessary and are supported by evidence. Doctors, parents and young people have said such care reduces depression and suicidal thoughts in transgender youths.

Conservatives nonetheless often describe the care as potentially harmful. Kansas House Speaker Dan Hawkins said lawmakers are trying to protect young people.

"Children under the age of 18 are not equipped with the knowledge or maturity to make a decision that permanently affects the rest of their lives," he said in a newsletter earlier this month.

LGBTQ+ rights advocates fear the next step is restrictions on care for adults. Florida is the only state that has done that, through there have been proposals in at least two other states.

Mo Jenkins, a 25-year-old transgender woman who ran unsuccessfully for a Texas House seat in Houston last year, described the possibility as terrifying. Her state banned gender-affirming care for minors in 2023.

"It was never going to stop with children," she said.

Democrats say they'll defend civil rights

The discussions among Democrats in red or swing states reflect the memory of Trump ads that blasted their presidential nominee, Vice President Kamala Harris, as being "for they/them" while "President Trump is for you."

Democratic Kansas state Sen. Cindy Holscher focused her reelection campaign in affluent Kansas City suburbs on education and taxes, capturing 61% of the vote.

"Democrats have a tendency to want to lean on those social issues, but they aren't necessarily winning issues," she said.

Holscher, Carmichael and other Democrats say they will still oppose measures restricting transgender rights.

"Civil rights are in the DNA of Democrats," said Joan Wagnon, a former Kansas Democratic Party chair, state lawmaker and Topeka mayor.

A chef lost his dream home in the Palisades Fire. He keeps his spirits up by feeding others

By JANIE HAR and CAROLYN KASTER Associated Press

PACIFIC PALISADES, Calif. (AP) — The Pacific Palisades home where chef Daniel Shemtob and his wife dreamed of raising a family is now nothing more than a cratered pit of twisted metal and rubble. Gone are the gourmet kitchen, the nursery with the baby giraffe and elephant wallpaper, the half-century-old olive trees in the yard.

But even as the Los Angeles-area wildfires continue to burn, Shemtob has been soothing his soul by dishing out free, foil-wrapped breakfast burritos and tacos from his award-winning food truck to first-responders and weary evacuees.

It would be easy for the two-time Food Network competition winner to dwell on the loss of the home, which he and his wife, Elyse, moved into about eight months ago, leasing with an option to buy. Yet he smiles, thinking about the people he has met through the food giveaways.

One man was so happy with his sweet and spicy steak taco that he declared it the first time he smiled since his home burned. Another person loved the simple cheese quesadilla the chef made for him so much, he came back for more and brought six family members.

Then there was the National Guardsman who lent a sympathetic ear one cold morning.

"He sat and wanted to hear my story while he ate his breakfast burrito," said Shemtob, 36. "That was very cathartic."

The Palisades and Eaton fires broke out Jan. 7 in Los Angeles County and forced tens of thousands to flee their homes, killing at least 28 people and destroying nearly 16,000 structures. Wiping out entire neighborhoods, the two blazes rank among the most destructive in the state's history.

Shemtob never dreamed the Palisades Fire would reach his neighborhood. When he evacuated around noon on Jan. 7, he took only a laptop, to be able to work, and homemade meatballs and pasta, because he was hungry.

But that night a remote home sensor alerted the couple to smoke in the master bedroom. Then there was fire. Then window after window started shattering.

Two days later he sneaked back to the neighborhood by bicycle to see the ruins for himself.

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"That was our garage. That's our basement," he said in a video, addressing his wife as he panned the camera across the scene, still hot with embers and rising smoke. "Everything is gone."

He sank into a deep depression. Then he remembered he had something to give.

The Saturday after evacuating, Shemtob took The Lime Truck to a donation center in Pasadena.

He has always loved the intimacy of cooking from a food truck, so he volunteered with World Central Kitchen, a nonprofit founded by chef José Andrés that rushes to disaster sites with hot meals.

He was surprised to find celebrity chef Tyler Florence ready to make tacos by his side.

At the center, people were sad and stressed. But there were also signs of community: One woman brought a pot of homemade stew and bowls for anyone who wanted some.

"People were coming there with whatever they had to give," Shemtob said.

Since then, thousands of people have gotten meals from his trucks.

At another donation site in Pasadena last week, Shemtob whooped as he handed out the final two foil-wrapped meals of the night. "Great job, team," he said, pumping both fists in the air.

Shemtob estimated that they handed out 750 meals that night alone, along with 200 pairs of shoes from the nonslip shoe company he owns, Snibbs.

He shares the story of his own loss with others, when he thinks it can help.

The voracious Palisades Fire consumed clothes that Shemtob designed himself, kitchen tools he collected and culinary awards he won. Half his late mother's photographs and other belongings, stored in his basement, were also destroyed; the other half went up in flames at his brother's home nearby, which also burned.

The couple loved the house in part because it was close not only to his brother's place but also to her brother and to a home that her parents were building to be near their grandchildren.

On Sunday, Shemtob returned to the neighborhood with an AP photographer, driving past lot after lot of flattened devastation before stopping at what used to be his home.

Among the spiky metal and charred rubble, he spotted a blackened muffin tin, a shard of an Hermès platter that was a wedding gift, the outline of an refrigerator and a piece of a car.

For now he and Elyse, who is expecting their first child in April, are staying at her aunt's place. They did not have insurance.

But Shemtob has bounced back before: Just before the coronavirus pandemic, he purchased two businesses that wound up failing.

"And then I decided to take my food truck out and feed front-line workers," he said, "and the moment I did that, I started feeling better again."

Trump finds new ways to flex presidential power after returning to White House

By CHRIS MEGERIAN and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump is swiftly breaching the traditional boundaries of presidential power as he returns to the White House, bringing to bear a lifetime of bending the limits in court-houses, boardrooms and politics to forge an expansive view of his authority.

He's already unleashed an unprecedented wave of executive orders, daring anyone to stop him, with actions intended to clamp down on border crossings, limit the constitutional guarantee of birthright citizenship and keep the popular Chinese-owned TikTok operational despite a law shutting down the social media platform.

Democrats and civil rights organizations are rallying to fight Trump in court, but legal battles could drag on before slowing the president down. Meanwhile, Trump is drafting a new blueprint for the presidency, one that demonstrates the primacy of blunt force in a democratic system predicated on checks and balances between the branches of government.

"He's going to push it to the max," said Sen. Tommy Tuberville, a Republican from Alabama.

Trump tried to take a similar approach in his first term, with mixed results. This time, there are fewer

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guardrails.

His administration has few of the establishment figures that once tried to curb his penchant for upheaval. The U.S. Supreme Court is stocked with conservative justices, and recently decreed that presidents are broadly immune from prosecution for any official actions taken during their term. Republicans are in complete control on Capitol Hill, where the leaders owe their majority positions to Trump's support or acquiescence.

In a striking display of Trump's dominance, almost no one from his party challenged the decision to pardon almost everyone charged in connection with the Jan. 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol.

"We're not looking backwards, we're looking forward," said Senate Majority Leader John Thune of South Dakota.

It's the kind of scenario that Democrats warned about during last year's campaign, when they claimed that Trump would govern as a dictator if elected to another term.

Sitting in the Oval Office just hours after being inaugurated on Monday, Trump rejected the characterization.

"No, no," he said, shaking his head and pursing his lips. "I can't imagine even being called that."

Then he continued scrawling his signature on executive orders that were laid out across the Resolute Desk.

Trump's blitz didn't surprise Barbara Res, who worked for the future president years ago at his namesake company.

"Politics is about compromise. Business is all about leverage," Res said. "He's not a compromiser."

Although Trump got his start in the brick-and-mortar field of real estate, he appears to be taking a page from the "move fast and break things" tactic of technology company executives who spent millions bolstering his presidential bid and attended his inauguration.

John Yoo, a law professor at the University of California at Berkeley who helped expand presidential authority while working for George W. Bush, said Trump's executive orders were "unprecedented in terms of the sweeping scope of the orders and in the sheer number."

Although such orders can be easily reversed by a future president, they could have a profound impact for now.

Yoo described as "legally shaky" Trump's effort to allow TikTok to keep operating even though U.S. officials have described it as a national security threat because of fears that China could access user data or manipulate the content algorithm. A law signed by President Joe Biden required the platform to shut down in the United States unless its Chinese parent company found a new owner by Sunday, the day before Trump took office.

But Trump directed his Justice Department not to enforce the ban, which Yoo compared to a student asking for more time on an exam after it was due.

Yoo also said Trump is trying to "really push the envelope" by declaring that migrants who are entering the country constitute an "invasion." The president directed the military to help take "operational control" of the U.S. border, but troops are not allowed to handle law enforcement, whether it's seizing drugs or arresting migrants.

"This is without historical parallel," Yoo said. "This is really an extraordinary claim of presidential power."

Nearly two dozen states have already sued Trump over his executive order intended to limit birthright citizenship, part of his sweeping effort to curb immigration. The president's opponents said the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution requires that people born in the U.S. are citizens, including people whose parents were not legally citizens at the time of their birth.

"Presidents have broad power but they are not kings," said New Jersey Attorney General Matt Platkin, a Democrat.

Depending on how the legal battles play out, Yoo said Trump could set a new standard for his successors.

"If he's successful with even half the executive orders, every future president is going to want to do the same thing," he said.

It's not unusual for presidents to test the limits of presidential authority, said Julian Zelizer, a Princeton University historian. For example, Biden tried to expand the cancellation of federal student loans, only to

see his proposal blocked by the U.S. Supreme Court.

"But as with most things," Zelizer said, "Trump goes further than the rest to see just how far he can go."

Res recalled a similar approach at the Trump Organization, where Trump prided himself on his ability to chisel down contractor costs or lean on local officials for favorable treatment for his properties.

"No matter what you gave him or offered him, he wanted more," she said.

Res said Trump would keep in his desk a black-and-white picture of Roy Cohn, an attorney renowned for his ruthlessness.

"He would pull that out when he was arguing with a contractor," she said. "Here's my lawyer, sue me."

Trump's ongoing challenge will be keeping Republicans in line on Capitol Hill, and some have suggested they're still willing to cross him.

Sen. Susan Collins, a Maine Republican known for an independent streak, said she supports some of Trump's executive orders but "others I have real questions about."

Sen. Adam Schiff, a Democrat from California who has been a political nemesis of Trump, said Trump's actions run the gamut "from the plainly unconstitutional — as in the attempt to end birthright citizenship — to the draconian, with mass deportations."

Others, he said, like the renaming of the Gulf of Mexico, are just "absurd."

Asked if Congress would stand up to the new White House, Schiff said he wasn't sure.

"We're about to find out," he said.

