

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Friday, Feb. 7

Senior Menu: Scalloped potato with ham, beets, fruited Jell-O, whole wheat bread.

Girls Wrestling at Yankton, 9 a.m.

Boys Basketball at Vermillion: C game at 4 p.m., JV at 5 p.m., varsity to follow.

JH Boys Basketball at Waubay, 7th grade only, 4:30 p.m.

Boys Wrestling at Lyman, 6 p.m.

## Saturday, Feb. 8

Girls Basketball at DAK XII/NEC Clash at Madison. Groton Area vs. Elk Point-Jefferson at 2:45 p.m.

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

**Groton Daily Independent**

**PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445**

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



## Sunday, Feb. 9

### SUPER BOWL SUNDAY

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

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion/milestones/Souper Bowl of Caring, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.

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

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

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

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

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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.**

## Sanctuary City Suit

The Justice Department sued Illinois, Chicago, and Cook County yesterday over their laws limiting the involvement of local police in the enforcement of federal immigration policies, areas commonly known as "sanctuary" jurisdictions. The lawsuit came a day after newly sworn-in Attorney General Pam Bondi called for such regions to be federally defunded.

At least a dozen states and hundreds of cities—including New York and California—have statutes prohibiting local law enforcement, to some degree, from cooperating with federal requests to detain migrants or provide information on noncitizens. Such laws ostensibly serve to cultivate trust between immigrant communities and authorities, though critics claim they allow cities and states to flout federal authority.

The tensions hinge on legal questions around whether the federal government can commandeer states to fulfill its obligations, known as the anticommandeering doctrine. The Trump administration argues federal power preempts such state laws.

## Chiefs vs. Eagles

Super Bowl festivities kick into high gear today in New Orleans, ahead of Sunday's title game between the Kansas City Chiefs and the Philadelphia Eagles (6:30 pm ET, Fox). The pair faced off in a dramatic championship matchup two years ago, with Kansas City winning 38-35 on a last-second field goal.

Led by star quarterback Patrick Mahomes, the Chiefs look to become the first team to win three straight Super Bowls (the Green Bay Packers won three straight NFL championships leading into the Super Bowl era). They'll face a dual threat in Philadelphia quarterback Jalen Hurts and running back Saquon Barkley, who combined for seven touchdowns in a rout of Washington two weeks ago.

Hip-hop star Kendrick Lamar, fresh off winning five Grammys, will perform at halftime, with an appearance from R&B singer SZA.

## Shen Yun Probe

Federal authorities have launched a criminal investigation into Shen Yun, a New York-based Chinese dance group run by the Falun Gong religious movement, for potential visa fraud and labor violations, according to The New York Times yesterday.

The investigation follows a report in 2024 alleging Shen Yun exploited young dancers by subjecting them to extensive work hours for below minimum wage. A former dancer filed a lawsuit in November, accusing the company of trafficking children, confiscating passports, and exploiting performers. The group says labor laws don't apply to their student performers as they are not working employees. Part of the investigation is also whether the group arranged romantic relationships for its performers.

Shen Yun, known for its anticommunist stance and connection to The Epoch Times, had assets totaling \$266M at the end of 2023. Authorities have allegedly sought information about the group's financial and labor practices, including possible directions for performers to smuggle cash into the US.

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## Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Buffalo Bills' Josh Allen edges Baltimore Ravens Lamar Jackson to win NFL's Most Valuable Player award. NCAA bans transgender athletes from competing in women's sports a day after President Donald Trump's executive order.

Irv Gotti, music producer and founder of record label for major acts like Ashanti and Ja Rule, dies at age 54.

Virginia Halas McCaskey, longtime owner of the Chicago Bears, dies at age 102.

Shohei Ohtani's ex-interpreter sentenced to 57 months in prison after admitting to stealing nearly \$17M from Ohtani to cover gambling debts.

## Science & Technology

AI researchers train a reasoning model for under \$50 in computing credits using a technique known as distillation on an earlier version of Google's Gemini.

Humpback whale songs follow the same basic structure as human language; vocalizations obey Zipf's law, which states the most common words follow a power distribution.

Personalized cancer vaccine shows promising results in early study in patients with kidney cancer; genetic material from each person's individual tumor was used to develop their treatments.

## Business & Markets

US stock markets close mixed (S&P 500 +0.4%, Dow -0.3%, Nasdaq +0.5%).

Peloton shares close up 12% after beating sales forecasts.

Coach parent Tapestry shares close up 12% to all-time high after topping sales estimates.

Honeywell to split into three companies, separating its aerospace unit from its automation business and spinning off its advanced materials arm.

Amazon tops Q4 earnings estimates; shares fall after hours on lowered Q1 guidance.

Bank of England cuts key interest rate by quarter-point to 4.5%—the lowest level since mid-2023—and halves 2025 economic growth outlook to 0.75%.

## Politics & World Affairs

Federal judge extends deadline for Trump administration's buyout offer to government workers to at least Monday, pending court hearing.

Federal workers union sues to block shutdown of US Agency for International Development.

Russell Vought, coauthor of Project 2025 policy roadmap, confirmed to lead Office of Management and Budget.

"60 Minutes" releases unedited transcripts of October interview with former Vice President Kamala Harris, which triggered a \$10B lawsuit from President Donald Trump, who claims CBS doctored the interview and should be terminated.

US Army helicopter that collided with an American Airlines jet and led to deaths of 67 people last week had key surveillance system turned off, officials say.

## GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT #06-6

### School Board Meeting

February 10, 2025 – 7:00 PM – GHS Conference Room

#### AGENDA:

1. Call to Order with members present. Approve agenda as proposed or amended.

#### POTENTIAL CONFLICTS DISCLOSURE PURSUANT SDCL 23-3

#### CONSENT AGENDA:

1. Approval of minutes of January 13, 2025 school board meetings as drafted.
2. Approval of January 2025 District bills for payment.
3. Approval of January 2025 Financial Report, Agency Accounts, and Investments.
4. Approval of January 2025 School Transportation Report.
5. Approval of January 2025 School Lunch Report.

#### OLD/CONTINUING BUSINESS:

1. Open Forum for Public Participation...in accordance with Board Policy & Guidelines.
2. Program Overview Presentations
  - a. Technology...A. Helvig
  - b. Library/Media...B. Madsen, A. Tvinnereim
  - c. HS Dual Credit...J. Schwan
3. Second reading and approval of recommended Job Descriptions: Teacher, Paraprofessional, Maintenance Team Member
4. Administrative Reports: (a) Superintendent's Report; (b) Principal's Reports; (c) Business Manager Report

#### NEW BUSINESS:

1. Discussion and possible approval of LiveTicket TV Agreement for 2025-26 school year.
2. First reading of recommended policy amendments: DID-A Fixed Asset Capitalization Policy and Federal Grants Manual
3. Approve establishment of custodial accounts: Tri-M Music Honor Society and Helping Hands.
4. Executive Session pursuant to SDCL1-25-2(1) Personnel Issues.
5. Approve resignation of Butch Farmen, Maintenance Team Member.
6. Approve hiring Adam Hjernstad, Maintenance Team Member.

#### ADJOURN

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**Tina's Baskets! Text/Call at 605-397-7285 to reserve your basket now. They are going fast! Cash, check or Venmo.**



**2. White vase with sour suckers. \$7.50**



**3. Kit Kat Cake with Valentine suckers on top. \$35**



**4. Hersheys Cake, two tier with strawberry hard candy. \$40**



**7. Valentine container with fake roses and white bears. \$5**



**8. Reeses candy bars with Valentine suckers. \$50**



**9. Heart basket with assorted candy. \$15**



**10. Vase filled with strawberry drops and chocolate rose candy. \$9**



**12. Valentine's love balloon with fake flowers, MMs, skittles. \$15**



**14. Mini chip ahoy's cookies, be mine valentines book, a bear with a love heart on it and some hot wheels in it. \$12**



**15. Betsie Voucher book, puppy, mini chocolate hearts. Behind the dog a bag of heart bear gummies and a small box of mix chocolates. \$12**

## Groton Area Tigers Dominate in Four-Game Sweep Over Deuel Cardinals

The Groton Area Tigers put on a show in their latest basketball matchup, securing victories in all four games against the Deuel Cardinals. Both the boys' and girls' varsity teams enforced the mercy rule en route to commanding wins, while the junior varsity squads also came out victorious.

### Boys' Varsity: Groton Cruises to 75-43 Victory

The Deuel Cardinals started strong, taking an early 13-12 lead, but the Tigers responded quickly, regaining control at 15-13 and extending their advantage to 22-18 by the end of the first quarter. A dominant 11-2 run before halftime gave Groton a comfortable 42-26 lead at the break. The Tigers continued their relentless attack in the third quarter, outscoring Deuel 18-11 to hold a commanding 60-37 lead. With 3:41 left in the game, Groton extended its lead to 70-40, triggering the mercy rule and a running clock. The Tigers closed out the game with a 75-43 victory.

Ryder Johnson led all scorers with 25 points, while Keegen Tracy added 16, Karson Zac chipped in 14, and Gage Sippel finished with 10. Turner Thompson led the rebounding effort with seven boards as the Tigers collected 31 rebounds overall. Johnson, Sippel, and Becker Bosma each secured six rebounds. Groton moved the ball efficiently, recording 16 assists, with Bosma and Zac contributing four each. On defense, Johnson and Zac had two steals apiece, while Johnson, Sippel, Thompson, and Zac combined for six blocks.

The Tigers shot an impressive 69% on two-pointers (24-of-34) and hit 40% from beyond the arc (6-of-15). At the free-throw line, they finished 9-of-13 (69%). Deuel's offense struggled against Groton's defense, shooting just 32% from the field (15-of-47) and 52% from the line (10-of-19). Gabe Sather led the Cardinals with 18 points, while CCaden Finnesand added 13.

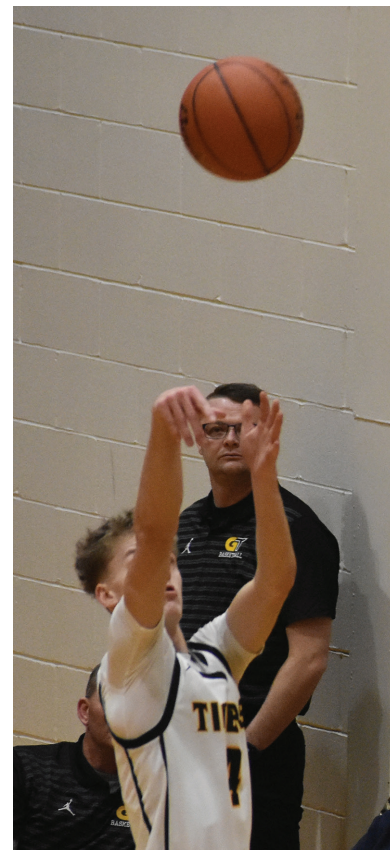
With this win, Groton improved to 10-4 on the season, while Deuel fell to 10-5.

### Girls' Varsity: Lady Tigers Enforce Mercy Rule in 59-30 Win

The Deuel Cardinals got off to a quick 4-0 start, but Groton wasted no time taking over, outscoring their opponents 18-4 to close the first quarter with an 18-8 lead. The Lady Tigers maintained control, extending their advantage to 28-16 at halftime. A dominant third quarter saw Groton pull ahead 50-22, and with 7:37 remaining in the game, the Tigers hit the 55-22 mark, activating the mercy rule. They cruised to a 59-30 victory.

Rylee Dunker led the scoring with 11 points, while Taryn Traphagen and Kennedy Hansen each contributed 9. Chesney Weber controlled the boards with seven rebounds, while Jaedyn Penning grabbed six. Traphagen and Jerica Locke each dished out three of the team's 13 assists. Locke also led a tenacious defensive effort with five steals, as the Tigers collected 22 total steals. Traphagen recorded two blocks.

Groton shot 52% from inside the arc (22-of-42), 25% from three-point range (4-of-16), and 60% from the free-throw line (3-of-5). Deuel's Camdyn Peterreins led her team with 11 points, followed by Jaycee Hourigan with



**Ryder Johnson**  
(Photo by Paul Kosel)



**Jerica Locke**  
(Photo by Paul Kosel)

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10. The Cardinals shot 47% from the field (14-of-30) but struggled from the free-throw line, making just 1-of-4 attempts (25%). Deuel committed 22 turnovers, a number Groton capitalized on throughout the game.

The Lady Tigers improved to 12-4, while Deuel dropped to 3-11.

## Junior Varsity Success: Groton Sweeps Lower Levels

The Groton junior varsity squads also secured wins, completing the Tigers' perfect night.

Girls' JV: Groton dominated with a 29-point run that spanned from the first quarter through late in the third, leading to a decisive 51-9 win. Chesney Weber led with 15 points, while McKenna Tietz added 10.

Boys' JV: The Tigers battled through an early 10-8 deficit but took control in the second quarter, leading 23-15 at halftime. They maintained their edge to secure a 40-30 victory. Easton Weber led Groton with 14 points, while Jaxtin Winter paced Deuel with 10.

It was a statement night for the Groton Area Tigers, who showcased their depth and dominance across all levels. With both varsity teams gaining momentum as the season progresses, Groton will look to continue their winning ways in the coming weeks.

- Story compiled by ChatGPT



**Gage Sippel**  
(Photo by Paul Kosel)

## Boys Stats

Ryder Johnson: 25 points, 6 rebounds, 2 assists, 2 steals, 3 fouls, 2 blocks.

Keegen Tracy: 16 points, 2 rebounds, 2 assists, 1 steal.

Karson Zak: 14 points, 3 rebounds, 4 assists, 2 steals, 1 foul, 1 block.

Gage Sippel: 10 points, 6 rebounds, 1 assist, 1 foul, 2 blocks.

Becker Bosma: 3 points, 6 rebounds, 4 assists, 1 steal, 3 fouls.

Easton Weber: 3 points, 1 rebound.

Blake Pauli: 2 points, 1 assist, 2 fouls.

Jayden Schwan: 2 points, 1 steal.

Turner Thompson: 7 rebounds, 2 assists, 3 fouls, 1 block.

Logan Warrington: 1 steal.

2-Pointers: 24-34 69%, 3-pointers: 6-15 40%, Free Throws: 9-13 69%, 31 rebounds, 9 turnovers, 16 assists, 8 steals, 13 fouls, 6 blocks.

Deuel: Jaxon Peterreins 18, Caden Finnesand 13, Troy Jenson 3, Kyle Finnesand 3, Sutton Benck 2, Jaxon Peterreins 2, Gavin Maaland 2.

Field Goals: 15-47 32%, Free Throws: 10-19 52%, 10 fouls and 10 turnovers.



**Taryn Traphagen**  
(Photo by Paul Kosel)

## Girls Stats

Rylee Dunker: 11 points, 4 rebounds, 1 assist, 3 steals.

Kennedy Hansen: 9 points, 2 rebounds, 2 steals, 2 fouls.

Taryn Traphagen: 9 points, 2 rebounds, 3 assists, 3 steals, 2 blocks.

Chesney Weber: 8 points, 7 rebounds, 1 assist, 2 steals, 1 foul.

Brooklyn Hansen: 7 points, 2 rebounds, 2 assists, 3 steals.

Jerica Locke: 7 points, 3 rebounds, 3 assists, 5 steals.

Jaedyn Penning: 4 points, 6 rebounds, 1 steal, 1 foul.

Faith Traphagen: 2 points, 3 rebounds, 1 assist, 2 steals.

Mia Crank: 2 points.

Laila Roberts: 3 rebounds, 1 assist, 1 steal.

Talli Wright: 1 rebound, 1 assist.

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2-Pointers: 22-42 52%, 3-Pointers: 4-16 25%, Free Throws: 3-5 60%, 33 rebounds, 15 turnovers, 13 assists, 22 steals, 4 fouls, 2 blocks.

Deuel: Camdyn Peterreins 11, Jaycee Hourigan 10, Alayna Carlson 4, Ella Kerkvliet 2, Graclyn Nielsen 2, Katrina Hagberg 2.

Field Goals: 14-30 47%, Free Throws: 1-4 25%, 7 fouls and 22 turnovers.

Groton won the boys junior varsity game, 40-30. Deuel held a 10-8 lead after the first quarter. Then the Tigers led at half-time, 24-15, and after three quarters, 34-24.

Easton Weber led Groton Area with 14 points followed by Anthony Tracy with nine, Ethan Kroll eight, Jayden Schwan three, and adding two points apiece were Jace Johnson, Logan Warrington and Asher Johnson.

Jaxton Winter led Deuel with 10 points followed by Gavin Maaland and Braxton Winter with seven points each, Grif Nielsen had four and Sutton Bedeck and Kyle Finnesand each had one point.

The game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Hefty Seed.

The Groton Area girls junior varsity team won its game, 51-9, with a 29 point run extending from early in the first quarter to late in the third quarter.

Chesney Weber led the Tigers with 15 points followed by McKenna Tietz with 10, Kella Tracy 9, Talli Wright 5, Makenna Krause 4, Sydney Locke 4, Avery Crank 2 and Mia Crank 2.

Taylor Brown and Ava Fokken each had three points for Deuel while Kaycee These had two and Amelia Giese 1.

The game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Weber Landscaping.

Both varsity games were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Agtegra, Avantara Groton, Bierman Farm Service, BK Custom T's & More, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency, Jungle Lanes & Lounge, Locke Electric, Krueger Brothers, R&M Farms/Rix Farms, The Meathouse in Andover



**GHS senior girls were recognized Thursday night. Pictured are Faith Traphagen, Laila Roberts, Kennedy Hansen, Brooklyn Hansen and Elizabeth Flihs.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)



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**The Rhythm Roar Drum Line performed at halftime of the girls varsity game Thursday night.**

(Photo by Paul Kosel)

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## Bragg Scores 1000th Career Point in Loss to Golden Eagles

Crookston, M.N. – The Northern State University women's basketball team's late rally fell short against Minnesota Crookston, falling 79-74. During the game, Madelyn Bragg recorded her 1,000th career point while leading the team with 27 points. Michaela Jewett also extended her streak, notching her fifth consecutive double-double performance.

### THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 74, UMC 79

Records: NSU 14-9 (NSIC 11-6), UMC 9-15 (NSIC 7-11)

Attendance: 385

### HOW IT HAPPENED

Northern State tallied 12 points in the first quarter, 16 in the second, 22 in the third, and 24 in the fourth. The Wolves recorded 38 points in the paint, 14 second-chance points, 9 points off the bench, and 8 points off turnovers.

Northern State shot 43.7% from the floor and 64.3% from the free-throw line.

Madelyn Bragg led the team with 27 points and seven rebounds, while also recording her 1,000th career point.

Michaela Jewett continued her streak, earning her fifth consecutive double-double with 16 points and 13 rebounds.

Rianna Fillipi rounded out the top scorers with 16 points, four steals, and three assists.

### NORTHERN STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Madelyn Bragg: 27 points, 7 rebounds, 3 assists, 55.0 FG%

Rianna Fillipi: 16 points, 4 steals, 3 assists, 2 rebounds

Michaela Jewett: 16 points, 13 rebounds, 2 assists

Alayna Benike: 4 points, 10 rebounds, 4 assists

### BEYOND THE BOX

Madelyn Bragg recorded her 1,000th point and became the 37th player in program history to join the 1,000-point club.

### UP NEXT

Northern State returns home to face Bemidji State in NSIC action. Tip-off is set for 6 p.m. on Saturday, February 8, at Wachs Arena.

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## Kaleb Mitchell's Double-Double Propels Wolves over Golden Eagles

Crookston, Minn. – The Northern State University men's basketball team broke through on Thursday at Minnesota Crookston, defeating the Golden Eagles 62-59. The Wolves led by 11 at the half and held on to secure their first league victory of the year.

### THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 62, UMC 59

Records: NSU 2-21 (1-16 NSIC), UMC 5-19 (4-14 NSIC)

Attendance: 401

### HOW IT HAPPENED

The Wolves scored 36 points in the first and 26 in the second, shooting 41.7% from the floor, 31.8% from the 3-point line, and 62.5% from the foul line

They scored 32 points in the paint, 15 points off turnovers, and ten points off the bench

Northern led the game with seven made 3-pointers and added 28 rebounds, ten assists, nine steals, and four blocks

The defense held the Golden Eagles to 3-of-14 from beyond the arc and forced 18 turnovers

Marcus Burks led three Wolves in double figures with 18 points, knocking down 8-of-13 from the floor; he added four rebounds, two assists, two blocks, and two steals

Kwat Abdelkarim was second on the team with 15 points and six rebounds, adding three assists and a team leading three steals

Kaleb Mitchell tallied his third double-double of the season with 12 points and ten rebounds in the win, draining 6-of-11 from the floor

James Glenn dished out a team best four assists, while Tobi Obiora led the team off the bench with five points

### NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Marcus Burks: 18 points, 61.5 field goal%, 4 rebounds, 2 assists, 2 blocks, 2 steals

Kwat Abdelkarim: 15 points, 60.0 3-point field goal%, 6 rebounds, 3 assists, 3 steals

Kaleb Mitchell: 12 points, 54.5 field goal%, 10 rebounds, 1 block, 1 steal

### UP NEXT

The Wolves return to Wachs Arena on Saturday for a 4 p.m. match-up with Bemidji State. Saturday is Glacial Lakes Energy night in the Barnett Center and Chivilla Bay will be set-up in the main hallway for Build-A-Wolf night. Fans can make their own Thunder the Wolf for \$35 and includes an adoption certificate and custom NSU shirt.

## The Community Coach Guest Column



**Paula Jensen**  
Senior Vice President



### **Title: From Volunteer to Leader: Building Stronger Rural Communities**

Volunteering is a big part of life for most of us living in rural areas. A recent community survey by Dakota Resources and eight rural communities found that about 80% of people believe they need to get involved to help their community succeed. However, what I am hearing from local leaders is, "We need more engaged residents who want to volunteer!"

Volunteering can mean different things: donating money, helping neighbors, taking on leadership roles, or working on community projects. Across the country, the number of people who volunteer formally has been dropping for about 20 years. However, the numbers improved after the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2023, the national volunteering rate was 28%, up from 23.2% in 2021.

Rural America has always been an exception to these trends. In small towns, people rely on each other to create strong, successful communities. South Dakota ranked #6 in the country for formal volunteering, with 37.8% of people volunteering in 2023. This is up from 34.2% in 2021.

Yet, here in South Dakota, we still rank 6th for the highest need for leaders in the country. In our state, about 1 in 15 adults must serve as leaders for nonprofits or local government roles. In smaller counties, the need is even greater—closer to 1 in 7 people. For example, in my home county of 4,390 people, we need about 627 residents to step up into leadership roles.

The challenge is clear: many of the same people are carrying the weight of leadership across multiple organizations. These dedicated leaders, often called the "Same Ten People," are stretched thin. This is where you come in. Have you ever thought about taking on a leadership role in your community? Maybe no one has asked you yet, or maybe you're not sure where to start. The truth is, our communities need you, and your involvement can make a huge difference.

In my work with rural organizations and communities I have seen multiple solutions to meeting the demand for more leaders:

**Community Engagement:** Hosting regular community gatherings to engage residents in naming local priorities can give people a voice and entice them to volunteer for a priority they are passionate about.

**Youth Engagement:** Giving young people leadership opportunities in schools, organizations, and community programs can help create the next generation of volunteers.

**Economic Support:** Offering help, like small stipends, childcare, or recognition programs, can make it easier for people who can't afford to volunteer for free.

**Capacity Building:** Helping local organizations recruit, recognize, train, and keep volunteers can strengthen their ability to serve the community.

**Partnerships:** Creating partnerships between local governments, businesses, and nonprofits can provide more resources and support for volunteer work.

Even though 37.8% of South Dakotans volunteer—a rate higher than most of the country—it's not enough to meet the demand for leadership roles that exist. Small towns and rural areas depend on people like you to step up, lead, and ensure our communities thrive. Without enough leaders, essential organizations and services could fade away.

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Leadership doesn't require special skills or years of experience—it requires a willingness to care and take action. Whether it's joining a local board, running for office, or mentoring a youth group, your effort matters. Don't wait to be asked. Look around and see where you can lend your voice, your time, or your skills.

Imagine what your community could be if more people stepped into leadership roles. It starts with you. Reach out to local organizations, talk to current leaders, and find a place where you can make a difference. Our rural communities are strong, but they will only stay that way if we all take part.

The future of our small towns depends on leaders like you. There's no better time to step up, get involved, and make your community a better place—starting today.

*The Community Coach. Having a passion for community leadership and development is what drives Paula Jensen's personal and professional life. Paula lives in her hometown of Langford, South Dakota, population 318+. She serves as a Strategic Doing practitioner, grant writer and community coach with Dakota Resources based in Renner, South Dakota. Dakota Resources is a mission-driven 501c3 Community Development Financial Institution working to connect capital and capacity to empower rural communities. Contact her at paula@dakotaresources.org.*

Coming up on [GDILIVE.COM](http://GDILIVE.COM)

Groton Area  
Tigers  
**GT**

**Friday, Feb. 07**

**Boys at Vermillion**

**4 p.m.: Boys C**

Sponsored by Grandparents Watching

**5 p.m.: Boys JV**

Sponsored by Hefty Seed

**Followed by Girls Varsity**

Sponsored by Agtegra, Avantara Groton, Bierman Farm Service, BK Custom T's & More, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Farmers Union Co-op of Ferney and Conde, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency, Jungle Lanes & Lounge, Locke Electric, Krueger Brothers, R&M Farms/Rix Farms, The Meathouse in Andover

**\$5 ticket or  
GDI Subscription  
required to watch the games.**



Coming up on [GDILIVE.COM](http://GDILIVE.COM)

Groton Area  
Tigers  
**GT**

**Saturday, Feb. 08**

**Girls DAK XII-NEC Clash  
at Madison**

**2:45 p.m.**

**Groton Area**

**vs.**

**Elk Point-Jefferson**

Sponsored by Agtegra, Avantara Groton, Bierman Farm Service, BK Custom T's & More, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Farmers Union Co-op of Ferney and Conde, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency, Jungle Lanes & Lounge, Locke Electric, Krueger Brothers, R&M Farms/Rix Farms, The Meathouse in Andover

**\$5 ticket or  
GDI Subscription  
required to watch the games.**



## Valentine's Day: A Time to Honor Our Veterans and Their Families

Valentine's Day is traditionally a time for celebrating love, affection, and appreciation for those who hold special places in our hearts. While roses, chocolates, and sweet messages are the norm, it's also a perfect opportunity to reflect on a different kind of love—the deep and unwavering love for country and the sacrifice that comes with it.

As we celebrate this day of love, let us not forget the men and women who have selflessly served in our military. They've given up comforts, faced dangers, and endured hardships to protect the freedoms we hold dear. Valentine's Day is a chance to recognize the extraordinary contributions of our veterans—those who have fought for our country in times of peace and conflict alike.

It's also a time to honor the families of our veterans. Behind every soldier, sailor, guardian, airman, and marine is a family that has sacrificed just as much. They've lived with uncertainty, carried the weight of waiting for loved ones to return, and often had to manage life's challenges alone. These families serve alongside our veterans, offering their unwavering support, strength, and love, sometimes without recognition.

This Valentine's Day, consider reaching out to a veteran, a service member, or a military family. A simple card, a word of thanks, or a gesture of support can make a world of difference. Or, it could be a great time to do a "buddy check." Remember, love comes in many forms, and sometimes, the most meaningful expressions of love are those that acknowledge the sacrifices others have made for us. As we exchange sweet notes and tokens of affection this February 14th, let's take a moment to extend that same appreciation to those who have served our country and the families who stood by them. The love and sacrifice they have shown deserve our heartfelt recognition—not just on Valentine's Day, but every day.



**Greg Whitlock,**  
**Secretary**  
**South Dakota**  
**Department of**  
**Veterans Affairs**



## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### Majority leader says education savings account bill wouldn't pass state Senate

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 6, 2025 11:32 AM

Some Republican leaders are pushing for legislative action on "school choice" this year, but the state Senate majority leader says his chamber doesn't have the votes to support it.

Gov. Larry Rhoden, who assumed the position last month upon the exit of former Gov. Kristi Noem for a post in President Trump's cabinet, is "kind of getting his legs under himself," according to Sen. Jim Mehlhaff, R-Pierre.

Based on discussions with the governor, Mehlhaff said, "we decided we just don't want to go down that bunny trail over in the Senate this time."

"We're going to move on to other priorities," the majority leader said during a legislative leadership press conference on Thursday at the Capitol in Pierre.

The push for education savings accounts took a major hit last Wednesday when two separate bills — one backed by the Governor's Office and another, more expansive proposal, were defeated in the House Education Committee.

The governor's bill was rejected in a 9-6 vote. It proposed a \$4 million allocation for education savings accounts. The more expansive plan, estimated at \$142 million, failed 8-7.

Support within the Senate Republican caucus is slim, Mehlhaff said.

"There was zero love for it," Mehlhaff said, citing budget constraints and competing priorities. "We're cutting PBS, we're cutting the state library, we're cutting maintenance and repair on our public buildings, we're cutting veterans service officers — we're cutting all over the place. There's just a lot of members in the Senate that didn't think it was appropriate to dig up \$4 million to start a new program."

House Majority Leader Scott Odenbach, R-Spearfish, said the fight will continue. House leaders are considering alternative approaches, including tax credit-based solutions that might garner broader legislative support.

"There's also a lot of people saying, 'Well, gosh, President Trump is jumping into this now, let's wait and see what he is wanting to do in that space,'" he said.

President Donald Trump recently signed an executive order directing the U.S. Department of Education to explore new funding opportunities for such programs at the state level.

*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.*

## South Dakota Senate revives bill to expand powers for state auditor

**Midweek confusion on compromise between state officials nearly tanks transparency effort**

**BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 6, 2025 6:15 PM**

The state Senate voted unanimously to grant the state auditor the right to access and investigate agency records on Thursday — 24 hours after shooting down the idea by a single vote.

