

Groton Daily Independent

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Saturday, Feb. 22

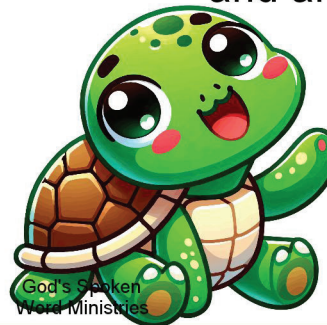
Boys Region Wrestling at Hamlin, 9:30 a.m.
Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m.
to 1 p.m., 209 N Main

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

Saturday Blessings

Happy Weekend

May the Lord's presence surround you with peace, His love fill your heart with joy, and His guidance lead you in every step. May you walk in His grace and rest in His unfailing promises. Blessings to you today, this weekend, and always!



Amen.

Sunday, Feb. 23

Groton Youth Wrestling Tournament
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, 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.

Germany's Snap Elections

Germans head to the polls tomorrow to vote in federal elections that will shape their country's new government and determine how Europe's largest economic power and most populous nation will be run over the next four years.

Issues concerning voters include immigration, climate policy, and economic stagnation. Current Chancellor Olaf Scholz of the center-left Social Democratic Party faces criticism for Germany's economic contraction over the past two years. Scholz's three-way coalition, which collapsed last year over differences in tax and debt policy, is in third place in the latest poll results.

The center-right Christian Democratic Union is leading in polls and proposes reducing regulations, cutting taxes, and scaling back climate targets to boost competitiveness. The nationalist-populist Alternative for Germany, which is polling second, opposes immigration, supports closer relations with Russia, and wants Germany to leave the European Union.

Judge vacates Eric Adams' corruption trial date, appoints counsel on next steps.

A New York judge Friday said he would not immediately dismiss charges against the Democratic New York City mayor and appointed an independent lawyer to present arguments against the Justice Department's dismissal request. The development comes a day after New York Gov. Kathy Hochul (D) said she would not remove Adams from office. See previous write-up on the corruption case [here](#).

Man accused of trying to kill author Salman Rushdie found guilty.

Hadi Matar was found guilty of second-degree attempted murder and assault for the 2022 knife attack on Rushdie during a speaking event in New York. The now 27-year-old New Jersey man stabbed Rushdie more than a dozen times, leaving him permanently blind in one eye. Matar faces up to 25 years in prison; sentencing is scheduled for April 23.

DOJ investigating UnitedHealth's Medicare billing practices.

UnitedHealth Group is America's largest healthcare conglomerate based on revenue, bringing in roughly \$400B last year. The civil fraud probe examines whether the group routinely made diagnoses that triggered extra payments for its Medicare Advantage plans. UnitedHealth's shares closed down 7% on the news Friday.

Energy drink Celsius shares rise nearly 30% on Alani Nu acquisition.

Celsius bought health and wellness drinks brand Alani Nutrition for roughly \$1.8B. The cash-and-stock transaction is expected to close in the second quarter of this year. It follows a string of similar deals in the beverage industry as functional drinks grow in popularity among young people; last year, Keurig Dr Pepper said it was buying a 60% stake in energy drink maker Ghost for \$990M.

New York Yankees ditch their ban on beards after 49 years.

The team officially reversed a longstanding facial hair policy, allowing players and staff to maintain "well-groomed beards" moving forward. The change marks a departure from a rule imposed in 1976 by then-Yankees owner George Steinbrenner, which previously prohibited all facial hair except mustaches to help players instill discipline.

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Soul singer-songwriter Jerry "Ice Man" Butler dies at age 85.

Butler died in his Chicago home after battling Parkinson's disease. He gained fame as the lead singer of R&B group The Impressions and later enjoyed a successful solo career with hits like "Only the Strong Survive" and "He Will Break Your Heart." Butler was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 1991 and also served as a Cook County commissioner in Illinois for over three decades.

Humankind(ness)

Today, we're sharing a story from reader Jennifer B. in Queens, New York.

"While out with my elderly father, he accidentally cut his finger on a sharp key ring that was attached to his walker. We were already en route to a bakery to have our usual hot chocolate and chai tea, and he was unfortunately bleeding all over everything that he came in touch with. So I got him situated in the bakery and went to Frank's Pharmacy that's located in Jackson Heights and was just a few stores down and was looking for a quick fix kit to clean up his hand."

"I happened to see a woman that worked there and asked her for a bandaid and explained what had happened with my dad and she left me and came back with a couple of bandaids, alcohol wipes, and numerous paper towels, and didn't want me to give her any money for all that she graciously supplied. I was so relieved and grateful to her for just being so kind and supplying me with just what I needed to help clean my dad's hands so we could continue to enjoy ourselves."

Groton Area Sweeps Britton-Hecla in Dominant Basketball Performance

BRITTON – The Groton Area Tigers had a night to remember on Friday, winning all five basketball games against Britton-Hecla in a commanding fashion. The varsity boys' and girls' teams both enforced the mercy rule, while the junior varsity and C teams added to an undefeated evening for Groton.

Boys Varsity: Groton Rolls Past Britton-Hecla 63-31

The Groton Area boys' varsity team wasted no time asserting dominance, scoring 13 straight points in the first quarter to take an early 23-12 lead. By halftime, they stretched their advantage to 35-19, and the gap widened to 54-27 by the third quarter. The 30-point mercy rule took effect with 6:23 remaining when Groton led 58-28, sealing the 63-31 victory.

Ryder Johnson led the Tigers with 20 points, followed by Keegan Tracy with 16 and Becker Bosma with 10. Groton shot efficiently, making 13 of 20 two-pointers (65%) and 12 of 24 three-pointers (50%), including an impressive 5-of-6 shooting from deep by Tracy. Johnson made four three-pointers while Bosma made two and Turner Thompson one. The Tigers also tallied 23 rebounds, led by Bosma with 8, and 19 assists, with Bosma again leading with 7.



Defensively, Groton forced 17 turnovers while matching that total themselves. Gage Sippel recorded 2

Gage Sippel goes for the dunk in the third quarter to give Groton Area a 39-21 lead. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

of the team's 3 blocked shots. Despite Britton-Hecla struggling to find offense, Daniel Person put up 24 of his team's 28 points.

With the win, Groton improved to 14-5 on the season and will face Aberdeen Christian next Friday at the Aberdeen Civic Center. Britton-Hecla fell to 9-10.

Girls Varsity: Groton Cruises to 61-21 Victory

The Groton girls' varsity team dominated from the start, building a 23-6 lead in the first quarter and heading into halftime up 41-16. By the third quarter, the mercy rule was triggered with 4:33 left as Groton extended its lead to



Kennedy Hansen eyes Britton-Hecla's Daynika Zuehlke before make her move. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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47-16 before closing out the game at 61-21.

A well-balanced offensive attack saw multiple players contribute, with Jerica Locke leading the way with 10 points. The Tigers were efficient inside, making 20 of 39 two-point attempts (51%), and hit 4 of 17 three-pointers (24%). Locke, Kennedy Hanson, Laila Roberts, and Taryn Traphagen each knocked down a three-pointer.

Groton controlled the glass with 24 rebounds, led by Roberts with 6, and tallied 24 steals, with Locke, Traphagen, and Roberts each grabbing 3. The Tigers also dished out 14 assists, with Locke and Roberts each recording 5.

Britton-Hecla struggled offensively, shooting just 30% (6-of-20) and was unable to keep up with Groton's fast pace. With the win, the Lady Tigers improved to 14-6 and will begin regional tournament play on Tuesday in Groton.

Junior Varsity and C Team Wins

The Groton boys' junior varsity squad handled Britton-Hecla 46-23. Ethan Kroll led Groton Area with 14 points, while Ethan Weber, Jayden Schwan, and Asher Johnson each chipped in 7, Logan Warrington had 6 and Anthony Tracy added 2 points. Mitchell Burger and Jace Rein each led Britton-Hecla with 8 points while Nathan Folkman had 4, Riley Hofland 2 and Lofton Heer 1.

In the boys' C game, Groton came out on top 43-20. Jace Johnson had a game-high 17 points, and Asher Johnson contributed 7, Anthony Tracy 6, Ryder Schelle 5, Ethan Kroll 4, Wesley Borg 2, Jordan Schwan 2. Jack Tevederl led Britton-Hecla with 10 points while Monte Hoops had 4, Jace Rein 3 and Dylan Redler 3.

On the girls' side, the junior varsity team cruised to a 51-16 win after a dominant second-half performance. Kella Tracy led the way with 13 points, followed by Chesney Weber with 12, McKenna Tietz 10, Ashlynn Warrington 5, Talli Wright 4, Tevan Hanson 3 and Mia Crank 2. Chellon Pruitt led the Braves with 7 points.



Laila Roberts has an outstanding night with seven points, six rebounds, five assists and three steals. She got the steal here and made her way to the basket for the layup. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

Looking Ahead

With both varsity teams entering the region tournament on a high note, Groton Area hopes to carry this momentum into postseason play. The boys will take on Aberdeen Christian next Friday, while the girls will begin their tournament run on Tuesday at home.

- Story compiled by ChatGPT

Girls Varsity Stats

Jerica Locke: 10 points, 3 rebounds, 5 assists, 2 steals, 1 foul.

Jaedyn Penning: 8 points, 1 steal, 1 foul.

Kennedy Hansen: 7 points, 1 rebound, 1 assist, 2 steals, 1 foul.

Brooklyn Hansen: 1 assist, 4 fouls.

Rylee Dunker: 6 points, 2 rebounds 2 steals 2 fouls.

Faith Traphagen: 2 points 4 rebounds 1 assist 3 steals, 1 foul.

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Laila Roberts: 7 points, 6 rebounds, 5 assists, 2 steals, 1 foul.

Taryn Traphagen: 8 points 3 rebounds, 3 steals, 1 foul.

Mia Crank: 2 points, 1 foul.

McKenna Tietz: 2 points, 1 rebound, 1 assist, 2 steals.

Chesney Weber: 7 points, 2 rebounds, 2 steals.

Kella Tracy: 2 steals.

Ashlynn Warrington: 1 rebound.

Sydney Locke: 2 points, 1 rebound, 1 steal.

2-Pointers: 20-39 51%, 3-Pointers: 4-17 24%, Free Throws: 9-16 56%, 24 rebounds, 10 turnovers, 14 assists, 24 steals, 13 foul.

Britton-Hecla: Heather Storbakken 10, Maddi Micko 4, RaeAnn Hagenson 3, Daynika Zuehlke 2, Chellon Pruitt 2. Field Goals: 6-20 30%, Free Throws: 6-16 38%, 15 fouls, 28 turnovers.

Boys Varsity Stats

Ryder Johnson: 20 points, 4 rebounds, 3 assists, 1 steal.

Keegen Tracy: 16 points, 2 rebounds, 3 assists, 1 steal, 2 fouls.

Gage Sippel: 4 points, 1 rebound, 2 steals, 1 foul, 2 blocks.

Becker Bosma: 10 points, 8 rebounds, 7 assists, 1 block.

Blake Pauli: 1 rebound, 1 foul.

Karson Zak: 4 points, 3 rebounds, 3 assists, 1 steal, 1 foul.

Easton Weber: 4 points.

Turner Thompson: 5 points, 3 rebounds, 1 assist, 2 fouls.

Jayden Schwan: 2 assists, 1 steal, 4 fouls.

Logan Warrington: 1 rebound.

2-Pointers: 13-20 65%, 3-Pointers: 12-24 50%, Free Throws: 1-4 25%, 23 rebounds, 17 turnovers, 19 assists, 6 steals, 9 fouls, 3 blocks.

Britton-Hecla: Daniel Person 24, Graham Fosness 2, Jordyn McGregor 2, Jaxon Zuehlke 2, Chaz Vietor 1. Field Goals: 10-24 29%, Free Throws: 10-12 83%, 7 fouls, 17 turnovers.

All five games were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM. The varsity games were 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 and The Meathouse in Andover. Jeslyn Kosel did the girls junior varsity game sponsored by Weber Landscaping. Paul Kosel did the boys junior varsity game sponsored by Hefty Seed. The C game was sponsored by Jeff and Lisa Howard.



Turner Thompson makes this three-pointer from the right side. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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It's been 30 years since the Hecla Rockets made it to the state tournament and this was Coach Terry Nelson's first year as coaching in Hecla. The team was recognized Friday night during the basketball game. Nelson is now the girls coach for the Britton-Hecla Braves. (Photo

by Paul Kosel)



The Rise of AI: How Artificial Intelligence is Reshaping Commerce, Religion, and Humanity

There are many areas of AI that will have permanent impacts on humanity and none of the elected leaders are not discussing the unintended consequences of AI at all.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming the world at an unprecedented pace, reshaping commerce, religion, and the very fabric of human society. The book *The Age of AI: And Our Human Future* by Henry Kissinger, Eric Schmidt, and Daniel Huttenlocher explores these developments, offering insights into how AI is altering governance, economics, ethics, and even spirituality.

This article examines AI's impact on commerce, religion, and humanity, exploring its potential consequences—including class division, mental apathy, and social unrest.

Overview of The Age of AI: And Our Human Future

The *Age of AI* provides a thorough analysis of AI's implications for human civilization. The authors discuss how AI differs from previous technological advancements by functioning autonomously, making decisions at speeds incomprehensible to humans, and reshaping power dynamics.

AI's ability to process vast amounts of data and learn from patterns allows it to optimize efficiency, but it also raises ethical concerns regarding control, security, and unintended consequences.

The book suggests that AI will become a force that influences global policies, human cognition, and existential philosophies.

AI's Role in Commerce

1. Automation and Workforce Displacement

AI-driven automation is revolutionizing industries by increasing efficiency and reducing costs. Manufacturing, logistics, and service industries are replacing human labor with AI-powered robots and algorithms. Companies such as Amazon and Tesla have adopted AI-driven robotics to streamline production and distribution, leading to significant job displacement.

The consequences of this shift include a widening gap between skilled and unskilled laborers. While AI creates high-paying jobs in programming, data science, and robotics, it also eliminates millions of blue-collar positions, exacerbating economic inequality. Governments must address these disparities through policies like universal basic income (UBI) or large-scale retraining programs.

2. AI in Financial Markets and Economic Power

AI is transforming financial markets by optimizing trading strategies, fraud detection, and customer service. High-frequency trading (HFT) algorithms make investment decisions within microseconds, outpacing human traders. AI-driven analytics predict economic trends and personalize financial services, increasing profitability for corporations but also concentrating economic power among those who control AI systems.

Additionally, AI enables the rise of digital currencies and decentralized finance (DeFi). Cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin use AI for predictive analytics and security protocols, challenging traditional banking systems. However, this AI-driven financialization may create monopolies, where a few tech giants wield disproportionate economic influence, potentially undermining democratic institutions.

AI and Religion

1. Digital Theologies and AI-Generated Spirituality

AI is influencing religious practices and theological discourse. AI-powered chatbots serve as virtual spiritual advisors, while machine learning algorithms analyze religious texts, uncovering historical interpretations previously unnoticed. Some religious organizations employ AI to enhance worship experiences, from predictive sermon topics to AI-assisted religious matchmaking.

One striking development is the emergence of AI-generated religious texts. In 2020, an AI trained on biblical scriptures generated new psalms and prayers, raising ethical concerns about authenticity and divine inspiration. AI's ability to generate religious doctrine challenges traditional religious authorities, leading to debates over its theological legitimacy.

2. AI as a Religious Entity

As AI continues to evolve, some theorists speculate about its potential to become a deity-like entity. Given AI's ability to process information beyond human comprehension, it may be perceived as an omniscient being, leading some individuals to form AI-centric religious movements. Tech leaders like Anthony Levandowski have already proposed AI-based faiths, such as the "Way of the Future," which views AI as a godlike force that should be worshipped and revered.

The philosophical implications of AI as a religious entity challenge traditional beliefs, raising questions about the nature of divinity, free will, and moral responsibility. If AI governs aspects of human life traditionally overseen by religion, spiritual hierarchies may erode, leading to ideological fragmentation.

AI's Impact on Humanity

1. Social Classes and Uprising

As AI drives wealth concentration and job displacement, new class divisions are emerging. A society dominated by AI creates three primary groups:

AI Elites: Tech executives, data scientists, and policymakers who control AI development.

AI Middle Class: Skilled workers adapting to AI-driven industries.

AI Underclass: Displaced workers struggling with economic instability.

Historical precedent suggests that technological revolutions often lead to social unrest. The Industrial Revolution sparked labor movements and violent protests. Similarly, an AI-driven economy could lead to mass uprisings, with displaced workers demanding systemic change. The rise of populist movements advocating for wealth redistribution, AI regulation, and anti-corporate policies is a likely outcome.

2. Mental Apathy and Cognitive Decline

AI's integration into daily life may contribute to cognitive decline. As AI handles decision-making, problem-solving, and creativity, human reliance on critical thinking diminishes. AI-driven recommendation algorithms dictate personal choices in media, politics, and lifestyle, fostering intellectual complacency.

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3. Ethical Dilemmas and Unintended Consequences

The widespread adoption of AI presents numerous ethical dilemmas:

Bias and Discrimination: AI algorithms often reflect human biases, leading to discriminatory outcomes in hiring, policing, and lending.

Surveillance and Privacy: AI-powered surveillance systems, such as China's social credit system, monitor and control citizens' behavior, raising concerns about authoritarian governance.

Existential Risks: Some AI researchers, including Elon Musk and Nick Bostrom, warn about the potential for superintelligent AI to surpass human control, posing an existential threat.

Conclusion: The Future of an AI-Driven Society

AI is reshaping commerce, religion, and human society in profound ways. While it offers unparalleled efficiency, innovation, and problem-solving capabilities, it also presents significant challenges—economic

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disparity, ethical dilemmas, and cognitive decline.

If left unchecked, AI could lead to a dystopian society where wealth and power are concentrated among AI elites, fostering social unrest and ideological fragmentation.








Governments, businesses, and individuals must navigate these changes carefully, ensuring that AI serves humanity rather than dominates it. Policy frameworks that promote transparency, ethical AI development, and equitable economic structures will be essential in shaping a future where AI enhances rather than undermines human progress.

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Groton Area falls to number two in the region

Clark/Willow defeated Great Plains Lutheran. The GPL loss was enough to drop the Tigers into the number two spot. That means on Tuesday, Groton Area will host the first round games with Groton Area taking on Redfield in the first game followed by Sisseton taking on Britton-Hecla. The other game (not sure of site) will have Milbank taking on Webster Area. Of course, keep in mind, these are not official and anything can change. Hopefully by tomorrow we can have the official brackets from the SDHSAA.

#	Name	Season			Seed Pts
		W	L	PCT	PTS
1	 Aberdeen Roncalli	15	5	.750	43.650
2	 Groton Area	14	6	.700	43.550
3	 Sisseton	13	7	.650	42.400
4	 Milbank	12	8	.600	41.250
5	 Webster Area	10	10	.500	40.450
6	 Britton-Hecla	5	15	.250	37.700
7	 Redfield	3	17	.150	36.900

Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling League Week #14 Results

Team Standings: Chipmunks 20, Shihtzus 16, Cheetahs 16, Jackelopes 15, Coyotes 11, Foxes 6

Men's High Games: Lance Frohling 208, Brad Waage 196, Austin Schuelke 185

Women's High Games: Darci Spanier 176, Vicki Walter 167, Michelle Johnson 161

Men's High Series: Lance Frohling 547, Brad 509, Brad Waage 484

Women's High Series: Darci Spanier 454, Michelle Johnson 441, Vicki Walter 426

Week 14 Fun Game: Most Fills - Jackelopes with 70!

Chipmunks won the 2nd third!

Jackelopes won the 1st third!

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NSU Women's Basketball

Wolves Power Past Cougars in Friday Night Action

Aberdeen, S.D. – A strong team effort propelled the Northern State University women's basketball team to a 75-72 victory over Sioux Falls to kick off the weekend. The game featured 12 lead changes, with the Wolves securing the win in the final minutes. Rianna Fillipi and Madelyn Bragg each scored over 20 points, with Fillipi setting a new career-high and breaking the school record for steals.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 75, UMD 72

Records: NSU 17-10 (NSIC 14-7), USF 14-7 (NSIC 12-9)

Attendance: 1697

HOW IT HAPPENED

Northern State scored 20 points in the first quarter, 19 in the second, 16 in the third, and 20 in the fourth

The Wolves registered 36 points in the paint, 18 points from free throws, 13 points off turnovers, and 9 points from the bench

NSU shot 50.0% from the field and 66.7% from the free-throw line

Rianna Fillipi led the team with a career-high 27 points and recorded her first double-double of the season with 10 rebounds

Madelyn Bragg followed with 25 points, 4 assists, and 3 blocks, shooting 63.1% from the floor

Michaela Jewett contributed 7 points, 10 rebounds, and connected on 3-of-6 shots from the field.

NORTHERN STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Rianna Fillipi: 27 points (career-high), 10 rebounds, 5 assists, 3 steals, 63.1% FG

Madelyn Bragg: 25 points, 4 assists, 3 blocks

Izzy Moore: 9 points, 5 rebounds, 50.0% F

Michaela Jewett: 7 points, 10 rebounds, 2 assists, 1 steal, 50.0% FG

BEYOND THE BOX

Rianna Fillipi set a new school record for career steals with 263, surpassing the previous record of 261 set by Jammie Coyle (1996-2000).

The Wolves secured the fourth seed in the NSIC and will play on Sunday, March 2, against the winner of the 5-seed vs. 12-seed matchup on February 26.

UP NEXT

Northern State wraps up the regular season tomorrow, Saturday, February 22, at 6:00 p.m., facing #17 Southwest Minnesota State at Wachs Arena.

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NSU Men's Basketball

Sioux Falls Pulls Away from Northern State in Friday NSIC Contest

Aberdeen, S.D. – The Northern State University men's basketball team led at the half against Sioux Falls on Friday, however fell to the Cougars who rallied back in the second.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 66, USF 77

Records: NSU 2-25 (1-20 NSIC), USF 15-12 (11-10 NSIC)

Attendance: 1137

HOW IT HAPPENED

The Wolves scored 44 points in the first and 22 in the second, shooting 44.6% from the floor, 31.6% from the 3-point line, and 55.6% from the foul line

They tallied 34 rebounds, ten assists, six made 3-pointers, six steals, and two blocks

Northern scored 30 points in the paint and 21 points off the bench, adding nine points off turnovers

James Glenn led three in double figures with 17 points, followed by Kaleb Mitchell with 15 off the bench and Devon Brooke with ten

Marcus Burks pulled down a new career high 11 rebounds, leading the team and dished out a team best five assists

Tobi Obiora added a team leading three steals and two blocks alongside eight points and four rebounds

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

James Glenn: 17 points, 5 rebounds, 2 steals

Kaleb Mitchell: 15 points, 53.8 field goal%, 2 rebounds

Devon Brooke: 10 points, 50.0 field goal%, 3 rebounds, 1 steal

UP NEXT

Northern concludes the 2024-25 season today hosting Southwest Minnesota State. Tip-off time is set for 4 p.m. against the Mustangs.

Rounds Leads Legislation to Protect Rural Postal Processing Facilities

WASHINGTON – U.S. Senators Mike Rounds (R-S.D.) and Richard Durbin (D-Ill.) today reintroduced the Postal Processing Protection Act, legislation that would require the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) to consider consequences for rural areas during its closure or downsizing review process in order to protect rural mail processing facilities. Rounds and Durbin first introduced this legislation in the 118th Congress in June 2024.

USPS's reviews of processing facilities closures does not require them to consider the impact on rural areas or highly rural areas as long as the closure gains efficiencies. However, USPS's reviews of post office retail locations does require them to answer whether closing the location is consistent with their obligation to provide effective and regular postal services to rural areas. This legislation would require USPS to consider the impact to rural areas when closing or downsizing processing centers, just as they do with closing post office retail locations.

"Rural mail services are a lifeline for South Dakotans," said Rounds. "We must make certain that residents across our entire state are able to receive letters and packages in a timely manner. USPS is required to review impact to rural residents when closing a retail location, so it's only right that they consider the impact for processing facilities as well."

"If I drop a piece of mail off in Springfield to go across town, why should it have to go all the way to St. Louis and back? Postmaster General DeJoy's 'Delivering for America' plan, which included downsizing four mail processing centers in our state, is decimating a service that Illinoisans rely on," said Durbin. "I'm joining Senator Rounds to reintroduce the Postal Processing Protection Act to ensure that USPS leadership does its due diligence in studying the impact of consolidating or altering mail processing and shipping facilities before crippling critical USPS locations."

Rounds has been a leader on protecting rural USPS services. In April 2024, Rounds sent a letter to USPS Postmaster General Louis DeJoy urging USPS to avoid downsizing or significantly reorganizing mail processing operations in South Dakota. As a result, USPS paused the downsizing of mail processing facilities in Huron and Sioux Falls.

The Life of Dennis K. Larson



Services for Dennis K. Larson, 84, of Groton will be 10:30 a.m., Saturday, March 1st at Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Groton. Nicole Phillips, SAM will officiate. Burial will follow in Union Cemetery under the direction of Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton.

Visitation will be held at the church on Feb. 28th from 5-7 p.m. with a prayer service at 7:00 p.m.

Dennis passed away February 18, 2025, at his home.

Dennis K. Larson was born December 3, 1940, in Britton, South Dakota to Clifford M. and Alice Mabel (Johnson) Larson.

Dennis was raised on a farm east of Langford, South Dakota. He attended the Hoinés Country School #203 until 8th grade. He graduated from Langford High School in 1958. He continued his education at Northern State Teachers College in Aberdeen, South Dakota and graduated with a degree in Business Administration and Economics in 1962. While attending Northern he played football, forging many strong friendships that endure to this day. On August 19, 1961, he married his high school sweetheart, Shirley Jones. They shared 63 wonderful years together; 70 years if you count their dating years! They were blessed with two children, Eric and LaRae.

His first job out of college was with First National Corporation, now Wells Fargo. He was transferred to First National Bank in Groton on October 1, 1965, as the assistant manager. Dennis rented a farm outside of Groton in 1970, which is their current home. He farmed full time until 1981. In 1986 he created L & S Agency Incorporated until his retirement on January 1, 2014. He and Shirley enjoyed 22 years of wintering in Mesa, Arizona. He cherished his many friendships through numerous groups. His favorite trips were made more memorable because he experienced them with his family.

Dennis grew up working on the family farm. From a young age he was instilled with the value of hard work and caring for others. Life was not easy, but through it all there were many blessings, much happiness, and forever relationships. His strong faith was always his center, his true north. When things got tough, he always looked to the Lord for guidance and knew He would provide. His faith never wavered but continued to grow in all of his years. He was an active member of Emmanuel Lutheran Church holding many positions in service of the church.

His love and commitment to his family was incredible. He loved unconditionally. He taught his children and grandchildren to be generous and compassionate with all people you encounter. Dennis was always present, whether it was an athletic/school event, which meant driving late into the night, or a scheduled phone call on a Sunday evening. When he committed to something, he followed through to the best of his ability. All people in Dennis' life were considered family. He was the type of person that you could simply just sit and visit with, forever marked by his special touch. You see, relationships mattered to Dennis. People were important to Dennis, and he showed that time and time again. He served on multiple boards and committees all throughout his life, starting with the Aberdeen Jaycees and ending with Lutheran Outdoors, with many in between. He continued to serve others in all that he did. He made a difference far and wide in our community and many communities in the surrounding area. He was always looking for a way to give back. His guiding Bible verse was Luke 12:48 "To whom much is given, much is expected." His advice to all is to, "Stay close to your faith, your family, and just have a happy life."

Dennis is survived by his wife, Shirley, son Eric (Becky) Larson Mitchell, SD, daughter LaRae (Steve) Blote, Rapid City; grandchildren, the joy of his life, Connor and Lauren Larson, (fiancé Matthew Billion), Emily and Grace Blote, twin brother Dale Larson, brother Roger (Diane) Larson, sister Joyce Skovran, brother-in-law Kenny (Sherry) Jones, sister-in-law Penny (Bill) Stolle, Darla Larson, and many nieces and nephews.

He was preceded in death by his parents Clifford and Alice Larson, in-laws Kenneth and Rose Jones, brother Clark Larson, brothers-in-law James L. Jones, Brian Jones, and Andy Skovran, and sisters-in-law Bonnie Larson and Marlene Jones.

In lieu of flowers Dennis requested any memorial contributions be directed to the following: Palliative Care/Hospice Care at Avera St. Luke's Hospital, Lutheran Outdoors, Lutheran Social Services, Groton Baseball Association, or the Northern State University Foundation.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

House shoots down prison money, but new vote looms

If vote totals hold, lawmakers could redirect millions in revenue

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 21, 2025 7:41 PM

PIERRE — A legislative maneuver meant to secure funding and continue discussion on an \$825 million men's prison failed by two votes Friday in the South Dakota House of Representatives.

The vote on House Bill 1025 was 34-35, with one member absent and a majority of 36 votes required for passage. The House could vote on whether to reopen debate when lawmakers return to Pierre next week.

The vote throws the future of the massive prison project into question, and could chart a path to easing some of the state's financial strain in a year where lawmakers are pondering cuts and swatting back funding requests.

House Speaker Pro Tempore Karla Lems, R-Canton, said after the vote that some of the money could go to a trust fund lawmakers want to establish for revenue from unclaimed property. That money comes from abandoned assets that revert to the state.

"We don't want to just blow that money," Lems said. "We'd like to see it possibly go into an unclaimed property trust fund, or at least part of it. Maybe there would still be some dollars this year to do some other things."

Lems voted against HB 1025 on Friday.

In its original form, the bill would've sent \$182 million toward the proposed 1,500-bed prison in Lincoln County. It also would have cleared the Department of Corrections to tap into a prison fund worth more than \$600 million, set aside by legislators in prior years, to begin building it.

To build the prison that's been designed, mapped out and bid for, its funding package would need support from two-thirds of lawmakers in both the House and Senate, a chamber where it has yet to appear.

Debate fails to sway critics

On Friday in the House, Sioux Falls Republican Rep. Jack Kolbeck moved an amendment designed to keep the bill alive with a simple majority. It stripped the bill of everything but a provision moving \$148.1 million into the prison construction fund. The original proposal also sought to spend \$33.9 million from the state's budget reserves.

Since the amendment bill would've moved money, rather than spend it, it could've side-stepped the state's constitutional requirement that spending bills need two-thirds support.

"I've heard a lot of people say we need to build a new prison," Kolbeck said. "This amendment allows that discussion to continue."

The amendment passed 37-32.

Lems was the first to speak against the amended version of the bill. She rattled off questions about the prison's rural location and a pending lawsuit over that location, unknown costs for roads and ongoing operations, and on a price tag she sees as too high.

She called the prison "Plan A" for dealing with overcrowded conditions in the state's correctional system. There could be other, cheaper options or alternative locations, Lems said, and there's a bill circulating that would force correctional officials to consider them.

"Before I vote to put any more money into a savings account, I want to know what the plan is," Lems said.

Rep. Taylor Rehfeldt, R-Sioux Falls, supports the prison project as envisioned by the state's executive branch. She pointed out that the Legislature balked at a \$38 million funding bill for a women's prison in

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2022. The following year, it passed a bill to spend \$60 million on the same project. Now under construction, the maximum price for that Rapid City facility came in at \$87 million.