A frigid storm drops rare snow on Houston and New Orleans as Florida readies plows in the Panhandle

By GERALD HERBERT and DAVID J. PHILLIP Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — A rare frigid storm charged through Texas and the northern Gulf Coast on Tuesday, blanketing New Orleans and Houston with snow that closed highways, grounded nearly all flights and canceled school for more than a million students more accustomed to hurricane dismissals than snow days.

The storm prompted the first ever blizzard warnings for several coastal counties near the Texas-Louisiana border, and snowplows were at the ready in the Florida Panhandle.

In the Texas capital, two people died in the cold weather, according to a statement from the city of Austin. No details were provided, but the city said emergency crews had responded to more than a dozen "cold exposure" calls. Officials said one person died from hypothermia in Georgia.

Snow covered the white-sand beaches of normally sunny vacation spots, including Gulf Shores, Alabama, and Pensacola Beach, Florida. The heavy snow, sleet and freezing rain hitting parts of the Deep South came as a blast of Arctic air plunged much of the Midwest and the eastern U.S. into a deep freeze.

A powdery South made for some head-turning scenes — a snowball fight on a Gulf Shores beach, sledding in a laundry basket in Montgomery, Alabama, pool-tubing down a Houston hill.

One of the country's quirkiest cities, New Orleans, didn't disappoint under the snowy spotlight. There was an attempt at urban skiing along Bourbon Street; a priest and nuns in a snowball fight outside a suburban church; snowboarding behind a golf cart; and sledding down the snow-covered Mississippi River levees on kayaks, cardboard boxes and inflatable alligators.

High school teacher David Delio and his two daughters glided down the levee on a yoga mat and a boogie board.

"This is a white-out in New Orleans, this is a snow-a-cane," Delio said. "We've had tons of hurricane days but never a snow day."

The nuns at St. Catherine of Siena Catholic School near New Orleans encouraged their students last week to pray to saints, including Our Lady of the Snows — a devotional term for Mary, mother of Jesus — for the snow day they received Tuesday, said the Rev. Tim Hedrick. The priest said he invited the nuns to make snow angels, and they challenged him to a snowball fight that has since received tens of thousands of views on social media.

"It's a fun way to show that priests and sisters are humans, too, and they can have fun," Hedrick said.

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It has been more than a decade since snow last fell on New Orleans. With more than 9 inches (23 centimeters) of snow in parts of the city Tuesday, New Orleans has far surpassed its record — 2.7 inches (6.8 centimeters) on Dec. 31, 1963 — according to the National Weather Service. There were unofficial reports of 10 inches (26 centimeters) of snow in New Orleans in 1895, NWS meteorologist Christopher Bannan said.

For Houston, the winter blast marks the latest dramatic fluctuation in extreme weather. Hurricane Beryl devastated the city in July, killing dozens and knocking out power to large swaths of the city. Several months later, a winter storm has dumped the most snow in decades over the Houston area.

Nearly 2,000 flights to, from or within the U.S. were canceled Tuesday, with about 10,000 others delayed, according to online tracker FlightAware.com. Both Houston airports suspended flight operations starting Tuesday. Nearly every flight was cancelled at New Orleans Louis Armstrong International Airport, but most airlines planned to resume operations Wednesday.

Alvaro Perez was hunkering down at George Bush Intercontinental Airport in Houston on Tuesday after his flight to El Salvador was canceled. His new departure is scheduled for Thursday.

"I'll just ride it and stay here," Perez said.

Snow on the Gulf Coast

Ahead of the storm, governors in Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and even Florida — the Sunshine State — declared states of emergency and many school systems canceled classes Tuesday. School closures were planned in some coastal communities in North and South Carolina.

The NWS said up to 4 inches (10 centimeters) of snow fell in the Houston area. Texas transportation officials said more than 20 snowplows were in use across nearly 12,000 lane miles in the Houston area, which lacks its own city or county plows.

Forecasters say snowfall could stretch from north Georgia, through Atlanta, and into southern portions unaccustomed to such weather.

Parts of the Florida Panhandle were coated white Tuesday. Tallahassee, Florida's capital, last saw snow in 2018 — just 0.1 of an inch (0.25 centimeters), according to the weather service. Tallahassee's highest snowfall on record was 2.8 inches (7 centimeters) in 1958.

"Believe it or not, in the state of Florida we're mobilizing snowplows," said Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis.

Mobile, Alabama, hit 5.4 inches (13.7 centimeters) and counting Tuesday, topping the city's one-day snowfall record of 5 inches (12.7 centimeters), set Jan. 24, 1881, and nearing its all-time snowfall record of 6 inches (15.5 centimeters) in 1895, the weather service said.

The blizzard warning in effect until midday Tuesday was the first issued by the office in Lake Charles, Louisiana, according to meteorologist Donald Jones.

Louisiana transportation agency workers worked through the night to prepare bridges and roadways. Nonetheless, Louisiana State Police said they have already responded to more than 50 crashes Tuesday, and pleaded for people to stay home.

Return of the Arctic blast

This latest cold snap comes from a disruption in the polar vortex, the ring of cold air usually trapped at the North Pole.

Frigid cold persisted across the eastern two-thirds of the country as the East Coast was blanketed in snow while people from the Northern Plains to the tip of Maine shivered in bitter cold. The NWS said normal temperatures would return slowly by the end of the week.

A state of emergency was declared in at least a dozen New York counties with up to 2 feet (60 centimeters) of lake-effect snow and extreme cold expected around Lake Ontario and Lake Erie through Wednesday.

Wind chills are expected to reach minus 30 F to minus 50 F (minus 34 C to minus 46 C) across the Dakotas and into the Upper Midwest through Friday, the NWS warned. Subzero wind chills were forecast from the Central Plains eastward through Wednesday night.

Santa Ana winds expected to return to Southern California

In Southern California, where blazes have killed at least 27 people and burned thousands of homes, dry conditions and strong Santa Ana winds remained a concern.

Trump administration directs all federal diversity, equity and inclusion staff be put on leave

By ALEXANDRA OLSON and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump's administration moved Tuesday to end affirmative action in federal contracting and directed that all federal diversity, equity and inclusion staff be put on paid leave and eventually be laid off.

The moves follow an executive order Trump signed on his first day ordering a sweeping dismantling of the federal government's diversity and inclusion programs that could touch on everything from anti-bias training to funding for minority farmers and homeowners. Trump has called the programs "discrimination" and insisted on restoring strictly "merit-based" hiring.

The executive order on affirmative action revokes an order issued by President Lyndon Johnson, and curtails DEI programs by federal contractors and grant recipients. It's using one of the key tools utilized by the Biden administration to promote DEI programs across the private sector — pushing their use by federal contractors — to now eradicate them.

The Office of Personnel Management in a Tuesday memo directed agencies to place DEI office staffers on paid leave by 5 p.m. Wednesday and take down all public DEI-focused webpages by the same deadline. Several federal departments had removed the webpages even before the memorandum. Agencies must also cancel any DEI-related training and end any related contracts, and federal workers are being asked to report to Trump's Office of Personnel Management if they suspect any DEI-related program has been renamed to obfuscate its purpose within 10 days or face "adverse consequences."

By Thursday, federal agencies are directed to compile a list of federal DEI offices and workers as of Election Day. By next Friday, they are expected to develop a plan to execute a "reduction-in-force action" against those federal workers.

The memo was first reported by CBS News.

The move comes after Monday's executive order accused former President Joe Biden of forcing "discrimination" programs into "virtually all aspects of the federal government" through "diversity, equity and inclusion" programs, known as DEI.

That step is the first salvo in an aggressive campaign to upend DEI efforts nationwide, including leveraging the Justice Department and other agencies to investigate private companies pursuing training and hiring practices that conservative critics consider discriminatory against non-minority groups such as white men.

The executive order picks up where Trump's first administration left off: One of Trump's final acts during his first term was an executive order banning federal agency contractors and recipients of federal funding from conducting anti-bias training that addressed concepts like systemic racism. Biden promptly rescinded that order on his first day in office and issued a pair of executive orders — now rescinded — outlining a plan to promote DEI throughout the federal government.

While many changes may take months or even years to implement, Trump's new anti-DEI agenda is more aggressive than his first and comes amid far more amenable terrain in the corporate world. Prominent companies from Walmart to Facebook have already scaled back or ended some of their diversity practices in response to Trump's election and conservative-backed lawsuits against them.

Here's a look at some of the policies and programs that Trump will aim to dismantle:

Diversity offices, training and accountability

Trump's order will immediately gut Biden's wide-ranging effort to embed diversity and inclusion practices in the federal workforce, the nation's largest at about 2.4 million people.

Biden had mandated all agencies to develop a diversity plan, issue yearly progress reports, and contribute data for a government-wide dashboard to track demographic trends in hiring and promotions. The administration also set up a Chief Diversity Officers Council to oversee the implementation of the DEI plan. The government released its first DEI progress report in 2022 that included demographic data for the federal workforce, which is about 60% white and 55% male overall, and more than 75% white and more than 60% male at the senior executive level.

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Trump's executive order will toss out equity plans developed by federal agencies and terminate any roles or offices dedicated to promoting diversity. It will include eliminating initiatives such as DEI-related training or diversity goals in performance reviews.

Federal grant and benefits programs

Trump's order paves the way for an aggressive but bureaucratically complicated overhaul of billions of dollars in federal spending that conservative activists claim unfairly carve out preference for racial minorities and women.

The order does not specify which programs it will target but mandates a government-wide review to ensure that contracts and grants are compliant with the Trump administration's anti-DEI stance. It also proposes that the federal government settle ongoing lawsuits against federal programs that benefit historically underserved communities, including some that date back decades.

Trump's executive order is a "seismic shift and a complete change in the focus and direction of the federal government," said Dan Lenington, deputy council for the conservative Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty, which has pursued several lawsuits against federal programs. The institute recently released an influential report listing dozens of programs the Trump administration should consider dismantling, such as credits for minority farmers or emergency relief assistance for majority-Black neighborhoods.

He acknowledged that unwinding some entrenched programs may be difficult. For example, the Treasury Department implements housing and other assistance programs through block grants to states that have their own methods for implementing diversity criteria.

Pay equity and hiring practices

It's not clear whether the Trump administration will target every initiative that stemmed from Biden's DEI executive order.

For example, the Biden administration banned federal agencies from asking about an applicant's salary history when setting compensation, a practice many civil rights activists say perpetuates pay disparities for women and people of color.

It took three years for the Biden administration to issue the final regulations, and Trump would have to embark on a similar rule-making process, including a notice and comment period, to rescind it, said Chiraag Bains, former deputy director of the White House Domestic Policy Council under Biden and now a nonresident senior fellow with Brookings Metro.

Noreen Farrell, executive director of gender rights group Equal Rights Advocates, said that she was hopeful that the Trump administration "will not go out of its way to undo the rule," which she said has proved popular in some state and cities that have enacted similar policies.