The Wednesday loss for Senate Bill 60 at the state Capitol in Pierre came amid confusion over a compromise amendment meant to appease the concerns of the governor's office. The bill was introduced by Attorney General Marty Jackley and supported by Auditor Rich Sattgast.

Several lawmakers said Wednesday from the Senate floor in Pierre that all three offices had agreed to remove the audit and investigatory authority of the auditor from the original bill, so as not to duplicate the work of the attorney general.

Others signaled that such a move would defang the bill, and that they preferred the attorney general-supported version that cleared a Senate committee on Jan. 27.

The auditor and attorney general sat in the gallery for the second round of debate on the bill Thursday. Jackley brought it to lawmakers at the start of session in the face of the myriad scandals involving former state employees.

Ex-Department of Social Services (DSS) employee Lonna Carroll is accused last July of embezzling \$1.8 million from the state.

Former Department of Revenue employee Sandra O'Day allegedly created 13 fake vehicles to help her secure \$400,000 in loans before her death last year. Two more former revenue department employees, Lynne Hunsley and Danielle Degenstein, were later charged for malfeasance.

Renee Strong faces felony charges for allegedly submitting falsified reports of food-service health inspections for the Department of Public Safety.

Former DSS employee Amalia Escalante Barrientos pleaded guilty last month to a misdemeanor for using a voucher intended for a foster family to buy groceries for herself.

**Senate revives auditor authority bill**

After the Senate voted to reconsider SB 60 on Thursday, Sen. Jim Mehlhaff, R-Pierre, moved an amendment similar to the one he'd spoken against the day before. There was "quite a bit of confusion" Wednesday about Jackley's position on the compromise amendment, he said, but "this is very much supported by the attorney general," as well as the governor's office and auditor.

Currently, the state auditor doesn't have the authority to access agency records and assess their financial and operational fidelity. In its original form, SB 60 empowered the auditor with access to the financial and internal records of state agencies for the purposes of conducting audits, and to conduct investigations.

The governor's office had argued that an elected state auditor doesn't necessarily have the professional expertise to conduct agency audits. There were also concerns about duplicating investigative efforts.

Thursday's amendment still removed audit authority, but preserved access to records, as well as the ability to investigate financial transactions. In the event malfeasance or irregularities emerge, the auditor would report them to the attorney general.

Senate President Pro Tempore Chris Karr, R-Sioux Falls, said he was pleased to see the state office-holders compromise with the legislature to ease their worries about the bill's value as a bulwark against misconduct.

"Do I still like the original bill? I do. Is this amendment, I think, a compromise we should move forward? I think it is," Karr said.

Wednesday's version of the bill died 17-18; Thursday's iteration passed 35-0.

The Senate did vote Wednesday to advance another Jackley-backed transparency bill, Senate Bill 61, which seeks to strengthen the state's internal control board.



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Senate Bill 60 now moves to the state House of Representatives.

*John is the senior reporter for South Dakota Searchlight. He has more than 15 years experience covering criminal justice, the environment and public affairs in South Dakota, including more than a decade at the Sioux Falls Argus Leader.*

## SD governor predicts solution for rising homeowner property taxes

**BY: SETH TUPPER - FEBRUARY 6, 2025 3:31 PM**

PIERRE — Lawmakers will find a way this winter to “tamp down the increase” in property taxes for South Dakota homeowners, Gov. Larry Rhoden predicted Thursday at the Capitol.

Rhoden said during a press conference that he formed a property tax working group with legislators and began meeting with them Monday. Lawmakers are in Pierre for their annual legislative session.

“I’m pretty confident based on our first meeting — that went very well — that we’ll be able to find a solution this session,” Rhoden said.

He did not divulge a specific plan but said it will focus on homeowners who’ve faced the biggest tax increases.

“For the last several years, the overall property tax burden has already shifted” to homeowners, Rhoden said.

Numbers from the state Department of Revenue prove the point.

South Dakota’s method for assessing the value of agricultural land changed from market-based to productivity-based during an implementation period that concluded in 2019. That year, agricultural property owners paid 27% of all property taxes while homeowners paid 39%.

Since then, the burden has shifted to 20% for agriculture and 44% for homeowners. The share paid by commercial property owners has risen from 29% to 31%. The remaining share comes from utilities and special assessments.

Rhoden said there are complicating factors, such as the continual addition of more homes and businesses while the number of farms and the amount of agricultural land decline. He said that’s one reason for the shrinking burden of ag-land owners.

But he acknowledged that the housing market of the past several years has driven prices and valuations up sharply for some homeowners, leading to successive years of extreme tax increases.

“And so rather than take a shotgun approach with some of the proposals that would affect us statewide, given the situation we’re in, I feel very confident that we need to take a rifle shot,” Rhoden said.

The governor gave no indication if he’d endorse a plan previously proposed by his new lieutenant governor, Tony Venhuizen, when Venhuizen was a legislator. That plan called for an increase in the state sales tax rate to provide property tax relief for homeowners.

*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.*

## Bill tying SD school administrator salaries to teacher pay passes committee

**BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 6, 2025 2:03 PM**

South Dakota public school administrative salaries could soon be capped based on teacher pay.

Sioux Falls Republican Sen. Sue Peterson told the state Senate Education Committee she introduced Senate Bill 161 to close the gap between the average salaries of teachers and administrators in South Dakota.

The state’s average teacher salary ranks 49th in the nation, according to the National Education Association, despite a half-percent state sales tax increase in 2016. That infusion raised average teacher pay by

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about 12% in its first year and bumped South Dakota from last to 47th before the state fell back down in the rankings.

South Dakota's average administrator salary ranks 16th in the nation, based on a ZipRecruiter ranking-Peterson shared. Administrators, by state law, include superintendents, principals and business managers.

"That's wrong. This disparity is unacceptable," Peterson said. "It's time to prioritize those who are on the front lines of education: our teachers."

The legislation would cap administrative salaries at three times a district's average teacher salary.

South Dakota's average teacher salary is \$53,153, according to the National Education Association. Under the proposal, a district with that exact rate for average teacher salary wouldn't be able to pay any of its administrators more than about \$160,000 a year, Peterson said. The state's average school administrator salary sits at \$106,959 a year, based on ZipRecruiter data Peterson shared.

The Sioux Falls School District is the largest in the state, serving nearly 24,000 students. Its average teacher salary is \$60,138, according to a records request sent to the district. The average administrator salary in the district is \$146,828, according to the district. Outgoing Superintendent Jane Stavem, however, was paid a \$270,413.11 salary for this school year.

There is no nationwide ranking for average administrator pay by state through a professional organization like the National Education Association teacher salary listing, according to Rob Monson, executive director for School Administrators of South Dakota.

Monson, who spoke with South Dakota Searchlight after the committee hearing, also said he does not have complete data to compare the state's administrative and teacher salaries.

Lawmakers and those testifying in committee did not discuss the accuracy of Peterson's ZipRecruiter information, but its figures for average teacher salary do not square with the National Education Association data. According to ZipRecruiter, which claims to list average salary for jobs based on listings on its site, South Dakota's average teacher salary also ranks 16th in the nation, at \$46,590 a year.

Monson and other representatives of public school administrators, school boards and teachers oppose the bill, saying it would infringe on school board authority and limit schools' ability to recruit and compete for candidates. The bill would push "the best" candidates into the private sector or out of state, Monson said.

The bill doesn't consider administrators, who also serve as principal, special education director, curriculum director, bus driver and more for rural school districts, Monson said. Nor does it consider salary needs based on school district size, Monson said.

Peterson said school boards could separate pay for administrators based on additional roles, meaning they could be paid more than the cap set in the bill if they took on more responsibilities and titles.

Sen. Jamie Smith, D-Sioux Falls, said lawmakers and school boards should focus on raising teacher salaries, not pushing administrative salaries down.

"I think we do pay our administrators in our state a fair wage," Smith said. "I think our teacher salaries are getting better, but we're not there yet. But I don't think this exactly solves it."

Sen Curt Voight, R-Rapid City, said there needs to be more accountability for leaders in schools.

The Legislature passed a bill last year requiring school districts to raise average teacher compensation — salaries and benefits — each year by a rate nearly equal to the increase in state education funding. The aim was to improve accountability and teacher salaries over time.

*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.*

## U.S. Senate confirms Russ Vought, a Project 2025 author, to manage the nation's budget

**Thune says country must 'reign in our spending' and OMB director will 'lead that charge'**

**BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - FEBRUARY 6, 2025 6:52 PM**

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Senate voted Thursday to confirm Russ Vought as director of the Office of Management and Budget, giving support to one of the architects of Project 2025 and someone who hopes to erode Congress' control over government spending.

Vought, who worked as OMB director during President Donald Trump's first term in office, was confirmed on a 53-47 party-line vote that followed Democrats keeping the chamber in session overnight to highlight their opposition.

Objections to Vought centered around his goal to give the president more authority over federal spending decisions, which Democrats said is a violation of the separation of powers in the Constitution.

"Congress makes laws and appropriates funds, not the president," New Hampshire Sen. Maggie Hassan said. "At stake is not a legal technicality, at stake is our very notion of self-government, a notion that Mr. Vought appears to disdain."

Hassan, a Democrat, referenced the Trump administration halting congressionally approved funding for grant and loan programs in late January as one example of OMB overreaching.

"The grant money was never the president's to cut, freeze, or restore — it doesn't belong to him or to Mr. Vought, it belongs to the American people," Hassan said.

She also pointed to the Government Accountability Office finding OMB "violated" a federal law known as the Impoundment Control Act when it withheld \$214 million in security assistance for Ukraine during the first Trump administration.

"It was five years ago this week that this body debated President Trump's attempt to illegally impound funds that were intended for Ukraine," Hassan said, referring to the first of two impeachments. "An impoundment attempt that was supported and directed by Mr. Vought."

### **Obscure office with big clout**

The Office of Management and Budget, also called the White House budget office, is responsible for submitting the president's annual budget request to Congress, but it also has sweeping authority over federal regulations and federal agencies.

Acting OMB Director Matthew J. Vaeth caused considerable confusion in late January when he released a two-page memo calling for a halt to trillions in federal funding for grant and loan programs spread across departments and agencies.

The memo, which was later rescinded, led to two separate lawsuits and two federal judges issuing temporary restraining orders blocking the Trump administration from implementing the proposed funding freeze.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., said Wednesday that Vought is qualified to become OMB director, in part, because he has already been OMB director.

"There's no question that he will be able to hit the ground running," Thune said. "As director of OMB, Mr. Vought will have the chance to address two key economic issues — cutting burdensome government regulations and addressing excessive spending."

Thune said the United States is on a "dangerous spending track" and that the government should find "ways to reign in our spending and to target government waste."

"And I'm confident that Mr. Vought will help lead that charge," Thune said.

### **Rapid confirmation for Trump nominees**

Vought's confirmation marked the 13th of Trump's nominees to receive Senate confirmation in the three weeks that he's been in the Oval Office.

"That's roughly twice as fast as nominees were confirmed at the start of the two previous administrations," Thune said. "The Senate will take up additional nominees next week and will maintain an aggressive pace to get the president's full team in place as soon as possible."

Senate-confirmed nominees include, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Central Intelligence Agency Direc-

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tor John Ratcliffe, Defense Secretary Peter Hegseth, Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy, Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lee Zeldin, Interior Secretary Douglas Burgum, Energy Secretary Christopher Wright, Attorney General Pam Bondi and Housing and Urban Development Secretary Eric Turner.

## 'Impoundment' struggle

Vought has spent the past four years leading the Center for Renewing America, a think tank he launched following his tenure in the first Trump administration.

The organization has published repeatedly about the 1974 Impoundment Control Act and impoundment authority, arguing the president should be able to block funding Congress has approved.

The U.S. Constitution gives the legislative branch the so-called power of the purse, putting the authority over how federal dollars are spent in the hands of lawmakers.

Congress passed the Impoundment Control Act more than 50 years ago, after then-president Richard Nixon halted billions in funding the body had approved.

The law gives the president two ways to request that Congress rescind funding it already appropriated — sending a rescission request via a special message, which allows the president to hold onto the money for 45 days, or through a deferral sent through a special message.

"The President, OMB, or a department or agency head or employee may defer budget authority to provide for contingencies, effect savings, or as specifically provided by law," according to a report from the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service. "No officer or employee of the United States may defer budget authority for any other purpose."

During his confirmation hearing in the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, Vought testified he believes the president holds the ability to impound funding approved by Congress. Vought has also said repeatedly he believes the 1974 law is unconstitutional.

"The president has run on the issue of impoundment and has reminded the country that 200 years of presidents have used this authority," Vought said during the hearing. "And we'll be developing our approach to this issue and strategy once his administration is in office."

Democrats have sounded alarm bells over the president potentially holding impoundment authority, saying it would make it extremely difficult for lawmakers to negotiate bipartisan agreement on the dozen annual government funding bills.

The president simply ignoring parts of a spending agreement would lead to even more distrust and gridlock within Congress, Democrats say.

## Project 2025

Vought also wrote part of the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025, a 922-page document outlining the conservative organization's goals for a second Trump administration.

In a 26-page chapter on the executive office of the president, Vought wrote the OMB director "must ensure the appointment of a General Counsel who is respected yet creative and fearless in his or her ability to challenge legal precedents that serve to protect the status quo."

Vought wrote that Trump "should use every possible tool to propose and impose fiscal discipline on the federal government."

"Anything short of that would constitute abject failure," Vought contended.

Vought also wrote about the management aspect of OMB's portfolio, pressing for political appointees to have more authority and influence than career staff.

"It is vital that the Director and his political staff, not the careerists, drive these offices in pursuit of the President's actual priorities and not let them set their own agenda based on the wishes of the sprawling 'good government' management community in and outside of government," Vought wrote. "Many Directors do not properly prioritize the management portfolio, leaving it to the Deputy for Management, but such neglect creates purposeless bureaucracy that impedes a President's agenda—an 'M Train to Nowhere.'"

*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.*

## Lawmakers press Social Security on lag in paying expanded benefits to public employees

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - FEBRUARY 6, 2025 4:24 PM

WASHINGTON — U.S. senators from both political parties wrote to the acting Social Security commissioner on Thursday, expressing concern it might take the agency more than a year to implement an expansion to benefits that Congress approved last year.

“The Social Security Fairness Act restores full Social Security benefits for the millions of teachers, police officers, firefighters, and other public servants who are unfairly penalized by the Windfall Elimination Provision (WEP) and the Government Pension Offset (GPO),” the group of 28 senators wrote. “We call for the immediate implementation of this legislation to provide prompt relief to the millions of Americans impacted by WEP and GPO.”

The senators then asked Commissioner Michelle King to provide Congress with “monthly updates and briefings” on how the agency was implementing the new law.

The one-page letter was signed by Wisconsin Democratic Sen. Tammy Baldwin, Connecticut Democratic Sen. Richard Blumenthal, New Jersey Democratic Sen. Cory Booker, West Virginia Republican Sen. Shelley Moore Capito, Louisiana Republican Sen. Bill Cassidy, Maine Republican Sen. Susan Collins, Illinois Democratic Sen. Dick Durbin, Pennsylvania Democratic Sen. John Fetterman, Nebraska Republican Sen. Deb Fischer, New York Democratic Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, New Mexico Democratic Sen. Martin Heinrich, Colorado Democratic Sen. John Hickenlooper, Virginia Democratic Sen. Tim Kaine, Maine independent Sen. Angus King, Minnesota Democratic Sen. Amy Klobuchar, New Mexico Democratic Sen. Ben Ray Lujan, Oregon Democratic Sen. Jeff Merkley, Kansas Republican Sen. Jerry Moran, Alaska Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski, Georgia Democratic Sen. Jon Ossoff, California Democratic Sen. Alex Padilla, Rhode Island Democratic Sen. Jack Reed, Nebraska Republican Sen. Pete Ricketts, Nevada Democratic Sen. Jacky Rosen, Alaska Republican Sen. Dan Sullivan, Virginia Democratic Sen. Mark Warner, Vermont Democratic Sen. Peter Welch and Rhode Island Democratic Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse.

### No estimated timeframe

The Social Security Administration has a webpage with answers to several questions regarding the new law and how the agency is trying to implement the change in benefits.

The webpage says the agency “cannot yet provide an estimated timeframe for when we will adjust a person’s past or future benefits, but we will continue to provide updates on this webpage. We thank the public for its patience.”

The webpage also explains how people who have never filed for Social Security benefits due to the Windfall Elimination Provision or the Government Pension Offset can apply now that there is a new law.

A spokesperson for the Social Security Administration said the agency “received the letter and will respond directly to the requestors.” States Newsroom had asked for details about why the law’s implementation might take a year.

Congress voted on a broadly bipartisan basis late last year to approve the bill making the change and then-President Joe Biden signed it into law in January.

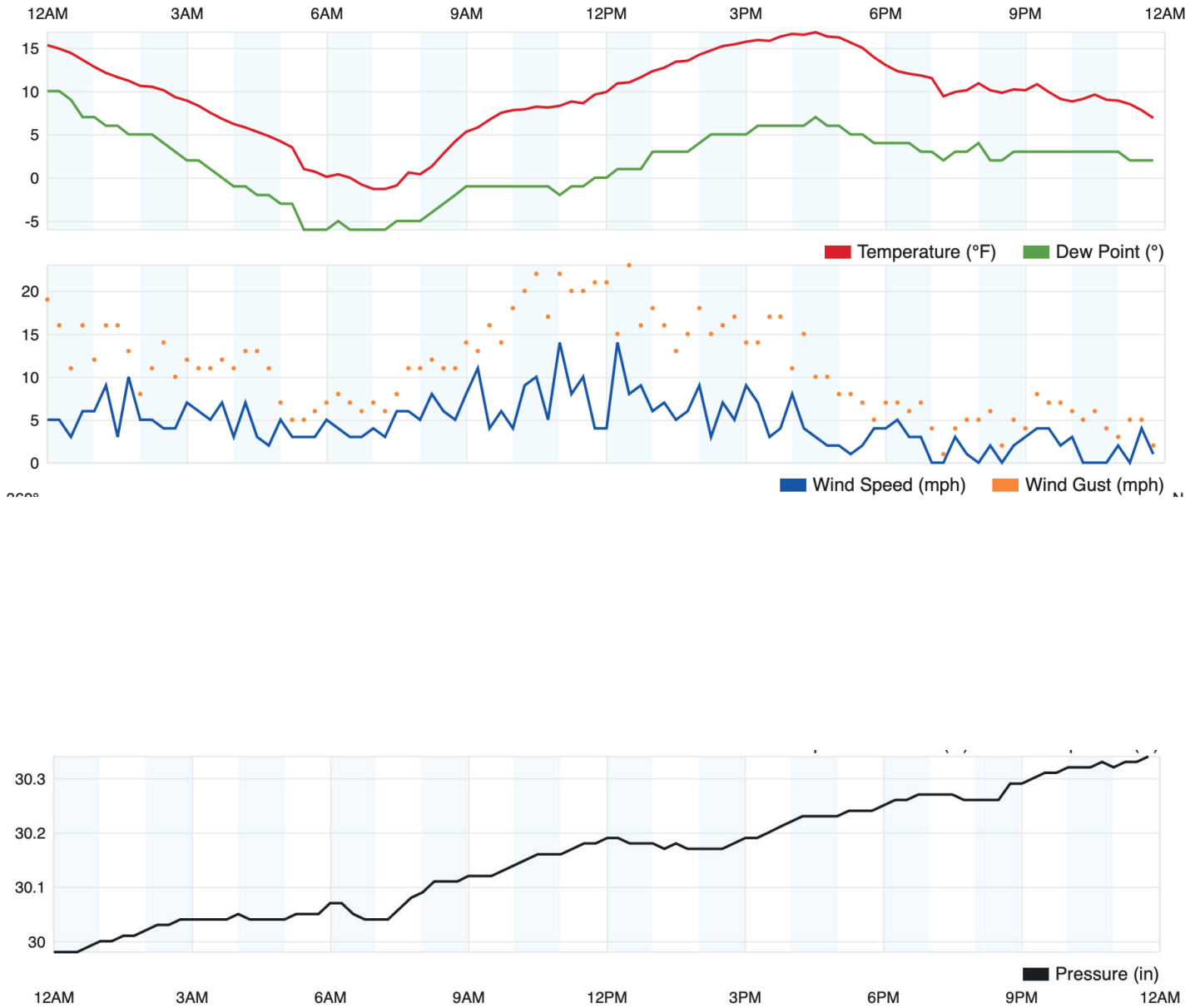
The pension offset affects about 746,000 Americans while the windfall provision affects 2.1 million, according to a report from the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service, which includes maps showing which states have higher concentrations of people affected by the two former provisions.

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

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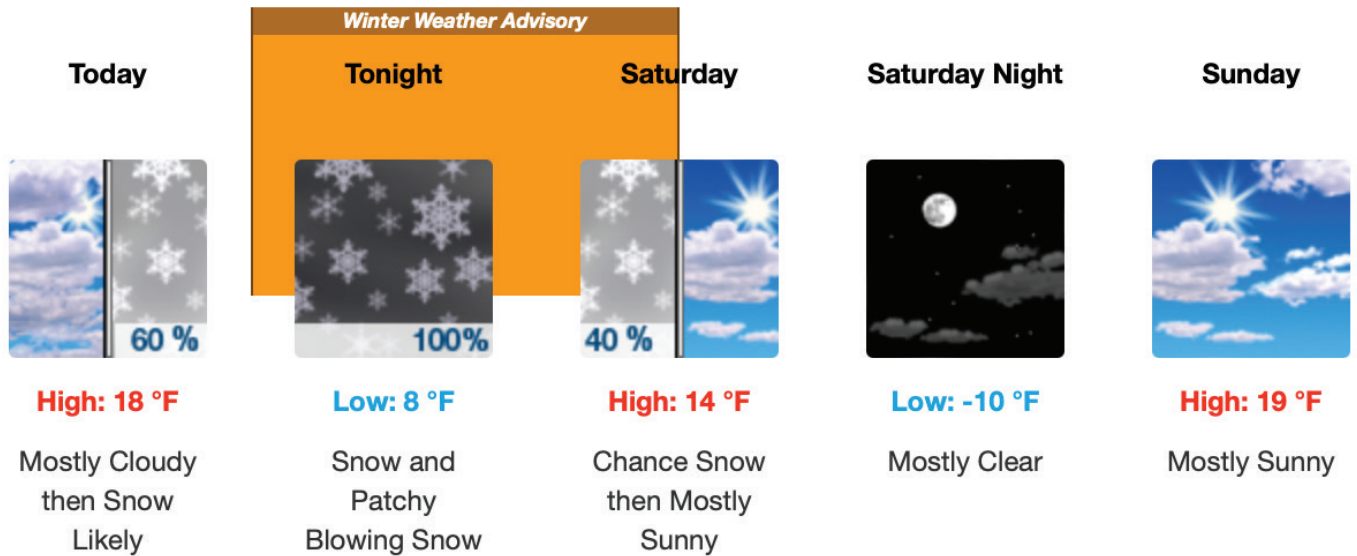
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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## Snow Moving In Later Today

February 7, 2025  
3:16 AM

### Key Messages

- Accumulating snow expected to begin this afternoon and persist into Saturday.
- Highest snow amounts expected to fall along and north of U.S. Highway 12.
- Peak snowfall currently expected this evening through early Saturday morning.

NEW

### What Has Changed?

- **Winter Storm Watch** changed to a **Winter Weather Advisory**.

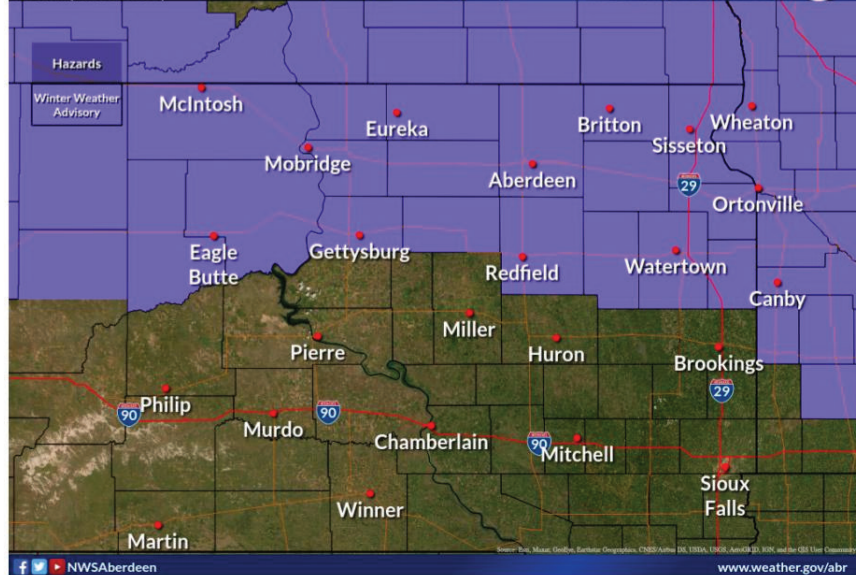
### Next Scheduled Update

- Friday afternoon.

### Winter Weather Headlines

for Friday and Saturday

Weather Forecast Office  
Aberdeen, SD  
Issued Feb 07, 2025 2:55 AM CST



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

A winter storm will move across the region this afternoon into Saturday, with peak snowfall expected Friday evening into Saturday morning along and north of Hwy 12.



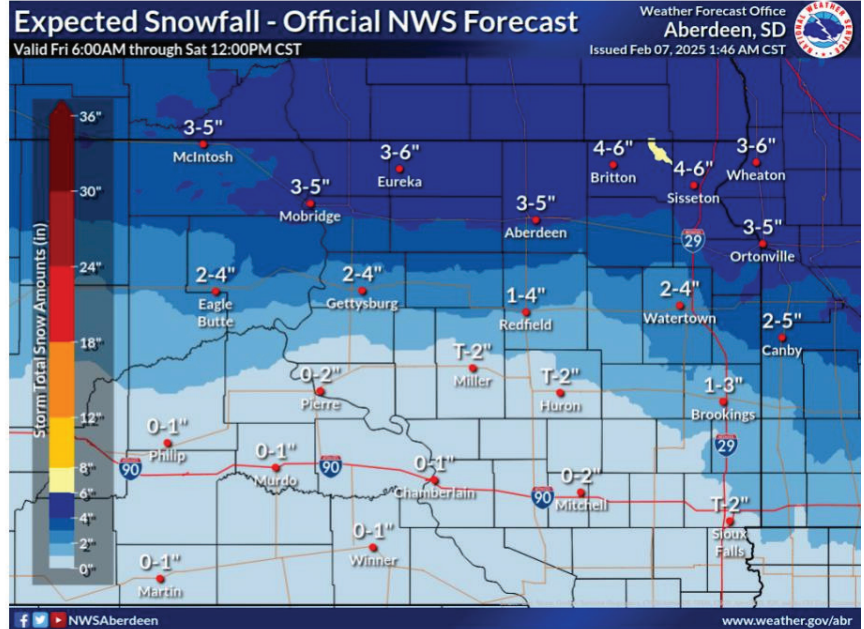
## Expected Snowfall Amounts

February 7, 2025

3:22 AM

Highest snowfall totals over far northern SD into west central MN

- Highest snow accumulations have shifted northward slightly, now highest (3-6") along and north of Hwy 12.
- Northeast winds becoming northwest with gusts of 20 to 30 miles per hour could cause localized blowing and drifting snow, which may reduce visibility at times.
  - Blizzard conditions are not expected at this time.
- Any shift, north or south, in the track of the low pressure system will change where the heavier snow will fall.



Highest snow accumulations have shifted northward slightly, now highest (3-6") along and north of Hwy 12. Wind gusts between 20 and 30 mph could cause localized blowing and drifting snow, reducing visibilities at times.