With a guaranteed maximum price for the men's prison set to expire if work doesn't commence by March 31, Rehfeldt questioned what could happen to the price tag after that.

"What will that be in the future? Probably more. Almost certainly more," Rehfeldt said.

Rep. Will Mortenson, R-Fort Pierre, said even if the unanswered questions lead the state down a path toward a different kind of prison, that shouldn't prevent the state from adding money to the construction fund in preparation. Paying cash instead of interest – this year or in the future – will save hundreds of millions of dollars.

The state needs space, Mortenson said, and "it is fiscally conservative to set it aside in a fund."

He also said most of the objections relate to location, but those objections are likely to dog the project wherever it lands.

"I'd love to build the prison in Montana or Mars or somewhere else," Mortenson said. "Unfortunately, that's not how these things work."

But Rep. Logan Manhart, R-Aberdeen, said it's not about location. It's about size and design, which he said is more than the state needs.

"When we're going to spend this kind of money on a Ritz-Carlton prison, I have some questions," Manhart said.

Rapid City Democratic Rep. Peri Pourier pleaded with her fellow lawmakers to think about the root causes of crime, like poverty, drug abuse, family violence and a lack of state-supported services to address them.

"Yes, we need a new prison, but do we need that big of a prison? And if we do, we need to ask ourselves why we need that big of a prison," Pourier said.

She nearly wept as she recounted her recent struggle to gain traction for state dollars to support Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) in Rapid City. Children involved in abuse and neglect proceedings can be assigned CASA representatives to look out for their interests in court.

"West River has the highest child abuse and neglect rates in the state, and these kids are going to court with no one looking out for them," Pourier said. "Do you know how hard it was to fight for a minuscule \$5 million to help them?"

Pourier challenged representatives to imagine what their grandchildren would think years from now about their investment in such a large prison.

"This is what we're going to bet on. We're going to bet that they're going to get locked up," Pourier said.

Failed vote not end of discussion

Rehfeldt moved immediately following the vote to reconsider the bill. The House will decide next week whether to take up the bill a second time.

Howard Republican Rep. Tim Reisch, a former Department of Corrections secretary, was absent for Friday's vote. Reisch has voted for prison funding each time it's come up during his tenure in Pierre.

It will take some work to find support and flip votes, Mortenson said, but flipping votes "is what we do around here."

"I think a lot of people came here ginned up to vote no on building the prison in Lincoln County in that spot," Mortenson said. "I don't think it really sank in to most of the members that that isn't what this does. This just sets aside money for 'a' prison. It doesn't have to be 'the' prison."

Republican Gov. Larry Rhoden has called the new prison – in the Lincoln County location – his top priority. The prison would largely replace the Sioux Falls penitentiary.

After Friday's vote, a spokeswoman for Rhoden told South Dakota Searchlight that "we look forward to continuing the conversation."

Prison money could be reinvested

If House Bill 1025 ultimately fails, lawmakers would have \$182 million more to work with in a tight budget

year. If it passes in its amended form and moves \$148.1 million into the prison fund, they'd have \$33.9 million.

Lems was one of several lawmakers to suggest that some of the money could go into an unclaimed property trust fund. A proposal to set up such a fund, meant to earn interest on unclaimed money handed over to the state after three years of dormancy, is moving through the Legislature this session. A sister proposal aims to ask voters in 2026 to let the South Dakota Investment Council manage the fund.

House Speaker Jon Hansen, R-Dell Rapids, said some of the unspent prison money could ultimately be placed into the prison fund, where it earns interest. If voters let the investment council manage an unclaimed property fund, though, starting that off with a chunk of the \$182 million earmarked for the Lincoln County site would mean bigger returns in the long run.

The interest from the unclaimed property trust fund could, at some point, be used to offset high property taxes, Hansen said.

"I've always been open to that idea," he said.

House Assistant Majority Leader Marty Overweg, R-New Holland, also mentioned a trust fund, but said nothing is final with the prison funding proposal. As a Republican caucus, he said, "we've had discussions on what we'll do if it gets killed, not where it goes."

"It's pretty hard to do much with one-time money, except put it into a savings account," Overweg said.

Senate Pro Tempore Chris Karr, R-Sioux Falls, also trumpeted talks of an unclaimed property fund.

The budget reserve funds could wind up funding immediate needs if they aren't used for prison funding.

"The budget reserve typically just gets used for one-time dollars," Karr said. "So those would be open to go to some of the other projects that are in the one-time bills out there."

Pourier saw other avenues worth exploring with the extra dollars, either immediately or paid for with interest: mental health services and substance abuse services and aftercare programming, particularly in rural areas, and expanding access to trauma-informed care.

She pointed to testimony from Corrections Secretary Kellie Wasko, who's repeatedly said that the majority of offenders struggle with mental health and substance abuse, and to Attorney General Marty Jackley, who's spent years talking about how drug abuse can become the fuel for violent crime.

"These guys, girls, everybody, the people who struggle with substance abuse disorders, they have a chemical imbalance in their brain and they're self-medicating," Pourier said.

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.

'Cruelty was the point': SD federal workers, programs feel the pain of Trump firings and freezes

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 21, 2025 6:11 PM

Darwin Hertzell reported to his job with the Natural Resources Conservation Service on Feb. 14 and opened an email.

"Some very generic, no-name email. It was a template," he said. "It said you're a probationary employee, pack up your stuff and leave."

The service is part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Hertzell, who worked in Rapid City, conducted cultural resource reviews to ensure the service's projects disturbed nothing of historic or cultural significance in the nine counties he oversaw.

He said neither his boss nor his boss' boss knew the firing was coming.

Hertzell was one of thousands of federal employees nationwide who were fired recently as part of federal workforce reductions carried out by President Donald Trump and his so-called Department of Government Efficiency, run by billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk.

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The action has reportedly resulted in nearly 10,000 firings nationally and 75,000 voluntary buyouts across federal agencies including the Department of Education, General Services Administration, Office of Personnel Management, the Small Business Administration, the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service, Veterans Affairs, National Nuclear Security Administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and others.

Mass firings mostly targeted probationary employees, who comprise roughly 220,000 of the 2.4 million-person federal workforce. Probationary workers are either newly hired, or have worked in the federal government for decades and started a new role that subjects them to a probationary status of one to two years.

The extent of the firings in South Dakota, as well as the South Dakota impact of federal funding freezes ordered by Trump, is difficult to ascertain. The White House did not respond to a request from South Dakota Searchlight's parent organization, States Newsroom, for comment about exactly how many federal workers were fired or where they were located.

'Cruelty was the point'

Liz Renner, who was a fish biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is another fired federal worker in South Dakota. When she was fired on the morning of Feb. 14, she was given until 3 p.m. to turn in her laptop, ID and office keys. She raced to send final messages and download paperwork before she was locked out of her email.

Renner said she was the only person fired from her office in Yankton, but she heard that 45 Fish and Wildlife Service employees were fired from the regional office that includes South Dakota.

"It really does feel like the cruelty was the point with some of these layoffs," Renner said. "Many of us that were laid off received glowing performance reviews. So this narrative and some of these condescending emails coming out that are claiming that we didn't meet performance expectations is patently false."

Nikki Gronli, formerly the South Dakota state director of USDA Rural Development under the Biden administration, said she knows of 65 USDA layoffs in South Dakota, mostly employees who have been working less than a year. She said the firings are shortsighted, and she warned of the long-term consequences.

"A third of USDA employees nationwide are about to retire in the next three years," she said. "These new hires were brought in to learn, to keep the department running in the future."

Funding freeze impact

Trump has also issued orders freezing grants and loans, halting foreign aid, and ending diversity and inclusion programs and environmental initiatives since he took office last month. Many of the actions are being resisted in court; meanwhile, the effects are being felt across the country.

Doug Sombke is president of the South Dakota Farmers Union. He said the firings and funding freezes are disrupting some conservation and rural development efforts.

"These layoffs hit people who help farmers secure loans, grants and conservation funding," Sombke said. "These programs were already understaffed."

Sombke said delays are occurring in a rural energy efficiency initiative called the Rural Energy for America Program. It helps farmers upgrade to equipment with better energy efficiency.

"We already had farmers waiting months to get their grant money," he said. "Now some of them are being told they might never get it."

Taneeza Islam is the CEO of South Dakota Voices for Peace, a nonprofit funded in part with dollars that the nonprofit Acacia Center for Justice receives from the federal government to support immigrants and refugees. She said the federal government cut off the organization's funding this week, only to restore it later in the week.

The funding helps the organizations provide legal services to unaccompanied minors who have crossed the border seeking asylum.

"This has been such an emotional roller coaster," Islam said.

Congressional delegation unresponsive

South Dakota's two U.S. senators and one U.S. representative have not responded to South Dakota Searchlight's requests for interviews about the freezes and firings.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-South Dakota, and several other members of Congress recently sent a letter to new U.S. Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins requesting quick action to increase logging in the Black Hills National Forest, in support of timber companies who say they're in danger of closing.

The letter did not acknowledge the 3,400 Forest Service employees who were reportedly fired nationwide in the Trump-Musk purge, or address how that would impact the service's ability to carry out timber sales.

The Black Hills National Forest did not respond with answers to South Dakota Searchlight questions about the number of its employees fired.

The fallout from the firings and funding freezes has included a public outcry, such as a Wednesday protest in South Dakota. Over 50 residents gathered outside the Sioux Falls office of U.S. Rep. Dusty Johnson, R-South Dakota, holding signs and chanting.

"This is a constitutional crisis!" one protester shouted, referencing the conflict between Congress' power over the purse and Trump's assertion of power over federal funding.

Among the protesters was retiree Joan McMillan. She said her daughter worked for Veterans Affairs and took a buyout to avoid a firing.

"They are taking a sledgehammer to everything," McMillan said.

The outcry has reached some state lawmakers. During a press conference Thursday, state Sen. Liz Larson, D-Sioux Falls, said she is getting calls from concerned constituents.

"We've also heard that there are gag orders on certain employees to talk about this issue," she said.

Republican Gov. Larry Rhoden was asked about the cuts during his Wednesday press conference. He said the state does not know how many federal employees were fired in South Dakota, but he said there are many employers in the state who need workers.

"There are a lot of opportunities in South Dakota for these federal employees that are laid off," Rhoden said.

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.

Republican state AGs seek to clarify stance on disability law

SD's Marty Jackley issues multiple public statements

BY: ANNA CLAIRE VOLLERS, STATELINE - FEBRUARY 21, 2025 5:33 PM

Amid a public backlash over the potential loss of disability protections, 17 Republican state attorneys general — including South Dakota's — submitted a new court filing Thursday to clarify their position in a lawsuit that seeks to strike down part of a federal law that safeguards disabled people from discrimination.

The lawsuit, filed in September, targets the Biden administration's addition of a gender identity-related disorder to the disabilities protected under a portion of federal law known as Section 504.

The AGs, in a joint status report filed with a U.S. District Court in Texas, clarified that they don't want the lawsuit to take away Section 504 accommodations for people with disabilities.

"We've been saying all along that there was never any intention to take away 504 accommodations, and this court filing confirms that," South Carolina Republican Attorney General Alan Wilson said in a statement Thursday.

South Dakota Attorney General Marty Jackley has issued three news releases since Feb. 14 stressing that same point.

"Despite the considerable misinformation about this lawsuit, the intent of this lawsuit was never to ask

the court to declare all of Section 504 unconstitutional or to any way reduce funding for disabled children and their families," Jackley said in the latest release.

In recent weeks, the AGs have faced a growing public outcry stemming from conflicting messages about what the lawsuit would do.

National disability rights groups, advocates and experts have pointed to parts of the lawsuit in which the AGs ask the court to find the entirety of Section 504 unconstitutional. They fear that if the court agrees, the law's discrimination protections for all people with disabilities could vanish.

Arkansas Republican Attorney General Tim Griffin, Georgia Republican Attorney General Chris Carr and others issued public statements in recent weeks adamantly denying that interpretation. Griffin has said that if the states win the lawsuit, "regulations would go back to what they were" before the gender identity-related disorder was added.

"Plaintiffs clarify that they have never moved — and do not plan to move — to declare or enjoin Section 504 ... as unconstitutional on its face," the new joint status report reads.

The lawsuit is currently on hold. The parties in the case agreed to pause litigation shortly after President Donald Trump took office, while his administration reevaluates the federal government's position. A spokesperson for Carr told Stateline in an email that they expect the Trump administration to reverse the Biden rule, which could cause the lawsuit to be dropped.

South Dakota Searchlight contributed to this report.

Anna Claire Vollers covers health care for Stateline. She is based in Huntsville, Alabama.

Budget committee rejects Noem's \$10 million school safety plan

Other spending bills, including Richmond Dam replacement, live to see another day

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 21, 2025 4:17 PM

Lawmakers on the South Dakota Legislature's main budget committee rejected a bill Friday at the Capitol in Pierre that would have directed \$10 million toward school safety grants.

Former Gov. Kristi Noem proposed the grants before she departed recently to become secretary of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. She aimed to fund surveillance cameras, panic buttons, doors, locks, fencing, gates, barriers and other security measures.

The state Department of Public Safety, Department of Education and the South Dakota Police Chiefs' Association all backed the bill.

Dianna Miller, a lobbyist for the Large School Group, opposed the bill for budgetary reasons. Lawmakers are considering numerous cuts to balance the budget, and the governor's proposed budget includes only a 1.25% increase in state funding for public schools.

"I hope, I pray our budget and sales tax will increase and we do the things necessary to get through this year, and then maybe the program would be ripe for it," Miller said. "But the fact of the matter is that right now is not the time."

Lawmakers on the budget committee endorsed funding for several other projects and proposals Friday, including another bill Noem backed. It would allocate \$13 million for the replacement of the Richmond Lake dam near Aberdeen.

The dam, built in the 1930s, is classified as high-risk.

"This really is an emergency," said Rep. Scott Moore, R-Ipswich.

The project is expected to cost over \$20 million. Lawmakers have already allocated about \$10 million toward repairing the state-owned dam.

The committee also advanced a bill providing a one-time, \$500,000 appropriation for a student-teacher stipend grant program. The funding will support \$5,000 grants to help school districts offer stipends to student teachers, addressing teacher shortages.

A bill that originally proposed \$5 million for state Capitol restoration work was reduced to \$100 and sent to the House floor after some lawmakers raised concerns. The move allows lawmakers to keep the bill

alive while considering an appropriate amount.

The committee advanced a bill allocating \$180,000 for sexual assault exam supply kits, which include things like swabs and evidence bags. The funding will go toward purchasing, storing and distributing the kits to health care facilities.

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.

Property tax tinkering continues as SD lawmakers advance ideas to rival, complement governor's plan

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 21, 2025 3:56 PM

South Dakota lawmakers whittled down options for property tax relief legislation Friday at the Capitol in Pierre by moving two more solutions forward and rejecting others.

One of the endorsed bills would lower a cap on local governments' annual increases in property tax collections. The other would roll back assessments on owner-occupied homes and commercial properties and cap their increases.

House leadership endorses HB 1235 because 'it hurts everybody a little bit'

Of five tax bills up for consideration Friday in the House State Affairs Committee, Sioux Falls Republican Greg Jamison's House Bill 1235 was the only one to make it through to the House.

The bill would lower limits on local governments' annual increases in property tax collections — for schools, counties, cities and others — from 3% to 2.5%, which could force local governments to make cuts and lower property tax burdens for all types of properties, Jamison said. If the local government decides the funding isn't enough, its citizens could vote for an opt out to raise taxes beyond the growth limit, he added.

"The intent of this bill is to send a message to those taxing districts that we've had enough," Jamison said. "We need to change. We need something different."

Wendy Semmler, property tax director for the state Department of Revenue, said that if Jamison's bill and Gov. Larry Rhoden's proposed property tax legislation both pass the Legislature and are signed into law, local government budgets would "be hit with a double whammy." Rhoden's bill includes provisions to cap the growth in countywide home values for five years, trim the amount of revenue counties and schools could collect based on new construction, and expand eligibility for a property tax freeze program benefiting elderly and disabled people.

Semmler also had concerns that the Jamison bill's inclusion of school districts would circumvent the state aid education funding formula. Jamison told lawmakers he'd be willing to talk with the Governor's Office to find a solution.

Semmler urged lawmakers to support the governor's "comprehensive" plan instead of "piecemeal" legislation.

Dan Klimisch, president of the South Dakota Association of County Commissioners and a Yankton County commissioner, told lawmakers the legislation would lead to cuts in services that aren't required by the state.

"What is going to happen is we're just going to end up cutting roads, bridges and infrastructure," Klimisch said. "That's our biggest funding part: our highway department."

Lawmakers on the committee endorsed the bill with a 9-3 vote. Assistant House Majority Leader Marty Overweg, R-New Holland, said the legislation was the first property tax bill "that makes total sense" to him.

"It taxes everybody. It hurts everybody a little bit. But it also helps everybody a little bit," Overweg said. "There's no carve-out for anybody. Straight across-the-board cuts, straight across-the-board hurts."

The legislation will head to the House next.

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Bills defeated in the House State Affairs Committee would have created new taxes on advertising in the state, taxed pharmaceutical advertisements, limited annual valuation increases on some properties, and limited property tax increases on owner-occupied properties.

Senate panel passes rollback property tax bill with expectations to amend

In the Senate Taxation Committee on Friday, two bills introduced by Sen. Amber Hulse, R-Hot Springs, passed out of committee.

Senate Bill 169 would require local governments to put an extra notice in a newspaper or on their website if they plan to consider an opt out to raise property taxes beyond limits in state law. It passed the committee unanimously.

Senate Bill 191 would roll back owner-occupied residential and commercial property valuations to 2020 assessments for those who bought a property prior to November of that year. For those who bought a property after that, the valuation would roll back to the fair market value at the time of the purchase. In both cases, future annual valuation increases would be capped at 3% until the property is sold, transferred or significantly renovated.

It would allow homeowners to renovate or improve their home without triggering an assessment increase, as long as the improvements are less than 40% of the home's current value — similar to a provision in Rhoden's bill.

Hulse and other proponents said the legislation would protect homeowners from unexpected property tax hikes, allow them to budget better, and stay longer in their homes.

Clark Verhulst, a Spearfish resident, told lawmakers he prefers Hulse's bill over the governor's because his home's current property tax bill is \$9,100, which isn't sustainable for him. Prior to 2020, he was able to afford to live in his home.

"It's totally out of whack the way it is right now," Verhulst said.

A similar bill was introduced last year but was rejected because of constitutionality concerns surrounding uniformity within property tax classes. If the legislation passes, South Dakota courts will "scrutinize" whether it treats similar properties within the same class differently, said South Dakota Department of Revenue Secretary Michael Houdyshell.

"My comment last year was based on the fact that that proposal, which is similar to this one, creates non-uniformity of taxation within the same class of property which is owner-occupied," Houdyshell said. "Now we're adding non-agricultural property to the mix as well based on a point in time when the property is purchased."

Semmler, of the Department of Revenue, said the bill would result in \$31 billion of taxable value being "wiped off the books." That would impact local government funding and \$114 million in "local effort" education funding.

The state would have to make up that \$114 million to fund public schools, Semmler said, or increase maximum levies, which would impact agricultural properties.

Representatives of the South Dakota Farm Bureau, South Dakota Retailers Association and the South Dakota Association of Assessing Officers also opposed the bill.

"We don't see the solution to property tax relief as an assessment cap," said Cori Kaufmann, with the assessor's association.

SB 191 passed unanimously out of the Senate Taxation Committee, with an expectation that Hulse would work with opponents to address some of their concerns.

Two bills that failed in the committee would lower property taxes while increasing sales taxes and freeze property tax revenues and assessments for two years.

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 adopts a 'Plan B' budget as GOP seeks billions for border security

South Dakota's Thune and Rounds vote yes

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - FEBRUARY 21, 2025 2:00 PM

WASHINGTON — U.S. senators voted early Friday to approve a budget resolution that Republicans hoped would get them one step closer to passing core elements of their agenda, including boosted immigration enforcement.

But the resolution may serve as more of a back-up plan due to an ongoing dispute between the House and Senate.

The 52-48 vote came after senators debated dozens of amendments as part of the vote-a-rama process that began Thursday evening and continued overnight. Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul was the sole Republican to vote against approving the budget resolution, along with all Democrats and independents.

Senate Budget Chairman Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said during debate that he wished House GOP leaders the best of luck passing their own budget resolution, but didn't provide details about how the two chambers might work out an eventual agreement.

The House is expected to vote on its budget resolution next week after the chamber returns from its one-week recess on Monday.

"To my House colleagues, I prefer one big, beautiful bill that makes the tax cuts permanent, that does the things we need to do on the border and with our military and cuts spending. I wish you all the best. I prefer what you're doing to what we're doing," Graham said. "But we've got to have a Plan B if you can't get it done soon."

Budget process underway

Both chambers of Congress must vote to adopt the same budget resolution in order to unlock the complicated budget reconciliation process the GOP plans to use to pass legislation increasing defense and border security funding by hundreds of billions of dollars, overhauling energy policy and extending the 2017 GOP tax law.

The Senate's budget resolution proposes that lawmakers pass legislation addressing the first three issues before moving a separate bill later this year addressing tax law. Congress would need to adopt a second budget resolution with reconciliation instructions for the tax piece, under the Senate plan.

House GOP leaders want to pass all of the proposals in one bill and President Donald Trump endorsed that path earlier this week, before posting on social media Thursday evening that the Senate's two-bill plan was "greatly appreciated."

"Thank you to Majority Leader John Thune, and the Republican Senate, for working so hard on funding the Trump Border Agenda," Trump wrote. "We are setting records, the likes of which have never been seen before, on stopping criminal illegal aliens from entering our Country.

"Put simply, we are delivering for the American People, far faster and, more successfully, than anyone thought possible. Your work on funding this effort is greatly appreciated!"

Not adopting one budget resolution would end Republicans' plans of passing changes to policy without Democratic votes in Congress and curtail a significant portion of the agenda GOP politicians campaigned on.

ICE in need of cash

Graham said during his floor speech the Senate is moving forward now because Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, needs additional money for deportations and detention beds.

"This is a big deal, folks. The Republican Party is going to go all in on border security," Graham said. "We're going to upgrade our defense capability, and we're going to pay for it."

Graham explained during his speech that the budget resolution wouldn't actually provide any money toward Republicans' policy plans, but would send instructions to the committees so they could draft their

bills later this year.

Those reconciliation instructions, Graham said, would allow committees to spend up to \$175 billion for border security initiatives, including finishing the border wall that Trump started during his first term.

Another \$150 billion would go to the Pentagon to bolster various defense capabilities. Graham said where exactly to spend that money would be up to the Armed Services Committee, though he suggested modernizing nuclear weapons and purchasing other weaponry.

Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., raised concerns about what government programs Republicans may cut funding for in order to pay for the new spending on defense, the border and eventually tax breaks.

"Republicans are going down this partisan path because they know Democrats are not going to join them in throwing Medicaid, nutrition assistance and veterans benefits into the wood chopper, so they can throw more tax cuts at billionaires and the biggest corporations," Murray said.

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 advance carbon pipeline moratorium and bill regulating land agents

Eminent domain proposals remain pending

BY: SETH TUPPER - FEBRUARY 21, 2025 1:44 PM

South Dakota lawmakers advanced bills Friday at the Capitol in Pierre that would put a moratorium on carbon dioxide pipelines until new federal safety rules are finalized, and would authorize landowners to sue pipeline companies for the alleged abuses of their land agents.

The bills don't name Summit Carbon Solutions, but they're a response to the Iowa company's proposed \$9 billion, five-state pipeline that would pass through eastern South Dakota. It would collect carbon dioxide emitted by more than 50 ethanol plants and transport it for underground storage in North Dakota, to capitalize on federal tax credits incentivizing the prevention of heat-trapping emissions into the atmosphere.

Land agent bill

Rep. Kaley Nolz, R-Mitchell, is the main sponsor of the bill that would authorize lawsuits by landowners who allege they've suffered from deception, fraud, harassment, intimidation or misrepresentation by a land agent for a carbon pipeline company.

Landowners who file a suit within 12 months of the behavior and prove the allegations to a court could have their agreement with a company voided. The bill allows for an award of damages up to three times the amount of the agreement or highest offer.

Several landowners testified and alleged that they'd been contacted by pipeline land agents who claimed that the landowners' neighbors had signed agreements, only to find out later that wasn't true. Nolz filed the bill in response to those complaints.

"Clearly, the existing laws were not enough deterrence," Nolz said.

Members of the committee who opposed the bill said the alleged abuses are already illegal under existing laws.

Justin Bell, a lobbyist for Summit, said the bill could lead to excessive litigation and unfair targeting of one project's land agreements — known as easements — while not addressing similar agreements for other types of projects.

"I'm not sure I understand why, if this truly is happening and is a problem, why this would be limited to just one form of easement," Bell said.

The legislation additionally includes a provision requiring land agents for carbon pipelines to be a company employee, a resident of the state or a real estate agent licensed in the state. A similar provision was part of a broader package of pipeline law reforms passed by the Legislature last year that was tossed out

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by South Dakota voters in November.

The committee voted 8-4 to send the bill to the House floor.

Moratorium bill

Rep. Richard Vasgaard, R-Centerville, is the main sponsor of the moratorium bill.

"This pipeline is going to be in the ground for a long time," Vasgaard said. "Let's make sure it's done right."

The legislation would bar the state Public Utilities Commission from permitting carbon dioxide pipelines until the federal Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration adopts its new safety rules for carbon pipelines. The administration issued proposed rules last month and will finalize them sometime after a 60-day public comment period.

A lobbyist for Summit Carbon Solutions testified against the moratorium, saying it would take authority from the state Public Utilities Commission and hand it to the federal government. A majority of the House Commerce and Energy Committee disagreed and sent the bill to the House of Representatives on a 7-6 vote.

Eminent domain bills pending

Among other pending pipeline bills is one that would ban the use of eminent domain by carbon pipeline companies. Eminent domain is a legal process for obtaining land access from unwilling landowners, with just compensation determined by a court, for a project beneficial to the public — traditionally for projects such as electrical power lines, crude oil pipelines, water pipelines and highways. That bill has passed the House and is awaiting action by a Senate committee.

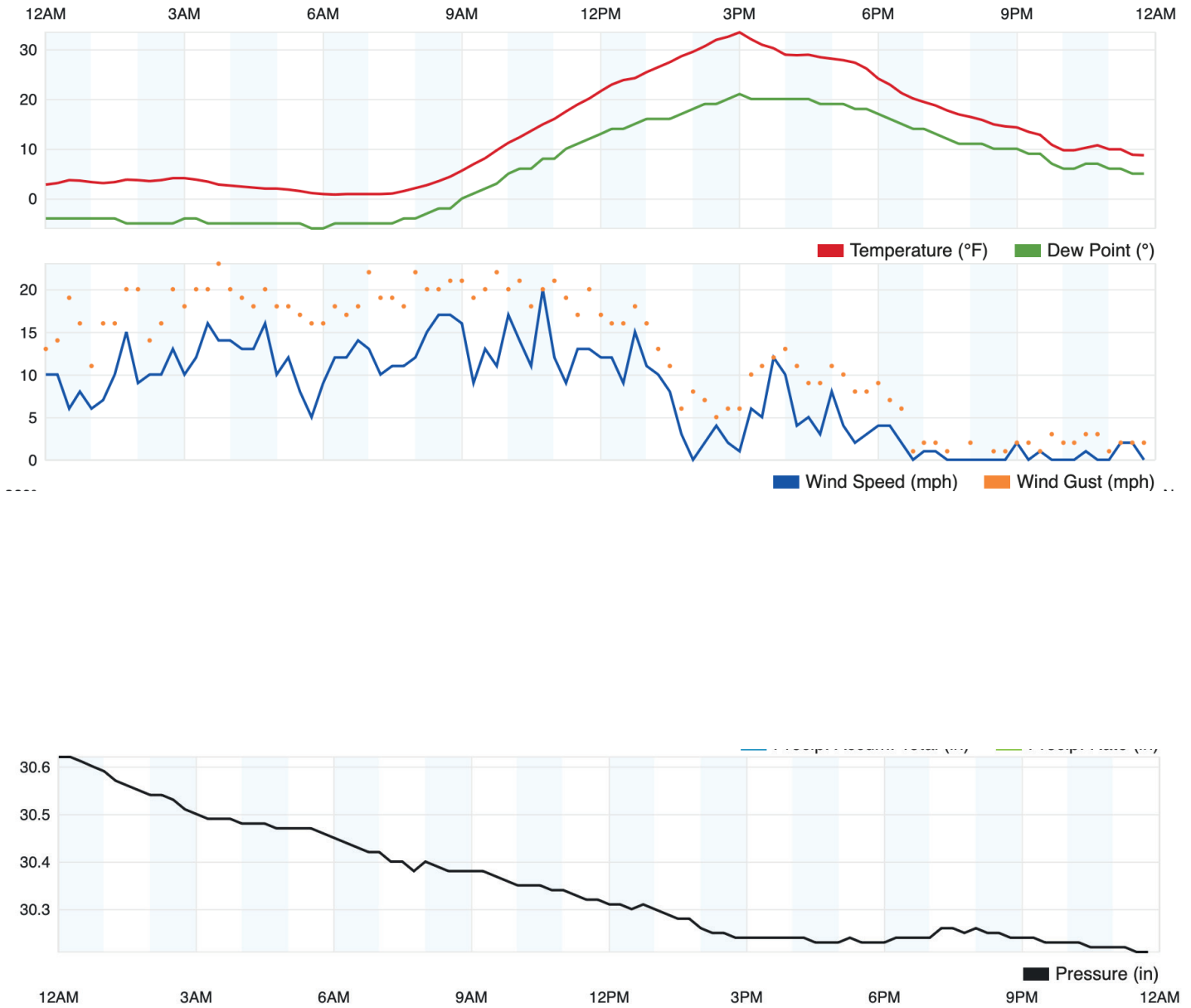
Another bill pending in the Senate would retain eminent domain as an option, but require entities using it to first attend mediation with the affected landowner and to also have a Public Utilities Commission permit before commencing eminent domain proceedings. That bill failed Friday in a close Senate vote with two members absent. The sponsor, Senate Majority Leader Jim Mehlhaff, R-Pierre, announced his intent have it reconsidered next week.