And Biden's DEI plan encompassed some initiatives with bipartisan support, said Bains. For example, he tasked the Chief Diversity Officers Executive Council with expanding federal employment opportunities for those with criminal records. That initiative stems from the Fair Chance Act, which Trump signed into law in 2019 and bans federal agencies and contractors from asking about an applicant's criminal history before a conditional job offer is made.

Bains said that's what Biden's DEI policies were about: ensuring that the federal government was structured to include historically marginalized communities, not institute "reverse discrimination against white men."

Despite the sweeping language of Trump's order, Farrell said, "the reality of implementing such massive structural changes is far more complex."

"Federal agencies have deeply embedded policies and procedures that can't simply be switched off overnight," she added.

Trump defends pardons for rioters and suggests Proud Boys could have place in politics

By MICHELLE L. PRICE and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump on his first full day in office Tuesday defended his decision to grant clemency to people convicted of assaulting police officers during the 2021 attack on the Capitol and suggested there could be a place in American politics for the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, extremist groups whose leaders were convicted of seditious conspiracy against the U.S.

The president also continued to dismantle the government's promotion of diversity, equity and inclusion, known as DEI. The White House issued a memo placing on paid leave all federal staff who work on those efforts, with plans to lay them off soon. DEI trainings were also canceled.

Trump's actions were the latest step in his drive to overhaul Washington and erase the work of President Joe Biden's administration.

A priority for Trump has been helping supporters who laid siege to the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, making their pardons his first official action once he returned to the White House after his inauguration on Monday.

Among the roughly 1,500 people pardoned by Trump were more than 200 who pleaded guilty to assaulting police. At least 140 officers were injured during the riot — many beaten, bloodied and crushed by the crowd — as Trump's supporters tried to overturn Biden's election victory.

Before the Capitol attack, the Proud Boys was a group best known for street fights with anti-fascist activists when Trump infamously told the group to "stand back and stand by" during his first debate in 2020 with then-presidential candidate Biden.

The group's former top leader, Enrique Tarrío, and three of his lieutenants were convicted of seditious conspiracy for a violent plot to stop the peaceful transfer of presidential power from Trump to Biden after the 2020 election. Tarrío was serving a 22-year prison sentence, the longest of any Capitol riot case, before Trump pardoned him on Monday. Some members of the group marched in Washington on Monday as Trump was sworn into another term.

When pressed by a reporter about the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers and whether there was a place for them in politics, Trump said, "Well, we have to see. They've been given a pardon. I thought their sentences were ridiculous and excessive."

Trump spoke to reporters at the White House as he highlighted an investment in artificial intelligence infrastructure and declared, "We're back."

"I think we're going to do things that people will be shocked at," he said.

When pressed about his decision to free people from prison who were shown on camera viciously attacking Capitol police officers, Trump declared, "I am a friend of police, more than any president who's ever been in this office."

The president on Tuesday said he thought the sentences handed down for actions that day were "ridiculous and excessive" and said, "These are people who actually love our country, so we thought a pardon would be appropriate."

Two major law enforcement groups, The International Association of Chiefs of Police and the Fraternal Order of Police, issued a joint statement saying they were "deeply discouraged" by the pardons and commutations and believed those convicted should serve their full sentences.

The president was also asked about his personal net worth benefitting from his launch of a new cryptocurrency token the day before he was sworn into office, and whether he would continue to sell products to benefit himself while in office.

"I don't know much about it other than I launched it," he said. "I heard it was very successful. I haven't checked it. Where is it today?"

Trump had opened his first full day back in office by demonstrating one of his favored expressions of power: firing people.

The new president posted on his Truth social media network early Tuesday that he would fire more than 1,000 presidential appointees "who are not aligned with our vision," including some high-profile names.

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Trump fired chef and humanitarian José Andrés from the President's Council on Sports, Fitness and Nutrition, retired Gen. Mark Milley from the National Infrastructure Advisory Council, former State Department official Brian Hook from the board of the Wilson Center and former Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms from the President's Export Council.

"YOU'RE FIRED!" Trump said in his post — his catchphrase from his reality TV show, "The Apprentice." Andrés and Bottoms disputed Trump's assertion that they were fired, saying in posts on social media that they had already submitted their resignations.

Biden also removed many Trump appointees in his first days in office, including former press secretary Sean Spicer from the board overseeing the U.S. Naval Academy.

Three major business leaders — SoftBank Group CEO Masayoshi Son, OpenAI CEO Sam Altman and Oracle Corp. Chairman Larry Ellison — joined Trump on Tuesday afternoon to announce the creation of a new company called Stargate, which would invest up to \$500 billion over the next four years in AI infrastructure, according to the White House.

Initial plans for Stargate, which is beginning construction in Texas, date back to Biden's time in office. Tech news outlet The Information reported on the project in March 2024.

Trump also attended a national prayer service Tuesday morning at Washington National Cathedral, a customary visit for new presidents and one that wrapped up four days of inauguration-related events.

One of the speakers at the interfaith service, the Right Rev. Mariann Budde, the Episcopal bishop of Washington, used her sermon to send a message to Trump, urging compassion for LGBTQ+ people and undocumented migrant workers.

"You have felt the providential hand of a loving God. In the name of our God, I ask you to have mercy on the people in our country who are scared now," said Budde, who has criticized Trump before.

Asked afterward by a reporter what he thought of the service, Trump said: "Not too exciting was it. I didn't think it was a good service. They could do much better."

Later in the day, the president met with House Speaker Mike Johnson and Senate Majority Leader John Thune and other GOP legislators. It was the first formal sit-down for the GOP leadership teams, including House Majority Leader Steve Scalise, Senate GOP Whip John Barrasso and the new president, as they chart priorities for using Republican power in Washington.

It was more of a date than a marriage, said one person familiar with the private meeting, and granted anonymity to discuss it.

Trump floated many ideas on the priorities ahead — for tax cuts, disaster aid, regulatory reforms and the upcoming March deadline to fund the government — with no clear preference for their various strategies, only that they get the job done. Policy aides Stephen Miller and James Braid joined the talk.

The GOP leaders were given chocolate chip cookies and commemorative coins.

After the meeting, Senate Republicans raised the threat of recess appointments to install Trump's Cabinet. Thune pushed for a quick confirmation, but Trump has demanded that Republicans prepare to put the Senate in recess, allowing Trump to appoint his picks to Cabinet posts without Senate confirmation.

Trump mused Tuesday that the Los Angeles wildfires would give Republicans leverage with Democrats over budget negotiations, because Los Angeles is "going to need a lot of money. And generally speaking, I think you'll find that a lot of Democrats are going to be asking for help."

At least 76 people killed in a hotel fire at a ski resort in Turkey

By SUZAN FRASER Associated Press

ANKARA, Turkey (AP) — A fire raged through a 12-story hotel at a popular ski resort in northwestern Turkey early Tuesday during a school holiday, killing at least 76 people — at least two of them when they jumped from the building to escape the flames, officials said.

At least 51 people also were injured in the fire at the Grand Kartal hotel in Kartalkaya, in Bolu province's Koroglu mountains, some 300 kilometers (185 miles) east of Istanbul, said Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya. The fire occurred near the start of a two-week winter break for schools, when hotels in the region are packed.

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"Our hearts are broken. We are in mourning," Yerlikaya told reporters outside the hotel. "But you should know that whoever is responsible for causing this pain will not escape justice."

Atakan Yelkovan, a hotel guest staying on the third floor, told the IHA news agency there was chaos on the upper floors as other guests tried to escape, including by trying to climb down from their rooms using sheets and blankets.

"People on the upper floors were screaming. They hung down sheets ... Some tried to jump," Yelkovan said.

Yerlikaya said 45 of the 76 people killed have been identified while efforts to identify the other victims were continuing.

"Forty-five bodies were delivered to their families. We could not (immediately) identify the others," Yerlikaya said, adding that the emergency response teams would conduct a final search for victims on Wednesday.

Health Minister Kemal Memisoglu said at least one of the injured was in serious condition, while 17 other people were treated and released.

The hotel had 238 registered guests, Yerlikaya said. The fire was reported at 3:27 a.m. and the fire department began to respond at 4:15 a.m., he told reporters.

The government appointed six prosecutors to lead an investigation into the blaze, which is believed to have started in the hotel's restaurant section. Nine people have been detained as part of the investigation into the fire, Yerlikaya said. Earlier, Justice Minister Yilmaz Tunc said the hotel's owner was among the people detained for questioning in the probe.

At least two of the victims died when they jumped from the building in panic, Gov. Abdulaziz Aydin told the state-run Anadolu Agency earlier. Those killed included Nedim Turkmen, a columnist for Sozcu newspaper, his wife and two children, the newspaper announced.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced a day of national mourning to be observed on Wednesday. All flags at government buildings and Turkish diplomatic mission abroad would be lowered to half-staff, he said.

Necmi Kepcetutan, a ski instructor at the hotel, said he was asleep when the fire erupted and he rushed out of the building. He told NTV television that he then helped some 20 guests out of the hotel.

The hotel was engulfed in smoke, making it difficult for guests to locate the fire escape, he said.

"I cannot reach some of my students. I hope they are OK," the ski instructor told the station.

Television images showed the roof and top floors of the hotel on fire.

Witnesses and reports suggested that the hotel's fire detection system failed to operate.

"My wife smelled the burning. The alarm did not go off," said Yelkovan, the guest interviewed by IHA. "We tried to go upstairs but couldn't, there were flames. We went downstairs and came here (outside)," he said.

Yelkovan said it took about an hour for the firefighting teams to arrive.

NTV television suggested that the wooden cladding on the exterior of the hotel, in a chalet-style design, may have accelerated the spread of the fire.

Part of the 161-room hotel is on the side of a cliff, hampering efforts to combat the flames.

"Because the rear side is on a slope, intervention could only be made from the front and sides," Yerlikaya confirmed.

Tourism Minister Mehmet Nuri Ersoy told reporters that the hotel underwent inspections in 2021 and 2024 and that "no negative situation regarding fire competence" was reported by the fire department.

Earlier, in an address in Ankara, Erdogan said: "Unfortunately, we received very sad news this morning from Bolu, Kartalkaya. Our brothers and sisters were killed and injured in a fire that broke out in a hotel."

"All necessary steps will be taken to shed light on all aspects of the incident and to hold those responsible accountable," he added.

NTV showed a smoke-blackened lobby, its glass entrance and windows smashed, its wooden reception desk charred and a chandelier crashed to the ground.

Aydin's office said 30 fire trucks and 28 ambulances were sent to the site.

Other hotels at the resort were evacuated as a precaution and guests were placed in hotels around Bolu. Meanwhile, a gas explosion at a hotel at another ski resort in central Turkey injured four people. The explosion took place at the Yildiz Mountain Winter Sports Center in Sivas province. Two skiers and their instructor were slightly injured while another instructor received second-degree burns to the hands and face, the Sivas governor's office said.