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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 19 °F at 4:06 PM

Low Temp: 0 °F at 2:33 AM

Wind: 19 mph at 1:45 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 10 hours, 06 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 62 in 1987

Record Low: -42 in 1895

Average High: 26

Average Low: 4

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.14

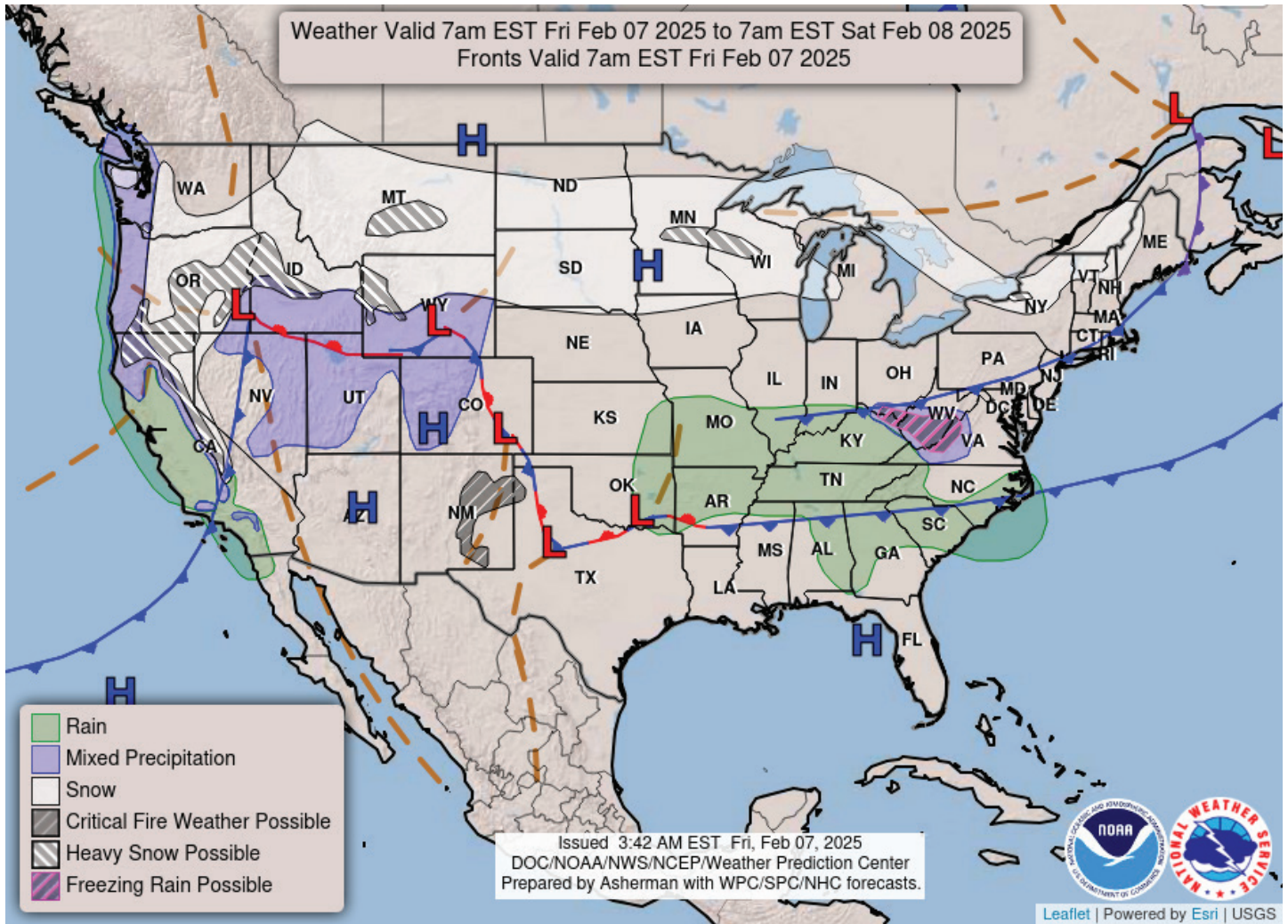
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.14

Average Precip to date: 0.69

Precip Year to Date: 0.14

Sunset Tonight: 5:49:52 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:41:47 am



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## Today in Weather History

February 7, 1994: Snow falling over the area produced heavy accumulations from central into northeast South Dakota with 11 inches at Kennebec and eight inches at Watertown from the 7th through the 9th. Extreme cold accompanied and followed the snow with low temperatures of 52 below zero at Promise and 45 below zero at Aberdeen on the 9th. Snow accumulation caused a roof to cave in on a drugstore at Bristol. A man died of exposure attempting to walk home near Sioux Falls after his car became stuck in a ditch.

February 7, 2001: Heavy snow of 6 to 16 inches fell across central and northeast South Dakota, resulting in school and activities cancellations, closing of some businesses, and challenging if not impossible travel. Several people became stranded and had to be rescued. There were also flight cancellations and delays, along with some vehicle accidents resulting in minor injuries. Some snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Mound City, Mobridge, Eureka, 7 inches at Milbank and 6 SE McIntosh, 8 inches at Aberdeen, Ipswich, Selby, Iona, and Britton, 9 inches at Clark, 1 S Columbia, Isabel, Webster, and 10 inches at Roscoe, Watertown, and 1 W of Summit. Locations with snowfall of a foot included Mission Ridge, Murdo, 4 NW Onida, Castlewood, 23 N Highmore, and Timber Lake. Thirteen inches of snow fell at Canning and Fort Pierre, 14 inches fell at Gettysburg, Eagle Butte, and Pierre with 15 inches at Miller and 16 inches of snow at Clear Lake, Mellette, and Faulkton.

February 7, 2010: A compact but strong area of low pressure moved from Canada and across the Northern Plains from the 7th through the 9th. A prolonged period of moderate to heavy snow developed over far northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota, bringing 6 to 8 inches of snow to the area. Some snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Milbank, Wheaton, and Ortonville; 7 inches at Clear Lake, Sisseton, and Artichoke Lake; 8 inches at Summit, Victor, Wilmot, and Browns Valley.

1812: The Hard Shock of the New Madrid Earthquake series strikes the area around the small town of New Madrid, Missouri. A three-mile-long island, Island #32, was completely sunk! The Mississippi River once again ran backward. This major shock marked the beginning of the end of New Madrid's extended ordeal, even though aftershocks would continue to be felt for years, and the fault is still active.

1835: A Great Freeze took place from February 2-9 across southern Georgia, southeastern South Carolina, and northern Florida. During this freeze, the St. Johns River was frozen, "several rods from the shore," and people were able to walk a distance from the shore. Many citruses and other fruit trees were killed to the ground, never to grow again, when temperatures reached as low as 1°F in Charleston and 8°F in Jacksonville. A Florida gentleman told a newspaper that the state "appeared as desolate as if a fire had swept over it" after the severe freeze of that winter season. According to Florida Citrus Mutual, this freeze was so severe that it is considered an impact freeze. This indicates that the freeze annihilates entire groves across the state, killing both mature and young citrus trees while causing a profound economic impact on the citrus industry and prompting growers to replant farther south. This freeze ended attempts to grow citrus in southern Georgia, southeastern South Carolina, and northern Florida.

1892: The temperature falls to 90 degrees below zero in Verkhoyansk, Russia, on this day. The temperature was considered the coldest temperature ever recorded in the Northern Hemisphere. However, this reading was done by a spirit thermometer, which is less accurate than a mercury thermometer. The accepted record was 90 degrees below zero in Oimaykon on February 6, 1933. However, recently published report by the WMO, the coldest temperature in the Northern Hemisphere is -69.6°C (-93.3°F) on December 22nd, 1991 at Klinck Automatic Weather Station (AWS) Greenland.

1904: A small fire in the business district of Baltimore, Maryland becomes wind-whipped into an uncontrollable conflagration that engulfs a large portion of the city by evening. Click [HERE](#) for more information from the website Digital Maryland.

1933: The USS Ramapo, a 478 ft. Navy oiler was traveling from Manila to San Diego when it encountered the tallest rogue wave ever recorded. The wave measured 112 feet in height was caused by 70 mph winds over a broad fetch of the ocean.

2017: Six tornadoes traveled across southern Louisiana. The strongest tornado, an EF-3, impacted eastern New Orleans.



## FROZEN IN FEAR

A young man from Kansas dreamed of becoming a crew member of a tall ship. Finally, his lifelong ambition was realized when he was offered an opportunity to sail on one of the few remaining ships. His enthusiasm was short lived when, after a few days, the captain ordered him to climb to the "crow's nest" and search the horizon for approaching vessels.

The higher up he climbed on the rope ladder, the more frightened he became and the slower his progress. Halfway up he stopped, frozen in his tracks. He was unable to move. No amount of persuasion or encouragement from the sailors below inspired him to go higher. Finally, someone had to climb up behind him and slowly coax him down to safety.

Every now and then we all seem to get "stuck" when we are unable to overcome an old habit, when facing a new challenge or being forced to do something we have never done before. People all around us may provide insight and ideas to solve our problem and challenge us to move on. But nothing seems to make sense, and we "freeze" in our tracks.

However, God, in His Word, promises that "He gives power to the faint and weary, and might to him who has no strength."

When life's obstacles "freeze" us with fear, we must claim the promises of God and move forward in faith!

Prayer: Lord, may our faith in Your Word and our trust in Your promises give us the confidence and assurance that You will always provide for our safety. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. Isaiah 40:29-31

*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: 02.04.25

14 24 31 53 54 1

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$94,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 32 Mins 38 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.05.25

4 13 17 44 45 5

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$23,520,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 47 Mins 38 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.06.25

18 21 32 39 41 7

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 2 Mins 38 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.05.25

19 20 22 30 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$29,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 2 Mins 38 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.05.25

13 24 40 41 50 4

TOP PRIZE:

**\$10,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 31 Mins 38 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.05.25

19 27 30 50 62 14

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$133,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 31 Mins 38 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

## Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

### **GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL**

Arlington 55, Deubrook 54  
Avon 54, Bon Homme 29  
Bennett County 50, Stanley County 16  
Brookings 60, Sioux Falls Lincoln 39  
Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 69, Crow Creek Tribal School 63  
Dakota Valley 60, Elk Point-Jefferson 51  
DeSmet 59, Elkton-Lake Benton 23  
Dell Rapids St Mary 67, Iroquois-Lake Preston 25  
Dupree 42, Lead-Deadwood 38  
Edgemont 42, Hulett, Wyo. 17  
Freeman 59, Alcester-Hudson 24  
Groton 59, Deuel 30  
Harding County 43, Timber Lake 29  
Hill City 62, Newell 41  
Ipswich 46, Waverly-South Shore 31  
Jones County 37, New Underwood 34  
Lennox 65, Baltic 28  
Lyman 65, Highmore-Harrold 31  
McCook Central-Montrose 61, Garretson 30  
Milbank 48, Aberdeen Roncalli 38  
Mobridge-Pollock 58, Belle Fourche 39  
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 51, Hanson 36  
Northwestern 48, Aberdeen Christian 12  
Parkston 49, Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 47  
Pine Ridge 61, Little Wound 49  
Scotland/Menno 44, Platte-Geddes 38  
Sisseton 55, Clark-Willow Lake 37  
St Thomas More 52, Winner 39  
Tiospaye Topa 69, Bison 15  
Tri-Valley 48, Dell Rapids 41  
Vermillion 53, Sioux Falls Christian 38  
Wagner 52, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 45  
Wall 64, White River 55  
Warner 53, Leola-Frederick High School 40  
Webster 58, Redfield 36

### **BOYS PREP BASKETBALL**

Aberdeen Christian 59, Northwestern 34  
Bon Homme 68, Avon 53  
Centerville 55, Bridgewater-Emery 49  
Custer 68, Hot Springs 32  
Dakota Valley 66, Elk Point-Jefferson 39  
DeSmet 75, Elkton-Lake Benton 64

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Dell Rapids 57, Tri-Valley 35  
Dell Rapids St Mary 85, Iroquois-Lake Preston 52  
Deubrook 65, Arlington 25  
Freeman 80, Alcester-Hudson 72  
Great Plains Lutheran 78, Wilmot 51  
Groton 75, Deuel 43  
Hanson 60, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 53  
Hulett, Wyo. 64, Edgemont 45  
Lemmon High School 57, McLaughlin 27  
Lennox 47, Baltic 39  
Leola-Frederick High School 58, Warner 51  
Mobridge-Pollock 56, Belle Fourche 47  
Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 62, Mitchell Christian 33  
Parkston 65, Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 40  
Pine Ridge 71, Little Wound 61  
Platte-Geddes 63, Scotland/Menno 42  
Sioux Falls Lincoln 81, Brookings 64  
Sioux Valley 55, Flandreau 53  
Stanley County 58, Chamberlain 26  
Timber Lake 58, Harding County 35  
Todd County 66, Lakota Tech 55  
Wagner 54, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 29  
Wall 69, White River 24  
Waubay/Summit 55, Florence-Henry 40  
West Central 67, Tea 52  
Wolsey-Wessington 45, Wessington Springs 39

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

## Forte scores 25, South Dakota downs Denver 86-79

By The Associated Press undefined

DENVER (AP) — Chase Forte scored 25 points as South Dakota beat Denver 86-79 on Thursday night.

Forte also contributed six rebounds and three steals for the Coyotes (14-10, 5-4 Summit League). Quandre Bullock added 20 points while shooting 7 for 11 (1 for 4 from 3-point range) and 5 of 8 from the free-throw line while they also had five rebounds. Isaac Bruns had 18 points and shot 6 of 13 from the field, including 3 for 5 from 3-point range, and went 3 for 6 from the foul line.

The Pioneers (8-17, 2-8) were led in scoring by DeAndre Craig, who finished with 19 points and six rebounds. Pedro Lopez-Sanvicente added 12 points, six rebounds and two steals for Denver. Isaiah Addo-Ankrah finished with 10 points.

NEXT UP

Both teams next play Saturday. South Dakota visits Oral Roberts and Denver plays St. Thomas (MN) at home.

## South Dakota State wins 102-86 against St. Thomas

By The Associated Press undefined

BROOKINGS, S.D. (AP) — Owen Larson had 22 points in South Dakota State's 102-86 victory over St. Thomas on Thursday night.

Larson added 10 rebounds for the Jackrabbits (16-9, 7-3 Summit League). Joe Sayler shot 5 of 11 from the field, including 1 for 3 from 3-point range, and went 5 for 5 from the line to add 16 points. Kalen Garry



had 15 points and went 6 of 13 from the field (2 for 5 from 3-point range).

The Tommies (18-7, 8-2) were led in scoring by Drake Dobbs, who finished with 23 points. St. Thomas also got 14 points from Miles Barnstable. Kendall Blue also had 13 points, four assists, two steals and two blocks.

NEXT UP

South Dakota State next plays Thursday against Omaha at home, and St. Thomas will visit Denver on Saturday.

## Chicago Bears owner Virginia McCaskey, the daughter of George Halas, dies at 102

By JIM LITKE AP Sports Writer

Virginia McCaskey, who inherited the Chicago Bears from her father, George Halas, but avoided the spotlight during four-plus decades as principal owner, has died. She was 102.

McCaskey's family announced through the team that she died Thursday. She had owned the Bears since her father's death on Oct. 31, 1983.

"While we are sad, we are comforted knowing Virginia Halas McCaskey lived a long, full, faith-filled life and is now with the love of her life on earth," the family said. "She guided the Bears for four decades and based every business decision on what was best for Bears players, coaches, staff and fans."

Like her father, a co-founder of the NFL, McCaskey kept the team in family hands. She gave operational control and the title of president to her eldest son, Michael McCaskey, who served as chairman until being succeeded by brother George McCaskey in 2011.

During her stewardship, the Bears won a Super Bowl in 1986 and lost a second 21 years later.

"Virginia Halas McCaskey, the matriarch of the Chicago Bears and daughter of George Halas, the founder of the NFL, leaves a legacy of class, dignity, and humanity," NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell said in a statement. "Faith, family, and football — in that order — were her north stars and she lived by the simple adage to always 'do the right thing.' The Bears that her father started meant the world to her, and he would be proud of the way she continued the family business with such dedication and passion. Our thoughts and prayers go out to the McCaskey and Halas families and Bears fans around the world."

Four of McCaskey's sons remain with the Bears' board of directors: George, Patrick, Brian and Ed. A recent valuation by Forbes.com pegged the team's worth at \$6.4 billion.

McCaskey, the older of Halas' two children, never expected to find herself in charge. Her brother, George "Mugs" Halas Jr., was being groomed to take over the team, but died suddenly of a heart attack in 1979.

McCaskey assumed ownership upon her father's death in 1983, and her late husband, Ed McCaskey, succeeded Halas as chairman. Not long after, she turned over control to Michael, the eldest of her 11 children.

"I think it's important that all of our family remembers that we really haven't done anything to earn this," McCaskey said in a rare interview in 2006. "We're just the recipients of a tremendous legacy. I use the word 'custodian,' and we want to pass it on the best way we can. ... We've been working on that for a long time."

McCaskey's official title was secretary to the board of directors. Despite her generally hands-off approach and low public profile, she occasionally exercised ultimate authority on team decisions as matriarch of the family.

One of those involved a 1987 lawsuit brought by the children of "Mugs" Halas, which was resolved by a stock buyout of their shares. A more recent reminder came in December 2014, when George McCaskey announced the firings of coach Marc Trestman and general manager Phil Emery at a news conference, and was asked to describe his mother's role in the process.

He paused, struggling to describe her unhappiness with the just-ended 5-11 season, and the team's generally fading fortunes.

"She's pissed off," George McCaskey said. "I can't think of a 91-year-old woman that that description would apply, but in this case, I can't think of a more accurate description."

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"Virginia McCaskey has been on this earth for eight of the Bears' nine championships, and she wants more," he added a moment later. "She feels that it's been too long since the last (Super Bowl win), and that dissatisfaction is shared by her children, her grandchildren and her great-grandchildren. She's fed up with mediocrity. She feels that she and Bears fans everywhere deserve better."

Virginia McCaskey came by her fandom honestly. According to family members, she often wouldn't serve dessert on Sundays when the Bears lost. In that same 2006 interview, she recalled attending the first playoff game in league history, when she was 9.

The Bears and Portsmouth Spartans finished the 1932 season in the first tie for first place, so the league added a game to determine a champion. Because of snow, the game was moved indoors to the old Chicago Stadium, the Bears won 9-0 playing on an 80-yard field that came right to the walls.

"I remember I didn't save my ticket stub, but one of my cousins had saved his," McCaskey said. "We sat in the second balcony and the ticket price was \$1.25.

"I took it to one of the Super Bowls to show (former Commissioner) Pete Rozelle and then I don't know what happened to it afterward," she added. "But that's OK."

Her tenure as the Bears' owner included the establishment of the Bears Care program in 2005. The Bears said that Bears Care has issued grants totaling more than \$31.5 million to 225 qualifying agencies to improve the quality of life for people in the Chicago area, especially disadvantaged children and their families. Bears Care also supported health awareness programs focusing on breast and ovarian cancer.

McCaskey had 11 children, eight sons and three daughters. She is survived by her sons Patrick (Gretchen), Edward Jr. (Kathy), George (Barbara), Richard, Brian (Barbara) and Joseph, and daughters Ellen (Barney) Tonquest, Mary and Anne (Mike) Catron. She is also survived by 21 grandchildren, 40 great-grandchildren and four great-great-grandchildren.

## Search underway in western Alaska for plane carrying 10 people

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) — An aircraft carrying 10 people across Alaska's Norton Sound south of the Arctic Circle went missing Thursday afternoon and rescuers searched into the night for any sign of the aircraft.

The Bering Air Caravan was heading from Unalakleet to Nome with nine passengers and a pilot, according to Alaska's Department of Public Safety. Authorities were working to determine its last known coordinates.

Unalakleet is a community of about 690 people in western Alaska, about 150 miles (about 240 kilometers) southeast of Nome and 395 miles (about 640 kilometers) northwest of Anchorage.

The disappearance marks the third major incident in U.S. aviation in eight days. A commercial jetliner and an Army helicopter collided near the nation's capital on Jan. 29, killing 67 people. A medical transportation plane crashed in Philadelphia on Jan. 31, killing the six people onboard and another person on the ground.

The Cessna Caravan left Unalakleet at 2:37 p.m., and officials lost contact with it less than an hour later, according to David Olson, director of operations for Bering Air. The aircraft was 12 miles (about 19 kilometers) offshore, according to the U.S. Coast Guard.

"Staff at Bering Air is working hard to gather details, get emergency assistance, search and rescue going," Olson said.

Bering Air serves 32 villages in western Alaska from hubs in Nome, Kotzebue and Unalakleet. Most destinations receive twice-daily scheduled flights Monday through Saturday.

Airplanes are often the only option for travel of any distance in rural Alaska, particularly in winter.

The Nome Volunteer Fire Department said in a statement on social media that ground crews were searching across the coast, from Nome to Topkok.

"Due to weather and visibility, we are limited on air search at the current time," it said. People were told not to form their own search parties because the weather was too dangerous.

In an update early Friday, the department said that "crews are still searching on the ground, canvassing as much area as possible," but that "we do not have any updated information on the location of the missing aircraft."

A U.S. Coast Guard airplane crew was expected to search the missing aircraft's last known position. The National Guard and troopers were also helping with the search, according to the fire department.

It was 17 F (-8.3 C) in Unalakleet around takeoff, according to the National Weather Service. There was light snow falling and fog.

The names of the people onboard weren't yet being released.

Nome, a Gold Rush town, is just south of the Arctic Circle and is known as the ending point of the 1,000-mile (1,610-kilometer) Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race.

## One of the victims of Sweden's deadliest mass shooting called his fiancée to say he loved her

By ALEKSANDAR FURTULA, SERGEI GRITS and STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press

OREBRO, Sweden (AP) — Despite his gunshot wounds, sustained Tuesday in Sweden's deadliest mass shooting, Salim Karim Iskef managed to video-call his fiancée to tell her he loved her one last time.

The 28-year-old asked Kareen Alia to look after his mother and herself before the call ended. There was no answer when she called back, and she later found out he'd died from his injuries. He was one of 10 people killed when a gunman opened fire at the adult education center in Orebro where Iskef was studying to become a nurse.

The couple had recently bought a home and planned to marry this summer.

"He had all of these dreams in his heart. Now, unfortunately, all of these dreams are gone. Their light has been put out," Father Jacob Kasselia, priest of their local Orthodox Christian church, told Swedish broadcaster TV4.

Authorities said the shooter, who has not yet been officially identified, was connected to the adult education center where he opened fire with at least one rifle-like weapon and may have attended school there previously.

The shooter was found dead with three guns, 10 empty magazines and a large amount of unused ammunition next to his body. It was not clear how he died, but officials said police did not return his gunfire.

Officers found at least five people, all over age 18, with serious gunshot wounds. A sixth person was treated for minor injuries.

Investigators have not uncovered a definitive motive behind the bloodshed. Police said there were no warnings beforehand, and they believe the perpetrator acted alone. Authorities said there were no suspected connections to terrorism at this point.

'My whole life was with him'

The school, Campus Risbergiska, offers primary and secondary educational classes for adults age 20 and older, Swedish-language classes for immigrants, vocational training, and programs for people with intellectual disabilities. It is on the outskirts of Orebro, about 200 kilometers (125 miles) from Stockholm.

Iskef was studying nursing there after serving as a healthcare worker during the COVID-19 pandemic. His family fled Syria between 2014 and 2015 because of its long-running civil war.

"We've lived together our entire lives," his sister Hanan Eskif told TV4. "We worked together, and we studied together, we went to church together. My whole life was with him, how am I supposed to live without him?"

Their family held a memorial service at their Orthodox Christian church, although they hadn't received Iskef's body by late Thursday.

"We keep looking out the window thinking maybe he'll return and knock on the door, and we'll have to open it. We don't sleep, we don't eat, don't drink. Nothing, we just sit and look out," Eskif told the broadcaster.

Guns in Sweden

The government and Sweden Democrats on Friday planned to move forward with proposals to tighten gun laws, including restricting access to semi-automatic weapons such as the AR-15, Swedish news agency TT reported.

Authorities said the shooter had licenses for four weapons, three of which were found next to his body. Police have seized the fourth. Officials have only said at least one gun was a rifle-like weapon.

Currently, in order to possess a firearm legally in Sweden, applicants must obtain a weapon license and demonstrate that it will be used for an acceptable purpose, such as hunting or target shooting, and not be misused.

Applicants must also submit previously obtained hunting or target shooting certificates. Hunting certificates require people to pass a training course, while target shooters must be certified as active and experienced members of clubs.

In a country of roughly 10.5 million people, there were just over 660,000 registered gun owners at the beginning of 2024, according to the Swedish news agency TT. Those registered owners had some 2 million guns, objects that are considered firearms and weapon parts that require a permit.

TT reported that 1.6 million of those guns are registered for hunting, and another 176,000 for target-shooting.

All weapons must be stored in secure cabinets approved by the police. Applications for fully automatic weapons or one-handed weapons are only granted for exceptional reasons, and such permits are generally time-limited.

Permits are revoked if the weapon is modified to be substantially different from its original function.

## **Philippine vice president preparing for impeachment battle but silent on option to resign**

By JIM GOMEZ Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines (AP) — Philippine Vice President Sara Duterte said Friday that her lawyers were preparing for a legal battle in her upcoming impeachment trial but refused to say if resignation was an option so she could preempt a possible conviction that would bar her from running for president in the future.

Duterte was speaking for the first time since the House of Representatives impeached her Wednesday on a raft of criminal charges, including plotting to have President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. assassinated, which she again denied. Marcos was her running mate in the 2022 elections but they have had a bitter falling out.

At the news conference, she underscored economic hardships and said the lives of Filipinos have become "much worse" due to skyrocketing costs of living.

"God save the Philippines," Duterte said and asked her supporters to turn to social media to express their sentiments instead of holding street protests to avoid disrupting their lives.

A potential conviction and ban on Duterte holding office would be a major setback to one of the country's most prominent political families that has been perceived as veering toward China.

The impeachment complaint focused on the alleged threats to Marcos, irregularities in the use of office funds and Duterte's failure to stand up to Chinese aggression in the disputed South China Sea, according to proponents of the petition. The Senate is to take up the case when it reconvenes in June.

Marcos has boosted defense ties with Washington, Manila's longtime treaty ally, as the Philippines faced China's increasing aggressive actions in the contested waters.

The vice president's father, former President Rodrigo Duterte, nurtured cozy ties during his term with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian leader Vladimir Putin while threatening to end U.S. military engagements in the Philippines.

That backdrop has made the impeachment proceedings important to the United States and China, whose rivalry for influence looms large in the region, said Jean Franco, a political professor at the state-run University of the Philippines.

"China will lose a perceived ally if Duterte gets convicted," Franco said. The U.S., which saw its alliance with Manila called into question under the previous Duterte administration, would benefit, she said.

Asked if she was considering resignation, a move that would preempt a possible conviction that would block her from running in the 2028 presidential elections, Duterte refused to give a categorical reply.

"We're still too far from those matters," she said, adding that a large number of lawyers have signed up

to join her impeachment defense.

She reiterated that she was open to seeking the presidency in 2028 when asked, but added that she has to assess her chances. The vice president's popularity rating has declined in independent surveys, but she is still regarded as a leading presidential contender.

"We're seriously considering that but it's difficult to decide without the numbers," she said.

## Trump signs order imposing sanctions on International Criminal Court over investigations of Israel

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE and JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump on Thursday signed an executive order imposing sanctions on the International Criminal Court over investigations of Israel, a close U.S. ally.

Neither the U.S. nor Israel is a member of or recognizes the court, which has issued an arrest warrant for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for alleged war crimes over his military response in Gaza after the Hamas attack against Israel in October 2023. Tens of thousands of Palestinians, including children, have been killed during the Israeli military's response.

The order Trump signed accuses the ICC of engaging in "illegitimate and baseless actions targeting America and our close ally Israel" and of abusing its power by issuing "baseless arrest warrants" against Netanyahu and his former defense minister, Yoav Gallant.

"The ICC has no jurisdiction over the United States or Israel," the order states, adding that the court had set a "dangerous precedent" with its actions against both countries.

Trump's action came as Netanyahu was visiting Washington. He and Trump held talks Tuesday at the White House, and Netanyahu spent some of Thursday meeting with lawmakers on Capitol Hill.

The order says the U.S. will impose "tangible and significant consequences" on those responsible for the ICC's "transgressions." Actions may include blocking property and assets and not allowing ICC officials, employees and relatives to enter the United States.

Human rights activists said sanctioning court officials would have a chilling effect and run counter to U.S. interests in other conflict zones where the court is investigating.

"Victims of human rights abuses around the world turn to the International Criminal Court when they have nowhere else to go, and President Trump's executive order will make it harder for them to find justice," said Charlie Hogle, staff attorney with American Civil Liberties Union's National Security Project. "The order also raises serious First Amendment concerns because it puts people in the United States at risk of harsh penalties for helping the court identify and investigate atrocities committed anywhere, by anyone."

Hogle said the order "is an attack on both accountability and free speech."

"You can disagree with the court and the way it operates, but this is beyond the pale," Sarah Yager, Washington director of Human Rights Watch, said in an interview prior to the announcement.

Like Israel, the U.S. is not among the court's 124 members and has long harbored suspicions that a "Global Court" of unelected judges could arbitrarily prosecute U.S. officials. A 2002 law authorizes the Pentagon to liberate any American or U.S. ally held by the court. In 2020, Trump sanctioned chief prosecutor Karim Khan's predecessor, Fatou Bensouda, over her decision to open an inquiry into war crimes committed by all sides, including the U.S., in Afghanistan.

However, those sanctions were lifted under President Joe Biden, and the U.S. began to tepidly cooperate with the tribunal — especially after Khan in 2023 charged Russian President Vladimir Putin with war crimes in Ukraine.

Driving that turnaround was Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., who organized meetings in Washington, New York and Europe between Khan and GOP lawmakers who have been among the court's fiercest critics.

Now, Graham says he feels betrayed by Khan — and is vowing to crush the court as well as the economy of any country that tries to enforce the arrest warrant against Netanyahu.

"This is a rogue court. This is a kangaroo court," Graham said in an interview in December. "There are places where the court makes perfect sense. Russia is a failed state. People fall out of windows. But I

never in my wildest dreams imagined they would go after Israel, which has one of the most independent legal systems on the planet.”

“The legal theory they’re using against Israel has no limits and we’re next,” he added.

Biden had called the warrants an abomination, and Trump’s national security adviser, Mike Waltz, has accused the court of having an antisemitic bias.

Any sanctions could cripple the court by making it harder for its investigators to travel and by compromising U.S.-developed technology to safeguard evidence. The court last year suffered a major cyberattack that left employees unable to access files for weeks.

Some European countries are pushing back. The Netherlands, in a statement late last year, called on other ICC members “to cooperate to mitigate risks of these possible sanctions, so that the court can continue to carry out its work and fulfil its mandate.”

The U.S. relationship with the ICC is a complicated one. The United States participated in negotiations that led to the adoption of the Rome Statute that established the court as a tribunal of last resort to prosecute the world’s worst atrocities — war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide — if individual governments did not take action.

The U.S. voted against the Rome Statute in 1998. Then-U.S. President Bill Clinton signed the statute in 2000 but did not send the treaty to the U.S. Senate to be ratified.

When George W. Bush became president in 2001, he effectively canceled the U.S. signature and led a campaign to pressure countries to enter bilateral agreements not to hand over Americans to the ICC.

## **Iran supreme leader says US talks ‘not intelligent, wise or honorable,’ upending push to negotiation**

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iran’s supreme leader said Friday that negotiations with America “are not intelligent, wise or honorable” after President Donald Trump floated nuclear talks with Tehran.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei also suggested that “there should be no negotiations with such a government,” but stopped short of issuing a direct order not to engage with Washington.