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.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



High: 42 °F

Partly Sunny

Tonight



Low: 21 °F

Mostly Cloudy

Sunday



High: 53 °F

Mostly Sunny

Sunday Night



Low: 33 °F

Mostly Cloudy

Monday



High: 55 °F

Chance Rain
and Breezy

Very Mild Conditions Next Several Days

Low Chances For Moisture

Sat



Highs:
39 to 51
10 - 15
above normal

Sun



Highs:
44 to 61
15 - 25
above normal

Mon



FIRE DANGER
Highs:
48 to 63
15 - 30
above normal

Tue



Highs:
50 to 62
15 - 25
above normal

Wed



Highs:
44 to 52
10 - 15
above normal

Warmest Temps Across Central SD/Cooler in Far Northeast SD/Western MN

The next several days will feature above normal-spring like temperatures. With portions of central South Dakota still lacking snow cover, and increased winds, there is an increasing potential for elevated fire danger Monday. Some showers will move through the region during the week, but don't anticipate overall much moisture



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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 34 °F at 3:01 PM

Low Temp: 1 °F at 6:05 AM

Wind: 23 mph at 3:43 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 10 hours, 51 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 60 in 2021

Record Low: -24 in 1918

Average High: 31

Average Low: 9

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.47

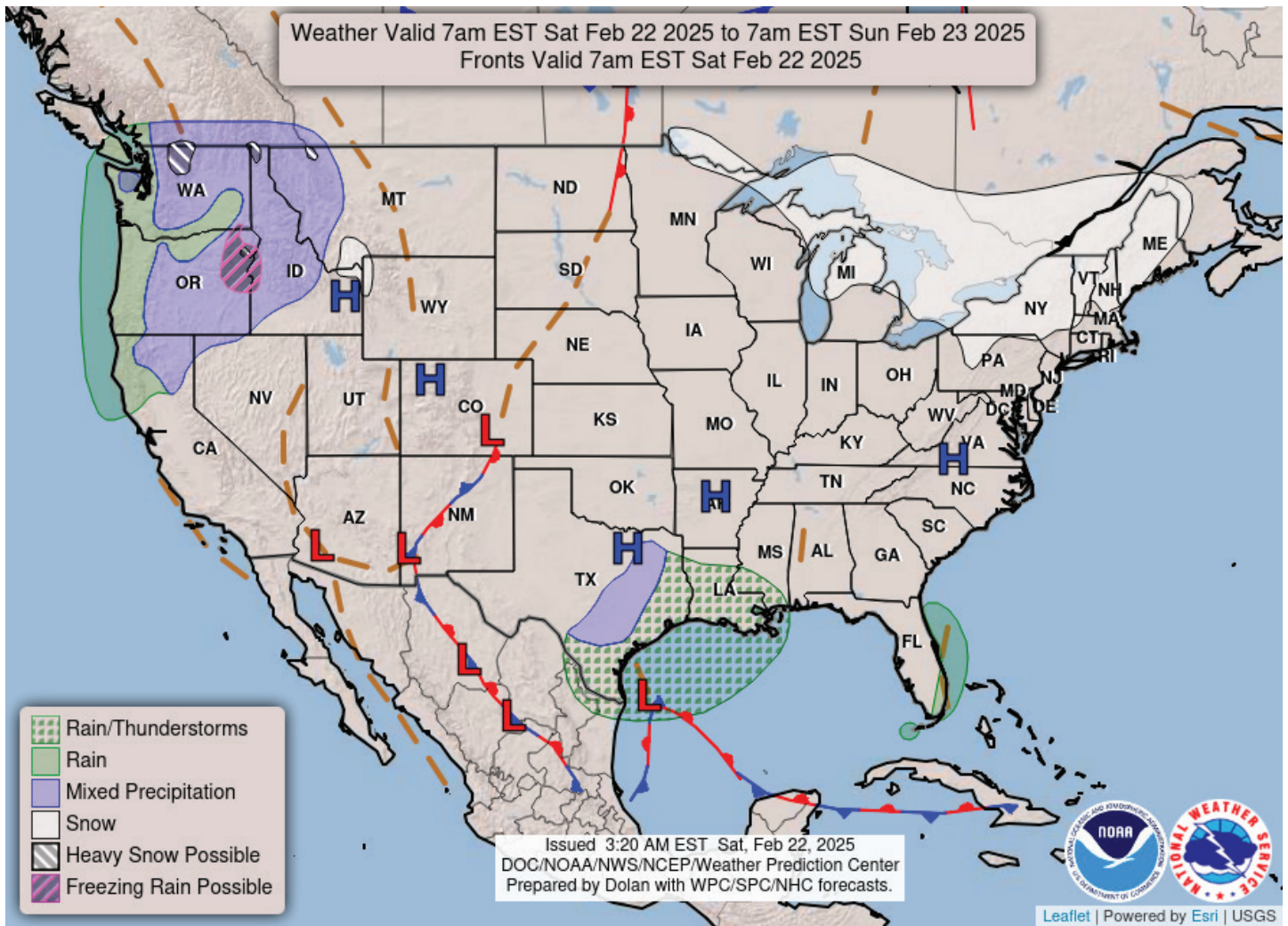
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.20

Average Precip to date: 1.02

Precip Year to Date: 0.20

Sunset Tonight: 6:11:24 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:18:27 am



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Today in Weather History

February 22, 1914: Heavy snow fell across parts of central and north-central South Dakota with 6 to 12 inches of accumulations. Snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Timber Lake and Onida, 7 inches at Kennebec, and 12 inches at Murdo.

February 22, 2000: High temperatures across central and northeast South Dakota were in the 50s and 60s. Record highs occurred at Watertown, Pierre, and Kennebec. Watertown rose to 65 degrees, Pierre rose to 69 degrees, and Kennebec warmed to 71 degrees late in the afternoon. Other high temperatures include; 55 degrees at Sisseton, 59 degrees at Aberdeen, and 64 degrees at Timber Lake.

1773: According to David Ludlum, "The memorable Cold Sabbath in New England history" took place on February 22, 1773. "Many persons froze extremities while going to church."

1936 - Although heat and dust prevailed in the spring and summer, early 1936 brought record cold to parts of the U.S. Sioux Center IA reported 42 inches of snow on the ground, a state record. (20th-22nd) (The Weather Channel)

1971: One of the worst snowstorms in Oklahoma history dumped up to 3 feet of snow on northwest Oklahoma from February 20nd to February 22. By the time the snow ended on the 22nd, the city of Buffalo had 36 inches of snow on the ground, setting the state record for storm-total snowfall. Winds of 30 to 50 mph caused snowdrifts up to 20 feet high. Follett, Texas, picked up 26 inches while Amarillo recorded 14 inches.

1986 - A twelve day siege of heavy rain and snow, which produced widespread flooding and mudslides across northern and central California, finally came to an end. The storm caused more than 400 million dollars property damage. Bucks Lake, located in the Sierra Nevada Range, received 49.6 inches of rain during the twelve day period. (Storm Data)

1987 - A storm moving northeastward out of the Gulf of Mexico began to spread heavy snow across the Middle Atlantic Coast Region. Thunderstorms in northern Florida produced wind gusts to 65 mph in Alachua County. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Dry weather prevailed across the nation, with windy conditions from the Central Rockies to northern New England. Winds gusted to 58 mph at Cleveland OH, and reached 63 mph at Erie PA. Winds in the Central Rockies gusted to 120 mph at Mines Peak CO and Rendezvous Peak WY. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Strong northwesterly winds ushering cold arctic air into the north central U.S. produced snow squalls in the Great Lakes Region, with heavy snow near Lake Michigan. Totals in northwest Indiana ranged up to 24 inches at Gary, and up to 16 inches buried northeastern Illinois. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Thunderstorms developing along and ahead of a cold front produced severe weather from southern Mississippi to North Carolina. One thunderstorm spawned a tornado just prior to dawn which touched down near Opp AL injuring ten persons and causing half a million dollars damage. Thunderstorm winds injured four persons south of Troy AL, and five people at Columbus GA. Thunderstorm winds gusted to 76 mph at Dothan AL. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1998: Seven tornadoes struck east-central Florida late on this day and early on the 23rd. Three of the tornadoes were rated F3 on the Fujita scale. Twenty-four people were killed in Kissimmee alone. A total of 42 people were killed, 265 injured, and the total damage was \$106 million.



THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Michelangelo's statue of David is considered to be one of the most beautiful sculptures in the world. Many believe it is his most noteworthy accomplishment. Few know its unpromising beginning.

The block of marble from which he fashioned David had been disfigured by another artist. After attempting to "make" something from the marble, he cast it aside as "worthless" and having no potential.

But Michelangelo was not discouraged when he looked at the rejected mass of marble. While another saw only flaws, he saw a future locked up inside a piece of cold, rejected rock that was colored with irregular markings.

There is an important lesson for each of us here. Paul wrote, "Those who become Christians become new persons!" When we accept Christ as our Savior and Lord, He starts a "work" on the inside that will manifest itself on the outside. Through Him we become brand-new people from the life that is given to us by the Holy Spirit. We are not the same people we once were. God looked at us, saw the potential in us, and began to form us into the likeness of Christ. We are not re-formed, or reshaped, we are, in fact, re-created!

Michelangelo was ultimately limited by the size and shape of the block of marble and his vision. But as new persons in Christ we are only limited by the limits we place on God and what He can do through us!

Prayer: We pray, Father, that our minds and hearts will be open to the limitless potential we have through You. May we grow into the likeness of Christ through Your Holy Spirit. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun! 2 Corinthians 5:17

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: 02.21.25

1 13 28 37 46 10

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$181,000,000

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.19.25

3 22 23 35 41 2

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$24,470,000

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 10 Mins 26
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.21.25

19 35 44 45 47 10

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 25 Mins 26
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.19.25

6 9 16 27 30

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$41,000

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 25 Mins 26
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.19.25

15 21 34 43 60 23

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 54 Mins 27
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.19.25

6 21 28 49 60 20

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$215,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 54 Mins 27
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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Upcoming Groton Events

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

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News from the **AP** Associated Press

Friday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Central 68, Brookings 58
Bison 58, Oelrichs 13
Bridgewater-Emery 53, Irene-Wakonda 51, OT
Castlewood 64, Estelline-Hendricks 55
Chadron, Neb. 60, Lakota Tech 59
Colman-Egan 77, Canistota 49
Dakota Valley 63, Madison 61
DeSmet 62, Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 29
Dell Rapids St Mary 67, Baltic 52
Flandreau 57, Elkton-Lake Benton 38
Gregory 63, Bon Homme 26
Groton 63, Britton-Hecla 31
Harding County 73, Edgemont 35
Harrisburg 66, Sioux Falls O'Gorman 51
Howard 70, Arlington 39
Huron 57, Watertown 52
Ipswich 69, Langford 41
Jones County 48, Bennett County 39
Kadoka 67, Lyman 54
Lennox 49, Dell Rapids 40
Leola-Frederick High School 73, Herreid-Selby 40
Marty 69, Flandreau Indian 58
Milbank 68, Webster 40
Mitchell 53, T F Riggs High School 44
Northwestern 50, Waverly-South Shore 49
Platte-Geddes 63, Wagner 57
Potter County 65, Highmore-Harrold 55
Rapid City Central 63, Douglas 52
Rapid City Christian 58, Rapid City Stevens 55
Redfield 74, Tiospa Zina 66
Sioux Falls Washington 55, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 42
St. Francis Indian 100, Crow Creek Tribal School 33
Stanley County 52, Little Wound 44
Sunshine Bible Academy 47, North Central 44
Tea 63, Yankton 44
Vermillion 52, Ponca, Neb. 42
Wakpala 72, Faith 67, 2OT
Wall 85, Belle Fourche 46
Waubay/Summit 72, Sioux Falls Lutheran 40
Wessington Springs 80, James Valley Christian School 63
West Central 72, Chamberlain 34
White River 59, New Underwood 56
Winner 54, Mobridge-Pollock 51

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GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Central 57, Brookings 26
Avon 52, Freeman 36
Bison 59, Oelrichs 25
Bridgewater-Emery 57, Irene-Wakonda 46
Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 72, Pine Ridge 57
Clark-Willow Lake 54, Great Plains Lutheran 43
Crow Creek Tribal School 55, St. Francis Indian 51
Custer 58, Hill City 45
Dakota Valley 68, Madison 24
Gregory 43, Bon Homme 39
Groton 61, Britton-Hecla 21
Harding County 61, Edgemont 24
Herreid-Selby 59, Aberdeen Christian 20
Kadoka 39, Timber Lake 29
Lennox 44, Beresford 41
Leola-Frederick High School 42, Lower Brule 34
McLaughlin 80, Wakpala 35
North Central 49, Sunshine Bible Academy 25
Northwestern 33, Waverly-South Shore 23
Philip 62, White River 41
Rapid City Central 55, Douglas 24
Rapid City Stevens 64, Rapid City Christian 49
Redfield 56, Tiospa Zina 25
Sioux Falls Jefferson 55, Sioux Falls Lincoln 38
Sioux Falls Washington 67, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 47
St Thomas More 62, Hot Springs 17
Stanley County 44, Little Wound 30
T F Riggs High School 48, Mitchell 47
Tea 53, Yankton 36
Vermillion 70, Parker 39
Wagner 66, Platte-Geddes 27
Wall 44, Belle Fourche 32
Watertown 49, Huron 45
Wessington Springs 54, James Valley Christian School 20
West Central 74, Chamberlain 24
Winner 54, Mobridge-Pollock 43

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

Lawsuit filed by 17 states against abortion accommodations in the workplace can proceed

By CLAIRE SAVAGE Associated Press

A lawsuit filed by 17 states challenging federal rules entitling workers to time off and other accommodations for abortions may proceed, a federal appeals court ruled.

The Eighth Circuit Court's decision on Thursday reverses Eastern District of Arkansas U.S. District Judge D.P. Marshall, Jr.'s dismissal of the case in June after he found that the states lacked standing to sue. Eighth Circuit Chief Judge Steven M. Colloton, who was appointed by former President George W. Bush in 2003,

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wrote in Thursday's opinion that the states do have standing since they are subject to the federal rules. Led by Republican state attorneys general in Tennessee and Arkansas, the 17 states sued the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in April challenging its rules on how to implement the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act, a 2022 bipartisan law requiring employers to make "reasonable accommodations" for pregnant or postpartum employees.

In addition to more routine pregnancy workplace accommodations like time off for prenatal appointments, more bathroom breaks, or permission to carry snacks, the rules say that workers can ask for time off to obtain an abortion and recover from the procedure.

"The Biden-era EEOC's attempt to turn a good law into an ideological weapon to force broad elective abortion accommodations is illegal," Tennessee Attorney General Jonathan Skrmetti said in an emailed statement. "The EEOC's unlawful regulations undermine the constitutional authority of the people's elected representatives and we are vindicated by the Court's decision to let our suit proceed."

The lawsuit — joined by state attorneys in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Utah and West Virginia — is one of several legal challenges to the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act rules. One case in Texas seeks to overturn the law in its entirety.

The Eighth Circuit Court's decision to revive the case comes after a 2022 U.S. Supreme Court ruling opened the door to state abortion bans, and as bills to track and charge women who get abortions with murder have gotten attention in Missouri, North Dakota and Oklahoma state legislatures this month.

The EEOC, which enforces U.S. anti-discrimination laws, during former President Joe Biden's administration published regulations that provide guidance for employers and workers on how to implement the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act. In them, the agency said that workers can ask for time off to obtain an abortion and recover from the procedure, along with pregnancy-related medical conditions like miscarriage, stillbirth and lactation. Citing numerous court rulings, the EEOC in its regulations said it was conforming to decades of legal precedent establishing that pregnancy-related discrimination laws include abortion.

But many Republican lawmakers, including Louisiana Sen. Bill Cassidy, who co-sponsored the bill, were furious when the EEOC stated that the law covered abortions. Both Republican EEOC commissioners voted against the rules at the time.

A spokesperson for the EEOC said the agency will "refrain from discussing litigation" but referred The Associated Press to Acting Chair Andrea Lucas' position on the Commission's PWFA regulations, which she voted against.

"I support elements of the final rule. However, I am unable to approve it because it purports to broaden the scope of the statute in ways that, in my view, cannot reasonably be reconciled with the text," she wrote in a statement at the time explaining her decision to vote against the rules.

The EEOC has undergone significant change since President Donald Trump took office last month. After naming Lucas, a Republican, as acting chair, Trump fired two Democratic commissioners of the five-member bipartisan EEOC before their terms expired in an unprecedented move. Had the commissioners been allowed to carry out their terms, the EEOC would have had a Democratic majority well into Trump's term. The administration also dismissed Karla Gilbride as the EEOC's general counsel, replacing her with Andrew Rogers as acting counsel.

Without a quorum, the EEOC cannot rescind its own rules, although Lucas in the statement said she intends for the EEOC to reconsider portions of the rules she believes are unsupported by law once a quorum is re-established.

The Department of Justice represents the EEOC in court, and under Trump, it remains to be seen whether it will continue to fight the states' lawsuit.

Inimai Chettiar, president of advocacy group A Better Balance, which spearheaded a decade-long campaign for the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act and filed an amicus brief in support of the EEOC alongside National Women's Law Center, American Civil Liberties Union, and several more organizations, on Thursday called the Eighth Circuit Court's decision "an attack on reproductive choice."

"Workers in need of an abortion should not be discriminated against or forced off the job because of a need for vital health care," she said.

With Lucas' stated intention to alter the PWFA rules, the existing lawsuits against them, the EEOC firings and the DOJ changing hands under the new presidential administration, "things are moving pretty fast and we're very concerned about what's going to happen to the PWFA regulations specifically that cover abortion," Chettiar said. She emphasized that for the vast majority of Americans, the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act is still the law of the land, and the EEOC's regulations remain in effect.

"This law is still on the books, the regulation is still on the books. Women still have access to all of these accommodations and they can call our free legal helpline if they need more clarification," she said.

Sepsis a threat in pope's pneumonia battle as Vatican Holy Year celebrations march on without him

By NICOLE WINFIELD and SILVIA STELLACCI Associated Press

ROME (AP) — The Vatican carried on with its Holy Year celebrations without the pope Saturday, as Pope Francis battled pneumonia and a complex respiratory infection that doctors say remains touch-and-go and will keep him hospitalized for at least another week.

Francis slept well overnight, Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni said in a brief early update Saturday.

But doctors have warned that the main threat facing the 88-year-old Francis would be the onset of sepsis, a serious infection of the blood that can occur as a complication of pneumonia. As of Friday, there was no evidence of any sepsis, and Francis was responding to the various drugs he is taking, the pope's medical team said in their first in-depth update on the pope's condition.

"He is not out of danger," said his personal physician, Dr. Luigi Carbone. "So like all fragile patients I say they are always on the golden scale: In other words, it takes very little to become unbalanced."

Francis, who has chronic lung disease, was admitted to Gemelli hospital on Feb. 14 after a weeklong bout of bronchitis worsened.

Doctors first diagnosed the complex viral, bacterial and fungal respiratory tract infection and then the onset of pneumonia in both lungs. They prescribed "absolute rest" and a combination of cortisone and antibiotics, along with supplemental oxygen when he needs it.

Carbone, who along with Francis' personal nurse Massimiliano Strappetti organized care for him at the Vatican, acknowledged he had insisted on staying at the Vatican to work, even after he was sick, "because of institutional and private commitments." He was cared for by a cardiologist and infectious specialist in addition to his personal medical team before being hospitalized.

Dr. Sergio Alfieri, the head of medicine and surgery at Rome's Gemelli hospital, said the biggest threat facing Francis was that some of the germs that are currently located in his respiratory system pass into the bloodstream, causing sepsis. Sepsis can lead to organ failure and death.

"Sepsis, with his respiratory problems and his age, would be really difficult to get out of," Alfieri told a press conference Friday at Gemelli. "The English say 'knock on wood,' we say 'touch iron.' Everyone touch what they want," he said as he tapped the microphone. "But this is the real risk in these cases: that these germs pass to the bloodstream."

"He knows he's in danger," Alfieri added. "And he told us to relay that."

Deacons, meanwhile, were gathering at the Vatican for their special Jubilee weekend. Francis got sick at the start of the Vatican's Holy Year, the once-every-quarter-century celebration of Catholicism. This weekend, Francis was supposed to have celebrated deacons, a ministry in the church that precedes ordination to the priesthood.

In his place, the Holy Year organizer will celebrate Sunday's Mass, the Vatican said. And for the second weekend in a row, Francis was expected to skip his traditional Sunday noon blessing, which he could have delivered from Gemelli if he were up to it.

"Look, even though he's not (physically) here, we know he's here," said Luis Arnaldo Lopez Quirindongo, a deacon from Ponce, Puerto Rico who was at the Vatican on Saturday for the Jubilee celebration. "He's

recovering, but he's in our hearts and is accompanying us because our prayers and his go together."

Beyond that, doctors have said Francis' recovery will take time and that regardless he will still have to live with his chronic respiratory problems back at the Vatican.

"He has to get over this infection and we all hope he gets over it," said Alfieri. "But the fact is, all doors are open."

Hamas frees first 5 of 6 Israeli hostages to be released in the latest exchange

By WAFSA SHURAF, MOHAMMED JAHJOUH and MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Hamas freed the first five of six Israeli hostages due to be released Saturday even as heightened tension between the adversaries clouded the future of the fragile ceasefire deal.

The five included three Israeli men seized while attending the Nova music festival and another abducted while visiting his family in southern Israel when militants stormed across the border in the Oct. 7, 2023 attacks that triggered Israel's nearly 16-month campaign in Gaza.

The fifth man released and the sixth due to be freed later Saturday have been held by Hamas for around a decade since they each entered Gaza on their own.

They were handed over to the Red Cross in two separate ceremonies in Gaza, brought out on stages by masked, armed Hamas fighters in front of hundreds of Palestinians. In the central town of Nuseirat, Omer Wenkert, Omer Shem Tov, and Eliya Cohen were posed alongside fighters — and a beaming Shem Tov even kissed the militant next to him on the head and blew kisses to the crowd. They were then put in Red Cross vehicles and taken to Israeli troops.

Watching the release, Cohen's family and friends in Israel chanted "Eliya! Eliya! Eliya!" and cheered when they saw him for the first time. Shem Tov's grandmother ululated in joy, shrieking, "Omer, my joy! My life!" as she saw him.

The latest releases, to be followed by the freeing of hundreds of Palestinians imprisoned by Israel, are going ahead after tensions mounted over a grisly and heart-wrenching dispute triggered this week when Hamas initially handed over the wrong body for Shiri Bibas, an Israeli mother of two young boys abducted by militants.

The remains that Hamas transferred with her sons' bodies on Thursday were later determined to be those of an unidentified Palestinian woman. In response, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed revenge for "a cruel and malicious violation," while Hamas suggested it had been a mistake.

On Friday night, the small militant group believed to have been holding Bibas and her sons — the Palestinian Mujahedeen Brigades — handed over a second body. Bibas' family said Israeli forensic authorities had confirmed the remains were hers.

"For 16 months we sought certainty, and now that it's here, it brings no comfort, though we hope it marks the beginning of closure," the family said.

Difficult negotiations likely over the ceasefire's next phase

The ceasefire deal has paused the war but is nearing the end of its first phase. Negotiations over a second phase, in which Hamas would release dozens more hostages in exchange for a lasting ceasefire and an Israeli withdrawal, are likely to be even more difficult.

The six hostages being freed Saturday are the last living ones to be released under the first phase.

Cohen, Shem Tov and Wenkert, all in their 20s, were abducted by Hamas fighters at the Nova music festival. During their release, they were brought out wearing fake army uniforms, though they were not soldiers when they were kidnapped.

Earlier Saturday, two other hostages — Tal Shoham, 40, and Avera Mengistu, 38 — were freed in the southern Gaza city of Rafah. Arriving back in Israel, both were taken to medical centers for examination.

"This is an unforgettable moment, where all emotions are rapidly mixing together. Our Tal is with us," Shoham's family said in a statement, calling for a deal to free all those still captive. "There is a window of

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opportunity; we must not miss it.”

Shoham, who also holds Austrian citizenship, was visiting his wife’s family in Kibbutz Be’eri when Hamas militants stormed into the community during the Oct. 7, 2023 attacks. Shoham’s wife, two young children, and three other relatives who were abducted with him were freed in a November 2023 exchange.

Mengistu, an Ethiopian-Israeli, had been held in Gaza since entering on his own in 2014. Watching the handover on Israeli media, Mengistu’s family broke out into a Hebrew song, “Here is the Light,” as they saw him for the first time in more than a decade.

The sixth hostage due to be freed later, 36-year-old Hisham al-Sayed, crossed into Gaza in 2015 and has been held since.

Hundreds of Palestinian prisoners set for release

More than 600 Palestinians jailed in Israel will be freed in exchange, the Palestinian prisoners media office said Friday. They include 50 serving life sentences, 60 with long sentences, 47 who were released under a previous hostage-for-prisoner exchange and 445 Palestinians who were seized by Israeli troops in Gaza since the war began.

Hamas has said it will also release four more bodies next week, completing the first phase of the cease-fire. If that plan is carried out, Hamas would retain about 60 hostages, about half of whom are believed to be alive.

Hamas has said it won’t release the remaining captives without a lasting ceasefire and a full Israeli withdrawal. Netanyahu, with the full backing of the Trump administration, says he’s committed to destroying Hamas’ military and governing capacities and returning all the hostages, goals widely seen as mutually exclusive.

Israel’s military offensive killed more than 48,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children, according to Gaza’s Health Ministry, which doesn’t distinguish between civilians and combatants. Israel says it has killed more than 17,000 fighters, without providing evidence.

The offensive destroyed vast areas of Gaza, reducing entire neighborhoods to rubble. At its height, the war displaced 90% of Gaza’s population. Many have returned to their homes to find nothing left and no way of rebuilding.

Rich in cash, Japan automaker Toyota builds a city to test futuristic mobility

By YURI KAGEYAMA AP Business Writer

SUSONO, Japan (AP) — Woven City near Mount Fuji is where Japanese automaker Toyota plans to test everyday living with robotics, artificial intelligence and autonomous zero-emissions transportation.

Daisuke Toyoda, an executive in charge of the project from the automaker’s founding family, stressed it’s not “a smart city.”

“We’re making a test course for mobility so that’s a little bit different. We’re not a real estate developer,” he said Saturday during a tour of the facility, where the first phase of construction was completed.

The Associated Press was the first foreign media to get a preview of the \$10 billion Woven City.

The first phase spans 47,000 square meters (506,000 square feet), roughly the size of about five baseball fields. When completed, it will be 294,000 square meters (3.1 million square feet).

Built on the grounds of a shuttered Toyota Motor Corp. auto plant, it’s meant to be a place where researchers and startups come together to share ideas, according to Toyoda.

Ambitious plans for futuristic cities have sputtered or are unfinished, including one proposed by Google’s parent company Alphabet in Toronto; “Neom” in Saudi Arabia; a project near San Francisco, spearheaded by a former Goldman Sachs trader, and Masdar City next to Abu Dhabi’s airport.

Woven City’s construction began in 2021. All the buildings are connected by underground passageways, where autonomous vehicles will scuttle around collecting garbage and making deliveries.

No one is living there yet. The first residents will total just 100 people.

Called “weavers,” they’re workers at Toyota and partner companies, including instant noodle maker Nis-

sin and Daikin, which manufactures air-conditioners. Coffee maker UCC was serving hot drinks from an autonomous-drive bus, parked in a square surrounded by still-empty apartment complexes.

The city's name honors Toyota's beginnings as a maker of automatic textile looms. Sakichi Toyoda, Daisuke Toyoda's great-great-grandfather, just wanted to make life easier for his mother, who toiled on a manual loom.

There was little talk of using electric vehicles, an area where Toyota has lagged. While Tesla and Byd emerged as big EV players, Toyota has been pushing hydrogen, the energy of choice in Woven City.

Toyota officials acknowledged it doesn't expect to make money from Woven City, at least not for years.

Keisuke Konishi, auto analyst at Quick Corporate Valuation Research Center, believes Toyota wants to work on robotic rides to rival Google's Waymo — even if it means building an entire complex.

"Toyota has the money to do all that," he said.

Everyone agrees kids are safer flying in their own seats, but no one requires it. Why?

By JOSH FUNK Associated Press

The crash landing of a Delta Air Lines flight in Toronto this week highlighted the potential dangers of flying with a young child sitting on an adult's lap. The plane flipped over, which would make holding onto a baby extremely difficult.

Authorities haven't said whether the 18-month-old child who was injured in the crash was riding on a parent's lap. All 21 people who were hurt were released from the hospital, but young children have died in previous crashes.

Despite the recent rash of aviation disasters, airline crashes remain rare, but children could easily get hurt if they are on a parent's lap when a plane encounters turbulence.

Experts agree it's safer for children younger than 2 years old to have their own plane seats and ride in approved car seats when flying, even if families have to pay for an extra ticket. But babies are still allowed to travel in laps, so parents continue doing it despite the risks.

"The saddest part is that most families who travel with a lap child think that because it's allowed, it's safe," said former flight attendant Jan Brown, who had to look a mother in the face after she had just lost her 22-month-old son when their plane crashed and broke into several pieces near Sioux City, Iowa, in 1989.

Brown stopped that mother from climbing back into the wreckage of United Flight 232 after it came to rest upside down in a cornfield.

"I told her what I thought would stop her: that rescue workers would find him. And she just looked up at me and said, 'You told me to put my baby on the floor. And I did. And he's gone.' And so I think that was the moment that I became a child seat advocate," Brown said.

Of the four lap children on that plane, three were injured and the woman's son was among the 112 people who died.

A 6-month-old boy traveling on a parent's lap was killed in 2012 when a plane landed hard and overran the end of a runway in Nunavut, Canada. Last year, three infants on laps could have been sucked out of an Alaska Airlines plane after a door plug flew off midflight, but none were sitting close enough to the opening for that to happen.

What do experts recommend?

The National Transportation Safety Board and its counterpart in Canada, the Transportation Safety Board, have long recommended that young children fly only in approved car seats to protect them. The Federal Aviation Administration also recommends the use of car seats but doesn't require it despite lobbying from advocates.

In addition to those safety regulators, the American Academy of Pediatrics and most major airline trade groups and unions support requiring young children to fly in approved car seats.

The main crash investigators in the United States and Canada started recommending car seats for children under 2 and specialized restraint systems for older kids until they are taller than 40 inches (102

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centimeters) after the deadly crashes in their countries decades ago.

"We've all been there at that point in your life when you've got young children. You're not swimming in money. You're trying to save nickels and dimes any way you can. And if you can avoid buying an extra seat, it's a completely understandable reaction," NTSB member Tom Chapman said. "It's just that people don't understand the risk that they are subjecting their child to by not buying that seat and properly restraining them."

Not only is it safer for children to ride in their own seats, but it's more enjoyable for parents who don't have to hold a squirming baby for hours in the air.

Safety advocate and mother Michelle Pratt, who founded Safe in the Seat, said no matter how tempting it is to check that lap child box, families should get everyone a ticket.

"Your baby could cost less than your checked suitcase. Why not take advantage?" Pratt said.

What do parents think?

Some parents like Clare Ronning aren't convinced. After landing in Burbank, California, with her husband and 5-month-old baby Thursday, she said she doesn't see a need for a car seat on a plane.

"I don't really see the difference, personally," said Ronning, who already has taken her daughter on six flights. "It just seems like another money grab."

But Meredith Tobitsch never imagined flying without a seat for her 3-year-old daughter and won't do it with her 14-month-old now, either, because of safety and practical concerns.

"If there was turbulence, your natural reflex would be to let go of your child," said Tobitsch, who lives in Connecticut, adding that her oldest daughter always slept better in her car seat, making the flights much more enjoyable.

"Obviously, that does add to the cost of air travel for families, but it is a safety thing. At least for us, we're fortunate to do that," she said.

Why isn't it required?

The FAA relies on a study done in the 1990s to justify not requiring families to buy tickets for children younger than 2.

The rationale is that if families had to buy those extra tickets, more of them might drive instead of fly. Because driving is riskier than flying, that would mean more kids would die in car crashes than would be saved in planes if car seats and separate tickets were required.

Chapman with the NTSB thinks that logic is a stretch and the study should be revisited, particularly since airline tickets are more affordable today.