South Korea to shrink biomass energy subsidies after criticism over link to deforestation

By VICTORIA MILKO Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — The South Korean government will reduce subsidies for biomass energy after rising domestic and international criticism of its link to deforestation. Environmental activists generally applauded the reforms but criticized loopholes and slow timelines for phasing out the subsidies.

"While not without caveats, (the) decision by the South Korean government demonstrates that large-scale biomass power has no place in a renewable energy future," Hansae Song, program lead at South Korea-based nongovernmental organization Solutions for Our Climate, said in an email to The Associated Press.

Biomass power, predominantly generated by burning wood, is growing globally as countries accelerate their transition to use cleaner energy — even though many scientists and environmentalists see it as problematic. In South Korea, it's the second-largest source of renewable energy.

South Korea has subsidized biomass energy with millions of dollars for more than a decade via their renewable energy certificates program. In a single recent the government gave approximately \$688 million to support power plants using biomass, according to a press release from South Korea's Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy.

Faced with limited domestic forest resources, South Korea's biomass power industry has structured its business model around importing large volumes of wood pellets at lower prices from forest-rich nations. In 2023, imports accounted for 82% of the country's wood pellet demand, making South Korea the world's third-largest importer of biomass fuels, after the United Kingdom and Japan. An AP report found that biomass imported from Indonesia was linked to deforestation of natural, intact forest.

"As the (biomass) market expanded, various issues emerged," the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy said in their press release. "Criticisms regarding forest degradation and carbon emissions associated with biomass power generation persist."

Under the revised policy, South Korea will not support any new biomass power plants. Subsidies for six existing state-owned plants co-firing coal and biomass will end this year, while the value of renewable energy certificates for three state-owned dedicated biomass plants will be phased down by 2027. At privately owned plants, subsidies for co-fired biomass from six plants will be phased out over the next decade, while subsidy weightings will be reduced for 12 dedicated biomass plants over the next 15 years.

But environmental activists are critical of loopholes in the new policy.

Domestically produced wood pellets and chips will still have the same level of support as before, including those co-fired with coal — which experts say could pose a threat to South Korea's forests. Power plants under construction or in planning with approved business permits are exempt from the new policy and subject to the phased reduction timelines for existing facilities.

State-owned co-firing facilities — which will lose their renewable energy certificates — currently account for only 10% of South Korea's biomass power fleet, while the phase-out of most private co-firing will take over a decade to complete under the new policy, said Solutions for Our Climate.

"This extends the life of thermal power plants — many with emissions per unit of energy higher than coal — beyond the Paris Agreement-aligned coal phase-out deadlines," Song wrote in an email to AP.

The South Korean Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy, Korea Forest Service and Ministry of Environment did not respond to requests for comment from AP.

Experts said South Korea's policy change could signal a shift in how countries consider and incorporate biomass as part of their own energy transitions.

"There has been a positive shift in terms of discourse around biomass subsidies," said Claire Squire, a research associate at the University of Maryland School of Public Policy Center for Global Sustainability. "Cutting subsidies won't necessarily fix everything, but potentially if they're constructed differently than they have in the past, that might be an improvement."

As countries accelerate their energy transitions, demand for biomass is growing: The use of bioenergy has increased an average of about 3% per year between 2010 and 2022, the International Energy Agency said.

Experts including the IEA say it's important for that demand to happen in a sustainable way, such as using waste and crop residue rather than converting forest land to grow bioenergy crops. Deforestation contributes to erosion, damages biodiverse areas, threatens wildlife and humans who rely on the forest and intensifies disasters from extreme weather.

Many scientists and environmentalists have rejected the use of biomass altogether. They say burning wood-based biomass can emit more carbon than coal and tree-cutting greatly reduces forests' ability to remove carbon from the atmosphere. Critics also say that using biomass to co-fire, instead of transitioning directly to clean energy, simply prolongs the use of coal.

Palestinians confront a landscape of destruction in Gaza's 'ghost towns'

By ABDEL KAREEM HANA and TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Palestinians in Gaza are confronting an apocalyptic landscape of devastation after a ceasefire paused more than 15 months of fighting between Israel and Hamas.

Across the tiny coastal enclave, where built-up refugee camps are interspersed between cities, drone footage captured by The Associated Press shows mounds of rubble stretching as far as the eye can see — remnants of the longest and deadliest war between Israel and Hamas in their blood-ridden history.

"As you can see, it became a ghost town," said Hussein Barakat, 38, whose home in the southern city of Rafah was flattened. "There is nothing," he said, as he sat drinking coffee on a brown armchair perched on the rubble of his three-story home, in a surreal scene.

Critics say Israel has waged a campaign of scorched earth to destroy the fabric of life in Gaza, accusations that are being considered in two global courts, including the crime of genocide. Israel denies those charges and says its military has been fighting a complex battle in dense urban areas and that it tries to avoid causing undue harm to civilians and their infrastructure.

Military experts say the reality is complicated.

"For a campaign of this duration, which is a year's worth of fighting in a heavily urban environment where you have an adversary that is hiding in amongst that environment, then you would expect an extremely high level of damage," said Matthew Savill, director of military sciences at the Royal United Services Institute, a British think-tank.

Savill said that it was difficult to draw a broad conclusion about the nature of Israel's campaign. To do so, he said, would require each strike and operation to be assessed to determine whether they adhered to the laws of armed conflict and whether all were proportional, but he did not think the scorched earth description was accurate.

International rights groups, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, view the vast destruction as part of a broader pattern of extermination and genocide directed at Palestinians in Gaza, a charge Israel denies. The groups dispute Israel's stance that the destruction was a result of military activity.

Human Rights Watch, in a November report accusing Israel of crimes against humanity, said "the destruction is so substantial that it indicates the intention to permanently displace many people."

From a fierce air campaign during the first weeks of the war, to a ground invasion that sent thousands of troops in on tanks, the Israeli response to a Hamas-led attack on Oct. 7, 2023, has ground down much of the civilian infrastructure of the Gaza Strip, displacing 90% of its population. The brilliant color of pre-war life has faded into a monotone cement gray that dominates the territory. It could take decades, if not more, to rebuild.

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A U.N. assessment from satellite imagery showed more than 60,000 structures across Gaza had been destroyed and more than 20,000 severely damaged in the war as of Dec. 1, 2024. The preliminary assessment of conflict-generated debris, including of buildings and roads, was over 50 million tons. It said the analysis had not yet been validated in the field.

Airstrikes throughout the war toppled buildings and other structures said to be housing militants. But the destruction intensified with the ground forces, who fought Hamas fighters in close combat in dense areas.

If militants were seen firing from an apartment building near a troop maneuver, forces might take the entire building down to thwart the threat. Tank tracks chewed up paved roads, leaving dusty stretches of earth in their wake.

The military's engineering corps was tasked with using bulldozers to clear routes, downing buildings seen as threats, and blowing up Hamas' underground tunnel network.

Experts say the operations to neutralize tunnels were extremely destructive to surface infrastructure. For example, if a 1.5-kilometer (1-mile) long tunnel was blown up by Israeli forces, it would not spare homes or buildings above, said Michael Milshtein, a former Israeli army intelligence officer.

"If (the tunnel) passes under an urban area, it all gets destroyed," he said. "There's no other way to destroy a tunnel."

Cemeteries, schools, hospitals and more were targeted and destroyed, he said, because Hamas was using these for military purposes. Secondary blasts from Hamas explosives inside these buildings could worsen the damage.

The way Israel has repeatedly returned to areas it said were under its control, only to have militants overrun it again, has exacerbated the destruction, Savill said.

That's evident especially in northern Gaza, where Israel launched a new campaign in early October that almost obliterated Jabaliya, a built up, urban refugee camp. Jabaliya is home to the descendants of Palestinians who fled, or were forced to flee, during the war that led to Israel's creation in 1948. Milshtein said Israel's dismantling of the tunnel network is also to blame for the destruction there.

But the destruction was not only caused from strikes on targets. Israel also carved out a buffer zone about a kilometer inside Gaza from its border with Israel, as well as within the Netzarim corridor that bisects north Gaza from the south, and along the Philadelphi Corridor, a stretch of land along Gaza's border with Egypt. Vast swaths in these areas were leveled.

Amir Avivi, a retired Israeli general, said the buffer zones were an operational necessity meant to carve out secure plots of land for Israeli forces. He denied Israel had cleared civilian areas indiscriminately.

The destruction, like the civilian death toll in Gaza, has raised accusations that Israel committed war crimes, which it denies. The decisions the military made in choosing what to topple, and why, are an important factor in that debate.

"The second militants move into a building and start using it to fire on you, you start making a calculation about whether or not you can strike," Savill said. Downing the building, he said, "still needs to be necessary."

In Jabaliya, Nizar Hussein hung a sheet over the shattered remains of his family's home, stepping gingerly around a large, leaning concrete slab.

"At the very least, we need years to get a house," he said. "It is a feeling that I cannot describe. Thank God (for everything)."

Pete Hegseth's former sister-in-law alleges abuse against second wife in affidavit to Senate

By FARNOUSH AMIRI and TARA COPP Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senators vetting the nomination of Pete Hegseth for defense secretary received an affidavit Tuesday from a former sister-in-law alleging that the onetime Fox News host was abusive to his second wife, to the point where she feared for her safety. Hegseth denies the allegations.

The sister-in-law, Danielle Hegseth, was formerly married to the nominee's brother, and in an affidavit obtained by The Associated Press, she said she believes that Pete Hegseth is "unfit" to run the Defense

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Department based on what she witnessed and heard. She said she first relayed her allegations to the FBI in December but was concerned that the information was not shared with Congress as senators consider Hegseth's nomination to lead the Pentagon.

The affidavit describes Hegseth's treatment of his second wife, Samantha, and alleges repeat drunkenness and a domestic situation where Samantha Hegseth had a safe word to indicate if she was in danger at home. Danielle Hegseth said Samantha texted that safe word to her sometime in 2015 or 2016, which prompted her to call a third party for help.

"I have chosen to come forward publicly, at significant personal sacrifice, because I am deeply concerned by what Hegseth's confirmation would mean for our military and our country," she said.

An attorney for Pete Hegseth vehemently denied the allegations. Tim Parlatore said the affidavit was filled with "belated claims" by an ex-relative with "an axe to grind against the entire Hegseth family."

"Sam has never alleged that there was any abuse, she signed court documents acknowledging that there was no abuse and recently reaffirmed the same during her FBI interview," Parlatore said in a statement. "Belated claims by Danielle Dietrich, an anti-Trump far left Democrat who is divorced from Mr. Hegseth's brother and never got along with the Hegseth family, do nothing to change that."

The affidavit was filed in response to a request from Sen. Jack Reed of Rhode Island, the top Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, who said he was seeking her statement to gain "personal knowledge about Mr. Hegseth's fitness to occupy this important position."