Khamenei’s remarks upend months of signals from Tehran to the United States that it wanted to negotiate over its rapidly advancing nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of crushing economic sanctions worth billions of dollars.

What happens next remains unclear, particularly as reformist President Masoud Pezeshkian campaigned on and promised as recently as Thursday entering into a dialogue with the West.

Khamenei’s remarks to air force officers in Tehran appeared to contradict his own earlier remarks in August that opened the door to talks. However, the 85-year-old Khamenei has always been careful with remarks about negotiating with the West. That includes balancing the demands of reformists within the country who want the talks against hard-line elements within Iran’s theocracy, including the paramilitary Revolutionary Guard.

Khamenei noted that Trump unilaterally withdrew from the earlier nuclear deal under which Iran drastically limited its enrichment of uranium and overall stockpile of the material, in exchange for crushing sanctions being removed.

“The Americans did not uphold their end of the deal,” Khamenei said. “The very person who is in office today tore up the agreement. He said he would, and he did.”

He added: “This is an experience we must learn from. We negotiated, we gave concessions, we compromised— but we did not achieve the results we aimed for. And despite all its flaws, the other side ultimately violated and destroyed the agreement.”

It’s not clear what sparked Khamenei’s remarks. However, they come after Trump suggested he wanted to deal with Tehran, even while signing an executive order to reimpose his “maximum pressure” approach to Iran on Tuesday.

“I’m going to sign it, but hopefully we’re not going to have to use it very much,” he said from the Oval

Office. "We will see whether or not we can arrange or work out a deal with Iran."

"We don't want to be tough on Iran. We don't want to be tough on anybody," Trump added. "But they just can't have a nuclear bomb."

Trump followed with another online message on Wednesday, saying: "Reports that the United States, working in conjunction with Israel, is going to blow Iran into smithereens, ARE GREATLY EXAGGERATED."

"I would much prefer a Verified Nuclear Peace Agreement, which will let Iran peacefully grow and prosper," he wrote on Truth Social. "We should start working on it immediately, and have a big Middle East Celebration when it is signed and completed."

Trump did not elaborate.

Khamenei, like other Iranian leaders, uses elliptical comments to indirectly govern policy while not boxing himself into any one decision. As supreme leader, he's also created a vast bureaucracy that competes with itself for influence, including with its civilian leadership under Pezeshkian.

As recently as Thursday, Pezeshkian suggested Iran could open itself up to even more inspections from the United Nations' nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency.

"They (can) come and inspect one hundred times more since we are not supposed to go after" a nuclear weapon, Pezeshkian told foreign diplomats.

Iranian diplomats for years have pointed to Khamenei's preachings as a binding fatwa, or religious edict, that Iran won't build an atomic bomb.

Iran long has insisted its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes. However, it now enriches uranium to 60% purity — a short, technical step from weapons-grade levels of 90%. Iranian officials increasingly suggest Tehran could pursue an atomic bomb. U.S. intelligence agencies assess that Iran has yet to begin a weapons program, but has "undertaken activities that better position it to produce a nuclear device, if it chooses to do so."

Earlier in the week, Trump also said that displaced Palestinians in Gaza could be permanently resettled outside the war-torn territory and proposed the U.S. take "ownership" in redeveloping the area into "the Riviera of the Middle East."

While not directly linking Trump's comments on Gaza, Khamenei appeared to be referencing them in his remarks as well.

"The Americans sit, redrawing the map of the world — but only on paper, as it has no basis in reality," Khamenei said. "They make statements about us, express opinions and issue threats. If they threaten us, we will threaten them in return. If they act on their threats, we will act on ours. If they violate the security of our nation, we will, without a doubt, respond in kind."

## **Bangladesh's government warns of stern action after house where independence was declared is razed**

By JULHAS ALAM Associated Press

DHAKA, Bangladesh (AP) — Bangladesh's interim government headed by Nobel Peace laureate Muhammad Yunus said Friday it will contain vandalism and arson taking place across the country amid concern from a major Bangladeshi opposition political party and neighboring India over attacks on a historic house linked to ousted former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Mobs targeting supporters of ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina have vandalized homes and businesses in various parts of the country since Wednesday night. Many of the establishments belonging to former lawmakers, Cabinet members and the leaders of Hasina's Awami League party were set on fire, apparently as part of a coordinated campaign involving the former home of Bangladesh's independence leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman — Hasina's father — in Dhaka, the capital.

Hasina fled the country to India on Aug. 5 amid a student-led mass uprising that ended her 15-year rule.

Early Friday, the Press Wing of Yunus in a brief statement warned that stern actions would be taken against such acts of violence.

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"The interim government notes with deep concern that some individuals and groups are attempting to vandalize and torch various institutions and establishments across the country. The government will strongly contain such acts," the statement said.

It said the government was ready to protect the safety of life and property of the people.

The statement came more than 24 hours after the attack on the building from where Rahman declared Bangladesh's independence in 1971. The Wednesday night attack followed a daylong campaign on social media by Hasina critics and student leaders. They declared a "bulldozer procession" toward Rahman's house, which was turned into a museum by Hasina. As the protesters stormed the building, police stood by. A team of military soldiers later attempted to stop them but then left.

An intelligence official in Dhaka told The Associated Press that there were reports of some 70 attacks across Bangladesh since Wednesday following the vandalism and arson in Rahman's home. The country's leading English-language Daily Star reported Friday that acts of violence targeting Hasina's supporters took place in at least 20 districts. Channel 24 TV station in Dhaka reported violence in at least 35 districts across the country. The station said the village home of a veteran politician from Hasina's party and former Bangladesh president, Abdul Hamid, was one of the targets.

In a statement early Friday, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party headed by former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, Hasina's main political rival, urged the Yunus-led government to "bring the situation under control."

"Otherwise, anarchy will spread across the country. It is a timely demand for us to urge the stringent implementation of law and order and to make the state's and government's role more visible," the statement said.

India, which aided Bangladesh to gain independence from Pakistan in a bloody war in 1971, in a statement on Thursday condemned the demolition of Rahman's house, calling the site a symbol of a "heroic resistance."

It highlighted the role of Rahman's residence in the formation of Bangladesh's national identity.

"All those who value the freedom struggle that nurtured Bangla identity and pride are aware of the importance of this residence for the national consciousness of Bangladesh. This act of vandalism should be strongly condemned," the statement reads.

Bangladeshi political analyst Nazmul Ahsan Kalimullah said Thursday that such violence could pose a serious threat to the aspiration of a democratic transition through an election.

"The overlook by the state in preventing such acts of vandalism and anarchy from happening could ignite further chaos. These should not be ignored," he said.

Yunus has said a new election will be held either in December or by June 2026.

## **Judge in Boston to consider latest bid to block Trump's birthright citizenship order**

By MICHAEL CASEY Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — A federal judge in Boston on Friday will consider a request from 18 state attorneys general to block President Donald Trump's executive order ending birthright citizenship for the children of parents who are in the U.S. illegally.

The hearing comes after a federal judge in Seattle blocked the order Thursday and decried what he described as the administration's treatment of the Constitution, saying Trump was trying to change it with an executive order. The Seattle ruling in a lawsuit brought by four states and an immigrant rights group followed one by a Maryland federal judge, who on Wednesday issued a nationwide pause on the order in a separate but similar case.

In the Boston case, the state attorneys general, along with the cities of San Francisco and Washington, are asking Judge Leo Sorokin to issue a preliminary injunction.

They argue that the principle of birthright citizenship is "enshrined in the Constitution" and that Trump does not have the authority to issue the order, which they called a "flagrantly unlawful attempt to strip hundreds of thousands of American-born children of their citizenship based on their parentage."



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They also say Trump's order would cost states funding they rely on to "provide essential services" — from foster care to health care for low-income children to "early interventions for infants, toddlers, and students with disabilities."

At the heart of the lawsuits is the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in 1868 after the Civil War and the Dred Scott Supreme Court decision, which held that Scott, an enslaved man, wasn't a citizen despite having lived in a state where slavery was outlawed.

The Trump administration has asserted that children of noncitizens are not "subject to the jurisdiction" of the United States and therefore not entitled to citizenship.

Attorneys for the states have argued that it does — and that has been recognized since the amendment's adoption, notably in an 1898 U.S. Supreme Court decision. That decision, *United States v. Wong Kim Ark*, held that the only children who did not automatically receive U.S. citizenship upon being born on U.S. soil were children of diplomats, who have allegiance to another government; enemies present in the U.S. during hostile occupation; those born on foreign ships; and those born to members of sovereign Native American tribes.

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.

## Dog Show 101: What's what at the Westminster Kennel Club

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The Westminster Kennel Club dog show is back for a 149th year — and back at New York's Madison Square Garden for the first time since early 2020.

It's a happy homecoming for the United States' most prestigious canine event, which moved to venues outside Manhattan in recent years because of the coronavirus pandemic and then other considerations. But organizers longed to return to the self-described World's Most Famous Arena.

"If you love dogs and you want to see the very best dogs from all around the world competing for the top prize of best in show at Westminster, just be there," club President Donald Sturz said. For fans who can't be there in person, Fox Sports is showing the event's various components on FS1 and FS2 and streaming some on the network's website and app; Westminster is streaming some others. The competition spans Saturday, Monday and Tuesday, with best in show awarded around 11 p.m. Tuesday on the East Coast.

Might Mercedes, the German shepherd who was Westminster's runner-up last year, become top dog this time? Or could this be the year for Monty the giant schnauzer, who was a Westminster finalist the last two years, won the American Kennel Club's big show in December and is currently the sport's top-ranked dog? Will the prize go to another high-ranking dog — or a dark horse?

Here are the basics on Westminster and the dog show world it epitomizes.

When is Westminster?

It begins Saturday morning at the Javits Center convention hall with agility and obedience championships and some demonstration events, including Westminster's first experiment with flyball. That's essentially a canine relay race that involves running a course of jumps and retrieving a ball.

The traditional, breed-by-breed judging — what show folk call "conformation" — unfolds Monday and Tuesday. First-round competition, where dogs are judged against others of their breed, happens during the daytime at the Javits Center. Then, in what are essentially semifinals, each breed winner is judged against others within its "group" of dozens of breeds at Madison Square Garden in the evenings. In the final round, the seven group winners compete for best in show Tuesday night.

At each level, judges decide which dog in the ring best matches the ideal, or "standard," for its own breed.

How many dogs?

About 2,500 dogs from 201 breeds and varieties (subsets of breeds) are signed up to compete.

Hailing from every U.S. state and 12 other countries, contestants include such familiar breeds as golden retrievers and such rarities as sloughis. No doodles, though. At least for now, those poodle mixes aren't recognized as purebreds by the American Kennel Club, the governing body for Westminster and many

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other U.S. dog shows.

Dachshunds are the best-represented breed, with 52 entered.

The agility and obedience contests involve a few hundred more dogs, including mixed-breed ones. Last year a border collie-papillion combination named Nimble became the first mixed-breed winner in the agility trial's decade-long history.

How do dogs get into the show?

First, breeders determine which puppies are physically and temperamentally suited for showing. Those pups are raised, trained and groomed to put their best paw forward in the show ring. "Beginner puppies" can start competing in AKC shows at 4 months.

Some owners exhibit their own dogs where and when they can. Others have professional handlers who crisscross the country to compete most weekends, sometimes with multiple pooches.

Trying for a national ranking is known as "campaigning" a dog, and no wonder. As in politics, hopefuls — or, here, their owners and handlers — may gather intel about rivals' plans and either seek or avoid a face-off. They may weigh a particular judge's record. Some even run full-page ads in dog magazines to congratulate, salute and promote their animals.

Are there favorites?

All Westminster dogs are champions, as measured by their sport's complicated point system. But yes, there are stats, kept by the Canine Chronicle magazine.

Besides Monty and Mercedes, entrants include Vito, a pug who won the National Dog Show televised Thanksgiving Day, along with 2024 Westminster semifinalists Comet the shih tzu and Louis the Afghan hound. There's a high-ranking otterhound, representing one of the country's rarer breeds, and a big-winning wire fox terrier, whose breed won more than any other at Westminster.

Still, show cognoscenti often say victory goes to "the dog on the day," meaning the one that has the performance of a lifetime.

And regardless which dog the judge chooses, others sometimes win the audience's heart. Among the crowd faves over the years: a Sussex spaniel who sat up straight on his hind legs before the judge; a treat-seeking Leonberger who gnawed at his handler's pocket while going around the ring; and a shiba inu shown by a 10-year-old girl.

What breeds win most?

Wire fox terriers have taken the top prize 15 times, most recently in 2019. Poodles of various sizes have 11 wins. A miniature poodle named Sage won last year.

Many breeds haven't won yet, including such favorites as the French bulldog and Labrador retriever. But never say never: Two of the last three winners have been firsts for their breeds: the petit basset griffon Vendéen and the bloodhound.

What do winners get?

Bragging rights, ribbons and trophies. There are no cash prizes, though the agility and obedience winners each get to direct a \$5,000 Westminster donation to a training club or the American Kennel Club Humane Fund.

OK, it's prestigious, but aren't there protests?

Animal rights activists routinely protest outside, and sometimes inside, the show. During last year's final round, someone carrying a sign reading "boycott breeders" tried to climb into the ring. The demonstrator was quickly intercepted and arrested.

The Westminster club says it promotes responsible dog ownership and celebrates all canines while highlighting the "preservation" of breeds with particular traits.

## House GOP rushing to produce Trump's big budget bill with tax cuts, program cuts and other promises

By LISA MASCARO, KEVIN FREKING and DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Republicans are working overtime after a lengthy White House meeting to meet President Donald Trump's demand for a big budget package that includes some \$3 trillion in tax breaks, massive program cuts and a possible extension of the nation's debt limit.

Speaker Mike Johnson had GOP lawmakers working into the night ahead of a self-imposed Friday deadline to produce the package, after having blown past an earlier timeline to draft the contours of a bill that could begin making its long journey through Congress to the president's desk.

Trump's message as he popped in and out of the nearly five-hour meeting Thursday at the White House was simple: Get it done.

"What he does a really good job at is: Here's the end result that I want," Rep. Lisa McClain, R-Mich., the House GOP Conference chair, said afterward.

On the list for the emerging budget package from the House GOP: making tax cuts that expire at the end of this year permanent, cutting spending on federal programs and ensuring Trump has enough money to launch his deportation operation and finish building the U.S.-Mexico border wall. The package could raise the nation's debt ceiling to allow more borrowing and prevent a federal default.

It's a heavy lift for Congress, and House and Senate GOP leaders have been desperately looking to Trump for direction on how to proceed, but so far the president has been noncommittal about the details — only pushing Congress for results.

The standoff is creating frustration for Republicans as precious time is slipping and they fail to make progress on what has been their top priority with their party in control in Washington. At the same time, congressional phone lines are being swamped with callers protesting cost-cutting efforts led by billionaire Elon Musk against federal programs, services and operations.

Trump set the tone at the start of Thursday's session, lawmakers said, then left them to hammer out the details. Republican senators are heading Friday to Trump's private Mar-a-Lago club for their own meeting.

"Very positive developments today," Johnson said once he returned to the Capitol. "We're really grateful to the president for leaning in and doing what he does best, and that is put a steady hand at the wheel and get everybody working."

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt told reporters the president and lawmakers discussed "tax priorities of the Trump administration," including Trump's promises to end federal taxation of tips, Social Security benefits and overtime pay. Renewing tax cuts Trump enacted in 2017 also was on the agenda, she said.

"The president is committed to working with Congress to get this done," Leavitt said.

Johnson, R-La., needs almost complete unanimity from his ranks to pass any bill over objections from Democrats. In the Senate, Republicans have a 53-47 majority, with little room for dissent.

House Republicans reconvened in the evening at the Capitol to make sure all the Republicans would be on board with the emerging plan, particularly the spending cuts that have the potential to cause angst among lawmakers as they slice into government services Americans depend on from coast to coast.

The chair of the House Budget Committee, Texas Rep. Jodey Arrington, said his panel is preparing to hold hearings on the package next week.

But as Johnson's timeline has slipped, the Senate is making moves to take charge.

Republicans led by Senate Majority Leader John Thune of South Dakota have proposed a two-step approach, starting with a smaller bill that would include money for Trump's U.S.-Mexico border wall and deportation plans, among other priorities. They later would pursue the more robust package of tax break extensions before a year-end deadline.

Sen. Lindsey Graham, chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, announced that his panel, too, was pushing ahead next week with hearings to kickstart the process.

The dueling approaches between the House and Senate are becoming something of a race to see which

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chamber will make the most progress toward the GOP's overall goals.

The House GOP largely wants what Trump has called a "big, beautiful bill" that would extend some \$3 trillion in tax cuts and include funding for the president's mass deportation effort and border wall. It includes massive cuts from a menu of government programs — from health care to food assistance — to help offset the tax cuts.

The smaller bill Graham is proposing would total some \$300 billion and include border money and a boost in defense spending, largely paid for with a rollback of Biden-era green energy programs.

House Republicans are deeply split over Graham's approach. But they are also at odds over their own ideas.

House GOP leaders are proposing cuts that would bring \$1 trillion in savings over the decade, lawmakers said, but members of the conservative House Freedom Caucus want at least double that amount.

Trump has repeatedly said he is less wed to the process used in Congress than the outcome of achieving his policy goals.

If the House GOP's initial meeting with Trump at the White House last month was a good first date, this one was "whether we want kids or not," McClain told reporters.

"This was a very different meeting," she said. "It was still positive, optimistic. But it was getting down to business."

## Josh Allen wins AP NFL Most Valuable Player award

By ROB MAADDI AP Pro Football Writer

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Josh Allen wanted to leave New Orleans with different hardware. Still, he's happy to be recognized for his accomplishments.

Allen edged two-time winner Lamar Jackson for the AP NFL Most Valuable Player award in the closest race since Matt Ryan beat out Tom Brady in 2016.

"I wish we weren't hoisting this trophy. I wish we were hoisting the Lombardi — and we're going to keep working until we do," Allen said Thursday, referring to winning a Super Bowl.

Allen, who led Buffalo to a fifth straight AFC East title, got 27 first-place votes to Jackson's 23 and finished with 383 points. He received 22 second-place votes and one third. The Bills fell short of playing on Sunday, losing to the Kansas City Chiefs in the AFC title game.

Jackson, who led the Ravens to a second straight AFC North championship, got 26 second-place votes and one fourth for a total of 362 points.

Eagles running back Saquon Barkley finished third (120 points) followed by Bengals quarterback Joe Burrow (82) and Lions QB Jared Goff (47).

Allen threw for 3,731 yards, 28 TDs and had six picks for a 101.4 passer rating. He ran for 531 yards and 12 scores, becoming the first player in NFL history to have five consecutive seasons with at least 40 total touchdowns.

"I feel like my teammates wanted this more for me than I did, but I'm very honored," said Allen, who was joined at the awards by fiancée Hailee Steinfeld.

Jackson had career-highs with 4,172 yards passing, 41 TDs to just four interceptions and a 119.6 passer rating, which led the NFL. He got 30 first-place votes to Allen's 18 to earn AP first-team All-Pro honors.

The last time a first-team All-Pro didn't win the NFL MVP award was 1987. John Elway was the MVP that season and Joe Montana was first-team All-Pro. The MVP award is given to a player who had the most valuable season while All-Pro is a statistical recognition.

AP Coach of the Year

Kevin O'Connell beat out Dan Campbell for AP NFL Coach of the Year after leading the Minnesota Vikings to 14 wins with quarterback Sam Darnold.

The Vikings, widely picked to finish last in the NFC North, ended up playing for a division title and the conference's No. 1 seed in the final game of the regular season. They lost to the Lions and then were knocked out of the playoffs by the Rams.

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"I put a lot of thought into this season. I thought it had a chance to be a special team," said O'Connell, who was presented by Bill Belichick, the coach who drafted him in the third round in 2008. "It really wasn't about that. It was more my belief in our organization and my belief in our coaches and our players to come together and just try to win one football game.

"It's a great example of unique people and unique things being able to come together and find a way to try to have unique results."

O'Connell got 25 first-place votes, 18 seconds and seven thirds, appearing on all 50 ballots.

Campbell, who guided Detroit to a franchise-record 15 wins, got 19 first-place votes to finish second. Kansas City's Andy Reid (4), Denver's Sean Payton (1) and Washington's Dan Quinn (1) also received first-place votes.

AP Defensive Rookie of the Year

Los Angeles Rams edge rusher Jared Verse was an overwhelming choice for AP NFL Defensive Rookie of the Year.

"Hard work can take you anywhere," Verse said. "You don't have to be the biggest, the strongest, the fastest. As long as you work hard, you can overcome anything. So, it's just a testament to that."

Verse had 4 1/2 sacks and led all rookies in quarterback hits (18), pressures (77) and hurries (56). He also had 11 tackles for loss. Verse got 37 first-place votes, well ahead of Eagles rookie cornerback Quinyon Mitchell, who received nine.

Rams defensive tackle Braden Fiske, Chargers cornerback Tarheeb Still, Texans safety Calen Bullock and Commanders cornerback Mike Sainristil each got one apiece.

AP Comeback Player of the Year

Joe Burrow took the AP NFL Comeback Player of the Year award after returning from wrist surgery in 2023 to lead the NFL with 4,918 yards passing and 43 touchdown passes.

Burrow played all 17 games for the Bengals (9-8) after missing seven due to injuries the previous season. He received 31 first-place votes and finished far ahead of Chargers running back J.K. Dobbins (3).

Vikings QB Sam Darnold (8), Bills safety Damar Hamlin (3) and Patriots cornerback Christian Gonzalez (2) also got first-place votes.

AP Offensive Player of the Year

Saquon Barkley ran away with the AP NFL Offensive Player of the Year award after rushing for 2,005 yards, eighth-best in NFL history, in his first season with the Eagles.

Barkley sat out Philadelphia's final regular-season game when he was 101 yards away from breaking Eric Dickerson's single-season record but he has 442 rushing yards and five touchdowns in the playoffs.

Barkley needs 30 yards rushing in the Super Bowl to set the all-time single-season record, including the playoffs. Hall of Fame running back Terrell Davis had 2,476 yards rushing in 19 regular season and playoff games in 1998 for the Super Bowl champion Denver Broncos.

Barkley received 35 of 50 first-place votes.

Ravens quarterback Lamar Jackson received 12 first-place votes and teammate Derrick Henry got one. Bengals quarterback Joe Burrow and Bills QB Josh Allen also received one first-place vote each.

Bengals wide receiver Ja'Marr Chase finished third in the voting despite no first-place votes. Chase, a unanimous selection for All-Pro, won the receiving triple crown, leading the league with 127 receptions, 1,708 yards and 17 TDs.

AP Defensive Player of the Year

Patrick Surtain II became the seventh cornerback to win the AP NFL Defensive Player of the Year award.

The Denver Broncos' All-Pro allowed just 37 receptions, had four interceptions and opposing quarterbacks had a 61.1 passer rating throwing against him.

Surtain received 26 first-place votes, beating out Bengals edge rusher Trey Hendrickson (11) and Browns edge Myles Garrett (5).

"When I'm holding my side of the field down, that's where I become most valuable to the team," Surtain said. "That's what I did all year. ... That's what I came to do, is lock down my side of the field."

Steelers edge T.J. Watt (3), Eagles linebacker Zack Baun (2), Lions safety Kerby Joseph (1) and Vikings

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edge rushers Andrew Van Ginkel (1) and Jonathan Greenard (1) also received first-place votes.

Stephon Gilmore was the last cornerback to win the Defensive Player of the Year award in 2019. Charles Woodson, Deion Sanders, Rod Woodson, Lester Hayes and Mel Blount previously won it.

AP NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year

Jayden Daniels was a near-unanimous choice for AP NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year after helping the Washington Commanders win 12 games.

The Pro Bowl quarterback received 49 of 50 first-place votes with the other going to Raiders tight end Brock Bowers.

"It's just nothing but hard work, and just preparation," Daniels said, alluding to the jump he made in his final season at LSU, when he won the Heisman Trophy. "If you lock in for one year, your life will change. I kind of did that."

Daniels, the No. 2 overall pick, threw for 3,568 yards, 25 TDs and posted a 100.1 rating. He also ran for 891 yards and six scores. Daniels led the Commanders to a pair of road playoff wins before losing to the Eagles in the NFC championship game.

Broncos quarterback Bo Nix finished third in the voting, Jaguars wide receiver Brian Thomas Jr. was fourth and Giants wideout Malik Nabers placed fifth.

AP Assistant Coach of the Year

Ben Johnson was a clear choice for the AP NFL Assistant Coach of the Year, receiving 29 first-place votes.

Johnson, who was the Lions offensive coordinator, led a group that was first in scoring (33.22 points per game) and second in yards (409.5). He was hired to coach the Chicago Bears after Detroit lost in the playoffs.

Vikings defensive coordinator Brian Flores got three first-place votes and finished second in the voting. Former Lions defensive coordinator Aaron Glenn, who was hired to coach the New York Jets, received six first-place votes and came in third.

A nationwide panel of 50 media members who regularly cover the league completed voting before the playoffs began.

## Antonio Gates, Jared Allen, Eric Allen and Sterling Sharpe make the Pro Football Hall of Fame

By JOSH DUBOW AP Pro Football Writer

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Antonio Gates, Jared Allen, Eric Allen and Sterling Sharpe were voted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in the smallest induction class in 20 years following offseason rule changes meant to make it harder to get inducted.

Sharpe got in as a seniors candidate in voting announced Thursday night at the NFL Honors and will join younger brother Shannon as the first siblings ever inducted into the Hall. Two-time Super Bowl MVP Eli Manning fell short and won't join older brother Peyton in Canton, Ohio, this year.

Shannon delivered the news directly to Sterling, and they will be together forever at the Hall after the induction ceremony on Aug. 2.

"I don't think that has really set in yet," Sterling Sharpe said. "It's one of those situations where the closer it gets to having the same color jacket he has and standing in same place he stood and being able to have a conv about the journey to get there I think it will set in. But right now it hasn't hit home yet."

While the small class is a change from past years when at least seven people got inducted in each of the previous 12 classes, it isn't unprecedented.

There were only four inductees in the 2005 class and there were 18 other years with three or four inductees since the first class of 17 was enshrined in 1963.

"You almost appreciate it more," Jared Allen said. "Nothing comes easy. When I found out it was only four, it became more special. There's a true emphasis on what it means to be a Hall of Famer. Clearly we fit that. For me, it was kind of a sigh of relief."

New rules were instituted this year after a push by Hall of Famers to make the Hall more exclusive, and

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that led directly to the smaller class. The modern era candidates were voted from 15 down to seven in the final stage, instead of five in past years.

The 49 voters then got to vote for five of the seven with anyone reaching 80% or finishing in the top three getting into the Hall. In past years, the five finalists all got an up-or-down vote with all five getting in for the past 17 years.

The candidates from the seniors, coach and contributor categories were then all placed in a group with voters picking three. Candidates also needed 80% support with the top finisher automatically getting in even if he fell short.

Hall of Fame spokesman Rich Desrosiers said no decision was made on whether to keep this system in place for 2026 but said one year might be too soon to draw any conclusions.

Gates got elected in his second year of eligibility. He played only basketball in college before turning into one of the NFL's top tight ends after being drafted by the Chargers.

"The opportunity I got speaks volumes of how (the Chargers) believed in me," Gates said. "I'm happy it all paid off."

He became an All-Pro in just his second season in 2004. He was an All-Pro again the next two seasons and went on to have a 16-year career with the Chargers. Gates finished with 955 catches for 11,841 yards and an NFL record for tight ends with 116 touchdown receptions. He ranks seventh all-time in TD catches.

Jared Allen was a four-time All-Pro who finished his career with 136 sacks, including a league-leading 22 in 2011 for Minnesota. He also led the league in sacks with 15 1/2 for Kansas City in 2007 and reached double digits in seven straight seasons. His final game was a Super Bowl loss for Carolina against Denver in the 2015 season.

Eric Allen starred for 14 seasons as a top cornerback in the NFL and never had to move to safety as he aged. Allen's career spanned from the "Fog Bowl" game in 1988 when he starred for Philadelphia as a rookie to the "Tuck Rule" game in the 2001 season for Oakland in his final game.

Allen finished with 54 interceptions, including eight returned for touchdowns. He was a first-team All-Pro in 1989 and had two other seasons as a second-team selection.

He got in on his 19th year of eligibility.

"Rarely does life play out like you want it to," Eric Allen said. "There's always some curves and bends. But time always reveals the truth. ... It took maybe time for people to see the complexity of my situation."

Sharpe had a short but productive career for the Green Bay Packers from 1988-94. His best season came in 1992, when he became the sixth player to win the receiving triple crown, setting an NFL record with 108 catches for 1,461 yards and 13 touchdowns.

He broke his own record with 112 catches in 1993 and led the NFL with 18 touchdown receptions in his final season, 1994, before a neck injury cut his career short.

Sharpe was a three-time All-Pro and had 595 catches for 8,134 yards and 65 TDs. He trailed only Jerry Rice over his seven-year career in receptions and TD catches.

The Sharpe brothers will join three father-son tandems in the Hall: Tim and Wellington Mara; Art Rooney Sr. and Dan Rooney; and Ed and Steve Sabol.

The four other modern-era candidates who reached the final stage but fell short were Willie Anderson, Torry Holt, Luke Kuechly and Adam Vinatieri. Those four automatically advance to the final 15 for next year's voting.

The other eight finalists who got cut earlier were Manning, Jahri Evans, Steve Smith Sr., Terrell Suggs, Fred Taylor, Reggie Wayne, Darren Woodson and Marshal Yanda.

The seniors candidates who fell short were Maxie Baughan and Jim Tyrer, with Mike Holmgren falling short as the coach and Ralph Hay as the contributor.