But parent Andrea Arredondo suggested there might be some truth to it, saying she might fly less if she had to buy a ticket and lug along a car seat for her 4-month-old when flying with her family and two older kids.

"I would be more likely to decrease our plane travel than bring a car seat," Arredondo said, explaining she and her husband already have their hands full traveling with three kids, three car seats that they check, a stroller and play set.

A mother and her young sons are among the remains returned to Israel by Hamas

JERUSALEM (AP) — The remains of a mother of two young boys who were taken to Gaza together at the start of the Israel-Hamas war have been returned to Israel, bringing the total closer to the 33 hostages supposed to be released under the ceasefire that started last month.

The plight of Ariel and Kfir Bibas captivated Israelis since the boys were taken during Hamas' deadly attack on Oct. 7, 2023. Israel identified the boys and another hostage, Oded Lifshitz, who was 83 when he was abducted, after their remains were handed over Thursday. The remains of the boys' mother, Shiri Bibas, were handed over separately after an initial mix-up with another body.

In the first phase of the ceasefire deal, a total of 33 hostages in Gaza — eight of whom are dead — were supposed to be freed in exchange for almost 2,000 Palestinian prisoners held by Israel. Five Thai citizens

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who were working in Israel on the day of the attack were freed last month as part of a separate deal.

Hamas-led militants took 251 hostages during their Oct. 7, 2023, attack that launched the war in Gaza. More than 60 hostages remain in Gaza, although about half are believed to be dead. The others were released, rescued, or their bodies recovered.

Israel's military campaign has killed over 48,000 Palestinians, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not say how many were fighters but says more than half were women or children.

Here's a look at the hostages returned so far:

Shiri, Ariel and Kfir Bibas

The bodies of Ariel and Kfir Bibas were returned Thursday and the remains of their mother, Shiri Bibas, were returned Friday. Hamas said the three were killed in an Israeli airstrike. Shiri's husband, Yarden, was also abducted from Kibbutz Nir Oz on Oct. 7, 2023, and was released alive earlier this month.

A video of the family's abduction showed a terrified Shiri Bibas swaddling her two redheaded sons in a blanket and being carried away by militants. The footage ricocheted around the world in the hours after the attack.

Ariel was 4 years old at the time and Kfir was 9 months old, making him the youngest captive taken by Hamas. Ariel Bibas loved Batman and family photos showed the four Bibases dressed as the character. Kfir, the infant with red hair and a toothless smile, became a symbol across Israel for the feelings of helplessness and anger over the hostages' captivity.

Oded Lifshitz, 84

The body of Oded Lifshitz, one of the oldest hostages held by the militants, was returned Thursday, his family confirmed. He was taken captive from his home in Kibbutz Nir Oz, along with his wife, Yocheved Lifshitz, who was freed during a weeklong ceasefire in November 2023.

His family said in a statement they had "hoped and prayed so much for a different outcome."

"Now we can mourn the husband, father, grandfather, and great-grandfather who has been missing from us since October 7," they said. "Our family's healing process will begin now and will not end until the last hostage is returned."

Oded and Yocheved Lifshitz are among the founders of Nir Oz. Oded, a journalist, campaigned for the recognition of Palestinian rights and peace between Arabs and Jews. In retirement, he drove to the Erez border crossing on the northern edge of the Gaza Strip once a week to ferry Palestinians to medical appointments in Israel as part of a group called On the Way to Recovery.

Oded took pride in his work helping the traditionally nomadic Bedouin people of the Negev Desert, his daughter told The Associated Press, describing a case that went to Israel's High Court and resulted in the return of some of their land.

Sagui Dekel Chen, 36

An Israeli-American, Chen was working outside on his pet project, bus conversions, when militants stormed his kibbutz. He instructed his wife, Avital, to hide in the safe room with their two daughters. Chen, one of the first people to raise alarm of the infiltration on the kibbutz, was taken captive.

Avital was seven months pregnant at the time of the attack; she gave birth to a third daughter, Shachar Mazal, in December 2023.

Chen is an avid tennis player who co-founded an arts center for young people in southern Israel, according to the Hostages and Missing Families Forum, an advocacy group representing the families of hostages,

Iair Horn, 46

Horn is an Israel-Argentinian who was taken captive along with his brother, Eitan Horn, who was staying with him at the time. Eitan Horn remains in captivity and his name is not on the list of hostages to be released during the ceasefire's first phase.

Iair Horn managed the kibbutz pub and is a fan of the local soccer team in Beer Sheba, according to the hostages forum. Friends gathered at the kibbutz pub on Nir Oz to watch Horn's release from captivity and to toast his return, according to Israeli media.

Alexander (Sasha) Troufanov, 29

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Sasha Trufanov, an Israeli-Russian, was taken hostage along with three members of his family: grandmother Irena Tati, mother Yelena (Lena) and girlfriend Sapir Cohen. His father, Vitaly Trufanov, was killed on Oct. 7, 2023. The rest of his family was freed during a weeklong ceasefire in November 2023.

Sasha Troufanov works as an engineer for Amazon, according to the hostages forum. His family immigrated to Israel from the Soviet Union 25 years ago.

He was believed to be held by Palestinian Islamic Jihad, another militant group in Gaza, which has released multiple videos of him in captivity, including one just hours before his release.

Eli Sharabi, 52

Eli Sharabi was taken captive by the militants from Kibbutz Beeri, a communal farm that was one of the hardest hit in the Hamas attack. His British-born wife, Lianne, and their teenage daughters, Noiya and Yahel, were killed by militants while hiding in their safe room. His brother, Yossi Sharabi, who lived next door, was killed in captivity. Hamas militants are holding his body, according to the Hostages Forum.

Eli Sharabi's home bore marks from the attack months later. AP journalists saw bullet holes in the walls and the shattered oven and TV screens. Nearby homes were torched by militants and their roofs blasted off during fighting on Oct. 7.

Ohad Ben Ami, 56

Ohad Ben Ami, a father to three, was taken captive with his wife, Raz, from Kibbutz Beeri, where he was an accountant. Raz Ben Ami was released during the weeklong ceasefire in November 2023.

The hostages forum described Ohad Ben Ami as a "passionate nature enthusiast" and the "cornerstone of his family."

Or Levy, 34

Or Levy was pulled out by the militants from a bomb shelter near the Nova music festival in southern Israel. His wife, Einav Levy, was killed during the attack. Their son Almog, now 3, has been in the care of relatives since the assault.

Levy was taken captive alongside American-Israeli Hersh Goldberg-Polin as well as two other hostages — Eliya Cohen and Alon Ohel. Goldberg-Polin, whose parents staged a high-profile campaign for his release, was killed in Hamas captivity.

Or Levy is from the city of Rishon Lezion, where he worked as a computer programmer for a startup.

Yarden Bibas, 35

The release of Yarden Bibas dimmed hopes that his wife and children were still alive in Gaza.

Hamas has claimed that the three were killed in an Israeli airstrike. Israel has not confirmed that, but a military spokesperson said last month that the government was "extremely concerned" about their welfare.

Yarden Bibas was taken from Kibbutz Nir Oz on Oct. 7. Photos from the abduction show him wounded, bleeding from the head.

Keith Siegel, 65

Keith Siegel, from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, was abducted with his wife, Aviva Siegel, from Kibbutz Kfar Aza, a communal farming village heavily damaged by the attack. She was freed during the November 2023 ceasefire deal, and has campaigned across the world for the release of her husband and other hostages.

Aviva Siegel said that she was held hostage with her husband during her 51 days in captivity. She said she took comfort from having her husband by her side as they were moved from tunnel to tunnel, the two given almost no food or water. Her parting words to him were, "Be strong for me."

Ofer Kalderon, 54

Ofer Kalderon, a French-Israeli hostage, was taken captive from Kibbutz Nir Oz. His teenage children, Sahar and Erez, were also abducted, but they were freed during the weeklong ceasefire in 2023.

Arbel Yehoud, 29

Arbel Yehoud was taken hostage with her boyfriend, Ariel Cunio, from Kibbutz Nir Oz. A third-generation resident of the kibbutz, she loves science and space, and her friends held a public star gazing to mark her birthday in captivity.

Her brother, Dolev Yehoud, was killed on Oct. 7.

Agam Berger, 20

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In videos of Agam Berger's abduction, her face is covered in blood, though it's unclear if it is from her own wound or those of other soldiers.

Berger is a violin player from a suburb of Tel Aviv who enlisted in the army just two months before the attack.

Gadi Moses, 80

Gadi Moses was one of the oldest hostages who remained in captivity in Gaza.

He was taken from his home on Kibbutz Nir Oz, one of the communities hardest-hit in the Hamas-led attack. The hostages forum described Moses as an expert agronomist who lectured on agriculture and helped maintain the kibbutz's community vegetable garden.

Moses' partner, Efrat, was killed during the attack.

Watchara Sriaoun, 33

In the Oct. 7 attack, militants overran the compound where agricultural workers lived on Kibbutz Nir Oz. Out of the 16 Thai workers living there, 11 were killed and five, including Watchara Sriaoun, were abducted.

They were among at least 31 Thai workers taken in the assault. In the November 2023 ceasefire, 23 were released in a deal negotiated between Thailand and Hamas, with assistance from Qatar and Iran.

Sathian Suwannakham, 35

Sathian Suwannakham was also taken from Nir Oz. The kibbutz has continued to advocate for the release of the Thai workers by posting regularly about them on social media, in addition to the Israeli hostages.

Surasak Rumnao, 32

Surasak Rumnao was abducted from the town of Yesha, located near the southern Gaza Strip.

His mother, Khammee Lamnao, said the Thai Embassy in Israel called her to let her know her son would be released.

Pongsak Thaenna, 36

Pongsak Thaenna was also taken from the town of Yesha. Thais make up the largest group of foreigners held in Gaza.

In the early days after the Oct. 7 attack, then-Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin pressed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in phone conversations to assist the Thai hostages.

Bannawat Saethao, 27

Bannawat Saethao was also abducted from the town of Yesha.

Liri Albag, 19

Liri Albag, who was among those abducted from the Nahal Oz military base, was featured in a video Hamas released in early January, filmed under duress. Her family said the video was "difficult to watch" because of Albag's clear emotional distress. They were particularly active in the protest movement pushing for a deal with Hamas to bring the hostages home.

"Liri, if you're hearing us, tell the others that all the families are moving heaven and earth and want their children home, and we will fight until all hostages are returned," her father said in a statement after the video was released.

Karina Arieiev, 20

Karina Arieiev was also taken from Nahal Oz.

Just before she was abducted, she sent a message to her family, saying: "If I don't live, take care of mom and dad all their lives. Don't give up, live," according to Israeli media. Her family said she loves to cook, sing, dance and write poetry.

Daniella Gilboa, 20

Also taken from Nahal Oz, Daniella Gilboa was originally named Danielle. Her parents changed it after she was taken captive, in line with a Jewish tradition that is believed to bring God's protection.

Gilboa, from Petah Tikva, a suburb of Tel Aviv, played piano and studied music in high school. She dreams of being a singer, according to Israeli media.

Naama Levy, 20

The footage from Naama Levy's abduction, in which she is wearing gray sweatpants covered in blood,

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was shown around the world.

Levy, among those taken from Nahal Oz, is a triathlete. When she was younger, she participated in the "Hands of Peace" delegation, which brings together Americans, Israelis and Palestinians to work on coexistence.

Romi Gonen, 24

Romi Gonen was taken from the Nova music festival in southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023. She spoke to her family for nearly five hours as militants marauded through the festival grounds. She told them that roads clogged with abandoned cars made escape impossible and that she would seek shelter in some bushes.

Her father, Eitan Goren, said she survived in part by learning Arabic, as it was the only way to communicate with her captors. "I just enjoy being with her even in silence, touching, hugging, watching her," he said, a week after her release. "I missed it so much."

Emily Damari, 28

Emily Damari is a British-Israeli citizen abducted from her apartment on Kibbutz Kfar Aza. She lived in a small apartment in a neighborhood for young adults, the closest part of the kibbutz to Gaza. Militants broke through the border fence of the kibbutz and ransacked the neighborhood.

The day after her release, Emily's mother, Mandy, said her daughter was "in high spirits and on the road to recovery."

Doron Steinbrecher, 31

Doron Steinbrecher is a veterinary nurse who loves animals, and a neighbor to Damari in Kibbutz Kfar Aza. Steinbrecher holds both Israeli and Romanian citizenship.

Steinbrecher was featured in a video released by Hamas in January 2024, along with two female Israeli soldiers. Her brother said the video gave them hope that she was alive but sparked concern because she looked tired, weak and gaunt.

After years of firm support, 10 days upended the US approach to Ukraine

By JUSTIN SPIKE Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — As Ukraine approached the three-year mark of Russia's full-scale invasion, the country's hoped-for path to a favorable and lasting peace was upended in a matter of days by the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump.

Kyiv had benefited from years of staunch support by its allies in the United States and Europe which had provided crucial military and financial support to help defend against Moscow's grinding incursions.

But when Trump held a lengthy phone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin last week — undoing years of U.S. policy to isolate the Russian leader over his aggression — it was taken as a signal in Kyiv and other European capitals that their alliance to contain Moscow was fraying.

Here's a timeline of events:

Wednesday, Feb. 12

On their 90-minute call, Trump and Putin agreed to begin negotiations to end the war, a move that was met with jubilation in Russia but which Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy had warned would be "very dangerous" if Ukraine were excluded from talks.

Although Trump spoke to Zelenskyy immediately after the Putin call, U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said that day that NATO membership for Ukraine, something Kyiv believes would protect the country and Europe from future Russian attacks, was unrealistic. He suggested Ukraine should abandon hopes of winning all its territory back, a perspective that is remarkably close to Moscow's.

The breakneck speed of Trump's transformation of U.S. policy toward Ukraine and Russia left many war-weary Ukrainians feeling that they were being left out of the conversation on their future, and fearing that a deal forced by Washington and Moscow would result in lost territory and vulnerability to future Russian aggression.

Friday, Feb. 14

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European leaders had their first chance to meet with members of the new Trump administration at the Munich Security Conference in Germany, where they hoped to gain clarity on Trump's approach to the war.

But leaders were stunned as senior U.S. officials including Vice President JD Vance lambasted European nations, gave mixed signals on support for Kyiv and suggested Europe would not be at the table for negotiations on Ukraine.

During highly anticipated talks between Vance and Zelenskyy in Munich, the Ukrainian leader told Vance that his country needed security guarantees as a precondition for engaging in any talks with Moscow to end the war.

Zelenskyy also said he'd ordered his ministers not to sign off on a proposed agreement to give the United States access to Ukraine's rare earth minerals, a key part of his talks with Vance. Ukrainian officials said the U.S. proposal did not offer any specific security guarantees in return for access to Ukraine's vast reserves of critical minerals that are used in the aerospace, defense and nuclear industries.

A senior White House official described Zelenskyy's refusal as "short-sighted."

Sunday, Feb. 16

On the final day of the conference, French President Emmanuel Macron began rallying European leaders to fortify their support for Ukraine, with his foreign minister announcing an emergency "working meeting" in Paris to assess the continent's next steps.

Meanwhile, amid concerns that U.S. support for Kyiv was faltering, a group of European countries was quietly working on a plan to send troops into Ukraine to help enforce any future peace settlement with Russia.

Tuesday, Feb. 18

U.S. and Russian officials met for talks in Saudi Arabia's capital, sidestepping Kyiv and its European backers. The two countries agreed to work together to end the war in Ukraine and to improve diplomatic and economic ties, an extraordinary about-face in U.S. foreign policy.

Yet the three U.S. principals at the meeting in Riyadh — Secretary of State Marco Rubio, national security adviser Mike Waltz and Trump's special Mideast envoy Steve Witkoff — maintained that the four-hour discussion was aimed mainly at assessing Russia's seriousness about wanting a peace deal.

All three said publicly that no specific proposals had been put on the table, and that it remained to be seen if the Russians were willing to negotiate in good faith.

They also rejected assertions that either Ukraine or the Europeans were being excluded, noting that although they weren't present in Riyadh, Trump, Vance and Rubio had all spoken with both Zelenskyy and European officials who would be involved if and when peace talks actually start.

Zelenskyy dismissed the talks, saying they would "yield no results" in the absence of Ukrainian participation. He postponed a plan to visit Riyadh the next day to avoid any linkage of his trip with the U.S.-Russia meeting.

Trump showed little patience for Kyiv's objections to being sidelined in Riyadh, and ramped up inflammatory rhetoric that caused anger and alarm in Ukraine and seemed to contradict the assurances that Rubio, Waltz and Witkoff had endeavored to provide.

Speaking from his Mar-a-Lago resort, Trump made the jarring suggestion that Ukraine itself was responsible for starting the war that has cost tens of thousands of Ukrainian lives, and criticized Zelenskyy for Ukraine delaying elections because of the invasion, in accordance with the Ukrainian Constitution.

Wednesday, Feb. 19

Trump's comments, and a Wednesday post on social media that called Zelenskyy a "dictator," led to Zelenskyy saying that some of the president's claims were "disinformation" that originated in Russia, and that he would like Trump's team "to be more truthful."

Trump, Zelenskyy said, is living in a Russian-made "disinformation space."

As relations between the two leaders eroded, one thing remained on the horizon that some observers thought could serve to lower the temperature on the disagreements between Washington and Kyiv: Trump's special envoy for Ukraine and Russia, Ret. Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg, arrived in Ukraine's capital by

train Wednesday morning for discussions with Zelenskyy and other officials.

Kellogg has long been Trump's top adviser on defense issues. He was due to speak with Zelenskyy about Trump's efforts to end the war, and the Ukrainian leader had previously said he looked forward to explaining what was happening in Ukraine to Kellogg and accompanying him to see the front line.

Thursday, Feb. 20

A news conference that was set to follow a meeting between Zelenskyy and Kellogg was abruptly cancelled at the request of the U.S. delegation.

Friday, Feb. 21

In a complimentary gesture that stood in stark contrast with the tone of the preceding days, Kellogg wrote on X that he'd had a "long and intense day with the senior leadership of Ukraine."

He said he'd had positive discussions with "the embattled and courageous leader of a nation at war and his talented national security team."

Still, Trump continued to lay into Zelenskyy, grumbling that a visit to Kyiv last week by U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent was "a wasted trip" after the Ukrainian side declined to agree to a U.S. proposal to procure profits on rare earth minerals.

At the same time, Waltz, Trump's national security adviser, expressed confidence that Zelenskyy would seal a rare earths deal. "Here's the bottom line. President Zelenskyy is going to sign that deal," Waltz said.

Trump, speaking to "The Brian Kilmeade Show" on Fox News radio, also dismissed Zelenskyy's complaints about not being included in the Saudi talks. He voiced certainty that Putin wanted to strike a deal.

"He doesn't have to make a deal," Trump said of Putin. "Because if he wanted, he would get the whole country."

Border Patrol agent whose death is tied to cultlike Zizians is being buried with military honors

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — A U.S. Border Patrol agent whose killing in Vermont during a traffic stop near the Canadian border has been tied to a cultlike group is scheduled to be buried with full military honors Saturday at a national cemetery.

David Maland, 44, died Jan. 20 during the stop on Interstate 91 in Conventry, about 20 miles (30 kilometers) south of the border with Canada. The driver of the stopped car is accused of opening fire on Maland and other agents, sparking a shootout that left her companion dead. Both belonged to a group called the Zizians that may be linked to six deaths in three states, investigators said.

Maland, who went by Chris, is to be buried at Fort Snelling National Cemetery in Minneapolis. A native of Minnesota, he served in the Air Force and the State Department before joining the Border Patrol.

"Chris was a loving son, brother, uncle, fiance and dedicated colleague," his family said in a statement released late Friday. "His kind heart and fighting soul made him a warm and inviting person to be around and pillar of strength for his country.

"We love you, Chris. You'll live in our hearts forever."

In the Air Force, Maland was responsible for protecting bases, personnel and property. In 2001, he worked security duty at the Pentagon during the Sept. 11 attacks, his family said.

He received the Global War on Terrorism Service Medal, among other honors, according to his obituary.

Maland was a K-9 handler at the State Department and at his Border Patrol job in Vermont. He first joined the Border Patrol in Texas.

"He will be remembered for his courage and commitment to protecting fellow Americans," Minnesota state Rep. Krista Knudsen, Maland's cousin, said on the House floor last month. "He is also a person who served faithfully with honor and bravery. He always put his service above himself."

Parents and kids navigate talks of loss and tragedy as they return home after LA area fires

By JAIMIE DING Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Ceiba Phillips, 11, couldn't believe what he saw when he returned to his Southern California neighborhood a month after a wildfire reduced it to rubble.

The ruins of his best friend's house and his beloved school. His house survived, but the backhouse where his grandparents lived and packed him lunch every morning was reduced to ashes and a silver pool of melted aluminum. His favorite cozy diner, Fox's, was decimated.

Seeing it in person — after seeing it through photos — brought shock and tears.

"There's not even a word created for it," Ceiba said. "It's sad, it's heavy, somewhat angry. Why did this have to happen?"

The Eaton fire that tore through Altadena on Jan. 7 left parents and children alike to deal with the trauma of one of the most destructive fires in California history. As people return to their neighborhoods, many kids are navigating the grief of losing everything that was familiar. Their parents, meanwhile, are learning how to help them cope.

Children thrive on routine, and reestablishing one as quickly as possible is key to helping kids cope, said Lori Peek, a sociology professor at the University of Colorado Boulder who studies the impact of natural disasters. It's essential for kids to stay connected with their friends, and for parents to have honest conversations with them about the difficulty of what they are facing.

"Being honest about our own emotions and opening up, but then being very inviting for children to share what they're feeling, what they're grieving, what they're experiencing, that can be one way to start those really important conversations," Peek said.

It's this kind of space that Chiara Angelicola, who works in early childhood education, was trying to create when she organized a Kids Town Hall event for families affected by the fires. Children had the opportunity to share how they felt and participate in art and somatic therapy exercises, which focus on how trauma can affect the body. Ceiba's 4-year-old sister, Quoia, went with their mother, Alyson Granaderos, along with more than 100 other kids and parents.

"A lot of these kids had a lot to say ... and some of it even made the adults uncomfortable," Angelicola said. "I think that exercise in learning how to be uncomfortable experiencing certain feelings is very necessary for children because we're modeling for them that feelings won't hurt us."

Hundreds of therapists and non-profits also have offered their mental health services for free to victims of the fires.

A last normal day

Ceiba's home was one of about six on his street that wasn't destroyed, but it sustained so much smoke damage it's not livable right now. On a recent day, the family carefully entered wearing respirator masks and protective equipment.

Ceiba looked out his bedroom window and said he didn't care that his house had survived. "I'd rather have all of Altadena," he said.

Ceiba remembers every detail of his last normal day.

School let out early due to intense Santa Ana winds that fueled the fires. He and his sister went to Ceiba's best friend's house. They played on a trampoline, drew comics, and chucked LEGO figurines off the balcony.

"I've probably been to his house more than 2,000 times," Ceiba said.

That evening, the family received a text message from Ceiba's grandma asking if they saw the fire that had broken out nearby. They ran to their window and saw the whole mountainside ablaze.

"I was on the floor like praying, please protect my house and my family. And you know, mom's like, 'Come on, you got to get up, pack your stuff,'" Ceiba said.

The 11-year-old sprang into action, dumping his clothes and quarters into his bag and packing for his younger sister.

They sheltered in their dad's office in neighboring Pasadena. Ceiba could barely sleep. By the morning,

much of his neighborhood was gone.

Finding a rhythm again

Ceiba's days have taken on a rhythm again, even at his new school in Pasadena.

When he greeted his mom on a recent afternoon, he shared a fun fact he'd learned that day: In 1846, a future president, Abraham Lincoln, had almost joined the ill-fated Donner Party as it set out from Springfield, Illinois, on its infamous journey out West, only to get trapped in California's Sierra Nevada.

Ceiba has decided to play the saxophone in band class, and his state project will be on Michigan, where his mom is from. Granaderos said her son already seems to be adapting.

But his conversations with friends now veer into unusual topics for 11-year-olds.

"The insurance isn't covering us and how's your house? How's this person's house?" Ceiba said, sharing what he and his friends discuss.

He wonders what will become of his community. He's optimistic though.

"I know Altadena and I know that it's going to stick together," Ceiba said.

Beauty, sadness and destruction

Ceiba had clamored right away to go back home after the fire, but Granaderos was hesitant. After the dust settled, she knew that allowing her kids to see and experience what happened was part of the healing process.

"You're facing this realization of certain conversations you have to start to have with your kid, right?" Granaderos said. "There's beauty in the world, and there's also a lot of sadness and destruction."

Quoia burst into tears when the family drove past what was left of The Bunny Museum in Pasadena dedicated to rabbits. She loved seeing the giant inflatable bunnies that loomed over the street corner nearly every day. Ceiba cried along with her.

"I just couldn't really take it," he said.

But not all is lost.

Granaderos named both of her children after trees — Ceiba, the tree of life, and Quoia after the Sequoia. She planted a sapling of the iconic Sequoia — which is extraordinarily resilient to fire, insects and disease — in the home's backyard when Quoia was a baby.

After the fire, it is still standing.

Meet the 5 top court justices in Brazil who could decide the future of former President Bolsonaro

By MAURICIO SAVARESE Associated Press

SAO PAULO (AP) — The fate of Brazil's former President Jair Bolsonaro is largely in the hands of five people.

Within the next three weeks, a panel of five of Brazil's 11 Supreme Court justices will decide whether Bolsonaro and 33 others charged by the country's prosecutor-general of attempting a coup will stand trial.

To expedite certain cases, including criminal ones, Brazil's top court can use one of its two five-justice panels, both of which are permanent and exclude the chief justice. Changes in each panel usually take place mostly by request or when one of its members becomes chief justice. In Brazil, the chief justice serves for two years.

As rapporteur of the cases against Bolsonaro, Justice Alexandre de Moraes was authorized to bring them before the panel he sits on.

The 5-judge panel that could decide Bolsonaro's future excludes the two justices he appointed: André Mendonça and Kássio Nunes Marques. They sit on the other panel of the court.

Bolsonaro's lawyers have said that they want the decision to fall on the full-court, not just on the 5-justice panel. But that decision can only be made by de Moraes, as the rapporteur of the case, or by three of the justices in the panel — a majority.

If the charges are accepted, that same panel could become the main judicial body to hear Bolsonaro's defense, witness testimony and sentencing.

Brazil's legal experts are split on whether to keep the trial within the 5-justice panel, so it doesn't drag into the 2026 presidential election, or to move for a full-court decision, which would carry greater authority.

Luis Henrique Machado, a criminal attorney and professor at the IDP university in Brasilia, says it is "virtually impossible" that the panel will reject the charges against Bolsonaro, though this does not guarantee a guilty verdict.

The former President denies any wrongdoing in all five counts against him and has claimed that he is being politically persecuted.

Here are the judges set to decide whether Bolsonaro will be on trial and likely rule on the case:

Alexandre de Moraes

De Moraes is the rapporteur of the cases against the former president in the court and also a target of Bolsonaro and his allies. Appointed by former president Michel Temer in 2017, de Moraes is regarded as a conservative member of the court who, unlike his peers, has experience as public security secretary. The 56-year-old justice was also targeted by billionaire Elon Musk, who advocated for his impeachment for alleged judicial overreach.

Cármén Lúcia

Lúcia, who is also the chairwoman of Brazil's top electoral court, was appointed by Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in 2006 during his first term. Since then, the 70-year-old justice has been considered one of the harshest on the court on criminal cases, including those once aimed at the current president. Lúcia has often followed de Moraes in her decisions regarding democratic guardrails. Two years ago, she wrote in one of her rulings that Bolsonaro didn't respect the presidency.

Cristiano Zanin

Zanin is the chairman of the panel. The 49-year-old was Lula's attorney between 2013 and 2023, when he was appointed by the leftist leader to the country's top court. Zanin's work helped overturn Lula's graft conviction at the Supreme Court, allowing him to leave jail and defeat Bolsonaro in the 2022 election. He was a critic of judicial overreach during the sprawling Car Wash corruption probe, which put Lula behind bars for almost one year.

Flávio Dino

A former federal judge who transitioned to politics before being appointed to Brazil's top court, Dino, 56, is the latest justice to take his seat. He was appointed by Lula in 2023 after serving as his justice minister. He was on that job when Bolsonaro supporters trashed government buildings on Jan. 8, 2023, which the country's prosecutor-general says was part of a plan to return the far-right leader to the presidency. Dino has been a Bolsonaro critic for years.

Luiz Fux

Fux, regarded by his peers as a moderate, was appointed in 2011 by then President Dilma Rousseff. The 71-year-old had a difficult relationship with the Bolsonaro presidency during his time as chief-justice between 2020 and 2022, particularly with respect to matters regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. When he left the position, shortly before the latest presidential election, he said the court was targeted daily by "hostile words or undemocratic acts." He often follows de Moraes' decisions.

Justice Department files complaint against judge weighing challenge to Trump's transgender troop ban

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Justice Department filed a complaint Friday accusing a federal judge in Washington of misconduct during hearings over President Donald Trump's executive order that calls for banning transgender troops from serving in the U.S. military.

The complaint filed by Attorney General Pam Bondi's chief of staff, Chad Mizelle, marks an escalation of the Republican administration's criticism of the judiciary, which has been weighing a slew of legal challenges to the Republican president's actions.

The complaint to the chief judge of Washington's federal court accuses U.S. District Judge Ana Reyes of

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inappropriately questioning a government lawyer about his religious beliefs and trying to “embarrass” the attorney with a rhetorical exercise during an exchange about discrimination. It is seeking an investigation, saying “appropriate action” should be taken to ensure that future hearings are conducted with the “dignity and impartiality the public has a right to expect.”

A representative from Reyes’ chambers declined to comment Friday.

During the rhetorical exercise, Reyes told the attorney that she changed the rules in her courtroom to bar graduates of the University of Virginia law school from appearing before her because they are all “liars and lack integrity.” She instructed the government attorney, a graduate of the school, to sit down.

In another exchange cited in the complaint, the judge asked the attorney what “Jesus would say to telling a group of people that they are so worthless, so worthless that we’re we’re not going to allow them into homeless shelters?” She continued, “Do you think Jesus would be, ‘Sounds right to me?’”

The government lawyer responded, “The United States is not going to speculate about what Jesus would have to say about anything.”

“An independent impartial judiciary is fundamental to our system of justice,” Mizelle wrote. “When judges demonstrate apparent bias or treat counsel disrespectfully, public confidence in the judicial system is undermined.”

Reyes is known for her stern rebukes of lawyers on both sides. In a different case earlier this month, she verbally rebuked former U.S. Solicitor General Seth Waxman, who’s representing eight government watchdogs suing the Trump administration over their firing. She denied an emergency motion and called it “beyond comprehension” to hold a hearing on a matter rather than resolving it in a “five-minute phone call.”

The Trump administration has been ramping up its criticism of judges over rulings blocking parts of his ambitious agenda rolled out in the first weeks of his administration.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt earlier this month accused judges of acting as “activists rather than honest arbiters of the law.” Supporters have circulated pictures of judges online, made claims about their families and suggested that the Republican president simply ignore their orders.