In the affidavit, Danielle Hegseth says she believes Hegseth's marriage to Samantha was abusive. She said Samantha in 2014 told her she once hid in her closet because she feared for her safety. She acknowledged she did "not personally witness physical or sexual abuse" by Pete Hegseth toward his wife.

"I believe what Samantha told me because what she told me is consistent with what I personally observed of Hegseth's erratic and aggressive behavior over many years," she said.

Neither Samantha Hegseth nor an attorney who represented her in divorce proceedings immediately responded to requests for comment. A lawyer for Danielle Hegseth noted that she wouldn't be commenting further than the affidavit.

In a statement to NBC News, which first reported on the affidavit, Samantha Hegseth said there "was no physical abuse in my marriage. This is the only further statement I will make to you, I have let you know that I am not speaking and will not speak on my marriage to Pete. Please respect this decision."

Samantha Hegseth and Pete Hegseth both signed a Minnesota court document in 2021 during their divorce saying neither claimed to be a victim of domestic abuse.

Republican leaders said they doubted the new allegations would change the votes of support they are lining up for Hegseth. They marched ahead with the nomination Tuesday evening, taking a key procedural step needed to confirm him by week's end.

"Looks like a desperate ploy by Democrats who are being driven by the far left because they know that we have the votes to confirm," said Sen. John Barrasso, the No. 2 GOP leader.

Asked if the new allegations changes the votes for Hegseth, he said: "No."

Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, said he was aware of the reported allegations and compared the situation to the claims made against Brett Kavanaugh during his own confirmation hearing, before he was eventually confirmed as a Supreme Court justice.

"I don't really have anything to offer," Cornyn said. "I was involved in the Kavanaugh hearings, where people came out of the closet making all sorts of false allegations."

Questions were raised before Hegseth's hearing last week about the scope of the FBI background check, which some said failed to include interviews with those who had raised allegations against him. Democrats pushed for a deeper FBI review that could be more broadly shared with senators.

During the hearing, Hegseth did not directly answer yes or no to questions about his drinking, instead saying the issue was part of an orchestrated smear campaign against him.

At the time, it was left to the Trump transition team to decide how much more information to pursue and share on Hegseth.

The information in the affidavit was not relayed to the leaders of the Armed Services Committee when FBI officials briefed them earlier this month on the results of Hegseth's background check, according to a person familiar with the contents of the briefing who was granted anonymity to discuss it.

"As I have said for months, the reports of Mr. Hegseth's history of alleged sexual assault, alcohol abuse, and public misconduct necessitate an exhaustive background investigation," Reed said in a statement Tuesday. "I have been concerned that the background check process has been inadequate, and this affidavit confirms my fears."

Hegseth was grilled by senators during his hearing about his behavior, including excessive drinking, extramarital affairs and allegations of sexual assault, which he has denied.

Hegseth has promised not to drink on the job and has denied a 2017 sex assault allegation but acknowledged paying the woman a settlement. He was going through a divorce at the time after having a child with a Fox News producer who became his current wife, according to court records and his social media posts.

In the affidavit, Danielle Hegseth also alleges that Pete Hegseth, while under the influence of alcohol and both were leaving a bar, repeatedly shouted "no means yes!"

"I took this to mean that, in his opinion, nonconsensual sex is ok," Danielle Hegseth said in the affidavit.

White House cheers release of two Americans freed in a swap with Taliban brokered by Biden, Qatar

By ZEKE MILLER, JON GAMBRELL and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A prisoner swap between the United States and Afghanistan's Taliban freed two Americans in exchange for a Taliban figure imprisoned for life in California on drug trafficking and terrorism charges, officials said Tuesday.

The deal to release two Americans, Ryan Corbett and William McKenty, was brokered by Joe Biden's administration before he left office Monday, according to a Trump administration official who was not authorized to comment publicly and requested anonymity.

The Taliban's Foreign Ministry in Kabul said the two U.S. citizens had been exchanged for Khan Mohammed, who was sentenced to two life terms in 2008.

Biden, who oversaw the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, on Monday handed power to President Donald Trump. The Taliban praised the swap as a step toward the "normalization" of ties between the U.S. and Afghanistan.

That is likely a tall order, as most countries still don't recognize the Taliban's rule and two other Americans are believed held. The Trump White House cheered the release and thanked Qatar for its assistance with the deal while pressing the Taliban to free other Americans.

"The Trump Administration will continue to demand the release of all Americans held by the Taliban, especially in light of the billions of dollars in U.S. aid they've received in recent years," White House National Security Council spokesperson Brian Hughes said in a statement.

U.S., Taliban and Qatar involved in the swap

Corbett, who had lived in Afghanistan with his family when the U.S.-backed government collapsed in 2021, was detained by the Taliban in August 2022 on a business trip.

"Our hearts are filled with overwhelming gratitude and praise to God for sustaining Ryan's life and bringing him back home after what has been the most challenging and uncertain 894 days of our lives," the family's statement said. They thanked both Trump and Biden.

Corbett's family also praised Qatari officials "for their vital role in facilitating Ryan's release, and for their visits to Ryan as the United States' Protecting Power in Afghanistan." Qatar has hosted negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban over the years.

A Qatar Foreign Ministry statement said those who were traded passed through Doha and that it hopes the deal "would pave the way for achieving further understandings" to resolve disputes peacefully.

It was unclear what McKenty was doing in Afghanistan.

Biden administration's effort to get a deal

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Before Biden left office, his administration had been trying to work out a deal to free Corbett, McKenty as well as George Glezmann and Mahmood Habibi, in exchange for Muhammad Rahim, one of the remaining detainees at the military prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

The Taliban had rejected multiple proposals that also would have included Glezmann and Habibi before accepting the deal to release Corbett and McKenty late last week following negotiations in Qatar, according to a former senior Biden administration official who was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on the condition of anonymity.

The official added that Biden officials found in past negotiations for American detainees in Russia that "one deal can make it easier to get future ones" and that the Trump administration should continue to push the Taliban for Glezmann and Habibi.

Russia had rejected proposals to include American Paul Whelan in separate prisoner swaps that freed Americans Trevor Reed and Britney Griner before ultimately including Whelan in a 24-person deal that included Wall Street Journalist Evan Gershkovich and others.

Glezmann, an airline mechanic from Atlanta, was taken by the Taliban's intelligence services in December 2022 while traveling through the country. Habibi, an Afghan-American businessman who worked as a contractor for a Kabul-based telecommunications company, also went missing in 2022. The Taliban have denied they have Habibi.

Habibi's family welcomed the exchange and said they were confident the Trump administration would make a "greater effort" to free him, expressing their frustration with the Biden team.

"We know they have evidence my brother is alive and in Taliban hands and it could have been influential in encouraging the Taliban to admit they have him," Habibi's brother Ahmed said in a statement shared by the nonprofit Global Reach.

Biden officials "refused to use" the evidence, he claimed. "We know Trump is about results and we have faith he will use every tool available to get Mahmood home."

The trade for Corbett and McKenty was originally supposed to take place Sunday night but had to be delayed until Tuesday because of logistical delays, including bad weather, the former Biden administration official said.

Taliban prisoner first convicted of narco-terrorism

Mohammed, 55, was a prisoner in California after his 2008 conviction. The Bureau of Prisons early Tuesday listed Mohammed as not being in their custody.

Hafiz Zia Ahmad Takal, a Taliban Foreign Ministry deputy spokesperson, said Mohammed had arrived in Afghanistan and was with his family. Photos released by the Taliban showed him being welcomed back in his home province of Nangarhar, in the country's east, with multicolored garlands.

Mohammed told Taliban-controlled media he had spent time behind bars in Bagram and in Washington.

"It's a joy seeing your family and coming to your homeland. The greatest joy is to come and join your Muslim brothers," he said.

He was detained on the battlefield in Nangarhar and later taken to the U.S. A federal jury convicted him on charges of securing heroin and opium that he knew were bound for the United States and, in doing so, assisting terrorism activity.

The Justice Department at the time referred to Mohammed as "a violent jihadist and narcotics trafficker" who "sought to kill U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan using rockets." He was the first person to be convicted on U.S. narco-terrorism laws.

Ahmed Rashid, the author of several books about Afghanistan and the Taliban, described Mohammed as the "biggest drugs smuggler the U.S. had to deal with and key funder of the Taliban."

Taliban try to gain international recognition

The Taliban called the exchange the result of "long and fruitful negotiations" with the U.S. and said it was a good example of solving problems through dialogue.

"The Islamic Emirate looks positively at the actions of the United States of America that help the normalization and development of relations between the two countries," it said.

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The Taliban have been trying to make inroads in being recognized, in part to escape the economic tailspin caused by their takeover. Billions in international funds were frozen, and tens of thousands of highly skilled Afghans fled the country and took their money with them.

However, some nations have welcomed Taliban officials, like the United Arab Emirates, home to Abu Dhabi and Dubai. On Tuesday, Emirati leader Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan again welcomed Taliban Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani, who also heads the Haqqani network, a powerful force within the group blamed for some of the bloodiest attacks against Afghanistan's former Western-backed government.

Haqqani is still wanted by the U.S. on a bounty of up to \$10 million over his involvement in an attack that killed an American citizen and other assaults. The meeting came even as the UAE maintains a close relationship with the U.S.

'Once in a lifetime' snow hits parts of the U.S. South

By ISABELLA O'MALLEY Associated Press

A winter storm sweeping through the U.S. South on Tuesday was dumping snow at levels millions of residents haven't seen before.

Moisture from the Gulf of Mexico was combining with a low-pressure system and chilly air to drop significant amounts of snow in some spots. That included 10.5 inches near Lafayette, Louisiana by Tuesday afternoon — within striking distance of the state record of 13 inches set in 1960.

The National Weather Service said 7 to 8 inches of snow had been reported in areas between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. New Orleans' old record was 2.7 inches set in 1963. In Texas, the Houston-Galveston area had 2 to 4 inches before midday.

The National Weather Service's Lake Charles, Louisiana, office issued its first-ever blizzard warning Tuesday. The NWS' Mobile office reposted video on X of two people having a snowball fight in Orange Beach, Alabama, just steps from the Gulf of Mexico.

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime event for a lot of these folks down there. For kids that have never had snowball fights ... they're going to have one," said Tom Kines, a meteorologist at the private weather company AccuWeather.

The U.S. Gulf Coast is far better known for its hurricanes — Houston, for example, was rocked by Hurricane Beryl in July — and it's a "fairly rare phenomenon" to see snow in the region, said Bradley Brokamp, meteorologist with the National Weather Service office in Houston. That's a combination seen a little more often in the Northeast, which gets snowy winters and the occasional tropical storm.

In Houston, the Yale Street Grill was virtually the only business open in one inner-city neighborhood. A couple of the restaurant's workers had time to venture outside and build a 3-foot tall snowman complete with carrot nose and scarf.