## Alabama puts man to death for a 1991 murder in the nation's fourth execution using nitrogen gas

By KIM CHANDLER Associated Press

ATMORE, Ala. (AP) — An man convicted of murdering a woman after breaking into her apartment as she slept was put to death Thursday evening in Alabama in the nation's fourth execution using nitrogen gas.

Demetrius Frazier, 52, was pronounced dead at 6:36 p.m. at a south Alabama prison for his murder conviction in the 1991 rape and killing of Pauline Brown, 41. It was the first execution in Alabama this year and the third in the U.S. in 2025, following a lethal injection Wednesday in Texas and another last Friday in South Carolina.

"First of all, I want to apologize to the family and friends of Pauline Brown. What happened to Pauline Brown should have never happened," Frazier said in his final words. He finished by saying, "I love everybody on death row. Detroit Strong."

Frazier in his final words also criticized Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer for what he called her failure to step in following appeals for him to be returned to serve out a previous life sentence in her state.

Recently, Frazier's mother and death penalty opponents had pleaded to Whitmer to take Frazier back to his home state of Michigan to complete his life sentence for the murder of a teenage girl before he was turned over years ago to Alabama authorities. Michigan does not have the death penalty. Police had said Frazier confessed to killing Brown in 1992 while in custody in Michigan.

Whitmer told The Detroit News before the execution that her predecessor, Rick Snyder, "unfortunately" agreed to send Frazier to Alabama and it was in the hands of officials there.

"It's a really tough situation," she told the media outlet. "I understand the pleas and concerns. Michigan is not a death penalty state."

Prosecutors said that on Nov. 27, 1991, Frazier, then 19, broke into Brown's apartment in Birmingham while she was asleep. Prosecutors said he demanded money and raped Brown at gunpoint after she gave him \$80 from her purse. He then shot her in the head and returned later to have a snack and look for money, they said.

Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey said in a post-execution statement that justice was done.

"In Alabama, we enforce the law. You don't come to our state and mess with our citizens and get away with it," Ivey said. "Rapists and murderers are not welcome on our streets, and tonight, justice was carried out for Pauline Brown and her loved ones."

Frazier was sentenced to life in prison in Michigan for the 1992 murder of Crystal Kendrick, 14. Then in 1996, an Alabama jury convicted him of murdering Brown and recommended by a vote of 10-2 that he receive a death sentence. Frazier remained in Michigan custody until 2011 when the then-governors of the two states agreed to move him to Alabama's death row. Frazier suggested in his final statement that his confession to the killing of the Michigan girl was false.

Alabama became the first state to conduct nitrogen gas executions, putting three people to death last year with the method. It involves placing a respirator gas mask over the person's face to replace breathable air with pure nitrogen gas, causing death by lack of oxygen. Frazier, like the first three people to be executed by the method, shook or quivered on the gurney, although to a lesser degree than the others.

Frazier was strapped to a gurney with a blue-rimmed gas mask covering his entire face. The execution began at about 6:10 p.m. after a corrections officer did a final check of the mask.

Frazier moved his outstretched palms in a swirling circular movement for the first minute or two. At 6:12 p.m., he stopped circling his hands. He appeared to grimace, quiver on the gurney and take a gasping breath. A minute later, he raised both legs several inches off the gurney and then lowered them.

His breathing slowed at 6:14 p.m. to a series of sporadic breaths. He had no visible movement by about 6:21 p.m. The curtains to the execution chamber closed at 6:29 p.m.

Alabama Corrections Commissioner John Hamm said afterward that the gas flowed for about 18 minutes and that instruments indicated Frazier no longer had a heartbeat 13 minutes after the gas began.

Hamm said he believed that Frazier lost consciousness quickly. He said he believed other movements,



including the raising of the legs and periodic breaths, were involuntary.

A federal judge last week refused to block the execution. Defense attorneys had argued the new method does not work as quickly as the state promised. Media witnesses, including The Associated Press, previously described how those put to death with the method shook on the gurney at the start of their executions.

The judge, however, ruled that the descriptions of the executions did not support a finding that any of the men "experienced severe psychological pain or distress over and above what is inherent in any execution."

Abraham Bonowitz of Death Penalty Action said the method of execution is "experimental gas suffocation." He said it needs more scrutiny in the federal courts before Alabama uses it to carry out another execution.

Some of Brown's family members witnessed the execution but declined to make a statement to the media.

Hours ahead of his execution, Frazier visited with his mother, sister and legal team. He had a final meal from Taco Bell that included burritos and a Mountain Dew soft drink.

## Baseball star Shohei Ohtani's ex-interpreter is sentenced to nearly 5 years in sports betting case

By AMY TAXIN Associated Press

SANTA ANA, Calif. (AP) — The former interpreter for baseball star Shohei Ohtani was sentenced Thursday to nearly five years in prison for bank and tax fraud after he stole nearly \$17 million from the Los Angeles Dodgers player's bank account.

Ipei Mizuhara, who was supposed to bridge the gap between the Japanese athlete and his English-speaking teammates and fans, was sentenced in federal court in Santa Ana to four years and nine months after pleading guilty last year.

He was ordered Thursday to pay \$18 million in restitution, with nearly \$17 million going to Ohtani and the remainder to the IRS. He was also sentenced to three years' supervised release on top of the prison sentence and ordered to surrender to authorities by March 24.

"The magnitude of the theft — \$17 million — in my view, is shockingly high," U.S. District Judge John W. Holcomb said upon issuing the sentence.

Holcomb said most people don't make that much money in their lifetime.

"I hope that Mr. Mizuhara will be able to repay that sum," Holcomb said. "That remains to be seen."

Mizuhara addressed the court and apologized to Ohtani, the Los Angeles Dodgers, the government and his family.

"I am truly, deeply sorry for what I have done," Mizuhara said. "I am prepared to be punished for it."

Mizuhara has acknowledged using the money to cover his growing gambling bets and debts with an illegal bookmaker, in addition to \$325,000 worth of baseball cards and his own dental bills.

His attorney declined to comment after the hearing.

Acting U.S. Attorney Joseph T. McNally told reporters outside court that Mizuhara took advantage of Ohtani's vulnerability as a non-English speaker trying to navigate the world of celebrity baseball — a high-profile example of something that is all too common. He emphasized that Ohtani was a victim.

"Mr. Mizuhara lied, he cheated and he stole," McNally said. "His behavior was shameless."

Mizuhara's attorney, Michael Freedman, had asked for a sentence of one and a half years. During the sentencing hearing, he asked that the judge consider his client's gambling addiction was challenged by his connection to a bookie willing to credit him large sums of money because of who he worked for.

"He was exposed to a world in which he was given a unique and unlimited credit to run up these kinds of numbers," Freedman said.

Federal prosecutor Jeff Mitchell said the amount stolen by Mizuhara amounted to about half of what Ohtani earned from the Los Angeles Angels when he pitched for them, and the damage went even further.

"The most significant harm to Mr. Ohtani is the reputational damage, which may never be fully repaired," Mitchell said.

The case affected arguably the world's most famous baseball player and stoked an international media frenzy. It stemmed from a broader probe into illegal sports bookmaking organizations in Southern California

and the laundering of proceeds through casinos in Las Vegas.

Mizuhara accessed Ohtani's account beginning in 2021 and changed its security protocols so he could impersonate him to authorize wire transfers. By 2024, Mizuhara had used the money to buy about \$325,000 worth of baseball cards at online resellers and had bet tens of millions of dollars that weren't his to wager on international soccer, the NBA, the NFL and college football. Prosecutors said Mizuhara never bet on baseball.

Mizuhara was born in Japan and moved to California with his parents when he was 6. He struggled to learn English but eventually did, and he returned to Japan in 2013 to become an interpreter for a Japanese baseball team and later for Ohtani, according to court filings.

The two formed a tight-knit bond, and Mizuhara moved with Ohtani in 2018 to the U.S., where he took on numerous errands for the player such as grocery shopping, Mizuhara's attorney wrote.

Inside baseball, Mizuhara stood by Ohtani's side for many of the athlete's career highlights, from serving as his catcher during the Home Run Derby at the 2021 All-Star Game, to being there for his two American League MVP wins and his record-shattering \$700 million, 10-year deal with the Los Angeles Dodgers.

Off the field, Mizuhara was Ohtani's friend and confidant. He famously resigned from the Los Angeles Angels during the 2021 MLB lockout so he could keep speaking to Ohtani, and he was rehired after a deal was struck.

Last year, Ohtani and the Dodgers won the World Series, and the baseball star won his third Most Valuable Player award.

## **Trump promotes misleading claims about federal government's media subscriptions**

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Federal government payments to news outlets like Politico, The New York Times and The Associated Press for subscriptions or to license content are in the crosshairs of Trump administration spending hawks, with the president on Thursday calling it potentially "THE BIGGEST SCANDAL OF THEM ALL."

It's the latest in a series of skirmishes with the media, long a target of Donald Trump and his supporters. The Defense Department last week evicted NPR, NBC, the Times and Politico from their Pentagon workspaces, and Trump has continued to criticize CBS' "60 Minutes" for its handling of an interview with former opponent Kamala Harris last fall. Free press advocates are also concerned about Trump's plans for the media outlet Voice of America, whose charter guarantees its editorial freedom.

This time, though, is a bit different. By linking federal government spending to the media, Trump has bundled two of his long-favored political targets into one rhetorical package — denouncing a common practice as untoward while offering no supporting evidence for his assertions.

On Wednesday, White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said the government had paid more than \$8 million for Politico subscriptions and that Elon Musk's government efficiency team "is working on canceling those payments." That quickly set off a social-media maelstrom and a hunt by online sleuths for other evidence of taxpayer spending on the news.

"The U.S. government must stop paying for media subscriptions. Now," Richard Grenell, Trump's special mission envoy, posted on X.

Trump, on his Truth Social platform, complained about payments to the "FAKE NEWS MEDIA" for creating good stories about Democrats. "Did the New York Times receive money??? Who else did??? THIS COULD BE THE BIGGEST SCANDAL OF THEM ALL," he wrote.

And at a national prayer breakfast at the Capitol on Thursday morning, Trump touted the efforts to look into the media spending. "We're catching them left and right," Trump said. "We're catching them. We're catching them to a point where they don't know what the heck is going on. They can't believe they're getting caught."

Governments paying for news outlets' content is common Politico, in a statement to readers from CEO Goli Sheikholeslami and Editor-in-Chief John Harris, said Thursday that it is not getting a government subsidy.

"It is a transaction — just as the government buys research, equipment, software and industry reports," they said. "Some online voices are deliberately spreading falsehoods. Let's be clear: Politico has no financial dependence on the government and no hidden agenda. We cover politics and policy — that's our job."

It has not been unusual for governments, federal and state, to subscribe to major media outlets to keep up on important or strategic issues. The U.S. State Department, for example, may depend on international news reporting for clarity on incidents happening in countries where the United States has interests. Specialists in an agency like the Department of Transportation follow trade publications for industry trends.

The Politico Pro service helps government and private sector customers "track policy, legislation and regulations in real time with news, intelligence and a suite of data products," the company said. It would not discuss how many subscriptions it has sold, or the prices.

The New York Times said it earned less than \$2 million last year through government subscriptions, which are offered at a discounted rate. Through one arrangement, the Times gives access to more than 1 million active and retired military members and their families.

"These officials and other public servants are simply seeking to better understand the world through our independent journalism, like millions of other Americans," spokesman Charlie Stadtlander said.

Elon Musk's voice is also in the mix

Musk, also a frequent critic of the mainstream media and the owner of a platform that in many ways competes with it, retweeted one message on X that complained about the AP "raking in millions of dollars in government money for years."

"Not for long," Musk added. "This is obviously a huge waste of taxpayer money."

AP spokeswoman Lauren Easton said that "the U.S. government has long been an AP customer — through both Democratic and Republican administrations. It licenses AP's nonpartisan journalism, just like thousands of news outlets and customers around the world. It's quite common for governments to have contracts with news organizations for their content."

The outlet would not reveal how much it is earning in federal government contracts.

Separately, Musk's focus on the USAID agency has threatened some \$268 million in congressionally-authorized funding aimed at offering training and support to some 6,200 independent journalists working around the world, including in war-torn Ukraine, said the organization Reporters Without Borders.

Denying the money "will create a vacuum that plays into the hands of propagandists and authoritarian states," said Clayton Weimers, executive director of Reporters Without Borders' USA branch.

## **Trump administration plans to slash all but a fraction of USAID jobs, officials say**

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration presented a plan Thursday to dramatically cut staffing worldwide for U.S. aid projects as part of its dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development, leaving fewer than 300 workers out of thousands.

Late Thursday, federal workers associations filed suit asking a federal court to stop the shutdown, arguing that President Donald Trump lacks the authority to shut down an agency enshrined in congressional legislation.

Two current USAID employees and one former senior USAID official told The Associated Press of the administration's plan, presented to remaining senior officials of the agency Thursday. They spoke on condition of anonymity due to a Trump administration order barring USAID staffers from talking to anyone outside their agency.

The plan would leave fewer than 300 staffers on the job out of what are currently 8,000 direct hires and contractors. They, along with an unknown number of 5,000 locally hired international staffers abroad, would

run the few life-saving programs that the administration says it intends to keep going for the time being.

It was not immediately clear whether the reduction to 300 would be permanent or temporary, potentially allowing more workers to return after what the Trump administration says is a review of which aid and development programs it wants to resume.

The administration earlier this week gave almost all USAID staffers posted overseas 30 days, starting Friday, to return to the U.S., with the government paying for their travel and moving costs. Workers who choose to stay longer, unless they received a specific hardship waiver, might have to cover their own expenses, a notice on the USAID website said late Thursday.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio said during a trip to the Dominican Republic on Thursday that the U.S. government will continue providing foreign aid.

"But it is going to be foreign aid that makes sense and is aligned with our national interest," he told reporters.

The Trump administration and billionaire ally Elon Musk, who is running a budget-cutting Department of Government Efficiency, have targeted USAID hardest so far in an unprecedented challenge of the federal government and many of its programs.

Since Trump's Jan. 20 inauguration, a sweeping funding freeze has shut down most of the agency's programs worldwide, and almost all of its workers have been placed on administrative leave or furloughed. Musk and Trump have spoken of eliminating USAID as an independent agency and moving surviving programs under the State Department.

Democratic lawmakers and others call the move illegal without congressional approval.

The same argument was made by the American Foreign Service Association and the American Federation of Government Employees in their lawsuit, which asks the federal court in Washington to compel the reopening of USAID's buildings, return its staffers to work and restore funding.

Government officials "failed to acknowledge the catastrophic consequences of their actions, both as they pertain to American workers, the lives of millions around the world, and to US national interests," the suit says.

## **Rwanda-backed rebels tell residents of a captured eastern Congolese city they are safe**

By CHINEDU ASADU, RUTH ALONGA and JEAN-YVES KAMALE Associated Press

GOMA, Congo (AP) — The Rwanda-backed rebels who captured eastern Congo's key city of Goma sought to reassure its residents Thursday, holding a stadium rally and promising safety under their administration as they try to shore up public support amid growing international pressure.

The M23 rebels continued advances elsewhere in eastern Congo despite their own announcement of a unilateral cease-fire, and the U.N. secretary-general called for them to lay down their guns and agree to mediation. Health officials, meanwhile, said the rebellion had disrupted a key medical lab in Goma.

As thousands gathered at the stadium in Goma, which the rebels captured last week with the support of troops from neighboring Rwanda, M23 political leader Corneille Nangaa told the crowd that the city had been "liberated and sanitized" and that new administrative heads have been appointed.

"I ask you to sleep well because we bring you security; this is our priority," Nangaa said. "Starting next week, the children return to school. Let all state agents return to their offices. The displaced people are returning to their homes."

The rebels are backed by some 4,000 troops from neighboring Rwanda, according to U.N. experts. They are the most potent of the more than 100 armed groups active in Congo's east, which holds vast deposits critical to much of the world's technology.

Unlike in 2012, when the rebels first captured Goma but held it for only a short time, analysts say the M23 is now eyeing political power and eager to show it can govern.

One of those at the rally Thursday, Emmanuel Kakule, a Goma resident, said he is still worried about the situation in Goma.

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"I came to listen to their project," the 26-year-old said. "I don't know if I'm convinced. ... We're still afraid." Rebels continue to advance despite unilateral ceasefire

Earlier this week, the rebels announced a unilateral ceasefire to facilitate humanitarian aid, but the Congolese government later dismissed that as a "false communication" amid reports of continued rebel advances in the east.

On Thursday, the rebels were advancing into South Kivu province and were 50 kilometers (30 miles) from the provincial capital of Bukavu, according to Nene Bintou, president of the civil society in the province. The rebels also had seized a town in the mineral-rich region a day earlier after the ceasefire was declared.

The advance has caused tension and fear among residents in Bukavu, with many fleeing to surrounding villages further afar from the city. Public transportation has also become less available, forcing some to trek for hours with their children and belongings.

Three Swiss aid workers killed

Three Congolese employees of a group known as Swiss Church Aid were attacked and killed Wednesday during a mission in North Kivu province's Rutshuru territory, about 65 kilometers (40 miles) from Goma, the group said in a statement.

The group, which is investigating the incident and suspended other projects in the province, called the attack a "serious violation of international humanitarian law."

A critical laboratory under threat in Goma

Africa's top public health body, meanwhile, sounded notes of alarm Thursday, saying that the rebellion had disrupted services at a high-security medical lab in Goma involved in the control and surveillance of infectious diseases such as Ebola.

The disruption at the National Institute of Biomedical Research lab underscores "the need for the decentralization of laboratory capacity" in the region, said Yap Boum II, a manager at the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Boum, in an online briefing, said that collection of samples for illnesses such as mpox had been disrupted and that the rebellion has led to dozens of mpox patients fleeing from treatment centers, raising the risk of the disease spreading.

U.N. chief asks rebels to silence their guns

The U.N. and aid groups have expressed concern about the safety of the displaced people in Goma. Before it was captured by the rebels, the city was a critical humanitarian hub that hosted many of the more than 6 million people displaced by conflict in the region.

On Thursday, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres issued an urgent appeal to the rebels and their Rwandan military backers to "silence the guns" and stop the escalating fighting in the region, stressing that there is no military solution to the conflict in the mineral-rich region.

"It is time for mediation. It is time to end this crisis. It is time for peace," Guterres told U.N. reporters.

The U.N. chief announced that he will be flying to Addis Ababa to take part in a meeting of the African Union Peace and Security Council next week, "where this crisis will also be front and center."

"We also see the continued threat by other armed groups, either Congolese or foreign," Guterres said. "We have countless reports of human rights abuses, including sexual and gender-based violence, forced recruitment, and the disruption of lifesaving aid."

Malawi directs preparation for peacekeepers' withdrawal

Meanwhile, Malawi President Lazarus Chakwera, said that he's asked the commander of his country's peacekeepers in eastern Congo to begin preparations for their withdrawal.

Malawian troops are part of a regional peacekeeping force supporting Congolese army in the region. At least 3 Malawian troops and 14 South African soldiers — also part of the force — have been killed in the fighting.

Chakwera said on Wednesday that the withdrawal was "to honor the declaration of a ceasefire" by the rebels and to pave the way for negotiations and a lasting peace. He did not give a timeframe for the Malawian troops' withdrawal.

South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa, however, said his country's peacekeepers would remain in

Congo to show its commitment to a peaceful resolution of “one of the world’s most intractable conflicts.”

Ahead of a summit of African countries starting Friday in Tanzania to discuss the conflict in eastern Congo, Ramaphosa said the leaders would be reiterating “our call for a ceasefire and a resumption of talks.”

## Trump’s Gaza plan shocks the world but finds support in Israel

By TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — President Donald Trump’s plan to seek U.S. ownership of the Gaza Strip and move out its population infuriated the Arab world. It stunned American allies and other global powers and even flummoxed members of Trump’s own party. The reaction in Israel was starkly different.

The idea of removing hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from Gaza — once relegated to the fringes of political discourse in the country — has found fertile ground in an Israeli public traumatized by Hamas’ Oct. 7, 2023, attacks and grasping for ways to feel secure again after the deadliest assault in their country’s history.

Jewish Israeli politicians across the spectrum either embraced the idea wholeheartedly or expressed openness to it. Newspaper columns praised its audacity and TV commentators debated how the idea could practically be set in motion. The country’s defense minister ordered the military to plan for its eventual implementation.

Whether or not the plan becomes reality — it is saddled with obstacles, not to mention moral, legal and practical implications — its mere pronouncement by the world’s most powerful leader has sparked enthusiasm about an idea once considered to be beyond the pale in the Israeli mainstream.

“The fact that it has been laid on the table,” said Israeli historian Tom Segev, “opens the door for such a clear crime to become legitimate.”

To be sure, many of those who expressed openness to the plan said it seemed unfeasible for a multitude of legal and logistical reasons. And they say the departures should be voluntary, perhaps an acknowledgment of claims by critics, among them the U.N. secretary-general, that forced expulsions could amount to “ethnic cleansing.”

And many others, including liberal Israelis and Palestinian citizens of Israel, voiced opposition to it. The liberal daily Haaretz, in an editorial Thursday, urged Israelis to “oppose transfer.”

“Even if Trump disregards international law, it’s crucial to remind Israelis that the forced expulsion or transfer of civilians violates international humanitarian law, constitutes a war crime and amounts to a crime against humanity,” the editorial said.

In a joint Washington news conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Tuesday, Trump said he envisioned the U.S. taking control of the Gaza Strip, having its people relocate to other places and rebuilding the war-battered coastal enclave into the “Riviera of the Middle East.”

The proposal sparked outrage in the Middle East, including in Egypt and Jordan, two close U.S. allies at peace with Israel that Trump has suggested take in the Palestinians.

Netanyahu, meanwhile, called Trump’s plan “remarkable” and the “first good idea” that he had heard.

“The actual idea of allowing first Gazans who want to leave, to leave. I mean, what’s wrong with that?” Netanyahu told Fox News. Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz took it a step further, asking the military to craft a plan for a potential exodus. Katz has given few details on how such a plan would work.

Even Netanyahu’s rivals indicated openness.

Benny Gantz, a former defense minister and centrist opposition figure, said Trump’s proposal showed “creative, original and intriguing thinking.” Opposition leader Yair Lapid, also a centrist, told Israeli Army Radio “in general, it’s good.” Both said the details and practicability of the plan were complicated and needed to be studied, and they urged Trump and Netanyahu to focus on freeing the hostages who remain in Gaza.

For Palestinians, Trump’s proclamation triggered painful memories of the expulsion or flight from their homes in what is now Israel in the 1948 war that led to its creation. It also resurfaced the trauma of further displacement wrought by the 1967 Mideast war, when Israel occupied the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Staying steadfast on their land is a key component of the Palestinian identity. In fact, many Palestinian

refugees dream of returning to the lands in Israel from which they were originally displaced — something Israel says would threaten its existence as a Jewish majority state.

Segev says the concept of driving people off their land is not foreign to the Israeli consciousness. He says Israel's founding leaders felt they needed to clear Palestinians off the land to ensure the security and stability of the state.

But in modern Israel, the idea has been promoted only by fringe elements, most prominently the slain radical Rabbi Meir Kahane. The American-born Kahane's views got him banished from the Israeli parliament and led the U.S. to outlaw his group, the Jewish Defense League.

Now, however, Kahane's once radical positions are the mainstay of far-right political parties, including one led by a disciple of his, that have been key to Netanyahu's rule. They were thrilled to have someone as powerful as Trump adopt their idea, which they have billed as "voluntary emigration," a term the Palestinians say is a euphemism for forced transfer. Trump's backing will likely embolden these hard-liners.

When Hamas attacked on Oct. 7, Israelis were already in a yearslong shift away from support for Palestinian statehood and many had adopted an approach, promoted by Netanyahu, that the conflict was unsolvable and could only be managed through sporadic wars and military operations.

The shock of Hamas' attack — militants killed 1,200 and took about 250 hostages, parading some through Gaza to cheering crowds — brought the Palestinian issue back to the fore and prompted in Israelis an openness to more radical ideas as long as they help restore a sense of security.

Sefi Ovadia, a broadcaster on a popular Israeli talk radio morning show, told his audience Thursday that he had "moral reservations" to the idea before Oct. 7, but that since the attack, he no longer does. Ben Caspit, a widely read columnist, wrote in the Maariv daily that "every Israeli, barring the most delusional ones on the outer reaches of the left, ought to welcome this initiative."

Trauma from Hamas' attack has prompted many Israelis to believe that a way to end the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is to "remove Gaza from the equation," said Shmuel Rosner, a senior fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute, a Jerusalem think tank.

"It was a fringe idea in Israel before Oct. 7 and in some cases it was an illegitimate idea," Rosner said of Trump's plan. "Oct. 7 changed everything."

## **Senate confirms Project 2025 architect Russell Vought to lead powerful White House budget office**

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate confirmed Russell Vought as White House budget director on Thursday night, putting an official who has planned the zealous expansion of President Donald Trump's power into one of the most influential positions in the federal government.

Vought was confirmed on a party-line vote of 53-47. With the Senate chamber full, Democrats repeatedly tried to speak as they cast their "no" votes to give their reasons for voting against Vought, but they were gavelled down by Sen. Ashley Moody, a Florida Republican who was presiding over the chamber. She cited Senate rules that ban debate during votes.

The Thursday night vote came after Democrats had exhausted their only remaining tool to stonewall a nomination — holding the Senate floor throughout the previous night and day with a series of speeches where they warned Vought was Trump's "most dangerous nominee."

"Confirming the most radical nominee, who has the most extreme agenda, to the most important agency in Washington," said Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer in a floor speech. "Triple-header of disaster for hardworking Americans."

Vought's return to the White House Office of Management and Budget, which he also helmed during Trump's first term, puts him in a role that often goes under the public radar yet holds key power in implementing the president's goals. The OMB acts as a nerve center for the White House, developing its budget, policy priorities and agency rule-making. Vought has already played an influential role in Trump's effort to remake the federal government as one of the architects of Project 2025, a conservative blueprint

for Trump's second term.

The budget office is also already shaking up federal spending. It had issued a memo to freeze federal spending, sending schools, states and nonprofits into a panic before it was rescinded amid legal challenges.

In the Senate, Republicans have stayed in line to advance Vought's nomination and argued that his mindset will be crucial to slashing federal spending and regulations.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune pushed for his confirmation this week, saying he "will have the chance to address two key economic issues — cutting burdensome government regulations and addressing excessive spending."

Vought has often advanced a maximalist approach to conservative policy goals. After leaving the first Trump administration, he founded the Center for Renewing America, part of a constellation of Washington think tanks that have popped up to advance and develop Trump's "Make America Great Again" agenda. From that position, Vought often counseled congressional Republicans to wage win-at-all-costs fights to cut federal programs and spending.

Writing in the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025, Vought described the White House budget director's job "as the best, most comprehensive approximation of the President's mind."

The OMB, he declared, "is a President's air-traffic control system" and should be "involved in all aspects of the White House policy process," becoming "powerful enough to override implementing agencies' bureaucracies."

During Trump's first term, Vought pushed to reclassify tens of thousands of federal workers as political appointees, which could then enable mass dismissals.

Vought has also been a proponent of the president using "impoundment" to expand the executive branch's control over federal spending.

When Congress passes appropriations to fulfill its Constitutional duties, it determines funding for government programs. But the impoundment legal theory holds that the president can decide not to spend that money on anything he deems unnecessary because Article II of the Constitution gives the president the role of executing the laws that Congress passes.

During confirmation hearings, Vought stressed that he would follow the law but avoided answering Democrats' questions on whether he would withhold congressionally allotted aid for Ukraine.

Democrats charged that Vought's responses amounted to an acknowledgment that he believes the president is above the law.

In response to questions from Republican lawmakers, Vought did preview potential budget proposals that would target cuts to discretionary social programs.

"The president ran on the issue of fiscal accountability, dealing with our inflation situation," he said.

Vought has also unabashedly advanced "Christian nationalism," an idea rising in the GOP that the United States was founded as a Christian nation and the government should now be infused with Christianity.

In a 2021 opinion article, Vought wrote that Christian nationalism is "a commitment to an institutional separation between church and state, but not the separation of Christianity from its influence on government and society."

## **US border czar blames leaks for hindering immigration raids in Colorado suburb spotlighted by Trump**

By COLLEEN SLEVIN, THOMAS PEIPERT, JESSE BEDAYN and MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press DENVER (AP) — Donald Trump's border czar on Thursday blamed news media leaks for hindering a large-scale operation in a Denver suburb the president has held up in his efforts to link violent crime with immigration.

More than 100 members of the Tren de Aragua gang were targeted Wednesday at apartment buildings and other sites in Denver and neighboring Aurora, according to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

It was unclear how many people were arrested. Fox News, which was embedded with the operation, said 30 people were arrested, including at least one member of the Venezuelan gang. But White House



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Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt said more than 100 members of Tren de Aragua were deported from Colorado on Wednesday.

It was not clear where they would have been sent since Venezuela has refused to accept its citizens back. The Defense Department said Wednesday that 10 people sent to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, were Tren de Aragua members.

ICE, which promoted the operation on social media shortly after it got underway, referred questions about the raids, including arrest totals, to the Department of Homeland Security, which did not immediately respond to a request for comment Thursday.

Dozens of heavily armed officials from several federal agencies, many wearing masks and arriving in armored vehicles, swarmed locations across the Denver area in the daylong operation that had been anticipated since Trump took office.

They knocked down doors in at least one apartment building and provoked outrage among activists, who were on scene at some of the operations and taunted agents as they worked.

Trump's border czar, Tom Homan, told reporters Thursday that details on the operation had been leaked, putting officers at risk. Media reports leading up to the raids said they were imminent.

"This isn't a game," Homan said.

"We know that TDA is dangerous," he added, referring to the Venezuelan gang. "Everybody can agree to that, but when they get a heads-up that we are coming, it's only a matter of time before our officers are ambushed. Their job is dangerous enough. So we are going to address this very seriously."