Reyes, who was nominated by Democratic President Joe Biden, indicated that she won’t rule before early March on whether to temporarily block the Trump administration from enforcing the order, which plaintiffs’ attorneys have said illegally discriminates against transgender troops.

Her questions and remarks, however, suggested she is deeply skeptical of the administration’s reasoning for ordering a policy change. Reyes also lauded the service of several active-duty troops who sued to block the order.

“If you were in a foxhole, would you care about these individuals’ gender identity?” the judge asked the government attorney, who answered that it “would not be a primary concern of mine.”

Trump’s Jan. 27 order claims the sexual identity of transgender service members “conflicts with a soldier’s commitment to an honorable, truthful, and disciplined lifestyle, even in one’s personal life” and is harmful to military readiness. It requires Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth to issue a revised policy.

Six transgender people who are active-duty service members and two others seeking to join the military sued to block the Trump administration from enforcing the order. In a court filing, plaintiffs’ lawyers argued that Trump’s order openly expresses “hostility” and constitutionally impermissible “animus” toward transgender people.

Trump’s order also says that “use of pronouns that inaccurately reflect an individual’s sex” is inconsistent with a government policy to “establish high standards for troop readiness, lethality, cohesion, honesty, humility, uniformity, and integrity.”

After 30 years in prison for murder, new DNA evidence frees Hawaii man who maintained innocence

By JENNIFER SINCO KELLEHER Associated Press

HONOLULU (AP) — A Hawaii man who spent 30 years in prison for a murder he long denied committing declared the day “Freedom Friday” and said he was eager to visit his mother after a judge ordered him

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released because of new DNA evidence.

There were gasps and cries in the courtroom when Judge Kirstin Hamman said, "And the judgement and sentence is vacated and the defendant is ordered to be released from custody," before a Zoom feed broadcasting the hearing suddenly turned off.

She ruled that new evidence, including DNA test results, would likely change the outcome of another trial against Gordon Cordeiro.

The case involves the 1994 killing of Timothy Blaisdell during a drug deal robbery on the island of Maui. Cordeiro's first trial ended in a hung jury, with only one juror voting to convict him. But he was later found guilty of murder, robbery and attempted murder and sentenced to life without the possibility of parole.

The Hawaii Innocence Project took up his case, and during a hearing this week it argued that Cordeiro must be released on the grounds of new evidence proving his innocence, ineffectiveness of his previous attorney and prosecutorial misconduct.

Maui County Prosecuting Attorney Andrew Martin said he was disappointed in the ruling and "None of the judge's findings exonerate him in any way."

His office intends to appeal and file a motion seeking to impose bail on Cordeiro's release, Martin added, saying there is a flight risk because a murder charge is involved.

Kenneth Lawson, co-director of the Hawaii Innocence Project, said it was a very emotional moment. "He cried, we all cried," Lawson said. "He believed that he was going to be exonerated ... but having gone through two trials, you lose faith in the justice system. To finally hear a judge say, 'I'm vacating your convictions,' that's when it hit him."

Following his release Cordeiro, now 51, stood outside the Maui Community Correctional Center and talked to reporters, calling it "Freedom Friday." The Associated Press listened by phone from Honolulu.

He said he felt thankful. He thanked his supporters, the judge and even prosecutors who stipulated to certain facts in the case.

"I'd like to go see my mom," Cordeiro said. "Would be nice."

Asked about adjusting to life as a free man after 30 years behind bars, he said, "I got good support."

According to court documents filed by Cordeiro's attorneys, he was wrongfully convicted in part because police relied upon four jailhouse informants motivated by promises of reduced sentences and fabricated murder-for-hire plots.

"Unfortunately for Cordeiro, the State's use of incentivized jailhouse informants and their fabricated evidence and testimony about the murder-for-hire plots, was enough to convince a jury of his guilt in his second trial," the Hawaii Innocence Project said in a court filing.

However the judge ruled there was insufficient evidence to show that the state intentionally used false testimony and rejected a claim of prosecutorial misconduct.

Cordeiro had several alibis for the day Blaisdell was killed, his attorneys said: The then-22-year-old was at home with his parents and sisters, spending the day building a shelving unit in his family's open-air garage and installing a stereo in his sister's car — nowhere near the so-called Skid Row area in upcountry Maui where the killing happened.

Blaisdell had gone to Skid Row with a man named Michael Freitas and planned to buy a pound of marijuana with \$800 in cash, according to court documents. His body was found at the bottom of a ravine.

Freitas kept changing his story, Cordeiro's attorneys said, and he shifted the blame onto their client, a friend who he falsely believed had "snitched" on him in an unrelated drug case.

After Cordeiro's conviction, new testing on physical evidence from the scene excluded him as the source of DNA on Blaisdell's body and other crime scene evidence, the Hawaii Innocence Project said, and a DNA profile of an unidentified person was found on the inside pockets of Blaisdell's jeans.

The judge agreed that the new DNA evidence and new information about gunshot residue would change the results of a later trial.

Cordeiro's attorneys believe Freitas, who died in 2020, set Blaisdell up to be robbed and was involved in his killing.

"The police botched this case from the beginning and turned the No. 1 suspect into the state's star witness,

resulting in a 30-plus-year nightmare and miscarriage of justice for Gordon and his family," Lawson said.

Trump fires chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and two other military officers

By TARA COPP and LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump abruptly fired Air Force Gen. CQ Brown Jr. as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on Friday, sidelining a history-making fighter pilot and respected officer as part of a campaign led by his defense secretary to rid the military of leaders who support diversity and equity in the ranks.

The ouster of Brown, only the second Black general to serve as chairman, is sure to send shock waves through the Pentagon. His 16 months in the job had been consumed with the war in Ukraine and the expanded conflict in the Middle East.

"I want to thank General Charles 'CQ' Brown for his over 40 years of service to our country, including as our current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He is a fine gentleman and an outstanding leader, and I wish a great future for him and his family," Trump posted on social media.

Brown's public support of Black Lives Matter after the police killing of George Floyd had made him fodder for the administration's wars against "wokeism" in the military. His ouster is the latest upheaval at the Pentagon, which plans to cut 5,400 civilian probationary workers starting next week and identify \$50 billion in programs that could be cut next year to redirect those savings to fund Trump's priorities.

Trump said he's nominating retired Air Force Lt. Gen. Dan "Razin" Caine to be the next chairman. Caine is a career F-16 pilot who served on active duty and in the National Guard, and was most recently the associate director for military affairs at the CIA, according to his military biography.

Caine's military service includes combat roles in Iraq, special operations postings and positions inside some of the Pentagon's most classified special access programs.

However, he has not had key assignments identified in law as prerequisites for the job, including serving as either the vice chairman, a combatant commander or a service chief. That requirement could be waived if the "president determines such action is necessary in the national interest."

More Pentagon firings

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, in a statement praising both Caine and Brown, announced the firings of two additional senior officers: Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Lisa Franchetti and Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force Gen. Jim Slife.

Franchetti becomes the second top female military officer to be fired by the Trump administration. Trump fired Coast Guard Commandant Adm. Linda Fagan just a day after he was sworn in.

A surface warfare officer, Franchetti has commanded at all levels, heading U.S. 6th Fleet and U.S. Naval Forces Korea. She was the second woman ever to be promoted to four-star admiral, and she did multiple deployments, including as commander of a naval destroyer and two stints as aircraft carrier strike group commander.

Slife led Air Force Special Operations Command prior to becoming the service's vice chief of staff and had deployed to the Middle East and Afghanistan.

He told The Associated Press on Friday: "The President and Secretary of Defense deserve to have generals they trust and the force deserves to have generals who have credibility with our elected and appointed officials. While I'm disappointed to leave under these circumstances, I wouldn't want the outcome to be any different."

Trump has asserted his executive authority in a much stronger way in his second term, removing most officials from the Biden administration even though many of those positions are meant to carry over from one administration to the next.

The chairman role was established in 1949 as an adviser to the president and secretary of defense, as a way to filter all of the views of the service chiefs and more readily provide that information to the White

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House without the president having to reach out to each individual military branch, according to an Atlantic Council briefing written by retired Maj. Gen. Arnold Punaro. The role has no actual command authority.

Trump acted despite support for Brown among key members of Congress and a seemingly friendly meeting with him in mid-December, when the two were seated next to each other for a time at the Army-Navy football game.

The firing follows days of speculation after a list of officers, including Brown, to be fired was circulated on Capitol Hill — but notably was not sent via any formal notification to either of the Republican chairmen of the House or Senate armed services committees.

Sen. Roger Wicker, GOP chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, didn't mention Caine's name in a statement Friday.

"I thank Chairman Brown for his decades of honorable service to our nation," Wicker said. "I am confident Secretary Hegseth and President Trump will select a qualified and capable successor for the critical position of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff."

Congressional Democratic leaders called out the firings as a direct attempt to politicize the military.

"A professional, apolitical military that is subordinate to the civilian government and supportive of the Constitution rather than a political party is essential to the survival of our democracy," Rhode Island Sen. Jack Reed, ranking member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said in a statement late Friday. "For the sake of our troops and the well-being of every American, elected leaders — especially Senate Republicans — must defend that enduring principle against corrosive attempts to remake the military into a partisan force."

Brown risked discussing race

Brown's future was called into question during the confirmation hearing for Hegseth last month. Asked if he would fire Brown, Hegseth responded, "Every single senior officer will be reviewed based on meritocracy, standards, lethality and commitment to lawful orders they will be given."

Hegseth had previously taken aim at Brown. "First of all, you gotta fire, you know, you gotta fire the chairman of Joint Chiefs," he said flatly in a podcast in November. And in one of his books, he questioned whether Brown got the job because he was Black.

"Was it because of his skin color? Or his skill? We'll never know, but always doubt — which on its face seems unfair to CQ. But since he has made the race card one of his biggest calling cards, it doesn't really matter," Hegseth wrote.

As he walked into the Pentagon on his first day as defense chief on Jan. 27, Hegseth was asked directly if he planned to fire Brown.

"I'm standing with him right now," said Hegseth, patting Brown on the back. "Look forward to working with him."

Brown, who spent Friday visiting troops at the U.S.-Mexico border, drew attention to himself for speaking out about the death of George Floyd in 2020. While he knew it was risky, he said, discussions with his wife and sons about the killing convinced him he needed to say something.

As protests roiled the nation, Brown posted a video message to the Air Force titled, "Here's What I'm Thinking About." He described the pressures that came with being one of the few Black men in his unit. He recalled pushing himself "to perform error-free" as a pilot and officer his whole life, but still facing bias. He said he'd been questioned about his credentials, even when he wore the same flight suit and wings as every other pilot.

Brown's path to the chairmanship was troubled — he was among the more than 260 senior military officers whose nominations were stalled for months by Republican Sen. Tommy Tuberville of Alabama. But when the Senate vote was finally taken in September 2023, Brown easily was confirmed by a vote of 89-8.

It had been 30 years since Colin Powell became the first Black chairman, serving from 1989 to 1993. But while African Americans made up 17.2% of the 1.3 million active-duty service members, only 9% of officers were Black, according to a 2021 Defense Department report.

Brown's service as chairman made history in that this was the first time that both the defense secretary,

Lloyd Austin, and the Joint Chiefs chairman were Black.

AP sues 3 Trump administration officials, citing freedom of speech

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

The Associated Press sued three Trump administration officials Friday over access to presidential events, citing freedom of speech in asking a federal judge to stop the blocking of its journalists. "We'll see them in court," the White House press secretary said in response.

The lawsuit was filed Friday afternoon in U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C., 10 days after the White House began restricting access to the news agency. It was assigned to U.S. District Judge Trevor McFadden, a Trump nominee.

The AP says its case is about an unconstitutional effort by the White House to control speech — in this case not changing its style from the Gulf of Mexico to the "Gulf of America," as President Donald Trump did last month with an executive order.

"The press and all people in the United States have the right to choose their own words and not be retaliated against by the government," the AP said in its lawsuit, which names White House chief of staff Susan Wiles, deputy chief of staff Taylor Budowich and press secretary Karoline Leavitt.

"This targeted attack on the AP's editorial independence and ability to gather and report the news strikes at the very core of the First Amendment," the news agency said. "This court should remedy it immediately." The Constitution's First Amendment guarantees freedom of the press, speech and religion and bars the government from obstructing any of them.

Leavitt said that she learned about the lawsuit Friday while driving from the White House to an appearance at the Conservative Political Action Conference.

"I wanted to get the White House counsel on the phone before taking this stage to see what I can and cannot say but, look, we feel we are in the right in this position," she said. "We're going to ensure that truth and accuracy is present at that White House every single day."

Trump directly cited AP's editorial decision

In stopping the AP from attending press events at the White House and Mar-a-Lago, or flying on Air Force One in the agency's customary spot, the Trump team directly cited the AP's decision not to fully follow the president's renaming.

"We're going to keep them out until such time as they agree that it's the Gulf of America," Trump said Tuesday.

This week, about 40 news organizations signed onto a letter organized by the White House Correspondents Association, urging the White House to reverse its policy against the AP. They included outlets like Fox News Channel and Newsmax, where many of the on-air commentators are Trump supporters.

"We can understand President Trump's frustration because the media has often been unfair to him, but Newsmax still supports AP's right, as a private organization, to use the language it wants to use in its reporting," Newsmax said in a statement. "We fear a future administration may not like something Newsmax writes and seek to ban us."

While AP journalists have still been allowed on White House grounds, they have been kept out of the "pool" of journalists that cover events in smaller spaces and report back to its readers and other reporters. The AP has been part of White House pools for more than a century.

The lawsuit said the AP had made "several unsuccessful efforts" to persuade the administration that its conduct was unlawful. Julie Pace, AP's senior vice president and executive editor, traveled to Florida this week to meet with Wiles.

The AP Stylebook is a sticking point

In an email to AP, Wiles said the news organization was targeted because its influential stylebook is used as a standard by many journalists, scholars and students across the country, the lawsuit said. She said the administration was hopeful the name change would be reflected in the AP Stylebook "where American audiences are concerned."

The Stylebook is used by international audiences, as well as those within the United States. The AP has said that its guidance was offered to promote clarity, and that even though Gulf of Mexico will continue to be used, journalists should also note Trump's action to change the name.

A Trump executive order to change the name of the United States' largest mountain back to Mount McKinley from Denali is being recognized by the AP Stylebook. Trump has the authority to do so because the mountain is completely within the country he oversees, AP has said.

Wiles also wrote to the AP that its stylebook's influence "has been misused, and at times weaponized, to push a divisive and partisan agenda," according to the lawsuit.

In an Axios story last week, Budowich noted other AP Stylebook entries that have rankled some conservatives. They include the decision to capitalize Black but not white in racial references, guidance on gender-affirming medical care and direction not to use the term "illegal immigrants."

In a radio interview with Fox News' Brian Kilmeade on Friday, Trump referred to the Associated Press as "radical left lunatics." He said that "Associated Press is a third-rate outfit with a first-rate name."

He said "just about everybody" accepted the Gulf of America name change but "AP wants to be cute." There has been a mixed response from other news organizations: The New York Times and Washington Post are continuing to use Gulf of Mexico, while Fox News has switched to Trump's choice. Google Maps is using Gulf of America for users in the United States.

Woman accused of drugging and robbing older men in a deadly romance scheme

By TY ONEIL, JESSE BEDAYN and SEJAL GOVINDARAO Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — A woman used online dating apps to lure at least four older men to meet her in person, then drugged them with sedatives and stole hundreds of thousands of dollars in a "sinister" romance scheme, FBI officials in Las Vegas said Friday.

Three of the men died, authorities said, and she has been charged in one of their deaths.

Aurora Phelps, 43, who is in custody in Mexico, faces 21 counts including wire fraud, identity theft and one count of kidnapping resulting in death, Sue Fahami, the acting United States attorney for the District of Nevada, said at a news conference.

"This is a romance scam on steroids," said Spencer Evans, the special agent in charge of the FBI's Las Vegas division. One of the four victims, who were targeted in 2021 and 2022, awoke from a coma after Phelps gave him prescription sedatives over the course of a week, Evans added.

In one instance Phelps is alleged to have kidnapped a victim by heavily sedating him and taking him across the U.S.-Mexico border in a wheelchair and then to a Mexico City hotel room, where he was later found dead.

After incapacitating her victims, Evans said, Phelps stole their cars, withdrew money from their bank accounts, used their credit cards to purchase luxury items and gold and even tried to access social security and retirement accounts.

According to the indictment, Phelps met one man in July 2021, went on lunch dates with him and that November ordered lunch to his house and slipped him a prescription drug.

While he was "mostly unconscious" for about five days, Phelps gained access to his accounts and stole his iPhone, iPads, driver's license and bank cards, according to the indictment. She also allegedly accessed his E-Trade account and sold Apple stock worth about \$3.3 million, though she was unable to withdraw that money.

Authorities believe Phelps used popular dating apps including Tinder, Hinge and Bumble to find her targets. The men were lonely and looking for companionship and went on multiple dates with Phelps before she stealthily gave them sedatives, according to Evans.

"It's folks that are out looking for love that ran into something far more sinister," he said.

Phelps, a dual citizen of Mexico and the U.S., had been on the FBI's radar for a couple of years, according to Evans. He declined to comment on her criminal history.

Phelps does not have a U.S.-based attorney who could speak on her behalf, a spokesperson for the Department of Justice said. The Associated Press left messages seeking comment with Mexico's Foreign Affairs Ministry and Attorney General's Office.

Several of the victims' relatives called authorities when they were unable to contact their loved ones, Evans said.

One woman was unable to reach her father the day after he went on a date with Phelps in Guadalajara, Mexico, in May 2022, according to court records. The next day Mexican police found him dead on the bathroom floor of his home. Phelps then used an account belonging to the victim to purchase a gold coin, along with other transactions, the indictment alleges.

The FBI is aware of more alleged victims in the U.S. and Mexico, Evans said, and is making information about the case public, including suspected aliases, in hopes of identifying others who "fell victim to her scams and whose trust in her may have cost them their life."

The FBI is also working with the Department of Justice and Mexican authorities to secure her extradition.

If convicted on every charge, which include seven counts of wire fraud, three counts of mail fraud, six counts of bank fraud, three counts of identity theft and one count of kidnapping, Phelps faces a maximum sentence of life in prison, Fahami said.

LA mayor dismisses fire chief over response to most destructive wildfire in city history last month

By MICHAEL R. BLOOD Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Six weeks after the start of the most destructive wildfire in city history, Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass ousted the fire chief Friday amid a public rift over preparations for a potential blaze and finger-pointing between the chief and City Hall over responsibility for the devastation.

Bass, a first-term Democrat, said she is removing Chief Kristin Crowley immediately. "Los Angeles needs to move forward. This is a new day," she told reporters at City Hall.

While Bass initially praised Crowley in the early hours of firefighting, she said she later learned an additional 1,000 firefighters could have been deployed the day the blaze ignited. Additionally, she said Crowley rebuffed a request to prepare a report on the fires that is a critical part of investigations into what happened and why.

"One thousand firefighters who could have been on the job fighting the fires were sent home" on Crowley's watch, Bass said.

Powerful winds fueled devastating fires

The Palisades Fire began during heavy winds Jan. 7, destroying or damaging nearly 8,000 homes, businesses and other structures and killing at least 12 people in the affluent LA neighborhood. Another wind-whipped fire started the same day in suburban Altadena, a community to the east, killing at least 17 people and destroying or damaging more than 10,000 homes and other buildings.

Bass has been facing criticism for being in Africa as part of a presidential delegation on the day the fire started, even though weather reports had warned of dangerous wind and wildfire conditions in the days before she left.

Speaking at City Hall, Bass said Crowley never notified her of the looming danger before she departed, even though that was standard practice since she took office in December 2022.

"She has my cellphone. She knows she can call me 24/7," Bass said. "That did not happen this time."

At City Hall, Bass was pressed again on how she could have been unaware of the fire risk before leaving the country, given widespread media coverage about intensifying winds and tinder-dry conditions. She didn't appear to respond directly.

The Los Angeles Fire Department said it had no comment about the ousting of the chief. Crowley could not immediately be reached for comment. The mayor's office said the former chief exercised her Civil Service rights to stay with the department but at a lower, yet-to-be determined rank.

Scathing response from firefighters union

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The firefighters union sharply criticized Bass' decision and echoed the former chief's concerns over the department's staffing and funding.

Crowley is "being made a scapegoat ... without the benefit of a full investigation into what actually happened," United Firefighters of Los Angeles City, Local 112, said in a statement.

"The reality is our fire department has been understaffed and under-resourced for years — including during Mayor Bass' time in office," the union said.

"The LAFD did have operational budget cuts in this fiscal year, including cuts to overtime, brush clearance and civilian positions. In fact, we still have nearly 100 broken down fire engines, trucks and ambulances in the maintenance yard because of civilian mechanic job cuts. This is a city that has neglected its fire department," the statement said.

Chief was appointed during period of turmoil for LAFD

Crowley was named fire chief in 2022 by Bass' predecessor at a time when the department was in turmoil over allegations of rampant harassment, hazing and discrimination. She worked for the city fire department for more than 25 years and held nearly every role, including fire marshal, engineer and battalion chief.

Crowley was the department's first female chief.

Her dismissal followed weeks of growing distance between the mayor and Crowley. As chief, Crowley publicly criticized the city for budget cuts that she said made it harder for firefighters to do their jobs. In January, when the Palisades fire was out of control, Crowley said in televised interviews that her department was underfunded and understaffed and emergency vehicles had been idled because the LAFD didn't have the mechanics to fix them.

Bass said Friday that the budget was increased, not slashed.

Billionaire developer Rick Caruso, who was defeated by Bass in the 2022 election and has been critical of her wildfire management, called Crowley's dismissal "very disappointing."

The chief "spoke honestly about the severe and profoundly ill-conceived budget cuts the Bass administration made to the LAFD," Caruso said in a post on the social platform X. "Honesty in a high city official should not be a firing offense."

Africa trip has left mayor facing lingering questions

Since returning to the U.S. last month, an at-times defensive Bass had provided only sketchy insight into her thinking in the days leading up to her departure for Africa. Her absence quickly became an embarrassment — on her return, she appeared silent with a blank expression when intercepted on camera by a reporter at the airport, who asked repeatedly why she had been gone and if she had regrets.

In televised interviews this week, Bass acknowledged she made a mistake by leaving the city. But she faulted Crowley for failing to alert her about the potentially explosive fire conditions.

Mayor's tenure reshaped by deadly fire and rebuilding job

Bass' handling of the Palisades fire and the vast rebuilding job will be the measure of her tenure. She has said that she intends to seek reelection in 2026.

Bass, a former legislator and member of Congress who was on former President Joe Biden's vice presidential short list, is known for an understated, coalition-building style. Her leadership is being tested as the cleanup and recovery get underway involving the Trump administration, the state, Los Angeles County, the city and other municipalities damaged in the fires, along with an array of government agencies and private interests.

Tensions already have emerged, including local political rivalries, while Trump has been critical of state water policy. Questions have been raised about who is in charge of the rebuilding, with so many entities and officials involved. Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom has assembled a group of business leaders to dovetail with the larger reconstruction effort.

"This is her first major challenge and she is going to be judged on it, and that could be good or bad," longtime Democratic consultant Bill Carrick said. For the moment, "she seems to be struggling."

Responding to a reporter, Bass disputed the idea that her administration is in upheaval.

"The business of the fire department and the city will continue" while the search for a permanent re-

placement is underway, she said.

US envoy praises Zelenskyy after Trump's censure of the Ukrainian leader

By ILLIA NOVIKOV Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — President Donald Trump's envoy to Ukraine and Russia said on Friday that he had held "extensive and positive discussions" with Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy about the three-year war with Russia and praised the Ukrainian leader as an "embattled and courageous leader of a nation at war."

Retired U.S. Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg — who traveled to Kyiv on Wednesday and whose planned news conference with Zelenskyy on Thursday was changed at the last minute to a simple photo opportunity — struck a positive tone after what he said on the social platform X was "a long and intense day" of talks with Ukraine's senior leadership.

His comments marked a departure from recent rebukes of Zelenskyy by Trump and other senior U.S. officials that appeared to indicate an abrupt deterioration of relations. Trump called Zelenskyy "a dictator without elections" and warned him that he'd "better move fast" to negotiate an end to the war or risk not having a nation to lead.

The possibility that vital U.S. military aid for Ukraine was in doubt darkened the mood in Kyiv as Ukrainian forces struggle to hold back Russia's bigger army on the battlefield.

European governments, uneasy about being sidelined so far in talks between senior U.S. and Russian officials, have jumped to shore up Zelenskyy and at the same time avoid a breakdown in transatlantic relations.

Polish President Andrzej Duda, whose country has been a vocal supporter of neighboring Ukraine, said Zelenskyy phoned him on Friday. Duda said he told Zelenskyy "to remain committed to the course of calm and constructive cooperation" with Trump.

"We consistently believe there is no other way to stop the bloodshed and achieve lasting peace in Ukraine except with the support of the United States," Duda said he also told Zelenskyy.

"I trust that goodwill and honesty form the foundation of the U.S. negotiation strategy," Duda said on X. "I have no doubt that President Trump is guided by a deep sense of responsibility for global stability and peace."

The European Union's top defense official said Friday that the bloc plans to send a strong message of support to Ukraine next week with a new aid package to mark Monday's third anniversary of the war.

EU Defense Commissioner Andrius Kubilius said senior members of the bloc's executive branch are weighing how, "in a very urgent way, to send a very strong message to Ukrainians and to the world that we are standing together with Ukraine."

European policy commissioners, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and other top EU officials are traveling to Kyiv on Monday.

Russia has pressed on with its invasion even as talks with the U.S. take place, striking civilian targets almost daily.

On Friday, Russian forces dropped three powerful glide bombs on Kostiantynivka, in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region, killing one man and injuring two others, regional Gov. Vadym Filashkin said.

Another Russian glide bomb damaged homes and injured five people in the northeastern Kharkiv region, Ukraine's Interior Ministry said.

The public quarrel between Trump and Zelenskyy began after Russia and the U.S. agreed Tuesday to start working toward ending the war in Ukraine and improving their diplomatic and economic ties. With that, and a phone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Trump abruptly reversed the three-year U.S. policy of isolating Russia.

Trump's national security adviser, Mike Waltz, said during a White House briefing on Thursday that the U.S. president is "obviously very frustrated" with Zelenskyy.

Zelenskyy was unhappy that a U.S. team opened the talks without inviting him or European governments that have backed Kyiv.

When Trump claimed without evidence Zelenskyy was deeply unpopular in Ukraine and falsely suggested that Ukraine was to blame for the war, Zelenskyy said Trump was living in a Russian-made "disinformation space," suggesting he had been duped by Putin.

Judge cancels NYC Mayor Eric Adams' trial and leaves corruption charges intact until mid-March

By LARRY NEUMEISTER and MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A federal judge on Friday canceled the corruption trial for New York City Mayor Eric Adams and appointed counsel to advise the court about the Justice Department's controversial request to drop charges against the Democrat.

Judge Dale E. Ho's written order means he won't decide before mid-March whether to grant the dismissal of the case against the embattled mayor of the nation's largest city.

On Friday, Ho said he appointed Paul Clement, a former U.S. solicitor general under President George W. Bush, to present arguments on the government's case-drop request.

The judge noted that courts are normally "aided in their decision-making through our system of adversarial testing, which can be particularly helpful in cases presenting unusual fact patterns or in cases of great public importance."

He said a Wednesday hearing had "no adversarial testing of the Government's position," and the absence made it important to appoint Clement to assist the judge in reaching a conclusion.

At the hearing, Acting Deputy U.S. Attorney General Emil Bove defended his request to drop charges, saying they came too close to Adams' reelection campaign and would distract from the mayor's assistance to the Trump administration's law-and-order priorities.

Adams confirmed at the hearing that he knew charges could later be reinstated — a feature of the request that has led some legal experts to speculate that the mayor can only escape trial if he helps Trump's plans to round up New Yorkers who are in the country illegally.

Adams was indicted in September on charges alleging he accepted over \$100,000 in illegal campaign contributions and travel perks from a Turkish official and others seeking to buy influence while he was Brooklyn borough president. He faces multiple challengers in June's Democratic primary. He has pleaded not guilty and insisted he is innocent.

Ho said he wanted all parties and Clement to address the legal standard for dismissing charges, whether a court may consider materials beyond the motion itself and under what circumstances additional procedural steps and further inquiry was necessary.

He also said he wants to know when dismissal without the ability to reinstate charges is appropriate. He set a briefs deadline for March 7. Oral arguments, if necessary, would be March 14.

In his order Friday, Ho said Clement could review a 1977 case in which a judge rejected the government's demand to dismiss a case.

University of Richmond law professor Carl Tobias said Clement was a conservative lawyer, a sensible choice to be a neutral adviser for a recently appointed judge whose previous experience was primarily civil matters.

Late Thursday, three former U.S. attorneys — from New York, Connecticut and New Jersey — submitted a letter urging Ho to "hear from parties other than the government and the defendant in deciding about the appropriate next steps."

In a letter to Ho Friday, Adams' lawyer Alex Spiro cited Attorney General Pam Bondi's Thursday remarks at the Conservative Political Action Conference that the indictment against Adams was "incredibly weak" and needed to be dismissed to end the "weaponization of the government." He urged Ho to dismiss the charges based on "the evidence and on the law."

The Justice Department did not respond to a comment request.

Adams will not be required to attend future hearings, the judge said.

That could help mitigate some political damage for Adams without the spectacle of court appearances while he is trying to convince the public that the case isn't distracting him from running the city.

Adams has sought to project calm as questions over his independence have sparked a political crisis for him.

This week, four of his top deputies resigned. Gov. Kathy Hochul announced that she had for now decided against removing Adams from office but would propose legislation to enhance state oversight of City Hall as a way to reestablish trust with New Yorkers.

Bove's initial request last week to then-interim U.S. Attorney Danielle Sassoon to drop charges against Adams was rejected, and she resigned, accusing Bove of dangling a quid pro quo that would ensure help from Adams in the immigration fight in return for dismissal of his criminal case.

Another prosecutor, Hagan Scotten, told Bove in a resignation letter that it would take a "fool" or a "coward" to meet Bove's demand, "but it was never going to be me."

In all, seven prosecutors, including five high-ranking prosecutors at the Justice Department in Washington, had resigned before Bove made the dismissal request himself, along with two other Washington prosecutors.

Police arrest a suspect in a stabbing at Berlin's Holocaust Memorial that injures 1 person

By EBRAHIM NOROOZI Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Police arrested a man suspected in a stabbing attack Friday at Berlin's Holocaust Memorial that left a Spanish tourist seriously injured, police said.

There was no immediate indication of a motive for the attack, which comes two days before Germans vote in a national election on Sunday.

Police spokesman Florian Nath told a news conference that the attack happened at 6 p.m. "probably with a knife. Maybe with something else." Nearly three hours later, a male suspect approached officers who had surrounded the memorial grounds. "He had blood on his hands and this made him very suspicious," Nath said.

Police arrested the man, handcuffing him and holding him on the ground. Nath said police seized the attack weapon and would interrogate the suspect as the investigation continued.

The victim was identified as a 30-year-old Spanish man, who was taken to a hospital.

The attack took place at the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, a field of 2,700 gray concrete slabs near the Brandenburg Gate in the heart of Berlin, which honors the 6 million Jews killed in the Holocaust under the direction of Nazi Germany.