"I've seen all the storms. I've been through all the hurricanes. So, this has been really fun. I have a 4-year-old daughter at home who I'm ready to get back to so she can play in the snow," said Emma Kratky, a waitress and assistant manager.

It appeared Florida had broken its state snowfall record of 4 inches, set in Milton on March 6, 1954. The National Weather Service's Mobile office said Pensacola had gotten 5 inches.

That office also said Mobile's airport had gotten 6.2 inches, surpassing the old record of 5 inches set Jan. 24, 1881.

Even the double-digit snowfall near Lafayette was well short of the Valentine's Day snowstorm that struck parts of the Gulf Coast in 1895. That storm dumped 19 inches on Houston and 15.4 on Galveston.

Winter cold blasts and climate change

Meanwhile, cold is blanketing the majority of the continental U.S. thanks to a polar vortex disruption. The Arctic polar vortex is a band of strong winds above the North Pole that usually locks in extremely cold air, but right now is stretching south, allowing bone-chilling air to flow down. For example, parts of south central and southeast Texas are expected to see wind chills as low as 10 to 15 degrees into Wednesday, according to an extreme cold warning from the NWS.

Scientists say these stretching events are becoming more frequent and have been linked to the planet-warming emissions that humans are releasing. Studies report human-caused climate change is raising Arctic temperatures at an alarming rate and decreasing the pressure and temperature differences between cold Arctic air and warmer air underneath it, heightening the chance for polar vortex disruptions.

Israel's top general resigns over Oct. 7 failures, adding to pressure on Netanyahu

By MELANIE LIDMAN and AREF TUFAHA Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel's top general resigned Tuesday, taking responsibility for security failures tied to Hamas' surprise attack that triggered the war in Gaza and adding to pressure on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has delayed any public inquiry that could potentially implicate his leadership.

While a fragile new ceasefire in the Gaza Strip held, Israel launched a "significant and broad" military operation in the occupied West Bank, killing at least nine people and injuring 40, Palestinian officials said.

Lt. Gen. Herzl Halevi is the most senior Israeli figure to resign over the security and intelligence breakdown on Oct. 7, 2023, when thousands of Hamas-led militants carried out a land, sea and air assault into southern Israel, rampaging through army bases and nearby communities.

The attack — the single deadliest on Israel in its history — killed some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and the militants abducted another 250. More than 90 captives are still in Gaza, around a third believed to be dead.

Halevi's resignation, effective March 6, came days into the ceasefire with Hamas that could lead to an end to the 15-month war and the return of remaining captives. Maj. Gen. Yaron Finkelman, head of Israel's Southern Command, which oversees operations in Gaza, also resigned.

Their resignations will likely add to calls for a public inquiry into the Oct. 7 failures, something Netanyahu has said must wait until the war is over. Halevi's resignation letter noted that the military's investigations into those failures were "currently in their final stages."

And Halevi made his most explicit call yet for a public inquiry in comments to journalists, saying it would be "granted full transparency" by the military.

Halevi had appeared to be at odds with Israel's new defense minister, Israel Katz, over the direction of the war. He said Israel had accomplished most of its goals, while Katz echoed Netanyahu's vow to keep fighting until "total victory" over Hamas. Katz replaced the popular Yoav Gallant, who Netanyahu dismissed in a surprise announcement in November after growing disagreements over the war.

Another major operation in the West Bank

The ceasefire that started Sunday does not apply to the West Bank, where Israel announced new operation against Palestinian militants in Jenin. The city has seen repeated Israeli incursions and gunbattles with militants in recent years.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called on security forces to use "maximum restraint" in the West Bank, a spokesman said.

Israel captured the West Bank, Gaza and east Jerusalem in the 1967 Mideast war. The Palestinians seek an independent state encompassing all three territories.

The West Bank has seen a surge of violence during the war in Gaza. Israeli troops have carried out near-daily raids that often ignite gunbattles. There has also been a rise in attacks on Palestinians by Jewish extremists — including a rampage in two Palestinian villages overnight Monday — and Palestinian attacks on Israelis.

Hamas condemned the Israeli operation in Jenin, calling on Palestinians in the West Bank to step up attacks. The smaller and more radical Islamic Jihad militant group called it a "desperate attempt" by Netanyahu to save his governing coalition.

Netanyahu faces domestic criticism over ceasefire

Netanyahu faces criticism from far-right allies over the ceasefire, which requires Israeli troops to pull back from populated areas in Gaza and envisions the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, includ-

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ing militants convicted of involvement in deadly attacks on Israelis.

Hamas has already returned to the streets, showing that it remains in control of the territory despite the war killing tens of thousands of Palestinians — including some Hamas leaders — and causing widespread devastation.

The ceasefire's first phase is to last for six weeks, with 33 hostages gradually released. Three hostages and 90 prisoners were released Sunday, when it took effect. The next release is Saturday. Talks on the far more difficult second phase begin in two weeks.

One of Netanyahu's erstwhile partners, Itamar Ben-Gvir, quit the government on Sunday, weakening the coalition but still leaving Netanyahu with a parliamentary majority. Another far-right leader, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, has threatened to leave if Israel does not resume the war after the ceasefire's first phase.

Separately on Tuesday evening, Israel's emergency rescue service said four people were stabbed and wounded in Tel Aviv in what police described as a terror attack. Police said the attacker, a 28-year old "foreign national," was killed by security forces at the scene.

New bodies found in Gaza

With the calm of the ceasefire, emergency responders looked through rubble for bodies they had been unable to reach before.

"We retrieved 120 decomposed bodies over the past two days," civil defense worker Haitham Hams told The Associated Press in the southern city of Rafah, as colleagues unearthed a thigh bone and a pair of pants.

Israel's military campaign has killed over 47,000 Palestinians in Gaza, according to local health authorities, who say women and children make up more than half of the fatalities but do not say how many of the dead were fighters. Halevi on Tuesday said close to 20,000 militants had been killed, without providing evidence.

Gaza's Health Ministry said 72 bodies had been taken to hospitals in the past 24 hours, almost all of them recovered from attacks before the ceasefire. An unknown number of bodies remain unreachable because they are in northern Gaza, where access remains restricted, or in buffer zones where Israeli forces are.

Nearly 900 trucks of aid entered Gaza on the third day of the ceasefire Tuesday, the United Nations said — significantly higher than the 600 trucks called for in the deal — in a rush to supply food, medicines and other needs it has described as "staggering" for the population of over 2 million people.

"Most importantly, we want things that will warm us in winter," one of the many displaced Palestinians, Mounir Abu Seiam, said Tuesday as people gathered in the southern city of Khan Younis to receive food.

22 states sue to stop Trump's order blocking birthright citizenship

By MIKE CATALINI Associated Press

Attorneys general from 22 states sued Tuesday to block President Donald Trump's move to end a century-old immigration practice known as birthright citizenship guaranteeing that U.S.-born children are citizens regardless of their parents' status.

Trump's roughly 700-word executive order, issued late Monday, amounts to a fulfillment of something he's talked about during the presidential campaign. But whether it succeeds is far from certain amid what is likely to be a lengthy legal battle over the president's immigration policies and a constitutional right to citizenship.

The Democratic attorneys general and immigrant rights advocates say the question of birthright citizenship is settled law and that while presidents have broad authority, they are not kings.

"The president cannot, with a stroke of a pen, write the 14th Amendment out of existence, period," New Jersey Attorney General Matt Platkin said.

The White House said it's ready to face the states in court and called the lawsuits "nothing more than an extension of the Left's resistance."

"Radical Leftists can either choose to swim against the tide and reject the overwhelming will of the people, or they can get on board and work with President Trump," White House deputy press secretary Harrison Fields said.

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Connecticut Attorney General William Tong, a U.S. citizen by birthright and the nation's first Chinese American elected attorney general, said the lawsuit was personal for him.

"The 14th Amendment says what it means, and it means what it says — if you are born on American soil, you are an American. Period. Full stop," he said.

"There is no legitimate legal debate on this question. But the fact that Trump is dead wrong will not prevent him from inflicting serious harm right now on American families like my own."

What is birthright citizenship?

At issue in these cases is the right to citizenship granted to anyone born in the U.S., regardless of their parents' immigration status. People in the United States on a tourist or other visa or in the country illegally can become the parents of a citizen if their child is born here.

It's enshrined in the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, supporters say. But Trump and allies dispute the reading of the amendment and say there need to be tougher standards on becoming a citizen.

The U.S. is among about 30 countries where birthright citizenship — the principle of *jus soli* or "right of the soil" — is applied. Most are in the Americas, and Canada and Mexico are among them. Most other countries confer citizenship based on whether at least one parent — *jus sanguinis*, or "right of blood" — is a citizen, or have a modified form of birthright citizenship that may restrict automatic citizenship to children of parents who are on their territory legally.

What does Trump's order say?

Trump's order questions that the 14th Amendment extends citizenship automatically to anyone born in the United States.

Ratified in 1868 in the aftermath of the Civil War, the 14th Amendment says: "All persons born or naturalized in the United States and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside."

Trump's order asserts that the children of noncitizens are not subject to the jurisdiction of the United States. It excludes the following people from automatic citizenship: those whose mothers were not legally in the United States and whose fathers were not U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents, and people whose mothers were in the country legally but on a temporary basis and whose fathers were not citizens or legal permanent residents.

It goes on to bar federal agencies from recognizing the citizenship of people in those categories. It takes effect 30 days from Tuesday, on Feb. 19.

It's not clear whether the order would retroactively affect birthright citizens. It says that federal agencies "shall" not issue citizenship documents to the people it excludes or accept other documents from states or local governments.

What is the history of the issue?

The 14th Amendment did not always guarantee birthright citizenship to all U.S.-born people. Congress did not authorize citizenship for all Native Americans born in the United States until 1924.

In 1898 an important birthright citizenship case unfolded in the U.S. Supreme Court. The court held that Wong Kim Ark, who was born in San Francisco to Chinese immigrants, was a U.S. citizen because he was born in the country. After a trip abroad, he had faced denied reentry by the federal government on the grounds that he wasn't a citizen under the Chinese Exclusion Act.

But some advocates of immigration restrictions have argued that while the case clearly applied to children born to parents who are both legal immigrants, it's less clear whether it applies to children born to parents without legal status.

The issue of birthright citizenship arose in Arizona — one of the states suing to block Trump's order — during 2011 when Republican lawmakers considered a bill that would have challenged automatic birthright citizenship. Supporters said then that the goal wasn't to get every state in the nation to enact such a law, but rather to bring the dispute to the courts. The bill never made it out of the Legislature.

What has the reaction to Trump's order been?

In addition to the states, the District of Columbia and San Francisco, immigrant rights groups are also

suing to stop Trump's order.