While campaigning in Aurora last year, Trump said he would target migrant gangs nationally, calling it "Operation Aurora" after a widely circulated video showed some armed members of Tren de Aragua entering an apartment in the city of 400,000 people shortly before a fatal shooting outside.

Hannah Stickline said six heavily armed officers knocked on her door in Denver's Cedar Run apartments around 6 a.m. Wednesday and demanded to see her identification. After she showed it, they asked which of her neighbors were in the country illegally. She refused to answer.

"It's insulting and it's infuriating because I would never snitch on my neighbors," she said.

Fernando Martinez, who stayed the night at a friend's apartment in the complex, said Drug Enforcement Administration agents knocked on their door and then used a battering ram to open it. He said a stun grenade landed at his feet before the agents threw him to the ground. He was not detained after showing identification.

Three people have died because of fentanyl at the complex in the last month, the DEA said.

Trump's campaign promise of mass deportations has raised expectations of large-scale operations. ICE averaged 787 arrests a day from Jan. 23 to Jan. 31, compared to a daily average of 311 during a 12-month period ended Sept. 30 during the Biden administration. ICE has stopped publishing daily arrests totals.

Homan, who was in Colorado for the operation on Wednesday, said arrests will increase once "the aperture opens up beyond criminals." ICE, which has been publicizing arrests with the caption, "The Worst First," has said people with criminal histories are their immediate — but not only — priority.

"I've made it clear that if you're in the country illegally, you're not off the table," Homan said.

Leavitt, the White House press secretary, said "more than 8,000" people in the country illegally had been arrested since Trump's inauguration through Wednesday, with 461 later released for reasons that included medical conditions and lack of detention capacity.

Wednesday's operation included the largely empty apartment complex where the viral video was taken in August. Residents have been moving out because all but one of its buildings is set to close Feb. 18 after a judge said it was a public safety threat.

In December, police say a group of people that included seven suspected Tren de Aragua members tied up, pistol whipped and terrorized two fellow immigrants from Venezuela at the complex. Nine people, initially put in ICE custody, are being prosecuted on state charges and transferred to the local jail.

## Judge temporarily blocks Trump plan offering incentives for federal workers to resign

By CHRIS MEGERIAN, COLLIN BINKLEY and BYRON TAU Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal judge on Thursday temporarily blocked President Donald Trump's plan to push out federal workers by offering them financial incentives, the latest tumult for government employees already wrestling with upheaval from the new administration.

The ruling came hours before the midnight deadline to apply for the deferred resignation program, which was orchestrated by Trump adviser Elon Musk.

Labor unions said the plan was illegal, and U.S. District Judge George O'Toole Jr. in Boston paused its implementation until after he could hear arguments from both sides at a court hearing scheduled for Monday afternoon. He directed the administration to extend the deadline until then.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said 40,000 workers have already signed up to leave their jobs while being paid until Sept. 30. She described federal employees who have been working remotely as lazy, saying "they don't want to come into the office" and "if they want to rip the American people off, then they're welcome to take this buyout."

A federal worker in Colorado, who like others spoke on condition of anonymity out of fear of retribution, said the insults directed at the government workforce by members of the Trump administration have been demoralizing for those who provide public services.

She said the judge's decision bolstered suspicions, echoed by people who work across various departments and agencies, that the deferred resignation program was legally questionable.

Another worker in the Pacific Northwest decided to take the offer on Thursday, even after the judge's decision. She hopes to use the opportunity to move overseas. But even if the money never comes, she still wants out. She's unwilling to comply with administration policies such as eliminating diversity initiatives, and she worries that the situation will only get worse for people who stay.

The worker said she opened her laptop, sent her resignation email, and closed it again.

Democrats and unions warn that workers could be stiffed

The administration has been ramping up its pressure on employees to leave, sending a reminder on Wednesday that layoffs or furloughs could come next.

"The majority of federal agencies are likely to be downsized through restructurings, realignments, and reductions in force," said the message from the Office of Personnel Management, which has been a nexus of Musk's efforts to downsize the government.

The email said anyone who remains will be expected to be "loyal" and "will be subject to enhanced standards of suitability and conduct as we move forward." Some employees could be reclassified to limit civil service protections as well.

"Employees who engage in unlawful behavior or other misconduct will be prioritized for appropriate investigation and discipline, including termination," the email said.

Democrats and union leaders have said workers shouldn't accept the deferred resignation program because it wasn't authorized by Congress, raising the risk they won't get paid.

"It's a scam and not a buyout," said Everett Kelley, president of the American Federation of Government Employees.

An employee at the Department of Education, who also spoke on condition of anonymity out of fear of retaliation, said the administration appeared desperate to get people to sign the agreement. However, she said there were too many red flags, such as a clause waiving the right to sue if the government failed to honor its side of the deal.

The deal is 'exactly what it looks like,' says Trump official

Trump put Musk, the world's richest man, in charge of the so-called Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, which is a sweeping initiative to reduce the size and scope of the federal government. The original email offering the deferred resignation program was titled "Fork in the road," echoing a similar message that Musk sent Twitter employees two years ago after he bought the social media platform.

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Trump administration officials organized question-and-answer sessions with employees as the Thursday deadline approached.

"I know there's been a lot of questions out there about whether it's real and whether it's a trick," said Rachel Oglesby, the chief of staff at the Department of Education. "And it's exactly what it looks like. It's one of the many tools that he's using to try to achieve the campaign promise to bring reform to the civil service and changes to D.C."

The Associated Press obtained a recording of the meeting, as well as a separate one held for Department of Agriculture employees.

Marlon Taubenheim, a human resources official with the Agriculture Department, acknowledged that "these are very trying times" and "there's a lot of stress."

"Unfortunately, we don't have all the answers," he said.

Jacqueline Ponti-Lazaruk, another agency leader, said employees "probably didn't have the runway of time that you might have liked to make a life-changing decision."

For those who remain, she said, "we'll just keep plugging along."

Assurances from administration officials have not alleviated concerns. Some federal workers said they did not trust the validity of the offers, doubting that Trump has the authority to disburse money. Others point to his record of stiffing contractors as a New York real estate mogul.

Musk's plans spark demonstrations in Washington

Scattered protests have sprung up outside federal buildings, including on Tuesday at the Office of Personnel Management.

Dante O'Hara, who works for the government, said if more people don't speak up, "we're all going to lose our jobs and they're going to put all these loyalists or people that will be their shock troops."

Government jobs have often been considered secure positions, but O'Hara said there's fear in the workforce. The sense from his colleagues is "I don't know if I'm going to be here tomorrow because, like, we don't know what's going to happen."

Dan Smith, a Maryland resident whose father was a research scientist at the Department of Agriculture, said federal workers are "so underappreciated and so taken for granted."

"It's one thing to downsize the government. It's one thing to try to obliterate it," Smith said. "And that's what's going on."

Mary-Jean Burke, a physical therapist for the Department of Veterans Affairs in Indianapolis, said she's worried that too many people will leave, jeopardizing health care services.

Burke, who also serves as a union official, said doubts have also been growing over whether to take the offer.

"Originally, I think people were like, 'I'm out of here,'" she said. But then they saw a social media post from DOGE, which said employees can "take the vacation you always wanted, or just watch movies and chill, while receiving your full government pay and benefits."

The message backfired because "that kind of thing sounded a little bit too good to be true and people were hesitant," Burke said.

Either way, she said, Trump has achieved his apparent goal of shaking up the federal workforce.

"Every day, it's something," Burke said. "If he signed up to be a disrupter, he's doing it."

## 13 states to sue over DOGE access to government payment systems containing personal data

By DAVE COLLINS Associated Press

Democratic attorneys general in several states vowed Thursday to file a lawsuit to stop Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency from accessing federal payment systems containing Americans' sensitive personal information.

Thirteen attorneys general, including New York's Letitia James, said in a statement that they were taking action "in defense of our Constitution, our right to privacy, and the essential funding that individuals and

communities nationwide are counting on.”

“As the richest man in the world, Elon Musk is not used to being told ‘no,’ but in our country, no one is above the law,” the statement said. “The President does not have the power to give away our private information to anyone he chooses, and he cannot cut federal payments approved by Congress.”

The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment Thursday afternoon.

Government officials and labor unions have been among those raising concerns about DOGE’s involvement with the payment system for the federal government, saying it could lead to security risks or missed payments for programs such as Social Security and Medicare.

Also Thursday, a federal judge ordered that two Musk allies have “read only” access to Treasury Department payment systems, but no one else will get access for now, including Musk himself. The ruling came in a lawsuit filed by federal workers unions trying to stop DOGE from following through on what they call a massive privacy invasion.

It was not immediately clear when the Democratic attorneys general will file their lawsuit.

Joining James in the statement were the attorneys general of Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, Rhode Island and Vermont.

President Donald Trump tapped Musk, the world’s richest man, to shrink the size of the U.S. government.

Democrats have criticized the tech billionaire’s maneuvers, which include the hostile seizure of taxpayer data and the apparent closure of the government’s leading international humanitarian aid agency.

DOGE recently gained access to sensitive payment data within the Treasury Department after Treasury’s acting Deputy Secretary David Lebryk resigned under pressure.

“This level of access for unauthorized individuals is unlawful, unprecedented, and unacceptable,” the attorneys general said. “DOGE has no authority to access this information, which they explicitly sought in order to block critical payments that millions of Americans rely on — payments that support health care, childcare, and other essential programs.”

Democratic members of Congress have expressed similar concerns that Musk, an unelected citizen, wields too much power within the U.S. government and states blatantly on his social media platform X that DOGE will shut down payments to organizations.

Musk has made fun of the criticism of DOGE on X while saying it is saving taxpayers millions of dollars.

DOGE officials sought access to the Treasury payment system to stop money from flowing into the U.S. Agency for International Development, according to two people familiar with the matter. That effort undermines assurances the department has given that it only sought to review the integrity of the payments and had “read-only access” to the system as part of an audit process.

The two people familiar with the matter spoke Thursday to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation.

## **Newly unsealed documents reveal more details of prosecutors’ evidence in 9/11 attacks**

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Newly unsealed documents give one of the most detailed views yet of the evidence gathered on the accused 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, including how prosecutors allege he and others interacted with the hijackers who carried out the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks.

The summaries of evidence released Thursday include Mohammed’s own statements over the years, phone records and other documents alleging coordination between Mohammed and the hijackers, videos included in al-Qaida’s planning for the attacks and prosecutors’ summaries of government simulations of the flights of the four airliners that day. But few other details were given.

Also to be presented are the photos and death certificates of 2,976 people killed that day at the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and in a Pennsylvania field, where the fourth airliner commandeered by the al-Qaida hijackers smashed into the ground after a revolt by passengers.

The newly revealed framework of military prosecutors’ potential case against Mohammed, who prosecu-

tors say conceived of and executed much of al-Qaida's attack, is contained in a plea agreement that the Defense Department is battling in court to roll back.

Mohammed and two co-defendants agreed in the plea deal with military prosecutors to plead guilty in the attack in return for life sentences.

The Associated Press, The New York Times, NPR, The Washington Post, Fox News, NBC and Univision are suing to get the plea bargains unsealed. The summaries of the prosecution evidence were released Thursday in a partially redacted version of Mohammed's agreement.

The evidence summaries point to the possibility of additional revelations about the attacks yet to come.

As part of the plea agreement, prosecutors, defense and the senior Pentagon official overseeing the cases at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, agreed to an unusual step — a hearing that would allow them to make public the evidence compiled against the three.

It appears designed to address complaints from families and others that a plea bargain typically would otherwise keep the evidence from fully being revealed.

Another unusual part of the deal mandated Mohammed to agree to answer questions from the families of victims.

Military prosecutors, defense attorneys and Guantanamo officials negotiated the deal over two years under government auspices. The negotiations were an attempt to bring a resolution to the 9/11 case, which has remained in pretrial hearings for more than two decades since the attacks.

Then-Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin interceded to try to void the plea agreement after it was announced, saying that waiving the possibility of the death penalty in so grave an attack was a decision that defense secretaries should handle.

Federal court hearings in the Defense Department's attempts to roll back the plea agreements are ongoing.

Legal arguments over whether the sustained torture that Mohammed and other 9/11 defendants underwent in CIA custody has rendered their statements in the case inadmissible and has slowed the case. So have repeated staffing changes at the Guantanamo court and the logistical difficulties of holding a trial in a courtroom a plane flight away from the U.S.

## Trump administration sues Chicago in latest crackdown on 'sanctuary' cities

By SOPHIA TAREEN Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — The Trump administration sued Chicago on Thursday alleging that 'sanctuary' laws in the nation's third-largest city "thwart" federal efforts to enforce immigration laws.

The lawsuit, which also names the state of Illinois, is the latest effort to crack down on places that limit cooperation between federal immigration agents and local police. It follows the federal government's threats of criminal charges and funding cuts to what are known as sanctuary cities.

"The conduct of officials in Chicago and Illinois minimally enforcing — and oftentimes affirmatively thwarting — federal immigration laws over a period of years has resulted in countless criminals being released into Chicago who should have been held for immigration removal from the United States," according to the lawsuit filed in Chicago's federal court.

### Targeting sanctuary cities

President Donald Trump has often singled out Chicago and Illinois because they have some of the nation's strongest protections for immigrants. Top administration officials last month visited the city to launch stepped up immigration enforcement and showcased footage of "border czar" Tom Homan making arrests.

The aggressive approach and harsh rhetoric have been heavily criticized for stoking fears in immigrant communities and feeding false claims about crime among immigrants.

While several high-profile and violent crimes involving people in the U.S. illegally have been in the news in recent months, there is nothing to support the allegation that it happens daily. Studies have found that people living in the U.S. illegally are less likely than native-born Americans to have been arrested for

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violent, drug and property crimes.

Still, the sentiment is the cornerstone of Trump's agenda. The first bill he signed of his new administration, named after slain Georgia nursing student Laken Riley, requires the detention of immigrants in the country illegally who are accused of theft and violent crimes.

Federal funding cuts

Hours after new Attorney General Pam Bondi was sworn in Wednesday, she ordered an end to Department of Justice grants for jurisdictions that "unlawfully interfere with federal law enforcement."

Courts, however, have repeatedly upheld the legality of the range of sanctuary laws. The laws do not allow local law enforcement to actively interfere with federal operations. The first Trump White House also tried to deny public safety grants to sanctuary jurisdictions, but courts also largely rejected those attempts.

California Democratic Attorney General Rob Bonta said he is monitoring the directive's implementation.

"We won't hesitate to respond if the Trump administration attempts to delay or unlawfully condition vital public safety funding for state and local law enforcement," he said in a statement.

Connecticut Attorney General William Tong, a Democrat, used an argument that Republicans have used against members of his party, saying pausing funding to sanctuary jurisdictions is defunding the police.

"This is yet another attempt by the Trump administration to defund police and distract local law enforcement from serious public safety threats, including gun violence, reckless driving, domestic violence and the opioid epidemic," Tong said in a statement.

The administration has already made clear that legal precedent won't necessarily stand in its way. Lawyers say that simply filing lawsuits can intimidate jurisdictions to back away from their sanctuary laws.

Immigration advocates expect the administration to use a range of political tools against sanctuary jurisdictions, from legislation to Bondi's directives to threats to restrict funding from agencies including the Department of Transportation.

"This is going to be an ongoing attack on all fronts and in multiple agencies," Kerri Talbot, the co-executive director of the Immigration Hub, a pro-immigration policy group, told reporters.

Sanctuary cities vow to fight back

The lawsuit against Chicago claims that local laws run counter to federal laws by restricting "local governments from sharing immigration information with federal law enforcement officials" and preventing immigration agents from identifying "individuals who may be subject to removal."

Heavily Democratic Chicago has been a sanctuary city for decades and has beefed up its laws several times, including during Trump's first term in 2017. That same year, then-Gov. Bruce Rauner, a Republican, signed more statewide sanctuary protections in law, putting him at odds with his party.

Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson said Chicago will remain a welcoming city. He and other mayors plan to testify next month at a congressional hearing on sanctuary cities. In recent months, Chicago has helped host trainings for people to learn their rights when it comes to immigration agents and publicized the information at public transit stations.

"The safety and security of Chicago residents remains the priority," he said in a statement Thursday. "Chicago will continue to protect the working people of our city and defend against attacks on our long-standing values."

Illinois Democratic Gov. JB Pritzker said the state has always complied with the law.

"Unlike Donald Trump, Illinois follows the law," Pritzker's office said in a statement. "Instead of working with us to support law enforcement, the Trump Administration is making it more difficult to protect the public, just like they did when Trump pardoned the convicted January 6 violent criminals."

The lawsuit also names Cook County, where Chicago is located, and its sheriff.

Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle said in a statement that the nation's second-most populous county, "remained committed to being a fair and welcoming community for all residents."

Sheriff Tom Dart issued a statement saying his office doesn't pass or enact immigration legislation and follows all laws.

## Trump delivered on his promise to order a ban on transgender female athletes. What's next?

By WILL GRAVES AP National Writer

Donald Trump, the candidate, pledged to get "transgender insanity the hell out of our schools" and "keep men out of women's sports."

Donald Trump, the president, wasted little time delivering on his promise to address a topic that seemed to resonate across party lines. Trump issued an executive order on the day his second term began that called for "restoring biological truth to the federal government" and signed another on Wednesday titled "Keeping Men Out of Women's Sports."

The federal government now has wide latitude across multiple agencies to penalize federally funded entities that "deprive women and girls of fair athletic opportunities."

"The war on women's sports is over," Trump declared.

Probably not. Legal challenges like the ones that have met some of the other executive orders aimed at transgender people are likely.

What is in the executive order?

The biggest takeaway is that the Trump administration has empowered the federal government to take aggressive steps to go after entities — be they a school or an athletic association — that do not comply. Federal funding — and potentially grants to educational programs — could be pulled.

The threshold for noncompliance: Any entity that denies "female students an equal opportunity to participate in sports and athletic events by requiring them, in the women's category, to compete with or against or to appear unclothed before males."

The Education Department announced less than 24 hours after the order's signing that it was investigating San Jose State University, the University of Pennsylvania and the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association, all of which have had Title IX violations reported against them for allowing transgender athletes to compete.

Determining "sex" vs. "gender" and how will that affect Title IX?

Every administration has the authority to issue its own interpretations of the landmark legislation best known for its role in ensuring gender equity in athletics and preventing sexual harassment on campuses.

Given the push-pull of how recent presidencies view Title IX, it has created a whiplash effect.

Joe Biden signed an executive order on his first day in office that interpreted sex as "gender identity" under Title IX, a move that protected transgender athletes from being discriminated against if they wanted to participate in a sport that aligned with their gender identity, not their sex assigned at birth.

Yet it took more than three years for Title IX regulations saying that to be finalized. And when they were, they lacked specifics sports and were put on hold by courts.

Trump's order explicitly states that sex means the "immutable biological classification as either male or female." "Sex" is not a synonym for and does not include the concept of "gender identity." The order adds that "sexes are not changeable and are grounded in fundamental and incontrovertible reality."

The decision marks a significant shift in the way Title IX is viewed and more explicitly, how it will be enforced.

How many transgender athletes will be affected?

That number is hard to pin down.

The NCAA, for example, does not track data on transgender athletes among the 544,000 currently competing on 19,000 teams at various levels across the country, though NCAA President Charlie Baker testified in Congress in December that he was aware of fewer than 10 active NCAA athletes who identified as transgender.

A 2019 survey of high school students by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) noted just 5% of respondents said they participated in a sport that aligned with their gender identity. A 2022 report by the Williams Institute estimated about 300,000 high school-age students (ages 13-17) identified as transgender. How many of those young people participate in sports is unknown, but it is

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likely a tiny fraction.

Does the order have actual teeth?

The reach of Title IX extends far beyond the participation of transgender athletes. Noncompliance is believed to be widespread.

The Women's Sports Foundation noted in a 2022 report that there were still "gross gender inequities" across all college divisions and that there was "cause for concern about widespread Title IX noncompliance in high school and college and university athletic programs" even before the COVID-19 pandemic made women's sports even more vulnerable.

Yet to date no school at any level has had its federal funding rescinded for not meeting Title IX standards that require institutions to provide women with equal access and treatment, said Cheryl Cooky, a professor at Purdue University who studies the intersection of gender, sports, media and culture. She wondered where all this support for women's sports in general — and not on this issue specifically — has been for the last five decades.

"All of these other inequalities have existed and now you're in a position of power to address those opportunities and this is what you're addressing?" Cooky said. "The fact that this is the issue that the administration is concerned about speaks volumes in terms of how we value women in this society and how we value women's sports in this society."

Yet given Trump's unpredictable approach to governing, precedent and history might not apply.

How will this work at the state level?

About half the states have already enacted legislation that effectively bars transgender athletes from competing in the category that aligns with their gender identity. The AP reported in 2021 that in many cases, states introducing a ban on transgender athletes could not cite instances where their participation was an issue.

Some states are already planning to challenge the Trump order in court. Connecticut Attorney General William Tong called the order "mean spirited and unlawful" and called for those opposed to the order to "stand together and fight back."

What also remains unclear is whether a federal agency can go after specific organizations — like state high school sports associations — that do not receive money directly from the federal government.

How will this affect college sports?

The NCAA Board of Governors moved quickly, amending its transgender participation policy to limit competition in women's sports to athletes assigned female at birth. The NCAA has more than 500,000 athletes competing for some 1,100 schools.

"We strongly believe that clear, consistent, and uniform eligibility standards would best serve today's student-athletes instead of a patchwork of conflicting state laws and court decisions," Baker said Thursday. "To that end, President Trump's order provides a clear, national standard."

The National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics, the governing body for more than 200 small schools across the country, voted unanimously in 2023 to effectively ban transgender athletes from competing in women's sports.

What about the Olympics?

On a move most saw coming once Trump won a second term, his administration still managed to sneak in a curveball.

The order calls for the office of the secretary of state to use "all appropriate and available measures" in hopes of having the International Olympic Committee come up with a uniform transgender policy. The organization has passed the buck for years, deferring to the international federations for each sport.

That could change, however, when a new IOC president replaces the retiring Thomas Bach. Several candidates to replace Bach — notably former track star and current director of World Athletics Seb Coe — have voiced support for a uniform policy.

The IOC this week said it will "continue to explain and discuss the various topics with the relevant authorities."



## **NCAA changes transgender policy to limit women's competition to athletes assigned female at birth**

By ERIC OLSON AP Sports Writer

The NCAA changed its participation policy for transgender athletes on Thursday, limiting competition in women's sports to athletes who were assigned female at birth.

The move came one day after President Donald Trump signed an executive order intended to ban transgender athletes from girls' and women's sports. The order gives federal agencies latitude to withhold federal funding from entities that do not abide by Title IX in alignment with the Trump administration's view, which interprets "sex" as the gender someone was assigned at birth.

The NCAA policy change is effective immediately and applies to all athletes regardless of previous eligibility reviews. The NCAA has some 1,100 member schools with more than 500,000 athletes, easily the largest governing body for college athletics in the U.S.

"We strongly believe that clear, consistent, and uniform eligibility standards would best serve today's student-athletes instead of a patchwork of conflicting state laws and court decisions," NCAA President Charlie Baker said. "To that end, President Trump's order provides a clear, national standard."

The NCAA's decision was hailed by former Kentucky swimmer Riley Gaines, a vocal advocate of banning transgender athletes from women's sports. Gaines, who was at the White House signing ceremony with Trump, was among more than a dozen college athletes who filed a lawsuit against the NCAA last year, accusing it of violating their Title IX rights by allowing transgender woman Lia Thomas to compete at the national championships in 2022.

"I can't even begin to tell you how vindicating it feels knowing no girl will ever have to experience what my teammates and I did," Gaines posted on X shortly after the NCAA announced the policy change.

The previous NCAA policy went into effect in 2022 and adopted a sport-by-sport approach, where transgender participation was determined by the policy of the sport's national governing body. In sports with no national governing body, that sport's international federation policy would be in place. If there is no international federation policy, previously established IOC policy criteria would take over.

Over the past year, however, transgender athletes have been targeted by critics who say their participation in women's sports is unfair and a potential safety risk. It became a major talking point in Trump's re-election campaign even though there is believed to be a very small number of transgender athletes; Baker last year said he knew of only 10 transgender athletes in the NCAA.

The NCAA's revised policy permits athletes assigned male at birth to practice with women's teams and receive benefits such as medical care. It is not uncommon, for example, for women's basketball teams to practice against fellow students who are male.

Regardless of sex assigned at birth or gender identity, an athlete can practice and compete with a men's team assuming they meet all other NCAA eligibility requirements.

However, the NCAA said an athlete assigned female at birth who has begun hormone therapy (testosterone, for example) can practice with a women's team but cannot compete on a women's team without risking the team's eligibility for championships.

Member schools remain responsible for certifying athlete eligibility for practice and competition. The NCAA also said schools are subject to local, state and federal legislation and such legislation supersedes NCAA rules.

The NCAA policy change was announced hours after the Trump administration said it was investigating potential civil rights violations at two universities and a high school sports league that allowed transgender athletes to compete on women's teams. The Education Department said it had opened reviews of San Jose State University, the University of Pennsylvania and the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association.

San Jose State's women's volleyball team drew headlines last season over unconfirmed allegations that the roster included a transgender player. As for Penn, three former teammates of Thomas, the transgender swimmer, this week sued the NCAA, Ivy League, Harvard and the school over Thomas's participation at conference and national championships, saying it violated Title IX provisions.

Sia Lillii, captain of the Nevada volleyball team that refused to play San Jose State this season, said she was "ecstatic" about the new NCAA policy.

"Women have fought long and hard for equal athletic opportunities," Lillii said. "By completely removing men from women's sports, we are moving back to the true definition of Title (IX). Women are given an opportunity to champion their own sports division and shine on a fair competition floor."

The NCAA also said its Board of Governors had directed staff to help all member schools foster respectful and inclusive collegiate athletic cultures, noting it has recently updated its mental health guidance.

"The updated policy combined with these resources follows through on the NCAA's constitutional commitment to deliver intercollegiate athletics competition and to protect, support and enhance the mental and physical health of student-athletes," Baker said. "This national standard brings much needed clarity as we modernize college sports for today's student-athletes."

The NCAA policy now mirrors that of the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics, which governs sports at 241 mostly small colleges across the country. Last April, the NAIA unanimously approved a policy allowing only athletes whose sex assigned at birth is female and have not begun hormone therapy to compete.

## **DOGE was tasked with stopping Treasury payments to USAID, AP sources say**

By FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Officials working with Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency sought access to the U.S. Department of Treasury payment system to stop money from flowing to the U.S. Agency for International Development, according to two people familiar with the matter.

DOGE's efforts to stop USAID payments undermine assurances that the department gave to federal lawmakers in a Tuesday letter that it sought only to review the integrity of the payments and had "read-only access" to the system as part of an audit process.

The two people familiar with the matter spoke Thursday to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation.

The actions by DOGE, a Trump administration effort to find ways to reduce the federal workforce, cut programs and slash federal regulations, have raised concerns among civil servants, Democratic lawmakers and others that Musk's team is withholding funds appropriated by Congress to suit the president's political agenda.

USAID, a federal agency charged with delivering humanitarian assistance overseas, has been a particular target of President Donald Trump and Musk, both of whom have argued that much of the agency's spending is wasteful. Supporters of the agency, however, say that it is essential for national security, helping counter Russian and Chinese influence while providing humanitarian assistance across the globe.

A judge on Thursday sided with advocates and federal workers unions who sought to stop the department from giving DOGE and Musk access to the payment systems. U.S. District Judge Colleen Kollar-Kotelly restricted DOGE's read-only access to Tom Krause, a software CEO, and Marko Elez, who reported to Krause but has since left his role at Treasury. The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The Treasury Department's Fiscal Service conducts over 1.2 billion transactions annually and accounts for 90% of federal disbursements, including for Social Security and Medicare.

Krause, who is listed online as the CEO of Cloud Software Group, works at the department as a special government employee and is subject to less stringent rules on ethics and financial disclosures than other federal workers.

The department's acting deputy secretary, David Lebryk, retired after more than 30 years of service when Krause and DOGE requested access to sensitive data, the two people told The AP.

Trump ordered a funding freeze at USAID his first day in office, saying, "the United States foreign aid industry" was "not aligned with American interests." The funding freeze and subsequent stop-work orders

shuttered most U.S. programs, which are worth billions of dollars and are in more than 100 countries.

While the funding freeze is supposed to last for as little as 90 days, aid workers say the damage done to aid work globally would require extensive investment and rebuilding to mend. Musk has tweeted repeated criticisms and unsubstantiated accusations about USAID as his DOGE crew dismantles much of the agency.

"Spent the weekend feeding USAID into the wood chipper," Musk tweeted early this week.

The news that the department was trying to stop foreign aid payments was first reported by The New York Times.

## **Trump's Justice Department ends Biden-era task force aimed at seizing assets of Russian oligarchs**

By FATIMA HUSSEIN and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration's Justice Department has disbanded a Biden-era program aimed at seizing the assets of Russian oligarchs as a means to punish Russia for its invasion of Ukraine.

The move to disband Task Force KleptoCapture is one of several moves undertaken by the Justice Department under the new leadership of Attorney General Pam Bondi that presage a different approach toward Russia and national security issues.

The department also ended the Foreign Influence Task Force, which was established in the first Trump administration to police influence campaigns staged by Russia and other nations aimed at sowing discord, undermining democracy and spreading disinformation. The U.S. government in the run-up to the 2024 presidential election aggressively moved to disrupt propaganda campaigns by Russia, which officials have assessed had a preference for Trump.

In a memo addressed to all employees Wednesday — the first day of Bondi's tenure — the attorney general's office stated that "attorneys assigned to those initiatives shall return to their prior posts, and resources currently devoted to those efforts shall be committed to the total elimination of Cartels and TCOs" — an acronym for Transnational Criminal Organizations.