Pope Francis isn't out of danger but his condition isn't life-threatening, medical team says

By NICOLE WINFIELD and COLLEEN BARRY Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis' complex respiratory infection isn't life-threatening but he's not out of danger, his medical team said Friday, as the 88-year-old pontiff marked his first week in the hospital battling pneumonia in both lungs — along with bacterial, viral and fungal infections on top of his chronic bronchitis.

Francis' doctors delivered their first in-person update on the pope's condition, saying he will remain at Rome's Gemelli hospital at least through next week. The pope is receiving occasional supplements of oxygen when he needs it and is responding to the drug therapy that was strengthened after the multiple infections were diagnosed, they said.

Gemelli hospital Dr. Sergio Alfieri and Francis' personal physician, Dr. Luigi Carbone, said Francis remains in good spirits and humor. Alfieri said that when he entered Francis' suite to greet him on Friday morning as "Holy Father," the pope replied by referring to Alfieri as "Holy Son."

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"To the question 'is the pope out of danger?' No, the pope is not out of danger," Alfieri said. "If you then ask if in this moment the pope is in a life-threatening situation, the answer is also no."

"Just now he went from his room to the chapel to pray for 20 minutes," he said. "This is the situation. He is the pope, but he is also a man."

Francis was admitted to Gemelli hospital on Feb. 14 after a weeklong bout of bronchitis worsened. Doctors first diagnosed the complex respiratory infection and then the onset of pneumonia in both lungs on top of chronic bronchitis. They prescribed "absolute rest."

Alfieri said the pope came down with a seasonal infection that has filled hospitals, but with a difference. "Other 88-year-old people generally stay at home and watch TV in a rocking chair. Do you know any other 88-year-olds who govern, let's say, a state and is also the spiritual father of all Catholics in the world? He does not spare himself, because he is enormously generous, so he got tired," Alfieri said.

Francis is a known workaholic and has admitted to being a not-terribly-compliant patient in the past. Alfieri said he had been a "great patient" since he was admitted, but turned the floor over to Carbone to respond to whether he was disciplined when home, at the Santa Marta hotel in the Vatican where he lives.

"He loves the church, and so it's clear he put the church first while we cared for him at Santa Marta," Carbone replied.

Carbone said that Francis was responding to the drug therapy that was "strengthened" after the pneumonia was diagnosed earlier this week.

He is also fighting a multipronged infection caused by bacteria, virus and fungus in the respiratory tract. Doctors said there was no evidence the germs had entered his bloodstream, a condition known as sepsis that they said remains the biggest concern. Sepsis is a complication of an infection that can lead to organ failure and death.

Francis is receiving supplemental oxygen when he needs it through a nasal cannula, a thin flexible tube that delivers oxygen through the nose, but otherwise is attached to no other machinery.

The doctors said Francis' chronic bronchitis had caused permanent damage to his airways, a condition known as bronchiectasis. The cortisone treatment he received in the hospital has raised his blood sugar levels, requiring treatment for diabetes. But Alfieri said he hoped the condition would be temporary.

In the best scenario, the pope will return to his residence cured of the infections, but his chronic conditions will remain, Alfieri said.

As his hospital stay drags on, some of Francis' cardinals have begun responding to the obvious question that is circulating: whether Francis might resign if he becomes irreversibly sick and unable to carry on. Francis has said he would consider it, after Pope Benedict XVI "opened the door" to popes retiring, but has shown no signs of stepping down and in fact has asserted recently that the job of pope is for life.

Francis confirmed in 2022 that, shortly after being elected pontiff, he wrote a resignation letter in case medical problems impeded him from carrying out his duties. There is no provision in canon law for what to do if a pope becomes incapacitated.

But there is no indication Francis is in any way incapacitated or is even considering stepping aside. During his hospital stay, he has continued to work, including making bishop appointments. After a hospital stay in 2021, he bristled when he learned that some clergy were allegedly already preparing for a conclave to elect his successor.

Francis had an acute case of pneumonia in 2023 and is prone to respiratory infections in winter.

Doctors say pneumonia in such a fragile, older patient makes him particularly prone to complications, given the difficulty in being able to effectively expel fluid from his lungs. While his heart is strong, Francis isn't a particularly healthy 88-year-old. He is overweight, is not physically active, uses a wheelchair because of bad knees and had part of one lung removed as a young man.

Despite the seriousness of Francis' illness, it appears there have been moments of levity. Alfieri said he bowed his head close to the pope to explain that the hospitalization would continue until he could safely return to his residence at the Vatican.

"He asked if I wanted to say confession," the doctor said. "I said, 'Holy Father, if I have to confess, your

hospitalization will be much, much longer.”

3 shot and killed outside Louisville, Kentucky, motor vehicle office, police say

By DYLAN LOVAN Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (AP) — Three people were shot and killed outside a motor vehicle office in Louisville on Friday, police said.

Officers were called to the office around noon and found a man dead and two women wounded in the parking lot, according to a statement from the Louisville Metro Police Department. The two wounded were taken to the hospital, where they died.

Numerous police responded to the shooting at a state Driver Licensing Office on the southern outskirts of Louisville. Police evidence markers were set on the ground around an area about 20 feet from the entrance to the building Friday afternoon.

Police Maj. Donald Boeckman said the shooter left in a vehicle. Boeckman did not have a description of the vehicle and said investigators were still reviewing surveillance video.

“It’s absolutely a tragedy, and I’m surprised there wasn’t more people injured,” Boeckman said. He said police believe there is not an ongoing threat to the public.

Police did not know if the victims were connected, Boeckman said.

Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear posted a statement on social media calling the shooting “a senseless act of violence.”

The Kentucky Transportation Cabinet, which operates the license office, said in a news release that security at the office locked down the building quickly after the shooting.

“We are thankful that all our employees are safe and our hearts go out to the victims of the incident,” the release said. Employees were sent home, and the office was closed for the day.

A New Jersey man is convicted of attempted murder in the stabbing of Salman Rushdie

By CAROLYN THOMPSON Associated Press

MAYVILLE, N.Y. (AP) — A New Jersey man was convicted Friday of attempted murder for stabbing author Salman Rushdie multiple times on a New York lecture stage in 2022.

Jurors delivered the verdict after deliberating for less than two hours, also finding Hadi Matar, 27, guilty of assault for wounding a man who was on the Chautauqua Institution stage with Rushdie at the time.

Matar ran up to Rushdie as he was about to speak on Aug. 12, 2022, and stabbed him more than a dozen times before a live audience. The attack left the 77-year-old prizewinning novelist blind in one eye.

Rushdie was the key witness during seven days of testimony, describing in graphic detail his life-threatening injuries and long and painful recovery.

Matar, who stood for the verdict, looked down but had no obvious reaction when the jury delivered it. As he was led out of the courtroom in handcuffs, he quietly uttered, “Free Palestine,” echoing comments he has frequently made while entering and leaving the trial.

The judge set sentencing for April 23. Matar could receive up to 25 years in prison, which District Attorney Jason Schmidt noted is the maximum for a conviction on attempted murder in the second degree.

Matar was disappointed, according to his public defender, Nathaniel Barone. “But I thought, quite frankly, that he was well prepared for the verdict, regardless of what it was,” Barone said.

In his comments following the verdict, Schmidt said video evidence helped make the case “rock solid.”

“We had a number of different angles to show the jurors,” he said. “It really is as compelling as it can possibly get.”

Schmidt added: “Mr. Matar came into this community as a visitor. And really, it’s my job to make sure that he stays a resident of New York state for the next 25 years.”

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During his closing argument, assistant public defender Andrew Brautigan told the jury that prosecutors had not proved that Matar intended to kill Rushdie. The distinction is important for an attempted-murder conviction.

Schmidt said while it's not possible to read Matar's mind, "it's foreseeable that if you're going to stab someone 10 or 15 times about the face and neck, it's going to result in a fatality."

Rushdie, who has been famous worldwide since the novel "Midnight's Children" was published more than 40 years ago, told jurors he thought he was dying when a masked stranger ran onto the stage and stabbed and slashed at him until being tackled by bystanders. Rushdie showed jurors his now-blinded right eye, usually hidden behind a darkened eyeglass lens.

Schmidt reminded jurors Friday about the testimony of a trauma surgeon, who said Rushdie's injuries would have been fatal without quick treatment.

He also slowed down video showing Matar approaching the seated Rushdie from behind and reaching around him to stab at his torso with a knife. Rushdie raises his arms and rises from his seat, walking and stumbling for a few steps with Matar hanging on, swinging and stabbing until they both fall and are surrounded by onlookers who rush in to separate them.

Rushdie is seen flailing on the ground, waving a hand covered in bright red blood. Schmidt freezes on a frame showing Rushdie, his face also bloodied, as he's surrounded by people.

The video, recorded by the Chautauqua Institution's house cameras, also picked up gasps and screams from audience members who had been seated to hear Rushdie speak with City of Asylum Pittsburgh founder Henry Reese about keeping writers safe. Reese suffered a gash to his forehead, leading to the assault charge against Matar.

From the witness stand, institution staff and others who were present on the day of the attack pointed to Matar as the assailant.

Rushdie spent 17 days at a Pennsylvania hospital and more than three weeks at a New York City rehabilitation center. He detailed his long and painful recovery in his 2024 memoir, "Knife."

"The conviction of Salman Rushdie's attacker is an important step toward justice for this unparalleled writer and reaffirms that violence can never be the answer to ideas," PEN America said in a written statement Friday, noting that the case was "a stark reminder of the enduring threats faced by writers who challenge authority and orthodoxy."

"We must remain vigilant in defending the right to speak, write, and think, without fear," the statement read. Rushdie is a former president of the nonprofit literary and free expression organization.

Throughout the trial, Matar often took notes with a pen and sometimes laughed or smiled with his defense team during breaks in testimony. His lawyers declined to call any witnesses of their own and Matar did not testify in his defense.

As he has previously, Barone said Friday that Matar likely would have faced a lesser charge of assault were it not for Rushdie's celebrity.

"Unfortunately, the notoriety of Mr. Rushdie certainly didn't help in how this case may have been presented," he said. "And we believe that it was overcharged."

A separate federal indictment alleges that Matar, of Fairview, New Jersey, was motivated to attack Rushdie by a 2006 speech in which the leader of the militant group Hezbollah endorsed a decades-old fatwa, or edict, calling for Rushdie's death. Iranian leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued the fatwa in 1989 after publication of the novel "The Satanic Verses," which some Muslims consider blasphemous.

Rushdie spent years in hiding. But after Iran announced that it would not enforce the decree, he had traveled freely over the past quarter century.

A trial on the federal terrorism-related charges will be scheduled in U.S. District Court in Buffalo.

Steve Bannon is accused of doing a straight-arm Nazi salute at CPAC but says it was just 'a wave'

By JILL COLVIN and ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON Associated Press

Groton Daily Independent

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OXON HILL, Md. (AP) — Steve Bannon was accused of making a Nazi salute as he concluded a speech at a conservative gathering where President Donald Trump is slated to speak this weekend, but Bannon said Friday the gesture was merely a “wave.”

Bannon, who once served as Trump’s chief strategist and helped lead his 2016 Republican campaign, was onstage at the Conservative Political Action Conference outside of Washington on Thursday evening when he extended his right arm in the air, his palm flat, after imploring the crowd to “Fight! Fight! Fight!” — a reference to what Trump shouted after an assassination attempt in Butler, Pennsylvania, during last year’s campaign.

The gesture drew immediate backlash due to its similarities with the right-arm salute linked in history to the Nazis and their allies.

“Steve Bannon’s long and disturbing history of stoking antisemitism and hate, threatening violence, and empowering extremists is well known and well documented by ADL and others,” the Anti-Defamation League, an antisemitism and human rights watchdog, wrote on X in response. “We are not surprised, but are concerned about the normalization of this behavior.”

Meanwhile, French far-right National Rally president Jordan Bardella said he had cancelled his scheduled speech at CPAC on Friday in reaction to what he described as “a gesture referring to Nazi ideology.”

“While I was not present in the room, one of the speakers allowed himself, out of provocation, a gesture referring to Nazi ideology. As a consequence, I made the immediate decision to cancel my speech,” Bardella said in a written statement.

Bannon, speaking to a French journalist from Le Point news magazine on Friday, said the gesture was not a Nazi salute but was “a wave like I did all the time.”

“I do it at the end of all of my speeches to thank the crowd,” Bannon said.

Bannon, whose “War Room” podcast is extremely popular on the right, also blasted Bardella for his decision to cancel, calling him “unworthy to lead France.”

“He’s a boy, not a man,” Bannon said, according to video posted by correspondent Claire Meynial.

He echoed those comments later Friday, telling The Associated Press, “If he canceled because I waved to the crowd like I did at the Front National seven years ago ... he’s not a man and he will never be the leader of France.”

Online, some far-right users suggested Bannon had made the gesture purposely to “trigger” liberals and the media, while others distanced themselves. Nick Fuentes, a far-right influencer and Trump ally who uses his platform to share his antisemitic views, said in a livestream that Bannon’s salute was “getting a little uncomfortable even for me.”

Bannon’s gesture came at the end of a speech in which he repeated lies about the 2020 election, which Trump lost to Democrat Joe Biden, and continued to press for Trump to serve a third term, something the Constitution explicitly bars.

“The future of America is MAGA. And the future of MAGA is Donald J. Trump,” he said. “We want Trump in ‘28!”

Bannon is not the only person in Trump’s orbit whose gestures have come under scrutiny.

Trump adviser Elon Musk drew criticism last month after he slapped his hand on his chest and then extended his arm out in a speech at Capital One Arena celebrating Trump’s inauguration. But extremist monitors and experts said it was unclear what Musk was trying to convey to the crowd.

Musk “made an awkward gesture in a moment of enthusiasm, not a Nazi salute,” the ADL concluded.

Musk also pushed back. “Frankly, they need better dirty tricks,” he posted on X several hours after he left the stage. “The ‘everyone is Hitler’ attack is sooo tired.”

Marshall Lerner, a Jewish conservative who attended CPAC but had not seen Bannon’s appearance or gesture, said he was bothered by how some critics look to link Trump’s Make America Great Again movement with Nazism and mentioned the criticism of Musk.

“It’s like saying if the Nazis got up in the morning and they ate breakfast and Trump got up in the morning and ate breakfast, he is doing things that the Nazis are doing,” Lerner said. “That’s silly. That’s ridiculous.”

That doesn't make any sense."

CPAC chairman Matt Schlapp defended Bannon, writing on X that he participated in the passing of resolutions in strong support of Israel and in opposition to antisemitism as they kicked off the conference.

"I stand w Israel and Bannon," Schlapp wrote.

This year's gathering, held in Oxon Hill, Maryland, has drawn a who's who of conservative leaders and Trump administration officials, including numerous Cabinet members. Vice President JD Vance addressed the convention earlier Thursday.

Jerry 'Ice Man' Butler, soul singer whose hits included 'Only the Strong Survive,' dies at 85

By HILLEL ITALIE AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Jerry Butler, a premier soul singer of the 1960s and after whose rich, intimate baritone graced such hits as "For Your Precious Love," "Only the Strong Survive" and "Make It Easy On Yourself," has died at age 85.

Butler's niece, Yolanda Goff, told The Associated Press that Butler died Thursday of Parkinson's disease at his home in Chicago. A longtime Chicago resident, Butler was a former Cook County board commissioner who would still perform on weekends and identify himself as Jerry "Ice Man" Butler, a show business nickname given for his understated style.

Butler, a member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and a three-time Grammy Award nominee, was a voice for two major soul music hubs: Chicago and Philadelphia. Along with childhood friend Curtis Mayfield, he helped found the Chicago-based Impressions and sang lead on the breakthrough hit "For Your Precious Love," a deeply emotional, gospel-influenced ballad that made Butler a star before the age of 20. A decade later, in the late '60s, he joined the Philadelphia-based production team of Kenneth Gamble and Leon Huff, who worked with him on "Only the Strong Survive," "Hey Western Union Man" and other hits. His albums "Ice on Ice" and "The Ice Man Cometh" are regarded as early models for the danceable, string-powered productions that became the classic "Sound of Philadelphia."

Butler also was an inspired songwriter who collaborated with Otis Redding on "I've Been Loving You Too Long," a signature ballad for Redding; and with Gamble and Huff on "Only the Strong Survive," later covered by Elvis Presley among others. His other credits included "For Your Precious Love," "Never Give You Up" (with Gamble and Huff) and "He Will Break Your Heart," which Butler helped write after he began thinking about the boyfriends of the groupies he met on the road.

"You go into a town; you're only going to be there for one night; you want some company; you find a girl; you blow her mind," Butler told Rolling Stone in 1969. "Now you know that girl hasn't been sitting in town waiting for you to come in. She probably has another fellow and the other fellow's probably in love with her; they're probably planning to go through the whole thing, right? But you never take that into consideration on that particular night."

The son Mississippi sharecroppers, Butler and his family moved north to Chicago when he was 3, part of the era's "Great Migration" of Black people out of the South. He loved all kinds of music as a child and was a good enough singer that a friend suggested he come to a local place of worship, the Traveling Souls Spiritualist Church, presided over by the Rev. A.B. Mayfield. Her grandson, Curtis Mayfield, soon became a longtime collaborator. (Mayfield died in 1999.)

In 1958, Mayfield and Butler along with Sam Gooden and brothers Arthur and Richard Brooks recorded "For Your Precious Love" for Vee-Jay Records. The group called itself the Impressions, but Vee-Jay, anxious to promote an individual star, advertised the song as by Jerry Butler and the Impressions, leading to estrangement between Butler and the other performers and to an unexpected solo career.

"Fame didn't change me as much as it changed the people around me," Butler wrote in his memoir "Only the Strong Survive," published in 2000.

One of his early solo performances was a 1961 cover of "Moon River," the theme to "Breakfast at Tif-

fany's." Butler was the first performer to hit the charts with what became a pop standard, but "Moon River" would be associated with Andy Williams after the singer was chosen to perform it at the Academy Awards, a snub Butler long resented. His other solo hits, some recorded with Mayfield, included "He Will Break Your Heart", "Find Another Girl" and "I'm A-Telling You."

By 1967, his formal style seemed out of fashion, but Butler was impressed by the new music coming out of Philadelphia and received permission from his record label (Mercury) to work with Gamble and Huff. The chemistry, Butler recalled, was so "fierce" they wrote hits such as "Only the Strong Survive" in less than an hour.

"Things just seem to fall into place," Butler told Ebony magazine in 1969. "We lock ourselves in a room, create stories about lovers, compose the music, then write the lyrics to match the music."

By the 1980s, Butler's career had faded and he was becoming increasingly interested in politics. Encouraged by the 1983 election of Harold Washington, Chicago's first Black mayor, he ran successfully for the Cook County Board in 1985 and was re-elected repeatedly, even after supporting a controversial sales tax increase in 2009. He retired from the board in 2018.

Butler was married for 60 years to Annette Smith, who died in 2019, and with her had twin sons. Many of his generational peers had struggled financially and he worked to help them, while also supporting various family members. He chaired the Rhythm & Blues Foundation, which offers a wide range of assistance to musicians, and pushed the industry to provide medical and retirement benefits. Butler considered himself lucky, even if he did pass on the chance to own a part of Gamble and Huff's Philadelphia International recording company.

"You know, I have lived well. My wife probably would say I could've lived better," Butler told the Chicago Reader in 2011. "Did I make 40, 50 million dollars? No. Did I keep one or two? Yes. The old guys on the street used to say, 'It's not how much you make. It's how much you keep.'"

Ex-Proud Boys leader Enrique Tarrío arrested near Capitol on assault charge after press conference

Associated Press undefined

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former Proud Boys national leader Enrique Tarrío was arrested Friday near the U.S. Capitol on a charge that he assaulted a woman protesting a gathering attended by Tarrío and others who received presidential pardons for crimes stemming from the Jan. 6, 2021, riot in the nation's capital.

Capitol police said officers saw Tarrío strike the protester's cellphone and arm after the woman placed the phone close to his face as they walked near the Capitol. Tarrío had just left a news conference that had ended "without incident," police said.

"The woman told our officers that she wanted to be a complainant, and the man was arrested for the simple assault," police said in a statement.

An attorney who represented Tarrío in his Capitol riot case didn't immediately respond to an email seeking comment.

Tarrío, of Miami, was serving a 22-year sentence — the longest among hundreds of Capitol riot cases — when President Donald Trump granted clemency last month to all 1,500-plus people charged in the Jan. 6 attack.

A jury convicted Tarrío and three of his lieutenants of seditious conspiracy for a violent plot to stop the peaceful transfer of presidential power from Trump to President Joe Biden after the 2020 election.

Tarrío attended a press conference Friday with other Proud Boys and Oath Keepers founder Stewart Rhodes, who also was convicted of seditious conspiracy but freed from prison last month after Trump commuted his 18-year sentence.

Measles outbreaks rise to nearly 100 cases between Texas and New Mexico. Here's what you should know

By DEVI SHASTRI AP Health Writer

The measles outbreak in rural West Texas has grown to 90 cases across seven counties, the state health department posted online Friday, and 16 people are hospitalized.

In neighboring eastern New Mexico, the measles case count is up to nine, though state public health officials said Thursday there's still no evidence this outbreak is connected to the one in Texas.

Measles is a highly contagious disease. Here's what you should know about how to protect yourself against measles, as well as what's happening in Texas and New Mexico.

Where are measles spreading?

The West Texas cases are concentrated in Gaines County, which has 57 infections, and Terry County, north of Gaines, where there are now 20 confirmed cases.

Dawson County, to the east of Gaines, was new to the count with six. Yoakum County has four and Lubbock, Lynn and Ector counties have a case each.

Texas state health department data shows the vast majority of cases are among people younger than 18: 26 in kids younger than 4 and 51 in kids 5-17 years old. Ten adults have measles and three cases are "pending" an age determination. The Ector County Health Department told the Odessa American its case was in a child too young to be vaccinated.

State health officials have said this outbreak is Texas' largest in nearly 30 years. Health department spokeswoman Lara Anton said last week that cases have been concentrated in a "close-knit, undervaccinated" Mennonite community — especially among families who attend small private religious schools or are homeschooled.

In New Mexico, all of the cases are in Lea County, which borders Gaines County in Texas. The state health department has said people may have been exposed at a grocery store, an elementary school, a church, Nor-Lea Hospital and a Walgreens in Hobbs, New Mexico.

What is measles?

Measles is a respiratory virus that can survive in the air for up to two hours. Up to 9 out of 10 people who are susceptible will get the virus if exposed, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Most kids will recover from the measles if they get it, but infection can lead to dangerous complications like pneumonia, blindness, brain swelling and death.

Is the vaccine safe?

Yes, the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine is safe and highly effective in preventing measles infection and severe cases of the disease.

The first shot is recommended for children between 12 and 15 months old and the second between 4 and 6 years old. The vaccine series is required for kids before entering kindergarten in public schools nationwide.

Before the vaccine was introduced in 1963, the U.S. saw some 3 million to 4 million cases per year. Now, it's usually fewer than 200 in a normal year.

There is no link between the vaccine and autism, despite a now-discredited study and health disinformation.

Why do vaccination rates matter?

In communities with high vaccination rates — above 95% — diseases like measles have a harder time spreading through communities. This is called "herd immunity."

But childhood vaccination rates have declined nationwide since the pandemic and more parents are claiming religious or personal conscience waivers to exempt their kids from required shots.

The U.S. saw a rise in measles cases in 2024, including an outbreak in Chicago that sickened more than 60. Five years earlier, measles cases were the worst in almost three decades in 2019.

Gaines County has one of the highest rates in Texas of school-aged children who opt out of at least one

required vaccine, with nearly 14% of K-12 children in the 2023-24 school year. Health officials say that number is likely higher because it doesn't include many children who are homeschooled and whose data would not be reported.

What are public health officials doing to stop the spread?

Health workers are hosting regular vaccination clinic and screening efforts in Texas, as well as working with schools to educate people about the importance of vaccination and offering shots.

New Mexico health officials are also hosting several vaccination clinics in Hobbs next week.

Voletta Wallace, Notorious B.I.G.'s mother and keeper of his legacy, dies at 78

By MARIA SHERMAN AP Music Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Voletta Wallace, the dedicated mother of the late great rapper The Notorious B.I.G. and protector of his legacy, died Friday morning. She was 78.

Monroe County Coroner Thomas Yanac confirmed her death Friday to The Associated Press, saying she died at her home in Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, after a stint on hospice care. She died of natural causes.

A representative for the estate of The Notorious B.I.G. did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The Notorious B.I.G., one of the rap's greatest performers, was shot to death at age 24 in Los Angeles in 1997. The case remains unsolved. He was survived by his wife, the musician and actress Faith Evans, and his two children, Christopher Jordan Wallace and T'yanina Dream Wallace.

Wallace was a dedicated keeper of the legacy of her son, born Christopher Wallace. When he first emerged on the scene as one of rap's most distinctive talents with songs that expertly detailed street life in Brooklyn, she labeled his music "noise."

Since his death, his gift took on a new meaning for her. She told AP in 2017, 20 years after his death, "I remembered my son said, 'Don't listen to my music.' And I never listened to his music. I heard it on the radio and it sounded good, because it was clean. But I said, 'You know what, I have to. I have to listen to that music.' And that's what I did."

"I cried so much that day just listening to the music. I remember I sat, I stood. I rested my head on the stereo and I just cried like a baby. And that was therapy for me. And I said, 'Oh my God — that was a talented young man to put those words together.' He had a beautiful voice. I love his voice," she continued.

Wallace launched the Christopher Wallace Memorial Foundation following her son's death, an organization that provides educational resources for children. In 2003, she honored mothers of other musicians who died untimely deaths — Aaliyah, Lisa "Left Eye" Lopes, Tupac Shakur, Jam Master Jay, Big Pun, Big L and Freaky Tah — at "B.I.G. Night Out," a benefit for the foundation.

"It is our way of saying, 'Keep your head up,'" Wallace told AP at the time. "It's the foundation's way just to let these parents know that we love them."

She also took legal action on behalf of her son. In 2004, she dropped a wrongful-death lawsuit against a former suspect in the rap star's slaying — Amir Muhammad, aka Harry Billups. The 2002 lawsuit also named the city of Los Angeles and Muhammad's former college roommate, David A. Mack, a Los Angeles policeman. It accused Mack of hiring Muhammad to shoot the hip-hop artist and police of failing to investigate properly after a fellow officer came under suspicion.

In 2021, Wallace worked as an executive producer on the Netflix documentary "Biggie: I Got a Story to Tell," and told AP about her role in the public eye.

"They never knew me. The public never knew me. I was thrust into this environment, I should say, after he passed away, because I'm a very private person. Extremely private," she said. "What he was doing out there, maybe I should have known. But honestly, I didn't. And to this day, there are people who are saying, 'Oh, she knew.' (whispers) But I never knew."

Notorious B.I.G.'s 1994 debut album for Bad Boy Records, "Ready to Die," has sold over six million units as of 2018, according to the Recording Industry Association of America, and included the hits "Big Poppa"

and "Juicy."

His sophomore album, "Life After Death," released two weeks after his death, sold more than 11 million units. It launched multiple hits, including the timeless No. 1 hits "Mo Money Mo Problems" and "Hypnotize." In 1997, Wallace accepted the MTV Video Music Award for best rap video for "Hypnotize" on behalf of her son. ____

Associated Press journalist Gary Gerard Hamilton contributed to this report.

Thousands of supporters of Hezbollah's slain leader Nasrallah fly into Beirut for his funeral

By BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Nearly five months after he was killed in an Israeli airstrike, thousands of supporters of the longtime leader of Lebanon's militant Hezbollah group have flown into Beirut for Hassan Nasrallah's funeral on Sunday.

Nasrallah was killed on Sept. 27 when Israel's air force dropped more than 80 bombs on Hezbollah's main operations room in southern Beirut. It was the biggest and most consequential of Israel's targeted killings in years.

The death of Nasrallah, one of the Iran-backed Shiite group's founders and Hezbollah's leader of more than 30 years, was a huge blow to the group he had transformed into a potent force in the Middle East.

Hezbollah, which the U.S. and some of its allies has designated a terrorist organization, has suffered significant losses in the latest war with Israel, including the killing of several of its most senior military and political figures.

His cousin and successor Hashem Safieddine, who was killed in an Israeli airstrike on a Beirut suburb a few days later, will be laid to rest in his hometown in southern Lebanon. The two had temporarily been buried in secret locations. Hezbollah earlier this month announced plans for their official funerals.

Crowds are expected to gather on Sunday at Beirut's main sports stadium for a funeral ceremony before Nasrallah's interment.

Flights from Iraq, where Hezbollah has a huge following among Iraqi Shiites, have been full for days on end. According to an Iraqi transportation ministry official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the flights, up to 6,000 people have flown to Beirut over the past days.

Among those who arrived from overseas was also American commentator Jackson Hinkle, who regularly spreads false information on social media, especially in support of Russia and its war on Ukraine.

"I am honored to be attending the funeral," Hinkle posted on the social media platform X after arriving this week in Beirut.

Hinkle posted a photo of himself visiting a war-wrecked southern Lebanese border village, waving a Hezbollah flag.

Nasrallah, idolized by his supporters and with large followings among the Shiites and the Islamic world, also held the title of sayyid, an honorific meant to signify the Shiite cleric's lineage dating back to the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam.

However, Lebanese authorities have revoked permission for a passenger plane from Iran, leaving dozens who had wanted to attend the funeral stranded in Tehran and triggering protests by Hezbollah supporters in Lebanon.

The ban came after the Israeli army accused Iran of smuggling cash to Hezbollah by way of civilian flights, leading some in Lebanon to allege that their government had caved in the face of a threat from Israel.

Some of those who were expected to fly in from Iran were now coming to Lebanon via Iraq. Also, members of Iran-backed groups in the region also were traveling to Beirut to attend Nasrallah's funeral.

Kazim al-Fartousi, spokesman for the Iran-backed Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada group in Iraq, arrived on Friday. He said Nasrallah was "the father, commander and the book that we read every day to learn about freedom."

U.S. Republican Rep. Joe Wilson criticized Lebanese politicians who were planning to attend the funeral.

"Any Lebanese politician who attends the funeral of the murderous terrorist Hasan Nasrallah is standing with the Iranian Regime," Wilson said on X.

Experienced workers, not just rookies, get cut as Trump slashes probationary employees

By MARK THIESSEN and CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) — Warren Hill spent more than two decades working at the Lake Clark National Park and Preserve, which spans 4 million acres of coastline, forests, lakes and glaciers in Alaska.

Last summer, he was promoted to serve as maintenance supervisor, in addition to his roles as carpenter and mechanic. But because Hill was starting a new role, he was on probationary status when President Donald Trump's administration began firing thousands and thousands of federal workers who had less civil service protection.

"I'm furious," he said. "I am just a few years away from retirement, not to mention all my benefits disappeared in a flash."

Probationary employees are generally younger, with less than a year or two on the job. However, the classification can also apply to workers with much more experience who were placed on probation when they transferred between agencies or moved into a different position. Now many have been swept up in layoffs championed by Elon Musk, the billionaire entrepreneur who is advising Trump.

A lot of them, including Hill, were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. They were often terminated in cursory letters that described their services as no longer needed or accused them of poor performance even in cases where they had received positive reviews for their work.