Chapters of the American Civil Liberties Union in New Hampshire, Maine and Massachusetts along with other immigrant rights advocates filed a suit in New Hampshire federal court.

The suit asks the court to find the order to be unconstitutional. It highlights the case of a woman identified as "Carmen," who is pregnant but is not a citizen. The lawsuit says she has lived in the United States for more than 15 years and has a pending visa application that could lead to permanent status. She has no other immigration status, and the father of her expected child has no immigration status either, the suit says.

"Stripping children of the 'priceless treasure' of citizenship is a grave injury," the suit says. "It denies them the full membership in U.S. society to which they are entitled."

In addition to New Jersey and the two cities, California, Massachusetts, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Wisconsin joined the lawsuit to stop the order.

Arizona, Illinois, Oregon and Washington filed a separate suit in federal court challenging Trump's order as well.

Marco Rubio became secretary of state without a hitch. Keeping Trump's favor may be harder

By FARNOUSH AMIRI and MATT BROWN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — For Marco Rubio, the easy part is over. He was confirmed by the Senate as secretary of state with unanimous support, Democrats joining Republicans in praising his acumen and judgment.

Now comes the task that will make or break his tenure: retaining the full backing of his new boss, Donald Trump.

The 53-year-old Rubio is coming into the job with more experience than President Trump's previous secretaries of state, having spent the last 14 years in the Senate becoming intimately acquainted with U.S. foreign policy from the Indo-Pacific to the Middle East and Latin America. But that traditional experience, coupled with Rubio's longstanding hawkish views on Russia and support for America's role in NATO, is what some worry will eventually make him the target of Trump's wrath.

"Rubio is going to face some challenges as he and the president try to come to terms about what is the purpose of American power?" said Thomas Shannon, a former U.S. diplomat, who often worked with Rubio during both the Obama and the first Trump administrations.

Still, it was a collegial scene Tuesday as Rubio was sworn into office. Vice President JD Vance, who served alongside him in the Senate, called him a friend and a "bipartisan solutions seeker" as he delivered the oath.

Rubio echoed Trump in his own brief remarks, emphasizing that anything the government and State Department do must make the country stronger, safer or more prosperous.

"If it doesn't do one of those three things, we will not do it," Rubio said.

He repeated that sentiment as he made his first appearance at the State Department, telling staffers that his job, and theirs, would be to defend and execute Trump's "America First" policies.

Rubio's support in Washington has an establishment tinge, with many hopeful he will prove a steady hand at a time of global upheaval. In interviews with more than a dozen people, including Republican and Democratic lawmakers, as well as former diplomats and colleagues, he was repeatedly described as the "responsible" choice to represent the U.S. abroad, a known quantity both at home and on the global stage.

"I think he'll be able to deliver that message, country by country, continent by continent, and that's uncompromising, but also that's comforting," said Sen. Kevin Cramer, a Republican from North Dakota. "Not that I'm looking for every other country to be comfortable with us, but in a way that I think is not alarming."

Rubio's worldview has been largely shaped by his own history: the son of Cuban immigrants who arrived in Miami in May 1956 "with nothing but the dream of a better life," he testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last week. His father was a bartender and his mother a hotel maid.

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"Because of them, I had the privilege to be born a citizen of the greatest nation in the history of the world," he said. "And to be raised in a safe and stable home, by parents who made their children's future the very purpose of their lives."

The "only in America" story is one that helped him get elected to public office in Florida, making his way from city commissioner to the Florida House of Representatives, eventually becoming the first Cuban American speaker in the Legislature's history.

When Rubio became speaker, "it was a very big deal. I think the ceremony was projected towards Cuba, whether they wanted to hear it or not," said Dan Gelber, who served as Democratic leader at the same time. He said that he and Rubio remained friends over the years despite "severe disagreements about policy."

"He was never a jerk. He was always respectful of the process and our voice," Gelber said. "It was sort of the way I always thought a partisan government should operate."

Rubio's rise continued in 2010 as he was elected to the Senate as part of the "tea party" wave of outsiders taking on Washington. His first Senate speech focused on the "American miracle" that brings immigrants from all around the world to the U.S. to "leave their children better off than themselves."

A few years later, he was part of a bipartisan group that advocated for allowing a path to citizenship for immigrants in the country illegally. He played a key role in crafting a sweeping, bipartisan immigration bill that passed the Senate but went nowhere in the House, defeated by a fierce conservative backlash.

In the decade since, Rubio's views on immigration have shifted toward the hard-line stance of Trump, who on Monday made good on his campaign pledge to aggressively pursue deportations and restrict entry into the United States in his second term.

In his confirmation hearing, Rubio echoed Trump's dark vision of America's immigration system, saying that "despots and narco-terrorists" have taken advantage of "open borders to drive mass migration, traffic women and children, and flood our communities with fentanyl and violent criminals."

It was a remarkable tone for Rubio, who is working overtime to ensure there is no daylight between his public statements and Trump's. While his colleagues across the aisle believe that he is conforming to Trump's rhetoric, they're hopeful he will maintain some of his mainstream views.

"I think Marco is a hawk, but he's also an internationalist, and I think the challenge for him will be to maintain the long bipartisan tradition of America being indispensable in world affairs," said Sen. Brian Schatz, a Hawaii Democrat who served with Rubio on the Foreign Relations Committee. "And there are people in the Trump world who want us to run away from being the leaders of the free world. And I'm hoping that Marco's instincts towards American strength will win the day."

Both sides agree that it will be Trump who decides if Rubio is MAGA enough to remain a member of his administration and represent his views around the world. He unceremoniously fired his first secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, via tweet, and has long made clear he views foreign policy as his domain.

Rubio is also no stranger to Trump's fury. The two men exchanged schoolyard jabs during the 2016 Republican primary with the president labeling him "little Marco." Rubio responded by insulting the size of Trump's hands and calling him a "con artist" and "vulgar."

Asked if he believes Rubio can last in the job, Rep. Michael McCaul, who until recently served as chair- man of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, gave a nod to past turmoil.

"Well, it is the Trump administration," McCaul said. "But I think he's a survivor."

Beneath a veneer of calm, Trump's inauguration holds warning signs for US democracy

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

All the living former presidents were there and the outgoing president amicably greeted his successor, who gave a speech about the country's bright future and who left to the blare of a brass band.

At first glance, President Donald Trump's second inauguration seemed like a continuation of the country's nearly 250-year-long tradition of peaceful transfers of power, essential to its democracy. And there was

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much to celebrate: Trump won a free and fair election last fall, and his supporters hope he will be able to fix problems at the border, end the war in Ukraine and get inflation under control.

Still, on Monday, the warning signs were clear.

Due to frigid temperatures, Trump's swearing-in was held in the Capitol Rotunda, where rioters seeking to keep him in power the last time roamed during the Jan. 6, 2021, attack. Trump walked into the space from the hall leading to the building's west front tunnel, where some of the worst hand-to-hand combat between Trump supporters and police occurred that day.

After giving a speech pledging that "never again" would the government "persecute political opponents," Trump then gave a second, impromptu address to a crowd of supporters. The president lamented that his inaugural address had been sanitized, said he would shortly pardon the Jan. 6 rioters and fumed at last-minute preemptive pardons issued by outgoing President Joe Biden to the members of the congressional committee that investigated the attack.

"I did have a couple of things to say that were extremely controversial," Trump told the crowd in the Capitol's Emancipation Hall. It was the same space that had filled with rows of National Guard troops sleeping on the hard floors for weeks in the aftermath of the Jan. 6 attack.

Hours later, Trump followed through on a campaign promise to pardon those involved in the attack — some 1,500 of his supporters, including ones who had assaulted police officers. That came after an extraordinary pardon issued by Biden — announced by the White House as he greeted Trump at the inaugural ceremony — for several members of Biden's extended family. The 11th hour Biden pardons were a response to Trump's continual threats to carry out a campaign of retribution against his political opponents.

The head-spinning developments of Trump's first day back in power suggested there will be no lack of controversy during his second term.

"The form is normal," Rick Hasen, a University of California, Los Angeles law professor, said of Trump's inaugural. "The substance is not."

Hasen said the pardons of those who tried to violently overturn the results of the 2020 election were particularly worrying.

"It's harder to imagine a greater affront to the rule of law than to give pardons to those who tried to overthrow the government," he said.

Andy Craig, a fellow at the Institute for Humane Studies at George Mason University, was aghast that Trump received the full, respectful pomp and circumstance of a peaceful transition that he tried to deny Biden. "This is a surreal situation in a lot of ways and I get there is no rulebook to follow, but I think people are frustrated, rightly so, with a tone deaf 'everything is normal' approach," Craig said.

Even after regaining the highest office in the land, Trump continued to lie about his 2020 election loss. He didn't mention it in his formal address, but in his impromptu, second speech, Trump falsely contended it was only due to voter fraud and that if votes were counted accurately he would win California, a state he lost by more than 3.2 million votes.

The celebration of the peaceful transfer of power kicked off just before noon Monday with both Trump and Biden present. That was a stark difference from last time, when Trump didn't attend the event to hand over power to Biden.

Democratic Sen. Amy Klobuchar kicked off the speeches because she chairs the joint congressional inaugural committee. She pronounced that the theme was "our enduring democracy." It was a fairly anodyne line and in other circumstances would be a fairly routine speech, but had a stark implication given the setting.

Klobuchar spoke about how "in other countries" the festivities might be in a presidential palace, but the United States holds them at "the people's house," the Capitol complex. She concluded by recognizing the firefighters battling blazes in Southern California.

"Our democracy's strength and grit must match theirs," Klobuchar said.

The day began with a reminder of the unprecedented dynamic that Trump's return has created. Biden preemptively pardoned Dr. Anthony Fauci, former Gen. Mark Milley — a vocal Trump critic whom the new president has suggested should be executed — and the congressional Jan. 6 committee members, staff and officers who provided them testimony.

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Among them was former Rep. Liz Cheney, one of the few Republicans to challenge Trump and who had been targeted for prosecution by her former Republican colleagues in the U.S. House. During his second speech, Trump again dug at Cheney, calling her "a crying lunatic."

"These are exceptional circumstances, and I cannot in good conscience do nothing," Biden said about his blanket pardons. "Even when individuals have done nothing wrong — and in fact have done the right thing — and will ultimately be exonerated, the mere fact of being investigated or prosecuted can irreparably damage reputations and finances."

Former Metropolitan Police Officer Michael Fanone, who lost consciousness and suffered a heart attack after a rioter shocked him with a stun gun, was one of the officers who received a last-minute Biden pardon because he testified before the Jan. 6 committee.

Fanone said he learned about the pardon from a Washington Post reporter who called him Monday morning.

"I haven't digested it," he later told The Associated Press. "I just can't believe that this is my country."