The Trump administration has made combating the illicit flow of fentanyl into the U.S. a priority. The opioid is blamed for some 70,000 overdose deaths annually.

The Justice Department on Wednesday also shifted its approach to enforcement of a World War II-era law known as the Foreign Agents Registration Act, which requires people to disclose to the government when they lobby in the U.S. on behalf of foreign governments -- including Russia -- or political entities. Under the policy change, prosecutors were directed to focus criminal enforcement on acts of more traditional espionage rather than registration violations.

Despite the disbanding of the task force, Trump administration officials, including Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, have called for a more aggressive stance on Russia. During his confirmation hearing, Bessent advocated for stronger sanctions on Russian oil, saying the Biden administration's sanctions regime wasn't "muscular" enough.

"I believe the previous administration was worried about raising U.S. energy prices during an election season," he said.

Trump has said he will bring about a rapid end to the war in Ukraine and said talks are ongoing to bring the conflict to a close. "We made a lot of progress on Russia, Ukraine," Trump said earlier this week. "We'll see what happens. We're going to stop that ridiculous war."

## **How Rubio's trip abroad was overshadowed by foreign policy at home, from USAID to Trump's Gaza plan**

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

SANTO DOMINGO, Dominican Republic (AP) — U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio may have hoped to spend his first trip abroad focused exclusively on issues close to his heart: immigration, counternarcotics and curbing Chinese influence in the Western Hemisphere.

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Instead, the five-nation tour to Central America — a destination he deliberately chose for his maiden voyage as President Donald Trump's top diplomat — was overshadowed by a massive Washington-centered upheaval in U.S. foreign policy.

Just two weeks into his new job, the Miami-born former Florida senator did stay true to his original intent in meetings with the leaders of Panama, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Guatemala and the Dominican Republic. He secured significant agreements on migrant deportations, and at least one country said it's exiting China's oft-criticized Belt and Road development and infrastructure initiative.

And his fluency in Spanish, which he used almost exclusively in those discussions and about 50% of the time in public, appeared to have impressed his hosts.

But the dismantlement of the U.S. Agency for International Development and Trump's surprise proposal for a U.S. takeover of the Gaza Strip — both of which were widely panned and led to speculation that Rubio had been sidelined even before stepping into the field — dominated his public engagements and downtime.

Here's a look at the main developments from the trip:

Trying to explain the USAID upheaval

Without a doubt, the controversial unraveling of the world's premier foreign aid agency was the biggest distraction from Rubio's travel agenda, particularly after he found himself in charge of it at his first stop in Panama City on Sunday.

Rubio quickly delegated his authority to another Trump appointee, Peter Marocco, who development workers believe is on a mission along with Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency to eliminate virtually all U.S. foreign assistance.

Trump, on his first day in office, ordered a freeze on such aid pending a 90-day review by the State Department. Rubio, who as a senator had defended foreign assistance, had earlier sought to mitigate the damage by issuing a waiver to exempt emergency food aid and "life-saving" programs.

By Tuesday, when Rubio was in Guatemala, an order came down to shut down all but the most essential USAID missions and repatriate American staff within 30 days.

He defended the dismantlement and resulting layoffs of thousands of contract workers by accusing agency staff of "insubordination" for ignoring or refusing legitimate demands to justify their spending.

Rubio said Thursday that people will be on leave of absence beginning Friday and given 30 days to return home "if they so desire." He said the department was willing to listen to those who have "exceptional circumstances regarding family or displacement."

"We're not being punitive here," Rubio said. "But this is the only way we've been able to get cooperation from USAID."

Walking back Trump's Gaza comments

As people were still processing the USAID decision, Trump's unexpected proposal Tuesday for the U.S. to take control of the Gaza Strip, then rebuild and develop the Palestinian territory was the next bump in Rubio's journey, which was literally jolted later that night by a 1 a.m. earthquake.

Asked for his reaction Wednesday to the almost universally criticized idea, which would upend decades of U.S. support for an independent Palestinian state, Rubio sought to downplay Trump's comments.

Rubio called it a "very generous" offer that deserved to be taken seriously and suggested that any U.S. role in Gaza would be temporary. He reiterated that on Thursday, saying "to fix a place like that, people are going to have to live somewhere else in the interim."

That's far from what Trump had actually proposed during a news conference in Washington with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Amid conflicting signals from the White House about whether U.S. money could be spent or troops deployed, Trump then doubled down on the idea, leaving it for his special Mideast envoy Steven Witkoff — and perhaps Rubio — to sort out.

Rubio, who is expected to travel to the Middle East before the end of the month, will have a hard sell on his hands as every country in the region except for Israel is vehemently opposed.

Warning about the Panama Canal

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In Panama, Rubio generated headlines by repeating a Trump warning to the Panamanian president that unless steps were taken to radically reduce Chinese influence in and around the canal, the United States would be forced to do so itself.

With port facilities at both ends of the canal managed by a Hong Kong-based company, Rubio said China's presence in Panama constituted a direct threat to U.S. national security interests, particularly in the event of a conflict.

Panamanian President José Raúl Mulino said the government was already auditing the contract with the Hong Kong firm and could make adjustments when it was complete. Rubio did win one major concession when Mulino said Panama would not renew its membership in China's Belt and Road initiative when it expires.

Uncertainty swirled on another key U.S. concern — the payment of canal transit fees for American naval vessels. U.S. officials said Sunday that an agreement in principle had been reached to eliminate those fees, and the State Department tweeted on Wednesday that a deal had been finalized. But Mulino forcefully denied the claim Thursday.

Mulino said the U.S. statement "really surprises me because they're making an important, institutional statement from the entity that governs United States foreign policy under the president of the United States based on a falsity. And that's intolerable."

Rubio said later Thursday that he was "not confused" about the status of the canal agreement and understood that Panama has to follow a legal process to eliminate the fees. "They're a democratically elected government. They have rules. They have laws. They're going to follow their process," he said.

Given that the U.S. has a treaty obligation to protect the canal, Rubio said, "I find it absurd that we would have to pay fees to transit a zone that we are obligated to protect in a time of conflict."

## Reaching deportation agreements

Rubio's immigration successes on the trip have the potential to lay the groundwork for Trump's promised mass deportations. He secured agreements with El Salvador and Guatemala to receive migrants from other countries who are deported by the U.S.

In the case of El Salvador, President Nayib Bukele said he would take in not only deportees of any nation but also offered his country's prison space to hold U.S. prisoners, including American citizens if needed. Trump and Rubio acknowledged the offer raised legal issues.

Guatemala agreed to expand its capacity to receive its own citizens sent back by the U.S. and to take migrants from other countries and then repatriate them home at U.S. expense.

Guatemala pledged during Rubio's visit to create a border security force that would police its borders with El Salvador and Honduras.

Rubio said the U.S. would support Costa Rica's immigration enforcement efforts by trying to provide more biometric technology to identify who was transiting that Central American nation.

And he said the U.S. would continue to pay for Panama's deportation flights to other countries.

After watching Colombian migrants loaded onto one such deportation flight in Panama, Rubio said, "You could say our border doesn't begin in Texas or Mexico, it begins much farther down."

## As Trump pushes the limits of presidential power, the courts push back

By CHRIS MEGERIAN and LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A familiar pattern has emerged since President Donald Trump returned to the White House less than three weeks ago: He makes a brash proposal, his opponents file a lawsuit and a federal judge puts the plan on hold.

It's happened with Trump's attempts to freeze certain federal funding, undermine birthright citizenship and push out government workers.

Now the question is whether the court rulings are a mere speed bump or an insurmountable roadblock for the Republican president, who is determined to expand the limits of his power — sometimes by simply

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ignoring the laws.

Although Democrats may be encouraged by the initial round of judicial resistance, the legal battles are only beginning. Lawsuits that originated in more liberal jurisdictions like Boston, Seattle and Washington, D.C., could find their way to the U.S. Supreme Court, where a conservative majority has demonstrated its willingness to overturn precedent.

"What's constitutional or not is only as good as the latest court decision," said Philip Joyce, a University of Maryland public policy professor.

Roughly three dozens lawsuits have already been filed, including by FBI agents who fear they're being purged for political reasons and families who are concerned about new limitations on healthcare for transgender youth.

The spotlight on the judiciary is brighter because the Republican-controlled Congress has essentially abdicated its role of serving as a check on the presidency. Lawmakers from Trump's party have acceded to his demands to unilaterally cut spending and fire government watchdogs without proper notice.

That leaves only the courts as a potential guardrail on the president's ambitions.

"We're down to two branches of government," said Justin Levitt, a professor at Loyola Law School.

The latest setbacks for Trump came Thursday.

In Seattle, U.S. District Judge John Coughenour blocked Trump's executive order on birthright citizenship, which was intended to prevent the children of parents who are in the country illegally from being automatically considered Americans.

Coughenour described birthright citizenship, which was established by the 14th Amendment, as "a fundamental constitutional right" and he assailed Trump in scathing terms.

"The rule of law is, according to him, something to navigate around or simply ignore, whether that be for political or personal gain," said the judge, who was nominated by President Ronald Reagan in 1981.

"There are moments in the world's history where people look back and ask, 'Where were the lawyers? Where were the judges?'" Coughenour added. "In these moments, the rule of law becomes especially vulnerable. I refuse to let that beacon go dark today."

The judge had previously called the order "blatantly unconstitutional" when issuing a temporary ruling.

"I've been on the bench for over four decades," Coughenour said then. "I can't remember another case where the question presented was as clear as this one is."

Also on Thursday in Boston, U.S. District Judge George O'Toole Jr. paused Trump's plan to encourage federal workers to resign by offering them paid leave.

O'Toole, who was nominated by President Bill Clinton in 1995, did not express an opinion on the deferred resignation program, which is commonly described as a buyout. He scheduled a hearing for Monday afternoon to consider arguments.

"We continue to believe this program violates the law, and we will continue to aggressively defend our members' rights," American Federation of Government Employees National President Everett Kelley said in a statement.

The White House said at least 40,000 federal workers have already agreed to quit in return for being paid until Sept. 30.

"We are grateful to the judge for extending the deadline so more federal workers who refuse to show up to the office can take the administration up on this very generous, once-in-a-lifetime offer," White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said in a statement.

It's unclear which legal battles will reach the U.S. Supreme Court, where justices can choose what cases to consider. But Trump has nominated three out of nine members, and the court has taken an expansive view of presidential power.

In a case involving criminal charges against Trump, the justices ruled that presidents are immune from prosecution for any official actions taken during their term.

Sonia Sotomayor, one of the few liberal justices on the bench, said the ruling would make the U.S. president "a king above the law."

Steve Vladeck, a professor at Georgetown University Law Center, said the courts have been pushing

back on Trump in his second term. But he warned that judicial decisions need to be enforced.

"The collapse of any congressional pushback, any congressional responsibility, I think is an ominous sign for what would happen if this administration starts openly defying court orders," Vladeck said.

Historically, that would be a political non-starter and leave a president vulnerable to impeachment. But Trump was acquitted by the U.S. Senate despite two House impeachments from his first term, and then reelected by American voters, leaving him with little fear of punishment.

One closely watched legal issue involves the president's ability to withhold funding authorized by Congress, a practice known as impoundment. Although it's restricted by legislation passed in 1974, after scandals involving former President Richard Nixon, some of Trump's allies have described the law as an unconstitutional limit on White House authority.

The concept was tested by Trump when the Office of Management and Budget decided to freeze federal grants and loans while the administration conducted an ideological review of spending.

The directive was blocked by U.S. District Judge Loren AliKhan, who was nominated by President Joe Biden in 2023.

"Defendants' actions in this case potentially run roughshod over a 'bulwark of the Constitution' by interfering with Congress's appropriation of federal funds," AliKhan wrote.

## **The sea was once a blessing for the Pakistani city of Gwadar. But it's become a curse**

By RIAZAT BUTT Associated Press

GWADAR, Pakistan (AP) — There was a time when few people in the coastal Pakistani city of Gwadar understood what climate change was. After a decade of extreme weather, many more do.

Rain battered Gwadar for almost 30 consecutive hours last February. Torrents washed out roads, bridges, and lines of communication, briefly cutting the peninsula town off from the rest of Pakistan. Homes look like bombs have struck them and drivers swerve to avoid craters where asphalt used to be.

Gwadar is in Balochistan, an arid, mountainous, and vast province in Pakistan's southwest that has searing summers and harsh winters. The city, with about 90,000 people, is built on sand dunes and bordered by the Arabian Sea on three sides, at a low elevation that makes it vulnerable to climate change in a country that has already seen its share of catastrophe from it.

"It's no less than an island nation situation," warned Gwadar-based hydrologist Pazeer Ahmed. "Many low-lying areas in the town will be partially or completely submerged if the sea level continues to rise."

The sea, once a blessing for Gwadar's fishing and domestic tourism sectors, has become an existential threat to lives and livelihoods.

Warming oceans mean bigger and more powerful waves, and those waves get whipped higher by summer monsoon winds. Warmer air holds more moisture -- about 7% more per degree Celsius (4% per degree Fahrenheit) — and that means more big rain events.

"Waves have become more violent due to the rising sea temperatures and eroded beaches," said Abdul Rahim, deputy environment director at Gwadar Development Authority. "The tidal actions and patterns have changed. Hundreds of homes have been washed away. It is very alarming."

Melting glaciers contribute to rising sea levels, another cause of coastal erosion. The sea level at Karachi rose almost 8 inches (almost 20 centimeters) between 1916 and 2016, according to data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. It's projected to rise another half-inch (about 1.3 centimeters) by 2040.

In areas near Gwadar, like Pishukan and Ganz, waves have swallowed up mosques, schools, and settlements. There are gashes in the cliffs at the popular picnic spot of Sunset Park, and rocks have cascaded onto the shore. Beaches run flat for dozens of kilometers because no structures remain on it.

Authorities have built seawalls from stone or concrete to hold back saltwater intrusion. But they're a small solution to a massive problem as Gwadar's people and businesses are fighting climate change on different fronts.

Saltwater pools on government land, salt crystals glistening in the sunshine. In the Shado Band neighbourhood, former local councillor Qadir Baksh fretted about water seeping up through the ground and into his courtyard every day, held at bay only by regular pumping. Dozens of houses have the same problem, he said.

Officials, including Ahmed and Rahim, said changes in land use and unauthorized building are worsening flooding. Locals said some major construction projects have destroyed traditional drainage pathways.

Gwadar is the centerpiece of a massive Chinese-led initiative to create an overland route between its western Xinjiang region and the Arabian Sea through Gwadar. Hundreds of millions of dollars have poured into the town to create a deep seaport, an international airport, expressways and other infrastructure. The more sensitive projects, especially the port, are tightly secured by the Pakistani military, out of sight and off-limits to the public.

But there is no proper sewage or drainage system for residents despite a decade of foreign investment, and Gwadar's porosity, high water table, rising sea levels, and heavier rainfall are rocket fuel for the town's vulnerability.

There's nowhere for the water to go.

"In the past when it rained, the water disappeared up to 10 days later," said Baksh. "But the rain that came last year hasn't gone. The water rises from the ground with such speed it will reach the four walls of my home if we don't run the generator every day to extract it. Officials say it's because of climate change but, whatever it is, we're suffering."

Gwadar's fishing community is also hurting. Catches are smaller, native fish are disappearing, and migration patterns and fishing seasons have changed, said Ahmed and Rahim. There is also algae bloom and the invasion of unwanted marine species like pufferfish.

Illegal fishing and foreign trawlers are responsible for a few of these things, but it's mostly rising sea temperatures.

People have migrated from places like Dasht and Kulanch because of water scarcity. What agriculture there was in Gwadar's surrounding areas is vanishing due to loss of farmland and livestock deaths, according to locals. It's part of a wider pattern in which Pakistan's farmers are seeing declining crop yields and increasing crop diseases due to climate extremes, particularly floods, droughts and heat waves, according to the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

"There are heat waves and dust storms in Gwadar," said Ahmed. "But the main impact of climate change here is that there is too much water and not enough of it. If nothing is done to address this problem, we will have no option but to retreat."

## **Devoted nap-takers explain the benefits of sleeping on the job**

By CATHY BUSSEWITZ Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — They snooze in parking garages, on side streets before the afternoon school run, in nap pods rented by the hour or stretched out in bed while working from home.

People who make a habit of sleeping on the job comprise a secret society of sorts within the U.S. labor force. Inspired by famous power nappers Winston Churchill and Albert Einstein, today's committed nap-takers often sneak in short rest breaks because they think the practice will improve their cognitive performance but still carries a stigma.

Multiple studies have extolled the benefits of napping, such as enhanced memory and focus. A mid-afternoon siesta is the norm in parts of Spain and Italy. In China and Japan, nodding off is encouraged since working to the point of exhaustion is seen as a display of dedication, according to a study in the journal *Sleep*.

Yet it's hard to catch a few z's during regular business hours in the United States, where people who nap can be viewed as lazy. The federal government even bans sleeping in its buildings while at work, except in rare circumstances.

Individuals who are willing and able to challenge the status quo are becoming less hesitant to describe



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the payoffs of taking a dose of microsleep. Marvin Stockwell, the founder of PR firm Champion the Cause, takes short naps several times a week.

"They rejuvenate me in a way that I'm exponentially more useful and constructive and creative on the other side of a nap than I am when I'm forcing myself to gut through being tired," Stockwell said.

The art of napping

Sleep is as important to good health as diet and exercise, but too many people don't get enough of it, according to James Rowley, program director of the Sleep Medicine Fellowship at Rush University Medical Center.

"A lot of it has to do with electronics. It used to be TVs, but now cellphones are probably the biggest culprit. People just take them to bed with them and watch," Rowley said.

Napping isn't common in academia, where there's constant pressure to publish, but University of Southern California lecturer Julianna Kirschner fits in daytime naps when she can. Kirschner studies social media, which she says is designed to deliver a dopamine rush to the brain. Viewers lose track of time on the platforms, interrupting sleep. Kirschner says she isn't immune to this problem — hence, her occasional need to nap.

The key to effective napping is to keep the snooze sessions short, Rowley said. Short naps can be restorative and are more likely to leave you more alert, he said.

"Most people don't realize naps should be in the 15- to 20-minute range," Rowley said. "Anything longer, and you can have problems with sleep inertia, difficulty waking up, and you're groggy."

Individuals who find themselves consistently relying on naps to make up for inadequate sleep should probably also examine their bedtime habits, he said.

A matter of timing

Mid-afternoon is the ideal time for a nap because it coincides with a natural circadian dip, while napping after 6 p.m. may interfere with nocturnal sleep for those who work during daylight hours, said Michael Chee, director of the Centre for Sleep and Cognition at the National University of Singapore.

"Any duration of nap, you will feel recharged. It's a relief valve. There are clear cognitive benefits," Chee said.

A review of napping studies suggests that 30 minutes is the optimal nap length in terms of practicality and benefits, said Ruth Leong, a research fellow at the Singapore center.

"When people nap for too long, it may not be a sustainable practice, and also, really long naps that cross the two-hour mark affect nighttime sleep," Leong said.

Experts recommend setting an alarm for 20 to 30 minutes, which gives nappers a few minutes to fall asleep.

But even a six-minute nap can be restorative and improve learning, said Valentin Dragoi, scientific director of the Center for Neural Systems Restoration, a research and treatment facility run by Houston Methodist hospital and Rice University.

Bucking the trend

While workplace dozing is uncommon in the U.S., some companies and managers encourage it. Will Bryk, founder of AI search startup Exa, swears by 20-minute power naps and ordered two sleeping pods for employees to use in his company's San Francisco office.

Ice cream maker Ben & Jerry's has had a nap room in its Vermont headquarters for a couple of decades, and a handful of employees use it, company spokesman Sean Greenwood said. "Employees who feel taken care of are much more likely to use this responsibly," he said.

Arianna Huffington, the celebrity author who co-founded the news website Huffington Post, became an advocate of a good night's sleep and occasional naps after she collapsed from exhaustion in 2007. She installed a nap room at her former company, now called HuffPo, and at Thrive Global, a behavior change technology company where she serves as founder and CEO.

"If people have been up all night because of a sick child or a delayed flight, if they have the opportunity to nap, ... then they will be much more productive and creative for the rest of the day instead of dragging themselves or trying to boost their energy through multiple coffees or cinnamon buns," Huffington said

in an email.

Kirsten Perez, 33, is a devoted napper. She used to use her lunch break at work to catch a few winks in her car. When she got her own office, she closed the door for a siesta while sitting at her desk.

Nowadays, working from home as a marketing manager at Nvidia, the Atlanta resident usually takes her daily nap in bed. She sets an alarm for 15 minutes, falls asleep within a minute and wakes up 30 seconds before the alarm rings.

"I can tell when my reasoning, my mood are dropping, just kind of feeling the drag of the day," Perez said. In those situations, she asks herself, "Do I have a chunk of time in the next hour or so?" And then I'll figure out when I can find 15 minutes and find myself horizontal."

Creating space for sleep

Naps are accepted and even a necessity in some occupations. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention encourages naps for nurses working night shifts. But many nurses can't sleep at the hospitals where they work because they're too busy and aren't given access to beds.

Nurses "regularly struggle to have sufficient time to use the bathroom or go outside for fresh air, no less take a nap," said a spokesperson for the National Nurses United union.

Some companies are trying to fill the void. Inspired by his mother who worked as a nurse, Neil Wong founded Nap York, which offers sleeping pods in Manhattan and Queens that can be rented for about \$27 an hour.

His regular customers include super-commuters, UPS drivers, a security guard who works two full-time jobs, and doctors who work at nearby hospitals. Nap York also gives half-off prices to essential workers such as police officers, firefighters and emergency medical service personnel.

"In this society, you really only have two place to sleep: you have your bed at home and you have a hotel room you can probably get for 100 bucks," Wong said. "There's really no third space that's quiet, that provides some privacy, where you can also rest."

## **New kickoff rule gets chance on Super Bowl stage after last year's game had no returns**

By JOSH DUBOW AP Pro Football Writer

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Last season's Super Bowl featured just about everything.

There were trick plays, clutch performances and plenty of high drama as Kansas City rallied for a 25-22 overtime win against San Francisco.

The one thing missing — a single kickoff return.

All 13 kickoffs went for touchbacks, marking the first Super Bowl ever without a kickoff return and providing the final impetus for the NFL to approve one of its most significant rules changes in years by completely overhauling the kickoff.

The new kickoff rule that did lead to a reduction in the rate of injuries and an increase in returns gets the opportunity to appear on the highest-profile stage on Sunday when the Chiefs take on the Philadelphia Eagles in the Super Bowl.

"It's kind of brought a new life to it," Eagles special teams coordinator Michael Clay said. "Gives us something to coach off of, kind of go back to the drawing board and kind of get creative with our ideas."

The new rule — called the "dynamic kickoff" — was implemented with the hopes of decreasing injuries by limiting the high-speed collisions and incentivizing returns after the rate of returns fell to an all-time low of 21.8% last season.

For the uninitiated, the new setup looks odd at first with the kicker alone at his 35 and his 10 coverage players lined up at the opposing 40. The return team has at least nine blockers lined up in the "setup zone" between the 30- and 35-yard line with at least seven of those players touching the 35. Up to two returners are allowed inside the 20.

Only the kicker and two returners will be allowed to move until the ball hits the ground or is touched by a returner inside the 20.

Any kick that reaches the end zone in the air can be returned, or the receiving team can opt for a touchback and possession at the 30. Any kick that reaches the end zone in the air and goes out of bounds or out of the end zone also will result in a touchback at the 30.

According to the NFL, the change led to 332 more returns in 2024 with the return rate increasing to 32.8%. There were also 59 returns of at least 40 yards, the most in the league since 2016, and seven TD returns. The concussion rate fell 43% from the previous three years and there were the fewest lower-extremity strains on kick return plays since 2018.

The return rate has increased to 45.1% in the postseason, but that might be based more on the difficulty of kicking deep in cold weather, which won't be an issue with the Super Bowl set to be played in a dome.

For the regular season, both teams had about one-sixth of their kicks reach the landing zone requiring a return with the Chiefs at 17.2% and the Eagles at 16.5%. Philadelphia's rate increased to 43.5% in the playoffs which was a function of weather more than strategy of trying to stop the opposition before the 30.

"We want to minimize any of the risk that can possibly happen," Clay said. "We're just trying to eliminate any added variables that get us in trouble."

The rule was adopted on a one-year trial and could be altered or eliminated this offseason. Kansas City special teams coach Dave Toub has liked the rule in general but would be in favor of at least one change to increase the rate of returns even more.

"If we move touchbacks to the 35 there will be a lot more returns," he said.

The kick returns have played a key role for both Philadelphia and Kansas City on the way to the Super Bowl.

The Eagles' coverage units have generated two takeaways, forcing a fumble on the opening kick of a wild-card win against Green Bay and again in the NFC title game against Washington. Kenneth Gainwell also had a 44-yard return in the divisional round against the Rams.

Nikko Remigio set the tone for the Chiefs when he returned the opening kick in their first playoff game in the divisional round against Houston 63 yards to set up a score.

"The guys like it," Clay said. "They've embraced it and they just want to do anything to help this team advance as far as possible."

## Utility says its equipment may have started a small blaze that erupted during January's LA firestorm

By CHRISTOPHER WEBER Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A California utility said Thursday that its equipment may have sparked a small wildfire in Los Angeles that broke out the same day as two massive blazes in the area that killed at least 29 people and destroyed thousands of homes.

Southern California Edison said the Los Angeles Fire Department is investigating the cause of the Hurst Fire and believes the utility's equipment caused the blaze, which did not destroy any structures or cause any deaths. In a required filing with state utility regulators, SCE said "absent additional evidence, SCE believes its equipment may be associated with ignition of the Hurst Fire."

In a second filing, the utility said it is looking into whether an idle transmission line became energized and possibly sparked the deadly Eaton Fire, which also sparked Jan. 7 devastated Altadena. But it still maintains there's no evidence that its equipment was responsible for starting that blaze.

The utility acknowledged last month that fire agencies are investigating whether its equipment may have started the Hurst Fire, which scorched about 1.25 square miles (3.2 square km) around the Sylmar neighborhood of Los Angeles.

The utility said it is cooperating with investigators.

Regarding the Eaton Fire, SCE said it was reviewing a video that purports to show "flashes" of electrical arcing from a tower near where the blaze began. The utility said preliminary investigation found no evidence that arcing occurred, while acknowledging that some damage was found on related equipment.

"SCE does not know when this damage occurred and a comparison between pre- and post-fire photographs is underway," the filing said.

Multiple lawsuits against SCE citing the video claim the utility's equipment sparked the Eaton Fire, but the utility maintains that it's still too early to make that determination.

"SCE has not identified typical or obvious indications that would support this association, such as broken conductors, fresh arc marks in the preliminary origin area, or evidence of faults on the energized lines running through that area," the utility said in a news release announcing its filings.

The Eaton Fire, which killed at least 17 people, was fully contained last week. Full containment was also reached on the Palisades Fire, the largest of the blazes that destroyed thousands of homes and killed at least 12 people.

## **Jimmy Butler is headed to the Golden State Warriors, Andrew Wiggins to Miami Heat, AP source says**

By TIM REYNOLDS AP Basketball Writer

Jimmy Butler got what he wanted. He's being traded out of Miami and got a new contract in the process.

The Heat and the Golden State Warriors have agreed on a deal that sends Butler to the Bay Area, a person with knowledge of the talks said Wednesday. Butler helped carry the Heat to the NBA Finals twice, long before a hostile breakup that saw him suspended three times by the team in January.

Golden State is making it happen by moving Andrew Wiggins, Dennis Schroder, Kyle Anderson, Lindy Waters and first-round draft compensation out in the deal, said the person, who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because the trade has not gotten league approval.

Wiggins and Anderson are headed to Miami; it's unclear if Anderson will be staying with the Heat. Schroder is getting moved to Utah — where the Warriors, coincidentally, were Wednesday night — and Josh Richardson is heading from Miami to Detroit along with Waters. Also on the move: P.J. Tucker, who was just traded to Utah and briefly was set to return to Miami, where he played in 2021-22. As the trade continued evolving Thursday, Tucker was being moved to Toronto and Davion Mitchell was headed to the Heat.

It took a lot, but Butler got his wish.

"My brother, man. I'm going to miss him, for sure," said Heat forward Nikola Jovic, who looked up to Butler. "I think a lot of guys here will. He's someone who did a lot for this franchise."

The Heat will get a protected first-rounder from Golden State; for now, that is a pick in this year's draft though that could change based on final terms. And ESPN reported that Butler has already agreed on a two-year extension with the Warriors, one that would be worth around \$113 million.

"I'm really happy that he got what he wanted," Jovic said. "That bag's kinda really big."

Mark down March 25: Golden State at Miami, the first time Butler could play again in South Florida.

Golden State becomes Butler's fifth team, after stints in Chicago, Minnesota, Philadelphia and Miami. His arrivals were celebrated in all four cities, and his departures weren't exactly smooth in any of them.

With the Warriors, he joins Stephen Curry and Draymond Green — two players who were part of all four recent Golden State championship teams and have hopes of getting back to title contention again.

The Warriors had a closed-door meeting in the locker room Wednesday as news of the trade was getting out; coach Steve Kerr met with the team during the period that the room is typically open to reporters before games. Golden State wound up falling to Utah 131-128.

"Our guys were in the locker room getting ready to play and all of a sudden we're saying goodbye," Kerr said.

Butler's breakup with the Heat brewed for months. The primary issue was money; he was eligible for the two-year, \$113 million extension and the Heat never offered it, largely because he missed about 25% of the team's games in his Miami tenure.

The relationship was broken beyond repair at the end. When Butler said he didn't expect to find on-court joy with the Heat again in early January, he was suspended for seven games as the last straw on a list of

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what the team called detrimental conduct.