"They have no idea how many lives they are destroying and the negative economic impact they are having in our community and all the others like ours," Hill said.

The total number and experience level of probationary employees who have been fired isn't clear. The layoffs have taken place across many agencies, including Health and Human Services, Veterans Affairs, Education, Energy, the Food and Drug Administration and the National Park Service. Roughly 2,000 employees were cut from the U.S. Forest Service, and another 7,000 people are expected to be let go at the Internal Revenue Service.

Unions for federal workers filed a lawsuit Thursday to stop and reverse the layoffs, accusing the administration of the "indiscriminate firing of thousands of patriotic public servants across the country."

The Trump administration has defended its handling of probationary employees, which is part of a sweeping effort to downsize the federal government.

"The probationary period is a continuation of the job application process, not an entitlement for permanent employment," said McLaurine Pinover, a spokesperson for the Office of Personnel Management.

Kevin Hassett, director of the White House National Economic Council, brushed off concerns about employees being falsely accused of lackluster work.

"I've never seen a person who was laid off for poor performance say that they were performing poorly," he told reporters on Thursday.

Trump's allies have long considered civil service protections to be an impediment to achieving his agenda, and there's been talk about reclassifying employees to make them easier to fire. For now, administration officials have tried to push out as many as possible, either by giving them financial incentives to quit or laying off those on probationary status.

"Probationary periods are an essential tool for agencies to assess employee performance and manage staffing levels," read a memo distributed on Inauguration Day. "Employees on probationary periods can be terminated during that period without triggering appeal rights to the Merit Systems Protection Board."

Federal agencies were given four days to draw up lists of all probationary employees.

Some of them were working as civilians after long careers in the military.

Terri Wollenberg said she spent more than three decades in the U.S. Army and Navy before retiring and going to work at the Cedar Rapids Veterans Center in Iowa, where she remained in probationary status.

She met clients at the door, confirmed schedules and assisted the center's counselors.

But last Friday, Wollenberg said her director "let me know that I was done."

"I didn't even know I was on a list that could possibly be considered, but it appears that any one of us could be on that list," she said.

There's no one left to do her job, Wollenberg said during a press conference organized by Iowa Democrats. "We're not here to get rich," she said. "We're here to work for the citizens of the United States."

Kayleigh McCarthy was among the probationary U.S. Forest Service employees fired last week, allegedly for performance issues.

She had been hired as a seasonal employee at the Anan Wildlife Observatory in Alaska, but she was upgraded to a permanent position within the last year. She monitored and recorded black and brown bear behavior in the Tongass National Forest, and sometimes she would stop tourists on hiking trails to give the animals the right of way.

"A lot of times, mama bears — especially black bears — are walking across with their cubs," McCarthy said.

McCarthy had spent her summers living on a float house and became entrenched in the community, where she met her boyfriend. Her situation began to unravel on Sunday, when her supervisor reached out.

"She had to call me and told me that I had been terminated and that it was supposedly because of performance, even though she told me that my performance had always been exemplary," McCarthy said.

"It says on the termination letter that it's because of performance, when in fact I only have exemplary performance, and so it doesn't seem that there's just cause for these firings," she said.

McCarthy plans to appeal her firing. But once she finishes her graduate degree at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, she'll likely need to leave the state to find a new job.

"I am angry, and I am upset and I am heartbroken," she said.

January home sales fall as high mortgage rates, prices freeze out would-be buyers

By ALEX VEIGA AP Business Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Sales of previously occupied U.S. homes fell in January as rising mortgage rates and prices put off many would-be homebuyers despite a wider selection of properties on the market.

Sales fell 4.9% last month from December to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 4.08 million units, the National Association of Realtors said Friday.

Sales rose 2% compared with January last year, marking the fourth straight annual increase. The latest home sales, however, fell short of the 4.11 million pace economists were expecting, according to FactSet.

Home prices increased on an annual basis for the 19th consecutive month. The national median sales price rose 4.8% in January from a year earlier to \$396,900.

"Mortgage rates have refused to budge for several months despite multiple rounds of short-term interest rate cuts by the Federal Reserve," said Lawrence Yun, NAR's chief economist. "When combined with elevated home prices, housing affordability remains a major challenge."

The U.S. housing market has been in a sales slump dating back to 2022, when mortgage rates began to climb from pandemic-era lows. Sales of previously occupied U.S. homes fell last year to their lowest level in nearly 30 years.

The average rate on a 30-year mortgage briefly fell to a 2-year low last September, but has been mostly hovering around 7% this year, according to mortgage buyer Freddie Mac. That's more than double the 2.65% record low the average rate hit a little over four years ago.

While mortgage rates have been easing in recent weeks, the decline hasn't been enough to change the affordability equation for many prospective home shoppers.

Home loan applications fell 5.5% last week from the previous week to the lowest level since the start of the year, according to the Mortgage Bankers Association.

Mortgage rates are influenced by several factors, including the yield on U.S. 10-year Treasury bonds, which lenders use as a guide to price home loans. Fears that inflation may remain stubbornly high amid a

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solid U.S. economy and the potential impact of tariffs and other policies proposed by the Trump administration have driven the 10-year Treasury yield higher since the election, though it has eased in recent weeks.

Rising home prices and elevated mortgage rates, which can add hundreds of dollars a month in costs for borrowers, have kept many prospective home shoppers on the sidelines, especially first-time buyers who don't have equity from an existing home to put toward a new home purchase. They accounted for 28% of all homes sold last month, matching the share in January 2024, but down from 31% in December. The annual share of first-time buyers fell last year to a record-low 24%. It's been 40% historically.

If mortgage rates don't ease from current levels, first-time buyers will continue to struggle, "because housing affordability is not there," Yun said.

Forecasts from several economists mostly call for the average rate on a 30-year mortgage to remain above 6% this year, with some economists including an upper range as high as 6.8%.

Home shoppers who could afford to buy at current mortgage rates or pay all-cash to sidestep financing altogether had more homes to choose from last month.

There were 1.18 million unsold homes at the end of last month, up 3.5% from December and up 16.8% from January last year, NAR said.

That translates to a 3.5-month supply at the current sales pace, up from a 3.2-month pace in December and a 3-month pace at the end of January last year. Traditionally, a 5- to 6-month supply is considered a balanced market between buyers and sellers.

One reason the inventory of homes for sale has been rising is properties are taking longer to sell.

Homes typically remained on the market for 41 days in January before selling — the longest since before the pandemic. In December, homes were typically on the market 35 days before they sold.

Despite the improved inventory, sellers still generally have the edge over buyers.

Some 15% of homes purchased last month sold for above their list price. And, on average, homes received 2.6 offers last month, Yun said.

Yun expects there could be 1.5 million homes on the market when the spring homebuying season gets going, but noted the U.S. needs there to be closer to 2 million properties for sale.

"We are still supply constrained, but the worst of the supply constraint is over," he said.

For Dominican baseball hopefuls, age fraud cases and a curveball from Japan reflect a broken system

By DÁNICA COTO and MARTÍN ADAMES ALCÁNTARA Associated Press

BANÍ, Dominican Republic (AP) — There was little sleep in the days leading up to Jan. 15.

Dozens of teenage baseball players across the Dominican Republic lay in bed, unable to close their eyes. They had batted, pitched and ran until sore, sacrificing time away from family since they were children with hopes of returning with a life-changing pay day. Hopes of becoming the next David Ortiz or Pedro Martínez — big league stars with inconceivable financial security. Those journeys started as young as 10, players racing against time to lock in a contract before turning 16 — before it's too late.

"When you say you're 17, they don't even look at you," player-turned-trainer Carlos Álvarez said.

Now, for some, that future they fought for was at risk, all because of one promising pitcher half a world away.

Pursued this offseason by presumably every major league team, Japanese phenom Roki Sasaki announced on Jan. 17 that he intended to join the Los Angeles Dodgers, two days after MLB's signing season for top international prospects opened — the same period in which hundreds of Dominican players hoped to finalize handshake deals with MLB teams and finally cash the checks they'd sought for years. The 23-year-old Sasaki signed a minor league contract with a \$6.5 million bonus — money that otherwise might have gone to those Dominican players.

Instead, the Caribbean country's baseball industry was once again forced to reckon with a system many say is broken as it struggles to find a solution.

"It's the dream of a young boy to play in the major leagues," said Junior Noboa, the Dominican Repub-

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lic's baseball commissioner. "It also gives him the opportunity to not only change his life, but his family's life completely."

'The demands are too much'

On a recent January afternoon, MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred strode into the Dominican Republic's sprawling National Palace to meet with President Luis Abinader behind closed doors.

Upon emerging, Manfred told reporters that an international draft was the best solution to end early verbal deals with the families of young Dominican players.

"I draft you, you sign, you know you have an agreement," he said.

Such a system is years away, at best. What remains, despite years of corruption and criticism, is a form of free agency in which scouts fan out across the Caribbean country in search of talented players as young as 10 years old who then live and train at academies in hopes of reaching a handshake deal on a multimillion-dollar contract with an MLB franchise before they're 16. This year's signing period was for players born between Sept. 1, 2007, and Aug. 31, 2008.

The Dominican poverty rate is over 20%, and some families live on less than \$2 per day. One big league signing bonus — for hundreds of thousands, if not millions of dollars — can transform the life of a player, his family and others around him. It's an enormous amount of pressure, and it falls squarely on kids who would be middle schoolers in the U.S.

The concerns are many. Fear that loan sharks might target huge shares of players' future earnings. Verbal commitments with teams that fall apart. And most recently, mounting examples of players being pressured to falsify their age by as many as seven or eight years to increase their value. That includes news last November of a prominent player under the assumed name Cesar Altagracia who was punished by MLB for pretending to be 14 to land a deal with the San Diego Padres. He was actually 19.

"I believe that the demands are too much, and that's why we're seeing some cases of falsifying ages," Noboa said, noting that baseball scouts insist on seeing young teens play like adults.

Every year in the Dominican Republic, there's at least 40,000 players who are 16 and able to sign under MLB rules, but only some 550 to 600 are given deals, said Eddy Lorenzo, a local scout.

The push to get noticed weighs heavily in a country with limited options, where an estimated 95% of players training at academies are impoverished and a majority quit school to pursue their big-league dreams.

"The earlier you develop a kid, the earlier he can enter the market. And the earlier he gets into the market, the more money you can get," Lorenzo said. "This is a Third World country and a business. Everyone tries to get the most money for a player. It's the reality."

'They don't even look at you'

Phones across the Dominican Republic recently pinged with a message detailing the names of local players that MLB suspected of lying about their age.

Trainers took note, but not all those seeking a multimillion-dollar contract get caught that early in the game.

Álvarez, formerly known as Esmilyn "Smiley" González, played for three years with the Washington Nationals before he was caught. At 15 years old, he assumed his cousin's name and took four years off his real age after pressure from his coach and despite initial resistance from him and opposition from his mother and uncle.

"I really tried to make a go at it with my real age, but there was no chance," Álvarez said.

He signed with the Nationals in 2006 for \$1.4 million and tried to focus on the sport he loved despite persistent fear would lose everything.

The day the team introduced its new players, Álvarez's heart dropped when he looked up and saw his face plastered on the big screen. He assumed the Nationals were just minutes away from finding out he lied. Alvarez was headed to his physical, and since he had never had one, he thought it involved X-rays that would somehow reveal his real age.

Now a trainer based in the western city of Baní, where the wind rustles mango and palm trees, Álvarez says the pressure on young players can be unbearable.

"They feel like they're the only ones who can help their family," Álvarez said.

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'Willing to do anything'

Juan Emilio Pimentel, who played as a catcher for the Dodgers in the Dominican complex league, recalled growing up with two pairs of shoes: one to play ball and the other for the weekends.

Around 15 years old, at the urging of his coach, he assumed the name of his neighbor and close friend: Amaury Arias. He was so committed, he even memorized the name of his friend's great-grandmother.

"People who are poor are willing to do anything," he said.

Pimentel played with the Dodgers' Dominican minor league team for three years then left for reasons that when asked, he demurred, saying, "They never found out about me."

'Too old to sign'

At 14 years old, Carlos de la Rosa is familiar with the pressure to secure an MLB contract.

He started playing baseball at age 9 with a plastic bottle every day until his mother said, "Let's better take you to a baseball field."

He hasn't left it since, playing shortstop in hopes he can follow in the footsteps of his brother, who signed two years ago with the Kansas City Royals.

"It's different here compared with over there (in the U.S.), because here, at my age already, I have to be at 100%," he said with a soft smile as sweat rolled down his forehead.

It's possible to sign at a later age, but bonuses are smaller and there's sometimes scrutiny there, too. Johan Quezada, a former MLB pitcher who now plays in Mexico, signed at 18. He recalls MLB confirming where he studied, where he was baptized and even taking his DNA to match it to his parents since he's 6-foot-9 and his father is only 6-1.

No easy solutions in sight

Noboa said he is working with the government to cut down on persistent age fraud. They have started registering academies to keep track of them, but they only have 300 out of thousands that operate across the country, with hundreds more added each year by players who didn't sign and became coaches.

Noboa also has contacted government agencies to keep an eye on official documents being issued or altered, since he believes public employees are illegally profiting from the fraud.

"They're not doing it for free, you know," Noboa said.

But other changes are out of his hands, and out of the hands of trainers, players, scouts and the Dominican Republic in general.

Most notably, an international draft. Noboa believes a draft could fix many of the system's problems by eliminating incentive for MLB teams to strike handshake deals with players as young as possible.

For starters, support in the DR isn't uniform. Some coaches still see value for players in a market where they are technically free agents, although their ability to cash in has dropped sharply. Until 2017, there was no cap on how much a team could spend on a Latin American player. Then MLB negotiated a cap as part of its collective bargaining agreement with major league players, and total spending dropped 25% the next year, to \$153 million.

Management tried to get a draft agreement for the second time in 2022 and proposed a minimum spend of \$191 million for 2024 but the union rejected an international draft — acceptance would have led to the end of draft pick compensation for qualified free agents. Spending on international amateurs in 2024 totaled \$181 million.

The current labor contract expires in December 2026, making change unlikely until 2028 at the earliest. If and when conversations on the international draft resume, it'll be MLB and active major league players at the table — not Noboa, Dominican coaches or the teenagers fighting for those life-changing deals.

"They say, 'Don't change what works,'" Lorenzo said. "There's a lot of hypocrisy from everyone, from the teams to the trainers...They say they're against this. They're the first ones to pick up a 10-year-old kid and start training him."

Their mosque burned down in LA-area wildfire. They're still determined to gather for Ramadan

By DEEPA BHARATH Associated Press

PASADENA, California (AP) — All that remains of Masjid Al-Taqwa is a sign that bears its name.

The mosque in Altadena, which served a tight-knit Muslim community for 42 years, burned to the ground in one of the Los Angeles area's deadliest fires in January — leaving the congregation heartbroken and without a place to pray and break their upcoming Ramadan fast together.

With that weighing on their minds, about 20 mosque members and a few connected families met on a recent Saturday at a local Islamic school to pray and share a meal, their first together since the fire. Many who came are living in motels or with family after losing their homes in the Eaton fire, which killed 17 people and scorched thousands of homes and over 14,000 acres across Los Angeles County.

With Ramadan just days away, their volunteer imam, Junaid Aasi, had good news to share. Clad in a white robe, black jacket and prayer cap, he walked onto the plush blue prayer rugs and placed a small karaoke machine in the middle of the multipurpose room at New Horizon Islamic School.

Aasi announced the school was offering this space for four nights each week during Ramadan. There were gasps of relief, and utterances of "Alhamdulillah," an Arabic phrase that means "praise be to God."

Aasi said many in the community have been anxious about Ramadan and having this room, even if only for some days each week, is a blessing.

"Ramadan is not only a time when we pray and eat together, but we also help and support each other and others in the community," he said. "This year, with so many who have lost so much, it's going to be more important than ever."

The imam, with a secular job as an IT professional, has volunteered at the mosque for the past 25 years. He has revisited the property since the fire. Sometimes, he says, he can still see everything the way it was when he closes his eyes.

The place where people would perform wudu — the ritual washing of hands, feet and face before coming in to pray. The thick carpets where they prayed. Copies of the holy Quran. A fig tree outside.

"I still can't believe it's all gone," Aasi said.

He said many members are still displaced and hurting emotionally.

"One member just texted me that they were on their way here but stopped to check out their (burned) home," Aasi said. They were so overwhelmed, he added, that they couldn't bring themselves to the gathering.

Aaron Abdus-Shakoor, one of the mosque's founders and current board president, lost his home, the building that housed his real estate business and several investment properties around Altadena. He said the mosque, which began in the 1970s as a meeting place for Nation of Islam members, evolved into a mainstream, multicultural Muslim community. It was called the Pasadena-Altadena Daawa Center until members in 1997 renamed it Masjid Al-Taqwa, which means "pious and god-conscious."

"All these years, we've been good citizens," Abdus-Shakoor said. "We've always kept our doors open and have tried to be a positive influence in the community."

In the early days, the communal Ramadan celebration only happened on Eid al-Fitr, which marks the end of the holy month, he said. But for many years now, members have hosted a daily community iftar, the evening meal during Ramadan, which breaks the day-long fast.

For many, the mosque has been a second home.

Salah Eddine Benatia, an Algerian immigrant, has only been in the country three months. He discovered Al-Taqwa online and had been riding the bus from Pasadena for prayers.

"I felt so warmly welcomed by this community," he said. "I miss home a lot especially around Ramadan. I was so sad when I heard the mosque burned down. Being here gives me a sense of being with family."

Farzana Asaduzzaman, who has lived in the neighborhood since 2016, said Ramadan at the mosque has always been "a family affair."

"Everyone brings food, we fast, we break our fast together," she said. "The kids would play Uno, make

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arts and crafts, and assemble Eid gift bags. We would put up heaters in the outside area, sit down, sip hot chai and talk for hours.”

Asaduzzaman, her husband and their three children, ages 14, 10 and 3, lost their home in the fire as well. They spent two and a half years renovating the property before it burned down.

“Our masjid may be gone and our neighborhood may be gone, but our community is strong,” she said. “This is our support system. We’ll be together for Ramadan, no matter where it is. We’ll find a place where we can see our kids run around and where we can gather and be together again.”

For Mohammed AlDajani, a second-year medical student, the mosque was a five-minute walk from his condo, which was also lost in the fire. For AlDajani, who had no relatives or friends nearby, the mosque fulfilled the need for social and spiritual nourishment.

“The masjid was actually a nice incentive for me to move here,” he said. “It’s a place that has helped ground me in this community.”

AlDajani said, unlike many mosques he has attended, Masjid Al-Taqwa’s members represent many nationalities and ethnicities — Arab, African American, Afghan, Indian, Bangladeshi, Turkish and North African among them.

“I found that very unique,” he said.

Last year was his first Ramadan in Southern California. The mosque’s youth painted a mural of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, a disputed holy site that has become a flashpoint in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As a Palestinian American, AlDajani said the community project touched him profoundly at a time when his heart was broken by the suffering of those in Gaza.

He said he learned about the Altadena mosque’s destruction even before he found out his home was gone.

“It’s just like my chest sank when I saw the images,” AlDajani said. “It was difficult because I was there for morning and night prayers every day. It was my little haven. It doesn’t feel right, having that empty space there.”

As he tries to find a place to rent, AlDajani says the mosque community has been “keeping him afloat.”

“Our prayer group still meets on the weekends,” he said. “I was anxious about Ramadan. It’s nice to know we’ll still be able to gather and pray, and this haven will still exist.”

Sakeenah Ali’s children, who attended Elliott Magnet Middle School across the street from the mosque, lost their school in the fire.

“They would hear the afternoon call to prayer from their school, which was very special,” she said, adding that she went out and saw the mosque burn and the parking lot covered in ash.

“Cars were on fire, trees were smoldering,” Ali recalled. “You could hear explosions everywhere – boom, boom.”

But she believes that her community is resilient.

“The key is to keep showing up,” Ali said. “Make sure we have our prayer time, stay connected and be consistent. We are going to rebuild.”

Could Trump really return DOGE savings to taxpayers?

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER and PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writers

WASHINGTON (AP) — An idea first proposed on social media has bubbled up to the White House and received President Donald Trump’s enthusiastic endorsement: Take some of the savings from billionaire Elon Musk’s drive to cut government spending and return it to taxpayers.

“I love it,” Trump said late Wednesday on Air Force One, when asked about the proposal.

If Musk’s target of \$2 trillion in spending cuts is achieved by next year, supporters of the idea say that about one-fifth of those funds could be distributed to taxpaying households in checks of about \$5,000.

But before you start planning for a windfall, budget experts say such huge savings — nearly one-third of the federal government’s annual spending — are highly unlikely. And sending out a round of checks — similar to the stimulus payments distributed by Trump and then President Joe Biden during the pandemic

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— could fuel inflation, economists warn, though White House officials dismiss that concern.

With the annual budget deficit at \$1.8 trillion last year and Trump proposing extensive tax cuts, there will also be significant pressure to use all the savings to reduce that deficit, rather than pass on part of it.

Here's what to know about the proposal:

Where is this coming from?

James Fishback, founder of investment firm Azoria Partners which he launched at Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida, promoted the idea Tuesday on X, formerly known as Twitter, prompting Musk to respond that he would "check with the president." Fishback said there have also been "behind the scenes" conversations about the issue with White House officials.

Musk has estimated that his Department of Government Efficiency has cut \$55 billion so far — a tiny fraction of the \$6.8 trillion federal budget. But DOGE's public statements so far haven't verified the presumed savings, and its claims that tens of millions of dead people are fraudulently receiving Social Security have been disproven.

Fishback supports having the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office determine how much DOGE saved. If DOGE cuts \$500 billion by July 2026, he said, then the checks would be \$1,250, rather than \$5,000.

"We uncovered enormous waste, fraud and abuse," Fishback said in an interview with The Associated Press. "And we are going to make good and pay restitution and then rewrite the social contract between the taxpayer and the federal government."

Fishback supports sending out checks, rather than using all the money to reduce the deficit, because it would encourage Americans to seek out wasteful government spending "in their communities, and report it to DOGE."

When am I going to get my check?

OK, let's slow down. According to the proposal, DOGE must first complete its work, slated to be done by July 2026. Once that happens, one-fifth of any savings could be distributed later that year to the roughly 79 million households that pay income taxes. About 40% of Americans don't pay such taxes, so they wouldn't get a check.

How much can DOGE really save?

Color most economists and budget experts skeptical that its focus on "waste, fraud, and abuse" can actually reduce government spending by much. Budget-cutters from both parties have sought to eliminate "waste" — which doesn't have much of a political constituency — for decades, with little success in reducing the deficit.

One of the biggest moves by the Trump administration so far has been to fire tens of thousands of government workers, but such changes aren't likely to produce big savings.

"Only a small share of total spending goes to federal employees," said Douglas Elmendorf, former director of the Congressional Budget Office. "The big money is in federal benefits and in federal taxes and those are not in DOGE's purview."

In November, John DiIulio Jr., a political scientist at the University of Pennsylvania, wrote in an essay for the Brookings Institution that "eliminating the entire federal civilian workforce would leave in place about 95% of all federal spending and the \$34 trillion national debt." DiIulio noted that government contractors and nonprofits that receive government funds now employ three times as many people as the federal government's 2.2 million employees.

It's also not clear how much in savings can be achieved without Congress codifying it in law.

"Firing someone doesn't save money until Congress comes back and reduces the appropriation for that employee's agency," Elmendorf said. "If you fire somebody but leave the appropriation where it is, then ... that money can be spent on something else. So DOGE can't really achieve savings until there's legislative change as well."

Wouldn't another round of government checks contribute to higher inflation?

Trump and his economists blame Biden's \$1,400 stimulus checks, distributed in the spring of 2021, for fueling the worst spike in inflation in four decades. Yet they maintain that sending checks stemming from

reduced government spending wouldn't boost inflation.

Kevin Hassett, director of the White House's National Economic Council, said Thursday that since the money would have been spent by the government anyway, having it spent by consumers would be a wash. Biden and Trump's stimulus checks during the pandemic were deficit-financed, which can be more inflationary.

But Ernie Tedeschi, director of economics at the Yale Budget Lab, and an economist in the Biden White House, said that more government checks are "the last thing we need economically right now."

The U.S. unemployment rate is now much lower than in 2021, Tedeschi said, which means that businesses could struggle to hire enough workers to meet the additional demand created by a round of checks. Worker shortages can push up prices.

Yet some Democrats agree with Hassett, but for different reasons.

"I can't imagine they'd be inflationary because I can't imagine they'd be big enough," said Elaine Kamarck, senior fellow in governance studies at the Brookings Institution.

Kamarck, who worked with Vice President Al Gore to cut government waste in the Clinton administration, dismissed the DOGE dividend as "ridiculous."

"There's no money there, and certainly not enough money to make a big contribution to taxpayers," she said. "The guy just says things," she added, referring to Musk.

Connor McDavid scores in OT to give Canada 3-2 win over United States in 4 Nations Face-Off final

By JIMMY GOLEN AP Sports Writer

BOSTON (AP) — When they played "O Canada" for the second time, there were no American fans left in the arena to boo.

Instead, the Canadian team stood at the blue line, arm in arm, player and coach, wearing their championship hats while the maple leaf flag was lowered behind the 4 Nations Face-Off trophy and the national anthem reverberated across the Americans' home ice. The fans who remained, many of them in their red Team Canada jerseys, sang along.

Connor McDavid scored at 8:18 of overtime to give Canada a 3-2 victory over the United States on Thursday night as the North American rivals turned what had been a tune-up for the 2026 Olympics into a geopolitical brawl over anthems and annexation as much as international hockey supremacy.

Or, to put it another way: It was the 51st U.S. state 3, Canada's 11th province 2.

"You can't take our country — and you can't take our game," Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau posted on X in a cross-border callback to President Donald Trump's chatter about turning one of the United States' closest allies into the 51st state.

"A lot of stuff going on with Canada and the USA right now, and us playing against each other was kind of a perfect storm for our sport," said Nathan MacKinnon, who was selected the MVP of the new tournament with four goals in four games. "It was much more popular than even we would have imagined. It was getting so much attention from our whole continent."

Jordan Binnington stopped 31 shots — including the last 20 in a row — on the same ice where he helped the St. Louis Blues win the Stanley Cup as a rookie five years ago. MacKinnon and Sam Bennett also scored for Canada, which made it 2-2 in the second period and then played a scoreless third.

After a flurry of saves by Binnington early in the overtime, Canada gained a faceoff in the U.S. zone and Mitch Marner got the puck along the boards before popping it into the center to McDavid for the winner. The Canadians poured over the boards to celebrate, shook hands with the vanquished Americans, and then took turns skating with the never-before-awarded trophy.

"Just to see the reaction. Just to know what it means to us. I know it's just a quick tournament, and it's not an Olympic gold medal or anything like that, but it means the world to our group, as you can see," McDavid said.

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"I hope (the new fans) love it," he said. "It's a great game, it's a great sport and I hope we put on a good show these last couple days and gained some fans, ultimately. You can't ask for a better show than that."

Brady Tkachuk and Jake Sanderson scored for the Americans, and Connor Hellebuyck stopped 22 shots in regulation and three more in OT. The U.S. has lost all but one game against Canada in best-on-best international play dating to the preliminaries of the 2010 Vancouver Olympics; the lone victory was in the 4 Nations round-robin, a game so good it turned Thursday's sequel into one of the most anticipated international hockey events in decades.

"I think guys that are at home watching this, I'm hoping they're wanting a piece of it," U.S. forward Dylan Larkin said. "This grew the game really well, but I hope it pushes guys to want a piece of this and then the next generation that got to watch this, they're going to watch the Olympics next year and hopefully there's a different outcome."

The already ripe rivalry between the two North American hockey powers took on an added intensity during the tournament following Trump's tariff threats and talk of making Canada the 51st U.S. state. Trump called the American team Thursday morning to wish it well, then turned to Truth Social to take a poke at "Governor Trudeau."

The political backdrop combined with the quality of the round-robin game, which the United States won 3-1 on Saturday, to bring the atmosphere of a Stanley Cup Final or Olympic gold medal game to the TD Garden.

Fans in their team jerseys waved flags, shouted for their countrymen and continued the ritual booing of the opposing national anthem that has become a nightly undercard for a tournament that returned the NHL's stars to the international scene after missing the last two Winter Games.

The pregame hype video was a callback to the 1980 Olympics, when the undermanned U.S. team upset the powerful Soviet machine in the midst of the Cold War. "Miracle on Ice" Olympic hero and honorary U.S. captain Mike Eruzione wore a Johnny Gaudreau jersey to honor the memory of former Boston College and Calgary Flames star who was killed by a drunk driver while bicycling in New Jersey at his sister's wedding last summer.

The American fans chanted "Johnny Hockey!" to spur their team on, and broke into frequent cheers of "U-S-A! U-S-A!" — just like in Lake Placid.

But this time it was the team in red that came away with the win.

"We wanted this one," Canada forward Mark Stone said. "You've got 40 million Canadians, sitting at home, and you feel the energy. Anytime you have the chance to play for our country, or the flag on our chest, it's a special, special feeling. ... It brings us together. And just glad we got to get this one."

French street artist Shuck One pays tribute to Black history at Pompidou Center in Paris

By SYLVIE CORBET and NICOLAS GARRIGA Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — French street artist Shuck One is honoring Black figures who shaped France's recent history on the mainland and overseas, in an art installation being produced for an exhibition starting next month at the Pompidou Center in Paris.

Shuck One is a Black graffiti and visual artist native of the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe, which is a French overseas department. He is participating in the "Black Paris" exhibition, which retraces the presence and influence of Black artists in France from the 1950s to 2000.

The Pompidou Center, one of the world's top modern art museums, said that it will celebrate 150 artists of African descent, from Africa to the Americas, whose works have often never been displayed in France before.

Shuck One is one of five artists chosen to provide contemporary insights.

"I wanted to invoke the memory of the Black figures who created the 'Black Paris' and who, in a way, were pioneers before us in artistic, intellectual and other fields," Shuck One told The Associated Press.

"It's a way for me to honor them."

Activist and artist

Describing himself as "an activist who became an artist," Shuck One grew up in the 1970s in Guadeloupe. After he arrived in Paris in the 1980s, he was considered one of the pioneers of French street art and graffiti — inspired by figures of the Négritude movement that denounced colonialism, racism and Eurocentrism.

His installation, titled "Regeneration," is four meters (13 feet) high and 10 meters (33 feet) long. It shows major moments of Black history through paintings and collages of maps of Paris, archives and photos.

The starting point of the installation is the "Tirailleurs Sénégalais," a corps of colonial infantry in the French army that fought in both World Wars.

One highlight is the May 1967 riots in Guadeloupe that led to the massacre of possibly dozens of people — figures are still being questioned by historians. Another feature is the BUMIDOM, a French state agency that between 1963 and 1981 organized the migration of 170,000 people from French overseas departments to the mainland for economic purposes, now considered by historians a symbol of post-colonial domination and discrimination.

Portraits of Black figures

It also shows portraits of Black figures, including politicians, writers, civil rights activists and other pioneers.

They include U.S.-born entertainer and civil rights activist Joséphine Baker; Aimé Césaire, poet and founder of the Négritude movement; and American political activist Angela Davis.