AP Top 25: Ohio St, Notre Dame are 1-2 in final poll; Mississippi and BYU ahead of playoff teams

By ERIC OLSON AP College Football Writer

Ohio State was No. 1 in the final Associated Press Top 25 college football poll of the season Tuesday after beating Notre Dame for its first national championship since 2014.

The Buckeyes (14-2) received every first-place vote following their mostly dominant run through the College Football Playoff. The Irish (14-2) finished No. 2 for their highest end-of-season ranking since 1993.

Oregon (13-1), which had been No. 1 in eight straight polls entering the playoff, lost to Ohio State in the Rose Bowl quarterfinal and finished No. 3. The Ducks' previous high final ranking was No. 2 in 2014.

Texas (13-3) and Penn State (13-3), which both reached the semifinals, rounded out the top five. The Longhorns finished in the top five for a second straight year for the first time since 2008-09. The Nittany Lions ended in the top five for the first time since 2005.

It's the first time the Big Ten has had three teams in the final top five.

No. 6 Georgia (13-3) was followed by Arizona State (11-3), Boise State (12-2), Tennessee (10-3) and Indiana (11-2).

No. 11 Mississippi (10-3), which closed with an impressive Gator Bowl win over Duke, and No. 13 BYU (11-2), which routed Colorado in the Alamo Bowl, were ranked ahead of two playoff teams from the ACC, SMU and Clemson.

SMU (11-3) stayed at No. 12 ahead of No. 14 Clemson (10-4), even though it lost to the Tigers in the ACC championship game and by four touchdowns to Penn State in the first round of the playoff. The Mustangs' final ranking was their highest since they were eighth in 1984. Clemson, which lost to Texas in the first round, has been ranked in the final poll every year since 2011.

Alabama took the biggest fall, six spots to No. 17. The Crimson Tide dropped two of their last three under first-year coach Kalen DeBoer, including a 19-13 bowl loss to Michigan. The Tide come out of the season with their lowest ranking since Gene Stallings' 1995 team was No. 21.

Ohio State had its lowest ranking of the season, at No. 7, following its 13-10 loss to 21-point-underdog Michigan on Nov. 30. The Buckeyes went into the playoff No. 6 and played their best ball of the season, beating Tennessee 42-17, Oregon 41-21, Texas 28-14 and Notre Dame 34-23 in the championship game in Atlanta on Tuesday night.

The Buckeyes won their sixth AP national championship. They also won in 1942, 1954, 1968, 2002 and 2014.

Poll points

Ohio State's five-spot promotion to No. 1 matched the biggest in the final poll. Mississippi and No. 16 Illinois (10-3) also jumped five spots.

The Southeastern Conference's seven teams in the final Top 25 are the most since 2013.

Big 12 champion Arizona State (11-3) has its highest final ranking since the 1996 Rose Bowl team was No. 4.

Mountain West champion Boise State finished in the top 10 for the first time since 2011.

No. 23 UNLV (11-3), which matched its school record for wins, is ranked at the end of the season for the first time.

No teams that were ranked in the previous poll Dec. 8 were voted out of the Top 25.

Conference call

SEC — 7 (Nos. 4, 6, 9, 11, 17, 19, 22)

Big Ten — 5 (Nos. 1, 3, 5, 10, 16).

ACC — 4 (Nos. 12, 14, 18, 20).

Big 12 — 4 (Nos. 7, 13, 15, 25).

AAC — 2 (Nos. 21, 24).

Mountain West — 2 (Nos. 8, 23).

Independent — 1 (No. 2).

Australian Open: Novak Djokovic beats Carlos Alcaraz and gets closer to a 25th Grand Slam title

By HOWARD FENDRICH AP Tennis Writer

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — Novak Djokovic refused to let anything stop his pursuit of a record 25th Grand Slam trophy in the Australian Open quarterfinals. Not a problem with his left leg. Not an early deficit. And not the kid across the net, Carlos Alcaraz, who was making things difficult and eyeing his own bit of history.

Djokovic overcame it all, just as he has so often along the way to so many triumphs, moving into the semifinals at Melbourne Park for the 12th time with a 4-6, 6-4, 6-3, 6-4 victory over Alcaraz in a scintillating showdown Tuesday night between a pair of stars born 16 years apart and at opposite ends of their careers.

"I just wish that this match today was the final," Djokovic said. "One of the most epic matches I've played on this court. On any court."

The action was non-stop, the shot-making brilliant, even as the encounter stretched on for more than 3 1/2 hours and nearly to 1 a.m. — never more so, perhaps, than when Alcaraz saved a break point in the fourth set. The 33-stroke exchange was the longest of the evening, and when it ended with Djokovic sailing a forehand long, the capacity crowd at Rod Laver Arena went wild. Djokovic reached for his bothersome leg and yelled toward his entourage; Alcaraz, his chest heaving, leaned on a towel box and grinned.

Turned out that only delayed the final result.

With his wife, son and daughter cheering in the stands — Dad joked about the late hour afterward — the No. 7-seeded Djokovic prevailed thanks to the sort of remarkable returning and no-mistakes-made groundstrokes against Alcaraz that Big Three rivals Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal dealt with for years.

"I felt like I was controlling the match, and I let him get into the match again," Alcaraz said. "When Novak is at this level, it's really difficult."

Djokovic enjoyed some of his own best efforts in the latter stages, pointing to his ear or blowing kisses or spreading his arms while puffing out his chest. There was the forehand winner on a 22-stroke point that earned the break for a 5-3 lead in the third set. There was that set's last point, which included a back-to-the-net sprint to chase down a lob. Alcaraz wasn't shy, either, shouting "Vamos!" and pumping his fists after one particularly booming forehand in the fourth set.

When the match ended, Djokovic yelled toward his team's box, before giving his coach, Andy Murray, a hug. Then Djokovic applauded for No. 3 seed Alcaraz as he left the court.

"I'm sure we are going to see a lot of him," Djokovic said. "Maybe not as much as I would like."

On Friday, Djokovic's 50th major semifinal will come against No. 2 seed Alexander Zverev, a two-time runner-up at majors who beat No. 12 Tommy Paul 7-6 (1), 7-6 (0), 2-6, 6-1. Djokovic said he hopes he can recover in time to face Zverev at full strength.

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This was the eighth Djokovic vs. Alcaraz meeting, but the first at the Australian Open — and the first that wasn't in the semifinal or final. Zverev called it "a clash of generations" between "two of the best players that probably ever touched a tennis racket."

Hard to find the hyperbole.

At 37, Djokovic is undoubtedly past his prime, yes, but no man has won more Australian Open championships than his 10 or more Grand Slam singles titles than his 24. At 21, Alcaraz is unlikely yet to have reached his peak, yes, but no man ever had reached No. 1 in the rankings as a teen until he did or collected major trophies on three different surfaces by his age.

Alcaraz hasn't been shy about hoping to complete a career Grand Slam by adding a victory in Australia to the two he owns from Wimbledon — beating Djokovic in the finals in 2023 and 2024 — and the one apiece from the U.S. Open and French Open. Djokovic made getting an Olympic gold medal for Serbia his priority in 2024 and succeeded at the Paris Games last August — beating Alcaraz in the final — and otherwise cares mainly about the majors.

"Every time that we play against other, I think a show is guaranteed," Alcaraz said. "I'm just lucky I get to live this experience."

Djokovic had something else on his mind lately: He was angry about insulting on-air remarks made by an Australian TV commentator, and refused to speak to the host country's official tournament broadcaster on Sunday. Djokovic got the apologies he sought from the channel and its employee on Monday, and made it known he was ready to focus on facing Alcaraz.

But at 4-all, Djokovic grabbed at his thigh and crouched down after stretching for a shot. He finished that game but lost it, before taking a medical timeout. When play resumed, his left thigh was taped, and Alcaraz served out that set. Anyone who thought Djokovic might go gently into the night is not familiar with his game. He began attacking Alcaraz's serves relentlessly and, soon, the second set was his. Alcaraz acknowledged after the match he was distracted by Djokovic's injury and regretted not trying to push him to the limit.

"If I lost that second set, I don't know if I would continue playing," Djokovic said, crediting painkillers from the tournament doctor with helping him feel better.

There was nary an empty blue seat in the stadium, and fans repeatedly cried out between points, drawing a stern, "Enough. Thank you," from chair umpire Eva Asderaki-Moore.

While the ball was in play, though, it got quite quiet, the hush pierced only by the squawks of seagulls flying overhead or the squeaks of sneakers or the "Aaahs" and "Ooohs" of impressed ticket-holders during electric exchanges.

Djokovic and Alcaraz showed off their skills as the temperature dipped below 70 degrees Fahrenheit (20 Celsius) and wind gusted at 30 mph (nearly 50 kph), rippling Djokovic's blue shirt (although not Alcaraz's tighter-fitting sleeveless number).

Both tracked down shots they had no business getting to. Both went from defense to offense and conjured up winners out of nowhere. Both did much more, too, such as Alcaraz's well-disguised drop shots or Djokovic's marvelous returns, including two winners that closed the second set.

But it was Djokovic who was better on this memorable night.

Today in History: January 22, Supreme Court issues Roe v. Wade decision

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Wednesday, Jan. 22, the 22nd day of 2025. There are 343 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Jan. 22, 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court, in its Roe v. Wade decision, declared a nationwide constitutional right to abortion. (The court would overrule Roe v. Wade in 2022, in the decision Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization.)

Also on this date:

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In 1901, Britain's Queen Victoria died at age 81 after a reign of more than 63 years; she was succeeded by her eldest son, Edward VII.

In 1944, during World War II, Allied forces began landing at Anzio, Italy.

In 1947, America's first commercially licensed television station west of the Mississippi, KTLA-TV in Los Angeles, made its official debut.

In 1953, the Arthur Miller drama "The Crucible" opened at the Martin Beck Theatre in New York.

In 1973, former President Lyndon B. Johnson died at his Texas ranch at the age of 64.

In 1998, Theodore Kaczynski pleaded guilty in Sacramento, California, to being the Unabomber responsible for three deaths and 23 injuries in return for a sentence of life in prison without parole.

In 2006, Kobe Bryant scored 81 points, the second-highest single-game point total in NBA history, in the Los Angeles Lakers' 122-104 victory over the Toronto Raptors.

In 2008, actor Heath Ledger, age 28, was found dead of an accidental prescription overdose in a New York City apartment.

Today's birthdays: Celebrity chef Graham Kerr (TV: "The Galloping Gourmet") is 91. Singer Steve Perry is 76. Film director Jim Jarmusch is 72. Actor Linda Blair is 66. Actor Diane Lane is 60. DJ Jazzy Jeff is 60. Celebrity chef Guy Fieri is 57. Actor Olivia d'Abo is 56. Actor Gabriel Macht is 53. Actor Balthazar Getty is 50. Rapper Logic is 35. Actor Sami Gayle is 29. WNBA point guard Caitlin Clark is 23.