It kept getting worse: Butler was suspended three times in January alone, the second a two-game ban for missing a team flight, the last an indefinite one that followed him leaving shootaround early after learning he wasn't going to start a Jan. 27 game against Orlando. That was the end.

"There was a lot said by everybody, except for me, to tell you the truth," Butler said after his first game back following the first suspension. "We'll let people keep talking. ... The whole truth will come out."

The Heat said Butler asked for a trade, which caused them to change course from team president Pat Riley's December vow not to trade him; when the first suspension was announced, the Heat said they were trying to make a trade happen.

Butler is averaging 17 points per game this season. He had one of the best statistical games in Heat history against Detroit on Dec. 16 — 35 points, 19 rebounds and 10 assists.

It was never the same again. In his six appearances following that Detroit game, including one where he departed in the first quarter with illness, Butler averaged 9.5 points, 2.7 rebounds and 4.2 assists.

Wiggins, the No. 1 pick in the 2014 draft, has averaged 18.5 points in 11 seasons — first with Minnesota, then Golden State. He is someone that Kerr has raved about at times this season, and when Wiggins was good the Warriors were usually really good. Golden State was 8-3 this season when Wiggins scored at least 23 points.

"Wiggs is one of my favorite players I've ever coached," Kerr said. "Just a beautiful soul, just a wonderful human being. And we don't hang that (championship) banner in '22 without him. Everything he brings every single day, the laughter, the smile, the joy, just a wonderful human being. And so, I'm going to miss him."

Butler joined Miami in 2019 to fill Dwyane Wade's spot as the star of the team, the face of the franchise. He was an All-Star twice in Miami, helped the Heat to the NBA Finals in the bubble in 2020 and then as a No. 8 seed in 2023 and turned in some epic postseason performances. There have been 18 40-point games in Heat playoff history; Butler is responsible for eight of them, including a team-record 56 against Milwaukee in 2023.

The last time Butler spoke publicly as a Heat player was at a padel tournament on Jan. 25. "I love this city with everything that I have," he said that day.

Two days later, he was suspended by the Heat for the third and final time.

## **From fighting disease to protecting the Amazon rainforest, USAID has big impact across the globe**

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI Associated Press

The Trump administration's decision to close the U.S. Agency for International Development has drawn widespread criticism from congressional Democrats and raised questions and concern about the influence billionaire ally Elon Musk wields over the federal government.

The United States is by far the world's largest source of foreign assistance, although several European countries allocate a much bigger share of their budgets to aid. USAID funds projects in some 120 countries aimed at fighting epidemics, educating children, providing clean water and supporting other areas of development.

The stop-work order has upended many of those projects, and has seen nurses laid off and clinics closed in more than 25 countries where two-thirds of all child deaths occur globally, said Janeen Madan Keller, policy fellow and deputy director of global health policy at the Center for Global Development.

Here is a look at USAID's impact around the world:

Protecting the Amazon rainforest and fighting cocaine in South America

USAID has been critical in providing humanitarian assistance in Colombia, conservation efforts in the Brazilian Amazon and coca eradication in Peru. Recent USAID money has also supported emergency humanitarian aid to more than 2.8 million Venezuelans who fled economic crisis.

In 2024 alone, the agency transferred some \$45 million to the U.N. World Food Program, mostly to as-

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sist Venezuelans.

In Brazil, USAID's largest initiative is the Partnership for the Conservation of Amazon Biodiversity, which focuses on conservation and improving livelihoods for Indigenous peoples and other rainforest communities.

Over in Peru, part of USAID's \$135 million funding in 2024 was dedicated to financing cocaine-production alternatives such as coffee and cacao. The humanitarian agency has been seeking to curb production of the drug since the early 1980s.

Disease response, girls' education and free school lunches in Africa

Last year, the U.S. gave the sub-Saharan region more than \$6.5 billion in humanitarian assistance. But since Trump's announcement, HIV patients in Africa found locked doors at clinics funded by an acclaimed U.S. program that helped rein in the global AIDS epidemic.

Known as one of the world's most successful foreign aid program, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR, has been credited with saving more than 25 million lives, largely in Africa.

"The world is baffled," said Aaron Motsoaledi, the health minister of South Africa, the country with the largest number of people living with HIV, after the U.S. freeze on aid.

Motsoaledi says the U.S. funds nearly 20% of the \$2.3 billion needed each year to run South Africa's HIV/AIDS program through PEPFAR, and now the biggest response to a single disease in history is under threat.

Halting U.S. aid also could have a dire impact on the humanitarian situation in eastern Congo, where American aid funds access to food, water, electricity and basic health care for 4.6 million people displaced by years of conflict. European nations are discussing increasing aid, but a European diplomat told the AP that will not make up for the loss of the U.S., the country's largest donor.

In Ghana, the Chemonics International development group said it's pulling logistics for programs in maternal and child health, malaria response and HIV.

Education programs have been halted in Mali, a conflict-battered West African nation where USAID has become the country's main humanitarian partner after others left following a 2021 coup.

In civil-war-torn Sudan, which is grappling with cholera, malaria and measles, the aid freeze means 600,000 people will be at risk of catching and spreading those diseases, said an official who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly on the matter.

Countering Russian influence

USAID supports governance and media projects in countries where Russia exerts a large influence, such as Georgia and Armenia. Last year, it sharply increased support for programs in Armenia as the government of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has sought to reduce links with Russia and strengthen ties with the United States and the European Union. The aid freeze means several independent broadcasters have been forced to cut some of their programs.

Boris Navasardian, president of the Yerevan Press Club, said independent media "could face a forced choice – end their existence or seek sponsorship from political parties or big business."

Hospitals in war-ravaged Syria

Doctors of the World Turkey says it has been forced to lay off 300 staff and shutter 12 field hospitals it runs across northern Syria, a region devastated by years of war and a huge 2023 earthquake. Hakan Bilgin, the organization's president, said it relies on USAID for 60% of its funding and has had to cut its daily consultations from 5,000 to 500.

"As a medical organization providing life-saving services, you're basically saying, 'Close all the clinics, stop all your doctors, and you're not providing services to women, children, and the elderly,'" Bilgin said.

Bilgin said the impact on northern Syria, where millions rely on outside medical aid, could be catastrophic.

"The real impact is bigger than we can measure right now," he said in the group's Istanbul office, surrounded by half-unpacked boxes and worried colleagues.

Support for marginalized communities from the Balkans to Uganda

In Kosovo, which has received more than \$1 billion from USAID since 1999, women's groups fear the impact of losing American funding for gender and diversity-related projects in the conservative country.

"This might leave women's groups stranded and unsupported," said Ariana Qosaj Mustafa of the Kosovo

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Women's Network.

Emina Bosnjak of the Sarajevo Open Center said USAID promotes awareness of discrimination, violence and hate speech, and marginalized groups would suffer if that stops.

"Stronger narratives that stand against human rights and stand against democracy and rule of law will actually become more visible," she said.

A non-profit organization supporting LGBTQ people in Uganda also feels under threat. Pius Kennedy, a program officer with the Kampala-based nonprofit Africa Queer Network, said he and five other permanent employees had been ordered by USAID to stop work.

He said the funding freeze could erase years of gains made in protecting sexual minorities in Uganda, one of more than 30 African countries where homosexuality is criminalized.

"We would always look at the United States as something that we would always run to in case you are facing a number of insecurities in the country," Kennedy said — but that may no longer be the case.

Support for media in Myanmar and mine clearance in Cambodia

The freeze of foreign assistance from USAID include \$39 million for rights, democracy, and media in Myanmar, whose military seized power from the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi in 2021, a human rights group said Thursday.

The group Human Rights Myanmar said the frozen funds "are vital for organizations challenging military rule and promoting democracy, which advance U.S. interests by upholding American values and countering China's authoritarian influence."

Myanmar's military government is the most repressive in Southeast Asia, clamping down on free media, imprisoning thousands of nonviolent critics and political rivals and carrying out a brutal war against pro-democracy resistance forces, heedless of civilian casualties.

The U.S. has also frozen funding for landmine removal in Cambodia. In an illustration of the geopolitics of foreign aid, China has stepped in to fill the gap. Beijing and Washington vie for influence in Southeast Asia, with China gaining ground in the past decade.

Heng Ratana, director-general of Cambodian Mines Action Center said China has released \$4.4 million to support continuing demining operations in seven Cambodian provinces. Days earlier, he had said demining programs in eight other provinces that were funded by the United States had to stop.

Wartime help in Ukraine

U.S. funding in Ukraine has helped to pay for fuel for evacuation vehicles, salaries for aid workers, legal and psychological support, and tickets to help evacuees reach safer locations.

That includes the cost of using a concert hall in eastern Ukraine as a temporary center for civilians fleeing the relentless Russian bombardment. That shelter is now in peril because 60% of the costs — equivalent of \$7,000 a month to run — were being covered by the U.S.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy says his government expects \$300 million to \$400 million in aid to be cut. Most of that was for the energy sector that has been targeted by Russia.

## How to cook the perfect boiled egg, according to science

By ADITHI RAMAKRISHNAN AP Science Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Scientists say they've cracked the code for boiling the perfect egg.

It's a recipe you can test for yourself — though the timing isn't ideal with soaring egg prices in the United States from a bird flu outbreak.

The perfect boiled egg has a velvety yolk paired with a soft, solid white.

Achieving this balance can be a challenge because the yolk cooks at a lower temperature than the white. Hard boiling an egg can yield a chalky yolk, while cooking low and slow can produce jelly-like, undercooked whites.

Researchers cooked hundreds of eggs and used math to tackle this runny conundrum. One equation dealt with how heat travels between a hot surface and an egg; another captured how the egg's contents morph from liquid to solid with a gel-like state in between.

Their final recipe involves transferring eggs in a steamer basket every two minutes between two bowls of water — one boiling and the other lukewarm at 86 degrees Fahrenheit (30 degrees Celsius) — for a total of 32 minutes before cooling under running water and peeling.

"You could definitely do this at home with half a dozen eggs or so," said Gregory Weiss, a chemist at the University of California, Irvine, who was not involved with the research.

In the method proposed by the researchers, dubbed periodic cooking, the egg whites heated and cooled until fully set. The yolk, on the other hand, held firm at a constant temperature and cooked until creamy.

"You can almost spread it, like on bread," said study author Emilia Di Lorenzo from the University of Naples Federico II.

To confirm they had cooked up something new, the researchers tested the chemical makeup of the prepared eggs and served them to a panel of eight tasters alongside traditional boiled eggs.

The research was published Thursday in the journal Communications Engineering.

This new technique could mean more time in the kitchen compared to a standard hard-boiled egg, said food scientist Joanne Slavin from the University of Minnesota. But the blend of textures on the tongue could be worth the extra time.

"This is a slower process to get a better outcome," said Slavin, who had no role in the study.

## **Musk uses his X ownership and White House position to push Trump priorities, intimidate detractors**

By ALI SWENSON and CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The emergence of X owner Elon Musk as the most influential figure around President Donald Trump has created an extraordinary dynamic — a White House adviser who's using one of the world's most powerful information platforms to sell the government's talking points while intimidating its detractors.

In recent days, Musk has used X to promote Trump's positions to his 215 million followers, attack an agency he's trying to shut down as "evil" and claim a Treasury employee who resigned under pressure over payment system access committed a crime.

His use of the social media platform he owns has become both a cudgel and a megaphone for the Republican administration at a time that his power to shape the electorate's perspective is only growing, as more Americans turn to social media and influencers to get their news.

Musk isn't bound to all the same ethics and financial disclosures as some other federal workers because he is classified as a special government employee. Trump earlier this week dismissed concerns about Musk's conflicts of interest, saying, "Where we think there's a conflict or there's a problem, we won't let him go near it."

Yet for the world's richest man to single-handedly control the levers of one of the most influential online communication channels while holding an office in the White House complex is "unthinkable" in our current system of government, said Steven Levitsky, a political scientist at Harvard University and the author of "How Democracies Die."

"This is a combination of economic, media and political power that I believe has never been seen before in any democracy on Earth," he said.

Requests for comment from Musk's special commission, the Department of Government Efficiency, and X were not returned.

A foot in two powerful worlds

The close link between Musk's X account and Trump's administration has been criticized not only because it gives Trump an unusually large mouthpiece. Musk's ownership of X also could give him financial incentive to use his own platform instead of other pathways to disseminate the most urgent and vital government information.

In the first two weeks of Trump's term, Musk has used his long-held celebrity cachet to amplify the



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president's talking points on California's wildfires, federal spending, Cabinet picks and more to his enormous following. He used X to criticize and intimidate those who spoke out against his far-reaching takeover of government agencies as the head of DOGE.

He also held a livestream on X featuring entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy and two Republican senators to discuss DOGE's work, inviting users to listen in live. Twelve hours later, DOGE posted it to Facebook for non-X-users to hear the recording.

Trump's stake in the much smaller social platform Truth Social — which he transferred last year into a revocable trust of which he is the sole beneficiary — is another example of such a consolidation of power.

Musk insists his X postings about DOGE and other government business are to benefit the public, as a transparency measure. Supporters say he deserves credit for sharing his unfiltered thoughts and strategies, and they view his style as a breath of fresh air after years of government obfuscation.

He has pledged that DOGE, tasked with slashing federal spending, will post all its actions online — though its official government website is currently blank, with only the tagline, "The people voted for major reform."

#### A mouthpiece for Trump's narratives

Since it became clear Musk would join the administration, he has repeatedly amplified Trump's narratives on X, where the platform's owner is the most followed user and is reportedly often recommended as a new user's first account to follow.

Sometimes those narratives include misleading information. After wildfires blazed through Los Angeles last month, Musk shared another user's post declaring that "TRUMP UNLEASHES CALIFORNIA'S WATER" while "BIDEN AND NEWSOM LET WILDFIRES BURN."

The Army Corps of Engineers did start releasing large flows of water from two California reservoirs on Friday and continued to do so through the weekend, the Los Angeles Times reported. But that federally controlled water flows to farmland in California's crop-rich Central Valley, not the Los Angeles County neighborhoods coping with the aftermath of last month's deadly fires. It also was released at a time it was not needed by farmers.

In December, before Trump took office, Musk helped him temporarily sink a government funding deal, whipping up outrage with a torrent of X posts attacking the legislation for what he described as excessive spending.

More recently, Musk has taken to X to advance DOGE's efforts to shut down the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID, posting Sunday to label the agency as "evil" and a "criminal organization."

#### Intimidation and a lack of transparency

Musk also has used the platform to insinuate that others may have committed crimes. It's finger-pointing that, from Musk's office adjacent to the West Wing, could be seen as having the approval of the administration and thus the Justice Department.

The day after the Treasury Department's acting deputy secretary, David Lebryk, resigned under pressure over payment system access, Musk posted that Lebryk had committed "crime on a scale that makes the mafia look like preschoolers stealing cookies." It's unclear what law, if any, could have been broken.

At least one Trump-appointed prosecutor seems ready to listen to tips that come from Musk's platform. Interim U.S. Attorney Ed Martin recently thanked an anonymous pro-Trump X account when it recommended he "look into" another user who posted criticizing DOGE.

On Monday, Musk posted that he had "deleted" 18F, a government agency that worked on technology projects such as the IRS' Direct File program. The news, which was not shared elsewhere, led to confusion about whether Direct File is still available to taxpayers, but the free filing program is still available, at least for the coming tax season.

Critics say that instead of complete transparency, Musk is showing only what he wants to reveal about the commission he leads. The X owner has suspended the accounts of some X users who posted the names of his DOGE team members. And many details of the commission's work have been left vague as it has rapidly taken control of agency databases, slashed costs and gained access to the U.S. Treasury payment system without congressional approval.

Blurring the line between government and personal interests

Musk's influence in the Trump administration comes as other CEOs who run the world's biggest social media companies have shown deference to the president and even changed policies to align with his worldview.

Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg, Google CEO Sundar Pichai and TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew all attended Trump's inauguration. Zuckerberg, whom Trump threatened to imprison last year, recently shifted his platforms' policies to do away with fact-checking and echoed Trump's concerns that the government harassed social media companies to "censor" lawful speech.

Meanwhile, TikTok's future in the U.S. depends on the app finding new ownership. Trump has taken a lead role in brokering that deal and suggested the government might explore an ownership stake.

Steven Livingston, the founding director of the Institute for Data, Democracy & Politics at George Washington University, said Musk's role shows how American democracy is already faltering.

"It's bending to the will and the whim of a billionaire and not to Congress," he said. "Where does X and Elon Musk end and the government begin? I'm not sure where that line is anymore."

## **Trump administration plans to pressure the IOC to come up with a uniform transgender athlete ban**

By WILL GRAVES AP National Writer

President Donald Trump is ready to take his fight against transgender athletes to the International Olympic Committee.

Trump said Wednesday during a signing ceremony for an executive order aimed at banning transgender athletes from women's sports that his administration wants the IOC to "change everything having to do with the Olympics and having to do with this absolutely ridiculous subject" ahead of the 2028 Summer Games in Los Angeles.

The order empowers the Secretary of State's office to pressure the IOC to amend standards governing Olympic sporting events "to promote fairness, safety and the best interests of female athletes by ensuring that eligibility for participation in women's sporting events is determined according to sex and not gender identity or testosterone reduction."

The order also calls for the Secretary of State and the Department of Homeland Security to "review and adjust, as needed, policies permitting admission to the United States of males seeking to participate in women's sports."

The IOC has allowed transgender athletes to participate at the Olympics since 2004. However, it wasn't until 2021 that the first openly transgender athletes competed under the rings.

Outgoing IOC President Thomas Bach said in December that Olympic organizers were "very confident" they could work with the Trump administration. The president initially backed Los Angeles during his first administration when the city bid for the 2024 Games ultimately awarded to Paris.

Officials with the LA28 organizing committee did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

LA28 organizing committee chairman Casey Wasserman reportedly met with Trump in Florida last month before Trump's second term began, with Wasserman saying afterward both were looking forward to delivering a successful Games.

The IOC has largely stayed out of the discussion around transgender athletes, letting the international governing bodies for each sport set the parameters for gender participation.

The rules can run the gamut. Entities like World Aquatics have very strict guidelines, while World Triathlon rules are more liberal.

The IOC's stance could change considerably in the near future following Bach's retirement. Among the candidates to replace Bach is former track star Sebastian Coe, now the leader of World Athletics. Coe has been a strong proponent of limiting participation in female sports to cisgender women.

Two years ago, track and field under Coe banned transgender athletes from international competition — adopting the same rules as swimming — and adopted new regulations requiring some athletes to undergo hormone-suppressing treatment for six months before competing to be eligible.

The rhetoric around transgender athletes heated up at the Paris Olympics last summer, with Trump eagerly entering the fray.

On the campaign trail, Trump frequently misgendered two Olympic female boxers as men and said their ability to participate in the Paris Games was "demeaning to women" even though both Imane Khelif of Algeria and Li Yu-ting of Taiwan were assigned female at birth and identify as women.

Trump referenced both athletes again on Wednesday.

"They had two women or two people that transitioned and both of them won gold medals and they won them very convincingly," Trump said. "But all of that ends today because with this executive order, the war on women's sports is over."

The question going forward is what kind of leverage the United States can use to influence the IOC. Given the volatile nature of the issue, Trump's order could begin a groundswell among international federations for the IOC to come up with a uniform standard.

## **Mexican border cities are in limbo as tariff threats spark fears of a recession**

By MEGAN JANETSKY Associated Press

CIUDAD JUÁREZ, Mexico (AP) — As soon as the sun glints over miles of border fence dividing the United States and Mexico, the engines of cargo trucks packed with auto and computer parts roar to life along border bridges and bleary-eyed workers file into factories to assemble a multitude of products geared toward the U.S. market.

For more than half a century, this daily rhythm has helped fuel the heartbeat of a transnational machine that generated more than \$800 billion in trade between the U.S. and Mexico in 2024 alone.

Over the past year, however, President Donald Trump's threatened 25% tariffs against Mexico and Canada have plunged manufacturing hubs all along the northern Mexican border into limbo, a state that persists despite a one-month reprieve to which Trump agreed on Monday.

Tariffs would cripple Mexican border economies that are reliant on factories churning out products for the U.S. — auto parts, medical supplies, computer components, myriad electronics — and likely thrust the country into a recession, economic forecasters have warned. Some workers wonder how much longer they'll have jobs, while business leaders say the uncertainty has already led many investors to start tightening their purse strings.

"It's a conflict between governments and we're the ones most affected," said 58-year-old truck driver Carlos Ponce, leaning against his rig at the customs border crossing between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, Texas. "Tomorrow, who knows what will happen?"

Ponce, who was driving a truck full of car shock absorbers, said he's spent the past 35 years moving goods across the border, just as his father did before him. Now, he's unsure how much longer that will last.

Manufacturing in export-oriented assembly plants known as maquiladoras are the heart of Ciudad Juárez's economy, with 97% of its goods going to the U.S., according to figures from Mexico's Economic Ministry.

The factories were born in the 1960s in an attempt to boost economic development in northern Mexico and lower prices for U.S. consumers. The maquiladora program later took off after the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, was signed in 1994. The agreement was supplanted by a similar pact, the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, or USMCA, negotiated between the three countries during Trump's first term.

Today, neon signs with the dollar-to-peso exchange rate flash across the city, a reminder of the close ties binding both sides of the border.

"Everything that happens in the United States: its economic, social policy ... directly affects us because companies here in Mexico depend on what they sell in the United States," said Thor Salayandia, head of his family's auto-parts manufacturing facility in Ciudad Juárez. "The United States also needs Mexico to keep manufacturing, but they're not seeing things like that."

This week, workers and business leaders alike breathed a sigh of relief when Mexican President Claudia

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Sheinbaum announced she had negotiated with Trump to delay tariffs one month.

"Now, we're buying time," Salayandia said.

Workers here assemble everything from auto parts to computer panels to T-shirts emblazoned with the American flag, logos of popular U.S. football teams and slogans such as "Proud to be a federal employee."

Parts can cross the border multiple times before the final product is sold to U.S. consumers. That economic interdependence has left many in the city struggling to imagine a future without it. One U.S. company said it would likely have to move part of its manufacturing in the city to the U.S., but at a sharp cost.

Antonio Ruiz, a compliance officer at Tecma, a U.S. firm that helps foreign companies set up shop along the border, said his was among a number of businesses to call emergency meetings over the weekend as economic forecasters warned that the tariffs could drive Mexico into a recession.

"It's very difficult to be prepared for something that has never happened before," Ruiz said. "As much as you want to prepare for it, the best you can do is prepare to brace yourself in the short term."

Salayandia and economists warn that any sort of tax could lead to cascading unemployment and rising prices on both sides of the border. In Mexico, they say, it could also spur a rise in violence in border areas by pushing the unemployed into the hands of drug cartels, as well as an increase in Mexican migration to the U.S.

Manuel Sotelo, a leader of Mexico's National Chamber of Freight Transportation who owns a fleet of trucks that cross the border every day, sees the tariff threats as more of a political power move than a future economic reality.

"Both countries would be paralyzed," said Sotelo, who sat at a desk covered with local newspapers carrying bold headlines on the tariffs, a Trump bobblehead positioned behind him. "Let's say he did slap a 25% tariff (on Mexico), what would they do during the Super Bowl without avocados?"

On the other hand, Sotelo acknowledges that the tariff talk has already inflicted some damage. He and other business leaders say that over the past year they've watched investment dip in Ciudad Juárez because of political uncertainty, as investors hesitate to funnel their money into businesses that could collapse with the stroke of a pen in Washington.

While Trump's election has been the primary driver of that uncertainty, June elections in Mexico and a controversial judicial reform carried out by Mexico's governing party have added to it. Sotelo said he saw a 7% drop in business last year, and only expects that to continue until lingering tariff threats are resolved.

One collective of maquiladoras in the city says it has seen at least three factories halt production.

"Every time we hear this discourse from political leaders, the people running our governments, it sends shock waves through the border," Salayandia said. "Because the border is a global thermometer. Our products go all over the world. Those companies will go look in other parts of the world where they offer conditions to keep competing."

## **The US is freezing and La Nina usually eases warming. Earth just set another heat record anyway**

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The world warmed to yet another monthly heat record in January, despite an abnormally chilly United States, a cooling La Nina and predictions of a slightly less hot 2025, according to the European climate service Copernicus.

The surprising January heat record coincides with a new study by a climate science heavyweight, former top NASA scientist James Hansen, and others arguing that global warming is accelerating. It's a claim that's dividing the research community.

January 2025 globally was 0.09 degrees Celsius (0.16 degrees Fahrenheit) warmer than January 2024, the previous hottest January, and was 1.75 C (3.15 F) warmer than it was before industrial times, Copernicus calculated. It was the 18th month of the last 19 that the world hit or passed the internationally agreed upon warming limit of 1.5 C (2.7 F) above pre-industrial times. Scientists won't regard the limit as

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breached unless and until global temperatures stay above it for 20 years.

Copernicus records date to 1940, but other U.S. and British records go back to 1850, and scientists using proxies such as tree rings say this era is the warmest in about 120,000 years or since the start of human civilization.

By far the biggest driver of record heat is greenhouse gas buildup from the burning of coal, oil and natural gas, but the natural contributions to temperature change have not been acting quite as expected, said Samantha Burgess, strategic lead for climate for the European weather agency.

The big natural factor in global temperatures is usually the natural cycle of changes in the equatorial Pacific Ocean waters. When the central Pacific is especially warm, it's an El Nino and global temperatures tend to spike. Last year was a substantial El Nino, though it ended last June and the year was even warmer than initially expected, the hottest on record.

El Nino's cooler flip side, a La Nina, tends to dampen the effects of global warming, making record temperatures far less likely. A La Nina started in January after brewing for months. Just last month, climate scientists were predicting that 2025 wouldn't be as hot as 2024 or 2023, with the La Nina a major reason.

"Even though the equatorial Pacific isn't creating conditions that are warming for our global climate, we're still seeing record temperatures," Burgess said, adding much of that is because of record warmth in the rest of the world's oceans.

Usually after an El Nino like last year, temperatures fall rapidly, but "we've not seen that," Burgess told The Associated Press.

For Americans, news of a record warm January might seem odd given how cold it was. But the U.S. is just a tiny fraction of the planet's surface, and "a much larger area of the planet's surface was much, much warmer than average," Burgess said.

January was unseasonably mild in the Arctic. Parts of the Canadian Arctic had temperatures 30 C (54 F) warmer than average and temperatures got so warm sea ice started melting in places, Burgess said.

Copernicus said the Arctic this month tied the January record for lowest sea ice. The U.S.-based National Snow and Ice Data Center had it as second-lowest, behind 2018.

February has already started cooler than last year, Burgess said.

Don't count 2025 out in the race for hottest year, said Hansen, the former NASA scientist who has been called the godfather of climate science. He's now at Columbia University. In a study in the journal Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development, Hansen and colleagues said the last 15 years have warmed at about twice the rate of the previous 40 years.

"I'm confident that this higher rate will continue for at least several years," Hansen told The Associated Press in an interview. "Over the full year it's going to be nip-and-tuck between 2024 and 2025."

There's been a noticeable temperature rise even when taking out El Nino variations and expected climate change since 2020, Hansen said. He noted recent shipping regulations that have resulted in reduced sulfur pollution, which reflects some sunlight away from Earth and effectively reduces warming. And that will continue, he said.

"The persistence of record warmth through 2023, 2024 and now into the first month of 2025 is jarring to say the least," said University of Michigan environment dean Jonathan Overpeck, who wasn't part of the Hansen study. "There seems little doubt that global warming and the impacts of climate change are accelerating."

But Princeton's Gabe Vecchi and University of Pennsylvania's Michael Mann said they don't agree with Hansen on acceleration. Vecchi said there's not enough data to show that this isn't random chance. Mann said that temperature increases are still within what climate models forecast.

## Today in History: February 7 The Beatles arrive for their first US tour

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Friday, Feb. 7, the 38th day of 2025. There are 327 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Feb. 7, 1964, the Beatles were met by thousands of screaming fans at New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport as they arrived to begin their first American tour.

Also on this date:

In 1904, the Great Baltimore Fire began; one of the worst city fires in American history, it destroyed over 1,500 buildings in central Baltimore.

In 1943, the government abruptly announced that wartime rationing of shoes made of leather would go into effect in two days, limiting consumers to buying three pairs per person per year. (This was reduced to two pairs per year in 1944; rationing was lifted in October 1945.)

In 1971, women in Switzerland gained the right to vote through a national referendum, 12 years after a previous attempt failed.

In 1984, space shuttle Challenger astronauts Bruce McCandless II and Robert L. Stewart went on the first untethered spacewalk.

In 1991, Jean-Bertrand Aristide (zhahn behr-TRAHN' ahr-ihs-TEED') was inaugurated as the first democratically elected president of Haiti. (He was overthrown by the military the following September.)

In 1999, Jordan's King Hussein died of cancer at age 63; he was succeeded by his eldest son, Abdullah.

In 2013, Mississippi certified its ratification of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, making it the last state to officially abolish slavery.

In 2021, after moving south to a new team and conference, Tom Brady led the Tampa Bay Buccaneers to a 31-9 Super Bowl victory over the Kansas City Chiefs on the Buccaneers' home field.

In 2023, LeBron James passed Kareem Abdul-Jabbar to become the NBA's all-time career scoring leader.

Today's birthdays: Author Gay Talese is 93. Sen. John Hickenlooper, D-Colo., is 73. Actor James Spader is 65. Country singer Garth Brooks is 63. Actor-comedian Eddie Izzard is 63. Actor-comedian Chris Rock is 60. Actor Essence Atkins is 53. Basketball Hall of Famer Steve Nash is 51. Actor Ashton Kutcher is 47. Actor Deborah Ann Woll is 40. NFL quarterback Matthew Stafford is 37. NHL forward Steven Stamkos is 35.