But there are also less known names like writer and activist Paulette Nardal; Eugénie Eboué, the first Black woman elected to France's National Assembly and Gerty Archimède, the second to be elected shortly after; and Maryse Condé, a novelist from Guadeloupe.

"The overall message of the exhibition is ... to revive these forgotten figures, but also a next-generation aspect, a way to pass their history on," Shuck One said as he carefully studied the elaborate collage of photos and archive documents on a big wall of the exhibition.

"It's also a way of making people understand what's activism is about — (it's) very well to talk about the community, but it's also important to know its history," he said.

The exhibition, which runs from March 19-June 30, is one of the last at the Pompidou Center before it shuts down later this year for renovations, which are due to last five years.

Federal judge allows Trump's mass firings of federal workers to move forward

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal judge in Washington has allowed President Donald Trump's mass firings of federal workers to move forward.

U.S. District Judge Christopher Cooper decided Thursday he could not grant a motion from unions representing the workers to temporarily block the layoffs. He found that their complaint amounted to an employment dispute and must follow a different process outlined in federal employment law.

Cooper acknowledged that the Republican president's second term "has been defined by an onslaught of executive actions that have caused, some say by design, disruption and even chaos in widespread quarters of American society."

But Cooper, who was appointed by President Barack Obama, a Democrat, wrote that judges are "duty-bound to decide legal issues based on even-handed application of law and precedent — no matter the identity of the litigants or, regrettably at times, the consequences of their rulings for average people."

The ruling comes as thousands of federal government employees have been shown the door during in the first month of Trump's second administration.

The administration argued in court the unions failed to show that they were facing the kind of irreparable, immediate harm that would justify an emergency order stopping layoffs.

The unions, representing hundreds of thousands of federal workers, maintain that Trump's efforts to slash

the federal workforce conflicts with Congress' power to shape the size and direction of agencies through funding decisions, as well as laws detailing how such layoffs must be carried out.

The president of the National Treasury Employees' Union, Doreen Greenwald, said that Cooper's decision was a temporary setback and that "federal employees will get their day in court to challenge the unlawful mass firings and other attacks on their jobs, their agencies, and their service to the country."

The lawsuit is among more than 80 challenging a range of actions Trump has undertaken with his blitz of executive orders. Unions also filed a separate suit challenging mass firings in California this week.

The Latest: Trump signals he's open to multiple budget bills instead of just one

By The Associated Press undefined

Hours after the Senate approved a spending framework, President Donald Trump said in a Fox News interview that he's open to approving the spending plan in multiple bills "as long as we get to the same point."

Here's the latest:

Maine governor says funding fight is about 'whether a President can force compliance with his will'

Maine Gov. Janet Mills says Trump does not have the right to withhold funding appropriated by Congress and paid for by taxpayers "in an attempt to coerce someone into compliance with his will."

The Democratic governor made the statement Friday after the U.S. Department of Education told Maine's Department of Education that it had been instructed to begin an investigation into the state for allowing transgender athletes to compete.

Trump has threatened to cut the state's federal funding unless it backs down.

Mills says she thinks "the outcome of this politically directed investigation is all but predetermined" but said she would work with the attorney general to fight for Maine in court.

"But do not be misled: this is not just about who can compete on the athletic field, this is about whether a President can force compliance with his will, without regard for the rule of law that governs our nation," she said. "I believe he cannot."

The Supreme Court won't allow Trump to immediately fire head of whistleblower office

The Supreme Court on Friday temporarily kept on the job at the head of the federal agency that protects government whistleblowers, in its first word on the many legal fights over Trump's second-term agenda.

The justices said in an unsigned order that Hampton Dellinger, head of the Office of Special Counsel, could remain in his job at least until Feb. 26. That's when a lower-court order temporarily protecting him expires.

The high court neither granted nor rejected the administration's plea to immediately remove him. Instead, the court held the request in abeyance, noting that the order expires in just a few days.

Park service restores jobs and adds more seasonal workers

The Trump administration is restoring jobs for dozens of National Park Service employees fired amid government-wide reductions and hiring nearly 3,000 additional seasonal workers, following an uproar over an aggressive plan to downsize the agency.

At least 50 jobs are being restored to help maintain and clean parks, educate visitors and collect admission fees, according to two people familiar with the agency's plans who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly on the matter.

The moves come as the park service said in a new memo that it will hire up to 7,700 seasonal positions this year, up from about 5,000 promised earlier this week and higher than the three-year average of 6,350 seasonal workers. The park service has about 20,000 employees.

Lawmakers and advocacy groups have criticized the widespread layoffs as unnecessary and a threat to public safety and the parks themselves.

Associated Press reporter Matthew Daly contributed reporting.

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US Department of Education announces investigation of Maine agency over transgender athletes

The U.S. Department of Education says it is initiating an investigation into the Maine Department of Education over the inclusion of transgender athletes.

The announcement Friday came the same day that Trump and Maine Gov. Janet Mills sparred at the White House over the issue after Trump singled her out at a governor's event.

Trump has threatened Maine's federal funding if the state continues to allow transgender athletes to play in women's and girls sports. Mills, a Democrat, told the Republican president, "We'll see you in court."

State officials had no immediate comment on the planned investigation.

Justice Department files complaint against judge weighing challenge to Trump's transgender troop ban

The complaint accuses U.S. District Judge Ana Reyes of inappropriately questioning a government lawyer about his religious beliefs and trying to "embarrass" the attorney with a rhetorical exercise during an exchange about discrimination.

During the rhetorical exercise, Reyes told the attorney that she changed the rules in her courtroom to bar graduates of the University of Virginia law school from appearing before her because they are all "liars and lack integrity." She instructed the government attorney, a graduate of the school, to sit down.

In another exchange cited in the complaint, the judge asked the attorney what "Jesus would say to telling a group of people that they are so worthless, so worthless that we're— we're not going to allow them into homeless shelters?"

The complaint calls for an investigation, saying "appropriate action" should be taken to ensure that future hearings are conducted with the "dignity and impartiality the public has a right to expect."

Trump plans to retaliate against taxes on digital services

Trump says he plans to sign an action as soon as Friday to put tariffs on countries that tax digital services. "What they're doing to us and other countries is terrible with digital," Trump told reporters.

The U.S. president didn't flesh out the details of the action or how the tariffs would necessarily apply.

About half of European countries have announced, proposed or implemented taxes on digital services, which largely hit U.S. tech companies, according to the Tax Foundation, a center-right think tank.

Pentagon is cutting 5,400 probationary jobs

The Pentagon says it's laying off 5,400 probationary workers starting next week and will put a hiring freeze in place.

It comes as Trump's administration is firing thousands of federal workers who have less civil service protections.

At the Defense Department, "we anticipate reducing the Department's civilian workforce by 5-8% to produce efficiencies and refocus the Department on the President's priorities and restoring readiness in the force," said Darin Selnick, who is acting undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth also has directed the military services to identify \$50 billion in programs that could be cut next year to redirect those savings to fund Trump's priorities.

Trump says he's not going to visit Moscow

The president dismissed reports that he might be going to Moscow, saying, "No, no I'm not."

Trump made the comment as he spoke to reporters while swearing in new Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick.

Ex-Proud Boys leader Enrique Tarrío arrested near Capitol on assault charge

Former Proud Boys national leader Enrique Tarrío was arrested Friday near the U.S. Capitol on a charge that he assaulted a woman protesting a gathering attended by Tarrío and others who received presidential pardons for crimes stemming from the Jan. 6, 2021, riot in the nation's capital.

Capitol police said officers saw Tarrío strike the protester's cellphone and arm after the woman placed the phone close to his face as they walked near the Capitol. Tarrío had just left a news conference that had ended "without incident," police said.

"The woman told our officers that she wanted to be a complainant, and the man was arrested for the simple assault," police said in a statement.

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Tarrio, of Miami, was serving a 22-year sentence — the longest among hundreds of Capitol riot cases — when President Donald Trump granted clemency last month to all 1,500-plus people charged in the attack. AP sues 3 Trump administration officials, citing freedom of speech

The Associated Press sued three Trump administration officials Friday over access to presidential events, citing freedom of speech in asking a federal judge to stop the 10-day blocking of its journalists.

The lawsuit was filed Friday afternoon in U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C.

The AP says its case is about an unconstitutional effort by the White House to control speech — in this case refusing to change its style from the Gulf of Mexico to the “Gulf of America,” as President Donald Trump did last month with an executive order.

“The press and all people in the United States have the right to choose their own words and not be retaliated against by the government,” the AP said in its lawsuit, which names White House Chief of Staff Susan Wiles, Deputy Chief of Staff Taylor Budowich and Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt.

“This targeted attack on the AP’s editorial independence and ability to gather and report the news strikes at the very core of the First Amendment,” the news agency said. “This court should remedy it immediately.”

Lutnick takes oath to be commerce secretary

Howard Lutnick has been officially sworn in as commerce secretary, a cabinet post that the Wall Street investor plans to use to impose Trump’s planned tariffs.

“We are going to balance the budget of the United States of America, because Donald Trump understands global business,” Lutnick said while in the Oval Office with the president.

Lutnick is a supporter of cryptocurrency and led the financial services firm Cantor Fitzgerald.

US stocks tumble as businesses and consumers worry about tariffs and Washington

U.S. stocks fell sharply after reports showed worries about how Trump’s policies may be hitting the economy.

The S&P 500 sank 1.7% Friday for its worst day in two months. The Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped 1.7%, and the Nasdaq composite tumbled 2.2%.

The losses accelerated through the day following several weaker-than-expected reports on the economy.

One report suggested U.S. business activity is close to stalling, with optimism slumping because of worries about tariffs and other potential policies from Washington. Reports on consumer sentiment and home sales also came in weaker than expected.

Akamai Technologies weighed on the market after giving financial forecasts that fell short of expectations. Treasury yields fell in the bond market.

ICE’s acting director has been reassigned

The top official in charge of carrying out Trump’s mass deportations agenda has been reassigned after the administration voiced concerns that the deportation effort isn’t moving fast enough.

Homeland Security spokesperson Tricia McLaughlin said in a statement that Caleb Vitello, acting director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, was “no longer in an administrative role, but is instead overseeing all field and enforcement operations.”

The statement didn’t give a reason for the move. Vitello is a career ICE official with more than two decades on the job. But White House officials have expressed frustration with the pace of deportations of people in the country illegally.

Judge clears way for Trump administration remove thousands of USAID staffers

A federal judge has cleared the way for the Trump administration to pull thousands of U.S. Agency for International Development staffers off the job.

U.S. District Judge Carl Nichols removed his temporary block on the effort to pull all but a small fraction of USAID staffers from their posts and give those abroad a 30-day deadline to move back to the U.S. at government expense.

His ruling comes in a lawsuit filed by unions on behalf of workers. They say the rush to dismantle the agency had cut off some staffers overseas from emergency communications systems, including some in danger of political violence in Congo.

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The Trump administration and the cost-cutting Department of Government Efficiency tied to billionaire Elon Musk have moved swiftly to shutter USAID, asserting that its work is wasteful and out of line with the president's agenda.

Lawmakers ask about list of possible military firings

A group of lawmakers, all of whom served in the U.S. military, have asked Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth to provide the criteria he is using to evaluate military officers for possible dismissal.

In the last two days, a list of seven three- and four-star military officers identified to be fired, including Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. CQ Brown, has circulated among some lawmakers.

It was not clear who sent the list to Capitol Hill, and the office of the secretary for defense did not immediately respond to questions about it.

A U.S. official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive matters, described the list as potentially just socializing those names to gauge how much pushback there would be in firing them.

Notably, neither Republican leaders of the House or Senate armed services committees said they have been notified or provided an official list from the Pentagon.

"Most if not all of the three and four star General and Flag officers were general officers under the first Trump administration and have served honorably under many administrations of both parties," said the seven lawmakers — six Democrats and one Republican.

Three- and four-star officers' ranks are all tied to their position, and the president has the authority to relieve them at will.

Associated Press reporter Tara Copp contributed reporting.

Trump promotes mail voting fraud falsehoods despite past inconsistencies

Trump several times parroted conspiracy theories about mail voting fraud at a White House meeting Friday with a bipartisan group of governors, falsely declaring, "Any time you have mail-in ballots, you're going to have fraud — without question."

Leading up to the 2024 election, however, Trump and other Republican officials encouraged voters to cast their ballots by mail in a presidential race projected to be decided by razor-thin margins. The Republican National Committee also embraced early and mail voting in 2024, and Trump has promoted these voting methods on recordings played during the convention and at rallies.

This is despite false narratives about mail voting forming much of the bedrock of Trump's unfounded claims of a stolen 2020 election.

Trump also leaned heavily into the election misinformation playbook in the days before the 2024 election, laying the groundwork to claim voter fraud if he lost. As the election tipped in his favor, Trump's complaints went silent.

Trump repeats plan to shift FEMA responsibilities to the states

Trump told governors that he wants states to have "skin in the game" when it comes to disaster response, but that the federal government should continue picking up most of the cost.

He repeated his desire to shift responsibility for responding to hurricanes, tornadoes, fires and other disasters from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to states.

"I'd rather have you do it," Trump said, predicting it would save money to put the onus on states. He suggested splitting the costs, with the federal government picking up 75%.

Trump has been critical of FEMA, with some of his criticisms rooted in misinformation.

Trump invites governors to tour Fort Knox with him

Trump brought up his plan to have Elon Musk's DOGE team verify that the U.S. gold reserves are indeed locked away at the ultra-secure Fort Knox — and he invited the nation's governors to come along.

"We're going to go in there pretty soon," Trump told the governors during a meeting at the White House. "They're going to open the doors to Fort Knox. And if any governor would like to go with us, we'll go."

Reflecting on the lore surrounding the gold reserves and the intense security measures that protect them, Trump joked that it would be terrible to discover the precious metal was missing. But he predicted it would all be there.

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It was the third straight day that Trump brought up the check-in at Fort Knox.

Trump has tense exchange with Maine Gov. Janet Mills

Trump had a tense exchange with the Maine Gov. Janet Mills over the state's policies toward transgender youth.

While speaking to governors who were meeting at the White House, Trump asked Mills whether Maine would comply with his executive order barring transgender girls from playing on girls sports teams.

"I'm complying with state and federal laws," Mills responded.

Trump shot back: "We are the federal law."

"You better do it because you're not going to get any federal funding at all if you don't," he said, adding that Maine may be a Democratic state, but its residents largely agree with him on the issue.

"I'll see you in court," Mills responded.

"Good. I'll see you in court," he said. "I look forward to that. That should be a real easy one. And enjoy your life after, governor, because I don't think you'll be in elected politics."

Ric Grenell says he would run for California governor if Harris enters race

Ric Grenell, who is Trump's envoy for special missions, said he "may not be able to resist" running for governor of California if he gets to race against former Democratic Vice President Kamala Harris.

Grenell announced he may be interested in the Republican gubernatorial nomination in an interview with Politico's Dasha Burns on stage at the Conservative Political Action Conference outside Washington.

Harris was defeated by Trump in last year's presidential election, and had previously been a U.S. senator from California and the state's attorney general.

"We spent hundreds of millions of dollars to define who Kamala Harris is. If she thinks that she's going to run for governor of California, a Republican is going to win, and I may not be able to resist trying to run against her."

Judge adjourns trial for New York City Mayor Eric Adams but appoints counsel to advise on next steps

A federal judge has adjourned the corruption trial for New York City Mayor Eric Adams and appointed counsel to advise him on how to handle the Justice Department's request to drop charges against the Democrat.

The ruling Friday by Judge Dale E. Ho will delay by at least a couple weeks when he will decide whether to grant the request to drop charges against the embattled mayor of the country's largest city.

A government lawyer cited an executive order by President Donald Trump as he defended the request to drop charges during a hearing Wednesday.

Adams confirmed at the hearing that he accepted that charges could later be reinstated.

Mayor sidesteps Trump's talk of a Washington, DC, federal 'takeover'

Mayor Muriel Bowser is keeping things diplomatic regarding President Donald Trump's call for a federal "takeover" of the District of Columbia.

Earlier this week, Trump repeated his longstanding call for a federal takeover — citing crime rates, homelessness and graffiti among the city's failings.

In an extended Q&A at the National Press Club Friday, Bowser sidestepped chances to push back and focused on common ground.

"The president is very focused on making our nation's capital the most beautiful capital in the world," she said. "It turns out that's our focus as well."

When asked about threats to the 1973 Home Rule Act, Bowser focused on "some people in the Congress" as the most imminent danger.

There are currently no migrants being held at Guantanamo Bay, US official says

There were no immigrants being held at Guantanamo Bay Naval Station as of Friday morning, U.S. military authorities said a day after 177 Venezuelan migrants were flown from the U.S. military base to their home country.

The naval base on the eastern end of Cuba has served as a way station for Venezuelan immigrants with final orders of deportation from the U.S. since military transport flights began arriving with migrants on a near-daily basis from Texas on Feb. 4.

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"At the moment, there are no illegal migrants being held at Guantanamo Bay," the U.S. Southern Command of the Department of Defense said Friday in an email.

Juan Agudelo, an emergency removal operations supervisor in Miami for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, said Guantanamo Bay is being used as a temporary staging facility for immigrants as they are repatriated abroad.

Immigrants rights groups are suing U.S. authorities to establish direct access to immigrant detainees at Guantanamo.

Trump tells governors he's had 'very good talks with Putin' and praises North Carolina's Stein
Trump continued speaking about Russia and Ukraine as he addressed Republican and Democratic governors gathered at the White House for a meeting Friday morning.

The president told the governors that he has "had very good talks with Putin" and "not such good talks with Ukraine."

He also had some rare praise for a Democrat, telling the room that he's been working well with North Carolina's new Democratic Gov. Josh Stein, whose state is still recovering from Hurricane Helene.

Trump signals he's open to multiple budget bills, backing away from preference for 'one big beautiful bill'
Hours after the Senate approved a spending framework, the president said in a Fox News interview that he's open to approving the spending plan in multiple bills "as long as we get to the same point."

Trump temporarily derailed the Senate's spending push this week when he publicly bashed the approach from the Senate Budget Committee chairman, Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina. Trump said he favored the "big beautiful bill" from House Republicans, a more politically fraught package that includes \$4.5 trillion in tax cuts but slashes government programs and services.

Senators want to address those priorities later, in a second package.

"Now, what they approved yesterday is one part of it and then they approve another part of it," Trump said Friday.

"I guess you could make the case you could do three. You could do 10," he added. "As long as we get along, you know as long as we get them all added up and it's the same thing."

He said it's "a very good signal" that senators got the first bill passed and that Republicans have "fantastic" unity.

Maine Democrats vow to fight Trump on pulling funding over trans athletes

High-ranking Democrats in Maine said Friday they will fight back against Trump's vow to deny the state federal funding due to the participation of transgender athletes in girls' sports.

Trump addressed a group of governors on Thursday and said he "heard men are still playing in Maine" and that he would pull funding because of it under the terms of an executive order he signed this month.

"So we're not going to give them any federal funding. None, whatsoever, until they clean that up," Trump said.

Maine's Attorney General Aaron Frey said he will "defend Maine's laws and block efforts by the president to bully and threaten us."

Gov. Janet Mills also said the state "will not be intimidated" by Trump's threats.

"If the president attempts to unilaterally deprive Maine school children of the benefit of federal funding, my administration and the attorney general will take all appropriate and necessary legal action to restore that funding and the academic opportunity it provides," Mills said.

Trump adviser says he expects Ukraine to agree to deal allowing US access to the country's rare earth minerals

Trump's national security adviser says he believes Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy will accept a deal letting the U.S. access his country's rare earth minerals.

Speaking at the Conservative Political Action Conference, Mike Waltz said, "Here's the bottom line. President Zelenskyy is going to sign that deal," though it wasn't clear on what timeline he meant.

Trump said this week that he believed the U.S. had a deal on accessing Ukraine's critical minerals when Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent traveled to Kyiv last week.

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Zelenskyy said previously that he'd directed his ministers not to sign off on a proposed agreement.

Vice President JD Vance also discussed the deal with Zelenskyy in Munich days after the Bessent meeting.

Trump said Bessent's visit to Ukraine was 'a wasted trip,' continues criticism of Zelenskyy

Trump continued his criticism of Zelenskyy on Friday and said that U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent's trip to Kyiv last week to try to secure a deal to access Ukraine's minerals was "a wasted trip."

"Frankly I wish he didn't go there, waste all of his time like that," Trump said on an interview on "The Brian Kilmeade Show" on Fox Radio.

He started to criticize Zelenskyy for his leadership as his country was destroyed by war. Host Brian Kilmeade said, "That's Putin's fault," and Trump said. "I get tired of listening to it, I'll tell you what."

Trump continued complaining about Zelenskyy and said he "doesn't think he's very important to be at meetings" and that he's been negotiating "with no cards, and you get sick of it."

He said Putin wants to make a deal and added, "He doesn't have to make a deal. Because if he wanted, he would get the whole country."

Social Security Administration ends cooperative agreements with researchers focused on equity in benefits

The Social Security Administration terminated its cooperative agreements with its Retirement and Disability Research Consortium – which includes research relationships with the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Brandeis University, University of Baltimore, and Westat.

The agency cites President Trump's executive order titled "Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing."

"Terminating our RDRC cooperative agreements aligns with President Trump's priorities to end fraudulent and wasteful initiatives and contracts," said Social Security's Acting Commissioner Lee Dudek.

The center's website states that its research agenda focuses on equity in access to Social Security retirement for under-recognized and underserved segments of society, the intersection of health and access to healthcare and equitable disability program participation and disparities in disability program access and participation.

Social Security says ending the cooperative agreements will bring about \$15 million dollars in cost savings.

US envoy praises Zelenskyy after Trump's censure of the Ukrainian leader

President Donald Trump's envoy to Ukraine and Russia said on Friday that he held "extensive and positive discussions" with Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy about the three-year war with Russia and praised the Ukrainian leader as an "embattled and courageous leader of a nation at war."

Retired U.S. Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg — who traveled to Kyiv on Wednesday and whose planned news conference with Zelenskyy on Thursday was changed at the last minute to a simple photo opportunity — struck a positive tone after what he said on the social platform X was "a long and intense day" of talks with Ukraine's senior leadership.

His comments marked a departure from recent rebukes of Zelenskyy by Trump and other senior U.S. officials that appeared to indicate an abrupt deterioration of relations.

Economic vibes not looking so great for Trump

Consumer confidence fell nearly 10% on a monthly basis in February, a sharp plunge that suggests President Donald Trump's tariff plans have given his administration a potentially short honeymoon with voters.

The University of Michigan Index of Consumer Sentiment came in Friday at a reading of 64.7, down 9.8% on a monthly basis and 15.9% on a yearly basis. The Trump administration has touted other measures of confidence such as the National Federation of Independent Business' index to suggest there is newfound optimism because of Trump's return to the White House.

But during President Joe Biden's tenure, the Michigan numbers often tracked with his loss of public approval. The latest Michigan figures have people expecting on average that inflation will increase 4.3% over the next year, a sharp increase from the January reading. Tariffs are taxes on imports that can raise prices for consumers.

Confidence among Republicans has held steady in the index, but it has fallen sharply among Democrats and political independents.

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White House defends DOGE cuts amid complaints about 'chainsaw' approach

Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt defended the Trump administration's sweeping measures when asked about complaints Friday that DOGE is using a "chainsaw" approach to cutting the government's size and spending, Leavitt told reporters at the White House that there is public support for the administration, and it is "committed to cutting waste, fraud and abuse."

"The president campaigned on that promise. Americans elected him on that promise, and he's actually delivering on it. And this is something that Democrats promised they would do for decades. President Trump is just the first president to get it done," she said.

Treasury raises concerns with China's Vice Premier over fentanyl

Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent expressed concerns about China's counternarcotics efforts, according to a Treasury readout of his first call Friday with Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng.

President Donald Trump, who signed an order imposing 10% tariffs against China earlier this month, is aiming at combating the illicit flow of fentanyl into the U.S., where the opioid is blamed for some 70,000 overdose deaths annually.

China is a major supplier of precursor chemicals used for the manufacturing of fentanyl.

The Treasury said the finance ministers also spoke about "economic imbalances, and unfair policies, and stressed the Administration's commitment to pursue trade and economic policies that protect the American economy, the American worker, and our national security."

The pair agreed to remain in communication.

Sinn Féin leaders won't attend St. Patrick's event at White House to protest US stance on Gaza

Sinn Féin's President Mary Lou McDonald addresses the media in Dublin, as Sinn Féin's David Cullinane looks on, in Dublin, Ireland, Monday, Feb. 10, 2020. Ireland braced for weeks of political uncertainty Monday after an earth-shaking election that saw the Irish Republican Army-linked party Sinn Fein — long shunned by its bigger rivals — take the largest share of votes. (Niall Carson/PA via AP)

The Irish party's leader Mary Lou McDonald said the Trump's administration's position was "catastrophically" wrong and she was taking "a principled stance against the threat of mass expulsion of the Palestinian people from Gaza."

Trump has proposed removing about 2 million Palestinians from Gaza so the U.S. can own and rebuild what he called the "Riviera of the Middle East." Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has welcomed the idea, but it's been universally rejected by Palestinians and Arab countries, caused concern from other world leaders and thrown a ceasefire into doubt.

She was joined in the boycott by Northern Ireland First Minister Michelle O'Neill, the party's vice president, who said she was standing "on the side of humanity."

Chinese Vice Premier expresses 'solemn concern' over tariffs in video call with US Treasury Secretary

Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng has expressed "solemn concerns" to U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent about the Trump administration's imposition of an additional 10% tariff on imports from China.

The comments came in a video call that was Bessent's first contact with a senior Chinese official since assuming his post. Trump said he imposed the tariff because China needs to do more to control the fentanyl trade. China responded with tariffs on select American products and other targeted measures.

Ahead of the call, Bessent told Bloomberg that the first thing he wanted to talk about was curbing fentanyl precursor chemicals coming from China

Federal judge will consider further blocking Trump administration from freezing funds

The judge will consider a request to further block the Trump administration from freezing trillions of dollars of grants and loans that fund everything from clean energy programs to bridge repairs to emergency shelters.

U.S. District Court Judge John McConnell in Rhode Island, who already approved a temporary restraining order on the funding freeze, is hearing a request for a permanent injunction from nearly two dozen Democrat states. If approved, it would be the first order since the Trump administration announced a sweeping pause on federal aid, stirring up a wave of confusion and anxiety across the United States.

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A second lawsuit over the funding freeze by groups representing thousands of nonprofits and small businesses is being heard by U.S. District Judge Loren AliKhan in Washington, D.C. AliKhan is also considering a request to issue a preliminary injunction.

Macron says he plans to tell Trump not to "be weak" in the face of Putin amid negotiation talks. Macron is to travel to Washington to meet with Trump on Monday, the White House said.

In a one-hour question and answer session on his social media Thursday, Macron said he'll tell Trump: "You can't be weak in the face of President Putin. It's not you, it's not your trademark, it's not in your interest. How can you then be credible in the face of China if you're weak in the face of Putin?"

Trump's recent statements that echo Putin's narrative and plans to have direct negotiations with Moscow have left European allies and Ukrainian officials worried. But Macron suggested Trump's strategy to create "uncertainty" in talks with Russia could actually make Western allies stronger in these talks.

Macron added he would seek to persuade Trump that U.S. interests and Europeans' interests are the same, telling him: "If you let Russia take over Ukraine, it would be unstoppable."

That means any peace deal must be negotiated with Ukrainians and Europeans around the table, Macron reaffirmed.

Trump holds Black History Month event as some agencies skip recognition after anti-DEI order

President Donald Trump speaks as golfer Tiger Woods listens during a reception for Black History Month in the East Room of the White House, Thursday, Feb. 20, 2025, in Washington. (Pool via AP)

Trump marked Black History Month at the White House on Thursday by making an appearance at a celebratory reception with a surprise guest, golf legend Tiger Woods, while calling out other athletes in attendance and marveling at the size of the crowd.

Trump also announced he planned to bring Alice Johnson, a prison reform advocate whom he pardoned in 2020, into his administration to work on clemency issues.

The White House's Black History Month reception preserved a tradition, but it comes in the wake of Trump issuing a wide-ranging executive order ending the federal government's diversity, equity and inclusion programs has disrupted its observance elsewhere.

Trump didn't mention his anti-DEI crusade as he addressed hundreds of guests in a reception in the East Room, though he did make a brief reference to the The New York Times' "1619 Project," which highlights the lasting consequences of slavery in America.

How Trump's mass layoffs raise the risk of wildfires in the US West, according to fired workers

The Forest Service firings — on the heels of deadly blazes that ripped through Los Angeles last month — are part of a wave of federal worker layoffs, as Trump's cost-cutting measures reverberate nationwide.

Workers who maintained trails, removed combustible debris from forests, supported firefighters and secured funds for wildfire mitigation say staffing cuts threaten public safety, especially in the West, where drier and hotter conditions linked to climate change have increased the intensity of wildfires.

"This is 100% a safety thing," said Tanya Torst, who was fired from her position as a U.S. Forest Service partnership coordinator in Chico, California. She recalled the deadly Paradise blaze that killed 85 people east of Chico in 2018. "That's why I'm speaking out."

Today in History: February 22

US hockey team beats USSR in 'Miracle on Ice'

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Saturday, Feb. 22, the 53rd day of 2025. There are 312 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Feb. 22, 1980, the "Miracle on Ice" took place at the Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, New York, as the United States Olympic hockey team upset the Soviet Union, 4-3. (The U.S. team went on to win the gold medal two days later with a 4-2 victory over Finland.)

Also on this date:

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In 1732, the first president of the United States, George Washington, was born in Westmoreland County in the Virginia Colony.

In 1784, a U.S. merchant ship, the Empress of China, left New York for the first trade voyage of an American ship to China.

In 1959, the inaugural Daytona 500 race was held; although Johnny Beauchamp was initially declared the winner, the victory was later awarded to Lee Petty.

In 1967, more than 25,000 U.S. and South Vietnamese troops launched Operation Junction City, aimed at smashing a Vietcong stronghold near the Cambodian border.

In 1997, scientists in Scotland announced they had successfully cloned an adult mammal for the first time, a sheep they named "Dolly."

In 2010, Najibullah Zazi (nah-jee-BOO'-lah ZAH'-zee), accused of buying products from beauty supply stores to make bombs for an attack on New York City subways, pleaded guilty to charges including conspiring to use weapons of mass destruction. (Zazi faced up to life in prison but spent nearly a decade after his arrest helping the U.S. identify and prosecute terrorists; he was given a 10-year sentence followed by supervised release.)

In 2021, the number of U.S. deaths from COVID-19 topped 500,000, according to Johns Hopkins University.

Today's birthdays: Actor Paul Dooley is 97. Actor James Hong is 96. Actor Julie Walters is 75. Basketball Hall of Famer Julius Erving is 75. Golf Hall of Famer Amy Alcott is 69. Actor Kyle MacLachlan is 66. Golf Hall of Famer Vijay Singh is 62. Hockey Hall of Famer Pat LaFontaine is 60. Actor-comedian Rachel Dratch is 59. Actor Paul Lieberstein (TV: "The Office") is 58. Actor Jeri Ryan is 57. Actor Thomas Jane is 56. Actor-singer Lea Salonga is 54. Tennis Hall of Famer Michael Chang is 53. Singer James Blunt is 51. Actor Drew Barrymore is 50.